

# Realism and Illusion in Tennessee Williams' Plays

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2023.10718>

Received: 07 July 2023; Revised: 20 July 2023; Accepted: 26 July 2023; Published: 14 August 2023

**Abstract:** - This diploma paper examines realism and illusion in modern drama, particularly in Tennessee Williams' plays, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*. It explores the influence and importance of these themes in shaping modern literature, evolving from traditional dramatic structures to enrich storytelling. The paper provides an overview of Williams' life and his distinctive style. Through a close analysis of the selected plays, it delves into the complexities of the characters, their desires, fears, and struggles in navigating truth and illusion. Additionally, the study explores the symbiotic relationship between realism, illusion, and the theatrical techniques employed by Williams. The primary objective of this study is to unveil the profound influence and immense significance of realism and illusion in shaping the landscape of modern literature. Throughout the history of dramatic storytelling, these themes have undergone a remarkable evolution, breaking free from the constraints of conventional dramatic structures to find liberation and prominence in the realm of modernity. As a result, playwrights have been able to explore the complexities of human existence and society more deeply, crafting narratives that touch the core of the human psyche.

Key words: Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, realism, illusion, modern literature.

## I. Introduction

### 1.1 Biographical notes on Tennessee Williams

Thomas Lanier Williams, one of the greatest playwrights in American history, was born on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. He was the second child of Cornelius and Edwina Williams. Raised mostly by his mother, Williams had a complicated relationship with his father, a salesman who chose work instead of parenting. Williams described his childhood in Mississippi as happy and pleasant. This sense of belonging and comfort were lost when his family moved to St. Louis, Missouri. As a result of this, Williams started to write. His early adult years were dealing with attending college at three different universities, working at his father's shoe company, and moving to New Orleans, which began a lifelong love of the city. He graduated from University of Iowa in 1938 and began the life as a writer and started wandering. (Weales, 1965)

Williams spent many years traveling and trying to write. His first acclaim came in 1944 when *The Glass Menagerie* went to Broadway. It won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and, as a film, the New York Film Critics' Circle Award. According to Sharma (2016), Williams put so much of his life experience into his works that they can be treated synonymously. By using his background as a meaningful metaphor it has given so much of diversity to American Drama.

That women are more present in Williams plays, is as the result of the effect that women had throughout author's life. He was really close to his mother and his sister. Regardless of this element, Williams tackled many issues such as realism and illusion, love and death, sexuality, victimization of women and conflicts between society and individuals, that shocked the audiences of his time. (Nawaz & Awan, 2018)

Williams, as one of the most eminent playwrights of the twentieth century (Nawaz & Awan, 2018) was awarded Drama Critic Circle Awards, two Pulitzer Prizes and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. His famous play, *The Glass Menagerie*, opened on Broadway on March 31, 1945 and in Chicago on December 26, 1944 and two years later *A Streetcar Named Desire* earned Williams his first Pulitzer Prize.

The 1960s were challenging years for Williams, as he went through very harsh treatment from the press. His plays were criticized for addressing taboo topics. Williams began to depend on alcohol and drugs and though he continued to write, completing a book of short stories and another play, he was going downward. (Weales, 1965)

Williams wrote plays, a memoir, poems, short stories and a novel. In 1975 he published *Memoirs*, which gave details about his life and his addiction to drugs and alcohol, also about his homosexuality. On February 25, 1983 Williams was found dead in a hotel

filled with bottles of wine and pills. According to Sharma (2016), his plays that were created with such diversity and honesty, rank him as one of the greatest American playwrights of all times.

### 1.2 Background: *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Williams' memory play *The Glass Menagerie* is considered to be his first successful work. It was set in 1937 during the Great Depression. It won New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Donaldson Award and Sidney Howard Memorial Award 1945. Portraying family relationships and their battles against the despair that threatens their lives (Nalliveettil & Gadallah, 2016) also exploring the theme of characters' struggles in accepting reality, this play shows a great contrast between reality and appearance. The idea of transfer from illusion to realism is illustrated by the main characters of the play, which involve Amanda Wingfield, a mother abandoned by her husband, Laura which is physically disabled and her brother Tom, a boy with big dreams and fantasies, and also a gentleman caller named Jim O'Connor. The narrator of the play is Tom, who is also a character in the drama. (Singh, 2015)

Moreover, *The Glass Menagerie* appears to be an expressionistic play due to the mixture of emotional, visual and cognitive domains. The clash between coherence and emotions often set the tone of communication among the characters (Nalliveettil & Gadallah, 2016). As a sentimental play, it is difficult to distinguish the lines of reality from illusion since Tom does not explain it. However, Williams indicates such situations by stage directions which help us to realize which are the elements of realism and illusions that are the main features of the play. (Nawaz & Awan, 2018)

*A Streetcar Named Desire*, first performed in 1947, is one of the most acclaimed works of Williams. It won the New York Critic's Award and Pulitzer Prize with 855 performances and 12 Academy Award nominations. William wrote it in a way as to touch the hearts of those in the audience. Certainly, the American theater can be split into periods before and after *A Streetcar Named Desire*, since the American Drama won a whole new context as well as a new approach to taboo topics after its publication. (Senejani & Mojgan, 2012)

The play deals with diverse subjects that are connected to social conflicts between individuals. As stated by Kafka (2007), concepts of reality are central in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Because of the highly tragic elements encountered in the play, many immediately label it as a tragedy. Characters shape their own perceptions in a way that they can deal with the unpleasant reality of their lives. The main characters of the play are Blanche DuBois, her sister Stella Kowalski, Stanley Kowalski, Stella's husband and Mitch, Stanley's friend. All these characters are living in their own illusions and they are victims of their own dreams (Singh, 2015). All their lives are dominated by illusions. But Williams asks us take a look below the surface and to understand the reasons behind their illusions, why they have become that way and at the end to appreciate them for who they are (Abbot, 1988).

Furthermore, Williams' plays often focus on women using their sexuality to survive in a cruel, male-dominated world. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* both Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski are forced to survive in a changing world, but they choose different paths that are determined by their gender, social status and personal experiences. (Kafka, 2007)

Finally, Both *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* illustrate the theme of movement from illusion to reality in a remarkable manner. The characters of the dramas are unable to deal with the real world around them and as a result they find peace and comfort in their worlds of illusion (Singh, 2015). They struggle for survival, and it feels like the only way to fight this struggle was with the help of dreams and fantasies. Illusions give potential to this problem. So, the author makes us realize that indeed man cannot escape the real world.

### 1.3 The aim of the paper

As mentioned above, Williams' works gave a new direction to American Drama. This influence came as a result of introducing taboo subjects that were not discussed before and by presenting a unique style of writing that touched people's lives. The way how Williams' characters are a living proof of many other people who live on their own fantasies to escape the harsh reality that surrounds them, makes these works even greater. Given the above reasons, this paper aims to examine the usage of the themes, realism and illusion in Williams' plays. It will examine the influence that this writing had in literature and it will represent why and how are these themes portrayed through the characters of the plays. Thus, this paper tends to give further insight into Williams' ways of using realism and illusion, by analyzing the plays and other sources.

### 1.4 Methodology

As mentioned above two plays have been selected for this critical analysis.

In order for this paper to be conducted, primary and secondary sources have been used.

The primary sources were the plays *A Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* which were read and analyzed many times for the purpose of coming up with better arguments. Moreover, reading of other critical books and online journal articles as secondary sources were much needed and very beneficial for a better understanding of the characters, themes and symbols of the plays. Considering the fact that both plays have many similar elements as well as many differences, it was challenging to differentiate the concrete components that presented best the usage of realism and illusions and to elaborate the reasons that supported them. However, many useful materials and articles regarding the topic of the research were found, so it made the work easier. Besides this, it can be suggested that Williams' plays, which changed the American theatre, can easily be called masterpieces. While reading these plays, you can feel the power of language that has been used as it makes you get into the story and feel the emotions that the characters are feeling.

## II. The evolution of realism and illusion in modern literature

In the early twenties, the American society had become aware of the gap between the real and the ideal. According to Abbott (1988), the term *illusion* refers to a special set of strategies – dreams, fantasies or visions that people use to give their lives a certain meaning that makes them feel safe and keeps them away from the reality that would break them. Meanwhile the term *reality* refers to “the truth” or the real world that surrounds us. On a deeper level, it entails the set of social structures that people use in their everyday lives (Abbott, 1988).

The socio-cultural position forced the playwrights to take into consideration this aspect more seriously. Writers tried to exaggerate and to overstate these illusions as they identified them in society. However, for Americans it was hard to digest in the actual extent so they had to protect themselves by hiding the devastating reality, so they established and analyzed a particular kind of illusion, the illusion of success, portrayed for the money and power. Nevertheless, the disappointments of real life encouraged them into an imaginary world of private happiness. Therefore, forming many illusions that seemed to have become a necessity for them in order to feel fulfilled. (Peterson, 1969)

Finally, the frequent presence of the theme of illusion became a striking feature of the modern American culture and society. Because of the Great Depression the land of opportunities was now a land of despair and as a result of this people were already seeking for a better life. Aldalabeeh, (2016). They were hunting an ideal world to accomplish their goals and that is why they started building ideals and visions with all sort of fantasies.

### 2.1 Illusion and reality in Tennessee Williams' works

Williams explores realism and illusion, but not directly criticizing the obsession with money and power. Even why his interest is in the particular individuality which makes his characters different from his associates, his works also say a lot about the society from which the character are alienated (Peterson, 1969). As Aldalabeeh (2016) claims, Williams' portrayal of these themes is mainly concerned with illusionary people who are living on the edge of the society and who restrict themselves to their own worlds of fantasy and illusions but also fail to observe the actual rules of the society. So, Williams' characters are unable to confront the cruel reality that surrounds them.

Just as his characters, even Williams himself used writing as a way of escaping reality. Friedrich (2010) claims that a key to understanding Williams' works is to analyze how he relates the themes of the plays to his personal life. It feels like everything represents more than itself.

His personal experiences are employed vividly in his plays through the means of the stage. Also, the most famous personages represent a part of him or his family. Juan (2010) stated that Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* represents Williams' sister who experienced a frontal lobotomy and Tom represents Williams himself who had to work at the shoe company because his father was always traveling. So, Williams' plays reflect his life so much that many times can be confused as his autobiography.

Williams uses particular effective methods to bring home the clash between the illusion and the actual to his readership. His best works are presented by accordance between the harsh reality and a poetic expressionism that he mastered (Aldalabeeh, 2016). His world is full of men and women who are estranged from the society but also from themselves, and who are always searching for salvation (Peterson, 1969). They all present a unique picture of society.

The majority of the characters are people who do not accept their destiny, and most of them live in their past, some better days which might be real or imaginary. Therefore, trapped in their past, they are victims of their own illusions (Aldalabeeh, 2016). This makes them feel safer and capable of shaping their own realities into their visionary worlds.

Williams, no doubt, through his plays emphasizes the fact that people actually cannot confront the truth in its certain form but also recommends that they cannot escape from reality as well. And to make this acceptable, one has to live with illusions, which deliver false honor and morality that indeed help him to deal easier with life's problems. (Aldalabeeh, 2016)

Trying to protect themselves from self-destruction and the brutal reality, living in illusion could be the only way out of the individuals' harsh situations. The shift from illusion to reality is the theme which characterized Williams' writing with his poetic language and shocked the audience of his time. His characters lie, form illusions, dream and try to protect themselves from hurt, this is why he referred to them as "characters trapped by circumstances" (Abbot, 1998). As a result, this paper will further elaborate the means of the characters related to the usage of realism and illusion in general in the both plays.

### III. *The Glass Menagerie* Characters' illustration in terms of realism and illusion

In the play, all characters indulge in illusions. They live in different visions that are created from their own minds. However, they are dissimilar in the way how they perceive their dreams and visions, but similar in the fact that they are not capable to face the reality around them. They may or may not always lose against their difficulties but most importantly endurance and persistence is always there. Not surprisingly, Williams praises patience in every character pointing the goodness in them.

#### 3.1 Amanda Wingfield

Amanda lives in the illusions of the golden days in her young age; she is not ignorant of the real world as well. She possesses a great determination and strength. Actually, she is the only one that is trying to hold the family together after her husband's abandonment. As Singh (2015) claims, she is devoted to her children and guides them into more useful ways than those that she has followed herself. Her past is like a place to hide the tough reality of the present.

Amanda lives between a world of illusion in her youth, and a world of reality which is her present life. When her husband abandoned her, she faced a meaningless life, so she began to live through her kids by reliving her own life. By doing this, she fails to understand that her children have different personalities and are not supposed to live the way she did. The vacillation between these two worlds is her only defense against that emptiness. (Singh, 2015)

She alienates Tom by trying to push him on his job, and she harms Laura irrevocably by forcing her on a business career and then by trying to find her a husband.

As Amanda said "My devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children" (Williams, 1944, p.26). It can be seen that when it is appropriate for her she closes her eyes to the reality, nevertheless the everyday living forces her to face the real world sometimes. And finally, her stories have been told so many times that they no longer seem to be an illusion, instead they feel very realistic to her and to the readership.

#### 3.2 Laura Wingfield

Laura Wingfield is a leading character in the play that also illustrates the shift from illusion to reality. As a victim of her own shyness and sensitivity, her world is totally out of reality. She is a "delicate, haunted girl...the over-sensitive misfit in a world that spins with blind fury" (Abbott, 1988, p.141), but after all that is what makes her unique. Her world is the world of glass animals that are delicate just like her. She finds escape and comfort in them, and the only time where she gets out of her illusions is at the last scene with the help of Jim. Her lack of confidence is her main issue and that is what makes her even more fragile and more sentimental.

However, Jim is the only one that encourages her and tries to uplift her confidence by telling her that she is special. He tries to see the real world around her something that she does not achieve. (Singh, 2015)

As stated by Abbott (1988), Laura is unable to face the real life around her. She lives into her own world of the tiny glass animals whose frailty seems as her own. It is a world that Amanda refuses to accept. Even Amanda denies the reality in front of her and the relationship with her daughter is based on reluctant acceptance, denial and rejection.

#### 3.3 Tom Wingfield

Tom is the narrator of *The Glass Menagerie* and also a character in the play. Tom is an "illusion-ridden character" (Singh, 2015) and one of the leading characters in the play that represents the movement from illusion to reality. He is trapped by reality and he thinks that he will be able to find himself only in a world of traveling and adventures. He would not be able to crash his mother's illusions of him, however he is sure that for him to progress as an individual, he has to get rid of the family obligations. (Singh, 2015)

“You are the only young man that I know of who ignores the fact that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it!” (Williams, 1944,p.46), this is how Amanda refers to Tom.

He tells his mother, “I am leading a double life, a simple honest warehouse worker by day, by night a dynamic star of the underworld” (p.20) trying to let her know that what he wants is to travel the world and to have a life of adventures. He appears to be living in a world that is unsuitable to his own desires but instead he is trying to create his world that is appropriate to his fantasies. However, the only way he finds escape from the grim reality of his life and from his mother’s instructions on how to do everything, is through movies, literature and alcohol. After all, he felt like he had to escape in order to save himself.

“I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass. Perhaps I am walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow.

Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes ... Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be ! (p.116)

Tom’s rejection of his family to follow his illusionary dreams seems as a protection for him because he knew that if he stayed he would be devastated. However, he cannot leave his memories and he seems to feel guilty at leaving Laura behind (Singh, 2015). So, Tom as other characters in the play is vacillating between reality and illusion.

### 3.4 Jim O'Conor

Jim is another character that helps treat the theme of reality and illusion. He is the most realistic character in the play, however he has his own illusions too. As Singh (2015) claims, his illusion is the American Dream, that he can achieve anything in his life no matter that all he thinks is money and power. He is devoted to achieving success, and cannot get away from these fantasies. So, all these characters are living a life between illusion and reality. They choose to live in an illusionary world to provide protection from the harsh and tough realities of life so they prefer to neglect them to make themselves feel better. (Singh, 2015)

Through this Williams is trying to establish the idea that one’s individual attempts in seeking the ideal world and the fulfillment of one’s dreams, comes to nothing. Instead one should learn to work on what they hope to accomplish or else he will be in pain. (Aldalabeeh, 2016)

## IV. A *Streetcar Named Desire* Characters’ illustration in terms of realism and illusion

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* the author aims to represent these themes through the characters’ attitudes and their destructive consequences in order to confess that they are just like the writer himself, all defeated by alcohol, depression and isolation (Gencheva, 2016). This paper will discuss how characters engage in illusions to escape the harsh reality of situations around them.

### 4.1 Blanche DuBois

Blanche is Williams’ best example of illustrating the theme of reality and illusion.

Blanche struggles to let go her relation to old Southern ways and to move into the future. Her background of her past indicates her approach of her present position (Kafka, 2007). Because of her desire for the magic of fantasy, she misses the opportunity to integrate in the real world.

She lives in her own world of fantasies and she depends on male sexual admiration. That is the reason why she thinks that by marrying she will get rid of poverty and the bad reputation that surrounds her.

Blanche’s life has been affected by many tragic events, she lost her husband who committed suicide, her fortune was gone and she had lost her teaching job.

All these brutalities of her life have turned her to alcohol and sexual promiscuity. She drinks alcohol because she thinks that it will help her to forget the harsh reality of her life.

Blanche and Stanley are closely connected to alcohol even though Blanche claims that she drinks it rarely.

Blanche's illusions include her lying about her age, trying to recover her beauty and her charm (Kafka, 2007) pretending to be younger than she really is, and hiding herself from the light are symbols of hiding from the society as well. She blocks the light of the world, so she does not face the reality around her. As Blanche herself admits "I like it dark. The dark is comforting to me." (p.116). Blanche's aversion of light proves that she is the symbol of illusion and she is not capable to face the truth that could be exposed from the light.

In addition, when Mitch attempts to look at her under the light she defends herself and says "Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!--Don't turn the light on!" (pp. 117). So, as seen Blanche is self-aware about her fantasies and she really does not want to live in a real world and for her it does not matter if that magic is real or not but instead she will force her own reality and shape it as she wants.

According to Kafka (2007), Blanche replaces her reality (poverty, sexual problems, and the loss of her job) with the illusion of how she wants her life to be.

Her inability to distinguish reality from illusion increases at the end of the play where she no longer adapts reality to fit her needs, but she has created a whole new reality. The play culminates in her rape, which symbolizes the final violation of her sensitive world of "lies and conceit and tricks" (p.127) "by the brute future that Stanley represents". (Kafka, 2007)

Consequently, Blanche at the end completely loses herself in her personal fantasies.

Finally, Williams effectively advances the theme of conflict between reality and illusion through Blanche's character. Her total dependence upon men for happiness, the alcoholism and the mental illness, made this portrayal even more illustrative regarding her illusionary world and also more powerful.

#### 4.2 Stanley Kowalski

Stanley, Stella's husband, seems to be a straightforward man whose perception of reality is different from Blanche's. Kafka (2007) claims that Stanley presents "the new migrant working class". Williams uses Stanley as an extreme point of Blanche's character, by presenting the contrast and conflict between the truth and illusion, and Stella as a midpoint of these two extremes (Gholi, 2011). No matter how straightforward Stanley could be, still he has his own fantasies, he does not understand the refinements of life and when something feels as a threat to him, as Blanche did, he must strike back to stay safe in his comfort zone. He is constantly looking at Blanche's real past. He in fact attacks her world of illusion which is inappropriate with his reality (Gholi, 2011) and tries to expose her failures to others.

Stanley seems to be living an ideal life, he is happy with what he has and he considers himself to be the king of his home. He does not believe anything Blanche says that is why he starts to investigate everything about her. (Gencheva, 2016) His animalistic, cruel and brutal behavior, drives Blanche to destruction.

#### 4.3 Stella Kowalski

As mentioned above, Stella seems to be the middle point and also the bridge between these two extreme worlds. She appears to be the most thoughtful character of the play and she is very realistic regarding some specific situations. However, there are cases in the play where even Stella is unable to accept the truth and we see her facing the illusionary life in order to escape reality. This is seen at the end of the play when she cannot believe or accept the possibility of rape, neither the fact that her husband was the one who committed the act. (Gencheva, 2016)

Stella's and Stanley's relationship is based on everything else except love. Her overwhelming love and her "brutal desires" towards Stanley are expressed by her words in the play: "things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark-- that sort of make everything else seem -- unimportant" (p.70). It is seen that their physical attraction is what keeps their relation alive and these lines reveal Stella's true feelings driven by her sexuality and her fantasies.

#### V. Conclusion

Williams' plays pushed drama into new levels. They are a masterpiece of American Literature and theatre. His most famous works *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*, shocked the audience by beautifully presenting the clash between realism and illusion. The usage of fantasy and visions as means of defense from the harsh reality of life, is a powerful theme that features in the aforementioned plays. As elaborated in this paper, all the characters of these plays indulge in illusions, escaping from their everyday lives and shaping their own reality by forming false appearances and wrongly perceived concepts because only this way they would feel fulfilled and satisfied.

The way how Williams' puts so much of his own life experience in these works makes them even more fascinating for the readership. His ability to produce realistic drama that deals with lives of people and their struggles to accept reality, symbolizes and represents other issues as well. Behind every vision, dream, lie, or illusion there stands a reason that in a way or another makes every character hide from the real world and Williams makes the reader understand their situation and their struggles without judging them. This theme of conflict between the real and the ideal illusionary world dominates in Williams' plays and it's a reflection of the society and the writer himself.

Overall, this paper concludes that Williams' usage of realism and illusion in these award-winning plays, is what makes his works unique and as a result they broke the boundaries of American drama.

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