

Conflict between Illusion and Reality: A Study of Tennessee

Williams’

The Glass Menagerie

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“Attempting to find in motion what was lost in space...”

– *The Glass Menagerie*

Abstract

The Glass Menagerie is one of the finest plays of Tennessee Williams. It almost transformed the life style of Williams overnight. It is through his wandering that Williams has experience the trauma of life like Crane, an American poet and displayed the swinging motion of illusion and reality in a splendid way in his plays. Tennessee Williams presents before us the dark world of one-dimensional society of the modern civilization that survives in the midst of exploitation, violation of moral code of conduct, dehumanized passions of power and intimate relationships in this play. He makes us realize that such worldly circumstances of the tainted world drives the misfits, the rebels or the fugitive kinds to lead lives of depression, alienation and unhappy madness. It happens due to their failure of adjustment with the worldly norms and they construct make-believe worlds around them through fabricated illusions in order to feel a sense of untrammled freedom. Williams through his impulsive creative activity provides us with a basic premise to understand with tenderness ad fortitude such individuals trapped in their own predicament. In the light of these factors, the paper analyses the theme of the conflict between illusion and reality in Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*.

Key Words: Williams, illusion, conflict, reality, predicament, dehumanization.

Tennessee Williams is a wandering-bird from one place to another in search of comprehending the meaning of reality and transparency of human soul. The strong echo of his past was reflected in his decisions and direction. His early tragic phase of life forced him to pen his works with great sense of loss and emotional sterility. His prime focus as a dramatist rests in understanding the complexity of human relationships in a wider sense.

He once decided to move to New York in his youth and met Audrey Wood who turned to him a literary agent for more than twenty five years of his career. Thereafter, he despised his job as a writer of screenplays for MGM Studios only unfortunate enough to submit his own work titled “The Gentlemen Caller” which was rejected by MGM, and fortunately, in fact, it became the most loveable American play, *The Glass Menagerie*

He has been influenced by many literary personalities such as Anton Chekov, Henrik Ibsen, Eugene O’Neill, D.H. Lawrence, August Strindberg and Hart Crane. Williams owes his conception of illusion versus reality to Neil, Lawrence and particularly, the large portion is to be shared with Hart Crane, the American Poet, who had undergone the similar adventures of Williams.

All the characters in the play have a finger of illusion that versus realities. Illusion is considered a feeble defense against the harsh reality of life. People are lured to the illusion which is a kind of falsehood and escapism that pretend to rescue them momentarily from the bitter facts of life. It centers on the anticipation, desolation, dilemma and failure of Wingfield family. The characters in the play sway between illusion and reality.

Tennessee Williams, a celebrated playwright of twentieth century American literature whose plays attempt to probe the darker side of human nature, the vulnerability of human beings with all their sensitivities and illusions. He points out the viciousness of modern man when he senses a difference or alienation in another. He shows the irony in how modern man wants desperately to communicate in a society, even when its taboos ensure a destructive battle for domination. Williams is a ruthless analyst of the American psyche and an exorcist of illusions. He also deals with contemporary issues such as the place of woman in the society, homosexuality and its social acceptance, and the plight of battered wives. Like the modern day television dramas on suicide and wife battering, his dramas brought social

problems out of the darkness of collective repression into the light of collective anger and appraisal.

Tennessee Williams presents before us the dark world of one-dimensional society of the modern civilization that survives in the midst of exploitation, violation of moral code of conduct, corruption dehumanized passions of power and intimate relationships. He makes us realize that such worldly circumstances of the tainted world drives the misfits, the rebels or the fugitive kinds to lead lives of depression, alienation and unhappy madness. It happens due to their failure of adjustment with the worldly norms and they construct make-believe worlds around them through fabricated illusions in order to feel a sense of untrammelled freedom. Williams through his impulsive creative activity provides us with a basic premise to understand with tenderness and fortitude such individuals trapped in their own predicament. In the light of these factors, the paper analyses the theme of the conflict between illusion and reality in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*.

The Glass Menagerie talks of the plight of the ill-adjusted woman, who remembers a myth of gracious living but is defeated by the impinging realities of the present. This drama has strong autobiographical overtones. By his own admission, his plays contain links to his own life. The three characters of the family resemble Williams, his mother and his sister. Williams seems to believe that the true romantic can find living pleasant only through his faith in idealism, dreams and illusions. He seems to view the delusions of his characters as pathetic defenses against the shipwreck of their lives. The playwright often wonders which is real – outward work of houses, streets or the inner world of their memories, hopes and fears.

Laura lives in a world of illusion created by glass menagerie. She fails to relate herself to the outside world in the school and later in a business college; she has withdrawn into a world of her own. Her physically challenged condition is symbolic of her isolation. It is her brother Jim, who encourages her to think of love and marriage, but the revelation of the truth about him sends her back to the world of illusion which is broken – the unicorn is symbolic of this condition.

Tom also lives in a world of illusion formed by movies, clubs, and luxuries. His present job in the warehouse of the Continental Shoemakers is so frustrating that shows and movies become the only outlet for him. This questioned the prevailing idea of the American Dream. His longing to be poet is not recognized. Ultimately when he finds life at home intolerable like life is on fire path. The gentle man callers for his sister turn to wrong men.

Depressed Tom leaves home to join the Merchant Marine and seek adventure on the high seas and new cities. But even this turns out to be an illusion as he moves from one place to another and turn back to his life in St. Louis with homesickness.

Amanda is caught up in the illusions of her genteel old southern upbringing, which has taught her that a man will support a woman and that there are certain foolproof rules for snagging one. Her experience, however, prove this to the contrary- specifically, when her husband runs out of the family and leaves her to fend for herself, and later when Laura's shyness presents her from normal socialization. Still, Amanda never stops believing that a gentleman will soon call upon her and make everything right. At the same time, she inflicts these illusions and reality on her children – insisting that if, Tom finds a husband for Laura, it will take care of all their problems. The idea that Tom can solve all their problems with a replacement is itself an illusion, one that's quickly eradicated by the reality once he brings home a caller for Laura.

Amanda and Laura, both refuse to face the reality of their lives; Amanda retreats into the past, and Laura retreats into her. Laura's withdrawal is more deadening than Amanda's, however, because she is completely self-centered. Amanda is at least trying to hold the family together, economically and spiritually. She tries to help Laura lead a normal life, first by sending her to Business College then by making plans and provisions for a gentleman caller.

Laura retreats from the real world, is a result of her belief that since she is crippled, she is unlovely and unlovable. Feeling unattractive, Laura is frightened by a situation by which this attractiveness is directly tested, entertaining a man. Self centered for too long, she seems incapable of realizing that what comes into her world does not necessarily reflect on her. Given such limited perception, Laura cannot participate in human relationship and will continue to be unhappy in the real world.

In the play, Williams shows us clearly that the various illusions of the characters have are the means of coping with the facts of their lives. However frivolous and foolish their illusions may seem, all the characters of the play would suffer, perhaps even be broken, if they are deprived of them. Without the pretence and self deception, Amanda would have no self- confidence and hope for the future. Jim would not have the hope for his future after his failure to attain the peak of success people believed he would have. Laura would wither and die because she could not identify herself with anything, nor see beauty, delicacy, and truth in small, fragile even commonplace things like her collection of her glass figures. Tom would

not escape because he could not hope to experience change and adventure, Without doubt, illusions provide a shield to the characters that might otherwise be crushed or doomed.

Williams depicts that the life is a mixture of illusions and facts. Sometimes the illusions give better relief to a frustrated man. Just as facts can cause heartache and agony, illusions, too, can bring sorrow and pain. Amanda's illusions are painful to Tom, Laura's and Tom's are painful to Amanda. The characters of the play attempt to create an aura of illusions in order to either forget the unpleasant reality of human existence or to avoid certain experiences of the past. Sometimes they are also fed up with this material life and the worldly wise people that inhabit it. Such illusions serve as an escape for them and also enable them to remain disguised in a make-believe world.

A woman is presented at a moment when frustration had led to a crisis. She has only two possible ways of acting: to face reality or to retreat into illusion. The significant question is whether she will face the crisis and choose to live in the real world, free of debilitating illusions and capable of compassion for others. (Tharpe Jac.L)

Williams was the first American dramatist to stir the conscience of the nation. But his play was not about social issues only. The philosophical and even mystical nature of Williams' work can be even more frightening than its social content. Williams spoke not just for society's unfortunate misfits- he also spoke for the conformists. The playwright suggests to the modern world through his characterization that none can escape reality by simply taking off in the flight of illusion. He speaks to us about the inherent loneliness of modern life, the tendency of individuals to approach fatal alienation, the withdrawal from ultimate questions, the attraction of ill-considered ideals. Williams has conquered in prompting us thinking along that line by dramatizing the conflict between reality and illusion.

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