

## THE FRAGILE HOME OF A PRECARIOUS GIRL: A BUTLERIAN STUDY OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*. PART II



Ladan Farah BAKSHSH

Ph.D. Student, Doctoral School of Humanities, University of Warsaw, Poland.

### **The Fragile Home of a Precarious Girl: A Butlerian Study of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. Part Two**

**Abstract.** This section of the article consists of three analytic discussions (“Illusion,” “Unemployment,” “Absence of a Father Figure”) and further probes into social and cultural factors that make the protagonist of Williams's play precarious in Butlerian sense of the term. This survey attributes five reasons to Laura's precariousness, which also involve, and at times are generated or intensified by her mother, her brother, and her suitor. These precarity agencies, which are in one way or another interrelated, include gender (in a patriarchal society), lameness, pipe dreams, inability to work (in a capitalist milieu), and the absence of an authoritative and supportive man. Laura is a misfit both domestically and socially in the sense that physically, financially, and sexually, she fails to abide by the social norms set by the normative power which privileges men over women and those who can work and pay tax over those who cannot.

**Keywords:** pipe dream, lameness, unemployment, patriarchy, and regulative power.

### **Căminul fragil al unei fete precare: un studiu Butlerian al *The Glass Menagerie* a lui Tennessee Williams. Partea a doua**

**Rezumat.** Prezentul articol își propune să exploreze noțiunea de precaritate a lui Butler în *The Glass Menagerie* a lui Williams. Sunt de asemenea puse sub examinare agenții care induc precaritatea personajelor piesei, în special cea a Laurei, reacția la repercusiunile precarității și modalitățile prin care aceasta duce la o nouă identitate. În ultimele decenii, feminismul și studiile de gen, cu toate subcategoriile și subdiviziunile lor, au reprezentat una dintre principalele preocupări și interese în critica literară, precum și în studiile sociale și culturale. O cercetătoare extrem de influentă în studiile feministe și de gen este Judith Butler. Puterea normativă și problemele legate de gen sunt motive susținute pe parcursul studiului, care abordează următoarele întrebări: Care sunt rădăcinile sentimentului de precaritate al Laurei? Cum îi afectează și îi provoacă precaritatea pe cei din jurul ei? Cum se descurcă sau cum răspunde la sentimentul ei de precaritate? Pentru a răspunde la aceste întrebări, cercetătorul se va baza pe concepția lui Butler despre precaritate și caracter precar și se va concentra pe termeni cheie precum feminitate, patriarhat, vise, deficiență fizică, sistem de reglementare și insecuritate financiară. Această secțiune a articolului este împărțită în trei părți principale, și anume „Introducere”, „Cadru teoretic” și „Analiză”, care cuprinde „Feminitate” și „Dizabilitate”.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Butler, Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, precaritate, feminitate și dizabilitate.

(...)

### 3.3 Illusion

Every member of the Wingfield family tries to find solace in an image or an illusion. It seems that Laura is more delusional than her mother and her brother; she is both disabled and she is a woman living in the patriarchal southern society. While Amanda's escapism is reflected in the illusion of a southern belle who never ages, Laura's escapism seems to be far more complex. For Laura, the need to escape requires a detachment from life, not embracing or refining it; therefore, it is materialized through taking refuge in her glass figurines, especially the unicorn.

In *The Symbolism of Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie: An Inductive Approach* (2007), Brent D. Barnard describes these illusory escapes as 'otherworldly' believing that "In Williams, it is an escape, a refuge, an imaginative location that transcends reality, an atemporal remove that relieves its inhabitants from the sordidness of their dreary lives" [24, p. 22]. The illusory escape that Laura partakes in involves "a world of her own – a world of – little glass ornaments, Mother.... She plays old phonograph records and – that's about all" [13, p. 23]. The emphasis on imagination, visual, and auditory stimuli throughout the play points to the urgency of the need for self-deception. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler notes that "in such perceptions in which as ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what that reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion" [1 p. xxii]. Laura regards the figurine of the unicorn as herself, the other animals as being parts of an illusory world, and music as an auditory representation of it. Just as Laura feels out of place in the world she lives in, her unicorn seems to be an odd ball among other statuettes – they are both misfits: "[Jim] Poor little fellow, he must feel sort of lonesome. [Laura] [smiling]: Well, if he does he doesn't complain about it. He stays on a shelf with some horses that don't have horns and all of them seem to get along nicely together" [13, p. 50]. The figurines play a significant role in the creation of Laura's illusions; she deeply identifies herself with them,

especially with the unicorn. She regards them as a part of herself and herself as one of them, both emotionally and physically, and that is why she bursts into tears when Tom's coat hits the shelf of her glass collection.

The fragility of the figurines corresponds to Laura's precarity and vulnerability in the sense that she has become fragile like her glass collection, easily broken and unable to step outside her room, which is comparable to the shelf. Nor is she helped by Jim, who does not really know how to deal with Laura's fragility. Jim's confusion is what Philip C. Kolin sees as a form of lack of masculinity, something that Jim tries to portray through his attempts of joking, dancing, and trying to kiss Laura [25, p. 160]. All of these culminate in the disillusionment that knocks Laura speechless when he tells her that he must go back to his fiancé: "I hope it don't seem like I'm rushing off. But I promised Betty that I'd pick her up at the Wabash depot ... Some women are pretty upset if you keep 'em waiting" [13, p. 52]. Laura's precarity here stems from her sentimentality and the illusion she has developed in her otherworld as she is totally unaware of the brutalities of the real world. In Tom's words, Jim "is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from" [13, p. 22]. I must add that Laura's mother and brother, too, have created their own illusory worlds. As Barnard has observed,

At times, both Amanda and Tom inhabit Otherworlds. The former turns in her fancy from the Wingfield tenement to her girlhood home in Blue Mountain. In her memory, servants wait on her still, and gentlemen callers perpetually knock on her door. Tom too has created an atemporal otherworld, one which promises to relieve the sordidness of his life, though his paradise lies before him, in the future, rather than lying behind him in the past. [24, p. 22]

Amanda's delusion of being a lady in a southern mansion causes her to see Jim as a means for her daughter's salvation; she joyously listens to their conversations from the kitchen,

changes the décor of her apartment, and gives him a candle so that he could spend more time with Laura. But it can also be argued that she looks at their possible marriage as a means of the materialization of her dreams. Similarly, Tom's role in arranging the meeting is not purely out of love for his sister as can also be seen as a way of getting rid of self-criticism because of his plans for leaving his family.

### 3.4 Unemployment

Laura's social status in her capitalist and patriarchal society is undermined by womanhood, disability, and unemployment. In her *Precarious Life*, Butler states that "the fundamental modes of dependency that do bind us and out of which emerge our thinking and affiliation, the basis of our vulnerability, affiliation, and collective resistance" [7, p. 49]. Laura's disability is probably the most significant reason for her precarity and despair since the society regards her as someone who cannot make money and consequently cannot pay tax. Furthermore, she cannot fulfil her household duties designated by men and she is not well-educated, which means she cannot find a proper job. Her financial insecurity only makes things worse both for her and her family. In this context, a woman with no job and no husband has no future. As Fox has argued, "Laura is saddled with a mother ... whose over protectiveness emerges at least in part from a sense of desperation over the limited choices that await a woman unable to mold herself to either marriage or merchandising" [13, p. 7]. Even her mother thinks of her as a failure and a loafer. The audience feels justified in condemning Amanda's obsession with her daughter's celibacy and failure, but they can also feel justified in condemning the world or her fate. As Hovis has proclaimed,

If Amanda is less capable than her son, Tom, of appreciating Laura's 'true self,' it is because Amanda recognizes her daughter's inability to survive in the world outside their apartment. There is a strong naturalistic element in all of Williams's drama, and the world of *Menagerie* is perhaps his most Darwinian. [19, p. 7]

He goes on to state that "Amanda understands the social and economic realities of their world, and, by modeling the role of the belle, she attempts to teach her daughter an important survival technique" [19, p. 7]. Laura knows that because of her unemployment, she has to put herself in the marriage market (metaphorically speaking), but the flip side is the high probability of facing rejection time and again. Her mother, too, considers marriage as a workable solution (in fact, the best solution), but both Laura and her mother fail to realize that marriage does not change the fact that Laura will be financially dependent her whole life and suffer the consequences.

Laura lacks the required social skills and has not picked up any form of profession, further frustrating her mother as she had spent her savings on her typing lessons: "Fifty dollars' tuition, all of our plans – my hopes and ambition for you – just gone up the spout, just gone up the spout like that" [13, p. 14]. This frustration stems from the fact that a daydreamer like Laura has no place in a capitalist and patriarchal society; even a character like Jim (or Tom for that matter) who answers to the agencies of power, such as masculinity and the ability to work, feels disappointed and rejected. In her "Resisting the S(crip)t: Disability Studies Perspectives in the Undergraduate Classroom (2013), Sarah Hosey regards Laura's position at the end of the play as that of futile "choice and accomplishment," writing that.

Laura may be emotionally and physically ill-suited for successful participation in what Williams portrays as brutal and dehumanizing labor and marriage markets; looked at in this way, Laura's limp and her preoccupations become not only markers of individuality but potentially radical rejections of a capitalist-patriarchy. [26, p. 28]

The irony is that the choice of not participating in a capitalist and male-dominated system further debilitates Laura. While it seems that Laura does not want to get entangled in the web of the market, her aversion to participate in it makes her more vulnerable, as it forces her

to live a life of solitude in the prison that her overprotective mother has built for her; nor is this favorable for Amanda who tries to marry her daughter off to Jim or any other suitor. The similarity between the words 'Amanda' and 'amend' (to repair) is ironic. As Bernard has observed, "Amanda reupholsters the furniture, places a 'colored paper lantern' over the light in the ceiling, etc., all in hopes of captivating him. On the night preceding his arrival, she is under a strain because she fears her efforts will prove to be insufficient" [13, p. 45]. Amanda's fretting over insufficiency is engendered by the realization that her daughter is an unemployed and lame southern girl, whom she has to take care of for the rest of her life. Another reason for Laura and Amanda's frustration is the fact that Tom, the only breadwinner of the family, is always dreaming of leaving them, in the pursuit of a better life elsewhere. While his salary is barely enough to provide the family with subsistence, his absence would prove catastrophic for the future of his sister and his mother. His savings for his plans have already drained away the money he could spend on the basic necessities such as utility bills. Laura would certainly feel more precarious if Tom did move out since his absence would automatically put her in a very awkward situation in the sense that she would be forced to replace Tom as the next breadwinner of the family. In view of her disability, that would be a tall order and an impossible mission. Her marriage would lighten up the burden of her mother and facilitate her brother's plans. This follows that her celibacy, on the other hand, would keep the family locked in a vicious circle.

### 3.5 Absence of a Father Figure

Laura's life is centered around three men, her father, whose absence has caused the financial downfall of the family and his wife's illusions, Tom, who seems to be the only person who understands her, even though he leaves her in the end, and lastly Jim, the boy she had had her eye on in high school and is ultimately jilted by (here again, the similarity between the words Jim and jilt is ironical). In *Frames of War*, Butler

states that "Fatherhood is the sole or major cultural instrument for reproduction of masculinity" [10, p. 112]. She adds that "The presumption is that if a child has no father, that child will not come to understand masculinity in culture, and, if it is a boy child, he will have no way to embody or incorporate his own masculinity" [10, p. 112]. There is no denying that all the male characters of the play let Laura down, one way or the other. The first man who leaves her is her father; despite his absence, however, he exerts a great deal of influence over the Wingfield family. Barnard explains that "Between each episode of *Glass Menagerie*, the music is to return as a 'reference to the emotion, nostalgia, which is the first condition of the play.' At times, Laura provides the context of musical nostalgia, with her continually playing the records her father left her as a 'reminder of him' [24, p. 19]. Tom confesses that her sister "lives in a world of her own – a world of little glass ornaments ... She plays old phonograph records and – that's about all" [13, p. 23], implying that she tries to make up for the absence of her father through her glass collections and nostalgic memories. As Hovis has claimed, "Laura is incapable of adopting the role of the belle. Her intense sexual frustration combined with her father's abandonment and her mother's tyranny has produced such a fragile sense of self that she is utterly incapable of the kind of projection required in the coquettish behaviors Amanda prescribes" [19, p. 7]. The implication is that her father's absence has not only resulted in emotional scars but also a deep sense of precarity, which she tries to cope with by clinging to other men, especially those accessible. This, in turn, augments her precariousness in the sense that it generates illusion and attachment, which would inevitably bring about more isolation and more distress.

Like his father, Tom is obsessed with the idea of leaving home and shirking family responsibilities. As Barnard has put it, Tom "seems to believe that if he were to abandon his family and follow his instincts, he would come to experience the same timeless tranquility his father enjoys, who – at least in his photo – is



‘gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling, as if to say, ‘I will be smiling forever’ [24, p. 22]. Tom always longed for following in his father’s footsteps; he does not hesitate to give vent to his desire and he does not seem to mind the consequences: “I’m like my father. The bastard son of a bastard! See how he grins? And he’s been absent going on sixteen years” [13, p. 15]. He seems to suggest that the family somehow managed to move on after the absence of his father, and it will once again if he follows suit, although he knows, only too well, that his family cannot survive financially if he stops providing for it.

The last man who betrays Laura is Jim; although unlike the other two men he is under no obligation to support and protect the family, his abandonment is a terrible blow to Laura and Amanda as he had made them feel quite excited and upbeat about the possibility of a bright future. Jim never actually understood what hopes he raised in every member of the family and what his proposal would mean to them. Kolin believes that

Jim’s performances of hyperbolic virility are driven by his narratives of boundless masculinity. He brags to Laura that, when he was in school, ‘I was beleaguered by females in those days’ and reminisces that with his manly voice he ‘sang the lead baritone in that operetta’ *The Pirates of Penzance*, not sensing the incongruity between the diminutive (‘operetta’) and his sexual self-importance. [25, p. 159]

The promise of being a masculine savior is amplified by Jim’s intelligence and domestic skills, such as fixing the electricity outage. Amanda makes her son appear as a clumsy idiot before a so-called genius handyman or a “gentleman caller”; her exaggerated compliments, which betray frustration, will soon turn out to have been misplaced since Jim is neither a gentleman nor a real suitor. Jim tries to pose as an ideal man and meet all the requirements of a perfect husband; his hypocrisy only compounds everyone’s pipe dreams and makes the ensuing disillusionment more painful. He fails to fix the outage, he fails to help Laura with her low self-esteem, and he fails

to keep impressing Laura as the first man she was romantically attracted to. After Jim walks out on her, she feels more precarious than ever, as she realizes that had lost the traditional way of surviving poverty and disability through marriage. To feel secure and confident in a capitalist and patriarchal society, she needed the support of a man, as a brother, a father, and most importantly, a husband, but she is denied the privilege. She knows that she can climb the social ladder and win the respect and recognition of her family and the society through the gender the dominant system or the normative power has standardized and prioritized. The failure proves to be a great disappointment to all and a major drive in their sense of precarity.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research has aimed to assess the applicability of Judith Butler’s notion of precarity to Tennessee Williams’s *Glass Menagerie*, in an attempt to discover what makes Laura’s life precarious or grievable and what her defense mechanism is in coping with her sense of precarity. In the twentieth century, Butler gradually came to distance herself from purely feminist and gender studies and her notion of performativity and incorporated a number of broad disciplines (such as politics, power, culture, and sociology) in her conceptualization of personal and collective identity. Every community, in her view, tends to marginalize and disenfranchise certain parts of its population and prioritize certain others; this obligatory normative power leads to the sense of vulnerability, insecurity, and inferiority, which she terms as precarity, from which no one is permanently or completely immune. Also, she contends that due to the dynamic nature of precarity agencies, a precarious person may get de-marginalized if they meet the requirements defined by the power structure.

The present study has identified five main reasons for Laura’s precariousness, which also affect, and at times are generated or intensified by, her parents, her brother, and her suitor. These precarity agencies, which are one way or another interrelated, include gender (in a patri-

archal society), lameness, pipe dreams, inability to work (in a capitalist milieu), and the absence of an authoritative and supportive man. She is regarded as a liability and a burden; that is why her mother and brother are more than happy to see the back of her. She is jilted by all the three important men in her life (first her father, then her suitor, and finally her brother); nor is she helped by her abusive and unsupportive mother, who is desperate to marry her off to a “gentleman caller.” Laura soon realizes that she is a misfit both domestically and socially in the sense that physically, financially, and sexually, she fails to abide by the social norms or fit into the recognized and privileged class of the society, which by default consists of those who can earn money, who do not need to earn money, and who are men or are backed up by a protective man particularly a husband, a brother, or a father. Laura takes refuge in illusions and her glass collection, which bring nothing but more alienation and more precarity.

#### Bibliography:

1. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
2. Mansfield, Nick. *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*. University of N.-Y. Press, 2000.
3. Blackwell, Louise. Tennessee Williams and the Predicament of Women. In: *South Atlantic Bulletin*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1970, p. 9-14.
4. Downes Henry, Terese. *Representations of Gender and identity in the Drama of Tennessee Williams*. Dissertation. The University of Texas at Arlington Press, 1998.
5. Crandell, George W. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Tennessee Williams: A Guide to Research and Performance*. Ed. Philip C. Kolin. Greenwood Press, 1998. p. 109-125.
6. Bauer-Briski, Senata Karolina. *The Role of Identity in the Major Plays of Tennessee Williams*. Peter Lang, 2002.
7. Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.
8. Ettliger, Nancy. Precarity unbound. In: *Alternatives*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2007, p. 319-340.
9. Schierup, Carl-Ulrik et. al. “Introduction.” *Migration, Precarity, and Global Governance: Challenges and Opportunities for Labour*. Eds. Carl-Ulrik Schieru et. al. Oxford University Press, 2015. 1-24.
10. Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.
11. Joy, Annamma et. al. Judith Butler on Performativity and Precarity: Exploratory Thoughts on Gender and Violence in India. In: *Journal of Marketing Management*, 2015, vol. 31, no. 15-16, p. 1739-1745.
12. Yaghoubi-Notash, Massoud et al. Language, Gender and Subjectivity from Judith Butler’s Perspective. In: *Philosophical Investigations*, 2019, vol. 13, no. 28, p. 305-315.
13. Tennessee, Williams. *The Glass Menagerie*. New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1999.
14. Stein, Roger B. *The Glass Menagerie Revisited: Catastrophe without Violence*. In: *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 1992, vol. 71, no. 4, p. 354-358.
15. Levy, Eric P. “Through Soundproof Glass”: The Prison of Self-Consciousness. In: *The Glass Menagerie*.” *Modern Drama*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1993, p. 529-537.
16. Falvo, Donna; Beverley E. Holland. *Medical and Psychosocial Aspects of Chronic Illness and Disability*. Jones & Bartlett Learning, 2017.
17. Yu, Jiefei. Metaphorical Disability in Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*. In: *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, vol. 12, no. 5, 2022, p. 990-995.
18. Adler, Thomas P. Culture, Power, and the (En) Gendering of Community: Tennessee Williams and Politics. In: *The Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 4, 1995, p. 649-665.
19. Hovis, George. “Fifty Percent Illusion”: The Mask of the Southern Belle in Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and “Portrait of a Madonna.” *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views*. Ed. Harold Bloom, Blake Hobby, Chelsea House Publishers, 2007, p. 171-185.
20. Ferguson, Philip M. A Place in the Family: An Historical Interpretation of Research on Parental Reactions to Having a Child with a Disability. In: *The Journal of Special Education*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2002, p. 124-131.
21. Longmore, Paul K. *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*. Temple University Press, 2003.
22. Fox, Ann M. Reclaiming the Ordinary Extraordinary Body: Or, The Importance of *The Glass Menagerie* for Literary Disability Studies. In: *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, vol. 426, no. 3, 2022, p. 1-15.
23. McRuer, Robert. Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence. In: *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis, 5th ed. Routledge, 2017, p. 369-378.
24. Barnard, D. Brent. *The Symbolism of Tennessee Williams’ The Glass Menagerie: An Inductive Approach*. Dissertation. Louisiana State University, 2007.
25. Kolin, Philip C. The Family of Mitch: (Un)suitable Suitors in Tennessee Williams. In: *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views*. Ed. Harold Bloom, Blake Hobby. Chelsea House Publishers, 2002, p. 157-170.
26. Hosey, Sara. Resisting the S(crip)t: Disability Studies Perspectives in the Undergraduate Classroom. In: *Teaching American Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2013, p. 26-30.