

Living the Self: A Mirror of Modern Life in The Glass Menagerie

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Abstract— Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) shows a family stuck between family duties and personal dreams. Today, many people face the same struggle: choosing between helping their family and finding their own happiness. The rapidly shifting social fabric, marked by individualism and the decline of collective identity resonate even more deeply with the play's themes. In our life also, we often find ourselves playing certain roles or types. This play (Tennessee Williams' 'The Glass Menagerie') also shows us their truth: each character is not just an individual, but also a "type" that represents bigger ideas. Moreover, this paper looks at how the play's characters show this shift from "we" (family, society and togetherness) to "me" (individual needs and dreams) also how it exemplify the modern struggle between duty and self-assertion.

Keywords— dream, family, glass menagerie, individualism, society.

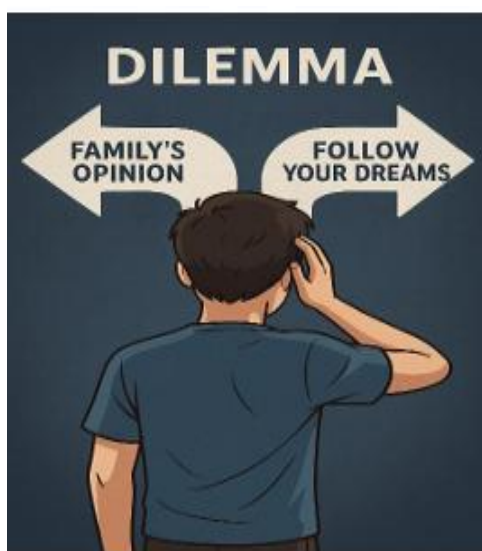


Fig.1: Representing the dilemma of an Individual

The 21st century has witnessed a dramatic shift from collective identity to individual autonomy – a move from “we” to “me”. The *Glass Menagerie* presents characters torn between personal aspirations and family obligations, reflecting this timeless tension. Although written in the mid -20th century, the play's resonance with today's

culture of self-realization and individualism is striking.

In Hindi, the word “jeevan” has a deep meaning. “Jee” means ‘to live’ and “van” means ‘an individual’. So, jeevan means to live as an individual. But in real life, living as an individual is not so simple because we are always tied to family, community and memories. This Play shows us how each character tries to live (jee) as their own self (van) – and how hard is it to balance “we” (family, society) with “me” (individualism).

One of the most significant American plays of the twentieth century, *The Glass Menagerie*, marked a turning point in modern drama, not only for its poetic and emotional style but also for its bold use of a memory play structure, which Williams helped to popularize. The play is semi-autobiographical – Williams' own life and family are deeply embedded in characters of Tom, Amanda and Laura. Tom represents Williams himself, Amanda represents his mom and Laura represents his sister. In the way, the play becomes not just a personal memory, but a universal meditation on family, duty, broken dreams and the struggle to live one's own life or jeevan i.e. “me” life of an individual.

“When a person's own voice gets lost in the noise of family and society, life becomes just a memory –

something they keep acting out in their mind, not something they truly lived."

This play is about the Wingfield family: Amanda, her son Tom and her daughter Laura. Amanda is a mother who keeps talking about her past when she had lots of "gentlemen callers". She wants Laura to have the same life once she had. Even she wants her son Tom to fulfill their American dream. Amanda's dreams are not just her own; she wants the whole family to live them. Amanda believes in family life – everything must be done for the family. Tom works in a shoe warehouse, a job he hates. But he does this to support his family.

This is the "we" life- everyone in the Wingfield family lives for each other, not for themselves.

Tom Wingfield serves as both the narrator and the central character in 'The Glass Menagerie', acting as

the emotional bridge between past and present. He informs the audience that the play is a 'memory play' shaped not by exact words but by feelings, regret and remembrance.

Tom is not happy with just working and living for his family. He wants adventure and to leave the boring life he has. Even his father also left them alone and escape his duties in order to live a life as an individual ('me' life). In the same manner Tom wants to follow his father's footsteps and find freedom.

He says:

"I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard! Did you notice how he's grinning in his picture in there? And he's been absent going on sixteen years!" (Page No .46)

Laura, with her physical and emotional vulnerabilities, represents the casualties of the shifting identity. Amanda's dreams for Laura's future are driven by a collective "we", but Laura's own desires are muted and passive. Her retreat into the glass menagerie symbolizes a refusal or inability to fully embrace an individual.

In today's context, Laura's struggle mirrors how vulnerable individuals – those with disabilities or anxiety disorders – can find themselves caught in the crossfire of family expectations and the modern demand for self-assertion. The pressure to "perform" an individual identity in the modern world can be alienating for those who, like Laura, find strength in quiet, shared bonds.

The shift from "we" to "me" can be clearly seen, Tom primarily uses the pronoun "we" while referring to his family, indicating a sense of collective identity and shared

experience with in the wing-field household.

But as the play progress he increasingly uses "I" and "me", highlighting his growing alienation and desire to break free from his family's suffocating expectations. This shift is not a sudden event but a gradual process.

The society in which we live in has define roles based on gender. The way men and women are shown on stage results the expectations society has for them. Women are often shown as gentle, dependent and tied to the home, while men are shown as strong, independent and responsible for earning money. At first, this fits the idea of the American Dream. But as the story moves on, the display changes to show that these roles are not always

working. The men can not always succeed as providers and the women's dependence becomes a problem instead of a comfort.

The themes of The Glass Menagerie echo the present day cultural movement towards self reliance and personal fulfilment.

"Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world." (Page No.9)

As Emerson states in his most powerful work 'Self-Reliance'.

Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie and Emerson's essay self-Reliance both explore the journey from living for others to discovery one's true self. Tom's struggle to leave his family and follow his dreams reflects Emerson's idea and break free from society's expectations. While Amanda clings to the past and Laura hides from life shows Emerson's idea also.

In the play, the American Dream is shown as a distant hope that never becomes real. Amanda dreams of a rich future for her daughter Laura through marriage, while Tom dreams of escaping his boring life. Both dreams represent the American idea of success, freedom and a better life. But in reality none of these dreams come true. Laura stays in her small world, Amanda remains in her past and Tom leaves his home but feels guilty. Tennessee Williams shows that the American Dream can be beautiful, but also painful and unreachable for many people. Only Jim can be able to achieve his American Dream but he has to struggle a lot in order to achieve it.

Jim's character shows the shift from "we" to "me" by focusing on his own growth and future, but without cutting off all ties to others. He works hard, studies at night and plans for success, showing self-reliance. At the same time, he still cares about people, like when he

encourages Laura. Jim proves that moving from “we” to “me” doesn’t always mean leaving everything behind – it can mean building yourself while staying kind and connected.

Psychologists like Erik Erikson and Carl Jung studied the balance between individual desires (the “me”) and social roles (the “we”). Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development explains that during adolescence and young adulthood, individuals experience a conflict called “identity vs role confusion” – a perfect fit for Tom’s character.

The struggle between “we” and “me” is not just literary it is a developmental stage in human life and failure to resolve it can lead to emotional suffering and guilt, as we see in Tom.

Charles Dickens’ novel “Hard Times” deals with life during the industrial revolution. In this novel (Hard Time), like in *The Glass Menagerie*, we see characters who struggle to find their individual identity (me) while being controlled by social systems, family expectations, and utilitarian education (we). This shift from “we” to “me” is not just a theme – it becomes the very story of their life (jeevan), torn between duty and desire, facts and feelings, structure and soul.

This play also explores how escapism, whether through Amanda’s nostalgic memories, Laura’s glass collection, or Tom’s movie – going, contributes to this shift. These form of escapism provide temporary relief but ultimately fail to address the underlying issues, pushing the character further into their individual realities.

In the past, life was largely centered around family, tradition and shared responsibilities. People often sacrificed personal dreams to support the household, much like Tom working in a warehouse for his family, or Amanda holding onto old values. The individual was shaped by the “we”. In contrast, the present focused more on self-identity, freedom and personal success. Today, like Tom’s desire to become a poet, many choose to follow their own paths, even if it means emotional distance from family. This shift from togetherness to independence reflects a modern way of living where “me” often comes before “we”, sometimes at the cost of connection and money.

CONCLUSION

This reflects how, in today’s world, many people are moving away from family and society to focus on themselves and their goals. This shift from living for others to living for oneself is shown through Tom’s painful journey. Writers like Emerson also supported the idea of

trusting yourself and finding your true path. The play reminds us that while chasing personal freedom, it is important to remember that it often comes with emotional loss, guilt and memories that stay with us. Just like the glass, animals in the play, human feelings and relationships are fragile and easy to break when we move from ‘we’ to ‘me’.

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