

## Caught in the Maelstrom: Wingfields' Struggle and Trauma during the Great Depression in *The Glass Menagerie*

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the profound impact of the Great Depression on the lives of Wingfields', in Tennessee Williams' seminal play, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). The economic downturn of the 1930s serves as a critical backdrop. It is against this background the characters' experiences, decisions, and ultimate fates are unfolded. The analysis delves into Wingfields' struggle between their obligations to family and desire for personal freedom. Conversely, Laura Wingfield's victimisation is depicted through her acute social anxiety and physical disability, exacerbated by the socio-economic pressures of the time. The study employs a historical lens to contextualise the Wingfields' plight within the broader socio-economic challenges of the Great Depression. It explores how pervasive economic hardship intensifies the characters' personal struggles. This draws our attention to the theme of entrapment, aspiration, and disillusionment. The Wingfields' experiences are a microcosm of the widespread human suffering and resilience during the Great Depression. Through Amanda, Tom and Laura's experiences, Williams' play emerges as a poignant commentary on the enduring human spirit amidst pervasive economic turmoil. The characters' struggles underscore the harsh realities faced by countless families during this time, highlighting the enduring relevance of Williams' work in understanding the human condition in times of crisis. Ultimately, *The Glass Menagerie* serves as both a historical document and a timeless exploration of resilience and hope in the face of relentless adversity.

## INTRODUCTION

The Great Depression, a cataclysmic economic downturn that spanned the 1930s, profoundly reshaped the social, economic, and psychological landscape of the United States. Its pervasive effects permeated all levels of society, exerting relentless pressure on individuals and families alike. In Tennessee Williams' seminal play, *The Glass Menagerie*, the impact of this economic maelstrom is vividly illustrated through the lives of Amanda, Tom and Laura Wingfield. Set against the backdrop of a struggling St. Louis household, the play provides a poignant exploration of how the Great Depression exacerbated personal struggles, aspirations, and the sense of entrapment faced by ordinary Americans. *The Glass Menagerie*, first performed in 1944, is an autobiographical work that captures Williams' own experiences during this turbulent period. The play centres on the Wingfield family, comprising Amanda Wingfield and her two children, Tom and Laura. Amanda, a faded Southern belle, clings desperately to memories of a more prosperous past while her children grapple with the harsh realities of their present circumstances. Tom, the play's narrator and protagonist, is burdened with the role of primary breadwinner, while Laura, his painfully shy and physically disabled sister, retreats into a world of delicate glass figurines to escape her overwhelming anxieties. This study seeks to explore the profound impact of the Great Depression on Tom and Laura Wingfield. By examining the economic, social, and psychological dimensions of their victimisation, this analysis aims to uncover the intricate ways in which historical forces shape individual destinies. The plight of the Wingfield family, emblematic of the broader societal struggles of the era, offers a lens through which to understand the enduring human spirit amidst pervasive economic and emotional turmoil.

The Great Depression's economic devastation is a central theme in *The Glass Menagerie*, manifesting most acutely in Tom Wingfield's life. As the family's primary breadwinner, Tom's meagre earnings from his monotonous job at a shoe warehouse barely suffice to meet their basic needs. This financial strain compounds Tom's sense of entrapment and frustration, as he is forced to sacrifice his personal dreams and ambitions to support his family. His desire for adventure and a life beyond the confines of his St. Louis apartment starkly contrasts with his obligations, creating a poignant portrayal of personal sacrifice forced upon many during this era of economic despair. Tom's nightly escapes to the movies represent his yearning for freedom and a life of greater meaning, a stark juxtaposition to his reality. This escapism, however, only provides temporary relief, highlighting the inescapable nature of his responsibilities. The economic pressures of the Great Depression not only constrain Tom's physical existence but also suffocate his aspirations, leading to a simmering discontent that ultimately drives him to abandon his family in search of personal fulfilment. In contrast to Tom's external struggles, Laura Wingfield's victimisation is depicted through her internal battles with acute social anxiety and physical disability. The socio-economic pressures of the time exacerbate Laura's isolation, as the scarcity of opportunities for women, particularly those with disabilities, underscores her dependence on her family.

Laura's collection of glass animals, her "glass menagerie," symbolises her fragility and her retreat into a world of delicate fantasy to escape the harshness of reality. The economic hardship of the Great Depression further marginalised Laura, limiting her prospects for independence and self-fulfilment. Her failed attempt at business school, which her mother Amanda had hoped would secure her future, exemplifies the insurmountable barriers faced by those with disabilities in a society struggling to survive. Laura's retreat into her inner world of glass figurines and old records serves as a coping mechanism, a way to shield herself from the relentless pressures and disappointments of the outside world. Employing a historical lens, this study contextualises the Wingfields' plight within the broader socio-economic challenges of the Great Depression. The pervasive economic hardship of the era intensifies the characters' personal struggles, magnifying themes of entrapment, aspiration, and disillusionment. The intersection of personal and economic adversity in the play offers a nuanced understanding of how historical forces shape individual destinies.

Tom and Laura's experiences, set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, reflect the broader societal impacts of this period of economic instability. The play's portrayal of their struggles serves as a microcosm of the wider human experience during the Great Depression, illuminating the ways in which economic forces can shape and constrain individual lives. Through the lens of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams offers a poignant commentary on the enduring human spirit amidst pervasive economic and emotional turmoil. By focusing on Tom and Laura Wingfield's struggles during the Great Depression, this study aims to elucidate the intricate ways in which historical forces shape individual destinies.

In examining the victimisation of Tom and Laura Wingfield caused by the Great Depression, this analysis provides a deeper understanding of the socio-economic challenges of the era. It reveals the enduring relevance of Williams' play as a reflection of human resilience and the capacity to find meaning and hope amidst adversity. Through the Wingfields' story, *The Glass Menagerie* emerges as a timeless exploration of the human condition, capturing the complex interplay between historical forces and individual lives.

Despite its rich thematic content, much of the scholarly analysis of *The Glass Menagerie* has focused primarily on its autobiographical elements and its place within Williams' oeuvre. While these aspects are undoubtedly significant, there is a relative paucity of research that specifically examines the play's portrayal of the Great Depression and its impact on the characters. Understanding the historical and socio-economic context of the play can offer deeper insights into the characters' motivations, behaviors, and relationships. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by analysing how the Wingfield family's struggles and traumas during the Great Depression are depicted in *The Glass Menagerie* and how these experiences reflect the broader societal issues of the time.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology involves a multidisciplinary approach, combining literary analysis with historical context to explore how the economic conditions of the 1930s influenced the characters and themes of the play. This section outlines the research design, data collection methods, analytical framework, and the process for ensuring reliability and validity.

### Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on thematic analysis and interpretive analysis of the text. The goal is to uncover the nuanced ways in which the Great Depression shapes the characters' behaviours, relationships, and psychological states in *The Glass Menagerie*. The research is divided into two main phases:

**Literary Analysis:** Close reading of the play to identify themes, symbols, and character dynamics.

**Historical Contextualization:** Examination of historical sources to understand the socio-economic conditions of the Great Depression and their relevance to the play.

### Data Collection Methods

#### Primary Sources

**Textual Analysis of *The Glass Menagerie*:**

Conduct a thorough reading of the play to extract relevant passages that reflect the impact of the Great Depression.

Focus on dialogues, stage directions, and character descriptions that highlight economic themes.

#### Secondary Sources

**Literary Criticism and Scholarly Articles:**

Review existing literature on *The Glass Menagerie* to gather interpretations and analyses related to the Great Depression.

Use academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and university libraries to access peer-reviewed journals and critical essays.

**Historical Documents and Records:**

Consult historical texts, articles, and primary sources from the 1930s to gain insights into the economic conditions and societal impacts of the Great Depression.

Access archives and digital libraries for firsthand accounts and statistical data from the era.

### Analytical Framework

The analysis will be structured around several key themes that connect the play to the historical context of the Great Depression:

**Economic Hardship:**

Examine how financial instability is portrayed through the characters' struggles and aspirations.

Analyze Amanda Wingfield's obsession with securing a future for her children as a response to economic pressures.

**Psychological Impact:**

Explore the psychological effects of economic hardship on the characters, focusing on Laura's withdrawal and Tom's desire for escape.

Interpret symbolic elements, such as Laura's glass menagerie and Tom's frequent visits to the fire escape, in light of their psychological states.

**Familial Dynamics:**

Investigate how economic stress influences the relationships and interactions within the Wingfield family.

Analyze the tension between Amanda and her children, considering how financial concerns exacerbate familial conflicts.

**Societal Expectations and Gender Roles:**

Assess how societal expectations during the Great Depression, particularly regarding gender roles, are reflected in Amanda's aspirations for Laura.

Explore the limited opportunities available to women and how these constraints shape the characters' behaviour and decisions.

**Ensuring Reliability and Validity**

**Triangulation:**

Use multiple sources of data (literary texts, historical records, scholarly articles) to corroborate findings and provide a comprehensive analysis.

Cross-reference interpretations from literary criticism with historical data to ensure accuracy and depth.

**Peer Review:**

Submit findings and interpretations for peer review to ensure scholarly rigor and validity.

Engage with academic peers and advisors to refine analysis and address potential biases.

**Reflexivity:**

Reflect on personal biases and assumptions that may influence the analysis.

Maintain a critical perspective throughout the research process to ensure objectivity and fairness.

**Conclusion**

The research methodology outlined here provides a systematic approach to exploring the impact of the Great Depression on the Wingfield family in *The Glass Menagerie*. By combining literary analysis with historical contextualization, this study aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how economic conditions shape the characters and themes of the play.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

*The Glass Menagerie* is set during the period of Great Depression, which started in 1929 and lasted throughout the 1930s. The play unfolds the story of three characters, Amanda, Laura, and Tom, who suffer to climb up the social ladder during the Great Depression. The play is based on Williams' love for his sister Rose and his angst at being trapped during the worsening social and economic condition of America in the 1930s. This play has a context of social upheaval: war in Spain (1936–39) and the bombing of Guernica (1937), imminent war in Europe, and labour unrest in American cities. Reynolds in his study believes that, "Williams introduces *The Glass Menagerie* through a context of

social upheaval- ...” (1991: 522). B. Stein, in his review of the play, sees allusions to the Depression and the impending war. He sees a “note of social disaster [that] runs throughout the drama, fixing the lives of individuals against the larger canvas” (1964:145). There is a pervasive theme of social turmoil or distress that permeates the entire drama. The lives of the characters in the play are depicted as being deeply influenced and shaped by the broader societal conditions of the time, such as economic hardship and the aftermath of the Great Depression.

The pervasive sense of loss, disillusionment, and longing for escape experienced by the characters mirrors the sentiments of many Americans during the Great Depression.. The characters’ struggles with financial instability, unfulfilled dreams, and societal pressures are a microcosm of the broader experiences of many Americans during this era. The play’s depiction of these issues provides a poignant commentary on the impact of the Great Depression on individuals and families. The characters’ struggles resonate with the experiences of many Americans during the Depression, making the play a timeless exploration of human resilience and vulnerability in the face of economic and social adversity. Through the Wingfield family, Tennessee Williams captures the enduring human spirit amidst hardship and the relentless pursuit of hope and a better future.

Tennessee’s Play is deeply rooted in his personal experiences, yet it transcends mere autobiography to explore universal themes and emotions. Williams uses the personal struggles of the Wingfield family to reflect the broader social and economic issues of the 1930s. The characters in the play closely resemble Williams’ own family members. Amanda Wingfield, the overbearing mother, reflects Williams’ own mother, Edwina. Laura, with her shyness and physical disability, mirrors Williams’ sister, Rose, who suffered from mental illness and underwent a lobotomy. Tom, the aspiring poet who feels trapped by his family obligations, represents Williams himself. The play stands as a poignant and personal reflection of Tennessee Williams’ own life, capturing the complexities of his family dynamics, his struggles with personal and familial obligations, and his desire for artistic and personal freedom. It is heavily influenced by Tennessee Williams’ personal past, but it achieves a timeless quality through its exploration of universal themes.

Williams’ skilful use of expressionistic techniques and symbolism elevates the play from a personal memoir to a profound commentary on the human condition. Through its autobiographical elements, the play transcends mere personal history to explore universal themes of memory, illusion, escape, and the fragility of human aspirations. Eminent critic Delma E. Prestley believes it is not merely a memory play of one family but the memory of an entire nation going through an extremely difficult time. For her, the play transcends its portrayal of the Wingfield family and serves as a larger metaphor for the American experience during the Great Depression. She summarises that “*The Glass Menagerie* is more than Williams’ private glance into the lives of the Wingfields. It is also a memory of America during a critical period of history, the Great Depression. The play is firmly rooted in the fertile soil of the intellectual and political history of the twentieth century” (1990: 45). By framing the play within

this context, Prestley highlights its significance as a cultural artefact that captures the zeitgeist of the 1930s. This interpretation encourages readers and audiences to consider how personal narratives are shaped by and reflect broader historical forces. This dual perspective allows the readers to appreciate the play's depth and its resonance with the intellectual and political currents of the twentieth century.

### **Sufferings caused by economic Downturn**

Tennessee makes the Great Depression a central point in his dramatisation of suffering in the play. He achieved this through a detailed description of the Wingfield apartment and its surroundings, setting the tone for the play's atmosphere. The apartment is located in a lower-middle-class neighbourhood in St. Louis, characterised by its cramped and dimly lit living quarters. *"At the rise of the curtain, the audience is faced with the dark, grim rear wall of the Wingfield tenement"* (1). When the play begins, the audience sees a sombre and unwelcoming rear view of a tenement building. This sets a bleak and dreary tone, reflecting the difficult lives of the characters. The Wingfield apartment is intimately related to the context of the Great Depression, reflecting the economic hardships and constrained living conditions of the era. The building itself is described as: *"The apartment is one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower-middle-class population"* (1). This reflects the confining and oppressive environment the characters inhabit. It also emphasises the family's financial struggle. The "hive-like" structure suggests a sense of overcrowding and lack of privacy, typical of urban dwellings during the Depression, when many families were forced into smaller, more affordable housing due to economic constraints. The setting mentions the "Fire escapes", which serve as symbolic pathways to escape from their stifling lives and connect the apartments. *"The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire-escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation"* (1).

This setting immediately suggests a sense of isolation and marginalization. Alleys are often associated with the less glamorous, more neglected parts of urban environments, and entering through a fire escape implies a makeshift or secondary access point rather than a main, welcoming entrance. The metaphor of buildings "always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation" is powerful. It suggests that, within these walls, there is a persistent and unrelenting sense of hopelessness and struggle. The fires are not literal but represent the inner turmoil, suffering, and relentless pressures faced by the residents. "Slow and implacable" conveys that this despair is enduring and unyielding, not a sudden or transient blaze but a continuous, consuming force. The imagery of slow-burning fires of human suffering highlights the chronic and deep-seated nature of their struggles. This elaborate metaphor serves to deepen the reader's understanding of the characters' emotional and social environment. This setting reflects the reduction in quality of life and the need to make do with less common experiences during the

Depression. The fire escape represents a bridge between the confined, claustrophobic space of the Wingfield apartment and the outside world. It reflects the cramped living conditions and the need for practical solutions in Wingfield's lower-middle-class urban environment. It paints a picture of a living environment that is both practical and precarious, reflecting the larger existential challenges faced by the inhabitants.

The living room is dominated by a photograph of the absent father, contains the modest furnishings and Laura's cherished glass menagerie. The living-room is crowded with bulky, over-decorated furniture, which is a continual reminder of the Wingfields' former comfortable circumstances. After the escape of Wingfield, the setting encapsulates the family's economic struggles and sense of entrapment. The general atmosphere of the apartment, described as dimly lit and filled with a sense of stagnation, mirrors the pervasive sense of despair and hopelessness that characterized the Great Depression. The setting serves as a backdrop that underscores the pervasive impact of the Great Depression on the Wingfield family's daily life, shaping their interactions, dreams, and sense of entrapment.

Tennessee vividly captures the spirit of the Great Depression through the experiences of the Wingfield family. The economic and social context of the era shapes the characters' lives. He uses the backdrop of the Great Depression and war to explore themes of escape, responsibility, and disillusionment, making the play a poignant commentary on the struggles of the time. Tom's opening monologue sets the stage for the play by mentioning the historical context, including the Spanish Civil War. He speaks directly to the audience, providing a backdrop of global unrest that parallels the personal turmoil within his own household. He has "a poet's weakness for symbols" and he speaks often of the world outside (2). "Here in Spain there was Guernica! Here there was a disturbance of labor, sometimes pretty violent, in otherwise peaceful cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Saint Louis" (2). The reference to Guernica, a town in Spain that was bombed during the Spanish Civil War evokes a powerful image of the destruction and chaos of war. This bombing is famously depicted in Picasso's painting "Guernica". He then shifts to examples of labour disturbances in American cities—Chicago, Cleveland, and Saint Louis. Tom discusses his yearning for adventure and escape, drawing a parallel between his mundane life and the dangers of the Spanish Civil War. This reflects his internal conflict and desire to break free from the constraints of his responsibilities at home.

Tom's narrative announces "the social background of the play" (2) when he is reading headlines about Spain in newspaper. He says, "In Spain there was revolution... In Spain there was Guernica" (2). Spanish Civil War between the Republican, loyalists and the Nationalists with fascist ideology. The Nationalists received support from Nazi Germany and Republican from Russia but Nationalists won. They committed the massacre of Guernica by using air force. Tom tells us that the general public of America kept away from the whirlwind of politics and found escape in movies. Tom says:

I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. To begin with, I turn back time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy. In Spain there was revolution. Here there was only shouting and confusion (2).

In Spain, the revolution was a direct and violent conflict (referring to the Spanish Civil War), while in America, the response to economic turmoil was more chaotic and disorganized, characterized by protests, strikes, and social unrest without a unified direction. **“Matriculating in a School for the Blind,”** metaphor suggests that the American middle class was going through a period of ignorance or denial regarding the severity of their economic situation. “Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes,” implies a collective blindness to the harsh realities of the time, either due to their own inability to perceive the truth or a wilful refusal to confront it. Tom’s commentary offers a critique of the American middle class’s inability or refusal to fully grasp and respond to their deteriorating economic conditions. It suggests a widespread failure to acknowledge and address the root causes of their plight. It metaphorically describes the struggles of the American middle class during the mid-20th century. They are metaphorically blind to the economic challenges and changes happening around them. They are unaware or unable to see the implications of the shifting economic landscape. “What he calls the “social background” of the play has tremendous importance. The sober truth is that America is still in the depression and on the brink of war. He suggests that “The note of social disaster runs throughout the drama, fixing the lives of individuals against the larger canvas” (Stein, 145). Tennyson implies that either the middle class failed to see the warning signs of economic change, or the economic system failed to support and protect them adequately. It reflects a sense of disillusionment or disappointment with the system. The “fiery Braille alphabet” symbolizes the harsh reality they are forced to confront, even if they cannot see it clearly. They are experiencing the painful consequences of economic disintegration. The sense of confusion, frustration, and struggle experienced by the American middle class as they grapple with economic challenges beyond their control are masterfully captured by Tennyson.

### **The Great Depression**

Due to the 1929 stock market crashes, many men have lost their jobs. They find difficulty running their families. So they began to work for meagre wages. Tom, the narrator of the play, works in warehouses for sixty-five dollars a month for the sake of his family. He longs to be an adventurer but is constrained by the family’s economic background. Tom is a representative of an economic era where factory workers were trapped in wretched working conditions, got minimum wages, and faced continuous strikes. “The cost of share prices rose to record highs and encouraged even more people to invest. All of this action created what is known as an economic bubble” (Watkins, 1930: 41). The huge price fall in the

stock market made the news with the panic on October 29th, known as 'The Black Friday'. The consequence of this economic downfall was that families started losing their jobs. Factories remained closed with no money to pay the workers. Desperate people started working for food, carrying placards saying they were willing to offer their labour in exchange for food, in place of money. Many families were ashamed of their financial situation and tried to maintain the façade by improving the exteriors of their houses (Amanda relies on chintz and covers up broken lamps before Jim's visit). In Ford Motor Company more than 90000 people lost their job. Wages declined by about 60% as a result there was a tension among the labourers in the cities. Tom refers to this tension when he mentions labour protests in cities like Chicago, Cleveland and Saint Louis. As the Great Depression has left many men unemployed, they began finding solace in alcohol, left their families and never returned. Giving in to their failure to provide for their families, a lot of men abandoned their homes, never to return. "A survey in 1939 stated that 1.5 million American women had been abandoned" (Grollier Educational Corporation: 104). In extreme cases, men committed suicide in shame. Amanda's husband left the house for the same reason resulting in tragedy in the family.

### **Wingfields' Struggle**

Amanda grew up in a small farming town in the Midwest, a region hit hard by the economic downturn and the Dust Bowl. Her family owned a modest farm that provided a comfortable life before the Depression. In the 1920s, Amanda's family prospered. In the 1920s, Amanda's family prospered. They produced surplus crops, which they sold at good prices. Amanda attended school, enjoyed community gatherings, and looked forward to a promising future. The family even managed to save some money and invest a little in the stock market, encouraged by the booming economy. In October 1929, the stock market crash marked the beginning of the Great Depression. Amanda's family lost their savings overnight. The crash didn't just wipe out their investments; it also eroded confidence in the economy, leading to a reduction in demand for agricultural products. As the Depression deepened, crop prices plummeted. The once-thriving farm now struggled to cover basic expenses. The Dust Bowl, a series of severe dust storms, further devastated their land. Amanda's father worked tirelessly to salvage what he could, but the relentless droughts and dust storms made farming nearly impossible. With little income, Amanda's family faced numerous hardships. They had to make do with less food, worn-out clothing, and no money for medical care. Amanda, once a vibrant young girl, watched as her parents' health declined under the strain of overwork and stress. During the Great Depression, countless individuals experienced significant hardships.

Amanda's town, like many others, saw the rise of soup kitchens and breadlines. The community banded together to support each other, but resources were scarce. Amanda's family received some relief from New Deal programs initiated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Programs like the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) provided subsidies to reduce crop production and stabilize prices, offering some financial relief to farmers. By the late 1930s,

conditions began to improve slightly. The Soil Conservation Service helped restore some of the farmland, and Amanda's family started to see better crop yields. Though the Depression left deep scars, Amanda's determination and the collective effort of her family and community showcased the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity. Amanda's experience during the Great Depression left a lasting impact on her. She carried the lessons of frugality, resilience, and community support throughout her life.

Amanda Wingfield is portrayed as a character profoundly affected by the Great Depression. Her experiences and behaviours reflect the socioeconomic pressures and emotional toll of this era. As a mother struggling to maintain her family's stability and her own sense of identity amidst financial hardship, Amanda embodies the plight of many individuals during the Great Depression. Amanda's constant preoccupation with financial stability is a direct result of the economic pressures of the Great Depression. The need to provide for her family forces her to exhibit behaviours that reflect her desperation and anxiety. "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!" (Scene 5: 46) Amanda's insistence on planning for the future reflects her awareness of the precariousness of their financial situation and the importance of securing a stable income.

Amanda often reminisces about her youth and the genteel lifestyle she once enjoyed, a stark contrast to her current reality. This nostalgia represents her struggle to cope with the harsh economic conditions of the present. "One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain—your mother received—seventeen!—gentlemen callers!" (Scene 1: 3). Her repeated references to the past highlight her inability to accept the present and her yearning for the stability and status she once had. Amanda places considerable pressure on her children, particularly Tom, to improve their financial situation. Her demands stem from a place of anxiety and fear for their future, which the Depression has made uncertain. "Laura, go tell your brother to rise and shine!" (Scene 3: 24) Amanda's relentless urging for Tom to wake up and go to work exemplifies her fear of financial instability and her dependence on his income.

The economic strain and her unfulfilled dreams take a toll on Amanda's mental health, leading to behaviours that are often perceived as overbearing or erratic. Her actions are a coping mechanism for the stress and hopelessness she feels. "My devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children!" (Scene 4: 26). Amanda's self-awareness of her overbearing nature indicates her internal struggle and the psychological impact of the pressures she faces. Her financial anxieties, nostalgic clinging to the past, pressure on her children, and mental health struggles are all symptoms of the economic and social hardships of the era. Through Amanda, Tennessee Williams paints a vivid picture of the pervasive impact of the Great Depression on individuals' lives and their relationships, highlighting themes of survival, sacrifice, and the quest for stability in an unstable world.

With the Great Depression traditional gender roles in America began to change, Women started working. Amanda too tries to earn some extra money by

convincing people to subscribe to a magazine. "I stopped off at Rubicam's business college to speak to your teachers about your having a cold and ask them what progress they thought you were making down there. ... I went to the typing instructor and introduced myself as your mother. She didn't know who you were. Wingfield, she said. We don't have any such student enrolled at the school! (9). She continuously urges Laura to get a job and to improve her typing skills. "Amanda is at least trying to hold the family together, economically ..." (McGlenn, 1977: 517).

The Great Depression also pushed women to get an education in order to find jobs to support the family. Amanda admits Laura to a business school even though the fee is too high for her and she breaks down when she comes to know that Laura has left the school, thus closing the opportunity to education and job altogether. "What are we going to do? What is going to become of us? What is the future?" (116). Families started living together as they could not afford to live separately. This tension that comes from living in cramped spaces with the whole family, can be felt in the play. Amanda continuously nags Tom; she doesn't even realize how eccentric she is. The situation has changed her; the southern belle has turned into a nagging working-class mother, who is overprotective of her last resort, her son Tom. Close living also led to a lack of privacy, thus hindering the emotional growth of younger people. The younger generation postponed marriage and their plans to settle down independently, as their focus remained on making ends meet. In the play, Mr Wingfield who appears only in the portrait, has left his family, quitted his job and never returned. The last word, the family heard of him is a picture post card with "Hello - Good-bye!" and no address" (116). "Men literally took their economy as a matter of faith. They worshipped the market place, so when the stock market crashed, many men were left hopeless and powerless" (Qtd in Urban, 2007:124).

During Great Depression, women hold the centre of power, in the family. They were abandoned by the men of their family and were forced to take up responsibility. They began working in various fields. In the play, the Wingfield family was abandoned by both the father and the son, which forces Amanda to earn a meagre income by selling The Homemaker's Companion subscription through telephone. They began working in various fields. In the play, the Wingfield family was abandoned by both the father and the son, which forces Amanda to earn a meagre income by selling The Homemaker's Companion subscription through telephone. The Great Depression has completely transformed the lives of the American working class people during nineteen thirties. Even though the working men in Spain held a successful revolution in 1936, America remains the same. "Marriage and birth rates declined, as many couples decided to wait until they could afford marriage and children" (Urban, 2007: 126).

In the play, the Wingfield family finds difficulty in getting a gentleman caller for Laura. She was forced by her mother, Amanda, to attend the business college to accomplish her. Her crippled leg makes her feel much different from others and develops a feeling of inferiority complex. I have always been interested in creating a character that contains something crippled ..... who were

frightened of a life, who were desperate to reach out another person. "Tennessee Williams' interest in creating a character who is "crippled" and "frightened of life" yet "desperate to reach out to another person" is poignantly embodied in Laura Wingfield Laura's physical disability and extreme shyness render her emotionally fragile and reclusive (Joanne, 1986: 10). She retreats into her world of glass animals, symbolizing her delicate nature and fear of the harsh realities outside. Despite her timidity, Laura's interactions with Jim, the gentleman caller, reveal her deep yearning for connection and normalcy. This juxtaposition of vulnerability and desire for human connection captures Williams' vision of a character marked by both physical and emotional limitations, striving for a meaningful bond amidst a life of isolation and fear.

Amanda expects her daughter to learn to be independent. Because all the family needs, is an income in some way during the Great Depression. This becomes evident when Amanda asserts: "I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position. I've seen such pitiful cases in the south—barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife! ... little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life! (12). Jim O'Connor, a shipping clerk is the only man in the play, who is well balanced in reality. When Laura was with Jim, she finds more comfortable as the unicorn "stays on shelf with some horses that don't have horns and all of that seem to get along nicely together" (97). Jim finds everything in him except confidence and tries his best to awake it in her. He encourages her telling her lameness as a small defect and advises her to ignore it. Quick response of the encouragement of Jim is that she feels happy and shows him her collection of glass animals, dances with him and lets him kiss. While dancing, "They suddenly bump into the table. JIM stops" (p.109) the horn of one unicorn is broken; Laura is not disturbed. "Symbolically, her calm reaction represents her desire now to become a normal person and no longer remain a unique individual apart from others." (Donahue, 1964: 13) She presents Jim a broken horn unicorn as a souvenir denoting that she is out of her illusionary world. The liveliness and optimism returns with him. Amanda's efforts to find a suitor for Laura can be seen as a desperate attempt to ensure her daughter's financial security in an uncertain world. This reflects the gender norms and economic realities of the time, where marriage was often seen as a means of financial stability. "All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be." (Scene 5: 54) This reflects Amanda's pragmatic approach to ensuring Laura's future, emphasizing the limited options available to women during the Depression.

Williams, offers significant insights into his personal struggles and how they influenced his work, including his famous play *The Glass Menagerie*. In 1939, he had a breakthrough with a story accepted by *Story* magazine, a highly prestigious publication for young writers at the time. This achievement was a crucial milestone in his journey towards becoming a renowned playwright. Williams submitted four plays to a Group Theatre contest, which had an age limit of twenty-five. To qualify, he subtracted three years from his age, considering them "wasted" due to the interruption in his education and writing career caused

by his father's insistence that he work during the Great Depression. The economic hardship of the Great Depression forced Williams to abandon his studies and work as a clerk in his father's shoe factory. This period was marked by intense frustration and a sense of entrapment, mirroring the experiences of his character Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. The stress and dissatisfaction from working at the shoe factory led Williams to a nervous breakdown.

Much like Williams, Tom Wingfield in the play is an aspiring writer trapped in a mundane job at a shoe warehouse. His desire to escape and pursue his dreams mirrors Williams' own struggles during the Great Depression. The economic hardship and the necessity to provide for his family, as depicted in Tom's life, reflect the broader societal context of the Great Depression, which influenced Williams' writing. Williams' own efforts to break free from his stifling job and family obligations to pursue his artistic passions are echoed in Tom's narrative arc, emphasizing the tension between duty and self-fulfilment.

Tom's dreams and aspirations as a poet are indeed heavily influenced and ultimately shattered by the socio-economic realities of the time, particularly the Great Depression. The Great Depression creates a backdrop of financial instability and scarcity, which severely limits Tom's ability to pursue his poetic dreams. He is forced to work at a dead-end job in a shoe warehouse to support his family, trapping him in a cycle of monotony and frustration. The harsh economic climate of the Great Depression means there are fewer opportunities for artistic and creative endeavours. Poetry and other forms of artistic expression are often seen as luxuries that cannot be afforded during times of economic struggle, further dimming Tom's prospects.

Tom Wingfield emerges as a multifaceted character, embodying both the roles of narrator and participant. Set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, Tom's character illustrates the profound impact of economic hardship on individual aspirations and familial relationships. As a victim of this era, Tom's struggles are emblematic of a generation trapped in a web of socioeconomic constraints, personal responsibilities, and unfulfilled dreams. The Great Depression casts a long shadow over the Wingfield family, defining their financial instability and shaping their interactions. Tom's job at a shoe warehouse is a direct result of the economic turmoil of the time. "It was the Great Depression, and jobs were hard to find, but to Tom, the aspiring writer just beginning to achieve recognition, typing shoe orders eight hours a day was his "season in Hell." (Hale, 2003: 83) Tom's description of his day-to-day life at the warehouse highlights the oppressive nature of his financial situation and the lack of opportunities to improve his circumstances. "You think I'm crazy about the warehouse? You think I'm in love with the Continental Shoemakers? You think I want to spend fifty-five years down there in that – celotex interior! with – fluorescent – tubes!" (Scene, 3: 19). It emphasizes the financial necessity that forces Tom to endure a job he loathes, illustrating the economic pressures of the Great Depression. The need for steady employment, no matter how soul-crushing, is a grim reality that many faced during the Depression. Tom's work is monotonous and devoid of any creative satisfaction, starkly contrasting with his aspirations as a poet and adventurer. This dissonance between his dreams and

reality is a source of persistent frustration and resentment. His famous line, "Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse!" encapsulates his internal conflict.

The economic conditions of the Depression forced him to subdue his natural inclinations and artistic desires, leading to a life of drudgery. Tom's sense of entrapment is not solely economic but also deeply personal. He is burdened with the responsibility of supporting his mother, Amanda, and his sister, Laura. The pressure to provide for his family while sacrificing his own ambitions mirrors the plight of many during the Depression, who had to forgo personal fulfilment to meet basic needs. Tom's sense of duty toward his mother and sister conflicts with his personal desires, a common dilemma during the Great Depression when many had to support their families at the cost of their own dreams. "House, house! Who pays rent on it, who makes a slave of himself to –" (Scene 3: 18). This line is critical in understanding Tom's character and the broader themes of economic hardship and personal sacrifice during the Great Depression. The repeated use of the word "house" emphasizes his fixation on the financial responsibilities he bears. It reinforces Tom's disdain for his job and the sacrifice of his personal dreams for financial stability. Tom's frustration with his financial responsibility towards the household demonstrates the burden he carries, preventing him from pursuing his own aspirations. Amanda's constant demands and her nostalgic view of the past add to Tom's sense of entrapment and his desire to escape. Amanda acknowledges her overbearing nature, which further constrains Tom's ability to break free from his responsibilities.

Tom's conversations with his mother often reveal his pent-up anger and desperation to alter his life circumstances. "Every time you come in yelling that Goddamn 'Rise and Shine! Rise and Shine!' I say to myself, 'How lucky dead people are!' But I get up. I go! For sixty-five dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being ever!" (Scene, 3: 20). Tom's outburst highlights his intense dissatisfaction and the significant sacrifices he makes for his family. These lines are crucial in understanding Tom's character as a victim of the Great Depression and his internal struggles. Amanda's cheerful yet insistent "Rise and Shine" is meant to motivate, but for Tom, it symbolizes the start of another day trapped in a monotonous and soul-crushing existence. The comparison to the dead underscores how trapped and hopeless he feels. The Great Depression exacerbates this sense of hopelessness, as economic hardship leaves him with few options for change or escape. The specific mention of "sixty-five dollars a month" highlights the meagre financial reward for his labour and the significant personal cost. This figure underscores the economic realities of the Great Depression, where even a small income was crucial for survival but came at a great personal cost.

The theme of escape permeates Tom's narrative. He is a dreamer trapped in a mundane existence, yearning for adventure and meaning. His visits to the movies symbolise his desire to escape from the grim reality of his life. The movies provide a temporary respite, a vicarious thrill that contrasts sharply with the bleakness of his daily routine. This need for escapism is intensified by his nightly excursions, which further strain his relationship with his mother, who perceives

them as acts of irresponsibility. Tom's internal conflict reaches its zenith when he finally decides to leave his family, following in the footsteps of his father, who abandoned them years earlier. This decision is laden with guilt and sorrow, underscoring the emotional toll of the Great Depression. His departure is not just a physical act but a symbolic one, representing a desperate bid for freedom at the cost of familial bonds. Even as he leaves, Tom is haunted by the memory of his sister Laura, whose vulnerability and dependence he cannot shake off. His closing monologue reflects a deep sense of regret and unresolved guilt, as he confesses, "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (116).

Tom is a poignant representation of a victim of the Great Depression. His struggles encapsulate the broader human condition during this period – caught between duty and desire, reality and dreams, confinement and escape. Tom's character serves as a testament to the enduring impact of economic hardship on individual lives and the sacrifices made in the pursuit of personal freedom. His story is a universal one, echoing the timeless themes of aspiration, responsibility, and the quest for meaning in an indifferent world. Tom's closing monologue reveals the depth of his internal conflict and the lasting impact of his decision to leave. "I didn't go to the moon, I went much further - for time is the longest distance between two places... I left St. Louis. I descended the steps of this fire escape for a last time and followed, from then on, in my father's footsteps, attempting to find in motion what was lost in space..." (Scene 7: 115-116). Tom's yearning for escape and the emotional distance he feels from his past life. By saying he went "much further" than the moon, Tom suggests that his journey wasn't just a physical departure but a profound emotional and psychological shift. The idea that "time is the longest distance between two places" signifies that despite physically leaving, the memories and the passage of time have created an insurmountable emotional gap.

His final monologue poignantly encapsulates his quest for freedom and the profound emotional toll of his choices. Through Tom, Tennessee Williams highlights the universal themes of aspiration, responsibility, and the search for meaning in an indifferent world, making him a timeless representation of a victim of his era. Williams intricately weaves the theme of economic hardship and personal sacrifice into Tom's character, making him a poignant representation of a victim of the Great Depression. Tom's struggle between duty and desire, reality and dreams, underscores the profound impact of this era on individual lives and aspirations.

## **CONCLUSION**

This play provides a poignant exploration of the struggles faced by the Wingfield family against the backdrop of the Great Depression. This period of economic turmoil amplifies the family's financial instability, highlighting the pressures and constraints they endure. Amanda Wingfield's nostalgia for a more prosperous past and her desperation for her children's future security are intensified by the economic hardship. Tom's longing for escape and adventure becomes even more pressing as he feels trapped by his responsibilities in a stagnant economy. Laura's fragility and retreat into her glass menagerie

symbolize the delicate and precarious nature of the family's existence during these difficult times. The Great Depression serves as a critical context that shapes the characters' actions and decisions, emphasizing the themes of escape, memory, and the relentless pursuit of dreams despite harsh realities. Williams masterfully intertwines the personal and the historical, illustrating how the Wingfields', like many families of the era, are caught in the maelstrom of economic and emotional struggles. This confluence of personal and historical narratives not only deepens our understanding of the characters but also underscores the broader human condition during one of America's most challenging periods.

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