

The Gentleman Caller in the Context of 21st Century Europe: Translation of Tennessee Williams's Symbols into Serbian

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Abstract:

Breaking from the constraints of the “exhausted” realistic plays of his day with a view to achieving a “more penetrating and vivid expression of things”, Tennessee Williams resorted to the unconventional techniques of expressionism immersing himself in the world of symbols. This paper will explore the versatile role and meanings of the Gentleman Caller as a repetitive, reverberating and omnipresent symbol from Williams's celebrated *The Glass Menagerie*. Unfolding the wide range of meanings of the Gentleman Caller, the paper will go on to analyze its recent translations into Serbian, attempting to show that the impossibility of finding an equivalent comprehensive umbrella term in Serbian and the necessity to break the repetitiveness and vary the solutions from context to context, greatly affect the symbolism and literary and dramatic effects produced in the original piece. Thus, even in the context of, in translational terms, enlightened 21st century Europe, with literary translation activity consciously preceded by thorough stylistic analysis, some literary effects appear to remain elusive.

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....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 (Williams 395).

This is what Tennessee Williams, one of the most celebrated American dramatists, rivalled only by Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller (Kolin ix), wrote in the Production Notes, a preface to his renowned and award-winning play, *The Glass Menagerie*. In this preface, he expressed his views on theatre and art in general, as well as his vision of artistic devices, used to represent life and truth, making one of his major aesthetic statements (Kolin 43). This is what he did in practice in his numerous plays. In his partial deviation from realism, Tennessee used unconventional techniques, staying away from the photographic in art and regarding it as insignificant. With these techniques, he transformed reality and the world around him in an attempt to capture universal truths.

On the way to transformation, Williams created what he called “plastic theatre”, stressing the importance of combination of all staging elements. He also resorted to poetry and poetic devices, his first love that he never abandoned. In Bigsby's words,

Williams's poetry "derives from a region of America which has self-consciously invested itself with a romantic mythology, as it does from characters whose struggle with the real leaves a residue of poetry in their broken lives" (Bigsby 29). Naturally, this led him to the world of symbols in which he immersed himself fully and uncompromisingly, making extensive use of them to depict inner thoughts and emotions and to create a new, transformed, and above all poetic reality.

Williams's fondness for symbols is obvious. They appear on the linguistic level and are present in other elements of staging. The title of the *The Glass Menagerie*, the play we are focusing on, is symbolic. As the play progresses, symbolism extends to a host of linguistic and non-linguistic elements, such as sound, music, the screen, etc. Among a variety of symbols, we chose the omnipresent Gentleman Caller, whose polysemous nature and role in the play can hardly pass unnoticed. It is particularly intriguing how the Gentleman Caller was translated.

At the beginning of the play, the Gentleman Caller is explicitly introduced as a symbol by Tom, the narrator. Assuming the role of a poet, resembling Williams himself, Tom directly addresses the readers, attracting their attention to this character, "But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol" (Williams 401).

The role of the "gentleman caller" is especially versatile and meaningful in Amanda's case. It is in her character and mind that this term synthesizes most of its meanings and connotations. The first and the most obvious meaning of the "gentleman caller" traces back to Amanda's past. In the place of her youth, the gentleman caller was a male visitor, usually a visitor to a house where a young girl lived. It reflected the socially recognized practice of men who visited young women, wishing to win their love and marry them. But these callers were not common visitors: they were young men, gentlemen, and, in Amanda's case, rich planters. Thus, the term "gentlemen callers" implied courting, chivalry, gentlemanliness and girls' prospects for a bright future.

As such, the gentleman caller represents Amanda's link to the past she is obsessed with. References to her past appear throughout the entire play. In Griffin's words,

Although the family now lives in reduced circumstances in St. Louis on Tom's salary of sixty-five dollars a month as a warehouse clerk, Amanda never stops reminding her children of her own more affluent past. Reminiscing is a recognizable parental characteristic, but it is an obsession with Amanda. In his introduction to "The Characters" Williams says she is "clinging frantically to another time and place" (Griffin 23, 24).

"Another time and place" was a world in which she, full of hope, vigour and beauty, had a different life. This was a life in the good Old South, with affluence, grand estates, spacious balconies, plantations, gallantry, graciousness and promises. As Thomas E. Porter points out, the myth of the Old South, in which Amanda devoutly believes, was one of gracious living, family tradition, chivalry, and coquetry which lent a stability of time and place to those who partook of it (Griffin 24). That was a time when girls were surrounded by armies of suitors who offered them status, wealth, security and luxurious life. Voluntarily trapped in the whirlpool of memories and illusions from her past,

Amanda manages to blur the stinging truth of the present circumstances and make her life easier to endure. Her memories and illusions are personified by the Gentleman Caller.

However, for Amanda the Gentleman Caller does not belong only to the blissful world of memories. Disillusioned by her daughter's failure to proceed with the business school, Amanda turns to the gentleman caller as another real option for Laura,

After the fiasco at Rubicam's Business College, the idea of getting a gentleman caller for Laura began to play a more and more important part in Mother's calculations. It became an obsession. Like some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment. (Williams 410)

This present-time option, thus, becomes a symbol of escape, and escape has most often been proposed as the central motif of *The Glass Menagerie*: from a too-possessive love; from responsibility (personal, familial, and social); from reality; from time; and even from an indifferent universe (Kolin 36). In the broadest sense, we can speak of escape from confinement. According to Jacqueline O'Connor, confinement figures as a major theme in this drama (Bloom 69), as all three members of the Wingfield family live in their own kind of confinement.

Amanda is confined to the circumstances totally in contrast to her former life and expectations, to the position of a single mother living a life of dependency, unable to change neither her own future nor the future of her children. Reduced to poverty by a wayward husband, she is paralyzed by the prospect of being abandoned a second time, her fear exacerbated by the presence of an unemployable, crippled daughter (Haley, Ch.4). As such, for Amanda, the Gentleman Caller represents the escape from the precariousness of her grim present circumstances, from continual frustration. It represents a chance for the fulfilment of her strongly felt motherly urge to ensure a stable future for her children being the primary mission of her life.

On the other hand, Tom is confined to his dead-end job preventing him from fulfilling his dreams and, more importantly, to the role of the breadwinner for his helpless mother and sister. Even when he plucks up the courage to break free from the former, he remains confined to the feelings of love and duty towards his sister. Boasting to Laura about the magician who performed a coffin trick getting out of the coffin without removing one nail, he directly refers to his own confinement, claiming that this is a "trick that would come in handy for me – get me out of this 2x4 situation!" (Williams 417). So, for Tom, the Gentleman Caller also represents an escape, a chance for him to rid himself of the crippling burden of duty that he carries on his shoulders.

Laura, crippled as she is, is voluntarily confined in the apartment, which, according to her mother, will lead to permanent confinement if she does not pursue a career or marriage (Bloom 69). Apart from being physical, Laura's confinement is both social and psychological. Laura's social interactions are practically non-existent while her fragile inner self dwells in a world of her own best symbolized by her collection of tiny glass pieces which takes up most of her time. As stated in "The Characters", "Laura's separation increases till she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf" (Williams 394). Progressive as it is, Laura's isolation might even take her to the confinement of a state asylum (Bloom 69). Thus, for

her, the Gentleman Caller is a potential escape from this self-sufficient isolation. Not only would Laura be saved from potential spinsterhood and a life of eternal dependency, but she would also be capable of escaping from her inner confinement. In her scene with the Gentleman Caller, in the moment of trust in his reassuring words, Laura comes out her shell, opening up to surrender to him, which is symbolically presented by her entrusting him with her favourite glass unicorn. Unfortunately, her Gentleman Caller proves to be an illusion. Her heart is broken in the same way as her unicorn. This throws Laura back to even greater isolation.

However, despite depicting characters living in their own personal confinement, *The Glass Menagerie* does not remain confined to the misery of individuals desperately searching for escape. To use Stein's words, the play "is built upon more than the poignant plot of illusion and frustration in the lives of little people" (Bloom 62). The context and atmosphere of the play point to something wider than the personal level, something making the members of the Wingfield family just small but fitting parts of a larger picture. As Bigsby points out, the play is set at a moment of change not only in the private but in the public world, as though the latter resonated the private pain (Bigsby 35). The note of social oppression is felt throughout the play. The exact time of setting is 1939, the year when the Second World War broke out, and America was on the brink of war. Putting the play in context in one of his monologues as the narrator, Tom says,

Adventure and change were imminent in this year. They were waiting around the corner for all these kids...In Spain there was Guernica! But here there was only hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars, and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows...All the world was waiting for bombardments (Williams 425).

In addition, we see that America is still struggling with the harsh circumstances of the Depression which has thrown people into hardship, with one American dream destroyed by the Depression itself and another waiting to be destroyed by war. The Depression has put an end to security, replacing it with insecurity which "drives some to a lonely desperation, redeemed only by hermetic fantasies and myths" (Bigsby 33). And just like the Wingfield family, the whole country seems to be living a life of illusion, consoling itself with movies, glamour magazines and dance music entitled "The World is Waiting for the Sunrise". Or, as Tom put it, "the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes" (Williams 400); at the same time, "There is an ominous cracking sound in the sky...The sky falls" (Williams 462). The snapping of the horn from a glass unicorn thus stands for something more than the end of a private romantic myth. It marks the end of a phase of history, of a particular view of human possibility (Bigsby 36).

Thus, substantially reinforced in the play by the haunting image of the Gentleman Caller, escape emerges as the key word on the social level, too. And to conclude with Griffin's words, "escape-seeking society might be regarded as a macrocosm of the Wingfield family, where the women seek refuge in old traditions and tunes, and Tom deserts them to wander the world, only to learn there is no escape" (Griffin 36).

Finally, we can speak of the wider, universal meaning of the Gentleman Caller, which is best encapsulated in Tom's words in his introductory monologue, "he is the long

delayed but always expected something we live for” (Williams 400). Thus, the Gentleman Caller becomes the symbol of human life itself, of human nature, of man’s vague but ever-present yearning for something elusive, unattainable, something seemingly within their reach and yet so distant. It is the symbol of continual expectation and desire, hope for a better tomorrow.

In his memorial tribute to Williams, following his death in 1983, Arthur Miller emphasized the dramatist’s “rhapsodic insistence on making form serve his utterance” (Bigsby 31), and really, the stylistic means employed by Williams to create or reinforce the variety of meanings in *The Glass Menagerie* and to achieve specific stylistic effects are diverse. The one of particular importance for the issue discussed is – recurrence. According to Beaugrande,

Saying the same thing over again normally carries a context-sensitive message, such as approval, insistence, anxiety, doubt, surprise, or irony. /.../ thus, recurrence is typically an instance of “incremental recursion”, where the repeated event adds to the value of the original (Onić 293).

Thanks to its recurrence, the Gentleman Caller in *The Glass Menagerie* strikes us as a reverberating, omnipresent symbol. Just as “(l)ike some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment” (Williams 411), the repetitive phrase reverberates throughout the play, haunting in the same way the readers’ minds, evoking all its meanings and symbolism, images from the past, present and future. It is through recurrence that Amanda’s frame of mind and psychological state are brought closer to us. Her persistent reference to the Gentlemen Callers from her past and Laura’s potential Gentleman Caller convey most vividly and penetratingly her obsessions, anxiety, despair and frustration. Also, it is through recurrence that the Gentleman Caller emerges as the leitmotif of the play, conveying the idea of escape as the central motif. Finally, it is through recurrence and the variety of meaning that the Gentleman Caller adds to the poetic nature of the language used, and Williams’s propensity for poetic language and lyricism has been widely recognized (see Crandell xxv-xxvii).

Here it needs to be emphasized that the Serbian translations analysis includes only published translations, which are, presumably, retrospective, excluding the prospective ones which might be lying forgotten in the archives of some Serbian theatres. Surprisingly enough, the only two published translations were published only recently, in 2002, leaving the gap between the first publication of *The Glass Menagerie* in English and their own publication unaccounted for. The translations in question are by Prendić (T1 - NNK Internacional, Beograd, 2002) and Ćurćija Prodanović (T2 -Zepter Book World, Beograd, 2002) respectively.

The first thing that strikes us in the analysis is that the term “gentleman caller(s)” is translated in Serbian with a variety of different words. The most frequent found in both translations are:

- gost(i)
- mladić(i)
- gospoda

- mladić (koji dolazi u posjetu)

Apart from this, there are some more terms used in one *or* the other translation, and they are as follows:

T1: kavaljeri, mladi gospodin, poseta

T2: posetilac, mladi posetilac

Probably the most illustrative part of the play in this sense is Scene I in which the Wingfield family are having dinner, through which the author introduces the characters, their interrelations and frustrations. After dinner ending in Tom's bout of anger at his mother's continual nagging, Amanda reveals her own frustration and weaknesses,

AMANDA: Resume your seat, little sister – I want you to stay fresh and pretty – for **gentlemen callers!**

LAURA: I'm not expecting any **gentlemen callers.**

AMANDA: ...Sometimes they come when they are least expected! Why, I remember one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain – (*Enters kitchenette.*)

TOM: I know what's coming!

LAURA: Yes. But let her tell it.

(Amanda returns with bowl of dessert.)

AMANDA: One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain – your mother received – seventeen! – **gentlemen callers!** Why, sometimes there weren't chairs enough to accommodate them all. We had to send the nigger over to bring in folding chairs from the parish house.

TOM: ...How did you entertain those **gentlemen callers?** (Williams, 402-403)

This is how the extract was translated by Prendić and Ćurčija Prodanović respectively,

T1

AMANDA: Vрати se na mesto, draga devojčice. Želim da budeš sveža i lepa... za **gospodu koja će doći u posetu.**

LORA: Ne očekujem nikakvu **gospodu!**

AMANDA: Oni ponekad dođu kad ih najmanje očekuješ! Znaš, sećam se jednog nedeljnog popodneva u Plavoj planini... (*Uđe u kuhinjicu.*)

TOM: Znam šta sad ide!

LORA: Da. Ali pusti je da ispriča.

TOM: Opet?

LORA: Voli to da priča.

(Amanda se vraća sa činijom sa desertom)

AMANDA: Jednog nedeljnog popodneva u Plavoj planini...vašu majku je posetilo... sedamnaest **mladića!** Znaš, ponekad nije bilo stolica da se svi smeste. Morali smo da šaljemo crnca da donese stolice na sklapanje iz parohijskog doma.

TOM: Kako si zabavljala te **mladiće?** (Prendić, 22)

T2

AMANDA: Nemoj, mila... hoću da budeš sveža i lepa za svoje **goste!**

LAURA: Ne očekujem nikakve **goste.**

AMANDA: ... Oni naiđu kad im se najmanje nadaš...O, pa sećam se jednog nedeljnog popodneva u Plavim planinama... (*Ulazi u kuhinju.*)

TOM: Znam šta sada dolazi!

LAURA: I ja. Ali pusti je...

TOM: Zar opet?

LAURA: Ona voli da priča o tome.

AMANDA (*vraća se, noseći poslužavnik sa kafom*): Tog popodneva vašoj majci došlo je u posetu sedamnaest **mladića!**... Zamislite, nije bilo dovoljno stolica i morali smo da šaljemo robove da iz parohijske kuće donesu stolice na rasklapanje.

TOM: ...A kako si zabavljala svu tu **gospodu?** (Ćurčija Prodanović 10)

Only a few lines later, in the same scene, Amanda will proudly exclaim, “My **callers** were **gentlemen** – all!” (Williams 403), which was rendered in Serbian as, “Svi moji **kavaljeri** su bili **otmeni!**” (Prendić 23), and “Moji **gosti** bili su **gospoda**, svi do jednog!” (Ćurčija Prodanović 11). Then, after a dreamy recollection of the past with an array of callers mentioned, Amanda returns to the present moment, and to grim reality, too:

AMANDA: ...Stay fresh and pretty! - It’s almost time for our **gentlemen callers** to start arriving...How many do you suppose we’re going to entertain this afternoon?

LAURA: ...I don’t believe we’re going to receive any, Mother.

AMANDA: ...What? No one – not one? You must be joking...Not one **gentleman caller?** It can’t be true! There must be a flood, there must have been a tornado!

LAURA: It isn’t a flood, it’s not a tornado, Mother. I’m just not popular like you were in Blue Mountain... (Williams, 404)

AMANDA:...Budi sveža i lepa! Još malo pa je vreme da počnu da stižu **mladići**...Šta misliš, koliko će ih danas doći?

LORA:... Ne verujem, majko, da će iko da nam dođe.

AMANDA: ...Šta? Niko...naš niko? Mora biti da se šališ!...Ni jedan jedini **mladi gospodin?** To je nemoguće! Biće to prava navala, kao kad protutnji tornado!

LORA: Nikakva navala, majko, i nikakav tornado. Ja jednostavno nisam tako popularna kao ti nekada u Plavoj planini... (Prendić, 24)

AMANDA:...Budi sveža i lepa! Već je skoro vreme da naiđu naši **gosti**... Šta misliš, koliko će ih danas doći?

LAURA:... Ne verujem, majko, da će iko doći.

AMANDA:...Šta? Zar baš niko... ni jedan jedini? Ti se šališ!...Ni jedan **posetilac?** Nemoguće! Biće ih more. Navaliće kao uragan!

LAURA: Moguće je, majko. Ja nisam tako omiljena kao što si ti bila u Plavim planinama... (Ćurčija Prodanović 12)

It is interesting to note that the individual meanings of the terms found in both translations cover different aspects of *gentleman caller* and, as such, are semantically contained in the original term. *Gentleman caller* is a visitor, who is rendered by the term *gost*; it is also a (young) man, whom we find in its translation into Serbian as *mladić*; and, finally, it is a gentleman, translated into Serbian as *gospoda*. Thus, by varying the translation throughout the play, alternating terms covering different aspects of the overall meaning of *gentleman caller*, the translators managed to transfer the underlying concept quite successfully. Still, apart from having a more comprehensive meaning than any of the translations offered, with its continual recurrence *Gentleman Caller* multiplies its significance and symbolism alike.

Unlike the translation by Prendić, where the terms are varied quite freely with no particular pattern spotted, the translation by Ćurčija Prodanović reveals an attempt to stick to one term and preserve repetition, as the word *gost* appears more frequently than any other translations. This to a certain extent cushions the impact of variation preserving much of the effect produced by *gentleman caller* in the original text, although the insufficiency and reduction in meaning of the word used is nevertheless felt.

Gentleman Caller appears in stage directions, too, in a meticulous and unusual manner showing that Williams didn't write his plays only to be staged but to be read as well. Perhaps the best example to illustrate this is the final scene when Jim, the *Gentleman Caller*, leaves the Wingfields' apartment. The stage directions are: "*Still bravely grimacing, Amanda closes the door on the gentleman caller*" (Williams 465). Here, the use of *gentleman caller* instead of Jim as their familiar guest at the end of the evening symbolizes the end of all hopes for escape. Recognizing the symbolism, none of the translators resort to *Džim* to replace the reference to *gentleman caller*:

Još uvek se hrabro osmehujući, Amanda zatvara vrata za gostom. (Prendić, 88)

Upinjući se hrabro da zadrži ljubazan izraz lica, Amanda zatvara vrata za mladićem. (Ćurčija Prodanović, 64)

However, due to the reasons explained above, the respective solutions: *gost* (T1) and *mladić* (T2), unfortunately, are not as effective as the original.

The aim of this paper was to show that the impossibility of finding an equivalent comprehensive all-covering term in Serbian and the necessity to break the repetitiveness and find another solutions greatly affect symbolism, literary and dramatic effects of the play. Thus, even in the context of in translational terms enlightened 21st century Europe, with literary translation activity consciously preceded by thorough stylistic analysis, some literary effects appear to remain elusive.

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