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Blue Mountain and Blue Roses: An Exploration of the Feminine Psyche in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams, the remarkably outstanding American dramatist of the 1920s, through his plays, presents a marked concern for the identity crisis a woman faces. He projects the crisis arising out of the conflict between a woman's own aspirations and the traditional role expectations. *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) depicts the life of two women- Amanda Wingfield and her daughter Laura Wingfield. Amanda is the typical Southern belle that suffered a reversal of economic and social fortune, who withdraws from reality into fantasy. Her daughter Laura, the physically and emotionally crippled heroine of the play is a self-less character who does not speak as much of others. She is extra-ordinarily sensitive and delicate; and her cripple isolates herself into her own illusory world with her own glass menagerie. This paper is an attempt to close study the women protagonists in this play and to reveal that they are a combination of a particular personality type. Williams seems to be interested in the personal and psychological aspects of his women. This paper tries to analyse the psyche of these women and prove that they seem to be more complex and complicated than portrayed in the work.

Keywords: Identity crisis, Psychological aspects, Feminine psyche, Personality type, Reality and fantasy.

American society was in an interesting stage of rapid transition after the first world war. The process of disintegration and reconstruction of the traditional social structure during the 1920s left its impact on the literature of the time. Modern American drama came alive in the second quarter of the twentieth century and Tennessee Williams emerged as the most outstanding playwright during the period. William's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) introduces the audience to two female characters – Amanda, the mother and Laura, the daughter of the Wingfield family. Since this play is the most autobiographical of Williams' works, most of the characters are drawn from the members of his family or close acquaintances. Amanda Wingfield, most certainly is modelled on Williams' own mother Edwina Williams who like her, belonged to the decadent South, and could never reconcile herself to the uncouth existence at St. Louis.

Amanda represents the ideals of the Old South, the puritan tradition. Herself a daughter of the perished Old South, Amanda is a strong yet pathetic character. A Janus-faced character that looks two ways, at the past and the present, she is not able to reconcile them. In the Production Notes to the play, Williams has pointed out the main features of his character as follows:

> A little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place… She is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia. There is much to admire in Amanda and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at. Certainly, she has endurance and a kind of heroism. (*The Glass Menagerie* 36)

Amanda's preoccupation with past – her life in the American South – is the basic fact of her being. She is a member of the 'Daughters of the American Revolution' (GM 42). In the play, there are enormous differences between Amanda's memories of her girlhood in Blue

Mountain and her current life in a Depression era tenement in St. Louis. The South is the lost paradise of her Blue Mountain youth, revealed indirectly and in brief glimpses throughout the play."Incapable of adapting herself to the present drab social and economic situation and the alley apartment in St. Louis, she frequently loses herself in her maiden past" (Mathur 75).

Constantly taking refuge in memories of bygone greatness connected with her adolescence and early adulthood, we see her recalling her life in Blue Mountain, "One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain … Seventeen! Gentlemen callers! ... 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." (GM 40) In scene VI, she recalls how she had all the virtues of a girl of the American South – she had led the cotillion, won the cakewalk twice at Sunset Hill, danced in the Governor's ball at Jackson, filled her house with jonquil flowers (GM 67). She claims she could have married any of those "planters and sons of planters" (GM 40). Instead, she married a genial, carefree man, working for the telephone company "who fell in love with long distances" (GM 38) and abandoned the family.

Her vibrant memories of that Arcadian South are also qualified by a few sombre touches. With its aura of physical and geographical unreality, the name 'Blue Mountain' seems designed to imply that her story belongs to a realm of fairy tale. 'Sunset Hill' introduces a nostalgic suggestion of things once brilliant but now slowly fading, perhaps dimmed by distance in time. According to Stein, "Amanda, wrapped up in her own illusions and selling magazine subscriptions and brassieres prefers to believe not in Tom's favourite D.H Lawrence, but in Cinderella and Courtly love." (37)Her yellow dress and bathrobe is a reminder of her glorious past. All these suggest that she is a woman continually caught between fantasy and reality. She often indulges in playful games so as to escape the drudgery of everyday living. She tells Laura, "You be the lady this time and I'll be the darky" (GM 39).

But she is unable to live forever in this world of illusion. On the one hand, she is well aware that her family's situation is dire. Little money is coming in, they live in a run-down apartment, and both of her children are drifting, though in different ways. At this point, she becomes a realistic mother. She tries to be practical in her outlook. She has aptly been called "a disillusioned romantic turned… realist" (Tischler 32). She truly wants a good life for her children. She is keen enough in making provisions for her oversensitive daughter. She arranges to send Laura to a Secretarial School in an attempt to endow her with some means of self-support. When that fails the mother's zeal to procure a husband for her daughter is quite understandable. She is very much aware of what becomes of unmarried women who are not equipped to take up a job. She tells Laura, "I've seen such pitiful cases in the South – barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife! … Little birdlike women without any nest – eating the crust of humility all their life. (GM 45)Even if she fails to acknowledge Laura's defects, she is realist enough to understand Laura's difficult position. Furthermore, she has seen the letter that Tom received from the Merchant Marine and knows that he will soon be leaving. Facing these brutal facts, she makes Tom arrange to have the gentleman caller arrive.

She wants only the best for her children. She does gear her whole life toward their happiness. Her sacrifice for them has made her the best, ever remembering mother. Scene V in which she looks at the new moon and expresses her wish evidences this:

> AMANDA. What did you wish for?
>
> TOM. That's a secret.
>
> AMANDA. …I don't have secrets. I'll tell you what I wished for on the moon. Success and happiness for my precious children! I wish for that whenever there's a moon, and when there isn't a moon, I wish for it, too. (GM 59)

She always insists her children to "Rise and Shine" (GM 52), a basic characteristic of the American Dream of Success. When Tom complains of the grimness of life in the Shoe factory, she replies, "Try and you will succeed" (GM 53), the traditional motto of this dream. The play focuses on her attempts to "hold the family together and to steer her children into more practical paths than those she has followed herself" (Mathur 76).

Amanda doesn't want her children to make the same mistakes that she has made. She cannot understand why Laura cannot develop charm and gaiety. Her idea of charm differs vastly from that of Laura. Amanda can, at any moment, turn on a volley of chatter, be exceptionally lively and gay. She does possess strong attributes. Being in a financially tight position, she herself labours to supplement the family income by soliciting subscriptions for a Women's magazine, over the telephone. When face to face with bleak reality, she tries to condition herself to it. Her garrulous prodding, at times, show streaks of wisdom. She tries to keep Tom away from corrupting influences such as books by D.H Lawrence (GM 48). She displays deep foresight when she rebukes her son and says, "you are the only young man that I know of who ignores the fact that the future becomes the present, the present the past and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it" (GM 62).

Amanda devotes herself to her children. She does possess a great determination and strength. Many women could not have survived under the same situation. When she thinks a gentleman caller is coming, she sets herself to the task of preparation with determination that cannot be equalled in her children. Her dominating ways are a direct outcome of her single-handed efforts to shoulder the responsibility she feels for her children, in the absence of their father. What Nancy M. Tischler says is quite relevant here:

> In discarding the real father's part, Tennessee Williams found it necessary to endow the mother with some masculine practicality … Although she has approached much of

her life unrealistically; her plans for her children and her understanding of their shortcomings are grimly realistic. (34-35)

The reference to *Gone with the Wind,* the classic best-seller about the tradition of Southern Romance, seems quite apt. For a moment Amanda is seen in a vivacious spirit, lively and active, just like Scarlett O'Hara, who has a will to survive. All her actions as a careful, lovely mother, make Laura say that she is "like the picture of Jesus' mother in the museum!" (GM 44); Mother Mary, being the archetype of the traditional mother imagery.

But Amanda is full of paradoxes. In devoting herself to her children, she has made herself overbearing and nagging. "She is a psychic configuration of the Good Mother and the Terrible Mother" (Mathur 79). Her intentions are almost always good. Her calculated contrivance is really aimed at her children's well-being. What makes her a negative mother is her inability to consider her children as grown-up individuals. Out of her love for her children, she only provokes Tom's antagonism and aggravates Laura's reclusive state and the family frustration.

Ignoring Laura's shy disposition, she exhorts Laura to be social at the church gatherings, an activity which makes the latter recoil even further within herself. She constantly asserts that the defect in Laura's leg is negligible. Her desperate efforts to distract attention from Laura's crippled state magnify the deformity in the girl's own consciousness. Also, she constantly castigates Tom for his eating habits, his going to movies, his smoking and his late hours. When he speaks of his natural instincts, she explodes, "Instinct is something that people have got away from! It belongs to animals!" (GM 55).

All these reduce the mother-children relationship to one of continual friction. For all her practicality, she remains basically a dreamer. However, the end of the play sees her in no better position than before. She wants Laura to have a secure home and family of her own. By trying to find a suitable husband for Laura, Amanda is trying to have a "do-over" with her

own failed relationship. If she can find a good man for Laura so that her daughter will not follow in her footsteps and end up alone, Amanda will find a kind of redemption. That is why the announcement that Jim has a fiancée is such a disappointment to her. When she discovers that Jim is engaged, she loses her hope that Laura will attain the popularity and social standing that Amanda herself has lost.

"Amanda" in Latin means "worthy of being loved" and throughout her life she has struggled to be loved. But her life moves in the opposite direction of her expectations. The present is so depressing for her, with her unmarried daughter, moody son and that whole U.S Depression era thing. Thus, she chooses to live in the past. The past has a wonderful experience for her, compared to the reality in which she is an abandoned wife. Mr. Wingfield was cruel to leave the family, but she still loves him. She wears his bathrobe and often looks at his portrait. She can never put the past behind her. She is obsessed with her past as she constantly reminds her life in Blue Mountain. She is blind to the rest of the world around her which is continually changing. This explains her repeated failures in life. Thus, unwilling to recognize the painful harsh realities of the present, she finds a rescue in her glorious past, which she had in the Blue Mountain.

The daughter, Laura Wingfield, is a composite image of Williams' sister Rose Williams and a lady named Laura Young whom Williams knew when he was a child in Mississippi. Laura evolved from Williams' various versions of the play and the story *The Portrait of the Girl in Glass*. The epigraph of the play, "Nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands" (GM 34), taken from a love poem "Somewhere I have never travelled" by E.E Cummings, can be attributed to Laura. She is extra-ordinarily sensitive and alienated person. She is the most pathetic figure of the play. Arnott observes that "in Glass Menagerie the heroine lived in a world of illusion, and she became as remote from life as a fragile… It is this terrible loneliness, this solitary agony, that we feel unbearable" (26).

A childhood illness has left her slightly crippled and introverted. Studying her, it is difficult to draw a line between her mental and physical aberrations. She is extremely self-conscious and unsocial. The physically and emotionally crippled Laura is the only character in the play that never does anything to hurt anyone else. Despite the weight of her own problems, she displays a pure compassion. Laura is presented as extremely shy and she becomes frightened and nervous when Tom and Amanda quarrel."Laura Wingfield in the play stands as a paradigm of the culture of which she is a part. The world of modernity, the dancehall and the typewriter, is outside of her experience. Vulnerable, she chooses instead a world of myth… It is [a world of] factitious security, broken easily" (Bigsby34).

Even though Laura is presented as living in a quiet and calm world of her own, the tragedy of her situation is clearly understood through Amanda's words. "You know how Laura is. So quiet - but still water runs deep!" (GM 54). Amanda tells Tom. Laura emerges as a powerful individual in the story. She is identified as seeking comfort in isolation "I went in the art museum and the bird-houses at the Zoo. I visited the penguins every day! Sometimes I did without lunch and went to the movies. Lately I've been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel-box, that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers" (GM 44).

From her very small age itself she has developed a feeling that she is one of the most vulnerable persons. Her character is a young lady that has a physical defect that made her walk lamely. She mostly turns away when dealing with her emotions. Her emotion is so fragile which made her trap in her fantasy dreams. Her strangeness and vulnerability are further presented as the accelerating factor of her separation from the world. Her dilemma is exposed in these words, "Laura, who has been crippled since birth, has no escape open to her. She must adjust to her mother who is so unrealistic that she denies that Laura is crippled… Indeed, the only way Laura can survive is to retreat into her own delusions" (Blackwell 102).

Laura's limp is an outward sign of her inferiority complex. Having a slight handicap, she does not have any involvement from her outside world. "She lives in a world of her own – a world of – little glass ornaments… She plays old phonograph records… That's about all" (GM 64). Her brace is the mechanical device that remedies the physical defect but aggravates the moral damage. In high school, arriving late for class was humiliating for her because she imagined that the clumping of the brace attracted everybody's attraction to her limp:

> LAURA. Yes, it was so hard for me, getting upstairs. I had that brace on my leg – it clumped so loud!
>
> JIM. I never heard any clumping.
>
> LAURA.(Wincing at the recollection). To me it sounded like – thunder. (GM 80)

Whenever she "clumps" along, whether into the choir classroom during high school, or later in life in her brief interval at business school, she perceives the sound to be much louder than it actually is. Laura's personal insecurity causes her to project this even farther, believing that everyone must notice her limp and that she will always be seen as different from those around her. This causes her to withdraw from life outside the small family apartment, unable to go about normal living. "Laura, the daughter, has escaped from life into the timeless world of her imagination. She is one of the many gentle creatures, destroyed by life, in Williams' plays." (High 227)Her extreme shyness caused by the crippled condition showed itself in Soldan high school, and she dropped out. Her failure at Rubicam's business college is another episode that drives her to the life of an introvert. She cannot find any gentleman caller. Even buying butter in the delicatessen is a problem for her.

While in high school, the simple misunderstanding of "pleurosis" for "Blue Roses" by Jim has a lasting effect on Laura. She comes to treasure this moment and name because it represents one of the few times Laura speak to her hero, Jim. However, this mishap actually gives insight to Laura's personality. The name "Laura" is derived from the laurel shrub or

tree from which wreaths used to be made to honour heroes and athletes. Laura is far from athletic or a hero; but her name reflects her connection with nature and parallels blue roses. Roses are extremely delicate flowers and require immense care – an aroma that perceives the freshness of a new flower. Laura is just like a rose because she is just as fragile and needs a lot of care and nurturing. For example, she easily becomes "sick" when she learns that Jim is going to visit her house. Both Amanda and Tom have to tend to Laura so she will not become too upset and faint or wither like a flower.

At the same time, through its association with the colour blue, the rose is here deprived of its traditional overtone of passion, as is Laura. Blue roses do not exist in this world or even if there is, it is not by nature. Because it was only an ideal, the blue rose has come to symbolize the unattainable, a desire that is just outside one's grasp. It has also come to signify mystery, especially a mystery that can never be fully solved. The symbol of the colour blue tells everything about Laura, who gets this nickname by mistake. Blue colour makes this rose weird, unfamiliar and strange for people around. Also, blue stands for gloomy. It is always connected with hopelessness and depression. It suggests an atmosphere of sadness and melancholy that envelops Laura's slight, hardly real person. Thus, this nickname of Laura, which Jim gave her, predicts the bad end of her love.

Laura does possess a glass menagerie which she cares for with great tenderness. This is a collection of different animals "co-existing" together in one little cabinet. It includes "little animals made out of glass, the tiniest little animals in the world" (GM 84). "A collection of glass animalculae means a great deal too much to Laura, an introvert whose shyness is enhanced by a limp and whose youth and beauty are being wasted on daydreams." (Arnott 22)Laura parallels her glass collection in many ways. They are representatives of all the softest emotions that belong to recollections of things in past. They stand for all the tender things, sensitive. Laura too has the same sort of translucent beauty, the same delicate exterior.

She is also very breakable, in the sense that she freaks out at the slightest social challenge and runs away. Beauty and fragility, of the glass animals and Laura, complements each other. "Be careful – if you breathe, it breaks!" (GM 84). Laura warns Jim. Mathur describes her plight in the following words:

> Unable to cope with her crippled body or the mechanical routine of the business school she briefly attends, she fabricates a nether-nether world out of the glass animals she collects. Quite literally they offer her the only security, intimacy and permanence she can find in the brutal environment of her St. Louis tenement. (81)

Along with regular animals in the glass menagerie lives the unicorn, symbolizing Laura's difference from others. The unicorn is Laura's embodiment. It is her favourite piece:

> LAURA. I shouldn't be partial, but he is my favourite one.
>
> JIM. What kind of a thing is this one supposed to be!
>
> LAURA. Haven't you noticed the single horn on his forehead?
>
> JIM. A unicorn, huh?
>
> LAURA. Mmm – hmmm!
>
> JIM. Unicorns, aren't they extinct in the modern world?
>
> LAURA. I know!
>
> JIM. Poor little fellow, he must feel sort of lonesome. (GM 85)

Excepting its horn, the unicorn is same as a normal horse. Similarly, Laura is a beautiful girl except for her crippled left leg. She seems understanding that there are some similarities between the unicorn and her life. The glass menagerie represents Laura's private world which she builds up, where she can hide and feel safe. It symbolizes her trait and life, which is brittle and introverted.

Infact, Laura's life is unreal. It represents her imaginative world which she devoted herself – world that is colourful and charming, but based on fragile illusion. Glass is

transparent, but when light goes through it, it reflects the rainbow of colours. Likewise, Laura looks extra-ordinarily pretty when someone chooses to look at her from a different angle. This change is clear during her dancing with Jim. Extremely self-conscious and nervous initially, she later begins to shed her morbid shyness. For the first time we see her inner charm. She becomes confident. She is even capable of forgetting her physical handicap. She responds to Jim because he responds to her difference. With Jim, she sees her difference is an asset and not a handicap. She forgets it and glows in the light of the candelabra and Jim's offer of warm friendship.

But when her hopes are shattered at the end of the evening, Laura has nowhere to retreat – she has never really left her pretend world. The incident of the broken horn by the gentleman caller is symbolic of Jim's ability to rid Laura of her uniqueness:

JIM. Aw, aw, aw. Is it broken?

LAURA. Now it is just like all the other horses.

JIM. It's lost its-

LAURA. Horn! It doesn't matter. May be it's a blessing in disguise.

JIM. Still I'm awfully sorry that I was the cause. (GM 86)

Since the unicorn is broken, it is now ordinary, and Laura gifts it to Jim, remaining in her different world, with the other animals, which are not like the others. When Jim intrudes upon her life and that of the household, he will for a moment throw open the door of this dreamy girl's mind. But after his departure, darkness sets in over the remnants of the glass animals. Laura is irremediably broken for having opened the door of her life to let in a representative of the modern mechanised world. It leaves her more secluded than ever.

Laura has no hopes or ambitions for her future. She quit her typing class because she was too shy to take the speed exam. She is not able to face the realities of life. Her only apparent interest seems to be her old music records and her glass menagerie. Even at the end

of the play, she remains the same. Laura slips in on the fire escape in scene IV (GM 53), highlighting her inability to escape from her situation. The outside world becomes threatening for her. Her retreat to a dark corner of the stage is indicative of her imaginary existence, her movement away from real life. Laura dwells in her past, where she cherishes her memories of being with her high school hero. She is not able to come out of her past. Thus, she lives in a dream; an illusory world, full of fragile glass creatures, where she is a blue rose, which has no existence in the natural world. "She is not frigid and hostile; she does not reject but rather is rejected, not because of her limp, but because she is the sensitive, misunderstood exile… One of the fugitive kind, too fragile to live in a malignant world" (Ganz 125). Thus, it can be concluded that these women invent a world of their own, retreat into this private world and lead an imaginary existence. The moment they confront the world of reality, there occurs an emotional unbalance and it leads to the fragmentation of their inner self.

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