
RESEARCH ARTICLE

“Crisis in Paternity”: Abjected Mothers and Creating the Self in Suddenly Last Summer and the Glass Menagerie

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the paternal crisis in self-formation and subject development in Tennessee Williams’ characters: Suddenly Last Summer and The Glass Menagerie. Based on Kristeva’s theory, it is apparent that Williams’ characters are deprived of the skill to love and communicate with other people because they lack what Kristeva calls the ability to “Abject” and separate themselves from their mothers to create their own independent self. Abnormal attachment to their mothers causes a defect in their “Screen of Emptiness,” leading to the absence of formation of the “Imaginary Father” concept. This concept is responsible for guiding the child to form appropriate social skills. Tom, Laura, and Sebastien lack the ability to identify with the ‘Imaginary Father’ whose significant role is to occupy the “Psychic Space” which guides the child through social interaction with others.

KEYWORDS

Abject Mother, Psychic Space, Screen of Emptiness, Imaginary Father

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Tennessee Williams’ *Suddenly Last Summer* and *the Glass Menagerie* capture a peculiar mother-child relationship that has a negative impact on the formation of the characters’ personalities. The paternal crisis of these characters appears because of their unsuccessful attempts to separate and “abject” themselves from their mother’s love and strong bondage to establish their own identity and independence where they can ensure perpetual happiness. The character’s failure of abjection and separation from their own mothers and giving space to the Imaginary Father makes the child antisocial and unable to engage with outside society. Kristeva explains that when children fail to liberate the self from their mother, “it causes a defect in the “Screen of Emptiness,” leading to the absence of the Imaginary Father whose significant role is to occupy the “Psychic Space” guiding the child to form strong social interactions with others.” (Berg 21) When the child separates from the mother, they begin to identify with the Imaginary Father who is the intuition of a preexisting figure of the world of love and socialization. Kristeva claims that identification with the Imaginary Father is a very crucial stage in human development and its failure gives rise to antisocial and abnormal behaviors. This paper uses Kristeva’s theory of abjection to understand the anti-social behavior of Laura, Tom and Sebastian and focuses on their inability to act socially appropriate with others due to their failure to separate from their mother and escape her control and associate with the Imaginary Father figure.

Tom, in the *Glass Menagerie*, is the narrator and the main character in the play. He is an aspiring poet and brother to Laura. Tom is the son of Amanda and the escaped father in the photograph above the mantle. His main goal throughout the entire play is to escape his family, particularly his mother, but he resists the temptation out of responsibility because he is the main source of income for his family. Various scenes of the play show that Tom is isolated and engulfed in his own world because of his mother’s domineering nature. She keeps him close to her although he tries to escape this boring, tedious, and stressful relationship. In scene one, for instance, when Amanda calls him to the dinner table, she immediately bombards him with eating instructions emphasizing the importance of “mastication,” until Tom, infuriated, stops eating and tells her that he can’t enjoy the food anymore: “Sickening—spoils my appetite— all this discussion of animals’ secretion—salivary glands—mastication!” (The Glass Menagerie 24). Tom is a pitiable figure who tries to resist this overbearing and domineering

environment wherein his mother not only tells him how to chew his food but also controls his reading taste. This happens when his mother, giving him no privacy, confiscates D.H. Lawrence's novels that he likes to read and returns them to the library: "I took that horrible novel back to the library— yes! That hideous book by that insane Mr. Lawrence." (The Glass Menagerie 38-39) Tom is not free to pursue his own life or even his literary interests the way he likes. His mother nags at him incessantly and tries to run his life to fit her own interests. She continues to scold him for any interests he pursues. Tom feels that his mother kills his sense of creativity and prevents him from finding and pursuing his interests. As such, "Tom cannot establish boundaries between the self and the other, bringing about attachment to unreasonable things in the real world; thus, he fills his Psychic Space with erratic and eccentric hobbies" (Bloom 29)

To escape Amanda's world of tyranny and this tiresome and hectic existence, Tom becomes withdrawn into a private world of illusion and fantasy where he finds comfort in reading, writing poetry, smoking constantly, watching movies regularly, and dreaming about real-life adventures which are all prohibited by his mother. Tom considers sailing to the South Sea Islands and going on Safaris. He even admits, "I seem dreamy." He lives in a world of fantasy that provides him with satisfaction with his professional goals and romantic relationships. Amazingly enough, Tennessee Williams provides the reader with symbols that emphasizes the notion of escape and "abjection" such as Malvolio's magic show and the fire escape scenes:

Tom: But the wonderfulest trick of all was the coffin trick. We nailed him into a coffin and he got out of the coffin without removing one nail. [He has come inside.] There is a trick that would come in handy for me — get me out of this two by-four situation!

Tom: You know it don't take much intelligence to get yourself into a nailed-up coffin, Laura. But who in hell ever got himself out of one without removing one nail?? (The Glass Menagerie 45)

Tom watches a magic act in which a man escapes from a coffin, calling it "the wonderfulest trick of all". In Tom's mind, this act parallels his situation at home where he feels locked in, but this scene provides him with a way to escape without destroying his family the way his father had done sixteen years ago. According to Hayman "escaping the coffin without removing a nail makes him feel like a prisoner in his own life" (113). Furthermore, the fire escape scene is another emphasis on the perception of escape in Tom's mind: "Tom enters, dressed as a merchant sailor, and strolls across to the fire escape" (The Glass Menagerie 22). The fire escape is the entrance to the Wingfield apartment, and that is where Tom goes to smoke cigarettes, for which his mother harasses him endlessly. From the fire escape, the sounds of the nightclub across the street can be heard, and although it is an escape, it is still the entrance to the trap in which Tom lives. Finally, he walks out of the apartment and chooses to abandon his family like his father did in the past to find the adventures he desires.

With these scenes in mind, Tom's efforts to escape symbolize his separation from his mother's imprisonment. Of course, he experiences a tense relationship with his mother, who tries not only to stop his rejection but also to dominate his character and mold him the way she desires. Consequently, he senses internally, a tremendous burden because he compares himself with other youths of his age who can enjoy life, freedom, love, and personal ambitions whereas Tom is forced to stay at home, work hard to provide for his mother and sister. He can't mingle and interact with other people, he tries to escape his fate by going to the theatre every day, smoking constantly, reading books and writing poetry. Apparently, being captive of his mother's domain and not able to abject himself from her, lead him to develop a flaw in his narcissistic development, bringing about the fact that his "Screen of Emptiness," with reference to Kristeva's theory, is still naturally vacant, which should be filled with the concept of the Imaginary Father (Kristeva 29). Now, Tom fills his Screen of Emptiness with fictional characters.

Similarly, Laura is a sensitive, delicate and crippled girl whose main concerns are playing with her glass animals and enjoying her victrola. Her physical defect has shaped her life, giving rise to her terrible inferiority complex due to her handicap. Her physical defects and weak personality are only a reflection of her internal, emotional and psychological flaws caused by her mother's authoritarian nature. She is always ashamed and nervous whenever she encounters a stressful situation. For instance, she becomes physically ill from fear and nervousness when she attempts to take a typing test in business school and when she is forced to dine with Jim O'Conner. Jim says that she suffers from an inferiority complex and lives in her world of dreams and illusions; her life focuses on a collection of glass animals and menageries that she can buy and control. These fragile glass animals are her way of escaping from family tension and sense of inferiority. Laura has no future for the rest of her life; she lives in self-sustained illusions that prevent her from living a normal life. She drops out of high school as well as Business College, which puts her into a life of dependency. According to Jim: "You know what I judge to be the trouble with you? Inferiority complex! Know what that is? That's what they call it when someone low rates himself!" (The Glass Menagerie 98). She is unable to cope with society, so she dislikes typewriters, offices, flirtations, and strangers. Because she is too reserved to face the real world, she looks like her own glass collection, delicate, beautiful and too fragile to be moved from the shelf. The glass menagerie is a symbol of her fragility. In fact, her involvement with these glassy animals reflects her inability and timid self while interacting with other human beings. The collection, like Laura, is locked at home, so they are kept on a little shelf, the only place

where they belong, and regularly polished. In a similar way, Laura is kept and cared for, relies on her mother for emotional support and brother for financial support.

Many symbols refer to the fact that Laura is cut off from reality. When Williams refers to the symbol of The Blue Roses, he alludes to Laura as a beautiful and rare flower. Blue Roses is an indication of pure fantasy and has no existence in the real world. Similarly, Laura is special and unique, but she is also cut off from real life and has no identity. Like the unicorn that Jim breaks accidentally, Laura is a mysterious and exotic human being who lives in her own world, disconnected from reality. For instance, in her response to a question asked by Jim, in scene seven, about what she has done after school, Laura immediately starts talking about her glass collection, as if it is part of her future career, rather than referring to her typing classes in business school.

Jim: Now how about you? Isn't there something
you take more interest in than anything else?

Laura: well, I do—as I said—I have my—glass
Collection- [*A peal of girlish laughter rings
from the kitchenette.*]

Jim: I'm not right sure I know what you're talking
about. What kind of glass is it?

Laura: Little articles of it, they're ornaments
mostly! Most of them are little animals made
out of glass, the tiniest little animals in the
world. Mother calls them glass menagerie!
Here's an example of one, if you like to see
it! This one is one of the oldest. It's nearly
thirteen. [*Music: "the glass menagerie"*] [*He
stretches out his hand*] Oh, be careful— if you
breathe, it breaks!

Jim: I'd better not take it. I'm pretty clumsy with things (The Glass Menagerie 100-101).

In her attempt to find refuge from the demands and shocks of the social burdens of interacting with others, Laura guides her interests to animals and rare species of plants. This interest brings about the remarkable point that she is unable to move on from the world of symbolism to reality. For instance, when she attends business school, she visits the zoo to see the animals and goes to the park to admire the greenhouse and gardens and, at home, she makes herself busy with her collection of glass figures. According to Falk her love for rare specimens—penguins, tropical flowers, and the sole unicorn among her glass horses—"are just a compensation for what she lacks because of her failure to abject her mother." (212)

Furthermore, Sebastian, in *Suddenly Last Summer*, lacks the loving father. Throughout the play, Sebastian is still attached to his mother's dominance and could not separate himself from her. This situation blocks him from creating the required space, responsible for the existence and identification with the Imaginary Father. Sebastian forms a unique and complex relationship with his mother, Mrs. Violet Venable, the intimidating widow of an extremely wealthy businessman. She believes that she and Sebastian were inseparable; neither Sebastian's friends nor her own husband could divide them. During Encantada's tour, for instance, she decided to stay with Sebastian even though her husband was back in New Orleans on his deathbed. This shows how she devotes her life to serving her son and shows a strong desire to protect him. She speaks of him as being "chaste" and jokes about helping him at the delivery of his annual poem, which, according to Devlin "Violet pretends to be a creative power in Sebastian's work and regards herself as a guardian of his poetic gift." (132). She endeavors to recall all her son's eccentricities and funny conduct that she tries to correct. In other words, his mother does not only dote on him but also obsesses with him and everything he does or says. There are many scenes in the play that show their close and unhealthy relationship:

Mrs. Venable. My son, Sebastian...! We were famous people.
People didn't speak of Sebastian
and his mother or Mrs. Venable and her
son, they said "Sebastian and Violet,
Violet and Sebastian are staying at the
Lido, they're at the Ritz in Madrid.
Sebastian and Violet, Violet and
Sebastian have taken a house at Biarritz
for the season," and every appearance,

every time we appeared, attention was
centered on us! (Suddenly Last Summer 12)
Mrs. Venable. ... My son, Sebastian, and I constructed
our days, each day, we would-carve out
each day of our lives like a piece of
sculpture. —Yes, we left behind us a
trail of days like a gallery of sculpture! (Suddenly Last Summer 13).

From these quotes, it is obvious that Sebastian is the main pivot around which his mother rotates; they never separate from each other except one summer. They travel together. Her devotion and love for her son reach the point of aggression towards others. Her aggression against Catherine is a clear example particularly after his death when she tries to destroy Sebastian's cousin, Catherine who knows the narrative of his demise. The play also suggests that Mrs. Venable's close attachment to her son starts, as Catherine speculates, on "the day he was born in this house" (Suddenly Last Summer 23). The previous statement stands for the well-built maternal bond between Sebastian and his mother. The only reason he traveled to Spain without her was because she was not feeling well. He does this choice because his mother "weren't able to travel...she had a stroke" (Suddenly Last Summer 27). After his death, his doting mother tries to keep her son's memory as a noble poet who dedicated his life to artistic idealism and free from any offensive passions: "I'm devoting all that's left of my life... to the defense of a dead poet's reputation" (Suddenly Last Summer 7). She likes to protect the sanctity of her relationship with Sebastian and endeavors to do anything to keep her extraordinary relationship with her son. Therefore, she determines to stop Catherine from revealing that Sebastian was murdered by boys who prostituted themselves to him.

Sebastian is an aspiring poet who appears in the play as a shadow. He was murdered mysteriously on a journey to Europe and his mother tries to conceal the enigmatic motivation behind his murder. Like Laura and Tom, Sebastian substitutes what he misses in his Psychic Space with exotic and strange plants and use the pretty females— particularly his mother and Catherine—to attract young boys to satisfy his sexual orientation. Sebastian's crisis is derived from his inability to separate himself from his mother and directs his sexual desires to attract young innocent boys. The absence of the Father figure affects his perception of the societal norms and social skills. Sebastian continues to pursue his search for what he lacks, probably the loving father: "All poets look for God, you'd say to yourself" (9). Sebastian was in a continuous quest for what he lacks, the Imaginary Father. For instance, in his tour to Galapagos, the Encantas Islands, Sebastian thought of entering a Buddhist monastery looking for God. According to Thomas P. Adler, Sebastian is obsessed with the evil in himself to the point that he transfers this evil to God, creating a God devoid of any love or goodness:

Sebastian went looking for a clear image of God in the Encantas Islands, and thinks he found the desired image in the birds of prey devouring the newborn turtles. Since Sebastian himself lives basically a predatory life, using his mother and his cousin Catherine as procurers for his homosexual liaisons, he mistakenly, yet understandably, equates his savage vision with a cruel God who created a hideous world where men attack their fellowmen. Instead of entering into communion with other people, Sebastian inverts the normal flow of love, turning it back in upon himself. (*Suddenly Last Summer* 141)

Sebastian misinterprets some natural phenomenon, the scene of the hawkish birds, and mixes it with his understanding of the concept of the Almighty. Sebastian assumes that the image of the birds goring the baby turtles is the clear image of God/father that he looks for. He apparently becomes fascinated and totally engrossed with what is considered uncivilized and barbarous. Maurice Yacowar confirms what Adler notices when he says, "His [Sebastian's] God is the terror of a sky filled with devouring birds that gorge themselves on the underbellies of baby sea turtles. As Sebastian commits himself to this cruel and narrow vision, he too becomes a consumer of flesh" (51).

Unfortunately, Sebastian cannot be acquainted with what he searches for because he suffers from empty psychic space, exhibited in missing the Krestivian concept of Imaginary Father whose assignment is to facilitate learning the social norms and concepts where Sebastian can learn and grow as a normal person. Hence, Sebastian was not literally searching for God, but he was in search for the missing element in his psychic space, represented as his loving father. At this point, he tries to fill his Psychic Space with the brutal view of the birds devouring the baby turtles. Sebastian is fascinated by this view; he even looks at it as a metaphor of love. This image plays an important role in how Sebastian regards the real world and builds his character accordingly. In an attempt to understand how Sebastian recognizes the different values, symbols and codes of the society; Stanton indicates that "based on this fact, Sebastian was baffled and distracted, believing that the image of Father is the image of birds goring the baby turtles, which is not true, because his Psychic Space is vacant and not supported by the primary identification of the loving father." (32) Henceforth, one can observe that Sebastian is obsessed with the devil—his Imaginary

Father—especially in the scene where he exploits the boys who live on the free beach in Cabeza de Lobo. In this respect, the most ferocious theatrical image in the play is depicted when Sebastian was eating luxuriously in cities where the natives were starving, giving rise to the ferocious image that Sebastian tries to identify himself with.

On the contrary, the relationship between Catherine Holly and Violet is based on jealousy and vengeance. Mrs. Venable believes that Catherine, in addition to helping Sebastian to separate from her, has snatched her son and endangered his life, particularly when she traveled with him to Europe at the time of his deadly accident. Mrs. Venable postulates that Catherine is responsible for her son's murder: "before her eyes, a horde of street boys in the resort of Cabeza de Lobo tore Sebastian's limb from limb and devoured parts of his body" (Suddenly Last Summer 23). Eventually, this horrible scene disturbed Catherine to the point of being obsessed with this memory that sends her to the Sanitarium. At the asylum, Catherine's raving and delirious state threatens to undermine Mrs. Venable's emotional memories of her son. To protect her son's reputation, she asked Doctor Cukrowicz to examine Catherine in the hope that he would agree to perform a frontal lobotomy:

Doctor. There is a good deal of risk involved in the operation...

Mrs. Venable. You said that it pacifies them, it quiets them down, it suddenly makes them peaceful.

Doctor. Yes, it does that, that much we already know, but—

Mrs. Venable. Oh, but what a blessing to them, Doctor, to be just peaceful, to be just suddenly—peaceful. (Suddenly Last Summer 14-15)

The act of lobotomy will cut off the horrible memory of Sebastian's death from Catherine's brain because she, at the time of his death, is depicted as a distressed person whose state of mind is in part connected with her memories of Sebastian's death. In the asylum, Catherine talks about the horrifying past incident during a vacation trip with Sebastian that has caused her nervous breakdown. To stop such gossip, particularly Catherine's crazed utterances relating to Sebastian's fate, Mrs. Venable attempts to bribe a young experimental neurosurgeon to perform a frontal lobotomy on Catherine. According to Goodwin, "the barbaric action of lobotomy would be essential to uncover the internal and external reasons and motivations behind this act. She is murderously jealous of Catherine who tries to assist Sebastian to uncover his identity and autonomy and discard the shackles enforced on him by his mother." (212) Mrs. Venable threatens to lobotomize Catherine and deface her existence to retaliate and penalize Catherine's inclination towards Sebastian, this, in reality, is the main motive and purpose behind the act of lobotomy. Catherine's dreadful and awful action of having a romantic relationship with Sebastian, according to Mrs. Venable, is responsible for the disconnection of his relationship with his mother. On the other hand, the actual reason for the lobotomy is that Mrs. Venable tries to suppress Catherine's memory of Sebastian's death. Mrs. Venable wants to cloud the truth about her son's homosexuality and horrible death. In fact, she wants him to be remembered as a great poet. Catherine believes that she failed her mission of separating Sebastian from his mother:

Catherine. Yes, you see, I failed him! And so, last summer, we went to Cabeza de Lobo, we flew from where he gave up writing his poem last summer.

Mrs. Venable. Because he'd broken our—

Catherine. Yes! Yes, something had broken, that string of pearls that old mothers hold their sons by like a—sort of a—sort of—*umbilical* cord, long—after...

Mrs. Venable. She means that I held him back from—. (Suddenly Last Summer 36)

Mrs. Venable believes that nobody can seize her son from her, bringing about the fact that Catherine's relationship with Sebastian might occur on account of his relationship with his mother. However, when Catherine appears in his life and falls in love with him, he misinterprets her emotions and utilizes her to implement his own selfish interests. His cruel conduct reflects his ignorance of the meaning of love; it is beyond his comprehension, inducing the fact that he is unable to decode and decipher the different social values, signs and symbols. He therefore takes advantage of their love—both his mother's and Catherine's—not appreciating their deep affection towards him and utilizes them as sexual bait to attract boys for his sexual satisfaction. Henceforth, his relationship with his mother and Catherine is somehow based on abnormal motives, at least from Sebastian's side. For him, love, perhaps, means mutual utilization by which people use and consume each other. According to Judith Thompson:

The relationship between Mrs. Venable and her son is also revealed to be of a mutually exploitive nature. Explicitly revealed is Sebastian's victimization of his mother, who, before her disfiguring stroke, served the same function of solicitor or pimp subsequently assumed by Catherine: "*Not consciously!* She didn't know that she was procuring for him... [but] both the same thing for him, made contract for him. (112)

Apparently, Sebastian could not comprehend Catherine's and his mother's true emotions, because of the absence of the Father figure which in turn prevents him from appropriately socializing and interacting with people. Catherine, for instance, after the raping accident, tries to have a normal and traditional love relationship with Sebastian and attempts to build a typical man-woman relationship. However, he does not realize her intentions and uses her, as he used his mother in previous years, to attract young men and boys he seduces. He does not know how to approach other people based on the established social norms of society.

Ultimately, Tom, Laura, and Sebastian lack Kristeva's concept of the loving Father, which is responsible for learning the norms, values, and societal guidelines appropriate to communicate and thrive. All three of the characters are still trapped in their mother's world, which makes them lack the ability to abject and separate themselves from her. Consequently, they won't be able to love and socialize normally with others in a typical relationship. Hence, they all fall into the state of engulfment and isolation which stems from their mother's assertive nature, who keeps them under her wing even though they try to resist her and seek to escape their unpleasant life conditions. The void of the Father figure, as shown in the characters of Tom, Laura, and Sebastian and their inability to abject their mothers, causes them to fill the "psychic space" with unnatural things and unreal love objects, resulting in trapping them in an abnormal world. In fact, their tragedy stems from the fact that their "psychic space" remains empty, causing their incapability to love, commune, and behave in a normal and satisfactory way.

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