"By Instinct": The Problem of Identity in "The Glass Menagerie"
Author(s): Robert L. McDonald
Source: *CEA Critic*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (SPRING/SUMMER 1997), pp. 58-64
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44377194

"By Instinct": The Problem of Identity in *The Glass Menagerie*

Robert L. McDonald

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS OF *THE GLASS MENAGERIE* have been noted time and time again, so persistently that we can hardly experience the play that established Tennessee Williams's reputation without at least a subliminal awareness of its foundation in the troubled, confused adolescence and young manhood of its author. Thus, for all its greatness as a stage piece—it was nothing less than "a revolution . . . to the New York theater," according to Arthur Miller (30)—Williams's so-called "memory play" about a young man's burden of obligation to his family's expectations has become familiar as a poignant example of raw personal experience translated into fine art.[1]

Despite this, an often ignored autobiographical key to appreciating *The Glass Menagerie* is Williams's essay "The Catastrophe of Success," written for the *New York Times* on the third anniversary of the play's December 1944 debut and frequently reprinted as the play's preface. In brief, the essay chronicles the effect of *The Glass Menagerie*'s enormous popular success on the playwright's sense of himself and his art. As Williams recalls,

> The sort of life that I had previous to this popular success was one that required endurance, a life of clawing and scratching along a sheer surface and holding on tight with raw fingers to every inch of rock higher than the one caught hold of before. . . . I was not aware of how much vital energy had gone into this struggle until the struggle was removed. (135–36)

Williams was famous, but he had also, he began to realize, fallen to "the catastrophe of Success" (140); he felt seduced and victimized by a lofty but shallow life of pretense. And after a series of increasingly severe bouts with depression, the psychophysical shock of an eye operation finally "re-adjusted" his perspective on life (138).

What makes this experience interesting to readers of *The Glass Menagerie* is not so much the pathos Williams evokes with its revelation, but the meaning he draws from it and explains, when "The Catastrophe of Success" is printed as a preface to the play, just before introducing his

literary namesake, Tom Wingfield. Williams finally understands for himself that "the public Somebody you are when you 'have a name' is a fiction created with mirrors," and he cautions readers that "the only somebody worth being is *the solitary and unseen you that existed from your first breath*" (140; emphasis added). In light of this statement, *The Glass Menagerie* becomes more profoundly than ever the play of a young man's struggles to enact the essential self that he feels stirring, "solitary and unseen."

Joseph K. Davis has argued that, through his actions, "Tom Wingfield emerges as Williams's prototypical 'fugitive'—a sensitive, modern individual who is artistic in impulse and temperament" (195). Yet, although he does appear ever in flight—out the door, off to the movies, off to join the Union of Merchant Seamen—Tom is finally less a fugitive, one who hides out when the odds go against him, than a young man actively struggling to define himself against a world that will not accommodate him. Even if he runs and eventually flees for good, at least until his memories catch up with him, we must not forget that Tom is not easy with flight but elects it as the only way to be free to live life on his own terms. The tragedy of Williams's "poet with a job in a warehouse" (*Menagerie* 129), then, resides in Tom's efforts to negotiate his way into manhood in a world whose models are both confusing and utterly incompatible with his "self."

In the most global sense, the world the character Tom has to confront is the one Tom the narrator establishes as the "social background of the play" in his opening soliloquy: "that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class was matriculating in a school for the blind" (145). As narrator, Tom insists on a keen social awareness, punctuating his story with references to the Spanish revolution, political unrest in Europe, and the general discontent of a people at home who were, at last, "having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy" (145). It was a time of fear and uncertainty, as one recent historian puts it, with "nothing of the abstract in the pinched and anguished lives of millions of ordinary Americans" (Watkins 13). Bread lines and protest lines alike were long, but so were those at movie houses, where people like Tom Wingfield sought relief in Shirley Temple's sweetness, in splendid epics such as *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935), or in screwball comedies such as Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert's *It Happened One Night* (1934). In the daylight, there was little tolerance in the scheme of things for those who would avoid practicalities. There was little room for a poet, consumed and driven, as Tom tells his mother he is, by "so much in [his] heart that [he] can't describe" (145). There was little tolerance for one who, as Amanda admonishes her son, "ignores the fact that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it!" (185).

In some ways, Jim O'Connor, Tom's colleague at the Continental Shoemakers and Laura's unwitting "gentleman caller," might be seen as the ideal man of the 1930s. He is the prototypical all-American boy, handsome and pure of heart, wearing "the scrubbed and polished look of white dishware" (190) and fueled by pure gumption and an absolute faith in the benefits of acquiring "social poise" (199). These fine qualities add up to something much less than ideal, however—as Jim's relative lack of success since his glory days on the debate team and in the chorus attests. Instead, they merely serve to point up another fact of life in Depression-era America that caused problems for people like Jim, as well as Tom: a pervasive de-emphasis of individuality in favor of concern for the "group." As Malcolm Cowley once remarked, the thirties were a time when virtually everyone was swept along in "a daydream of revolutionary brotherhood," living a collective passion that he could see especially "in the shining eyes of younger people," particularly those who saw themselves as artists (xii). Oddly enough, Tom and Jim's difference from their culture on this point, which goes unacknowledged by both young men, is perhaps the only thing they really have in common. The whole society seems to be moving in an opposite sociological direction while Jim is mastering the essentials of public speaking in an effort to grease his singularly focused climb up the ladder of capitalism—and while Tom, instead of working at the job he is being paid for, indulges himself by writing poems on the insides of box lids to vent whatever he feels "starting to boil inside" (202).

Significantly, in his first great confrontation with his mother, in scene three, Tom is most distressed by the fact that he has "*no thing*, no single thing—in my life here that I can call my OWN!" (161). His only interest in "unity" is the desire to join the Union of Merchant Seamen and to do so to satisfy a thirst for first-hand "adventure" (173). When he is challenged on this point, particularly through his mother's repeated accusations of self-indulgence, he becomes unhinged and typically shouts some thin defense of himself, usually just as he walks out the door. In fact, the last words from his mother that Tom can recall are from her final dismissal after the gentleman-caller fiasco and just before he leaves St. Louis for good. "Go, then!" she shouts. "Go to the moon—you selfish dreamer!" (236). Tom feels the point but cannot act on it to change anything about how he lives his life, just as he feels but is unresponsive to the social force behind her earlier plea to him: "We have to do all that we can to build ourselves up. In these trying times we live in, all that we have to cling to is—each other" (171).

Perhaps the clash of Tom's "solitary and unseen" self with his society is not wholly his fault, however. The play suggests that his models for "contributing" have been something less than ideal, and ironically one of the biggest hindrances has been his mother herself. In several of the

examples already mentioned, Amanda chastises her son for not doing his part as the proverbial "man of the family," for not being sensitive enough to the most basic "plans and provisions" for family life (174).[2] Yet too often Amanda's messages for him are mixed. In the same breathy gestures with which she begs Tom to engage life with enthusiasm, to "Rise and Shine!" (168), she seems perversely dedicated to keeping him subordinate to her. In instances throughout the play, from directing Tom's eating—"Honey, don't *push* with your fingers. If you have to push with something, the thing to push with is a crust of bread. And chew—chew!" (146)—to her harping on points such as the number of cigarettes he smokes, Amanda insinuates her son's dependence or incompetence in the most basic aspects of living, even as she urges him to confront the world like the twenty-three-year-old man that he is. She wants him to stay away from the "movies," or wherever he is wasting his time, and to dedicate himself to the idea that all a person has to do is "Try and you will *succeed*!" (171). But when he hasn't brushed down his cowlick adequately or quickly enough, she grabs a hairbrush and does it for him, since, after all, she tells him, "You look so pretty when your hair is combed!" (178). Amanda thinks she is building her son up by telling him, "I've had to put up a solitary battle all these years. But you're my right-hand bower! Don't fall down, don't fail!" (170). But it should be no wonder at all that he responds, "gently," according to the stage directions, and rather flatly (even impotently), "I try, Mother" (170).

Amanda's insistence on controlling Tom is clearly a product of her legitimate fear that he is destined to turn out like his father. This sense overcomes her in scene four, when she begs Tom to ignore his "craze for adventure" (174) a while longer and to own up to what she sees as his responsibilities:

> Oh, I can see the handwriting on the wall as plain as I see the nose in front of my face! It's terrifying! More and more you remind me of your father! He was out all hours without explanation—Then *left! Goodbye!* And me with the bag to hold. I saw that letter you got from the Merchant Marine. I know what you're dreaming of. I'm not standing here blindfolded.... (175)

Tom can provide someone to take his place if he feels the need to launch himself "whichever way the wind blows," she says (175); but in the meantime, he is expected to play the part his mother and his culture have determined for him, regardless of the fact that he has not been cultur*ed* to do so.[3] However, since he has all his life been treated less as a participant than as the family's sometimes irascible and disagreeable pawn, the responsibilities asserted for Tom by his mother don't stimulate him at all. They just make him feel, as he tells her, like "a slave" (161).

Life with his family overwhelms Tom, makes him feel small and insignificant; he feels unstable regarding every point on which he is expected to stand as "the man" of the family. He is ill-equipped to care about such matters as fixing a light bulb or even whether Laura gets her gentleman caller, and so his place at home seems profoundly unproductive. Yet Williams provides a particularly revealing indication of Tom's sense of a connection with a life larger than the one commencing inside his mother's apartment, that symbolic site of modern society's urge "to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism" (143). When Tom comes home a little drunk, after that first great explosive argument with his mother in scene four, the stage directions tell us there is a "deep-voiced church bell tolling the hour of five." As Tom arrives on the scene, we are told, with "each solemn boom of the bell in the tower, he shakes a little noisemaker or rattle as if to express the tiny spasm of man in contrast to the sustained power and dignity of the Almighty" (166). It is a magnificent moment for understanding Tom's own sense of his place in the world and for understanding why he would need so desperately to find a way out of his present circumstances. He wants his life to express that "tiny spasm of man"; he is desperate for the chance to engage and enact life as the man he feels he is meant to be. He is tired of "waiting for bombardments" (184). As he tells Jim, "I'm tired of the *movies* and I am *about* to *move*" (201).

The only problem, of course, is that Tom's only observable model for this kind of life is the one set by his father, that "fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in [a] larger-than-life-size photograph" (145) but whose cryptically eternal smile every one of the Wingfields confronts every day. He was a man who cut himself free when he needed to—when he "fell in love with long distances" (145)—and how he has made out, no one knows. There is not, then, much of a guarantee attached to the journey that Tom begins, a life devoted to "attempting to find in motion what was lost in space" (237). Apparently, it has been something less than satisfactory, for the very act of Tom's narration of the play, as Delma Presley has observed, is evidence of an unrequited "quest," of movement forward always "burden[ed] [by] the memory of his past" (71). But at the moment Tom finally leaves Amanda and Laura, and the world they inhabit, it is absolutely his only option.

Williams only slightly revised his ideas on the primacy of that "solitary and unseen" self, that essential self, that resides in us all. In a 1973 interview with Robert Jennings, he suggested that, while he would never stoop to "hypocrisy" or "wearing masks," he did believe that there were times when "one must just behave in a manner that is not precisely instinctual" (84). This seems to be a lesson he had learned since creating Tom Wingfield, for it precisely expresses Tom's problem. In one of the most famous lines from

the play, Tom tells his mother why he cannot be happy with his job or, by implication, with anything about his present life, which the job is seen to represent: "Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse!" (174). The source of Tom's angst, and the conflict at the heart of Tennessee Williams's first great play, is that a sensitive young man is not by instinct a provider, a group-player, or anything else that is easily compatible with a homogenizing culture. In fact, Williams seems to insist, culture itself will serve as a natural and unavoidable antagonist for those who find themselves compelled to follow the dictates of instinct (or spirit or heart or any of its other names) over the dictates established by community, afflicting them with a tragic sense of inadequacy, of betrayal, even though they are convinced that their compulsion is essential and right.

Notes

[1]For a compact review of Williams's tendency to write his life into his art, particularly *The Glass Menagerie*, see Delma Presley's chapter, "The Voyage of Tom Williams" (85–98). Ronald Hayman notes some of the autobiographical features of the play in *Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else Is an Audience* (94–95). It is not difficult, then, to appreciate Thomas L. King's argument for the primacy of Tom Wingfield's soliloquies in deciding the thematic heart of *Menagerie*: "They reveal Tom as an artist figure whose utterances show how the artist creates, using the raw material of his own life" (86).

[2]Tom's relationship with Amanda has been a perennial topic in critical discussions of the play. For good treatments of the ways her expectations frustrate him, see Presley (50); Nancy M. Tischler (94–98); and especially Eric P. Levy, who maintains that Tom is "exposed to the mirror of parental judgment held up by his mother" (531) and is eternally "haunted by the mirror of parental judgment" (532).

[3]In his book on Williams and Arthur Miller, David Savran observes that American gender roles became fully institutionalized as social roles during the 1930s, when they were "efficiently implanted and consolidated and made virtually synonymous with membership in the nuclear family" (10). Savran does not treat Tom (as son and as pseudo-father/provider) in this light, however.

Works Cited

Cowley, Malcolm. *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s*. New York: Viking-Penguin, 1981.

Davis, Joseph K. "Landscapes of the Dislocated Mind in Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*." *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*. Ed. Jac Tharpe. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1977. 192–206.

Hayman, Ronald. *Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else Is an Audience*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993.

Jennings, C. Robert. "Playboy Interview: Tennessee Williams." *Playboy* Apr. 1973: 69–84.

King, Thomas L. "Irony and Distance in *The Glass Menagerie*." *Tennessee Williams*. Modern Critical Views. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea, 1987. 85–94.

Levy, Eric P. "'Through Soundproof Glass': The Prison of Self-Consciousness in *The Glass Menagerie*." *Modern Drama* 36 (1993): 529–37.

Miller, Arthur. "An Eloquence and Amplitude of Feeling." *TV Guide* 3 Mar. 1984: 30.

Presley, Delma E. The Glass Menagerie: *An American Memory*. Twayne's Masterwork Studies 43. Boston: Twayne, 1990.

Savran, David. *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992.

Tischler, Nancy M. *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan.* New York: Citadel, 1961.
Watkins, T. H. *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s.* Boston: Little, 1993.
Williams, Tennessee. "The Catastrophe of Success." Preface to Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 135–41.
———. *The Glass Menagerie. The Theatre of Tennessee Williams.* Vol. 1. New York: New Directions, 1971. 123–237.

Virginia Military Institute