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ENGL 4028

11/14/18

A Juxtaposition of Protagonists

Tennessee Williams is the brilliant playwright of the two emotionally beautiful plays *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *The Glass Menagerie* is a play about a family struggling to make ends meet due to the fact that the original sole provider, the father, had abandoned them. The play takes a deep look into the lives of its three main characters, Amanda, Tom, and Laura; and it shows how this small family copes in a friendless world. On the other hand, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a story that examines the relationship between Stanley and Stella Kowalski, a married couple. This relationship is threatened when the wife's sister, Blanche DuBois, comes to stay in their small home. Ultimately, this play explores various heavy topics, such as abuse, alcoholism, and rape, and addresses individual relationships between various characters. These plays, while incredibly unique in their own right, bear some remarkable resemblances. For instance, both *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* have extremely similar main characters. One cannot help but notice the various parallels between Amanda and Blanche, Laura and Stella, and Tom and Stanley. It is apparent that Amanda and Blanche both place a fair amount of importance on one's appearance and they both have dependency issues with men as well. In Laura and Stella's case, their submissive personalities are overtly obvious and they both fell prone to being deceived by the men that they loved. Finally, Tom and Stanley both use alcohol as a means of feeling better and they are both determined to get their own way, regardless of who has to suffer the consequences. In the end,

the characters Amanda and Blanche, Laura and Stella, and Tom and Stanley bear various similarities towards their own counterpart, which shows that, even though the details of their personalities are different, Tennessee Williams cut these characters from the same cloth.

One of the numerous similarities found between the two plays is how alike the various main characters are. For instance, the characters Amanda Wingfield and Blanche DuBois are extremely similar to one another. One way in which these two characters bear resemblance to each other is through their mutual dependence upon men. Michael DiSchiavi writes in an article, “In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the strangers on whose kindness Blanche DuBois has ‘always depended’ are exclusively male strangers. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda and Laura Wingfield depend on Tom for their very survival” (18). Thus, Blanche depends upon the men for kindness in regards to her poor situation, and Amanda relies upon her son, Tom, to provide for her and her daughter. To elucidate, Amanda Wingfield was a southern belle who had found herself in unfortunate circumstances. Her husband and the father of her children had abandoned her, her daughter, and her son, which caused the family to struggle to make ends meet. This resulted in both Amanda and Laura becoming entirely dependent upon Tom to keep them from destitution (Williams, *The Glass* 9-68). This is evident during the play when Amanda and Tom get into an argument about how he spends his time and his drinking habits which prompts her to say to him, “How dare you jeopardize your job? Jeopardize our security? How do you think we’d manage—?” (Williams, *The Glass* 23). Here, it is evident that Amanda and Laura depend upon Tom and his job at the warehouse to provide for them, which makes Amanda’s dependency upon a man quite clear. This is similar to the way that Blanche DuBois’ survival is also dependent upon men. She bounces around from man to man taking advantage of their hospitality and is quite lost without them. She even states in *A Streetcar Named Desire* that she “has always

depended on the kindness of strangers” (Williams 102-03). In Blanche’s case, the kindness she depends upon seems to come predominantly from men; for example, she takes advantage of Stanley’s supposed kindness by staying at his house and attempts to court Mitch by using deceitful means (Williams, *A Streetcar* 1-103). Thus, it is clear that Blanche does not depend upon women to save her because, after all, there is nothing that a woman could do for Blanche because women were not exactly in charge of their own affairs at the time. Thus, both Amanda and Blanche are completely dependent upon men, and can seemingly do nothing to fend for themselves, which only serves to increase their dependency.

Another similarity between the characters Amanda and Blanche is the importance they both place on ensuring that they appear elegant in other people’s eyes. Jordan Y. Miller writes in an article, “Amanda’s past bears small resemblance to Blanche’s sordid experiences, but Amanda’s pretensions of gentility and her struggles to uphold the semblances of elegance ring just as false” (90). Here, Miller states that while Amanda and Blanche’s pasts may not contain a plethora of similarities, they do have at least one aspect of their lives in common: their shared struggle in keeping up a false appearance of refinement. This fact is demonstrated best when Amanda tells Laura, “Now just you wait. I’m going to dress myself up. You’re going to be astonished at your mother’s appearance” (Williams, *The Glass* 43). Here, Amanda is dressing up in an attempt to convince Jim, their gentleman caller, that she is a refined and elegant woman. She is desperately holding on to the person she was in the past and believes she can still be in her present state. Unfortunately for Amanda, this is nothing more than a mere fabrication of her own mind; she is not the woman she once was. Similarly to Amanda, Blanche attempts to convince others of her supposed refined grace as well. This is evident when she goes out with Mitch and pretends to be a virtuous woman by saying “It’s just—well—I guess it is just that I have—old

fashioned ideals!” (Williams, *A Streetcar* 65). Here, Blanche is essentially pretending to be a virgin in order to convince Mitch of her sophisticated nature, which is not even remotely close to the truth. Nevertheless, she puts on these false airs of gentility in order to convince Mitch that she is the kind of woman you marry, not mess around with. In the end, both Amanda and Blanche seem to cling to the elegance they both had in the past in order to convince other people that they are still graceful because they believe that is how they will obtain respect.

Another pair of similar characters from *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* is Laura Wingfield and Stella Kowalski, who are similar in their fragile and submissive natures. In fact, Bert Cardullo comments on the fragile nature of Laura when he writes, “The physically as well as emotionally fragile Laura escapes from her mid-twentieth-century urban predicament in Saint Louis [...] through art and music, through the beauty of her glass menagerie and through the records she plays on her Victrola, or gramophone” (33). Here, Cardullo is stating that Laura is too fragile to handle her suffocating surroundings, and attempts to escape by withdrawing into herself and various art forms. Laura also has a submissive nature, which shows itself whenever her mother tells her what to do. For instance, during the scene when Jim comes over to dinner, Amanda tells Laura to go and open the door, something Laura truly does not want to do, which is revealed when Laura practically has a nervous breakdown and frantically says, “Mother, please, you go to the door!” (Williams, *The Glass* 45). Nevertheless, Laura bends to her mother’s will when she finally succumbs and opens the door to let Tom and Jim inside (Williams, *The Glass* 46). This shows that Laura is easily willing to submit to her mother’s commands instead of sticking up for herself, which simply serves to showcase her submissive personality. Additionally, Stella Kowalski also has a submissive personality, especially when it comes to her husband, Stanley. This is demonstrated through the way that Stella allows Stanley

to get away with his temper and inappropriate behavior. After Stanley throws Stella's radio out the window and then abuses her, she simply makes excuses for him and refuses to leave him. This is evident when Blanche says that she is going to get Stella away from Stanley and Stella responds, "He didn't know what he was doing.... He was as good as a lamb when I came back and he's really very, very ashamed of himself" (Williams, *A Streetcar* 44). Here, Stella simply tries to make allowances for Stanley's inexcusable behavior, which is a clear indicator of a submissive personality. The fact that she does not stick up for herself and just allows Stanley to treat her however he desires proves that she is not a dominant person. Thus, both Laura and Stella have submissive personalities that allow other people to take advantage of them quite easily.

Furthermore, Laura Wingfield and Stella Kowalski are also similar in the way that they are both deceived by the men they view romantically. In Laura's case, she had romanticized a boy she hardly ever had any contact with, Jim O'Connor, into a person he simply was not, which allowed her to put him on a pedestal. This resulted in Laura garnering romantic feelings for Jim and even her being led to believe that he could be interested in her as well. In fact, Jim had led her on by dancing with her, complementing her, and kissing her, and then played it all off by telling her he was engaged (Williams, *The Glass* 60-64). He had deceived her into thinking that they could have been romantically linked, only to cruelly shatter any of her hopes. Jim O'Connor should have been honest with her from the beginning instead of toying with her emotions. Stella Kowalski was also deceived by her husband, Stanley. Unfortunately, Stanley's deceit had far more dire consequences than Jim's did. Stanley had raped Stella's sister, Blanche DuBois, and then denied that it had ever happened, convincing everyone that Blanche was crazy (Williams, *A Streetcar* 94-103). Stella had believed Stanley's lie because she could not bear to think that it

could have ever been true. Thus, Stella was wholly and undeniably deceived by the man she had romantically linked herself to, just like Laura Wingfield. Sadly, both of their deceitful love interests caused them both pain. Jim caused Laura pain in the form of unrequited love and by giving her the hope of love and then crushing it. Stanley caused Stella pain by convincing her that her sister was both crazy and a liar, which hurt her because she loved Blanche and did not want to think that way about her. All in all, Laura and Stella had both felt the pain of another person's lies. Additionally, it can be conjectured that both of these women subconsciously allowed themselves to be deceived because the love that they wanted from these men was greater than any of their other desires. Laura hardly knew Jim, yet she completely allowed herself to be taken in by him. Stella knew how brutal Stanley could be, yet refused to believe her sister's accusations against him. Thus, it is quite probable that they were a part of their own deception.

Tom Wingfield and Stanley Kowalski are the final pair of similar characters from the two plays. One such similarity that can be found between the two is in the way that they both use alcohol to make themselves feel good. In Tom's case, alcohol is a substance that can be used in order to make himself feel better about his current living situation and to help ease the irritation of his overbearing mother. This is evident when Tom arrives at the apartment quite drunk after having a big disagreement with his mother about his life and the way he lives it (Williams, *The Glass* 23-25). Surely, he uses the numbing effects of alcohol in order to ease the pain he felt over the entire situation. Stanley also uses alcohol to make himself feel better; however, Stanley's alcohol use is certainly a little more dangerous than Tom's. It is apparent that Stanley enjoys drinking socially, especially during one of his poker games; unfortunately, this can cause him to be quite volatile in his actions. This is evident when Stella upsets him whilst he is drunk and he retaliates by throwing her radio out the window (Williams, *A Streetcar* 39-40). Stella responds to

this action by saying to him “Drunk—drunk—animal thing, you!” (Williams, *A Streetcar* 40). Here, Stella is pointing out the obvious by saying that Stanley’s impertinent actions are due to his heavy inebriation. She even explains Stanley’s terrible behavior to her sister Blanche the next day by saying, “Oh. Well, it’s his pleasure, like mine is movies and bridge. People have got to tolerate each other’s habits, I guess” (Williams, *A Streetcar* 46). By saying this, Stella is alluding to the fact that this is certainly not the first time Stanley has completely lost his temper whilst under the influence, and it will definitely not be the last time either. Stanley will continue to have his poker parties and drink heavily because he likes it, and Stella will have no choice but to simply tolerate it. Thus, while Stanley is unmistakably a discourteous and volatile drunk and Tom is not, both Tom and Stanley do use alcohol as a means of enjoying themselves.

Another similarity between the characters Tom and Stanley is found in the way that they are both determined to get their own way in life. For Tom, this means leaving home, and by extension abandoning his mother and sister, in order to pursue the life he actually wants. Near the end of the play, Tom tells Jim that he is a member of the Union of Merchant Seamen and that he paid his “dues this month, instead of the electric light bill” (Williams, *The Glass* 48). Here, it is obvious that Tom has put his own wants over the needs of his mother and sister by neglecting the light bill in order to pursue what he desires. Dr. Sneh Lata Sharma comments on this by stating “man must have his own way. Like every other male character in Williams’ plays, without feeling any sense [of] guilt, he [Tom] leaves home, for he never committed himself to the familial or societal norms” (115). In other words, Tom leaves his mother and sister simply because he must have his own way, and he selfishly will not settle for anything less. This sense of entitlement is apparent in Stanley’s personality as well. A prime example of this would be during the scene that he calls for Stella to come back, and refuses to stop until she does. This is

shown when he calls Eunice on the phone and tells her “Eunice, is my girl up there? I want my girl! I’ll keep on ringin’ till I talk with my baby!” (Williams, *A Streetcar* 41). Here, Stanley makes his intentions plain: he will not stop calling for Stella, and irritating everyone in the neighborhood, until he gets Stella to come back down to him. He certainly made good on his promise when he had proceeded to go outside and kept screaming Stella’s name until she came back downstairs again and into Stanley’s open arms, which demonstrates that Stanley got his way, as he surely expected to (Williams, *A Streetcar* 42). Thus, both Tom and Stanley were extremely determined when it came to getting what they wanted, and it is clear that they did not care about how others felt in regard to their actions either.

All in all, the main characters of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* share some remarkable similarities to one another. Blanche DuBois and Amanda Wingfield both place quite a heavy significance on keeping up with their appearance, even if one does not necessarily have the means to do so. This makes it evident that the two women placed a sufficient amount of importance upon the opinions of others. This is likely because they both recognized that in order to get what they want, they would have to be able to appease the people who were holding all of the cards. In their particular cases, the people holding the cards were often men. Surely, this is also why Blanche and Amanda were so dependent upon what a man could provide for them, because they saw that it was the only way to survive. Laura and Stella, the other two female protagonists, also shared an aspect of their personalities in that they were both submissive people. They were completely willing to bend to someone else’s will, so long as they were taken care of. This shows intelligence on their part in that, just like Blanche and Amanda, they were doing what they needed to do in order to survive. Laura and Stella were both deceived by the men that they loved as well. This deception shows that Laura and Stella

Finally, Tom and Stanley had a few personality traits in common with each other as well. They both used alcohol as a means to enjoy themselves and make themselves feel better. Also, they both were a little self-entitled, and because of this sense of entitlement, they displayed an intense sort of determination. This resulted in them insisting on getting the things that they wanted and believed they deserved, regardless of who got caught in the consequences. These similar characteristics make it apparent that Tennessee Williams had some type of basic template when it came to creating his main characters; and he did not often deviate from this template when constructing their general personalities. The character template that Williams' had was likely formed by people he actually knew who had a heavy influence on his life, which is why all of these similarities show up in his characters throughout multiple works. This helps to add an air of authenticity to Williams' writing style because he drew upon things in his own life. As an artist, Williams was open and honest about the topics and characters presented in his plays, which is reflected in his writing style. Overall, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* are two wonderful plays with interesting, albeit similar, main characters. Surely, these plays will be beloved for years to come.

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