

# Depiction of the American Dream in Tennessee Williams'

## *The Glass Menagerie*

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**Abstract:** Tennessee Williams most famous play *The Glass Menagerie* presents the socio-political conflicts of the contemporary society. The play refers to the 1930s era of Great Depression in America. It was a period of struggles against hopelessness that threatens their lives and family relationship. Middle class people suffered mostly specially the Wingfields who represents this kind of people. American dream is a pathway to escape from this suffering, but it is difficult to attain it. This dream is not only about material prosperity but it is all about success that is gained through hard work. The United States of America's Declaration of Independence proclaims that 'life, liberty and pursuit of happiness' are rights of every individuals irrespective of their personal background. Most Americans believe that it can be achieved through hard work but this dream is like a myth.

**Keywords - Milk, Functional Milk, Sugar, Lemongrass, Clove, Optimization.**

### I. INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) is one of the leading American playwrights of the post-World War II era when America was in crisis because of Great depression. America's financial conditions was in a troubled situation and people were disillusioned for unemployment. Tennessee Williams wrote *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944 after the World War II. Williams' first dramatic success brought him recognition as one of the most highly-regarded American playwrights. He won the prestigious New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). The socio-political condition of the contemporary American society is very important for this play. The play refers to the time period during 1930s the time of Great Depression in America,

[...] when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, [...], so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy" (Williams: 1999, 5).

The socio-cultural view in America during the 1930's and the post-war period constitutes the backdrop against which the human predicament is enacted in Williams' work. The play reflects on the condition of the middle-class people in the existing society. During the first half of the twentieth century he depicts a vivid picture of the American society and exposes the vision of an affluent society, which is dreamy and yet selfish, deceitful and fake. Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie*, deals with the conflict between the dream of a small southern family and the harsh realities of life. The Wingfield's yearn for love, marriage, and economic security. The play deals with the theme of frustration, isolation, misery and insecurity in human life, especially in a materialistic society. This research paper analyses the significance of desire for the American Dream and the conflict between illusion and reality, between ideal and reality, between good and evil, or between dream and reality.

At the beginning of the Twentieth century, the economic system of America was dependent on the productive abilities of various industries. During the period of Great Depression country's economic condition faced a very difficult time. The main reason behind this recession was the difference between country's productive capacity and the people's capacity to purchase. So, the economic system crushed, factories were shut down and resulted a large number of unemployment. In this economic recession people from every stratum of society were affected, but the condition of the middle class and the immigrants was worst. They lost their individuality and were looking for their identity. So, a huge number of population from rural areas migrated to North America in search of their identity, job opportunities and material success but only a few of them were able to attain their desired goal because they were mostly exploited by the existing system.

The term American Dream has numerous implications, but basically it suggests that through hard work one can achieve the desired goal to live happy and a prosperous life. This idea is older than the United States of America itself. A large number of people from England came to the new land and established a new country. After the formation of this new land their desire was to live a prosperous life without any social or religious bondage. Therefore, American Dream equates desire for happiness but attaining this dream is not a simple task for all the Americans because here people are discriminated on the basis of monetary power.

Brooks Atkinson describes the play as the "purest work to come from the pen of Tennessee Williams.... Although it is as fragile as the glass toys that the lonely daughter consoles herself with, it has the supple strength of truth." (Donahue: 1964, 21) In 'The Glass Menagerie,' memory plays a very vital role thematically and in terms of the play's presentation. Thematically, we find the detrimental effects of memory in the form of Amanda's living in the past. As far as the play's presentation is concerned, the entire story is told from the memory of Tom, the narrator. He makes it clear that, because the play is memory, certain implications are raised as to the nature of each scene. In 'The Glass Menagerie,' the Wingfield's are the representatives of, "[...] this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused

mass of automatism" (Williams: 1999, 1). Here Tom plays the central character in the play who narrates some past incidents of that period when his family belonged to the agrarian south of America but now they live in an apartment in St. Louis, Missouri. Tennessee Williams compares that apartment with hives and, therefore, the people who live within it are like bees, the working class. Everybody in this situation is obsessed with their own condition, therefore, they try to escape from it. They try to reach their happy days of the past with the help of their memories and desires. And these memories and desires somehow lead them to achieve their American Dream.

Tennessee Williams portrays the real condition of the contemporary American society from the very beginning of the play. The narrator makes it clear that the play has the touch of unreality over reality. He states,

“[...] I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve.  
But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you  
illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in  
the pleasure disguise of illusion” (Williams: 1999, 4).

As the play begins we find Tom the protagonist reminiscence the events before he left his mother and sister in a very troubled situation of the economic depression. While on the other hand, we find Amanda and Laura too recapitulate their past within Tom's memory. In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* some features of American dream are manifested through the characters especially Amanda's desires which truly lead her to the American Dream. Her dream is a traditional one as she always wanted to embody the image of the Southern Belle but in her attempt to fulfil her dream to live a happy married life with her wealthy husband failed as her husband abandoned her long time ago. She is the embodiment of all social norms in the play. She stands for all that normalization means but, paradoxically, she is an outcast. She was not able to follow the code of a complete nuclear family. Even though it was not her fault, she stayed on her own with two children in financial crisis. Her husband left nothing but shame to them. Amanda is struggling being a single mother for her two children as her husband abandoned her in the midst of poverty and responsibility. As she sees her dream dissolving she desperately tries to impose her values upon Tom and Laura and even tries to control their fate. At the end of scene five Laura's extremely massive attitude is depicted where Amanda instructs her daughter that she should be wishing for "Happiness! Good Fortune!" (Williams: 1999, 49). She wants Tom to be a decent man and have a successful career so that he will be able to take care of his family. Hence, Tom started working in a shoe factory to fulfil the needs of his family, but he desires to become a successful poet. Amanda's dream incorporates her desire to see her children prosperous and happy in the existing society. She takes her children as something extraordinary, therefore, ignores their deformities and says "Both my children—they're unusual children! Don't you think I know it? I'm so proud! Happy [...]" (Williams: 1999, 31). Amanda's daughter Laura has physical disability so she has minimal hope of finding a husband, so she dwells in her imaginary world of 'glass menagerie'. She always retreats in her past to escape the present condition. One such instance when Amanda recalls the social position in the Blue Mountain in contrast with the present situation in St. Louis as it gives her a chance to neglect the present scenario. She projects her aspirations on them to fulfil her own desire, sometimes she appears as a controlling power over Tom and Laura. So, she sends her at Rubicam's Business College to make her future secured as a working woman. When she realises that Laura is unable to adjust herself with the speed of the typewriter, thus leaves the institution she becomes worried and says, "What are we going to do, what is going to become of us, what is the future" (Williams: 1999, 12) because she is aware of the fact that society will be very harsh to a girl like Laura who lives in her own world so she needs a financial stability. So she dreams to find a life-partner for her daughter so that she may have a financially secured future as she is well aware of the fact that "Girls that aren't cut out for business careers usually wind up married to some nice man" (Williams: 1999, 17). She becomes so desperate that she even calls several women to subscribe to a glamour magazine. She remembers those incidents to encourage her daughter Laura as she has lost all hopes to get a good gentleman as her husband. Amanda in the later part of the play resides in her memories when she appears in "[...] a girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash" (Williams: 1999: 53). In her youth she used to wear every Sunday to meet the gentlemen. When Tom brings Jim O' Conner as the gentleman caller to his house, Amanda talks and laughs out of sheer joy, like a young girl, wearing girlish clothes. She is willing to change Laura's life and fit her into a society where Amanda was once part of in her youth. She does not want to accept and admit that Laura is different and unable to cope with her disability.

Laura is a central character in *The Glass Menagerie*, she is supposed to be a mature self-confident young woman but she is the simply the opposite. She is shy, introvert, anti-social and weird. All she is interested in is her collection of glass animals and old music records. For Laura, memory is more wistful as she is the symbol of the 'glass animals' because of her tenuous and timid nature. She is afraid of the modern world so she lives with her glass collection. Things which are made of glass are very fragile because a gust of air can destroy it anytime. The cause of her behaviour could be found in her disability that being different affected her so much that it places her to the edge of the society. Laura seems almost invisible for the others. Her invisibility is a part of her inability to live with her disability. She is obsessed with her own disability. Even though Amanda, Tom and Jim assure her several times that her disability is just "a little defect – hardly noticeable, even!" she is not able to cope with her illness and considers herself crippled. (Williams: 1999, 26) She left high school, lost the opportunity to socialize in a business course. Her "inferiority complex" shifts her out of the society. (Williams: 1999, 77) She has no friends, acquaintances and spends most of her time with glass animals where she confides and considers it as her best friends. Jim does not remember her, even though he was speaking with her several times in a not very distant past. Laura recollects about Jim whom she idolised and admired since her childhood days but fails to say anything to him about her desires. So, when Jim O'Connor comes to their apartment, she becomes nervous. For some time, she felt that she is living her dream, but after Jim's revelation about his relationship with another girl, her all hopes and dreams are shattered and to escape from this situation she again drives to her own world of glass animals. Her character is affected and shaped in such a way that she would never be able to fit in the society and change her attitude to herself, become more self-confident and sociable. She will always be different, without self-esteem and confidence. She will never be able to live a life of an ordinary woman and is condemned to stay in a world of her own.

Amanda's effort to assist Laura is rather ineffective and hopeless. Laura is reminded about all the social norms that she can hardly achieve that depresses her immensely. Amanda wants Laura to fit in either the category of a successful secretary, or a happily

married wife. Laura is unable to become any of the two. She is neither able to work nor study within a group of people. All activities in public are stressful for her. Her shyness restricts her to participate in any social events and to have a acquaintance and interaction with other people. Moreover, the strong protection of Amanda creates a greenhouse in which Laura is captivated. Amanda heightens the plight of her daughter, and she herself fluctuates between dream and reality.

In the play, the character of Jim O'Connor shows the true embodiment of the American Dream and the ideology of optimism and progressivism. As Tom says in the first scene that "He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from [...], he is the long -delayed but always expected something that we live for" (Williams: 1999, 5). In this play he is the symbol of hope and desire. He is the high school boy whom Laura admires and loves. He is also the gentleman caller of the play and also desired by Amanda, for her daughter. Jim appears in the play in the sixth scene, but from the very first every member of Wingfield family expects someone to rescue them from the present condition but Jim is like other ordinary Americans. In his school days he was very popular and

"seemed to move in a continual spotlight. He was a star [...] always running or bounding, never just walking. He seemed always at the point of defeating the law of gravity" (Williams: 1999, 50)

However, after graduation his speed reduced but he does not become disappointed and disillusioned. He is ambitious and hard working. He continues his study of engineering at night to improve his condition. Thus, he tries to adjust himself with the scientific development of the modern world. Like the other characters he does not try to escape the reality but to triumph over it. So, once he says to Laura, "I am disappointed but I am not discouraged" (Williams: 1999, 78). Jim has apparently lost his charm and he even admits to Laura that his current situation is not he dreamt of "I hoped...that I would be further...than I am now" (Williams: 1999, 76) He is quite optimistic and the urge to attain the American dream still blazes in his heart. Therefore, he represents the unrealized dream of success which every American tries to reach but a few can attain. Truly he is the embodiment of American dream so Laura loves him from his school days. She desires him to be her husband but because of her physical disability she never expresses her feeling to him. So, when Jim comes to their apartment her desires begin to rejuvenate but after a few moments it again becomes unattainable for Laura as Jim is already engaged. Laura dreamt for happiness, love and sex along with economic security but it turns to nightmare. Laura's encountering Jim had fatal consequences for the whole family. Amanda realized she was not going to achieve her desirable goal in maintaining a protective husband and Laura would stay lonely. Tom did not endure his mother's pressure and left her and his sister in the same way as his father did. Laura realized that she is determined to be in a solitary, exceptional and useless state. Her love for Jim, the only thing she lived for, was destroyed and she stayed alone with her collection of glass menagerie.

Tom Wingfield, the most important character in *The Glass Menagerie*, lives in the world of his own dreams. He is a poet of adventurous nature, dreaming of great things but helpless in the face of his present unsatisfactory situation. He works in a warehouse, though without his heart in the work, to support his deserted mother and crippled sister. Amanda's attitude towards Tom is she thinks one day her son will bring them financial security and happiness by working sincerely in the shoe company. So, she ignores the fact that Tom dislikes his job and wants to get rid of this boring lifestyle. Rather she always gave him advice that "Try and you will succeed!" (Williams: 1999, 31) and to 'Rise and Shine'. All these highlights the basic features of the American Dream. That's the reason why she always reminds Tom that his job is very much important for the security of their family. Amanda fears that her son, too, is going to develop on the line of his father. She often assumes a dominating attitude towards him, rebuking him for his carelessness: "You are the only young man that I know of who ignores the fact that future becomes the present, the present the past and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it." (Williams: 1999, Scene V) She calls Tom an indecisive dreamer who "live in a dream; you manufacture illusions" (Williams: 1999, 303), and who is also selfish. She even warns him against drinking, smoking and watching movies and also says him that he has no right to jeopardize their security by leaving them on the crisis. Even she advises her son to reduce his smoking habit, so that he can save some money for a night course, which will help him to improve his career. While she calls Tom 'a manufacturer of illusions', she has her own dreams and illusions. At one moment she is grand and dominating, at the next moment she laughs like a child and talks like a fool. She is in one kind of mood in the presence of Tom, in another in his absence. Their fights take many different forms, Amanda and Tom major conflict is their inability to reconcile their different dreams for the future. Even though she seems to help her children, her discipline rather depresses them. She is not able to accept the truth that she does not belong to the society anymore and her children are not able to fulfil or at least follow her dreams. She wants a successful career and a lot of money for her son and totally ignores his dreams, wishes and sacrifices he brings to take care of the family. She criticizes every deed he does. Trying to govern his life, she bullies him with her rules and recommendations. She never praises anything that he does. She considers him to be selfish and ignorant while he takes care of the whole family.

Tom feels confined from being stuck in an uninspiring job, cramped into a small apartment with his family, and unable to see the world or have adventures. Amanda is similarly confined to her thoughts of the past, and Laura traps herself in a world of glass animals. Escape can be categorised in two ways as escape from reality into an alternate world, or escape from a trap or confinement. In 'The Glass Menagerie,' dreams of the future are the source of conflict, primarily when one character's dream doesn't match up with another's. While Amanda wants her children to fulfil the classic American Dream of hard work and success, Tom has dreams of being a writer, and Laura is too shy to even leave the house. This also raises the issue of parents imposing their dreams on their children, rather than allowing them to figure out themselves just what it is that they want. *The Glass Menagerie* serves as a direct attack on the American Dream, as Amanda's expectations for the marriage and success of her children are impossible.

The dream of Tom also opposes the materialistic notion of American dream. He does not like to work at the shoe factory; for he thinks that there he has lost his individuality by doing a boring job and the existential problems concerning money and family. He

dreams of a successful poetic career. According to Tom, to succeed in such kind of dream what is needed is the desire for adventure, because it will help him to gather experience and knowledge. Adventure does not need much hard work too. For that Tom takes the help of movies, magic shows, alcohol etc. He is a solitary young man spending his free time in the cinema, watching movies to compensate for the missing adventures and interesting events in his life. "People go to the movies instead of moving!" (Williams: 1999, 61) For him these are also the means of escape from the real world to a world of fantasy and desire. So, he is very much anti-capitalistic in his attitude. In 'The Glass Menagerie' rainbows are used to symbolise hope and each mention of rainbows in the play is associated with a hopeful situation. When Tom talks about his rainbow-coloured scarf that he got at the magic show, he talks about how it changed a bowl of goldfish into flying canaries. Just like the canaries, Tom wishes to fly away and escape from his imprisonment. He is trying to change his life but he is trapped in his duties towards his family. He realizes that he has to choose between the responsibility to his family and authentic life that would be his own. He wants to change everything and escape but he is paralyzed in everyday routine and duties. At the end when Tom looks at 'pieces of coloured glass, like bits of a shattered rainbow,' he remembers his sister and hopes that he 'can blow [her] candles out' (Williams: 1999, 137). Ironically, though the rainbows seemed to be positive signs, they all end in disappointment. Therefore, except Jim, the American Dream in *The Glass Menagerie* is just like a myth for the other characters. Tom, in the end, is compelled to follow the footsteps of his father, who out of frustration, deserted his wife and helpless children, leaving them to fight out and solve the problems themselves. Tom was so depressed with his present situation that he deserted his family like his father. Tom presents himself to be "a fifth character [...] who does not appear except in this larger – than-life-size photograph over the mantle. [...] left us a long time ago" (Williams: 1999, 5). The whole Wingfield family suffered for this alcoholic man because he abandoned them in the midst of misfortune. As he had an overwhelming influence on the other Wingfield characters so Amanda is concerned and insecure about her son's alcoholic nature and his love for adventure. For Laura, her father's memoirs are present in the old victrola, which takes her into her own world which is beyond the real world.

Tom is so much overwhelmed by his father's memory that he escapes from the imprisoned life of the Wingfield apartment with the desire to reach the 'South Sea Island' of adventure. He leaves his mother and sister in a critical situation and follows his father's path and goes with the Merchant Marine Naval Company. "He, too, represents the conflict between dream and reality, and under the pressure of this conflict he seeks escape. After he escapes those past memories haunt him. His last dream to escape from his burdensome situation, too, comes in conflict with the reality of his love for his sister, Laura: "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be." (Williams: 1999, Scene VII) We sympathize with him and admire his patience and mature understanding. He knows what his sister is crippled and peculiar, and knows his mother, too. That's the reason why he comes back after a decade from his voyage and makes a very detailed narration of the incidents which took place. The young Tom whom we encounter in the play is the embodiment of older Tom's consciousness. Thus, memory for him is not a kind of escape, but a means to retreat to the past. The more he tries to escape; he is more entrapped in them. At the end of the play, Tom says,

"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! [...]" (Williams: 1999, 97)

Thus, Tom's guiltiness haunts him during his life of adventure and also entraps him in his memories.

In this play almost all the characters are dreamers, including Jim who belongs to the gross, vulgar real world. He also dreams to rise higher from the base. Even Amanda desires to reach the American dream, but like other Americans she is unable to attain it. Amanda and Laura are born only to dream and are dejected, to fight and be defeated, by the harsh realities. Amanda's dream "has been smashed by reality but has not been forgotten." (Tischler: 1988, 98) She had the desire to live a happy wealthy life, but what she actually does is,

"Wished for on the moon. Success and happiness for my precious children! I wish for that whenever there is moon, and whenever there isn't, I wish for it, too" (Williams: 1999, 40)

The play achieves universality and is not merely confined into the author's past but depicts the condition of the middle-class people in the American society during a period of transformation and conflict. Materialism, selfishness, and exploitation rampant in society frustrate the dreams of the individual. Then there is clash based on personal character-traits, caste and class prejudices, political demagoguery and cruelty. At personal or individual level, the character's temperamental fixations and psychological abnormalities operate as cruel reality against his own dreams. These realities may crash upon one's dreams unexpectedly and thwart their fulfilment, destroying the character along with his dreams.

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