

THE AMERICAN DREAM IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' THE GLASS MENAGERIE

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ABSTRACT

This study focused to analyze the American dream reflected in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* through the dreams that each character in the play has. The analysis focused on what each character dreams for and how they tried to make their dream come true, whether they succeeded or failed in making their dream come true or not. The writers used the historical background and the concept of the American dream that holds three points, namely being a richer, better, and fuller life. The writers used the descriptive qualitative method in analyzing the study. The needed data were collected by doing library research. The main data were derived from the play itself and the supporting data are collected from several sources such as journals, e-books, and other sources downloaded or accessed from the internet. To analyze this topic, the writers traced the background of the play, when it was written by Williams, to find out the social and economic condition of the play. From the study that the writers conducted, it can be concluded that all the characters in the play have their own dream, but nobody succeeds to reach his or her dream.

Keywords: American Dream, Glass Menagerie, illusion, escapism

ABSTRAK

Studi ini focus menganalisa American Dream yang terefleksikan dalam drama karya Tennessee Williams yang berjudul *The Glass Menagerie* melalui mimpi setiap tokohnya. Analisa difokuskan pada mimpi setiap tokohnya dan bagaimana mereka berusaha mewujudkan mimpi tersebut, apakah mereka berhasil atau gagal dalam meraih mimpi-mimpi tersebut. Penulis menggunakan sudut pandang sejarah dan konsep American Dream yang meliputi tiga hal yaitu mimpi menjadi kaya, hidup yang lebih baik, dan hidup yang lebih berkecukupan. Penulis menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dalam studi ini. Penulisan melakukan studi pustaka dengan mengumpulkan baik data primer maupun data sekunder. Data primer diperoleh dari karya tersebut, sedangkan data sekunder diperoleh dari buku, jurnal sastra, serta sumber lainnya dari internet. Penulis melakukan pelacakan sejarah penulisan drama ini untuk memperoleh latar belakang sejarah, dan sosial ekonomi saat drama ini ditulis. Dari studi ini diperoleh kesimpulan bahwa semua tokoh utama drama ini masing-masing mempunyai mimpi sendiri-sendiri, namun tak satupun yang berhasil mewujudkan mimpinya.

Kata kunci: American Dream, Glass Menagerie, ilusi, pelarian

Everybody has his, or her right to have and reach his or her dream. Everybody has the right to live a prosperous and happy life, but it is a fact that not everybody can make his or her dream come true. The one who can make his or her dream come true will live a prosperous and happy life, but the one who fails will be in misery in which he or she tends to have an illusion, and sometimes he or she will try to escape from the real world to his or her own world. That is what happens with the characters in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. Every character in this play has his or her own dream and tries to make the dream come true, but he or she fails.

Tennessee Williams is one of the leading playwrights of his time in the United States of America. He was not only a playwright, but also an essayist, and memoirist. He was born in Mississippi in 1911 as a son of a shoe company executive. He had a happy life in his childhood until the family moved to an urban environment in St. Louis, Missouri which made his life unsatisfactory. He started to write plays when he studied at Washington University. Bloom in Guan, et.al states that *The Glass Menagerie* is one of Williams' well-known plays that was performed on Broadway. It is one of Williams' most accepted plays and won recognition both from his own times and the current society (Guan, et.al, 2016).

Chowdhury mentioned that one of the top playwrights in post-World War II America is Tennessee Williams. In his plays, he was well known for depicting the social and political tensions of modern civilization as well as the state of the populace. The reader perceives Sohis' plays as being realistic (Chowdhury, 2014).

Before *The Glass Menagerie* went to Broadway, it opened in Chicago on December 26, 1944. It was awarded the Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. *The Glass Menagerie*, the original title was *The Gentleman Caller*, but because it was rejected by the studio, then it was changed into *The Glass Menagerie*. *The Glass Menagerie* also got the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Donaldson Award, before it was published in book format by Random House (Frey, 2019).

The Glass Menagerie was written based on the condition in the United States, especially in an urban environment in St.Louis. It reflects the condition of St. Louis during the Great Depression. The United States of America after the end of the 2nd World War was in economic difficulties. They experienced a moment that was called The Great Depression. Grafe states that the plot of *the Glass Menagerie* is set against the larger social context of the country in the 1930s; when worry and fear

became dominant. The Great Depression forced many families to fight for their survival after they lost their jobs and had no income. After the crash of the stock, the situation in the urban areas of the South and North began to worsen rapidly and unemployment reached a serious problem (Grafe, 2007).

The Great Depression was a worldwide economic depression that started in the United States in 1929. It was also well known as the *Black Thursday* when panicked investors sold their shares that causing a decreasing business investment. It also affected the increasing unemployment, the workers who kept working got salary fall and many others got lower salaries. This depression also caused many farmers to lose their farms which made thousands of farmers have to migrate to California to search for work (Amadeo, 2022). The Great Depression also caused marriage and birth rates declined since couples delayed their plan to get married until they could afford to marry and have children (Urban, 2007).

In some areas, such as crime as a result of rising unemployment, suicides as a result of rising numbers of depressed people, malnutrition, prostitution as a result of rising numbers of desperate women, and alcohol consumption as a result of people using it as an escape during the Great Depression, there was a significant increase. The cost of doctors' fees prevented them from placing a high focus on health care. People put off getting married while divorce rates sharply declined. Men made the decision to leave their marriages and their spouses. (ushistory.org, 2022).

Tennessee William explores the tension between the aspirations of a small southern family and the harsh realities of life in *The Glass Menagerie*. The Wingfield family longs for romance, marriage, and financial stability. The drama explores the themes of human life's dissatisfaction, loneliness, suffering, and insecurity, particularly in a materialistic world (Bhaduli, 2018).

Tennessee Williams is not the only writer who wrote about The American Dream with the social and political background of the Great Depression. There are some other writers who wrote about the American Dream, such as Oscar Wilder with his *Death of a Salesman*, John Steinbeck's *The Great of Wrath*, Jeffrey Archer's *Kane and Abel*, etc.

Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* is about an urban family who lives in an apartment in St.Louis. The family consists of a mother, Amanda Wingfield, her daughter, Laura, and her son, Tom. All three members of the family have their own dream and problem in their life. The dream that most people at the time of the play was written is called the American Dream. Williams tells us that the horrible economic circumstances of the Wingfields are a representation of the social catastrophe that took place in America through *The Glass Menagerie*, according to Janardanan. Williams uses the Great Depression and the fact that America was on the verge of war to illustrate how past events have an impact on the present (Janardanan, 2007).

The term the American dream was used for the first time by James Truslow Adams in his book entitled *The*

Epic of America. It refers to the hope that was promised by America to thousands of people who demanded equality and liberty in pursuing their dream to have a better life (Rosadi, 2012). James Truslow Adams in Fettke states that The American Dream is that dream of a land where life should be better and richer and fuller for everybody, in which everyone has the same opportunity according to each ability or achievement (Fettke, 2021). Lowe defines the American Dream as being able to have the opportunity to be successful, having the opportunity to be free to express yourself, and being able to live independently. These things require some financial stability (Lowe, 2015).

The Glass Menagerie takes place in 1930s America, when there is only chaos and shouting. When the vast majority of America's middle class matriculated into a school for the blind, there were labor disruptions, some of which were quite violent, in otherwise tranquil communities (Williams, Sc/ I; 2).

The Wingfield's apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower-middle-class population, and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of America society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused of automatism.

The apartment faces an alley and is centered by a fire escape, for all these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and inflammable fires of human desperation. The fire escape is the landing of it and steps descending from it. This setting suggests that the family belongs to the lower middle class and lives in the center of an overcrowded population of urban. The apartment suggests that the family is not a prosperous one. The family can only rent an apartment in the rear of the dark and narrow alleys on both sides of the apartment. It suggests the boredom of living and the unbearable living of the family.

The fire escapes symbolize the various aspects of being trapped or as a method of escape. As the author writes in his introduction, "huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation". Then play itself presents Tom's frustration both at home and at work caused by the boredom of life and his mother. Tom always tries to escape from his intolerable job, situation, and life. The fire escape gives the reader an initial glimpse into the idea of escapism. The function of the family home serves as an illumination of the family's lower lever status (The Role of Setting, 2017).

The American dream is always associated with the mobility of people to another place to gain economic success for a better life. And success here is always considered as gaining a better life economically. Success is always seen in how much money, how big the house, and what kind of car someone has. Actually, the American dream does not only relate to economic success; but also relates to the other sectors. Merriam Webster defines the American dream as a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and

becoming successful. Smith says that people have a different understanding of the American dream. Some Americans say that becoming wealthy is very important to the American dream, but some others say that the American dream is not only about becoming wealthy but also about having freedom of choice in how to live, having a good family life, and retiring comfortably (Smith, 2017).

The effects of the American dream made people migrate to America with big hope. They left their village, hometown even their country for different reasons, such as they want to escape from their poverty tyranny, political condition, religious or racial persecution, want to have a new culture; and to pursue happiness. People migrated to America with a high expectation that by coming to America their problems will be over. They thought that the street to the wealthy life was paved with gold and they could get opportunities anywhere. Most of the immigrants were not prepared with the skills to survive. They did not have any connection or place to live. They got difficulties in finding a job, and they experienced culture shock and a language barrier.

The American dream made many people have high expectations to gain a better life. Not all people who migrated to America succeeded in gaining a better life, many failed. People who could not gain a better life tended to be unable to face the reality. They escaped from the reality and lived in their illusion. Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* reflected that social and psychological conditions through the characters of the play..

METODE

The purpose of this study is to analyze how the American Dream is described in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, how the characters struggle to reach their dream, and the effects of the American Dream concept on their lives and minds. Data related to the focus of the study were collected from different sources. The main data were taken from the play written by Tennessee Williams entitled *The Glass Menagerie*, while the supporting data were collected from articles, journals of literature, e-books, and other related sources. Data collecting was carried out by reading both the main and supporting sources intensively, taking notes, classifying data, interpreting the data, discussing the data, and the final step was displaying the data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To get a better understanding of the focus of the study, the writers read some related studies done by different writers. The first related study that the writers read is a dissertation written by Barnard entitled, *The symbolism of Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie: an inductive approach*. Barnard states that Laura and her glass menageries symbolize the spirit, while her brother Tom represents flesh. Williams symbolizes Laura related to spirituality such as the Old South, romantic idealists, and what he calls those "small and tender things that relieve the austere pattern of life and make it endurable to the sensitive," entities which time, industrialism, and the modern world ultimately destroy (Barnard, 2007).

Bhawar in Conflict between Reality and Illusion in Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie* states that through play, Williams strongly suggests to the world that nobody can escape from the reality. The play is about the loneliness of modern life, the tendency to approach alienation, and withdrawal from the real world. The escape mechanism that the family takes has become a destructive power. *The Glass Menagerie* identifies the beating of reality by illusion as a huge and growing aspect of the human condition in its time (Bhawar, 2020).

Sumarsono makes a conclusion that Laura Wingfield, the daughter of Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, experiences an inferiority complex, and her self-confidence, self-consciousness, fear of embarrassment, and fear of being scrutinized have triggered her social anxiety. This condition gets worse caused of her mother's failure in facing the reality and knowing what her daughter really wants (Sumarsono, 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The play is open with the appearance and narration of Tom's collecting the incidents before he left his mother and sister in a difficult situation caused by the economic depression. All the characters in this play have their own obsession with facing the reality. Amanda, the mother, is obsessed with her husband's desertion from the family life when they were facing economic difficulty and she has to take the responsibility both as the mother and the father. The American Dream has driven this family from their former place in the Blue Mountain to the suburban in St.Louis with the hope that they can have a better, happier, and wealthier life, but what they hope does not come true. They fail to reach their dream. The husband left the family because he could not afford to earn his family's living. He preferred to leave the family without divorcing his wife, Amanda; since he did not afford to divorce his wife. Running away from the home and the responsibility was the only thing that he could do.

Tom Winfield has to work in a shoe factory to fulfill the family's needs since he is the only man in the family. For Tom, working at the shoe factory is not his dream. He has his own desire to be a successful poet. Laura, who has a little deflection of her leg, has an inferiority complex that makes her get difficulty socializing with others. This inferiority complex makes her live in her own world of the glass menagerie. This condition makes Amanda worried that Laura will get difficulty finding a husband. Thus, all the three characters try to escape from the reality to their own world.

The Glass Menagerie was written after the Second World War was over, or when the Americans experienced the Great Depression. It is interesting to see the social condition of American society in this play. The play describes the social and economic conditions of the middle-class people at the time the play was written. The economic system of America since the beginning of the 20th century depended on the productivity of the industries. It attracted people from the rural areas to migrate to America to search for jobs and make their life better, happier and wealthier, but not all of them could

reach their dream to live a better, happier, and wealthier life. Most of them were exploited by the economic system.

During the Great Depression, the country got difficulty facing the hard economic condition. People did not have the ability to purchase what they needed. Many industries stopped their production and resulting in a lot of unemployment. This condition affected all people from any class of society, but the worst occurred in the middle class and the immigrants. People who had moved to a new place in America got a lot of difficulties. Those who left their hometown with a big dream had to face the reality that they failed to gain the dream offered by America. Many people got disappointed with the boredom of life. Many people got frustrated and began to withdraw from reality and lived in the world of illusion. The one who could face the reality would survive, but some of them failed to face it and committed suicide.

The Wingfields is the representative of the middle class who experienced the hard time caused by the Great Depression. The Wingfields belong to the agrarian south of America and move to St.Louis, and live in an apartment with the hope that they can make their dream come true. Living in a difficult economic condition and failing to reach their American Dream makes them unable to face the reality. They try to escape from the present world and live in their illusion. With the help of their memories in the past, they try to reach their happy dream in the past, their American Dream.

In order that people can reach their American dream, they must do hard work. Without working hard, it is impossible to reach the American dream, to live a happy and prosperous life. Reaching the American Dream is not easy for all people. A happy and prosperous life is sometimes just a dream that cannot be achieved. People are discriminated against based on the monetary power they have. The more money they have, the easier they get what they want.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, we can see the reflection of the American Dream through the characters of the play, especially Amanda and Jim O'Conner. Amanda's dream is to see all her children live a happy and prosperous life. Her moving from Blue Mountain is one of the ways to gain a better, happier, and more prosperous life. Her illusion about her past life at the Blue Mountain indicates that she has the dream, but she fails to make it come true. Her marriage to Mr. Wingfield is the other way to make her dream come true, but she made a mistake that Mr. Wingfield failed to make her gain the American Dream. Moreover, he left her and made her a single parent to take care of her two children.

Amanda's expectation of her children is more than they can fulfill. She believes that her children are special ones, the extraordinary ones, which makes her forget or ignore the weakness of her children. She has an obsession that their children, Tom and Laura, will become successful people who live better, happier, and wealthier than the other people. This obsession sometimes makes her control over her son and daughter's life. She dominates, and she directs them in every activity they do. She believes that Laura is a special girl that will get a good husband who

brings her happiness. She knows that Laura must be able to live independently. She knows that Laura must be able to find a job and earn her own living. She sends Laura to a business college to secure her future, but Laura gets difficulty facing the situation since she is crippled and has an inferiority complex. Laura leaves the school and cannot continue her education. Knowing that Laura is unable to face the difficult situation at school makes her have an idea of finding her a husband who can secure her life in the future. She asks Tom to find a hardworking gentleman and invites him to dinner to see Laura. Finding a husband for Laura is not easy since, during the difficult condition, men tend to delay their plan to get married until the situation gets better so they can afford to get married and have children.

What she does to Laura is not different from what she does to Tom. She believes that Tom is the one who can secure their life since Tom will bring them financial security and happiness by working hard at the shoe company. She does not care that Tom does not enjoy working at the shoe factory. She ignores his desire and dream of being a successful poet. For Amanda, Tom's job at the shoe company is very important for the financial security of the family. She does not like seeing his hobbies going to the cinema, drinking alcohol, and smoking a cigarette. She always asks him to leave his useless hobbies and save his money for a better future. She forgets that the obsession that she has, makes her dominates so much in her children's life. Although Amanda has such the American Dream, Amanda is one of the Americans who fail to reach the American Dream.

For Tom, working at the shoe factory has killed his own dream. Working at the shoe factory makes him lose his individuality. He has his own dream that is different from her mother's. He wants to have a career as a successful poet. He wants to have the adventure to gather his experience and knowledge. His dream to have an adventure makes him like going to movies, drinking alcohol, etc. He uses his father as his inspiration and he follows him leaving the home and the family for adventures. He follows his father's way and goes with the Merchant Marine Naval Company leaving his mother and sister in a difficult financial condition. His going to movies, drinking alcohol, and leaving his home and family are his escape mechanism from the difficult and boring life that he faces.

Laura's American Dream is different from her mother's dream. Her dream is not for having a prosperous life, but for happiness. Laura likes and loves Jim O'Connor from his school, but she does not express her feeling since she does not have any courage to do. The psychological deflection that makes her have an inferiority complex becomes the obstacle that blocks her to express her feeling. Her feeling for Jim arises when he is invited to dinner to see her, but it decreases and she has to keep her feeling after finding out that Jim O'Connor is engaged with another girl.

Jim O'Connor is the representative of the American who has the American Dream. He is the one who is more realistic than the other characters. He knows that people

face difficult conditions. When some people escape from their difficult life to their world of illusion, he stays in his life, trying to face the condition by getting a better education. He continues his engineering study to improve his condition. He tries to adapt to the difficult situation through his education to match the development of modern life. Jim O'Connor is the one that is hoped and expected to save the Wingfield. He is expected to rescue Laura from the difficult life. He is the gentleman caller desired by Amanda for Laura's husband.

The effect of their failure in gaining their American Dream makes them live in their own world. Amanda lives in her world of illusion, where she likes to recall her beautiful moments in the Blue Mountain when some gentlemen callers visited her. Laura who fails to reach her dream to get married to Jim for happiness lives in her collection of the glass menagerie, while Tom who cannot make his dream of being a successful poet come true, chose to leave his family for adventure. All that the characters do indicates their escape mechanism from the reality that they fail to gain their American Dream.

CONCLUSION

The American Dream has driven many people to leave their hometowns with their families for a better, happier, and more prosperous life. Some people succeed in gaining their American Dream, but some others fail. The Glass Menagerie reflects the difficult condition of the Americans at the time when they experience the Great Depression in the United States. Tennessee Williams used their characters to present the effect of the American Dream and the Great Depression on the urban people and the middle class of people. The Wingfield family is the representation of the people who experienced the difficult situation at that time. Through *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams succeeds to manipulate each of his characters in describing the different effects and attitudes toward the American Dream. *The Glass Menagerie* succeeds in presenting the representative of the Americans who failed in gaining their American Dream for a better, happier, and more prosperous life.

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