

# CHARACTERISTICS OF SOUTH AMERICAN AS THE EFFECT OF SLAVERY AS IT REFLECTED IN LITERATURE

(A Historical View of Tennessee William's The Glass Menagerie)

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**Abstrak:** Karya sastra merupakan sebuah cerminan dari era tertentu, karena penulis sering menggambarkan kondisi-kondisi dan fenomena-fenomena melalui karya sastra. Salah satu cara untuk mengetahui cerminan tersebut adalah dengan melihat atau meneliti setting atau latar belakangnya. Setting dari drama *The Glass Menagerie* karya Tennessee William adalah St. Louis yang merupakan kota terbesar kedua di Missouri yang dulunya adalah sebuah negara di bagian selatan yang menjadi tempat perbudakan. Salah satu tokoh utama di dalam cerita ini adalah Amanda Wingfield, seorang ibu yang dulunya adalah seorang majikan dari beberapa budak. Amanda menganggap dirinya sebagai seorang aristokrat atau kalangan kelas tinggi tetapi para generasi mudanya yang diwakili oleh anak-anak Amanda, menunjukkan sifat yang berbeda dari generasi Amanda. Ini menunjukkan bahwa Amanda tidak selamanya bisa bertahan dengan sifatnya itu yaitu berhenti bermimpi dan berkhayal tentang keglamouran masa lalunya. Lebih lanjut berarti juga untuk berhenti dari tradisi Amerika Selatan yang bersifat aristokratik.

الملخص: يمثل الانتاج الأدبي وضعاً اجتماعياً وعصراً معيناً. لأن الكاتب، كثيراً ما يصور وقائع ومظاهر اجتماعية في كتاباته. ومن أساليب معرفة هذا التصوير بالنظر إلى خلفية كتابته. وخلفية تمثيلية *The Glass Menagerie* تأليف تينيس وليام هي مدينة ست. لويس. هي المدينة الكبيرة الثانية في ميسوري. في السابق كانت هي دولة في الجانب الجنوبي كالمركز للعبودية. أحد رجال القصة في هذه أمندا ونجفيلد (وهي سابقاً سيدها لكثير من الموالى). شعرت أمندا أنها امرأة من العلويات جنساً. لكن الجيل بعدها (أبناءها وغيرهم) لا يشعرون بما شعرت به هي. دلّت هذا على أن أمندا لا تستطيع أن تدوم في شعورها ورؤياها السابقة. عليها التوقف من هذه كلها ومن تقاليد أمريكا الجنوبية (الشعور بعلويات الجنسية).

**Keywords:** Setting, refleksi, karakteristik

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is not only a product of human thoughts but also a reflection of a certain era at the time when it is written. Through literature we can know about the personal perspective, interpretation, judgement of the writer. The writer often shows the description of a certain condition and phenomenon from a certain era through literature. The reader then, become know about the specific situation in a certain era when the literary works ere written. So, it can also be said that one of the way to know the situation and condition of the specific era is by learning and observing the setting in a certain literature work.

Setting is all the information and clue related to time, place, and condition of happening or event behind the literary works<sup>1</sup>. Kenney also says that setting includes the description about geographic location. Topography, view, and the specific information about the decoration of the room, works, or the daily business of the characters, time when the events happens, historical era, season, religion, environment, moral, intelektual, social, and characters' emotion<sup>2</sup>.

Based on that spesification, Hudson divides setting into two categories. They are social setting and physical or material setting. Physical or material setting includes place, time, and physical nature around the characters, while the social setting is the description of the condition of the society or certain social groups, habits of a certain era, attitudes of life, customs which set the event<sup>3</sup>.

The function of setting is first to give information about the situation as it is. Besides, there is also a setting functioned as a reflection of the psychological condition of the characters<sup>4</sup>.

A good setting can give a clear description about events, characters' traits, and conflicts faced by the characters so that the story seems to be life and vivid as if it really happens in a real life<sup>5</sup>.

Although Tennessee Williams's *Glass Menagerie* does not directly describe the existence of the American South, this play reflects the spirit of the American South in the modern era. Set in time of the great depression (1930s), this play portrays a Southern mother, Amanda Wingfield, who tries to rekindle the

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<sup>1</sup> Panuti Hadimurti & Mohamad Sudjiman, *Memahami Cerita Rekaan*, (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1991), 44.

<sup>2</sup> William Kenney, *How to Analyze Fiction*, (New York: Monarch Press, 1966), 44.

<sup>3</sup> William Henry Hudson, *An Introduction to the Study of Literature*, (London :George G. Harrap & Co Ltd, 1963), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Panuti Hadimurti & Mohamad Sudjiman, *Memahami Cerita Rekaan*, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Burhan Nurgiyantoro, *Teori Pengkajian Fiksi*, (Yogyakarta: Gajahmada University Press, 1998), 216.

atmosphere of the old South in their struggle to cope with the difficult life after the Civil War and during the great depression.

This short paper is an attempt to see William's *The Glass Menagerie* from its historical background. Here are the assumptions on which the topic of this paper is based:

1. Tennessee William was born in Columbus, Mississippi (March 26, 1911) and brought up in the Southern tradition and culture<sup>6</sup>. His mother valued refinement and the good manners of Southern gentry, and she made sure that Williams grew up having both<sup>7</sup>. It is quite logical then to consider that William was influenced by the old Southern way of life.
2. The setting of place of *The Glass Menagerie* is St. Louis, the second biggest city in the state of Missouri that used to be a Southern slave-state. Logically, this place still bears some deeply-rooted characteristics of the South.
3. It is widely known that most of Tennessee William's works focus on disturbed emotion and unresolved sexuality in the Southern families<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, to expect that *The Glass Menagerie* also deals with the problem of Southern is not at all groundless.

For the above reasons, this paper, then, aims at: (1) finding out how one of the characters of the play, Amanda Wingfield, reflects the fading aristocracy of the old South, (2) examining the significance of the other characters (Laura and Tom Wingfield, and Jim O'Connor), and (3) interpreting the points that Williams might want to convey to the readers (or audience). As this paper applies a historical approach, a brief look at the American South will surely be much of advantage.

## THE OLD AMERICAN SOUTH : ARISTOCRACY, SLAVERY, AND THE CIVIL WAR

As the result of its being well-off agricultural area, the American South had formed a particular tradition of its own. Historically, along with the clearing of new promising plantations, the demand of workers (black slaves) become higher and higher, and from then on slavery spread over the South. The facts that the

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<sup>6</sup> Ninan Baym, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, (New York: WW Norton&company, 1989), 177.

<sup>7</sup> Ehrenharft, *Tennessee William's The Glass Menagerie and A Street Car Named Desire*, (New York: Baron's book incorporated, 1985), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Van Spanckeren, *Outline of American Literature*, (Washington DC: United States information Agency, 1984), 96.

Southern society then broke up into two main classes, the white masters and the black workers (the slaves), had created certain ways of life and attitude for the white masters in particular, and the white Southerners in general.

These white masters live an easy authoritative life, and they developed a sense of superiority over the black. Eventhough only one of every three white Southern families owned slaves, and of these the majority owned only one or two apiece<sup>9</sup>, it was enough for the South to build its long-lived characteristics, i.e. aristocracy. [Note: Aristocracy, in this case means “the leading persons of a state—the patricians or nobles—or those regarded as superior in rank, talent, intellect, or wealth” (Encyclopaedia Americana on CD-ROM, 1996)]

However, the inequality between the white masters and black slaves had caused debates which culminated in the issue of Civil War (1861-1865). Under Lincoln presidency the Civil War was turned into an antislavery crusade. This made the war was worth fighting for the North<sup>10</sup>. The facts that the South was later defeated in the war, and that slavery was abolished, gave a bitter and shocking experience to the white Southerners. It was, certainly, not easy for them to change their tradition and way of life. Rubin Jr. even says that “the loss of the war and the end of the slavery should have destroyed their identity.” It, however, did not. In defeat, the white Southerners strongly retained their aristocratic identity<sup>11</sup>.

Besides gradually losing their identity, most white Southerners also suffered from the loss of wealth to provide their decent living condition. Because of the emancipation (or freeing the slaves), now they had to spend much more money to finance their plantation. Furthermore, they also had to suppress their feeling of superiority as “masters”. This difficult situation still remained in the very soul of the white Southerners long after the end of the Civil War, probably even up to present time.

In addition to above fact, the defeat in the Civil War left for them “a sense of deprivation and shared hatred and adversity” toward the North<sup>12</sup>. They had to change their prosperous way of life in the past into a “poor” way of life, and they had to be ready to face the “Commerce, industry, and the almighty dollar with the same avidity and finesse as the victorious North”<sup>13</sup>. Their catastrophe

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<sup>9</sup> Louis D Rubin Jr, *The American South: Portrait of A Culture*, (Washington DC: United Stated Information Agency, 1991), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Donald A. Ritchie, *A Heritage of Freedom: History of United States*, (New York: Scripner Educational Publisher, 1985), 367.

<sup>11</sup> Louis D Rubin Jr, *The American South: Portrait of A Culture*, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

seemed to be complete now. What they could do was, among other things, romanticizing and glorifying the easy life in the past and the heroism of the Civil War, regretting their defeat in the war, and imagining what would have happened if only they could win the Civil War. This characteristic seemed to be deeply held in the heart of the white Southerners.

## DISCUSSION OF THE GLASS MENAGERIE

Entering the first scene of the play, readers are actually introduced to the setting of place, i.e. an alley in St. Louis. This city immediately provides the atmosphere of the American South. St. Louis is the biggest city in the state of Missouri, a state which used to legalize slavery. However, what can be seen in the scene is not the “old” St. Louis, but the present St. Louis in the difficult era of Great Depression (1930s). This is shown through the description of an apartment which is located in an “overcrowded urban centre of lower middle-class population”, and which is “dim” in the interior. Borrowing Styan’s term, the setting “announces the soul-destroying urban environment of a southern family”<sup>14</sup>. The depressing scene is emphasized by the narrator’s (Tom Wingfield) additional comment that “here there were disturbances of labor, sometimes pretty violent.”

So strong is the influence of aristocrat tradition on her that she does not really realize she is now living in a different era with different tradition and values. To Amanda, the beautiful memory of the past is the happiest and most meaningful experience she had ever had, especially her experience in accepting gentlemen callers. Amanda says that at that time she sometimes had to receive as many as seventeen gentlemen callers in just one evening. If it happened, then she would have to “send her nigger over to bring additional folding chairs from the parish house.” (p.604)

Asked by Tom what she and her gentlemen callers talked about, Amanda proudly says that because they were high-class people they talked about “things of importance in the world.” They would never talk about “anything common or vulgar.”

AMANDA:.....*My callers were gentlemen – all. Among my callers were some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta – planters and sons of planters. There was young Champ Laughlin who later became vice-president of the Delta*

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<sup>14</sup> J. L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Realism and Naturalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 137.

*Planters Bank. Hadley Stevenon who was drowned in Moon Lake and left his widow one hundred and fifty thousand in Government bonds. There were Cutrere*

*Brothers..... (scene I)*

Amanda's experience is so beautiful that she tries hard to rejuvenate her experience in her crippled daughter, Laura, life. Realizing that Laura is invalid, Amanda motivates her enthusiastically and even eagerly wants to see Laura have the same experience as she had in the past. To strengthen her support, Amanda uses her experience when she was young.

AMANDA:.....I've seen such pitiful cases in the South- barely tolerated spinster living upon the grudging patronage of sister's or brother's wife-stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room-encouraged by one in-law to visit another-little birdlike woman without any nest-eating the crust of humility all their life.

When finally Amanda, helped by Tom, succeeds in arranging a gentleman caller for Laura, she tries to impose her aristocratic illusion of the South on Laura. Amanda insists that Laura should dress the way she did in the past.

AMANDA :.....*This is the dress in which I led the cotillion. Won the cakewalk twice at Sunset Hill, wore one Spring to the Governor's Ball in Jackson! See how I sashayed around the ballroom, Laure? [She raises her skirt and does a miming step around the room.] I wore it on Sundays for my gentlemen callers!.....(scene VI)*

Further, Amanda also insists that Laura should wear what she calls "Gay Deceivers", something to be stuffed on Laura's chest to make Laura's chest lovelier (because Laura's chest is flat).

The climax of her recalling the memory of the old South happens when Amanda talks to Jim, Laura's gentleman caller, while they are waiting for supper.

AMANDA :.....Well, in the South we had so many servants. Gone, gone, gone. All vestiges of gracious living! Gone completely! I was't prepared for what the future brought me. All of my gentlemen callers were son 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 servants. But man purposes- and woman accept the proposal! To vary that old, old saying a little bit- I married no planter! (Scene VI)

So far the point is clear; Amanda is much overshadowed by the memory of the glory of the South tradition. And up to the present time, she still proudly keeps her Southern tradition strongly: her table manner, her way of dressing, her

life among her prominent planters, and her possession of slaves. In this extent, it is appropriate to call this play “a memory play”.

The problem however, is that her memory of the old South seems now meaningless, in the sense that those beautiful aristocracy will never come back to her again. First, time has changed. Amanda is now living in a difficult situation: her husband left her so that she depend her life on her son, and she is suffering financially from the impact of the Great Depression.

Presenting such situation, Tennessee William seems want to give emphasis on Amanda’s glorification of the aristocracy of the old South which seems inappropriate in the modern era. This can be inferred from the fact that all of her past experiences are beautiful but they are no more than dreams. Those beautiful things now are just memories. This all due to the fact that, first of all, Civil War has brought many changes to the South States in general, and to her family in particular. History points out that after the civil war (which also means the end of slavery) “railroad building and the renewal westward movement of Americans encouraged industry and urban growth”<sup>15</sup>. These things speeded up the changes.

Plantations owners stopped relying on their slaves, and in addition to that, social structures were modified by the new immigrants from the free states. These brought more changes which kept rolling until the Great Depression of the 30s struck the whole nation and slowed down the economic life.

In the case of Wingfields, it seems that Amanda fails to cope with a difficult situation the Great Depression has created. She seems to live under great pressure. First of all, readers are informed that Mr. Wingfield has already gone, leaving the family a serious financial problem. (To a certain extent, this was due to Amanda’s mistake in choosing a husband). Secondly, her only daughter, Laura, makes her worried because Laura is crippled and terribly shy young girl. And thirdly, Tom is not serious in his job at a shoe company. Instead of taking real actions or working hard to solve her financial problems, she recalls and celebrates the past (the aristocratic way of life).

## **TOM, LAURA, AND JIM : THE OPPOSING FORCES**

Although both Tom and Laura are the product of the Southern mother, they are also the product of a more modern era. No wonder they have quite different view about their ancestor’s tradition, including aristocracy. It can even

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<sup>15</sup> *Grolier Encyclopedia of Knowledge*. Vol. 17, (Danbury: Grolier Incorporated,1995), 407.

be said that they are against this characteristic tradition of the old American south. They perceive life more realistically although to a certain extent they, like their mother, also try to escape from the difficult life they are in. This difference makes them in conflict with their mother.

Tom Wingfield is boldly protesting his mother sets rules in the dinner table. Tom directly says that the rules have spoiled his appetite. I haven't enjoyed one bite of his dinner because of your constant directions on how to eat it," Tom says (p. 604). And when Amanda tells her experience with the gentlemen callers, Tom immediately says, "I know what's coming." It means that the story has become a routine for him and that he does not give a serious response to it.

Tom is also cynical towards Amanda's activity with women who subscribe glamour magazines for "ladies of letters". Considering their financial life, Tom sees that it is not proper for her mother to involve herself in such a lady-class circle. Besides, Tom knows what kind of ladies they are. They just think about "delicate cuplike breasts, slim, tapering waists, rich, creamy thighs, eyes like wood smoke in autumn, fingers that soothe and caress like string of music, bodies as powerful as Etruscan sculpture" (p. 609). For Amanda, this activity is an attempt to revive his beautiful memory.

Her opposition to Amanda is even getting stronger when Amanda takes Tom's book back to the library because Amanda thinks that the book is filthy. The book was written by Mr. Lawrence (probably referring to Lady Chatterley's Lover by D.H. Lawrence). At the climax of this opposition Tom decides to live the house for he feels that "there is no single thing in his life that he can call his own" (p. 610). The following quotation shows how angry he is to his mother.

*TOM:.....Every time you come in yelling that Goddam "Rise and Shine!", "Rise and Shine!", I say to myself, "How lucky dead people are!" But I get up. I go! For sixty dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being ever!.... (Scene III)*

And to Amanda's surprise, Tom calls her an "ugly-babbling old witch" (p.611). Laura, fortunately, succeeds to calm her brother down and makes him apologize to Amanda. Otherwise, the Wingfields will lose the breadwinner.

It is apparent that Tom really does not like the way his mother treats her children in which she is overshadowed by the old South tradition. Everything is always compared to the old South. His disagreement can be best described by his metaphor of people going to the movie. They are watching movies instead of moving.

*TOM :.....People do go to the movies instead of moving. Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventures for everybody in America*



sits in a dark room and watches them have them! Yes, until there's a war. That's when adventure become available top the masses!.....( Scene VI)

Here Tom is " sitting in the dark" watching what his mother does. Laura Wingfield, unlike her brother rejects her mother's treatment in a different way, in a quite mild and disguised way. She does not make an open confrontation, and on the surface she even does not show her rejection toward her mother illusion of the old South. It seems that Laura is illing to be a victim rather than to be a rebel. The best thing that Laura can do is to keep reminding her mother about their real life. When Amanda dreams of receiving gentlemen callers in the past, Laura would say "I'm Not expecting any gentlemen callers." (p.604), or "I don't believe e're going to receive any, Mother" (p.605), or "I'm just not popular like you ere in Blue Mountain" (p.605).

A stronger rejection from Laura can be seen when she secretly quits attending Rubicam's Business College. She does not like study there, and she knos that her attending the college is actually her mother's ambition. Besides, Amanda wants Laura to meet many young men in the college since Amanda is affraid that Laura will never get married because of her extreme shyness. To a certain extent she is giving hard pressure to Laura. Amanda still thinks that she can dictate her children to do what she wants. This is aristocratic ways of bringing up children.

Later, when Amanda finds out that Laura stops of Rubicam's Business College, she shows her disappointment and anger by giving examples from the old Southern girls' experiences, especially the unmarried girls who didn't occupy a position. "I've seen such pitiful cases in the South" Amanda says. Once again, Amanda is obsessed by the old South.

As young people from a more modern generation, Tom and Laura try to live their life in their own way. To show his disagreement to his mother, Tom prefers atching movie to listening to Amanda's stories. He does not ant to give any reason why he alays watches movies, even to his own mother. For Tom, what he does is none of somebodyelse 'sbusiness. In other words, he really respects privacy, and he is consistent about this. Since he does not expect somebody else to mind his business, then he never wants to mind somebody else's business. This principle is clearly observed in the play. He never interferes Amanda's or Laura's business.

Besides paying high respect to one's privacy, Tom also wants his freedom to do what he thinks is right without any pressure from others. He smokes although his mother does not allow him to do it. He goes to the movies almost

every night and leaves his “ordering” mother. And he lets Laura to have her own freedom too.

Laura, on the other hand, wants more or less the same thing as her brother does. She wants to be free to decide what is good for her. She leaves the college because her heart is not there. She is interested more in visiting the museum, the bird house, the zoo, or jewel box (a big glass house here tropical flowers are raised). Laura, too, respects privacy, especially in relation to her hobby of collecting and taking care of the glass menagerie. She wants to have her own world in which she can live her own life. Consequently, when her mother arranges to invite a young gentleman caller for her, she rejects it. If finally she reluctantly accepts the young man, Jim, it is because she does not want to see her mother sad.

Tom and Laura are two forces that try to stop Amanda’s glorification of the old South tradition and pride. Behind these two characters lies a message for Amanda to face the present life realistically and factually. Time has changed, and Amanda should adjust herself to it. Otherwise, Amanda will always be in her illusion and he will be a “unicorn” ( a very rare animal) in a modern world.

To end the discussion, it is wise to take a look at the last characters in the play, the gentleman caller named Jim O’ Connor. Concerning the topic of this study, Jim certainly has a significant role in the sense that it is Jim who gives a kind of shock therapy for Amanda. Jim’s apology for being unable to be Laura’s boyfriend ultimately wakes Amanda up from her dream. Amanda’s illusions of the old South can never be realized now. She should start facing life realistically in the new world. In this way, then we can place Jim as the enactment of Tom and Laura’s rejection to Amanda’s celebration of the old South.

Seeing from a different point of view, however, readers may come to another conclusion. Probably they will see Amanda, Tom, and Laura as actually one similar character : one who escapes from a difficult situation. Remembering the old South is a means for Amanda to forget his difficult life; going to the movies and smoking are two ways for Tom to escape from his boring activities in the shoe company; and collecting glass menagerie is a good way for Laura to get rid of the pressure she gets because of her being crippled. This conclusion, of course, needs a further study.

## CONCLUDING REMARK

The historical study of *The Glass Menagerie* results in several points as follows:

- a. Symbolically, Amanda Wingfield can be seen as an old South tradition of aristocracy which tries hard to survive in the modern era, an era that puts realistic, practical actions and equal rights as a priority. This is particularly represented in the way she glorifies and celebrates the old South tradition and pride, and the easy life she used to have. Her aristocratic nature also can be traced in her authoritative treatment towards her children (setting strict rules, arranging her daughter's love affair, keep controlling and ordering). The fact that Amanda fails to revitalise her aristocratic tradition may, then be interpreted that there is no more place for such tradition in the modern era, or that such tradition in the modern era, or that such tradition does not fit to the present time anymore. Tom, Laura, and Jim seem to represent the modern generation that holds different values in facing life.
- b. The modern life (meaning: modern Southern life) has changed a great deal. Privacy, individualism, and freedom (E.g: Tom's demands her mother not to mind his business; Laura wants to have her own world; Laura's choice of leaving the college) are highly appreciated and gradually replace the old South tradition such as parents' authority, family's pride, and aristocracy (E.g. Amanda tries to control everybody in the house, her anxiety about Laura's being crippled, getting older, and having no boyfriend; Amanda's story of the easy life she used to have). The characters from the younger generation (Tom, Laura, and Jim) of this context signify the new or modern South tradition that gradually changes and leaves the old one.
- c. Changing one's way of life needs one's courage to make some adjustment. When Amanda's plan to present a gentlemen caller for Laura fails, it means that Amanda has to be ready to start facing new life. The new South now is different from the old South. This means that Amanda also has to get rid of the shadow of the old-fashioned South tradition which indirectly means "Stop dreaming and escaping". Further, this can also mean stop applying the old South aristocratic tradition since it does not fit anymore in the modern South.

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