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Emasculated Masculinity: Tom Wingfield's "illusion" in the Glass Menagerie

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Abstract

The experience of reading Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* can often draw the readers in multiple directions. One of the conflicting and poignant directions leads us to Tom Wingfield and his struggles. Set during the Great Depression in America in the 1930s, Tom is at a crossroads trying to find his masculine identity. However, his journey into manhood is hindered by several factors; social, economic, and domestic. Since American hegemonic masculinity has traditionally linked men's identity to that of a successful man, Tom's failure to climb the social ladder is equated to his failure in defining his masculine identity and asserting his manhood. This article explores the milieu that leads to Tom's increasing masculine anxiety which ultimately emasculates him. By analysing Tom's failure to embody the mandates of traditional masculine ideals, this article argues that Tom's search for a masculine identity remains an "illusion" with no objective reality.

Keywords: Masculinity, Identity, Gender

Introduction

Sociologist Michael S. Kimmel asserts in his book *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (2006), that the concept of the "Self-Made Man" was born with the "growing commercial and, soon, industrial society of the newly independent America" (13). The economic progress provided opportunities to acquire wealth, which facilitated American men to build themselves and achieve social mobility. The image of the "Self-Made Man" remained the ideal of American masculinity until the Great Depression hit America in the 1930s. Kimmel writes:

The optimism ushered in by the Roaring Twenties was ushered out by the Great Depression and widespread unemployment in the 1930s. Never before had American men experienced such a massive and system-wide shock to their ability to prove manhood by providing for their families. (127-128)

The economic recession that followed due to the Great Depression affected men's crucial role as providers, stripping them of their patriarchal authority. Unemployment and lack of opportunities put men in conflicting situations in the family and workplace, two spaces that had allowed them to assert their masculine identity. Not only did the Depression spark fundamental changes on the economic front, but for "most men the Depression was emasculating both at work and at home" (Kimmel, 132). The family man "lost status with their wives and children and saw themselves as impotent patriarchs" (132). This failure to provide financial stability led to an imbalance in the power structure in the domestic sphere; men lost their position as the patriarchal head of the family, and with it their sense of manhood.

Set during the Great Depression in America in the 1930s, Tom Wingfield in Tennessee Williams's play *The Glass Menagerie*, finds himself at a crossroads in search of his masculine identity. He is representative

of thousands of young American men trying to find their rung upon the social ladder. As the only male figure in the family, Tom has been burdened with the responsibility of a provider. However, working a menial job at the shoe warehouse for a meager pay does not provide him enough power to be considered a patriarch to his mother and sister. He has no means to assert his manhood within the four walls of their dilapidating apartment. The family, thus, becomes the first space where Tom's masculinity faces emasculation.

Symbolically, Tom's emasculation takes place at different levels; by his mother in the domestic sphere, in his workplace that offers no respite and suffocates his creative temperament, and lastly a social milieu that offers no congenial social and economic means to fulfill the demands expected of a young man to manifest the fundamental markers of masculinity.

Emasculating Masculinity

Tom's mother Amanda serves as an overbearing matriarchal figure in the play. She has a strong hold over her adult children. What she sees as endearment suffocates her children and frustrates them which leads to episodes of emotional outbursts. There are instances throughout the play where Amanda obsesses over correcting or directing the actions of her children. Her constant harping characterises both Tom and Laura as incompetent and directionless individuals. It is humiliating for Tom and Laura as it belittles their effort to become grown-up adults.

As much as Amanda cares about her daughter, her efforts to improve her daughter's circumstances, ultimately become humiliating experiences for Laura. This only aids in impairing the fragile bond between the extrovert mother and the socially awkward, crippled daughter. For Tom, the volatile relationship with his mother puts him in a difficult position because it hinders him from finding his true place in the family. Author Robert L. McDonald states that Tom's conflict with his "self" and society is not "wholly his fault" and that "ironically one of the biggest hindrances has been his mother herself" (60). McDonald rightly points out that Amanda's relationship with her son is full of contradictions. She constantly berates him about his responsibilities as the man of the family, and yet "she seems perversely dedicated to keeping him subordinate to her" (61). Amanda tells Tom "I've had to put up a solitary battle all these years. But you're my right-hand bower! Don't fall down, don't fail!" (Williams, 258). Tom, tired of the verbal hustle, quietly replies "I try, Mother." (258). Unbeknownst to her, Amanda, through her words and actions ends up infantilising her adult son. The following conversation the mother and son exchange at the dinner table is one of many instances where Amanda treats Tom, less like a man, and more like a boy.

AMANDA [to her son]: 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 sections 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 flavours that have to be held in the mouth for appreciation. So chew your food and give your salivary glands a chance to function!

TOM: I haven't enjoyed one bite of this dinner because of your constant directions on how to eat it. It's you that makes me rush through meals with your hawk-like attention to every bite I take. Sickening – spoils my appetite– all this discussion of -- animals' secretion – salivary glands – mastication!

AMANDA [lightly]: Temperament like a Metropolitan star! [He rises and crosses downstage.] You're not excused from the table. (Williams, 236)

This infantilising and simultaneous emasculation not only stunts Tom's growth as an adult but undermines his masculinity. Amanda goes on to chastise Tom for his constant smoking, and his frequent "visits" to the movies, confiscates his books by calling them "FILTH", and criticises his "self-indulgence" in his dreams and ambitions. At other times, she would grab a comb and brush down his hair like he was a little boy, "Comb your hair! You look so pretty when your hair is combed!" (264), or she would direct Tom, "Where is your muffler? Put your wool muffler on!" (262). Tom's annoyance and frustration can be seen in his actions when he "snatches it angrily from the closet and tosses it around his neck and pulls both ends tight." (262). Despite the motherly "hawk-like attention", Tom is constantly under a barrage of criticism from his mother. Amanda continues to guilt-trap Tom with accusations of selfishness and self-indulgence that undermine his status as a man in the family. This leads to Tom's constant confrontation with his mother. In one of their arguments, Tom vents his resentment when he calls his mother "ugly-babbling- old witch" and tells her he has been "driven out" of his senses. Tom expresses his discontentment when he says:

TOM: Look! - I've got *no thing*, no single thing-

AMANDA: Lower your voice!

TOM: In my life here that I can call my own! Everything is – (Williams, 250)

He tells her he feels like a "slave" at the warehouse working for a menial sum to pay the house rent. This aligns with Kimmel's concept of the workplace as a "man's world", and "If manhood could be proved, it had to be proved in the eyes of other men" (19). For many, during the Depression, the workplace too lost its masculine appeal, "With nearly one in four American men out of work, the workplace could no longer be considered a reliable arena for the demonstration and proof of one's manhood." (Kimmel, 128). Even though Tom is a working man, it is by no means a job that would provide him the necessary boost to gain financial progress or social mobility. He expresses his disgust and resentment to his mother in the following words:

TOM: Listen! You think I'm crazy about the *warehouse*? [He bends fiercely toward her slight figure] You think I'm in love with the Continental Shoemakers? You think I want to spend fifty-five years down there in that- *celotex interior*! With – fluorescent – tubes! Look! I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains – than go back mornings! I go! Every time you come in yelling that God damn '*Rise and Shine*!' '*Rise and Shine*!' I say to myself, 'How lucky dead people are!' But I get up. I go! For sixty-five dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and *being* ever! And you say self- selfs' all I ever think of. Why, listen, if self is what I thought of, Mother, I'd be where he is- GONE! [Pointing to father's picture.] As far as the system of transportation reaches! [He starts past her. She grabs his arm.] Don't grab at me, Mother! (Williams, 252)

Tom faces double jeopardy at his workplace. In addition to the fact that he is stuck in a dead-end job, the workplace fails to provide him with the "homosocial" space or male-male camaraderie that is part of the male culture. Scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick popularized the concept of "homosocial" in her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (1985)*, claiming that men while escaping from the domestic and the feminine enter the "homosocial" space, which is neither sexual nor erotic, but a space of male bonding where men find "non-threatening community in the company of other men" (173). On a similar note, Kimmel writes that "American men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other. Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment" (5). He goes on to write that one of "men's relentless efforts to prove their manhood contains this core element of homosociality" (5). The workplace which has traditionally been regarded as a masculine space, or a

"man's world" provides the perfect milieu for men to participate in "homosocial enactment". Based on this theorisation, it may be said that Tom's failure to create or enter this space at his workplace is directly equivalent to his failure to define his masculinity or prove his manhood. Tom confesses that he is not on friendly terms with any of the male workers except Jim. Because of his poetic temperament, the "other boys in the warehouse regarded" him "with suspicious hostility" (Williams, 273). Tom thus fails to assert his manhood in the workplace (public sphere), just as he fails to assert his manhood in his family (domestic sphere).

Tom's masculinity undergoes further emasculation with the introduction of the character of Jim O'Connor. Jim is a quintessential American; ambitious, athletic, and practical man who strives to find his way up the social ladder. Jim is clear-headed and is sure of his American dream. He embodies many of the classic traits associated with American masculinity; athletic, talented, ambitious, competent, and victorious, which is unfortunately lacking in Tom. Jim serves as a foil to Tom. Reminiscing their bygone years, Tom describes Jim as follows:

In high school Jim was a hero. He had tremendous Irish good nature and vitality with the scrubbed and polished look of white chinaware. He seemed to move in a continual spotlight. He was a star in basket-ball, captain of the debating club, president of the senior class and the glee club and he sang the male lead in the annual light operas. He was always running or bounding, never just walking. He seemed always at the point of defeating the law of gravity. (Williams, 273)

Based on Tom's description of Jim, he represents the archetypal American masculinity. Professor and author Philip C. Kolin remarks in his article "The Family of Mitch: "Un"suitable Suitors in Tennessee Williams" that "Jim's performances of hyperbolic virility are driven by his narratives of boundless masculinity"(158). Jim tells Laura with "reflective relish" that he was "beleaguered by females in those days" (Williams, 296). In scene seven, Jim even tells Amanda humorously, "Sure. I'm Superman." (290). The use of the "Superman" figure in the play is significant because it highlights Tom's "lack". Ironically, the figure of Superman has always been associated with great power and strength, oftentimes considered the epitome of hypermasculinity. Author Dr. Edward Avery-Natale writes that Superman was "created as a representation of masculine fantasies" (72). With his "Superman" masculinity, Jim easily asserts his manhood in the Wingfield household, capable of fixing false "mechanics", even trying to instill confidence in Laura by attempting to subdue her inferiority complex. Aptly enough, this juxtaposition of Tom and Jim's "Superman" reference emasculates and makes flaccid Tom's masculinity.

Unlike Jim, who seems to possess clear and practical ambitions, Tom's "adventure" dream is a vague and ambiguous one. Even though Jim has lost some of his "speed" in the six years that have passed, he maintains a robust and optimistic view of life. Tom nurtures his ambitions, yet he feels trapped and inept. This spiritual lethargy makes it impossible for him to move on from his menial daily routine. His inability to act upon his cherished dreams and improve the quality of his life stunts his social status, and he maintains a restless and sour outlook on life. Unlike Jim, Tom is conflicted in every sphere of his life.

It may be said that Jim serves a dual purpose in the play. Firstly, he serves as a foil to Tom, as discussed above. Secondly, and more importantly, Jim's arrival at the Wingfield household can be seen as a symbolic replacement of Tom and the ushering of the physical presence of a man embodying masculine ideals. Amanda immediately elevates Jim's masculine prowess when he steps forward to fix their fuse-box, while simultaneously pointing out Tom's incompetence in spotting "a burnt-out fuse". Amanda setting up Jim as Laura's "gentleman caller" is reminiscent of her demand to Tom that he bring home a potential husband for his sister while forbidding him to follow his ambition to leave home "till there's somebody to take

your place" (261). After the dinner in scene seven, Amanda coaxes Jim to accompany Laura in their parlour, while she orders Tom, "Now, Thomas, get into this apron!" (290). Under a patriarchal lens, the word "apron" itself conjures up an image of domesticity and femininity, which, in the present context, translates to Tom's emasculation. In this instance, Amanda has found that "somebody" to take Tom's place. Jim, thus, serves as a symbolic replacement for Tom as the masculine figure in the house.

To escape this emasculation, and find his place as a man in the world, Tom must escape the domesticity of his women-dominated family, and from the "suspicious hostility" at his workplace. Tom tells his mother, "Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse!" (Williams, 260). Instead, the warehouse serves as a "coffin" for Tom, just as he feels stifled in their small apartment. He yearns to escape and seek adventure, just like his father did. In a significant development, Tom identifies with the only male figure in his family, the absent father. The only evidence of the existence of Tom's father is his "blown-up" photograph hung on the wall of their modest living room. Tom tells Jim, "I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard!" (283). Despite his absence, Professor Millie M. Kidd writes "the masculinity he embodies - if not the man himself – has become idealized, especially for Tom" (48). During one of their heated altercations, Amanda accuses Tom, "More and more you remind me of your father! He was out all hours without explanation!- Then *left! Goodbye*!" (261). She yells at him; "Overcome selfishness! Self, self, self is all that you ever think of!" (262). Identifying with the figure of his absent father becomes Tom's last hope to assert his manhood. Hence, like his father, Tom too must escape. It may be said that Tom's desire to seek adventure is equivalent to his need to escape the constant emasculation he faces in the family and his workplace.

Conclusion

In a tragic turn of fate, Tom's final effort to find his masculine identity by running away from home fails in the end. It is evident in Tom's closing speech that leaving the apartment, the suffocating warehouse, and even leaving Saint Louis to follow his "father's footsteps, attempting to find in motion what was lost in space" (Williams, 313) was not enough to escape his emasculation. He has failed to imbibe the cultural standards of masculine ideals. Professor Millie M. Kidd writes, "While most critics acknowledge that Tom's flight to independence leads him instead to a state of paralysis, they fail to recognize that he not only disentangles himself from the domestic ties that bind but also fails to conform to the masculine culture to which he has run." (47). When the play ends, Tom is the same man he was when the play began, a man with no masculine authority, emasculated, a man in a rut. One can only understand and surmise Tom's frustration and masculine anxiety in his angry outburst, "I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains – than go back mornings!" (Williams, 251). Amanda's "unwittingly cruel" words ring true in the end, unerringly summing up Tom's predicament. She tells Tom, "You don't know things anywhere! You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions!" (311). Thus, Tom's search for a masculine identity fails in the end, his manhood remains an "illusion", with no objective reality.

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