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



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

Abstract. The present article aims to explore Butler's notion of precarity in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. Agencies that induce precarity in characters of the play, Laura in particular, reaction to the repercussions of precariousness and the ways it leads to a new identity are also put under scrutiny. In the last decades, feminist and gender studies, with all their subcategories and subdivisions, have been one of the main concerns and interests in literary criticism as well as in social and cultural studies. A highly influential scholar in feminist and gender studies is Judith Butler. Normative power and gender related issues are sustained motifs throughout the study, which addresses the following questions: What are the roots of Laura's feeling of precarity? How does her precarity affect and inflict those around her? How does she cope with or respond to her sense of precarity? To answer these questions, the researcher will draw upon Butler's conception of precarity and precariousness and will focus on such key terms as femininity, patriarchy, pipe dreams, physical impairment, regulative system, and financial insecurity. This section of the article is divided into three main parts, namely, "Introduction," "Theoretical Framework," and "Analysis," which comprises "Femininity" and "Disability."

Keywords: Butler, Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, precarity, femininity, and disability.

Căminul fragil al unei fete precare: un studiu Butlerian al *The Glass Menagerie* a lui Tennessee Williams. Prima parte

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", „Cadrul teoretic" și „Analiză", care cuprinde „Feminitate" și „Dizabilitate".

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

1. Introduction

In the last decades, feminist and gender studies, with all their subcategories and subdivisions, have been one of the main concerns and interests in literary criticism as well as in social and cultural studies. A highly influential scholar in feminist and gender studies is Judith Butler (1956), an American philosopher, gender theorist, and political activist. Butler's post-structuralist performance-based subjectivity has been of tremendous influence in ethics, queer studies, third wave feminism, and literary theory. In her seminal book on gender performativity, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Butler states that:

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative, suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality [1, p. 173].

In *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway* (2000), Nick Mansfield argues that in Butler's view, "the gender identity and behavior you manifest are products of a socially and culturally sanctioned system and hierarchy, and not the inevitable result of naturally occurring differences between men and women" [2, p. 68] and "gender is a regulated system of performances. In short it is built on the correct repetition of behaviors" [2, p. 77]. Butler's first book is *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-century France* (1987), in which she reviews Hegelian subject and a number of 20th– century French philosophers' conceptions of it. Her next book, which marks a drastic shift from Hegelian phenomenology to gender and feminism, is *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). The book, whose central debate was initially reflected in a previously written article titled "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988) is regarded as her most influential work on the subject of performativity. In many of her books, including *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993), *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (1997), *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), *Senses of the Subject* (2015), and *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), such motifs as gender, sex, performance, the body, the self, and subject formation keep recurring over and over again.

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), a pen name for Tennessee Lanier Williams III, is considered one of the most influential and successful American playwrights of the 20th century. In his "Tennessee Williams and the Predicament of Women," Louise Blackwell argues that in contemporary American theatre, Williams is renowned and revered as the writer of female leading characters [3, p. 10]. Williams' masterpieces often include autobiographical elements; his *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, for instance, include episodes and aspects of his personal life, among which one can detect homosexuality, alcoholism, and mental instability. The similarity between Rose, Williams's older sister, and Laura Wingfield, the major character in *The Glass Menagerie* is unmissable; both of them are visibly reclusive, timid, and diffident. Analogies can also be drawn between the domineering Amanda Wingfield, Laura's mother, and the playwright's mother or Tom, Laura's brother (who is torn between family responsibilities and personal dreams), and his alter ego. In *Representations of Gender and identity in the Drama of Tennessee Williams*, Terese Downes Henry has asserted that the fictional characters Williams creates can be viewed as the hallmark of unreserved autobiographical expressiveness [4, p. 3]. Other important qualities which characterize Williams' plays are psychological realism [5, p. 112], prominence of female protagonists, and a gloomy and dark quest for identity [6, p. 12]. The present article studies Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* to identify and analyze examples and manifestations of Butler's notion of precarity in

the life of its major characters, Laura in particular. Reaction to precariousness and the ways it leads to a new identity are also put under scrutiny. Put another way, this research explores the reasons for precarity and fragility and the effects it exerts on the characters who feel precarious in the Butlerian sense of the term. Regulative power, patriarchy, capitalism, and gender related issues are sustained motifs throughout the study. Here, the central questions are: Why does Laura feel so precarious in her family? How does she cope with her sense of precarity? How does her precarity affect and inflict her brother and her mother? To answer these questions, the researcher will draw upon Butler's conception of precarity and precariousness and will focus on such key terms as femininity, celibacy, physical impairment, pipe dreams, the disintegration of family, and male chauvinism. In the following pages, first Butler's understanding of precarity will be briefly introduced in "Theoretical Framework," and then the possibility of observing its typical aspects in *The Glass Menagerie* is explored. The analytical section of the article is divided into five main categories: "Femininity," which probes into Laura's feeling of precarity caused by her gender, "Disability," which seeks to realize whether physical disadvantage has anything to do with Butlerian precarity, "Illusion," which aims to discover if precarity feeds and results in illusion and self-deception, "Unemployment," which tries to identify the relationship between financial issues and Butlerian precarity, and finally "Absence of a Father Figure," which takes it upon itself to see if the lack of a father or supporting male figure stimulates a sense of precarity and vulnerability in the orphan (here, Laura).

2. Theoretical Framework

In the works, Butler wrote in the 2000s, her feminist views on gender, identity and performativity expanded to cover precarity, politics, power, and ethics while her concern with marginality remained persistent. It implies that she gradually came to fuse her previously formulated notions of performativity and gendered subjectivity with regulatory power, the self / the other dichotomy, and most importantly, reasons for and aspects of precarious existence. This shift is especially evident in her *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009).

In *Precarious Life* Butler writes about lives that are not equally precarious and those who live on the margins of social existence and are exposed to social injustice, harm, and precarity. Adopting a rather pessimistic view about social life, she maintains that "living socially" presupposes "the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all" [7, p. 14]. Nancy Ettlinger broadly defines Butler's precarity as "a condition of vulnerability to social, political, economic, environmental events, and shocks" [8, p. 331]. In Butler's view, precariousness is a "social condition from which clear political demands and principles emerge" [7, p. 4]. Butler justifies the claim by giving the example of the attacks on 9/11. Another example is "the extensive deaths now taking place in Africa are also, in the media, for the most part unmarkable and ungrievable" [7, p. 35]. Butler insists that global power imbalances make it hard for Westerners, for example, to identify with those faces or names that are culturally and ethnically different, especially if those faces were presented as a personification of evil. Adopting a Butlerian perspective, Schierup et al. explain that "migrants and racialised minorities make up a disproportionate part of the growing social category whose experience in the world of work is marked by 'precarity' in terms of informal labour, wage squeezes, temporariness, uncertainty, and pernicious risk" [9, p. 2].

Image-making and the imposition of the self onto the other is, no matter how false and unjust it may be, nevertheless what connects individuals to one another – culturally and intellectually; as Butler has asserted, "I cannot muster the 'we' except by finding the way in which I am tied to 'you,' by … finding that

my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know" [7, p. 49]. The word 'human' in this context refers to a state of being which is 'broken' because of the harm caused by the other. Butler's understanding of precarity and ethics pivots around the universalization of ethics and the inevitability of the formation of the self and the other. It follows that for Butler, precarity serves as a basis of identification, which consequently leads to violence against the other. She wonders "from where might a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kinds of violence we have suffered, if not from an apprehension of a common human vulnerability?" [7, p. 30].

Distinguishing between precarity and precariousness in her *Frames of War,* Butler states that "precariousness is shared by all; precarity is distributed unequally" [10, p. 25]. For her, precarity is a more sinister and more systematic version of precariousness as it represents not simply a natural feeling of insecurity but an unstable way of living which lacks governmental support and is characterized by constant threat and vulnerability: "Precariousness has to be grasped not simply as a feature of this or that life, but as a generalized condition whose very generality can be denied only by denying precariousness itself" [10, p. 22]. She claims that precarity "designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" [10, p. 22]. Annamma Joy et al. explain that precarity designates "the lives of those deemed by the powerful to not matter, whose lives are inherently precarious. Precarity is thus applicable to all potentially disenfranchised 'others' … anyone viewed as lesser by the dominant social order" [11, p. 1742]. Elaborating on performativity and gendered subjectivity, Massoud Yaghoubi-Notash et al. write that "the idea of a gender identity is socially made, politically charged and informed by a socio-historical context of a male-dominated society and other social laws. Gender is the cultural embodiment of a sexed body and is shaped and constructed through social mechanisms" [12, p. 308]. One can relate performativity to precarity by arguing that political contexts and social laws and mechanisms, which construct, change, and influence gendered identity and performativity, can also be viewed as disenfranchising factors in the precarious lives of the dominated or the other.

3. Analysis

Laura, one of the major characters in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, seems quite vulnerable and weak in a male-dominated society. We should keep in mind the different types of dominance that patriarchy exerts in Laura's life. As a woman, she is treated unfairly by patriarchy, as if she lacked something or were inferior to men. In addition, as Williams states in his "production notes," "a childhood illness has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, and held in a brace" [13, p. 2], making her a handicap and her lameness is automatically interpreted as a lack and a shortcoming. Moreover, this mixture of her being physically handicapped and the society's perception of her being weak only because of her femininity intensifies the poignancy of both aspects. Thirdly, her obsession with her dreams can be seen as another form of weakness, as she uses them to cope with reality, which is simply too harsh and devastating. As Roger B. Stein has stated in his "*The Glass Menagerie* Revisited: Catastrophe without Violence" (1992), the play is "a vision of lonely human beings who fail to make contact, who are isolated from each other and society" [14, p. 4]. Yet, this defense mechanism is one of the reasons for her precariousness. Fourthly, her unemployment and lack of skill cause her to be seen as a burden to her family and it also undermines her position in the society. Finally, we can say that Laura's lack of a masculine figure as her guardian or source of protection also makes her vulnerable in a male-dominated society. That is why her family tries to make up for this lack by bringing Jim into her life. In what follows, I will attribute the

roots of Laura's precarity to womanhood, lameness, pipe dreams, financial dependence, and the absence of a supportive father figure.

3.1. Femininity

Laura, as a woman, needs to live up to the images of femininity to be accepted in her society and any deviation from the image causes her to become a liability. *Gender Trouble*, Butler states that:

Femininity becomes a mask that dominates/resolves a masculine identification, for a masculine identification would, within the presumed heterosexual matrix of desire, produce a desire for a female object, the Phallus; hence, the donning of femininity as mask may reveal a refusal of female homosexuality and at the same time, the hyperbolic incorporation of that female Other who is refused- an odd form preserving and protecting that love within the circle of the melancholic and negative narcissism that results from the psychic inculcation of compulsory heterosexuality [1, p. 68].

The image is that of the southern belle, an active woman who wins over her suitors by sexual prowess and beauty and keeps her husband happy by being responsible, obedient, and a caring mother. As Amanda, Laura's mother, has put it, "So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? … What is there left but dependency all of our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared for occupy a position … Of course, some girls do marry!" [13, p. 16]. This lifetime of dependency is what she envisages for her daughter. Early in the play, Amanda sets up her expectations for Laura as she says that she was visited by seventeen gentlemen in a single day. As Eric P. Levy has asserted in "Through Soundproof Glass": The Prison of Self-Consciousness in *The Glass Menagerie*" (1993), Amanda forces her ideal feminine image upon her daughter, trying to project herself as a mirror for her lost femininity, in order to feel feminine again [15, p. 2]. This obsession with the feminine image is also observable in another scene of the play, as Amanda tries to force Tom, the only masculine figure in the family, to protect Laura whom she regards as the weakest link of the family: "I mean that as soon as Laura has got somebody to take care of her, married, a home of her own, independent–why, then you'll be free to go wherever you please, on land, on sea, whichever way the wind blows you! But until that time you've got to look out for your sister" [13, p. 23].

Here, not only Laura's disability is magnified, but her womanhood is viewed as a precarity agency. Amanda seems to be insinuating that her daughter will never be independent if she does not get married and does not live in another house. This idea corresponds with Laura's sense of guilt, and as Donna R. Falvo has noted in *Medical and Psychosocial Aspects of Chronic Illness and Disability* (2005), "Guilt can be described as self-criticism or blame. Individuals or family members may feel guilty if they believe they contributed to, or in some way caused, the chronic illness or disability" [16, p. 7]. An example of such self-criticism can be seen in the way Laura shirks from the outside world, for instance when her mother makes her socialize in a church sermon: "I took her over to the Young People's League at the church. Another fiasco. She spoke to nobody, nobody spoke to her. Now all she does is fool with those pieces of glass and play those worn-out records. What kind of a life is that for a girl to lead?" [13, p. 14]. In "Metaphorical Disability in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (2022), Jiefei Yu argues that Laura feels both guilty as a woman and a as disabled person, as she believes her inability to learn to write shorthand, or not being able to use a typewriter, makes her a burden to others [17, p. 1]. Thomas P. Adler asserts that a person who feels inferior to others supposes that they are constantly judged by others; however, they try to satisfy the need for superiority by restricting themselves to what they have and what they know as a means of regaining control. Also, this restriction helps them to prevent failure [18, p. 652].

Laura recalls her experience of tension and anxiety while she was studying: "had to go

clumping up the aisle with everyone watching," something she was partaking in for regaining her image of femininity which her mother had forced upon her. This shows that her retreating and self-restriction are cover-ups for her inability to stand up against her mother and on a larger scale, the society as a whole. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler points to the pressure that the society puts on women to fulfill their prescribed roles and the resulting desire for sex-change: "Femininity is taken by a woman who "wishes for masculinity," but fears the retributive consequences of taking on the public appearance of masculinity" [1, p. 66]. As a consequence, the woman's "mind is associated with masculinity and body with femininity" [1, p. 17]. Laura had internalized the idea that she lacked something, as she felt guilty for only being there. Laura fails to comply with the image her mother represents as the "woman of the house," according to which the woman does her best to impress others with her housekeeping skills. Amanda, for instance, redecorates the furniture, changes the lamps, and invites Jim over, all to impress him. Laura, on the other hand, is always drowsing or idling. Williams implicitly confirms her laziness by drawing attention to her makeshift bed: "Nearest the audience is the living room, which also serves as a sleeping room for Laura, the sofa unfolding to make her bed" [13, p. 5].

It must be added that Laura uses idleness and passivity as a way to have control over others, or as a kind of defense mechanism or opposition. This is also evident in Amanda's search for gentleman callers and Laura's obvious indifference: "[Amanda]: Resume your seat, little sister – I want you to stay fresh and pretty – for gentlemen callers!" [13, p. 16], "[Amanda]: Remember suggesting that it would be nice for your sister if you brought home some nice young man from the warehouse. I think that I've made that suggestion more than once. [Tom]: Yes, you have made it repeatedly" [13, p. 22], "[Amanda]: (impatiently). Why are you trembling? [Laura]: Mother, you've made me so nervous!" [13, p. 17], or "[Laura]: … I won't come to the table. [Amanda] What sort of nonsense is this? … it won't be him! … but whether it is or not, you will come to the table. You will not be excused" [13, p. 43]. The difference frustrates Amanda: "It's rare for a girl as sweet an' pretty as Laura to be domestic! But Laura is, thank heavens, not only pretty but also very domestic" [13, p. 17], showing that she sees Laura only as an extension of the feminine ideal image she has for herself. According to George Hovis, the act of forcing one's daughter to accept and expect suitors is not just out of tradition, but it possesses a form of Darwinian function, showing the weakness that women like Amanda felt in the socio-economic conditions of the time [19, p. 175]. Amanda believes that her daughter is both pretty and domestic, but she suspiciously confesses that Laura is "quiet but–still water runs deep!" [13, p. 17]. Amanda tries to relate any distinct attribute Laura has to femininity, firstly as a way to get over the guilt she feels due to her self-projection onto her daughter, and secondly, out of genuine concern she has for her daughter, seeing the future of her daughter has part of her responsibility, something very dominant in the gender roles of the time.

3.2. Disability

Throughout the play, Laura is described by rather pejorative terms, a constant adjective among which is "cripple." The physical manifestation of the label is her short leg, amplified in the eyes of others by the braces she must wear to walk. This causes her to be perpetually conscious of herself, oftentimes unconsciously reminding others of her physical impairment. In her *Frames of War*, Butler states that "disability and racialization depend upon the reproduction of bodily norms" [10, p. 52]. Laura's mother believes that "it is terrible, dreadful, disgraceful that poor little sister has never received a single gentleman caller," and she believes that it is her daughter's lameness that has brought her shame and disgrace [13, p. 16]. In his "A Place in the Family: An Historical Interpretation of Research on Parental Reactions to Having a Child with a Disability" (2002), Philip M. Ferguson states that in the mid-20th century, the

society believed that the family of the disabled person was to blame for the state they were in, and being both a woman and poor multiplies the amount of this blame [20, p. 124]. Her mother's humiliating remarks cause Laura to feel guilty for her disability, as she sees herself as a burden in the household. To Amanda, being normal is far more important than being happy; this exacerbates Laura's precarity as she knows that can never be normal or she can never belong to any place, not even her own home. As Paul K. Longmore has contended in his *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* (2003), "The majority of crippled children were excluded from public schools (the term 'crippled' encompassed almost anyone with a disability), and those who were educated were done so in hospitals, in a more 'appropriate' setting" [21, p. 58]. This shows that the society excludes and looks down on those whom it dubs as crippled. As a solution to the exclusion imposed by the society, recommends that "The point is not to stay marginal, but to participate in whatever network or marginal zones is spawned from other disciplinary centers" [10, p. xxxii]. She justifies her proclamation by declaring that "In marking off the very domain of what is subject to repression, exclusion operates prior to repression - that is, in the delimitation of the law and its objects of subordination" [10, p. 71].

It also justifies Laura's reluctance to go on the stage at the school. She felt rejected and alienated by the education system and she was adamant that she would never take part in any of student activities. The pressure from society also affects Laura's mother, who is blamed for her daughter's disability. Yu believes this to be the driving force behind the urgency of Amanda's desire for Laura's marriage [17, p. 2]. According to Ann M. Fox, under the gaze of the family and the society Laura has only two choices: either to develop the expected feminine charms or to totally ignore her disability [22, p. 6].

To Amanda, her daughter is incapable of living a normal life as she desperately needs someone else (obviously, a man) to compensate for her disability. However, this turns out to be another reason for Laura's precarity since she knows that her chances of marriage are limited because of her physical impairment. Her mother insists that by having "charm–and vivacity–and–charm!" [13, p. 17], she can overcome any lack or setback in life, most importantly, her lameness. In desperation, Amanda resorts to Laura's beauty, seeing it as the only thing that can win her a suitable husband; nevertheless, by exaggerating her daughter's looks, she is actually denying the reality of her daughter's life and making things worse for her. Laura irritates her mother by reminding her that she is the mother of a "cripple," something that does not conform to her ideal image of a southern girl; however, what does conform to the image is Laura's beauty and serenity, even though she does not know how to exploit it. That is why Amanda keeps denying her daughter's physical defect. Amanda's denial can, in effect, be interpreted as another form of consciousness, but unlike her mother, Laura never ignores or hides bitter facts.

As far as physical disability is concerned, Laura feels incapacitated by a dilemma. On the one hand, she has to give up on what the society considers as normal social behavior by restricting herself to her room; on the other, she has to bear the others' denial and misunderstandings. Her society, in Robert McRuer's words, suffers from the idea of "compulsory able-bodiedness," which as shown in previous examples, causes the society to believe that everyone is "non-disabled," unless proven otherwise [23, p. 371]. This is evident in Jim's reaction to Laura admitting to seeing herself as "crippled" and his patronizing remarks. There is, however, a touch of superiority in Jim's comforting words; he is sympathizing with Laura while he does not really know what it means to be a cripple. This lack of understanding makes Laura feel pitied and miserable, the result of which is more precarity and more isolation. Laura is shocked and speechless when Jim tells her about his engagement, shattering her illusion about being special to him in any way or excelling in anything. Pretentious sympathy can only intensify precarity and lack of confidence.

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