

## Chapter I

## I. The illusions of the three protagonists: Tom, Chance and Brick



## The Glass Menagerie (1950)

## A. Tom desires to have an adventurous life

*The Glass Menagerie* (1945) is a “memory play” set in the late 1930s, during the Great Depression<sup>1</sup>, and is about Tom’s family: his mother, Amanda Wingfield, and his younger sister, Laura. Tom Wingfield is trapped not only by working in a warehouse job but also by his responsibilities to his mother and sister. Amanda, Tom, and Laura try to find a better life under their poverty-stricken conditions. In short, Tom’s leaving home is primarily caused by the economic pressure on his family and from society in the time of the Great Depression. This play, written by Williams in 1944, is actually Tom’s memories of his family in the 1930’s through the crisis leading up to his escape from his stultifying home and job (*Understanding* 104). This period of time is described by many bewildered Americans as a time not for working but for going their blind way, dancing, or making love. On the other

<sup>1</sup> The Great Depression began in the United States, from the collapse of the New York Stock Market in 1929 and lasted until 1939. It was the most severe economic depression ever experienced in the Western world. By late 1932, U.S. stocks had dropped to about 20% of their pre-crash value and unemployment had reached 20~30%.

hand, the Second World War (1939-45) was a time in which the middle-class<sup>2</sup> changed America by improving the nation's economic, industrial, and scientific capabilities for the purposes of the war. In the play, Tom tries to help his family financially by working in a boring shoe factory; however, he goes to night movies after work to forget the harsh reality. His adventurous dream in the movie is negated by his mother. In order to satisfy his inborn instincts, he decides to escape from his family to become a Merchant Mariner. A critic, Thomas P. Alder, proposed that the central motif of *The Glass Menagerie* is "escape":

The central motif of *The Glass Menagerie*: escape—from a too-possessive love; from responsibility (personal, familial, and social); from reality; from time; and even from an indifferent universe (Alder a: 36).

Tom escapes the possessive love of his mother, escapes his responsibilities for supporting his mother and his sister, and escapes the reality of working in a monotonous shoe factory. He is a dreamer. He talks about his feelings of a man's "instinct" to his mother:

TOM: Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse!

AMANDA: Man is by instinct! Don't quote instinct to me! Instinct is something that people have got away from! It belongs to animals!

Christian adults don't want it! (*Understanding* 118)

The word "instinct" enrages Amanda, because she regards instinct as belonging to animals, not to Christian adults. According to Falk, Amanda believes that Christian adults should be concerned with things of the mind, and spirit and leave dirty words like "instinct" for monkeys and pigs (Falk a: 48). However, Amanda is a traditional mother, and a protector of

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<sup>2</sup> The middle class consists of people who have economic independence but do not have a great power in society, such as merchants, professionals, bureaucrats, farmers and skilled workers.

her family. She loves her son, but constantly corrects Tom's behaviors such as his eating habits, smoking, and going to the movies. At times, their personalities come into domestic conflict:

TOM: No, I won't hear more, I'm going out!

AMANDA: You come right back in—

TOM: Out, out, out! Because I'm—

AMANDA: Come back here, Tom Wingfield! I'm  
not through talking to you! (*Understanding* 114)

Amanda wants Tom to find a nice young man for his sister to marry. Laura is slightly crippled and shy, which make her somehow different from other girls. Tom wants his mother to be a little more realistic about Laura's situation when he invites his friend Jim to dinner with the family:

TOM: Laura seems all those things to you and me  
because she's ours and we love her. We  
don't even notice she's crippled any more.

AMANDA: Don't say cripple! You know that I  
never allow that word to be used!

TOM: But face facts, Mother. She is and—that's  
not all—

AMANDA: What do you mean "not all"?

TOM: Laura is very different from other girls.

AMANDA: I think the difference is all to her ad-  
vantage.

TOM: Not quiet all—in the eyes of others—  
strangers—she's terribly shy and lives in a

world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house.

AMANDA: Don't say peculiar.

TOM: Face the facts. She is (*Understanding* 123).

Amanda refuses to admit Laura's shyness and her crippled leg, and believes that Laura can meet a true love one day. She does not accept Laura as being crippled and insists that Laura just has a little physical defect.

However, when Amanda finds out that Jim is engaged to another girl, she is upset and starts more arguments:

AMANDA: You don't know things anywhere! You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions! Where are you going?

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! ... (*Understanding* 139)

After the bitter argument, Tom left home for good:

AMANDA: ....

Go 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 interferes with your selfish pleasure! Just go, go, go— to the movies!

TOM: All right, I will! The more you shout about my selfishness to me the quicker I'll go, and I won't go to the movies! (*Understanding* 139)

Finally, Tom follows his father's footsteps, and leaves his mother and sister behind in order to follow his instinct. A critic, Bauer-Briski, points out that Amanda has driven Tom out of their home and destroyed her little family as well as taken away their provider. As a result, she and Laura are left worse off than before (Bauer a: 32). He wants to start his adventure immediately, and he can not wait for it for any longer. By joining The Union of Merchant Seamen, perhaps Tom will have his portion of an adventure as well as some sexual fulfillment, if not love, in ports all over the world. Tom left his mother and sister behind in order to gratify some of his instincts (Bauer a: 22-3). The idea of absolute freedom or an adventurous life is Tom's illusion.

Because of his sensitivity and love for Laura when he revisits his former abode many years later. He talks to Laura in his mind about his difficulties with leaving home:

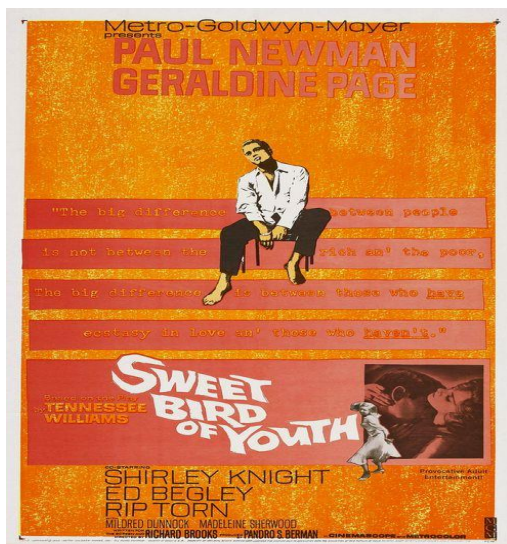
TOM: ...Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger—anything that can blow your candles out! (*Understanding* 140)

In fact, "like father like son", he went away to find his dream: to follow in his father's footsteps because his father was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he

gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town...

(*Understanding* 108)

## B. Chance fancies wealth and a beautiful wife



### Sweet Bird of Youth (1962)

Williams seems to want to express his own doubts about life in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (published in 1959). A critic, Nancy, explains that Williams had doubts about his life from the time in his twenties when he started lying about the year of his birth in order to qualify as a “young playwright”, through his prolonged apprenticeship in the theatre, living like an adolescent with no home or family of his own, Williams counted each advancing year with apprehension (Tischer c: 99). The success of *Sweet Bird of Youth* encouraged Williams to write more successful works about many people’s lives. Nancy also finds out that the reasons for Chance’s willingness to become a gigolo are his gentle and innocent character, and his ambition. At first, Chance was a beautiful youth and deeply in love with Heavenly. But the interference of Heavenly’s father forced him to find a way to win her. He became an ambitious person, and to become a gigolo seemed a fast way to get rich. He thought that his handsome face might advance him in the theatrical world, but his expectation of joining in

a big production never happened. So, Nancy expresses cruelly that “Chance Wayne, finally, is nothing more than one of the many disposable bits of handsome flesh but that stage and film producers buy and use” (Tischer c: 105).

Another critic, Falk, regards the origin of *Sweet Bird of Youth* having come from Williams’ own life, ideas, and experiences (Falk b: 122). The play, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), begins with an aging actress, Alexandra Del Lago, and her gigolo, Chance, in a hotel in St. Cloud on an Easter Sunday morning with the sound of church bells. When Chance was young, he hoped to get married to Heavenly, but in order to be able to marry her, he realized, he must leave her temporarily to pursue material wealth. So Chance leaves her temporarily. Later, Scudder, the man who is going to marry Heavenly the following month, tells him that Heavenly’s father wants to punish Chance with castration:

SCUDDER: ...Chance, I think I ought to remind you that once long ago the father of this girl wrote out a prescription for you, a sort of medical prescription, which is castration. You’d better think about that, that would deprive you of all you’ve got to get by on.

CHANCE: I’m used to that threat. I’m not going to leave St. Cloud without my girl (*Sweet* 19).

Chance was born in the poor family without the big names and money he wanted. In his youth, he was so vain that, for instance, he joined the Navy because a sailor’s uniform looked good on him. After leaving the Navy, he came back to St. Cloud to be with Heavenly. They had a “pleasure” time together. He confessed to Princesses: “the biggest of all differences in this world is between the ones that had or have pleasure in love and those that haven’t any pleasure in love, but just watched it with envy, sick envy” (*Sweet* 50). Chance believes that the real differences are not between the rich and the poor or good and

evil. Chance found routines and disciplines to be boring, and wanted to search for a quick way to enter a career in show business, but he ends up being a gigolo.

After finishing his story, Chance borrows Princess's Cadillac and, in order to display his successfulness to his hometown's citizens drives it to the Royal Palms Hotel. He wears a white mess jacket, a scarlet cummerbund and light blue trousers. After seeing Chance in the cocktail lounge, Aunt Nonnie warns him to go away from there. But, Chance insists on staying in town: "I go back to Heavenly, or I don't. I live or die. There's nothing in between for me" (*Sweet* 83). Chance tries to prove to Aunt Nonnie that he has a movie contract with Alexandra Del Lago:

CHANCE: ....

.... Aunt Nonnie, look at this contract.

AUNT NONNIE: I don't want to see false papers.

CHANCE: There are genuine papers. Look at the notary's seal and the signatures of the three witnesses on them. Aunt Nonnie, do you know who I'm with? I'm with Alexandra Del Lago, the Princess Kosmonopolis is my—

AUNT NONNIE: Is your what?

CHANCE: Patroness! Agent! Producer! She hasn't been seen much lately, but still has influence, power, and money— money that can open all doors. That I've knocked at all these years till my knuckles are bloody (*Sweet* 82).

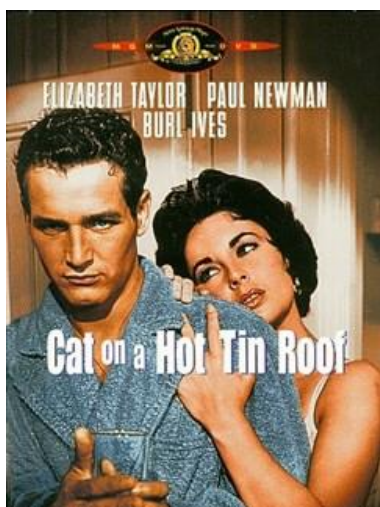
Chance begs Aunt Nonnie to listen to his reasons for staying in his hometown:

AUNT NONNIE: No, no, go away!

CHANCE: Where no? Where can I go? This is the home of my heart. Don't make me homeless (*Sweet* 84).



## C. Brick dreams of a successful life in the future



*Cat on A Hot Tin Roof* (1955) is set in Glorious Hill near Clarksdale. Big Daddy, the owner of the biggest plantation in the Delta is afflicted with cancer. His first son, Gooper wants to inherit his estate after his death. Margaret, the wife of his other son, Brick, a former football star, also longs for Big Daddy's estate, and believes she is entitled to it. Brick Daddy is trying to decide who will inherit his huge estate, Brick or Gooper. There are three pairs of family members: Big Daddy and Big Mama, Brick and Margaret, Gooper and Mae. This is a "family play" (Tischer c: 83). However, Brick, an alcoholic, is mostly indifferent to the plantation. In the Act One, Margaret talks about the birthday party with Brick, and she asks Brick to write his name on Big Daddy 65<sup>th</sup> birthday present:

MARGARET:

It's got to be your handwriting; it's your present, I've given  
him my present; it's got to be your handwriting!

...

BRICK:

I don't have to do anything I don't want to do..... (*Cat* 34-5)

Brick often ignores Margaret's request, even to please his father in order to inherit Big Daddy's estate.

Brick always thinks back about the glorious days when he was a football star with Skipper as his teammate in their college. Brick tells his father that he and Skipper were scared to grow up and they only wanted to toss the ball, and the aerial attack that made us famous.

Also, just a day before his father's birthday Brick broke his ankle by jumping hurdles on the nearby high school athletic field because he can not forget the happy youthful days and his relationship with Skipper, and they sometime jumped hurdles before (*Cat* 61).

The cause of Brick's alcoholic problem is suspected to be some abnormal relationship between Skipper and Margaret; he relies on the liquor for his relief. The climax of the play is the confrontation between Brick and Big Daddy, when Big Daddy wants to know that Brick lives with mendacity:

BIG DADDY:

....

there's nothing else to live with except  
mendacity, is there?



BRICK:

Yes, sir. Yes, sir there is something else that you can live with!

BIG DADDY:

What?

BRICK:

This! —Liquor.... (*Cat* 109)

However, a critic, Nancy, explains that Brick is refusing to accept the real, material, disgusting, corrupt world and pretending to be an idealist who is too pure to touch the earth, which is itself a lie (Tischer c: 90). On the other hand, another critic, Bigsby, explains Brick's idealism differently: his idealism is not untangled with an adolescent resistance to

process. He wants to cling on to the world of college sports and male relationships and when that fails him he turns to alcohol (Bigsby a: 57).

Some people escape reality by drinking. When drinking a lot, they can avoid facing truth. For example, Brick wants to drink a lot to escape his problematic life. Brick, by drinking, can neither become a good husband nor inherit his father's estate. He must find a way to cope with his drinking, to accept the truth, and to accept his failure:

BIG DADDY:

—You won't sleep with her, that you sleep on the sofa. Is that true or not true? If you don't like Maggie, get rid of Maggie! —What are you doin' there now?

BRICK:

Fresh'nin' up my drink.

BIG DADDY:

Son, you know you got a real liquor problem?

BRICK:

Yes, sir, yes, I know.

BIG DADDY:

Is that why you quit sports-announcing, because of this liquor problem?

BRICK:

Yes, sir, yes, sir, I guess so (*Cat* 83).

