

Interpretation of the Characters in *The Glass Menagerie* From the Perspective of Existentialism

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In one of Tennessee Williams's most well-known dramas, *The Glass Menagerie*, he portrays us with a sad family. From the existentialist point of view, this paper interprets the survival dilemma and free choice faced by the four Wingfield families in the play. While inspiring people to think and explore their own life meaning and survival choice, it also tries to reveal Tennessee Williams' humanistic concern for the helpless and depressed living state of people in modern society.

Keywords: existentialism, *The Glass Menagerie*, survival dilemma, free choice

Introduction

As one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century, Tennessee Williams is renowned for his profoundly insightful plays about human nature and dramatic themes. Williams' works often explore complex and profound human relationships, revealing the complex emotions of the human heart. Not only were works like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and others famous on stage, but they were also made into several well-known motion pictures. Often rich in symbolism and drama, his works reveal the pain of human existence and the desire to pursue happiness through delicate dialogue and deep characterization. His work also covers people's lives on the margins of society, offering deep reflections on gender, religion, and social issues. Williams created many immortal works in his life. His contribution to American drama lies in his artistic achievement and his profound observation of human nature. His writings have become literary masterpieces and are still frequently read and examined today. American writer Tennessee Williams's early work, *The Glass Menagerie*, made him widely recognized once it was released. The play lifted Tennessee Williams out of poverty and laid a solid foundation for him to become a prominent American playwright. With multiple accolades, including the Sidney Howard Memorial Award and the New York Theatre Critics Circle Award, the piece has significantly influenced American and international theatre. Amid the economic crisis, *The Glass Menagerie* chronicles the tale of a lady who struggles to make ends meet on her own with her kids and makes a futile attempt to locate her daughter as a spouse. Amanda, the mother, is obsessed with memories of the past. Tom loves writing, but he has to go to work in a shoe factory every day. Laura, the daughter, because of lame and cowardly, hides at home all day. This essay will examine and analyze the classic drama *The Glass Menagerie* from an existentialist point of view, and it will attempt to reinterpret the characters' destinies by examining the survival conundrum that each of the main characters must face.

Literature Review

Existentialism is a philosophical trend that arose in Europe at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Its main point is to highlight the value of each person's existence, while underlining his/her autonomy, obligation, and autonomy. Existentialism focuses on human existence and experience, trying to understand how humans find personal meaning in a meaningless universe. One of the core ideas of existentialism is that existence takes precedence over essence and that humans do not have a fixed, determined essence but define themselves through their actions and choices. Individuality is no longer viewed as a static concept but as a dynamic process. Freedom and choice are important themes of existentialism. Existentialism holds that human beings must take responsibility in the face of freedom because each person's choices have a profound impact on himself and others. Prominent existentialist figures include Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and others. In addition to having a significant impact on 20th century philosophical thought, existentialism served as a precursor to subsequent philosophical and cultural theories. The following subjects are the main areas of focus for both domestic and foreign researchers studying *The Glass Menagerie*: investigating the relationship between Williams's theatrical writings and his own experiences; discussing the play's female characters, Amanda and Laura, from a feminist standpoint; the missing father figure and the escape theme of the work. However, there is little research on Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* from the existentialist perspective. This may be because many scholars do not think Tennessee Williams was an existentialist. However, no one can deny that Williams is a writer with a high humanistic spirit, and he pays attention to reality and society. Therefore, we can say that in Williams's works, there are still many aspects that reflect existentialism. "No American dramatist has explored female characters as thoughtfully and compassionately as Williams" (Harold, 2006, p. 28). Therefore, it is reasonable and necessary to re-study the classic play *The Glass Menagerie* from an existential perspective. The following aims to offer a fresh viewpoint on how to approach Williams's play by discussing the characters from an existentialist point of view.

Laura: Out of the Glass Menagerie

Sartre (2014, as cited in Jean, 1993), the representative of existentialism, also put forward: "Others are hell" (p. 93). Although everyone has an opportunity to choose, the largest issue people encounter when making a decision is the decision made by others, but everyone's freedom may affect the freedom of others. If you cannot treat the eyes of others correctly, then others are the hell of self. It seems as if the other person has taken my universe away from me; as the "I" becomes alienated under their sight, the situation escapes from me, and I am no longer in control of it (Dong, 2001). Laura's physical limitations made her feel inferior, and when she was in high school, the braces on her legs always creaked, a sound she thought sounded like thunder. She shuddered at the thought of passing in front of people. Laura, in the eyes of others, becomes an object, loses her freedom, and loses her control of herself. The presence of the other makes her no longer Laura herself but a "crippled" girl with a nose brace. When the other appears, the "I" acquires an existence: The "I" is someone or others, and the "I" is someone not of my own making. At the same time, Laura, under the gaze of others, reflects a fixed image of herself: a blue rose of melancholy. In this case, when her mother asked Laura to go to college to learn typing, Laura did not think she was capable of learning to type. Laura cannot go to school and cannot work, so she hides in *The Glass Menagerie* where there is no other. In the enclosed zoo, she can talk and play with her animal friends at ease. Laura could not treat the evaluation of others

correctly, and the gaze and evaluation of others became the hell of Laura. Laura also failed to treat herself properly, and she became her own hell.

All actions of man are in pursuit of freedom, whether in the dilemma of self-deception or in the fetters of others; man is striving for freedom (Donald, 1985). And Jim's arrival gives Laura a chance to come out of her shell. Jim invites Laura, who cannot dance, to dance with him. Laura gains fun from learning to dance. She even laughs so hard that she cannot breathe when she dances. The beloved unicorn accidentally fell off the horn. Laura did not break her heart and cry, but she felt that the unicorn who fell off the horn became less strange. This symbolizes Laura's beginning to break her fantasy, give up her fictional life, and face the bleak reality (Murphy, 2005). Then Laura found out that Jim was engaged. But instead of being crushed, the lovelorn Laura bit her lip, flashed a brave smile, and presented the horned unicorn to Jim. It is a symbol of Laura's determination to go out into the real world and to build a new, more complete personality.

Tom: Struggling Between Ideal and Reality

Sartre's existentialism believes that individual freedom is absolute, humans do not have any given nature, all characteristics of humans need to be shaped by their own actions, and external norms have disappeared. But existentialism is not vulgar optimism. Although it may appear that humans are completely and unrestrictedly free, this freedom carries with it an equal amount of responsibility, and individuals must take accountability for their own acts. It is in the process of facing the survival dilemma of life that man can surpass himself and establish his own existence.

In this play, Tom is a young man full of ideals. He loves literature and poetry, eager for adventure and excitement. His colleagues call him Shakespeare. While working in a shoe factory, he used to hide in the toilet and secretly write poems. He had always dreamed of becoming a poet and sailing around the world on a merchant ship, but his poor family made his dream impossible. The real-life he has to face is that because his father left home, Tom must bear the burden of supporting the family, and his menial work is compelled to take on the role of the family's primary source of income. He is out of breath from the pressures of real life, and the weight of his family forces him to put up with a boring and miserable lifestyle in addition to work. He is unable to realize his long-held dream of traveling. His sister Laura's autism and disability made Tom feel he had to give up his dreams and work hard to support his family. Tom's monthly salary is the main source of income for his family, and every day he walks to work, he knows that he is not taking this journey for himself but for the survival of his mother and sister. The conflict between the depressed and helpless real life and the beautiful dream of traveling is Tom's biggest survival dilemma. He longs to live for his ideal, but the cruel reality never allows him to have such an idea. All this makes Tom have indescribable antipathy and aversion to real life.

Tom finally made a choice between a dilemma and decided to create his own value. Following his most recent argument with his mother, Tom made the decision to move out of his mother's house, live by himself, and follow his own path. He refused to live in the framework his mother called him to set, refused to passive choice, and finally chose his own freedom, bravely went to his own future, and became the master of his own destiny. However, although Tom was freed from the burden of his family, he could not shake the guilt he felt for his sister Laura. The window full of glass bottles he passes always reminds him of Laura, which is a reflection of his guilt toward Laura, but it is also a consequence of his choice to be himself. Just as Sartre said, freedom does not mean doing whatever you want; it is closely linked with responsibility; whether you listen to or refuse, the call for freedom is the result of free choice; there are corresponding responsibilities to bear.

Amanda: Indulging in the Past

During the Great Depression in the United States in the 1930s, the disintegrating economy affected people's daily lives and mental states, and there was a great deal of noise and confusion. There was a kind of "nostalgia" in society—a "nostalgia" for life in the American South. This light sadness and nostalgia overflow throughout the text, "it is a play of memories, and the scene should be dimly lit to create an atmosphere of sentimentality and unreality" (Tennessee, 1992, p. 56). Several of the play's main characters, Tom Wingfield as the narrator, his mother Amanda Wingfield, his sister Lola Wingfield, and Jim O'Conner, the "visiting gentleman" who appears in the final scene, all reflect the nostalgia of the period. Among them, the mother, Amanda, is the most prominent. Sartre, a representative of existentialism, believes that the world is absurd, life is painful, life is meaningless, and the meaning of existence should be absurd. Realizing the absurdity of life cannot be a point, but a beginning (Albert, 1989). This starting point allows us to realize the absurdity of life, which is absolutely necessary, but we cannot give up and sink. Amanda's early life was beautiful and in her early years she was courted by many beautiful men but she eventually chose to marry a telephone operator. This was the beginning of her unfortunate life. Her husband, Wingfield, chooses to leave the family irresponsibly because of his oppressive life and personal desire for freedom. The harsh reality is that Amanda is reduced to an abandoned housewife; she must bring up her two children in order to survive. Under the pressures of life, this petite woman is forced to run around and make careful calculations in an effort to provide for her family. In the face of the unbearable weight of life and the inescapable suffering, remembering the past and anesthetizing herself with the memories of the good times she once had is not the right choice. Under the bad life situation, Amanda always misses the past. Throughout the whole narrative, there are three fragments of Amanda's memories of her "old life", which inadvertently set the overall narrative tone of the play. Amanda's characterization and character conflict reaches its peak when she discovers that Jim has a girlfriend. Due to her physical handicap, her daughter Laura refuses to contact the outside world and shuts herself off from playing with some glass animals. Since Laura is unable to live on her own, Amanda wants to help her find a husband. When ambitious husband Jim comes to visit her, Amanda sees hope. But unfortunately, Jim already has a girlfriend. At this point, Amanda's illusions are completely shattered; it seems that the only way she can escape reality for a while is to re-immers herself in the good old days of her lost teenage years. Amanda's miserable life is a product of the cruel social reality and the inevitable result of her self-choice. Faced with a terrible life predicament, Amanda indulges in fantasies of a better life in the past, living in a world of memories she has woven for herself. This may seem absurd, but it is a form of self-redemption, a more immediate and emotional response to a meaningless life.

Old Wingfield: Shirking His Responsibilities in Search of Freedom

Existentialism maintains that a person's activities determine who they are and that a person's actions are what make them who they are. Therefore, a person should be evaluated by his moral actions, not by his identity, appearance, education, or career. The father, Wingfield, was unable to meet the social requirements of men at that time, unable to achieve achievements in society and family; coupled with his own yearning for a free life, he made the decision to part ways with his family early to prevent himself from shouldering their problems. He left to fulfill himself, but he suffered his wife and children. Since he left home, the whole family has been plunged into infinite pain. Although existentialism emphasizes that people should take "I" as the center to

explore, pursue, solve, and optimize everything that creates people, existentialism also emphasizes that people's moral behavior should be used to evaluate a person. The father in the play runs away from home to pursue freedom, although he realizes his own peace and value. However, as Sartre's existentialism says, free choice is the choice to bear responsibility. Wingfield's departure has a terrible effect on the family members, and the series is filled with problems for the mother, son, and daughter in many ways after the father leaves home. Because of her husband's departure, the mother, Amanda, becomes a victim of traditional marriage and social norms. When Wingfield left the family to go on a long journey, he took almost all the important things in the house and left behind only a photograph. For the mother, Amanda, her husband's abandonment of the family means that she has to take on a dual role, and she suffers from the intrusion of memory flashbacks and confined cowering. For the daughter, her father's absence represents a lack of fatherly love, as well as the burden of her mother's oppressive love, and she suffers from hyper-vigilance and confinement cringes. Against the backdrop of Wingfield's irresponsible running away from home, the whole family becomes shattered: the mother, Amanda, obsessed with the bygone Southern era because of the hard life of constantly running for her children; the daughter, Laura, autistic because of her disability and lack of fatherly love and extremely low self-esteem; and the son, Tom, unable to bear the strict family atmosphere, decides to leave the house and follow his father's path. As can be seen, the father's running away leaves the whole family without a strong anchor and a sense of security, all of which is a consequence of his running away from the responsibilities he is supposed to have. There is no freedom to do what he wants to do, everyone cannot survive without responsibility, and irresponsible and reckless freedom can bring misery and disaster to others.

Conclusion

The dilemmas of survival in *The Glass Menagerie* are everywhere: stifling poverty, frustrating fascination with the past, embarrassing physical deformities, and desperate escape. The drama finally ends in the disaster of the Wingfield family, but even in the dual dilemma of reality and spirit, the Wingfield family still bravely makes the choice of self-survival. In fact, the predicament and embarrassment encountered by the characters in the drama reflect the real face of human existence. The Wingfield family, portrayed by Tennessee Williams, are ordinary characters struggling for survival, and also the epitome of modern people torn between choice and responsibility. Their suffering is the inescapable problem of human existence. Ultimately, it is challenging to escape the terrible destiny since people are genuinely caught in a struggle between illusion and truth. The drama presents not only the tragedy of a family but also the tragedy of human existence. Through the fate and choice of the characters in the play, it can be seen that Williams pays close attention to the lower masses and has a high degree of humanistic feelings. At the same time, Williams also thinks about how people face the reality of helplessness and how to overcome difficulties. In the nihilistic and absurd world, people who exist for themselves should bravely choose and actively practice freedom, and try to find their own value as human beings.

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