

Analysis Of The Play “The Glass Menagerie” And The Poem “The Road Not Taken”

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Abstract

The paper intends to examine a play and a poem with a critical lens based on any social or cultural perspective. The play chosen is “Glass Menagerie” by Tennessee Williams, and the selected poem is “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost. Both the play and the poem are critically compared and contrasted with respect to the critical eye of the culture or the society. Other elements of the different genres of literature are examined, such as the tone, setting, symbolism, and cultural issues or problems. Based on these aspects of the literature, both the poem and play are carefully examined and explained. The paper starts with a summary of the play and the poem to give the readers some knowledge regarding the background of both readings. It then describes the main thesis or the argument, with the help of which both the poem and the play are critically analyzed.

Introduction

“The Glass Menagerie” is a thought-provoking and interesting play written by Tennessee Williams. The main focus is on a family of four. A mother named Amanda lived with her two children, Tom and Laura. The head of the family, or the father, had left the family as he didn’t want to take responsibility. Tom also wanted to leave for the same reason and always quarrelled with her mother on different issues. One day, when the fight reached its limit, Amanda told Tom that he could leave if he and Amanda could get Laura married as soon as possible. Tom brought a gentleman named Jim O’Connor who was his colleague, for him to meet his family. There Laura realized that Jim was his crush when she was in high school. When Laura and Jim were left alone, they talked. Jim got flirtatious and kissed Laura. After that, he admitted that he was already engaged and left. This broke Laura’s heart and made Amanda furious. She believed that Tom played a trick on them just to leave them alone. Tom left, but even after so many years, he couldn’t forget his sister and her memories haunted him all the time.

“Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost enables the readers to think and wonder about all the choices and decisions taken or not taken in life. The poem highlights the moments and times of life when critical decisions have to be made. The ambiguity of the poem arises from the choice between [free will and determinism](#). It is a question of whether the poet is aware of the decision he makes or doesn’t fantasize the other way. The poet, through this poem, made fun of his friend who was an English Welsh poet, Edward Thomas. He often regretted not being set on a different way or path and sighed

over what he and his friend Frost might have observed or done, which was quite romantic in the eyes of Robert Frost. Thus, he teased his friend by saying, “No matter which road you take, you’ll always sigh and wish you’d taken another” (Spacey, 2017). This point also serves as irony on human nature that an individual never gets satisfied with his or her decisions and always sighs and becomes sad upon those choices and decisions he or she did not make. The person wastes his time thinking that if he had been on a different path, what would be the different things he would have experienced?

Relating the two readings under consideration, one aspect of today’s culture and society can be majorly observed. This aspect is associated with the roles both genders play in society and how they are depicted in the play. The play shows the character of Tom, who, despite being the only son and brother, does not want to take responsibility for her mother and sister and wants to run away. His father did the same. On the other hand, Tom’s sister Laura is shown as a weak and sensitive girl who gets deceived by her crush’s flirtatious talks and gets her heart broken. The unequal distribution of responsibilities among both genders often results in the rebellious behaviour of either side. We often talk about equal rights of men and women, and this is also for supporting the males.

When women are given enough opportunities on different grounds of life, they turn out to be supporters of the opposite gender. However, when a woman is viewed as a weak and sensitive individual, and she is just for the household chores, then the males of the society get sick with handling everything on their own (Blackstone, 2003, p.337), and for them, the woman remains nothing but an object kept inside the house on whom he can take out all his frustrations and aggression. This dependence on females on males often leads the males to become controlling and rebellious. They become insensitive, and though they are fully aware that the females they are surrounded by are weak and completely dependent on them, they leave them. Another male character shown in the play, known as Jim O’Connor, is shown as an unfaithful and flirtatious person who takes advantage of the loneliness he is in with Laura. It is because of such men that women need to become strong and independent.

How The Play And The Poem Are Related?

Robert Frost, in his poem “The Road Not Taken”, talks about the decisions and choices people make in their lives and also regret the choices they do not make. This aspect of the poem is clear in the play, where Tom’s decision to get her sister married to his fake colleague and leave his family haunted him for the rest of his life. He regretted his choices, and even after so many years, the memory of his sister did not let him be at peace. In the poem, using one description of the forest i.e. “yellow leaves” indicate the reality that one decision is able to completely change and transform our lives, just like Tom’s life completely changed after he decided to leave his family. Two roads were set before him: either stay with the family and take the responsibility or get Laura married and leave the house. He opted for the second road which led him into the darkness since his hurriedness of backing off from the responsibilities made his life even more miserable.

He kept on sighing over his decision and thought about what would have happened if he had not followed his father's path and had been an obedient and loving brother. Just as Frost said, some changes are permanent and do not lead us back to the original path, and these are the changes that completely transform our lives in a positive or a negative way. Thus, gender roles and the notion of feminism can also be seen in the whole relationship described in the play and the poem. Tom and his father, being the males and strong individuals of the society, are allowed to make any decision about any matter they want, no matter how negatively impacting they might be. They control the females around them by making big decisions about their lives. In the play, Amanda asks Tom to find a husband for Laura. This big decision is not taken by Laura herself. She could have been strong and independent enough to decide and make choices for her life her own way, but she is an innocent and sensitive girl who can't be trusted with this responsibility, though it's her life and only she has the right over it.

Even in our society, no matter how educated women are, their opinions and decisions are not as valued as those of men. This has become a universal phenomenon. No matter where we belong, how much education we get, what culture or traditions we follow, or what religion we believe in, males are always considered powerful, dominant, and intellectual, while women are viewed as sensitive, emotional, and weak creatures as compared to men. People are unable to realize the strength of women. Amanda, Tom and Laura's mother, is a strong character since she manages to raise her kids alone and manages to live without her husband, who simply left so that no responsibility can be put on his shoulders. This tells no matter how responsible or irresponsible a man is for his household, a woman never fails to realize her duties as a wife, a mother, or a sister. However, no matter what she does for her family, she's never appreciated and is always taken for granted. The male-dominated society has always been and is still fearful of accepting the strength and power of women, which is extraordinary and incomprehensible to men.

Tone And Setting

The setting and tone of the play depict the sadness of the narrator. The whole play takes place in a regretful tone since the narrator aims to convey his regretful and distressed sentiments to the audience. He wants to tell how depressed he is about the decision he made, which can't make the situation normal. The scenes take place in a dramatic way, with the music in the background giving more feel to the play. On the other hand, the poem is written in a reflective tone making it thought-provoking for the readers. He admits that only one path has to be taken, but sometimes, there come situations in life where making a choice is extremely hard. And once we go in a certain direction, we end up thinking about the other path which we did not take. The tone of the poem is also meditative since the poet sensibly thinks about all the pros and cons of both the choices set before him. This is important because the future is dependent on that one choice. The poem, just like the play, also shows regret and sadness.

"I shall be telling this with a sigh

somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
and that has made all the difference.”

This last stanza of the poem demonstrates the regretful feelings of the poet on taking the road which is not much travelled. Taking that road changed the life of the poet just as it transformed Tom’s life in the play. He had two roads in front of him: a road where he was free from all the responsibilities and a road where he would be staying with the family and taking up all their responsibilities. He chose the road of being free from his family, and this road changed his whole life in a negative way.

Symbolism

The title of the play “The Glass Menagerie” has a deep meaning, though its importance in the play is negligible. In one scene, Laura is shown playing with the glass menagerie. Anything made up of glass is sensitive and fragile, and here, Laura’s heart was as sensitive as the glass menagerie she was playing with. Her heart broke when she heard Jim was already engaged and he was just being flirtatious with her. “The Glass Menagerie” can also symbolize the fragility of life. One decision is made, and everything is transformed. The fire escape outside the apartment of Amanda’s family is a symbol of escaping from life’s frustrations and distressful situations. Laura wanted to escape from the distress Jim had caused her, while Tom wanted to run away from life’s responsibilities, and when he tried to do that, he got caught in the regretful sentiments that he couldn’t escape. The glass unicorn in their collection of Laura symbolizes her distinctiveness. It is a sign of her being different from others and her unusualness. Just like a unicorn is nothing without its horn, Laura seems nothing without those hopes and dreams Jim took away from her. On the other hand, the title of the poem clearly symbolizes the choice not made in life by the poet. The yellow leaves in the poem are just one description that the poet gives about the forest. This one description indicates the fact that just one decision is all it takes for the whole transformation of life.

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.”

This divergence of roads indicates the two options or choices set before the poet. All humans undergo this opportunity to choose one road or make a decision on every path of life.

Cultural And Social Issues Or Problems

Many problems and issues have been encountered in the play from a cultural perspective. In our culture and society, girls are constantly brainwashed that they are weak and inferior to men since their childhood. This mindset does not let the girls take responsibility for themselves and the household. They are always under the control of fathers, brothers, and husbands. Just as in the play, Amanda asks Tom to search husband for her sister Laura. It depicts how, in our society, big decisions

in life are to be taken by the males of the family only. Women's own sentiments and opinions are not given any significance. We live in a patriarchal society where male opinions and decisions are taken seriously, and "where anything women produce, including children, belongs to the husband, women and girls have a low value" (Lorber, 1997, p.13). The males of our society first make women weak and dependent on them, and when that happens, they also leave them alone all by themselves without being questioned by anyone.

This tells how fearful men are of the strength and power of women. "Perhaps it is born from the general hatred of men that appears to have permeated the feminist movement" (Nottingham. ac. the UK). Amanda, Tom's mother, raises her kids without her husband. Her husband left them because he wanted to be free from all the responsibilities. Amanda could have also left the kids and led her life freely but she, being a loving as well as a strong woman, took the responsibility for her kids and showed that she wasn't weak to run away from her duties. However, Amanda's daughter wasn't taught to be a strong woman. This was due to the presence of her brother who was given the responsibility of the household. If Laura had been given the responsibility for her own life at least, she could have supported her brother and gotten away from the insincere and unfaithful people like Jim. Thus, the equal distribution of responsibilities and rights is important both for males and females.

It has also been observed that mothers who tend to control their kids soon lose them. Amanda, though she was a loving and concerned mother, had fights with Tom and tried to control him. This could also be the reason Tom wanted to leave the house. Also, in the case of Laura, she went to Rubicam's Business College, thinking that a business career would help Laura become self-sufficient. But it turned out to be wrong as Laura stopped taking classes. Here, Amanda failed to determine what interests Laura had and in what subject she would like to be admitted. If she had asked her, she would have been in a better place or position instead of later giving her hope of getting married.

This is the true depiction of our culture and society, where mothers think that what they decide for their kids is best for them and do not let children take their decisions by themselves. The consequences of this are never good and healthy. In fact, children become shy and feel uncomfortable facing the world alone, just like Laura in the play, or they also tend to show rebellious behaviour, just like Tom. This difference in attitudes is also prominent due to the gender roles. Due to the mother's controlling behaviour, girls are more likely to become shy and confused, while boys often rebel and, in extreme cases, even leave the house. Hence, parents must understand the negativity this controlling behaviour causes in the family. And people, in general, must understand the roles both genders are supposed to play and how they can support, and encourage each other in their walk of life. Men must not think inferiority of women or exploit their capabilities. Instead, they must support them so that they can get support and respect in return.

Conclusion

The play and the poem had a deep connection and had many similarities and differences with respect

to the tone, setting, main themes, and the message they conveyed. We critically analyzed two different genres of literature from a cultural or social perspective. The critical lens we used to examine these readings was the difference between gender roles and feminism. The play depicted a true picture of the male-dominant society we all live in, where women are not allowed to show their strength and power in front of men. The power of taking one's decisions is not handed over to the women by the men at the level of the family and also outside the family.

Women are considered weak and fragile and not capable of facing the outside world. Another point we encountered was the role of parents in society. In the society or the culture we are a part of, parents often fail to realize the interests of their kids and try to take control of them. This controlling behaviour from the parents' side results in bad consequences. It is more common in single parents since they are insecure that one day their kids will also leave them like their partner. In this insecurity, they try to control their offspring according to their interests and thoughts, which results in children being offended and disturbed. And they tend to rebel against the rules their parents have set for them. Thus, parents must not create an environment in which the children feel suffocated and disturbed and make them do things or make decisions that, in the end, prove regretful.

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