Narcissistic Depression in Tennessee William’s the Glass Menagerie

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Abstract:
The present article revisits Tennessee William’s The Glass Menagerie using certain concepts of psychoanalytic framework like Narcissistic Depression as tools of analysis. Modern man has constantly been concerned with the problem of depression; there are also some psychologists who have extrapolated some special psychological terms about depression such as objective depression or something that Julia Kristeva calls it as narcissistic depression. In this kind, the psychic or the depressed narcissist instead of feeling hostility to some internal object feels flawed, incomplete and wounded. In this way, depressive actions like mourning, hides an aggressive reaction against a lost object or a person and thereby reveals the ambivalence on the part of the mourner with respect to the object of his mourning. Considering such a phenomenon in mind, this study strives to apply Kristeva’s concept of narcissistic depression on William’s play The Glass Menagerie. The study covers many parts of the play starting with a literature review concerning narcissism and narcissistic depression. This will then culminate into shedding light on the traces of such depression and following psychological disorder and mental pitfalls in the characters of William’s The Glass Menagerie. The findings show that all of the characters in this play lead a life of loneliness characterized by the themes of illusion, frustration and repression which further echoes the whole society being presented in Williams’ play.

Keywords: Kristeva, drama, Tennessee Williams, depression, narcissism, character.
1. Introduction

While we realize that the following review of literature on psychoanalytic theory might be familiar to some of the readers of SRJ, we present it nevertheless in order to be as through as possible. According to classical psychoanalytic theory (Abraham: 89) depression like mourning, hides an aggressive action against a lost object and thereby reveals the ambivalence on the part of the mourner with respect to the object of his mourning. In the utterances like, ‘I love him/her’, the depressive seems to talk about a lost being or object, ‘but, even more, I hate him/her; because I love him/her, in order not to lose him/her, or I install him/her in myself; but because I hate him/her, the sense of otherness in the speaker is an example of bad, worthless and destructive ego. The above self-accusation might become an accusation against the other and the self-annihilation might lead to the tragic disguising of another’s massacre. Such Freudian logic presupposes, as it is suggested, a severe super-ego and a complex dialectic of idealization and devalorization, both of oneself and the other: the set of these mechanisms is based upon the mechanism of identification. For it is indeed identification with the loved/hated other - through incorporation, introjections, projection - that is affected by the taking into oneself of an ideal, sublime, part or trait of the other. This becomes one’s necessary and tyrannical judge. The analysis of depression is, in consequence, conducted through a making manifest of the fact that the self-reproach is hatred against the other, and no doubt, the bearer of an unsuspected sexual desire. It is understandable that such an accession of hatred in the transference carries its own risks for the analysis and as well as for the analyst, and that the treatment of depression (even of that identified as neurotic) risks schizoid fragmentation. Embroidering in the same line Kristeva says:

With the treatment of narcissistic personalities, however, modern analysts (E. Jacobson, among others) have been led to comprehend a different modality of depression. Far from being a dissimulated assault upon another - imagined to be hostile because frustrating - sorrow would be the signaling of an incomplete, empty, and wounded primitive ego. Such a person considers himself to be not injured but stricken by a fundamental lack, and a congenital deficiency. His grief hides neither the guilt nor the failure of a secretly hatched vengeance against the ambivalent object. Rather, his sorrow could be the most archaic expression of a narcissistic wound, impossible to symbolize or name, and too precious for any exterior agent (subject or object) to be correlated to it. For this type of narcissistic depressive, sorrow is, in reality, his only object. More exactly, it constitutes a substitute object to which the narcissist clings, cultivating and cherishing it, for lack of any other. In this context, suicide is not a camouflaged act of war but a reuniting with sorrow and, beyond it, with that impossible love, never attained, always elsewhere (1980:42).

Such are the promises of the void, of death. Considering Freud’s theory of death wish with melancholia, Kristeva formulates the notion of depression and speak of them without distinguishing the particularities of two ailments but keeping in mind their common structure (Ibid). However, she connects melancholia with the mother, the fact that Freud has never mentioned in his theories. In the *chora*, the child is in the mother’s embrace. In this psychic space, there is no difference between the child and the mother; moreover, the child’s needs are satisfied without asking for them. As there is no need to ask for the needs, the child does not speak. If by accident the child loses her/his mother, s/he will learn language in the future, but s/he cannot articulate her/his loss. The sad child suffers this loss, but it cannot express it. In fact, there is no adequate word, which can substitute this sense of loss, and this loss can “neither is replaced nor forgotten” (Iannetta, 2002:196). In the same notion Kristeva says:

The child king becomes irredeemably sad before uttering his first words; this is because he has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother, a loss that causes him to try to find her again, along with other objects of love, first in imagination, then in words (1980: 6).

It appears that, the child may behave normally in her/his early life, but gradually one can recognize the effect of this loss in her/his life. For example, the child speaks little, or s/he sleeps most of the time. Kristeva defines melancholia as:
Abyss of sorrow, a non-communicable grief that at times, and often on a long term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself (ibid. 3).

The child is mourning for his/her lost mother. As this lost object is part of her/him, s/he thinks that s/he is incomplete and fragmentary without it. Consequently, the child becomes unable to use language, and this is the first symptom of melancholia. From Kristeva’s stand point, “the collapse of the symbolic is a tell-tale sign of melancholia” (Sabò, 2010: 57). This sense of incompleteness results in the sadness and non-communicable grief. The melancholic subject considers this grief as a private feeling and s/he cannot share it with other people, neither could s/he put it into words. Even the melancholic subject speaks a dead language; s/he is foreigner to her/his maternal language. As Kristeva admits “the depressed speak of nothing, they have nothing to speak of: glued to the Thing, they are without objects” (Kristeva, 1980: 51). Sometimes, the melancholic subject speaks but his/her “sentences outgrow grammatical/linguistic structure, it breaks out of language and denies its sense” (Iannetta, 2002: 221). His/her speech is repetitive and monotonous. Put differently, Kristeva states that:

They utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to stand still. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerges and dominates the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies. Finally, when that frugal musicality becomes exhausted in its turn, or simply does not succeed in becoming established on account of the pressure of silence, the melancholy person appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness as a symbol or the excess on orderable cognitive chaos (Kristeva, 1980: 33).

When the child recognizes the distinction between her/him and her/his mother, it enters the symbolic stage. In fact, s/he uses language to express her/his needs and desire for her/his mother. However, the melancholic subject loses her/his mother before s/he can perceive the difference between herself/himself and her/his mother. In other words, the child does not enter the symbolic realm. As the consequence, the child is not able to name or to symbolize what s/he has lost and the lost object remains unnamable. Since the melancholic subject loses what s/he loves, s/he loses her/his motivation to speak. Through the symbolic realm and use of language, the child becomes a unified subject and s/he becomes able to express her/his individuality as ‘I’. The child moves from the realm of plentitude to the symbolic realm and distinguishes herself/himself from her/his mother and her/his surroundings. When the child leaves her/his mother behind, s/he brings her back to life in signs and language (Sabò, 2010: 63). Embroidering in the same issue Iannetta says:

As a result, he becomes an “I” through language. In fact, a traumatic separation from object of love is the necessary foundation of human identity. As a product of individuation, this crisis is in essence individual and is therefore timeless and unrecorded in the history (2002: 194-195).

This shows that, if the child does not enter the symbolic realm, s/he will not have a unified subjectivity; therefore, s/he remains and mingles in a heterogeneous subject. On the same token Kristeva adds:

The early ego largely lacks cohesion, and a tendency towards integration alternates with a tendency towards disintegration, a falling into bits…the anxiety of being destroyed from within remains active. It seems to me in keeping with the lack of cohesiveness that under the pressure of this threat the ego tends to fall into pieces (1980: 19).

In Kristeva’s view, the melancholic subject does speak, but in an imaginary and creative way. Additionally, Sabò states, “unlike the true psychotic the melancholic has not lost the use of signs together” (Sabò, 2010: 60). The melancholic poets and writers recognize their imaginary father and they express their sadness and sense of loss within language. In order to share her/his sense of loss with other people, the writer reaches the realm of signs and gives name to the object that s/he mourns. As Kristeva mentions, the writer must at one time or another have the experience of loss in order to write about it (Rice and Waugh, 1989: 133). Considering the above hypothesis in mind the present study aims at foregrounding the signs of narcissistic depression and its following psychological disorder.
in the main characters of William’s most famous work The Glass Menagerie. The play relates the story of Wingfield family who are struggling through difficult financial, emotional and psychological hernia during the time of American Depression.

2. Discussion

Tennessee William’s characters live most of the time in future; however, in the strictest sense of the word they in actuality have their existence in an illusion. The characters are dreaming of a better life in the future to run away from the stagnant and unpleasant present. Merle Jackson refers to the employment of anti-heroic protagonists in Tennessee Williams’ plays and the personification of humanity neither good, knowledgeable, nor courageous (1977:87). The people of the play are experiencing a constant escaping from here and now; though they never reach anywhere. Time goes forward, but it does not carry the characters into accessions, and earned rewards (Gilman, 1974: 145). “The play is filled with those awkward, clumsy moments when people try to cope with daily living while at the same time in the grip of obsessions and aspirations, unable to see anything with clarity, unsure of putting one foot in front of the other’’(Kilroy 2000:89).

They characters in Williams’ play are passively waiting for a better life in the future without ever confronting that promised moment. Their movement is from the present to the future but the future they are experiencing is even worse than the present. Thus, absurdity is what is frequently felt by these people escaping from their responsibilities. These people are truly alone and aimless; the only thing they are thinking about is the future; thus stagnancy and passivity is the very traits of these people drowned in their dreams. These people have no true ‘careers’. They are living in a real world but they are constantly thinking about the ideal world. Chekhov wishes to reveal the importance of the present time, and to show how the future is always illusion, the past always absence or lost (Gilman, 1974: 149).

In hope of a better life in the future, these characters lose their present; it is as if they are escaping from something, searching something or waiting for something to happen. Thus, life is summed up in the past and the future for them and ‘now and the present moment’ has no meaning. Dreaming about the past and the future are the only remedies to escape from the present time. From the very beginning of the play, the sense of lack of responsibility and discouragement for meeting life as it is (the tension of the play), takes the audiences’ attention. A photograph of the father hangs on the wall of the living room and as the stage directions of the beginning of the play reads, ‘he is gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling, as if to say, ‘I will be smiling forever’. The father’s photograph symbolically encourages the members of the family, especially his son, to follow his way, to escape from their responsibilities, to get farther from reality every day, and as much as they will, and plunges into their colorful dreams.

Because of the absence of the father, all responsibilities are on Amanda’s shoulders and what makes the situation worse is the catastrophic situation of America in the thirties at the time of Depression and financial recession. Thus, to escape from these heavy burdens, Amanda, intermittently, is lost in her past or sweet dreams of the future. She is, sometimes, drowned in her past memories of Blue Mountain where she received seventeen gentlemen callers (invisible or illusive character) or plunges in her dreams for Laura’s future and her marriage. She boasts of her past and how she was able to entertain her gentlemen callers and how these gentlemen were, more or less, extraordinary rich people. Amanda, wrapped up in her own illusions, prefers to believe not in Tom’s favorite D. H. Lawrence, but in Cinderella and courtly love and Gone with the Wind. Amanda is not drowned in her past memories; she is thinking of Laura’s future and tries to make her ready for her gentlemen callers. She asks Laura to stay fresh and pretty all the time, since, as she repeatedly insists, sometimes gentlemen callers come when they are least expected.

Amanda is very much worried about her own and her daughter’s good looking. At one part of the play, she wears a girlish frock she had worn when she was a young girl in different magnificent parties, for her gentlemen callers. What is very comic in the play is that Laura is not expecting any gentlemen callers, which is in sharp contrast to her
mother’s perpetual waiting. Amanda thinks that it is almost time for them to start arriving; while Laura is living in her own dreams and has another haven to resort to. Instead of thinking about what her mother is dreaming about, she resorts to her glass menagerie which symbolizes her fragility. The play projects a vision of lonely human beings who fail to make contact, who are isolated from each other and from society, and who seem ultimately abandoned in the universe (Stein, 1977: 36).

Amanda gets distance from her family and plays a great role in disintegration of the family, getting obsessed with her past and future. She is willingly waiting for gentlemen callers, in other words, for strange figures to come and marry Laura. The whole play is brimmed with the idea of “gentlemen callers”. She cannot stand what Tom tells her that they are not going to receive any. For Amanda, it sounds like a joke and says: “What? No one, and not one? You must be joking! Not one gentleman caller? It can’t be true! There must be a flood; there must have been a tornado!” (Williams, 1945: 11) For Laura, it is not a joke but a bitter reality she is constantly escaping from. She declares: “it isn’t a flood; it’s not a tornado, Mother. I’m just not popular like you were in Blue Mountain. . . . Mother’s afraid I’m going to be an old maid” (Ibid, 12).

Intense sense of liveliness and purpose in life and just wandering about is what is much seen in this play. At the beginning of the play, it is understood that Laura has told lie to her mother about attending classes in Business College. Amanda unbelievably gets informed that Laura has just been going out walking from half past seven till after five every day, even in winter. Laura confesses to her mother that, instead of attending the college, she has gone to different places such as parks, the art museum, the bird houses at the zoo, and even sometimes without lunch she has gone to the movies and that lately, she has been spending most of her afternoons in the jewel-box, the big glass house where the topical flowers are raised.

Amanda reasons that what Laura has done is a big deception upon her, while she is unaware and at the same time reckless about her daughter’s self-deception which is her main problem. Amanda is worried about the future she had depicted in her mind; she cries: “what are we going to do, what is going to become of us, what is the future?”, “all of our plans—my hopes and ambitions for you—just gone up the spout” (Ibid, 15, 17). Seeing her daughter’s incompetency for following her studies, Amanda gets very much anxious about the future of her daughter if she doesn’t marry, too. She outlines Laura’s future in front of Laura’s eyes to stimulate her for marriage:

I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren’t prepared to occupy a position. I’ve seen such pitiful cases in the South—barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister’s husband or brother’s wife!—stuck away in some little mouse-trap of a room—encouraged by one in-law to visit another—little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life! (Ibid, 19).

Although, Amanda advises her daughter not to amuse herself with the glass menagerie and not to play eternally the worn out phonograph records which her father left, she herself is trapped among her memories and there should be someone else to remind her of her pathological obsession. She faces realities which she has never mapped out for her family, but instead of improving the situation she herself aggravates it with her pathological waiting. After the fiasco at Business College, the idea of getting a gentleman caller begins to play a more and more important part in Amanda’s calculations. Tom narrates: “like some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment” (Ibid, 22). Gentleman caller appears as a strange figure for Laura and especially for Amanda. Both are searching for a Savior who will come to help them, to save them, to give their drab lives meaning (Stein, 1977: 40).

What is really funny in Williams’ plays is that the characters are always dreaming about the future, while they are sorrowfully living in that future that they were eagerly waiting for, in the past. Once, Amanda tells Tom: “you are the only young man that I know of who 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!” (Williams, 1945: 55). Living in their dreams, they end where they began or even worse than that.
Amanda cannot believe that her son passes all his days and nights at the movies: “I don’t believe that you go every night to the movies. Nobody goes to the movies night after night. Nobody in their right minds goes to the movies as often as you pretend to” (Ibid, 27). Amanda thinks that her son goes to the movies, since he has been doing things that he is ashamed of. But Tom is not ashamed of anything. He is an irresponsible man living in his dreams idly. Tom vehemently wishes to follow his father’s way of life and escape from all restrictions, responsibilities or whatever which is close to reality. He condemns his mother for coercing him to work in the warehouse; he wants to follow his dreams rather than living in reality. Amanda’s constant refrain to Tom is “Rise an’ Shine”. Tom rises every day but he does not shine, at all. They pass every day in hope of tomorrow but they do not reach anywhere. Tom tells his mother:

Every time you come in yelling that God damn “Rise and Shine!” “Rise and Shine!” I say to myself, “How lucky dead people are!” But I get up. I go! For sixty-five dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being ever! And you say self—self’s all I ever think of. Why, listen, if self is what I thought of, Mother, I’d be where he is—Gone! , pointing to father’s picture, (Ibid, 28).

Escape from reality, aimless wandering, passive life, and self-deception are the very traits of Tom and Laura. The music in the play also ironically conveys the same impression; the music such as: “All The World is Waiting for the Sunrise” (Ibid, 46). These characters search change, success and happiness which they never reach. Laura wanders in parks and zoos and does not have enough courage to face her mother and the realities of her life. Laura is trapped in psychosis or stranded in an imagined world of the glass menagerie; she wins immunity from time only by stepping into the world of her glass menagerie, an existence where there is no love as there is no aging (Bigsby, 2004: 49). Tom, on the other hand, wanders aimlessly and from morning to night goes to the movies and dreams about “not trodden ways”; he likes to practice magic tricks and spend his time thinking about the trivial which makes Amanda very much worried about his future. Tom and Amanda frequently quarrel with each other, so the tension between the mother and son is another element of ‘indirect action’. Amanda cannot tolerate his son’s lack of responsibility and the way he lives. Tom, on the other hand, criticizes his mother, reasoning that she does not pay the least attention to his desires and does not differentiate between what he is doing and what he wants to do.

This is not only Amanda who is worried about Tom, but Laura also thinks that Tom is not happy with his family and job and that he hates them and goes out nights to get away from them. But Tom reasons that the cause of his restlessness and loitering lies in his longing for adventure and change which is not satisfied in his simple job in the warehouse. Tom believes that an adult should satisfy his instincts, which is in sharp contrast with Laura’s viewpoint circulating about superior things, things of the mind and the spirit. Thus, Amanda who is full of the future suffers from Tom’s irresponsibility and his escape from realities and, on the other hand, suffers from Laura’s self-deception, her timidity for facing realities and her resorting to loneliness and her glass menagerie.

Amanda asks Tom to find out a nice young man for his sister, at the warehouse and this is Jim whom he asks to come to their home. Tom knows that Jim and Laura know each other and has heard that Laura speaks admiringly of his voice. However, he is not sure if Jim remembers her or not. But Jim is exactly the man Laura has felt in love with, since high school and has told her mother about and showed his picture to her mother in the year book. Laura who has been far from realities and has been living in her own dreams—to the extent that several times, she brings about dismal failure and fiasco—one again is confronting reality she has been escaping from all these years. Very much like their apartment which is in the rear of the building, these characters are in the rear of their dreams and the artificial, flimsy worlds they have built in front of themselves, preventing them from facing life as it is. Her shyness and loneliness for a girl at her age is something peculiar for Kristeva’s famous term. To Laura to be alone with Jim, a stranger, is the climax of her life; while the incident is apparently unimportant. She is very much in love with him that she cannot breathe normally at his presence. When she was at high school, she became acquainted with him in her chorus, singing class and hearing his voice, she fell in love with him.
As Amanda very angrily asserts, Tom is an awful dreamer who enormously manufactures illusions. Tom, unlike other people drowned in their dreams, is able to step forward and put his void dreams into action; though at the end he fails and regrets what he did ‘peripeteia’ (Aristotelian term for reversal of intention); this is what some of Williams’ characters are doomed to, such characters as Tom in The Glass Menagerie and Blanche in The Streetcar Named Desire. Tom is planning to change and thinks that he is right at the point of committing himself to the future that doesn’t include the warehouse. He tells Jim that he is tired of the movies and is about to move, so he stipulates:

People go to the movies instead of moving! Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventures for everybody in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watches them have them! . . . I’m starting to boil inside. I know I seem dreamy, but inside—well, I’m boiling!—whenever I pick up a shoe, I shudder a little thinking how short life is and what I am doing!—whatever that means, I know it doesn’t mean shoes—except as something to wear on a traveler’s feet! (Williams, 1945: 76-77)

Tom, ultimately, follows his father’s footsteps, “attempting to find in motion what was lost in space” (123), and now after many years, he is totally regretful of what he did, which is in complete reversal with what he had expected.

3. Conclusion

Therefore, this study emphasizes the psychological disorders of characters in William’s The Glass Menagerie with an overview of Kristeva’s philosophy. These characters live in the dream-like domain of future; they live and brood in their dreams and pathologically manufacture illusions to the extent that their passive waiting leads to absurdity and the senses of ennui, desperation, and total disappointment. The play establishes several character types who are trapped in the web of their own psychological depression. Laura is the prototype of the fragile heroine obsessed with her dreams and fantasy, whose isolation draws her into a life of depressive artifice. Amanda is also a character who lives in an unreal world, hoping to gain things which are beyond the horizon of her reach. Tom is an artist trapped by circumstances, eager to his family and wishes to resolve his internal depression. The themes of loneliness and the life of illusion that characterize this play continue till the end. Obviously, there are some characters putting their dreams into action, but they ultimately find that what they have desired is an empty bubble and is not worth putting into action. It is also apt to say that the above findings which characterize The Glass Menagerie are found in all of Williams’ later works.

4. References

