The Shift from Illusion to Reality in Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*

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*The Glass Menagerie* is a phenomenal memory play penned by Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), an eminent American playwright. The play was first produced by Eddie Dowling and Louis J. Singer at the Civic Theatre, Chicago on December 26, 1944 and at the Playhouse Theatre, New York City on March 31, 1945. The play was a great success. It won New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Donaldson Award and Sidney Howard Memorial Award 1945. Among the most prominent and urgent themes of *The Glass Menagerie* is the difficulty the characters have in accepting and relating to reality. All the characters of the play cherish illusions in their lives. The theme of shift from illusion to reality is depicted through the main characters of the play. The characters in the play include Amanda Wingfield, the mother abandoned by her husband, daughter Laura who is physically and mentally crippled, son Tom, a young man with dreams; and a gentleman caller named Jim O’Connor. The drama takes place in the mind of Tom who is both actor and narrator of the play.

The difference between appearance and reality creates an ironic gap in *The Glass Menagerie*. Tom Wingfield, nostalgically and wistfully recollects his past before the outbreak of the World War II. He lived in St. Louis with his sister Laura and mother Amanda. His father, who worked with a telephone company, deserted the family leaving Amanda to fend for herself and children. The single incident in the play is that Tom brings home his friend Jim O’Connor to meet his sister Laura and unfortunately Jim is already engaged to someone else. This drama of illusion begins with Tom’s words:

Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in pleasant disguise of illusion.  
( 234 )

In the play, all characters indulge in illusions. As Bigsby says: “In *The Glass Menagerie*... the fragile and the vulnerable are seen to be as much victims of their own dreams as of the implacable forces of the real and the unforgiving rhythm of modernity” (Critical 52). Amanda Wingfield cherishes the illusion of golden days of her youth. As she exclaims to Tom and Laura, “One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain – your mother received seventeen! – gentlemen callers” (237)! She recalls her comfortable and luxurious days when she
was leading an aristocratic life on the plantation. Later she tells Jim O’Connor, “Well in the south we had so many servants. Gone, gone, gone. All vestige of gracious living! Gone completely! I wasn’t prepared for what the future brought me” (285). It proves that she is nostalgically addicted to the past and is not ready to face the reality of her St. Louis tenement. She thinks: ‘I am what I was’.

Although Amanda lives in illusion, she does not ignore all the realities of life. She can never overlook the dingy reality of St. Louis. She is the only person who is trying to keep the family together after her husband’s desertion. As Tischler says, “The mother, Amanda Wingfield is trying to hold the family together and steer her children into more practical paths than those she has followed herself, for she is a disillusioned romantic turned evangelical realist” (Rebellious Puritan 94 ). She knows that her daughter is not confident and smart enough to settle herself in life. That is why, Amanda is putting all her efforts to make Laura settle in her life.

Amanda may be defeated but she is not destroyed. So Amanda vacillates between the world of illusion – when she was young – and the world of reality – which is her present. The past is her refuge from present – it is her romance in the rough and tough reality. Delma E. Presley is of the opinion that all the characters in the play are caught up in illusions of their making and build up “their lives on insubstantial promises of deception” (Streetcar 20).

Laura Wingfield is another leading character in the play who presents the theme of movement from illusion to reality. Tennessee Williams says in the production notes, “Amanda, having failed to establish contact with reality, continues to live vitally in her illusions, but Laura’s situation is even graver” (228). Laura is a completely illusion-ridden character in the beginning of the play. She comes in contact with reality for a short while and again she surrenders to the illusions. Laura was out of place in the real world because of her shyness and sensitivity. Her world is the world of phonograph records and glass animals, that are fragile like her. She goes to phonograph to find escape. She indulges in illusions about Jim also. For a short while, she comes in contact with reality in the last scene where she comes out of the shell of her illusions with the help of Jim. When Jim observes that Laura’s main problem is her lack of confidence in herself, he tries to instill confidence in her by telling her to think of herself as superior in some way.

Jim is trying to encourage and uplift her spirits by saying that she is unique. He is the one who forces her to see the reality of her life. Tischler comments, “Laura contrasts with the normal, middle class, realistic Jim whom she dreamily falls in love. Their views show their complete diversity” (Rebellious Puritan 100).

Tom Wingfield is one of the foremost characters in The Glass Menagerie. Tom, as a character, is also illusion-ridden and represents the theme of movement from illusion to reality. He is a romantic trapped by reality. His job and his family responsibilities have clipped the wings of his romanticism and adventure. What he has to do is the reality of his life and what he intends to do is his dream and fantasy. He tells his mother, “I am leading a double life, a simple honest warehouse worker by day, by night a dynamic tsar of the underworld” (242).

Tom thinks that he will be able to discover himself in the world of adventure and travel. As Gordon Rogoff says, “Williams, on the other hand moves his characters almost ceaselessly because he has to. Perpetual motion, in his case, is also an attitude” (87). He harbours the illusion that by joining Merchant Marine and sailing to all parts of the world, he would be able himself. To develop as an individual, he has to break away from the family responsibilities. But Tom loves his family. He cannot afford to shatter the illusions of his mother and sister. They have great expectations of him. Tom tries to go for the door and throws off his coat which shatters the glass animal and Laura cries as if wounded. Tom comes back to the room to comfort Laura. It shows that
he can’t escape without shattering Laura. His body acts on the dialects of his mind as described by Spinoza in the concept of duality and he leaves the home.

Jim O’Connor is described by Tom as “The most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from” (235). He also contributes to depict the theme of movement from illusion to reality in the play. His illusion is the American Dream, which is Horatio Alger myth: ant person with average intelligence and proper training can achieve anything. It is the ‘rags to riches’ path of the nineteenth century America. Jim has this illusion. He thinks in terms of money and power. His ambitions and aspirations are lofty. To realize his ambitions and aspirations, he attends night school and a course in public speaking to be eligible for an executive position. He is a believer in ‘the cycle democracy is built on’. He thinks that all men are created equal, everyone is just like anyone else, only better.

Jim is harbours the illusion of American Dream that he can become anything in his life. He also labours under the delusion that by taking course in radio engineering, he would be able to get in to the television industry and reach to the top. Brett Ashley Crawford remarks, “Jim, a good natured aspiring capitalist, accepted the end of his past high school glory as he looked forward to his future in radio” (309). But, in reality, he has to do the job in the warehouse. As Rita Colanzi says, “Tom Wingfield’s introduction and accompanying screen legends—‘The High School Hero’, ‘The Clerk’—make us mindful that gentleman caller too has gone beyond his youthful glory” (457). Like Wingfields, he must be protected by illusion from a harsh world that prevents individual fulfilment.

Thus all the four characters are vacillating between illusion and reality like the Western philosophers of dualities who are alternate between dualism and monoism. Human life is gull of illusions and it is difficult to free it from illusions. Illusions provide a shelter from the hard and harsh, rough and tough realities of life even though for a short span. Amanda, Laura and Tom fail in their lives because they prefer to live in their illusionary worlds and neglect reality. There is a fifth character also, who is the father of Tom and Laura. He does not appear on the scene except in his larger than life photograph over the mantel. Tom says about him, “He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; . . . . The last we heard of him was a picture postcard from Mazatlan, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, containing a message of two words. “Hello-Goodbye!” and no address” (235).

So father was also illusion-ridden, he deserted the family without realizing the responsibilities of the family. For the sake of his adventure and for the love of long distances, he left the family in lurch to fend for itself. He was so afraid of the reality that he did not even leave his address to his nearest and dearest ones. This genetic defect was transferred to Tom in inheritance who following the footsteps of his father fell in love with the long distances. The difference between the father and the son was that the father could break the bonds of his family without any guilt but Tom could not shatter the shackles of the family.

To cap it all, it can be said that The Glass Menagerie deals with the theme of movement from illusion to reality in a remarkable manner. The main characters in the play neglect the reality. Each member of the Wingfield family is unable to overcome this difficulty, and each, as a result, withdraws into a private world of illusion where he or she finds comfort and meaning that the real world does not seem to offer. Laura comes in contact with reality for some time but she prefers to move back to her illusionary world. Even Jim, who represents the “world of reality,” is banking his future on public speaking and the television and radio industries – all of which are means for the creation of illusions and the persuasion of others that these illusions are true.
Works Cited


