



Illusion and reality in the glass menagerie by Tennessee Williams

Savita Boral

M A English

Gurugram University

Abstract

“In memory, everything seems to be happen to music.”

Tennessee Williams

The glass menagerie is considered as the first major play as it is this work that for the first time brought serious critical and public attention to his work. This play is very personal for him; as in his youth, he was popular as storm and an awareness of that fact instantly alerts us to the possibility that on some level, the tom of the play is a depiction of Tennessee himself. This play is also called as memory play and can be presented with unusual freedom of convention. One of the most important themes of this play is the theme of illusion and reality. This paper is an attempt to discuss the significance and impact of this theme in all the four characters of the play, Amanda, Tom, Laura, and Jim ‘o’ Connor’s. And also, an attempt to highlight the need for illusion and pain caused by it.

Keywords: Illusion, reality, conflict, identity crisis,

Introduction

The glass menagerie is one of the admirable play of William Tennessee. Here, he has incorporated crippledness into all his major characters. In this play, it is not only Laura, who is crippled but William also projects a crippling mother and child relationship. We also see none of the characters and capable of living into the present. All the characters face hurdle in accepting the reality and always try to flee from there to the world of illusions.

According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, “There are as may pillows of illusion as flakes in a snowstorm. We make from one dream into another dream. Tennessee in his play precisely unveils the dangling motions of illusions and reality in his play. He says, “Attempting to find in motion what was lost in space.” Also, through the conflict between illusion and reality, he draws the dark world of society. He makes us understand that exploitation, violation, dehumanised passions of power leads us to depression, rootlessness and alienation. It makes our word fragmented and in order to restore happiness, we sneak to our illusions.

Amanda's 'illusion

Amanda Winfield celebrates several illusions to avoid the displeasing truth and situations of her family. The time is 1930, when there is Great Depression, but still she is trapped in the illusion of her genteel old Southern upbringing. One among that is, a woman always needs a man to make her life settle and this is the reason that she always insists her daughter Laura to be more presentable. Parallel to this we also see the tragedy of her life that her husband runs out of the family and leaves her to fend for herself. She always had an illusion that soon a gentleman will come and marry Laura.

Her greatest relief is believing and living in illusion that she is still beautiful and charming like long back as a young girl in Blue Mountain, where she had received seventeen gentleman callers. She also believed that Laura and Tom are 'bound to succeed' as they are 'just full of natural endowments'. She also always insisted Tom to find a suitor Laura but that it is a illusion as Tom himself is close to losing his job at a warehouse. He wants to become a merchant seaman and a poet. Amanda is also desperately clutched to her illusion that she thinks if Laura goes to the business school that she will overcome her shyness but that goes in vain. Next she thought Laura is pretty and that she can easily attract Jim o Connor forgetting the reality that she is introvert and the fact of her being crippled can't be denied .

The world of illusions of Laura

Amanda having failed to establish a balance between reality and illusion but Laura's situation is even grave. Laura has a childhood illness as her one leg is slightly shorter than the other and so she is held in a brace. Amidly, due to this, she has become introvert and has withdrawn herself from the society. From her school days itself, she lives in her own world of illusions. She felt embarrassed that die to her crippledness, she got late for her school chorus and the clumping sound of the brace was like a thundering for her. She in other way, we can say framed a self opinion about herself. Moreover Jim o Connor used to call her pleurisies but she misheard that and she though he called her as Blue Roses.

Laura lives in her world of illusions around the glass menageries. She always found alienated in the outer world so withdrew her from the business school. Her physically challenged condition is symbolic to her isolation. She is unable to adjust with practices and demands of the outer world and retract herself into the shell of glass menagerie and the old records that her father left. Her lack of adaptability is the result of her own illusions about herself. Just as the glass menagerie is fragile and tender same is the nature of Laura.

Tom's illusion

The play starts with Tom as he says, "I am the narrator of the play and a character in it". He also lives in a world of illusions that is formed by movies, clubs and luxuries. Whenever, he had an argument with Amanda, he preferred to walk to movies. In other words we can say that he is also a victim of his illusions. Tom wants to live in his job of warehouse and plans to find himself in the world of adventure and travel as he is deeply impacted by the illusion which is shown by the merchants of the Hollywood.

His one of the biggest illusion of all is that his joining the merchant marine and sailing to all parts of the world will make good for the emptiness that is in him. He faces a kind of alienation in his own home and outer world as well. Tom also wanted to become a poet, and the biggest hurdle on his way was his mother so he believed in escapism. Escapism is derived as psychological escape from everyday monotonous routine. At the end we see Tom as a narrator, has lost his illusions. He now from experiences has learnt that no amount of travel and adventure can shake the demon within him.

Jim 'o' Connor Illusions

Jim 'o' Connor is in the glass menagerie is 'The gentle Caller'. According to Tom, he is the most realistic character in the play. He is a flawless character. Jim was a popular student in his school. But, he is also affected and ruled by illusions. It is so in order to be happy and a successful future. He had not reached to that level of success as expected from him in his school days and landed up working in the same shoe warehouse where Tom works, but, he believes he can still capture it. Jim takes night school course in public speaking and thereby gaining social poise. He is quite confident that with his abilities and utilization of brain, he will be fitted for an executive

position. He is also in the illusion that by taking a course in radio engineering he will be able to gain a foothold in the upcoming Television industry and will attain success.

He had a firm belief that he is someone special and will do some great things in future. Jim's illusion is the American dream. The term American dream was coined by James Truslow Adams in his 'The epic of America'. He says, "Life should be richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability of achievement."

The need of illusions

The question sneaks that, what is the need of illusions? The answer is simple that illusion plays a self defence mechanism. When someone is unable to cope up with harsh and adverse situations of present life they find peace in their world of illusions. From the beginning itself we see Williams has pointed out illusions as the most important 'symbol' in this play. The transparent walls create the illusions of an apartment, the fire escape the leads into an out of the Wingfield Apartment seems to provide an escape from 'slow and implacable fires of human desperations'.

Amanda has self confidence and is strong enough because of her illusion. Even for Jim, it is his illusion that kept him motivated and was always hopeful of attaining success. Tom at the end realized living in illusions is temporary, but for time being he lived in his own world. And undoubtedly for Laura, her life was going on only because of illusions. Laura would have died because she could not identify herself with anything, nor see beauty, delicacy and truth in small things like her collection of glass figurines.

Affliction caused by illusions

This is interesting to observe that Williams did not say that illusions are better than reality or pleasing than facts. And this is so because just like reality illusions too sometimes bring pain and grief. For instance Amanda's illusion towards Tom and Laura are making their life difficult. Similarly Tom's illusions are hurting her mother. The most important painful illusion is one that induces tom to say 'good-bye' to Laura. And that actually changed his view and outlook towards life.

Conclusion

Tennessee Williams in his play has equally focused on both the factors; living life in illusions and in reality. Illusions are although sometimes harmful and curtail us from truth but also provide a shelter and acts like an umbrella in heavy rainfall. But facts and truths cannot be denied and has to be accepted. The more we dwell into the world of illusion the more we start losing our identity in the real world. Change is the law of nature and we need to accept and adapt accordingly.

Reference

1. Tennessee Williams: The Glass Menagerie, Bloomsbury publication
2. J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, What is An America
3. James Truslow Adams The epic of America
4. Peter Berry The beginning Theory