

Southern Womanhood in Modern World in the Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams

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ABSTRACT: Feminism is a diverse collection of several other theories such as social, political movements and moral philosophies. The feminism theory usual revolves around gender and sexuality. The theory aims to understand the nature of inequality and pay close interest on how to enhance the same. Playwrights such as Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams among others have captured some aspects of gender related issues in their works. Most of the universal themes they explore include patriarchy, stereotyping, objectification, sexual objectification, and oppression. The focus is on *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. This play demonstrates some gender sensitive issues particular in choice and use of characters, symbols and their hidden meanings, figurative language use among other literary devices.

Keywords: *The focus is on The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams*

INTRODUCTION

American literature is the literature written or produced in the area of the United States and its preceding colonies. For more specific discussions of poetry and theater, see *Poetry of the United States and Theater in the United States*. During its early history, America was a series of British colonies on the eastern coast of the present-day United States. Therefore, its literary tradition begins as linked to the broader tradition of English literature. However, unique American characteristics and the breadth of its production usually now cause it to be considered a separate path and tradition.

The New England colonies were the center of early American literature. The revolutionary period contained political writings by Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine. In the post-war period, Thomas Jefferson's United States Declaration of Independence solidified his status as a key American writer. It was in the late 18th and early 19th centuries that the nation's first novels were published. With the War of 1812 and an increasing desire to produce uniquely American literature and culture, a number of key new literary figures emerged, perhaps most prominently Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe. In 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) started a movement known as Transcendentalism. Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) wrote *Walden*, which urges resistance to the dictates of organized society. The political conflict surrounding abolitionism inspired the writings of William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe in her world-famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These efforts were supported by

the continuation of the slave narrative autobiography, of which the best known example from this period was Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) is notable for his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel about adultery. Hawthorne influenced Herman Melville (1819–1891) who is notable for the books *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd*. America's two greatest 19th-century poets were Walt Whitman (1819–1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830–1886). American poetry reached a peak in the early-to-mid-20th century, with such noted writers as Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Hart Crane, and E. E. Cummings. Mark Twain (the pen name used by Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835–1910) was the first major American writer to be born away from the East Coast. Henry James (1843–1916) was notable for novels like *The Turn of the Screw*. At the beginning of the 20th century, American novelists included Edith Wharton (1862–1937), Stephen Crane (1871–1900), Theodore Dreiser (1871–1945), and Jack London (1876–1916). Experimentation in style and form is seen in the works of Gertrude Stein (1874–1946).

American writers expressed disillusionment following WW I. The stories and novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896–1940) capture the mood of the 1920s, and John Dos Passos wrote about the war. Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) became notable for *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*; in 1954, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. William Faulkner (1897–1962) is notable for novels like *The Sound and the Fury*. American drama

attained international status only in the 1920s and 1930s, with the works of Eugene O'Neill, who won four Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize. In the middle of the 20th century, American drama was dominated by the work of playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, as well as by the maturation of the American musical.

Depression era writers included John Steinbeck (1902–1968), notable for his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Henry Miller assumed a unique place in American Literature in the 1930s when his semi-autobiographical novels were banned from the US. From the end of World War II up until, roughly, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the publication of some of the most popular works in American history such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. America's involvement in World War II influenced the creation of works such as Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). John Updike was notable for his novel *Rabbit, Run* (1960). Philip Roth explores Jewish identity in American society. From the early 1970s to the present day the most important literary movement has been postmodernism and the flowering of literature by ethnic minority writers.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Thomas Lanier "Tennessee" Williams III (March 26, 1911 – February 25, 1983) was an American playwright. Along with Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, he is considered among the three foremost playwrights of 20th-century American drama.

Tennessee Williams (1911-83) is a master playwright and a well known personality in the contemporary American theatre. It was Williams who alongwith Arthur Miller, Elmer Rice, Eugene O'Neill and Sydney Kingsley gave a new and fresh life to American literature. Williams ruled the stage since World War II and had the dare to write about the shady areas of human desire which were not taken up by other playwrights. His plays 'A streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and The Glass Menagerie are excellently written.

The years between the world wars were years of extremes playwrights like Elmer Rice, Irwin Shaw, Clifford Odest, Maxwell Anderson and Lillian Hellman played very pivotal role in American life nature during that period. Most of their plays dealt with the theme of criminal injustice that the contemporary society was facing. But, after 1945, their career became faint and they could not produce first rate plays. Playwrights like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams took up the mission to nourish the American drama. The quality of drama was taken to the next level. Tennessee Williams is a great playwright, whose plays are concerned with several controversial subjects as Foster Hirsch wrote: Nymphomania promiscuity, rape, greed,

alcoholism, impotence, homosexuality, profligacy, frigidity, crib fetishism, pedophilia, blowtorch killing, castration, dope addiction, venereal disease, cannibalism, madness, panty fetishism, masturbation, coprophagy: gleefully listed by Playboy, these are the subjects that have preoccupied Tennessee Williams,

Synopsis: The Glass Menagerie

In this memory play, narrator Tom Wingfield who is also a character in the play, tells the story from his memories. Set in St. Louis in 1937, Tom works a tiresome job in a shoe warehouse in order to support his mother, Amanda, and his sister, Laura. His father, Mr. Wingfield, left the family years ago, and with the exception of one postcard, has not been heard from since. But his presence is pervasive, as his picture still hangs in the family's living room. It is dinnertime in the Wingfield home; and Amanda regales, once again, tales of her many suitors as a young woman in the South. She is disheartened by Laura's profound shyness and her inability to attract men the same way she did. In hopes of helping her gain some confidence, Amanda enrolls Laura in a business college. Weeks later, Amanda discovers that Laura has dropped out without telling her. Amanda decides something must be done to find suitors for Laura. She starts selling magazine subscriptions in order to earn extra money, something Amanda is sure to bring the men calling. Meanwhile, Tom is miserable at work and seeks distraction in the movies, drinking, literature, and writing, much to his mother's disappointment. He knows his mother and sister rely on his income, but he feels trapped. Tom and Amanda argue frequently, and during one of their quarrels, Tom accidentally breaks several of Laura's prized glass figurines. The next morning, Tom apologizes to his mother and they talk about his restlessness and Laura's prospects. She asks him to keep an eye out for "nice, young men" at the warehouse to introduce to Laura. A few days later, he invites Jim O'Connor, a casual friend, home to dinner. Amanda is ecstatic and wants everything to be perfect. The next evening, Amanda prepares an elaborate meal and insists Laura wear a new dress. Laura is petrified, especially when she discovers that Jim is the same person she had a crush on in high school. Tom and Jim arrive, and Laura, still terrified, quickly leaves the room. The men discuss their jobs at the warehouse, and Tom admits to Jim that he has used the money for their electric bill to join the Merchant Marines and leave his job and family, seeking adventure in the world. Throughout dinner, Laura feigns illness while Amanda is a reincarnation of her flirty younger self. As dinner ends, the lights go out as a result of the unpaid electric bill. Candles are lit and Amanda encourages Jim to keep Laura company while she and Tom clean up dinner. At first Laura is paralyzed by her shyness when Jim joins her, but, once they start talking, she begins to come out

of her shell. They reminisce about how they knew each other in high school and the nickname, "Blue Roses," he had for her. Things continue to go well between Laura and Jim and they enjoy each other's company.

SOUTHERN WOMANHOOD IN MODERN WORLD IN THE GLASS MENAGERIE BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

In the play *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams use both male and female characters which exhibit some forms of gender related issues particular in feminism perspective. Three main characters used in this essay which will help us understand the play from feminism point of view are Amanda Wingfield, Laura Wingfield and Tom Wingfield. Other characters are equally important in development of feminism theory in the play, but will focus on the above. In *The Glass Menagerie*, gender roles play a large part in dictating the future plans of each character. Laura must get married because she is a girl; Tom should take business classes because he is a man. Gender roles seem to arise from tradition, as Amanda discusses what women should do and what men should do according to her Southern upbringing. Gender roles also dictate values, or how women and men are judged differently. Amanda places great importance on Laura's staying 'fresh and pretty,' while she believes that 'character' is the most important thing for a man.

Amanda is a southern woman. She is always conscious of the old cultural and social privileges of the south. When she was in her youth, she was liked by many gentleman callers. Even some of the rich gentleman callers came to pay courtship to her. Her early youth was thus romantic to the in-depth satisfaction of her. She was proud to keep so much hold on all those rich and handsome gentleman callers. She was all the time under the impression that she is a very embodiment of beauty and charm. Her life in the past was marked by countless choice. Her manners and attitudes were refined and elegant. She had a firm belief in the religious exhortation.

Amanda Wingfield is the mother of Tom and Mary. A single mother raising her kids through the help of Tom. She is a woman who is stark in past memory of her childhood and upbringing and unable to adapt to the modern world. She is financially unstable unlike in the past and must rely on the support of her son, Tom to support them having been abandoned by the husband. This demonstrates female relying too much on the male in the society to provide for them and the family. Amanda also shows that women are weak and unable to move on and adapt to modern realities, rather they live in world of fantasies and illusion clinging to the good past. Tennessee also portrays women as nagging.

Amanda believes that only a man can take them out of their painful reality. She nags Tom to bring callers to

marry Laura. She believes that a man's role is to support a woman. This will guarantee her daughter's future. In patriarch society, women believe that it's the male who dominate, and therefore it is their responsibility to take them out of it. When this fails to happen, women will withdraw to fantasy and illusion.

Laura Wingfield is the daughter of Amanda and a sister to Tom. She is the center of the play and very important for feminist approach to this play. She has a pure compassion to everyone. Amanda describes her has not selfish and grudging. She is selflessness.

Throughout the play, the readers are exposed to the idea that the women must find a gentlemen caller to complete their life. Laura is especially pressured to do so as her mother pushes her to be more interested in the dating scene and to live up to her own past. This is evident when she says

"It's almost time for our gentlemen callers to start arriving. How many do you suppose we're going to entertain this afternoon?" (10)

In addition, when Amanda tells the story of her own experience and says

"One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain- your mother received- seventeen!-gentlemen callers!" (8), it tells the audience that even when their mother was younger the women were ordered to find a man. Overall, gender roles have greatly impacted what is expected from Laura and Tom, including their wants and goals in life. Gender roles have the power to determine a persons future based on their gender.

Several symbols in the play allude to Laura. She is better placed to bringing out the elements of feminism in the play. She is portrayed has delicate and fragile just like the glass. To this, Tennessee shows that women are delicate just like objects and can easily break more so where their emotional feelings are involved. Jim calls Laura the "Blue Roses", to show her unusualness and attractiveness. Roses are attractive yet very delicate flowers. Men refer to women as attractive things and highly delicate.

The glass unicorn is Laura's valuable collection. This shows her unusualness. Jim tells Laura that unicorns are long extinct. Laura too is unfit to live in her present world. The unicorn is short-lived during the dance. Jim kisses Laura and the unicorn breaks and remains without horns. She gives it Jim.

This scene demonstrates the dependency of women especially when their hopes are shattered by their potential suitors. It like Jim destroyed Laura's life emotionally. Men are capable of shattering women's dreams.

Laura's glass menagerie is the most important symbol used in the play. Her collections are delicate, strange and almost out of fashion just like her personality. The glass displays different colors when light is subjected to it. This

depends on how you choose to look at it. This portrayal of women in different views shows that women mean different things to different people depending on how you look at them. The menagerie is colorful which serves as escape route to fantasy. Both Tom and Jim think that Laura is more unusual to the world. To them, Laura can be anything they want her to be. This is how men view women. During the time period of the play, it was essential that the father would have a job and provide for his family. However, Tom is now considered the father figure as his own father has abandoned them.

Tom is pressured to provide for his mother and daughter. This is evident when his mother tells him

"What right have you got to jeopardize your job? Jeopardize the security of us all? How do you think we'd manage if you were-"(23)

Also when Tom says

"For sixty-five dollars a month i give up all that i dream of doing and being ever!"(23),

he realizes what role he has to fulfill for his family. Amanda strongly believes a man's character is what will help him to be a successful gentlemen caller and eventually find a wife. *"Character's what to look for in a man."*(46), by this she believes the role of a man is to be thoughtful and supportive. Anytime Amanda has tried finding her daughter a gentlemen caller, she does not stress enough about the importance of his character.

"He might be, mightn't he? Some time in the future?"(45)

This is when Amanda is hoping the new gentlemen caller for Laura will be interested in being a family man. This is another gender role, as the male's were expected to be interested in having a family.

Tom Wingfield is the most important male figure in the play. Tom is a brother to Laura. Tom will be used to demonstrate the male patriarchal society views on their female counterparts. Tom is a poet and a very difficult character to understand. He is the character whose play is told from his recollections. He sometimes engages the audience directly. Amanda says that he is not a budding businessman. He normally escapes to movies at night. He is the male figure of Wingfield household and responsible for their welfare. He wants to escape this role and eventually does it, but this action haunts him because of the love he has for Laura, Amanda and his job. Women burden men with the roles of taking their care. Tom departure from his home causes emotional turmoil to Amanda and Laura, whom some critiques argue that he could be in love with them creating moral implications. When Amanda discovers that Jim has a girlfriend, he accuses Tom of playing a joke on them. This shatters her hopes of ever getting a suitor for her daughter.

A woman with such beliefs and assumptions happened to marry a man who was exceedingly handsome. After her marriage she had been living in the urban world. Her life in the urban tenement gradually became difficult. Earning was low. Her family had to live in a congested area. Her husband gradually displayed irresponsibility. He began to drink and smoke. Worst of all, he fell in love with long distance. After her husband left her, the sole responsibility fell on her shoulder. Amanda had to care for many things. Heavy burden of running family began to crush her. She had an onerous task of saving her family from every up and down after her husband left. To carry out all these tough duties, it is really difficult for a woman who is alone. Furthermore, Amanda had a physically crippled daughter to rear. She had a deviated and a normal son to care for. She tried her best to bring her son to the right track. But her son continued to smoke and drink. Her son Tom continued to show his original color despite the repeated efforts of Amanda to improve him.

In the last poignant scene of *The Glass Menagerie* describing Tom's subsequent return, he pleads with Laura to blow out her candles, which will symbolically allow him to pursue his freedom,

"Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger—anything that can blow your candles out! . . . Blow out your candles, Laura—and so good-bye. . ." (7.465)

On the one hand, she was frustrated because of her being deserted by her husband for a long time. On the other she was anxious about her almost lame daughter Laura. She expected her son to be progressive. But no progress happened at all. She felt suffocated at being confined in her tenement life. Her life was trapped in static and sterility. She desired change and progression from her children's future. But this desire remained fleeting and elusive. As a result her present life became very deceptive. She felt that life has cheated her. She felt deceived by the dream she had once entertained. She left no stone unturned in overcoming her torturous helplessness and frustration. But nothing happened as she expected. Consequently, she realized that she is trapped in the realm of disappointed predicament. She knew, at that time that the only remedy for her is nostalgia. She nostalgically longed for her past. She frequently remembered those days in her past when she was visited by more than a dozen of gentleman callers.

CONCLUSION

Tennessee Williams shows that women are really concerned about snagging things and the society is male dominated. Women have to depend on men for their social, economic and emotional well-being. The play reveals that

women tend to escape their predicaments by resorting to nostalgia of childhood memories or escapism through collection of delicate things which they consider very much valuable. The feminist struggle has still much to achieve in their quest for gender equality. This play can also reveal that women are not always actively oppressed, and for the most part women are part of a lot of the actual oppression. The unequal treatment of women in society originates not in men, but from underneath the obvious surface, where social structure dwells. On closer analysis of the reasons behind the desertion of Amanda, Laura's frailty, and the power that Tom has over his family at the end of the play, it is obvious that Tennessee Williams intended to demonstrate how women are victims of disillusionment and society's gender roles. Although Americans may believe that these problems of how a woman should behave and live are solved, many people around the world most likely still behave in this manner.

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