

# The Glass Menagerie Study Guide



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# Summary

## Summary

The play, set in St. Louis, Missouri in the 1930s, opens with a monologue by Tom Wingfield. Tom introduces himself to the audience and identifies himself as the narrator of the play; he also explains that the play consists of his memories. Tom tells the audience that the other characters are his mother, Amanda; his sister, Laura; and a young man who comes to dinner toward the end of the play. According to Tom, his father abandoned the family many years earlier, sending a single postcard from Mexico to say goodbye.

One evening, Amanda calls Tom to dinner. When he starts eating, Amanda begins to criticize his table manners. Irritated, Tom tells his mother that her attentiveness is ruining his dinner, and Amanda dismisses his complaint. As Laura offers to help her mother with the dessert, Amanda begins talking about her past. Tom grows weary, as he and Laura have heard their mother's stories many times before. Laura appears to understand Amanda's need to talk about the past, but Tom mocks his mother's tales of her youth and her many gentlemen callers. The focus shifts from Amanda's past to Laura's future, and Laura comments on her mother's worry that Laura will never marry.

As Laura polishes her collection of glass figurines one morning, Amanda comes home and accuses Laura of dishonest behavior. Amanda reveals that she had stopped by Rubicam's business school to check on Laura's progress. To Laura's dismay, Amanda discovers during this visit that Laura has stopped attending classes. Laura tries to explain that she embarrassed herself during class one day and that she was too humiliated to return. Amanda scolds Laura, but her tone changes when she asks Laura if she has ever liked a boy. Laura admits that she had feelings for a boy named Jim with whom she went to high school. Amanda's mood improves as she imagines Laura married, but when Laura reminds her mother that she is disabled, Amanda refuses to listen.

Later, Tom narrates from the fire escape of the Wingfield apartment as his mother calls potential magazine subscribers, explaining that Amanda has taken the job in order to make extra money. Moments later, Tom and Amanda argue about Tom's behavior; Tom feels justified in his choices because he earns the money that pays the rent and the bills, but Amanda feels Tom is putting his job at risk. Tom loses his temper with his mother, and he calls her names. Upset, Tom tries to grab his coat and leave the apartment, but in his emotional state, he breaks some of Laura's glass figurines. Tom gathers the pieces of broken glass while Laura looks on, pained by her the loss of her figurines.

At five o'clock the next morning, Tom comes home drunk. Laura lets him into the apartment, and he tells Laura about his evening out before he falls asleep on the sofa. An hour later, Amanda's alarm clock rings, waking Tom. As Amanda prepares breakfast, she refuses to speak to Tom until he apologizes. She then bursts into tears and blames herself for his bitterness towards her. Before Tom leaves for work, Amanda makes Tom promise not to become an alcoholic, and she tells him that Laura is worried about him. Amanda compares Tom to his father, claiming that they share a sense of restlessness. She acknowledges to Tom that she knows about Tom's desire to leave in order to join the Merchant Marine, but she insists that he stay until there is a man in Laura's life. Tom is able to leave the apartment only after he promises his mother that he will bring a nice young man home from his job at the shoe warehouse for Laura to meet. As Tom leaves, Amanda calls another potential magazine subscriber.

One evening, Amanda reminds Tom of his promise to introduce Laura to a young man. He tells Amanda that a young man is coming over to the apartment the following evening. Amanda interrogates Tom about the young man, whose name is Jim O'Connor, wondering if the young man has anything in common with her

own charming but untrustworthy husband. Tom cautions Amanda, telling her that Jim does not know that he is coming to dinner to meet Laura; Tom also reminds Amanda to remember that Laura is an unusual young woman. When Tom leaves the apartment to go to the movies, Amanda grows annoyed, but her mood changes when she sees the moon shining outside the window. Amanda tells Laura to make a wish on the moon, but Laura does not know what she should wish for.

The following evening, Tom explains to the audience that Jim O'Connor is an old high school acquaintance. Laura nervously gets ready for dinner with Amanda's help, and she finds out that the dinner guest is Jim O'Connor, the boy she liked in high school. When Tom and Jim arrive for dinner, Laura shakes Jim's hand before escaping to the back room. As Tom and Jim talk among themselves, Amanda makes an entrance that surprises both young men. Amanda summons Laura from the other room, and Laura emerges only to rest on the sofa while Tom, Jim, and Amanda say grace.

After supper, Jim approaches Laura in the living room. The lights go out, and Tom admits that he neglected to pay the electricity bill. Amanda insists that Tom help her wash the dishes while Jim and Laura talk. Jim suggests that Laura sit on the floor next to him, and his friendly manner disarms Laura. Their conversation flows; Laura grows comfortable with Jim and shows him her collection of glass figurines. When the music starts to play from the dance hall across the alleyway, Jim asks Laura to dance. After Jim compliments Laura and tells her that she is pretty, he kisses her. As soon as the kiss ends, Jim voices his regret and offers Laura a mint. He tells Laura that he has a steady girlfriend, and when Amanda enters the living room with a pitcher of lemonade, Jim explains that he needs to go to meet his girlfriend, Betty, whom he is soon to marry. Laura stands back as Jim leaves, Amanda blames Tom for his ignorance, and Tom leaves to go to the movies. The play ends as Tom ruminates on his past and says goodbye to his family and to the audience.

# Chapter Summaries

## Chapter Summaries: Scenes 1–2 Summary

### Scene 1

The scene takes place in an apartment belonging to the Wingfield family. The apartment “faces an alley and is entered by a fire-escape.” The playwright explains in the stage directions that the scene is not intended to be realistic, because it takes place entirely in memories. When the curtain rises, the audience sees the back wall of the apartment, as well as the alleyway that runs along both sides of the building. The living room doubles as the room where Laura, the daughter of the family and Tom’s sister, sleeps on a sofa bed. A collection of fragile glass animals is visible inside a cabinet in the living room, and a photograph of a handsome man in a military cap hangs on the wall. Tom, the narrator and the only son of Amanda Wingfield, enters and lights a cigarette while standing in front of the curtains.

After telling the audience that he will go back into the past to the 1930s, when America is suffering from “a dissolving economy,” Tom introduces himself to the audience as both the narrator of the play and as a character. He explains that the other characters are his mother, Amanda; his sister, Laura; and a young man who appears at the end of the play. Tom identifies the photograph on the wall as his father. Mr. Wingfield left his family “a long time ago,” and his last message to them took the form of a postcard from Mexico.

Amanda speaks from behind the curtains. Tom separates the curtains, and Amanda and Laura sit at a table, making gestures to appear as if they are eating a meal together. Amanda calls Tom to the table, and when he sits down, she criticizes his table manners and compares him to an animal. She explains her comparison in excessive detail, causing Tom to lose his appetite. When Amanda dismisses her son’s irritated response, he leaves the table in order to smoke a cigarette. Laura offers to fetch the dessert, but Amanda refuses to let Laura do any work; she prefers that Laura “stay fresh and pretty—for gentleman callers!” Laura reminds her mother that she is not expecting any visitors, but Amanda dismisses Laura’s reminder and leaves the room. Tom and Laura know what Amanda will say next, and sure enough, when Amanda enters with dessert, she starts telling a long-winded story about her own gentleman callers that Tom and Laura have heard many times before.

Amanda describes young women of her youth, telling Laura and Tom that she and other girls were gifted conversationalists when she was young. Then she lists a few of her suitors and describes them to Laura and Tom. In between Amanda’s lengthy descriptions, Tom interrupts with unhelpful questions, and Amanda finishes her story on a negative note: “And I could have been Mrs. Duncan J. Fitzhugh, mind you! But—I picked your *father*!” Laura changes the subject by offering to clear the table, but Amanda does not allow Laura to do anything that might cause her strain in case a guest arrives. When Laura insists no one will come, Amanda mocks her and suggests that extreme weather conditions must be taking place if Laura is so sure. Tom groans when he hears his sister admit that she is “not popular like you were in Blue Mountain,” comparing herself negatively to her mother. Laura says out loud that Amanda is scared that Laura will be a spinster.

### Scene 2

Laura is sitting at a small table with her collection of glass animals. She hears Amanda on the steps of the fire escape. When Amanda reaches the landing, Laura appears nervous, and she touches her face when she sees Amanda’s stormy facial expression. Laura greets her mother, but Amanda interrupts her, exclaiming that she would like to bury herself in a hole in the ground. Laura asks her mother why and if something has happened

to explain her mother's dramatic behavior. Amanda reveals that while she was out, she made a stop at Rubicam's business college to let Laura's teachers know that Laura has a cold. Laura grows quiet when her mother continues to explain that one of the instructors told her that Laura has not attended any classes at the secretarial school program at the college in six weeks. Laura tells her mother that she went for walks and to the museum and the movies to maintain the deception; she explains that she could not go back to class after humiliating herself by throwing up in front of her classmates and teachers. Amanda makes a lengthy speech about Laura's future as an unmarried woman, and at the end of the speech, she asks Laura if Laura has ever cared for a boy. Laura tells her mother about Jim, a popular boy from her high school who used to call her "Blue Roses." Laura tells her mother that Jim has likely married the girl he went out with in high school. Amanda insists that Laura will marry someday, and Laura protests, implying that because she is "crippled," no man will love her. Amanda scolds her daughter for using the word "crippled" and encourages Laura to develop her charm, a quality Amanda once admired in her husband.

## **Chapter Summaries: Scenes 3–4 Summary**

### **Scene 3**

Tom appears on the landing of the fire escape and tells the audience that his mother is obsessed with the idea of a gentleman caller for Laura. He explains that Amanda has begun selling magazine subscriptions over the phone in order to earn extra money, with which she will "feather the nest and plume the bird." Amanda enters the scene while talking on the phone to a potential subscriber; she talks incessantly until the woman on the other end of the phone hangs up on her. Amanda appears surprised when she finds out that there is no one on the line.

Tom and Amanda argue behind the curtains. Tom expresses anger at the fact that Amanda has taken his library books away when he is the one who pays the rent on the apartment in which they all live. When Tom comes through the curtains, Amanda also appears, wearing a bathrobe that once belonged to Mr. Wingfield. When Tom says he is leaving, Amanda scolds him for his self-centeredness. Her tirade continues with an accusation: "I think you've been doing things that you're ashamed of." Tom loses control and shouts at his mother about his dissatisfaction with his job at the shoe warehouse. During his rant, Tom denies that he has been acting selfishly. He tries to leave to go to the movies, but Amanda is suspicious and accuses him of lying about his destination. Tom grows emotional again and taunts his mother by saying that he is going to "opium dens, dens of vice and criminals' hang-outs." In fury, Tom calls Amanda an "ugly—babbling old—witch" as he makes his way to the door of the apartment. When Tom becomes tangled in his coat sleeves, he throws the garment across the room in frustration. The coat hits the shelf on which Laura stores her glass animals, accidentally breaking some of the fragile objects. Laura becomes upset at the sound of broken glass.

Amanda tells Tom she won't speak to him again until he apologizes to her, and she leaves the scene through the curtains. Laura is preoccupied with her loss. Tom goes to the shelf and "[d]rops awkwardly on his knees to collect the fallen glass."

### **Scene 4**

As a church bell rings, indicating that the time is five o'clock, Tom stands outside on the fire escape and "shakes a little noise-maker" in time with the bell. He has been drinking alcohol. Laura appears in her nightgown. When Tom tries to enter the apartment, he drops his key. Laura lets her brother in and asks him where he has been. Tom claims that he has been at the movies all night and describes a magician's stage show he attended. Laura tells Tom to lower his voice so as not to wake their mother, and he lies down and falls asleep.

As the church bell sounds for six o'clock, an alarm clock rings, and Amanda's voice orders Laura to wake Tom. Laura pleads with Tom to apologize to their mother, but he is still exasperated. Tom is reluctant to say he is sorry and asks his sister if their mother's silence is "such a tragedy." When Amanda appears, she pressures Laura to go to the shop for butter and to pay for the purchase on credit; Laura resists, finding such transactions uncomfortable, but she goes to the store as Amanda comes into the living room, where Tom is standing. After a few moments of silence, Tom apologizes to his mother, and Amanda becomes emotional. As she weeps, she talks of her devotion to her children and praises Tom for his "natural endowments." After he promises her that he won't become a "drunkard" like his father, Amanda asks Tom to have a discussion with her about Laura.

Amanda tells Tom that Laura is upset because Laura can sense that Tom is "not happy here." Amanda confronts Tom again about his whereabouts at night, and he insists he goes to the movies because he "like[s] adventure." Tom tries to exit the conversation with his mother, but she refuses to let him go, insisting that he talk with her about Laura. Amanda tells Tom that she feels frightened about Laura's future. When Tom displays confusion at Amanda's obsession over a house and a husband for Laura, Amanda confronts Tom and tells him that she knows about the letter he recently received from the Merchant Marines. Amanda accuses him of behaving selfishly like his father. She goads Tom, encouraging him to abandon his family as his father did, but "not till there's somebody to take your place." Amanda explains to Tom that Laura needs somebody to take care of her, and she asks him to bring someone home for Laura from the shoe warehouse. Tom agrees and leaves the apartment as Amanda calls another potential magazine subscriber.

## **Chapter Summaries: Scenes 5–6 Summary**

### **Scene 5**

It is springtime, and Tom, Laura, and Amanda have just finished dinner. As Tom goes out to the landing to smoke, Amanda scolds him for spending money on cigarettes. From the landing on the fire escape, Tom addresses the audience directly, describing the music that floats out of the Paradise Dance Hall from across the alleyway. Tom mentions the changes in the world that are about to take place, explaining to the audience that "[a]ll the world was waiting for bombardments." Amanda joins Tom on the landing, where Tom announces that he has invited a friend of his from the shoe warehouse to come to dinner tomorrow night. Amanda reacts excitedly at the prospect of Laura's first "gentleman caller" and makes plans to polish the silver. Tom threatens to cancel the dinner if Amanda continues to "make such a fuss," but his words do nothing to slow Amanda. Amanda, worried about Laura's future with a potential alcoholic, asks Tom if his friend is a drinking man. Amanda brushes Tom's hair while persisting in her interrogation, asking Tom about his friend's salary. Amanda obsesses over the possibility that Tom's friend, named Jim O'Connor, likes to drink, remembering how young women in her day would manage the issue of a young man's drinking habit. She calls her marriage to Mr. Wingfield a "tragic mistake," explaining that she was a victim of his charm and good looks. Tom reassures her; Jim is not particularly handsome, and he attends night school. Tom also mentions that he has not told Jim about Laura, and he warns Amanda not to "expect too much of Laura." Amanda bristles at the suggestion that Laura is different from other young women. To Amanda's disgust, Tom leaves the apartment to go to the movies, and Amanda calls for Laura to join her on the landing so that Laura "can make a wish on the moon."

### **Scene 6**

Tom addresses the audience directly, describing Jim O'Conner in detail. Tom knows Jim from high school. During that time, Jim was popular thanks to his friendly personality and wholesome appearance. Jim was an active student, and he was involved in many extracurricular clubs; he also held leadership roles like "captain of the debating club" and was a talented athlete and singer. Tom explains that he and the other students

believed that Jim would “arrive at nothing short of the White House by the time he was thirty.” Despite this promising adolescence, Jim is now working at the same shoe warehouse as Tom.

Tom goes on to describe their current friendship. The friendship works because Tom is someone who knows Jim as a high school hero. In addition, Jim is an open-minded and friendly colleague who is not suspicious of Tom’s impulse to write poetry when work is slow. Tom tells the audience that he remembers that Laura admired Jim’s singing when they were all high school students. He is sure that Laura will remember Jim, but he is less sure that Jim will remember Laura.

It is Friday evening. The apartment looks “astonishing” thanks to Amanda’s hard work, and Laura stands in the middle of the stage with her arms lifted as Amanda makes adjustments to her new dress. Laura’s hair looks different, and “[a] fragile, unearthly prettiness has come out in Laura.” Laura’s nervousness irritates Amanda, and Laura’s anxiety intensifies when Amanda puts two powder puffs in the front of Laura’s dress to disguise her flat chest. Laura looks at her reflection in the mirror as Amanda gets dressed for dinner, promising to “make a spectacular appearance.”

Amanda appears wearing a dress from her youth and holding a bunch of jonquils. She tells Laura that she wore this dress on the day she met Laura and Tom’s father. That particular spring, Amanda had malaria, received countless invitations to parties all around “the Delta,” and obsessed over jonquils. After her speech, Amanda turns on a lamp and puts the flowers in a bowl. She mentions the name of Tom’s friend, and Laura’s expression changes as she remembers Jim.

Laura asks Amanda if she is sure of Tom’s friend’s name, and she tells Amanda that she and Tom both knew a young man of the same name in high school. She then says she won’t come to dinner after all, explaining to Amanda that Jim is the boy she liked in high school whose yearbook picture she pointed out. They argue about who will answer the door when the time comes. Amanda refuses to allow Laura to miss the dinner, and as Laura frets, Amanda goes into the kitchen.

Tom and Jim arrive, and when the doorbell sounds, Laura cannot move. Tom and Jim exchange pleasantries while standing on the landing; inside, Laura insists Amanda answer the door and ridicules Laura’s fear. As the two women argue in whispers, Tom rings the doorbell again. Laura winds the victrola, and after the music starts, she goes to open the door. Tom enters the apartment with Jim and introduces Laura to Jim, who comments that he did not know that Tom had a sister. Laura and Jim shake hands, and Jim notices that Laura’s hand is cold. She tries to explain that she has just been playing the victrola, and Jim recommends “a little hot swing music to warm you up!” Laura leaves the room abruptly. The two men share the newspaper, but Tom loses interest and lights a cigarette. As Jim talks to Tom about his study of public speaking, encouraging Tom to develop his own “social poise,” Amanda calls for Tom, suggesting he ask Jim if he wants to wash his hands. Jim declines, continuing his conversation with Tom, warning him that he will “be out of a job” if he does not change his attitude at work.

Tom announces to Jim that he is making a plan to change his life. He tells Jim that he is “tired of the movies,” which surprises Jim, and Tom rants about his belief that only a war enables “the masses” to have adventures. Jim asks Tom about his plans, and Tom admits that he is now a member of the Union of the Merchant Seamen; instead of paying the most recent electricity bill, Tom paid his dues. Jim asks how Tom’s mother feels about his plans, and Tom explains that she is not aware of his intentions to leave. Amanda enters, calling everyone to the dinner table, and her appearance and exuberance shock both Tom and Jim. Amanda attempts to charm Jim with talk about the weather and “Southern behavior,” and Tom interrupts her to ask her about dinner. As Tom leaves to find Laura, Amanda continues to converse with Jim. Tom announces that dinner is on the table and that Laura is not feeling well enough to join them. Amanda calls for Laura, pressuring her to join them as she arranges the two young men around the table. Laura obeys her mother and “moves unsteadily toward the table.” She stumbles and groans, and Amanda finally takes Laura’s complaints seriously. Laura



rests on the sofa as it starts to rain. Amanda, Tom, and Jim sit down at the table; Tom begins to say grace as Laura tries not to cry from her position in the living room.

## Chapter Summaries: Scene 7 Summary

Thirty minutes later, dinner is almost over, and Laura is still resting on the sofa. The rain slows down as the moon emerges in the night sky. The lights go out in the apartment, and Amanda lights candles, assuming a fuse has blown. She asks Tom about the electricity bill, “the one I told you we got the notices about,” and Tom acknowledges that he did not pay the bill. Jim checks the fuses, which are all intact, and when Jim tries to diffuse the tension between Tom and his mother, Amanda responds to Jim flirtatiously. Amanda gives Jim two glasses of wine so that he can have a drink with Laura while Tom washes the dinner dishes as punishment for neglecting the light bill.

When Jim comes near, Laura sits up on the sofa. They greet each other, and Jim is charming and friendly. Jim sits on the floor with his wine, and he invites Laura to join him. She moves to the floor from the sofa to sit near him. Jim’s manner is conversational and easygoing, and though he asks Laura directly if she is a shy person, she keeps her composure, going as far as to ask Jim if he still sings. Jim is surprised to hear Laura talk about his singing, but after a few moments, he remembers Laura from their high school days. They reminisce about the chorus class they shared, and Laura confesses that she felt self-conscious in those days about having to walk in front of people. Jim’s response to Laura’s frank mention of her disability is encouraging and positive; he remembers that he used to call Laura “Blue Roses,” and he reminds her that “practically everybody has got some problems.” Together, they look at Laura’s old high school yearbook and reminisce. Laura grows less shy as Jim shows her warmth and genuine friendliness, but when Jim denies that he is engaged to marry Emily, his old girlfriend from high school, Laura again becomes distracted and withdrawn.

Laura tells Jim about her glass figurines. She also mentions that she dropped out of business college because it gave her “indigestion,” and he tells her that she has an “inferiority complex.” Jim talks about his own interest in self-improvement and advises Laura to “[t]hink of yourself as superior in some way!” Laura talks more about her collection of glass animals and gives Jim a tiny glass unicorn to hold, telling him that she trusts him to hold the fragile object. Jim places the unicorn on the table when he hears music coming from the dance hall across the alleyway. He asks Laura to dance, and they waltz around the living room; Laura’s disability makes her clumsy, but Jim does not seem to notice. As they dance, they bump into the table, causing the glass unicorn to fall; the glass unicorn’s horn breaks off, and “[n]ow it is just like all the other horses.” Jim compliments Laura, telling her that she is different from other girls and that she is pretty; he kisses her. They hear Amanda laughing in the kitchen, and the moment is broken. Jim says out loud that he “shouldn’t have done that” before offering Laura a mint. Awkwardly, Jim explains to Laura that he can’t call on her again, because he loves a girl named Betty. Jim tries to excuse his actions by saying he did not know Tom was inviting him to dinner to introduce them; he explains that Tom had not mentioned that he had a sister, and Jim just happened to be free that evening to join Tom for dinner. Jim tries to be kind, but Laura is disappointed. Laura gives Jim the broken unicorn and winds up the victrola as Amanda enters with a pitcher of lemonade. Amanda tries to leave the living room to give Jim and Laura more privacy, but Jim explains that he needs to leave, mentioning Betty and identifying her as “[t]he girl I go steady with.” Jim thanks Amanda for dinner and says goodbye to Laura, reminding her to follow his advice.

Amanda confronts Tom angrily, accusing him of playing a joke on her and Laura by inviting a man who is engaged to be married to dinner. Tom denies knowing that Jim is engaged, and Amanda berates him. Tom heads toward the door, saying he is going to the movies, while Amanda blames him for his insensitive behavior and calls him a “selfish dreamer.”

Tom delivers his closing speech from the fire escape as Amanda comforts Laura on the sofa. Tom explains that soon after this dinner, he is fired from his job at the shoe warehouse for “writing a poem on the lid of a shoebox” and that he leaves the city “pursued by something.” Though he has left his sister and their mother behind, he cannot forget Laura. The play ends when Tom says goodbye.

# Themes

## Themes

### Memory and Nostalgia

In the stage notes, Tennessee Williams describes the play as a “memory play,” setting an impressionistic tone from the beginning. This description indicates that Williams does not intend for the audience to understand the play as a depiction of reality; after all, memories are inherently unreliable and subjective. Rather than communicate a series of facts through the lines of the play, Williams chooses to communicate a collection of impressions and feelings. When Tom introduces himself at the start of the play, he explains that the entire play takes place in his memory, which emphasizes the unreliability of the story; Tom even points out his selectivity and subjectiveness, cautioning the audience to remember that the play is not a depiction of his life as it actually happened.

Amanda is also attached to her memories, but her attachment prevents her from engaging fully with her present life. Amanda, a former Southern belle, is vivacious and talkative, and much of her conversation with her children involves her idealized memories of herself as a young woman. Amanda remembers her youth as happy and exciting, so it makes sense that she prefers to live in her memory. When Amanda must acknowledge the present, she becomes unhappy and bitter, lamenting her mistakes and her losses. Amanda’s appearance in a dress from her youth the evening Jim comes to dinner highlights her inability to move on from her nostalgia.

Laura, on the other hand, remembers the past with less idealism than her mother. When she talks to her mother about her high school days, she reveals mixed feelings about the whole experience. Laura’s attachment to the past is less intense than her mother’s, emerging only during her conversation with Jim in the living room. Laura momentarily idealizes the past and indulges a nostalgic impulse only when she believes that Jim is genuinely interested in her; as soon as Jim tells her the truth about Betty, the true object of his affections, her nostalgia evaporates, and she lives in the present day once again.

Jim’s own memories of Laura from high school are vague, but they still endear him to Laura. The fact that he doesn’t remember the sound of her awkward gait adds to his appeal when juxtaposed with his more vivid memory of his old nickname for Laura. Laura, at this moment, places more value on his friendly nickname for her than it warrants. Jim is a friendly person, and the fact that he, too, remembers “Blue Roses” makes the memory more poignant to Laura than it deserves to be.

### Filial Piety and Duty

Amanda, a single mother, is obsessed with the notion of filial piety, and much of her conversation with Tom concerns his duties and responsibilities to his family. She speaks often of her disappointment and rage at being abandoned by her husband, and when she is angry at Tom, she compares his behavior to his father’s. When Mr. Wingfield rejected his family, he abandoned his filial duties, broke his wife’s heart, and damaged his wife’s self-perception. The effects of these consequences play out throughout every scene of the play.

Tom’s natural desire for freedom violates the sense of duty Amanda believes he should prioritize, and this conflict of interests creates tension in the Wingfield household. Amanda believes that Tom’s role as the man of the household is to provide and to ensure that the female members of the family are looked after. Tom is a young man, however, and he is full of curiosity and wanderlust; he resents his mother’s insistence that he take over the duties shirked by his father, especially because Tom works a job he dislikes in order to pay the bills

for his mother and sister. Every bit of poorly timed criticism that Amanda sends his way damages their relationship and gives Tom even more motivation to leave.

Amanda's interpretation of her responsibility to her children is as flawed as her approach to communication. Her desire to take care of Laura is authentic but clumsy, and she refuses to listen to either of her children. Amanda's inept parenting lets both Laura and Tom down, and while Tom can leave to go to the movies when the pressure builds, Laura cannot. Her disability holds her back in multiple ways, and her fragile nature suggests that she will not be able to endure Amanda's forcefulness for long.

## **Gender Roles**

Throughout the play, traditional gender roles influence the behaviors of every character. Though old-fashioned notions of femininity have betrayed Amanda, she continues to live according to these notions and to pressure her daughter to follow them. In her youth, Amanda's beauty and vivacious personality, both feminine ideals typical of this time and place, attracted her husband's attention, but this attraction did not last. Mr. Wingfield's abandonment of his family proves that Amanda's notions of femininity are not reliable; no matter how pretty her dress or how energetic her conversation, Amanda is unable to keep her husband at home and her family intact. Ironically, Amanda insists that Laura attend secretarial school. This decision suggests independence and self-sufficiency, but Laura is incapable of attending the classes, her confidence compromised by her disability and by her mother's constant badgering.

Amanda also pressures Tom and Laura to live according to these stereotypical gender roles. She expects Tom to fulfill the role of provider that his father left open; for a time, Tom sacrifices his own desires in order to support his mother and sister, but by the end of the play, Tom leaves, no longer able to live according to his mother's terms and demonstrating the dark and selfish side of the masculine stereotype. Amanda also reveals her attachment to masculine ideals when she quizzes Tom about Jim O'Connor. Her questions about Jim's drinking and his salary reflect her focus on Jim's potential to take care of Laura, which she believes is the most important aspect of Jim's personality. Amanda talks incessantly of Laura's need to marry; even small gestures of concern communicate Amanda's obsession with Laura as a female object. For example, Amanda tells Laura not to worry about certain household chores, but her solicitous attitude has more to do with her desire that Laura remain fresh and pretty in case a man comes to call than it does with genuine concern for Laura's health.

# Characters

## Characters

### Amanda Wingfield

Amanda Wingfield, mother of Tom and Laura, lives in a state of humiliation at having been left by her husband, and her constant admonishing of Laura to be more assertive may reflect her own deep sense of regret at not being more assertive herself. When Mr. Wingfield left, Amanda lost her ability to see herself as a bewitching and attractive young woman deserving of widespread attention, and her vivacious nature is now overbearing. Amanda's pushy temperament and talkative nature eventually drives Tom away; it is impossible to say if her manner contributed to her husband's departure or if his departure has exacerbated her difficult personality.

Amanda prefers to live in the past, during a time when she remembers herself as young, beautiful, and charming. The past is also a time before she was married and then abandoned by her husband. Her vanity is sometimes pitiful, and her attempts at gaiety are sometimes overblown; when Amanda's natural vitality bubbles over, she cannot help but seek attention from men. For example, Amanda's performance for Jim might be a reflection of her seemingly involuntary reaction to a young man in the house; at the same time, Amanda might simply be overcompensating for Laura's introversion.

### Tom Wingfield

Tom Wingfield is the narrator of the play and Amanda's son. Tom's father left when Tom was five or six years old, leaving him without a male role model. Tom was raised solely by Amanda, whose overbearing nature drives him away by the end of the play, and his reaction to Amanda is the opposite of his sister's. Amanda's pushiness drains Laura of energy, but it goads Tom into energetic and vitriolic displays of anger.

Tom is a poet. He writes poetry at work at the shoe warehouse, and this literary impulse costs him his job. When Tom is fired, he takes the opportunity to leave his life in Saint Louis. Even before Tom leaves his mother and his sister, he displays behaviors and makes choices that remind his mother of his wayward father; this comparison might work for Amanda, but it is unfair to Tom, who should not have to step in for his absent father. Amanda wants Tom to take on the role of her husband, but he is her son, and his youth and artistic ambition lead him away from her by the end of the play.

### Laura Wingfield

Laura is Amanda's daughter and Tom's sister. Laura lives with two disabilities: she has a problem with her leg that causes her to walk heavily and with a limp, and she is debilitatingly shy. Laura's limp makes her painfully self-conscious, and she is fearful of being in public to the point of dysfunction; her instability is evidenced by the fact that her vomiting episode at secretarial school discourages her from ever attending class again and her belief that her "clumping" while in high school was noisy and offensive to her classmates.

Laura lives primarily in her inner world, and she copes with her mother's intensity by withdrawing further into herself, her glass figurines, and her music. Laura's shyness and fragile psychological condition are exacerbated by her mother's vivaciousness; Amanda's energetic manner seems to make Laura retreat even further into herself, sapping Laura's strength. Laura can become more comfortable around people outside her family, like Jim O'Connor, but his warmth and their shared history are especially disarming. Sadly, the news of Jim's relationship with a woman named Betty is devastating, and Jim joins Tom and the memory of her

father as proof of the unreliability of all men.

## **Mr. Wingfield**

Mr. Wingfield, Amanda's husband and the father of Tom and Laura, does not make an actual appearance in the play except through the presence of his portrait on the wall. Amanda, his wife, describes him as charismatic and charming, with a ready smile and a stylishly tidy appearance. The fact that he abandoned his wife and two children sixteen years prior to the start of the play suggests that he is selfish and irresponsible. Amanda also describes him as a "drunkard," which suggests that he has never been reliable, as his alcoholism likely prevented him from being present to his wife and young children.

## **Jim O'Connor**

Jim is Tom's friend from the shoe warehouse, and when he comes over for dinner, he inadvertently becomes Laura's first and only "gentleman caller," a label only Amanda believes is appropriate. By the end of his visit, Jim reveals that he did not know Tom even had a sister and that he, Jim, has a steady girlfriend named Betty. Jim is a high school acquaintance of Laura and Tom's, and during their school days, he was popular and confident; Laura had a schoolgirl crush on him.

Jim is genuinely warm and kindhearted, but he has a duplicitous nature. In order to save himself humiliating comments, he does not tell Tom, his closest friend at the shoe factory, about his engagement to Betty. This absence of trust between him and Tom suggests that their friendship is based only on a mutual remembering of themselves as they were during easier times. Jim is also vain and susceptible to admiration; he kisses Laura after signing her program, which provides him with a moment of remembering himself as a success story. Jim's duplicity hurts Laura and Amanda, especially when he regrettably gives in to his impulse to kiss Laura. This intimate moment gives Laura hope that her first gentleman caller may be the answer to her mother's prayers. Jim's callous treatment of Laura echoes the callousness of Mr. Wingfield; after all, by kissing Laura, he has also betrayed Betty.

# Analysis

## Analysis: Form and Content

According to Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* is a “memory play.” It is narrated from the perspective of the character Tom Wingfield. What Williams calls “personal lyricism” is employed in the play not so much to challenge the accountability of Tom’s narrative as to display, from a character’s point of view, the impact that illusion has on individuals. The play, for example, portrays a large group of characters whose obsession with the past complicates their connection to the present. Illusory worlds are created by these characters, either to cherish the not-so-accurate memory of an idealized past or to protect an already-tattered emotional integrity. It is typical of Williams, a self-proclaimed romantic dramatist, to create characters who prefer dwelling in a fantasy world. Yet, the playwright, aware of the inevitability of the conflict between illusion and reality, also leaves the audience with no doubt about his cynical and bitter attitude in dramatizing the sometimes self-deceptive but always debilitating nature of his characters’ illusory world. Flashbacks are used effectively to underscore the struggle that characters must undergo when they do not know how to disentangle themselves from the past.

The main plot of *The Glass Menagerie* centers on what happens to the Wingfield family on one unforgettable evening. A childhood illness has left Laura Wingfield crippled; one of her legs is slightly shorter than the other and is held in a brace. Self-consciousness and a lack of self-confidence have turned Laura into an extremely shy person. She prefers living in a dream world created through her fantasies and her collection of glass animals. Laura’s mother, Amanda Wingfield, believes strongly in tradition. Her faith in the traditional Southern practice of having a “gentleman caller” has led her to make an arrangement for Laura to meet with one of Tom’s coworkers at the warehouse.

Jim O’Connor shows up one evening at the Wingfields’ apartment as the “gentleman caller.” He behaves like a gentleman, charming Amanda and strengthening her belief in this tradition. During the meeting, Jim’s outward glamour and glibness temporarily rekindle hopes in Laura’s closed heart. She tells him how much she admired him in high school and entrusts him with her favorite glass animal, the unicorn. When Jim clumsily breaks the unicorn’s horn and tells her that they are not compatible with each other, Laura loses even more of her ever-dwindling confidence in herself and furthers her alienation from reality.

At the end of the play, Laura is apparently thrown off her emotional balance and ready to retreat permanently into her fantasy world. Amanda, holding Tom responsible for the fiasco of Jim and Laura’s meeting, blames him as the manufacturer of dreams and illusions. Tom, now fully aware of the detrimental effects of the conflicts between the past and the present and between illusion and reality, decides to leave the family and take on the challenge of shaping his own life.

## Analysis: Places Discussed

### Wingfield apartment

Wingfield apartment. St. Louis, Missouri, home of the narrator, Tom Wingfield, and his mother and sister. Along with its outside fire-escape landing, this apartment is the setting for the entire play. It is too small for the Wingfields’ needs—Laura sleeps on a sofa bed in the living room—and its contents are worn and aging. The contrast between the dingy apartment and the world in which Tom’s mother, Amanda, alludes to having grown up in is striking. During the play’s first scene, Amanda relates a well-worn story of her youth in Blue Mountain in rural Mississippi. Her story contains a significant allusion to the front porch on which she received gentleman callers—some seventeen young men by her account. Williams contrasts the porch in Blue

Mountain with the apartment's fire-escape landing, on which the family watches the moon rise over a delicatessen.

### **Alleyways**

Alleyways. According to Williams's opening stage directions, the play's audiences should see alleyways running on either side of the apartment building and its rear wall before they see the apartment rooms in which the action will take place. The alleys are described as "murky canyons of tangled clotheslines, garbage cans, and the sinister latticework of neighboring fire escapes." This is significant, as the alleys remain visible throughout the play. Williams uses them to generate a constant visual comment on the action within the apartment. The alleys strike a strong contrast to the idyllic life Amanda describes from her youth and are in conflict with Tom's vision of a life of high adventure.

### **\*Famous-Barr Department Store**

\*Famous-Barr Department Store. St. Louis's leading department store at the time in which the play is set, in whose lingerie department Amanda works. Williams uses the store to emphasize Amanda's frustration over the way her life has turned out. In the opening scene when she talks about her suitors, she blames her poor choice as the cause of her public humiliation of having to sell bras at Famous-Barr.

## **Analysis: Historical Context**

### **World War II**

Although the setting of *The Glass Menagerie* is the 1930s, during the Great Depression and slightly before the beginning of World War II, Williams wrote the play after America had entered the war but before a decisive victory had been achieved. After being produced in Chicago in 1944, the play arrived in New York in 1945, the year the war ended. For Americans, the most significant historical event of the first half of the 1940s was the entry of the United States into World War II. Although the United States had not been eager to enter this war, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, making U.S. participation inevitable on the side of the Allies—primarily England, France, and Russia. In addition to Japan, the Allies fought against Germany, led by Adolf Hitler, and Italy, led by Benito Mussolini. Through most of the war, Franklin Roosevelt was President of the United States, until he died on April 12, 1945; he was succeeded by his vice president, Harry S. Truman. The European phase of the war ended in May 1945, and the Pacific phase ended with the dropping of nuclear bombs on Japan (in Hiroshima and Nagasaki) in August of 1945.

### **Women in the Workforce**

Among the American ramifications of World War II was the sudden increase of women in the workplace. Primarily because so many men were serving in the armed forces, women began performing jobs that had not previously been open to them, in factories for example; such work was now considered patriotic. "Rosy the Riveter" is a famous character who represents this trend. When the war ended and men returned home, however, women were expected to leave their jobs so that the men might find employment. Women did not enter the workforce in significant numbers again until the 1970s.

### **The Boom Years**

Another effect of returning soldiers was the passage of the G.I. Bill of Rights, which provided education benefits and home loans for many veterans. As a result, college enrollment increased substantially and began to become more available to middle and lower class students. New home construction and suburban development also expanded. This meant that many middle-class people moved out of major cities. On the other hand, because of work available in factories, this decade also saw mass migration from rural areas into cities.



Technological innovations also occurred, although contemporary standards make them seem decidedly dated. In 1944, the first general-purpose digital computer began to operate at Harvard University—although it needed four seconds to perform multiplication problems and eleven seconds to perform division! This computer had been built with 760,000 parts and 500 miles of wire—clearly neither a desktop nor a laptop version. Although its inventors might not have anticipated the electronic age of the late twentieth century, they clearly initiated a technological revolution.

More pertinent to average Americans was the development of Kodacolor, a color film marketed by Eastman Kodak. This film permitted individuals to take color pictures with inexpensive cameras.

### **The Growth of Post-War Arts**

Within the arts, Tennessee Williams worked in a rich context. Other plays performed in New York or major European cities included *The Searching Wind* by Lillian Hellman, *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre, and *Remember Mama* by John Van Druten, which included Marlon Brando in its cast. W. Somerset Maugham published his novel, *The Razor's Edge*, in 1944. Stephen Vincent Benet won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry that year, and T. S. Eliot published his *Four Quartets*. Such well-known and talented painters as Pablo Picasso, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Frida Kahlo produced much of their work during this period. Cole Porter, Judy Garland, Rita Hayworth, and Gene Kelly were popular entertainers. On a more humorous note, 1944 also saw the introduction of the Chiquita Banana song, which encouraged consumers to identify the fruit with a particular brand name—a trend that reached mammoth proportions by the late twentieth century.

## **Analysis: Literary Style**

### **Conflict**

Although the action in *The Glass Menagerie* occurs over only a couple of days, nearly every scene is laden with overt conflict. The most obvious conflict occurs between Tom and Amanda, since Tom needs to remove himself from the family in order to achieve his goals, while Amanda needs him to stay. This conflict is most evident during their frequent bickering about the way Tom chews his food or the number of cigarettes he smokes. A more significant conflict, however, occurs within Tom's character. In order to follow his dream, vague as it is, he will have to abandon not only Amanda but also Laura.

### **Narrator**

Although most plays do not rely on a narrator, *The Glass Menagerie* is structured so that Tom can fulfill two roles. He is both a character in the play and the person who, at times, tells the story directly to the audience. This occurs particularly at the beginning of the play, when Tom summarizes the events that have preceded the action and describes the setting, and at the end of the play, when Tom reveals what has happened to him during the intervening years.

### **Protagonist**

The protagonist of a literary work is the main character, who must change in some way during the course of the events, even if the change is entirely internal. Tom is clearly the protagonist of *The Glass Menagerie*. Although he is not heroic and will probably never triumph over his obstacles, he does take action by the end of the play.

### **Setting**

The broad setting of *The Glass Menagerie*—as described in Williams's stage directions—is "one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle-class population." In other words, it is a fairly large apartment house in a comparatively poor neighborhood. The specific city is unnamed, as if details are unnecessary since these neighborhoods so closely resemble each other. All of the action occurs within the living room and dining room of the Wingfield's

apartment; the primary importance of the setting is to reinforce the cramped feeling the characters struggle against. The time is also vague. Obviously, the play is set several decades ago, since Tom can support (although inadequately) a family of three on sixty-five dollars a month; yet, were it not for details such as these, the play could easily be set in the current generation.

### **Symbolism**

*The Glass Menagerie* achieves part of its effect through the prominent display of symbols. The father's portrait looms above the family on their wall, although he has been absent for years; obviously, he remains psychologically present and significantly affects the attitudes of the other characters. The candles also function symbolically. When Tom fails to pay the light bill, Amanda lights the apartment with candles, suggesting that this will lend a more romantic atmosphere to their home. The last action of the play is when Laura blows the candles out, as if this will erase her from Tom's memory in a death-like moment.

The primary symbol in this play, however, is Laura's glass menagerie, particularly the unicorn. The glass animals are fragile, as Laura is both emotionally and physically. Although they might imitate reality, they are not in themselves real, and their primary value lies in Laura's imagination. When the unicorn's horn breaks off, Laura describes him as now like the other horses, as if one must be broken in order to be normal. Laura is already "broken," however, and has never had the mythic status of a unicorn; she will never attain normalcy.

## **Analysis: Compare and Contrast**

**1930s:** Adolf Hitler begins to achieve power in Germany. Some Americans fought in the Spanish Civil War, although the United States did not officially participate. World War II began in Europe in 1939, but the United States declared its neutrality.

**1940s:** During World War II, most men served in the military, unless they were exempt for health or other reasons. Because so many people were affected, this war received prominent attention both in politics and in individual daily lives.

**Today:** Although The United States has engaged in comparatively minor military engagements during the last generation, no given war has become a cultural obsession since the Vietnam War ended in the mid-1970s. While men must register for the draft when they reach the age of 18, no one is currently drafted, and the military consistently speaks of "down sizing."

**1930s:** The major economic event was the Great Depression, which lasted most of the decade. Unemployment reached 13.7 million in the United States in 1932. Although men were considered the family's primary breadwinner when possible, women were also grateful for and sought out work.

**1940s:** During the war women entered the workforce but returned to homemaking when the war ended. They worked in factories and other places formerly identified with men in order to patriotically support the men who were overseas fighting.

**Today:** Many women work outside the home, even those with young children. They often do so in part because one salary can no longer adequately support a family. Another factor is the women's movement which has argued for equal treatment of men and women in politics and business and which has provided more diverse opportunities for women.

**1930s and 1940s:** Works of literature could be easily censored when they were considered obscene, even if the material was subtle. Writers such as James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence often received a scandalized response from the general public.

**Today:** Artistic merit and censorship remain an issue today. Although the works that were considered pornographic in the 1940s are frequently taught in high schools today, other works continue to be attacked. This is most evident when Congress considers the budget for the National Endowment for the Arts.

**1930s and 1940s:** Romantic interactions between men and women were often formal and constrained. Men were expected to initiate dating situations and were also expected to introduce themselves to the woman's parents. A woman generally lived with her parents until she got married.

**Today:** Although some relationships are "conventional," the range of acceptable behavior between men and women is quite broad. Gender roles are no longer as rigid, although women still do the vast majority of housework and child care. In part because the age of marriage has risen, women as well as men often live independently before they get married, and couples frequently live together before they get married. Simultaneously, women can remain single if they choose without being considered "old maids."

**1930s and 1940s:** Women seldom attended college or received any higher education. (Even for men, college was generally restricted to those who were financially comfortable.) If women attended a business school, they studied such subjects as typing and shorthand and prepared to be secretaries for bosses who would not have such skills.

**Today:** The percentage of women and men attending college is nearly equal, although some fields, such as technology and engineering continue to be dominated by men. A person who aspires to work in an office, however, needs many more sophisticated skills. Shorthand, for example, is an outdated practice, and a person who can type is often not employable unless he or she also knows one or more computer programs.

## Analysis: Media Adaptations

*The Glass Menagerie* was released as a film by Warner Brothers in 1950. This black-and-white version was produced by Jerry Wald and Charles K. Feldman and directed by Irving Rapper. It starred Jane Wyman as Laura Wingfield, Kirk Douglas as Jim O'Connor, Gertrude Lawrence as Amanda Wingfield, and Arthur Kennedy as Tom Wingfield. It also included roles for several characters who are only referred to in the play.

Another version of *The Glass Menagerie* was filmed by Cineplex Odeon and released in 1987. It was produced by Burt Harris and directed by Paul Newman. Newman's wife, Joanne Woodward played Amanda; John Malkovich played Tom; Karen Allen played Laura; and James Naughton played the gentleman caller. It is available on video through MCA/Universal Home Video.

A television adaptation also aired on CBS in 1966. This version starred Shirley Booth as Amanda, Hal Holbrook as Tom, Barbara Loden as Laura, and Pat Hingle as Jim. David Susskind was the producer and Michael Elliott the director.

Another television version was broadcast on ABC in 1984.

A sound recording has also been produced by Caedmon. This two-cassette version was released in 1973; the cast consists of Montgomery Clift, Julie Harris, Jessica Tandy, and David Wayne.

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# Quotes

## Quotes: Essential Quotes by Character: Tom Wingfield

### Essential Passage 1: Scene 1

TOM: I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it. The other characters are my mother, Amanda, my sister, Laura, and a gentleman caller who appears in the final scenes. He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from. But since I 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.

### Summary

In the opening scene, Tom Wingfield, a twenty-four-year-old worker in a shoe warehouse in St. Louis, Missouri, introduces himself as the play's narrator and one of its main characters. He announces from the beginning that the play will be a depiction of illusion, of dreams that never come true. It takes place in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, when everyone believes that dreams may still come true despite the harsh reality around them. Tom hints at the conflicts in Europe that will soon develop into World War II. In America, there is civil unrest, most notably in the form of labor strikes. Tom also takes the time to portray himself as a poet, one who thinks in symbols.

### Essential Passage 2: Scene 4

AMANDA: But, why—*why*, Tom—are you always so restless? Where do you go to, nights?

TOM: I—go to the movies.

AMANDA: Why do you go to the movies so much, Tom?

TOM: I go to the movies because—I like adventure. Adventure is something I don't have much of at work, so I go to the movies.

AMANDA: But, Tom, you go to the movies entirely too much!

TOM: I like a lot of adventure.

### Summary

It is the morning after yet another argument between Tom and Amanda. Tom has called his mother an ugly, babbling old witch. Amanda, having vowed not to talk to Tom until he apologizes, ignores her son, speaking through Laura. She sends Laura to the market, giving Tom a chance to apologize, which she is sure he will do. He in fact does, though reluctantly. Amanda wants this opportunity to talk to Tom about Laura and her future. Because Laura is excessively shy and unable to complete business school, Amanda pins her hope on finding Laura a "gentleman caller" who will prove to be a prospective husband. She approaches the topic by telling Tom that Laura is concerned about him, that he goes out at night, every night. Tom tells his mother that he goes to the movies, ostensibly because he likes adventure. There is not much adventure either at home or at his job, so Tom must seek adventure vicariously through the cinema. Amanda is confused and doubtful,

worried that he is planning to escape just as his father did.

### Essential Passage 3: Scene 6

TOM: I'm starting to boil inside. I know I seem dreamy, but inside—well, I'm boiling! Whenever I pick up a shoe, I shudder a little thinking how short life is and what I am doing!—Whatever that means, I know it doesn't mean shoes—except as something to wear on a traveler's feet! [Finds paper.] Look—

JIM: What?

TOM: I'm a member.

JIM [*reading*]: The Union of Merchant Seamen.

TOM: I paid my dues this month, instead of the light bill.

JIM: You will regret it when they turn the lights off.

TOM: I won't be here.

JIM: How about your mother?

TOM: I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard! See how he grins? And he's been absent going on sixteen years!

### Summary

At Amanda's request, Tom has invited to dinner his only friend from work. The gentleman caller is Jim O'Conner, who went to high school with both Tom and Laura. Amanda, excited about this romantic prospect for Laura, goes overboard in preparing their apartment, even buying new furnishings. Laura, however, is horrified because Jim was the most popular boy in school, and she was essentially invisible. She has retreated into the living room, too shy to join in the conversation with Tom and Jim. Tom takes Jim out to the landing, where they can smoke and talk in private. Tom confesses to Jim his dreams of a life of adventure. He has joined the merchant navy and has spent the money for the electricity bill on the dues. Tom has planned his escape for the near future, before the electric company shuts off the lights. Tom admits that he is no better than the father who abandoned them because he plans on abandoning them as well. All he can think of is escape from his humdrum life.

### Analysis of Essential Passages

Tom Wingfield is part of the lower-middle class of 1930s America, the segment of U.S. society that was most affected by the Great Depression. As Tom points out in his introduction to the play, dreams were shattered, leaving a bewildered populace behind. Searching for some kind of life outside of the small apartment that he shares with a fragile sister and an overbearing mother, Tom plots his escape.

Tom, with a "poet's weakness," struggles to find meaning in the episodes he will recount. In the unreal existence left by the economic collapse, Tom finds reality only in and through symbols. Each night, he leaves the confines of his home to indulge in the adventure of the cinema. Movies are only an illusion, but Tom finds in them all that he wants his life to be. Amanda doubts that he actually goes to the movies, suspecting that (like his father before him) he goes to bars, escaping from his family through the solace of alcohol. But Tom's

desire for adventure, such as he sees on the silver screen, will manifest in the form of the merchant marines. Just as his father ceased to care for the family that was his responsibility, so Tom abandons them too. He ultimately fails to live out the dreams that were the foundation of his departure. Seeking adventure, he does not find the life he thought he would—life as depicted in the movies.

## Quotes: Essential Quotes by Theme: Deception

### Essential Passage 1: Scene 1

TOM: Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. To begin with, I turn back time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy.

### Summary

Tom explains that his purpose as the play's narrator is not to present an illusion that has the appearance of the truth, but to give truth in the guise of an illusion. Tom says that the play takes place in the 1930s ("a quaint period") in Saint Louis, Missouri, in the midst of the Great Depression. It is a time when the happy illusions of the "Roaring Twenties" have been striped away by a U.S. economic disaster that has spread worldwide. In Europe, the people are revolting, instigating a violent change that will result in the fascist governments of Hitler and Mussolini. In America, labor unions go on strike and have physical confrontations in what were once peaceable cities. In these unsettled times, the play opens on Tom Wingfield's unsettled family.

### Essential Passage 2: Scene 2

AMANDA: Laura, where have you been going when you've gone out pretending that you were going to business college?

LAURA: I've just been going out walking.

AMANDA: That's not true.

LAURA: It is. I just went walking.

AMANDA: Walking? Walking? In winter? Deliberately courting pneumonia in that light coat? Where did you walk to, Laura?

LAURA: All sorts of places—mostly in the park.

AMANDA: Even after you'd started catching that cold?

LAURA: It was the lesser of two evils, Mother. I couldn't go back up. I—threw up—on the floor!

AMANDA: From half past seven till after five every day you mean to tell me you walked around in the park, because you wanted to make me think that you were still going to Rubicam's Business College?



LAURA: It wasn't as bad as it sounds. I went inside places to get warmed up.

AMANDA: Inside where?

LAURA: I went in the art museum and the bird-houses at the Zoo. I visited the penguins every day! Sometimes I did without lunch and went to the movies. Lately I've been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel-box, that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers.

AMANDA: You did all this to deceive me, just for deception? [*Laura looks down*] Why?

LAURA: Mother, when you're disappointed, you get that awful suffering look in your face, like the picture of Jesus' mother in the museum!

### Summary

Amanda returns home, clearly upset. She did not have the courage to go to her DAR meeting as she had originally planned, so Amanda dropped by Rubicam Business College, where Laura is ostensibly enrolled in business courses to pursue a career as a secretary. Amanda is shocked when she is told that Laura is no longer enrolled and had attended only a few days. Laura, in humiliation, explains that she had become nervous during a timed typing exercise and thrown up on the floor in front of the entire class. In shame, she did not go back. Instead, she had been going to the zoo, or in rare moments to the movies. Amanda is discouraged more than angry. She had been counting on Laura's getting a regular job to help provide for the family, since it seemed increasingly unlikely that Laura would find someone to marry.

### Essential Passage 3: Scene 5

AMANDA: The only way to find out about those things is to make discreet inquiries at the proper moment. When I was a girl in Blue Mountain and it was suspected that a young man drank, the girl whose attentions he had been receiving, if any girl was, would sometimes speak to the minister of his church, or rather her father would if her father was living, and sort of feel him out on the young man's character. That is the way such things are discreetly handled to keep a young woman from making a tragic mistake!

TOM: Then how did you happen to make a tragic mistake?

AMANDA: That innocent look of your father's had everyone fooled! He smiled—the world was enchanted! No girl can do worse than put herself at the mercy of a handsome appearance!

### Summary

Now that Laura's business career is over, Amanda hopes that her daughter will find a young man to marry. Because Laura is painfully shy, Amanda implores Tom to bring someone home from his work so that Laura will have the chance to meet a man. After repeated requests, Tom announces that he will be bringing someone home the next evening. His name is Jim O'Conner, a clerk at the warehouse and thus a few notches higher than Tom. Jim and Tom knew each other in high school, where Jim was the "big man on campus." Previously, Laura had pointed him out to her mother in the year book as someone on whom she had had a crush at the time. Amanda asks Tom about his character, but Tom is vague about any knowledge of this type. Amanda becomes wary, warning him that, in her day, a man's character was carefully scouted out to prevent a "tragic mistake." Bluntly, Tom asks his mother how her own "tragic mistake" happened. Amanda admits that she, along with everyone else, had been deceived by her future husband's charm and good looks. At this

remembrance, she hopes that Mr. O'Conner is not "too good-looking."

### **Analysis of Essential Passages**

Deception molds and defines the characters in *The Glass Menagerie*. From the play's beginning, Tom is the fractured voice of reality in the Wingfield family. His bluntness toward his mother is a reaction to Amanda's self-portrayal as a popular Southern belle. It is the very fact of her "popularity" in Blue Mountain that led her to being deceived by her future husband. Rather than seeking out Mr. Wingfield's true character, she is led astray by his good looks and charm. The price she pays is desertion and betrayal, left with two children who cannot make their way in a world that is so far removed from the genteel turn-of-the-century South in which Amanda grew up. She is unable to guide her children into the present, thus forcing them to deceive her as well as themselves.

Laura Wingfield, "crippled" and shy, has gone through life pretending to be invisible. When confronted with the reality of having to work and socialize, she succumbs to emotional illness and withdraws once again into the fragile world of her glass menageries. Those glass animals, unreal portrayals of nature, are as vulnerable and brittle as Laura is herself. When her favorite piece, the unicorn, is broken and loses its horn, she pretends that now he is "just like the others." In the same way, her encounter with Jim O'Conner has removed her uniqueness. When she discovers that Jim is engaged, she becomes—like her unicorn—broken.

Tom himself, though he functions as the voice of reality, deludes himself into the possibility of adventure beyond the confines of his present life. The merchant marines promise him the sort of glamorous life that he sees in the movies. When Tom finally escapes, he discovers that that world that he believed was "out there" is just as bleak and demanding as his family is.

The inability of each character to function beyond a manufactured world is a direct result of self-deception. As the play ends, the outcome of each Wingfield is left in question. Tom aimlessly wanders the country, Laura is unable to leave the sheltered world that she has created for herself among her glass animals, and Amanda realizes that she has two adult children whom she has failed to bring into a functioning relationship with the world.

# Critical Essays

## Critical Essays: Analysis

*The Glass Menagerie* is a play about coming-of-age. Tom's maturity is demonstrated by his final decision to leave the family, a decision that is made with the awareness of the inevitable clash between illusion and reality, between reaction and action, and between what life has given him and what he can control. In the opening of the play, Tom announces that unlike a stage magician who "gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth," he gives the audience "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion." Amanda is just such a stage magician, manufacturing illusion in the appearance of truth. Her problem is neither that she is insensitive nor that she is an overprotective mother attempting to keep her children under her wings. Her dilemma is that she is an anachronistic figure who clings "frantically to another time and place." Tradition, the main cause of Amanda's obliviousness to changes in society, is as important to her as her relationship with reality. Her faith in the "gentleman caller" tradition not only results in a failed marriage but also leads to the disastrous meeting between Jim and Laura.

Amanda's husband does not appear in the play, but his character plays an important role in demonstrating and accentuating Amanda's blindness. Mr. Wingfield, a bona fide gentleman caller, was hand-picked by Amanda to marry. He was also an irresponsible pleasure-seeker who later deserted the family for his own enjoyment of life. His abandonment of the family, in addition to announcing the death of the marriage, challenges the credibility of the "gentleman caller" tradition. Amanda is too nostalgically myopic, however, to see the portentous implication and too hopelessly dazzled by its glamour to admit its destructive potential. Thus, the circular movement of the play is not only underlined by the fact that Laura ends where she starts but also displayed in the emotional toll that two generations have to pay for living in a world of illusion.

Laura's tie to her make-believe world is as strong as Amanda's is to the past. Because of her apparent physical deformity, she has become sensitive to what people think of her. Her physical condition thus represents her mental distress; she is crippled both physically and mentally. In search of companionship, she builds her own fantasy world with her glass-animal friends and with a Victrola and many old records. Laura, however, is more than a prisoner of her own deformed consciousness. She is also a victim of moribund traditions, such as that of the "gentleman caller." The tragic nature of her life is made even more painful when the audience realizes that she is cognizant of the delicate nature of her fantasy world but that she does not see any alternative that can substitute for the security and companionship that her fantasy world provides her.

Jim is another magician who manufactures illusion in the appearance of truth. During his visit to the Wingfields' apartment, he tries to act like a gentleman, but his selfishness and egotistic nature are reminiscent of those of Amanda's former husband. Jim's interest in Laura arises only when he discovers that she still remembers all his "glorious" achievements in high school. He then practices public speaking skills on Laura, insensitively invites her to dance although he is aware of her physical condition, and continues to talk about the power of love after he bluntly breaks Laura's heart by refusing to see her again.

*The Glass Menagerie* ends with Amanda blaming Tom as the one who lives by dreams and illusions. Tom is not content with his work and dreams of becoming a poet. He represents the awakening generation of young people who are in a desperate search of their true identity. Tom is acutely aware of his responsibility, not in the traditional terms of being loyal to a family but in the sense of human choice. By deciding to break away from dying traditions, he has taken over control of his own destiny and turned himself into the speaker of "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion."

## Critical Essays: Critical Context

Tennessee Williams' first major play, *Battle of Angels*, was produced by the Theatre Guild in Boston in 1940 and brought him recognition. *The Glass Menagerie*, his second play, helped to solidify his position in the American theater, establishing him as a leading playwright. The play was completed in 1945, around the time that World War II was coming to an end. Many literary works produced at the time were related either directly or indirectly to the war. *The Glass Menagerie* was one of the first works in that era to depict young people's restlessness and struggles in trying to identify their relationship with the past, with tradition, and with society. The play has been used in both high school and college classrooms to display the detrimental effect of the struggle between illusion and truth and between the past and the present. It encourages young people to establish self-esteem, develop confidence, and think for themselves about the dreams for which they are willing to live and die. While Williams' later plays deal mostly with the adult world, *The Glass Menagerie* perfectly captures the fantasy world of young adults.

## Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

Winner of the Drama Critics Circle Award when it opened on Broadway, *The Glass Menagerie* has become a classic of the American theater. *The Glass Menagerie* is rich in themes. One of the play's primary interests lies in exploring illusion versus reality. From the beginning, Tennessee Williams, through his narrator, Tom, explains to the audience that this is a memory play, and he emphasizes the irony that truth is often cloaked by illusion.

Amanda represents the past, the pre-World War II era of the South, where she once reigned supreme in a culture that taught her to confuse appearance with substance. Amanda expends her ingenuity in manipulating others to care for her and for themselves, a seemingly selfish but also naïvely altruistic stance that ironically alienates and defeats those she most wants to encourage. Instead of acknowledging her children as individuals both gifted and flawed, she subconsciously denies them their humanity by insisting on their perfection. Tom and Laura retreat—Tom to the movies and eventually to distant lands, and Laura to the world of her imagination, peopled by music and glass animals. Tom and Laura react subconsciously to their mother's demands by avoiding any possibility of success, a stance that ensures their psychological and social defeat.

Tom is every bit the romantic his mother is, despite the fact that he does not realize it. He sees himself as a poet, as an artist whose very soul is stifled by his warehouse existence. In much the same way as Amanda is stuck in the past, Tom survives only on dreams of the future, ironically failing to realize his goals and the satisfaction he covets by dismissing his relationships and work obligations. He and Amanda both love Laura, but Tom believes that Amanda's refusal to recognize Laura's limitations is now what most demeans her daughter. Amanda believes that Tom's failure to treat his sister as the prize Amanda would have her be will seal Laura's sad fate.

Laura, the character who at first appears most divorced from reality, emerges as the only member of the Wingfield family who is in touch with the truth about herself. She understands her limitations, and even as she escapes the business school that does not fit her psychological needs, she seeks refuge in places designed to showcase precious and exotic specimens. Like her mother and brother, Laura takes comfort in illusion, as her preoccupation with her glass menagerie proves. When Jim, who provides Laura with hope, destroys her illusion, Laura realizes that she is indeed ordinary, like her unicorn-turned-horse. She understands the irony of the unicorn's accident and accepts her own altered psychological circumstances. Thus, in spite of the illusion that Laura is the weakest Wingfield, she emerges as the emotionally strongest family member. Laura is also the family peacemaker, the single person who understands the others so well that she refuses to challenge their fantasies, knowing that they, as has she, depend on their illusions to survive.

In the end, Tom leaves St. Louis, but as he so eloquently states, he cannot escape his memory of Laura. "[Time] is the longest distance between two places," he notes. Tom realizes that he cannot start life anew without coming to terms with the past. The audience understands that he is a metaphor for the post-World War II future.

Williams himself stated the play's essential significance best in his 1945 article "How to Stage *The Glass Menagerie*." He wrote that "Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance." That one must look beyond the facts to find the truth is Williams's loudest message, an early and significant literary manifestation of the psychological implications of human behavior first noted by Sigmund Freud. The playwright also observes that truth itself is subjective, its delineation ironically depending on a character's and an audience's always-illusory perspective.

## Critical Essays: Suggested Readings

Bigsby, C. W. E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*. 3 vols. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982-1985.

Devlin, Albert J., ed. *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986.

Donahue, Francis. *The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1964. A discussion of Williams' plays, with a focus on *The Glass Menagerie*.

Leavitt, Richard F., ed. *The World of Tennessee Williams*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1978. A competent introduction to the playwright and his plays, focusing on his themes.

Leverich, Lyle. *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. New York: Crown, 1995.

Nelson, Benjamin. *Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work*. New York: Obolensky, 1961. The first comprehensive study of the playwright and his work.

Spoto, Donald. *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1985. The first complete critical biography of Williams. Delineates the connections between the playwright's work and life.

Stanton, Stephen S., ed. *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977. Cogent, in-depth analysis of Williams' plays, including *The Glass Menagerie*.

## Critical Essays: Critical Overview

When *The Glass Menagerie* reached the New York stage in 1945, it was a resounding success. A year earlier, it had also been successful in Chicago, despite poor weather which initially deterred the audience. According to Felicia Hardison Londre, writing in *American Playwrights since 1945*, "a crusade by the warmly enthusiastic Chicago critics" was launched to keep the play in production. It has remained popular, with staged as well as filmed versions appearing frequently, and it is considered to be one of Williams's most successful works. Indeed, writing in *The Christian Century* in 1964 while Williams was still alive, critic William R. Mueller stated that Williams "is the greatest living American playwright and ranks next to [Eugene] O'Neill in the history of American theater."

Critics almost inevitably remark on the poetic structure and language of *The Glass Menagerie*. As evidenced by the success with which his plays have been filmed, Williams brought a "cinematic concept of dramatic action to the American stage," according to Londre. She continued, describing Williams's work as characterized by "a harmonious blending and mutual reinforcement of dialogue, character, symbols, scenic environment, music, sound effects, and lighting." In his article Mueller stated that a "common denominator of Williams's plays is the quality of their poetry." Mueller defined this "poetry" not in terms of conventional poetic devices such as rhyme and meter, but as language "suffused with imagery and so phrased as to create a dreamlike state." In *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, S. Alan Chesler credited Williams with creating "a new poetic drama.... Williams has employed visual and auditory effects to previously unattempted extents by emphasizing color, music and scenic devices."

Yet poetry is far from the only characteristic for which critics have praised Williams and his plays. Although many of the stage directions in this play are almost novelistic in their detail, his work is also discussed in terms of its theatricality. Contrasting Williams with William Shakespeare, Mueller argued that "Shakespeare can be played without setting, lighting, costume, music; Williams cannot. He makes fullest use of the craft of the stage: scenic effects, lighting, color, music are of vast importance in evoking from the audience the desired emotional response." The use of a scrim between the audience and the actors at the beginning of the play would be one example of this. Another would be the frequency with which scene changes are signaled through fading music.

Critics also frequently comment on the psychological complexity of Williams's work, especially addressing the autobiographical roots of *The Glass Menagerie*. In part because of his success in creating characters who evoke empathy, even if they are not entirely typical, *The Glass Menagerie* and plays which soon followed appealed to an exceptionally broad audience, from high school students to professional critics. In the words of Foster Hirsch in *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams*, "Williams creates driven characters who are unlike anyone most of us are ever likely to meet and yet they are almost all convincing and recognizable." In an article published in *Players*, Gerald Berkowitz analyzed these characters in terms of the setting Williams has created for them: "as we discover each aberration or peculiarity in their [the Wingfields'] characters, we also discover that it is benign or even appropriate to their setting. Laura's pathological shyness does not stifle her at home; she is even able to overcome her fear of Jim when talking of her glass animals. Her lameness, which so embarrassed her in high school, becomes irrelevant when she is sitting in the apartment."

In addition to the number of awards Williams won during his lifetime, another way to measure his critical success, and the critical success of *The Glass Menagerie*, is through the professional attention he continues to receive. Books and articles continue to be written about this play as the thematic, literary, and theatrical issues it raises continue to be debated. Within the last generation, these publications include not only a wide range of American and Canadian periodicals but also journals published in Brussels, France, Brazil, The Netherlands, Germany, and South Africa. This play, in other words, has achieved not only significant popular success but international critical success.

## **Essays and Criticism: Williams's Use of Modern Theatrical Technology as an Essential Element of his Drama**

Tennessee Williams is admired for the theatricality of his plays and for introducing literary, specifically poetic, devices into the theater. In *The Glass Menagerie* particularly, he relies on the craft of modern theater—on such devices as lighting and sound techniques—to enhance the effectiveness of his themes, themes which are not difficult to recognize.

Throughout this play, the characters are tempted toward illusion when they find reality too painful. Although the illusions of some characters are more socially acceptable, even typical, than others, Williams suggests that the "American dream" is as illusory as more overt psychological illnesses and that any given manifestation of illusion is as understandable, even acceptable, as any other one. Even Jim O'Connor, the character an audience would likely describe as closest to "normal," in other words, does not distinguish between reality and fantasy. Jarka M. Burian, writing in *International Dictionary of Theatre-1: Plays*, stated that each of the Wingfields "has a secret life and dream that inherently has little likelihood of actualization." Furthermore, in this play Williams suggests that the most specific arena of confinement, the family, is also the primary motivation for fantasy. Freedom equals freedom from familial responsibilities; yet since each character either attempts to achieve conventional family relations or obsessively to deny them, Williams indicates that such freedom is at best a vain hope.

This tendency to resist reality is most obvious in the female characters. Amanda Wingfield, the mother of Tom and Laura, is an abandoned wife who longs for a stable family structure, that is, a stable means of support, for her daughter. Amanda does not rely on her own experience as a cautionary device—or her experience cautions her toward conservatism. Her husband, who had left the family years ago, remains present in the "warty growth" of the Wingfield apartment; his photograph, "the face of a very handsome young man in a doughboy's First World War cap... gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling," dominates the living room. Rather than suggest that Laura should not depend on a husband to support her (as difficult as this choice would have been during the 1930s), Amanda desires instead that Laura find a suitable husband, one who will not drink excessively, who will find excitement enough in a conventional career and family.

Yet although she has kept her husband's photograph on her wall, Amanda sometimes seems to forget that she chose to marry a less-than-ideal man. She speaks frequently, almost obsessively, of the Sunday afternoon when she received "seventeen!—gentlemen callers! Why, sometimes there weren't chairs enough to accommodate them all." And each of these men was special: "Among my callers were some of the most prominent young planters on the Mississippi Delta—planters and sons of planters! ... There was young Champ Laughlin who later became vice president of the Delta Planters Bank. Hadley Stevenson who was drowned in Moon Lake and left his widow one hundred and fifty thousand in Government bonds.... That Fitzhugh boy went North and made a fortune—came to be known as the Wolf of Wall Street! He had the Midas touch." In continually reliving this Sunday afternoon, Amanda is able to retain a sense of her own popularity, a sense of success rather than of the failure that accompanies the marriage she did make. The unstated question is, of course, why she married the man "who fell in love with long distances" rather than one of these other implausibly successful beaux.

Simultaneously, however, because she lives more energetically in the past than in the present, she appears rather foolish when a gentleman caller does accompany Tom home for dinner. Although she does desire that Laura find a suitable husband, Amanda dresses and acts as if the gentleman is calling for her: "She wears a girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash. She carries a bunch of jonquils—the legend of her youth is nearly revived." This dress is not only "girlish," but is precisely the one "in which I led the cotillion" over twenty years earlier. But the intervening time has collapsed; Amanda's girlhood merges with her middle age.

Although Laura remembers liking only one boy rather than receiving seventeen gentlemen callers and although she knew this boy approximately five rather than twenty-five years ago, Laura's romantic life initially seems as decidedly over as Amanda's. While Amanda's illusions lead her to act foolishly, to become coyly extraverted, Laura's function with opposite results. Laura's fantasies are not simply a preference but a need; they incapacitate her. Laura's fantasies, that is, don't merely supplement reality but become reality. More specifically, her glass menagerie which gives the play its title resembles Laura in disturbingly accurate detail. Even the stage directions instruct us to interpret Laura as more similar to these delicate glass objects than to any of the other human characters: "A fragile, unearthly prettiness has come out in Laura: she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting." Laura describes the

unicorn with similar language: "he loves the light! You see how the light shines through him?" In the *Reference Guide to American Literature*, Christian H. Moe supported this view. Laura, he argued, "reveals herself as too fragile ... to pursue outside reality and thus becomes instead its victim retreating into her own fantasy world." This glass collection constitutes Laura's community, for she indicates that she devotes most of her time, and implicitly her emotional energy, to it. She personifies the animals, creating lives for them that reflect her own. When the unicorn's horn breaks, for example, Laura speculates that "The horn was removed to make him feel less—freakish! . . . Now he will feel more at home with the other horses."

By this point, Laura has revealed why she also feels "freakish." The brace on her leg "clumped so loud" according to her memory, drawing everyone's attention, she believes, to her disability. Yet the one time Tom uses the word "crippled" to describe Laura, Amanda reprimands him—demanding that her fantasy take precedence over the family's reality. One could argue that when the unicorn's horn breaks, he becomes "crippled" rather than "less—freakish." For it is his horn that grants him individuality. Laura, of course, longs to be more similar to others rather than so distinct from them.

In his willingness to be honest about Laura, Tom is perhaps the only character who can see Laura simultaneously as "peculiar" and as beautiful; a person so delicate that light can shine through her. Because he acknowledges that his life is frustratingly dull and confining, Tom fantasizes about the future. If he can leave the family, he believes, if he can imitate his father and simply follow his desires for long distance, he will have opportunity rather than responsibility. He will be able to write poetry rather than sell shoes. Tom does leave, of course, after he loses his job selling shoes because he was writing poetry. But though he does join the merchant marine and though he does abandon the family physically, he discovers that memory can haunt him. He can never leave them emotionally. The future becomes as oppressive as the past, for the "cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly colored but torn away from the branches." Rather than live merrily in the past as Amanda does, Tom is haunted by it, "I was pursued by something," he says. Try as he might to escape, "all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes. Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!"

Even Jim O'Connor, the most conventional of these characters, is nagged by his past. In an article published in *Players*, Gerald Berkowitz critiqued Jim for his own fantasies: "His dreams and values, as practical and realistic as they may be, sound shallower and more comical than Amanda's ... and his disquisitions on the art and etiquette of its [a pack of chewing gum] use sound far more odd and foolish than Laura's fantasies about the animals' feelings." While he may not be as obsessed as any of the others, he has discovered that the present has not lived up to his hopes. In high school, he had been extremely popular and had been expected to succeed at whatever he attempted. Yet, even if he makes somewhat more money, he nevertheless works in the same warehouse as Tom. Rather than surrender to disappointment, however, Jim continues to invest his hope in the future. Although he acknowledges that he had "hoped when I was going to high school that I would be further along at this time," he is currently studying public speaking because he believes it will suit him for "executive positions." It will give him "social poise," the one characteristic that will make him more successful, although the image he presents of himself in high school would indicate that he had been poised then. Like Tom, Jim continues to believe that the life he desires is possible. He lives with the illusion that if he simply tries harder, if he alters the details of his circumstances without altering their substance, then his search for excitement will be validated. Jim claims that "being in love has made a new man of me!" but he provides no evidence for this outside of rhetoric.

Although we don't discover what occurs to Jim in the future, the desolation of the play's conclusion indicates that disappointment is the inevitable outcome. In the words of Benjamin Nelson in his book, *Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work*, these characters are "doomed to failure because of their inability to do more than dream." Whether these characters attempt to achieve freedom through a family or detached from one, the play indicates that such freedom is the stuff of which dreams are made.



Source: L. M. Domina, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

## Essays and Criticism: Miss Taylor's Return

A lady, obviously no psychologist, once encountered William Lyon Phelps on the street in New Haven. "I hope you won't mind my telling you how much I enjoyed your lecture yesterday?" she asked. "Madam," beamed Professor Phelps, "you misunderstand me entirely. I am glutton for praise."

All of us are. Praise has never made anyone unhappy. We like it even when we do not believe it. We tire of it only when it is bestowed too long on other people. It is a music we do not object to having played off-stage. Although it may shame our consciences and insult our minds, it does no damage to our ears. So long as we remember that it sings the song not of what we are but of what we wish we were, it probably does not hurt us.

But the advance praise we hear of a book we have not read or a play we have not seen is another matter. Genuine and well meant as it is, if too unstinted it can do harm. Not to us, but to what it has been lavished upon. We take such praise seriously. It sends our hopes skyrocketing. It prepares us for a miracle in a world where miracles are infrequent.

To the book or play in question it presents a challenge few works can survive. Critics (and what playgoer or reader is not one?) are never more gluttonous than when it comes to giving praise. When disappointed because of the praise bestowed by others, we forget our own guilt in anticipating reactions or, worse still, raising expectations. We remember only our present disappointment. At such moments we are tempted to understand why managers employ, ungratefully, though not unreasonably, the word "raves" to describe reviews which find hats tossed so far in the air that their owners' heads are lost sight of.

I raise these general questions with a specific instance in mind. Recently I had the good fortune to see *The Glass Menagerie* but the bad fortune to see it after reading the reviews and hearing ecstatic reports about it from Chicago. Although Tennessee Williams's fantasy is a play I would not have missed, I wish I had missed both the reviews and the advance reports. At least until later. I wish I had missed them because Mr. Williams's play was forced to live them down. It was compelled to struggle against them much as a joke, however good, is condemned to a harder hearing when introduced by some witless fellow who insists upon laughing first, and then saying, "Oh, that reminds me of a very funny story."

A play would have to be a masterpiece indeed to compete with what has been said about *The Glass Menagerie* both in Chicago and New York. Mr. Williams's script, I am afraid, is not that masterpiece.

It has its high, its shimmering virtues. It is blessed with imagination. It has its many lovely moments. It is the kind of play one is proud to have the theatre produce, and pleased to sit before even when disappointed in this scene or in that. In any season it would be uncommon; in this season it is outstanding. It is the work of a mind both original and sensitive. Although it follows trails blazed by Thornton Wilder and William Saroyan, it manages to walk down them with a gait of its own.

It is as promising a first play as has been seen hereabouts in many a year.

Mr. Williams's is a play of moods; a study in frustration. Its plot is nonexistent, at least so far as plotting is ordinarily understood. It is too close to the heart of life to bother about story-telling merely for the sake of telling a story. To attempt to suggest its qualities by outlining its actions would be as unfair to *The Glass Menagerie* as it would be to try to suggest the qualities, say, of *The Three Sisters* in terms of a synopsis. No one can deny that *The Three Sisters* is about three Russian women who want to go to Moscow and never get there. Yet to say—this and only this—is to omit the wit, wisdom, perception, and autumnal radiance which

make Chekhov's play one of the wonders of the modern stage.

Mr. Williams bases his drama upon an incident rather than a plot. The only story he tells is how an impoverished Southern mother has her hopes dashed when she learns that the Gentleman Caller, who has at last come to see her crippled daughter, is already engaged. But Mr. William's interest does not stop with this story. His concern is what lies under the surface of events. He deals with those small happenings which can loom so large in the lives of unhappy people. He shows us the hopes such happenings can quicken, the memories they stir, the transformations they are able to effect, and the despair they often evoke.

His drama is projected as a memory, seen at moments not only through the actual gauzes provided by set designer Mr. Mielziner, but in flashes through the thicker curtain of time itself. Mr. Williams's is the simplest kind of make believe. The narrator he employs is the crippled girl's brother. The scenes we are invited to share are this brother's recollections. They are recalled to him when, as a merchant sailor in a foreign port, he sees objects in a store window which remind him of his sister's glass menagerie at home.

We move back in the sailor's life until we encounter the nagging dullness which drove him to seek the release of the sea. We learn of his hatred of the factory in which he worked; of his need for escape; of his incessant movie-going when (as Mr. Williams puts it), in the company of millions of other Americans sitting in darkened theatres in the pre-war years, he let a few Hollywood actors have all his adventures for him.

With this sailor brother we enter the poor home his memory has recreated. We inhale the honeysuckle of his mother's Southern recollections. We overhear her steady, soft-voiced scoldings, and understand her exasperation. We meet the crippled sister too. She is a girl who lives in the dreams summoned by the music of her Victrola records and the small glass animals in her collection to which she has given her heart. This sister is painfully shy. She is denied life by the selfconsciousness her braces have forced upon her. In an overstressed moment of symbolism Mr. Williams insists that, because of her deformity, she is as out of place among her healthy contemporaries as is the glass unicorn in her menagerie among the commoner animals.

We learn how this girl blooms under the attentions of a happy extrovert who cannot marry her. We also eavesdrop on her when, at last, she consents to face the boy her brother has asked home from the factory for a humbler version of the "Alice Adams" dinner party. Above all, we understand the decision of the brother, being what he was, to go to sea.

Mr. Williams writes about his characters warmly, with a sympathy that is constant and yet probing. He knows how to etch them in line by line, so that before the evening is over we know them well. We are on intimate terms even with the hard-drinking father who has deserted them and is represented only by a shoddy photograph on the wall. But, in spite of Mr. Williams's perceptions and the quality of his play, his writing lacks the impact of Clifford Odets's phrasing and the ultimate radiance of William Saroyan's feeling.

Full though his heart is, Mr. Williams's drama sometimes proves empty. I found that it lost my interest even while it held my admiration. Fascinated as I remained by the way in which its lines were spoken, it became difficult for me to keep my mind (in the second act) on every line that was being spoken. I was certain of my respect for the play in general, but increasingly aware of Mr. Williams's uncertainties.

Perhaps this was because, unlike Chekhov, Mr. Williams permits us to become uncomfortably conscious of how slight is the incident upon which he has based his play. Perhaps it is because his dialogue is not always active enough to compensate for the lack of action in his story. Perhaps it is because he allows us to know too much too early about all his characters except the charmingly written and played Gentleman Caller. Perhaps it is because Miss Taylor is off-stage for so long a scene in the second act. Or perhaps, as I have hinted, it is because the praise the play had won in advance had led me to expect that miracle which is every critic's hope.

Source: John Mason Brown, "Miss Taylor's Return" in the *Saturday Review*, Vol. 28, no. 15, April 14, 1945, pp. 34-36.

## Essays and Criticism: Review of The Glass Menagerie

The theatre opened its Easter basket the night before and found it a particularly rich one. Preceded by warm and tender reports from Chicago, *The Glass Menagerie* opened at the Playhouse on Saturday, and immediately it was clear that for once the advance notes were not in error. Tennessee Williams' simple play forms the framework for some of the finest acting to be seen in many a day. "Memorable" is an overworked word, but that is the only one to describe Laurette Taylor's performance. March left the theatre like a lioness.

Miss Taylor's picture of a blowsy, impoverished woman who is living on memories of a flower-scented Southern past is completely perfect. It combines qualities of humor and human understanding. The Mother of the play is an amusing figure and a pathetic one. Aged, with two children, living in an apartment off an alley in St. Louis, she recalls her past glories, her seventeen suitors, the old and better life. She is a bit of a scold, a bit of a snob; her finery has worn threadbare, but she has kept it for occasions of state. Miss Taylor makes her a person known by any other name to everyone in her audience. That is art.

In the story the Mother is trying to do the best she can for her children. The son works in a warehouse, although he wants to go to far places. The daughter, a cripple, never has been able to finish school. She is shy, she spends her time collecting glass animals—the title comes from this—and playing old phonograph records. The Mother thinks it is time she is getting married, but there has never been a Gentleman Caller at the house. Finally the son brings home another man from the warehouse and out comes the finery and the heavy if bent candlestick. Even the Gentleman Caller fails. He is engaged to another girl.

Mr. Williams' play is not all of the same caliber. A strict perfectionist could easily find a good many flaws. There are some unconnected odds and ends which have little to do with the story: Snatches of talk about the war, bits of psychology, occasional moments of rather flowery writing. But Mr. Williams has a real ear for faintly sardonic dialogue, unexpected phrases and an affection for his characters. Miss Taylor takes these many good passages and makes them sing....

Source: Lewis Nichols, in a review of *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) in *On Stage: Selected Theater Reviews from The New York Times, 1920-1970*, edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegan, Arno Press, 1973, p. 260.

# Teaching Guide

## Teaching Guide: Introduction

Whether it's your first or hundredth time, *The Glass Menagerie* has been a mainstay of English classrooms for generations. While it has its challenging spots—discussions of difficult family dynamics and explorations into motifs like deception—teaching this text to your class will be rewarding for you and your students. Studying *The Glass Menagerie* will give them a unique insight into various dramatic techniques, and important themes surrounding memory, reality, and illusion. This guide highlights some of the most salient aspects of the text before you begin teaching.

**Note:** This content is available to Teacher Subscribers in a convenient, formatted pdf.

## Facts at a Glance

- **Publication Date:** 1944
- **Recommended Grade Levels:** 10-12th grade
- **Approximate Word Count:** 20,700
- **Author:** Tennessee Williams
- **Country of Origin:** United States
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Literary Period:** Late Modernism
- **Conflict:** Person vs. Person, Person vs. Society, Person vs. Self
- **Narration:** First-Person; Tom Wingfield narrates and participates in the play
- **Setting:** St. Louis, Missouri; 1937
- **Structure or Dominant Literary Devices:** Memory Play
- **Mood:** Tragic, Regretful, Hopeless, Nostalgic

## Structure of the Text

**The Memory Play:** One of Williams's greatest contributions to the literary world was a new dramatic form he developed called the "memory play." Tom Wingfield, the protagonist, narrates the story directly to the audience and explicitly frames it as based on his memories. Modeling the subjectivity of memory, the play distorts reality and takes creative liberties: Tom speaks directly to the audience through the fourth wall and Williams incorporates production elements like sentimental music and screen projections to convey the haziness of memory. As the stage directions demonstrate in the first scene, "being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic."

**Stage Directions:** Stage directions are frequently published with plays to give readers an idea of what the play is meant to look like staged. Sometimes they are written by a play's author, and sometimes they are added after a premiere or major production of the play to describe what occurred that specific time. Williams was very particular about his stage directions, using them to convey as much about the tone of a play as about its production needs. Throughout *The Glass Menagerie*, stage directions inform everything from music to line delivery, allowing readers an almost novelistic experience of the text.

## Texts that Go Well with *The Glass Menagerie*

*A Streetcar Named Desire* is considered another one of Tennessee Williams's greatest plays. Written in 1947, the play follows Blanche DuBois as she moves in with her sister, Stella, and her sister's husband, Stanley. As the play proceeds, the animosity between Stanley and Blanche grows until Blanche suffers a mental breakdown. Similarly to *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* uses symbols, lighting, and music to explore themes of dissolution and memory and to present moments of theatrical expressionism.

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* won Tennessee Williams the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1955. Not only is it one of William's most popular plays, it was also his personal favorite. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* explores the toxic relationships between wealthy patriarch Big Daddy Pollitt, his son Brick, and his daughter-in-law Maggie. Themes of deception and sexuality are explored in greater depth than in *The Glass Menagerie*, but characters express similar feelings of entrapment and repression.

*Fences*, written by August Wilson in 1985, is a play set in 1950s Pittsburgh. Like *The Glass Menagerie*, the play portrays tumultuous family relationships, as Troy Maxson cheats on his wife and severs his relationship with his son.

*Long Day's Journey Into Night*, by Eugene O'Neill, is similar to *The Glass Menagerie* as a semi-autobiographical work. First performed in 1956, the play centers on four characters based on O'Neill's family. The plot takes place over the course of one day, as two sons and their parents grapple with issues like alcoholism, promiscuity, and illness.

*A Raisin in the Sun*, by Lorraine Hansberry, is a 1959 play that explores familial relationships. On the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s, the matriarch of the Youngers must decide what to do with a \$10,000 insurance check she receives after her husband's death. Her decisions cause tension within the family.

*Summer and Smoke*, by Tennessee Williams, is a 1949 play that combines the poetic expression of *The Glass Menagerie* with the violent realism of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The play centers on Alma Winemiller, a minister's daughter, who experiences a tumultuous romance with her childhood neighbor, John.

*The Cherry Orchard*, by Anton Chekhov, is a 1903 play similar to *The Glass Menagerie* in its hopeless, dismal tone. In this "Chekhovian comedy," Madame Lyuba Ranevskaya and her family must decide whether to sell her cherry orchard in order to pay off her debts. The end of the play, much like *The Glass Menagerie*, is bleak and tragic.

*Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett, was first performed in 1953 and is one of the most recognizable works of late modernism post-World War II. Throughout the play, Vladimir and Estragon search futilely for a character named Godot, who never appears. The play's themes and meanings are often debated, although most agree that it demonstrates the bleakness and desperation that characterized the literary period following WWII.

## Teaching Guide: Key Plot Points

**Tom Introduces Himself and Establishes the Play as Memory (Scene 1):** Through elaborate stage directions, Williams establishes the physical and metaphysical setting of the play. The action of the play takes place in a St. Louis apartment, part of "one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units." The Wingfield apartment is flanked on both sides by alleys and features a living room, a set of glass animals, and a photograph of Tom's father hanging on the wall. However, the play is actually set in Tom Wingfield's memory. Stage elements such as screen projections, sentimental music, and dim lighting are used to distance

the narrative from the strict realism an audience might expect. Tom narrates his story several years after the events of the play, immediately breaking the fourth wall (speaking directly to the audience) to describe the lights, music, and other characters. The first scene centers on the Wingfield family as they sit down for a meal. The dinner is tense: Amanda, Tom's mother, criticizes Tom's eating habits, and she pesters Laura, Tom's sister, for not receiving any gentlemen callers. Amanda reminisces on her past in Blue Mountain when she once received seventeen gentlemen callers in a single afternoon.

**Laura Reveals her High School Crush (Scene 2):** Laura is polishing her glass animals when Amanda enters the scene, crying theatrically. Amanda has discovered that Laura has been lying about attending business college for the past six weeks. Instead of attending school, the shy and nervous Laura walks around parks and visits the zoo. Amanda worries that Laura has no prospects and will be reduced to spinsterhood. She asks her daughter if she ever liked a boy and Laura replies that she once liked a boy named Jim in high school. Jim called her "Blue Roses" after mishearing Laura say she was diagnosed with "pleurosis." Amanda states definitively that Laura will "wind up married to some nice man," and Laura replies doubtfully that she is crippled. Amanda tells her never to use that word and to "develop charm."

**Tom and Amanda Argue (Scene 3):** From the fire-escape landing, Tom tells the audience that "the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment." Believing that the apartment needs redecoration should a gentleman caller stop by, Amanda finds a job selling magazine subscriptions. The tension between Tom and Amanda escalates into a full-blown argument "probably precipitated by his creative labors," his writing. Amanda accuses Tom of lying when he says that he is going to the movies every night and says that his late nights are jeopardizing his job and by extension the family's security. Tom retorts that he hates his job and resents the familial responsibility that keeps him there, sarcastically claiming that he is leading a double life as an "honest warehouse worker by day" and a "dynamic tsar of the underworld" by night. Tom calls Amanda a "babbling old witch," tears off his coat, and accidentally shatters some of Laura's glass animals. The scene ends as Tom, alone with Laura, silently cleans up the broken glass.

**Amanda Asks Tom to Find a Gentleman Caller for Laura (Scene 4):** Tom drunkenly returns home after a late night out. Laura opens the door for Tom, who tells her he has spent the whole night watching a long program at the movie theater. The next morning, while Laura is out buying butter, Tom apologizes to Amanda. In turn, Amanda expresses her reliance on Tom, and tells him that he's becoming more and more like his father, who abandoned the family. She asks where he goes at night and he hesitatingly repeats that he goes to the movies. When pressed as to why, he replies that he likes adventure, something he cannot find in his warehouse job. They argue briefly, with Amanda taking the stance that he should be able to rise above his desire for adventure. As Tom attempts to leave, Amanda stops him and asks him to help Laura find a gentleman caller. She fears that Laura will become a "home girl," a woman who just "drifts along doing nothing." She also reveals that she found a letter Tom received from the Merchant Marine. She tells Tom that he will be "free to go" once Laura "has got somebody to take care of her," and he agrees to bring home one of his coworkers to meet Laura.

**Tom Finds a Gentleman Caller (Scene 5):** Amanda criticizes Tom for having unkempt hair and for spending money on smoking. She joins him on the fire escape and through her questioning he slowly reveals that a gentleman caller for Laura named James Delaney O'Connor will be coming for dinner the following evening. Amanda is pleased but she is also stressed that the apartment is not prepared for visitors. She asks Tom a series of questions about the man. Tom, "submitting grimly to the ... interrogation," tells her that the gentleman caller works at the warehouse as a shipping clerk, makes twenty dollars a month more than Tom, and goes to night school. Tom tells Amanda not to "expect too much of Laura." Amanda brushes aside Laura's disability, but Tom replies that Laura is "very different from other girls": "she's terribly shy and lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people."

**The Wingfields Have Dinner with Jim O'Connor (Scene 6):** Amanda has cleaned and redecorated the apartment for Jim's visit. She hems Laura into her new dress and puts on a girlish yellow frock, reminiscing about her own gentleman callers and the summer she met her husband. Seeing how much work Amanda has put into preparing for the visit and how important it is to her, Laura is nervous. She becomes even more frightened and sick when she discovers that the gentleman caller's name is Jim O'Connor, the name of the boy she liked in high school. Laura insists she "couldn't sit at the table if it was him" and that she's sick and should be excused, but Amanda responds that she's "sick, too—of [Laura's] nonsense," and forces her to open the door for Tom and Jim. Jim introduces himself to her. He is surprised to discover that Tom, who Jim calls Shakespeare, had a sister since he doesn't remember her from high school. Laura flees the room. While Amanda prepares dinner, Jim attempts to interest Tom in a public speaking course he's taking. A "Mr. Mendoza" at the warehouse has talked to Jim about Tom, and Jim tells Tom he's going to lose his job if he doesn't improve. Tom replies that he hates his job in the warehouse and that he has enrolled in the Union of Merchant Seamen, paying the dues with the money allocated for the light bill. Amanda flirtatiously introduces herself to Jim, continuing to reminisce about the gentleman callers of her youth. Though she tries to manipulate Laura to the dinner table, Laura nearly faints in terror and spends dinner lying on the sofa, holding back tears.

**Jim Kisses Laura and Tom Leaves (Scene 7):** During dinner, the lights go out. Jim covers for Tom's neglect of the bill, keeping the secret about the Merchant Seamen's Union. Amanda takes Tom to wash dishes and sends Jim to care for Laura, who is still lying on the couch in the adjacent room. Laura admits to remembering Jim from high school, and he engages her about her disability and resultant shyness. They look at their high school yearbook together and Laura reveals her former crush. Jim tells Laura that she suffers from low self-esteem and needs to find her interest, as he has. Laura shows Jim her glass collection and her favorite glass animal—the unicorn. Then, using the music from the dance hall across the alley, Jim convinces Laura to dance with him. They accidentally bump the table and the glass unicorn falls to the floor, breaking its horn off. Laura says that she will imagine that the unicorn "had an operation . . . to make him feel less freakish." Jim tells Laura that she is pretty and unique, and that "somebody ought to build [her] confidence up." He kisses her. Immediately after, he says he "shouldn't have done that," and haltingly tells Laura that he won't call her. He is engaged and didn't know the dinner invitation was meant to be an introduction. Devastated, Laura gives the unicorn to Jim as "a souvenir." Amanda enters with lemonade and cookies, but Jim takes his leave, explaining his engagement and "duck[ing] jauntily out." Amanda tells Tom, who didn't know about Jim's engagement, that he has made them look like "fools." She tells him to "go to the moon," calling him a "selfish dreamer," and he "plunges out on the fire-escape," presumably on his way to the movies. From there, Tom delivers his closing monologue, telling the audience that he was fired shortly after the events of that evening. He left St. Louis, and the memory of his sister followed him everywhere. In the room behind him, Laura blows out the candles and the scene, like a memory, "dissolves."

## Teaching Guide: History of the Text

***The Glass Menagerie's Production History and Reception:*** According to *The New York Times*, *The Glass Menagerie* is considered "American theater's most exquisite *mea culpa*." Since its premiere in Chicago, the play has garnered praise for its depiction of a shattered family and has won numerous awards for its powerful and poetic language. One of Williams's most recognizable works, *The Glass Menagerie* is still produced in theaters across the country.

- **Chicago Premiere:** Williams's play premiered in Chicago in 1944. Though it was received poorly at first, the play garnered rave reviews from a few key critics who thought it demonstrated "courage . . . of true poetry." This early praise launched the play from obscurity into the spotlight.
- **Broadway Premiere:** *The Glass Menagerie* opened in the Playhouse Theater on Broadway on March 31, 1945 and ran until August 3, 1946. Directed by Eddie Dowling and Margo Jones, the opening cast

included Eddie Dowling as Tom Wingfield, Laurette Taylor as Amanda Wingfield, Julie Haydon as Laura Wingfield, and Anthony Ross as Jim O'Connor. The play opened two years prior to the creation of the Tony Awards, but it won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play in 1945 and launched Williams's career as a playwright. Between 1945 and 1959, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and six other Williams plays were produced on Broadway stages. With its 2014 and 2017 Broadway revivals, *The Glass Menagerie* went on to receive several Tony Award nominations and one win.

- **Laurette Taylor's Iconic Performance as Amanda Wingfield:** In the *New York Times* review from March 31, 1945, art critic Lewis Nichols wrote that "Tennessee Williams's simple play forms the framework for some of the finest acting to be seen in many a day. 'Memorable' is an overworked word, but that is the only one to describe Laurette Taylor's performance . . . Miss Taylor's picture of a blowsy, impoverished woman who is living on memories of a flower-scented Southern past is completely perfect." Lauded for her performance as Amanda, Taylor's performance set the standard for future actors tackling this part. Williams, in turn, went on to create a number of iconic female roles. In a tribute to Taylor published in *The New York Times* in December of 1949, Williams wrote, "I feel now—as I have always felt—that a whole career of writing for the theatre is rewarded enough by having created one good part for a great actress."

**Tennessee Williams's Personal History:** Tennessee Williams's life was challenging, and led him to grapple with dark subject matter through the poetic expression of his plays.

- **The Life of Tennessee Williams:** Thomas Lanier Williams (1911–1983), later known as Tennessee, was born in Columbus, Mississippi, and brought up in St. Louis, Missouri. Williams demonstrated promise as a writer from an early age. Two of his plays were staged by the University of Missouri's Dramatic Arts Club when he was a student there as part of their Dramatic Prize Plays Contest. At his father's urging, Williams went on to work in a shoe factory. He was deeply unhappy and suffered a nervous breakdown at just 24 years old. From then on, he devoted himself to writing. In 1945, Williams won national and international acclaim with the Broadway premiere of *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams received myriad awards, including two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1980. However, Williams fell out of favor later in his career. When Frank Merlo, Williams's long-time romantic partner, died of lung cancer in 1963, Williams entered a deep depression, exacerbated by a history of drug and alcohol addiction. In 1983, Williams died from asphyxiation while trying to ingest barbiturates.
- **Williams's Family Background and Semi-Autobiographical Works:** Many of Williams's plays, including *The Glass Menagerie*, which he developed from his short story "Portrait of a Girl in Glass," drew inspiration from his relationships with his disabled sister, difficult mother, and absent father. Rose, Williams's sister, was diagnosed with schizophrenia, and, at their mother's request, received a prefrontal lobotomy at the Missouri State Sanitarium in 1937. From then on, Rose lived in and out of mental institutions until her death in 1996. Rose's lobotomy and subsequent incapacitation inspired *Suddenly Last Summer*, a play about a woman who attempts to lobotomize her niece to prevent the disclosure of a dark secret. A faithful brother and friend to Rose, Williams left the majority of his inheritance to his sister. Edwina, Tennessee's mother, was a strict Southern woman who abided by prudish Victorian mores and suffered from bouts of hysteria and fainting spells. She alternately smothered and alienated her children; nevertheless, she encouraged Tennessee in his writing endeavors, even supplying him with his first typewriter at age twelve. Like the Wingfield patriarch in *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams's alcoholic father Cornelius was a shoe factory worker who was frequently absent from his son's life and scornful of his son's ambition to become a writer.

**Tennessee Williams's Poetic Expressionism:** A distinctive voice in the literary canon, Tennessee Williams is known for his ability to mix poetry with drama.



- **Williams’s Lyrical Writing Style:** Through elaborate stage directions and dialogue, Williams incorporated a lyrical writing style into his plays. For example, stage directions usually convey necessities of production to a director and design team. The first scene of *The Glass Menagerie*, however, opens with an effusive extended metaphor comparing the Wingfields’ apartment building to “one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centres . . . [which] are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society.” This level of figurative writing in both his stage directions and his dialogue gives Williams’s plays an elevated and poetic—as opposed to strictly realistic—tone.
- **Southern Gothic Literature:** Williams’s writing is part of the Southern gothic tradition, which frequently deals with delusional characters and grotesque or violent themes. Like many Southern gothic works, Williams’s plays often include themes of alienation and fallen grandeur. For example, *The Glass Menagerie* subverts the southern belle archetype with the characters of Amanda and Laura, who are presented in negative and darkly absurd ways.
- **Williams’s Portrayal of Complex Subject Matter:** Williams was not afraid to confront difficult subjects. Many of his plays deal with toxic family dynamics, mental health, depression, alcoholism, rape, and death. Williams also addressed sexuality with a directness that was unusual for his time, portraying women as complex characters with motivations and sexual desires of their own. Williams was even blacklisted in 1956 by Catholic Cardinal Spellman for the screenplay *Baby Doll*, which, like many of his other works, directly confronted male and female sexuality.

## Teaching Guide: Significant Allusions

**Allusions to History:** Since *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play, Williams situates the play in the actual history of 1937. In his opening monologue, Tom alludes to many real-life events in order to create the atmosphere of this time period. These allusions also call attention to the world outside of the Wingfield apartment, and demonstrate how separated Tom, Laura, and Amanda are from reality.

- **Daughters of the American Revolution, or D.A.R.** as it is referred to in the play, was established in 1890 as a nonprofit organization of women descended from those involved in the movement for American independence. Amanda’s involvement with the organization portrays her as someone who believes in the grandeur of the past and who takes pride in her lineage.
- When Amanda questions where Tom goes at night, he sarcastically says that he has joined **the Hogan Gang**. This violent gang, which was based in St. Louis, sold liquor during Prohibition and committed horrendous crimes including armed robbery and murder.
- Tom’s monologues to the audience include references to various historical events which root the play in its 1937 setting. He mentions the bombing of **Guernica**, which took place on April 26, 1937 during the Spanish Civil War, and Prime Minister Neville **Chamberlain’s umbrella**, which came to represent peace following the Munich agreement with Hitler in 1938.

**Allusions to Literature and Mythology:** Williams also draws on literature to temporally situate the play and provide thematic insights.

- Amanda confiscates Tom’s “**hideous book by that insane Mr. Lawrence.**” She is alluding to the novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* by D. H. Lawrence, which divulges in explicit detail the sexual life of the protagonist, Constance Chatterley. Although published in 1928, the novel was banned in many countries and not widely read until the 1960s.
- Twice in the play, the legend projected on the screen reads “Où sont les neiges?” or “Where are the snows?” This French phrase is excerpted from the phrase “Mais où sont les neiges d’antan?” (“Where are the snows of yesteryear?”) in **François Villon’s “Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis”** (“Ballad

of the Ladies of Times Past”). The poem discusses famous mythological women.

- In Greek mythology, **King Midas** could turn everything he touched into gold. As Amanda reminisces about her past in Blue Mountain, she describes one of her gentleman callers as having the “Midas touch” because he was able to successfully make a fortune on Wall Street.

#### Allusions to the Bible:

- **The screen projection preceding Tom’s announcement to Amanda that he has found a gentleman caller for Laura is “Annunciation.”** This word alludes to Luke 1:27-38, in which the angel Gabriel announces to the Virgin Mary that she will give birth to Jesus Christ. By equating Tom’s announcement with the Annunciation, Williams imparts how important this event is in the lives of the Wingfields. In the play, the annunciation is “celebrated with music” and the screen presents an image of a gentleman caller carrying a bouquet.

#### Allusions to the Arts:

- **Tom alludes to Clark Gable**, a famous American movie star of the 1930s and 40s who would have been at the peak of his career at the time the play is set. Tom expresses jealousy towards the characters in Gable’s movies because their lives are full of adventure and glamour; meanwhile, he feels trapped with his mother and sister, completely removed from the outside world.
- ***Pirates of Penzance*** is an 1879 operetta written by Arthur Sullivan and W.S. Gilbert. Its subtitle is “The Slave of Duty,” which recalls Tom’s feelings about his role as familial breadwinner. In high school, Jim sang “the baritone lead,” a pompous character who finds himself racked with guilt over a lie. In high school, Laura attended all three performances in which Jim performed. The two characters reminisce about their high school’s production of this operetta.

## Teaching Guide: Teaching Approaches

***The Glass Menagerie* as a Memory Play:** *The Glass Menagerie* was revolutionary for introducing a new dramatic form: the memory play. Tom, who is a main character in the play, narrates the story from his own perspective many years later, after he has lived the action on stage. He bookends the play with monologues which speak directly to the audience and break the fourth wall. He watches from the fringes of the set as his sister and mother recreate his memories. He moves fluidly between his two roles—from narrator to participant, and back again. When he narrates the final moments of the play, he describes the effects of distance and hindsight on his memories as a whole. This structure allows the play to develop crucial motifs about the power of memory and nostalgia.

- **For discussion:** How does the audience understand that *The Glass Menagerie* is based on memory? What stage directions and props support this theme? What other production elements could contribute to it?
- **For discussion:** How does the memory play touch on themes of nostalgia and memory? Since Tom is the narrator of the play, how does his point of view control the play? Is Tom a reliable narrator? Why or why not? Imagine if the play was told from Laura’s or Amanda’s perspective. How might that change the course or tone of the play?
- **For discussion:** What does Williams mean when he writes that the scene “dissolves” in the play’s final moments? How would you interpret this on stage? What other aspects of the memory play seem like they might be challenging to stage?
- **For discussion:** In Williams’s opinion, how is memory different from reality? Do you agree with how Williams depicts memory? Why or why not? How do you remember your past?

**Avoiding the Present as a Theme:** Each of the Wingfields in *The Glass Menagerie* frequently, even obsessively, reminisces about the past or envisions the future: Amanda daydreams about her youth in Blue Mountain; Laura recalls her high school years when she was in love with Jim; Tom imagines leaving his family and job to become a poet and live a life of adventure. Each of these characters' perceptions of time is skewed and causes rifts within the family. For example, Amanda's grandiose memories push her children away, because they cannot live up to the pressures of the idealized past. Because the Wingfields are preoccupied with either the past or the future, none of them are able to express themselves in the present.

- **For discussion:** After Tom tells Amanda he has found a gentleman caller for Laura, Amanda tells him, "You are the only young man that 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!" How does this phrase encapsulate Amanda's opinion of the past? How does Amanda obsess over the past? How does her nostalgia create tension between her and Laura? Her and Tom?
- **For discussion:** Tom dreams of a life beyond the St. Louis alley. What does Tom desire for himself? Why does he leave his family at the end of the play? How does Tom's memory of his father affect his decision to leave the family? In what ways is Tom similar to his father?
- **For discussion:** How do Laura's memories of the past affect how she interacts with Jim in the play? Why is she so nervous? How does Amanda escalate Laura's fears?
- **For discussion:** While Amanda reminisces about the past and Tom plans for his future, Laura's memories of high school are tainted by shame, and she is unable to envision a future for herself. How might Laura be trapped by her present? How could she break out of this trap? Does that seem likely? What sort of relationship with time does Williams seem to be advocating for?
- **For discussion:** Jim, the gentleman caller, talks about both his past and his future with Tom and Laura. How do his recollections and envisionings differ from those of the Wingfields? How does this affect his characterization? Does Williams seem to consider his relative flexibility a positive trait or a negative one? Why?

**Motifs of Stage Magicians and Illusions in *The Glass Menagerie*:** In Tom's first monologue, he says to the audience: "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion." Through the memory play format, the characters are continually oscillating between reality and illusion. Laura lives vicariously through her glass menagerie, Amanda lives in her past, and Tom looks to the future. None of the characters have a firm grasp on their realities, and they survive purely off of their imagined pasts or futures.

- **For discussion:** If, as Tom claims, he is not a "stage magician," what role does he play in the drama? Do you agree that Tom is not a stage magician? How does Tom present truth? How does Tom manipulate time, place, and atmosphere to "give truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion"?
- **For discussion:** Do you think any of the characters are "stage magicians"? How might Amanda be a stage magician in her interactions with Laura? How might Jim?
- **For discussion:** How do you think the play's end will impact the illusions of each family member?

**The Use of Symbols Throughout the Play:** Williams employs myriad symbols throughout the play to touch on various themes. These symbols include Laura's glass menagerie, her glass unicorn, candles, and blue roses. Each of these symbols are rife with meaning, and there is no clear answer as to what each symbol represents. In these cases, it is up to the audience to decipher their meanings.

- **For discussion:** Explore the symbol of Laura's glass menagerie. Laura is frequently polishing and cleaning her glass menagerie. What could it represent? When Tom breaks several of the pieces in the menagerie, Laura is distraught. Why?

- **For discussion:** After the glass unicorn breaks, Laura remarks that it looks like it had an operation, and will now “feel more at home with the other horses, the ones that don’t have horns.” How does the breaking of the unicorn reflect the scene between Laura and Jim? What larger themes could the unicorn also symbolize?
- **For discussion:** How are candles and ambient lighting integral in creating a memory-like scene? How are candles used in Tom’s final monologue to signal the end of the play? How do candles represent Tom’s memory of Laura after he leaves his family? What does Tom mean when he tells Laura to “blow out your candles”?
- **For discussion:** How does Jim come up with the nickname “blue roses” for Laura? What unintended connotations does this name have? How does this name indicate her fragility? How does the use of the name and the projection of blue roses on the screen demonstrate a sense of nostalgia?

**The Use of Stage Directions and Props as Integral to the Play:** In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams employs poetic language both in the dialogue of the characters as well as in the effusive, descriptive stage directions. His plays, critics note, are like movies in that they incorporate lighting, music, screens, and projections.

- **For discussion:** While some playwrights abstain from including lengthy stage directions, Williams believed that descriptive stage directions were important in establishing a play’s particular atmosphere. Remind students that stage directions are not imparted to the audience and that directors do not always need them to stage a production. What purpose do these elaborate stage directions serve? How might they help the actors become their characters or influence the direction of a production?
- **For discussion:** How do the opening stage directions establish the tone of the play? What does Williams mean when he says that the Wingfields live in “one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centres of lower-middle-class population and are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism”? How might Williams expect that metaphor to influence a director or set designer?
- **For discussion:** How do the music and lighting create a sense of nostalgia? How do the legends on the screen foreshadow coming scenes? What would the play be like without the music, lighting, legends, or lengthy stage directions? What do these elements add to the overall atmosphere of the play?
- **For discussion:** If you were a director, a designer, or an actor, how might you approach Williams’s stage directions? Are there some you see as more integral to a production than others? Why?

## Tricky Issues to Address While Teaching

***The Glass Menagerie Deals with Physical Disability:*** Laura Wingfield had pleurosis as a young girl, and an unknown condition has left her with a bad leg, for which she used to wear a brace. Although Tom openly refers to Laura as a “cripple”—a term also used by Laura herself—Amanda insists they refrain from using that word.

- **What to do:** Before reading the play, introduce students to the motif of disability in various literary works. Remind students that these issues are integral to the play, and that the character of Laura is based on Tom’s real-life sister Rose.
- **What to do:** Have students close-read Laura’s text to interpret how she feels about her disability, and compare her own feelings with those of her mother and brother. Point out that Laura seems more

affected by their conflict than by her own circumstances, and remind them that introversion is not an inherently negative trait.

- **What to do:** Point out to students that, as a figure in a memory, Laura is being interpreted through her brother's eyes, and the end of the play (specifically, her teasing of Jim and her smile at Amanda) implies she may not be as confined as Tom thinks she is. Ask students what they think Laura wants, and what she will do after Tom's departure.

***The Glass Menagerie Deals with Challenging Family Dynamics:*** One of the main tensions throughout *The Glass Menagerie* is the dynamic between Amanda and her two children. Amanda and Tom disagree on many subjects, but Tom stays home to support her and Laura. The family suffers both emotionally and, it is implied, financially, from the loss of Tom and Laura's father, who abandoned them long ago. Nevertheless, his presence is felt through the life-size painting of him that hangs above the mantle.

- **What to do:** Use your discretion to determine whether or not to mention these challenging topics before reading. In some cases, it may be helpful to introduce your students to these themes.

**Students May Have a Difficult Time Understanding the Structure of a Memory Play:** Even in 1944, the year *The Glass Menagerie* was published and first performed, the memory play was a striking new narrative structure. It is possible that students may have a difficult time grasping how Tom can serve as both a participant in the play and as the narrator. In order for your students to make sense of this structure, introduce students to the notion of the fourth wall in drama and have students perform the exercise below.

- **What to do:** Have students remember a pleasant memory, or even a sad memory. Have them write down their memory. How do emotions affect their memory? How is the way Williams writes his play similar or different to how they recall the past?
- **What to do:** In groups, have students share their memories. As a class, discuss the subjectivity of memory. Ask students to compare and contrast how other students recall their memories. Do you think that the other people involved in your memory would remember it in the same way you did? Do you think Laura and Amanda would tell this story in the same way as Tom? Why or why not?

## Alternative Approaches to Teaching *The Glass Menagerie*

While the main ideas, character development, and discussion questions preceding are typically the focal points of units involving this text, the following suggestions represent alternative readings that may enrich your students' experience and understanding of the play.

**Focus on the discussion of disabilities throughout the play.** How is Laura disabled? Why does Amanda refrain from referring to her daughter as "crippled"? What effect does Amanda's insistence appear to have on Laura? How does the play deal with disabilities?

**Focus on the play as a work of autobiography.** Introduce students to Williams's life story and discuss how he incorporates many of his life experiences into his works. Ask students to draw parallels between Williams's life and the events and characters in the play. Working in groups, have students create short plays and/or monologues about a significant period or event in their lives.

**Focus on Jim, the gentleman caller,** a minor character who is nevertheless integral to the climax of the play. Ask students to identify the climax of the play. What are the repercussions of discovering that Jim is already engaged? How do the other characters react? Would Tom still have left the family if Jim's visit had gone

well?

**Focus on the play as an early example of literary modernism,** a literary period that arose post-World War II. *The Glass Menagerie* was published shortly before the end of WWII. How do you think this historical period influenced the play? Why does Williams choose to include real-life events—the bombing of Guernica, for example—in the play?

**Focus on the Wingfield patriarch as his own character.** Despite being absent, how is the father still an active character in the play? What does the large photograph of him on the living room wall represent? How does Amanda view him? How do Tom and Laura view him?

**Focus on the play as an example of Southern gothic literature.** How does Williams incorporate the grotesque or the disturbing into the play? How does Williams engage with other Southern gothic tropes? Specifically, how do Laura and Amanda subvert the archetype of the southern belle?

**Focus on the play as a reaction to WWII.** Many critics argue that Tom looking to the future is symbolic of the United States looking to the future following the war. Do you agree with this reading of the play? What could this interpretation imply about the United States?

**Focus on the play as a text intended for performance.** While Williams does direct many line readings through punctuation and stage direction, there is nevertheless an element of character interpretation that will be brought by the actor inhabiting a role. What are some ways in which different actors might change the depictions of these characters? What about the play's overall themes? What actors might you expect to see cast in these roles? What new dynamics might they uncover?

## Teaching Guide: Topics for Further Study

Although *The Glass Menagerie* is set in the 1930s, many critics describe it as timeless. Describe the historical changes you would have to make if you were to set the play today.

Research the financial situation of single mothers today and compare their options to those of Amanda.

Examine the catalogs of several business or technical schools in your area and compare their curricula to the apparent curriculum of Rubicam's Business College, where Laura has been attending typing classes.

Interview someone in your school who has worked on the production of a play. Focus your questions especially on the technical aspects of stage craft so that you can discover how the screens, lighting, etc. would work in *The Glass Menagerie*.

## Teaching Guide: What Do I Read Next?

Tennessee Williams wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947. It features another frustrated family, though here the interactions become violent.

Eugene O'Neill is also considered a major American playwright. He published *Long Day's Journey into Night* in 1956. It also features a family within which tensions are obvious, in part because of the alcohol abuse present in the characters.

*A Raisin in the Sun*, written by Lorraine Hansberry and first produced in 1959 presents the situation of a black family, each of whose members attempts to exercise choice for the good of the family and themselves

individually.

*The Bluest Eye*, published by Toni Morrison in 1970, concerns a young African-American girl who loses touch with reality because of her life circumstances.

Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "In the Waiting Room," (1976) tells the story of a young girl at the moment when she realizes she is both an individual and part of a community.