

Able-Bodied Narratives of Disability: Importance of ‘crippled’ Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*

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Abstract

The character of Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* often gets overlooked in disability studies concerning theatre since it is a memory play and thus not entirely realistic. However, the representation of the disabled character by an able-bodied one (her brother, Tom) makes it even more pertinent for one to analyse the play in order to address the tropes used in theatre to portray disability. The paper aims to investigate how Tennessee Williams, through the character of Laura, contributes to disability theatre. Keeping in mind Sieber's idea of "how some bodies make other bodies feel," the play can be explored as a realistic depiction of the effects of disability on both the individual and those around them. Disability cannot be excluded from social representation in any form of media because it is not an isolated experience but a social category at par with race, class, and gender. It creates a community with a desire to both represent and be represented. And, like other communities, it has a history that resists being viewed solely as against the so-called "normal" bodies. Disability history, therefore, seeks to demonstrate that it can be represented as something valuable, as opposed to the typical depiction of the 'loss' of normalcy. The paper then addresses how *Glass Menagerie* as a modernist play contributes to the history of disability through non-conventional ways. For instance, Amanda's insistence on not using the word 'cripple' will help readers identify the importance of reclaiming the word. The inherent ableist language used throughout the play brings out the human determination of disregarding the differences of the human body, seeing the differently-abled only as individuals who 'lack', thereby invalidating their

identity. The paper will conclude by stating that, while Laura's character is not an ideal character to study disability, the play provides its audience with an authentic disability experience.

Keywords:

Disability, Laura, Theatre, Representation

Scholars have long studied disability as a social construct, similar to class and gender. However, one must also look for disability in other mediums like visual media. (Cinema and Theatre) Performative genres like theatre have a wider outreach since they address spectators rather than readers and thus bear the responsibility to convey and represent to a larger audience. A disability perspective helps in the critical analysis of problems that may exist in the narrative and representational modes of these texts. By challenging what is considered the 'norm,' disability studies can be seen to challenge the dominance of ableist ideologies in drama.

Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) is a memory play that develops on different themes like family dysfunction, the American Dream, reality and illusion by intersecting through the issue of disability. The paper argues that *The Glass Menagerie*, which has often been overlooked in disability studies concerning theatre, can be re-read as a play that authentically represents the influence of the socio-cultural environment on a disabled character. When viewed through an ableist lens, Laura is the crippled and tragic heroine, but when perceived through a disability-centred lens, we see her as the one character who is aware of her physical condition and thus abandons her struggle to become a part of what is considered normative society. Unlike other characters in the play who keep aspiring towards The American Dream, Laura sees it as a mirage for those in a disadvantaged position.

Tom, the narrator of this play, clarifies at the beginning of scene 1 that since it is a memory play, "it omits some details; others are exaggerated." (Williams 22) Laura's disability is frequently neglected in studies of the play perhaps because the writing is not entirely realistic. As Tom states in his monologue with which the play opens, the story he offers is reconstructed through memory. But, it is this very action of reconstruction that makes the play's representation of disability so striking – the fact that Laura's disability is offered through the memory lens of an able-bodied character.

When read in lieu with Sieber's concept of disability studies as an investigation of "how some bodies make other bodies feel", (Siebers 3) the play allows one to analyze how the able-bodied perception of disability influences the identities of a disabled person. *The Glass Menagerie*, as a play about relationships, investigates the influence of the same on its central protagonist, Laura. Talking about Laura's disability in hushed voices and as something that needs to be hidden worsens Laura's fragile anxious state. She spends most of her time worrying about how others will perceive her disability, whether at school or elsewhere in public. Her glass menagerie then becomes her refuge from the inadequate fears that occupy her mind.

Laura inhabits her world of the glass menagerie because it gives her a sense of control and power that she does not have in the real world. It happens because Amanda makes plans for the future of both her children while completely disregarding their wishes. Michael Paller writes of Laura's menagerie, "Just as Tom has his secret life, Laura has hers, and it provides her with not only a place to escape to, but also a source of strength." (as cited in Weiso, p.13) Laura cherishes the fragility of her menagerie in a measure that almost equals the way other characters focus on hers.

Tom Wingfield, the narrator, in one of his conversations with Amanda, says:

"Laura is very different from other girls..... Not quite all – in the eyes of others – strangers – she's terribly shy and lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house." (Williams 71)

Tom merely states what the rest of the world sees when they look at people like Laura. He admits that Laura is crippled. Amanda, on the other hand, refuses to deal with that reality when she tries to negate Laura's disability by suggesting it is something which can be negotiated by her beauty.

AMANDA: "Nonsense! Laura, I've told you never, never to use that word. Why, you're not crippled, you just have a little defect — hardly noticeable, even!" (Williams 38)

Williams' focus on Amanda's denial brings into attention the way the word 'cripple' is treated as an insult for the disabled. As Kent points out, there is a powerful directive against acknowledging disability as part of the identity:

"Amanda insists that the word "crippled" must never be spoken, refusing to let Laura stereotype herself as handicapped. But her extreme reaction whenever the word is uttered indicates a more insidious attitude. For Amanda, there is something unspeakable about Laura's condition, something that must be denied and hidden away. To be "crippled" is somehow

shameful, a disgrace. Laura has never been allowed to acknowledge her lameness as part of herself.” (Kent 97)

The banishing of such words from the family’s vocabulary in speaking of Laura as a disabled person denies her the right to acknowledge what is part of her body due to which she struggles to form an identity. Eli Clare argues that “Queer and Cripple are cousins: words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics.” Therefore, there is a need to reclaim terms like ‘crip’ that were, and are still being used to humiliate those with disability.

Jim O’Connor is described by the narrator as the most realistic character in the play and hence, attuned to the world which he inhabits unlike the members of the Wingfield family. His response to Laura’s disability being hardly noticeable isn’t correct but it is reflective of how able-bodied persons refuse to take into account disability as a variation of the human body by not acknowledging its presence. Another common trope brought into play through Jim’s character is his analysis of what he ‘believes’ to be Laura’s problem wherein the able-bodied person is shown to have more knowledge of the disabled person’s problem than the latter herself.

JIM: “Now I’ve never made a regular study of it, but I have a friend who says I can analyze people better than doctors that make a profession of it. I don’t claim that to be necessarily true, but I can sure guess a person’s psychology, Laura! . . . Yep—that’s what I judge to be your principal trouble. A lack of confidence in yourself as a person.” (Williams 108)

Jim and Amanda are both characters who represent the cultural values of their society which is obsessed with the concept of the ‘normal.’ They emphasise the importance of a standardised society in which differences are not embraced, and their ableist ideology is evident by the fact that they disregard Laura’s disability.

Another similarity between Jim and Amanda’s perspectives is their insistence on Laura’s ‘specialness’:

Jim: “A little physical defect is what you have. Hardly noticeable even! Magnified thousands of times by imagination! You know what my strong advice to you is? Think of yourself as superior in some way!” (Williams 108)

and

TOM: "Laura is very different from other girls."

AMANDA: "I think the difference is all to her advantage." (Williams 71)

This attitude of ascribing 'specialness' to the disabled person works in the opposite direction of inclusion, and to insist on it is to concretize the hierarchies that must be dismantled. "All of the external pressures put on Laura as a disabled woman, layered with the language of diagnosis, shape an overweening sense of what ableist attitudes she has internalised over the years." (Fox 140)

The nickname 'Blue Roses', given to Laura by Jim is a symbol with no history and meaning of its own. It is a picture that can exist only in imagination, with no existence in the real world. Critics have often attributed this word to Laura's unearthly beauty and fragility; however, it also signifies the hesitance in acknowledging disability as part of the world. Disability, like blue roses, is not seen as part of the world. Such an unearthly word used as a nickname denies addressing disability as a variation of the types of bodies inhabited by humankind.

To contrast Tom's assertion that Laura has an isolated presence due to her peculiarity, Williams inserts scenes where we are told that Laura skips business school and roams around visiting Forest Park, Zoo and the St. Louis Art Museum. One thing common in all these places is that they keep either paintings, flowers or animals preserved by locking them up to be displayed as the 'other'. Laura's choice of visiting these places reflects her desire to find for herself a place within her surroundings.

Disability not only imprisons the person inflicted with it but also affects those around. For instance, Tom, our narrator, seems like a prisoner of Laura's disability as it puts pressure on him to be the parental child and look after her. The guilt of leaving Laura for his own future haunts him. Amanda, who never admits throughout the play that her daughter is crippled, admits so in the last scene, only to induce in Tom the burden that comes with being in relation with the disabled person.

AMANDA: "Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job! Don't let anything interfere with your selfish pleasure! Just go, go, go— to the movies!" (Williams 125)

There is no doubt that Laura's psychological as well as physical alienation from the world she inhabits is deeply tragic in nature. However negative her isolation may be, Laura's character rightfully portrays "the experience of a disabled woman in a society obsessed with

compulsory able-bodiedness” (Fox 137). Instead of looking back at the past (as Amanda does) or looking forward to the future (as Tom does), Laura finds her escape in the present in her glass menagerie. She succumbs to the reality of her disability and abandons the struggle that a disabled person has to go through in order to be part of society.

In the character of Laura, one sees the intersection of class and gender with disability. By integrating three socially disadvantaged positions in Laura’s personality, Williams points to the influence one has over another. Her disability becomes a bigger problem as she is a woman expected to entertain gentlemen callers. This expectation becomes higher when it is a woman belonging to the lower class as the need for marriage and financial stability becomes more important.

Since *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play, one of its characteristics is also that it records a life-changing event. We see this radical change occur in Laura in the last scene when Jim breaks the horn of a unicorn, her favourite animal in the glass menagerie. She mentions earlier how the unicorn is her favourite but when Jim breaks the unicorn, there are no stage directions indicating that she even twitches. This absence of reaction can be seen as Williams’ intention to let the audience note that Laura as the only disabled person in the play accepts the difference in one’s body as a variant instead of discarding it as broken. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called it “disability gain” It helps understand “how we can appreciate the ways in which disability is a creative force, one from which we have real things to learn beyond simple inspiration or affective response. Disability may be difference, but it does not follow that it is lack; it can be the conduit to radical innovation and insight.” (as cited in Johnson 130)

LAURA: “I don’t have favourites much. It’s no tragedy, Freckles. Glass breaks so easily. No matter how careful you are. The traffic jars the shelves and things fall off them.” (Williams 115)

Conclusions

Laura’s rejection of abiding by the roles assigned to her may not have been a conscious attempt but certainly brings out the radicalism in the play. It allows the reader to view disability as more than just a force that brings individuals down but something that can empower them in non-conventional ways. *The Glass Menagerie* doesn’t produce a protagonist who can be the poster girl for disability studies, but its deep study can bring out elements that

are both common as well as radical, and allow the reader to see the problems that come with seeing disability through the lens of an able-bodied person.

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