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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE EXPRESSIONISTIC TECHNIQUE OF PRESENTING NARRATOR AND MEMORY IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' THE GLASS MENAGERIE

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Abstract

Expressionism was a movement in art and literature which presented a very subjective view of the world. The movement itself revolted against realism and naturalism, while the technique distorted reality, displayed the human emotions and tried to reveal the psycho-spiritual truth in the Modern world. *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) tells the story of a broken modern family with three characters- Tom, Laura and Amanda, all of whom live in their own reality. This family's encounter with another worldly character Jim, however, crashed their fragile world around them. In the modern era, when people are often fed extraordinary dreams through different channels, *The Glass Menagerie* tells the story of sufferings, unfulfilled desires, purposes, ambition, and fear of losing self, familial discord and exposes the reality to them. Tennessee Williams in his play uses expressionism to give his audiences a look into this undetected reality of the world.

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Introduction:-

The Glass Menagerie is one of the most beloved plays ever written by Tennessee Williams. The play is not only attractive to the audiences, it is also very close to the heart of the playwright himself, being that it is an autobiographical play. The family in *Menagerie* can also be compared to Williams' own family, with Amanda representing his mother, Laura representing his sister and Tom being Tennessee Williams' himself. Williams wanted *The Glass Menagerie* to be as dazzling an experience on the stage as it was for him to live through. To achieve that he uses Expressionism as a cushion to support the memories that haunt him. *The Glass Menagerie* is a "memory play" which is narrated by Williams' character counterpart Tom Wingfield. Using his own memories to elevate the audience experience ensures that this play is a very unique one in the history of theatre.

Expressionism:

Expressionism is a movement that emerged in the 20th century poetry and painting. It is a modernist movement that aimed at presenting a very subjective view of the world. It presented a truly distorted view of the world for emotional effect; certain moods and ideas were brought out through expressionist art. In literature, expressionism revolted against the ideas of realism and naturalism. Rather than cataloguing external events naturally, expressionistic literature displayed angst and turmoil and tried to attain a psychological or spiritual reality. In the encyclopaedia Britannica it is explained as:

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“In broader sense Expressionism is one of the main current of art in the later 19th and the 20th centuries, and its qualities of highly subjective, personal, spontaneous self-expression are typical of a wide range of modern artists and art movements.”

Tennessee Williams’ style of writing was quite different from the other playwrights of his times. Being interested in cinemas, he experimented with his plays heavily and tried to give a cinematic effects on the stage. *The Glass Menagerie* was one of the most important plays to him, so he put the maximum of his efforts in the technique in this play, Expressionism being the tool to carry it out. In his production notes Williams explained his use of this technique as:

“Being a “memory play”, *The Glass Menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom of convention... Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn’t be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are.”

For creating a highly charged emotional atmosphere, Williams manipulated with the music, stage setting, lightings and the narration of the play, giving it a memory aspect. Using Tom as a narrator and also the conveyer of memories was a genius expressionist move in the play.

The Use of Unconventional Technique:

Rejection of realism in favour of dreamlike states and memories is a characteristic of expressionist movement. These works created a non-linear and disjointed structure, using imagery and symbolism in the place of naturalism. Their main focus was abstract concepts and ideas. Expressionist artists observed the alienated movement of the individual in the modern world and came to the conclusion that our spiritual need will not be met through modern societal constructs. With this in mind, expressionists rebelled against the dehumanization of man in the urban and modern space. In an article on the use of expressionism in the theatre of Tennessee Williams the author determines the themes of expressionism in *The Glass Menagerie* to be:

1. “To show reality as subjective
2. To find value in the nebulous experience of “Memory”
3. To expose the dehumanisation and grotesqueness brought about by the modern urban culture
4. To present the modern angst of life in mid-20th century America”

The Use of Character Narrator:

It is true that Expressionism distorted reality, however, *The Glass Menagerie* is one of the most realistic portrayal of the American family life. Tennessee Williams wrote this play first as a story, but he never wanted it to be an ordinary one. *Menagerie*, had been the story of Thomas Lanier Williams III, before he ever became Tennessee, a story that stayed with the playwright as a vivid dream. It is probably for this reason why Williams gave this play a dream-like quality. But, unlike the works of other expressionists, he also wanted to preserve the reality of it. This was a very unconventional decision on the playwright’s part, for which he knew he had to use unconventional techniques. *The Glass Menagerie*, abandons all the sense of ‘real’ portrayal, yet still keeps it real, by using a very convincing Character Narrator- Tom. Tennessee Williams has used one of the characters in the play itself- Tom Wingfield- as the narrator of the play. The play itself is Tom’s memory of his family life, before he abandons them.

At the beginning of the play itself, we hear Tom narrating the events of his family in St. Louis. He gives the background, explains the settings and assures the audiences that the events we see are his memory, and the scenes that we see are as he sees them. *Menagerie*, however, goes beyond the memory of just the narrator, and does a very good job of portraying all the characters and their individual feelings. Tom’s position as a narrator especially helped Tennessee to draw attention to the theatrical quality of the play; Tom highlighted the memory aspect of the play. As a narrator Tom frames the action of the play as well as offers commentary on it, thus fulfilling his role completely as a narrator who is also a character.

The expressionistic use of the narrator lets the audience know that the scenes are from a memory and that Tom is both the person remembering them and also that he was involved in the scenes himself. However, Williams is criticized for the structure of this play. There are scenes in the play (for e.g. the scene between Amanda and Laura where they discuss Jim) that Tom was in no position to know about because of his absence in them. It is highly

improbable that Tom would know them. But such a criticism would be liable if Tom had described the play as an absolute truth. At the beginning of the play itself Tom narrates that:

“Yes, I have tricks in my pocket. I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of Illusion.”

The truth in the guise of illusion given by the narrator is his own truth, as well as the truth of Laura and Amanda, who exist separately from Tom. The scenes might not give a very objective truth, however, they are relevant to the play. Thus the use of the narrator was a successful use of expressionism, it provided an escape from reality, yet succeeded in giving the truth.

The Memory Aspect:

In *The Glass Menagerie* there is a close connection between narration and the memory aspect. Williams take advantage of this connection by presenting the play as a “memory play”.

This gives Williams a way to overcome the convention of reality and thus the story could be presented with unusual freedom. The playwright thus has had a better chance to investigate the characters, their mind and humanity in a very modernist fashion.

The play uses episodic method of revelation, where the person who has experienced the events describes them. Though it is a very common technique used in creative writing, this method becomes highly subjective when used with a narrator who is basically expressing an autobiographical memory. The creative literature thus become a memory narration where personal and individual events are recalled, but it might not be the truth.

Though *Menagerie* can be called the first fully-formed memory-play, this genre has existed in literature for a long time. However, the distinguishing factor for this play is that in *Menagerie* the memories aren't simply recalled, they are reconstructed. The memory of Tom is a very subjective one. Tom the narrator and character, could be showing himself to the audiences in a positive light to overcome the guilt of his past. We might not find any sympathy for him had the play been narrated by Amanda. *The Glass Menagerie* is a play which is based on the unreliability of the narrator and his reconstruction of the events, thus making it a heretically expressionist play.

Conclusion:-

The plot of *The Glass Menagerie* is very simple. Despite that, it is a dazzling experience for the audience. Critics aside, many common people have given the opinion that they like this play because they can relate to the characters. Williams has created the image of a modern man by portraying the emotional, social and moral issues of the time into a common language and by having a practical understanding of the theatre and its techniques. The play focuses on selective realism and the reality of the author himself. It is a dazzling example of an Expressionist drama. The expressionism being the highlight of the truth of what it means to be human in a much dramatized way.

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