

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



THE AUTHOR

Thomas Lanier (Tennessee) Williams (1911-1983) is generally considered the greatest Southern playwright in American history. Born in Mississippi to a traveling-salesman father and a disillusioned Southern-belle mother, he had a difficult childhood, neglected by his father and smothered by his mother. When he was seven years old, the family moved from Mississippi to St. Louis, where they struggled to adapt to the big city. His older sister Rose was mentally unstable. After dropping out of college, Williams took a job at the warehouse of the shoe company for which his father worked as a salesman. After ten months of work that he hated, Williams had a nervous breakdown, went to live with his grandparents, and began his career as a writer. Meanwhile, Rose's condition was getting increasingly worse, and she finally broke down completely, after which her parents had her lobotomized - an act for which her brother never forgave them.

In 1938, Williams moved to New Orleans, changed his name to Tennessee, and "came out of the closet," entering fully into the homosexual lifestyle. After a few early flops, he wrote *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944, which was produced to great public acclaim. In 1947 he won a Pulitzer Prize for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This allowed him to be financially independent, and he and his lover moved to Key West, where he found the solitude he needed to write, though he constantly feared that he would inherit his sister's madness. He continued to produce popular stage successes, including *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955; another Pulitzer Prize winner) and *Night of the Iguana* (1961). After the death of Frank Merlo, his lover, Williams became increasingly disconsolate and fell into drug dependence. This continued for the remainder of his life, and he died at the age of 72 when he choked on the lid of one of his pill bottles.

The Glass Menagerie was Williams' first success, and is highly autobiographical in content. It is easy to see Williams as Tom, the frustrated writer, and Amanda as his overbearing mother, deserted by his father, while clearly Rose is represented in the emotionally fragile Laura. The play itself is highly theatrical, and was innovative in its day in the use of projected images and captions to create the dreamlike atmosphere needed for the play. Williams was able to incorporate tremendous emotional power into everyday life and relationships, and liked to use ordinary objects as symbols for the deepest longings of man. The alienation of many of his characters also reflects

his own sense of otherness, both because of his difficult family life and because of his homosexuality.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Amanda Wingfield - The mother, who lives in a past of Southern gentility, unwilling to accept the real condition of her life and her children.
- Laura Wingfield - The painfully shy, handicapped daughter, she is too shy to hold a job or socialize with others. Her collection of tiny glass animals gives the play its name. She and her mother wrap all of their hopes in the eventual appearance of a “gentleman caller” who will marry Laura and deliver the family from their misery.
- Tom Wingfield - Laura’s brother, he is the only member of the family in touch with the real world. He also narrates the story.
- Jim O’Connor - The “gentleman caller,” he is a friend of Tom’s from work. Laura immediately falls in love with him, and is crushed to discover that he is engaged to be married.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“But since have a poet’s weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long delayed but always expected something that we live for.” (Tom, scene 1)

“What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren’t prepared to occupy a position. I’ve seen such pitiful cases in the South - barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister’s husband or brother’s wife!” (Amanda, scene 2)

“No, I don’t have secrets. I’ll tell you what I wished for on the moon. Success and happiness for my precious children! I wish for that whenever there’s a moon, and when there isn’t a moon, I wish for it, too.” (Amanda, scene 5)

“You are the only young man I know of who ignores the fact that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don’t plan for it!” (Amanda, scene 5)

“All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be.” (Amanda, scene 6)

“I wasn’t prepared for what the future brought me.” (Amanda, scene 6)

“You think of yourself as having the only problems, as being the only one who is disappointed. But just look around you and you will see lots of people as disappointed as you are.” (Jim, scene 7)

“Now it is just like all the other horses.” (Laura, scene 7)

“The warehouse is where I work, not where I know things about people!” (Tom, scene 7)

“You don’t know things anywhere! You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions!” (Amanda, scene 7)

“Blow out your candles, Laura - and so goodbye....” (Tom, scene 7)

NOTES

Scene 1 - The play takes place in the Wingfield home, a tenement apartment in St. Louis, and in the alley in front of the building. The time is 1937, just before World War II. Tom comes on as the narrator and establishes the setting. He then enters the set; dinner is being served, and Amanda immediately criticizes Tom for being late, insists that he chew his food more, tells him to push food with a crust of bread rather than his fingers, and warns him that he smokes too much. He leaves the table in disgust - apparently this is business as usual in the Wingfield home. Amanda insists that Laura stay seated so she would be pretty if any gentleman callers arrive (there never have been any), then launches into the thousandth retelling of a story from her youth in Mississippi when she received seventeen gentleman callers on the same day. She then tells what happened to several of those callers - most became rich, and most have by now died.

Scene 2 - As the scene opens, Laura is polishing her glass animals, but quickly hides them and pulls out a typewriter keyboard chart when she hears her mother approaching. Amanda was supposed to have gone to a meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution, but clearly did not go; she is upset, enters the room, and quite deliberately tears the keyboard chart in two. She has discovered that Laura, who was supposed to have been attending business school for the last six months, had in fact dropped out after two days when her nervousness caused her to throw up all over the floor during her first speed drill. Laura confesses that she has been walking in the park, the zoo, and the art museum every day while she was supposed to be attending classes. Amanda then asks Laura if she ever liked a boy, and she talks about a boy named Jim in high school - a singer and debater who sat near her in one of her classes and called her “Blue Roses” because she had had an attack of pleurosis. Amanda insists that Laura will be married some day, but Laura protests that she is crippled, and Amanda assures her that charm can make up for such a minor deficiency.

Scene 3 - Tom begins the scene by describing Amanda’s obsession with the prospective gentleman caller after the business school fiasco. She had begun selling magazine subscriptions over the phone in order to get enough money to spruce up the apartment and get Laura some nicer clothes - all to make her more attractive for this man who was sure to visit any day now. When he enters the scene, he and his mother are quarreling - she has just returned a D.H. Lawrence book to the library that he had taken out because she considered it filthy, but he argues that he slaves to pay the rent on the house, so he should be allowed to bring in whatever books he wants. He has been going out every night, and she accuses him of drinking and tells him he is selfish; he responds that

he hates his job, but goes every day to support the family; if he were selfish, he would have done what his father did - walked out and left them. In his rage, he calls Amanda an ugly witch, throws his coat across the room, and knocks down some of the animals in the glass menagerie, which shatter on the floor.

Scene 4 - It is five o'clock in the morning, and Tom is just returning home, obviously drunk. He claims, as usual, to have been at the movies; he describes the show, including a magician who extricated himself from a coffin without removing a single nail. Tom wishes he knew how to get himself out of his own personal "coffin." Laura urges him to apologize to his mother, who is not speaking to him. Finally, reluctantly, he apologizes, and Amanda goes off on a harangue seeking pity for all she suffers. She asks Tom to promise not to become a drunkard, then nags him about what he's not eating for breakfast and how he's drinking his coffee. She worries that he is unhappy with them, and again asks him where he goes every night. He insists that he goes to the movies because he needs adventure as an escape from a boring job. Amanda has found a letter he received from the merchant marine and suspects he is planning to leave them and go off to sea. She says he can, but not before Laura is provided for. She then asks Tom if there is some nice young man at work he can invite home to meet his sister. Tom, furious, agrees and stalks out of the house.

Scene 5 - Dinner has ended, and Amanda is telling Tom to comb his hair; the only way she wishes he would be like his father is to take more care about his appearance. He goes out to smoke, and she tells him that, if he stopped smoking, he could afford to take a night course in accounting; he says he would rather smoke. Tom turns narrator, and talks about the dance hall across the alley, where couples would dance in the low light and come out into the alley to make out. He tells the audience that their lives are about to be changed by the impending war, but that nobody realizes it at the time. Tom and Amanda sit on the fire escape watching the moon rise, and Tom tells his mother that he has invited a friend of his from the warehouse home for dinner the next night. She, of course, is overjoyed. She goes into a flurry of planning, wanting practically to make over the entire house in one day. She asks Tom about the boy, making sure above all that he doesn't drink, and wants to know how much money he makes, what he looks like, and what his plans are for the future. She obviously is already planning a wedding in her mind. Tom warns her that the visitor, Jim O'Connor, doesn't know anything about Laura - the poor soul doesn't realize he is being set up. Tom also warns her not to expect too much of Laura, who is both crippled and painfully shy. As he goes off to the movies, she calls Laura to wish on the moon - for happiness and good fortune.

Scene 6 - Tom begins as narrator, describing Jim as Big Man on Campus in high school who had never amounted to much afterward - he was a clerk in the warehouse where Tom worked. The two were casual friends; Jim called Tom "Shakespeare" because he wrote poetry during his lunch hour. The scene shifts to the apartment, where Amanda has accomplished a miraculous transformation of the dingy dwelling. Laura, in her new dress, looks like "a piece of translucent glass touched by light." Amanda, too, has prettied herself for the occasion, and is dressed in the gown she wore as a young lady to receive gentlemen callers. When Amanda tells Laura the name of the caller, she realizes it's the same boy she had liked in high school, and refuses to come to the table. When Tom and Jim arrive, Laura at first refuses to answer the door until Amanda

forces her to do it. She shyly greets the guest, then flees into the back room. Out on the terrace, Jim warns Tom that the boss at the warehouse is not pleased with his work, but Tom tells Jim that he doesn't care because he is about to join the Merchant Marine - he's tired of watching adventures in the movies and is determined to find some of his own. They come inside for dinner, and Amanda turns on the Southern charm, almost knocking Jim off his feet with her enthusiasm. When they go to the table, Laura refuses to come out, then is clearly ill when she appears. Amanda sends her into the living room to lie down, where she collapses in tears as the meal begins.

Scene 7 - Dinner is over, and the lights suddenly go out (Tom used the money for the electric bill to enlist in the Merchant Marine). They light candles, and Amanda tells Tom to help her with the dishes while Jim goes into the living room with Laura. The conversation that ensues means nothing to Jim, but to Laura it is the most important moment of her entire life. Jim quickly puts her at ease, and he soon realizes that they knew one another in high school. They reminisce, and he encourages her not to be ashamed of her handicap or her shyness. She asks him about his high school girlfriend, but he tells her the rumors of their engagement were greatly exaggerated. He tells her she has an inferiority complex, and encourages her to think more highly of herself. He then tells her of his future plans - studying public speaking and radio, looking for a future in television. He asks her what she excels at, and she begins to tell him about her glass menagerie, showing him her oldest and favorite piece - a unicorn. Jim coerces her into a clumsy dance, and in the process they bump the table and knock the unicorn to the floor, breaking off its horn. He then tells her she is pretty and kisses her on the lips. Realizing his mistake, he backs off, then explains that he can't call on her again because he already is engaged. She is devastated, but gently places the broken unicorn in his hand as a souvenir of the evening. Amanda then barges in with lemonade, makes some embarrassing comments, then Jim tells her, too, that he is engaged to be married, and hurriedly departs the scene. Amanda shouts at Tom for making a fool of them (though he didn't know Jim was engaged), Tom storms out, Amanda comforts Laura, and Tom as narrator brings the play to a conclusion, stating that he was soon fired from his job for writing poetry on a shoe box, then left home and wandered from city to city, never able to forget his fragile sister and her glass menagerie.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Discuss the role of the narrator in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. How does the presence of the narrator both distance the audience from the action and draw them in at the same time? Why does Williams choose to use this transparently artificial stage device? How does the point of view of the narrator affect the interpretation of the events of the play by the audience? Is the narrator the mouthpiece of the playwright? Is Tom a reliable reporter of events, or must the audience filter out his personal perspective in assessing the action of the play?

2. Discuss the impact of the missing father on the members of the Wingfield family in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. How is each member of the family affected by the departure of Amanda's husband? Who is hurt the most by his absence? Why do you think so? Support your argument with details from the play.
3. In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom tells us that the gentleman caller is a symbol of "the long delayed but always expected something that we live for." Is it true that everyone has a "something" like this in his or her life? To what extent does this contribute to the universality of the play? How would you assess this central image of the play from a Christian standpoint?
4. In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, what is the symbolism of the animal collection that gives the play its title? Does that symbolism refer primarily to Laura, or more broadly to the whole family? How does it relate to the themes of the play? Support your arguments with specifics from the story.
5. Compare and contrast Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to Amanda Wingfield in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. How are these two overbearing mothers the same? How are they different? Do they have the same approach to the marriages of their daughters? for the same reasons? Support your arguments with details from the two stories.
6. Compare and contrast Joe Keller in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* to Amanda Wingfield in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. Both insist that their actions are motivated by a desire to give the best to their children. Are their assessments accurate, or are they self-deceived? To what extent do the characters care more for themselves than for their children? Support your arguments with specifics from the two plays.
7. In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, when Amanda Wingfield is planning for the arrival of the gentleman caller, she tells her son Tom, "You are the only young man I know of who ignores the fact that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it!" Is she right? Does lack of planning always lead to regrets and a wasted life? How does Amanda's own experience shed light on the validity of her assertion?
8. In the last scene of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura gets out her favorite piece of glass - a tiny unicorn. Discuss the symbolism of this ornament. How does it help to convey the themes of the play?
9. Discuss the atmosphere created by the playwright in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. The setting is clearly artificial, as befits a "memory play," and the use of projections of words and pictures continually reminds the audience that they are in a theater, not entering into a slice of life. How effective are these techniques in advancing the themes of the play? If you were watching the play in a theater rather than reading it in a classroom, how would these insertions influence your perceptions of the action?

10. Evaluate Tom's decision to leave his mother and sister at the end of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. Was he right to pursue his own interests, or should he have remained behind to care for his family? Support your conclusion from the play and from Scripture.
11. Who is the protagonist of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
12. Analyze the character of Amanda Wingfield in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. Why is she so oblivious to the needs of her own children, despite her professed love for them and desire to seek their good? What about her past might explain her behavior and attitudes? Use specifics from the play to support your answer.
13. In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, the playwright makes use of a large number of symbolic objects. Choose three such objects, not including the glass menagerie itself, and discuss what they stand for and how they advance the themes of the drama.
14. Compare and contrast the characters of Madame Ranevsky in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Amanda Wingfield in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. Be sure to take note of how they relate to the past, the future, and the members of their families. Use specifics from both plays to support your arguments.
15. Compare and contrast the mixture of comedy and tragedy found in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. Discuss the ways in which Chekhov appears to have influenced his American admirer.
16. Compare and contrast the symbols of the cherry orchard in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and the glass menagerie in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. How do the playwrights use these central images to communicate the themes of the two plays? Do the symbols mean the same things to all the characters, or do they have varying meanings? Support your arguments with details from the plays.
17. Compare and contrast the stagecraft found in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. Chekhov gained his reputation as a realistic playwright, while Williams presents his classic drama as a "memory play," incorporating many obvious stage devices to distance the audience from the action. Which play is more true-to-life? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the plays.
18. Compare and contrast the characters of Tom and Jim in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*. How are these men alike? How are they different? Be sure to discuss their histories, their present activities, and the way they relate to the other characters in the story.

19. How would you explain Laura's temporary change in the presence of Jim O'Connor in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*? Is the Laura we see in the brief conversation with Jim the real Laura, or is she really the shy, dysfunctional character we see throughout the rest of the play? Why is the change in her only temporary? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
20. In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, why does Tom go to the movies so often? Is his own explanation - the need for adventure - the true one? the only one? Does he really go to the movies, or do you think he is doing something else? What? Support your conclusions with details from the text.
21. At the end of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom follows in his father's footsteps and leaves his family. Will Laura follow in her mother's footsteps? To what extent and in what ways? Why do you think so? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
22. Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* is described by the playwright as a "memory play." Whose memories are being recorded? The play is highly autobiographical, so certainly Williams' memories are on display on the stage. But in a sense we are also seeing Tom Wingfield's memories. To what extent is Tom a reliable narrator? Can the audience trust the objectivity of his memories, or are we learning more about the subjective state of the narrator than about what really happened and what the characters were really like?
23. Critic Eric Levy, commenting on Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, said, "To love ... is to be exposed to a mirror of negative judgment on which one becomes dependent for the sense of one's own worth." Discuss the applicability of this statement to the characters and action of the play. As different characters seek love and flee love, how is Levy's comment illustrated or contradicted?