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## The Concept of the Southern Lady in Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie (1945)

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## **The Concept of the Southern Lady in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945 \_\_**

Tennessee Williams (1911 -- 1983) presents the modern American South as a tough world in which the strong defeat and destroy their helpless, vulnerable fellow human beings. Most of his protagonists are sensitive, helpless and fragile women entrapped in a cruel, unfriendly world. Williams responded to the consequences of the socio-economic changes which took place in the American South during the nineteenth century. Owing to his Southern upbringing, Williams is able to depict with acute perception the Southerners' tortured souls, and the irredeemable state of a dying culture. The conflict between the Old South and the New South is, therefore, a prevalent theme in his drama, and his main interest is to highlight the individual's desire for contentment.

The image of the South as it stands in Williams' plays is composed of two main parts: a background in which he depicts the old, legendary and graceful South, and a foreground which projects the New South exposed to the vulgarizing effects of modern industrial civilization. Williams shows in particular the tension between the two images and the resultant consequences in terms of man's sense of alienation. Holman observes that one can "find at the heart of the Southern riddle a union of opposites, a condition of instability, a paradox. Calm grace and raw hatred, polished manners and violence" (Holman 1).

The American Civil War (1861 -- 1865) marked the beginning of the New South portrayed in Williams' drama. He presents it as a deforming culture in which the delicate, refined descendants of the Old South become maladjusted, alienated and exposed to the dehumanizing effects of modern civilization. Williams is interested in dramatizing the consequences of a fading culture on the human spirit. In this respect Bock writes:

Tennessee Williams' plays have been mainly shaped and coloured by the traditions and legends of the American Old South and the reality of an aggressive New South. The action of his plays takes place very often either in the Mississippi Delta Country south of Memphis, or in the Gulf area of New Orleans. When the action of his plays is set abroad, Tennessee Williams' characters still are definitely Southerners in their character structure and behaviour. (Bock 5)

Williams' women protagonists such as Laura, and Amanda, who cannot compromise with the harsh realities of the new urban south, retreat to their romantic dreams and illusions, a withdrawal which perhaps adds to their sense of estrangement. In their modern south, they look in vain for belonging and redemption. The modern south which Williams presents in his plays is dominated by moral corruption, conflicts and wars, a world in which modern individual becomes a misfit, as Williams himself remarks: "I have followed the developing tension and anger and the violence of the world and time I live in, through my own steadily increasing tension as a writer and a person" (Williams, "The World I Live in", 14).

The aim of this paper is to examine the cultural image of the Southern Lady in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). Traditionally, the concept of the belle, genteel lady was first introduced to America by the English colonists and it was "adopted throughout the colonies and remained popular across America through the late nineteenth century and beyond" (Boles and Atkinson 127). However, the movement for the female right to vote (1920) in general elections affected the termination of the image of the genteel lady in the northern states in particular. In the South remains of that image could be found in the southern women's self-perceptions and in the socialization of southern girls (Middleton-Keirn 141).

Ideals such as the husband as family authority and the family as a cornerstone of society came to the American South with the colonial settlers. Because of the expansive plantations system, the easy attainment of wealth and easy, gracious life, the concept of wealthy women could afford to be merely decorative; lovely, lily-white ladies of leisure who needed never to soil their hands (Jones 11). However, the reality of women's life was harsher than this romanticized image of the southern woman. Morals were much more lax in the colonial period; moreover, there was a double standard concerning morality for men and women. For example, women had to hide their husbands' infidelity, but husbands could "cast off" an unfaithful wife; more than that, illicit affairs were socially acceptable for "gentlemen", but if a woman was caught, she was labeled a whore (Spruill 121-123).

The plantation system, into which the notion of aristocracy with lord and lady imagery was woven, was firmly established in the South by the mid-eighteenth century (Mc. Millan 6). Despite the growing modernity of other parts of the country, the south developed "a rigid

caste society;" a status-seeking pattern that penetrated the society from the planters down through the lowest stage of the hierarchy (King 25-27). Many aspirants thus maintained appearances of gentility and thus the idea of the lady added an extremely important significance.

Likewise, evangelicalism, which was better characterized by interreligious "fraternalism", was a creative force in the development of the southern value system by the early nineteenth century (McLoughlin 4-5). Church provided perhaps a sense of community for the agrarians who were socially isolated by the distance necessitated by the required space for planting. Moreover, community evolved from and revolved around family and kinship networks centered in churches. Jean Friedman argued that family institution as well as property, were the two bases of identity and power: "church ... determined the social order; families identified with a church in a special region or place, and the familial values of southern evangelicalism ... pervaded the culture" (Friedman 7-9).

It is important to know that much of the motivation for women to display southern lady manner-patterns can be attributed to a wish for perfection. The idea is that one should attempt to aspire to "likeness to God," that is, to grow "in grace until they reached a state of virtual sinlessness" (Cairns 10-11). Most southern women wholeheartedly absorbed their evangelical Christianity. Jean Friedman states that the nineteenth century south as well as the "southern woman's identity ... may be considered in the context of familial and religious expectation and demand .... Evangelical churches exerts a powerful ... influence on southern culture, sociology, and psychology. The pathways to the church revealed the roles, values, and beliefs of the antebellum southern people" (Friedman 3).

Since the traditional southern society solidified its cultural identity, its people had a mistrust of the north representing to them the forces of modernity, a breaking of values and undermining of traditional institutions such as family and home. The idea of modernity defeated women because many of its principles were in direct opposition to their Christian faith. Seidel notes: "Southerners were, in their moral ideals, Victorians who reacted strongly against the corruption of their society. The Victorian counter to the corruption of the materialistic, industrialized world was the home" (Seidel 4).

The cultural image of the antebellum lady is, in fact, a cultural expectation for women's behavior composed of observations about

individuals generalized into a stereotype. Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* is an example of that female image, described as being "simple ... unaffected in ... manners, pure in speech ... in soul, and ever blessed with inborn grace and gentleness of spirit, lovely to look upon .... Pure, peaceable, gentle, longsuffering and godly" (Rable 4). Any visitor to the south must have remarked the qualities that distinguished southern women from their northern counterparts. One of such travelers in 1852 commented on "the beauty of form" of southern women, "their symmetrical and harmonious figures, their delicate taste in dress, and their "politeness and ... spontaneous courtesy" (Johnson 142). Moreover, rudeness, or hurting other people's feelings is still the basic southern female sin. She must never speak unkindly to a person's face. As a southern woman the writer Margaret Mitchel comments: "I was brought up to consider it to be better to commit murder than to be rude" (qtd. in Jones 328). Moreover, Boles and Atkinson made a list of twenty identifying characteristics of the southern lady; "simple, good, passive, delicate, innocent, submissive, mannerly, economical, humble, sacrificing, sympathetic, kind, weak, generous, pious, shallow, nonintellectual, hospitable, rich and calm" (Boles and Atkinson 130). The vast majority of antebellum women attempted to live up to the cultural expectation and they succeeded (Dillman 32).

Nonetheless, it could have been impossible for southern women to live up to the perfect cultural ideal because of the lives of most nineteenth century adult southern women in an agrarian society that involved unending labour and childbirth. Even planters' wives worked seemingly endlessly, though much of their work was supervisory. Plantation wives complained of the difficult task of supervising slaves who used to cope with their bondage through passive resistance. Only married or destitute women worked outside the home and teaching was the primary occupation for those antebellum women (Friedman 101). Female innkeepers, boarding house keepers, shopkeepers were common by the outset of the Civil War. Still, education is another problem that southern women had in living up to the perfectionist standards of the cultural ideal of ladyhood. It is true that the image pictured the southern lady as cultured, refined and advanced; yet her knowledge of the world in actuality would have kept her relatively innocent, inexperienced and limited. McMillan states that from 1830 to 1860 the South educated men and women were in roughly the same proportions as did the North,

women's education in the South focused on such issues as manners, behavior and piety (McMillan 80, 83).

Before the Civil War and a long time thereafter, the agrarian nature of the south, that was centered on the family unit, encouraged distance between residences. Consequently, home, family and faith in Christ represented all that was important to southern women. It was for these values that Civil War was fought. Southerners displayed an intense loyalty to their region and this sense of patriotism appealed to the majority. The southern attitude toward individualism is a central motivating factor in southern culture. John Shelton Reed points out that individualism or anti-institutionalism is inherent in the "Protestantism to which most southerners subscribe," in that evangelicals see "salvation as something to be worked out by the individual, in direct, unmediated relationship with Jesus;" and he argues that this individualistic tendency manifests itself in a range of behaviours including a preference for their own location and their own family institution (Reed 230-231). Consequently, the war in the minds of most southern women was not mainly fought about slavery, but rather about regionalism; about the right to preserve a way of life which they believed to be biblically based, and therefore correct.

During the war, southerner ladies were left with total responsibility for home, farm and plantation; adding, thus, tasks of running businesses and growing crops because their husbands, fathers and sons went away to fight. Moreover, they lived with constant anxiety and grief over their loved ones in battle. The experience changed the notion of the southern woman as a delicate, helpless lady and uncovered her steely core and her determination to survive. Their courage under pressures became unmistakable. For example, they organized in Athens, Georgia home guard units to defend their "rights, liberty and honor" (Rable 97). They also run hospitals. Strong family relationships have been demonstrated, as well, to reduce distress in times of war. Thus, the strength of the southern women during the Civil War changed the concept of the lovely, fragile lady with a core of solid steel: the cultural/historical image opposed the fictional one. This ideal is still a source of pride among Southerners of both sexes.

Because many men who came back from war were broken in body and in spirit, women had to continue carrying both male and female workload without men (Scott 91). Women struggled under unending workloads and poverty, which was the most terrible legacy of

the war. For example, post-bellum southern women, 'often' look after as many as fourteen children for whom they cooked, sewed, mended, washed and ironed, in addition to taking them to church and providing for their education (Mendenhall 96). Although all southerners were in need of the basic necessities of life after the war, southern women struggled continually to maintain their own southern identity. Playing the soft submissive lady to her husband, was the southern woman's way of rebuilding man's sense of pride and self-respect, damaged by military defeat (Scott 19). Similarly, by forcing families to cling together for survival, southern woman strengthened familial bonds and their traditional social system. Southern ladyhood in post-bellum period stressed the importance of possessing culture and refinement in the face of very real poverty and vulgarity.

The cultural image of the lady continued to be the almost universal norm among southern women in early twentieth century. Yet, due to the vast changes in society at large, and the modernity which was finally beginning to creep into southern life, a major shift occurred in that image. However, women maintained generally the outward manifestations of lady-like behaviour. Nonetheless, because twentieth century southern ladies have privileged manners to an extreme degree as compared to women in other parts of the country, they began to be perceived as "fakes", and as "slave to conventions" (qtd. in Seidel 33). Yet, the ideal image for women was changing, and many young southern women incorporated a new prototype into their southern ladyhood. The Victorian, motherly, "voluptuous" female figure gave way in the nineteen twenties to a more masculinized ideal which was "young, active intelligent [and] sophisticated" (Maginnis 58). By the turn of the century as many southern women as northern women were "gainfully employed" (Scott 129). However, the 1930s Great Depression took away some of the gains that had been won in terms of women's freedom in the 1920s.

In literature representation, non-members of southern sub-culture tend to portray the southern lady negatively. On the contrary, many members of the southern sub-culture still perceive the lady as a cultural ideal with a desirable set of expectations for women's behavior. For example, they tend to see the southern lady as a symbol of sweetness, refinement and culture. Thus, while some non-southern women might scorn Laura and Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, other southern women may tend to admire certain manners shown by those characters. In this sense, the dramatic portrayal of the

southern lady image, furnish and help perhaps to spread this social type. *The Glass Menagerie*, particularly, has been a standard in the literary canon in the American culture at large, so that its stereotypes have had ample opportunity to influence the thought and behaviour of innumerable persons (Presley 16).

The behaviours that have been primarily associated with the idealized antebellum southern lady are gentility, kindness, sweetness, purity, sincere belief in Jesus Christ, commitment to family, fragility and attention to physical appearance. These behaviours can be divided into the following groups: theatrical behaviour such as hypocrisy and false flattery; status consciousness such as attributes of wealth, aristocratic pretensions, an emphasis on good manners as a sign of breeding; and power covered by a feminine exterior or the exercise of steely control over self and/or others.

This paper, through the examination of *The Glass Menagerie*, underlines some examples which southern lady exhibits as prevalent behaviour stereotypes in twentieth century drama. The southern lady image in this play comes to be a maladjusted misfit in contemporary society. Delma Presley writes: "Amanda Wingfield speaks for a generation when she says, 'I wasn't prepared for what the future brought me' " (Presley 2). Laura and Amanda, each in her own way, are misfit ladies struggling to find their place in the new south. Their fragility becomes weakness and feebleness in a world grown very callous for graciousness. The tension in the play is to be a result of the wide gap between the reality of the lady's environment and her great expectations. This difference between what the Lady expects, and what really is, represents the basis of the lady's struggle. Amanda, with her children, is caught between expectations derived from a more genteel past and a comparatively sordid present. Being unable to find the kind of psychological tranquility she sought in her present circumstances, which are unlikely, moreover, to change, Amanda finds an escape and a kind of relief in the memories of her idealized past.

Technically, the setting of the play interacts with the poetic language Williams employs to dramatize in a solid shape his thematic concern with the spiritual plight of the two helpless southern lady-images isolated by a confining environment and threatened by a brutal modern world. Amanda's tenement house is located in an overcrowded, poor and gloomy section of the lower-middle-class population in St. Louis. Their apartment is entered by a fire-escape and the whole building

is surrounded by dark, narrow side lanes which are crowded with tangled clothes-lines, garbage cans, and the neighbouring fire-escapes. The whole place is dark, fearful and gloomy. This exterior part of the set suggests an atmosphere of frustration and confinement, and the fire-escape indicates a forceful desire for escaping from such an environment. In a remarkable contrast to that part of the set, the interior of the family's flat is described in the initial stage directions as 'rather dim and poetic'. In this way Williams shows that Amanda and Laura are sheltered by their illusions and romantic dreams, a world of their own making to which they retreat from the brutality and ugliness of their external surroundings

The first scene in *The Glass Menagerie* is enacted in mime, the family's meal is "*indicated by gestures without food or utensils*" (54). In this way Williams shows that this is not a specific meal, but rather it is a presentation of all the meals shared by the family members during their entrapment in St. Louis. Tom's first dramatized memory introduces the dramatic situation of the play: the father is absent and the head of the family is a southern lady image who is trapped in a miserable life in the New South, and who finds temporary escape only into lovely memories of her legendary girlhood. For example, she emphasizes on manners of "how to eat", to reaffirm her southern lady self-image, but Tom leaves the table protesting against his mother: "I haven't enjoyed one bite of this dinner because of your constant directions on how to eat" (55). Laura's theme is also introduced when she says "mother's afraid I'm going to be an old maid," foreshadowing her fate at the end of the play when she is abandoned by the gentleman caller forever (58).

Although Amanda tries to escape the present lie of her family life in the modern south, time-the-destroyer denies her even the possibility of a momentary escape. Theatrically, Amanda's failure to regain what is lost in her life is staged by the disappointment of this festive occasion. Although she declares that Laura, perhaps as an antebellum lady is in full charge of supper and that she is very domestic, Laura becomes sick and fails to sit with her gentleman caller, Jim, in a familial atmosphere during the meal. Instead, Laura lies on the sofa in the living room, isolated from the others. Her collapse is theatrically signaled by thunder, a summer storm outside the flat, and the screen projection of the legend *terror*, an externalization of Laura's inner feeling.

Similarly, the failure of electricity after dinner, and the recourse of Amanda to candles stage the Wingfields' habitual withdrawal from the world of reality in modern south to a world of illusions and dreams of the legendary, antebellum south. Likewise, Amanda's wish to spend the rest of the evening in the nineteenth century idealized south before the invention of the electric lamp, highlights the fact that illusion has become a way of life in the Wingfields' flat. Laura's gentleman caller is neither a gentleman nor a caller, but rather a normal person engaged to marry another girl. Thus, *The Glass Menagerie* reflects a conflict between two cultural images: the traditional, idealized way of life of the Old South embodied by Amanda and the modern vigorous civilization represented by Tom. The alienated relationship between Tom and Amanda is made clear from the very beginning of the play.

The misfits Amanda and Laura live in the hellish modern world of St. Louis tenement houses. Amanda is to deal with the reality of poverty, the desertion of her husband years ago, and two children with no glorious prospects; the thing which is too difficult for her to face up to. Consequently, she always tries to retreat to the dreams of her girlhood in Blue Mountains, Mississippi; and moreover, to impose those dreams on Laura's future. It is true that Amanda is to be blamed for attempting to impose traditional southern ideals on Laura though those ideals had not "worked" for herself; yet Amanda has tried in vain the "new woman" approach to Laura's future (Presley 59). She has attempted to have her trained for an occupation so that she could support herself, before resorting to the option of the 'gentleman caller' and marriage.

As a claim to the graciousness of the antebellum southern culture, Amanda can be seen as a status-conscious Lady. She is proud, for example, that she understands "the art of conversation" and that she can meet a great number of her legendary gentlemen callers (56). "The past was a wonderful experience for her compared to the reality" (123 HelpMe.Com). The relative grandeur of Amanda's oft-repeated memory of her girlhood in Blue Mountains protects her lady self-image. Again her great fuss about the preparations for guests and the rituals and ceremonies involved, might have been appropriate for the antebellum familial lifestyle of southerners planters. She polishes her wedding silver wares and launders the "monogrammed table linen" (84). She also pretends with Laura: "you be the lady this time and I'll be the darkey" (55), enjoying, thus, the memories of the servants of the past. She tells Jim, "well in the south we had so many servants ... I assumed that I

would be married ... and raise my family on a large piece of land with plenty of servants" (102). It is important for her that Jim sees her as she sees herself, rather than as her actual circumstances. Thus, Amanda, herself averse to the reality of her life in St. Louis, has great expectations for her daughter.

Similarly, as a part of her southern lady self-image, Amanda is genuinely concerned about her children's spiritual well-being. She is, for example, offended when Tom takes the Lord's name in vain and she tells him that Christian adults desire "superior things! Things of the mind and the spirit! Only animals have to satisfy instincts! Surely your aims are somewhat higher than theirs" (77).

Again, representing the image of the southern Lady, Amanda shows covert power, strength or steely control over self and/or others. Like a true southern matron, Amanda seeks to control Tom's and Laura's behaviour; however, she is too weak to succeed. Amanda cannot control her children or any other aspect of her life. She is a real victim; yet she is delineated as a character that enjoys a kind of endurance which encourages her to fight desperately for survival. Williams, himself, regards endurance as man's "most magnificent thing":

It's human valor that moves me. The one dominant theme in most of my writings, the most magnificent thing in all human nature, is valor – and endurance. The mother's valor is the core of *The Glass Menagerie* ... She's confused, pathetic, even stupid but everything has got to be all right to make it that way in the only way she knows how." (qtd. in Devlin 14)

Amanda, who has been abandoned by a husband, can best know the sense of insecurity of a girl without a family or a home of her own. In her own words:

I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position. I've seen such pitiful cases in the South – barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of a sister's husband or brother's wife! – Stuck away in some little mouse trap of a room – encouraged by one in-law to visit another – little birdlike woman without any nest – eating the crust of humility all their life. (63)

Still, attention to physical appearance, with which Amanda is obsessed, represents one of the behaviours to which she adheres as an

image of the antebellum southern lady. For example, she needs for Laura to know that when she was young she had a "pretty face and a graceful figure" (56). She rebukes Laura in order to stay "fresh and pretty" for the imaginary gentleman callers (57). On the evening of Jim's visit she makes elaborate preparations in terms of her dress as well as Laura's. She makes Laura wear Gay Deceivers for the *gentleman caller*. Amanda herself chooses to wear "a girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash," the dress in which she "led the cotillion" as a girl, with no notion of the grotesqueness of the choice for the current occasion (93-94). As a further revival of her legendary girlhood, she wears her hair in "girlish ringlets" (101). Moreover, Amanda herself entertains Jim with "girlish southern vivacity," an "unexpected outlay of social charm," and "gay laughter and chatter" (100). However, Amanda's dream of the genteel southern lady image is as fragile as Laura's glass animal figurines. Her appearance on stage in her old ball dress to greet Laura's *gentleman caller* and her girlish talks underline her hopelessness in life. She imagines that Jim comes to call on herself not on Laura. The ritualistic resurrection of her old dress, moreover, is a desperate attempt to escape from the hell of her present life to her southern old paradise in Blue Mountains. The whole ceremony is intended to help Amanda restore her lost idealized image as a southern belle.

The evening with the 'gentleman caller' promises to be a horribly painful experience for Laura until her heart becomes involved when Jim turns out to be the only boy in whom she ever had an interest, from high-school. When he reveals that he is engaged to be married, Laura is as damaged as is her favourite glass animal from her menagerie, a unicorn from which Jim has accidentally broken the horn.

It can be argued that Laura, as a delicate image of the southern antebellum Lady, functions as a metaphor for what is lost in modern south. Part of Williams' thematic intent is to show that the beauty, fragility and delicacy of Laura as an image of the southern belle do not belong to the present time of the New South in which she is frustrated and destroyed. In the ugly, brutal modern south, the ideal of gentility has no room and cannot survive. Laura's unworldly beauty and tenderness make her, according to Nelson, an "anachronism who must either retreat into the ideal beauty of unreality or break in the face of the meaningless harshness of the world outside the glass menagerie" (Nelson 99). In fact,

Laura chooses to retreat to her own world of romantic dreams with her set of glass animals, her old musical recordings and candle light.

In terms of theatrical presentation, Laura's theme of fragility and delicacy in a dehumanizing world is highlighted by Paul Bowles' theme music for *The Glass Menagerie*, which, according to Williams, is "primarily Laura's music;" he describes it as "the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest. It expresses the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow" (Williams, *Streetcar* 231). Laura's sadly pensive music, to which she retreats from the realistic world, links with other elements of Williams' poetic theatre language, which include effects of lighting and the glass animals symbolizing Laura's inner reality. Laura's music, like the use of lighting, corresponds to the tenuousness and fragility of glass, ideas woven into the recurring tune. Moreover, Laura's music, which returns between each episode to link different scenes, stands in unmistakable contrast to the outer world's sensuous hot swing music.

In addition, through the use of lighting Williams abstracts Laura and presents her as an unworldly image. As a means of accentuating characterization, shafts of light are focused on certain characters while the rest of stage is dimly lit. The lighting used on Laura is obviously intended to be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pure clarity. During the quarrel scene between Tom and Amanda, Laura is spotted by a pool of clear light to isolate her from the others and to confer an iconic aura on her uniqueness and uncorrupted nature. Tom describes her as peculiar, and her other-worldliness is suggested in recollection of her escaping from her school classes to frequent, instead, bird houses, the art museum, and glass houses, where she can see the tropical flowers. In the same way, at high school, Jim used to call her Blue roses.

In all, the southern legendary image of Laura, stands in the play for the particular and rare delicacy and beauty which cannot be found in the urban modernity of the south. Laura can be visualized as the necessary, graceful substitute for what is lacking in the contemporary south. Similarly, in his poem 'Lament for the Moths' Williams mourns the destruction of the moths which represent the needed delicacy in the brutalized modern south. In a different sense, Williams perhaps laments the loss of a legendary Southern culture whose defeat in front of modern American civilization is inevitable. In Williams' words:

Now that the plague has taken the moths away,  
Who will be cooler than curtains against the day,

Who will come early and softly to ease my lot  
As I move through the shadowy rooms with a  
troubled heart?

Give them, O mother of moths and mother of man,  
Strength to enter the heavy world again,  
For delicate were the moths and badly wanted  
Here in a world by mammoth figures haunted!  
(qtd. in Nelson 100)

Through the ritualistic encounter between Jim, as an image of the modern south, and Laura as an image of the idealized cultural south, Williams dramatizes an encounter between the realistic south inhabited by 'mammoth figures' and the delicate, legendary world of the south, an encounter which results in complete destruction of Laura, 'the moth'. When Jim first comes to the Wingfields' flat, Laura becomes confused and talks hesitantly and uncertainly. She is able to sit with Jim only in the dim light of candles within the world of her glass menagerie. Set beside Laura, Jim is clumsy and cannot fulfill her desire for gentility and tenderness. He simplifies her problem and explains it as an inferiority complex. It is true that he dances with her, kisses her and induces into her some sort of warmth and temporary confidence; yet, as Scanlan observes, Laura longs for more than he can offer: "Laura needs more than a kiss, more in fact than Jim could ever give her. She needs a tenderness and a love that she will never find. Her needs are so great that to satisfy them would mean altering the real world to fit her, changing it into a world like that inhabited by her glass animals, full of delicacy, beauty and tender harmony" (Scanlan 102). Laura and Jim form an incongruous couple; Jim belongs to the tough world that is lit by lightning and disturbed by hot swing music, but Laura belongs to a romantic idealized world with soft music, fragile glass toys and candlelight. Any attempt to wed these two opposites results in a catastrophe.

The Jim-Laura climactic encounter is symbolically dramatized. In a general sense Williams, who "relies heavily on symbolism to emphasize the themes in his plays," uses symbolic clusters as a poetic stage language to externalize the inner subjective reality of his characters (brighthubeducation.com). He, thus, makes his concepts visible to the audience. Commenting on his use of symbols, and defining it as "the natural speech of drama," Williams writes:

I can't deny that I used a lot of those things called symbols but being a self-defensive creature, I say that symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama. We all have in our conscious and unconscious minds a great vocabulary of images, and I think all human communication is based on these images as our dreams; and a symbol in a play has only one legitimate purpose which is to say a thing more directly and simply and beautifully than it could be said in words. (Williams, Foreword to *Camino Real* 121)

As a symbol, the whole set of glass ornaments represents Laura's helplessness as well as her tenderness. Moreover, "her collection of glass represents her own private world – set apart from reality, a place where she can hide and be safe. The events that happen to Laura's glass affects Laura's emotional state greatly" (novelguide.com). Her best-loved piece, the unicorn, symbolizes, in particular, her uniqueness, and most important "her life-maintaining illusion, her idealized concept of Jim, the high school hero" (Durham 127). Jim comments on the extinctness of the unicorn in twentieth century life. He also refers to its solitariness and Laura notes its singularity among the other horses with its single horn. Thus, the unicorn, Laura's favourite "represents Laura's strangeness. [It] is unique, like Laura, and as Jim points out, it is extinct and lonely because it doesn't fit in with other horses" (wisegeek.com). When they dance Jim knocks the table, the unicorn falls, loses its horn and becomes indistinguishable from the other horses. This theatrical event happens a moment before Jim's declaration to Laura that he is engaged to marry another girl. Laura collapses internally, "the holy candles in the alter" of her face are "snuffed out" and she seeks the support of her "victrola" music (123). Jim ceases to be an idealized gentleman in Laura's imagination and her romantic dreams are destroyed. Williams helps the audience realize this fact earlier in the play when Jim appears before them as an ordinary young man frustrated in contemporary life.

The modern ugly industrialized south, personified by Jim, denies Laura even her illusions and dreams of a meaningful human existence. In addition to indicating a pivotal change in relationship between Laura and Jim, the unicorn highlights Laura's powerlessness to confront the realities outside her cocoon. Through Laura's remark to Jim, "be careful -- if you breathe, it breaks," Williams shows that the glass toy, in its extreme fragility represents Laura, who exists in a world of her own, and

who is too delicate to survive in Jim's world or to be involved in a conventional family life (116). Although Jim succeeds in taking her for a moment out of her own world and encourages her to dance with him like any ordinary couple, the attempt ends in utter failure. Her painful sense of alienation remains as complete as it has ever been. She has been given only the briefest of release.

Because, in Artaud's words, "any strong feeling produces an idea of emptiness within us," Williams adopts poetic stage directions and effects which are more expressive in projecting the character's inner dimensions than words alone (Artaud 53). For example, when Jim perhaps wants to know Laura's response, "*She bites her lip which was trembling and then bravely smiles. She opens her hand again on the broken glass ornament. Then she gently takes his hand and raises its level with her own. She carefully places the unicorn in the palm of his hand, then pushes his fingers closed upon it*" (123). Because the broken unicorn, which becomes as normal as any other horse, no longer represents Laura, Jim can take it with him as a souvenir. Laura retreats to a further state of isolation and frustration, seeking refuge with old music records and the rest of the glass menagerie. Durham comments, "The unicorn has vanished, yes; but she still has her glass menagerie and the escape offered by her ancient phonograph records. One illusion is gone, but her other means of escape, her other illusions, still offer protection from life's harsh realities" (Durham 13). Laura is doomed to a life of sterility and spinsterhood with her widowed mother. In a sense, she has been turned into a piece of glass in her own glass menagerie.

In the last scene, which is enacted in mime, all of Amanda's silliness is dropped, and she appears as a serious, loving mother comforting her daughter. Amanda recognizes her family's defeat in the present as well as in the past. Earlier in the play she states "the future becomes the present, the present the past and the past turns into everlasting regret" (86). Amanda is aware of her family's frustration and disintegration in the present and in the past. The future is no better. Even Tom, who is able to break out of the broken family, fails to maintain a meaningful life in the contemporary south which, according to Nelson, gives nobody "sensible reason for existence" (Nelson 108). Tom comes to realize his illusion; he escapes from one trap to another, moving from his confining family life in St. Louis to a guilt-ridden existence in a brutal, larger world. Wherever he goes and whatever he does, Tom finds

himself bound to his sister and mother. In a sense, Tom finds it difficult to live with or without a family unit. However, he has already been absorbed into the harsh modern world of wars and disputes, a world which is 'lit by lightning' and which cannot accept helpless, vulnerable people like Amanda and Laura. Therefore, he asks Laura to snuff out her candles.

The darkness in which Amanda and Laura are left at the end of the play as well as the failure of electricity after the dinner party are reminiscent of the blackened atmosphere of the Second World War and its threat to the whole of humanity. Through this darkness of the play Williams involves the destruction of all helpless, genteel creatures in a brutal modern south. The cultural delicate image of the southern lady is doomed to alienation, frustration and disorientation in modern brutish south. There is no paradise in *The Glass Menagerie* except for Paradise Dance Hall with its hot swing music and kissing lovers. Laura's gentleman caller, who has been expected for a long time, is not a gentleman Saviour who may endow her sterile life with significance.

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**The Concept of the Southern Lady in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945 \_\_**

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**The Concept of the Southern Lady  
in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)**

هاتم الجنوب الأمريكى من خلال مسرحية تينيسى وليامز: المجموعة الزجاجية  
(١٩٤٥)

تدور فكرة هذه المقالة حول مفهوم الهاتم فى الجنوب الأمريكى وذلك من خلال مسرحية "المجموعة الزجاجية" التى كتبها تينيسى وليامز عام ١٩٤٥م وهذا التصور للمرأة الرقيقة والجميلة فى أمريكا يعود إلى حقبة المستعمرات الإنجليزية واستمر طوال القرن التاسع عشر وما بعده حيث أضفت منظومة المزارع العملاقة فى الجنوب والثروة العريضة المصاحبة لها على مفهوم الهاتم صفات المرأة الثرية، الندية، والرقيقة كالزنبق الأبيض تلك الخصال التى كانت تنعت بها المرأة فيما قبل الحرب الأهلية (١٨٦١ - ١٨٦٤) فى الجنوب الأمريكى بالإضافة لصفات أخرى كالنقاء، الكياسة، مراعاة هندامها العام والإلتزام بواجبات الأسرة.

وصورة الجنوب الأمريكى فى أدب وليامز تتكون من شقين ففى خلفية المشهد المسرحى تتجسد الفكرة الأسطورية عن جنوب الزمن الجميل والوديع بينما يبرز فى المقدمة جنوب العصر الحديث ذو مسحة الحداثة وما عليها من مادية جهنمية وقبح حضارة التصنع والتصنيع. ويعرض الكاتب الصراع بين هاتين الصورتين وما يترتب عليه من آثار سلبية على الهاتم الرقيقة غير المؤهلة وشعورها بالغرابة والعزلة. فمثلا شخصيات المسرحية مثل (أماندا/الأم) و(ابنتها/لورا) لا تتوافقان مطلقا مع حضارة العصر الحديث ذو الرتم السريع والتحديات العريضة ونتاج ذلك تصبح هذه الشخصيات ضحية الهوة الواسعة بين ثقافتين متباينتين: فلا تقارب على الإطلاق بين الواقع والمأمول مما يترتب عليه هروبهما لعالم الخيال والوهم كملاز أخير وملجأ قد يجدن فيه مع ذكرياتهما عن الماضى الجميل فى الجنوب بعض الراحة النفسية.

وينتهى الحدث المسرحى بلا بارقة أمل حيث الظلام الدامس الذى يخيم على خشبة المسرح دلالة على تحطيم هذه المخلوقات الرقيقة والجميلة فى عالمنا الحديث حيث لافردوس ينشد ولا منفذ ينتظر من حياتهن العقيمة.

## The Concept of the Southern Lady in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the concept of the South Lady as depicted by Williams in his play *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). Historically, the concept of the belle, genteel lady was first introduced to America by the English colonists and it remained popular across America through the late nineteenth century and beyond. Because of the expansive plantations system, the easy attainment of wealth, and gracious life, the concept of wealthy women is merely decorative; lovely, lily-white ladies of leisure. The traits that have been primarily associated with the idealized antebellum southern lady are gentility, kindness, sweetness, purity, commitment to family, fragility and attention to physical appearance. The image of the South as it stands in Williams' plays is composed of two main parts: a background in which he depicts the old, legendary and graceful South, and a foreground which projects the New South exposed to the vulgarizing effects of modern industrial civilization. Williams shows in particular the tension between the two images and the resultant consequences in terms of man's sense of alienation. Williams presents the New South as a deforming culture in which the delicate, refined descendants of the Old South become maladjusted, and exposed to the dehumanizing effects of modern civilization. As southern lady images, Laura and Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* become maladjusted misfits in contemporary society. Their fragility becomes weakness and feebleness in a world grown very callous for graciousness. The stress in Williams' play is a result of the wide gap between the reality of the Lady's environment and her great expectations: Amanda, with her children, is caught between expectations derived from a more genteel past and a comparatively sordid present. Being unable to find the kind of psychological tranquility she sought in her present circumstances, which are unlikely, moreover, to change, Amanda escapes to relief in the memories of her idealized past. Amanda and Laura are left at the end of the play in complete darkness, a stage business through which, Williams stresses the destruction of all helpless, genteel creatures in a brutal modern south. Thus, the cultural image of the southern Lady is doomed to frustration and disorientation in the modern brutish south. There is no paradise in *The Glass Menagerie* except for Paradise Dance Hall with its hot swing music. Laura's gentleman caller, who has been expected for a long time, is not a gentleman Saviour who may endow her sterile life with significance.