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## THE CONFLICT BETWEEN REALITY AND ILLUSION IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*

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**Abstract:** Tennessee Williams is considered to be one of the three most renowned American dramatists of the twentieth century as well as one of the most distinguished playwrights in the history of American drama. Being a Southern writer, his plays are undoubtedly dominated by his personal experience and social realities of the modern materialistic world which established new norms and values. His plays are metaphorical illustrations of the clash between the Old and the New South, and most of them depict the traditional themes of Old South versus New South, agricultural versus urban society, and aristocrats versus nouveau riche. The new materialistic and utilitarian age evaluated people based on their resourcefulness, the ability to sell themselves profitably and their financial success, which intensified the feeling of society as threat, anxiety, insecurity and alienation, especially after the World War II. Lacking characteristics necessary for success, Williams' characters are the castaways of society, trapped by circumstances and unadapted to life in the contemporary world. This accounts for another major theme of his plays – the conflict between reality and the world of illusion into which his characters retreat in a futile attempt to escape from the harsh reality of life. The aim of this paper is to analyze the theme of conflict between reality and illusion in Williams' masterpiece *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams depicts characters who, having failed to adjust, attempt to escape cruel reality and suffering by seeking shelter and solace in their illusory worlds. These illusory worlds take a variety of forms. They retreat into romanticized past or into the artificial world of glass figurines, or indulge in art and frivolous pleasures. However, as it appears, the world of illusion can only offer transient comfort and protection, as clashes with implacable reality of the contemporary American society are inevitable.

**Keywords:** reality, illusion, conflict, misfits, dysfunctional family.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams is regarded as one of the greatest American playwrights of the 20th century, alongside Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. He owed his celebrity status to a favorable reception by both theatre critics and audience, and his reputation and fame could be attributed to Williams's two masterpieces, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as well as to 60 other plays including *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Orpheus Descending*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *Night of the Iguana*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1955. Bringing the greatest talent of the post-war generation to the theatre, since the mid-1940s he "entered the imagination of American audience and remained an authority figure in theater, film and popular culture as well" (Subashi & Veliaj, 2015, p. 76).

Williams' first works appeared on Broadway in the 1940s, and his first works were mostly political plays dominated by social realities of the 1930s. The World War II intensified Williams' feeling of "society as threat" (Bigsby, 1984, p. 2). The new materialistic age established new norms and values that a considerable number of his characters fail to conform to. His heroes and heroines are fugitives trapped by circumstances and the harsh pragmatics of the modern world (Bigsby, 1984, p. 28; Falk, 1961, p. 164). They are misfits born out of their time, ill-equipped to survive and adjust to the new materialism. They are romantics living in an unromantic world, and they are often destroyed because they offer love in a world characterized by materialism and sterility (Bigsby, 1984, pp. 4-5). A recurring theme in Williams' plays is a constant conflict which torments and ultimately shatters his characters. This conflict takes a variety of forms – the conflict between spiritual and material, reality and illusion, death and desire, and tradition, values and moral standards of the Old South contrasted with the norms of the materialistic society of the New South. Being out of place in the contemporary world, Williams' lonely misfits create illusory worlds into which they retreat seeking refuge and solace. The illusions become their strategy of defense as they provide them the support with which they can keep themselves alive in this world (Aldalabeeth, 2016, p. 145). In almost all of Williams' plays protagonists cherish an image of an ideal world, but are forced to live in a world of a very different character. Consequently, the conflict between reality and illusion becomes the prevailing conflict and a recurring theme of Williams' major plays among which *The Glass Menagerie* is regarded as one of the finest American plays of the 20th century.

### 2. SOCIO-HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Williams' literary work was deeply affected by the social and economic condition and therefore the socio-historical background of his plays is essential to understanding of his plays in general and the recurring theme of reality versus

illusion in particular. Like the majority of Williams' plays, *The Glass Menagerie* is placed in the Southern setting, and the personal and social dilemmas of the principal characters are clearly linked to the South and dominated by social realities, atmosphere and spirit of the 1930s.

#### **The Old South and the New South**

Tennessee Williams and his plays are significantly attached to the heritage of the American South, as many of his writings are inspired by his early childhood memories in the Mississippi Delta. As a result, his major plays, *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, describe the disintegration of the American South and decline of the traditional Southern families. Williams' plays are suffused with references to the South, where the Old South is revived through memories of his Southern characters. Being desperate about the decline in their social status and wealth, they seek consolation in their memories of the past glory "by retreating into a distant past of dead chivalry and non-existent gentlemen callers" (Castellitto, 2010, p. 25). His dramas are metaphorical illustrations of the clash between the Old and the New South. The Old South, which is typically idealized and longed for, breeds fragile, misunderstood and misplaced characters, who feel out of place in the modern materialistic world of the New South (Falk, 1961). They struggle to survive in a society that has no understanding for their upbringing, value system and manners, and the aristocratic South, which is only preserved in their memory, serves as a kind of refuge from daily realities of the urban, materialistic world they now inhabit.

#### **America in the 1930s and 1940s**

In the opening monologue of *The Glass Menagerie* Tom, as the narrator, turns back time and takes the audience to "that quaint period, the thirties", when "there was shouting and confusion and labour disturbances" (Williams, 1959, p. 130). In Scene 5, he says that "here there was only hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars, and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows" (p. 160). His mention of Guernica reveals that he is taking the audience back to the last years of the 1930s during the Great Depression.

The Great Depression was the most devastating economic recession in American history caused by the stock market crash of 1929, which lasted for a decade. With national unemployment reaching well into double digits for over a decade, productivity levels falling by half, and millions of Americans deprived of their livelihood, the country and the nation experienced severe psychological, political, social, and cultural consequences. The crisis encouraged political reform and reaction, renewed labor activism, spurred migration, and challenged family structures and gender roles (Gellman & Rung, 2018). The events of Great Depression reached all Americans regardless of wealth, social standing, race, or education, while the government was ineffectively trying to cope with the crisis. It was undoubtedly a decade of contradictions. For majority of Americans 1930s were anxious years, while for a lucky few it offered an abundance of luxuries. The environment was changing as skyscrapers rose in the middle of the falling economy, the new supermarkets were gradually replacing the older grocery stores, and the first modern highways began to spread across the landscape. These statements of modernity constituted "a symbol of hope that in the near future the economy and social issues would be smoothed and would function as they were supposed to" (Young & Young, 2007, pp. xxiii-xxv). In these circumstances the feeling of alienation prevailed, originating from the discontents which the new materialism brought forth, as well as nostalgia for an older America, which was more in touch with the reality of human needs (Bigsby, 1984, p. 2).

As a result, Americans sought diversions such as sports, board games and the cinema, as a kind of refuge to alleviate the situation (Young & Young, 2007, p. xxv). The whole nation seemed to have retreated into the world of fantasies and illusions in an attempt to suppress the hard reality through frequenting bars and dance halls and enjoying alcohol consumption, as does Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, or through treasuring memories of the glorious past and clinging to them desperately, as does Amanda. According to Fromm (1947), this age was characterized by a growing marketing orientation and the emergence of a new type of market – the personality market – where all people pursuing all possible occupations were offered for sale, and their success largely depended on how well they could sell themselves. The personality factor played a decisive role and their success depended on how nice "package" they were, whether they were enthusiastic, sound, ambitious, and reliable, whether they had a good family background and knew the right people. If they failed to sell themselves profitably, due to a lack of the required characteristics, they were worthless (pp. 69-72). The idea of a better life was equated with material prosperity, and there seemed to be no place for ageing, physically handicapped or mentally fragile people (Krasner, 2006, p. 29). Based on this, it is not difficult to conclude that the Wingfields in *The Glass Menagerie* had no chance to succeed in the contemporary world, as they lacked the characteristics recognized and valued on the personality market.

### **3. REALITY AND RETREAT INTO ILLUSIONS IN *THE GLASS MENAGERIE***

Presented as a memory play, *The Glass Menagerie* complements Williams' lifelong fascination with reality and illusion, and shows his views on the subjectivity of memory (Maiti, 2017, p. 1). Through the recollection of Tom's

memories, we get an insight into the life of the Wingfield family in the pre-war depression era: Amanda Wingfield, his mother, a faded belle from a once-prominent Southern family who has suffered a reversal of economic and social fortune, and desperately clings to her romanticized past; Laura Wingfield, his sister, a young fragile woman whose leg impairment has caused her social anxiety and withdrawal from the outer world into the artificial world of her glass ornaments; and Tom, a young man burdened with familial obligations at the cost of his dreams. They live in a small gloomy apartment trying to make ends meet, as Tom's father abandoned the family a long time ago. All the characters deliberately try to escape from actualities of life and "live in a Utopia of their own" (Bhawar, 2020, p. 2167).

The theme of the conflict between reality and illusion is introduced early on in the play when Tom, as the narrator, addresses the audience and announces a "memory play" (Williams, 1959, p. 131). Since the whole story is based on his memories of events which took place several years earlier, it could be altered to a certain degree and unrealistic due to the time distance as well as the narrator's subjective perception of the events and characters in the play. Tom becomes the filter through which we see the events and the characters involved, so these are likely to represent a mixture of reality and illusion.

The world of illusion provides a retreat from reality and the need for escape is implicit in the description of the setting itself. The suffocating apartment complex and especially the symbolic use of the fire escape foreshadow the atmosphere of a trap from which one must break free (Biggsby, 1984, p. 42). All the characters feel trapped, in one way or another and the survival tactics they practice is to retreat from reality which oppresses them into a timeless world of their own making (Corrigan, 1997, p. 223). Amanda lives mostly in the past, Tom indulges in poetry, novels and frivolous pleasures, while Laura takes refuge in the world of her glass figurines.

Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930/1962), which highlights the fundamental tensions between the civilization and the individual, may provide the basis for the explanation of such behavior. According to Freud, the purpose and intention of human beings is the achievement of happiness. This endeavor has two sides, a positive one, aiming at experiencing the strong feelings of pleasure, and a negative one, aiming at avoidance of pain and unpleasure. The negative endeavor may take a variety of forms or methods. One of them is a voluntary isolation, by means of which individuals can defend themselves from the dreaded reality of the external world by turning away from it (pp. 23-24). This could explain Laura's retreat and isolation in the world of her glass figurines, and Amanda's occasional slips into the glorious past. Another method of avoiding unpleasure is through substitutive satisfactions which diminish it. These satisfactions can be offered by art, because of the joy experienced by an artist when creating (p. 22). The retreat into art as well as the use of intoxicating substances, which Freud mentions as another method (p. 25), can be easily recognized as methods practiced by Tom.

All of these methods have one thing in common. By practicing them, human beings avoid facing the harsh reality, and create their own worlds of illusion instead. To examine how this is reflected in the characters of *The Glass Menagerie*, a closer look is to be taken into their private worlds as well as their individual inner conflicts between reality and illusion.

#### **4. AMANDA WINGFIELD: A ROMANTIC FIGHTER**

Amanda Wingfield is an ageing woman "of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place" (Williams, 1959, p. 124). As compensation for the blow to her ego from her husband's rejection (Single, 1999, p. 76), and in order to relieve the tensions of life, she retreats into an illusory world inhabited by her younger self. Her most dominant illusory world is the Blue Mountain plantation where she once lived a comfortable and luxurious life of a respectable Southern belle courted by prominent gentlemen callers. But these nostalgic and possibly fabricated stories of her glorious past have been told so often to her children that they are no longer an illusion and instead have become her reality. In her desperate attempts to embellish reality, where she is an abandoned wife living a mediocre life, she has been trapped by the past and tradition in which she was brought up and, as a result, has become "oblivious to changes in society" (Bhawar, 2020, p. 2167). The illusion of the golden days of her youth that she cherishes provides her with only temporary solace, as the blows of reality are ruthless.

Another illusion is rooted in her refusal to admit that her daughter is far from being a vivacious, attractive girl, who could have many gentlemen callers. She insists on referring to Laura's physical condition as a hardly noticeable defect (Williams, 1959, p. 142), not allowing the word 'crippled' to be used. Her self-deception reaches its climax when, while ignoring Laura's peculiarity, she decides that marrying her off to a promising young man would be the best possible way to secure her daughter's future.

Amanda is, however, a complex character, being a curious combination of exaggerated gentility on one hand and annoying practicality on the other (Da Ponte, 1997, p. 264). Although she is horrified by Tom's attitude that "man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter", and she advocates the idea that Christian adults should want "superior things of the mind and the spirit" (Williams, 1959, p. 155), throughout the play she proves more than once that she herself

is a fighter, driven by the survival instinct. Despite frequent withdrawal into her illusory world, she is trying to keep her family together and provide for it by taking up jobs which must be humiliating for a former Southern belle. Her constant criticism of Tom's habits partly arises from her fear that he could lose his job due to his inefficiency at work (p. 146), and shows that she is aware of the reality of the depression era, people losing their jobs and companies closing down. What she desires most eagerly is security that the Depression has destroyed (Bigsby, 1997, p. 33). Obviously "she is not entirely blind to the situation" (Falk, 1961, p. 72). When she is not absorbed in memories, Amanda appears to a practical woman, prepared to cope with the crisis and lead her family through difficult times. She is a "delusional romantic turned realist" (Bhawar, 2020, p. 2167). However, the fact that her wishes are based on her own value system and that "denial of reality is a necessary condition of life to Amanda" (Bigsby, 1984, p. 42), ultimately causes the family ties to break. While obsessed with her daughter's future, she is undoubtedly prepared to victimize her son by assigning him the role of a substitute parent who is expected to make sacrifices for the sake of hers and his sister's well-being. Showing a complete lack of empathy, she demands that Tom should think about Laura's future first, while his own needs and dreams remain on hold. As she no longer has control over her surroundings and position in society, she attempts to maintain her image through the lives of her children. "So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? [...] Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling? [...] What is there left but dependency all *our* lives?" (Williams, 1959, p. 140; emphasis added), she asks Laura upon discovery that her daughter has for a while been pretending to attend the business college. This, along with her false hope that Tom would solve all their problems by finding a husband for Laura, makes it clear that she is trying to recreate her own life through the lives of her children. However, her children are not able to live up to her unrealistic expectations fuelled by her illusions, self-deception and willful blindness, and her family ultimately disintegrates.

#### **5. LAURA WINGFIELD: A UNICORN IN THE MODERN WORLD**

Laura Wingfield is a fragile and painfully shy young woman, "brutalized by life in the industrialized, overpopulated, depersonalized cities of the Western world" (Cardullo, 2007, p. 65). Her physical disability and resulting diffidence and feeling of embarrassment have had a powerful effect on her psyche and relationships with other people. On the basis of Freud's observations as to the roots of unhappiness (1962, p. 23), in Laura's case it may be considered to stem from the weakness of her body as the primary source. The secondary source of her unhappiness, which is evidently closely related to her physical disability, is her relationships to other people. In such circumstances, as Freud remarks, reality is regarded as the sole enemy and the source of all suffering, and all relations with it must be broken off. Alternatively, one can attempt to recreate the world by building up another world in one's head, the illusory world which is free from the most unbearable features of reality. This path to happiness, however, leads nowhere, and nothing can be obtained by following it because reality is too strong (p. 28). Similarly, Laura seeks shelter from harsh pragmatics of the contemporary world in which "individuals were alienated not only because of race, but owing to discrimination of gender, social class, physical handicap, age, or mental state" (Krasner, 2006, p. 29) by inhabiting the world of her "little glass ornaments and phonograph records which are her escape" (Falk, 1961, p. 76).

Williams utilizes powerful symbolism to illustrate Laura's peculiarity, uniqueness and disconnection from the real world. Instead of attending Rubicam's Business College, which would enhance her career prospects, she spends time in the park or visiting the Jewel Box, "the big glass-house where they raise the tropical flowers" (Williams, 1959, p. 139). The image of the Jewel Box implies a world out of touch with reality, as tropical flowers, which cannot be found in Laura's immediate surroundings in St. Louis, are grown there. Moreover, its name can be assumed to imply Laura's isolation and being trapped, as if in a box. She also visits the art museum and "the birdhouses at the Zoo. I visited penguins every day!" (p. 139). Both places offer her a perfect escape from reality, the former being a timeless world of art, and the latter providing a refuge for rare species. She feels perfectly in tune with all these places, as she herself is also strange and out of place in the real world. Moreover, all of them are enclosed spaces, implying her unwillingness and inability to step out of them, and step into the real world. The image of blue roses, as Jim nicknamed her in high school, is another symbol of Laura's peculiarity. If red roses are the traditional symbol of romantic love, then blue roses symbolize Laura's lack of passion (Single, 1999, p. 79), and her desire to transcend this world (Cardullo, 2007, p. 82). Just as blue roses appear peculiar among roses of more common colors, Laura appears to be a misfit in the real world. She has become so withdrawn from the real world that she is, "like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf" (Williams, 1959, p. 124). Suffering emotionally due to her physical disability, she desperately seeks retreat by escaping to the world of her glass animals. Quite significantly, her favorite figurine is the glass unicorn, an animal non-existent in the real world, which undoubtedly functions as the most powerful "symbol of Laura, who is also a delicate translucent being, out of place in the contemporary world" (Falk, 1961, p. 78). However, the unicorn is, despite its abnormality,

well accepted by the other members of her collection. As she points out to Jim, “he stays on a shelf with some horses that don’t have horns and all of them seem to get along nicely together” (Williams, 1959, p. 196), implying that unique and strange characters, as she is, can only be accepted and treated with empathy in a non-existent, imaginary world. Therefore her collection seems to offer her a more perfect world, her illusory sanctuary.

Reality and illusion intersect in the dreamlike scene of Jim and Laura sitting in the candlelight. Her shyness gradually disappears as Jim, who is the embodiment of reality and “symbolizes the outside world” (Aldalabeeth, 2016, p. 147), tries to build up Laura’s self-confidence and instill enthusiasm in her by pointing out her uniqueness and beauty. He is so different from her that “he appears to be the knight in a shining armor, which is yet another illusion” (Bhawar, 2020, p. 2168). The incident with the glass unicorn is a clear sign that neither an ordinary man, identifying himself with the utilitarian world of progress, can comprehend her illusions and fragility, nor can Laura survive and thrive in the unimaginative business-oriented world. In what is probably the most realistic moment of Laura’s life, Jim accidentally breaks the unicorn and, symbolically, Laura as well. “Now it is just like all the other horses” (Williams, 1959, p. 198), Laura observes and gives the hornless unicorn to Jim as a souvenir, possibly implying that the unicorn, having lost its uniqueness, no longer symbolizes her but Jim, who is one of the common people. For a short while, she leaves the protection of her illusory world and timidly steps into the world of reality, only to be hurt by it at discovery that she has misperceived Jim’s intentions, as he is already engaged to be married. Her faint hopes are instantly shattered and her heart is broken. She gives Jim the broken unicorn, which can be perceived to symbolize her broken heart, and “the holy candles on the altar of [her] face” are accordingly “snuffed out” (p. 202).

At the end of the play Laura blows out the candles that Jim has brought to their encounter as if in recognition that no one will ever be gentle enough again to perceive her inner beauty and appreciate her love for beauty in a world ruled by science and technology instead of heart and soul (Cardullo, 2007, p. 74). Her withdrawal into the world of illusion is voluntary and remains her own choice, as she resists conforming to the role that society prescribes for women.

#### **6. TOM WINGFIELD: A PARENTIFIED CHILD**

As the play opens, Tom, as the narrator who has tricks in his pockets, promises to give us “truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (Williams, 1959, p. 130). This foreshadows the conflict between reality and illusion as the major theme in play, and implies that what we are about to witness is “a projection of Tom’s consciousness” (Single, 1999, p. 72) rather than a record of what actually happened. The story of his family during the Great Depression is based on Tom’s perception of the past and his recollections, which are by nature subjective as memory is prone to distortions, and therefore the events and the characters involved are likely to represent a mixture of reality and illusion.

Through the characters of Amanda, Laura and Tom, Williams reveals the psychological underpinnings of a dysfunctional family (Single, 1999, p. 74). Within the dynamics of the Wingfield household, all its members have assumed certain roles that consist of the “rejected parent”, the “identified patient”, and the “parentified child” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1985, pp. 74, 330, 333). While Amanda is the “rejected parent”, having been abandoned by her husband, and Laura is the “identified patient”, physically and emotionally crippled, Tom has been assigned the role of the “parentified child”. He is forced to fill the void left by his absent father and take on his responsibilities, while pushing his own needs and dreams to the background. This is a clear example of parentification, a phenomenon that occurs in family life, consisting of a reversal of roles between the child and their parent or parents (Böszörményi-Nagy & Spark, 1973) in which the children demote their own needs in order to take care of the instrumental or psychological needs of the family members, usually the parents (Schier, 2012, as cited in Chojnacka, 2020, p. 85), mostly in order to maintain the balance of the family. With his father having abandoned the family sixteen years ago, we can only assume that Tom was forced to take on the role of a substitute parent much earlier than we see him in as the character in the play, and that he was compelled to grow up and mature quickly, without proper childhood and youth.

The reversal of the natural order of the family roles indisputably affects the child’s development and consequently marks the course of the individual’s adult life. First, it leads to loneliness and social isolation, and later on, parentified people usually face problems in their adulthood. Their struggle with family experiences often means leaving the house, both mentally and physically. This can be considered as “quitting the stage of loneliness” and reaching out to others, to the outer world, in search of help, their own self, and their own path in life (Chojnacka, 2020, p. 97). Parentified people feel trapped by familial responsibilities and the household becomes their ‘prison’. The feeling of Tom having been “trapped by circumstances” (Falk, 1961, p. 118) is established early in the play. The Wingfield family system is “a nailed-up coffin” (Williams, 1959, p. 150), and the very description of the Wingfield’s small suffocating apartment creates a claustrophobic feeling. But for Tom, the claustrophobia is not

only physical. He is a young man in his early twenties, who suppresses his poetic nature and longing for adventure, and performs a dull, commonplace job in a warehouse, “[making] a slave of himself” (p. 145), in order to earn sixty-five dollars a month and support his mother and sister. Given the fact that his only friend, though not a particularly close one is his colleague Jim, it is evident that Tom’s experience of the family role-reversal has made him socially isolated. This frustrating situation is worsened by his mother’s incessant nagging, criticizing and interfering with anything he does, while at the same time relying on him for companionship and support. Despite the sacrifices Tom makes, he is constantly being denied his maturity and independence. Therefore, it can be easily decided that the claustrophobia tormenting Tom is not only physical but also psychological (Single, 1999, p. 80), originating from the relationship with his domineering mother and the heavy burden of responsibility.

Tom develops his own system of escape into the world of illusion as a method of emotionally detaching himself from his family and coping with unbearable reality. Instead of establishing social contacts, he secludes himself to read novels and write poetry. But, according to Freud, relief and satisfaction induced by art can only “bring about a transient withdrawal from the pressure of vital needs and it is not strong enough to make us forget the real misery” (Freud, 1962, p. 28). He also frequents the cinema where, through adventures of fictional characters, he learns how exciting and full of promises a life can be, and he goes to bars, probably attempting to drown his disillusionment and despair in excessive drinking. However, relief brought by these methods is only temporary, and Tom, being a potentially creative character, feels “caught in a conventional and materialistic world” (Bhavar, 2020, p. 2168), and trapped by inappropriate familial responsibilities.

Ultimately, not only emotional but also physical detachment from the Wingfield household is necessary for Tom to create his own identity and fulfill his dreams. The Union of Merchant Seamen seems to offer a perfect refuge, suggesting wide open spaces and a breath of fresh air, which is in contrast to suffocating atmosphere of the Wingfield’s apartment (Single 80). He chooses a new path in his life, “that of becoming a member of the human community” (Freud, 1962, p. 24), and he becomes “part of the larger world that must find a common salvation in action” (Grassner, 1997, p. 240).

However, Tom has just replaced his commonplace job in the warehouse with the one, equally prosaic, at the sea, while his poetic nature is still suppressed and his dreams have not been fulfilled. Moreover, it is evident that he has only managed to escape physically. The past continues to exert a pull on him and he revisits it, as the narrator, burdened by guilt because his freedom has been purchased at the price of abandoning his helpless sister (Bigsby, 1997, p. 37). He returns, in his memory, to the bleak world of the Wingfield’s apartment, apparently in a desperate attempt to justify his actions and rid himself of the pain and guilt which torment him. While recreating the past, he becomes absorbed in it and the present becomes less significant. The real world of the Merchant Marine is pushed aside, and memories of his family, which he once deserted, now constitute his world of illusion in which he is trapped. Therefore “his escape is incomplete” (Corrigan, 1997, p. 222). His world of illusion is lit by Laura’s candles that are constantly burning in his mind. As she in the end blows the candles out, we can only hope that this will set him free and that he will embrace the real world in which he now lives.

## 7. CONCLUSION

One of Tennessee Williams’ major plays, *The Glass Menagerie*, is dominated by social realities of the 1930s, the period of economic depression and the feeling of anxiety, insecurity and alienation. This critique of modern society and accepted social values is a story of hardships and disintegration of a family poorly equipped to adjust to harsh realities of the contemporary world, which shows no sympathy for delicate, fragile, romantic, ageing or physically weak people. The Wingfields are misfits in the modern, materialistic and highly competitive world which evaluates people on the basis of their material success. Threatened by reality, which is the source of all their suffering, they devise their own methods of self-protection. They create their own illusory worlds into which they retreat in an attempt to avoid disappointment and despair. These illusory worlds, however, can only offer a temporary retreat and solace. They can neither help them withstand the blows of ruthless reality nor bring true happiness and fulfillment. The illusions which sustain them also isolate them and push them even further to the margins of society. *The Glass Menagerie* thus highlights the dangers of avoiding facing and accepting reality, and escapism and withdrawal into the world of illusion world as a growing aspect of the human condition in modern society.

However, there is a faint ray of hope at the end of play. Although Laura blows out her candles in the last scene, as we observe Amanda comforting her daughter, it appears that mother and daughter have finally established a more meaningful relationship. The extinguishing of candles could be interpreted not as a symbol of an everlasting darkness which has descended on them but as the new beginning of their life in which comfort and happiness will be sought in relationships with other human beings and not in deficient and fragile illusory worlds.

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