

# The Main Characters' Dilemmas in Tennessee Williams' "The Glass Menagerie"

Fuhua Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning 116028, China

## Abstract

The present paper is an analysis of the respective dilemmas of the three main characters Amanda, Tom and Laura in Tennessee Williams' play "The Glass Menagerie", with Amanda keeping wandering between the present and the past, Tom the present and the future and Laura the real world and the world of fantasy. The conclusion is that Amanda cannot get back to the past she once experienced; Tom keeps thinking about "the present" when he reaches "the future" he once imagined; Laura totally gives up the real world and integrates herself into the animal world of fantasy she once created.

## Keywords

dilemmas, Amanda, Tom, Laura, The Glass Menagerie.

## 1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams' play "The Glass Menagerie" is unfolded from the angle of the narrator Tom recalling the past days cohabiting with his mother Amanda and his elder sister Laura with the absence of his father who has mercilessly deserted the family. The three main characters are in constant self-conflict internally, facing and handling the brutality of the real world on the one hand and dreaming of an idealized world of fantasy on the other. All the three dreamers strive to escape from the harsh reality they are in by indulging themselves in the idealized fantasy world they have experienced, imagined or created. The present paper is to try to explore the dilemma the three main characters are in. By analyzing their wandering between reality of secular needs for survival and fantasy of spiritual needs for inner nourishment, the paper enhances readers' appreciation of the three main characters.

## 2. Body

### 2.1. Amanda's Dilemma: Wandering between the Present and the Past

Deserted by her husband, Amanda at present is a single mother of two children. Once a belle leading a life of a typical southern aristocrat, she now must struggle to survive during the economic depression. In reality, Amanda tries every means to keep the family running. She also shows her very concern about her daughter's marriage and hopes that her Laura can get married to an ideal man. To a large extent, Amanda is a practitioner, accepting reality as it is and striving to forge ahead with his son and daughter.

A representative of the type of people committed to the past glories or the good old days, Amanda lives in the present but trapped in the past. She relies on the past achievements to get the pride, self-appreciation and satisfaction she needs to cope with the harsh reality. For Amanda, the past happiness is too overwhelming for her to forget. Her happiness for the present and the coming years leans heavily on the past. For example, Amanda may mention the seventeen gentlemen she received in her young days whenever possible. Amanda did enjoy the opportunity to choose a decent husband of high economic and social status, but she made her life choice out of love and intuition. Amanda appreciates her husband's charming looks and temperaments without taking into consideration his humble economic and social background.

Therefore, her refusal to choose to marry a wealthy man or a man with power shows her reluctance to yield to secular needs. In other words, Amanda pays more attention to her own feelings and spiritual things such as glory and pride than to material comforts.

"Nostalgia" is the key word to describe Amanda who manages to keep her mental balance in reality by keeping looking back upon the climax of her young days. Amanda is in a dilemma in the real world. On the one hand, for her life must be continued without her husband. She must manage the family and educate her two adult children. That is, she must look forward. On the other, her real life lies in the past fantasy world from which she can get the true satisfaction she needs. That is, she must look backward. The trick here is that Amanda can by no means get back to the glorious past. Instead, the past glory only gets farther and farther away from her as time goes by. For Amanda, the rest of her life all revolves around the prime period in the early life stage, dooming her a "failure" in reality.

## **2.2. Tom's Dilemma: Wandering between the Present and the Future**

After the leaving of his father, Tom has become the backbone, taking responsibility for supporting the family. He must work in a shoe factory to make a living, doing the job he does not like. That is the harsh reality for Tom. What is noticeable is that Tom often indulges himself in the cinema, enjoying his own "adventure" all night there. But Tom has his ideal to pursue. He is dreaming of becoming a poet one day. Sometimes he cannot help desiring to follow in his father's footsteps---evading the family responsibilities and running away from home for good. He is also dreaming of becoming a sailor on a merchant marine ship. At the end of the play, Tom does say goodbye to his mother and elder sister and start his exploratory tour.

Despite his escaping from home, Tom is forever stuck in an awkward dilemma. On the one hand, he collects his courage to leave home and decides to stop caring for his elder sister. He asks Laura to blow out the candles in her room, leaving his sister in total darkness. But on the other hand, Tom is never totally freed from his concern for his family. He cannot help keeping thinking about his fragile crippled sister. On the way of realizing his dreams one by one, different from his father, Tom is not able to live life to the fullest. Tom used to wander between the present and the future, but once he reaches "the future" he desires, he cannot help looking back upon "the present" which for him has become "the past".

## **2.3. Laura's Dilemma: Wandering between the Real World and the World of Fantasy**

The beautiful, pure Laura develops very low self-esteem about herself because of her handicap. Amanda as a mother comforts her crippled daughter by defining her handicap as "a little defect hardly noticeable".[1] But Laura still lacks the very confidence to get along with outsiders. Therefore, Laura is mentally handicapped more than physically disadvantaged. In reality, after dropping out of school, she lives in seclusion. In her spare time, she would listen to the old records left by her father and indulge herself in the fantasy world of a collection of glass animals. "Laura's life has been split into two parts. On the one hand, she has to struggle in the real world of a nagging mother and the outside society; on the other hand, she creates a fantasy world of glass animals to combat the desire from outside society and possible harm that may have brought about by it." [2]

The arrival of Tom's colleague Jim breaks the peace and balance of Laura's life and enables Laura to walk out of the world of fantasy temporarily. Among all the glass figurines in the fantasy world created by Laura, the unicorn is her favorite animal. The unicorn, a symbol of Laura herself, is a unique animal vastly different from other animals, yet they can still live in harmony with one another. That is the human relationship Laura yearns for in reality and always fails to get. And that is why Laura cares so much about the unicorn and her little glass animal world.

Jim as an intruder from the real world ignites Laura's passion to return to the real world. So even when the horn of her favorite unicorn is broken off, instead of bursting into tears as she often did in the past, Laura smiles this time and manages to keep her cool. Laura's calmness indicates that she has determined to come back to real life and has begun to show less care about the fantasy world she has created. Laura recognizes Jim as the boy she has a crush on while in high school, and expects a lot to have further contact with him. But when Jim explains that he has already been engaged, Laura gets devastated. To end their relationship, Laura gives her unicorn to Jim as a gift. In this way, the unicorn representing Laura enters the real world and the world of her beloved Jim as well. Laura on the other hand becomes the very unicorn without horns, a member of the glass animals in the fantasy world. Laura's mind settles down for good. Nobody will disturb her any more, and she finally comes back to her delicate and "safe" imaginary fantasy world of glass animals.

### 3. Conclusion

The three main characters in Tennessee Williams' play "The Glass Menagerie" are all in their respective dilemmas. Amanda who has been trapped in the past keeps wandering between the past and the present. The present has become a means for survival, while the past glory and pride are what she truly relies on mentally. Tom's dilemma comes from the conflict between his dream of becoming a poet and leading a vagrant life and his responsibility of supporting the family and taking care of his crippled elder sister. So even when Tom does start his exploratory tour, he keeps worrying about Laura. Laura keeps wandering between the fantasy world she has created and the complicated real world because of the intrusion of the visitor Jim. Laura withdraws from society at first. But for the showing up of Jim, Laura for a short period of time collects her courage to get back to the real world. And as her hope of getting married to Jim fades away, she returns to her glass animal world of fantasy. And Laura becomes the only one of the three main characters whose dilemma has been seemingly resolved. By presenting their dilemmas in "The Glass Menagerie", Tennessee Williams seems to say that every human being lives in two worlds---one world for secular needs and the other always for spiritual comforts and accomplishments.

### References

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