

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND THE GENERATION GAP OF THE MODERN SOUTH:  
EXPLORING IDENTITY THROUGH NEGATION IN *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF* AND *THE GLASS*

*MENAGERIE*

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## Introduction

The social climate of the 1930's caused the American South to be one of the most fluid and changing decades of its community history. In its historical context, the Southern social identity was forcibly reorganized during the Great Depression and New Deal reform plans under Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The 1930's were a time of great social turmoil, where failing economics, combined with the forced acknowledgment of Southern cotton over-production and race and social rioting lead to the serious reform plans that changed the Southern social landscape forever. While strengthening industry with "raised wages, set maximum hours, encouraged unionization and collective bargaining" in 1933, the New Deal also implemented a severely reduced farming plan, where "Southern farmers harvested 11 million fewer acres in 1939 than they had in 1929" (Cooper, 654, 648). Farmers were forced to cut back on their output while simultaneously diversifying their crops to the extent that the Cotton Kingdom, which had been the dominant Southern economic activity since the time of American colonization, had shrunk from 45 Southern farmers out of every 100 men to 5 farmers out of every 100 men (647). These sweeping reforms in every aspect of Southern life, and most particularly in relation to growing industry stabilization and decreased agriculture production lead to a severe identity crisis for the traditional Southern elite of plantation owners. The plantation lifestyle became almost extinct during the Great Depression and the New Deal, and the generation of young adults caught amidst this social turbulence was forced to create a new social identity in correspondence to their new economic endeavors. While older generations looked back to their outdated social customs as the still-pervasive norm, Southern youth were forced to

decide whether to participate in the impossible plantation ideology or move forward to a new future with new social and economic traditions.

Tennessee Williams, growing up and writing drafts of his most famous plays during the turmoil of the 1930's social evolution, writes heavily from autobiographical experience to portray the generational struggle within an isolated family dynamic, using a microcosmic representation of a few individuals to represent a sweeping social problem that he felt exemplified the Southern struggle of identity at such a crucial historical moment. Williams sets his characters in broken homes where the social influence of the old American South is overbearingly present, regardless of physical location or practicality of such social standards. He crafts his stories around dysfunctional family relationships within their distorted social contexts, where he focuses on the parent-child relationship to illustrate how the cultural ideology of a parent can be so irrationally oppressive that it can cripple a child's social perception to the point of complete mental breakdown and failure to participate in any form of society. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams presents the stories of young adults who are struggling to accommodate their parents' lofty expectations of a proper Southern youth of cotillions, courting and innocent romance while existing in a modern era where such an idealized youth cannot possibly exist amidst growing industry and social equality. These Williams characters try to reconcile their family expectations with the pressures of modern life but fall drastically short of achieving any sort of productive existence.

I will compare these generational relationships using the frame of Lacan's "Mirror Stage" theory to argue that because of the negation of these youths by their Southern born and bred parents, the characters in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are

neither able to participate successfully in the society they inhabit nor live up to the ideals of the Old South, leaving them overly self-conscious and defeated, ultimately rejected from their families and unable to maneuver through life on their own. As children condemned to failure through expectations they cannot possibly achieve, Brick, Laura and Tom are just three of Tennessee Williams' characters who exemplify the generation of children caught between the past and present in the phasing out of the Old Southern ideal, unable to divorce themselves from tradition and even more unable to move forward in any other social modality.

In order to examine the parent-child relationship of the main characters in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and the *Glass Menagerie*, it is important to understand the Southern social systems within which the elder generation functions. First and foremost, Amanda (the single mother of Tom and Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*) and Big Daddy (Brick's father in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*) are faithful participants in the old guard of the South. Amanda recalls her youth as an idealized Southern Belle, complete with impeccably dainty manners and scores of "gentlemen callers," and Big Daddy values nothing more than his luxurious plantation home and acres of money-making cotton fields (*Glass Menagerie*, 8). For these aging parents, traditional social ideals of gentlemen and ladies, proper manners, aristocracy and wealth are still very much present in the society they inhabit, despite the fact that Amanda and her children have moved far away from the Mississippi Delta to apartment housing in St. Louis, and Big Daddy was never a legitimate aristocrat of the old guard that he imagines himself to represent. For Amanda, her past is an idealized memory that may never have truly existed, and one that is impossible to recreate for her children in the North. For Big Daddy, the era of gentlemen plantation owners is coming to an end with

the ever-increasing advances of industrialism in the modern age. Yet neither of these adults is willing to accept or even acknowledge these facts, and instead insist on instilling their antiquated values upon their children so that they too can become the Southern elites that their parents so determinedly romanticize.

In response to this pressure from their parents to live up to traditional ideals, the children are caught between an idealized state that is impossible to achieve and the roles they perceive for themselves in modern society, a society that in no way coincides with the high hopes of their parents. The struggle that ensues results in mutual estrangement between parent and child and the near-mental breakdowns of Tom, Laura and Brick as they try to make peace with their parents, themselves and the present life they inhabit. Their struggle becomes symbolic not only for these characters but also for the greater generation that Tennessee Williams represents. Caught between the Old South and its modern industrialization, Williams identifies the struggles of his generation to achieve the social modernization that accompanies changing industry and economics, a change that comes much more easily to their Northern-bred counterparts. Williams attributes this struggle to the disillusion of the older generation and the disenchantment of the younger when faced with the unforeseen challenges of a shifting lifestyle. In this predicament Williams searches for hope, but leaves his characters at a loss to fully reconcile the two opposing ideologies with which they are forced to interact. Because they cannot emulate their parents' dreams nor create any positive goals of their own, these broken children all choose to avoid reality through varying methods that save them from the pain of asserting a new self in society. But this evasion of reality comes at a high cost, leaving despair and mental breakdown as

the solitary outcome of this unique social and generational problem of outright denial of the social condition of the present.

Lacan's "Mirror Stage" theory frames the beginning of this generational conflict with the hypothesis that child development begins with negation, a process that will carry through to the rest of the child's life. It is important to clarify that negation is not synonymous with negative as in "no," but rather negative as in "not present" or "lacking." Lacan posits that an image of self can only occur in an infant once it distinguishes itself from the "other," or the mirror, that is the rest of the world. From a child's earliest recognition, he knows himself not by what he is, but by the fact that he constitutes that which is not "other," using negation of the external to distinguish the being that is the self. Yet it is also important to note that while viewing the world through this mirror lens the child creates an "Ideal I" that is more "constitutive than constituted," a reflected version of oneself that is a primarily imagined self that one aspires to be (Lacan, 4). Lacan theorizes that the child realizes itself first through visual negation, then imaginary negation (the child understand him to be different from the "other") and finally in symbolic terms which are manifested through language, society and behavior. This is all a normal part of child development and important to take place for every child to develop a sense of individuality. Yet the problem occurs when this method of identity-formation continues past earliest childhood into adulthood. When parents are meant to be encouraging young children to succeed in their goals, Williams' fictionalized parents are still framing the world in terms only of what their child is not, and focusing on the ways the child has failed to live up to their idealized notions of their own childhood. Tom cannot live up to his mother's version of an idealized Southern gentleman because he spends his time writing poetry instead of

working towards excessive wealth and social status. Laura is not the beautiful young girl with endless suitors who embodies a perfect Southern Belle, and Brick is not a successful football star, businessman, or family man with a happy wife and brood of children. Instead of focusing on what small successes or talents each child may have achieved, the parents instead provide only negative feedback based on their unfulfilled dreams and disappointments caused by their children's failings. These images of failure become the conversational mediators between parent and child and serve only to exasperate both sides of the relationship, making positive communication and self-identity impossible for their children and permanently damaging their perception of self to one of negativity and utter failure. This literary representation translates to its larger historical context to show that this disillusioned generation of youth cannot succeed in a lifestyle that the Great Depression and New Deal have eradicated. But this generation also cannot strive confidently towards a new future of modern industry and prosperity because Southern bankruptcy and continued economic depression still overwhelmingly pervade their lives.

Williams' plays come to represent Lacanian mirror theory-gone-wrong where Williams' conception of childhood reality expresses the disillusion that a child feels when they cannot achieve the "Ideal I" created by parental influence. While this mirror stage is supposed to end in early childhood, Williams' parental characters continue this sort of identification throughout their child's life, creating a perpetual psychological inability to identify oneself with any positive attribute. Yet Williams' characters have more complications than their parents' negation, and the greater context within which these self-conceptions first begin is equally crucial to their identity formation. Williams' child characters do not succeed only because they cannot live up to the expectations of their

parents and the “Ideal I,” but also because these expectations are no longer valid in the society in which they participate. Once identity becomes not only generational but also specific to a certain cultural ideology that is no longer relevant, it becomes even more difficult to fit this identity into a modern setting where these social ideals and pressures no longer exist. Through the careful examination of the parent-child relationships in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Glass Menagerie*, I aim to show how the negation of a child through parental interaction and social disillusion create a unique generation in the American South that is utterly incapable of living up to the past or achieving any success at survival in the present.

## Section I: The Failed Southern Dynasty: Changing Male Identity in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

Brick and Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* represent the failed Southern dynastic hierarchy and the irreconcilable proponents of the Old South and the New, where tradition has been subverted by the need for modernization and new standards of personal identity. Because Brick’s identity has been created through negation from his father, he cannot live up to the old standard Big Daddy believes in nor develop for himself a new identity that is functional in the modern era. Brick receives his self-image from what he is not, instilling in him a general “lacking,” and because of this feeling of inadequacy he cannot stand up to his father to assert firmly what he is. Brick is so preoccupied with what he lacks that he cannot value his merits or successes and use these to create a positive identity for himself. This is clearly portrayed in the language of the two men when they discuss the lack of Brick’s drive for the great achievements his father has accomplished. As a self-motivated, self-made man,



Big Daddy sees no limits to the “Ideal I” Brick could achieve if only he would apply himself in the same way Big Daddy had. He reminds Brick constantly of the “ten million in cash an’ blue-chip stocks... [and] twenty-eight thousand acres of the riches land this side of the valley Nile” that he possesses as proof of his financial and social success in life (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 88). Big Daddy focuses all value on the monetary “worth” that he has built up over the years and the absolute necessity of such wealth in order to be a successful Southern planter (88). Brick has not a penny to his name nor a hint of ambition, and even worse, he does not desire these things. Though Brick is the younger of two sons, Big Daddy wants to leave the plantation to Brick upon his death. Yet Brick is totally uninterested in this proposition saying to Big Daddy’s incredulous disbelief “No sir, I just don’t care” (112). Here the Lacanian mirror theory works in opposition to Big Daddy’s interests; instead of promoting his son to achieve his goals through pointing out his faults, Big Daddy consistently reveals the “other” in a way that makes Brick even more unhappily disinterested, pushing him farther away from his perception of success instead of closer to it, as he intended.

Brick’s inability to care or take active responsibility about any aspect of his life is the primary reason for the inability of either father or son to communicate with the other, deepening the generational chasm to an impassable degree. Big Daddy has spent the last years of his life waiting to “see if you [Brick] pull yourself together or if you don’t,” and his time for waiting is running out (112). He encourages Brick that “we can talk *now*,” to solve Brick’s perceived failings, but Brick coldly responds that they’ve “never *talked* to each other” in their lives. Brick’s life has been a long list of things he’s failed to become – a self-made millionaire like his father, a successful and responsible young man like his brother

Gooper, a football star like his friend Skipper. Big Daddy is sincerely trying to converse with his son to motivate him to participate in his own life again, but Brick cannot accept this, saying,

“Well, sir, every so often you say to me, Brick, I wan to have a talk with you, but when we talk, it never materializes. Nothing is said. You sit in a chair and gas about this and that and I look like I listen. I try to look like I listen, but I don’t listen, not much. Communication is – awful hard between people an’ – somehow between you and me, it just don’t happen” (92).

Brick is simply lectured by Big Daddy on what to be and how to be it, Big Daddy never really wants to hear Brick speak, he just wants to tell him what to do, taking the only active role in the confrontation. The Brick Big Daddy visualizes is just like the “gas” he goes on and on about, it is simply air and completely removed from the physical reality of Brick. Their conversational “gas” is also significant because it is something even less meaningful than real communication. While Big Daddy “tries” to talk to his son, Brick sits by and “tries” to listen, implying that their communication is at best only a failed attempt, nothing substantial or material in their lives. They are both complicit in this failure to deal with reality, but they still make no useful effort to change the characterization of their relationship, choosing to continue the charade rather than deal proactively with the reality of their existences. The other members of the family also dismiss Brick without giving him an active role in any relationship. Gooper is the one who “has given himself body and soul” to the plantation while “what did Brick do? Brick kept living in his past glory in college” (152). Brick’s wife Maggie is trying so hard to have a loving marriage and a child but Brick is the one who “can’t oblige” her (162). And Brick is still further not even a football player anymore but a washed-up “conquered hero” who never made it after all (157).

Experiencing failed expectation from his father, his brother, his wife and his past, Brick has

found refuge in the “mechanical...click...that makes him peaceful” when he drinks, an automatic response that requires only mechanistic effort for him to achieve relief, something far easier to manage than the self-reflection and active identity formation that would allow him to deal with his problems and make something positive out of his life (100).

Brick uses his alcoholism as crutch for his inability to live up to the expectations of others, preventing himself from experiencing further failure by simply aspiring to nothing at all, illustrating how his family’s negation has impacted him so strongly that he desires to give up his self identity to nothingness rather than deal with further negation of the “other.” Alcoholism is the rock bottom for Brick, no one can possibly expect anything from him in this life pursuit, there is no pressure of familial hierarchy, conjugal duty or sibling rivalry, and as an alcoholic with absolutely no potential, there is nothing more to lose from the social expectations of others. Any negation of his alcoholism would only be an affirmation of a positive quality and so this is the new low Brick has reached, trying to hide from all of the characteristics he lacks as a strong Southern gentleman and inheritor of a plantation dynasty. Throughout the play two props constantly support Brick, his crutch (he broke his leg from a recent injury jumping hurdles at his old high school) and his liquor, both of which he must have with him at all times. Big Daddy repeatedly tries to disarm Brick, grabbing first for his drink (110) and then for his crutch (128) because it seems that only without these is Brick willing to break through the generational gap and speak to Big Daddy with any semblance of truth. Brick is so attached to his props because they serve him as a shield from the ideological attacks of his father. Brick has already been psychologically broken from the negation of his father and Tennessee Williams intensifies

this internal problem as manifested in his physically deteriorated body, a body unable to stand up to the reality that has been created around him. Brick relies on his crutch and his drink as a way to participate in his existence only in a limited version of functionality. His props prevent him from having to engage fully in reality and help him refrain from making his own decisions in life, preferring to rely on drunkenness and weakness as excuses for remaining inactive in the world around him.

Big Daddy's resorting to drastic physical measures to disarm Brick becomes the bodily representation of their ideological struggle, illustrating the intensity of their conflict that pervades literally all of Brick's being. When finally cornered and physically deprived of his defense mechanisms, Brick is forced to admit his feeling of mendacity to Big Daddy, the disgust he feels with the world that is so strong that he is unable to remain sober because of his revulsion. Yet when Brick *finally* starts to open up, Big Daddy interrupts Brick's attempt at explaining his "disgust...with lying and liars" and immediately takes over the situation, reverting to the negation that focuses only on what Brick is lacking – here the ability to overcome (109). Big Daddy becomes immediately furious, saying, "What do you know about mendacity? Hell! I could write a book on it!" and carries on and on, not letting Brick get a word in edgewise between his rants about how many "lies [he] got to put up with!" (110). Unlike Brick, Big Daddy puts up pretenses and insists, "*I've* lived with mendacity! – Why can't *you* live with it? Hell you've *got* to live with it, there's nothing *else* to *live* with except mendacity is there" (111)? This moment is like many others in Brick's long life of failed expectations – because his father acted a certain way, Big Daddy assumes Brick must also act this way. But Brick is unwilling to live a life of false pretenses in order to achieve the old Southern success of his father – he thinks the something "else to live

with” is truth and honesty, he does not feel he’s “got” to live with the pretenses of appearance and he cannot compromise mendacity in the way that Big Daddy was able to. But even though he has this conception of what he wants in his life, he is equally unable to move towards it, feeling crippled by his current circumstance. This indecisiveness results in his choice to live with “something else... Liquor,” rather than the mendacity that is a crucial part of his father’s social ideology or move forward to creating a new ideology of his own (111). Brick’s inactivity and lack of desire to engage with the world is the most crucial problem in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and though everyone around him is trying to instill in him a desire to live, it is ultimately no one’s decision but his own, a decision that he deems nearly impossible.

Brick and Big Daddy’s inability to come to an ideological resolution is so strong that at times it seems they are not even able to converse, representing the conflict as not only one of failed attempts at communication, but a conflict where any compromise is utterly impossible between the two generations. Brick and Big Daddy’s ideological clash heightens when Big Daddy steals Brick’s crutch and demands to know what Brick is uttering when Brick again refuses to play games with Big Daddy and tells him the horrible truth rather than a lie about his fatal disease. Everyone on the plantation knows that Big Daddy is dying of cancer, but they all pretend that the doctor’s results were negative and that Big Daddy is healthy as can be, because dealing with the truth is too difficult and too unpleasant to face. Brick, on the other hand, will not play along with this game and reveals the diagnosis to Big Daddy as the only member of the family willing to confront truth, no matter how awful it may be. Yet Big Daddy insists “Who said I was ‘leaving the place’ ... I got fifteen years or twenty years left in me! I’ll outlive *you!*” (129). Despite the definitive signs of his illness,

Big Daddy would rather continue the illusion of life and prosperity and wants Brick to do the same. But Brick cannot sacrifice the truth in this way, and would rather face harsh reality than false appearances no matter what the cost. And the cost is high indeed – Brick can't understand "how anybody could care if he lived or died or was dying or cared about anything but whether or not there was liquor left in the bottle... Maybe it's being alive that makes them lie, and being almost *not* alive makes me sort of accidentally truthful..." (130). Brick will not play the games of his father's society and as a result cannot even participate in it. He associates his father's "aliveness" with illusion and his existence on the fringes of society as the only way he can accept the truth blatantly, preferring social consequence to what he feels is a grasp on real, essential truth. Brick has become so disillusioned by the mendacity that he views as an essential component of Southern society that the only way he feels he can escape it is through drinking and refusing to participate in the Southern hierarchy in any of its forms. Though alcohol leads him to feeling "almost *not* alive" in a way that he considers positive, removing him from the Southern ideals that he rejects, it also removes him from any opportunity to move away from these ideals and create a future of his own. As long as he relies on the crutch of liquor and his disgust of mendacity as enough, he will be unable to think clearly and independently enough to create any sort of existence that resembles the truth he so firmly claims to believe in.

Because Big Daddy has spent his life trying to abide by a strict set of social rules, he will do anything to get Brick to live by this same code, unwilling to recognize that such a code does not exist in Brick's mentality of mendacity nor the modern world that he lives in, keeping him permanently unable to cross the generational gap that has formed between him and his son due to their vastly differing ideologies. With his discovery of the depths of

Brick's alcoholism, Big Daddy exclaims, "you're my son and I'm going to straighten you out; now that *I'm* straightened out, I'm going to straighten out you!" and he promptly seizes Brick's crutch (102). Yet Brick refuses to give in to Big Daddy's game or follow in his footsteps. He does not value Big Daddy's struggles to be part of a society that he does not admire and shouts in resistance that he will escape this lifestyle - "I can hop on one foot, and if I fall, I can crawl" (102)! Big Daddy threatens to kick him off the plantation for good, threatening to take away the lifestyle Big Daddy covets but Brick remains unperturbed, saying "That'll come, Big Daddy," as though he not only expects this break, but welcomes it calmly (102). Brick does not want the plantation or its responsibility and he cannot bear the façade that he would be forced to portray if he lived the life of the wealthy plantation owner in the South. He knows that he cannot remain in this lifestyle and calmly waits for the time when he will leave the plantation forever. Big Daddy tries to deny him these things by showing Brick the low-down life he will live if he denies this reality, but Brick welcomes the life of "hustl[ing] drinks along Skid Row" sooner than that of the plantation Big Daddy means for him to inherit (102).

While the pointed ideological language Tennessee Williams' uses in the dialogue between Brick and Big Daddy has been the main focus of this paper, metaphorical language manifests itself also in the names Williams gives to characters themselves. Big Daddy is the epitome of his name, a charismatic, overweight, larger-than-life personality whom everyone knows and respects for his wealth and social status. Brick, in great opposition, epitomizes a solid brick wall, remaining so detached from Big Daddy and his arguments that Big Daddy's words do not even seem to penetrate into his comprehension. Though bricks have the potential to build a positive structure that could be strong and long lasting,

Brick is not yet at the point of creating something bigger than himself, instead remaining a solitary brick standing stubbornly impervious to the outside world. He fails to acknowledge, much less seriously engage with Big Daddy and his dreams of his son's successful future through inheritance. Brick will not allow himself to discuss these things with his father and completely refuses to talk seriously with his father about anything, remaining as unfazed as a brick wall by anything Big Daddy says or does. He is completely deaf to his father's pleas and reasoning and continues in his own stubborn beliefs, living his life by letting the words slide past him without interacting with Big Daddy or his advice at all. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is also a title full of meaning, because "a hot tin roof's 'n uncomfo'table place t' stay on," and though the temperature is rising, "everyone is trying to hold on just as long as they can" (51). Unwilling to change or find a feasible solution to their communication problems, Brick and Big Daddy just hang on to the present moment, refusing to move forward by acknowledging each others' reality and focusing instead on their negative implications.

Even at the end of the play, Big Daddy sees Brick in terms only of his inability to live up to the idealized version of a young southern gentleman and Brick in turn accepts this negative view of himself because of his repeated failure to achieve the goals set for him by others, resulting in Brick's refusal to participate in life in any way. Big Daddy tries to show Brick examples of the "other" by pointing out what he should be and what he should not be. Whether he values Brick positively (i.e. you aren't plantation-owning material but you should be!) or negatively (i.e. you aren't destitute yet but you could be!) it remains that he sees Brick only in terms of lacking and never in terms of the qualities that he does possess. Big Daddy cannot see Brick without evaluating his success by the criteria that existed in his



own life, criteria that Brick could never meet since he is not the same person as Big Daddy, nor living in the same social setting in which Big Daddy first came to manhood. As a result, Brick is desperate from his inability to live up to Big Daddy's standards and unable to construct his own, floundering between his rejection of the old Southern hierarchy and his inability to realize a new way of living that will reconcile his situation with the modern and changing South of which he finds himself a part. Brick is a displaced character, seeing his only option in alcoholism since he believes himself without enough merit to change. The play ends ambiguously and it seems that Big Daddy's unrelenting drive to instill the "other" in his son has left Brick completely devoid of any ability to "straighten himself out," neither accepting the old Southern hierarchy nor adopting a new life-vision of his own.

Brick is only one man, but he stands as a representative for many men sharing his same generational problems who are equally unable to find a way to forge ahead to create a new social system in the American South. Like Brick, they are able to recognize that the hierarchical system of their fathers is no longer valid in this industrializing 1930's society, but they are equally unable to find a solution to their problems, turning to substance abuse and refusing to participate actively in society because of their fear of a new existence in modern society. Though they are still the younger generation in Southern hierarchy, Brick insists that he and his peers are just not "young an' believing" anymore, and this ultimate lack of belief is the cause of their fear and lack of ability to survive in their changing social climate (115). Williams writes of men forced by their times to change their thinking and their ideologies, but these men are unable to step up and proclaim the future they would like to create. Hiding behind various crutches of their own, Williams acknowledges the difficulty of their struggle but also their failure. These men are not role models in their

Southern communities, but rather men afraid of the past and even more afraid of the changes the future could bring.

## Section II: *The Glass Menagerie* and The Southern Mother of Memory in Industrialized Northern Society

At first glance the *Glass Menagerie* appears to be a play that differs entirely from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Set in St. Louis in the 1930's, the Wingfield family seems to be far removed from Southern society. But if one examines the play a little closer it becomes apparent that many of the same social and familial issues that Brick and Big Daddy struggled with are reinterpreted through the Wingfield family. Though they are not currently living in the plantation South, Amanda Wingfield is a Southern Belle who has been transplanted to the North, deserted by her husband and left with two children who she fears will not succeed in the world because of their lack of ambition to achieve similar greatness to that which she accomplished in her youth. The Wingfields create even more complicated problems than the Politts' through the absence of a father figure and the additional worry of not only a male child, but a female as well. Together these problems are almost more than Amanda can deal with, and her character very accurately reflects the mental stress she undergoes as minimal employment and old-maidhood draw ever nearer for her children. *The Glass Menagerie* suggests that the lifestyle of the Old South that binds the elder generation to tradition is not necessitated only by location, but rather an attitude that prevails regardless of place or circumstance to craft an "Ideal I" for the family that now belongs to nothing but memory.

Memory plays a very important function in *Glass Menagerie*, and works to convolute the Southern hierarchy even more than in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Because Tom and Laura Wingfield (Amanda's children) are not growing up in the deep South like their mother, they are not only removed from the personal experience of the traditional South (like Brick) but they are removed from the location as well, unable to observe for themselves the old lifestyle or the new. All they have as reference are the stories of their mother, repeatedly told and emphasized by imagination and the passing of time, which have become stories that exist in memory and nowhere else. Amanda constantly speaks of "gentlemen callers," "cotillions," "cake walks" and "jonquils" as symbols of her youth and the wonders that await Laura once she begins to take gentleman callers of her own without ever stopping to consider that such things are not only outdated, but even impossible to find in urbanized St. Louis where her daughter is coming of age (*Glass Menagerie* 8, 53). She similarly speaks of her gentlemen callers as "some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta" and encourages her son to be equally successful though again, this type of wealth and status is impossible to obtain in the 1930's American North (8). Amanda is constantly encouraging her children to make up for the characteristics they lack, asking just a bit more "get-up" of Tom and a less "nervous" tendency from Laura, but it seems that her incessant nagging and negation of her children only push both of them farther and farther into the recesses of their faults so that by the end of the play it is uncertain whether either will be able survive the pressures placed on them to succeed where they have previously so consistently failed to distinguish themselves (44, 52).

Amanda uses her coming-of-age anecdotes to provide her children with an example of what they should aspire to in life, but because she chooses to live in memory rather than

reality, she is unable to see the entirely unrealistic nature of her goals. For Laura especially she tries to recreate the same Southern Belle lifestyle and cannot see any reason why Laura cannot behave the same way and expect the same successes of the “Ideal I” Amanda remembers of her youth. She tells Laura how she “sashayed around the ballroom” at dances, was constantly “restless and giddy” and kept “going, going! Evenings, dances! Afternoons, long, long rides! Picnics – lovely!” working herself almost into frenzy as she recalls how gay her youth was when she was courted by so many gentleman callers (54). She creates in her mind an image of Laura as “lovely and sweet and pretty” and completely capable of receiving her own gentleman callers but pays no attention to the fact that Laura “is very different from other girls” because she is “crippled,” “terribly shy” and “lives in a world of her own” (47). Tom repeatedly tries to get his mother to “face the facts” that Laura is “peculiar” and completely unlike the Southern Belle Amanda has convinced herself Laura can be, but she only shoos Tom away and refuses to acknowledge his commentary in any way (48). Perhaps this is because the truth is too painful to face, or perhaps because she is so caught up in her Southern fantasy that she cannot face the truth that neither she nor Laura will ever attain the status of the “Idealized I” that she has created in her fictional memory. When Laura gently tells her mother “I don’t believe we’re going to receive any [gentlemen callers],” Amanda says “airily, ‘What? No one – not one? You must be joking!’” despite the fact that her daughter never leaves the house and has no social connections to make such an evening possible (10). Amanda cannot face the truth of the situation around her, and almost always chooses irrational ignorance rather than admit the truth of her daughter’s real qualities and unlikelihood of any real marriage prospects. Because she so

desperately wants the “other” to manifest itself into Laura’s identity, she is too blind to see that this version of Laura is completely idealized and impossible to realize.

Amanda, like Big Daddy, values the appearance of happiness and success almost more than she values success itself and strives to pursue this appearance in spite of all obstacles, turning her children away from her by insisting on an existence they know to be only false memory. One of the main pieces of stage-decoration in the play is a “blown-up photograph of the father... as a handsome young man...smiling” (4). Here the Wingfield father is idealized not only visually as a happy volunteer in WWI, full of youth and promise, but the fact that his picture remains enlarged as a central focus of the room implies a happy family showing their admiration to a respected and beloved figure, while the truth is he abandoned his family for the freedom of the road without even saying goodbye. The portrait of the father serves as yet another important ploy in Amanda’s ideological creation of a perfect Southern family. Because this giant portrait dominates the living room as the first thing anyone sees upon entering, it is clear that Amanda idealizes this false version of her former husband and former life though it may never have been even close to the perfection that the portrait and her imagination imply. Amanda will not openly admit her failed marriage or her poverty and the impending crisis that awaits the family if Laura cannot marry and Tom cannot keep a job, and instead of dealing honestly with these issues she focuses her attention on illusions. When Tom’s friend Jim promises to come over for dinner she goes to great lengths to prepare for the visit, telling Tom “thank heavens I’ve got that new sofa! I’m also making payments on a floor lamp I’ll have sent out! And put the chintz covers on, they’ll brighten things up! Of course I’d hoped to have these walls repapered...” and even tries to “spruce up” her daughter as well as the house, forcing her to

wear “Gay Deceivers” (powder puffs to increase her bosom) to “set the trap,” for Jim, as Laura describes her mothers tricks and deceits (43, 52). All of these material details help Amanda subconsciously conceal the fact that both she and her daughter are emotionally and even physically lacking in the characteristics that a Southern wife and her lovely daughter should have, and serve as a distraction for herself and the young man as she tries to secure a husband for her daughter by disguising the reality around her. Though reality is unpleasant and often unbearable, Amanda is willing to do whatever it takes to at least create the *appearance* of joyful youth and timeless beauty in her daughter for the sake of her gentleman callers.

Though there does seem to be some degree to which Amanda realizes that her daughter may not be the Southern Belle of her dreams, the fact that she deals with this threat by creating unrealistic goals that Laura cannot possibly achieve shows that her inability to abandon her ideology will cast her daughter permanently into self-doubt and isolation from public society. If she cannot secure a successful marriage for Laura, Amanda’s alternative plan for her daughter involves a career as a secretary, a career Laura is meant to achieve through the completion of business courses in typing at a nearby college. In an important scene Amanda discovers that Laura has not been attending classes and becomes hysterical, shouting “fifty dollars’ tuition, all of our plans – my hopes and ambitions for you – just gone up the spout, just gone up the spout like that” (14). Laura tries to tell her mother that she wasn’t strong enough to “face” business college, how she had tried so hard but got so nervous and threw up on the day of the first test, but Amanda will not acknowledge any of these painful facts and says hopelessly “so what are we going to do the rest of our lives?” (15). Amanda only sees Laura in terms of failure and thinks

about the desolate future, not taking into account Laura's legitimate inability to complete these tasks or her genuine attempts to attend the program despite her crippling fear of fast-paced modern society. Instead of comforting her daughter or realistically analyzing the situation, she criticizes her daughter, saying that if she has a "slight disadvantage" (a gross understatement), she must simply "make up for it – develop charm – and vivacity – and *charm!* That's all you have to do!" as though it was the simplest situation in the world to remedy (18). Amanda's focus on Laura's lack of achievement in her version of success creates a complete breakdown of communication where Laura is forced to lie and hide her real passions from her mother. Amanda cannot help Laura cope with her situation, and can only focus on what she cannot possibly achieve, continuing to push Laura deeper and deeper into despair, heightening her awareness of her incompetency without providing any actual path towards improvement. This pushes Laura away from her mother, whom she so desperately tries to please but simply cannot. She knows she will not live up to her mother's expectations of marriage as a Southern Belle, and she feels even less qualified live up to her mother's ambitious expectations of a career-minded girl who can make life happen for herself. Unlike Tom or Brick, Laura "just drifts along doing nothing" but polishing her glass menagerie, not fitting into the business world of the North or the fantasy of the South, driving her mother to despair with her endless failures and shortcomings (34). Tom rationally analyzes his sister to be "the type that people call home girls," but Amanda is unwilling to accept any such excuse for her daughter, "unless the home is hers, with a husband!" (34,35). In a way that differs from her male counterparts, Laura turns her mother's criticism inward, unable to rebel in any way from the ideological

system that stifles her, becoming more and more like her menagerie, a silent piece of glass on a shelf, withdrawn from the world and unable to take a stand for her own independence.

The pressure on Laura is perhaps even more severe for her brother Tom, and Williams creates his character as one driven from his mother and ideological father towards the path of his real father, illustrating his younger generational move to transience instead of responsibility. Amanda continually reminds Tom that he must “overcome selfishness! Self, self, self is all that you ever think of!” and tells him that he must keep his job not only for himself but for Laura, until she is married and has someone else to look after her (35). She never praises Tom for taking care of the family after his father’s departure and still less encourages him to follow his true passion to become a writer, finding ways to negate even the most positive attributes that he has. She tries to control Tom by telling him “You’re going to listen, and no more insolence from you!” and wants him to mindlessly conform to her high standards but he, unlike Laura, has the ability to fight back and he counters her saying “For sixty-five dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being *ever!* And you say self – *self’s* all I ever think of. Why, listen if self is what I thought of, Mother, I’d be where he is – GONE!” (22, 23). At this crucial moment when Tom is trying to show his mother the positive things he’s done in his life, she refuses to hear what he’s saying and instead declares she won’t speak to him until he apologizes for his rudeness, focusing on his lack of civility rather than the positive value of what he *is* saying and doing. Amanda is so focused on her own lens of the world that she cannot even acknowledge, much less allow for Tom to have his own opinions, and her efforts to control even his smallest movements are an attempt to turn him into that “responsible” man with “*get-up*” that she wants him to be (44). Amanda continues to devalue Tom and focus on



what she perceives he is not, saying, “you are the only young man I know of who ignores the fact that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don’t plan for it” (45)! Amanda speaks here from her own life experiences and the bitterness that results from dissatisfied old age, wanting her son to avoid the pain that her life has become. But she fails to consider that this discontent is present in her son, even at his young age. Tom is much more aware of the dissatisfaction of a life poorly lived than she credits him, and this awareness is what leads him to eventually abandon his family. Tom knows that he cannot be the gentlemen his mother expects of him, nor the successful accountant or entrepreneur that would be her second choice, so he leaves the “coffin” of the apartment and embarks on a future of his own, permanently abandoning his mother’s outdated ideologies and incessant negation that he knows will lead to his own ideological death (27). While Laura is too kind and too meek to stand up for herself against her mother, Tom is much stronger than her, and in a way, more selfish. He will not allow his mother to drag him down into her ideological fantasies that have done nothing for her children but destroy them, and he knows the only way he can escape the trapped feeling of his St. Louis apartment is to reject the idealized portrait of his father and follow in his true father’s footsteps, leaving the family’s distorted reality in hopes of finding a new existence rooted in the present.

Moving away from individual characters to examine the play as a whole, the glass menagerie is the central metaphor that ties the Wingfield family together and also the metaphor represents Laura in particular, blatantly asserting the dangerously fragile nature of the family in their precarious social situation. First, the glass menagerie represents the precarious nature of the Wingfield family; they are all fragile pieces of glass living together

in the same cage at the zoo, trapped in too-close quarters and at every moment in danger of being irreparably shattered by a force from the outside world. They do not work naturally together and have been placed in their one, tiny apartment without enough room to be free to live life the way they want to. Each family member is aware of their personal vulnerability and the equally fragile nature of the others. Laura especially comes to represent the glass menagerie in the figure of her unicorn, which gets broken accidentally by Jim. She was unique and special, but she trusted herself with Jim, who dropped her and left her horn shattered, now just like all the other horses, but without their degree of perfection. Laura's glass collection is beautiful and at moments full of light, but it is also dangerously breakable in a way that can never be protected or fully repaired once tragedy strikes. She is a delicate girl who experiences moments of love and happiness, but most of her life is spent idly at home because when she does venture out into the world she is only hurt by the others around her. Too fragile to exist on her own, and too weak to stand up to her mother, Laura has made a life for herself sitting quietly in the back of her dingy apartment, striving to remain silent and unnoticed by the ideology of her mother and also the ideology of her own generation, represented most effectively by Tom and Jim. This glass menagerie also represents Laura and Tom's entire generation – fragile and unsure, a generation in great need of a stronger cultural identity and unity if it is to survive the evolving Southern ideology from plantation to industrialization in the 1930's climate of change.

Both Laura and Tom fail to represent the Southern ideal their mother dreams of, but like Brick they also cannot take a positive stand in their modern generation. Laura retreats like a piece of glass on the shelf, immobile and unwilling to do anything but observe the

world from afar. Tom is equally not meant to live in Northern industrialism, finding no happiness or purpose in the factory work he is forced to do to make ends meet for his family. He goes to the movies to watch actors “have all the adventures for everybody in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watches them have them,” but he is ready for action, and unlike Brick or Laura he is “tired of the *movies*” and “*about to move*” (61)! At the end of the play, Amanda has come no further in understanding or accepting her son, and she belittles Tom as a “selfish dreamer” to the very end when he decides to leave his family and St. Louis for good (96). He, like Brick, “was pursued by something,” and instead of getting lost in alcoholism like Brick, he ran (97). Yet remembrances of his sister and the sound of tinkling glass constantly remind him of his middle identity, caught between his mother’s past and a future he cannot yet obtain for himself. The play ends again uncertainly, but the audience is left to hope that maybe Tom, unlike Laura or Brick, will someday be able to form that independent identity that he so desperately lacks.

Tom, Laura and Brick are all children caught between the old Southern ideals of their parents and the transformation into modern ideology that is so difficult for them to embrace, though they deal with this turmoil in differing ways. Because of the continual negation from their parents and the focus on the “other” of outdated standards, none of these now-grown children have been able to successfully form a positive identity of their own within the context of their current social surroundings. Beaten down continually by their parents and instructed in a way that is not conducive to the modern world, they are caught between two versions of a self that cannot exist. Instead, they exist in a confused present moment where all success seems too far to reach. Trying to survive without

encouragement from anyone, combined with the harsh denial of their parents, these children have no sense of positive self and cannot create one in their current social existence. Brick tries to hide his identity somewhere in his alcoholism, choosing to displace the problems of his generationally failed ideology by focusing attention on other more physical problems. Laura would rather stay hidden and alone in her menagerie instead of confronting either the world of her mother or the world of the modern North. Tom tries to run away from his generational problems and his mother, thinking that distance and the Navy will solve his problems of identity. Though their attitudes and actions are all different, Brick, Laura and Tom all fail to realize that like their parents idealized expectations, their strategies of avoidance are not set in a positive reality and will not fix their problems of existence in the world they inhabit. Their present social identity cannot exist because of the changing social dynamic of the South, but the social evolution away from the idyllic plantation lifestyle to modern industry and equality is happening regardless of their willingness to participate, though participate they must.

These characters, like the generation they symbolize, must accept the changing social perceptions and react positively to create a new identity in the new social climate of the South. During Tennessee Williams' lifetime and particularly the 1930's the Old Southern plantation lifestyle was crumbling in the face of a changing economic system. Industrialization was finally beginning to boom in the American South and as a result, old traditions were becoming rapidly obsolete. A generation was born that could no longer live the dying plantation lifestyle, but it could also not participate in urbanized factories the way Northerners had been bred to do for so many years prior. In an atmosphere where neither the new or old standards of life could fully function, people were forced to adapt by

trying to create an independent identity between two stifling forces. Added to this are personal difficulties where Brick was crushed by a football injury and the death of a friend while Tom and Laura were unable to cope with the move to St. Louis or the abandonment of their father. These burdens only created an added pressure that gave more fuel to their parents' fire of generational criticism and negation.

Overall *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Glass Menagerie* represent an entire generation of young Southerners struggling to survive in a world between old and new ideals. With the older generation denying the progress of modernity and teaching the only values they know, it is no surprise that estrangement was Tennessee Williams' interpretation of the end result of such strong conflicting pressures between parent and child. As Tom tells his mother, "you say there's so much in your heart that you can't describe to me. That's true of me, too. There's so much in my heart that I can't describe to *you!* So let's respect each other's [differences]" and try to move forward because communication is impossible and inadequate between the two generations (*The Glass Menagerie*, 33). Brick similarly tells Big Daddy that it's true they've never lied to each other but they've never *talked* to each other" either (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 113). The ideological gap between these generations has grown so wide that the younger generation feels that there is no choice but to split from their parents' ideologies completely and start afresh without them. Not only can they not live up to their antiquated expectations, but they cannot even communicate with someone who has such different standards of life.

The outlook for these young characters is bleak, but Tennessee Williams, as a product of this generation himself, knows that survival is possible for the strong-willed. It is true that the negation of their parents has lead these children to despair, but it is also

true that the future is coming regardless of their willingness to accept it, and it is possible for life to change for the better with the acceptance of new standards and new ideologies. When dealing with the generational and social conflict of this generation, Williams is aware that they must not only overcome the burdening expectations of their families, but that of an antiquated society as well. Though the path to independent success is always difficult, Williams believes that through real communication and acceptance of the current social reality rather than negation and the high standards of the unrealistic "Ideal I," change and even happiness can happen for this mixed-up generation over time.

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