

AN ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLISM IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' PLAY *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*

Eka Siswantara

*English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
Universitas Cordova, Taliwang, Indonesia
Email: ekasiswantara.id@gmail.com*

Abstract : This research entitled “An Analysis of Symbolism in Tennessee Williams’ Play *The Glass Menagerie*” aims at understanding the meaning of each symbol in the play. The data of this research were obtained from the script of the play as the primary data and the secondary data were gained from several references from books and articles to support the analysis. The method of analyzing the data used was objective approach focusing on the intrinsic element of the play. Based on the discussion, the writer concludes that the symbols in this play are implied within three elements, they are (1) Symbol in the characters, where several objects are employed to symbolize and emphasize the characteristics and certain idea of the character in the play. Here several objects such as the glass menagerie, Victrola, blue roses and the glass unicorn represent the characteristic and certain idea within Laura Wingfield, meanwhile certain characteristic and theme in Tom Wingfield are represented through a fire escape, movies, merchant marine, and some other symbols attached to him. Certain objects also significantly become the symbol for certain idea in the other characters. (2) Symbol in the action of the character, where the actions of the character in this play symbolically imply certain idea to emphasize and clarify the story of the play. (3) Symbol in the background and setting, where certain place and moment are presented as the symbol for certain idea and issue in this play.

Keyword : *Drama, Symbol, Symbolism, Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie*

INTRODUCTION

Symbols are very crucial and tend to be our basic necessity in life. Therefore, symbols exist in almost all of elements of life; we use them in religion, education, communication, art and the other important aspects in our life. Thus, we could infer that our life is motivated, formed and celebrated with symbols. Fadaee (2011) states that symbol is something employed to represent another thing. Symbols signify the presence of additional independent objects in addition to the symbol itself including people, symbols, words, and numbers (Mohammadzadeh, 2019). Whereas,

According to Sandamali (2015), a symbol is an object, person, situation, or action that signifies other meaning. A symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance (Minderop, 2010). Meanwhile, the term symbolism refers to a practice of representing things by means of symbols or by investing things with a symbolic meaning or character (Qadri, 2017).

In everyday life, we are disposed to be a meaning maker by observing everything in nature then manifest it into certain symbolic meaning. Therefore

symbolism in human life is the fundamental necessity as a part of self-expression and the way of thinking. The tendency of inventing and interpreting the symbols is the unique ability of human being. This tendency presents the ability to transform the symbols within the culture and the creative world of human. Especially in the art, more specifically in the art of written text or literature, symbolism is intensely used. Through the imaginative work of literature, men express the intelligence using symbolism at the level of inventing as well as interpreting the symbols. Therefore in literature symbolism is something indispensable. Moreover, Zhang (2016) states that the authors of literary work often employ symbolism into their writing in order to attract the reader's attention.

From all of the forms in literature, drama is the distinctive one. Drama refers to literary works that is presented as reading material and performance on stage. Therefore drama is considerably different compared to other literary works, because drama is usually written with the purpose of being performed on stage and it focuses on dialogues among the characters. Although plays are also in the form of texts for a reading audience, the dramatic texts are mainly written to be performed for the theatrical performance.

Drama is said to be the most concrete of all genres in literature because it presents the stage performance realistically to the audience. The elements in drama are complex. The story is presented through the action of the characters and supported by many details on the stage such as properties, music, lighting, etc. The complexity of elements in drama makes the use of symbolism more complex as well. The author can express the symbols within the dialogue, act, properties, setting, object, music, and many other elements, hence we need a deep insight to recognize the symbolism in drama since it is

expressed abstractly through various things and we might often see it just as an ordinary act or property in the story which does not represent meaning or message. Thus the writer presumes that it is important to analyze the symbolism within a play to get a deeper understanding to the story as well as to appreciate the play. Furthermore, the writer is interested to analyze a play entitled *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams.

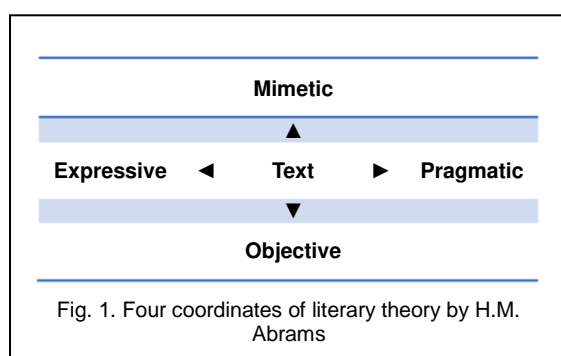
The Glass Menagerie portrayed a family who were struggling in a hopeless and insecurity live (Nalliveetttil & Gadallah, 2016). It is the most well-known plays written by Tennessee Williams that won the New York Drama Critics' Circle award that made him praised as one of the greatest playwrights at that time. Thus, according to Dugošija (2023) The Glass Menagerie is considered one of the greatest American plays of the 20th century. Moreover, Tennessee Williams is a distinguished symbolist of American drama (Subashi, 2020). Barnard (2007) states that *The Glass Menagerie* is one of Williams' greatest plays and one of the most intense in terms of symbolism. The very title of the play is a symbol, and symbols occupy almost every sentence. Therefore this study intends to analyze the symbolism in *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams to figure out the symbols in the play as well as the meaning of each symbol.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research applied the qualitative method. Qualitative research is generally known as a major research methodology which focuses on the explanation, decipherment, and interpretation of people's behavior, feelings, perspectives, or life experiences (Abrar, 2018). Qualitative methodologies elaborate description and interpretation of phenomena as well as develops and revises understanding (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Thus, qualitative method uses

interpretation, concern on meaning and messages, and presenting it in the form of description. In literature, the sources of data are literary works, text, and the data analysis as formal data are words, sentences, and text.

In literary criticism, there are four approaches based on the theory introduced by H.M. Abrams. They are Mimetic, Expressive, Pragmatic, and Objective. The following figure shows the four coordinates of literary theory by H.M. Abrams:



In this study, the writer applied the objective approach to analyze the data. The objective approach is based on objective criticism theory introduced by H.M. Abrams. Abrams (1999) states that:

Objective criticism deals with a work of literature as something which stands free from what is often called "extrinsic" relations to the poet, or to the audience, or to the environing world. Instead it describes the literary product as a self-sufficient and autonomous object, or else as a world-in-itself, which is to be contemplated as its own end, and to be analyzed and judged solely by "intrinsic" criteria such as its complexity, coherence, equilibrium, integrity, and the interrelations of its component elements.

The method of collecting data in this research was documentary one. Arikunto (2006) states that documentary research is gathering the data about the research in form of written data like journal, books, notes, newspaper, etc. This method is a

systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material (Egmir et al., 2017). Furthermore, the writer will search the data by browsing the internet to find more information as complementary data from journal, article, etc to support the analysis.

In collecting the data, the writer followed the steps as follows:

- a. Read the script carefully in order to obtain the accurate comprehension of the play.
- b. Identified some important points on the script related to the research.
- c. Read several relevant books to get more theory, information, and data to support the study.
- d. Improved the data from internet browsing to find several supporting data and information related to the research.
- e. Collected all of the sources and elaborated the important and significant data from the sources.
- f. Wrote the data and quoted some excerpts related to the study.

The data in this research were directly captured from the script of *The Glass Menagerie*. The writer of this research also used secondary data from several references.

The writer analyzed the script of *The Glass Menagerie* to figure out the symbols in the play. After the writer found the accurate and significant data related to the symbols in the play, then the writer described the symbols and elaborated them with the supporting dialogue and act that clarify those symbols. After that, the writer analyzed the significance of each symbol. Thus, the writer analyzed this study through following steps:

- a. Identified every thing in the play which probably has a symbolic purpose.

- b. Classified the symbols into several categories.
- c. Related the symbol with the possible meaning in the play.
- d. Figured out the accurate significance of the symbols.
- e. Explained the symbols as well as the interpretation of the symbols.
- f. Clarified the related data to support the interpretation of the symbols.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the writer elaborates several findings related to the symbol in Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie*. The writer found that, in this play, Tennessee Williams employs several symbols to support and emphasize the idea within the characters and the plot, and presents several symbolic actions to imply some abstract ideas in the story.

The symbols are implied in many elements in this drama. The writer divided the symbol in several categories to be discussed. They are *symbol in the character*, *symbol in the action of the character*, and *symbol in background and setting*.

Symbol in the character

In literature the character is not merely a piece of imaginative creature but tends to be representation of certain personality based on the real world. The characters represent various personalities to emphasize the theme that the author wants to express. In this play the characters represent different images and characteristics of humanity. To emphasize the idea and the characteristics within the characters, Tennessee Williams employs several objects as the symbol. The writer of this research found certain objects which have a symbolic purpose that are attached to the characters to represent certain idea, personality even identity of the characters respectively. The symbols are implied in the following characters:

a. Laura Wingfield

Several symbols related to Laura Wingfield to represent certain idea in her character are:

The Glass Unicorn

Unicorn is well known as a legendary animal described as a white horse with a large, pointed, spiraling horn projecting from its forehead. The Glass Unicorn in this play refers to the figure of unicorn in the form of little glass ornament. This object is a symbol for beauty, rareness and frailty, emphasizing Laura's characteristic who is beautiful, weak, and uncommon in terms of personality.

The Glass Menagerie

The Glass Menagerie is a term given by Amanda Wingfield for Laura's collection of little animals ornament made out of glass. This is a symbol for the illusion or fantasy. In this play it becomes the fantasy world of Laura. This is one of her way to escape from reality by spending much of her time to play her Glass Menagerie. Singh (2015) states that Laura was out of place in the real world because of her shyness and sensitivity. She prefers to live in the world of phonograph records and glass animals that are fragile like her to escape from her reality.

Victrola

Victrola is a brand for a phonograph record which is popular by the time of the First World War. In this play, it represents the conservative and solitary character as well as the idea of escapism in Laura. In many moments in this play Victrola is the thing that can comfort and release her from the pressure of reality. She prefers to just stay at the apartment enjoying the music from old phonograph record instead of going out to enjoy live hot swing music in the Dance Hall across her apartment.

Blue Roses

in this play Blue Roses significantly symbolize the beauty in peculiarity. This object is used to emphasize the characteristic of Laura Wingfield. Here the image of Laura who is pretty but really unique and different to the other girls is associated to the image of Blue Roses which are very pretty and attractive but looks peculiar because of the blue color which is uncommon for the roses.

b. Tom Wingfield

Symbols related to Tom Wingfield to represent his characteristic and theme within his figure are:

Fire Escape

The Fire Escape is very much close to the Tom's character especially on the theme of escapism within him. Thus this object symbolizes the escapism. His habit of smoking on fire-escape's landing and goes down the fire-escapes of his apartment every night to the outside world considerably symbolize the path to get out from his depressive life to the world that he longs for.

Movies

The movies become the symbol of escape from reality; his refuge from the pressure and depression, also the symbol of his desire as a man which naturally longs to be free and loves the adventure in life.

Mr. Wingfield's Photograph

Here the father's figure becomes the symbol for the absolute escapism. Thus, the desire to live free and willing for the adventure in Tom is seemingly motivated from his father's figure and story that gave up his job with the telephone company and wandered around the world. According to Sharma (2014), Tom's ideology is quite in keeping with his father's, no wonder at the end of the play, he follows in the footsteps of his father and leaves his mother and sister.

Rainbow-Colored Scarf

Rainbow-Colored Scarf is a magic scarf used by the magician when he watches a magic show in the movies then the magician gives him the scarf. The magic scarf here is a symbol for the hope, it seemingly becomes the hope to change the condition of his life as simple as the scarf changes everything magically.

Coffin Trick

Coffin Trick is one of the magic tricks that Tom watched, this significantly becomes symbol for his desire to escape, the coffin itself might represent his life in the apartment. Thus this represents the escapism that seemingly hard to do.

Merchant Marine

The Merchant Marine is the fleet of ships which carries imports and exports during peacetime and becomes a naval auxiliary during wartime to deliver troops and war materiel. Merchant Marine in this play symbolically represents the real freedom, escapism and adventure for Tom.

Shakespeare

Shakespeare is well known as a great poet and playwright, figure of Shakespeare here represents the artistic and poetic side of Tom and his pleasure writing a poem.

c. Amanda Wingfield

Several symbols related to Amanda Wingfield to represents certain ideas within her image are:

Wingfield Apartment

Wingfield Apartment is a symbol for the domination and the selfish side of Amanda as well as the prison for her children.

Blue Mountain

Blue Mountain is the small town in northern Mississippi where Amanda grew up. In this play Amanda has a beautiful memory about Blue Mountain. This is a symbol for the glorious time of Amanda and the escapism of reality; she often consoles herself by recalling the memory

about his past when she was on Blue Mountain and received seventeen gentlemen callers in one Sunday afternoon.

Yellow Dress and Jonquil

Yellow dress is used by Amanda when she received a Gentlemen Caller in her young age and also when Amanda received Jim as the Gentlemen Caller for Laura meanwhile the Jonquil itself is a kind of flower similar to narcissus or daffodil with clusters of small fragrant yellow flowers and cylindrical leaves. She also brought this flower when she received gentlemen caller in her young age as well as when she received Jim in her house. The objects are symbol for her reluctance to let go of her past; her desire of adolescence. Whenever her present pains her she escape to her loving region and loving memories. It is her imagination and craves for ideal life leads her towards apathy to her husband (Jadhao, 2012).

d. Jim O'Connor

Symbol related to the character of Jim O'Connor is:

The Gentlemen Caller

The Gentlemen Caller is a term for a young man that interested in dating a young woman. The man would be expected to visit a girl at her home. In this play the gentlemen caller is a symbol for hope, the one to be expected as the savior to release these three Wingfields from the disappointment and bring them escape from the illusion to the reality. Indumathi & Umamaheswari (2018) state that Amanda has a faith that only a man can be their savior to redeem them from their painful reality, therefore she nags Tom to bring callers to marry Laura. She believes that the man will support and guarantee her daughter's future. According to Daniel (2013), Jim represents a man from the world of reality who happens enters the Wingfield's world of illusion. But he exits right away to the reality without trapped

there and lets the Wingfield's family continue their illusion.

Symbol in the Action of the Character

Action and dialogue are the central element in drama. Through the action and dialogue the playwrights express their idea in the play. Sometimes the playwrights are not only delivering the message directly through the dialogue but it is also implied in several actions of the characters. Thus several actions in the play are made up in purpose to imply certain symbolic meaning. In this play several actions are identified as a symbol for certain idea. The writer found several actions which imply symbolic purposes as follows:

Tom strikes Laura's glass collection

In Scene 3, Tom and Amanda has a vicious argument which really scares Laura who is watching that quarrel, this scene shows how Laura has to face the unpleasant situation from the argument between Tom and Amanda. Tom's act that strikes the shelf of Laura's glass collection symbolizes how the situation shattered the world of Laura just as Tom shattered Laura's glass collection. It hurts her and makes an unpleasant feeling to her. From the analysis of the title, it can be safely inferred that the relationship between the three members of the family is as fragile as the characters themselves, and that if handled crudely, the relationship among them is as prone to be damaged as they themselves to be hurt (Guan et al., 2016).

Laura stumbled on Fire Escape

The moment when Laura stumbled on the fire escape here symbolically shows the impossibility of Laura to escape. The fire escape itself very much represents the escapism of Tom, therefore the action symbolically implies that Laura would not be able to escape as Tom's way to escape.

Laura lets Jim to handle the glass unicorn

This action symbolizes how Laura begins to open herself and lets the other

people to know her better. In this moment she tells everything about herself to Jim.

Jim dances with Laura

The action is a symbol for the change in Laura; her cripple condition very much affects her confidence but in this moment Jim persuades her to dance, which symbolically shows how Jim brings Laura escapes from her fear and lack of self confidence.

Jim breaks the glass unicorn

The action also emphasizes the changes in Laura. She begins to be a normal girl like other girls in term of personality and confidence, which is symbolized by the lost horn of the glass unicorn.

Laura gives the broken glass unicorn to Jim

This action symbolizes the broken heart of Laura because of Jim's engagement to Betty as well as the sign of Laura's transformation that make her becomes "less-freakish" to other girls which happens because of Jim.

Laura blows the candles out

The event symbolizes the hope of Tom to escape from the memory of his sister. When Laura blows the candles out implies her image is gone in Tom's memory.

Symbol in Background and Setting.

In this play several objects related to the background and setting appear not only as the element of the story but also represent certain symbolic purpose that emphasize certain ideas. These objects represent a condition, atmosphere or certain idea about the play, those symbols are:

The Apartment

Tennessee Williams sets this play in the condition known as the Great Depression that happening during 1930s. Thus, the appearance of the apartment as a setting of place represents the atmosphere

of this play that is going to be full of human desperation as stated by Tennessee Williams on the narration that these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation.

Guernica in Spain

Guernica is the name of a Town in Spain where in 1937 was brutally bombed by Germany during the Spanish Civil War. Guernica also refers to the massive painting created by Pablo Picasso, he named the painting after the town to evoke the horror of war that happened in the town. Guernica appears in this play as a symbol for a war. It implicitly shows the beginning of World War II

Paradise Dance Hall

The writer has discussed that this play is set during the condition known as a great depression, thus the idea of escapism is also considerably implied in the society. The Paradise Dance Hall here can be elucidated as a symbol for the escapism; place of people to escape from their stressful condition, a place where people can console themselves from the harsh reality during the great depression to get any temporary pleasure.

CONCLUSION

After analyzing this play, the writer concluded that Tennessee Williams used the symbols to imply and emphasize several ideas regarding to the story in this play. The symbols are implied in several elements of the play; the character, the action of character, and background and setting of the play. In relation to the characters, several objects are attached to them to represent identity, personality, and certain idea to support their characterization. The characteristic and certain idea in Laura Wingfield is represented through the glass menagerie, Victrola, blue roses and the glass unicorn, meanwhile the fire escape, movies, merchant marine, and some other symbols are attached to Tom Wingfield as the

representation of his personality and the theme within his character. To further extent the other objects also significantly become symbol for the certain idea in the character such as The Apartment, Blue Mountain, Yellow Dress and Jonquil for Amanda Wingfield and the Gentlemen Caller for Jim O'Connor.

In this play the story is also strengthened by the symbolic actions of the character. Certain actions represent the abstract idea to emphasize the story of the play such as the action of Tom that strikes Laura's glass collection or Jim breaks the glass unicorn that has a symbolic meaning to emphasize the story. In addition to this, the symbol is also presented through the background and setting. Several places mentioned in this play such as The Apartment, Guernica, and Paradise Dance Hall which considerably become the symbols to express certain ideas and issues within the play.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Heinle & Heinle.
- Abrar, M. (2018). A Critical Evaluation of Qualitative Reports and Their Contributions to Educational Research. *PAROLE: Journal of Linguistics and Education*, 6(2), 13. <https://doi.org/10.14710/parole.v7i1.13-22>
- Arikunto, S. (2006). Qualitative Research Methodology. In *Kementerian Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan*. Bumi Aksara.
- Barnard, D. B. (2007). *The symbolism of tennessee williams' The Glass Menagerie: An Inductive Approach (Doctoral Dissertation)*. https://shsudramaturgy2015newcomb.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/the-symbolism-of-tennessee-william_s-the-glass-menagerie-an-inductive-approach-barnard_dis.pdf
- Daniel, J. (2013). The world of illusion in Tennessee William's "The Glass Menagerie ." *International Journal of Innovative Research in Science, Engineering and Technology*, 2(11), 6183–6185.
- Dugošija, T. (2023). *The Conflict between Reality and Illusion in Tennessee Williams' the glass menagerie*. 57, 651–657.
- Egmir, E., Erdem, C., & Kocyigit, M. (2017). Trends in Educational Research: A Content Analysis of the Studies Published in International Journal of Instruction. *International Journal of Instruction*, 10(3), 277–294. <https://doi.org/10.12973/iji.2017.10318a>
- Fadaee, E. (2011). Symbols, metaphors and similes in literature: A case study of "Animal Farm." *Journal of English and Literature*, 2(2), 19–27.
- Guan, Y., Jia, L., & Gao, Y. (2016). Fragile as Escaping into the Glass World-Analysis of The Glass Menagerie from the Perspective of Cognitive Domains. *Advances in Literary Study*, 04(04), 67–76. <https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2016.44011>
- Indumathi, V., & Umamaheswari, D. (2018). Sensitive Of Women Empowerment in The Glass Menagerie By Tennessee Williams. *Scope International Journal of Science, Humanities, Management and Technology*, 4(3), 145–151.
- Jadhao, N. G. (2012). The Theme of Loneliness and Alienation In Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie." *Vidyabharati International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 1(2), 55–60.
- Minderop, A. (2010). *Psychology of literature: Literary Work , Method, Theory and Case Example*. Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia.
- Mohammadzadeh, M. (2019). The Structural Analysis of Symbols in the Ashurayi Literature. *International Journal of Advanced Studies in*

Humanities and Social Science, 8(2), 209–222.

8–13.

<https://doi.org/10.33945/sami/ijashss.2019.2.9>

Nalliveettil, G. M., & Gadallah, M. S. M. (2016). Discourse Analysis of Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 7(3). <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.7n.3> p.201

Qadri, G. (2017). Theories on Symbolism. *AGU International Journal of Research in Social Sciences & Humanities*, 5, 729–731.

Sandamali, K. P. S. (2015). Symbolism In Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man And The Sea. *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research*, 4(12), 125–129.

Sharma, L. S. (2014). Concept of Morality in Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, 2(9), 114–117. www.arcjournals.org

Singh, B. (2015). The Shift from Illusion to Reality in Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie. *MIT International Journal of English Language & Literature*, 2(1), 67–70.

Subashi, E. (2020). Myths and Symbols in Tennessee Williams' s Drama. *Turkophone*, 7(1), 28–36. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/turkophone/issue/56326/778479%0A>

Vaismoradi, M., Jones, J., Turunen, H., & Snelgrove, S. (2016). Theme development in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 6(5).

<https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v6n5p100>

Zhang, Q. (2016). The Application Of Symbolism To Represent Jane's Life Status In Jane Eyre. *International Journal of Arts and Commerce*, 5(2),