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Transitional Objects and Illusory Experiences in U.S. Modern Drama: A Study of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

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ABSTRACT: Lainer Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), one of the most celebrated dramatists and playwrights in the world of American dramaturgy, and D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971), one of the famous British moralists and psychoanalysts, delineate in urgent voice the existence of the intermediate, in-between area. They have utilized certain transitional objects either to emblemize definite points or to portray some perspectives on illusory experience and objective reality. This paper brings into focus the "glass menagerie," the descriptive title of Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), as a transitional object that has certain dramatic aspects of significant importance. By zeroing in on this specific object, the paper attempts to bring about a conclusion that the psycho-moralist Donald Woods Winnicott's theory of "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" in his *Playing and Reality* (1952-1971) and Tennessee Williams's practical theory of transitional (inanimate) characters in *The Glass Menagerie* are structurally and thematically complementary and affinitive. My contention is determined on the basis of some valuable passages from both works.

Keywords: external world, intermediate, internal world, transitional object, transitional phenomena

I. INTRODUCTION

Anyone, who is interest in literary studies or literary criticism, should have some knowledge about the association between literature and psychoanalysis theories. Both D.W. Winnicott and Tennessee Williams set forth in their works notable complementary and affinitive views concerning *intermediate* or *in-between space* and *object*. This intermediate possibility and truthfulness is situated neither within the personal self nor in the culture of things or the world of economic and political developments .D.W. Winnicott (2005) authenticates that the area of individual growth and experience appear to have been overlooked, while much attention in today's literature is focused on psychological reality, which is personal and inner (p. xv). Such in-between experience, where the transitional object contributes, is reserved in life experience (p. 16). After such contribution, there has been constant involvement of Winnicott in diverse philosophical, religious, political domains, to mention few, and intersubjective, moral and dialogical themes (Alford, 2000, pp. 235-159; Gerson, 2005, 107-126; Wilkin, 2006, pp. 12-18).Praglin (2016) finds an affinity between Winnicott's intermediate area and the theologian and socialist Martin Buber's doctrine of *das Zwischenmenschliche* in terms of influence on variety of interdisciplinary fields (p. 1), while Sekkel (2016) finds Winnicott's "transitional phenomena" and Walter Benjamin's "similarities" principles are created for the same purpose, that is, our life (p. 86). Winnicott's "object relation theory" is a branch of psychoanalytic theory, studies not only the human relationship and development but also the importance and treatment of inanimate objects in the culture of things.

II. DISCUSSION

Tennessee Williams' most excellent one-act drama *The Glass Menagerie* (1944-45) portrays the life of an utterly depressed Southern family who lost support of father, and now they dwell on the past and regret lost time. This family lives from hand to mouth in the hard days of a disregarded society after the depression. Williams, through the narrator, Tom, calls his work a memory play as it is based on a reminiscence of the past and it explores complex psychological issues and the paramount importance of nonhuman objects in U.S. modernism. Tom, the narrator and a character, extremely unhappy, addresses the audience and furnishes them with the key particularities and content of the play:

The play is memory It is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic....

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. He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somewhat 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 lived for.

There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear ... our father who left us a long time ago ...
(*The Glass Menagerie*, scene I, 22)

The Title of *The Glass Menagerie* denotes the importance of these glass animals as a significant central symbol in the play. It is a collection of tiny and fragile glass animals, Laura's favorite collection. Laura, the chief character in the play, describes the articles to Jim, the gentleman caller, as "Little articles of it, they're ornaments mostly! Most of them are little animals made of glass, the tiniest little animals in the world, Mother calls them a glass menagerie!" (scene vii, 82). These little sculpted ornaments suggest beauty, serenity and fragility. Laura is beautiful, but instead of associating and communicating with the outside objective world, she withdraws into her inner (subjective) world, the world of glass menagerie and ornaments. The ornaments are her first possession and she lives in a place in between the subjective inner world and the objective outer world. Winnicott (2005) interestingly explains his major concern in his theorizing on transitionality and playing, that I'm interested in the first possession, as well as the area in between the subjective and the objectively perceived. (p.4).

According to Laura, the glassy world, the world of make-believer, is real rather than imaginative. For her, the glass animals are not inanimate objects, but living objects having real spirits. The cold glass animals become warm whenever she touches them. Williams describes how Laura washes and polishes her glass things (scene ii, 27) and later she informs her brother that her "glass collection" makes her life better, therefore, she should care for them (scene vii, 81). In fact, Laura is beautiful, delicate and shy but she is not able to be easily noticed by others and fairly judged in the culture of objects, therefore, she would not stop going on about and referring to her glass animals. This is more akin to the description used by Winnicott of a boy aged eleven who suffered from fear of separation: the child is extremely self-conscious and easily blushes. He has a collection of teddy bears that he considers to be children. Nobody dares to refer to them as toys. He is devoted to them, lavishes attention on them, and sews trousers for them, which necessitates meticulous sewing, and he appears to derive stability from his family, which he mothers in this manner. (2005, p. 25)

According to Laura, unicorns like light and feel lonely, and all other horses like to go to the cinema and jewelry boxes every night. Laura's glass menagerie is symbolic of her loneliness and isolation, and her illusory experience is generated and related to our illusory experience. Whenever Laura faces lived objective reality, she seems to be down in the mouth and she fails the tough challenge. The portrayal this drama generates, seems to correspond to the truth. *The Glass Menagerie* is a biographical play and it has many biographical touches related to Williams' own life and direct experience. It is a memory story of his very childhood and his early life together with his family. Laura's role identifies with Williams' sister Rose; Laura's collection of glass animals is consistent with Rose's toys; Williams' childhood relationship with Rose is considered an emotional bond that connects Laura and her brother Tom in the play; and finally, Williams' mother is identified with Laura's mother, Amanda Wingfield in the play. Williams is well identified with Tom the narrator and character. Both Williams the dramatist and Tom the character and narrator belong to the world of objective reality. C. Bigsly (2004) writes that it provided the setting for a play about desperate measures devised by those whose alternatives have run out. In a recollection, Tom, a writer, returns to a family he had ruined in order to claim his right to write. Tom, as narrator, stands outside his family's environment, both literally and metaphorically. (p.38)

The glass menagerie symbolizes the loneliness and separation that Laura experiences. Amanda is a southern belle and a member in an organization. The greatness of her past in Mississippi and the shabbiness of her life in St. Louis, made her devoting and dedicating her life to work rather than to her family. In fact, the work-life balance of Amanda is hardly good as job dissatisfaction and personal life dissatisfaction are emphasized in the play. In another language, Amanda found it so difficult to strike the balance between being good mother and

being laborer. Thus, the glass menagerie represent isolation and loneliness and they are things that Laura falls back on as her mother could not or did not take her job as a mother very seriously. Amanda has spent most of her born days at work since it is unquestionably difficult for a family to make ends meet with two children and one parent, therefore, Laura was prone to anxiety.

Joven (1966), analyzing the character of Amanda, writes that she is shown as a person who is out of touch with reality. She is a flighty woman who causes her children embarrassment. (p.53). Moreover, Amanda is unfit to look after her daughter's safety, but a burden to her (Griffin, 1995, p.61). Laura was dealing with adaptation and the question of being taken to care, attempting to deny neglect and lack of good-enough mother by her use of the glass menagerie.

Interestingly and importantly, this is very similar to Winnicott's lack of "good enough mothering" and instance of a boy who is suffering with a fear of separation, and he's seeking to avoid it by using string. (Winnicott, 2005, p.23). Moreover, although Amanda is a well-educated and intellectual woman, she fails to be a good-enough mother for her daughter. Likewise, Winnicott suggests in his theorizing on illusory experience that the mother "makes no active adaptation" that "gradually lessens," and achievement in young care is based on dedication, rather than on intelligence and intellectuality (p.14). Therefore, the intellectual and well- educated mother Amanda does not meet the physical, cultural, social, economic and spiritual needs of Laura.

For Hirsch (1979), Williams was highly autobiographical and took a keen interest in the past (p.36). As a result, he inserted autobiographical elements into the play's structure and content. For Williams, there is no possibility to retrieve the lost past, even if you flog yourself to death. Aside from the past, the future appears to be bleak and worse than anticipated. (Bigsly, 2004, p.32). What Amanda expected for Laura's future such as her relationship with Jim and work at school has gone astray. She is very passive. Even the meeting between Laura and Jim was truly a joint effort, Amanda, Tom and Jim made a concerted effort to establish the cause of this fruitless meeting. The downside or one of the worst-case scenarios of not good-enough mother is a terrible dilemma like that of Laura. This is part of the structure and theme of *The Glass Menagerie*, that is, illusion and reality.

The most important symbolic transitional object among the glass animals is the unicorn. It is most delicate and the dearest to Laura. Laura warns Jim to be very careful in touching this specific thirteen-year old glass animal, "Oh, be careful - if you breathe it break!" (scene vii, 81). There is a great similarity between Laura and the unicorn in terms of fragility, beauty and delicacy, both are tender and overdelicate. Ali (2011) argues that illusory objects in *The Glass Menagerie* are transitional enjoyment for the individuals and shelter for their lives (p.49). In discussing the transitional phenomena, Winnicott (2005) writes that the transitional object become to be significant to the child and the parents become aware of its importance, carrying it during their travel. The parents do not wash it and allow it to become filthy and even stinky because they surely well know that she introduces a breach in the child's experience by washing it, a break that may ruin the object's significance and value to the child. (p.5). There is clear sign in Williams' play that the unicorn has become a symbol of Laura's inner subjective world. The single horn in the unicorn's forehead made it different and unique, as Laura points out to Jim (scene vii, 82). Both the unicorn with single horn and Laura who is a crippled girl physically and spiritually are unique and different. Symbolically and transitionally, the unicorn represents Laura's own self. There is a world of difference between Laura's life and other people's life. She, like the unicorn, does not air her grievances about being lonesome or unique and, like Laura, the unicorn is the most delicate of all the animals in the collection (James, et al. 1989, p. 596).

By utilizing the object of the unicorn, Williams represents sides of Laura's character by suggesting more than stating or describing. The most important scene in the play is when Jim, while kisses and dances with Laura and he unintentionally breaks the horn of the unicorn. The scene represents Jim's abortive attempt to cure Laura's loneliness and to transfer her from her idealized world to the external world by promising her the earth, but his plan does not come off, and it's time he faced up to the facts. At first, there is a flurry of activity and excitement, a flicker of emotion and interest, a glimmer of hope for the future. But then unfortunately, Jim's determined effort to save Laura's tense situation ends with a lull in the conversation, more than a touch of sadness, and there isn't even a stroke of luck. After Jim offered Laura all his most abject apology for the trouble he caused, she neither blames him for damaging the unicorn nor stops worshiping her collection, especially the unicorn, but she reacts by saying that it's not that problem and it's may be a foreshadowing for something good. Laura did not want to comment on this situation. She has not remonstrated with Jim or reduced him to tears with fault-finding, but she imagines that "he had an operation." The transitional object then was taken away so that it does not look so strange and "Now he will feel more at home with the other horses, the ones who don't have horns...." (scene vii, 85). The breaking of the horn represents only the short-term change in Laura's own life. Without the horn, the unicorn is no

longer considered abnormal and strange to Laura among other glass objects. Laura seems to get security from her imaginative family, the glass menagerie. However, it makes no sense to ask Laura about the reason for this as it's utterly impossible to account for such behavior.

Such experience will be such a formidable challenge, and Laura's experience is an epitome of and tally with many points made in Winnicott's proposed theory. Winnicott (2005) writes that the transitional object and transitional phenomena provide each human being with something that will always be significant to them, namely, a safe and unchallenged zone of experience. It is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never pose the question, "Did you conceive of this or was it provided to you from without?" about the transitional object. (p.17)

The question of inanimate (transitional) objects or characters brings me to my next point: the power of symbolism. Symbolically speaking, the unicorn and its broken horn is used by the dramatist to represent Jim's attempt to cure and reform inside Laura's broken and crippled self, to build up in her a self-confidence instead of shyness. But he has already destroyed all what he has built inside. In another language, in order to cure Laura, Jim set the wheels in motions by breaking the unicorn's horn. He hasn't broken her unicorn only, but also her heart. Because the unicorn represents likewise hopes and devotion that Laura could not find in her mother and she thinks now can find them in Jim, the breaking of the unicorn is a breaking of her inner(subjective) world (hopes, devotion, adaptation, good-enough family, et cetera), and a reform of the external world. Therefore, the transitional object (the unicorn) is neither an internal object nor an external one: it is a transitional object, its existence and aliveness determine the meaning of the internal object, and it becomes meaningless when it is no longer having meaning to the child. Criticizing Melanie Klein's theory of the internal objects (a mental and psychological concept) and external object, Winnicott (2005) writes that the transitory item is a possession rather than an internal object. It isn't, however, an external thing. (p.13). Thus, transitional objects do not belong to the inner world, yet they do not belong to the outer world either. Instead, they belong in an intermediate area between the two worlds, the inner and the external. It is worthwhile, however, to point out that the transitional object still stands for both worlds.

Winnicott's points accordingly concur with most of Williams's views that can be deduced from *Glass Menagerie*. Laura gives the unicorn to her brother as a token to take care of it because her hopes of devotion and adaptation have gone with it. The unicorn has become meaningless because it is no longer peculiar like her and the other glass animals and now it is more suitable for Jim as a representative of the real or external or objective world. So the transitional object is neither internal object nor external object but it can denote both worlds, the internal and external, the subjective and the objective. Within the in-between space of experiencing as a transitional sensation, between the inside and outside as theorized by Winnicott in the 1950s and remodified later and as already practiced by Tennessee Williams in 1940s, the transitional objects are not included in the young's inner reality yet they are not fully conceived as part of external objective reality. The transitional object is on the border between the inner and external realities and it stands for both realities but does not belong to them. It may denote inside Laura and outside Laura simultaneously without becoming part of either. In healthy experiences, the transitional object does not require mourning or repression and it's not allowed to become part of the other or part of the self.

In fact, the transitional inanimate objects, in both prose theory (Winnicott) and drama (Williams), belong to the world of illusion. Illusion is undoubtedly an absolutely important theme in the thematic and structural organization of *Glass Menagerie* and the framework of Winnicott's theory of childhood experience. In the play *Glass Menagerie*, the narrator Tom Wingfield, Laura's brother, "addresses the audience" saying "[h]e gives you illusion that has the appearance of the truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion (scene i, 21). Illusions are deceptions and misinterpretation of reality that must be avoided, but it's almost utterly impossible for children or even adults in the contexts of art and religion to avoid. (Pishkar, 2000) writes that illusion is deception, misinterpretation of realities, and hence appears to be thing to avoid or get rid of; nonetheless, human beings cannot avoid it (p.643). For Winnicott (2005), the in-between or intermediate domain of experiences makes up the majority of an infant's experiences, and it is preserved throughout life in the intense sensations associated with the arts, religion, imaginative living, and creative scientific labor (p.19). Moreover, although Winnicott is basically concerned with patterns set in infancy and childhood, he purposely leaves room for wide variations in his proposed theory: he suggests that the patterns begin to show at about four to twelve months, may continue to childhood and adolescence, or reappear at a later age. One of Winnicott's case studies is a boy aged seven years,

another case study is a child aged eleven, and finally suggests the patterns may develop into sexuality and a perversion.

The intermediate situation meant by Winnicott can be understood through analyzing Laura's state between her ability and her inability to recognize and accept reality offered by Jim. Jim broke the unicorn by touching it and broke Laura's heart by telling her of his new love, and Laura seemed to be down in the dumps. On the one hand, the unicorn represents Laura who feels disappointed and about to retreat to her illusory world it represents the inner world, and on the other hand, it represents Jim because after losing its horn it became usual and ordinary like Jim and, therefore, Laura gives it to Jim to take it into lived objective reality it now represents the external world. Therefore, the unicorn is a very clear instance of the transitional object and Laura is challenged by illusory experience and her situation is an epitome of Winnicott's transitional phenomena.

One of the important themes of *The Glass Menagerie* is the power of love. Love not only can make things real, but it can change the entire world. When Jim reveals that he and Betty, his new girlfriend, hit it off immediately and got on like a house on fire, he says to Laura that the power of love is enormous! Laura, love is a thing that transforms the world!" (scene vii, 88). Likewise, Laura's love for her glass animals is powerful to the extent it made them real and created a new world for her, an imaginary world.

Williams's play is devoted mostly to Laura. The title *The Glass Menagerie* refers to her and she is the central character in the play. When it comes to symbolism, the most significant symbol in the drama is the glass menagerie, the inhabitants of Laura's illusory world. The delicate, beautiful and fragile unicorn stands for Laura herself. Its horn may refer to Laura's shyness and keeping to herself all the time in her world of make-believer. Laura's retreat to a dark corner of the stage among her special living objects the glass menagerie, is a clear indication of her already departure from the objectively perceived world. After the unicorn's horn is broken, she gives it to Jim and decides to withdraw forever from the world of normality and darkness to her own unusual and idealized world. She prefers living among her family, the glass animals, a fact which may develop into sexual adaptation and perversion. When Winnicott tries to conclude about his chosen story of a boy aged eleven who suffered from separation, he writes that it's not hard to surmise that he has a material identification based on his own insecurity in respect to his mother, which could lead to homosexuality. Similarly, an obsession with string has the potential to become a perversion. (2005, p.25). This indicates that Winnicott's theory is not concerned with infants and children only, but it may be related to the age of adolescence and further.

III. CONCLUSION

As an artistic and literary form, drama depends not only on words but also on characters to develop the action and communicate the themes of the dramatist. In addition to animate characters, there are also inanimate characters or transitional objects which have certain significance on the stage and through which the dramatist triggers different themes and meanings. If there is a reason why these transitional inanimate objects are used in drama, it is because they share certain significance with the animate characters in communicating the themes and meanings. In his *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams employs nonhuman transitional characters to provide side of Laura's character. In fact, Williams's *Glass Menagerie* is a practical theory of transitional objects and transitional phenomena proposed by Winnicott later, and both Winnicott's prose theory and Williams's drama are psychological approaches that can be subsumed under one heading. Therefore, Winnicott's "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena" complements Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*.

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