

Individual happiness and responsibility in "the glass menagerie"

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Tennessee Williams' (1911-1983) play "The Glass Menagerie" tells the story of a family unable to cope with the harsh reality of impoverishment and how its members resort to the creation of alternate worlds to sustain their interest in life. In the play, Williams explores the conflict between an individual's right to be happy and his or her responsibility to others through the main protagonist Tom Wingfield who finds himself hindered from doing the things that give him fulfillment by his position as the family breadwinner.

Set in St. Louis in 1937, the play also reveals the tensions arising from failed expectations and broken relationships. Hence, Tom is caught in a perennial argument with his mother while his sister Laura finds it difficult to adapt to the outside world. However, Williams also makes it clear, through Tom's narrative in the play, that individual happiness is nothing but an illusion and that individuals can derive a greater sense of fulfillment by answering to their more important familial and societal responsibilities.

Being part of the larger social structure, individuals cannot escape their overriding responsibility to others. Tom's main conflict with his mother, Amanda, is therefore representative of the friction that results when an individual puts his own happiness above his own family's survival. In this case, however, Tom is unable to accept the concept of self-denial and puts leisure at the top of his priorities. He uses his dissatisfaction with his job as a worker at a shoe warehouse as an excuse to amuse himself in movies and drinking sprees.

The biggest flaw of his character is therefore revealed when he uses the money intended to pay the electric bill to realize his dreams of adventure. In the same manner, individuals as part of the larger society are expected to be able to contribute to its growth and progress. In the play, Amanda represents the pressure of social expectations on Tom which he finds difficult to fulfill. Consequently, Tom accidentally breaks his sister Laura's prized collection of glass figurines.

Although clearly unintended, the act precludes the shattering of Laura's world due to her disappointment with her brother's selfishness when he finally leaves her and her mother without any regard as to how they would survive without his support. In his selfishness, he neglects the feelings not only of his mother but also of his vulnerable sister Laura. Thus, it is in his lack of sense for his family's situation—and his inability to answer to familial and societal expectations—that Tom wishes to escape from his current world.

It is only much later, as he is haunted by Laura's memory, that he realizes that his actions have an impact not only on his life but on hers as well. His escape and abandonment of familial obligations to pursue “real-world adventures” therefore makes Tom feel guilty particularly of his sister Laura. In the end, Tom's narrative is shaped not by the “real-life adventures” he sought and left his family for but by the uncertainty of Laura's future after he abandons her and by the knowledge that his escape meant entrapment for her.

The Glass Menagerie therefore illustrates that while individuals have the right to pursue their happiness, this must be balanced with a clear sense of responsibility to others and to society as a whole. As the narrative of the main protagonist reveals, individuals cannot truly attain happiness by attempting to escape from responsibilities or by letting their own happiness destroy the happiness of another person. Ultimately, individual fulfillment and contentment is attained from being able to contribute to the happiness and contentment of others in the wider society one is in.