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Irony and Distance in
The Glass Menagerie

Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie, though it has achieved a firmly established position in the canon of American plays, is often distorted, if not misunderstood, by readers, directors, and audiences. The distortion results from an overemphasis on the scenes involving Laura and Amanda and their plight, so that the play becomes a sentimental tract on the trapped misery of two women in St. Louis. This leads to the neglect of Tom's soliloquies—speeches that can be ignored or discounted only at great peril, since they occupy such a prominent position in the play. When not largely ignored, they are in danger of being treated as nostalgic yearnings for a former time. But they are not sentimental excursions into the past, paralleling Amanda's, for while they contain sentiment and nostalgia, they also evince a pervasive humor and irony and, indeed, form and contain the entire play.

Judging from the reviews, the distortion of the play began with the original production. The reviews deal almost wholly with Laurette Taylor's performance, making Amanda seem to be the principal character, and nearly ignore the soliloquies.\(^1\) Even the passage of time has failed to correct this tendency, for many later writers also force the play out of focus by pushing Amanda forward.\(^2\) Among the original reviewers, Stark Young was one of the few who recognized that the play is Tom's when he said: "The story . . . all happens in the son's mind long afterward. . . ."\(^3\) He also recognized that the

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\(^1\) Lloyd Lewis, describing the Chicago production for the readers of The New York Times, Jan. 14, 1945, II, p. 2, said that Eddie Dowling had "brought back Laurette Taylor as a great character actress," called her performance a "tour de force," and, indeed, hardly mentioned anything but her performance in his review. John Mason Brown, when he reviewed the New York production for The Saturday Review on April 14, 1945, pp. 34-36, centered on Tom when he summarized the play by speaking of his mother, his sister, and so forth, but said, "The evening's performance—more accurately the season's—is Miss Taylor's." Joseph Wood Krutch, writing for The Nation on April 14, 1945, p. 424, called Amanda the central character: "Laurette Taylor . . . got everything that was to be had from the character of the pitiful and terrible old woman who is the central figure"; he went on to say that the narrator was "usually unnecessary."

\(^2\) Benjamin Nelson, in his Tennessee Williams: The Man and his Work (New York, 1961) contributes a twelve-page discussion of The Glass Menagerie in which he devotes three short paragraphs to Tom, hardly mentions the soliloquies, and shows his central interest when he says, "Williams' portrait of Amanda is one of the most compelling and honest he has ever drawn" (p. 105). Signi Lenes Falk's slant in Tennessee Williams (New York, 1961) is immediately obvious because the discussion of The Glass Menagerie appears in a chapter entitled "The Southern Gentlemwoman." Esther Merle Jackson, in her The Broken World of Tennessee Williams (Madison, Wisconsin, 1966), at least recognizes the importance of Tom as narrator when she says, "Williams creates in this drama a conscious self: the observing and reflecting 'Tom' who projects the flow of experience from his own recall. . . . As the play progresses, it becomes evident that each of the other members of Tom's family represents a position in his pattern of understanding" (p. 86). Esther Jackson, however, is interested only in discussing the fragmentation of consciousness which this represents.

\(^3\) The New Republic, April 16, 1945, p. 505.
production and Laurette Taylor tended to obscure the script, for, after a lengthy discussion of Miss Taylor, he said, “But true as all this may be of Miss Taylor, we must not let that blind us to the case of the play itself and of the whole occasion.” Young blamed on Eddie Dowling the failure of the narration noted by others: “He speaks his Narrator scenes plainly and serviceably by which, I think, they are made to seem to be a mistake on the playwright’s part, a mistake to include them at all; for they seem extraneous and tiresome in the midst of the play’s emotional current. If these speeches were spoken with variety, impulse and intensity ... the whole thing would be another matter, truly a part of the story.” Young indicates that while the reviewers tended to neglect Tom and the soliloquies to concentrate on Laurette Taylor, they were encouraged to do so by a production which made the play Amanda’s.

The play, however, is not Amanda’s. Amanda is a striking and a powerful character, but the play is Tom’s. Tom opens the play and he closes it; he also opens the second act and two further scenes in the first act—his is the first word and the last. Indeed, Amanda, Laura, and the Gentleman Caller do not appear in the play at all as separate characters. In a sense, as Stark Young noted, Tom is the only character in the play, for we see not the characters but Tom’s memory of them—Amanda and the rest are merely aspects of Tom’s consciousness. Tom’s St. Louis is not an objective one, but a solipsist’s created by Tom, the artist-magician, and containing Amanda, Laura, and the Gentleman Caller. Tom is the Prospero of The Glass Menagerie, and its world is the world of Tom’s mind even more than Death of a Salesman’s is the world of Willy Loman’s mind. The play is warped and distorted when any influence gives Amanda, Laura, or the glass menagerie any undue prominence. If Amanda looms large, she looms large in Tom’s mind, not in her own right; though of course the image that finally dominates Tom’s mind is that of Laura and the glass menagerie.

The full meaning of the scenes between the soliloquies lies not in themselves alone but also in the commentary provided by Tom standing outside the scenes and speaking with reasonable candor to the audience and reader. Moreover, the comment that the soliloquies makes is not a sentimental one; that is, they are not only expressions of a wistful nostalgia for the lost, doomed world of Amanda, Laura, and the glass menagerie but also contain a good deal of irony and humor which work in the opposite direction. They reveal Tom as an artist figure whose utterances show how the artist creates, using the raw material of his own life.

The nature of the narrator’s role as artist figure is indicated by Tom’s behavior in the scenes. He protects himself from the savage in-fighting in the apartment by maintaining distance between himself and the pain of the situation through irony. For example, when he gets into a fight with Amanda in the third scene and launches into a long, ironic, and even humorous tirade—about how he “runs a string of cat-houses in the valley,” how they call him “Killer, Killer Wingfield,” how, on some occasions, he wears green whiskers—the irony is heavy and propels him out of the painful situation, out of the argument, and ultimately to the movies. Significantly, this scene begins with Tom writing, Tom the artist, and in it we see how the artistic sensibility turns a painful situation into “art” by using distance. In his verbal assault on his mother, Tom “creates” Killer Wingfield. Tom’s ability to distance his experience, to protect himself from the debilitating atmosphere of the apartment makes him different from Laura. Laura does not have this refuge; she is unable to detach herself completely from the situation and she is destroyed by it. She
does, of course, retreat to the glass menagerie and the Victrola, but this is the behavior of a severely disturbed woman. Her method of dealing with the situation, retreating into a “world of her own,” does indeed, as Tom says, make her seem “just a little bit peculiar.” (scene V). Tom’s method is more acceptable; he makes art.

The kind of contrast that exists between Laura and Tom is illustrated by a comment Jung made about James Joyce and his daughter, Lucia. Lucia had had a history of severe mental problems and, in 1934, she was put under the care of Jung. Discussing his patient and her famous father in a letter, Jung wrote: “His [Joyce’s] ‘psychological’ style is definitely schizophrenic, with the difference, however, that the ordinary patient cannot help himself talking and thinking in such a way, while Joyce willed it and moreover developed it with all his creative forces, which incidentally explains why he himself did not go over the border. But his daughter did, because she was not a genius like her father, but merely a victim of her disease.” On another occasion Jung said that the father and daughter “were like two people going to the bottom of a river, one falling and the other diving.” We see here a psychoanalyst’s perception of the problem of artist and non-artist which is much the same as the problem of Tom and Laura. Tennessee Williams’ real-life sister, Rose, has also suffered from mental disturbances.

That an author’s early play should contain a highly autobiographical character who shows the mechanism by which art is made out of the material of one’s life is not particularly surprising, but it is a generally unnoted feature of The Glass Menagerie which is inextricably linked to the irony of the soliloquies. For the artist, irony is a device that protects him from the pain of his experience so that he may use it objectively in his art. We may suppose that Swift’s irony shielded him from the dark view that he had of the world and that the failure of that irony brought on the madness that affected him at the end of his life. The artist needs his distance from the material of his art so that he may handle it objectively, and the soliloquies of The Glass Menagerie, in part, reveal the nature of that distance and how it is maintained.

Generally, each soliloquy oscillates between a sentimental memory of the past, which draws the narrator into it, and a wry irony which keeps him from being fully engulfed and controlled by it. This tension is found in all the soliloquies, though it is not always handled in the same way: sometimes the fond memory is predominant and sometimes the irony, but both are always present. At times, Tom seems almost deliberately to court disaster by creating for himself and the audience a memory so lovely and poignant that the pain of giving it up to return to reality is too much to bear, but return he does with mockery and a kind of wit that interrupts the witchery of memory just short of a withdrawn madness surrounded by soft music and a mind filled with “delicate rainbow colors.” In short, Tom toys with the same madness in which his sister Laura is trapped but saves himself with irony.

The opening soliloquy begins on an ironic note. Tom says:

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4 Since the pagination differs for different editions of the play, I have identified the passages cited by scene in the text. The passages are taken from the published version rather than the acting version, which differs in some details. I have omitted the stage directions from the citations.
Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.

These opening lines have a cocky tone—"I will trick you," Tom says, "I'll tell you that I'm going to trick you and I'll still do it even after you've been warned. Besides," he says with perhaps just a touch of derision, "you prefer trickery to the naked truth." Tom begins in the attitude of Whitman on the facing page of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*—head thrown back, mocking, insolent, but not cruel.

Tom continues in the same mode by saying:

To begin with, I turn back time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy.

In Spain there was revolution. Here there was only shouting and confusion.

In Spain there was Guernica. Here there were disturbances of labor, sometimes pretty violent, in otherwise peaceful cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Saint Louis . . .

To this point in the speech, Tom's principal mode is ironic, but as he moves on, though the irony remains, a stronger element of sentiment, of poignant memory creeps in. He begins to speak of memory and to enumerate the characters in the play:

The play is memory.

Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic.

In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings.

I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it.

The other characters are my mother, Amanda, my sister, Laura, and a gentleman caller who appears in the final scenes.

The only break in this poignant mood is the phrase "that explains the fiddle in the wings"—an unfortunate phrase, but demonstrative of the tension, of the rhythmic swing back and forth between sweet nostalgia and bitter irony. The play may be sentimental rather than realistic, but "that explains the fiddle in the wings" breaks the sentiment.

Tom continues by saying:

He [the gentleman caller] is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from.

But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long delayed but always expected something that we live for.

With these words, the narrator drops his ironic detachment and enters into the mood of memory. The words can hardly be delivered but as in a reverie, in a deep reflection, the voice coming out of a man who, after frankly acknowledging the audience at the beginning of the speech, has now sunk far into himself so that the audience seems to overhear his thoughts. He then shakes off the mood with a return to irony and makes a kind of joke:

There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in this larger-than-life-size photograph over the mantel.

This is our father who left us a long time ago.

He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town . . .
The last we heard of him was a picture post-card from Mazatlán, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, containing a message of two words—

"Hello—Good-bye!" and no address.

There is humor here—not sentiment and not sentimental humor. Tom speaks fondly of his mother and sister and remembers their lost lives and the gentleman caller who symbolizes the loss and the failure, and we can imagine that his gaze becomes distant and withdrawn as he allows himself to be carried away into the memory, but then he remembers another member of the family, the father, and that hurts too much to give in to so he shakes off the reverie and returns once more to irony. The irony is no longer the playful irony of the interlocutor before the audience, but an irony which protects him from the painful memories of the past, that allows him to rise superior to the "father who left us" and to get a laugh from the audience, for the audience should and will chuckle at the end of the opening soliloquy as the light fades on Tom and he leaves his seaman's post. The chuckle may be good-natured, but the humor is not; it is gallows humor in which the condemned man asserts himself before a crowd in relation to which he is horribly disadvantaged by making it laugh. Tom is in control of his memory and already he is beginning to endeavor to work his trick by manipulating the audience's mood.

The opening soliloquy, then, reveals a number of elements that are to be important in the play: it establishes a tension between sentimental nostalgia and detached irony as well as a narrator who is to function as stage magician. The narrator disavows this, but we cannot take him at his word. He says that he is the opposite of a stage magician, but only because his truth looks like illusion rather than the other way round; he is still the magician who creates the play. He says that the play is sentimental rather than realistic, but that is a half truth, for while it contains large doses of sentiment, for the narrator at least, irony sometimes quenches the sentiment. Indeed, Irving Babbit's phrase describing romantic irony is appropriate here: "Hot baths of sentiment . . . followed by cold douches of irony." 6

The dominant note of the second soliloquy, at the beginning of the third scene, is irony. In the first soliloquy, Tom has provided the audience with a poignant picture of Laura and Amanda cut off from the world "that we were somehow set apart from." In the second soliloquy, irony almost completely obliterates the poignance as we see Amanda at work trying to find a gentleman caller for Laura, a gentleman caller who is "like some archetype of the universal unconscious." Tom continues the irony as he says:

She began to take logical steps in the planned direction.

Late that winter and in the early spring—realizing that extra money would be needed to properly feather the nest and plume the bird—she conducted a vigorous campaign on the telephone, roping in subscribers to one of those magazines for matrons called The Home-maker's Companion, the type of journal that features the serialized sublimations of ladies of letters who think in terms of delicate cup-like breasts, slim, tapering waists, rich, creamy thighs, eyes like wood-smoke in autumn, fingers that soothe and caress like strains of music, bodies as powerful as Etruscan sculpture.

The mocking humor in this is revealed by the derisive alliteration, the hyperbolic language, and in the humorous, parodying evocation of all the clichés of these stories. The speech makes fun of the literary equivalents of Amanda's memories of gentleman callers

6 Irving Babbit, Rousseau and Romanticism (Boston, 1919), Ch. VII.
in the mythical South. This is not to say that Amanda is savagely attacked with a kind of Swiftian irony; nevertheless, the attack is there, though the irony is balanced somewhat by one irruption of the nostalgic, pitying mode of discourse when Tom says that even when the gentleman caller was not mentioned “his presence hung in mother’s preoccupied look and in my sister’s frightened, apologetic manner.” The irony is also humorous and gets a laugh from audiences if it is performed as irony—especially at the end of the speech where, just as the first soliloquy breaks into a mild humor at the end, Tom humorously parodies the magazine stories.7

The first soliloquy strikes a balance between irony and nostalgia, the second is primarily ironic, and the third is primarily nostalgic. The third soliloquy begins with the Paradise Dance Hall:

Across the alley from us was the Paradise Dance Hall. On evenings in spring the windows and doors were open and the music came outdoors. Sometimes the lights were turned out except for a large glass sphere that hung from the ceiling. It would turn slowly about and filter the dusk with delicate rainbow colors.

Rainbow colors, in fact, fill much of the play: in the scene with Laura, late at night, after Tom has returned from the movies, the magic scarf he produces is rainbow-colored—this is one of the few scenes in which Tom and Laura relate tenderly to one another; the Paradise Dance Hall filters the dusk with “delicate rainbow colors”; sex hangs “in the gloom like a chandelier” and floods the world with “brief, deceptive rainbows”; and, in the last soliloquy, Tom says that he sometimes passes the window of a shop where perfume is sold—“The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors like bits of a shattered rainbow.” In the third soliloquy, the Paradise Dance Hall provides the rainbow colors that fill and transform the alley. The irony breaks through in only a few places: when Tom disrupts the mood of magic by pointing out that you could see the young couples “kissing behind ash-pits and telephone poles,” and, as usual, at the end when he says, “All the world was waiting for bombardments.”

All three soliloquies in the first act work together to help define its movement. The first soliloquy is fairly well balanced between nostalgia and irony. The detached irony of the second soliloquy foreshadows Tom’s struggle to detach himself from his situation; after it Tom fights with his mother and leaves to go to the movies. The third soliloquy asserts the nostalgic mode, and the scene following this, in which Tom and Amanda talk of the gentleman caller, is a tender, loving one. We see a playful, warm scene between Tom and his mother out on the fire escape which shows how, in spite of their quarrels, Tom and Amanda could also have their warm, understanding moments. By the end of the first act, the audience should be taken in by Tom’s trick, drawn into the rainbow-colored world and the pleasant memory of past times. The pain of Tom’s memory has been repudiated in the second soliloquy with irony, and, after the fight, when Tom runs off to the movies, with the delicate nostalgia of the third soliloquy, flooding the stage with rainbow light. The trick is working—we begin to think that Tom and his mother will get

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7 Paul Bowles’ music to accompany this speech indicates how the first production warped the play by throwing all the emphasis on Amanda. His music for Amanda’s recollection of her gentleman callers in the first scene is sweet, sentimental, and nostalgic. In this case the music is appropriate; however, the music for this ironic soliloquy continues in the same vein and is patently inappropriate; it seems to force Amanda’s wistful vision into a passage which mocks her.
along after all, that a gentleman caller will come to rescue them, but it remains a trick wrought by the magic of the rainbow which is broken, whose colors are “deceptive.”

The second act begins with a soliloquy which, like the first, strikes something of a balance between irony and nostalgia. Tom begins with a description of Jim in language that indicates that he has a genuine kind of amazed liking for this Irish boy. Only gentle irony is present in the following words:

In high school, Jim was a hero. He had tremendous Irish good nature and vitality with the scrubbed and polished look of white chinaware. He seemed to move in a continual spotlight. He was a star in basketball, captain of the debating club, president of the senior class and the glee club, and he sang the male lead in the annual light operas. He was always running or bounding, never just walking. He seemed always at the point of defeating the law of gravity.

Jim is made light of by the phrases “white chinaware” \(^8\) and “defeating the law of gravity,” but the mockery is mild, though it becomes stronger as the speech continues:

He was shooting with such velocity through his adolescence that you would logically expect him to arrive at nothing short of the White House by the time he was thirty. But Jim apparently ran into more interference after his graduation from Soldan. His speed had definitely slowed. Six years after he left high school he was holding a job that wasn’t much better than mine.

The irony begins to break through even more strongly after these words, for Tom was “valuable to him as someone who could remember his former glory, who had seen him win basketball games and the silver cup in debating.” And the irony even cuts against Tom: “He knew of my secret practice of retiring to a cabinet of the wash-room to work on poems whenever business was slack in the warehouse.” A degree of bitterness begins to emerge when Tom says that, with the example of Jim, the other boys began to smile at him too, “as people smile at some oddly fashioned dog that trots across their path at some distance.” The bitterness is quickly moderated, however, when Tom sympathetically remembers his sister in high school: “In high school Laura was as unobtrusive as Jim was astonishing.” Finally, as always in these soliloquies, the speech ends with an ironic barb that can often draw a laugh from the audience. Tom says that when he asked Jim home to dinner “he grinned and said, ‘You know, Shakespeare, I never thought of you as having folks!’ He was about to discover that I did. . . .”

The culmination of all the soliloquies and of the tension between irony and nostalgia that is carefully developed in them, is in the final one. Tom’s last speech contains just two touches of ironic detachment, but these are critical and are the foci on which this speech and, indeed, for Tom, the whole play turns. The speech begins with a touch of ironic humor. In the preceding scene, Amanda has told Tom to go to the moon. He begins his final speech with “I didn’t go to the moon.” This is a decidedly humorous line, indicating that Tom still has access to his detachment, but the audience is not laughing anymore, its detachment has been broken down. The speech then quickly moves into a tone of lyric regret:

I didn’t go to the moon, I went much further—for time is the longest distance between two places—

\(^8\) Joseph Wood Krutch completely missed the irony in this passage and in the soliloquies as a whole when he wrote his review for The Nation, April 14, 1945, p. 424. He said, “How a man capable of writing as firm as some of that in this play can on other occasions abandon himself to such descriptive passages as that in which a young man is described—in Oscar Wilde’s worst style—as ‘like white china’ is a mystery.”
Not long after that I was fired for writing a poem on the lid of a shoe-box.

I left Saint Louis. I descended the steps of this fire-escape for a last time and followed, from then on, in my father's footsteps, attempting to find in motion what was lost in space—

I traveled around a great deal. The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly colored but torn away from the branches.

I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something.

It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass—

Perhaps I am walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions. I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow.

Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes . . .

Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!

I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger—anything that can blow your candles out!

—for nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura—and so good-bye.

... The irony in this passage is no longer humorous. When Tom says "I didn't go to the moon," no one is laughing, and the final, ironic "and so good-bye" is not even potentially humorous. Tom seems to have been captured by the memory and the audience has almost certainly been captured, but Tom, in the end, still has his detachment. Laura's candles go out and Tom is relieved of his burden, uttering a final, flip farewell, but the audience has been more faithful than it intended to be; they are left behind, tricked by Tom who is free for the moment while they must face their grief, their cruelty, for they are the world that the Wingfields were somehow set apart from, they are the ones who shattered the rainbow.

The soliloquies, then, are of a piece: they all alternate between sentiment and irony, between mockery and nostalgic regret, and they all end with an ironic tag, which, in most cases, is potentially humorous. They show us the artist manipulating his audience, seeming to be manipulated himself to draw them in, but in the end resuming once more his detached stance. When Tom departs, the audience is left with Laura and Amanda alone before the dead, smoking candles, and Tom escapes into his artist's detachment having exorcized the pain with the creation of the play. This is the trick that Tom has in his pocket.