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## ESCAPE FROM REALITY IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*

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### ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* is peopled with powerless and defenseless characters. These characters are hypersensitive and in a constant search for protection. They are highly pressurized by life and its bitter reality. Adding to that they are haunted by their fear from the future. They are escapist who try their best to hide behind a protective shield. Their tireless search for security is never smothering. Their only possible defensive mechanism is to flee from their immediate hostile and aggressive surrounding. To achieve this aim, each character has improvised a method that suits him / her best. For example, one of the characters (Tom) sought refuge in alcohol and late night shows. While the other (Amanda) chose to re-live the golden days of her past through her recurrent recalling of these prime-times. As for the other one (Laura) she chose to sacrifice her maturity to flee to her child-like world of glass animals. Escape mechanism is slightly changed with the last character (Jim) who chose to attend night classes as a means to achieve this aim. Thus, all the major characters in *The Glass Menagerie* are trying their best to escape from their unbearable reality and to hide behind a protective shield even if this shield is a fragile one. They are psychologically ready and mentally prepared to run to their dreamy shelters rather than facing their brutal reality. Everything in these characters; every move, every gesture, every way of thinking can pinpoint their retreat and their escapist personality and the large photo of Mr. Wingfield (the biggest escapist) is an evidence.

**Keywords:** *protection, refuge, escape, escapist, reality*

Tennessee Williams was born in 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi (Kernan 40). He was born Thomas Lanier Williams, but during 1939 he took for himself the name Tennessee. Williams is the first American playwright to earn the title of a popular dramatist. His first professional success was *The Glass Menagerie* (Jackson 83). The play was very successful to the extent that it initially ran for 561 performances.

*The Glass Menagerie* is a play of escape; it is a real meaning of rejection, repulsion and refusal of social conventions. The play "shows how people take refuge in illusion or in the past whenever the circumstances seem gloomy and intoreable," as Dr. Mohammed Baqir Twaij maintains (1). It portrays escapist characters who live in illusion because they cannot make any adjustment

with reality. Their illusions "offer them the only light in a bleak universe." (Abdul-Kareem 129) The characters of *The Glass Menagerie* are living impossible reality; they are subjected to a high pressure and hostile surroundings. To protect their sensitive soul, they escape from their immediate presence with its harshness, ugliness, and cruelty. Their escape is their iron shield and their rocky cave that offers them refuge and protection. Each one of these characters escapes from his present by a method that he or she has improvised, either by living in past memories or fleeing to movies or caring about glass animals.

The play is divided into seven scenes and has four characters, besides a fifth one who does not appear except in a large photograph. This absent character is Mr. Wingfield, the father who deserted his family.

Scene, one opens with Amanda and her daughter, Laura, sitting around the dinner table and waiting for Tom. When the latter appears and seats himself, the family start eating; but soon this familial and warm atmosphere is shattered when Amanda rebuked Tom for eating hurriedly; she admonishes him on how to eat and digest his food. Amanda's remarks infuriate Tom and make him

leave the table in a fit of anger. This incident serves to establish the tense atmosphere in the house. A second bout of furious exchange of words takes place when Amanda finds and confiscates a novel her son was reading and the only reason is that it is written by D. H. Lawrence whom she believes insane and filthy:

I took that horrible novel back to the library—yes! That Hideous book by that insane Mr. Lawrence. I cannot control the output of diseased minds. Or people who cater to them. BUT I WON'T ALLOW SUCH FILTH BROUGHT INTO MY HOUSE! NO, no, no, no (Williams 601)!

Amanda's recurrent nagging has turned the warm apartment into a hellish cellular for Tom. These frequent and explosive dialogues with his mother, besides the difficulties at work, made Tom seek refuge in movies and alcohol to escape from this hellish and brutal reality. Sharad Rajimwale believes that "such encounters and confrontations only create in Tom a sense of alienation from his family"(53). Rajimwale adds that Amanda's behavior estranges Tom further

and further, and widens the gulf between them(53).

Tom does not want to return home after his work in the shoe warehouse. He goes around the town watching movies and shows, smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol seeking in them both a release for his suppressed spirit and an escape into lively, adventurous and vibrant life which is totally different from the one that he lives.

What is wrong with Tom is not his mother, but the harsh effect of reality that stifles the talent and the ambition of a young man and this is worsened by the recurrent nagging of a mother.

Tom is the victim of circumstances that he seeks to escape. He is a young man gifted with an artistic nature. "He is a poet who is eager to explore new areas of sensation and experience"(54); his idea of the poet is that of an adventurer, based on the romantic lives of Byron and Shelley, Lawrence and Hart Crane. But this dreamer *Shakespeare* as Jim, his workmate, called him, is stifled, dispirited, and disappointed by his job in the shoe warehouse. Tom's dreams come in direct conflict with the real world. "Most of his restlessness rises from this

maladjustment."(41). And this explains his aimless and purposeless escape to movies and night shows. In seeing the adventures of moving pictures, Tom thinks he can escape the drabness of his warehouse job and the discomforts of his home life.

Tom believes that he is sacrificing his poetic talent and artistic merits for a menial job that kills and smothers all the talents and ambitions that he is aspiring for. He feels that his society is exploiting him, putting a heavy yoke of slavery on his heavily burdened shoulders, in return of sixty-five dollars per month. Tom reaches an extent that he envies the dead people because they are free: "How lucky dead people are! But I get up. I go! For sixty-five dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being ever."(Williams 3.602)

According to Mehdi Zia'ee and Ali H. Shamsa'ee "Tom's story may be both personal and generally symbolic of life at a bleak time in our history"(149). Zia'ee and Shamsa'ee go on adding :

You might think of Tom as a representative of a whole generation of young people coming of age just as the world is

exploding into war. They have high hopes and rich dreams. But the future they wish for never comes. It is destroyed by forces beyond their control (149).

Tom's mother-Amanda- is very loving, but her demands can make life difficult for Tom and his sister Laura. Amanda's over-protectiveness hurts her both children. She presses so hard on them believing that this is for their own good. Amanda's greatest anxieties centre upon her children. She wants them to lead a clean, moral and healthy life. She acts as a responsible mother whose duty is to keep an eye on her children's behavior.

Amanda is an abandoned wife, "she is a single mother"(149). After her husband's desertion of her, she found herself burdened with a task which is hard to achieve. She found herself in an unusual situation. But she is a brave woman who does not give up easily. About Amanda, Rajimwale states that "she has the inner strength that keeps her going heroically through the worst emotional debacles"(37). Amanda manages her house and raises her children without a husband's help, in circumstances far below than what she has been used to (Abdul-Kareem 82). Amanda appears to

be the most powerful character in the play. She is strong, rather stronger than Tom and stronger than her husband; so, it is not easy for such a woman to come to terms with tragedy that her husband's disappearance has brought. But in spite of all her power and might, Amanda is too fragile to face the ugly face of reality. She is too tender to live the harsh and cruel circumstances and that is why she escapes from her hostile present and retreats to the world of comfort and security. Amanda's means of escape is not in going to movies or drinking alcohol like Tom, but in making dreamy journeys back into her past. She starts remembering the days of her youth, the days of joy and frivolity back to Blue Mountain, Mississippi, when she was a very popular girl. She was very attractive to the extent that in one day, she received seventeen gentlemen callers;

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 (Williams 1.592).

Amanda explains that most of the callers who vied for her affection were prominent young planters: "My callers were gentlemen—all! Among my callers were some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta planters and sons of planters" (Williams 1.592)!

In her memories, Amanda goes to extremes; she believes that she could have been the wife of someone else other than Mr. Wingfield, "I could have been Mrs. Duncan J. Fitzhugh, mind you! But I pick up your father" (Williams 1.593)!

As a matter of fact, both Tom and Laura have heard these recollections of the past many times before, and Amanda keeps tirelessly relating them because she is needing to fortify an endangered sense of self-worth, for she was unable to hold her husband's love, and his desertion of her was the shock that sent her back into the golden days of her girlhood. Amanda is fantasizing and romanticizing her past. For her, the past is her refuge from present; it is the sole means of escape from the ugly and monstrous face of reality. Amanda yearns for these days because, for her, they represent the gentle and beautiful life she once led as a girl. They are the source of beauty in this ugliness,

the illusion in this harsh reality, and the escape from the trap of human demands.

Amanda is a mother with a lofty intention. Her sole ambition is that her son and daughter should be successful and happy, and she tries hard to achieve this ambition. Most of the time, Amanda is sad and angry, she is extremely worried about her children, especially Laura, because she is crippled and shy. Amanda pays especial attention to Laura's future. She exerts all her efforts to make her avoid a life of spinsterhood.

Laura is a shy and sensitive girl. She prefers to live in shadows rather than face the glaring light of harsh reality. "She is the most wronged person and the most private being"(Ramjiwale 44). Crippled from childhood, Laura walks with the aid of a leg brace" (Zia'ee and Shamsa'ee 150); "*a childhood illness has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, and held in brace*" (Williams 584).

Laura is painfully shy, and unable to face the world outside the tiny Wingfield apartment, because of that, she spends her time polishing her collection of tiny glass menagerie and playing tirelessly her old phonographs, a legacy that she inherited from her father. Laura is highly conscious of her physical deformity, and her self-

consciousness is not normal, it is exaggerated and magnified bitterly in her eyes, to the extent that she feels that everyone is aware of her limp and the clumping sound of her brace. Thus, she has this conversation with Jim:

Laura: 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: To me it sounded like thunder! (Williams 7. 635)

This pathological problem accompanied by Laura's hypersensitivity and self-consciousness make her seek refuge from the outer world of reality. She withdraws into her world of make-believe. Her inability to adjust with the outer world leaves her exasperated and forces her to escape. Laura's escape from reality is not in movies like Tom or in past reveries like Amanda, but in her glass animals and old phonograph records. They become her best refuge and her welcoming world. Laura greatly loves her glass animals. She takes care of them, and preserves them with all necessary attention. She has developed complete identification with them till, as Tennessee Williams says, "*she is like a*

*piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf"* (584). The suggestion is that to give "the same care and delicate attention that her glass animals receive from her" (Rajimwale 45), both reflect beauty in fragility and both must be protected from the harshness of reality.

According to Gada N. Abdul-Kareem, Laura cannot fit into the world around her; "she is unable to harmonize the world of her dreams with reality" (71). Unlike Tom, Laura does not seek adventures or a more exciting world, what she seeks is security in a world where she is not peculiar. Because she is not brave enough to face the real world, she starts seeking a world where she can hide herself. This world is the world of glass ornaments and old phonograph records; they become her substitute for the world of reality. She builds a world of her own, a delicate, pure, and bright world, but unfortunately it is cold, lifeless and dangerously fragile. Laura's private world offers her security and freedom. It is the mechanism that she developed against the possibility of being hurt; but C. W. E. Bigsby sees a sad irony in that, and he points out that "Laura's willful withdrawal into the child-like of her menagerie derives

its sad irony precisely from the fact that it is a denial of her own maturity, of time" (39).

Being a practical woman, Amanda anticipates a life of spinsterhood and a dark future for Laura, since Amanda quite knows that an unmarried young woman is exposed to a miserable life in this society. She sees the spinsters as defenseless and "bird-like women without any nest- eating the crust of humility all their life" (Williams 2. 598). To avoid such a grim future, Amanda tries to entrap a husband for Laura. "She exerts all her efforts to make her passive and frigid-like daughter launch into a happy married life" (Ramjiwale 110). To turn these ideas into action, Amanda asks her son to bring a gentleman caller to his sister. One who is clean and does not drink, but not very attractive, to be invited to dinner and to be introduced to Laura. The idea of the gentleman caller will be the illusion that Amanda tries hard to turn into reality; and this illusion will take full possession of her mind to the extent that she cannot believe that Laura is terribly shy and crippled:

Laura: (*in a tone of frightened apology*) I'm crippled!

Amanda: Nonsense! Laura, I've told you never, never to use that word. Why, you're not crippled, you just have a little defect- hardly noticeable. (Williams 2. 599).

Amanda does not have the intention to accept this fact and she even hates the word "crippled" or as Gilbert Debusscher remarks "crippled is a word that Amanda has banned from the Wingfield vocabulary" (31).

Tom succeeds in inviting a gentleman caller to the house, this gentleman is Jim O'Connor; he is Tom's workmate in the shoe factory. Jim is ambitious, he believes in self-improvement. Hoping to get a position as a public executive or radio engineer, Jim studies public speaking and radio engineering at a night school.

When Jim saw Laura, he was surprised; for he was not knowing that Tom has a sister; and Laura too was surprised because she immediately recognized him, he was her classmate in Soldan High School and the hero of her dreams back to these days. Jim's easy-going behavior overcomes Laura. Her brief meeting with him is a dazzling revelation that indicates how a considerable treatment



can transform her into a different person. Laura is shy and not quite willing to show her little secrets and the deep admiration she had of him, but Jim is quick to sense it; he sees "Laura as a closed bud of flower that needs a little warmth of feeling to open herself." (Ramjiwale 47). He tries to tell her what she is needing, it is just a little self-confidence and she will be able to overcome her difficulties: "A lack of confidence in yourself as a person; a little physical defect is what you have. Hardly noticeable even! Magnified thousands of times by imagination" (Williams 7. 640).

Laura easily gets affected by Jim's encouraging words which infused into her strength and energy that she had never experienced. Such words, Laura has never been before spoken to. They are encouraging and inspiring; they awaken in her hope, confidence, and faith in life. Jim's words overcome her paralyzing shyness. And with him by her side, she thinks she can attain her impossible dreams. Jim has transported Laura from the world of meaninglessness, harshness, and cruelty to a world of love and warmth. He, to some extent, entered her world. Jim even asks her to dance with him even if she does not know anything about it. It is such a high emotional scene with

romance surrounding it that it reaches the climax when Jim kisses her, making her giddy and confused.

But this glowing period of illusion is short-lived, scattering painfully when Jim announces that he is in love with a girl whom he has been going steady for some time. Now Amanda and Laura are awakened from their nice dream but Jim mercilessly blows this dream up by proclaiming; "we're going to be married the second Sunday of June" (Williams 7. 647). About this sad incident, Rajimwale sorrowfully remarks that "the bright illusory world [of Laura] is vanished in one stroke" (57). Jim has done his best to kill the ray of hope the moment it is born. Bringing Jim to the family is a painful experience for all, Amanda feels crushed and defeated; the world collapses around Laura and she becomes more withdrawn. Even Tom is forced to abandon the family. They are all devastated. Each one of them is more alienated from the other than ever before. Defeated by the world around her, Laura recoils completely from the present. "Her temporary contact with it has been disastrous." (Abdul-Kareem 78). She retreats to her no-time and child-like world of glass animals, suffering a mental breakdown. The play ends with Tom

determined to leave home and go to the sea, "Laura's spinsterhood is confirmed [and] Amanda's hopes are dashed" (Kernan 40).

Back to the days of Soldan High School, Jim used to call Laura Blue Roses for she once had an attack of pleurosis. According to Dr. Mohammed Baqir Twaij, "this two-word name symbolizes a combination of things. A rose is usually delicate, pretty and fragile. A blue rose is strange and unique, not to mention how the word "blue" is associated with sadness and melancholy (7).

Dr. Twaij goes on adding that "accordingly, Laura symbolizes beauty, tenderness, rareness and melancholy" (7). By this association Laura is transformed to the world of unreality causing her to be regarded as exotic and unearthly. As a matter of fact, blue roses are rarely found in nature, "they exist nowhere in the real world" (Zia'ee and Shamsa'ee 150); like them, Laura cannot exist in a real world. Both Laura and the blue roses share common characteristics like odd beauty, isolation, peculiarity and abnormality.

Jim O'Connor is not a cruel person and he is not so much different from the Wingfields. He is simpler than they are;

like them, he has illusions of himself and these illusions offer him protection from the harsh world of reality. His illusion is that if he works hard to develop his special ability, nothing can keep him from being an executive someday. Like the Wingfields, Jim tries hard to escape from his harsh reality. He shares with Tom his hatred towards his job; he feels that his work is filthy and unpromising. But unlike Tom who escapes into movies and late night shows, Jim's means of escape is by attending night classes. According to Zia'ee and Shamsa'ee: "Jim tries desperately to escape from his dead-end job by taking public speaking and radio engineering courses" (152). Jim wants to be something other than being a worker. Like Amanda, Jim has good memories about the past, for he was the most popular boy in high school, the class president, captain of the debate team, and he was a star in basketball. As a matter of fact, Jim's past was a period of potential greatness and of promise, while the present is, as Debusscher states, "a time of disillusion and drabness" (39).

A most remarkable point about this play is the absence of Mr. Wingfield, the father of Tom and Laura and Amanda's husband. He does not appear on the stage

in person; he is physically absent. The only visual aspect of him is an enlarged photograph hanging on the living room wall. Mr. Wingfield is handsome, but he is selfish and irresponsible. He left his job, deserted his family and went into an exotic land just to be carefree and lead a life of adventures. In this, "he represents the romantic image of great escape to unfettered freedom where one has only to follow his instinct" (Ramjiwale 85). In spite of his absence, Mr. Wingfield is considered a character in the play; his influence is tremendous, the memory of him pervades the lives of Tom and Amanda. The phonograph records, that what he has left behind, become part of the fantasy world of Laura. Amanda wears his discarded robe, a touching reminder of her loneliness. And his photograph dominates the setting of the play and in a sense their whole life.

Amanda's attitude toward her husband is mixed. She obviously loved this handsome man, but she blames him for her present humiliating position. She believes that had he been here, there would not have been such a formidable crisis for her. Tom's attitude toward his father is also ambivalent. Like Amanda, Tom resents his father's irresponsibility

and blames him for their poverty. But he cannot help envying his father who has managed to escape. Tom thinks of his father as an escapee artist. He would like the adventure and the excitement he imagines his father to be experiencing. Although Tom finally breaks away from his family just as his father did, he is never able to make a complete emotional escape, unlike his father who was able to make that escape. The father was probably enjoying his departure, while the son was haunted by his individualistic action:

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 (Williams 7.650)!

Laura's attitude toward her father is ambiguous; she little comments on him, but she does cherish the things that he has left behind, the phonograph records. She listens to them almost always. Like her father, Laura escapes from her responsibilities and duties. She drops out her high school and she escapes from Rubicam Business College to stroll down

the streets, going to parks, museums, and zoos. In this Laura, as Rajimwale points out, "resembles her father, the dreamy escapist, preferring to remain unburdened"(85). As a matter of fact, Laura and Tom are seen as another copy of their father, they are "the true children of Mr. Wingfield"(85).

All the characters in *The Glass Menagerie* "believe incorrectly that escape from their present situation in life is possible" (Zia'ee and Shamsa'ee 152).

Amanda, Tom, Laura, and Jim not only want to flee from reality but also wish to escape time and history. Each of them is unable to accept and live with daily events and each compensates for this failure by rejecting the present through wish-projection and fantasy. Unable to live in the present, each character retreats into a time appropriate to his or her individual fantasy. They are a good example and a true embodiment of escapism; even the photograph of the father that is hung on the wall augments the theme of escape.

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