

Trap of Gender Roles: A Socio-Psychological Confinement in *The Glass Menagerie*

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In the twentieth century, American drama gradually moved away from focusing only on external events and began to explore the inner lives of characters. Tennessee Williams is one of the key playwrights associated with this shift. His play *The Glass Menagerie* is often described as a ‘memory play,’ because it presents events through Tom’s perspective. However, this label alone does not fully explain how the play works, especially in terms of the characters’ psychological struggles.

This paper specifies that gender roles in *The Glass Menagerie* act as a kind of psychological restriction for the characters creating invisible boundaries around them. These roles are not just imposed by society and culture but the characters themselves begin to believe in them eventually shaping their behaviour accordingly. As a result, they feel trapped, not only by external expectations but also by their own internal thoughts and beliefs.

Looking at the play through a feminist and psychological lens, it becomes clear that Williams is not only expressing a personal or nostalgic plot, he is also narrating how exterior world creates social expectations, especially gender roles, that deeply affect an individual’s psyche, identity and sense of autonomy. This study draws on feminist theory, psychoanalysis as well as existential philosophy to dive deep into how gendered identities shape emotional and psychological experiences of the characters in *The Glass Menagerie*. By combining these perspectives, it can be seen how societal roles not only constrain the characters but also produce emotional stagnation and fragmented individualities.

Each member of the Wingfield family reflects this in a different way. Amanda is strongly attached to her past as a Southern belle and tries to impose that identity on her daughter. Laura, on the other hand, becomes reserved and avoids social interaction because she feels she cannot meet those expectations. Even Tom struggles with the pressure to fulfil the role of a responsible male provider though he desires freedom and escape from his current reality. These pressures cause complications and force the characters to try and change the scenarios in which they feel stuck. They often feel trapped, unable to act or communicate effectively.

Critics argue that Williams belongs to the modern American realist tradition, where the focus is on the emotional intensity of characters and autobiographical elements. However, their readings tend to treat gender as just one of many themes, rather than considering how gender plays a crucial role in shaping the characters’ psychological experiences.

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Critical responses to *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams have long explored themes of memory, fragility and the intricacies of psychology on life. Early critics like Bigsby (2000) and Roudané (1997) placed Williams within the tradition of modern realism, highlighting the play's emotional depth and fragmented structure as reflective of subjective consciousness. These readings have helped shape *The Glass Menagerie* as an archetypal memory drama, where reality is filtered through perception rather than a straightforward depiction of events. However, despite their significance, these interpretations often overlook how gender plays a central role in the psychological turmoil that defines the characters' lives.

Gender analysis and specifically feminist theory offers a very helpful framework for understanding the deeper structures at play. Simone de Beauvoir's famous claim that "*one is not born, but rather becomes a woman*" (Beauvoir 283) aids to see femininity not as something innate but as a product of social attitudes. This outlook is especially relevant for deciphering Amanda Wingfield's role as a Southern belle and Laura Wingfield's withdrawal from society and social interaction. Instead of seeing these as inherent traits, we can understand them as roles that are taught and internalized in the ambience various unseen social structures.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is central to this analysis. Butler's work further progresses this viewpoint, claiming that gender is something we "do" rather than something we "are." Gender is not a core but something performed on the periphery through continuous and recurrent actions. Amanda's constant re-enactment of her past, for example, reflects this performative nature of gender. Her attempts to enforce a Southern belle ideal on her daughter, Laura, show how gender is constructed through reiteration and adherence to societal expectations. Instead of living in the present, Amanda's sense of self is sustained by the duplication of a past that no longer aligns with her present reality. Her performance of femininity, deeply rooted in a long-gone era, traps her in a cycle of self-delusion and melancholy.

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly Sigmund Freud's ideas on repression, adds another layer of understanding. Freud offers insight into how repressed desires and internal conflict manifest in behaviour. His concept suggests that when instinctual desires are suppressed due to societal pressures, they often resurface in unhealthy ways, leading to neuroses (Freud 45). Freud argued that unfulfilled wishes don't simply vanish but are rendered into symptoms like anxiety or withdrawal. (Freud 30) Laura's retreat into her glass animals, as well as Tom's restless yearning for escape are examples of emotional distress caused by repressed desires and synthetic limitations which confine their roles. Both characters feel imprisoned in their particular gender expectation which restricts them and somehow deviate their true identity. The characters are unable feel and express their individuality due to the external factors beyond their control.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy delivers a diverse lens to view and interpret the characters and their behaviour. Sartre famously said that humans are "*condemned to be free*" meaning that individuals must constantly define themselves through their actions (Sartre 56). However, in Williams' play, this freedom is heavily restricted by the characters' internalized gender roles. Amanda, Laura and Tom, all struggle to find real freedom because their identities are defined not by their own choices, but by the roles they are compelled to play because of the obligatory expectations levied on them by family, community and larger social structures.

By combining these theoretical frameworks, this becomes clear that gender in *The Glass Menagerie* operates as both a cultural script and a psychological mechanism. It isn't just a social construct but a deep psychological force that produces emotional paralysis, averting the characters from fully realizing their own potential.

Integrating Beauvoir, Butler and Sartre categorically reveals gender in *The Glass Menagerie* as the central core of the actions of the characters. Far from a mere social construct, gender emerges as a profound existential force, stimulating emotional paralysis that stifles the characters' potential for self-realization.

Beauvoir's concept of woman as "the Other" illuminates Amanda Wingfield's entrapment. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argues that women are defined not by essence but through their relation to men, reduced to immanence, stagnation in repetition, while men pursue transcendence. Amanda embodies this, clinging to her Southern belle past,

peddling subscriptions and pressuring her daughter Laura to ensnare a gentleman. Her gender script mandates domesticity and male dependence, paralyzing her from authentic agency. She projects this onto Laura, whose fragility mirrors the generic view of the eternal feminine stereotype, rendering both women passive spectators in their own lives.

Butler extends this by positing gender as performative, a repetitive act sustained through cultural norms. In *Gender Trouble*, she deconstructs gender as a stylized iteration, not innate biology. Laura's shyness and obsession with her glass menagerie exemplify this. Her femininity is performed through withdrawal, a script of fragility that Tom resents yet reinforces by fleeing. The play's stage directions (dim lights, screen projections, etc.) underscore gender's theatricality, trapping characters in deceptive roles. Tom's rebellion against his provider role critiques masculine performativity, yet his departure leaves the women mired in repetition.

Sartre's existentialism ties these threads, emphasizing bad faith and self-deception to evade freedom's anguish. Gender becomes a psychological crutch. Amanda denies her faded youth, Laura her limp's stigma and Tom his guilt. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre warns that inauthenticity breeds nausea. Here, it manifests as paralysis. Gender's script offers false security. The menagerie's shattered unicorn symbolizes Laura's potential fractured by imposed roles.

Far beyond social construct, gender internalizes as existential bad faith, shattering potential like the unicorn menagerie. Williams indicts this force unequivocally, it dooms the Wingfields to immanence, denying transcendence. Ultimately, authentic freedom demands dismantling these scripts, a radical imperative the play leaves hauntingly unfulfilled.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda Wingfield serves as a focal point through which gender is revealed as a performative prison. Her identity is deeply tied to a romanticized version of her Southern past, where femininity is associated with charm, social desirability and visibility. However, this identity isn't just nostalgic it is also compulsive, pointing to Amanda's psychological dependence on a gendered role that no longer aligns with her current reality.

Amanda's femininity is not an intrinsic essence. It is a script she constantly rehearses. Even though her performance of the Southern belle no longer has the same social relevance, she continues to enact it. This performative behaviour becomes particularly noticeable in her interactions with Laura, where she attempts to mould Laura into the same idealized version of femininity. Amanda's insistence on preparing Laura for marriage demonstrates her belief that female identity must culminate in domestic fulfilment. Her exasperated cry, "Why can't you and your brother be normal people?" (Williams 51), reflects how normality is constructed through gendered expectations, enforcing rigid roles that regulate behaviour and define social value.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Amanda's behaviour can be seen as a way of relocating her anxieties into mechanisms of control. Freud's theory of repression suggests that when desires and fears are suppressed, they resurface in compulsive behaviours (Freud 30). Amanda's storytelling, emotional exaggerations and domineering maternal role act as these compensatory mechanisms. By obsessively reconstructing the past, she avoids confronting the instability of her present identity as a single mother and economically precarious woman. This temporal dislocation creates a fractured sense of self. Amanda exists in three conflicting roles: the idealized Southern belle of her youth, the struggling single mother of the present and the authoritarian enforcer of social norms. These roles don't coexist harmoniously, rather, they create a tension within her identity and her sense of self. Her psychological state is marked by an ongoing conflict between memory and reality, authenticity and performance, authority and desperation.

The spatial confinement of Amanda's life in the Wingfield apartment further underscores this fragmentation. The apartment itself becomes a stage for her continual re-enactment of the past, transforming the domestic space into a theatre of repetition. Amanda's narratives overwrite the present, replacing lived reality with performative reconstruction. This aligns with the broader memory structure that critics like Bigsby (2000) identify in Williams' work, but it adds another layer, showing that this memory is not a neutral recollection but a gendered mechanism that sustains Amanda's sense of self.

Amanda's role as a mother intensifies the paradox of her situation. She wants to protect her children from failure, yet by enforcing traditional gender roles, she unintentionally perpetuates the very structures of confinement that cause them psychological distress. Her push for Laura to engage with social life isn't simply maternal care, but an attempt to stabilize her own fragile identity by projecting it onto Laura. Thus, Amanda's enforcement of gender norms is not just external pressure but an embodied survival strategy.

The emotional toll of this performative existence is severe. Amanda cannot interact with the present without filtering it through an idealized version of the past. As a result, she becomes emotionally rigid, unable to adapt to the changes around her.

Her identity is recursive which constantly returns to a fixed script of femininity that no longer reflects her material reality. Amanda's entrapment is not merely an individual pathology; it reflects a broader cultural condition. In the gendered economy of the play, femininity is valued only through its visibility and utility in domestic life. Amanda's identity crisis illustrates how women's subjectivity is dependent on external recognition. Simone de Beauvoir's insight that womanhood is socially constructed through external recognition (Beauvoir 283) is especially pertinent here. When such recognition is absent, Amanda's identity collapses.

Ultimately, Amanda's character demonstrates the core argument of this paper that gender operates as a socio-psychological prison. It enforces emotional paralysis through internalized performances, resulting in behavioural rigidity and fractured identity. Amanda's inability to escape her self-prescribed role shows how gender, as a system of social and psychological confinement, hinders her capacity for self-transformation.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura Wingfield also represents the extreme manifestation of gendered entrapment as internalized psychological paralysis. Unlike Amanda Wingfield, whose identity is built on the compulsive repetition of a past ideal, Laura embodies complete withdrawal, silence and almost total disengagement from the social world. Her condition is not just emotional fragility; it is the direct result of gender expectations that definitive femininity as delicate, passive and dependent.

Laura's defining characteristic is her inability to function within typical social structures. Her brief stint at business college ends in her withdrawal, signalling not failure, but psychological collapse under the weight of societal demands. Amanda's labelling of Laura as "crippled" (Williams 50) becomes more than just a description, it becomes a defining characteristic that Laura internalizes. In this way, Laura does not merely have a physical limitation but she herself becomes her limitation.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, this internalization can be understood as a form of repression. Laura's retreat into isolation and her reliance on her glass animals are signs of this psychic reorganization. Rather than engaging with a world that demands constant performance, Laura constructs a symbolic universe that is controllable, safe and free of social pressure. The glass menagerie, in turn, becomes the central metaphor of Laura's identity. Her statement, "Glass is something you have to take good care of" (Williams 45), holds both literal and symbolic meaning. The glass animals are fragile, delicate and aesthetically preserved, the very traits that mirror the femininity Laura is socially taught to embody. However, this symbolism is not inherent but ideological. It reflects a societal system that links women's identities to fragility and emotional containment. In this context, Laura's identity is crafted as an aesthetic object, existing for display, but not as an active subject.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps further clarify Laura's condition. However, for Laura, this performance of gender is replaced by refusal. She does not actively perform femininity. Instead, she becomes the passive residue of it transforming into a silent, delicate and reserved girl. Her identity is still performative, but it manifests in absence rather than presence.

The consequences of this enforced fragility are profound. Laura exists in a state of emotional paralysis, unable to

initiate action or engage socially. Her subjectivity is defined by avoidance rather than participation. This paralysis is not just psychological, it is epistemological. Laura cannot imagine herself outside the restrictive categories imposed on her by the outside world. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, femininity is socially constructed through relational identity, where a woman's selfhood is always defined through how others perceive her, (Beauvoir 283) Laura's inability to engage with the world of 'gentleman callers' or social mobility illustrates how she is confined to an identity of passive objecthood.

When Jim O'Connor briefly enters Laura's world, he momentarily disrupts her static existence. His recognition of her individuality challenges her internalized fragility, yet this disruption is fragile and unsustainable. Jim's declaration of engagement collapses, returning Laura to her prior state of withdrawal. The symbolic breaking of the glass unicorn reflects this collapse of alternate identity structures. The unicorn, marked as different and exceptional, loses its horn and becomes "like all the other horses" (Williams 92). Yet, this transformation is not liberating; it symbolizes the destruction of Laura's unique identity without providing her the agency to redefine herself. Laura's response to this event highlights the extent of her emotional paralysis. She does not resist or reinterpret her identity; she absorbs the rupture silently. This silence is crucial. It indicates that Laura's subjectivity has been so fully shaped by external expectations that even moments of potential change fail to generate any sense of agency. Her identity is not flexible but completely restrained, structured around the absence of action.

From a gendered perspective, Laura's paralysis reflects the cultural construction of feminine fragility as both an aesthetic and a disciplinary mechanism. Fragility is not just a trait of Laura's personality; it is a social script that defines her existence. By retreating into the glass menagerie, Laura attempts to protect herself, but this protection becomes a trap, further limiting her from developing into a coherent, autonomous subject. Importantly, Laura's paralysis is not isolated but structurally linked to Amanda's performative femininity and Tom's conflicted masculinity. Together, these gendered roles form a closed system in which agency is continuously deferred. Laura represents the endpoint of this system: the complete internalization of social limitation into identity itself.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom Wingfield embodies the instability of masculinity, torn between familial duty and his desire for personal freedom. His struggle is not one of simple empowerment, but of a profound conflict and fragmentation, caught between the expectations of being a provider and his longing for autonomy.

Tom's reflection on masculinity offers a window into this tension: "Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter..." (Williams 41). This assertion reflects his belief in an essential masculinity defined by action and freedom. However, Tom's reality as a warehouse worker is a stark contrast to this ideal. His job forces him into monotonous labour that suppresses his individuality, his desire for expression and his imagination. In this way, his aspirations for freedom clash directly with the obligations that bind him, producing a psychological rift.

Tom's behaviour can be understood as an example of sublimation and displacement. For Tom, his frequent trips to the movies serve as this form of displacement. These excursions offer him a fleeting sense of agency and adventure, yet they remain disconnected from the reality of his situation. The movies become his temporary refuge, allowing him to experience freedom in a controlled, fantasy-driven world but without any actual escape or change in his life.

Unlike Amanda, whose identity is rigidly tied to the past, or Laura, whose withdrawal creates a passive existence, Tom's identity is marked by movement, not just physical, but psychological. However, this mobility is more illusion than reality. His oscillation between work, home and fantasy doesn't resolve his inner conflict. Rather, it ends up amplifying it. He is divided between the dutiful son who remains tethered to his family and the man who yearns to break free and define his own life. This internal fracture creates a sense of disjointedness shaking his soul and undermining his sense of self.

This fragmentation is perhaps most evident in Tom's role as both the narrator and a character. As the narrator, Tom tries to impose order on the chaotic events of his past, offering a coherent interpretation of his experiences. But as a participant in those events, he is deeply enmeshed in the very structures he critiques. This dual role creates a temporal incoherence, Tom is split between the man he was and the man he is now, making it impossible for him to fully reconcile

his past with his present.

Tom's eventual departure from the family might seem like a resolution to his tension, yet his final monologue complicates any notion of liberation. In his words, "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me..." (Williams 97), Tom admits that no physical escape can sever his emotional ties to his family. This final confession underscores the persistence of guilt, which binds him to the familial structure he sought to leave.

Ultimately, masculinity in *The Glass Menagerie* is not about liberation; it is recursive, pulling the individual back into the very patterns of entrapment from which they long to escape.

In the play, emotional paralysis is not simply an individual flaw or psychological dysfunction; it is a systemic result of internalized gender roles. Amanda, Laura and Tom Wingfield each experience their paralysis in dissimilar manner, yet their struggles are interrelated, forming a closed symbolic system where action, change and self-realization are continually deferred. Their paralysis is not an isolated state but a collective, structural reality designed by the expectations positioned on them by family, society and beliefs regarding gender.

For Amanda, this paralysis manifests in monotonous nostalgia. She is trapped in a cycle of recalling her past glory days as a Southern belle, unable to adapt to the present reality of her life. Her nostalgia isn't just a longing for the past, it's a performative act, a way for her to preserve a sense of identity that is emancipated from the present. By constantly rehearsing her memoirs, she attempts to regain a lost version of herself, but in doing so, she locks herself into a never-ending loop of self-deception, unable to move ahead.

Laura's paralysis is more noiseless and withdrawn. Her internalized fragility, largely moulded by societal perceptions of femininity, makes it impossible for her to engage with the world around her. She retreats into the safe, controllable world of her glass animals, where fragility is not just a personal trait but a symbolic appearance of her gendered role. She is not just emotionally fragile; she is culturally constructed as fragile. Her retreat into seclusion simultaneously become both a defence mechanism and a prison.

Tom's condition is different in that it involves motion without resolution. Torn between his familial commitments and his desire for personal liberty, oscillates between duty and escape, but this movement is ultimately consuming. It is a kind of emotional and psychological inertia in motion. He cannot move forward because he is not free to choose his path and thus, he is trapped in a cycle of frustration, looking for escape through fantasy, but even his attempts to break free only expand his sense of being trapped in a life beyond his control.

Together, these three characters create a triadic structure of paralysis where each one embodying various modes of restrained subjectivity. Their individual struggles intermingle in ways that reinforce each other, making true liberation far beyond reach. Amanda's nostalgia, Laura's withdrawal and Tom's fluctuation are not separate phenomena but interrelated responses to a system that limits their life.

From an existential perspective, the characters' paralysis echoes a failure of agency under the weight of internalized societal restrictions. Jean-Paul Sartre's notion on freedom is turned on its head in Williams' universe. The characters don't possess the liberty to select because their identities have already been overdetermined by the rigid expectations placed upon them by gender and family. While freedom is theoretically possible, it is practically inaccessible, resulting in a state of immobilized consciousness. They are trapped not by external factors or forces but by the internalized roles and beliefs that shape and restrict their very being.

One of the most profound consequences of gendered entrapment in *The Glass Menagerie* is the fragmentation of identity that defines each of the central characters. Far from presenting a unified sense of self, the play showcases individuals whose identities are fragmented, pulling them in conflicting directions and creating a sustained and continuous undercurrent of psychological tension.

Amanda Wingfield is caught in a cycle of three temporal selves: she is the idealized Southern belle of her youth, the

harassed, abandoned mother in the present and the authoritarian enforcer of social norms and customs for her children. These identities do not merge; rather, they compete with one another for dominance, keeping Amanda trapped in an endless internal conflict shaping her personality. She can't let go of the past which dominates her mind and beliefs, yet the present keeps reminding her of her failures and her inflexible expectations for Laura and Tom only intensify her own misery and confusion.

For Laura, the divide is more internalized. She is torn between her imagined selfhood, the life she wants to live and the fragility imposed upon her by her family and community. Her disability, both physical and emotional, becomes the primary lens through which she views herself and her outlook is shaped in such a way that she is unable to imagine a future apart from the expectations that limit her and thus, impact her life immensely. Laura exists almost entirely in a state of withdrawal, incapable to merge the person she could be with the person others want her to be.

Tom Wingfield's identity is fragmented in a similar manner. He is divided between his familial obligations as the provider and his artistic aspirations, which symbolize self-determination and escape. His struggle is exacerbated by his guilt which acts as an endless reminder of the emotional pull of his family, even as he dreams of leaving them behind. Tom's pressure is not just peripheral but deeply psychological, as he is caught in an ongoing battle between duty and desire, responsibility and independence.

The characters of Amanda, Laura and Tom further highlight how gender operates as a socio-psychological prison in *The Glass Menagerie*. Amanda's performative femininity keeps her trapped in a nostalgic illusion of Southern gentility. Laura's internalized fragility erases her agency, while Tom's conflicted masculinity results in a constant state of instability. In each case, gender is not presented as a static category of identity, but as a regulatory system that structures thought, desire and behaviour. It is something that operates internally, shaping the way the characters perceive themselves and the world around them, while also limiting their capacity to imagine or become alternative selves as mode of expression or otherwise.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams masterfully explores the concept of gender as a socio-psychological prison, demonstrating how rigid gender roles not only define the characters' social identities but also contribute to their emotional paralysis and fragmentation of selfhood. The play, through the lives of Amanda, Laura and Tom Wingfield, reveals that the consequences of adopted and internalized gender expectations are far-reaching, affecting not only individual actions and desires but the foundation of identity itself. Each of the Wingfield family members is trapped within a predetermined role dictated by societal norms, a role that they not only passively accept but actively internalize, leading to a profound emotional confinement.

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