

Creating consciousness using marginalised women in Literature-special reference with William's the glass menagerie



Literature

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ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams is one of the most highly recognized and prolific American dramatists of the twentieth century. Critics such as Roger Boxill, Lyle Leverich, and Donald Spoto maintain that Williams presents cases for the alienated, the dysfunctional, and other outcasts of society, and that his genius sparks concern for their suffering, which may account for his plays' enduring popularity. Williams' first three major plays The Glass Menagerie (1945), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), and Summer and Smoke (1948); present the plight of sensitive, helpless women who are victims in Southern patriarchal society, either degraded or destroyed in their search for identity and security. Through these plays, Williams makes a critical plea for society to address the predicament of marginalized women in a cruel and insensitive world. This paper details, The Glass Menagerie as a representation of marginalised women and literature as a vehicle to make public awareness on patriarchy.

Williams' first three major plays The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Summer and Smoke; present the plight of sensitive, helpless women who are wounded in Southern patriarchal society, either degraded or destroyed in their search for identity and security. The plays represent clearer cut examples of marginalized women than most of his other plays. Williams grows progressively more pessimistic in his later plays dating from the middle of the century, perhaps due to his becoming more deeply involved with alcohol and drugs in order to cope with his unresolved life issues. Many of Williams' later plays are laden with topics of drug addiction, prostitution, incest, alcoholism, venereal disease, death, and racism all of which obscure the theme of women as victims in patriarchal society.

Feminist studies contend that patriarchal societies have marginalized women for centuries and that literature provides an excellent means of exposing this situation. These studies have also brought to light various issues concerning the marginalization of women, especially during the last century. Some of the specialized feminist approaches to studying literature are socio historical feminism, which examines literature as it represents women and culture; Marxist feminism, which studies female economic oppression; psychoanalytical feminism, which uncovers the unconscious and the repression of women's thoughts; post-colonial feminism, which relates to the psych-political "other"; and the linguistic approach that discerns gender differences displayed through the use of language. Other feminist theories are lesbian or queer, African American, Third World, and also "Gynecic criticism" led by Elaine Showalter who exposes the double standards applied to women's writing. In spite of the different emphases, feminist literary critics of all schools share several priorities: first, that we, as a society, need to expose and eradicate injustice toward women; second, that we need to redefine history and free it from androcentric biases; third, that literary critics need to re-evaluate literature that tends to be too subjective or prejudiced; and fourth, that education should promote a greater understanding of society's marginalization of women and fulfill the ultimate goal of feminism: to end patriarchy and to change the world by promoting equality toward women (Culler 102-08 and Eagleton 182-95).

The aspect of feminist literary criticism that pertains to defining women's roles in a particular society aptly applies to Williams' plays. In fact, critics such as Adler and Prenshaw maintain that the South represents a microcosm of patriarchal society. Williams' heroines are victims of a double standard observed in the society which allowed men to be degenerate but did not allow women to think about, much less enjoy, sex (Cash 3). A woman was "the pure pedestal goddess worshipped from afar by the impure and animalistic man whose savior she was supposed to

be" (Jones 213). In the South, people believed that their moral superiority ultimately depended on the sexual purity of women (Hovis 183).

Williams captures the essence of the quintessential South in its elegance, refined beauty, and romanticism. Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* yearns for the grace and elegance of this nostalgic past that is etched in her memory, a world she mythically transforms to a grander and more idyllic place, far beyond the reaches of reality.

Williams confronts modern society directly with the problem of female victimization, because in spite of the fact that we have made considerable progress over the last century, women still remain subordinate to men. Much of Williams' beliefs about marginalized women are rooted in his own life story.

As indicated in the Introduction, Williams uses many details from his own life in his plays, and many critics indicate that *The Glass Menagerie*, more than any of his other plays, is autobiographical. When asked about this, Williams replied, "All work is autobiographical if it is serious. Everything a writer produces is his inner history transposed into another time" (qtd. in Spoto 114). Williams told some of his closest friends that Amanda is a replica of his mother, Edwina Estelle Dakau; that Laura's real-life model is his sister, Rose; and that in his own heart he is Tom (Presley 86). Leverich explains that in Williams' mind, images of his mother, once a young and beautiful Southern belle whose venturesome husband deserted her to go on the road eventually became enmeshed with images of dismal, drab apartments, his sister's declining mental health, and his own feelings of desperation for freedom from the web of family disarray. Victimization by his father who was not only an alcoholic, but also an abuser (Williams and Mead 35-6 and Williams and Freeman 57, 59). Williams also empathized with his mother's emotional suffering over Rose's mental illness. Edwina admits that the long road to acceptance often made her feel ill and depressed (Williams and Freeman 86).

The Glass Menagerie is a partly factual, partly fictional reworking of Williams' years as a teenager, living with his family in St. Louis when the International Shoe Company promoted his father from travelling salesman to district manager. Because of the difficult adjustment caused by a move to a large city and his father's continually disruptive presence, Williams referred to this period as "nine years in limbo" (Williams and Freeman 33). Both he and Rose hated the confinement and the disruption of the previous idyllic life they enjoyed at their grandparents' home in the town of Clarksdale, in rural Mississippi, where their father, Cornelius Coffin Williams, wasn't around to frighten or

bully them (Spoto 12). Williams' choice of setting for *The Glass Menagerie* is the 1930s when "the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy" (1.400). During this time, life was bleak because jobs were scarce and upward mobility was static. It was even more dismal for women during the Great Depression, when women comprised twenty-five percent of the workforce. For women, jobs were more unstable, temporary, and seasonal than they were for men; consequently, unemployment was much higher among women.

There was also a strong bias against women who worked. In fact, many women who were employed full time called themselves "homemakers" to avoid being stigmatized for assuming men's jobs. Neither men in the workforce, unions, nor the government were ready to accept the reality that women also had to work as breadwinners, and this bias caused females intense hardship, especially those who were single, divorced, or widowed (Abelson 104). Amanda seems fully aware of the situation for working women and is resourceful in her plans for her children's success. *The Glass Menagerie* is an American tragedy on many levels, including a father's alcoholism and desertion, a mother's unsuccessful lot in life as a single parent, and a sister's growing helplessness as a victim; but the greatest tragedy is that of a dysfunctional family: the Wingfields. The absent father haunts each family member, as his larger-than-life presence inescapably pervades the apartment: "A blown-up photograph of the father hangs on the wall of the living room, facing the audience, to the left of the archway" (1.399).

Amanda, who was raised as a pampered and entitled Southern belle, is totally unequipped to handle family responsibilities and problems on her own after her husband deserts her, and she runs into resistance from one child and withdrawal from the other which besets her with anxiety. She refers to her role as a single parent as "a solitary battle" (4.419) because she has no support system in place, and the pressure of raising a family during the Great Depression leaves her on the verge of emotional ruin. Amanda's predicament mirrors Edwina's, who, through necessity, also became the primary care-giver for her children because her husband was either away or too busy pursuing his own interests. Edwina complains that Cornelius would spend lavishly on himself but would deny the children basic necessities of shoes and clothing. Obtaining money from Cornelius to buy groceries was also problematic for Edwina as she recounts, "the family fights usually reached their peak at the end of the month when bills arrived and the week-end drinking sprees began. There would be good-sized rows as Cornelius fumed over the bills and I battled for grocery money" (Williams and Freeman 37).

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)

Perhaps in Tom's speech, Williams is expressing the psychic pain and helplessness that he feels about losing Rose to schizophrenia, and especially about her lobotomy. Dakin reports that this was the greatest tragedy in Williams' life: "Tom's relationship with his sister Rose is so complicated psychologically, and so heartbreaking that it could almost make a book in itself" (Wil-

liams and Mead 14). Williams' attachment to Rose is very significant, and her fate left an indelible mark on him.

Williams reminisces about his sister, "She was the best of all, do you understand? More beautiful, more intelligent, sweeter and warmer than anyone. Not one of us was fit to stoop and tie her shoes" (qtd. in Williams and Mead 226).

O'Connor indicates however, that a veiled form of mental illness is present in Laura, probably down-played by Williams out of respect for Rose. Laura's mental illness is a social phobia that makes her retreat from the world of reality to a world of illusion through her glass figurines and the music from her father's hand-me-down Victrola (15). Gulshan Rai states that to Williams, Rose represents a mystical symbol of love, the epitome of a sensitive soul, mutilated and destroyed by a cruel world (5). As hard as Williams tries to let go of the pain that Rose's tragedy brings to him, his thoughts of her only cripple him further. To make matters worse, Williams' greatest fear throughout his life was that he too would lose his mind (O'Connor 5). He told many people that he wrote to escape madness (Rouse 3).

Similarly, Williams' mother figures, in his own life and in his work, display signs of mental instability. Williams portrays Amanda in his opening description of characters as having ". . . great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place. . . he is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia" (394). Early in the play, Amanda solaces her conflict with Tom by escaping to memories of her past life as a Southern belle surrounded by gentlemen callers. This is her escape mechanism that goes out of control and makes her appear out of touch with reality most of the time. She, like her daughter, Laura, is unable to function in the real world. When the world of fantasy takes over one's grip with reality, it becomes pathological. Edwina also shares a neurosis that borders on hysteria, similarly evident in Amanda's behavior. There is a history of nervous breakdowns in Edwina's gene pool, (and there is also a history of mental instability in the Williams family which makes it doubly hard for Williams if he fears that mental illness is genetic), and she was once hospitalized in a St. Louis psychiatric ward due to paranoia (Hayman 167). Like Amanda, Edwina centers her life on her children because of her unfortunate relationship with her husband. Cornelius was not only an obnoxious and wild alcoholic, he was also mentally and physically abusive. Williams grew up hating his father who belittled him and called him a "sissy." Cornelius taunted him as "Miss Nancy" because he was not athletic, and denied him love and encouragement (Leverich 83).

In *The Glass Menagerie* the harsh reality of the fate of the remaining female victims serves as a stark contrast to the happier world of illusion that they were able to devise as a mode of self-preservation when there was some financial provision for their existence. In their previously enclosed family dysfunction, Tom's escape was in writing and movies; Amanda's was reliving her past as a Southern belle surrounded by jonquils and gentlemen callers; and Laura's was in attending to her tiny glass figurines and playing her father's phonograph records. When Tom, like his father, deserts the family, their dysfunction is made even more transparent and pathetic. No one denies Tom the moral responsibility to himself in following the romantic imperative of "self-expression" (Jackson 137), but the results are so devastating to Amanda and Laura, the female victims in the family who are left helpless and defenseless.

Most feminists agree that gender differences are culturally determined and that literature provides a record of male dominance in male-female interaction (Showalter 127). Using feminist theory, this paper reviews and analyzes Williams' major play, *The Glass Menagerie* is a portrayal of women as victims. Of particular significance is the social milieu in which female oppression oc-

curs in these three plays, and Williams' perception of women as a marginalized segment of society.

Because of writers like Williams who compel a greater awareness of the victimization of women through literature, pathetic figures like Amanda, Laura, Blanche, Stella, and Alma will strengthen women's struggle to obtain equality and recognition as worthy human beings and to end the helplessness and tyranny caused by male domination. The tragedy of these women is the tragedy of the civilization "which bore them, nourished them, and then cast them out...they are social fossils in an age of commercialism and tawdriness" (Jones 219).

Williams' writing displays his sensitivity to the powerless status of women, or the insignificant "Other" because of his own marginalization as a homosexual, but more importantly because of his giftedness in presenting the plight of misfits and losers. Williams' female characters are some of his best, because both psychologically and thematically, they express his romantic and poetic style (Adler 77). Women and romantics are losers in an aggressive society, crushed and trampled on by the wheels of change and ugly realism. Misfits are those who are socially ignored and rejected in a male-dominated, insensitive world, like his mentally ill sister, Rose, who was involuntarily stripped of all her personhood. Blanche too, was taken away by a patriarchal mental health system like a lamb to the slaughter.

Williams' play is relevant to the predicament of women in western society today and will remain timeless in their portrayal of women as victims until we put an end to patriarchy. We need to pursue more active means of presenting worthwhile themes found in literature, and one way would be through a modern revival of Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* in movie and musical theatre productions. Inspired screenwriters, motion picture directors, and composers need to pick up the challenge that Williams has sparked and continue his efforts to put an end to the victimization of women through greater public awareness.

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