

## ANALYSIS

### *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)



Tennessee Williams

(1911-1983)

## PRODUCTION NOTES

Being a “memory play,” *The Glass Menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom of convention. Because of its considerably delicate or tenuous material, atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction play a particularly important part. Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn’t be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. The straight realistic play with its genuine frigidaire and authentic ice-cubes, its characters that speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance.

These remarks are not meant as comments only on this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new, plastic theater which must take the place of the exhausted theater of realistic conventions if the theater is to resume vitality as a part of our culture.

## THE SCREEN DEVICE

There is *only one important difference between the original and acting version of the play* and that is the omission in the latter of the device which I tentatively included in my *original* script. This device was the use of a screen on which were projected magic-lantern slides bearing images or titles. I do not regret the omission of this device from the...Broadway production. The extraordinary power of Miss Taylor’s performance made it suitable to have the utmost simplicity in the physical production. But I think it may be interesting to some readers to see how this device was conceived. So I am putting it into the published

manuscript. These images and legends, projected from behind, were cast on a section of wall between the front-room and dining-room areas, which should be indistinguishable from the rest when not in use.

The purpose of this will probably be apparent. It is to give accent to certain values in each scene. Each scene contains a particular point (or several) which is structurally the most important. In an episodic play, such as this, the basic structure or narrative line may be obscured from the audience; the effect may seem fragmentary rather than architectural. This may not be the fault of the play so much as a lack of attention in the audience. The legend or image upon the screen will strengthen the effect of what is merely allusion in the writing and allow the primary point to be made more simply and lightly than if the entire responsibility were on the spoken lines. Aside from this structural value, I think the screen will have a definite emotional appeal, less definable but just as important. An imaginative producer or director may invent many other uses for this device than those indicated in the present script. In fact the possibilities of the device seem much larger to me than the instance of this play can possibly utilize.

### THE MUSIC

Another extra-literary accent in this play is provided by the use of music. A single recurring tune, 'The Glass Menagerie,' is used to give emotional emphasis to suitable passages. This tune is like circus music, not when you are on the grounds or in the immediate vicinity of the parade, but when you are at some distance and very likely thinking of something else. It seems under those circumstances to continue almost interminably and it weaves in and out of your preoccupied consciousness; then it is the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest. It expresses the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow. When you look at a piece of delicately spun glass you think of two things: how beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken. Both of those ideas should be woven into the recurring tune, which dips in and out of the play as if it were carried on a wind that changes. It serves as a thread of connection and allusion between the narrator and his separate point in time and space and the subject of his story. Between each episode it returns as reference to the emotion, nostalgia, which is the first condition of the play. It is primarily Laura's music and therefore comes out most clearly when the play focuses upon her and the lovely fragility of glass which is her image.

### THE LIGHTING

The lighting in the play is not realistic. In keeping with the atmosphere of memory, the stage is dim. Shafts of light are focused on selected areas or actors, sometimes in contradistinction to what is the apparent center. For instance, in the quarrel scene between Tom and Amanda, in which Laura has no active part, the clearest pool of light is on her figure. This is also true of the supper scene, when her silent figure on the sofa should remain the visual center. The light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas. A certain correspondence to light in religious paintings, such as El Greco's, where the figures are radiant in atmosphere that is relatively dusky, could be effectively used throughout the play. (It will also permit a more effective use of the screen.) A free, imaginative use of light can be of enormous value in giving a mobile, plastic quality to plays of a more or less static nature.

T. W.

"No play can be truly flawless and certainly *The Glass Menagerie* is not so. Mr. Williams has replaced action in his script with the constant flow of human attitudes, relations and ideas across the stage; there are bound to be a few slow moments in the parade. There is one particular instance of too-obvious symbolism.... For every flaw, however, there are twenty brilliances, even in the matter of symbolism."

Otis L. Guernsey, Jr.  
*New York Herald Tribune* ts  
(8 April 1945) 1

"*The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* are among the noteworthy creations of the American drama. Of the latter two plays, *The Glass Menagerie* is the more lyrical, if also more tenuous, example of their author's artistry. But it is plain enough that even in the delicate work Williams retains a

highly objective attitude toward his picture of a life of failure. He locates his story in the context of the larger world, which demands a wide-awake attitude toward a society that, ailing and torn with the conflict of a Second World War, challenges our intelligence and capacity for action.

The narrations that frame the story of the mother, the daughter, and the son form another dimension and supply a measure of objective reality. The 'lives of quiet desperation' seem all the more defeated because they are lived in a world that no longer affords them shelter. A mighty wind has arisen and nobody seems to temper it to the shorn lamb, whether it be an aging Southern belle abandoned by her husband or a girl too painfully shy for the coarse-grained world. Although the play is written in a mood of tenderly rueful reminiscence, Williams exhibits here much strength of mind and objectivity. Sympathize though he does with his failures, he recognizes that one cannot accept their quiescence and bumbling. The son pays a tribute of compassion to his mother and sister, but acknowledges the validity of the instinct of self-preservation that made him leave them; he knows, too, that in the great struggle of the times their plight is, in a sense, of minor consequence.

*The Glass Menagerie* is, as had been claimed, a 'mood.' But it is a mood not mistaken by either the author or the Narrator (and they are actually the same person, since the play is largely autobiographical) for the whole of reality. The author was attached to his characters to such a degree that he could make them move us deeply, but he was also detached enough to locate them in time, place, and necessity. He created *The Glass Menagerie* as both poet and dramatist, as subjective writer and realist.

Fortunately, Williams found an effective form for his mixed kind of playwriting. He did not, it is true, entirely control his medium, mistaking theatrical virtuosity for effective emphasis out of an apparent desire to depart as far as possible from realistic technique. This may be seen in the stage directions he insisted on retaining for the published version... Yet Williams' feeling for form was essentially right. He used narrations and scenes with emphatic alternation, envisioned the action in the manner of vignettes that soon became alive and charged, and called for the expressive use of visual and musical effects. His work represents a poet who is thoroughly at home in the theatre. *The Glass Menagerie* exists on several levels; it is a work in which imagination and realistic elements stand in sound relation to each other. It is not a shattering drama, but it is a notable example of exquisite playwriting that is more tensile than it appears to be on the surface."

John Gassner, ed.  
*A Treasury of the Theatre*  
(Simon and Schuster 1950) 1033

"*The Glass Menagerie* (1945) is a 'memory play' involving the technique of broken chronology in which the recollections of a narrator present on stage introduce and comment upon incidents taken from his earlier life. This narrator is Tom Wingfield, a somewhat bitter young man who spent years working in a St. Louis warehouse before he finally became a merchant marine sailor. The other important characters in the seven scenes are his mother Amanda Wingfield, an impoverished widow who nostalgically recalls the youth in which she was a vivacious Southern belle with many suitors, and a daughter, Laura, crippled, moody, and unattractive to men. Like her mother, Laura lives in a world of illusion; she finds her escape in the 'menagerie' of glass animals which she cherishes in the sordid St. Louis flat.

Each of Laura's pitiful attempts to face reality have come to nothing; her mother has sent her to business college, but the atmosphere of the school made her physically ill, and Amanda discovers that she has not been attending her classes for several weeks. Tom, who is an avid reader and dreams of becoming a poet, is forced to work at a monotonous job in a shoe warehouse to support the family; he grows rebellious when he sees no way out of the impasse and turns to petty dissipation. A constant bicker goes on between him and Amanda over his way of life.

Finally Amanda persuades him to invite one of his fellow-employees from the warehouse to dinner; when Amanda learns that Laura is to have a 'suitor' she is filled with nervous elation, and makes a pitiful attempt to tidy up the flat. Jim O'Connor, the guest, is 'a nice, ordinary young man' who gets along well with Laura; by coincidence it happens that he is a secret beau for whom Laura had a clandestine admiration

in high school. As her desperate need for a lover becomes apparent, however, Jim grows apprehensive; finally he confesses to her that he is engaged to another girl and will soon be married.

After Jim leaves, Amanda bitterly upbraids Tom for bringing an engaged man as a suitor for Laura. Tom, his disgust at the sordid family situation rising to the point of rebellion, storms out of the flat—ostensibly to go to the movies, but actually to go off to sea. As the play ends Tom, now a detached narrator of his own life drama, confesses to the audience the feeling of remorse toward his sister which has pursued him ever since he abandoned her to her lonely spinsterhood.

In addition to the unrealistic device of the actor-narrator, *The Glass Menagerie* utilizes another surrealist or Expressionistic trick: a screen on which are projected magic-lantern slides bearing images or titles which comment ironically on the action. This device, intended to 'give accent to certain values in each scene,' was omitted in the Broadway production."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 409-11

"In retrospect one sees that the appearance of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945 marked the beginning (at any rate, the public beginning) of the most exciting dramatic career in post-war America. Williams' later plays, all dealing with love's failure in a world brutalized and perverse to the extent to which it betrays love, have not fulfilled the promise of quiet loveliness that *The Glass Menagerie* gave, but his imaginative use of the stage and the poetry of his realistic dialogue have hardly diminished in power. He argues no themes, is not a master of suspense, but he makes of the theater significant space for living characters. A dimension of meaning—wistfulness, tragi-comedy—is (to take an example) added to the bittersweet drama of the Wingfields by the smiling face of the footloose father, the happy doughboy, that presides over the heartbreaks of his deserted family.

The aliveness is harder to analyze. The effect of Amanda's speech, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but the expression on Mr. Garfinkel's face won't harm us!' has something to do with the way the associations of the first half clash with the prosaism of rhythm and reference of the second. The child's jingle of studied unconcern at being spiritually hurt becomes a brittle defense against poverty and humiliation and does not quite cover the cruelty that poverty and humiliation entail: Laura's having to face Mr. Garfinkel. The speech is a sad, soft woman's effort to be gay and hard. Williams' plays are full of such speeches. They ring true; people seem to talk like that. The very idiosyncrasies of image, diction, and cadence amount to lifelikeness.

Williams' success as the realist of frustration and despair may at first seem to contradict the artistic theory he propounds in the 'Production Notes' to *The Glass Menagerie*. Actually, the theory explains the success. 'Everyone' (he says in the notes) '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.' The crucial words here are 'in essence.' Williams' characters get their faintly fantastic inner glow from being 'essences.' They are convincingly real *because* they are more than life-like prototypes. They are defined, assume shape and three dimensions, in terms of their obsessions, their mannerisms, their associations with certain objects. Amanda is fluttering gentility, forlorn Southern belle of vivacious humor long frayed by wear, puzzled and panicked because of her daughter's failure to attract a single specimen of the breed of males by which, in Amanda's set of values, a woman's success and happiness are measured.

Laura is defined by her glass menagerie. The animals both symbolize her fragility and her quaint beauty and represent the world of lovely imagination into which she escapes from typing charts and speed tests. Tom writes poems on the lids of shoe boxes, and his emblems are the movies and the pirate ship, escapist symbols of glamorous adventure. Jim O'Connor chews gum and believes in Dale Carnegie and the future of television. These are portraits not in depth but in sharp focus. The method may represent Williams' limitation; he is neither a profound nor a versatile writer. But it makes his plays.

Williams' vignettes of the frustrations of ordinary people suggest Chekhov in their reliance on mood and atmosphere and in their near plotlessness. No one who reads Chekhov right will find anything paradoxical in the fact that Williams also scorns dramatic photography. His attitude, of course, is quite orthodox among contemporary playwrights, who all have read their Strindberg and Pirandello. But in *The Glass Menagerie* Williams is not just following fashion; the break with realism can be justified on the intrinsic grounds that the play is a 'memory play.' Its premise is the subjectivity of modern relativism: reality, it implies, is not what happened but how you feel about what happened.

Clearly, the solidities of naturalistic staging would have crushed Tom's delicate memories of mother and sister. The transparent apartment, the easy transitions from one point of time to another, the use of light and music to throw characters, objects, and events into relief—all this is a kind of poetry of the theater and psychologically true to the play's status as a record of inner experience. At the same time, the inner experience has been objectified by the theater medium. When Tom gulps his breakfast and quarrels with his mother he is simply another character, though the stage is his own mind. His double function in the play insures aesthetic distance. The play is enclosed by the narrator-director-character's memory, the Shakespeare of the shipping room.

But the memory device has not made the play rigid nor us uncomfortable. Only the literal-minded would object to Tom's staging a scene at which he was not himself present—the climactic one between Laura and Jim. By the strict logic of Tom's being the rememberer, the scene is construction by inference or, possibly, by report by either one or both of the two principals. But merely to begin speculating and explaining along these lines shows up the irrelevance of the whole issue. The play works by a higher logic than mere consistency of decorum, just as it is also too subtle to need the projection of theme-focusing 'legends' and 'images' on a screen wall that Williams had planned originally. It makes its meaning without such obvious and heavy-handed new stagecraft devices.

In keeping with the memory-play premise the plot is slight. Much of the play is little more than a tenuously coherent sequence of scenes of people getting on each other's nerves when their dreams and longings clash and wound. What story there is begins late: Tom, giving in to his mother's nagging, provides a gentleman caller for his sister, and for a few moments there is a promise of happy ending as the princess almost comes out of the spell that shyness and lameness have cast upon her. But the prince of the magic kiss turns out to be very much engaged, and the music from the old victrola again takes over from the Paradise Dance Hall band. In these elusive, fleeting, pastel reminiscences of moods, the only element of intrigue—the coincidence that Tom's friend turns out to be Laura's high-school ideal—seems almost to belong to another, more mechanical, kind of playwriting.

Whose play is *The Glass Menagerie*? Not Tom's; he is not himself the main character of his memories. And Jim is even more than Tom primarily a means to an end: a nice young man caught in an awkward situation, decent enough to sense its pathos and half-educated enough to try to remedy it with newspaper column psychology, socially deft enough to get out without too much embarrassment. The end both he and Tom serve is one they share with most of Tennessee Williams' male characters: to reveal female lovelornness and broken illusions. The play is Laura's and Amanda's, mother's and daughter's both, not the one's more than the other's, although Amanda mainly exists in terms of Laura's situation. Laura's unfitness for social life—her scene with Jim is an almost tender parody of a home date—is her distinction. She is exquisite because she is different and rare—blue roses among red, unique as a unicorn. Like her unicorn, she is fragile. She would be less precious were she more robust.

The unicorn loses its horn during the dance, and Laura—dancing, kissed—becomes for a moment like other girls. But as her mother's laughter tinkles in the kitchen the gentleman caller announces his unavailability, and her and her mother's dream shatters—not on human cruelty, for Jim is not cruel, but on the blind, casual cruelty of life itself: 'Things have a way of turning out so badly.' There is hardly the stuff of tragedy in middle-aged girlishness and pathetic shyness due to a physical defect, in frustration by coincidence. The play is squarely in the modern democratic tradition that assumes that serious drama can be made of the sufferings of small people and which proceeds to write such plays, foregoing claims to traditional tragic magnitude of destiny and language. But *The Glass Menagerie* is something more as well. In Tom's final memory image Amanda passes from exasperating silliness to a kind of tragic dignity as the

eternal mother sorrowing for her sorrowing child. The child becomes the girl of candles in a world 'lit by lightning.'

*The Glass Menagerie* fittingly introduces the sequence of Williams' plays, for it anticipates important themes and motifs and images of his later, more violent critiques of the spiritual desolation of the modern world. The notion that the weakest, the most vulnerable, are the best because their weakness and vulnerability signify sensitivity and imagination has become almost a hallmark with Williams. Fragile objects have continued to be important symbols in his plays. And the moon rising over Garfinkel's delicatessen suggests the blend of romantic daydream and sordidness, of sentimentality and comic realism, that defines his dramatic world."

Otto Reinert, ed.  
University of Oslo  
*Modern Drama: Nine Plays*  
(Little, Brown 1961) 446-49

"Tom Wingfield, alternating in the roles of narrator and participant of the 'memory play,' evokes the home in St. Louis which he left years ago: the drab reality of the little flat in a dark alley; his monotonous job in a warehouse from which he escapes by writing poetry; his mother, a former Southern belle who tried to govern her two grown children by the constantly recalled standards of her girlhood; his sister Laura, a shy, slightly crippled girl who found refuge in the imaginary kingdom of her glass animal collection; and Jim, a friend from the warehouse whom Mother, determined to find a 'gentleman caller' for her daughter, had forced Tom to invite, and who for a moment falls under the spell of Laura's dream world. Tom, too, flees from his mother and sister, but he cannot banish the thought of their fragile, helpless existence. (All the parts are rewarding, in particular that of the fussy, anxious mother, infuriating and pitiful in her futile meddling with the lives of her children. The play has the delicate twilight atmosphere of time remembered, 'truth in the pleasant disguise of an illusion.')

Theodore J. Shank, ed.  
*A Digest of 500 Plays: Plot Outlines and Production Notes*  
(Crowell-Collier 1963) 365-66

"Laura Wingfield, who wears a leg brace because of a crippling childhood illness and is hypersensitive about it, lives with her mother Amanda and brother Tom in a St. Louis tenement. Her father has long since deserted them, though a dashing photo remains as a reminder of his charm. Amanda, a victim of illusions about her past as a Southern belle and about Laura's future, persists in preparing her daughter for hypothetical secretarial work and for nonexistent 'gentlemen callers.' She likewise wants Tom to get ahead in his warehouse job, which largely supports the family, but as a poetic dreamer his thoughts, like his father's, are often about escape from the family, as he turns to compulsive movie-going or plans for merchant-marine service. Amanda persuades Tom to invite a friend from the warehouse for dinner, and lets herself leap to romantic conclusions concerning a relationship between the visitor and Laura, even though the pathetically withdrawn girl is only at home in her private world, which centers on a collection of glass animal figurines.

On the appointed evening Tom arrives with Jim O'Connor, who turns out to be a high-school acquaintance whom Laura admired and who has since been part of her dream life. Her shy, nervous confusion is eased by Jim's warmth and she shows him her favorite animal, a tiny unicorn, but when he later teaches her a few dance steps while trying to build up her self-confidence, they bump the table and the unicorn's horn is broken. She discounts the accident, saying that now the unicorn will 'feel less—freakish,' and Jim is moved to tell her that she herself is different from others 'in a nice way,' like 'Blue Roses,' his high-school nickname for her. He tells her that she is pretty and kisses her. He is sincere but casual and, suddenly embarrassed, explains that he cannot call again because he is engaged to another girl. Furious at Tom for bringing home an engaged man, Amanda goads him beyond the breaking point, and he leaves home, haunted by the memory of his sister, who now retreats even further into herself."

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 285-86

“This play, which won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1945, was Williams’ first success, and is considered by many critics to be his best work. It was first produced at the Civic Theatre in Chicago and later on Broadway. Tom Wingfield, who narrates the introduction and conclusion, describes the play as being set in memory, and therefore dimly lit, sentimental, and not realistic. The seven scenes of the play are set shortly before Tom leaves home to join the Merchant Marine.

In a flat in the slums of St. Louis, while the colored lights and music of the Paradise Dance Hall intrude upon the scene, his mother, Amanda, constantly harks back to imagined scenes of her southern girlhood and her ‘gentleman callers.’ Tom’s sister, Laura, slightly crippled from birth, withdraws into her private world, populated by the animals in her glass menagerie. At his mother’s insistence, Tom brings his friend Jim home to dinner so that Laura may have a ‘gentleman caller’ of her own, Jim accidentally breaks the horn on the unicorn, Laura’s favorite glass animal, thus making it less of a freak and more like the other horses, and manages to bring Laura out of her shyness and isolation for a few moments. However, after kissing Laura, Jim admits that he is already engaged, and Laura’s emergence from her fragile world is left in doubt.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962) 389-90

“In *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) by Tennessee Williams...three characters live in a world of illusions or hopes: the mother, who is attached to the glorious memories of her younger days in the South; the crippled girl, who has withdrawn into her own dreams symbolized in her menagerie of glass animals; and the son, who is looking for a life of adventures. But while mother and son are capable of adjusting themselves to a hard reality, the girl, when confronted with the possibility of carrying a bit of her dream into reality and realizing that she will fail, breaks down under the experience.”

Heinrich Straumann  
University of Zurich  
*American Literature in the Twentieth Century*, 3<sup>rd</sup> revised edition  
(Harper Torchbooks 1965) 203

Michael Hollister (2015)