

Tennessee williams and alice walker's presentations of entrapment



Explore how Tennessee Williams and Alice Walker present the idea of entrapment through the characters of Amanda and Celie?

Entrapment is the enclosure of someone unwillingly, and usually by force. This negative situation is evident with the protagonist in both *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Colour Purple* as we see a side of the characters we may not otherwise notice. Amanda's narcissistic self comes to light as the audience witness her character cornered into a small space. Alternatively, Amanda is also trapped within her own memory as she reminisces on her faded self, and it is her inability to let go of the past that will restrain her in adulthood. Not only does Amanda continue to entrap herself, she also represses those around her due to her heavy reliance on her son. Contrarily, Celie's entrapment only draws more empathy from the reader as her inability to escape from her historic legacy of slavery becomes increasingly evident. Because Celie is black she is inevitably given a poorer chance than the white middle and upper-class who surround her. Celie is entrapped not only because she is 'sold off' by her paternal figure, but because the narrator is also manipulated into believing she has nothing to move forward for with the believed loss of her sister and children. In contrast to Williams' techniques, Walker's novel focus' more on the contextual side of Celie as a black woman in the Deep South and how this entrapment within her cultural legacy would lead to her being an outcast. The evident reality of entrapment for the imperative characters of Amanda and Celie is explored through the overarching themes of; the physical environment, narrative and love.

The Glass Menagerie is a 'memory play' set and written in 1944 America which follows the distant interactions between Amanda and her two children

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as they attempt to find their feet in a time of financial strain and social outcasts. The play is framed by a traditional prologue and epilogue but remains encapsulated by Tom's narrative; which shows strong autobiographical elements to Williams' own opinion of his histrionic mother. In contrast, *The Colour Purple* is a 1982 epistolary novel set in the Deep South over a period of thirty years throughout 1910-1930. *The Colour Purple*'s plot arguably follows Freytag's Pyramid in relation to the structure of tragedy, especially the climax, falling action and denouement which mirror the hardships Celie faces. Both the novel and the play use these disparate character's narrative stance in order to scrutinize their positions while enforcing the idea of entrapment within the structure itself. Williams' play heavily focus' on the physical idea of entrapment within the setting to emphasize the claustrophobia of the characters, while Walker skilfully implements the depth of her context into Celie's entrapment within her own letters.

The physical environment faced by the characters in *The Glass Menagerie* is the first technique explored by Williams in order to portray the theme of entrapment. Williams' tactical use of the setting is crucial in presenting his interpretation of entrapment as he uses only one minimalistic setting throughout the whole play. It is the use of this 'flat' acting as a constant that limits the escape of the characters physically, and truly engulfs the audience into the life of this plain, yet disturbed, family. The stage directions of the flat state that it should be " always burning with the slow implacable fires of human depression" which could be referenced to the Wall Street Crash and the consequent Great Depression that occurred only a few years before. The

Great Depression was the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialised world, employment, savings, and spending depleted as America entered a time of true social anarchy. The references to the “depression” could draw the assumption that the flat brings to them what the Great Depression brought to America, it is as though being entrapped in this flat has led the characters to lose all hope for a positive future. Arguably, the flat offers the characters no escape to real life, but instead acts as a dismal backdrop for a harsh and surreal life. This stage direction depicts the idea that the situation cannot improve, which is especially the case for Amanda who finds herself not only physically trapped, but also trapped within her own memory of her youth as a southern belle; a title traditionally awarded to women embodying particular attitudes, appearances and manners.

Amanda’s constant physical environment could be argued to leave her having to face up to the reality of who she has become, her isolation in the flat gives no escape from herself. The only evident escape for the characters in *The Glass Menagerie* is the “fire escape” that Tom often frequents to throughout the play. The harsh singularity of this escape places a sublime hierarchy onto the simplicity of it, and it is Tom’s regular use of said escape that moves the plot dramatically towards the narrators escape from Amanda. Tom builds up the dim and distant possibility of escape every time he vacates here, until one day he truly does get out, leaving his mother and sister behind. Williams uses this setting so subtly and subconsciously that the characters don’t even realise the possibilities of escape until they truly achieve it, it could be commented as a form of dramatic irony into the constant pursuit for escape that the characters do not realise is possible.

Williams relies heavily on the use of ‘plastic theatre’ as he employs it to <https://assignbuster.com/tennessee-williams-and-alice-walkers-presentations-of-entrapment/>

heighten the awareness of certain characterisations. It is this dramatized use of the props and staging that sculpts the personality of the characters, the tactile use of a claustrophobic staging offers the audience a more abstract idea into the restrictions and entrapment of Amanda. Aside from the setting as a whole, the methodological use of 'the screen device' is one of both controversy and genius. Williams himself believed the screen "gave accent to certain values in each scene"[1] while many directors discarded the use of the device as unnecessary and distracting from the pathos of the play. Personally, I believe the screen to be unobtrusive in comparison to the script of the play, but instead a skilful emphasis on Volta's of intensity and anxiety. This dramatist use of the setting creates an impression of a dreamlike insubstantiality though the use of flashing random images as a form of how memory works. This technique only further reiterates the theme of entrapment through emphasising all that was for Amanda.

In contrast, it is the legacy of slavery that metaphorically entraps Celie. Slavery was particularly prominent in the Southern United States between the later nineteenth century and the Second World War. Walker refers to slavery coming in three stages; the first a 'suspended' life for women, the second an "assimilation into the mainstream of American life"[2], and the third a time of emergent women at the midst of the Civil Rights Movements. Argumentatively, *The Colour Purple* falls under the second stage due to Celie's suspension from her birth of drudgery towards the novel's final stages. Celie's own household follows the structure of the slavery hierarchy as she is moved from one male to another by the 'trading' of her father made possible by the colour of her skin. During a conversation with Shug,

Celie reveals that “ he beat me for not being you” presenting how she is physically trapped in the life of someone she is not. This is one of the novels many examples into the common objectification of black women. However, Walkers tactful use of the empathetic tone of this conversation signifies her overall purpose behind Celie’s entrapment- the avoidance of repeating society’s mistakes. In my opinion, Walkers blunt interpretations into the mind of an ‘ enslaved’ and entrapped woman are shown to be the debasement of destructive behaviour in order to prove to society how wrong they were in the first place. Walker herself even admitted to her Grandmother being beaten and raped by her white slave owner, I feel this family history pushed Walker to describe the; emotional, physical and spiritual devastation that occurs when family trust is betrayed. Saffer explores Celie’s physical entrapment being due to ‘ what is expected of her’ as explained here; ‘ Celie is left not only with the household duties, but her father’s unfilled sexual appetite to take care of... She is married off by the time she is seventeen to a man who doesn’t really want her. . . but she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her.’[3]This critic is commenting on how within her own home, Celie is still subject to slavery’s grip, he is exploring the idea that for a young black woman there will never truly be an ‘ escape’ from the legacy left behind. Therefore, this interpretation strongly supports my own argument into Celie’s encapsulating birth right of slavery being the thing to hold her back, and entrap her. The Colour Purple was written in 1982 yet is set from 1910 to 1930, a crucial event that unravelled was the Civil Rights Movements peak of 1954-1968, and this would urge not only a more sympathetic reader but also a more positive narration from Walker herself.

Walker is able to comment on all the atrocities that unravelled only a few
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years before while evoking pure empathy from both the reader and critics. Arguably, Walker is setting up the climax to this revolt from the black population, she shows how silencing and entrapping an entire race would evidently lead to an innovative civil outburst. It is in this way, Celie is able to be used as a symbol for Walker's exploration into the history of the entrapment behind racism.

Within *The Glass Menagerie*, Narrative is a crucial theme in the exploration of oblique entrapment for Amanda, her life is told through the narrator Tom's pessimistic opinion while she acts as a bystander to this anecdote of her own pitiful life. This type of narration is powerful and episodic, it draws attention to the theatricality of the play as Tom chooses the events the audience is shown, and the order they get to see them in. Maxwell refers to the narrative of the play to be a story that is "nakedly autobiographical"[4]. This description helps to cement Williams' attachment to the content of the play, he also found himself growing up with a backward-looking mother like Amanda, in Mississippi. Williams found both faults and absurdities, along with charm in the Old South, and reflects his fickle nature within Tom's narration and Amanda's lack of it. Williams explores entrapment due to his own prophesy of entrapment with his over-bearing mother, he instead flips his own perspective as he allows Amanda, the mother, to have a turn at the entrapment he felt his whole life. This supports my argument into the idea that Tom has come to resent Amanda, and so has entrapped her in his past. Amanda's complete lack of control over the narrative of the situation she finds herself in completely contrasts Celie's control over her writing. While both characters remain entrapped, Amanda appears to be even more so

purely because of her inability to comment on said entrapment. Williams was greatly influenced by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen and his ideas of small scale tragedies and disappointments for ordinary people. Most notably in comparison, Ibsen creates a way of life that leaves his characters feeling entrapped within a situation they have not chosen, while also forcing them to confront their past mistakes. Williams' overarching theme of entrapment is evidently highly influenced by Henrik's work as he mirrors it with the individual tragedies and entrapment of Amanda. Foley comments on how "Tom's desire for adventure and independence conflicts with his guilt in deserting the helpless female members of his family who are dependent on him." [5] Arguably, this highlights how the ghost of a strong patriarchal male is replaced with a young boy's pursuit into knowledge, the narrative shows the emptiness and regret Tom feels glared onto his over-bearing mother. This supports my argument into how Amanda's over reliance on her son would always result into her entrapment, when Tom stopped being used as a safety net Amanda became nothing but a character in the adverse story of his past life. By framing the play with Tom's narrative, Williams is able to enclose not only Amanda, but Laura also, within this isolation of the past. To the audience, it is as though these characters lives do not exist outside of this tragic yet satire anecdote. Amanda's character's entrapment within this plays narration further draws attention to the madness of her character, Williams is able to intensify Amanda's entrapment within her own insane mind, and in her sons also.

Whereas in *The Colour Purple*, Celie is the narrator of her own story. Celie's narration is purely the result of her harsh and constant victimisation that

leads to her entrapment and isolation. All of her letters begin with the purpose of explaining her torment and escaping from it through these very narratives, making Celie's similar to Tom's escapist narration in *The Glass Menagerie*. Celie's letters are almost always written to God as her way of subconsciously asking for help through the passive letter format. It is Celie's entrapment that inclines her to turn to God as her only way of escaping the harsh realities she faces on earth. Walker's insistent presence on religion within her novel offers a warm and sincere touch onto Celie's desperation to escape, while also cohering with the feminist belief that patriarchal culture must be overthrown to free people like Celie. The structural use of the letter format imprints an intimate tone over the novel, it allows the reader to believe they have a true connection and deeper understanding with this first-person narrative. Walker's use of first-person forces the reader to become entrapped within Celie's own perspective and experience the harsh existence of a character with so little personal privilege. While she struggles to speak up for herself in reality, she can express her true self through these letters to a third person. Evidently, Celie is clearly missing some gaps in her education as she writes " I don't even look at mens" yet Walker is able to create a remarkably expressive style for Celie's letters by drawing heavily upon dialect features of ' Black English'. Her lack of education only further draws Celie towards the theme of entrapment as she is stuck in her intellectual conditions purely faced because of her black family history. Dergeisi commented on how ' Writing becomes the only way left to Celie to express her being and her absence.' [6] As a critic she is evidently agreeing with my argument into Celie having nothing to move forward too, expressing her being as an " absence" portrays the idea that Celie writes in order to

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express what she has lost. This form of narration allows Celie to regain a form of control over her life, and while she lacks education she is able to create her own form of freedom of education through her colloquial use of language. This type of independence was advocated by Walker herself through the Womanist movement. Walker originally coined the term 'womanism' in her short story 'Coming Apart' after the realisation that 'feminism' fails to encompass the perspective of black women. Walker's ideology of furthering the female solidarity into a more expansive term could be argued to reflect why Celie feels such a close connection to the female characters around her. While Celie does appear to have found a type of escaping mechanism, the reader cannot help but compare her own letters to that of Nettie's who's 'white language' explores the positives of properly educated freedom.

The extended theme of love is the third and final key theme explored in order to mirror the reality of entrapment. While this theme is predominantly explored by Walker, within *The Glass Menagerie* the theme is constantly suggested through Amanda pushing her children towards a better life. Williams' portrayal of Amanda invites the audience to question whether it is actually love that drives her, or rather the fact that she has become entrapped by her own selfish ideology. Her over dramatic reactions and willingness to guilt trip her family pushes the audience to notice the degree of seclusion caused by Amanda's dismal attempts at 'love'. Amanda's consistent attempts to force Laura into her quintessential presentation of the 'real world' has proved to be disastrous at all steps. Amanda forces herself onto Laura through the guilt-trip of 'love' and leaves her with no other

option than to conceal herself alone in the house with nothing but her “transparent glass animals”. These glass menageries offer the symbolism that the entire play revolves around, they represent Laura’s fragility and innocence and emphasise just how easily Amanda can break those around her. It is through Amanda’s condescending love of Laura that the audience are able to see how easily a child can become entrapped by the ‘love’ of an overbearing mother. The estranged Mr Wingfield could be linked to Amanda’s constant reminiscence on her accepted past as she encapsulates those ‘loved ones’ around her so to prevent herself from feeling abandoned again. Amanda’s self-deflection of her lack of compassion, along with her naivety and reluctance to accept herself, is what has driven her son away into the Navy as a clear form of escape. Catchpole agrees with my criticism on Amanda as an “inadequate, self-centred mother... locked in absorption in her own lost youth.”[7] This criticism grapples onto the idea that it is in fact the scarcity of the love that Amanda gives that will be her downfall into never escaping the haunted flat. Williams’ also often heavily relied on the Freudian theory, especially the repression of emotions. This could arguably link back to the narration of Tom as he holds back his opinions on the lack of love he received as a child to later discuss all negative sides of his private inner world as an adult.

However, in *The Colour Purple* it is the absence of love Celie receives that entraps her. Celie is trapped in a loveless and forsaken marriage that is the root for much of her misery. It is this specific entrapment that reflects many women of the early 20th century who were forced into ‘socially desirable’ arranged marriages with no or little say from anyone but their father. On top

of this, Celie must live with the loss of both her children and sister, all who she assumes are dead. Celie is a character who lacks the fundamentals of what it means to be loved, and is consistently shown as someone who has little to escape to, and little to live for. Similarly to Amanda, Celie knows little of true love and so has no expectation in escaping giving her a better life. One of Celie's most sorrowful statements is when she claims "they don't love me neither, no matter how good I am" portraying a character who has no alleviation from those around her, and is almost 'dead' inside. The use of the phrase "no matter how good I am" highlights Celie's character's need to galvanize those around her in an attempt to earn the love she so consciously desires. Celie shows herself to be trapped in a cycle of a need to be wanted, a need that seems unreachable. This draws irony from the religious beliefs cast over the novel as the omnibenevolent God Celie so privately confides in gives no devotion or support back to the writer. While religion should be a safe haven from all the brutality and entrapment she faces, she receives no consolidation, no education, no escape from her job, and a self-esteem so low she feels the need to refer to herself as "ugly". As my argument follows, Celie's race lays at the basis of her absence of love and the reason for her entrapment within a loveless life. Celie feels inclined to accept the fact she will never be truly loved purely because of her indoctrination of her 'inferior' race. In divergence to Celie, Walker herself was very open and experimental with the idea of love. To prevent her own entrapment within expectations Walker experimented with bisexual and interracial relationships, boldly facing retaliations from the KKK and other people's interventions[8]. Celie in this way differs from Walker as she finds herself entrapped within her own ideological belief of juggling love and slavery.

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In conclusion, as originally argued the authors of both texts suggest that 'entrapment' and the consequent oppression of both Amada and Celie is key in order to keep the plot moving. Both writers explore the same sub-themes, yet through different methods in order to put forward this overarching theme throughout. Overall, Amanda as a character causes her own demise into entrapment through succumbing to her son's expectations in his critical narrative. William's offers Amanda no attempt of escape, metaphorical or literal. Due to William's use of stage directions creating the construction of a play, he is able to explore Amanda's entrapment even further through the characters, and the audiences, visual reactions to as the scenes play out. On the other hand, Celie as a character continues to be entrapped and tortured by the legacy of a black women in the early 1900's; Walker is able to skilfully play on the context of her novel in order to reinforce the overwhelming entrapment faced by the African-American race. Despite the stark differences in the play and the novels structure, both enable the audience and reader to unravel the underlying theme of entrapment.

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