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Enhancing Reality: Reimagining and Redefining Disability and Dysfunction through the Exploration of American Drama

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Abstract:

How does it feel to lack something that everyone else has? How does it feel not being able to do something that everyone else can do? This difference, felt by the disabled or differently-abled is more likely the desperation out of discrimination. The concept of equality here often equates to preferences, but preferences are not solutions; they are merely support mechanisms in social dynamics. The labelling of the disabled as unique or special is not optimistic in the truest sense, but shaping their minds to feel so is. The primary support system for one is the family; however, when circumstances become extreme and unbearable, they can shatter familial stability, disintegrating it into a dysfunctional entity. This research paper is a detailed study of the two American plays, *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* by Eugene O'Neill. It examines and interprets the intersection between disability and dysfunction and their role in the familial crisis in light of societal norms and expectations. Parallel to the literary world, the paper also discusses the perspective of viewing disability as art and conceptualizing addiction as a disability in the real world from a practical and policy-oriented perspective.

Keywords: Disability, Dysfunction, Family, Art, Addiction.

Life, under the same sky, is never the same for all. Each human is born different, and these differences make life compellingly complex. How do the disabled feel about being labelled as special when they do not feel truly special? Quite an irony it is. They feel inferior, sensitive, fragile, and perplexed when their voices are unheard and devalued. How do their families feel to provide fulfilling support in all dimensions? It is undeniably true that they feel physically and emotionally taxed to look after the disabled in the face of societal norms, pressures, and economic turbulence.

It is significant to examine, analyze, and interpret the term 'disabled' in a broader context. Disabled, not only describes those who have physical, and mental impairments and terminal illness, but those whose functional capacity is stifled due to certain psychological factors involving addiction, obsession, existential crisis, and so on.

Tennessee William's one-act classic, *The Glass Menagerie* centers on a plot that sheds light on the bitter state of reality highlighting the struggles of limitations and the psychological state of the disabled with no fundamental support, but escapism as the way out of conflicts. The family of the disabled is in a state of delusions and dysfunction in the face of societal norms and expectations. Set in the era of the Great American Depression, strained financially and emotionally, a family confronts situations of the present with perspectives of the past, making the reality bitter.

The character Laura Wingfield in the play is physically disabled. It is stated: "A childhood illness has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, held in a brace" (Williams, 51). Born and raised in a family fatherless, to a mother thoughtless and a younger sibling to a brother reckless, the dysfunctional nature of the family adds more to Laura's internal conflicts. Her disability makes her feel that her life is never or ever going to be a bed of roses, but a trail of thorns. She turns shy and silent, without any attempt to strive towards better well-being. Her external expression of introversion is the result of her internal suppression of insecurities and feelings of inferiority.

A disabled person needs to be provided with physical, mental, and social support and uplifting. For a deeper insight, it is significant to examine 'health' as a fundamental concept. What does it mean to be healthy or perfectly fit? 'Being healthy' does not merely rest upon the 'absence of illness' in an individual as health is a multidimensional concept. According to the World Health Organization, health is defined as: "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity" (WHO, 2006).

Unfortunately, in the case of Laura, there is no support and uplifting in any dimension within the familial framework. It becomes significant to examine and analyze how she is treated by her family of two. From a bigger picture, it can be interpreted in such a way that her mother, Amanda, intends to treat her daughter without partial consideration of her disability. Amanda says: "Why, you're not crippled, you just have a little defect - hardly noticeable, even!" (Williams, 71). However, it is significant to note that the impact of Amanda's perspective and approach towards Laura is unfitting and unhealthy.

Amanda's character is flawed with her mental framework firmly inclined to the past. Her thoughts and words are often nostalgic and never correlate with the events and circumstances of the present. She compels her daughter to pursue things in life just like an ordinary person could do, neglecting to contemplate the inner conflicts from which Laura is suffering. The ignorance of her inner conflicts leads to a psychological strain, shaping her personality to be conserved and eccentric. Amanda's flaw of constant reminiscence of the past and resistance to the present contributes to Laura's internal conflicts.

It should be noted that throughout the play, Amanda denies and disregards addressing or describing Laura, as 'crippled'. When Tom addresses Laura as crippled, Amanda warns him: "Don't say crippled! You know that I never allow that word to be used!" (Williams, 98). However, ironically when Tom invites Jim to be a gentleman caller for Laura, the situation takes a turn. Upon Jim's arrival, it becomes apparent that Jim's intentions are not sincere, as he is already engaged to another girl. This disappointing revelation prompts Amanda to yell out at Tom, ironically describing her daughter, crippled. She states the following:

That's right, now that you've had us make such fools of ourselves. The effort, the preparations, all the expense! The new floor lamp, the rug, the clothes for Laura! all for what? To entertain some other girl's fiancé! Go to the movies, go! Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job! Don't let anything interfere with your selfish pleasure I just go, go, go - to the movies! (Williams, 145)

Further, the characters of the play prefer and favour long-term escapism to a permanent resolution out of a daring choice or decision. The only male in the family, Tom, lives a life of labour, filled with hatred, regrets, and guilt. He is forced to fill in the position of his father when he is not ready physically, mentally, and socially. The lack of readiness, interest, and motivation results in his loose, casual, careless, and irresponsible attitude.

Aspired to become a writer, Tom is fated to spend his time and energy working in a shoe warehouse, uninspired in despair. A life unloved is no better than a life unlive. Unable to bear a life of existence, the rebellious will in him brings out distractions that constitute the mechanism of escapism. This escapism minimizes the visibility of Tom's psychological burdens. He likes to be engaged with sources of entertainment that include movies and magic shows.

Sharing a bitter relationship with his mother, simple conversations between the duo end up in arguments and emotional outbursts. It can be noted that immediately following every argument, he goes and lights a cigarette for distraction: “He lights a cigarette and goes over to the fire-escape door” (Williams, 109). Tom instead of embracing the unfavourable circumstances, desires to break free or escape them through certain elements that are entertaining and addictive. In the end, he abandons his family for the love of adventure just like his father who did for his love of long distances.

While analyzing the character of Laura, it is understood that her mode of escapism is unusual and becomes quite extreme. How does Laura, an old soul, with crippled confidence survive in a materialistic and superficial world? She escapes, not merely distracting herself, but contextually transcending to a world of fantasy, away from reality, seeking ecstasy. She becomes obsessed with glass animals and plays and interacts with them, constructing around her a world, comfortable, safe, and secure, for herself, on her own. Out of all the glass figurines, the unique unicorn is her favourite.

Laura's obsession with the glass figurines and peculiar love for the unicorn symbolizes her fragile nature and desire for fantasy. She is displeased with the bitterness of reality, the inefficiency of familial support, and her inability to normalize and reconcile with her situation. Her pursuit leads her into a world that only exists in her imagination. There is no one to question her ability, choices, and identity in her realm of fantasy. When it comes to the real world, Laura to carry forward in life, needs emotional support and desirable companionship.

In the play, the longing of a disabled character for an ideal companionship in the bitter reality overpowers the essence of fantasy. This can be witnessed in the brief encounter between Jim and Laura. Jim's genuine attention and attempt to connect enables Laura to slowly step out of her fantastical cocoon. During their conversation, she becomes so absorbed in Jim's charm and caring demeanour that she doesn't mind even when her favourite glass unicorn accidentally falls and breaks its horn. However, unfortunately, Laura's emergence into reality lasts briefly until Jim reveals that he is engaged with another girl:

I can't take down your number and say I'll phone. I can't call up next week and - ask for a date. I thought I had better explain the situation in case you misunderstand it and - hurt your feelings . . . I go out all of the time with a girl named Betty. She's a home-girl like you, and Catholic, and Irish, and in a great

many ways we - get along fine . . . Well - right away from the start it was - love!
(Williams, 138-139)

At this point, Laura's heart, where a single ray of hope has entered, shatters like the very glass. Aftermath, just like the unicorn that has become a plain horse following its fall, Laura's dream-like moments have faded away as memories, following Jim's revelation. She reenters her world of fantasy. The irony lies in the fact that Jim, the only character who understands Laura on physical, emotional, and social levels – even portraying her illness, 'pleurosis', as "blue roses" in an optimistic light, is not meant to be a permanent supporting figure in Laura's life. He says: "They're common as - weeds, -but -you - well, you're - Blue Roses!" (Williams, 137).

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the label of the disabled as 'special' is ironic. To be special is to feel special. Laura although disabled is treated like a healthy individual by her mother, which is not helping her in any aspect. While struggling to cultivate fundamental self-confidence with her disability for survival in society, Laura is further weighed down by the pressure to become a self-accomplished woman, merely for the sake of luring gentleman callers and getting married.

Amanda's attitude is shaped by the depressing familial situation of being a single mother with paternal duties burdening her maternal self. Her treatment of Laura as an ordinary individual is more of an ignorance towards her disability. It is fair to say the familial crisis worsens the impact of disability in Laura, resulting in no progress. Laura's encounter with Jim, their brief romance, and his revelation of having engaged already contribute to a strong sense of hopelessness in her about reality. It is the hopelessness that disables Laura more than her physical impairment.

Families of the disabled face immense challenges in providing comprehensive support in the light of physical, mental, emotional, and social dimensions. It becomes essential for them to gain a crystal clear insight into the physical and psychological turmoil of the disabled. However, it also is an undeniable fact that these families face hardships in psychological, societal, and economic aspects.

However, it is crucial to ensure patience and stability, avoiding any expression of bitterness or burdensome thoughts through their words or actions towards the disabled, as they are susceptible. It does not mean that one should treat and expect from the disabled what could be expected from an ordinary healthy individual. At some point, it becomes essential to help

the disabled realize that they are different, but not alone, and then that difference is to be portrayed neither negatively nor derogatory, followed by efficient support and motivation, cultivating in them hope, boosting their willpower to embrace their life and enhance the reality.

The brightest perspective of all is to view disability as an art. This might seem over-emphasizing. However, it is this sole perspective that makes the 'disabled' truly feel 'differently abled' or 'special'. This is not about normalizing the disability or the disabled but portraying disability as something beautiful which is against the conventional perspectives. It is more of a celebration of the beauty of the disabled.

The world becomes a far better place when the autistic turn artistic; the blind feel the delight of light in the dark; the deaf feel the sweetness of calmness; the paralyzed feel recognized and energized. It might take a long time for the world to turn into the most ideal. In the words of Neil Marcus, a truly remarkable differently abled performance artist: "Disability is not a brave struggle or courage in the face of adversity. Disability is an art. It's an ingenious way to live" (Marcus, 1996).

In an article, *The Art of Disability: An Interview with Tobin Siebers*, Siebers, who is notable for his books focusing on disability talks about linking the concept of beauty with disability and embracing disability as a tool for rethinking human perceptions, challenging the prevailing conventions. In an interview, he says that disability and art can be conceptualized as one. He points out the two different cultures of beauty, one emphasizing the human variation that acts as a driving force behind aesthetics and the other being commercial, emphasizing physical perfection (Siebers).

Embracing disability as a tool in the light of aesthetic culture provokes emotional and intellectual responses, paving the way for diverse conceptions that are positive and uplifting. He emphasizes the inclusion of disability in the realm of beauty and creativity, highlighting the historical connection between disability and modern art and addressing the ongoing struggle in the light of societal discrimination and stereotypes (Siebers).

It is fair to say that embracing disability as an art would play a vital role in enhancing the reality of differently-abled individuals providing them with continual optimism and further encouraging them in the pursuit of creativity. The bitter reality would turn better, making them feel special or differently-abled in the truest sense rather than merely labelling them as one. However, it is not easy to attain this perception universally as the degree of awareness and empathy regarding the struggles of the disabled varies from one individual to another.

Addiction and disability can also be conceptualised into one. Disability does not only imply insufficiency but also overabundance. This overabundance is what constitutes the base of addiction. It is significant to discuss addiction as a threatening disability. This is because there are striking similarities between the disabled and those who have addictions to drugs or substances. Both are discriminated against in the view of society which exhibits pity or disgust towards them.

In the article titled *Conceptualizing Addiction as Disability in Discrimination Law: A Situated Comparison*, the author Rebecca Bun employs the technique of ‘situated comparisons’ to examine the interconnectedness of addiction and disability in legal and geographical contexts, focusing on individuals with addictions to gain equality under the law. In simple terms, individuals having addictions, just like the disabled, deserve equal treatment in society. Conceptualizing addiction as a disability as per law might help those with addictions to a greater extent through rehabilitation and reformation in a society emphasizing open-minded, empathetic, non-discriminative perspectives. This creates a sense of belonging.

The play, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* by O'Neill is composed with a plot that provides a scope to discuss addiction as a disability. Set in the summer days of warmth, this play has a metaphorical title that refers to the light rays of life and hopes to diminish into horrors of death and darkness. It should be noted that this play is autobiographical as it narrates the story of O'Neill and his family, however, is incorporated with fictional and dramatic elements including the amplification of situational crisis.

Briefing out, a dysfunctional family of four it is, with the father James Tyrone, a failed actor sharing a bitter and complicated relationship with his unemployed and alcoholic elder son Jamie Tyrone who has a fatally ill younger sibling Edmund due to Tuberculosis and the lady of the house, their mother and James's wife Mary sufferers from miserable morphine addiction. A story it is of addiction, regrets, traumas, sorrows, blame, and hatred. The circumstances, choices, and perspectives of the characters not only portray addiction as the cause of the crisis but also the dismantled familial bonds and disabled characters who possess no power to recover from the hopeless and horrific state.

James Tyrone, the alcoholic head of the family following his fatal fall and failure in his acting career also fails as a husband and father with never-ending regrets haunting his mind and making him disabled. In Bloom's *Modern Critical Interpretations*, it is written:

James, having had several drinks, becomes garrulous and feels compelled to confess his own failure as an artist, a fact he connects with his penny-pinching ways. He explains that his beginnings turned him into a miser who bought the rights to a play that, while making him wealthy, destroyed his acting career. (Mann, 14)

The relationship between James and his elder son Jamie is bitter. James calls Jamie good for nothing as he is an unemployed alcoholic and is blamed as an undesirable and destructive influence on his younger brother, Edmund. He calls Jamie: “A waste! A wreck, a drunken hulk, done with, and finished!” (Sewall, 81). Jamie does not respect his father’s words. He responds to his father’s words by reversing the blame, accusing his father and his actions of his miserly trait as the primary reason for Mary’s morphine addiction and Edmund’s illness. The chaotic argument of the father-son duo constitutes the majority of the plot’s length.

Jamie exhibits hatred and exposes his jealousy toward his brother Edmund who is ill with Tuberculosis. It should be noted that the fictional character Edmund represents the playwright himself who has personally suffered from and overcome the illness. Jamie also blames his morphine-addicted mother for his own failures. He says: “I suppose I can’t forgive her – yet. It meant so much. I’d begun to hope, if she’d beaten the game, I could, too” (Mann, 14).

Mary Tyrone, the lady of the house is the worst affected as the result of the situational crisis and her morphine addiction can be discussed as a psychological disability. It is noted that she has had to go through a lot of struggles to obtain approval from her mother who had exhibited strong opposition for her daughter to marry an unprivileged actor. Despite the opposition, Mary and James get married. However, immediately following their marriage, it becomes a great deal of disappointment for Mary to realize the impact of James’s alcoholism and learn about his former mistress.

Since then, Mary has been facing a series of unexpected sorrowful events. She faces a tragedy, the death of her infant, Eugene due to measles transmitted from Jamie. Following the birth of Edmund, Mary’s health deteriorates significantly. It is stated: “Edmund born. After his birth, Mary is sick for a long time. She gets rheumatism in her hands and her hair begins to turn grey. To cure a “quack” gives her a morphine . . . In desperate want of morphine, Mary tries to commit suicide by drowning herself” (Törnqvist, 182). It is seen that Mary’s addiction results

from her longing to feel complete numbness rather than suffering from extreme distress. The longing for numbness, the morphine addiction is her escapism.

Towards the end of the play, it is evident that Mary loses her mind completely. She transcends into a mental state of the past, drowning herself in the bearable events of the past. The author describes Mary's mental state through monologues and pseudo-soliloquies. It should be noted that Mary's display of emotions is so intense that Jamie on her arrival at the scene, exclaims: "The Mad Scene. Enter Ophelia!" (Porter, 24). The play ends on a hopeless note when James realizes that his wife has completely transcended into the past, having forgotten the present and her treatment of him as a complete stranger.

Having analyzed the play, it is fair to conclude that addiction can be considered an intimidating disability that affects an individual beyond physical limitations, resulting in psychological limitations. The character Mary's intense battle with addiction mirrors the sufferings of disabled individuals who also encounter struggles and strains in familial relationships.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) acknowledges addiction to alcohol as a disability, whether the addiction is current or in the past. The ADA also recognizes recovery from drug addiction as a disability. According to the ADA, a disabled person is an individual with a physical or mental impairment that leads to limitations in life. Since addiction has been scientifically proven to affect the brain and neurological functions, it is classified by the ADA as a disability. However, it is significant to note that the ADA provides protection only to individuals who are in recovery – those who are no longer consuming illegal drugs (The Americans with Disabilities Act, 1).

It can be argued that conceptualizing and declaring addiction as a disability in world countries by law would help, reform and uplift those with addictions, enabling them to find comfort, effective treatment to recover, and a renewed sense of belonging. The legal recognition enables the affected individuals to seek help without the fear of discrimination. It also paves the way for effective and improved policies, funding, and other legal efforts to address addiction as a public health issue creating the essential degree of awareness.

To conclude, the research paper has analyzed the plot of the two American plays, *The Glass Menagerie* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and critically discussed disability and familial dysfunction. Following comprehensive analysis and discussion, the need to conceptualize disability as an art and addiction as a disability is emphasized. It is evident that

disability ranges beyond physical limitations and also has profound adverse effects on psychological and emotional dynamics. It is proved that negative perceptions associated with disability can be eliminated if the disability is embraced as an art through emphasis on beauty and creativity in aesthetic culture. Further, the benefits of the conceptualization of addiction as a disability through legal recognition are discussed.

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