

**The Negative Impact of Single-Parent Families on Children in Tennessee  
Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother***

**By**

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**Abstract**

Growing up in fatherless families has a negative impact on children. From a psychological point of view, single-parent children suffer from either self-alienation or social failure due to a sense of abandonment they experience in the part of their life. In fact, the theme of parenthood attracted the attentions of many writers to show its negative impact on children whose fathers escaped their families forever. The study is associated with depicting the ways in which absent fathers are seen and how they shape the life of their children as encoded in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*.

**Keywords:** parenthood, alienation, abandonment, absent fathers

**Introduction**

Parenthood has always been a favourite topic for twentieth century American playwrights to depict the happiness and the lack of it. Those writers assumed the role of parents in determining the lives of their children. They shed light on the value and the impact of parents on raising their children. It is believed that many American families have children who suffer from the problem of absent fathers and the majority of single parents who most of the times are mothers.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the United States of America witnessed social, political, and economic changes which affected what was called the picture of the ideal American family of the nineteenth century. The belief that "watching children grow up is life's greatest joy" began to decline (1). This collapse of family ties pushed some writers to question the responsibility of the father as a main pillar to

establish the structure of the family and the questions raised: Can the concept of parenthood be change over time? Can one parent bring up a child as two parents do?

Those questions were answered by Tennessee Williams and Marsha Norman. As a committed playwright, Williams, in *The Glass Menagerie* and Norman in her masterpiece *'night, Mother* explored the ways in which absent fathers are seen to affect the family relationship, particularly the mother-children one. They absorbed deeply into the children's psyche which shaped their relation with their matriarch mothers. As a matter of fact, fathers and mothers are substantially involved in setting the limits for their children in various aspects (2).

Within a psychological context, children who experience paternal warmth seem to grow more pleasant and sociable than those who have a single parent or divorced families. In their early children, Laura and Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, were abandoned by their father and hence were deprived of a male role model. The writer, who experienced the sense of abandonment, understood the state of being abandoned, the state of being haunted by the memory of the unseen father. Williams once wrote: "Tragedy. I write that word knowing the meaning of it. We have no death in our family, but slowly by degrees something was happening much uglier and more terrible than death" (3). This autobiographical element presents a real picture of real people who find themselves living at the margin of society. Williams presents his concern not about his father only, but his mother's emotional instability in a society that does nothing to his marginalized female victims. He was aware that his mother was victimized by his alcoholic and abusive father.

The personal history of his family is reflected in the characters of *The Glass Menagerie* in which such characters share the same feeling of suffering. In the play, Amanda, a mother of Great Depression, takes into her hands the responsibility to raise her children. She mourns over the father who escaped his responsibility by running away without a trace sixteen years before the play begins. Yearning for the golden days of her youth and comforts, she longs for her children to have the same comfort, but her devotion to them, makes her, as she admits at one point, to be hateful towards them. Likewise, Amanda fights with doing what she trusts to be the best and the most comfortable for her children. Amanda sobbingly states: "My devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children!" (4).

*The Class Menagerie* is a tragedy on different levels. It is about a father's abandonment and a mother's unsuccessful role in a single-parent family. Amanda's children, Laura and her younger brother Tom, are frustrated. Tom is not satisfied with his job. He works at a shoe workhouse and chafes under the banality and boredom of everyday life. He spends much of his spare time going to the movies at all hours of the night and feels both obliged towards yet burdened by his family. He feels he is misunderstood by his mother who has become trapped between worlds of illusion and reality.

It seems that Amanda, who was brought up as a pampered, is totally unable to handle family responsibilities on her own after her husband deserted her. She refers to her role as a single parent as "a solitary battle" because she has no financial support, and the pressure of raising a family during the Great Depression left her suffer from emotional instability as well (5). The absence of family ties creates clashes among the family members which enlarge the gap among them. Each one of them tries to escape from the harsh reality he is trapped in, Tom determined to break away from the prison of his dominating mother. He is tired of being treated as a boy. Since the beginning of the play, Amanda never stops nagging him. She keeps on giving him directions and lectures on his manner and this makes her offer much more damaging. Amanda says: "Honey, don't push with your fingers. And chew chew! Animals have sections in their stomachs which enable them digest food without mastication, but human beings are supposed to chew their food before they swallow it down." Tom reacts: "I haven't enjoyed one bit of this dinner because of your constant directions on how to eat it. It's you that make me rush through meals with your hawk, like attention to every bite I take sickening. It spoils my appetite" (6). Amanda tries to be a good mother but she is unable to understand what her children need. She always imposes her opinions upon them and never cares whether these opinions are good or bad.

Unintentionally she causes pain to her children. Her attitude towards the things Tom interested in is grim. She regards reading and writing poetry, going to the movies as unambitious activities and wasting of time. And in one situation, their quarrel reaches its highest point: Tom addresses his mother, saying: "Yesterday you confiscated my books! You had the nerve." Amanda says: "I took that horrible novel from the library-yes! That hideous book by that insane Mr. Laurence, I can't control the output of diseased minds or people who cater to them." Tom: What do you think

I'm at? Aren't I supposed to have any patience to reach the end of, mother? I know it seems unimportant to you what I'm doing." Amanda continues: "I think you have been doing things that you are ashamed of" (7). The father's role seems to be very influential though he never appears but his desertion left the family living with fears, worries, and lost desires.

It is evident that Amanda's worrying comes from the fears that her son will abandon her just like what her worthless husband did. She feels she was thrown into this world alone and afraid of being abandoned again. She is deeply disturbed by the likeness between her son and his father. She thinks that Tom has been drinking and this act may be learned from parents as Tom decides to abandon the family in the same way his father did before. Being tired of his mother's awful suspicion, he once calls her a witch. She is shocked to hear such word and vows never to speak with him.

Amanda then inflicts her illusion on Tom by insisting that as soon as he finds a husband for his disabled sister, their problems will come to an end. Laura seems to be another victim of her matriarch mother role. She is a beautiful and delicate high school girl. She suffers from a physical deformity due to a childhood illness that left her with a limp.

Laura as a girl has an inferiority complex which caused her to escape the social life. She could never make a business career for herself because of her sensitivity and her uniqueness. She is like the blue roses in that she does not exist in a real world. Her world is peopled with glass animals that are so like her. Amanda fails to provide Laura with maternal integrity. She never admits her daughter's deformity which is disclosed when she walks. It is evident that Laura's shyness and desolation stem not only from her disability but from the stressful atmosphere of the family. She has already passed through adolescence, a time of being left alone, and it was difficult and painful experience for a child like her, as she admits, to feel that she is like her peers. Even her school days, which were supposed to be cheerful, became as a nightmare that gave her a great amount of emotional instability. Amanda shows immaturity when she blames Tom for his useless attempt to find a husband for Laura. She has one thing in her mind, that Laura be married to a gentleman caller. In an attempt to manage her daughter's life, Amanda forces Laura to attend Rubicam's

Business School in order to help her get social and economic independence. Amanda thinks that Laura needs to break away from her prison-like life and to overcome her physical deformity. She wants her daughter to be like her, she always tells Laura that she should be nice and pretty for a gentleman caller and projects some of her personal trails on Laura (8).

When, for example the latter refuses to open the door for her brother and his friend Jim, Amanda gets angry and shouts “Why can’t you and your brother be normal people?” (9). Laura would rather prefer playing with the animals in her glass menagerie and listening to the old phonograph recorder than looking for a man. Amanda is tempted toward illusion when she finds reality too painful. She is never able to accept reality though time has changed. And because of her illusion, she keeps her hopes a live to provide Laura with a life of dependency. All her attempts lead to a closed circle. Her heart is full of things to be said to her children but she cannot express what is in her heart. However, she loves her children very much but she is also a valiant woman whose virtues are illusionary. She seeks consolation in a world of reminiscences about her romanticized picture of the past where she can find no solution. In the words of a critic Amanda is described as a fantastic creature—southern bells, the mother of all mothers, obsessed and devoted, desperate and stupid. She embodies the true reality of parenthood, albeit somewhat nightmarishly (10).

This sense of confinement and disruption of a previous life is projected in Marsh Norman’s *’night, Mother*. The play explores the psyche of a woman who plans and coolly organizes her suicide. It is a conversation between mother and her daughter to expose some aspects of their past while mourning over the sense of frustration and abandonment. Norman presents a depressed family shared by a mother, who has been divorced, and her forty-year-old daughter. The father is dead and the son is petty thief.

The play takes place in real time when the clocks on the stage are “about 8:15” and Jessie asks for her father’s gun to shoot herself. The mother and the audience are thrust into the heart of the story’s question: Will Jessie really kill herself, or can Thelma, the mother, find a way to stop her from committing suicide? Norman maps out the nature and the meaning of mother-daughter relationship in a divorced family, saying:

The mother-daughter relationship [...] is one of the world's great mysteries. The mother is the absolute source of self-respect and self-image and curiosity and energy. In fact, mother is where "going on" comes from. Making Money, Making Your Way are all things that Dad has historically taken care of. But going on is the business of Mom (11).

Jessie finds her life painful because she has led along life of disturbance and frustration. Her father and mother were strangers to one another while herself was estranged from a husband and son. She was deprived of paternal warmth and protection. She has been awakened up to the fact that her life is meaningless and she is able to end such a pointless existence.

The mother has failed to establish meaningful relationship with her daughter. She was narrow – minded in understanding what her daughter thinks about. As a result, Jessie feels both self and socially alienated and her decision to kill herself is a response to loss. It is not the loss of her father, her husband or son. It is the loss of the self. She explains:

It is somebody I lost, all right, it's my own self. Who I never was and never got there. Somebody I waited for and never came. And never will [...] I'm what was worth waiting for and didn't make it [...] Me who might have made a difference to me [...] I'm not going to show up. So there is no reason to stay (12).

*'night, Mother* goes far beyond criticizing the disintegration of an American family. It asks the most fundamental question: How can a divorced mother be capable of coping with her children's dilemmas? The fact that first parent is a woman is seen to be unnatural, hence she is not fit to nurture her children's individuality. When, for example, Jessie asks where to find the gun, she never realizes what will happen and it is not until the second quarter of the play that she asks her daughter what does she want the gun for.

Ironically, this implication suggests that life for Thelma is a dull routine. And when Jessie answers that she wants to kill herself, Thelma. At first, upbraids Jessie for such a bad joke and never realizes that Jessie is no more a child to be sheeped. Jessie's announcement to shoot herself sets off the struggle between mother and

daughter. Thelma feels the sense of guilt and mutual incomprehension because she never understood her daughter's desires and she didn't own up to this fact until the fateful day when Jessie announced to kill herself. Thelma finds herself deeply committed to save Jessie's life.

Norman paints a portrait of a woman who has lived with a divorced mother for more than twenty years and has suffered a series of personal losses, her father, her husband have left her, her son is criminal and drug addict, even her dog, King, has been run over by a tractor. Her emotional life is dominated by a sense of helplessness and overpowering loneliness. She never knew hope or love for she was confined to live in an isolated existence in Thelma's prison like house. It seems that Jessie has no other choice to change her destination. She explains this point:

I can't do anything either, about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it, make it work. But I can stop it off like the raids when there is nothing no, I want to listen to. It is all really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it. It is going to stop (13).

This situation indicates that Jessie's life would have been different if she had lived stable life with an ideal family, or if she had experienced the true sense of parenthood. This shattered cohesion of the family was the source of Jessie's anger and struggle for self-knowledge. She could not function independently outside home because her dream of being a happy woman was clashed by her father's desertion and her mother's indifference.

It is evident that the world for Thelma is as it appears to be, a world whose ups and downs she would take with good spirit. But for Jessie, the world is a zone where parents, daughters and lovers are all locked in a death struggle (14). And her decision about suicide makes it more of a play about mother-daughter relationship than a play about suicide. Jessie shows her anger at mother for being neglectful and unable to fulfil her demands, and for not providing her with an adequate sense of self control. One of the most painful moments of the play occurs with this exchange:

Thelma: Everything you do has to do with me, Jessie. You can't do anything, wash your face or cut your finger, without doing it to me. That's right! You might as well kill me as you, Jessie, it's the same thing. This has to do with me, Jessie. Jessie: What if it does! What if it has everything to do with you! What if you are all I have and you're not enough? What if could take all the rest of it

if only I didn't have you here? What if the only way I can get away from you for good is to kill myself? What if it is? I can still do it! (15).

Thelma loved Jessie but was not the best at showing this love for the longest time. She probably could not handle herself very well and this was the biggest tragedy for Jessie. Thelma's actions might increase Jessie's sense of alienation and reveal Thelma to be impotent and powerless to change the action of the play. Thelma, simply, stands for anxieties of parenthood, particularly those related to mothering.

In her essay "Maternal Thinking," Sara Ruddick states that mothering is primarily associated with the preservation, the growth, and the social acceptability of her children (16). Norman develops Thelma's character around those concerns. Thelma's fears and motivations make the audience accept and understand her present behaviour by which she, as a mother, seems to fail. Like Amanda, Thelma does nothing to further the action at the end of the play, and her last words, when she hears the shooting: "Forgive me. I thought you were mine," (17) are the words of a mother who lashes out at her daughter's stubbornness and passively resigned to her fate.

The fact that Jessie insists her life to be taken by her father's gun seems to be symbolic one. She appeals to reunite with her father, the informing figure of her imagination. In this regard, Louis K. Greiff compares Jessie to Laura Wingfield and regards them as sisters in disguise. He builds his comparison on the fact that both were deprived of the love of a father and are still haunted by the image of the unseen father, and both have suffered the tyranny and misunderstanding of mothers. It is obvious that Amanda's relationship with Laura is much the same of Thelma's relationship with Jessie (18). Both Amanda and Thelma, failed to understand the full implication of what they want say to their children.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, one can say that neither of these mothers can offer themselves as viable substitutes for fathers. The role of the father as the main pillar of his family is complementary to that of the mother. Both are vital parts in building happy families. Both fathers and mothers are expected to provide their children with confidence and self-esteem. Parents always support their children not only physically but emotionally as well. The family that is headed by both parents is seen as perfect and balanced one because their role in parenting children is a never ending one.



## Notes

1. Mitchell, 273.
2. Trends, 17.
3. Thornton et al., 73.
4. Williams, 26.
5. Foley, 25.
6. Williams, 2-3.
7. Ibid, 17-18.
8. Levy, 532.
9. Williams, 60.
10. Barnard, 33.
11. Betsko, 338-9.
12. Norman, 76.
13. Ibid, 30.
14. Mehta, 70.
15. Norman, 63.
16. Ruddick, 345.
17. Norman 77.
18. Greiff, 225.

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