

# THEME OF NECESSITY OF ILLUSIONS IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

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## ABSTRACT

*The Glass Menagerie is a masterpiece of the American dramatist, Tennessee Williams. This poignant and painful family drama depicts the inner and outer circumstances of once well to do Southern family. All the key characters of the family try to forget their glorious past and live in the world of illusions. The head of the family has already left bidding good bye to them all without an address. Through their dramatic tale, the playwright underscores the theme of necessity of illusions in life.*

## Paper

*The Glass Menagerie (1945)* is the masterpiece of American dramatist Tennessee Williams (1911-1983). It is a poignant and painful family drama set in St. Louis in which Amanda, a southern woman of great but confused vitality is seen frustrated among the dreams of her glamorous past in Blue Mountain area with several gentleman callers. But, now when she is in her grimness of her reduced circumstances due to her age and fragility of her body, mind and soul, she becomes a victim to a conflict between her youthful past and crippled present.

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She recalls her own youth and persuades her rebellious son, Tom to arrange a gentleman caller for her handicapped daughter, Laura, who symbolizes Amanda's crippled present. On the insistence of his nagging mother, Tom, unconcerned about his mother's intentions, is constrained to invite Jim O'Conner, one of his colleagues at the warehouse to dinner, giving impression to his mother that Jim is the gentleman caller on Laura. At the news, the mother has to "work like a turk"<sup>1</sup> in preparation to receive the gentleman caller of her daughter. The so called gentleman caller arrives and is provided with a chance to talk to Laura in privacy. He successfully breaks Laura's reserves, instills hope, love and confidence in her to remove her inferiority complex which she is constant victim of owing to her handicap. All goes well in Wingfield family until Jim, the so called gentleman caller discloses that he is already in love with and engaged to a girl named 'Betty'. This sting-in-the-tail is a bolt from the blue on Amanda and Laura and in delirium young Laura lapses again into her former dream world called 'Glass Menagerie', the world of her self created illusions.

The tragedy of Wingfield family is the tragedy of a decadant post war American family; each one of its members is a victim to the self created fears. All the three- Amanda, Laura and Tom- are passing through adverse conditions of social and economic insecurity. That is why they cannot cope with the stark realities of life. The

result of this drawback in their character creates in them another drawback: that each one of the three finds an escape in his own way from the real life into the world of self created mental illusions. All the three are living in hell ridden conditions of extreme poverty, constant ill health and consequent mental distress and frustration. The father of the household who never appears as a character but is present in the play in the form of a “larger than life size photograph over the mantle”<sup>2</sup> has escaped from his responsibilities by deserting his wife and children.

All the three seek an escape from the harsh reality of their existence into a fragile world of illusions. These illusions create a sense of hope for the better future but they do not know that illusions are only false hopes that ultimately turn dupes to play a havoc with the life of those who had pinned all hopes on illusions. All their hopes turn dupes when they receive from the head of the family a picture post card containing a message of two words: “Hello- Goodbye”<sup>3</sup> and no address .

The chief problem of Wingfield family is Laura, an American college dropout who wears a leg brace because of a crippling childhood illness because of which she has become a victim to inferiority complex as she always low rates herself with the eternal thought: “I am crippled”<sup>4</sup>. Due to her lack of confidence she escapes into an illusory world of psychic withdrawal into her own self. Williams indicates this withdrawal through a symbol which he calls ‘Glass Menagerie’, which according to the Lexicon Webster Dictionary is a term of French origin for “a collection of animals especially wild or foreign animals, for exhibition”<sup>5</sup>. It is also a term used for illusions which this schizophrenic girl can be seen playing with to psychologically find an escape from the realities of life into the artificial world of illusions with which she passes the stark

realities of time. Laura has created a small artificial world of her own which she plays on.

Tom, Laura's brother has also created an illusory world of his own making. He works in the warehouse on a smaller pay than is sufficient to feed three mouths of the Wingfield family and provide for an honorable living. He sheds his social responsibility on the illusion that it is not possible for him to take the burden of the family on his shoulders owing to his meagre salary. Instead, he begins to hate the apartment of their dwelling and seems to be walking in the footsteps of his father who has run away from home. He finds an escape from the reality of life into eating outside the home, drinking and going to movies. He hates his job in the warehouse because of its sterile formal routine. His illusions are much stronger than the benefits he is drawing from his job. As he says: "for fifty five dollars give up all that I dream of doing and being ever....Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter and none of these instincts are given much play at warehouse"<sup>6</sup>.

Amanda's predicament is that she is "a little woman" in the metaphysical sense who clings frantically to another time and place, but she is constantly irked by the horrible present. She persistently strives to escape into the world of illusions, a world in which she can forget her daughter's drawback and in which she can nag and possess Tom. Amanda's case is that of a woman of strong possessive instinct. Her possessive instinct is threatened by the disobedient and self-willed Tom, when he calls her "you ugly-babbling old-witch"<sup>7</sup> the dream of her illusion about dominating and possessing Tom is shaken. To bring the world in order again she manages through Laura things in such a way that Tom has to beg pardon for his impudence.

The positive side of *the Glass Menagerie* is that all these illusion makers get aware of the truth about themselves, though only for a moment. But again they quickly relax into another world of illusions. Tom expresses his desire to go even “much further” than the moon treading his father’s footsteps; Amanda continues her possessive dominance and Laura blows out all transitory romantic candles and takes up the collection of her glass toys once again. Through this ending of the play, Williams indirectly suggests his favourite theme of necessity of illusions in human life which are broken to turn the hopes of characters into dupes.

The dramatist wishes to convey the message that in the post modern age of hopelessness, rootlessness and ruthlessness, , men and women are not sincere to any moral code. In fact they don’t know any moral code and in order to exist in the fast growing age of material progress, they invent illusions about them and feel that illusions are the necessity to human life. They create hopes in their illusions to arrive at a comfortable conclusion but all their illusions break and their hopes turn dupes to leave them alone on the deserted shore.

## REFERENCES

1. *Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie (NY: Penguin Modern Classics ,1968), p.39.*
2. *Ibid. p.5.*
3. *Ibid. p.5.*
4. *Ibid. p.15.*
5. *See: Lexicon Webster Dictionary, Vol. I, ed. Mario Pei(USA : Delair Pub. Co.,Inc. 1983) p.595*
6. *Ibid. p.30.*

7. *Ibid.* p.22.