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A Broken Economy

by Ashley Urban

(English 1102)

Tennessee Williams' play, "The Glass Menagerie" is set in the city of St. Louis in the mid-nineteen thirties, which was during the time period of the Great Depression. Life during the thirties was a struggle for anyone no matter where they lived or what class they were in. Every single person in the United States was affected by the economic slump produced by the Great Depression.

The play, "The Glass Menagerie" is a memory play narrated by the main character Tom Wingfield. It takes place in the Wingfield's crowded, dingy apartment. Throughout the play, Tom recalls events from his past involving his crippled sister, Laura, and his outspoken mother, Amanda. For the majority of his adult life he had to work to support his mother and sister because his father had abandoned the family. Tom's attitude towards his family is puzzling; he truly cares for them yet he frequently acts unsympathetic to them. Tom escaped his family life by supposedly going to the movies, writing poetry, and also reading literature. "Similar to the character Tom, Tennessee Williams also found an outlet for fantasies and social dysfunction through writing, which became a vocation by the time he was a teenager" (Clum).

Amanda was always on Tom's case for something and she would constantly nag him as well as Laura. She thought that she knew everything and would try to entertain her children with extravagant stories of her past. She insisted that when she was younger she was a wealthy southern belle who received countless visits from classy gentlemen callers. Tennessee pulled Amanda's personality right out of his own life. "The model for many of Tennessee's characters is his mother, Edwina Williams, who played the role of southern belle more than was necessary, even in Ohio where she spent much of her adolescence" (Clum).

Amanda was always living in the past. Nothing for her was reality, she was stuck in a world of her own, she did not see things the way her children saw them, which is one reason why she was always trying to set-up Laura.

During his life, Tennessee Williams suffered from several anxiety and panic attacks. "The panics remained with him throughout his life and sustained his extreme hypochondria. They also motivated the behavior of many of his characters, particularly the terrified women he created, such as Laura Wingfield" (Clum).

Laura was physically and emotionally crippled. She had pleurosis, which effected her leg and labeled her as crippled. Laura had great compassion for Tom, but he still was not there for her as much as she needed him. So, Laura was dependent on Amanda because she was never given a chance to have a life of her own. Amanda was always trying to find Laura a suitable gentleman caller. One night Tom's friend, a young man by the name of Jim O'Connor stopped by for dinner with the family. Amanda helped Laura get ready, by picking out her clothes and doing her hair, so she could impress Jim and win his heart. Laura welcomed Jim at the door wearing an elegant dress, which would have looked very out of place in their murky apartment. In the end, Laura did start to feel a connection with him but her already fragile heart was broken when she found out he was actually already engaged. She escaped the incident with Jim and many of her other problems by playing with elegant glass figurines that were as delicate as her own posterior.

Everyone in the Wingfield family lived in their own fantasy world. None of them were ever

able to accept reality and deal with the situations that were dealt to them. The family never found any common ground with each other, and eventually Tom followed in his father's footsteps and ventured off on his own, leaving his feeble sister and unhinged mother behind to fend for themselves.

Part of the reason that the Wingfields may have acted the way they did was because of the horrendous economic disaster they lived through. The decade of the Great Depression brought fear and sorrow to millions of Americans.

The stock market crash in 1929 was a large factor of the Great Depression. It was one of the most devastating stock-market crashes in American history. The crash followed a speculative boom that had taken hold in the late nineteen twenties, which led millions of Americans to invest heavily in the stock market. In addition, an immense amount of people were actually borrowing extra money to buy even more stock. "The cost of share prices rose to record highs and encouraged even more people to invest. All of this action created what is known as an economic bubble" (Great Depression: Business).

"On October 24th, 1929 the market finally turned down and panic selling started. Over twelve million shares were traded in a single day. Prices kept going down for over a month, by November the DOW sank from 400 to 125. This mass migration of shares is what effected the market and is known as a large contributing factor to the start of the great depression" (Watkins, *The Great Depression* 41). During this time, the United States was financially unified as never before. "Harvests in California affected markets in New York. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and cinema linked the nation from coast to coast. The dust bowl in Oklahoma was reported in Florida; hurricanes in Florida were reported in Oklahoma. A national media reinforced the perception that the Great Depression was unprecedented in its intensity and depth" (Great Depression: Business).

Another consequence of the stock market's downfall was that many families lost their jobs and money. Everyone in society was effected somehow, every race and social class. "Doctors and lawyers were even struck with a 40% pay cut" (Ciment 676). "In 1932, 28% of the households in America didn't have a single employed wage earner" (Kutler 104). Also, from "1930 to 1933 it was recorded that an average of 75,000 workers lost a job every week" (Kott Washburne 456).

What happened to the economy after 1929 left most people overcome and flustered. The physical structure of business was still intact, undamaged by war or natural disaster. Men wanted to go to work, but many factories and offices stood dark and idle. Prolonged unemployment created a new class of lavish people. "The jobless sold apples on street corners. They queued up in breadlines and outside soup kitchens. Many lived in 'Hooverilles,' the shanty towns on the outskirts of large cities" (Social Trends). Helpless people wandered around their hometowns carrying signs that read, "I will work for food." Several people were forced to sleep in parks or alleys. "People had to survive on stale bread and whatever canned foods that had left in their homes" (Social Trends).

Many people tried to deny the seriousness of their situation. "But, by 1933, American families had 54% of the income that they had in 1929" (Kutler 104). Some people were very embarrassed about their financial problems and did not want their friends and neighbors to know so, they tried to impress them by sprucing up the exterior of their home. Also, people had to drastically cut down on socializing because many of them had to get rid of their club memberships because they could not afford the added monthly expense. The search for money and a job was rough and people had to live without their luxuries and even some necessities for several years. An unemployed Oregon father stated in 1933, "We don't dare buy soap when it will pay for an extra egg for our children" (McElvaine 170). Another unemployed father told the *New York Daily News Reporter* in October of 1932, "I haven't had a job in more than two years, sometimes I feel like a murder, what's wrong with me that I can't protect my children?" (Watkins, *The Hungry Years* 61).

The Great Depression especially affected men. "Men literally took their economy as a matter of faith. They worshiped the marketplace, so when the stock market crashed many men were left hopeless and powerless" (Watkins, *The Great Depression* 147). A lot of men did not know how to

face their families when they found out how much money they had lost. Most men were the only provider of their home, so when they lost their job they knew that they were letting their family down.

The traditional roles of the family really changed because of the economic crisis. Some men became so disabled after their losses that they just stopped looking for work all together because they had no integrity or hope left within them. In 1934 a man from Baltimore walked twenty miles saying, "I just stopped every place, but mostly they wouldn't even talk to me" (McElvaine 172). It was especially hard for a man over the age of forty to find work because the companies that were actually hiring wanted younger men in their twenties. This age conflict affected many men, and they gradually started to become depressed because they felt much older than they really were.

Also, many men resorted to alcohol as a temporary escape from their problems. This new reliance on alcohol led to some men becoming abusive to their wives and children. In some cases some men were so ashamed that they just all together walked out on their families and never returned. "A survey in 1939 stated that 1.5 million American women had been abandoned" (20th Century America 104).

These facts are very similar to the major motif of abandonment in "The Glass Menagerie". Mr. Wingfield left his family and they never heard from him again. At this point, Tom was forced to become the man of the house and he had to take on a very heavy load of responsibility. Taking care of Amanda and Laura turned out to be too much for Tom to handle and he ended up leaving them behind. In addition, Jim O'Connor abandoned Laura when he told her about his fiancé, she was left heartbroken.

An alternative to drinking for some people was the complete withdrawal from social contacts. People in this category avoided their friends, and sometimes even family. These men were so convinced that they were failures, they actually fell into a pool of self-blame and shame. An example of this in "The Glass Menagerie" is seen within Tom's actions. Tom escaped his problems by venturing off by himself. He tried to get away from his family as much as he could, he spent his time drinking, reading literature and going to the movies by himself. When he went out alone at night he always felt the guilt in his heart for not taking care of Laura the best that he could have.

In very extreme instances men committed suicide because they felt it was the only way out. In 1933 a St. Louis man was quoted, "One must get the job to keep his mind and body whole" (McElvaine 173). Americans had been brought up on the belief that meaningful work is the basis of life. Without such work, people felt they had no reason for being. "If no one will help, then I will take my life away," said a Detroit man in 1935 (Watkins, *The Hungry Years* 57).

The great depression also brought positive and negative consequences for women. The woman's role as the center of the family gained much significance during this time. "Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her book, *It's Up to the Women*, 'The women know that life must go on and that the needs of life must be met and it is their courage and determination which, time and again, have pulled us through worse crises than the present one'" (The Great Depression). Most middle class women whose husbands were unemployed helped save money in creative ways. "They saved money by buying day-old bread, relining coats with old blankets, cutting adult clothing down to children's sizes, and saving anything that might be useful someday, such as string and broken crockery or could be sold as scrap, such as old rags" (Watkins, *The Hungry Years* 87).

Also, women's roles strengthened because some were able to bring home a paycheck. They were able to get jobs that they could not obtain before. Many women worked in sewing, laundry, and dressmaking. In "The Glass Menagerie", is the fact that Amanda had to obtain a job to help support her family. Amanda earned a small income by selling subscriptions for "The Homemaker's Companion" on the telephone. She did not make enough money to cover all of her family's needs but she was at least able to contribute.

Another turning point for women during the great depression was that they were expected to

get an education to help support the family. Many women were forced to attain degrees in areas such as business. In, "The Glass Menagerie" Amanda had sent Laura to business school, only to discover that she went to the first class, got nervous and never went back. Everyday instead of attending the academy, Laura would go to the zoo or take a walk around the park to pass the time. When Amanda found out that Laura was ditching school she was very disappointed. She said to Laura, "I was under the impression that you were an adult, but evidently I was very much mistaken. What are we going to do? What is going to become of us? What is the future?" (Williams 16). This quote demonstrates just how upset Amanda was when she found out that Laura never went back to school. Amanda's response was justified though because during that time a family needed all the income they could get, and a woman in the thirties needed to learn to be independent.

Families depended on each other for income, strength, and hope. Writer Louis Adamic observed, "On the one hand, thousands of families were broken up, some permanently, some temporarily, or were seriously disorganized. On the other hand, thousands of families became more closely integrated than they had been before the Depression" (The Great Depression). Some families truly were brought together as a result of the Great Depression. Families were forced to "double-up" and move in together to lower the costs of living. "It is estimated that about 1/6 of families shared their home with another family" (Kutler 229). A Muncie, Indiana newspaper said, "Many a family that has lost its car has found its soul" (Kutler 230). Families had to be there for each other more than ever. "The divorce rate actually declined, in part because divorce became too expensive" (Kott 464). Families needed to convince each other that they were going to make it through the tough times and come out on top.

On the other hand, some families were actually torn apart because of their financial situation. Men had to leave their homes in search of work. People became very hostile and agitated one another because of the many worries and fears that overcame them. One of the fears being, a parent looking at their children and wondering what would become of them. Since most people did not even know where they would find food for the next day, it was very hard for them to picture where their children would end up. The hostility and anxiety was also due to lack of sleep. Several people had trouble sleeping because they were overwhelmed with their thoughts. Family members also became hostile in situations regarding who owned what. Families fought over everything from food to possessions.

This hostility is present within, "The Glass Menagerie" between Tom and Amanda. She sometimes insulted and nagged Tom, "What's the matter with you, you big, big idiot? Why can't you sit up straight? So your shoulders don't stick through like sparrows wings?" (Williams 22). Her constant nagging is what forced him to rebel and become more distant from the family. Amanda did not mean to insult Tom or to belittle him, she did care about him.

Laura was also emotionally effected by her mother. Amanda kept such a close watch on Laura that she could not fend for herself. She was way too dependent on other people and never was able to accomplish anything on her own. Amanda was very overprotective of her children, mainly because she had to raise them on her own. Being that her husband left her, she probably felt like she needed to be an outstanding mother to make up for their absent father. Also, she didn't want anything to happen to them because she did love them and didn't want them to disappear from her life.

During the Great Depression not many people were looking to find love. Less people were starting a family of their own. Many single couples in their twenties could not afford to break away from their parents and move out. "Marriage and birth rates declined, as many couples decided to wait until they could afford marriage and children" (Social Trends). This fact may be one reason why it was so difficult for Laura to find a "gentleman caller." Men definitely were not looking to start a family of their own, they were fighting just to make ends meet.

The Great Depression completely transformed American life in the nineteen thirties.

Everything from people's lifestyles to personal beliefs changed. All of the characters in "The Glass Menagerie" were emotionally affected by the Great Depression. Some people lost everything, including loved ones. This harsh decade was a struggle for every race and class of people in America. The Great Depression truly was the longest and most severe depression ever experienced by the industrialized Western world.

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