

## The Unseen Character: A Modern Use of an Old Device in Modern American Drama, A Study of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menageri*

Ouhiba Nawel Meriem

Dr Moulay Tahar University, Saida

Ouhiba.nawel@gmail.com

**Abstract :** This paper deals with the American modern drama, mainly the study of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* which is an autobiographical play considered as a classic of the American stage. What is extra ordinary in the play under study is the presence of an absent character, though his presence is express in different ways it has the same effects on the onstage figures and the plot. American playwrights inherited the unseen character device from the European style and adopted it with enthusiasm. It was in the hands of Eugene O'Neill that the unseen character found its first extensive use, the next major American dramatist to use the technique extensively was Tennessee Williams; who created his unseen characters in great variety as well as number to increase the level of dramatic contrast, bestowing an extra measure of ambiguity and in adding a measure of complexity to on stage characterizations.

**Key Words:** American Drama, Modernism, *The Glass Menagerie*, Unseen Characters

**الملخص:** نسعى من خلال هذا المقال إلى فتح نافذة على المسرح الأمريكي الحديث، و ذلك من خلال دراسة مسرحية (الحيوانات الزجاجية) للمؤلف المسرحي تينيسي ويليامس . ما يميز هذه المسرحية تحديدا هو وجود شخصيات غائبة عن الخشبة رغم أهميتها؛ حيث تؤثر بشكل مباشر على الشخصيات الأخرى من جهة، و على أحداث النص المسرحي من جهة أخرى. فقد تعمد المؤلف تغييرها و اكتفى بالإشارة إليها معتمدا أساليب مختلفة. استوحى الكتاب الأمريكيون هذه التقنية من المسرح الأوربي، و اعتمدها في مسرحياتهم بشكل لافت، خصوصا المؤلف تينيسي ويليامس، الذي أبدع في استعمال هذه التقنية كما و نوعا، ليضفي مزيدا من التعقيد و الغموض و التناقض على الشخصيات الأخرى الحاضرة في النص.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الشخصيات المغيبة، المسرح الأمريكي المعاصر، الحيوانات الزجاجية.

## Introduction

The American Writer in the Middle of the Twentieth Century had his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make credible much of the American reality. An increasingly managed and supervised society—controlled from the top down by invisible agencies—dominated by an instrumental reason which forecloses the free—play and implicit anarchy of both intelligence and spontaneous emotion, of love and beauty how is the writer to make himself heard let alone credible in such a world? The recurrent search in modern American writing for an appropriate moral style in an age when no value seems immune to appropriation by the devices of mass—produced culture has made the achievement of O’Neill, Williams and many others all the more deserving and worthy as literary intelligence and cultural capital .

The modernist movement in American Drama began in the second decade of the Twentieth Century in small enterprises such as the Washington Square Players, the Provincetown Theatre and the Neighborhood Playhouse. These groups produced Ibsen and Shaw as well as original plays that reflected their influence, combined with a new conception of individual and family conflict based on popular versions of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. The two major playwrights of the post—second world war period, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller differ as much from O’Neill as they do from each other in their dramatic material and techniques. Whereas Williams generally portrays psychological aberration intensified by a decadent southern culture, Miller is concerned with broader social and economic issues which determine the private agony of individual human beings. Like O’Neil, Williams and Miller are rooted in the tradition of realism, which they modify with expressionist techniques, but each made of this blend a style uniquely his own.

In his first successful play, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), Williams is explicit about his use of non—realistic techniques: his “scene is memory”, he says, and Tom Wingfield as narrator, the “ screen device (generally omitted from performances but indicated in the published version), the recurring melody of *The Glass Menagerie* , and

the lighting are all used to dramatize the past merging with the domestic life of the present and determining the inevitable guilt, loss, and sorrow of the protagonists.

*The Glass Menagerie* and *A Street Named Desire*, Williams's most acclaimed drama, portray the sordidness of lower-class life as present reality measured against the lost aristocratic traditions of the Old South. Both ways of life are parodies—the dream and the reality simultaneously divulging the pathos of human being trapped by desires which they cannot acknowledge or which they act out in obsessive need. In his plays, Williams is able, to transmit the “organic” quality of “truth, life or reality” through light, sound, bizarre characters, symbolic objects and authentic dialogue, which locate the brutal events of his plots somewhere between external and inner reality. Except for O’Neil no other modern American playwright has so successfully given shape to this amorphous area, though many have tried. But what innovations did Williams bring to modern American Drama? Among the techniques, one technique we think has rarely, been discussed in either Williams or any other playwright, it is the unseen characters techniques. Those characters who are offstage but makes important contributions to the play, they amplify the conflict of reality /illusion , increase the mood of longing and loneliness in the plays, and underscore the importance of love, even idealized love.

Throughout the Analysis of Tennessee Williams's play *The Glass Menagerie* we are going to see how the playwright handle the technique?, how the unseen characters are established in the play and how onstage figures are affected by those offstage figures?. We do believe that the unseen character technique is a device of great significance and had been of great benefit to the playwright. It might be a basis for some philosophical insights, and the cutting off of players onstage; facts which will be discussed throughout this paper.

## 1. Unseen Character from Traditional to Modern Use:

An unseen character is a fictional character that is never directly observed by the audience but is only described by other characters. They are characters that are "heard of, but never heard from" (Wellington, 1987, p.176) Unseen characters are a common device in drama and have been called "triumphs of theatrical invention". They are continuing characters who frequently interact with the other characters and who influence current story events.

The technique of unseen character was almost certainly a part of the theatre from its beginnings. In the West, the technique is prominent in the earliest plays that scholars have available, those written of the Athenian festivals of the 5<sup>th</sup> C B.C the figure of Slain Laius haunts the action of Sophocles 's *Oedipus Rex*, and Jason's off stage bride is a key figure in Euripides's *Medea*. The gods although influential in dramatic plots, are often kept unseen; Zeus never appears on the stage in the exhaust Greek plays (Bruckner, 1994, p.26).

In the renaissance drama of England the unseen character was not vigorously used, but Shakespeare employed the technique, occasionally, to good effect. Rosaline, in *Romeo and Juliet* is set up as a contrast to Juliet; but in order to preserve the focus on the ill fated lovers; she is never brought on stage. The unseen character returned to the British stage during the restoration assuming importance in such plays as John Dryden's *All of love* in which the lovers' happiness is visited by the unseen Fulvia and Caesar.

By the time of the 19<sup>th</sup> C was waning, playwrights had developed predictable uses of the unseen character: unseen figures are ancestors to whom one owes allegiance or people whose offstage activities provide a convenient impetus to the plot, sometimes they are no more than figures of fun or patios: Devices for illustrating the wit and/or empathy of an onstage figure. The unseen figure is rarely evoked in detail or obsessively referred to in the 19<sup>th</sup> C. theatre, and it remains a part of the Shadowy

offstage space: a convenient resource for the playwright, but not one that is taken very seriously. As the modern period emerged, however, the occasional and typical use of the unseen character underwent a transformation. Now, dramatists turned to the device again, finding new, expressive uses.

## 2. The Unseen Character Onstage:

Unseen characters are evoked onstage by several methods, in some plays it is evoked through a physical object such as photograph, in others it is directly described by an onstage person. Some playwrights' favourite dramatic devices in the character who doubles on other like in *The Glass Menagerie* of Williams Tennessee.

In fact, the establishment of the unseen figure onstage depends on the playwright himself. In evoking his unseen character, Williams Tennessee introduces them by a physical object or a direct description, and this unseen figure is described by several onstage persons for that it acquires complexities because everyone will see it in a different perspective. We can also find these unseen figures introduced on the stage as a voice which the audience heard but never sees the person.

Unseen figures have little impact on plot development, however, they have great influence on the plays, they also have complicated effects on onstage figures, the most dramatic effect that an onstage figure, they inspire strongly constructing emotions in onstage characters. In fact, despite their invisibility, they cause onstage reactions and can even become a presence in absence.

## 3. Unseen Characters within *The Glass Menagerie*

The evolution of *the Glass Menagerie* proceeded in anything but a straight line Williams put his play through multiple drafts, expanding and contracting the cast of characters and sending the plot in various directions. In one draft, the early relations between Amada and her husband are dramatized; then the father returns at the end of the play to set all problems right. In another effort a street musician named Tony

breaks up in the Winfield home and invites Tom into the Merchant Marine. In yet another, the story line is extensive connecting the Winfield to the pioneer days of America. William's solution to this struggle was, finally, to sharply limit the number of onstage figures, likewise limit the amount of time conversed and make this play a memory play, a dramatic presentation within a retrospective frame. *Menagerie*, in its final form, is not a depiction of what happened in the Wingfield home but a tracing of Tom's memories. The resulting play is dominated by two unseen characters.

### 3.1 Exploring the Context:

William's major characters are involved in building up layers of illusion. The climaxes of his plays are the moments when illusions are shattered and characters are forced to face reality. In *The Glass Menagerie*, the shattering of the illusion is ritualistic: a story is told, and then re-enacted. The re-enactment destroys the illusion. William's special achievement in *The Glass Menagerie* lies in creating a moment when the illusions of three characters are shattered simultaneously. When the action reveals that Tom cannot help his sister, no matter what he does, that the days of gentlemen callers are gone forever, no matter how much yearned for; and that Mr Wingfield will never come home, no matter how many records are played, then the characters break through to new levels of possibility. This is what gives *The Glass Menagerie* its family optimistic conclusion. Amanda's strength in the final pantomime is a symbol of the tardy arrival but dignified entry of truth.

Another important theme in *The Glass Menagerie*: patriarchal duty. For Tom, the torture of his memories is that he has failed to fulfil his duty as a surrogate for his father; in other words, he has repeated his father's falling away people who were born in the Reconstruction South. The men of the post war South felt they had failed their women, and felt compelled to amplify their allegiance to a patriarchal ideal. The women for their part, expressed resentment toward when by demanding this performance. This exact tension between Southern men and women provides much of the psychological background of *The Glass Menagerie* and can usefully be involved in

interpreting Tom's strong guilt and Amanda's steady anger. It also sheds light on certain motifs in other works by Williams.

Williams gives, also, some flavour of fate to his plays by devices that are also found in the plays of Chekhov: the ineffectual character and the circular plot. When Amanda tries to solve her problems, the result, although realistically motivated, seems almost hated.

A final theme in the play is "the conqueror worm". The gentleman caller in *The Glass Menagerie* is a figure of death. Amanda creates this association in her first speech about the gentleman callers of her past: so many of them are dead that Tom Jakes about it. Death's ability to disrupt illusions is symbolized by Jim O'Connor's visit. O'Connor's arrival is quickly followed by the blackout in the Wingfield home; and shortly after this, Williams focuses attention of Jim's huge shadow on the ceiling. Jim's "kiss of death" and exit is quickly followed by Tom's final instruction "to blow out your candles".

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the inner stage implies sheer repetition, the box within a box. The audience sees Tom dwelling on the past, searching his memories and then, within the inner stage, the audience sees Amanda doing the same thing. Tom repeats Amanda, even as he is repeating his father. Laura also repeats her mother and father, even though her nostalgia is shallow and her flight inner. The courtship of Amanda's and Mr Wingfield is repeated onstage, and so is Amanda's betrayal. And of his father simultaneously. The form of *The Glass Menagerie* then has its own message: that there are time- transcendent and inescapable patterns in life.

### 3.2The Major Unseen Characters:

The principal unseen character has no fixed identity. He is the gentleman caller, symbol of yearning for some better way of life, some solution to all problems: what Tom calls "this image, his spectre, this hope" (*Menagerie*: 1988, p.20), and "the long-

delayed but always expected something that we live for" (1988, p.11). He fuels memories of Amanda's past and fantasies of Laura's future.

Williams's *coup de theatre* is dramatizing the chasm that lies between illusion and actuality. The gentleman caller is the major figure in the idealized past described by Amanda; he is a character from the sentimental fiction which she sells on the telephone:

Bates was one of my own bright particular beaus. But he got in a quarrel with the wild Wainwright boy and they shot it out on the floor of the moon lake Casino. Bates was shot through the stomach. He died in an ambulance on his way to Memphis....my picture was found him the right he died (1988, p.14)

Tom cues Amanda into the speech and he follows her performance with a series of wry remarks. The next set speech about the gentleman caller appears in act II p7, When Amanda prepares Laura for the visit of Jim O'Connor. Hopping to encourage her daughter to rise above physical limitations Amanda recalls being socially successful during a struggle against malaria. Here the gentleman caller is not part of a preposterous melodrama, but a figure within a gracious and gallant way of living.

The third and final speech about the gentleman caller is delivered to Jim O'Connor himself. Amanda uses the speech as an apology for her deficiencies as a cook:

All my gentleman callers were sons of planters and so of course I assumed that I would be married to one and raise my family on a large piece of land with plenty of servants. But... I married no planter (1988, p.50)



Following most of her references to the gentleman caller, Amanda mentions her missing husband. Her associations suggest that Mr Wingfield was, at one time, a gentleman caller himself, an active part of Amanda's idealized view of the world. This, in turn, may offer one reason why the man left; he felt pressured to be perfect.

Amanda's rhapsodies about the gentleman caller seem to have differing effects on her children. Laura seems coved by the stories; she retreats further into her world of glass and music. Tom, by contrast, hears the speeches as an evocation of a better way of life, which he finally leaves the family to seek. Amanda ironically seems to stimulate the very yearning that makes the Wingfield men abscond.

The elder Wingfield, the departed husband, is the second of the play's major unseen character. He is first evoked by his image in photograph overhanging the family's apartment. Then in an opening monologue, Tom describes him: an evocation that focuses exclusively on the manner of his departure. Clearly, this man's importance lies not in his character but in his location. In other words, his absence is his presence.

Mr Wingfield also evoked by certain onstage objects: his records and the dress that Amanda wore when she met him. Nonetheless, the most forceful evocation is Tom himself, who seems almost fated to follow in his father's footsteps. We observe that Amanda is, in her home, running a particular kind of show, a menagerie of caged people who are trained and displayed. She is trying to turn Laura into a younger version of herself and Tom into an idealized version of her husband.

It could also be argued that Jim O'Connor, the real gentlemen caller, is an evocation of Mr Wingfield. Jim brings brief happiness to Laura and then departs, repeating Mr Wingfield's desertion of Amanda. In another sense, every onstage character in *The Glass Menagerie* evokes the unseen father, for every onstage character is escaping. Amanda escapes into the past, Laura into a fantasy world, Tom

escapes into the moiré theatre, and Jim escapes into dreams of success in the business world.

### 3.3 Unseen Characters' Effect on Onstage Figures

Unseen characters have complicated effects on onstage figures in the plays of Williams. In this regard Susan Koprince (1994: 92) suggests that the unseen character makes important contributions to Williams works. The lost men for example, leave behind varying amounts of psychological destructions, in the sense that this defective (irresponsible or feckless) patriarch leaves its victims disoriented and sometimes unbalanced. Certainly, the loss of Mr Wingfield in the play under study has propelled his wife and children into fantasy lives. Amanda dreams of Gentleman callers from the past, Laura plays with glass animals and Tom alternates between trips to the movies and dreams of high adventure. He even fantasies of going to war: *"That's when adventures becomes available to masses! Everyone's dish, not only Gable's!"* (*Menagerie*: 1988, P.48).

These characters served also in developing certain complicated themes such as *The works of Time*, in this regard the American theatre scholar Billy Mishoes has argues that, time as a theme, is recurrent and central in Williams' plays. Time he argues is repeatedly depicted as the antagonist of human beings. In this view, much of human pathology is an adaptive response to the assault of time. Williams uses the unseen character to express both the depredations of antagonistic time and the illusions that characters construct in order to escape anxiety. In *The Glass Menagerie* for example, Amanda busies herself with dreams of the past or visions of the future, neglecting the daily alienation of her son and the psychological destruction of her daughter. Her only successful relationships are with unseen figures.

*Fear of death* which is related to the time's depredations. For Williams, death has a cruel double power: it is frightening enough to provoke people into building illusions, and it is strong enough to shatter those same illusions. In the play under

study Williams uses the unseen characters as victims of death or players in the imaginary dramas that onstage figures construct as escape, this is well expressed through Amanda's remembered lovers who are spoken by as dead, but her vision of Laura's future emphasizes the figure of a living gentleman caller.

*Reality and Illusion* is another important theme that Williams has expressed through the unseen figures. In fact, characters who cannot face the present construct imaginary worlds in the past or future, losing themselves in nostalgia. Unseen characters provide much of the population of these artificial realms. Understanding this theme requires, first, a consideration of what it is that Williams' characters cannot face in the present, because their present is either abhorrent because of family life (which is the case of Tom within the play who could not support the suffocating atmosphere in which he was living) or painful because it contrasts so sharply with the past (case of Amanda who refused to accept the fact that her husband deserted her).

#### **4. Benefits of the Technique to the Playwright**

The creation of such a population was of great benefit to the playwright. In fact, through the unseen character Williams gained a dramatic Contrast that other techniques would not have afforded. Amanda wingfield, for example lives meagrely. The past beauty and scope of her life as created by references to Gentlemen callers, friends and places contrasts sharply with and highlights her small family and dingy apartment. Literal presentations of people and scenes from Amanda's past would provide less contrast to her straitened, present time circumstances. No scene designer, no costumier could sketch in the kind of glittering existence that Amanda paints for the audience in her speeches.

The unseen character also bestows an extra measure of Ambiguity to the play, which is an important gain for a playwright who believes that no truth is final. Amanda's rhapsodies about her past are open to question; the audience is free to wonder if things so wonderful as Amanda claims; if all these smitten suitors even

existed. Obviously, any onstage representation of Amanda's suitors or Mr Wingfield would destroy a part of the ambiguity for which Williams is working.

When working with his "lost man" figures, Williams secures a third benefit of the unseen character for his art. The onstage presence of any of Williams's lost men would undermine the most important thing about him: the fact that he is now here, no longer gone; it is that he has dropped an iron curtain in front of him, and he is as absent as if he never existed. Totally excluding him from the stage makes that point more forcibly, Williams is setting a priority: in the world of *The Glass Menagerie*, for example, it doesn't matter what Mr Wingfield was like (how he spoke, walked and generally conducted himself) what matters is that he is gone, and that his absence is a living force on the stage, as its work of destroying three people.

The technique adds also a measure of complexity to onstage characterization. Williams is justly celebrated for the complexity of certain of his onstage characters. However, his unseen characters have a complexity that is seldom noted. When a given character is absent from the stage, he only exists in the words of the onstage figures. For the audience, then, the unseen character is revealed in the interplay of thoughts and feelings on the stage. As these thoughts and feelings elevate in complexity, so does the complexity of the unseen character.

## Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to shed light on the modern use of unseen character as an old device. It is worth mentioning that the unseen character, in Tennessee Williams' works *The Glass Menagerie* is not just offstage whose invisibility is incidental and who interacts normally with the lives of onstage characters. But, the unseen character inhabits a second order of reality that, although it enwraps the onstage world, bears a special nature as well as a special population. For example, in the play under study, the special world of these characters in the past, in the sense that, onstage

characters compose vivid legends about the past, their attempt vainly to bring them into reality. The mythical super realm that is evoked in this manner not only directs the audience to larger consideration, but also draws a telling contrast to onstage events.

Tennessee Williams is not, of course, the only American theatre artist of the nineteenth century to have employed the technique of unseen character. Eugene O’Neil who is considered as a pillar of the American modern theatre used this technique in many of his famous plays such as: *A Wife for a Life*, *Desire under the Elms*, *Strange Interlude*, *Mourning Becomes Electra* ....etc.

The unseen figure occurs in many works of Edward Albee who follows Williams in creating dying or defective patriarchs in the unseen realm. These plays include *The Zoo Story*, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, *The American Dream*, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Arthur Miller employed the device occasionally; most notably in *All my Sons* his most Ibsen influenced work.

The unseen character, then, seems well established in the body of Modern American drama, and this fact inspires the hope that other researchers will examine the technique from different perspectives.

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