Laura Wingfield of The Glass Menagerie (1944) hardly qualifies as a romantic superwoman, a majestic ego eager to transcend the "mereness" of mundane human existence. In his narration of the drama at the same time as he plays a part in it, together with his final, self-centered leavetaking from the domestic misery-cum-menage of his mother and sister for ocean going as well as artistic adventure, Tom Wingfield owns that distinction. (See Harold Bloom's discussion of Tom as a romantic figure, and of Tennessee Williams's American as well as English romantic precursors, in his Introduction to Modern Critical Interpretations: Tennessee Williams [NY: Chelsea House, 1987], pp. 3-5.)

But Tom's romantic lineage as a lone, visionary quester, as opposed to his realistic-naturalistic role as a clear-sighted, participatory narrator, might have been clearer had Williams taken himself at his word in the Production Notes to The Glass Menagerie:

Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are.... Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance.... [A] new, plastic theatre ... must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture. (The Glass Menagerie [NY: New Directions, 1966])

If the playwright had heeded these words, he would have made his alter ego, Tom Wingfield, a genuine expressionistic protagonist, with American antecedents in Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones (1920), Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine (1923), and Sophie Treadwell's Machinal (1928), together with German precedents stretching from the quintessential expressionist Georg Kaiser very much the way back to such late, even ironic romantic relatives of his as Heinrich von Kleist and Georg Buchner. That is, Tom would have become a protagonist whose remembrance of familial things past was truly subjective: distorted, dreamlike or even nightmarish, and totally self-generated, a fantastic journey through the mind's inner reaches as well as the world's outer ones.

As it stands, however, Tom's memories are not expressionistic, but impressionistic: they are his impressions of his former domestic life, the veracity or accuracy of which is never placed in doubt by Tennessee Williams. The Glass Menagerie may be a memory play, then, but it does not question the reliability of memory, as do such plays as Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921) and Pinter's Old Times (1971), and as does a film like Kurosawa's Rashomon (1951). Instead, Tom's memories (like those of his Irish "offspring," the young narrator of Brian Friel's Dancing at Lughnasa [1990]) are very much in the Hollywood tradition of flashback films, whose flashbacks are set in a representational world we all recognize and accept. (Not by accident, The Glass Menagerie's earlier, 1943 incarnation was a screenplay, titled The Gentleman Caller but never produced.)

The opening stage directions of The Glass Menagerie suggest just such a flashback when they describe the theatrical equivalent of a cinematic "dissolve":

At the rise of the curtain, the audience is faced with the dark, grim rear wall of the Wingfield tenement.... At the end of Tom's opening commentary, the dark tenement wall slowly becomes transparent and reveals the interior of the ground-floor Wingfield apartment... Nearest the audience is the living room ... Just beyond, separated from the living
room by a wide arch or second proscenium with transparent faded portieres (or second curtain), is the dining room.... The audience hears and sees the opening scene in the dining room through both the transparent fourth wall of the building and the transparent gauze portieres of the dining-room arch. It is during this revealing scene that the fourth wall slowly ascends, out of sight. This transparent exterior wall is not brought down again until the very end of the play, during Tom's final speech. (The Glass Menagerie, pp. 21-22)

After this, Tom steps onstage and begins his narration—the very kind we would hear in voice-over in a flashback film. He should remain onstage throughout, even when he does not appear in a scene (as he doesn't in Scene 2), as the play's one concession to Tom's "subjective" point of view. (Even as it would be a concession to Tom's choral function, though, unlike the choruses of ancient Greek tragedy, Tom is a chorus of one; and, at the end of The Glass Menagerie, the individualistic Tom abandons the stage, or his family, whereas the socially-minded Greek chorus never deserted the stage and its fellow citizens.) But the fact that Williams never indicates in the stage directions that Tom is present at all times suggests that he was really writing what he decries in his Production Notes: a "straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters who speak exactly as its audience speaks ..." (p. 7). What we see onstage may be dimly or poetically lit; a screen device (on which images and titles are projected) may be used as the mind's eye of the narrator; a single recurring tune may "weave in and out of [a] preoccupied consciousness" (p. 9); and eating and drinking may be mimed instead of literally carried out—in other words, the action may appear to be impressionistic or "non-realistic" (though hardly expressionistic—-but this is realism by any other name. And all the more so because, like undisguised realism and naturalism, The Glass Menagerie never questions its own.

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