

Great Depression in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the great depression and the struggle the characters faces during the thirties in Tennessee Williams' play, *The Glass Menagerie*. Tennessee Williams, an American dramatist, was one of the three significant playwrights among his contemporaries such as Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. As a prolific writer, he has written numerous plays contributing to the field of drama. In the play, the characters seek for an escape from reality and dwells in the illusionary world. This paper also establishes the historical backdrop of America during Great Depression.

America, a well-developed nation, is considered as one among the first world countries, has faced economic derogations during the thirties. The Great Depression was one of the indelible incidents that happened in the history of America. The play, *The Glass Menagerie* is set during the period of great depression. The play unfolds the story of three characters, Amanda, Laura and Tom, who suffers to climb up the social ladder during the great depression. As a memory play, it draws much of the action from a character's memory, Tom. He introduces himself as the narrator and explains the social background of the play.

The setting of the play manifests the economic and social background of the characters. The action of the play is set in an apartment which is overcrowded with "lower middle class population" (3). The apartment has a fire escape, only through which the characters can enter and exit. The fire escape is symbolic for "all these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation." (3), projecting the character's hopelessness.

Due to the stock market crashes in 1929, many men have lost their employment. They find difficulty in running their families. So they began to work for meagre wages. Tom, the narrator of the play, works in warehouses for sixty five dollars a month for the sake of his family. His ambitions become suppressed. He longs to be an adventurer but was constrained by the family's economic background. In order to escape the harsh realities, he smokes and watches movies often. However his love for adventure will never end, as Carl Jung states,

Once a man's instinct is suppressed by the environment, it will not be suddenly eliminated as if it never existed. On the contrary it will merge into the conscious part of the human mentality. The collective unconscious, owing to its inappropriateness and incompatibility in real life, is often times concealed in our deep psychology. (Jung 997)

As the great depression has left many men unemployed, they began finding solace in alcohol, left their families and never returned. In the play, Mr Wingfield who appears only in the portrait, has left his family, quitted his job and never returned. The last word, the family heard of him is a picture post card with "Hello—Good-Bye" (*The Glass Menagerie* 6) with no address. Tom Wingfield longs to be an adventurer like his father and has a glowing dream of becoming an adventurer. He is also the only character in the play who escapes the illusionary world to live up his dream.

Men literally took their economy as a matter of faith. They worshipped the market place, so when the stock market crashed, many men were left hopeless and powerless. (A Broken Economy)

During great depression, women hold the centre of power, in the family. They were abandoned by the men of their family and were forced to take up responsibility. They began working in various fields. In the play, the Wingfield family was abandoned by both the father and the son, which forces Amanda to earn a meagre income by selling The Homemaker's Companion subscription through telephone. Amanda Wingfield relishes on recollecting her past memory of getting seventeen gentleman callers when she was in Blue Mountains and she

finds it as a way of escaping the reality. Even though she narrates the events of her past to Laura as a form of motivating her to be optimistic, she says that she “did not have the courage! I (she) wanted a hole in the ground and hide myself (herself) in it forever” (*The Glass Menagerie* 14). As a tender and commanding mother, she worries about her children’s future but fails to recognise their dreams. As in *It’s Upto the Women*, Eleanor Roosevelt says,

The women know that life must go on and that the needs of life must be met and it is their courage and determination which time and again, have pulled us through worse crises than the present one. (Foreword)

The great depression has completely transformed the lives of the American working class people during nineteen thirties. Even though the working men in Spain held a successful revolution in 1936, America remains the same. “Marriage and birth rates declined, as many couples decided to wait until they could afford marriage and children” (A Broken Economy). Similarly, in the play, the Wingfield family finds difficulty in getting a gentleman caller for Laura. She was forced by her mother, Amanda, to attend the business college to accomplish her. But she fortifies her illusionary world by spending her time with the glass menagerie. It is symbolic of her captivation as the glass animals. Her crippled leg makes her feel much different from others and develops a feeling of inferiority complex as the unicorn in her glass collection. She is as fragile as the glasses. She “lives in a world of her own” (*The Glass Menagerie* 58). But Amanda expects her daughter to learn to be independent. Because all the family needs, is an income in some way during the great depression. This becomes evident when Amanda asserts,

I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren’t prepared to occupy a position. I’ve seen such pitiful cases in the south—barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister’s husband or brother’s wife! ... little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life! (19)

Jim O’Connor, a shipping clerk is the only man in the play, who is well balanced in reality. He is the symbol of expectancy for the Wingfield family. He represents the external

world from which the Wingfield family is distanced. He also symbolises the universalities of uncertainty. When Laura was with Jim, she finds more comfortable as the unicorn “stays on shelf with some horses that don’t have horns and all of that seem to get along nicely together” (106). She presents Jim a broken horn unicorn as a souvenir denoting that she is out of her illusionary world. The liveliness and optimism returns with him.

There is an attitudinal difference between them. The aptitude of Tom differs from the expectancy of Amanda. On the other hand, Laura is a woman of psychological context leading a quiet calm life. They live under the same roof but in isolation. The conflict is found in a triangular structure. The whole play is a play of human conflicts due to great depression.

Works Cited

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