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# Academia Open



*By Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo*

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## Existential Identity and Authenticity in The Glass Menagerie Through Sartrean Lens

*Disfungsi Kelenjar Adrenal dan Kaitannya dengan Gangguan Endokrin*

Najlaa Atshan Khalaf Al-musawi, najlaaat@utq.edu.iq, (1)

*Collage of Medicine University of Thi-Qar, Iraq*

<sup>(1)</sup> Corresponding author

### Abstract

**General Background:** Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* has long been recognized for its psychological complexity and portrayal of familial dysfunction. **Specific Background:** While many analyses focus on psychoanalytic or realist readings, the play also invites exploration through existential philosophy, particularly that of Jean-Paul Sartre. **Knowledge Gap:** Limited scholarly attention has been given to examining the play through an existentialist-expressivist lens that bridges literary technique and philosophical inquiry. **Aim:** This paper aims to reinterpret *The Glass Menagerie* through Sartrean existentialism, focusing on themes of freedom, identity, and authenticity. **Results:** The study finds that Williams employs memory and expressionist techniques to illustrate characters' existential crises, highlighting their struggles with "bad faith," alienation, and the burden of freedom. Amanda, Tom, and Laura each embody forms of existential angst and self-deception, yet their experiences also signal the possibility of self-assertion and authentic living. **Novelty:** The paper offers a novel reading by integrating Sartrean concepts such as subjectivity, personal responsibility, and authenticity with Williams's theatrical method, revealing deeper existential dimensions of the play. **Implications:** This perspective not only broadens the interpretative scope of the play but also demonstrates how literary works can serve as philosophical discourses, emphasizing the relevance of existential thought in analyzing human experience amid socio-political pressures.

### Highlights:

Explores *The Glass Menagerie* through Sartrean existential philosophy.

Analyzes characters' identity, freedom, and existential crisis via expressionism.

Reveals existential depth and philosophical relevance in Williams's dramatic technique.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Expressionism, Jean-Paul Sartre, Tennessee Williams, Plastic Theatre, Subjective Identity.

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## Introduction

Thomas Lanier Williams III, pen-named as Tennessee Williams, was a prominent American playwright and screenwriter, often grouped with Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller as one of the top playwrights of the twentieth-century American drama [1, p.57]. Williams solidified his reputation as a playwright with the success of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944. He describes the play as "the catastrophe of success" [2, p.12]. The play marked the beginning of a series of triumphs, such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), and *The Night of the Iguana* (1961).

The post-war social and economic American conditions greatly influenced Williams' literary works, making an understanding of the socio-historical background essential to grasping his plays as a whole and the overarching theme of reality that runs through them. Williams experienced a heightened sense of restlessness towards society, viewing it as a potential threat. As noted by Bigsby [3], WWII "intensified Williams's feeling of society as threat" (p. 2). The emergence of a new materialistic era introduced different standards and beliefs that many of his characters struggle to adhere to.

Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* has been often examined for its representation of a dysfunctional family and psychological depth. This essay adopts a new track by analyzing the play through the lenses of both expressionism and existentialism, specifically via the existential perspective of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy. Whereas Expressionism focuses on conveying inner emotions and truths rather than objective reality, Existentialism, on the other hand, delves into the themes of individuality, freedom, and the search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world.

This study investigates how the play depicts a fragmented, expressionistic image of existence and highlights the tension between reality and perception through an analysis of the characters' interactions, conversation, and actions. The study highlights the play's central existential quest and how the characters negotiate a reality.

The repressed identity and existential angst are two prevalent themes in the play, as the characters struggle to assert their full freedom in front of themselves and others. Tom, the main character, embodies Sartre's assertion that denying one's freedom is cowardice, a sentiment Williams may have grappled with personally, as he faced ridicule and exclusion when relocating with his family to St. Louis. Williams began to uncover his own sense of identity when his family relocated to St. Louis, where he and his sister faced ridicule and exclusion from local children due to their Southern manners and speech. He chose the professional name Tennessee Williams to honor his Southern accent and background [4].

## Result and Discussion

Sartre's notion of "individual choice"

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy is based on the belief in human freedom alone, as articulated in his statement that "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" [5, pp. 23-24]. According to Sartre, individuals are responsible for their actions and thoughts, emphasizing the idea that human existence is grounded in personal choice. This existential perspective posits that life is shaped by individual decisions and the concept of a "fundamental project" that gives meaning to one's existence [5]. Sartre's existential psychoanalysis methodology seeks to explore the totality of human experience and the significance of personal agency, prioritizing accountability over unconscious drives.

Sartre's atheistic existentialism emerges from the societal despair and anxiety following World Wars, highlighting the dichotomy between external realities and human existence [6]. The principle that "existence precedes essence" underscores the absence of preordained essence in human beings, emphasizing the role of choice and action in defining one's self [6, p.26]. Sartre's exploration of themes, such as abandonment, anguish, and despair reflects his rejection of divine support and underscores the moral responsibility and freedom inherent in individual choice. The notion of acting without hope embodies Sartre's conviction in human agency and commitment to action despite uncertain outcomes [6, pp.34-39].

Expressionism in the play

Expressionism emerged as a reaction to, realism, impressionism, and naturalist distorted reality, and the anxiety of man's declining state of connection with environment, and the surroundings [7, p.1]. Essentially, Expressionism does not view the world as an objective mirror of reality, but rather as the artist's internal, subjective lens [8]. As encapsulated in Pierre Courthion's words, "Expressionism is to the eye what a scream is to hearing." Some traits of the expressionist movement included: a rejection of realism in favor of dreamy states; non-linear, frequently fragmented structures; an emphasis on abstract notions and ideas; and the use of imagery and symbolism in place of naturalism. In his essay, "Refractory visions: The Contours of literary expressionism," Freedman [9, p.62] writes:



The expressionistic poets we have examined thought of themselves as diametrically opposed to naturalism. They refused to accept the "objective" conception of reality. They equally rejected the pure analysis of the soul, cultivated in symbolist writing. Rather, the world must be distorted to reveal its inner meaning.

The movement's artists recognized personal isolation as a major feature of contemporary life, and they bore testimony to it. Angst is expressed through expressionism when we realize that contemporary social structures cannot satisfy our spiritual requirements. It is a furious critique of how the contemporary metropolitan environment dehumanizes man. Gassner [10, p.109] argued, "Expressionism followed a view of life and art that required the destruction of the external shape of reality".

Dahlstrom [11, p.52] believes that Expressionism aims to show the deepest feeling rather than the outside world. He writes: "The expressionist seeks to give meaning to all that happens within the ego to grasp into the chaos of the unconscious and bring to the light of consciousness whatsoever meaning there is to this existence of ours". Thus, reality and super-reality are blended without restraint, eschewing individual character development in favor of archetypes that represent modern society's fundamental issues like bourgeois morality, sexuality, warfare, and the societal dilemmas brought about by mechanization and industrialization.

Moreover, expressionism served as a form of protest against the increasing materialism and mechanization of modern industrial society. This trend was seen as dehumanizing, turning individuals into mere robots disconnected from their intrinsic selves and leading to lives devoid of purpose, filled with monotony and lacking in meaning. "The expressionists, in spite of the various shades of religious-mystical and socio-political-activist, are all united in their search for a new world, a new society and a new man" [12, p.70].

In his review of the play, theater critic John Lahr [13] highlights the expressionist elements present in *The Glass Menagerie*, noting how Williams uses symbolism and theatrical devices to convey the characters' inner emotions and conflicts. Lahr writes, "the play would ever quite exhaust the ravages of repression". Commenting on the play's expressionist style, Sontag [14] once wrote, "Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style—but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not." In [15], Mark Fisher argues that "Although experimental in form, with its tang of European expressionism and its dreamlike treatment of memory, the Tennessee Williams classic is as delicate as one of Laura Wingfield's glass animals. Nothing is out of place."

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the conflicts among all the characters become the most significant phenomenon, shattering the emotions. The play's characters exhibit an expressionistic attitude due to the intensity of their feelings. Everyone wants to live in their own dream world, but when harsh reality sets in, everyone's inner selves come to light. Laura comes across as a meek non-achiever, Tom as a conceited yet guilty dreamer, and Amanda as almost hysterical. Amanda is presented with her extraordinary sophistication as a contrast to the harsh reality outside. According to Freedman, "expressionism resembles the underground style of heightened romanticism" [9, p. 59]. In fact, Amanda's speech seems to be a romantic voyage toward the ideal Southern life of the nineteenth century.

Through the display of extreme emotion, expressionists seek to highlight and depict the inner truth. Here, every character in the play makes use of excess emotion. Whether it is being expressive in elegant "romantic" speeches, as in Amanda's instruction to Laura, to seduce Jim, or continually and obnoxiously disappearing into entertaining movies as the case with Tom, or being overly shy and helpless as it is with Laura. They are all, in a sense, navigating the extremes of life. This is an example of symbolic expressionism where the characters firmly transition from fantasy to reality. In his Production Notes, Williams writes: "Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth." [16, p. xix]

By illustrating the contrast between fantasy and truth, Williams depicts a bleak depiction of society. He shows how exploitation, disregard for boundaries, and the unchecked pursuit of power can result in feelings of despair, disconnection, and isolation. This fragmentation of our world pushes us to retreat into illusions in a quest for happiness. In the process, if someone fails or turns into a hysteric or living dead like Laura, nobody will care about them because everyone will be too busy trying to fit in and find a normative "success"; one must work ever harder to salvage the "depressed" country and "depressed" humanity.

Williams felt that realism was no longer sufficient to capture the complexity of contemporary life. A lack of external distractions, psychological activity, and symbolic connotations might better capture the entirety of the event. He employed expressionistic techniques to explore the subjectivity of reality, the value of memory as an illusive experience, the dehumanization and grotesqueness of modern urban culture, and the contemporary angst of mid-century American life. Williams himself admits, "A free and imaginative use of light can be of enormous value in giving a mobile plastic quality to plays of a more or less static nature" [17, p.108]. In his Production Notes, he writes: "Everyone should know nowadays...that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance". [16, p. xix]

The distorted reality and anxious self are expressed in the play through the use of lighting and set design that create a dreamlike atmosphere. The dimly lit apartment and the presence of a large glass unicorn in Laura's collection add to the overall mood of the play, emphasizing the characters' internal conflicts, troubled identity and



vacillating existence.

Laura is depicted as a fragile and delicate woman who retreats into her collection of glass animals, viewing them as a representation of her own fragile existence. Tom complains that "She lives in a world of her own" [18, p.39]. In his Notes at the beginning of the play, Williams writes: "she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf", a world of its own that reflects her inner and outer world. Laura's attachment to her glass figurines serves as a symbol of her desire for perfection in a flawed and harsh reality. According to Bloom, Laura's glass is "indicative of self-exploration, or, taken further, narcissism. It might be used as a barrier" [2, p.26].

Tom's final act of blowing out the candles can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture of closure and a farewell to the emotional ties that have bound him, marking his decisive step towards a future of uncertainty and possibility. The imagery of blowing out candles stands the fading of traditional sources of light, indicative of the shifting values and norms in the modern world. The mention of lightning portrays a world characterized by sudden and disorienting flashes of illumination, highlighting the chaotic and unpredictable nature of existence.

Tom's directive to "Blow out your candles, Laura...and so--goodbye" can also be interpreted as a farewell to his sister Laura, urging her to break free from the illusions or false hopes that have been holding her back, and to embrace new individual subjectivity.

The expressionist elements intersect with existential themes in *The Glass Menagerie*, creating a captivating and thought-provoking exploration of the human condition. In his introduction to the play, Robert Bray [19, p. xii] notes:

As the fractured world of the Wingfields unfolds, the first apparent fissure is the societal anonymity into which they have fallen, for they live in "one of those vast hive-like conglomerations . . . as one interfused mass of automatism." Collectively marginalized, as individuals in search of identity they fare even worse. Amanda, Laura, and Tom live out secret horrors, all the while unsuccessfully trying to conceal or repress their respective demons from each other. As a result, *Menagerie* reveals the story of family members whose lives form a triangle of quiet desperation, each struggling with an individual version of hell, while simultaneously seeking escape from the gravity of each other's pathologies.

Existentialism in the play

The War II and the economic recession that patted the country cast their shadow on the socioeconomic life of the American society. These devastating consequences on the individual's social self and existence construct Williams's thematic sphere of *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams posits that the primary ethical dilemma facing humanity in the twentieth century is the imperative to evade annihilation: "to beat the game of being against non-being" [20, p.67]. The idea of evading annihilation is central to thematic schema of the play. The characters showcase their own insecurities and fears, and try to find a sense of self-worth and identity in a world that can often feel overwhelming and apathetic. Her fragile nature and reliance on her glass menagerie as a form of escapism show how she, too, is trying to navigate the challenges of existence and evade the annihilation of her own sense of self. As Bloom aptly remarks, "Williams creates in this drama a conscious self: the observing and reflecting 'Tom' who projects the flow of experience from his own recall." [2, p.67]

The play was predominantly built around the effect of social reality on the individual subjectivity and their existential identity. Kakutani [21] remarkably observes, "Though essentially concerned with the existential confusions of living, Mr. Williams's plays are not devoid of social content". *The Glass Menagerie* constructs a young protagonist who must decide whether to leave home and, in turn, whether to go on an upcoming voyage. Embracing one's independence has repercussions, as many existentialist thinkers have noted; therefore, the protagonist must decide whether to leave his past and loved ones behind [22, p. 55].

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom faces an existential dilemma similar to that of Shakespeare's "existential" Hamlet as described by Bloom [2, p. 66]. Tom like Hamlet struggles with the idea of his own identity and place in the world. He feels trapped by his responsibilities to his family and society, but also feels a deep sense of dissatisfaction with his life. Like Hamlet, Tom is introspective and struggles with making decisions that will define his future. Both characters are torn between their personal desires and the expectations placed upon them by society.

Williams uses Tom's narrative voice as a way to explore these existential themes throughout the play. Tom frequently breaks the fourth wall, addressing the audience directly and revealing his innermost thoughts and feelings. This technique allows the audience to see the inner turmoil that Tom faces, much like Hamlet's soliloquies allow the audience to witness his internal struggles. Ultimately, both Tom and Hamlet must come to terms with their own identities and make decisions that will shape their futures. Tom's decision to leave his family and pursue his own dreams mirrors Hamlet's decision to seek revenge and fulfill his destiny as prince.

The play started with Tom's speech that summarizes the existential question, and reveals the inner conflict.

TOM: I have tricks in my pocket—I have things up my sleeve— but I am the opposite of the stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. [18, p.11]

While narrating himself, he tells audience that all is about "memory", and therefore, *what is* or seems real -- because "Being a memory play", "is not realistic". [18, p.11].

Tom's speech at the beginning of the play immediately sets the tone for the existential themes that will be explored throughout the story. By acknowledging that he is not a typical magician who presents illusions as truth, Tom is highlighting the idea that reality is not always what it seems. He is essentially breaking the fourth wall and inviting the audience to question the nature of truth and reality.

The notion that the play is a "memory play" adds another layer to this existential exploration. Memories are subjective and can be distorted over time, blurring the lines between what is real and what is a construct of our own minds. By framing the story as a memory play, Tom is suggesting that the events that unfold may not be entirely accurate, but they still hold power and significance in shaping his identity and understanding of the world. His speech demonstrates Williams' dramatic technique of the play. He introduces his reading of the idea of absolute truth and given reality. He delves into fathoming the characters' perceptions of their reality, and excavates the uncertain terrain of existential uncertainty.

By contrasting himself with the gentleman caller and other characters in the play, the narrator-actor, Tom, introduces the philosophical idea of what is real and what is not, and questions the commonly accepted notion of reality. "He [the gentleman caller] is the most realistic character in the play, serving as an emissary from a world that we are somehow detached from." [18, p. 11]

Tom here is reconstructing his subjective self. For him, one's existence is defined by his/her subjectivity, individual perspectives, beliefs, and experiences that shape one's understanding of reality. In this context, Tom's interpretation of reality differs from the gentleman caller. His identity, and consequently, his reality is determined by his attainment, not necessarily, the conventionally conformist one. This explains his depiction as a poet who fashions his realm and life, self and identity, being and existence. Life is a matter of choices.

Tom's self-awareness and introspection allow him to question the nature of reality and challenge societal norms. By presenting himself as an outsider, Tom suggests that reality is subjective and can be influenced by personal experiences and perceptions. This contrasts with the gentleman caller and other characters who may adhere more strictly to societal expectations and norms. Further, his reference to the gentleman caller as an emissary from a separate world highlights the idea of the social reality defined by the societal norms and conventions. In contrast, his reality is defined instead by individual experiences and perspectives. His introspective nature and questioning of reality suggest that what is considered "real" is subjective and open to interpretation. This is in line with Sartre's belief in the concept of existential freedom, where individuals are responsible for creating their own meaning and defining their own existence. Tom's introspective musings and self-awareness in the play can be seen as a reflection of this existential dilemma.

Williams' characters exhibit bad faith through their refusal to acknowledge truth and reality, as well as their tendency to cling to the past as a means of avoiding the burden of freedom. For Sartre, argues Colanzi [23, p.456], "the past has the fixed and contingent being of an object, so that to assert 'I am what I was' by assuming a post title or identity is to attempt 'to realize value and flee the anguish which comes...from the perpetual absence of the self'".

Additionally, Sartre's idea of authenticity, or the importance of being true to oneself, is echoed in Tom's struggle with his duty to his family and his desire to pursue his own dreams. Like Sartre's notion of living in good faith, Tom is constantly grappling with his own sense of identity and purpose amidst societal expectations and familial obligations.

Furthermore, Sartre's emphasis on the idea of the "other" is relevant to Tom's relationships with the other characters in the play, particularly the gentleman caller. The contrast between Tom and the gentleman caller can be seen as a representation of the "other" and the existential tension that arises when individuals must navigate their relationships with those who hold different values or perspectives.

In fact, Williams's existentialism is not nihilistic. It is a sort of rebellion against harsh realities. His plays serve as social protests against human atrocities and social impositions. The alienated selves, paralyzed lives, and dismantled identities of his characters are all outcomes of external forces. The problem with Williams's characters in his plays lies in their inability to adapt to the harsh social realities they are faced with. This leads to a conflicted sense of self. They either hide their true selves, or conform to a false social self. Williams says, "I was most interested in...Sartre, whose existential philosophy appealed to me strongly" [23, p.451].

By trying to conform to societal norms, they ultimately fail as they are living in the past. This results in an existential crisis where they become inward-looking, creating a self-made illusion of identity. Their failure to exist socially stems from their inability to truly be themselves. As Sartre famously said, "The reality of everyone's existence arises from the innermost self of man, not from anything that the mind can codify" [6, p.6].

Amanda's preoccupation with past memories and her obsession with finding a suitor for Laura demonstrate her desire to escape from present difficulties and cling to illusions of a more glamorous and fulfilling past. She insists

on shaping her children's lives according to her personal perspectives and past experiences. Despite the family's present existential dilemma, Amanda refuses to acknowledge their reality and chooses to dwell in the past, reminiscing about her own glory days as a Southern belle. This leads her to project her unfulfilled aspirations onto her daughter, Laura, and son, Tom, stifling their individuality and forcing them to conform to her own ideals.

Laura's self-esteem is shattered due to her physical disability and the pressure placed upon her by Amanda to adhere to societal expectations of femininity. As a result, Laura withdraws into the world of her glass menagerie, shy and introverted, reflecting an internalization of societal norms that prevent her from fully expressing her true self. Her collection of glass figurines serves as both a source of comfort and a form of escape from her physical and emotional insecurities. The delicate fragility of the glass menagerie mirrors her own vulnerability, and her tendency to retreat into this world symbolizes her struggle to navigate between the illusory realm of her imagination and the harsh realities of her existence.

Tom, on the other hand, struggles with his desire for freedom and self-expression, as he is torn between his responsibilities towards his family and his own aspirations. Inflicted as such, Tom ultimately chooses to abandon his family, symbolizing his rejection of societal expectations and his quest for authenticity. He represents Sartre's "man" that chooses what to be, and defines himself in terms of being against un-being. His existence springs from his created being and constructed reality.

Moreover, Williams's characters are detached escapists who search for their own existence outside the world of human suffering. According to Adam [24, p.113] Tom "is the fugitive kind, an outsider, a perpetual wanderer in space and time". The characters' emotionally disarrayed realities are part of the playwright's expressionistic technique for portraying their existential dilemma amid socio-politically conflicting human world. This echoes Sartre's notion that "The existentialists' emphasis upon the passion, anxiety, and the decision of individual man, and had a similar sense of the tragic predicament of humanity in modern civilization" [6, p. 9].

Tom's existential crisis in *The Glass Menagerie* can be seen as a struggle to assert his own autonomy and agency in a world that seeks to define him according to external expectations and constraints. Through his experiences and choices, Tom struggles with the fundamental questions of existence, freedom, and responsibility that are central to Sartre's philosophy, and ultimately seeks to find his own path towards self-realization and fulfillment.

A key aspect of Sartre's philosophy is the idea of "bad faith," which refers to the ways in which individuals deceive themselves and deny their freedom by adopting false beliefs or conforming to external expectations. Tom's existential crisis can be seen as a manifestation of his struggle to break free from the constraints of his oppressive family environment and his dead-end job at the warehouse. He is torn between his desire for freedom and self-expression and his sense of duty and responsibility towards his family.

Another central concept in Sartre's philosophy is the idea of "existence precedes essence," which means that individuals are not born with a predetermined purpose or essence, but rather they create their own essence through their actions and choices. Tom's dilemma in the play reflects this idea, as he tussles with the question of how to live an authentic and meaningful life in a world that seems devoid of purpose and meaning. He feels trapped by his circumstances and unable to find a way to break free and pursue his own dreams and desires.

TOM: I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard! Did you notice how he's grinning? Grin! Grin, you - huh? And gloat! Gloat! Yeah - yeah, I shook your hand, man! I have, because there's a writ out for you. [18, p.48]

This quote exemplifies Tom's frustration and feelings of resentment towards his father and his desire to break free from the cycle of unhappiness and regret that has defined his family's history. It reflects Tom's existential crisis as he grapples with the burden of his family's past and struggles to find his own sense of freedom and agency.

At the end of the play, Tom reveals his existential agony, and discloses his longing for a sense of escape and adventure, as well as his deep sense of alienation and disconnection from his current life:

TOM: I didn't go to the moon - I went much further - for time is the longest distance between two places. [18, p.68]

This highlights Tom's existential yearning for something more meaningful and fulfilling, as he seeks to break free from the confines of his mundane existence and explore new possibilities. It also reflects his sense of disillusionment and his recognition of the vast distance between his current reality and his dreams and desires.

In a pivotal moment, Tom expresses his inner turmoil and conflict in the following lines: "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger - anything that can blow your candles out!" [18, p. 68]. Tom is torn between what he should be (desire for personal freedom and self-expression) and what society wants him to be (his social existence). Tom finds himself surrounded with impeding social forces. This creates a sense of loss, disillusionment and alienation from the society around him.

Amanda's experience of existential crisis as a mother is reflected in the constraints of her life circumstances, and the responsibilities for her own choices and actions. She struggles with this concept as she is constantly nagging

and controlling her children, trying to mold them into what she believes they should be. She is unable to see them as separate individuals with their own desires and aspirations, instead viewing them as extensions of herself. As Nelson [25, p. 89] points out, while Amanda does cling to the past, "she clings just as desperately to the present. She is attempting to hold two worlds together and realizes that both are crumbling beneath her fingers".

Amanda's existential crisis is further exacerbated by her perceived lack of agency in her own life. Trapped in a loveless marriage and struggling to make ends meet, she longs for the past when she was a young debutante with suitors lined up at her door. She feels she has lost her sense of self and is unsure of how to find meaning in her current circumstances. Amanda's longing for her past glory as a Southern belle:

AMANDA: If you lived in the days when I was a girl and they had long graceful skirts sweeping the ground, it might have been considered an asset. When you've got a slight disadvantage like that, you've just got to cultivate something else to take its place! [18, p. 19].

In her Sartrean confrontation with the inherent meaninglessness of existence, and the quest for meaning, Amanda's struggle through her actions and choices is reflected in her obsession with her past and her attempts to live vicariously through her children. She is unable to accept the reality of her situation and instead clings to a romanticized version of the past.

TOM. Mother—you know that Laura is very different from other girls.

AMANDA. Yes, I do know that, and I think that difference is all in her favor, too.

TOM. Not quite all—in the eyes of others—strangers—she's terribly shy. She lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house.

AMANDA. Don't use that word peculiar.

TOM. You have to face the facts.—She is.

AMANDA. I don't know in what way she's peculiar. ... (*...Amanda rises, goes on to fire-escape landing r., looks at moon.*) [18, p. 39].

Amanda's dialogue with Tom, illustrates her internal conflict and sense of existential despair as she lives on her past to build her relationships with her children, and her own identity. Depressed over her doomed life, she cries: "I didn't have the strength --I didn't have the courage. I just wanted to find a hole in the ground and crawl in it and stay there the rest of my entire life." [18, p.16]

She reminisces about her past and expresses her longing for a better life, saying, "We can't have a business career. . . What is there left for us now but dependency all our lives?" [18, p.18]. This highlights her sense of being trapped in a life of dependence and her frustration with her lack of agency to improve her circumstances. She is unable to break free from the role of caretaker and provider. She realizes her own limitations and constraints: "I don't understand modern young people [18, p. 65].

Furthermore, Amanda's obsession with finding a suitable suitor for her daughter, Laura, can be seen as a manifestation of her own desire for agency and control in a world that often feels chaotic and unpredictable. Her attempts to shape Laura's future and secure her happiness reflect her own struggle to find purpose and meaning in a life that has not turned out as she had hoped. "The image of Amanda as a young woman with her gentleman callers...draws further attention to the absurdity of Amanda's exaggerated tales and supports the audience's developing suspicions." [2, p. 29] Amanda continues and ceases only when the recollection of her absent husband surfaces. In [26, p.62], Griffin suggests that this retreat "from the harsh reality of the Depression to the illusion of herself in the legendary South of elegant beaux and belles makes the present somehow more bearable for Amanda."

AMANDA: I remember one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain when your mother was a girl she received—seventeen—gentlemen callers! In Blue Mountain they had this terrible catastrophe at the school, a warehouse full of old machinery and stuff that the school was using for manual training caught fire and burned down, and she hadn't a single thing to wear for the occasion! [18, pp.13, 37]

She repeatedly demonstrates throughout the play that she is a fighter, motivated by the need to survive. Whereas she is characterized by Bhawar [27, p. 2167] as a "delusional romantic turned realist", [3, p.42] Bigsby argues that Amanda's wishes are grounded in her own set of values and that "denial of reality is a necessary condition of life to Amanda."

In the following dialogue between Jim and Laura, we could notice how Williams portray the existential crisis of the characters, and how they respond to their subjectivities and realities.

JIM. What are you doing now?

LAURA. I don't do anything—much. . . . Oh, ...My glass collection takes a good deal of time. Glass is something you have to take good care of.

JIM. What did you say—about glass?

LAURA. ...Collection, I said—I have one.

JIM. ... You know what I judge to be the trouble with you? ... Inferiority complex! You know what that is? That's what they call it when a fellow low-rates himself!

...

JIM: I guess you think I think a lot of myself! [18, pp.59-60].

Here, Amanda's is disappointed at Laura's perceived lack of agency and inability to succeed in the traditional roles that society expects of her. Further, Laura's preoccupation with her glass menagerie can, in Sartrean perspective, provide her with an alternative reality, or can be interpreted as a creation of an alter ego. Her struggle with her own identity and purpose in the play can be seen when she expresses her fear of facing the outside world and its harsh realities. She tells Jim: "Oh, be careful—if you breathe, it breaks!" (p.61), and being "sick at stomach" all the time" [18, pp.17, 31, 45].

The character of the gentleman caller is at the core of the existential theme of the play. He represents the Southern authentic American reality against which other characters' realities and identities are defined. Williams uses his visit as a catalyst that stands out as a crucial moment of dramatic action that shapes the characters' existential quests.

The play indeed contains very minimal true action, with much of the plot focusing on the internal struggles and desires of its characters. The gentleman caller's visit stands out as a crucial moment of dramatic action that shapes the characters' existential quests. It serves as a moment of confrontation and reflection for the characters, forcing them to confront their own realities, and catalyzes them to reconstruct their identities, and redefine their subjectivities. As stated by Bloom in [2, p.20] "the gentleman caller's visit is the only true dramatic action; the overall structure of the play is defined by this event".

The structure of the play is defined by the anticipation and aftermath of the gentleman caller's visit, highlighting the significance of this event in the characters' lives. For Laura, the visit of Jim provides a moment of connection and potential escape from the confines of her fragile existence. For Tom, it serves as a catalyst for his own existential journey, redrawing his perception of his identity and purpose, and affecting his decision to abandon his family.

## Self-Constructed Reality in the play

*The Glass Menagerie* explores the ways in which individuals construct their own realities as a means of coping with the challenges and disappointments of life. By delving into the characters' inner thoughts, desires, and fantasies, Williams highlights the individuals' anxieties and their perception of the world around them, as well as their search for creating their own realities to make sense of the world around them.

The keyword in the play is Toms' phrase "the "escape from a trap" [18, p.8]. He immerses himself in the world of literature and the movies, creating a romanticized vision of himself as a poet and a hero, even as he toils in a factory job he despises. His ability to detach himself from reality and live in his own imaginative world allows him a sense of freedom and autonomy, but ultimately leaves him feeling isolated and unfulfilled. Tom's "nature is not remorseless, but to escape from a trap he has to act without pity." [2, p.9]

Amanda, reconstructs her own reality to shield herself from the disappointments of her past and the harshness of her present circumstances. She romanticizes her memories of her youth and her former suitors, clinging to the idea of her Southern belle past as a way to escape the harsh realities of her life as a single mother struggling to make ends meet. Her reliance on nostalgia and idealized version of the past leads her to live in a state of delusion, unable to see the truth of her situation or accept the limitations of her current existence. "Amanda's grasp of reality is the most tenuous of all. She ameliorates her pathetic existence with fabricated memories of gentleman callers and the faded promise of what could have been" [19, p. xiii].

Laura retreats into her own world of fantasy and introspection, finding solace in her collection of glass animal figurines. She is painfully shy and insecure, and her physical disability further isolates her from the outside world. Her glass menagerie serves as a symbol of her fragile existence and her desire to protect herself from the harshness of reality. By retreating into the world of her glass animals, Laura creates a safe space for herself where she can find beauty and comfort in a world that often feels cold and unforgiving. "Whereas fabricating an idealized past becomes Amanda's compensation for her present existence, Laura's retreat into the world of her glass animals provides her only imaginative escape" [19, p. xiv]. Besides, her unwillingness to engage with the outside world and her fear of failure prevent her from fully embracing her freedom and making choices to pursue her own desires.



Hence, as Chandler [28, p.412] puts it, "experience is simply shattered into its elements and then reshaped in form strongly stylized to enforce some concept".

The vanity of being is depicted in the scene when Amanda was preparing Laura for the meeting with Jim:

*The dress is colored and designed by memory. The arrangement of Laura's hair is changed; it is softer and more becoming. A fragile, unearthly prettiness has come out in Laura: she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting* [18, p.42].

She wraps "two powder puffs in handkerchiefs", places them in "Laura's bosom", and describes them to Laura as "gay deceivers," telling her that "all pretty women are a trap." This action contributes to Amanda's ongoing quest to establish her daughter's identity, with deception serving as a manifestation of her "bad faith" in a different self. "Laura's personal dilemma is part of a greater dilemma: the destruction—slow and remorseless—of a family" [25, p.89].

Memory serves as a powerful tool for the characters in the to play construct their own realities and shape their perceptions of themselves and the world around them. In his comment on the play, the American literary critic, Harold Bloom argues that "for Williams, life itself, through memory as its agent, shatters itself and scatters the colored transparencies of the rainbow, which ought to be, but is not, a covenant of hope" [2, p.9]. The characters in the play the frequently rely on their memories to shape their perceptions of themselves and their surroundings, ultimately leading to the creation of their own subjective realities.

Tom's sense of isolation and estrangement, stemming from distress and monotony, is most evident in his longing: "How lucky dead people are! But I get up, I go! For six-five Dollars a month I give up to all that I dream of doing or Being ever!" [18, pp.23-24]. He comes to realize that he doesn't quite belong to the world he inhabits. Tom's acknowledgment of his status as an outsider further underscores his existential struggle to find his place and purpose in a world that seems devoid of meaning or fulfillment.

TOM: Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventures for everybody in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watches them having it! Yes, until there's a war. . . ! But I'm not patient. I don't want to wait till then. I'm tired of the movies and I'm about to move! [18, p. 48]

Tom's last words in the play encapsulate his Sartrean choice of making his own self and being, to construct his own reality and existence, and to pursue his own path towards freedom and self-realization:

TOM: Blow out your candles out! -- for nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura . . . , - and so--goodbye [18, p.68].

These lines resonate with existential themes of freedom, choice, and authenticity, echoing Sartre's ideas. In the context of the play, Tom's decision to leave behind his family and "blow out" the traditional sources of guidance signifies his rejection of conformity and his assertion of his own agency in defining his existence. Also, it symbolizes his break from the past and his commitment to moving forward, despite the lingering feelings of guilt and responsibility that continue to haunt him.

Furthermore, Tom's constant conflict with his mother Amanda and his frustration with his job at the shoe warehouse also underscore his existential struggle for autonomy and self-realization. His desire to break free from societal expectations and societal norms aligns with the existential theme of individual freedom and choice. In [29, p.43] Hammer remarks, "Everyone else in Williams's drama has a clear wish to escape, to get somewhere, to have something. But Laura's desire is something and somewhere else."

Tom tries to explain to his mother his dissatisfaction with the present realities, and exclaims: "Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse" [18, p.30]. Tom's statement about man being inherently a lover, hunter, and fighter highlights the primal instincts within individuals that often struggle to find expression in the mundane and repetitive work environment of the warehouse. This notion ties into his conception of subjectivity and existential identity.

In the context of subjectivity, Tom's restlessness can be seen as a reflection of his inner conflict between conforming to societal expectations -- being a dutiful son and provider for his family -- and fulfilling his own desires and aspirations. His yearning for adventure and excitement, as symbolized by the roles of lover, hunter, and fighter, underscores his struggle to assert his individuality and find a sense of purpose beyond his monotonous job at the warehouse.

Furthermore, Tom's existential identity is shaped by his realization that he is constrained by the circumstances of his life, much like the characters in his mother's elaborate tales. By juxtaposing the primal instincts of love, hunting, and fighting with the stifling reality of the warehouse, Williams underscores the challenges individuals face in reconciling their inner desires with external expectations. Tom's struggle to navigate his subjective desires and existential identity serves as a poignant exploration of the complexities of human nature and the quest for self-fulfillment in a world that often stifles individual expression. According to Greenfield [30, p.74], "Williams presents



us with an irresolvable conflict between meaningless rationalized modern work and the passion and romance that are for Williams the life's blood of men who are intellectually and spiritually alive."

Williams challenges conventional notions of identity and self-formation in *The Glass Menagerie*, proposing that true self-discovery is achieved through solitude and genuine authenticity. He writes,

the public Somebody you are when you "have a name" is a fiction created with mirrors and that the only somebody worth being is the solitary and unseen you that existed from your first breath and which is the sum of your actions and so is constantly in a state of becoming under your own violation--and knowing these things, you can even survive the catastrophe of Success! [31, pp.95-96]

Williams challenges the notion that self-making is solely based on external validation or conformity. He suggests that true self-discovery can only be achieved by stepping away from external influences and embracing one's authentic self. Laura retreats into her own world of glass figurines as a way to escape the pressures of fitting into society's standards. Similarly, Tom struggles with his own sense of identity. He realizes that he is trapped by his responsibilities, he determines to pursue his own dreams to remain true to himself, even in the face of external pressures.

## Conclusion

Williams' existentialism is categorically not nihilistic; rather, it presents a different strategy for facing meaninglessness that leaves room for optimism. The existential quest in *The Glass Menagerie* is exemplified by the characters' search for meaning and self-assertion through pursuing their actions, desires, and dreams. Through the lens of expressionism, their inner truths and struggles are laid bare, inviting the audience to contemplate the nature of existence and the pursuit of authenticity in a world marked by illusions and disillusionment. The characters' challenges with freedom, choice, authenticity, and the inherent meaninglessness of existence resonate with the principles of Sartre's existential philosophy. All the characters in the play struggle to emphasize their own subjectivities and realities through their perceptive interpretations. The characters' subjective viewpoints shape their understanding of themselves and the world around them. Their struggles to navigate their own identities parallel Sartrean existential themes of self-realization and personal responsibility. They experience a profound sense of anxiety and feelings of angst as they confront their own existential predicaments and struggles. Amanda's anxiety about her children's future and nostalgic yearning for her past, Tom's restlessness and desire for individual fulfillment and Laura's reluctance to engage with reality and her fear of failure all reflect a state of "bad faith" and existential angst, and their search for authenticity in a world that is alienating and uncertain.

Existentialism posits that individuals are responsible for creating their own values and identities, and that authenticity lies in embracing this freedom and taking ownership of one's actions. The idea of being defined by one's public persona as a somebody "have a name" resonates with the existentialist notion of "bad faith," where individuals conform to societal expectations and roles at the expense of their true selves. This leads to an existential crisis, where individuals feel a sense of emptiness, alienation, and lack of purpose in life. Williams's emphasis on embracing the "solitary" and "unseen" self highlights the importance of introspection and self-awareness in addressing existential angst. By recognizing the impermanence and external nature of societal success and validation, individuals can free themselves from the anxiety of living up to external expectations and focus on living authentically. Williams's insistence on "becoming under your own violation" reflects the existentialist belief in personal responsibility and agency in shaping one's own existence. By accepting this responsibility and actively engaging in the process of self-discovery and self-creation, individuals can find a sense of fulfillment and meaning in their lives, even in the face of existential uncertainty and unpredictability.

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