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\*Dr. M. Sangeetha

Assistant Professor of English,

Nallamuthu Gounder Mahalingam College

Pollachi-Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

sangeethadanya@gmail.com

\*\*Mr. R. Kalyasundaram

Ph.D Research Scholar (Part-Time)

Kandaswami Kandar's College,

P. Velur, Namakkal, Tamil Nadu, India.

The theme of illusion and reality in tennessee williams's

*The glass menagerie*

Tennessee Williams has brought to the American theatre a highly poetic literary individuality. He is a dramatist of lost souls. Tennessee Williams as a dramatist is highly indebted to the Russian playwright and short-story writer, Anton Chekhov. He is concerned with the decline of aristocratic societies and the clash between the old and the new social values. A strong influence on *The Glass Menagerie* is the life and work of the American poet, Hart Crane. It is the purest work to come from the pen of Tennessee Williams. Williams suggestively writes, *The Glass Menagerie* as a memory play. This paper attempts to justify the title of the theme of Illusion and Reality in *The Glass Menagerie*.

Williams has made illusion as an integral part. He uses his character and narrator Tom Wing field to tell us directly that the play is an illusion. Tom explains that his purpose is not simply to produce an illusion that appears true, a photographic representation of his family's

life in the 1930's, but, instead to reveal "truth" in the "disguise of illusion". Tom wants to discern a truth about life with the illusion he creates. Moreover, he wants us to understand that the truth in *The Glass Menagerie* is incorporated in the specific deceptions the characters themselves embrace and which they depend so very strongly.

At the outset, Williams suggests some of the important illusions in the play. The stage directions point out that transparent walks create an illusion of an apartment building, while music and coloured lights suggest a dance hall across the alley.

Amanda Wingfield cherishes several illusions to avoid the unpleasant truth of her family's present condition in the period of the great Depression of the 1930's and their horrendous life in the St. Louis tenement. She believes that she still retains the charm she once had as a young girl in Blue Mountain, and she treasures the memory of having "received seventeen gentlemen caller" one Sunday afternoon, any one of whom she could have married. She believes that her children, Tom and Laura, are "bound to success" since they are "just full of natural endowments". The fact is otherwise. Tom is close to losing his job at the warehouse, has decided to become a merchant seaman, and yet really wants to become a poet.

Tom's sister, Laura, suffers from acute shyness, is lame, and seems interested only in caring for her collection of glass animals and listening to old phonograph records, which her father left. Amanda desperately clings to her illusion that Laura can be happy and successful if she goes to the business college and learns stenography. But sadly enough, Laura proves to be a flop at the business college and discontinues her course abruptly. She cherishes the illusion that Laura being pretty will be able to ensnare Jim O' Connor, the gentleman caller and with this end in view she grooms Laura with "gay deceivers" and all to prepare Jim for the kill. But Jim seems to feel sorry for Laura as a brother might, rather than enamoured of her as a suitor. Moreover, when Jim makes his announcement that he is already engaged to one Betty and whom he is going to marry soon, Amanda's illusions shatter like egg shells.

People are not so dreadful when you know them. That's what you have to remember! And everybody has problems, not just you, but practically everybody has got some problems. You think of yourself as having the only problems, as being the only one who is disappointed. But just look around you and you will see lots of people as disappointed as you are. (p.47)

When Jim comes to call on Laura, Amanda seems to confuse things, thinking that he has come to call on her. Her yellow courting dress and her jonquils are a part of this illusion. Her giddy speeches and laughter are that of a young girl entertaining her beau, not that of a middle-aged mother trying to trap a husband for her daughter. When things are going bad for her and her children in the St. Louis tenements of the 1930's, she retreats into the comfortable, secure world of her youth, before she made the tragic mistake of marrying Mr. Wingfield, floored by his charming looks. It must be said to her credit that she does not however live completely in that world of illusion. She does make "plans and provisions". She does get things done. She works to send Laura to business school. When that venture fails, she collects magazine subscriptions to raise the money required to attract a gentleman caller for her daughter. And the stage directions for the pantomime ending in the latter scenes indicate that Amanda, during the time of great stress, does not retreat into her illusions, but stays in the world of cruel reality, comforting her daughter.

Laura who is shy and withdrawn has her own illusions. She believes that everyone used to watch her at school when she came late for the chorus practice and go "clumping" to her seat in the back row of the auditorium as she wore a brace on her leg. She tells him that to her, the clumping sounded like thunder. But Jim tells her that he "never even noticed" that. Though she really felt a crush for Jim, she kept it to herself because she was under the notion that Jim was going strong with Emily at school. It is this diffidence about her own self that makes Laura a school dropout. Unable to adjust to the demands of the world outside, she withdraws

herself into her shell-the glass menagerie and the old Victoria records that her father left. It is her shyness and nervousness makes her walk out of the business college. Her lack of adaptability is the result of her own illusions about herself. But become normal like the girls of her age. But Jim's disclosure that he is already engaged to one Betty shatters all the confidence that she gains at one stroke. She realizes that in the cruel world around her that her beauty and her fragile attainments have no place. She retreats to her shell once again enfolding her dream world about her for protection.

The character, Tom, is also a victim of his illusions. He thinks that he will find himself in the world of adventure and travel. Vicariously, he experience the "adventure" provided by the dream merchants of Hollywood in their motion pictures, escaping the drabness of his warehouse job and the discomforts of his home life for a few hours at a time. His great illusion is the belief that his joining the Merchant Marine and sailing to all parts of the world will make good for the emptiness that is in him. All of this is related to Tom's conception of the role of the poet. Tom believes that to write well he must experience directly as much of life as possible. The function of the poet is to report truth; the only way to arrive at truth is through experience. Tom sees Amanda as a threat to his poetry because of what she does to his by D.H.Lawrence and because she considers his job at the warehouse more important than his writing. He resents both Amanda and Laura because they keep him at this dull job when he should be travelling and writing. He realizes too late, however, that even a poet cannot escape his responsibilities. He has been more faithful to Laura than he had ever imagined he could be. Tom, as narrator, has lost his illusion. He knows from experience that no amount of travel and adventure will shake the demon that is within him.

Jim O'Connor's life, as common as it is, is ruled by illusions. He has created them in order to believe in a happy and successful future. Jim realizes that though he was the hero in high school that he has not reached the heights expected of him yet. But he believes that he

can still capture it. By taking a night school course in public speaking and thereby gaining "social poise", he is confident that with his brains and ability he will be fitted for an executive position. He also believes that by taking a course in radio engineering, he will be able to gain a foothold in the upcoming television industry and go right to the top of the ladder of success. He still believes that he is something special, designed for great things in the future. His illusion is the American Dream.

In *The Glass Menagerie* 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 or 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 glass figurines. 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.

But it must be borne in mind that Williams does not say that illusions are necessarily better or pleasanter than facts. 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, but perhaps the saddest illusion of all in the play is the one that induces Tom to say "good-bye" to Laura. She is a reminder of an illusion-filled past that blocked his growth by obscuring his view of the way things really are. To grow and see things clearly, he had to leave. Further, when he says "Nowadays the world is lit by lightning", Tom means that the world must be seen not in the soft, delicately flickering candlelight that is Laura but

in the electric, dynamic illumination of force beyond human influence. The force, manifest in lightning, is inexorable, and it blots out any candle flame.

A glowing light, soft colour, or nostalgic sound-or a shy, lame sister who appreciates such things-have place in the busy and insensitive world Tom sees around him. This belief, which is both that of Tom and the world, is, however, an illusion.

Williams reveals to us that illusions, though dangerous, provide a shelter to the characters in the play from the hard facts of life. Amanda's illusion that she is still the belle of Blue Mountain makes her forget at least temporarily the hard realities of life that she has to face in bringing up her children-Tom and Laura-in the unenviable atmosphere of her St. Louis tenement during the period of the great Depression of the 1930's. Moreover, her illusion also enables to sustain her emotional balance despite the angularities of her children, Tom and Laura. Tom's illusion that he is a poet and as such he must escape the horrible realities of his domestic life, provides him a peg to hang on his disappointments with his warehouse job and the uncongenial domestic set up of his nagging mother and his lame sister who is to be married. Laura's illusions finding shelter in the company of her little glass figurines enable to overcome her inability to come to terms with the realities of a demanding outside world. Jim's illusions about his superior capabilities help him swallow his failures and make him hope for a bright future. Of course, he is not an idle daydreamer but makes solid preparations for ascending the ladder of success in life.



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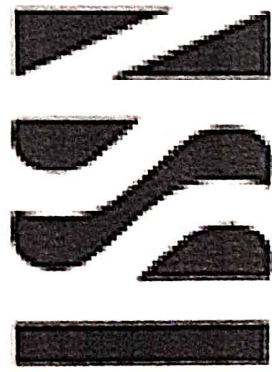
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