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Compensation in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on psychic compensation in the American play *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) by Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) adopted by the characters in the play to find a substitute of what they live in. The play is categorized within the genre of psychological drama that's why compensation is tackled from a psychoanalytic perspective. By the word 'compensation' it is meant that the defense mechanism that is used by an individual to cover up a weakness or a defect. Therefore, the paper is arranged in an order, beginning with a brief synopsis, illustrating the theme of compensation in general. Consequently, it analyses the play according to the main point upon which this account is based, by concentrating upon the methods that the characters of the play tackle to escape their difficult facts. This immediate intention ends with conclusions, clarifying the major results of the study.

Keywords: Compensation, Tennessee Williams', *The Glass Menagerie*

Introduction

In reality, Man may have many troubles that he must face sooner or later; and people may differ in the ways of dealing with these problems according to their own abilities. Some insist on ignoring the dilemma as long as possible, while others attack it to get it out of the way by using several attempts to help them to take rest and comfort from the burden of the hardship of their lives. This mundane portrait of life is widely revealed in literature, since most of the literary works represent life. However, in the modern period of American Literature, new topics come into focus and the literary minds of America become consumed with thoughts of isolation and loneliness because of the effect of the two World Wars upon life in general, which turns man to be a thoughtful about his status in the wide cosmos.

The field of psychoanalysis started officially with the Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and the field of psychoanalysis of the literary characters in fiction started with Freud too (Hilligsoe and Jakobsen, 2009) ^[6].

In his classical psychoanalytic theory, Sigmund Freud described compensation as a defense mechanism that protects the individual against the conscious realization of such deficiencies. It is a strategy by which one, consciously or unconsciously, hides a weakness, frustration, desire, or alike and substitutes with another capacity. It can be positive or negative. The first can help the individual to overcome the difficulties, whereas the second may reinforce the feeling of inferiority (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2022) ^[1]. Negative compensation can be of two kinds: *Overcompensation* and *Undercompensation*. The first shows the individual's struggle for superiority and higher positions, whereas the other reflects the need for help and fear of life (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2022) ^[1].

In origin, the founder of the school of individual psychology Alfred Adler (1870-1937) is the psychologist who introduced the term "compensation" as a cover to the feeling of inferiority (Gregory, 1987) ^[4]. In his book *Study of Organ Inferiority and Its Psychical Compensation* (1907), Adler debates that apparent inferiority or disability leads to adopt or to seek compensation (Gregory, 1987) ^[4]. The psychologist Adler blended his experience in his reflection of the term since he himself was a sick child unable to walk till he was four and he faced a series of accidents. That's why he transferred his experience to form compensation theory (Gregory, 1987) ^[4].

Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* can be considered as one of the defining works about the theme of compensation. It is about the Wingfield family who struggles to improve their lives. Tom Wingfield, the protagonist and the narrator of the play, both narrates and participates in the action through a series of seven scenes. From the beginning, Tom tells the audience that the play is "memory, and is therefore nonrealistic" (Williams, 1968, i: 1) ^[17].

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His memories retreat him to an apartment in St. Louis in 1937. As a narrator, He explains the progression of the events and allots this with "the pleasant disguise of illusion"(Williams, i: 2). Through the play, Tom's mother, Amanda, a single parent, has her memories of a Southern girlhood, hoping to connect past and present by finding a "gentleman caller" (Williams, 1968, i: 3) ^[17] for her own daughter, Laura, who wears a brace on her leg and is painfully shy. Laura is indulging into her private world of music and a collection of glass figures or menagerie. Each piece of these glasses represents double things for the playwright: "how beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken" (quoted in Wood, 1960: xxii). Under the request of Amanda to find a suitor for Laura, Tom selects Jim O'Connor, a casual friend, and invites him to a dinner. During the visit, it is discovered that O'Connor has an appointment with his fiancé and he must leave. Years later, though he travels far, the brother finds that he is unable to leave behind him the guilty memories of his sister (King, 1987) ^[10].

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the dramatist illustrates that none of the five characters (Tom, Amanda, Laura, Jim and the absent father) are capable of living in the present real world. These characters exhibit a state of delusion that originates from their dissatisfaction with their lives. Each seeks to find a substitute to cover or hide something he/she wants to escape. Accordingly, each member of the Wingfield family is unable to overcome the difficulty in accepting and relating to reality, and each, as a result, withdraws into a private world of illusion where he or she finds the comfort and meaning that the real world does not seem to offer (Kapcsos, 1997) ^[9]. In other words, the characters are all unhappy and cannot improve their situation in any significant way. Therefore, they use various methods to compensate the brutalities of their life and to avoid reality (Tischler, 1998) ^[16].

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Mr. Wingfield, the absent father, stands for the paternal portrait that wants to change his life by substituting the immediate one with that abroad. He managed to remove himself from the desperate situation that the rest of the family is still living in. He "was a telephone man and fell in love with long distance" (Williams, i: 3). His image is softly projected onto two oversized mirrors at each mention of his name. His last message to his family, on a postcard from Mazatlan, contained only two words: "Hello-- Goodbye!" and no address" (Williams, i:3). He also abandoned his wife and his two children. However, his departure of his family determines their life. Obviously, the father is a sample of achieving his wishes and desires by finding another environment instead of this with his family. For the father, such a compensation is positive but as an effect on his family it is too negative.

Additionally, the maternal stifling control of Amanda, the mother, upon the family lives which leads to her husband's escape years ago and to the physical and mental escape of her children. Accordingly, the fate of Amanda's children is her fault, for she is crippling them psychologically and emotionally (Ng, 1999) ^[12]. Moreover, by her hard treatment, behavior and over-protectiveness, home becomes like a cage, and, for that, each one of Wingfield family wants to change his/ her life by finding a substitute to cover the obstacle and to seek compensation.

Compensation can be felt in the behavior of Tom, the son, who imitated his father in following his steps as he saw "the

light fantastic out of town" (Williams, i:3). Clearly, Tom wanted to change his immediate atmosphere by another one outside in broad distances.

The place of the fire- escape at the beginning of the play helps to develop the theme of compensation. In function, the entrance from this fire helps each character to shift to the private world and compensate with another one. For instance, it gives Tom the opportunity to flee the apartment and get away from his nagging mother and unhappy home:

I descended the steps of this fire escape for a last time and followed, from then on, in my father's footsteps, attempting to find in motion what was lost in space... (Williams, vii: 75-76).

Amanda also sees the fire as an opportunity for gentlemen callers to enter her lives: "Tom and Jim appear on the fire-escape steps and climb to landing" (Williams, ii: 43). But, Laura's view is different from her mother and brother, for her seeking compensation seems to be hiding inside the apartment, not out.

Throughout the play, Tom is rebellious and longing to change his world. He is a worker in a shoe warehouse. Unable to tolerate his mother's failure to understand his needs and for her smothering affection, the son ends up turning to movies, poetic writing and midnight wanderings, where he feels reprieve. As the strain of his real life gets worse, the movie watching and drinking become more frequent (Jackson, 1977) ^[8]. Even his mother feels his seeking other ways, when she says, "I don't believe that you go every night to the movies. Nobody goes to the movies night after night" (Williams, iii: 17). Perhaps, Tom goes to them in order to find a place in which he can get peace, quiet, and a measure of normalcy. They also take him into another world, where his mother, sister, and runaway father do not exist. To him, they satisfy his vicarious gratification of adventure because, in the cinema, he becomes a hero, which he can never be at home. In addition, they provide him with an illusionary world that he yearns for in his daily life (Davis, 1977) ^[2]. Thus, when night comes, he chooses to live a false life by going to the movies in order to live through the adventures of men like Gable:

Yes, movies. Look at them-- All of those glamorous people-- having adventures--...People go to the movies instead of moving! Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventures for everybody in America ...That's when adventure becomes available to the masses! Everyone's dish, not only Gable's!... (Williams, vi: 46-47).

The image of Amanda and her interference in Tom's life are frequently revealed in the play. For instance, during meals, the mother insists that he must listen to long sermons such as "honey, don't push with your fingers. If you have to push with something..." (Williams, iii: 15). Also, as the son reaches for a cigarette, she complains, "you smoke too much!" (Williams, v: 29). Hence, the more Amanda nags, the more Tom seems to need his movie as a compensation to feel comfortable; and it is possible for him to temporarily forget the oppressive apartment (McGlinn, 1977) ^[11].

For he cannot handle his menial job and his unsatisfying home life, Tom believes that the atmosphere is stifling and damaging to his creative capacities since he has a talent to write poetry. In addition, he regards the warehouse in which he works as a prison that shackles all the basic impulses with which he believes, "man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter" (Williams, iv; 26). In the same place, he does not find any satisfaction at all, "I'd rather somebody picked up a

crowbar and battered out my brains than go back mornings!" (Williams, iii: 17). Therefore, he must escape his job as well as his family as a compensation, if he is ever to create a new life for himself (Thompson, 1989) ^[15].

Escape as a form of compensation for Tom means the suppression and denial of his familial emotions in himself, and it also means doing great harm to his mother and sister. But as far as he wanders from home, something still pursues him because the guilt of abandoning Laura is overwhelming him and he cannot seem to get over it. Thus, this defense mechanism leads not only to freedom but to the life of a fugitive who indulges in nostalgia (Thompson, 1989) ^[15]. It becomes clear that Tom is now truly following the footsteps of his father "I 'm like my father. The bastard son of bastard!" (Williams, vi: 47). Finally, when he leaves the Wingfield apartment, he entraps himself with memories of his sister. Accordingly, he escapes physically in prison, only, to fall mentally into another, that of his guilty conscience and his nostalgia for home, the glass menagerie and old fashioned melodies. Gradually, Tom realizes that he is unable to function in the present and wanders aimlessly thinking of his sister (Thompson; 29). Thus, psychic compensation is a central issue in this play, from Tom's travel at the end of the play, to his distancing from the family as he becomes increasingly frustrated with his life and his job. Tom's final soliloquy in *The Glass Menagerie* illustrates that idea:

I traveled around a great deal. The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly colored but torn away from the branches. I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. (Williams, vii: 75-76).

Tom explains that he is pursued by the memory of his sister, and he flees his family in pursuit of something. He says at the end he never finds peace, and is damned to remain forever trapped to his loneliness. Thus, he is trapped in a world more lonely than the one he leaves, and never manages to escape:

I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. 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! (Williams, vii;76).

Psychic compensation in the play is strongly portrayed in the case of Laura who fears the real world. She isolates herself from it, choosing instead to live through her glass figurines and old phonograph records which represent her own private world. This irrational fear is caused by her own perceptions about her minor disfigurement, one leg being longer than the other. Her physical handicap differentiates her from others. As a result, she finds herself escaping at every turn. For instance, she induces sickness as a way of ignoring the fact, such as in her typing class and even when the gentleman caller, Jim, awaits in the living room.

The collections of Laura's glass menagerie become her tactile consolation and characterize her fragility and delicate beauty that prevent her from participating in the outside world, which is harsh and brutal to her. For that, her mother and brother are forced to find a husband for her. Then, Tom, without any particular information about him, selects Jim O'Connor who works in the same warehouse where he works. Mrs. Wingfield prepares an elaborate dinner for this

coming suitor and insists that Laura must wear a new dress. At the last minute, the daughter knows the name of her supposed caller and is surprised to find that this name reminds her of the young man, Jim, whom she knew in her years of High School. It becomes clear that Laura's extreme fear of seeing Jim reveals her underlying concern about her physical appearance and about her inability to integrate herself successfully into society. As the daughter nervously awaits Jim's arrival, her mother tells her, "You couldn't be satisfied with just sitting home" (Williams, vi;39); yet, Laura prefers that. Before the meeting, she pretends sickness as a means to avoid the situation. Then, when she is forced to meet him, she excuses to leave under the pretext of her desire to play Victrola (McGillinn, 1977) ^[11].

Laura is, at first, paralyzed by the guest's presence, but his warm and open behavior soon draws her out of her shell. She confesses that she knew and liked him in High School but she was too shy to approach him. Gradually, they continue talking, and she reminds him of the nickname he had given her: "Blue Roses" (Williams, vii: 57)_an accidental corruption of the word for Laura's medical condition, "pleurosis" (Williams, vii; 58). In return, he reproaches her for her shyness and low self-esteem; but he also praises her uniqueness:

Jim: Just look about you a little. What do you see? A world full of common people! All of 'em born and all of 'em going to die! Which of them has one-tenth of your good points! Or mine! (Williams, vii: 63). Laura, then, ventures to show him her favorite glass animal, a unicorn. Consequently, the gentleman caller dances with her, but in the process, he accidentally knocks over the unicorn, breaking off its horn. It can be surprised that the crippled girl forgives and tells him that the unicorn becomes a normal horse, though, in particular, the glass unicorn greatly symbolizes her. As this piece of glass is different from all the other glass horses, it adds a unique quality and virtual "freakishness" (Williams, vii: 66) to her very characteristics (Kapcsos, 1997) ^[9]. Not only that, but she offers him the broken unicorn as a souvenir:

Laura: Now it is like all the other horses.

Jim: It's lost its—

Laura: Horn! It doesn't matter. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise....

Laura: Now he will feel more at home with the other horses, the ones that don't have horns. (Williams, vii; 66).

As a psychic compensation in a form of escape, Laura instantly reverts back to play the Victrola once Jim tells her he is engaged to "a home-girl ...Catholic, and Irish" (Williams, vii: 69) woman. Amanda, in reaction, turns on her son, who has not known that Jim is engaged, accuses him of being an inattentive, selfish dreamer and then throws herself into comforting her daughter. Laura, in reaction, utters doubtful laughs and reaches quickly into her world of glass menagerie.

As the title of the play indicates, the different girl's glass menagerie represents a number of facets of her personality. Like these figurines, Laura is delicate, fanciful, and somehow old-fashioned. She is unusual, lonely, and ill-adapted to existence in the world in which she lives. Thus, she can only live a brief moment in reality and quickly go back to her dreamy world with her glass collection (Jackson, 1987: 23-24) ^[7].

To continue, Amanda's relationship to reality is the most complicated matter in the play. Unlike her children, she is

partial to real-world values and longs for social and financial success. Yet her attachment to the values prevents her from perceiving the reality of her life. She cannot accept several matters concerning that she is or should be anything other than the pampered belle she was brought up to be, that Laura is peculiar, that Tom is not a budding businessman, and that she herself might be in some ways responsible for the sorrow and flaws of her children. She grew up in a country society and greatly accustomed to it. Since her present life is anything but genteel, she is forced to dwell in her past as a compensation (McGlinn, 1977) ^[11].

Mrs. Wingfield's going back into illusion is in many ways more pathetic than her children, because her retreat is through her obsession with her past; and she uses it to escape reality, especially when she constantly reminds her son and daughter in the time she received seventeen gentlemen callers on "one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain" (Williams, i: 5). The moment Tom and Laura worry her, she uses her Mississippi Delta childhood memories like a cooling balm (Ghiotto, 1998) ^[3]. In her preparation to meet Jim, Amanda dresses in the same girlish frock she wore on the day she met her husband, Mr. Wingfield. Hence, she lives in a fantasy world of dreamy recollections, and her children cannot escape from her own world.

Amanda refuses to acknowledge that her daughter is crippled and refers to her handicap as "a little defect hardly noticeable" (Williams, ii: 13). Only for brief moments she admits that, but, then, she quickly reverts back into her state of denial. Moreover, she does not perceive anything realistically, cannot distinguish between reality and illusion, and doesn't see anything in realistic terms, for instance, while she has not met him yet, she believes that Jim is the man that will rescue Laura. She suffers from a psychological impulse to withdraw into a fabricated lost time. In the following synopsis of her words to Tom, the mother makes this clear:

There's so many things in my heart that I cannot describe to you. I never told you but I--loved your father....And you--when I see you taking after his ways! Staying out late--and--well, you had been drinking the night you were in that--terrifying condition.... (Williams, iv: 25).

Throughout the whole events of *The Glass Menagerie*, Mrs. Wingfield presses her past on her daughter and doesn't see what her children want. This illusion proves to be the most dominated, for not only she is unable to escape it, but it is this affair that drives her son away as early as it does and destroys her daughter's chances for survival (McGlinn, 1977) ^[11].

Subsequently, the gentleman caller, Jim, reverts to his past as he looks through the High School yearbooks with Laura and remembers the days, when he was a hero, and recalls the days of his heroism. He uses his past as a means of compensation (Scheye, 1977) ^[14]. When the young caller reminisces about his lead in the operetta, the girl asks him to sign her program and he signs it "with a flourish" (Williams, vii: 60). It appears that only by entering into the Wingfields' world, the caller can become this High School hero again. As the scene progresses, he regresses to his days of wooing women as he woos the innocent Laura by dancing and kissing her. But of course this is not the real reality because the fact is that Jim is engaged, a matter which causes Laura to return into her own world of records and glass animals.

Unlike the Wingfields, this intruder lives only temporarily

in the past, therefore he leaves the dream world of the Wingfields. It seems that the present does not satisfy him. Even Tom realizes that it is valuable to Jim as someone who could remember his former glory. Although this gentleman caller pulls himself into the Wingfield's illusionary world, he sustains his reality senses. It becomes clear that Jim's desertion of Laura is the center of the play's dramatic action (Scheye, 1977) ^[14].

However, the present exists for the Wingfield family only to the degree that it can be verified by constant references to the past. But the main problem for them is that the past no longer exists. While these characters stay the same, the outside world changes. This explains why none of the characters can succeed in their present situations and they still repeat failure after failure in the present world (Rasky, 1988) ^[13].

Therefore, the major characters in *The Glass Menagerie* are victimized by their own conflicting desires and their alienation from the world which becomes a heap of broken images to them. As a result, the suffering in each character reflects Tom's pain, as it is seen through his recollections (Heilman, 1977) ^[5]. Along with the play, Williams reveals that one's inability to communicate in meaningful ways with other human beings is one of the modern life's most tragic situations. He also declares in his introduction to *The Rose Tattoo* that the most pressing moral problem of man in the twentieth century is to avoid extinction: "to beat the game of being against non-being" (Quoted in Jackson, 1977) ^[8].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the theme of psychic compensation is the main aspect in Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. The play emphasizes that the individual can flee his materialistic, physical and spiritual sufferings by using numerous ways to achieve his purpose. However, the characters of this study can be considered as archetypes or prototypes of the persons who want to put off the fact in which they live by seeking techniques for compensation.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the main character that lives in illusion is Laura Wingfield, a young girl who escapes into a fantasy world to avoid the problems of her life. She spends her entire life inside the apartment with her beloved glass animals because of her inability to cope with reality and to seek solace in her own world. Thus, as she raps herself within her isolated cocoon, she becomes more and more detached from the real world, especially in the aspect of her inability to go to the work, park and movies.

According to the point of psychic compensation, each individual has his/her own way of finding compensation. The father, for example, is characterized by his physical escape by traveling far away from his family, leaving his own wife and his two children forever. The mother is paralyzed by the prospect of being abandoned by her husband who is the root of her suffering in life, especially towards her crippled daughter whom she tries every means to integrate her into society, but to no avail. Amanda is the head of the household. She retreats to the past to escape her present life. Tom has two characters: the first Tom is the narrator who appears in the present time. He looks as an old or a mature person, indulging in his nostalgia for the past, and introduces his second self –Tom the character- that appears as a young tired man who is responsible for his mother and sister, and has the desire to escape his life

situations.

Lying is the main pretext of Laura to avoid facing certain situations such as her pretending sickness when she is asked to meet Jim. It is also taken by Amanda to show her superiority as in her story of seventeen gentlemen callers. Perhaps Williams tried to send a message that running away is not the way to solve life's problems. At the end, no character can completely escape their illusionary world. Psychic compensation can be temporarily as the events demonstrate.

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