The Decay of the American Dream: Tennessee Williams and *The Glass Menagerie*

Matthew Squires

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol23/iss3/10
In his 1928 presidential campaign, Herbert Hoover put the American Dream into these words as his campaign slogan: “A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage.” His statement is a concisely put declaration of the general goal of twentieth-century Americans—prosperity. However, Hoover’s statement was not the beginning of American materialism. The self-made man/woman, getting rich quick by one’s own wit, Social Darwinism—all of these concepts have been focuses throughout American history. Millions of settlers have immigrated to the United States in order to escape their social niche and progress economically, but American success fables do not necessarily materialize. In fact, besides not actually getting rich, many Americans realize that deep-rooted materialism can have devastating effects on their morals and on the family unit.

Set during the Great Depression, Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* serves as a historical commentary on the moral dilemmas embedded in the American Dream as evidenced generally during the Great Depression and specifically in Williams’s own life. From a moral perspective, the play also relates to current and contemporary conflicts between traditional family values and increasing materialism. Therefore, to develop a comprehensive critique of the American Dream in *Menagerie*, we must survey the pertinent history of American materialism, its effect in Williams’s own life, and the evidences of it as a theme in the play.

**Historical and Social Context**

The era of interest in studying *The Glass Menagerie* is between the late twenties and World War II, when Williams grew up and found his talent for writing. At that time, American nationalism was in steep decline as a result of several things,
including World War I, women's suffrage, ethnic rights problems, prohibition, and some revolutionary political ideas. Socialism in America was becoming a real issue. Topping the list, however, people were losing faith in the government because of the Great Depression. Citizens began to question not only the economic soundness of their government, but also the moral nature of the American system. Socialism took stronger root in America as workers realized that not only could they not prosper on their own, but also that they could not even get work. From the Cambridge studies in American literature, Rita Barnard writes: “So was the old parable that had served competitive capitalism so well: the rags-to-riches story, which held out the promise of success in exchange for hard work. Though patently irrational at a time when unemployment was rife and new businesses were likely to fail, the myth dies hard” (18). Along with the financial disillusionment, more and more families were becoming dysfunctional, children rebelling, spouses abandoning, etc. Therefore, during the Great Depression, materialism was aligned with greedy big business in the public mind and became the villain that used people to purchase and pursue things and destroyed families.

The economic and moral decay after WWI and during the Depression became a popular subject for new authors. Writers of the modern era who spoke out against a social condition and its moral implications are now known as the Modern Realists or Critical Realists. These writers include Steinbeck, Faulkner, O’Neill, Cather, Dos Passos, Waldo, cummings, and Ward (Keller 177–88). Several new social themes and ideas emerged from these writers. According to Keller, they

show the protagonists engaged in a quest for self-realization and pursuing success in terms of a democratic community [. . .] clashing with the world surrounding them, an environment that is far from ideal. Thus they become victims of a repressive system whose particular evil is that it prevents them from attaining the self-fulfillment embedded in the American Dream. (168)

Therefore, it is important to note that the American Dream in and of itself is not a bad thing; hence the subjects of the Critical Realists’ criticism are the unjust or immoral means by which people try to achieve the Dream and the external factors that prevent them from doing so.

Not all the writers adopted the same ideas, but they were united in disclaiming what they considered to be the “American Dream Gone Astray.” Some, like Hemingway and Dos Passos, wrote about the deglorification of war. Steinbeck and others focused on the political decay; and others, like Eliot and Faulkner, wrote about the decay of society in general and the fall of civilization. Keller writes that the authors “share a critical thrust: they are concerned about authorities, and institutions, such as the legal system, the police force, the church, politicians and business ethics, which to them are corruptible, presumptuous and hypocritical” (168). Therefore, critical realists always comment on corrupt institutions, erroneous philosophies, or manipulative social systems that hamper individual self-realization.
Williams and *The Glass Menagerie*

One of the best ways to study the social forces portrayed in *The Glass Menagerie* is to compare them directly with social forces that played out in Williams's own life. Williams told the *New York Times* that *The Glass Menagerie* was "semi-autobiographical—that is, it is based on my life in St. Louis [. . .]. When I'd come home from the shoe place where I worked—my father owned it, I hated it—I would go in and sit in her [his sister Rose's] room. [. . .]. As I thought about it the glass animals came to represent the fragile, delicate ties that must be broken, that you inevitably break, when you try to fulfill yourself" (qtd. in Scanlan 96). The moral compromise of breaking "fragile, delicate ties" in order to achieve success, or "fulfill" himself, was one of Williams's greatest mental battles, and hence the plot and conflict of *Menagerie* directly reflect Williams's story and his inner conflict.

Comparing *Menagerie* with Williams's life, the most obvious connection we can find is the plot itself. To begin, Williams was forced by his father to drop out of school in order to work in a shoe factory, which he hated. He eventually left his family in the pursuit of success and after graduating from college led a scandalous life including alcoholism and homosexuality (Falk 22–23). Christopher Bigsby, in a critical essay on *Menagerie*, explains that Tom (the narrator) "revisits the past because he knows that his own freedom, such as it is, has been purchased at the price of abandoning others, as Williams had abandoned his mother and, more poignantly, his sister" (37). Hence, the main action of *Menagerie* does come directly out of Williams's life.

The inspiration for the characters and the setting also come out of Williams's past. "Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life," said Elim Kazan, director of several of Williams's most successful plays (Imagi-Nation.com). His sister Rose "became the prototype for Laura," and Amanda resembles Tennessee's description of his mother, Edwina, who also had "many gentlemen callers" (Williams and Mead 15, 14). According to Allean Hale, the tenement portrayed in *Menagerie* is a transformation of Williams's early childhood home in St. Louis, and Jim's character emerged from a fraternity brother in Missouri (13, 15). To top it off, around 1938, Williams changed his own name from "Tom" to "Tennessee" (Imagi-Nation.com).

Naturally, the dramatic intensity of the play is also a result of feelings Williams felt in his own life. For example, his sister Rose suffered a nervous breakdown after Williams left, for which he blamed himself, and later Tennessee's mother had a frontal lobotomy performed on Rose, for which Tennessee never forgave her (Imagi-Nation.com). Williams spent a great deal of time after the operation caring for Rose, and many of his plays reflect his experience. He felt strongly about insanity, lobotomies, and alcoholism. In fact, during the later part of his life, Williams lived with depression and a "constant fear that he would go insane as did his sister Rose" (Imagi-Nation.com). According to Williams and Mead, "The story
of Tom's relationship with his sister Rose is so complicated psychologically, and so heartbreaking, that it could almost make a book in itself; it did form the nucleus of a number of his plays and stories in addition to The Glass Menagerie” (34).

Along with the emotional circumstances of his family life, Williams felt that his own success had corrupted his moral character. Soon after Menagerie he wrote a critical essay entitled “The Catastrophe of Success.” In it he criticizes the American Dream of materialism and argues that modern society is based on pretenses like the rags-to-riches myth. He says, “The Cinderella story is our favorite national myth, the cornerstone of the film industry if not of the democracy itself” (Williams, “Catastrophe” 30). By his own account, Williams reacted strangely to his newfound success by experiencing a “spiritual dislocation” in which he abandoned his friends and became more and more cynical (Williams, “Catastrophe” 32). The abandonment and struggle for success in Menagerie is a result of Williams's focus on success before Menagerie and his disillusionment with it afterward.

Materialism and the Broken Home

In an essay on the role of the family in Williams’s plays, Scanlan writes: “In the early plays Williams dramatized the family world in a state of collapse; in later ones family collapse is antecedent to the action. These two situations are combined in The Glass Menagerie” (Scanlan 92). However, not only does Menagerie document the collapse of a family, it gives reasons why. The Glass Menagerie dissects the American Dream of success and individuality to reveal a heart of materialism and selfishness. Examining the play in detail, we can see Williams’s theme of materialism emerging in the tone of the play and each of the characters. Though, like the “well wrought urn,” practically all of the elements in Menagerie combine to create the play’s meaning, a few elements stand out like neon signs, including the setting and the characterization.

Naturally, Williams begins with the most appropriate setting for his theme. What better place to demonstrate the decay of the American Dream than a tenement house? In the first stage notes in the play, Williams says:

The Wingfields’s apartment is [. . .] one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population and are systematic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism. (Williams, Menagerie 927)

The Wingfields' apartment creates feelings of disparity, confinement, and conformity with its dark rooms juxtaposed with the garbage in the alleys and the fire escape. The idea Williams tries to get across is that there really is no escape. He says: "All of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation” (927). Indeed, Williams’s tenement-house setting leaves its
occuants with much to be desired but not much to be done. It shows the audience from the very beginning of the play that the American Dream isn’t functioning.

The tone of frustration and human desperation is also magnified by Tom’s introductory monologue. He says: “I reverse it [time] to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind [. . .] their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy. In Spain there was revolution. Here there was only shouting and confusion” (928). So, by choosing the Great Depression as the time of action, Williams sets the play in the time most harmonious with his subject matter. He has chosen the time and place of the greatest disillusionment and frustration America has ever known.

Williams also manipulates each of his characters to portray the different effects the decayed American Dream has on different types of people. Naturally, the central character is Tom, who represents the struggling poet—the only person who takes real account of his deplorable situation. However, Jim, Amanda, and Laura all demonstrate different attitudes and conflicts that are important to see in juxtaposition with Tom.

Jim represents the type of person that remains completely fooled by the idea of capitalism and economic progress. On a general note, Tom says that Jim is “the long delayed but always expected something that we live for” (928). Always looking into the future, Jim fails to perceive the fundamental problems of the present. Contemplating his successful future, Jim exclaims, “Knowledge—Zzzzp! Money—Zzzzp! Power—Zzzzp! That’s the cycle democracy is built on!” (964). He is indeed a prototype of materialism, of striving after wealth. However, Tom reveals that Jim really isn’t getting anywhere financially or socially. He says that one would have expected that Jim would “arrive at nothing short of the White House by the time he was thirty” but that he “apparently ran into more interference after his graduation from Soldan. His speed had definitely slowed. Six years after he had left high school he was holding a job that wasn’t much better than mine” (949). Therefore, despite Jim’s exuberance, he’s in the same manipulated state of the decayed American Dream as everyone else in the play.

Like Jim, Laura and Amanda don’t come to terms with the decayed economic and moral situation either. Laura is simply innocent to the evils around her, and her shyness sets her up to be an almost helpless victim, as is shown by her tragic interaction with Jim. Twice in the play, her precious glass animals are symbolically broken as a representation of her innocent hopes and dreams, and she is unable to protect them. Amanda, on the other hand, is certainly not innocent, but she uses her past life and glory as a shield to guard her from reality. She is always remembering her youth and her many “gentleman callers.” In fact, the only memories she will allow of her run-away husband are from the times they were happy in love. The decaying American Dream directly affects both Amanda and Laura. Their financial situation is saddening; Laura’s tragic love relationships expose lost Romantic ideals;
and, most of all, Tom and his father both abandon them in search of success and self-realization.

Tom, unlike all the other characters, comes to a full realization of his deplorable situation and discovers that the only way to win is to leave. Unfortunately, Tom’s motives for leaving his family are material gain and self-fulfillment. He says to his mother, “Look—I’ve got no thing, no single thing—in my life than I can call my OWN!” and, “For sixty-five dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being ever! And you say self—self’s all I ever think of. Why, listen, if self is what I thought of, Mother, I’d be where he is—GONE!” (935, 937). Tom is focused on money. He wants to have “things,” and he does leave his family, showing that “self” really is his top priority. He explains his desire to fulfill himself: “I like adventure. Adventure is something I don’t have much of at work” (941). Adventure and money seem hardly acceptable excuses to abandon one’s family, but, like his father before him, Tom has a clear vision of the hopelessness of his current situation and knows he can’t progress there.

Ironically, Tom’s situation doesn’t improve much by the end of the play. He ends up “travel[ing] around a great deal” and says, “The cities swept about me like dead leaves” (971). He doesn’t seem to be gaining any “things,” and he definitely isn’t having any Hollywood style “adventure.” In fact, his mother’s words ring true as a criticism of the self-fulfilling materialism that inspired his departure: “You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions! [. . .] 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!” (970). Since Tom is narrating the story from the perspective of a poet, we can assume that he did eventually progress, but the feeling of remorse Tom expresses in his final monologue remains much more provocative than any hints of redeeming success. He says, “Oh, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!” (971). Though Tom may succeed financially, and he may find the self-fulfillment of the American Dream, he will always be reminded that he sacrificed his family for that success.

Conclusion

The Glass Menagerie connects the American Dream, and its materialism, directly with the break up of the nuclear family. It is a historical insight into the social and moral dilemmas of the Great Depression, a representative model of Critical Realism, and an autobiographical perspective on Williams’s own life. Most relevant to us, however, Menagerie poses a moral question, and Williams leaves his audience to answer it for themselves: Do our financial goals and the materialism on which our society is based jeopardize our family values?
Works Cited


