

## Applying Nietzsche's Concept of "Self-Creation" to Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*: A Postmodern Study

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### Abstract

The main tenet of Postmodernism is its insistence on the multipolarity of reality; postmodernists maintain that there is no definite, transcendental truth to be discovered and followed by individuals, instead there are plurality of truths made by people based on their needs and desires. According to Nietzsche existing realities, good and bad, are government's constructs and are created as tools to impose power on people and suppress people's creativity and potentiality. Nietzsche's solution in this chaotic world is "Self-Creation" which means individuals should live up to their own standards, not society's. Williams's characters are fragile and maladjusted wanderers who due to their inability to encounter facts and solve their problems take shelter in a cocoon of fantasy as a means of self-defense, to protect themselves instead of creating their own characters. The researcher's aim is to prove the cause of the protagonist's downfall was her traditional way of thinking, such as every woman needs a man to protect her, though in a postmodern world in which anything goes, everything is acceptable and as valid as the other things, there is no absolute truth.

**Key words:** Postmodernism, Self-creation

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Glass Menagerie* (1953) written by Tennessee Williams shares the features of both Modernism and

Postmodernism. The ambiguity of language, dysfunctional family, the sense of uncertainty pervaded in this drama, disintegration, displacement of the characters who are misfits in the society, the influence and persistence of the past into present made possible the application of Postmodernism to this play. In the present study, the protagonist is to be blamed for not striving to create herself and for letting society make fun of her and role play her like puppet. According to Postmodernists, whatever happens to anyone is the direct result of one's perspectives and attitude towards life; one is either rule over life or let life rule over one. One can rule oneself according to one's own wishes and desires and enjoy life and win or one can let society rule over one and impose sorrow, lack of confidence, nervousness, uncertainty, oscillation between reality and fantasy to escape the harsh reality society imposed on one and lose. One can be one's survivor or destroyer depending on the attitude one takes or one can wait for a savior who will never show up and disillusion one. As Dave Robinson maintained in his book *Nietzsche and Postmodernism*:

If there is no God and there are no eternal verities, and the universe in which we live is "absurd", then Nietzsche has a point. We do have to create ourselves. Who we are is decided by the choices we make and the acts we perform. And the process of creating ourselves may well be rather like that of the artist. (p.31)

Belief in the tradition and Meta-narratives and sticking to them is the real cause of Laura's downfall. She was prone to create logos for herself, and base her life on those logos. Precisely Logo-centrism was her fault; she found meaning in a male protector, her savior was not herself but men who never showed up or left her alone.

#### A. Postmodernism

It is a reaction to Modernism and to modernists' confidence in reason and scientific truth to explain everything. They were against modernists' notion of the

potentiality of man to make a better world. As opposed to modernists, reality for postmodernists is not a discoverable entity and reason would not lead us to reality. Unlike modernists who claimed that reality is knowable through the application of reason, postmodernists maintained that reality is not something out there to be explored and discovered, but it is something which is to be constructed by each individual according to their own will. The main reason, why postmodernists were against truth, reason and reality is for they believed they are masks for the dominance and power western civilization imposed upon people by the name of reality. Whatever they want to impose upon people, they impose it in the name of truth. Actually objectivity is a disguise to hide their cruelty and oppression. That's why postmodernists are anti realists. Stuart Sim wrote in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*: "To move from modern to postmodern is to embrace skepticism about what our culture stands for and strives for..." (p.vii)

## B. Self-Creation

Dependency on men was a traditional theme of modernism which was created by men in power and imposed upon others, though in a postmodern world, according to Nietzsche and his theory of Will to Power, everybody is to create rules for himself/herself based on what benefits him/her not based on what society prescribed, Dave Robinson in his book *Nietzsche and Postmodernism* stated:

Human beings only ever create "truths" for themselves that are useful and help them to survive as a species. "Knowledge" and "Truth" are only effective instruments, not transcendent entities. They are concepts that human beings invent. But they can never be "objective" because they always serve some human interest or purpose. (p.15)

## 1. ARGUMENT

A human being should first think about what is to his/her advantage, then follow it, in other words, human beings should follow what they need not what imposed on them. As Dave Robinson in his book *Nietzsche and Postmodernism* maintained "We cling to a belief in a central core of identity because we need it. It helps us to have a consistent grip on our experiences. It is a convenient fiction that is necessary for the preservation of our form of life." (p.23) Reliance on men was something which was harmful for Amanda, yet she felt obliged to maintain it, just because society prescribed it. Amanda could have found a business career for herself or her daughter to live by, instead of being dependent on every man around, her husband, her son, her son-in-law. "Amanda. ...We won't have a business career—we've given that up because it gave us nervous indigestion! [Laughs wearily.] What is there left but dependency all our lives?" (p.10).

Society promulgated the superiority of men and that every woman needs a man as her savior; society brought women up weak, sensitive and needy. But what are the criteria for this superiority? As Dave Robinson maintained nothing but power! "For Nietzsche, all human values are always a reflection of some power struggle, the result of one group wishing to impose its own values onto others." (p.26) so everyone who has the power, decides and imposes his/her ideas upon others, and others, though reluctant, should follow them. Docility and following what was imposed on her by society and not trying to disentangle herself were Amanda's fault. As a result of this dependency or devotion and lack of self-creation, she had lost her dear son and she ruined her daughter's life. "AMANDA [sobbingly]. My devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children!" (p.22)

## 2. RELIANCE ON HER HUSBAND

The abandonment of her husband was a devastating trauma for her, because she was too dependent on him. This unbearable defeat caused her to fluctuate between past which was pleasant and present which is unbearable, and between reality and illusion; for the reality that her husband jilted on her was beyond her tolerance, she shifted to her illusory world to ignore reality. This dependency was the cause of her disappointment, for if she was not so dependent on her husband, both emotionally and financially, his departure could not harm her this much. The one who she loved and cared for and chose among her gentleman callers turned out to be a failure and his departure drove Amanda mad! In her opinion, he was an irresponsible man who was not devoted to his family "He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances;" (p.4) though if she changed her attitude toward the world and conjugal life in particular, she could have accepted her husband departure, for in a postmodern world nobody can force the other to have the same world view as hers/his. A marriage bond is supposed to be broken anytime, anywhere, and for any reason without any complaint or despair by the other side of the marriage, for in a Postmodern world anything goes, anything is expected.

## 3. RELIANCE ON HER SON

After the departure of her husband, Amanda, did not desist dependency on men, she shifted the dependency from her husband to her son, Tom. She became totally dependent on Tom to protect the family financially; Their life depended on Tom's job which he detested and wanted to get out of. "AMANDA. What right have you got to jeopardize your job-jeopardize the security of us all? How do you think we'd manage if you were—" (p.14). Tom was her only hope so she expected him more than what

he can afford; too much expectation was the cause of her nagging at Tom on and on, and the cause of his running away to pursue his wishes.

Amanda, who had once been abandoned by a man, was not disappointed in them, and did not desist in finding another to lean on. By relying this much on Tom, Amanda overburdened and pushed him to strive to extricate himself from the pressure Amanda caused him, because men don't like anybody to expect them much, or to be dependent on them; this will cause them distress.

AMANDA. Promise, Son, you'll - never be a drunkard!  
TOM [*turns to her grinning*]. I will never be a drunkard, Mother....  
AMANDA. You can't put in a day's work on an empty stomach. You've got ten minutes - don't gulp! Drinking too hot liquids makes cancer of the stomach. Put cream in. (p.22)

So the reason why Tom abandoned his family was Amanda's behavior which was unbearable for Tom; she was a nagger, too domineering and she over criticized him and expected him more than normal. Amanda accused Tom of being selfish, while this was a big part of her very essence. She could not understand Tom, as an adventurous boy who likes to travel all around the world or as an independent individual who needs freedom. She forgot that Tom is also an individual with his own rights, that Tom's world is different from her, that he needs watching movie, drinking alcohol, being away from home as a getaway, that he wants something more than this drudgery, working day and night to support his family. "TOM. ... I know, I know. It seems unimportant to you, what I'm doing—what I want to do—having a little difference between them! You don't think that—" (p.14). Amanda expected him to be at their service and all the time, she was nagging and criticizing him:

TOM. I haven't enjoyed one bite of this dinner because of your constant directions on how to eat it. It's you that makes me rush through meals with your hawk-like attention to every bite I take. (p.3)

Tom was expiating his father's blunder; because his father left them, Tom had to work day and night to support the family; Amanda considered it Tom's duty, while it is not; it is not Tom's duty to expiate for his father's abandonment, for he had his own desires, wishes and hobbies. This was Amanda's problem that was too dependent on Tom to provide her with living and her trust in men. Once she trusted a man, her husband, and he jilted on her, yet she did not resist trusting men. At the end Tom turned out to be just like his father, he abandoned his family to pursue his own desires, so the result of Amanda's trust and dependency was again coming to failure, for Tom abandoned them, too. In one case Amanda could allow Tom to leave them and that was finding a husband for Laura as his substitute to protect them and then go. "AMANDA. Find out one that's clean-living—doesn't drink and—ask him out for sister!" (p.24)

#### 4. RELIANCE ON LAURA'S HUSBAND

Beside these two men who disappointed Amanda, she was looking for one for Laura. This theme of every woman needs a man to protect her, was infused in her mind no matter how many times men disappointed her. Instead of clinging to and looking for men to support her she should have lean to herself to support the family. She was too obsessive with the idea of finding a husband for her crippled daughter to support them. As Tom, the narrator of the play and Amanda's son mentioned:

TOM. After the fiasco at Rubicam's Business College, the idea of getting a gentleman caller for Laura began to play a more and more important part in Mother's calculations. It became an obsession. Like some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment. (p.12)

All the time she forced Laura to get prepared for suitors; by insistence on finding a husband for Laura and ignoring the fact of her physical defect and cultivating hope in her, Amanda betrayed her own daughter.

LAURA [*in a tone of frightened apology*]. I'm - crippled!  
[IMAGE: SCREEN.]  
AMANDA. Nonsense! Laura, I've told you never, never to use that word. Why, you're not crippled, you just have a little defect - hardly noticeable, even!... (p.11)

Amanda lived in fantasy, she could not see her daughter's defect, she ignored the fact which was so evident, the fact which came to surface at the end of the play when the harsh reality caused Amanda to get out of her world of fantasy and see the world around her with all the evident facts that her daughter is a crippled one, that there are no suitors around, that her husband had abandoned them and so had Tom. She could not see that Laura is not a normal girl, just like herself who received seventeen suitors in a day: "AMANDA. One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain, your mother received seventeen! gentlemen callers!" (p.4) By preparing Laura for the arrival of gentleman callers, she gave her a false hope which was shattered and rebuilt everyday.

Amanda brought her daughter up weak, shy, doubtful with a very low confidence for everyday she was waiting for gentlemen callers to come and they did not show up, this useless waiting ruined her confidence, for it was proved to her that she was not wanted. But if Amanda took her daughters physical defect into consideration, and pragmatically was not looking for a husband for her, Laura's character would have been very strong and independent. Amanda infused her way of thinking into her children's mind; her reliance on men became Laura's nightmare, for her mother pushed her to get prepared for suitors, while she had none! As a result of this lack, she became stressful, shy and dependent; Laura was a victim of her mother's traditional thinking that a girl must get married. She even frightened her of not getting married: "AMANDA. ...I know so well what becomes

of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position. I've seen such pitiful cases..." (p.10)

Amanda knew all these troubles, that she is a "deserted woman" and that Laura is a crippled girl, but in the cocoon of unreality she hid herself in, she did not want to admit them, but at the end, when Tom left them and Laura's gentleman caller turned out to be an engaged man, Amanda was so desperate that she could not pretend anymore, suddenly she took off that mask of fantasy she had worn for a long time. Finally she admitted all her troubles which she tried to hide under the mask of pretension:

TOM. I'm going to the movies.

AMANDA. That's right, now that you've had us make such fools of ourselves. The effort, the preparations, all the expense! The new floor lamp, the rug, the clothes for Laura! all for what? To entertain some other girl's fiancé! Go to the movies, go! Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job! Don't let anything interfere with your selfish pleasure! just go, go, go - to the movies! (p.70)

Tom went away forever, just like his father, and Amanda and Laura left alone. Amanda's dependency on men, her husband, her son and later the future husband of Laura, her ignoring reality like Laura's physical defect and that men are not trustworthy as she witnesses her abandonment by her husband, again she was looking for another man to lean on and living in fantasy all contributed to Amanda's downfall.

Not even once did she try to disentangle herself from the bonds of tradition which were drowning her deeply, and still she was clinging to them tightly. If she was able to face the fact and not creating a world of fantasy as a refuge, then there would be no world of fantasy to be shattered by the harsh reality at the end of the play, and there would be no failure.

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## CONCLUSION

What is concluded at the end of this research is believing in society's norms and holding tight to them without considering your own needs will cause disaster and eventually will ruin you. In this cruel world which is a scene of power struggle you should create your own rules and dominate the society or the society will brainwash and create rules for you and dominate you. Laura was hyper sensitive, delicate and weak but adroit at deluding herself and maintaining a mask of pretension. She came to

failure as a result of her clinging to the established norms of society, what is good and what is bad. She let society to overcome and rule over her because she felt obliged to conform to society's rules without even considering whether they are beneficial for her or not. Because she believed in such centers as good, men, morality and society, she held tight to them. Logocentrism was her fault; believing in men, morality and what were labeled good by society; she let society devour her, and coming to failure is the outcome and destiny of those who let society rule over and make fun of them.

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