

# **The importance of Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie in American Drama**

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**أهمية مسرحية تينيسي ويليامز حديقة الحيوانات الزجاجية**

**في المسرح الأمريكي**

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**Abstract:**

American Drama is enriched with Tennessee's play, in which he mixes universal topics and his own personal life and experience to represent this masterpiece. He enriches this play with his clever use of symbols, details, psychology and the southern accent, which all come together to show the real life of an American family that has dreams and each one of them escapes to his own world because every one of them does not seem to fulfill his own dream. They keep swinging between the past and the present or between imagination (dream and illusions) and reality. It seems that it is the way they handle life. Tennessee has included all the successful elements to make this play a hit.

**Key words:** taboos, obscene, individuality, women, new era, tragedy, symbols. Reality and illusion.

**المخلص:**

ترك تينيسي ويليامز نسخة رائعة في الدراما الأمريكية من خلال هذه المسرحية الغنية، حيث يمزج بين الموضوعات العالمية وحياته الشخصية وخبرته لتمثيل هذه التحفة الفنية. إنه يثري هذه المسرحية باستخدامه الذكي للرموز والتفاصيل وعلم النفس واللهجة الجنوبية، والتي تجتمع جميعها لإظهار الحياة الحقيقية لعائلة أمريكية لديها أحلام ويهرب كل واحد منهم إلى عالمه لأن كل واحد منهم لا يبدو أنه يحقق حلمه. يستمرون في التراجع بين الماضي والحاضر أو بين الخيال (الحلم والأوهام) والواقع. يبدو أن هذه هي الطريقة التي يتعاملون بها مع الحياة. تضمن عمل تينيسي جميع العناصر الناجحة لجعل هذه المسرحية ناجحة..

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المحرمات، الفاحشة، الفردية، المرأة، العصر الجديد، المأساة، الرموز، الواقع والخيال.

Thomas Lanier Williams, known as Tennessee Williams, is one of the three leading playwrights of American drama in the 20th century, besides Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. He was born in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1911. He wrote his first play *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!* when he was a teenager, in 1935 and at age of sixteen. (Bloom,57). His nickname Tennessee was given to him due to his deep southern accent. Williams suffered from depression, and he feared going mad. He was briefly institutionalized in 1969 after a severe nervous breakdown, and never forgave his younger brother Dakin for allowing him to be put into a madhouse, which was a nightmare, according to his 1975 memoir. Part of Williams' problem, aside from his alcoholism, was that in the 1960s, he had become addicted to prescription drugs. Many writers wrote about Tennessee's biography, but Lyle Leverich's was William's first and the only authorized biographer, who told the story of William's life through his personal sources like, college papers, letters, and private notebooks (Bak,1-7). He is considered controversial because of his topics and themes which were considered taboos, like madness, sex, rape, incest, cannibalism, nymphomania and extreme violent deaths. One of his plays called *A Streetcar Named Desire*, made the critics label it as "obscene" and "unacceptable" by the American morals because it was a shocking play that contains all the taboos (Subashi,80).

As for his style, he used a lyrical writing style and elements of the Southern Gothic style, especially in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He has been called a southern dramatist and is known as a poetic realist, which made the critic Frank Durham described Tennessee Williams as the "Theater Poet in Prose" and he added: "Eugene O'Neill was the first of the American playwrights to move thus beyond realism toward a new poetry of the theater, but today its chief figure is Tennessee Williams." (Durham ,4) , in addition, his usage of both verbal and visual imagery in his writings. His drama was a lyric or poetic one, with which he fills his dialogue, such lyrical qualities so subtle, that reader, unconsciously, responds not to realistic speech but, instead, to speech heightened by such poetic effects as alliteration, rhythm, onomatopoeia, and assonance. Even David Mamet, who is an American playwright, film director, screenwriter and author, describes William's plays as "the greatest dramatic poetry in

the American language". Williams insisted on a theater that was "plastic" which combined all the elements of production- dialogue, action, setting, lighting, even properties- in a unified, symbolic expression of a truth (Subashi,76). Even his brother, Daikin Williams predicted that two or three centuries later Tennessee would become more famous than William Shakespeare (Kolin,.3).

Many critics believe that Tennessee's weaknesses were the source of his strength. He suffered from mental issues and had many break downs, and this supported his art which reflects the individuality, desire and sexuality of his characters in a very open and bold way, that no other dramatist ever did before. This makes critics such as V. W. E. Bigsby assume that the underlying metaphors for Tennessee Williams's life and literary career were "the self as actor, society as a series of coercive fictions." His name and his plays became synonymous with desire, taboo, and the grotesque South." (Bigsby,64).

The Glass Menagerie is the first successful play for Tennessee which made him a very well-known playwright. It is an autobiographical play based on Tennessee personal life and his relationship with his mother and sister. As the character Tom in the play resembles Tennessee whose real name is Thomas, Amanda in the play resembles his mother, and Laura in the play who is referred to as "Blue Roses" resembles his sister Rose. Williams was a writer employed in a shoe warehouse, a job he hated, much like Tom. Williams had a friend named Jim Connor, just as Tom has a friend named Jim O'Connor. Williams also went to the movies incessantly, as Tom does, where there were organ concerts and vaudeville acts, as there are at the beginning of scene 4, Williams left home and become a wanderer, as Tom does (Bernard,3).which means he was writing about his personal life and critics criticized him for that, but his reply was: "It is the responsibility of the writer to put his experience as a being into work that refines it and elevates it and that makes of it an essence that a wide audience can somehow manage to feel in themselves: 'This is true.'" ( Williams, 159).

The play was first performed in Chicago 1944 and it got many positive reviews, such as Lillian Hellman's review, who is an American dramatist, saying:

With *The Glass Menagerie* of 1944 and *A Streetcar Named Desire* of 1947, he brought to the theater the greatest talent of the post-war generation. There are many good writers who do not influence men who came after them...influence is not the only measure of worth- but I think it safe to guess that Williams's influence on the theater will be there a hundred years from now because the mirror he held in his hand announced a new time, almost a new people, and the mirror will remain clear and clean (Antwerp,255). His mother, Edwina Williams, attended the opening night of the play and she described her arrival saying: "Everything seemed to be against the play, even the weather. The streets were so ice-laden we could not find a taxi to take us to the Civic Theatre and had to walk. The gale blowing off Lake Michigan literally hurled us through to the theater door", and after the curtain fell the audience went into sustained applause (Bloom, 7-8).

This play won the New York Drama Critics' Circle award through which Tennessee portrayed family relationships and struggles against hopelessness that threatens their lives (Nalliveettil ,201)

Critics suggest that one of the most important achievements and strengths of Tennessee is characterization, where his characters are products of a highly imaginative mind, but at the same time so convincing that one might be tempted to take them out of context and try to develop theories on their lives prior to and following the action of the play. (Griffin,19). His female characters in the play *Amanda and Laura*, who are exceptional, larger than life female characters. They are beautiful, lively, imaginative but so fragile and sensitive as to properly deserve "The Moth Ladies of Tennessee Williams" label. Those characters usually depend on the comfort of men around them and that is the reason behind their fragility and sensitivity, and when they are failed by them, they ultimately turn to the kindness of strangers, seeking love, affection and compassion. This is what their creator, Tennessee Williams also longed for and sought almost all his life. It is a well-known fact that he identified himself more with his heroines (Ibid).

Williams's women characters live caught up between illusion and reality, sexuality and love. There are two categories of them: female characters who idealize reality and those who face it. The former escape to a world of dreams, such as *Amanda* in *The Glass*

Menagerie or Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire. They behave in a strange way because they cannot accept themselves or the others (Subashi,76).

Through The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee adopts a revolutionary approach in which he combines all the production elements, dialogue, action, setting, and lighting, even costumes, in a unified and symbolic expression of the truth, and this is called "plastic theatre". He stated that he wanted to write a new kind of poetic drama by labeling this play as a "memory play", and this is why it should be staged "with unusual freedom of convention" he says:

"Because of its considerable delicate or tenuous material, atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction play a particularly important part. Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. The straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters who speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance. These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with the conception of a new, plastic theater which must take the place of the exhausted theater of realistic conventions if the theater is to resume vitality as part of our culture." (Williams, vi).

By this play, Tennessee started a new era in American drama, where expressive concrete form is in harmony with the poetic vision. The most essential elements of the plastic theatre in The Glass Menagerie were: "the use of a screen where themes, titles and pictures were shown to the audience at critical moments which represented an attempt to bold symbolism; the use of a recurring musical motive which becomes a leitmotiv; the use of cinematic

techniques; the use of lighting that appears unreal to allow for the memory-based format of the play; as well as the use of an unrealistic set and set pieces in a symbolic way that the focus is not on realism but on the truth of the human emotions".He combined Southern speech, both musical and poetic, with colloquial speech and slang of the mid-20th century to create a lyrical dialogue style that held his signature (Subashi,79).

The setting of the play is in St. Luis United States in the 1930s during the Depression period. There are seven scenes and only four main characters: Amanda, Laura, Tom and Jim O'Connor. It is about the tragic story of a three-member family. Because the father, Mr. Wingfield, left home long ago and his picture with big smile is the only thing that is left. Amanda, the deserted mother, lives in the memory when she was young and popular among the gentlemen. While Laura, the daughter, is lost in her own world with glass animals. And Tom the son working in a shoe factory, inherits his father's longing for faraway places. Hungering for the big changes in life and the country, he is caught in an awkward dilemma between supporting the family and leaving home to pursue his dream.

Amanda tries to find other ways to guarantee the future for her daughter. She tries every way to get Laura out of her shyness because Laura has great difficulty to communicate with strangers, so Amanda sent her to school thinking that this is the solution, but Laura dropped out. The other solution is to find a husband for Laura, so Tom invites his friend Jim to dinner to introduce him to his sister not knowing that Jim is engaged.

As for the title, the glass indicates that it is fragile and easily broken and needs delicate care which is a symbol of Laura's, Tom's and Amanda's character, because they are all fragile in their own way. The word menagerie invokes to mind the animals kept in cage which refers to the collection of things; thus the relationship is hinted in it. So the title shows the relationship between the three members of the family is as fragile as the characters themselves, and that if handled crudely, the relationship among them is as prone to be damaged as they themselves to be hurt. That is seen in Laura's speech in Scene Seven: "My glass collection takes up a good deal of time. Glass is something you have to take good care of.". To the three-member family, life is definitely hard. What's worse, however, is

their lack of skills to smoothen the relationship between them, especially that between Amanda and Tom where it seems that they can never communicate peacefully for several sentences before they plunge into quarrel with each other. Amanda's response to Tom's love for literature, is to suppress it in a brutal way. Just as in Scene Three, there's a fierce quarrel between Amanda and Tom, which frightens Laura (Guan ,71).

Amanda looks the strongest who is busy herself supporting the family and looking for the best way to secure Laura's life, yet there is sense of insecurity, which is reflected in her effort to seek a secure future for her daughter Laura. She sends Laura to business school to learn typewriting, so that Laura could support herself. Even though she is eager to find a gentleman for her daughter, she demands that the man not be a drunkard. "Old maids are better off than wives of drunkards!" At the same time she requires her son not be a drunkard "Promise, Son, you'll—never be a drunkard!" All this because her husband is a drunkard, who deserted her and the family. Laura is shy and has a strong sense of inferiority, having her own world and lacking the ability to communicate with others, as Tom says: "... lives in a world of her own, a world of little glass ornaments". She gives the impression of being tender and fragile, like the glass animal collected by her. "Glass breaks so easily. No matter how careful you are." She is the one most easily hurt and the one who has no ability to defend herself. Even the quarrel between her mother and brother would frighten her. "...there is a tinkle of shattering glass. Laura cries out as if wounded." Jim has given her a nickname which is "blue roses" meaning that she is pretty but hard to adapt to this world. "A fragile, unearthly prettiness has come out in Laura: she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting" (S,6). After all, Jim is the one who wounds her and makes her life more tragic. As for Tom, he is very sensitive who has great passion for poetry but is confined in a shoe factory in order to support the family. His relationship with the other workers is not satisfying, because he does not fit there due to his interest in writing poems. Just as the glass unicorn can only be integrated into the group by breaking its horn, so Tom must give up his dream to be merged with the family and the other people. This can be seen from the dialogue in Scene Seven:

JIM: Aw, aw, aw. Is it broken?

LAURA: Now it is just like all the other horses.

JIM: It's lost its—

LAURA: Horn! It doesn't matter. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise.

Tom escapes to the movie adventures to find comfort, since no one seems to understand him, and he has no way out. Just as there are always animals hungering for freedom and desiring to return to the wild, so he fled away to pursue his dream (Guan, 72).

There are many themes that Tennessee tackles in this play, one of them is memory since the play is a memory play. It opens and closes with monologues from the character and narrator Tom, who places himself in both past and present as he tells the story. He feels trapped by memory that keeps him from living the present. His mother Amanda also clings to her memories of the past when she was admired by many men. Even Jim has some memories, when the Wingfields treat him as the high-school hero as he used to be, and with the help of the candlelight and the music, he seems to slip into this memory. But the spell was broken when the glass unicorn breaks, he returns to his own life, outside the Wingfields' memories (Ibid).

Abandonment is another theme of this play where the male figures abandon the females. Mr. Wingfield abandons Amanda and his family as Tom describes him: "There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in this larger than-life-size photograph over the mantel. This is our father who left us a long time ago. He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances...The last we heard of him was a picture postcard...containing a message of two words: "Hello—Goodbye!", (S1). Jim abandons Laura, and at the end Tom abandons his mother and sister. Another theme is dreams and illusions where each one of those characters has his own dream and fantasy like, Tom who dreams about his future and how to escape his present. On the other hand, Amanda dreams about the future of her children, like her dream of Tom as a businessman. When her dream of Laura getting in a school falls apart, she replaces it with another fantasy of Laura's marriage. As for Laura she lives in a world of dreams where she retreats from reality. This theme leads us to another theme which is

escape. All the characters escape from reality through their dreams, as for Amanda, she sees things just the way she wants to see them not as they are, it is like she refuses to see reality and always looking for alternatives. Amanda keeps dreaming of the past: "One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain—your mother received—seventeen!—gentlemen callers!" (S1). Laura escapes to her own world where she can be in control and have freedom away from her shyness and lack of communication. Tom is a little bit different, because he wants an actual and physical escape to pursue his dreams, yet he cannot escape his family's love. He escapes to the movies: "I go to the movies because I like adventure. Adventure is something I don't have much of at work, so I go to the movies." (S4). Even Jim has escaped reality for some time, when he dances with Laura as he forgets about his reality for moments (Ibid).

Tennessee uses symbols to complete the picture, as he comments on his symbols saying: "Some critics resent my symbols, but let me ask, what would I do without them? Without my symbols I might still be employed by the International Shoe Co. in St. Louis. Let me go further and say that unless the events of a life are translated into significant meanings, then life holds no more revelation than death, and possibly even less" (Barnard,4). Like, the glass menagerie represents anything that is too beautiful and too fragile to survive in harsh reality. The Glass Unicorn represents how Tom envisions Laura: beautiful but magical and unique, and when he breaks the glass unicorn, it becomes a normal horse, no longer a magical creature. It shows that there is no chance for Jim and Laura to be together: she cannot exist in his world without breaking. Laura presents the broken unicorn to Jim as a souvenir that signifies the normal woman that Laura will never become.

Tennessee Williams left a remarkable print in American Drama through this rich play, in which he mixes universal topics and his own personal life and experience to represent this masterpiece. He enriches this play with his clever use of symbols, details, psychology and the southern accent, which all come together to show the real life of an American family that has dreams and each one of them escapes to his own world because every one of them does not seem to fulfill his own dream. They keep swinging between the past and the present or between imagination (dream and illusions) and reality.

It seems that it is the way they handle life. Tennessee has included all the successful elements to make this play a hit.

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