



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**English Literature**

**ALIENATION AND SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN  
"THE GLASS MENAGERIE" BY TENNESSEE  
WILLIAMS**

**KEY WORDS:**

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**ABSTRACT**

Tennessee Williams, one of the most prolific playwrights of America, adopted writing as an escape from the world. The alienation and frustration faced by Williams in his life becomes evident in the themes and characters of his plays. "The Glass Menagerie" was written by Williams at the time when the failure of socioeconomic system and the failure of man were going simultaneously. In this play the characters depend on the memories of past days to pull them through the grim existence. The truth of the play lies in the specific deceptions and self-created lyricism which the characters themselves embrace and on which they depend so strongly. Thus, Tennessee Williams was mainly concerned with the reality of the broken world which he has tried to envision and reflect in his plays. He seems to picture a universe in which people are trying to ascend the stairs that lead nowhere and of human beings who are trapped in a theatre that has no exits.

Tennessee Williams is one of the most prolific playwrights of America. His play writing career spanned more than four decades. Critics seem to agree that he is a writer of unusual talent. He adopted writing as an escape from the world. He portrays the darker side of the world that he has seen. He shows sympathy for lost souls and out-of-the-way characters.

Williams had faced alienation and frustration in his life which becomes evident in the themes and characters of his plays. His turbulent adolescence has gone a long way in shaping his artistic temperament. He was so much preoccupied by a sense of personal loneliness that it became a major theme of his plays. He finds it difficult to handle people in everyday situations and depicts only those who correspond to his own tensions. He presents a world which is full of immature and sick people.

The situations and circumstances in which he has placed his characters do not allow them to develop into free and happy individuals. They seem to be aliens who are all the time confused. They are aliens in the world of harsh and bitter reality who take refuge in illusions which are under continuous threat of extinction from the brutal forces of a society which has no place for the sensitive, delicate, or tender aspect of humanity. They seem to be lonely in a world which is full of bitterness and cruelty. 'Laura' in 'The Glass Menagerie' stood in the shades as if she dreaded what the world might offer. She hid in her room where two windows opened on an areaway called Death Valley. She is morbidly shy, over-delicate, as fragile as the little glass ornaments and phonograph record which are her escape. Thus, the theme of this work is aspiration and disappointment.

The play revolves around the introversion of Laura who, because of her crippled state and the futility of her early crush on a fellow high school student, is now psychologically withdrawn from life.

Any piece of literature is deeply influenced by the social and cultural conditions of the age. Hence it would be significant to deal with the social milieu and cultural surroundings of the time when this play was written. At that time, that is in 1930s, the world was being threatened due to the second world war. The old, grand, and noble culture was perishing and was being replaced by vulgar, unrefined mercantile values.

'The Glass Menagerie' is cradled in the playwright's recall of the depression years when he worked in the warehouse of the International Shoe Company by day and wrote by night. Rose Williams' short lived business studies, disappointing relationships and withdrawal from life inform the character of Laura as the predestined spinster with a lost love. Even the title refers to the collection of little glass animals that Rose and

Tom kept in their room in St. Louis, tiny figures that came to represent for him all the softest emotions that belong to the remembrance of things past.

This play was written by Williams at the time when the failure of socio-economic system and the failure of man were going simultaneously. Lyric Despair, which is an integral theme of 'The Glass Menagerie', is the combination of both failures. Every character in this play tries to submerge his or her frustration in the lyricism of deception. The pathos of life consists in the headless trampling over precious moments by the blind rush of events. That is why the festive occasion so often occurs in Williams' works as a metaphor of the attempt to recapture in the present what has been lost in the past.

The despondent people of 1930s could not succeed in making an adjustment with their surroundings; hence they indulged in finding a remedy for their lives. They were longing to make themselves free from the bondages of society. Their longing for freedom was deepened by their endeavour for emancipation. They had to strive to be freed but in the end, they had to give it up.

In 'The Glass Menagerie' the characters depend on the memories of past days to pull them through the grim existence. The absurd and pitiable widow Amanda is largely responsible for the inferiority complex which troubles her children. She, herself, lives in the memories of the past, by gone days, when she had been young and gay, living her life amidst happiness and joy in her hometown in South. She nostalgically remembers the beautiful dresses she had worn, the picnics she had enjoyed, the wildflowers she had gathered. She repeats again and again how she had been pursued by the eligible gentleman of the town. As she recollects:

One Sunday afternoon in the Blue Mountain,  
Your mother received seventeen gentlemen callers.

She returns to her own youth when her own daughter becomes old enough to receive the addresses of her first gentleman caller. The vitality, vivacity and enthusiasm which marks her conduct make us feel as if it was, she, who on the threshold of youth, is ready to bloom under the caressing glances of her first caller. She dresses herself in a girlish dress, almost bringing to life her youthful days. Laura, the crippled daughter, lives in her own private world of memories. She plays old phonograph records. Her memories centre round a young boy of her school days. She remembers how he used to sing in his wonderful voice, win debating prizes and call her 'blue roses'.

The truth of the play lies in the specific deceptions and self-

created lyricism which the characters themselves embrace and on which they depend so strongly. Amanda considers herself to be a part of the decayed southern aristocracy. The illusion is a shield by which she can escape facing the unpalatable and unpleasant reality of her family's present and future. It is just a dream world in which she seems to be floating when she thinks herself to be as charming as she had once upon been in her youth in Blue Mountain and fancies herself to be the idol of the seventeen gentlemen callers, who had called on one Sunday afternoon, anyone of whom she could have married. She tries to harbour a still more baseless illusion by believing that her children are bound to succeed since they are just full of natural endowments. The reality on the other hand is different. Tom's present job is slipping from his hands, and he has decided to become a merchant seaman, though in his hearts of hearts he aspires to be a writer. Laura, Tom's sister, prefers to live in her private world of glass animals and old phonograph records. Her lameness has nurtured in her a shyness and a wish to cut herself away from the rest of the world. Though she takes admission in Rubican's Business College, but finds difficult to adjust and so finally, after attending for a few days, decides to leave it. It is typical of Amanda's desperate clinging to illusion that she believes Laura can be happy and successful if she goes to Business College and learns typing. When she comes to know that Laura has decided otherwise, she feels disturbed. She is shocked to know that Laura instead of attending college had been whiling away her time elsewhere.

Amanda persists in imagining that the gentleman Tom has invited for supper would be a fine match for Laura and would be enchanted with Laura, if Laura is made to appear pretty and attractive, if the house is pruned and tidied and she herself plays the role of a charming youthful southern matron. She believes that all this will cast a spell on him, and he will start paying his addresses to Laura, visiting them frequently and then matter will successfully conclude with Laura's marriage to him. The fact is that Jim O' Connor, the gentleman caller, feels sympathy for Laura's sad state more like a brother and harbours no lover-like feelings towards her. Besides this his feelings are already pledged towards someone else. He is already engaged and when Amanda comes to know of it, her hopes of Laura's settlement are shattered.

Her shy and withdrawn nature is the result of her being a cripple. She remembers those days of her high school when wearing a brace in her leg she used to go for chorus practice. Sometimes when she was late, she had to go clumping to her seat on the back row of the auditorium and every eye in the hall would be focussed on her. In moments of oneness with Jim she confides to him that the clumping sound resounded like thunder in her eyes. Of course, Jim never even noticed. The unicorn about which she discusses to Jim, is in fact the representative of her own self. She develops her own illusions by saying that the unicorn loves the light, may feel lonesome as it is different from other animals, but it never complains about it and gets along nicely with the horses that do not have horns. She also says that all her glass animals like a change of scenery once in a while. She is referring to her own need for a change which she got by sometimes going to the movies or sometimes to see the jewel box, " where they raise the tropical flowers". One day the unicorn falls and horn breaks. But Laura consoles herself by saying:

I'll just imagine we had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less---freakish! Now he will feel more at home with the other horses, the ones that don't have horns...

Thus, Tennessee Williams was mainly concerned with the reality of a broken world which he has tried to envision and reflect in his plays. He was very much concerned with the problem of love, sympathy and understanding in a world in which these were constantly threatened with suppression and annihilation. Williams seems to picture a universe in which

people are trying to ascend the stairs that lead nowhere and of human beings who are trapped in a theatre that has no exits.

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