

## Introduction: The Past Is Haunting.

**The memory of some past moments is more persuasive than the experience of present ones. —Henry David Thoreau<sup>(1)</sup>**

**The past is never dead. It's not even past. —William Faulkner<sup>(2)</sup>**

Many American writers are particularly fond of the theme of the past in their writings. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill and William Faulkner are the renowned ones among them, but the best-known writer who is fascinated with the theme of the past is perhaps the playwright Tennessee Williams whose famous remarks on the theme of the past are self-illuminating. Several times in his *Notebooks*, he mentions the past in a literary and philosophic manner: "The past, however satisfactory, is only a challenge to the future" (p. 107). "The past is getting bigger and bigger at the future's expense" (p. 174). Rooted in the fertile earth of the Southern culture like William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams is naturally bound up with an old Southern complex; consequently, he devotes himself to writing about the past myths of the Old South and their significant impact on the present in several of his plays, the best of which are no doubt *The Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*.<sup>(3)</sup> Although some critics have briefly and sporadically commented on the past theme of Williams' plays, although a scholar published a paper entirely focusing on the theme of the past in Williams' other plays in 2006,<sup>(4)</sup> I have not yet discovered any major and systematic study on the importance of the theme of the past in *The Glass Menagerie*. Thus, this paper is committed to systematically studying the importance of the theme of the past with careful textual and character analyses, especially the impact of the past on the present in the play.

In her critical study of *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, Delma E. Presley (1990) claims:

**First, this "memory play," as the author preferred to classify it, effectively uses lightning, music, screens, and other devices to reveal how past events can forcefully affect the present. Second, set in a bleak period of American history, it provides insight into the ways different members of a family cope with forces of change. Finally the play explores a universal conflict between the urge toward self-fulfillment and the love of family, a conflict that often arises when**

**an individual seeks independence. There are other achievements in his first long-running play, but these are fundamental. (p. 10)**

Presley points out the three most important themes of *The Glass Menagerie*: the forceful effect of the past events upon the present, “the ways of different members of a family to cope with [the] forces of change” and the “conflict between the urge toward self-fulfillment and the love of family.” Although Presley (1990) acknowledges that “these [three themes] are fundamental” (p. 10), she does not spend any more time and space to discuss the first fundamental theme: the forceful effect of the past events upon the present in her book. But I believe that among all the three important themes, the first is the root of the other two. In other words, the forceful effect of the past upon the present is the most fundamental theme of the play. Thus, I am concentrating on this theme and carefully examining its multiple facets with a symbolic approach.

As a “memory play,” the past plays an indispensable role in multiple dimensions. For Tom Wingfield, the past reveals itself as a trap, from which he has tried to escape to free himself. Yet, even in his escape, he has to carry a heavy burden of guilt in/on the back of his conscience because of his betrayal of his family, wherever he runs. Both Amanda’s and Laura’s looking back may be a futile defense mechanism, wishing to make the unbearable life bearable and livable. Yet, for both of them, the past in fact becomes a deceptive nostalgia. While Amanda attempts to keep the remains of the old days and vainly refurbish the past values of the old South which are already “gone with the wind,” to borrow Dowson’s (1891, p. 1895) expression, Laura is simply unable to step out of the reveries of her old high school days. In their haunting nostalgias, time freezes, fantasy creates its own reality. They are “clinging frantically to another time and place” (p. 5),<sup>(5)</sup> without being aware that the past, as beguiling nostalgia, deceives and entraps them into a self-indulged world that never offers any promising hope in reality. The past also becomes a myth for Amanda and Laura. If Amanda often indulges herself in the myth of the old South, Laura attempts to remain forever in a fictive, innocent Arcadian myth of immunity and purity, in which innocent animals are replaced by glass menagerie and the pastoral world is substituted by zoos, parks, green houses, art galleries and museums. Both Amanda and Laura fail to function in a modern society in which the mythical world of the good old days are wiped out by blind cold materialism embodied in “those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living units” (p. 21). Thus, while Amanda, like Lot’s wife, is “crystallized in the act of looking

backward,” (p. 149) to borrow Melville’s (1965) expression from his *White Jacket*, Laura simply becomes a fugitive who is as fragile as glass animals and easy to be shattered. For them, the past becomes an imagined protecting haven in which fantasies become reality and life is lived in illusions; therefore, consciously or unconsciously, they attempt to preserve the past or try to recreate it in their own fantastic realms, but the unsympathetic and cold reality relentlessly deprives them of such luxurious indulgence by shattering their self-wished defensive mechanism of the past.

The past generates illusions rather than hopeful promises for Jim O’Connor who also manufactures illusions for Laura with his shallow boasting, as Jim zealously tells Laura, in their high school year book, *The Torch*, “It said that I was bound to succeed in anything I went into!” (p. 94). Yet, six long years after his graduation from high school, he finally has landed at the warehouse of the Continental Shoemakers instead of the White House. The “fifth character” in absentia or “the larger-than-life-size photograph” of the father stands for the sharp irony of the past itself with its beguiling but “gallantly smiling, the ineluctable smiling” (p. 22), which has an invisibly but obviously haunting or enchanting impact on every member of the Wingfield family.

In all cases, the past, appearing in whatever forms, is a negative force rather than a positive one, as it has either made one inescapably guilty, or beguilingly deceived some, or ironically tricked others, or seriously crippled the innocent. Although the past is mysteriously enchanting and hauntingly nostalgic, it is indeed ironically unforgiving, misleading, deceiving, and destructive.

### **The Past as a Trap**

**To mourn a mischief that is past and gone**

**Is the next way to draw new mischief on. —William Shakespeare<sup>(6)</sup>**

In his character sketch, Williams describes that “He [Tom Wingfield] is not remorseless, but to escape from a trap he has to act without pity” (p. 5). Physically Tom seems to successfully run away from the family trap that has shackled him with moral obligations and social responsibilities, yet spiritually he has never succeeded in his escape. No matter where he goes, Tom “always remains attached to the past: however far or fast he runs, that

chain [of the past] runs with him," to borrow Friedrich Nietzsche's words.<sup>(7)</sup> To Tom, the past is never a haven but an inescapable deep trap he can never completely get out, but in order to obtain his freedom, he finally chooses to escape from it nonetheless. In the first half of the play, we can see clearly that Tom is indeed hopelessly entrapped in the family by social responsibilities and moral obligations.

In terms of social responsibilities, he provides the main financial support to the family, but obviously he can barely do it because of his meager monthly salary of only \$65. But his family depends on him, as the blackout incident during Jim O'Connor's visit clearly illustrates it. The power company cuts off their electricity, as Tom has purposely failed to pay the light bill because he has paid the dues of membership for The Union of Merchant Seamen. In a moral sense, he is the only man in the family who has the obligation to take care of both his mother and crippled sister, as his father "skipped the light fantastic out of town" (p. 23) sixteen year's ago and never returned. But in order to support his family, Tom has to keep doing things that stifle his intellectual interest in poetry and hinders his spiritual needs for personal freedom. Thus he is hopelessly entrapped in the family, for the family, and by the family, so he is bitter and restless.

To temporarily escape from the drudgery burden of the family, he goes to the movies and sometimes to bars to numb his restless mind. But neither the movies nor the bars are his solutions to his problems. The irritating situation becomes worse by his mother's endless nagging, so he starts to prepare himself to get out of the trap, and finally he runs away. Physically he seems to have jumped out of that trap, but spiritually, he has been pulled back again and again by an invisible chain of conscientious guilt, no matter wherever he runs. His guilt for deserting his mother and crippled sister has permanently fettered him to the trap of the past with that unbreakable chain of conscience; therefore, as William Fordyce (1998) correctly points out: "The weight of family obligations is something Tom must cast aside, but he cannot do so unscathed; after he has left, the memory of the past, which is the very substance of the play, leads him into an emotional impasse" (p. 254). No wonder, at the end of the play, he repentantly confesses: "Oh, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (p. 115). This clearly indicates that "Tom's burden is the memory of his past" (Presley, 1990, p. 71) whose fetters he can never cast off.

## The Past as Guilt

**With memory set smarting like a reopened wound, a man's past is not simply a dead history, an outworn preparation of the present; it is not a repented error shaken loose from the life; it is a still quivering part of himself, bringing shudders and bitter flavours and the tinglings of a merited shame. —George Eliot<sup>(8)</sup>**

In his critical analysis of *The Glass Menagerie*, C. W. E. Bigsby (1997) claims:

**Tom Wingfield recalls the past for much the same reason that Willy Loman does in *Death of a Salesman*: guilt. He revisits the past because he knows that his own freedom, such as it is, has been purchased at the price of abandoning others.... He “writes” the play, more significantly, perhaps, because he has not effected that escape from the past which had been his primary motive for leaving. The past continues to exert a pull on him, as it does on his mother and sister, as it does on the South which they inhabit. (p. 37)**

Indeed, the past “continues to exert a pull” on every one, especially on the narrator, Tom Wingfield, and this powerful “pull” is vividly shown in the artistic tapestry of the play. It is exactly this very “pull” that chains Tom back to narrate the play of *The Glass Menagerie* for the audience who will soon discover that it is also this very “pull” that has tightly tied him down to the bottom of the abyss of guilt, and consequently this very “pull” drags Tom to the stage to pour out his deeply suppressed guilty feelings for deserting his mother Amanda and crippled sister Laura in the play. Thus, Tom begins to tell the audience at the very beginning, “The play is memory” (p. 23), and he clearly indicates that the play is about the past of his family. More importantly, through Tom’s narration, the audience will soon clearly see that all the characters in the play are either consciously or unconsciously hunting for the past or are haunted by the past.

From the very beginning, Tom clearly informs the audience: “To begin with, I turn back time” (p. 23). Tom is turning back time by recreating that “quaint period” of the past in which he deserted his family for his own freedom. Like Blanche Dubois in *The Street Car Named Desire* and Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, Tom is forever conscientiously haunted by his own guilt for his past mistreatment of his family. As Hilton Als (2005) rightly points out,

“*The Glass Menagerie* is steeped in the guilt a man feels at leaving the women of his life behind so that he can become the man he needs to be” (p. 103). This psychological guilt is ineradicable and incorrigible, as it permanently shackles his conscience. Like Blanche who can never get rid of her guilt for causing her young husband to commit suicide, like Willy Loman who is forever haunted by his guilty feeling of betraying his faithful wife Linda, Tom Wingfield has never succeeded in forgiving himself for selfishly deserting his mother and crippled sister when they desperately needed his help in their life.

Tom’s memory narration of the play is prompted by a strong wish to have a spiritual salvation from his burning guilt for what he has done to his family in the past. At least by revealing his incorrigible past misconduct to the public, he tries to lessen his spiritual suffering from the deep guilt forever gripped by the haunting ghost of the past. In other words, he needs to loosen his long depressed psyche from the guilty conscientious grip, and to have his stained soul cleansed. As anxious and grievous people can feel relieved by pouring out their troubles to their friends or relatives, Tom chooses to achieve his goal by revealing publicly what has been haunting his mind, and the result of such public revelation is his narration of the play which shows a complete cycle of his spiritual exile that returns to its original starting point.

The fact that he has revived his memories in the play proves that he has spiritually failed in his running away from his mother and sister. Thus at the end of the play, he tells the audience:

**I didn’t go to the moon, I went much further—for time is the longest distance between two places. ...but I was pursued by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise.... Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turned and looked into her eyes.... Oh Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!**  
(pp. 114-115)

Clearly Tom’s escape is a futile gesture, as Mary Ann Corrigan (1977) suggests, “The episodes of *The Glass Menagerie* reveal Tom’s gradually moving toward a break with his family that only years later he recognizes as a futile gesture” (p. 379). William Fordyce (1998) also observes: “Tom is in a position to use his pain and guilt as a measure of his emerging maturity as a human being.... However, the fact that years have gone by and he is still wandering in a spiritual limbo seems to make his quest a lost cause” (p. 262). Indeed, during the years of his escape, he has tried all possible ways to appeal to “anything that can blow [Laura’s] candles

out” (p. 118) because of his strong guilty feelings, but he has never succeeded in casting them off to achieve his spiritual salvation. The burning candles have been scorching and broiling his conscience, no matter how he wishes otherwise, as the phantom of Laura would and will always “touch [his] shoulder” again and again to remind him of his past guilt. The deep irony is that in his attempt to achieve his intellectual freedom and individuation, he is more tightly tied to spiritual guilt and suffering.

It is Jim O’Connor who provides the match and lights the candles when the electricity is cut off by the power company because Tom did not pay the bill, and it is also Jim who takes the candelabrum with “its candles lighted” to Laura. And more importantly Jim’s “*warmth and charm*” finally overcomes Laura’s “*paralyzing shyness*” (p. 88) and “*lights her inwardly with altar candles*” (p. 97; italics original). According to the above textual details, the candles obviously symbolize Laura’s secret hope and longing for a romantic love deeply buried in the bottom of her psyche. No wonder, “*The holy candles on the altar of Laura’s face have been snuffed out. There is a look of infinite desolation*” (p. 108; italics original), after Jim reveals his relationship with Betty and tells Laura that he cannot call again anymore. Although infinitely desolated, Laura, like a courageous cavalier, gives her un-horned unicorn to Jim as a souvenir. To the audience, the unicorn stands for Laura’s delicate, honest and innocent self, so she gives all her life treasures without any reserve to her idolized man, but to Laura, Jim used to be as unique and mythical as a unicorn in her dream. Nevertheless he is no longer unique any more, as the unique horn of the mythical unicorn is broken off in reality. Jim is gone out of Laura’s life, so Laura’s “holy candles ... have been snuffed out” by another desertion in reality (p. 108).

If Laura’s father is the first man who has deserted her and the family, Jim obviously is the second man who has deserted her in love life. Of course, like his father, Tom is the third man who deserts her again in her life. It is interesting to note that the great influence on Laura by the first two men is symbolically implied with music: the music of the old records and Victrola left by her father, and the singing in the high school operetta by Jim.

**Jim: You say you’ve heard me sing?**

**Laura: Oh yes! Yes, very often ... (p. 91)**

Laura’s answer to Jim’s question clearly suggests that she does not only mean Jim’s singing in the three high school performances of the operetta, but more importantly she means the unending enchanting echoes of the singing since the high school days. Laura still keeps “the

program” of the operetta even six years after high school graduation, and she keeps it more in her deep heart than in her high school yearbook.

It is also interesting to note that the great influence and impact on Laura by Jim and Tom is symbolically suggested with the candles. It is Jim who lights the candles and brings them to Laura in his visit, but it is Tom who begs the phantom of Laura to blow them out at the end of the play. Jim’s un-returning leave implies the symbolic extinguishment of her hope and the shattering of the deeply buried longing for a fantastic romantic love that has cheaply cheated her innocence. Tom’s leave hurts her both materially and spiritually, so the audience can imagine the invisible candle light of her faithful trust in Tom may gutter out if it is not snuffed out yet. But for Tom, the candles still keep burning. That is why he begs Laura’s phantom to blow them out at the end of the play. Thus, the candles themselves suggest a symbolic connection between the past and the present.

The lit candles also serve three interwoven symbolic meanings in the play: first they symbolize Laura’s deeply buried longings for romantic love; then, they embody Laura’s faithful trust in Tom who has ironically betrayed her for his own freedom; finally they emblemize the burning and scorching torture of Tom’s conscience caused by his very betrayal that has deeply sowed the seed of remorse forever generating guilt in his spiritual limbo. In this symbolic cobweb, the pattern of irony is firmly set in all three cases with Jim, Laura and Tom. Laura’s candle blowing right after Tom’s begging is not only ironic but also double-edged. It forms a poignant dramatic contrast between Laura’s helpless soul and Tom’s begged spiritual salvation in his restless soul. The deep irony is that if Laura’s candle blowing helps to end Tom’s spiritual torture, or if Tom’s soul is finally released from the conscientious fetters by the burning candles, then it will very well be the beginning of the peril of Laura’s social and material wellbeing in real life, if not mentioning her spiritual desolation. In other words, Tom’s spiritual salvation relies on Laura’s divine forgiveness which is possible only by her kindness and compassion. If this is the case, then we can sum up both Tom’s and Laura’s cases with Alexander Pope’s (1711/1968) famous line “To err is human, to forgive divine” (p. 11). Namely Tom is just an ordinary human being who makes mistakes in life, but Laura will be indeed divine if she can forgive the morally flawed Tom. But Tom’s open request for Laura to blow out the candles is still open at the very end of the play, which implies Tom’s strong wish is only one side of the coin or only a one-way traffic because Laura is voiceless and says nothing in this case. What the audience can see is the phantom of Laura blowing the



candles at Tom's self-wished blackmailing begging in his own imagination. Even if Laura forgives Tom's desertion, her faithful trust in Tom will be no longer the same. Eventually if it is not completely snuffed out, it may gradually gutter out. One should still remember that because Tom has failed to pay the light bill, the light is cut off during Jim's visit. That deliberate failure directly leads to the blackout of the family apartment, which foreshadows Tom's desertion of Laura and Amanda in Scene Seven. Certainly Tom's desertion will leave them in an unknown dark world, as no one knows what will happen to them, how they will survive, and what they will become.

By the end of the play, Tom is fully aware that nothing in the whole world can really blow out the candles that are burning and scorching his guilty soul except Laura's divine kindness and forgiveness:

**I reach for 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! (p. 115)**

**For nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura—so goodbye.... (p. 115)**

Tom has tried "anything that can blow out [the] candles" while wandering in his spiritual limbo, but he has never succeeded in achieving his goal while drifting in the world. That is exactly why he finally comes back to the very starting point of his life escape or rather self-exile and begs the shadow of Laura to blow them out for him once and for all. But taking all the above references into consideration, we can naturally come to the conclusion that Tom's restless guilty soul cannot and will not be resting, no matter how earnestly and in whatever ways Tom tries to get the candles blown out. The connections of the symbolic meanings of glass between Laura and Tom in the play can help to illustrate this point more clearly.

Tom's unintentional hitting of Laura's glass menagerie down from the shelf at the end of Scene Three not only causes Laura's sudden fright but also foreshadows Tom's intentional smashing of "his glass on the floor" (p. 114) in the last scene, which symbolically suggests a spiritual harm to Laura:

***With an outraged groan he tears the coat off again, splitting the shoulder of it, and hurls it across the room. It strikes against the shelf of Laura's glass collection, and there is a tinkle of shattering glass. Laura cried out as if wounded.***  
**(p. 42; italics original)**

The key word “wounded” in the last sentence quoted subtly implies that Laura would be spiritually “wounded,” for she is not physically “wounded” by Tom’s violent action anyway. The subjunctive mood used in the last sentence “*as if wounded*” because the glass collection which stands Laura’s spiritual life gets only “*a tinkle of shattering*,” not a violent smashing yet. In other words, at the end of Scene Three Tom is not yet really ready to desert Laura by running away. Hence, “[*h*]e drops awkwardly on his knees to collect the fallen glass, glancing at Laura as if he would speak but couldn’t” (p. 43; italics original).

The point that Laura is indeed spiritually wounded can be further proven at the end of the play in Scene Seven, when “*Tom smashes his glass on the floor*” (p. 114; italics original). Tom’s smashing of “*his glass on the floor*” just before he “*plunges out on the fire escape*” (p. 114; italics original) symbolically shatters Laura’s faithful trust in him, and the result of his escape is his desertion of Laura and his mother. The symbolic connection between Laura’s glass (menagerie) with Tom’s glass is too obvious to ignore. Tom’s desertion of Laura not only results in the precarious uncertainty of her social and material wellbeing, but also has the effect of spiritual damage (by smashing his glass). It is quite obvious that Laura’s glass animals not only represent the fragile and delicate nature of her person in body but also symbolize her transparent honesty, crystal purity, and delicate innocence in spirit.

Tom’s final storming out at the end of the play in Scene Seven reflects his violent bursting out at the end of Scene Three, and the stage instruction, “*Laura screams in fright*” (p. 114), obviously echoes the other stage instruction, “*Laura cried out as if wounded*” (p. 42; italics original) at the end of Scene Three. Symbolically Laura’s frightened scream towards the end reflectively echoes her painful crying at the end of Scene Three. The two stage instructions imply that Laura is indeed spiritually “wounded” when “*Tom smashes his glass on the floor*” (p. 114; italics original). This textual reflection gives us reason to believe that Tom’s violent bursting out has “wounded” Laura in both material and spiritual terms; therefore, we cannot help but doubt very much that even Tom’s anxious begging at the end of the play can really save his soul from his guilt of deserting Laura and Amanda. This can be also proven by his own final begging itself which is perhaps his last straw, “Blow out your candles, Laura—and good-bye ....” (p. 115; eclipses original). The ending eclipses of his final appeal leave the play forever open; thus, as audience, we can be quite sure that Tom’s odyssey will have no end; hence, the candles will keep burning on the wound of Tom’s guilty conscience.

## The Past as Nostalgias

**Nostalgia is a seductive liar, evoking bowdlerized pictures of times past with all the shadows painted out, thus obscuring or distorting the lessons to be learned. —George Wildman Ball<sup>(9)</sup>**

The past becomes a deceptive nostalgia for both Amanda and Laura Wingfield. While Laura attempts to remain in the sweet reveries of her old high school days, Amanda hangs onto her enchanting girlhood in Blue Mountain and vainly refurbishes the old golden days already “gone with the wind.” For both of them, the past becomes a haunting nostalgia in which time freezes, fantasy creates its own reality, and illusions replace real life living. Because of such a haunting nostalgia, Laura is socially crippled if we do not mention her physical crippling. Also because of such a haunting nostalgia, Amanda fails to meet harsh challenges in life although she courageously faces them. Her overdone care for and protection of her children, and her strong determination to prepare them for life challenges win admiration from the audience, but her irritating nagging ways of molding them with her old southern manners and past traditional mores not only produce the opposite results, but also cause the audience to lose their sympathy for her. Thus, Preston Fambrough (2005) rightly states:

**Although Amanda Wingfield, the embattled mother of Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, possesses admiring qualities, her personality is a formidable obstacle to sympathy..., [for] she labors grotesquely to mold her adult children into American success stories through nagging and moralizing. (p. 100)**

The dramatic irony about her character is that her strong will to manage her family life is most sincere and serious, but her counter-productive manners and ways of handling it are most pitiful and dramatically comic. The best example to illustrate the point is perhaps the fact that she struggles all her best to prepare a future for the family especially for Laura, while at the same time she keeps preaching the past values of the old South, as if she is never aware that “the past is a bucket of ashes/... a wind gone down,/a sun dropped in the west,” as Carl Sandburg once nicely put it.<sup>(10)</sup>

In the play, like Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Amanda still lives in the past and hangs onto the past values, but unlike Blanche, Amanda thinks about and plans for

the future of her family although in dramatically comic and ironic ways. That is why she ironically philosophizes “that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don’t plan for it!” (p. 63). But in fact, the past, as a beguiling nostalgia, deceives and entraps Amanda into self-indulged illusions rather than to provide her with any real solutions to her present problems, let alone any substantial hope for any promising future. Ironically she thinks that she is planning the future for her children while unconsciously damaging it for them.

If Tom is psychologically driven to recreate the past to lessen the suffering from his moral and spiritual guilt, if Laura is simply incapable of getting over the past, Amanda, is blindly deceived by the past. But the irony is that she nostalgically hangs onto the past while she knows that it is necessary to compromise and carry on a new life. C. W. E. Bigsby (1997) correctly points out:

**For his mother, Amanda, the past represents her youth, before time worked its dark alchemy. Memory becomes myth, a story to be endlessly repeated as a protection against present declines. She wants nothing more to freeze time; and in this she mirrors a region whose myths of past grace and romantic fiction mask a sense of decay. In Williams’s words, she clings “frantically to another time and place.” ... At the same time she knows that compromise is necessary. Survival has its price and Amanda is one of Williams’s survivors. (p. 38)**

Surely she is determined to survive and have a new life; thus, she actively plans for Laura’s future and tries hard to activate her plans, but ironically it is her very comic and pitiful ways of preparing the plans and her deadly serious attempts to activate them that derail them in reality. The exact reason of her failures is her complete incapability of casting off her out-of-date past values.

Like Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, who chooses to keep a blind eye on his two sons’ moral and personal weaknesses, Amanda often refuses to see any shortcomings of her own children. She refuses to face the reality that Laura has “inferior complex” because of her slight crippling, and she even forbids anyone to mention the word “cripple” at home, for she believes that her children are remarkable, “full of natural endowments,” and “will *succeed*”: “Both of my children—they’re *unusual* children! Don’t you think I know it? I’m so—*proud!*” (p. 49). Amanda’s remarks are strikingly similar to Willy Loman’s proud talking to his two

sons, Biff and Happy: “I thank Almighty God you’re both built like Adonises” (Miller, 1949, p. 33). Willy also believes that his sons, especially Biff will succeed. Moreover, Like Willy Loman who often recalls his brilliant successes in 1928 “when [he] had that red Chevy” (Miller, 1949, p. 18), Amanda keeps repeating her seventeen gentlemen callers. Thus, Gerald Weales (1965) comments:

**Amanda insists that she has remarkable children “just full of natural endowments,” but the insistence, insofar as she believes it, is as blatant an acceptance of the American success myth as Willy Loman’s in *Death of a Salesman*. (p. 47)**

After being forced to face Laura’s fiasco at Rubicam Business College, Amanda tries to convince Tom of getting “gentleman callers” for Laura so that Laura may find a “Mr. Right.” Yet the ways that Amanda tries to help is simply to urge Laura to follow suit and copy her past girlhood experience, and she believes that by copying her own past experience Laura can have many gentlemen callers, just as she used to have seventeen one Sunday afternoon when she was a young girl in Blue Mountain. Preparing for Jim O’Connor’s visit, Amanda takes out the dress she used to wear while receiving her seventeen gentleman callers. The dress itself is a relic of the past, which is of course out of date, out of place, and out of fashion for the present occasion. Clearly Amanda attempts to create an “appropriate” atmosphere according to her own past taste for Laura to receive the “gentleman caller.” When she actively puts on the show for Laura to imitate, comically she is not at all aware of her ridiculous but comic behavior. Although she does it comically, she is deadly serious and sincere in doing it all for Laura, trying to force her own outdated past values of a Southern belle onto Laura. In this respect, Amanda perhaps can be compared to Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, who stubbornly believes that his past can be repeated, but finally he not only fails but also has lost his own life for his illusions. Although Amanda does not die in the play, her failure in repeating the past is clearly similar to Jay Gatsby’s. If the nature of Gatsby’s tragedy derived from his stubborn attempt to repeat his nostalgic past is different from that of Amanda’s in terms of the shocking effect, the sharp irony is certainly similar in both Fitzgerald’s novel and Williams’ play.

Amanda’s comic tragedy is that she honestly believes in what she is doing but completely blind to the reality that the effect is just the opposite to what she wishes, and her behavior is comically pitiful even though Williams intends to create pathos through the

character of Amanda because she indeed loves and cares for her children too much in a wrong way. In effect, she becomes an “overbearing [woman] who at first seem[s] determined to force [her daughter] even deeper into social withdrawal by crushing [her] with a sense of social failure,” as Brian Sutton (2003, p. 172) puts it. She will never understand that her stubborn adherence to her outdated past Southern values is the very reason that drives Tom away from home, that makes Laura mentally paralyzed in a world she certainly fails to function. Clearly she will never understand the paradoxically ironic truth that it is she herself who, with her own past values, has molded Laura’s mental disability, perhaps much more serious than her physical one; no wonder she still confusedly says, “My devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children” (p. 48).

### The Past as Myths

**The myths of the Old South and of idyllic Southland were avidly accepted by many Southerners and by many of their fellow Americans. —Martin S. Day<sup>(11)</sup>**

The famous American historian Bruce Catton (1956) maintains that the past of the old South “was making its own legends and its own myths” (p. 203).<sup>(12)</sup> Commenting on *The Glass Menagerie* with a similar tone, C.W.E. Bigsby (1997) says, “Memory becomes myth, a story to be endlessly repeated as a protection against present declines.... The South does no less and Williams ..., like William Faulkner, acknowledges the seductive yet destructive power of a past reconstituted as myth” (p. 38). Delma E. Presley (1990) also points out, “Amanda’s version of the past is both a private and a public myth” (p. 35). Indeed, in *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda is haunted by those myths of the old South so much that she can no longer separate herself from them anymore. Rather, she not only refurbishes them and add them to her own myths, but also makes them become charming myths for Laura. Thus, with Amanda’s propagation, the past especially the past of the old South also becomes an enchanting myth for Laura who attempts to remain forever in a fictive, innocent and Arcadian world of immunity and purity, in which innocent animals become fragile and delicate glass menageries. For Laura, the past becomes an imagined protecting haven in which fantasies become her reality; thus consciously or unconsciously, she attempts to preserve the past in her own timeless fantastic realm.

Laura has never got over the past in her whole life, for she seems to be psychologically malfunctioning in the blind materialistic world. As an extremely shy and physically crippled girl, Laura has not only failed in both high school and the business college, but also failed to express her true feelings for Jim O'Connor whom she has secretly idolized and loved. Her genuine feelings and fantastic love has never died; rather it has been deeply suppressed and tightly locked in the bottom of her heart. She has her own colorful and poetic inner world which is embodied in her precious and artistic glass menagerie with shining rainbow colors while being reflected in bright light at different angles. The transparent simplicity, the crystal purity and the selfless spirit that the artistic glass menagerie symbolizes are the delicate and quaint values that Laura possesses, and these values are also suggested in her love of classical music as she likes to play "those worn-out records" (p. 53). Her sweet nostalgic memories of Jim O'Connor are his "so—beautiful" singing in the three performances of the high school graduation operetta.

Like Blanche's world of literature, art, music and dance, Lora's is also a world of art, music, and operetta. Her artistic glass menagerie and her nostalgic memory of Jim O'Conner's singing in the school and her old music records all symbolize her inner refinement. While avoiding going to Rubicam's Business College, she goes to the art museum, the zoo, the flower garden and the movies. Clearly her inner world is also a poetic pastoral world of innocent animals, sweet singing birds and colorful flowers, yet "the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them," (p. 23) so naturally no one could see these precious values in her, let alone appreciate them. To this huge middle class, Laura's world is perhaps an unreachable and mysterious castle in the air without "practical" values; therefore, Laura's values are not appreciated in the cold materialistic world. Laura is unique, as unique as the unicorn that stands for the mythic past but was extinguished long time ago. Yet the poignantly ironic problem for Laura is how to survive in the cold and materialistic world. It seems that she is entrapped into her own impasse as she chooses to live in such an "impractical" world with her illusions reflected in her glass menagerie and "those worn-out records" (p. 53). To her, the old quaint past has never extinguished, rather it has been continuing in her inner world. Like Blanche who attempts to preserve and recreate the past, Laura has been preserving her past carefully and tenaciously. She preserves not only "those worn-out phonograph records" left by her father (p. 34), but

also the program of the high school operetta and “the yearbook” of her high school graduation, in which her secret love has been nostalgically kept while her sweet memories keep spinning and haunting.

Laura loves her glass unicorn best, for the unicorn stands for the aesthetic uniqueness and the enchanting mythical values for the human imagination. To a certain extent, the unicorn symbolizes Laura herself, as Laura is also unique and has mysterious spiritual values. But materialistic people like Jim O’Connor fail to see these values; consequently, Jim is indifferent to the unicorn and blind to its unique and mythical values. To him, the unicorn is just an unreal or extinct animal: “Unicorns, aren’t they extinct in the modern world?” (p. 101). Thus, he never understands why Laura is so devoted to it. His action of breaking off the horn of the unicorn not only implies his carelessness and indifference, but also suggests his blindness to its unique values. On another symbolic level, the breaking foreshadows the shattering of Laura’s romantic dream and fantastic love for Jim. More importantly, if Laura, the unicorn, symbolizes mythical spiritualism while Jim stands for blind pragmatic materialism, the breaking of the unicorn horn suggests that the modern world is blindly marching into the bottomless pit of pragmatic materialism while carelessly casting away its mythical spiritualism in which aesthetic values are deeply rooted. Laura romantically believes that Jim possesses all the unique enchanting mythical values, but her fantastic illusions are finally shattered when Jim tells her about his relationship with Betty right after he breaks off the horn of the glass unicorn. The breaking of the unicorn horn not only destroys Laura’s fantastic dreams, but also marks the end of a particular human faith in mythical spiritualism, just as C. W. E. Bigsby (1997) puts it:

**The snapping of the horn from a glass unicorn thus stands for something more than the end of a private romantic myth. It marks the end of a phase of history, of a particular view of human possibility. (p. 36)**

True, it is Jim O’Connor who has initiated Laura into the enchanting “romantic myth” and sweet memories of singing, but it is also Jim who finally breaks her fantastic reveries that have been preserved in her deep soul for years, and ironically it is also Jim who at last shatters her secret sweet dreams into pieces. The cold and cruel reality certainly “marks the end of a phase of human history.” In Laura’s case, it not only reflects the end of a phase of her personal history, but also shows how fragile the values of her inner world are when that world is forced to confront the external materialistic world! Thus, Laura’s “particular view



of human possibility” is inescapably and inevitably terminated. No one can tell exactly what destination she will be forced into after her brother Tom deserts her and Amanda, but everyone can understand that it will be certainly helpless and precarious. Her fate will be as predictable as Blanche’s, as it is simply impossible for her to survive in the ruthless materialistic world.

If “the animating myths of America have failed those who look for some structure to their lives” (Bigsby, 1997, p.35), Tom, Amanda, Laura and Jim O’Connor as well as the run-away father are certainly among them. To Jim O’Connor and the run-away father, “those myths are themselves the root of a destructive materialism” (Bigsby, 1997, p. 35), To Tom, those myths themselves have become the root of spiritual limbo, but to Amanda and Laura, those myths are the root of nostalgias, fantasies, unrealistic dreams, “or deceptive illusions,” just as C. W. E. Bigsby (1997) terms it (p. 35).

### **The Past as Illusions/Delusions**

**Hypnotized by images of the past, we risk losing all capacity for creative change. —Robert Hewison<sup>(13)</sup>**

**Every journey into the past is complicated by delusions, false memories, false namings of real events. —Adrienne Rich<sup>(14)</sup>**

Jim O’Connor’s past is deceptive illusions not only for himself, but also for Laura.

**In high school Jim was a hero.... He seemed to move in a continual spotlight. He was a star in basketball, captain of 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. 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. (p. 68)**

All those seemingly brilliant things at high school have not helped Jim to “the White House;”

instead, they have finally landed him at “the warehouse” of the Continental Shoemakers. Obviously they become deceptive illusions. They reflect the beguiling false splendid social façade before the Great Depression. Jim’s seemingly brilliant successes at high school reflect the delicate bubbles of the American dream before the disastrous stock market crash in October 1929, which triggered the Great Depression of the 1930s. In the play, through Tom’s mouth, Williams twice mentions, “In Spain there was Guernica” (pp. 23, 57), and also reveals, “This is the social background of the play” (p. 23). Williams’ mentioning of Guernica, on the one hand, purposely contrasts the brutal warring reality in Europe with the delusions of American world filled “with delicate rainbow colors” (p. 57) or “brief, deceptive rainbows” (p. 57), while on the other hand it also ironically mocks the American social illusions (if not delusions) symbolized by Jim’s seemingly brilliant high school “successes.”

We know that Guernica in the Basque area of Northern Spain was bombed by German and Italian aircraft on April 26, 1937. According to this date, we can know Jim’s high school years (six years before) were just around the corner of the Great Depression. So Jim’s seemingly brilliant high school “successes” were the deceptive façade beguiling real serious problems afterwards, just as the false “fantastic” flourishing stock markets had beguiled disastrous problems before the Great Depression. Yet, those deceiving “successes” are symbolic fountains that surely eject illusions for people like Laura. Although his head-swimming fellow Americans will soon fall heavily from the colorful rainbow clouds of fantastic illusions, head-down to the hard rock of disillusionment—the reality of the Great Depression, Jim O’Conner does not seem to have quite woken up from the illusions of his so-called dazzling high school “successes.” Delma E. Presley (1990) argues, “But Jim is oblivious to the past” (p. 58). I would argue that if Jim is oblivious to anything, he is so to any historical and social lessons from which he has learned nothing. He is not really oblivious to the past, as he still wallows in his high school “so-called” successes. Tom’s statement about him at the beginning of Scene Six clearly proves the point:

**He was the only one at the warehouse whom I was on friendly terms. I was valuable to him as someone who could remember his former glory, who has seen him win basketball games and the silver cup in debating. (p. 68)**

Jim’s own words are the best evidence to show that he is indeed not oblivious to the past, “You remember that wonderful write-up I had in *The Torch*? ... It said I was bound to succeed in anything I went into” (p. 94). Surely he remembers the past!

With his deceptive past “brilliant” high school achievement, Jim has been manufacturing illusions not only for himself but also for Laura. Yes, he still has his high school confidence, and that is why he teaches Laura to get rid of her “inferiority complex” (p. 98). With his deceptive high school confidence, he is still manufacturing illusions or delusions for Laura with zealous bragging: “Full steam!—[His eyes are starry.] *Knowledge—Zzzzzp! Money —Zzzzzp! —Power!*” (p. 100) No wonder, enchanted by Jim’s great delusion, “Laura stares at him, even her shyness eclipsed in her absolute wonder” (p. 100). The fact that “[h]is eyes are starry” while he is bragging the three great things of knowledge, money and power obviously suggests that he is still not only living in his illusions but also producing illusions for Laura. The great irony is that Jim does not have any of the three “great” things he is exuberantly proclaiming. He had all sorts of glamorous things in his high school years, except real knowledge. In his brief introduction, Tom mentions all Jim’s high school glamorous things, except his academic studies: “He was a star in basketball, captain of the debating club, president of senior class and glee club and he sang the male lead in the annual light operas” (p. 68). But all these things do not include any academic achievement; therefore, we have no idea what academic achievement he got or whether he had any real knowledge at all. That fact alone can perhaps foretell that he may not gain true knowledge even though he is taking “Radio engineering and public speaking” at night school now (p. 64).

Presley (1990) is perfectly right by saying that “Jim’s vision of himself as a man of the promising future is as deceptive as Amanda’s vision of herself as a woman from the gallant past” (p. 48). The fact that his high school experience of being the captain of the debating club has got him nowhere in reality can strongly predict that his public speaking course at night school, which is relevant to debating, will not likely lead him anywhere in terms of career and real knowledge. He simply has neither money nor power, as his position of a shipping clerk at the warehouse can explain it clearly enough. Even his choice of the two courses of radio engineering and public speaking can prove that he is still living in his high school illusions, as the two odd subjects do not easily match in career choices in real life. Indeed, his choice of the public speaking course indicates that his high school illusions have still been dancing in his mind, and he is still hoping to become a “president” of some sort, if not the president of the White House. But his life six years after his high school graduation clearly shows that he has not

become any president whatsoever until now and will not likely become one in the foreseeing future. Yet he still has his illusions, and those old glamorously deceptive illusions are snowballed into new ones. In a hallucinating manner, he not only indulges himself in his own illusions but also deceptively mesmerizes Laura into her illusions. When he autographs her old “program,” he says, “My signature isn’t worth very much right now. But some day—maybe—it will increase in value!” (p. 96). With this kind of illusions, he surely feels good about himself, “*He unconsciously glances at himself in the mirror .... He adjusted his tie at the mirror*” (p. 99; italics original). But, he is never aware that the mirror reflects only the appearance, never anything deeper than the skin itself. With his skin-deep knowledge of things, he still confidently teaches the innocent Laura, “Think of yourself as *superior* in some way!” (p. 99). “Everybody excels in some one thing. Some in many!” (p. 99). Obviously, the innocent Laura is completely charmed by his vehement boasting: “*Laura stares at him, even her shyness eclipsed in her absolute wonder*” (p. 100; italics original). This is exactly like what Blanche says to Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, “The blind are leading the blind!” (p. 44). Surely he is a typical representative of “the huge middle class of America [that] was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes,” (p. 23) or rather their eyes are blinded by their own illusions. Jim’s illusions have not only befuddled his own vision, but also dangerously deceived Laura and cheaply cheated her innocence and honesty, as they have indeed enchanted Laura into her own illusions which keep spinning until the moment he tells her about his fiancée Betty.

### The Past as Irony

**The past is the present, isn’t it? It’s the future, too. We all try to lie out of that, but life won’t let us. —Eugene O’Neill<sup>(15)</sup>**

The past in *The Glass Menagerie* is neither a stereotypical cliché nor a rather trite subject matter as all the above discussion can explicitly show. Another effective evidence to prove its importance is the significant impact on all the other Wingfield family members by the absent father. At the beginning of the play, Williams makes the narrator Tom declare that the “larger-than-life-size photograph” of the father is a character in absentia: “There is a fifth

character in the play who doesn't appear except in this larger-than-life-size photograph over the mantel" (p. 23). What is the dramatic and thematic function of the photograph of the father in the play? The answer to the question is certainly the impact and the importance of the theme of the past which is implied by the following statement: "This is our father who left us a long time ago" (p. 23). Surely if the father left the family long time ago, if he does not have any significant influence on the family, if he does not have any important dramatic and thematic function in the play, there is simply no point to make his photograph as a character in absentia. Indeed, the father's "larger-than-life-size photograph" suggests the importance and impact of the theme of the past. No wonder, the father related references appear no less than seventeen times in the play.

To Amanda, her husband's photograph is an ironic reminder of the past. The irony is that it reminds her of both her young husband's charms of his "gallantly smiling" which forever signifies her sweet romantic past and his heartless desertion of her and the family. But it is the father's plenty of magic "charms" that have enchanted Amanda who reveals her secret to Tom, "I've never told you but I—*loved* your father..." (p. 50; italic original). This is one of the important reasons why the father's photograph is still kept there even though it is a bitter ironic reminder of his faithless desertion of the family. To Tom, the father's photograph foreshadows Tom's final desertion of his mother and crippled sister. Like his father Tom will also have fallen "in love with long distance... and skipped the light fantastic out of town" (p.23). Like father, like son, as Tom himself admits, "I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard! ... And he's been absent going on sixteen years!" (p. 80). Indeed it is his father's invisible influence that finally induces or allures him away from home. The irony is that Tom has struggled not to follow his father's steps, but he finally does it even though with remorse. The father's influence on Laura is even more obvious, and the most obvious indication of it is Laura's inheritance of her father's Victrola and old worn-out records that symbolically stand for the old Southern genteel culture. Whenever Laura feels nervous and upset, she will surely go to play those old worn-out records. It is quite clear that she appeals for her spiritual peace through those old records. The irony for Laura is that her inheritance from her father gets her nowhere in the cold external world although it may help her feel less pressured but more peaceful in her internal world. To the whole family, the father's photograph is an overpowering shadow forever haunting them, whose gallant smiling may remind them of the big

enchancing grins of the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland* although ironically they will not offer any promising hopes for their future.

### **Conclusion: The Past as Negative Forces**

**Let the dead past bury its dead! —Henry Wadsworth Longfellow<sup>(16)</sup>**

About all the characters discussed, one thing in common is that the past appearing in whatever forms is a negative force rather than a positive one in reality. The insecurity of the past entraps Tom deep into a dark pit of unbearable loneliness, intellectual suffocation and restless desperation, and then drives him far into a spiritual limbo. The negative force of the past guilt chains Tom wherever he goes, and finally drags him back to the very starting point of his life escape. It is obvious that Tom can not climb out his spiritual abyss of guilt because the serious harm that the past has caused him is surely a deep conscientious wound which is constantly sanded and salted by a torturing consciousness. He is indeed a poet “scarred by guilt,” but he may not be “elevated by [his] avocation,” as C. W. E Bigsby (1997) has claimed (p. 33).

The spell of the past bewitches Amanda with old myths and nostalgic reveries which she will never be able to cast off; she is still too blind to see any harm of them in reality. She is simply turned into an unconscious old cultural addict without realizing that “the past is a bucket of ashes,” as Carl Sandburg (1918) once put it (p. 84). She does not recognize that in reality, the past values of the old South are “gone with the wind.” Thus she takes the heavy boulder of old Southern values on her back, climbing her life mountain by following Sisyphus’ suit. Surely she gets repeated punishment, as Sisyphus does.

To Laura, the past has caused her not only physical crippling, but also spiritual impasse. Although the past holds some unforgettable memories for her as well as for her mother, no doubt at its best, the past offers her only charming but beguiling nostalgias or rather “deceptive illusions” (Bigsby, 1997, p. 35). The colorful bubbles of her sweet reveries of her secret love for Jim O’Connor are finally shattered into pieces by the falling of the unique unicorn onto the floor. Even though her spiritual values of kindness, compassion, innocence and purity are magnificent, they fail to grasp the attention of the materially pragmatic but spiritually blinded because “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” (p. 23). Thus, in this ruthless materialistic modern society, the past, no matter how charming and sweet, offers Laura nothing substantial. In a sense, the past has crippled her physically, socially and spiritually.

To Jim, the past is an anesthesia that makes him senseless to any historical and social lessons he should have learned. What the past has offered him is bubbling illusions of his so-called high school “successes” that have blinded his vision and disabled his sight to see anything deeper than the surface, anything farther than the façades of social and historical affairs, anything further than the superficialities of true human values. To some extent, what Herman Melville (1967) says in *White Jacket* may stand true in terms of the fates of Amanda, Laura, Tom, and Jim, “The Past is, in many things, the foe of mankind.... In the Past is no hope.... Those who are solely governed by the Past stand like Lot’s wife, crystallized in the act of looking backward, and forever incapable of looking before” (p. 149).

### Footnotes

- (1) Thoreau, H. D. (1906: 41), "Letter to Lucy Brown."
- (2) William, F. (1960: 81), *Requiem for a Nun*.
- (3) Part of this paper was presented at *The International Conference on English Education*, Shih Chien University, Taipei, Taiwan, on April 27, 2008.
- (4) Lee, Y. J. (2006: 231-250), "The Past in Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo* and *The Night of the Iguana*."
- (5) All the page number references of the play refer to the text of Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie* (1970 New Directions edition).
- (6) Shakespeare, W. (1622/1988: 825). *The Tragedy of Othello*. (Act 1, Scene 3: 203-204)
- (7) Nietzsche, F. (1980: 8), *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*.
- (8) Eliot, G. (1964: 597), *Middlemarch*.
- (9) Ball, G. W. (1971: 45), "How Not to Look Backward."
- (10) The verses quoted are from the second last stanza of Carl Sandburg's "Prairie."
- (11) Day, M. S. (1976: 505). For further discussion of the aristocratic values of the old South, to which Amanda tenaciously clings, see the famous American historian, Bruce Catton's essay (1956: 202-205). "Grant and Lee: A Study in Contrast."
- (12) Hewison, R. (1987: 166), *The Heritage Industry*.
- (13) Rich, A. (1995: 15), *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.
- (14) O'Neil, E. (1955: 87). *Long Day's Journey into Night*.
- (15) The verse quoted is from the sixth stanza of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life."



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