

Odets and Williams's women of the depression

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



The 1930's worlds of Clifford Odets and Tennessee Williams portray assertive and domineering women as the center of families in the age of the depression. Women in the plays are always fighting poverty in any way they can. The mothers often dominate the lives of their children and attempt to dictate rich futures for both their sons and daughters. Clifford Odets displays the nearly impoverished wife Edna and the bright, young woman Florence in the play *Waiting for Lefty* that was written in 1934 but not produced until 1935. In *Awake and Sing!*, written in 1933 and produced in 1935, Odets shows Bessie as the head of the household. Tennessee Williams places the intricate character of Amanda as the head of a broken household in his 1944 production of *The Glass Menagerie*. Odets and Williams both have strong women struggling against the onset of poverty. Edna, in *Waiting for Lefty*, threatens to leave her husband if he does not do something. After explaining to Joe why there is no furniture in the house she asks, "Who's the man in the family, you or me?" (Odets 9). Edna tells her husband to do something or she will run back into the arms of her old boyfriend Bud Haas because "He earns a living" (11). Edna is a wife that has been stripped bare by the depression and she is ready to fight back in any way possible to survive. The other women in the plays are not pushed quite so far by poverty, but all are trying to maintain a style of living that has become impossible. Again, in *Waiting for Lefty*, Florence demands an answer from Sid concerning their three-year engagement and "The answer is no- a big electric sign looking down on Broadway!" (20). Sid then tells Florence that she deserves a better standard of living and that if they ran away together now, "in a year, two years, you'd curse the day" (21). Florence turns away from love, in order to survive,

because it would only lead to poverty. Amanda in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* was not so lucky. In scene one Amanda is re-telling the story of how she received seventeen gentleman callers in one afternoon in Blue Mountain. She tells of how they became rich and left fortunes to their widows. Amanda's story ends with the remark, "And I could have been Mrs. Duncan J. Fitzhugh, mind you! But- I picked your father!" (Williams 9). Her remark seems very subtle given the fact that Mr. Wingfield was "a telephone man who fell in love with long distances" (5). Amanda raised two children on her own, always trying to recapture the style of living she left in Blue Mountain. Tom tells Jim O'Connor that Mr. Wingfield has "been absent going on sixteen years!" (62). That would have made Tom and Laura both children themselves when he left. Amanda, a single mother, continued to push mannerisms on her children in an attempt to make them civilized. At the very beginning of the play, she nags Tom about food when the entrance to their apartment is through a fire escape: "Honey, don't push with your fingers. If you have to push with something, the thing to push with is a crust of bread. And chew-chew! Animals have secretions in their stomachs which enable them to digest food without mastication, but human beings are supposed to chew their food before they swallow it down. Eat food leisurely, son, and really enjoy it. A well-cooked meal has lots of delicate flavors that have to be held in the mouth for appreciation. So chew your food and give your salivary glands a chance to function!" (Williams 6). The odd quote best displays the concerns Amanda expressed at the dinner table and in other aspects of her children's lives. She pushes her children to be more than on the verge of poverty by recalling her youth in Blue Mountain. The father,

Myron, in Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!* was not absent, but not always there. The character description Odets gives tells readers that Myron is "a born follower" (37). He cried when he finally realized that Hennie was pregnant and his wife was the strong one. In several scenes, Myron is content to be out of the main conversation reading his newspaper. He is a little slow in realizing that Hennie is pregnant because when Bessie and Hennie are arguing over whether or not Jacob should stay for the discussion, Myron asks, "What's wrong, Momma?" (53). When Myron enters upon Hennie and Ralph when they are about to make their big exit he only asks, "Where you going, little Red Ridding Hood?" She tells him nobody knows and he comments on how beautiful a baby she was in 1910. "That same year Teddy Roosevelt come back from Africa" (Odets 100). If Bessie had found Hennie leaving the apartment at night she would have drilled her for answers and made sure it was back to her husband's house, not out with Ralph. Myron was a present father but only there for show and financial support. At the time of the play *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom is the only one working to support the family. Despite his employment and Amanda's lack there of, Tom hands over his check, minus enough for movies and cigarettes, and allows Amanda to run the house. Laura has dropped out of high school and now quit going to Rubicam's Business College because is gave her "nervous indigestion" (16). The only entrance to the small apartment is through the fire escape landing, but Amanda insists on making "preparations" for the "first young man we've introduced to your sister" (43). She pulls out her wedding silver and old cotillion dress, has the lampshade re-done and lays out a throw on the couch. In her best effort she even

manages to whip up a batch of macaroons. All of these efforts are to insure that Laura has someone to support her and that she is not left out in the cold. Like Amanda, Bessie in Odets's *Awake and Sing!* is in a hurry to get her daughter married off, but for different motives. Bessie discovers that Hennie is pregnant and she needs to be married either to the father or some respectable man. Bessie is a dictatorial head of the household as illustrated at the discovery of Hennie's baby. She instructs, " Stop crying like a baby, Myron" and when Hennie leaves the room she calls her mother " Mussolini" (54-57). Hennie submits to her mother's demand and marries Sam Feinschreiber. Odets writes before the character descriptions, " All of the characters in *Awake and Sing!* share a fundamental activity: a struggle for life amidst petty conditions" (37). It seems petty to Jacob that Hennie be married off so quickly; he responds, " Respect? Respect! For the neighbors' opinion! You insult me, Bessie!" (55). Bessie may be worried about what neighbors will say about an un-wed mother, but realistically in the 1930's she is also concerned about another mouth to feed and doctor bills to bring that mouth into the world. In conclusion, the 1930's worlds of Odets and Williams illustrate how the women of each household stepped up and took charge in order to maintain a sense of " normal" life. Edna demanded her husband do something or she would. Florence agreed that an impoverished life in love was not worth settling for. Amanda drove her children to be more than they could be, even if she failed at it. Bessie took charge of a home and a husband that could collapse under the depression and struggled to keep her family life afloat. Odets and William's women were strong, beautiful, and assertive, even if they failed to accomplish their dreams.