

Price of freedom: an
analysis of the
motivations of
different tennessee
williams ...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Tennessee Williams's paradoxical nature as an individual can be seen at many different points throughout his life. Described as "enigmatic" by both his contemporaries and biographers, the prolific playwright seems to have translated this quality into many of his most celebrated characters (Woo 1). Two classic examples of this contradictory nature are Tom from *The Glass Menagerie* and John from *Summer and Smoke*. Both of these characters are practically defined by paradox. At the same time, they are both torn between intense personal desires, primarily for freedom and personal autonomy in some variety, and the intense duty they both have to their families and circumstances. As taxing as this struggle may be for the two men, as characters, it is a blessing in Aristotelian terms, as the pull between duty and desire defines Tom and John as proper characters according to Aristotle's definitions as enumerated in *Poetics*, which are that a full character must be good, proper, true to life, and consistent (Aristotle 27). Throughout the two plays, Tom and John are able to fulfill these requirements specifically because they are being torn between personal and familial wishes. However, near the end of both *Summer and Smoke* and *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom and John are each forced to make a seemingly final choice between the two, the results of which determine the rest of their lives as people and their authenticity as characters in Aristotelian terms. Ultimately, Tom appears to choose personal desire, while John opts for duty to community. However, the very act of making a choice results in both characters ceasing to be full and authentic in the Aristotelian sense.

Before examining the ways in which Tom and John function within the framework of this conflict, it is necessary to understand exactly what is

<https://assignbuster.com/price-of-freedom-an-analysis-of-the-motivations-of-different-tennessee-williams-characters-with-respect-to-aristotelian-definitions-of-character-and-the-struggle-between-duty-and-desire/>

meant by the “struggle between desire and duty.” For each character, the term “duty” refers to the circumstances he lives in, and the necessities those circumstances dictate. “Duty,” used in this way, also refers specifically to expectations or requirements that are not inherent to either Tom or John, but rather those which are forced upon them by external sources. In both cases, the primary catalysts for this pressure are the two men’s families, although in the case of John, Alma is also a primary source. By contrast, “desire” in this case refers to the needs and wishes of the characters that are derived solely from them and are fundamentally, if not necessarily originally, constructed as responses to their duties. For both Tom and John, their desires express an overall wish for freedom and a subtler wish to explore life and be free of the things that tie them down. Although the exact nature of each of the two characters’ wishes and obligations are different, they are extremely similar in what they represent.

Tom’s situation is much easier to understand, as it is applicable or at least understandable to the majority of people. For him, his duties include making money and supporting his family, and he is also expected to try and find a husband for his sister, Laura. This is quite clearly shown by Tom’s statement to Amanda that he both pays rent for their apartment and also “makes a slave of himself” to do so (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 22). This last point is particularly revealing, as the use of the word “slave” carries the undeniable connotation that Tom is not working from any position of personal drive or desire, but rather from a sense of duty and requirement.

Despite this, and likely as a result of it, he yearns for adventure and personal freedom, and escapes his obligations in many different forms, from <https://assignbuster.com/price-of-freedom-an-analysis-of-the-motivations-of-different-tennessee-williams-characters-with-respect-to-aristotelian-definitions-of-character-and-the-struggle-between-duty-and-desire/>

drunkenness to movie going. For Tom, these trips to the cinema are not simply the vice based vents his mother believes, but rather brief opportunities to slake his desire for autonomy. Stating unarguably that he gives up “ all that [he] dream[s] of doing or being ever” for the sake of making money for his family (in other words, his “ duty”), the films he sees are a way to indulge his own personal desire for freedom by sinking briefly into the adventure filled worlds of other people (23-24). However, this is only a temporary solution to his much greater desire to, like his father before him, leave his family and embark on a life of adventure. Thus, it is easy to see the enigmatic nature of Tom’s situation. Despite wishing nothing more than to leave, he stays with his family, torn between two great forces. This is a situation that is familiar to many people: living in an unpleasant state and wishing for a better one. By contrast, the paradox of John’s struggle between the fantasies of freedom and the realities of responsibility is seemingly much more difficult to understand.

Unlike Tom, John is not destitute and struggling to rise up in the world, and, also unlike Tom, John is seen as an important and valuable member of society. Born into wealth with “ a silver spoon in [his] mouth,” John is described as being not only favored by the randomness of birth, but also extremely gifted and seemingly destined for greatness (Williams, *Summer and Smoke* 18). Said to have been born with “ surgeon’s fingers,” a graduate from one of the best medical schools in the world, and having an already famous doctor for a father, there seems to be no doubt in Alma or anyone else’s mind that John must be “ divinely appointed” and destined for glory (18; 11). Everyone that is, except for the man himself. Throughout the <https://assignbuster.com/price-of-freedom-an-analysis-of-the-motivations-of-different-tennessee-williams-characters-with-respect-to-aristotelian-definitions-of-character-and-the-struggle-between-duty-and-desire/>

majority of the play, John seems determined to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory: gambling, driving recklessly, spending time with disreputable company, and generally acting like “ an overgrown school boy” (18). While on the surface, this behavior may seem like the simple excesses of youth or petty rebellion (or simply plain madness), the real reason is nearly identical to Tom’s, despite the situations being polar opposites: John wishes to evade the circumstances of his birth and be something different from what is expected of him by his friends and family. However, because his original situation was one deemed by society and those around him as “ success,” John’s ever elusive desire for “ something more” must correspondingly be what is generally thought of as failure: lechery, drunkenness, and gambling (53-57). In this way, John’s desire for freedom is clearly directly contrary to the wishes of those around him. Like Tom, he too is torn between desire and duty and, again like Tom, he continues to do his duty despite wishing fervently to act only according to desire. Thus, despite their respective circumstances of life looking like perfect opposites, John and Tom are both divided by the same fundamental issue, an issue which defines them both as people in their worlds but also as characters within a play.

As shown extensively above, the split between personal needs and familial obligations is both fundamental and integral to both Tom’s and John’s psychology, but it is also principal in their legitimacy as proper characters in the Aristotelian sense. As stated previously, Aristotle notes in Poetics that there are “ four things to be aimed at” with respect to character: goodness, propriety, trueness to life, and consistency. In all cases, Tom’s and John’s struggle between duty and desire helps to fulfill these requisites. The case of <https://assignbuster.com/price-of-freedom-an-analysis-of-the-motivations-of-different-tennessee-williams-characters-with-respect-to-aristotelian-definitions-of-character-and-the-struggle-between-duty-and-desire/>

goodness is proven easily. Both Tom and John make it clear that they wish to indulge their personal desire much more than continue with their duties.

However, until they are forced to choose, each keeps performing his duties;

Tom does so by continuing to go to work and by bringing Jim home. John's performance of duty is more difficult to see, since he goes further down the

path of indulgence of desire, but he too does his duty by both not simply

leaving, but also by planning to marry despite clearly despising her father

and believing that he himself has "slide downhill" at an incredible rate

(Summer and Smoke 55). This certainly counts as a duty, given the previous

definition, and thus each man's performance of duty despite wishing

otherwise can be classified as selfless rather than selfish, thus fulfilling the

Aristotelian requirements of goodness. The next two requirements, propriety

and trueness to life, are both fulfilled by this enigma in similar ways. Humans

are by nature paradoxical, and a character who violates this rule would

certainly be viewed as improper and unrealistic (Marken and Carey). Thus,

the very fact that this struggle seems contradictory fulfills both these

requirements. The final requisite for Aristotelian characters is consistency.

While this may seem like a stumbling block for Tom and John, who appear to

oscillate constantly between the two options, Aristotle anticipates this

problem by specifically stating that characters can be "consistently

inconsistent," which is certainly the case for Tom and John, who are both, at

different times, driven to act in line with their duties as well as their desires.

(Aristotle 28). Thus, far from undermining their legitimacy as characters,

Tom's and John's conflict between desire and duty strengthens it immensely.

That is, of course, until they are forced to choose one definitively, and, in

<https://assignbuster.com/price-of-freedom-an-analysis-of-the-motivations-of-different-tennessee-williams-characters-with-respect-to-aristotelian-definitions-of-character-and-the-struggle-between-duty-and-desire/>

each case, the legitimacy of their consistent inconsistency must be questioned and examined.

In Tom's case, the moment where he makes a final decision between duty and desire is very specific and can be narrowed down to a single line in the show. For Tom, the massive amount of pent-up tension in his life all comes to a head right after Jim leaves, when Amanda begins to accuse her son of being deceitful. In addition, she states categorically that Tom "live[s] in a dream" and "manufactures illusions" (The Glass Menagerie 67). This accusation suggests that for Tom, real life and the duties it necessitates have become naught but a distraction and ultimately irrelevant to the desires of freedom he is trying to make manifest. The absolutist tone of the statement is also not to be overlooked, as it seems to leave no more room for the continuation of the duty vs. desire paradox that defined Tom up until this point. Faced with this new reality, Tom's only response is to make a final choice, and his actions leave no doubt as to what he chooses: he gets his coat and leaves (67). Thus, by ending the conflict and making a definitive choice, Tom very clearly violates the fourth aim of character, that being consistency. Throughout whole show prior to this scene, Tom is constantly torn between two forces, and thus is permanently inconsistent in his actions. The correction of this and the choosing of a single pathway diverges sharply from the rest of the play and represents a lack of consistency by merit of being consistent. Thus, by attempting to correct the contradiction that plagues him throughout the show, Tom inadvertently sabotages his completeness as a character in the eyes of Aristotle.

Unlike Tom's final choice, John's does not appear to take place as specifically in the text, and also unlike Tom, John appears to choose duty. While there is not as exact a line to point to that signifies John's transformation, it is very apparent that between the end of Part II, Scene II and the start of Part II, Scene V, John has drastically changed. The death of his father appears to have finally shocked him out of his desire based indulgence, and he is now fully ensconced in the world of his duties. This is clearly shown by his continuation of his father's work, as well as his fulfillment of Alma's prophecies by "covering [himself] in sudden glory" (Summer and Smoke 70). He no longer acts wildly or like a boy, but rather like a sober and reserved man of status, like his father before him. Thus, by very clearly acting in line with only the expectations of those around him to the exclusion of his previous desires for adventure, it is evident that John has failed the Aristotelian character test in the same way as Tom, by acting in a uniform manner and thus breaking the policy of inconsistency.

Despite being apparent polar opposites in term of circumstances, John from Summer and Smoke and Tom from The Glass Menagerie have a great deal in common. Both are driven by a powerful desire to be independent, to find their own paths, to have adventures, and ultimately to have autonomy in their lives. Simultaneously, both men are trapped by the duties they have to their families and society, and this trapped existence ultimately forces both to decide between the two worlds. However, while it may appear difficult and contradictory as a real-life issue, the struggle both these characters face is integral to their authenticities in the eyes Aristotle, according to his four aims of character. Ultimately, the choice causes Tom to no longer be a legitimate

<https://assignbuster.com/price-of-freedom-an-analysis-of-the-motivations-of-different-tennessee-williams-characters-with-respect-to-aristotelian-definitions-of-character-and-the-struggle-between-duty-and-desire/>

Aristotelian character, and John remains only on a technicality. What is interesting to note is that the decision seemingly makes neither character happy, despite each having chosen a different path. The idea thus implicated is unavoidable: a choice where the two options are absolutes is not a healthy or productive one for either a character or a person.

Works Cited

Aristotle. *Aristotle's Poetics*. Ed. Stanley Appelbaum. Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997. Print.

Marken, Richard S., and Timothy Carey A. "Controlling People: The Paradoxical Nature of Being Human." Australian Academic Press. Australian Academic Press, n. d. Web. 13 Sept. 2016.

Williams, Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1975. Print.

Williams, Tennessee. *Summer and Smoke*. New York: Dramatists Play Services, 1977. Print.

Woo, Elaine. "Obituaries Lyle Leverich; Tennessee Williams Fan Became the Playwright's Biographer." *Los Angeles Times*. *Los Angeles Times*, 25 Dec. 1999. Web. 13 Sept. 2016.