
Tennessee Williams: Memories as symbols in *The Glass Menagerie*

الحيوانات الزجاجية المتوحشة

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Abstract

The Glass Menagerie is a metaphor, which is one of the greatest plays of great writer Williams. The play talks about the poor people in society and how they try to escape this group of people from the real world to get rid of the hardness of this tough reality and live in a fantasy world that is much like the glass where the world is very weak. This world is acting by Laura, she is the owner of these animals breakable glass where it's weak and unable to defend itself as well as the mother Amanda is a very selfish never think about her children but only herself.

Introduction

The plays of Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) are often associated with the withering legacy of the South American States during the American Civil War (1818-1865), and its aftermath. These plays highlight the end of an enduring mythology, which had formed around the idea of the Old South in pre-civil war era: of a graceful, civilized society, superior to the vulgar, materialistic northern states.¹

The Glass Menagerie is one of Williams' greatest plays. Its action takes place in a cramped apartment in a lower-class part of St. Louis in the year 1937. One concise description of this literary work is that it is a four-character autobiographical play. Both in its style and in its content, it is shaped and inspired by the writer's personal memories. The characters and the story mimic Williams' own life more closely than any of his other works. The play's lack of realism, its high drama, its overblown and too-perfect symbolism, and even the frequent use of music, are all due to its origins in memory. Even the story of the play is told because of the inflexible grip it has on the narrator's memory. The concept of "nostalgia" is the dominant condition of the play.² Williams worked on various drafts of the play prior to writing a version of it as a screenplay. The play was reworked from one of Williams' short stories entitled "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" (1943-1948). Written from the point of view of the narrator Tom Wingfield, many of his soliloquies in *The Glass Menagerie* seem lifted straight from the above-mentioned original work³.

Besides memories, the play is the most intense in terms of symbolism. The very title of the play is a symbol, and symbols occupy almost every sentence⁴. Therefore, this paper aims at sketching the way Williams relates memory to symbolism in this play.

The Play

The plot of *The Glass Menagerie* is structured around a series of abandonments. Mr. Winfield's desertion of his family determines their life situation. Jim's desertion of Laura is the centre of the play's dramatic action. Tom's abandonment of his family gives him distance

that allows him to shape their story into a narrative. Each of these acts of desertion proves to be of a devastating effect upon those left behind. At the same time, each of these acts is portrayed as the necessary move. In particular, each is strongly associated with the march of technological progress, and the achievements of the modern world. Mr. Wingfield leaves his family because he "fell in love with the long distances", which the telephone brings into people's consciousness. It is impossible to imagine that Jim who puts his faith in the future of radio and television could tie himself to the sealed, static world of Laura. Tom sees his departure as essential to the pursuit of "adventure", which is whetted by the movies he attends nightly. Only Amanda and Laura, who are devoted to archaic values and old memories, will presumably never assume the role of abandoner, and are doomed to be repeatedly abandoned.

The Glass Menagerie is a metaphor for each of the four characters in the play. Laura is the owner and caretaker of the glass animals through which she escapes from the real world in order to get away from the realities and hardships she endures. Though, physically, she is slightly crippled, her mind is very disabled on an emotional level. Overtime, she has become very fragile and vulnerable, much like the glass, which shatters easily. As the glass unicorn loses its horn; so she can lose control of herself. Laura is very weak, and open to attack since she is unable to defend herself against the truths of life. ***The Glass Menagerie*** is an unmistakable metaphor to represent Laura's physical and mental state.

Amanda is also well characterized in ***The Glass Menagerie***. The glass figures sit in a case, open for display and for the inspection of

all. Amanda tries to portray herself as a loving mother who does everything she can for her children, and who cares nothing for herself. But in reality, she is quite selfish and demanding. She is very suspicious to Tom's activities. Also, believing that Laura is lonely and needs a companion to get married, she continually pressures Tom to find a gentleman caller for her.⁵

Tom is much too difficult a character to analyze and compare to **The glass collection**. From the outside, he appears to be both weak and strong. He listens to his mother only because she will nag him to death if he does not. When he breaks the glass animals of Laura, and she begins to cry, he shows no real outward emotion towards her. But inside, he appears to be genuinely sorry. This is because he knows that there is no way whereby he can help his poor sister recover from her illness anymore.

Tom claims that he goes to the movies every night, but his mother does not believe him. When Tom finally bursts in rage and anger and confesses to the true nature of his activities, his mother does not believe him. In the end, she begins to crack and break a part.⁶

The gentleman caller whom Tom brings for Laura, at the urging of his mother, can also be discussed in terms of **the Glass Menagerie**. At first sight, he is very kind and warm. Amanda thinks he is perfect for her daughter Laura. But soon, she discovers that the caller is already engaged, and will soon get married. Tom knows that, but he claims that he does not. The caller represents the shelf that the glass rests upon. He is the link between Tom, Amanda, and Laura. Laura would have become happy, and so would Amanda, and then Tom

would have been able to go his own separate way, had he been freed of his duties to his mother and sister. The *shelf* seems to be broken because the gentleman caller ignites the greatest fight of all between Tom and Amanda. In addition, Laura is left shattered after she loses whatever is left within her as the caller turns out to be a complete disappointment.⁷

Symbols in *The Glass Menagerie*

In this play, Williams uses a multitude of symbols. From these symbols, there comes a deeper understanding of the relationships between the play's four characters who are based on the author's own family-members and his friend. The most obvious symbol in the play is Laura's glass menagerie, which represents the world she lives in. Another recurring symbol in the play is the fire-escape. Outside the fire-escape is the dance hall: a symbol of the reality of the outside world. Candles and rainbows are often mentioned in the play, which are suggestive of a variety of meanings.⁸

The fire-escape symbolizes an escape from the family. It represents the needful "bridge" between the illusory world of Wingfields and reality. The same holds true for the phonograph. But this time, the "bridge" seems to be just a one-way excursion, though the direction varies to each character. For Tom, the fire-escape is the way out of the world of Amanda and Laura, and an entrance into a world of new dimensions. For Laura, the fire-escape is a way into her own world.⁹ Also, the fire-escape represents exactly what its name implies: an escape from the fire of frustration - a function that rages in

the Wingfield household. Another important symbol is that of the unicorn. The unicorn is a symbol of Laura's uniqueness. As for the father's photograph, it is shown to represent something different for each character.

The assimilation of these symbols allows the achievement of a greater understanding of the play's theme. Throughout the play, Tom Wingfield is torn between the responsibility he feels towards his mother and sister, and his inner need to be his own man.¹⁰ Therefore, the play is enriched with many symbols, wherewith objects, characters, figures, and colors are used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

As the title of the play informs, *The Glass Menagerie* is the symbol control play. Laura's collection of glass animal figures represents a number of facts of her personality. Laura is delicate, fanciful, and somehow old-fashioned. Glass is transparent, but when light is projected upon it correctly, it refracts an entire rainbow of colors. Similarly, Laura, though quiet and bland around strangers, is a source of strange, multifaceted delight to those who choose to look at her in the right light.

The menagerie also represents the imaginative world to which Laura devotes herself: a world that is colorful and enticing, but based on fragile illusions.¹¹ Another symbol, the unicorn in Laura's collection - significantly: her favorite figure - represents her peculiarity. As Jim points out, unicorns are "extinct" in modern times, and are lonesome as a result of being "different" from other horses. The fate of the unicorn is also a smaller version of Laura's fate in scene seven.¹²

When Jim dances with Laura, and then kisses her, the unicorn's horn breaks off. As such, the unicorn becomes just another normal horse. After that event, Laura cannot become normal without somehow shattering. When Laura gives Jim the unicorn without its horn as a "souvenir", the unicorn seems more appropriate for him than her. Now, the broken figure represents all that he has taken from her, as well as what he has destroyed in her.

The name "Blue Roses" offers another symbol used by Williams. Being Jim's high school nickname for Laura, it symbolizes Laura's unusualness. The name is also associated with Laura's attraction to Jim, and the joy his kind treatment brings to her. Furthermore, it recalls Williams' sister, Roses, on whom the character of Laura is based.¹³

Williams uses such a collection of symbols in order to develop his multifaceted characters, and to display the recurring themes of the play. This use of various symbols appears throughout the entire work, which are usually disguised as objects or imagery. They allow the addressee to know the character's personalities, and their true inside characteristics. These symbols also add to the major themes, which develop as the play gains dramatic momentum. Accordingly, one may legitimately conclude that these symbols actually play the most important role in the entire structure of this play.¹⁴

Illusion versus Reality

Williams uses the role of the members of the Wingfield family to highlight the controlling theme of "illusion versus reality." The family as a whole is enveloped in a mirage. The lives of the characters do

not exist outside their apartment, within which they have basically isolated themselves from the rest of the world. Even their apartment is a direct reflection of the past, as stories are often recalled from the mother's teenage years at Blue Mountain, and a portrait of the man that previously left the family still hanging on the wall as if his existence were proven by the presence of the image.¹⁵

One of the fundamental and universal ideas explored in this literary work is the difficulty of accepting reality.¹⁶ In all its acts, the play exposes the difficulty all the characters have in accepting and relating to reality. Each member of the Wingfield family is unable to overcome this difficulty; and each - as a result - withdraws into the private world of illusion where he or she finds the comfort and meaning, which the real world does not seem to offer. Of the three Wingfields, reality has by far the weakest grasp on Laura. The private world in which she lives is populated by glass animals: objects that, like Laura's inner life, are incredibly fanciful and dangerously delicate. Unlike his sister, Tom is capable of functioning in the real world, as we see in his holding down a job, and talking to strangers. But, in the end, he has no more motivation than Laura's in pursuing professional success, romantic relationships, or even ordinary friendships. The result is his preference to retreat into the fantasies provided by literature and movies, and the stupor provided by the darkness.

Amanda's relationship to reality is the most complicated one in the play. Unlike her children, she is partial to real-world values, and longs for social and financial success. Yet, her attachment to these values is exactly what prevents her from perceiving a number of truths about her life. Although no longer young, she cannot accept that she should

be anything other than the pampered *Southern belle* she was brought up to be. She denies that Laura is peculiar; and that Tom is not a promising business man; and that she herself might be responsible for the sorrows and flaws of her children. Amanda's retreat into illusion is in many ways more pathetic than her children's because it is not a willful imaginative construction, but a wistful distortion of reality.

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Although the Wingfields are distinguished and are bound together by the weak relationships they maintain with reality, the illusions to which they succumb are not merely familial quirks. The outside world is just as susceptible to illusion as the Wingfields. The young people at the Paradise Dance Hall waltz under the short-lived illusion created by a glass ball - another version of Laura's glass animals. Tom opines to Jim that the other viewers at the movies he attends are substituting on-screen adventure for that of real-life adventure; finding fulfillment in illusion rather than real life. Even Jim, who represents the "world of reality," is basing his future on public speaking and the television and radio industries, all of which are means for the creation of illusions, and the persuasion of others that these illusions are true.

So, *The Glass Menagerie* identifies the conquest of reality by illusion as a huge and growing aspect of the human condition in its time. Beside, the play deals with the impossibility of escape. In scene four, Tom regales Laura with an account of a magic show. Clearly, Tom views his life at home and his work in the shoe warehouse as a kind of coffin-cramped, suffocating, and morbid – wherein he is unfairly confined.¹⁸

The promise of escape, represented by Tom's missing father and the fire escape outside the apartment, haunts Tom from the beginning of the play. In the end, he chooses to free himself from the confinement of his life.¹⁹In addition, the play has an ambiguous attitude toward the moral implications, and even the effectiveness of Tom's escape. As an able-bodied young man, he is locked into his life, not by exterior factors, but by emotional ones - by his loyalty to Laura and Amanda.

Escape for Tom means the suppression and denial of these emotions in himself. It also means: doing a great harm to his confinement in this coffin, without upsetting a single nail. But, the human nails that bind Tom to his home will certainly be upset by his departure. One cannot say that leaving home means true escape for Tom. As far as he might wander from home, there remains that "something" which "pursues" him. Like a jail break, Tom's escape leads him not to freedom, but to the life of a fugitive.

An autobiographical Background

The Glass Menagerie is an autobiographical play. There are innumerable parallels between the lives of the Wingfields on the stage and the actual lives of the Williamses. For instance, Williams' father worked for a phone company, just as Mr. Wingfield did²⁰ mother Edwina, actually shouted "Rise and shine!" in the morning, just as Amanda does.²¹In the play, Amanda says that going south "weakened resistance" so that she developed malaria. This was Edwina's experience, except that it occurred after her marriage rather than before.²² Finally, during Williams' early adulthood, she conducted

literary purges, just as Amanda does.²³ Naturally, there are also many parallels between Williams and Tom, his namesake. Moreover, Williams even had a friend named Jim O'Connor.

There are also several parallels between Williams' sister Rose and Laura. Aside from their both developing schizophrenia, Rose did go to Rubicam's Business College. The editors of Williams' letters write: "Ezzie Mayes, who joined TW and Rose for summer classes, has recalled the intimidating experience: 'For retyping we sat in a pool and practiced phrases such as "All good men come to the aid of their country.'" If there was one mistake the OGRE who ran the class humiliated you in front of the entire class. It almost killed Rose.'"²⁴ Of course, she ultimately dropped out, just as Laura does.²⁵

Tom's double role in *The Glass Menagerie*—as a character whose recollections the play documents and as a character who acts within those recollections—underlines the play's tension between objectively presented dramatic truth and memory's distortion of truth. Unlike the other characters, Tom sometimes addresses the audience directly, seeking to provide a more detached explanation and assessment of what has been happening onstage. But at the same time, he demonstrates real and sometimes juvenile emotions as he takes part in the play's action. This duality can frustrate our understanding of Tom, as it is hard to decide whether he is a character whose assessments should be trusted or one who allows his emotions to affect his judgment. It also shows how the nature of recollection is itself problematic: memory often involves confronting a past in which one was less virtuous than one is now. Because *The Glass Menagerie* is autobiographical, and because Tom is a stand-in for the

playwright himself (Williams' given name was Thomas, and he, like Tom, spent part of his youth in St. Louis with an unstable mother and sister, his father absent much of the time), one can apply this comment on the nature of memory to Williams' memories of his own youth.

Williams invested himself in all of the characters of the play. First, it appears that Laura's limp is parallel to a handicap Williams temporarily endured. Speaking of the trials he suffered at the first school he attended in St. Louis after moving there from small-town Mississippi, Edwina wrote, "The boys at the Eugene Field Public School made fun of Tom's Southern accent and manners. They taunted him as 'sissy' because he would not take part in their games—I am sure he never told them that less than a year before, his legs had been paralyzed and he could not even walk, much less run" due to his contracting diphtheria. The episode in scene seven where Jim teaches Laura to dance is probably patterned after Rose's teaching him to dance.²⁶

Laura is patterned after Williams in more important ways. She is shy and quiet, characteristics which link her to him. Leverich confirms this: Although the surface details of Laura resemble those of Rose, the character traits of Laura are also those of Tom Williams: his shyness, his reticence, his fears.²⁷ Williams himself believed that there was only one characteristic Rose and Laura shared—both were nonconformists, resisting the status quo. In his *Memoirs*, he writes, 'Laura of *Menagerie* was like Miss Rose only in her inescapable 'difference.'²⁸

Williams invested himself into the other characters as well. For instance, he sold subscriptions over the telephone, just as Amanda does.²⁹ His mother was not similarly employed. Moreover, he left home and traveled to Acapulco, a Mexican coastal town, just as Mr. Wingfield leaves home and travels to Mazatlan, another Mexican coastal town. Williams did have a friend named Jim O'Connor, but his personality sounds much different from O'Connor's.³⁰ Shockingly, Williams used an earlier version of himself as the source of O'Connor's enthusiasm for business and commerce—so far removed from Williams as he was later in life. Williams even loved going to big world fairs, parallel to Jim and his enthusiasm for Chicago's Century of Progress exposition. In 1939, one of the main reasons why Williams traveled to San Francisco was to attend the Golden Gate Exposition, and in the same year, he traveled to New York to see the World's Fair.³¹

The character that matches Williams best is Laura. There is a particular reason why this is so; he saw his own nature as containing a great deal of the traditionally feminine. In his *Memoirs*, he wrote,

"I was a very slight youth. I don't think I had effeminate mannerisms but somewhere deep in my nerves there was imprisoned a young girl, a sort of blushing school maiden much like the one described in a certain poem or song "she trembled at your frown." Well, the school maiden imprisoned in my hidden self, I mean selves, did not need a frown to make her tremble, she needed only a glance."³²

R. B. Parker says about this “in an interview with the *New York Times* in 1975, Williams pointed out that he believed there was no person living who ‘doesn’t contain both sexes. Mine could have been either one. Truly, I have two sides to my nature.’”³³ This belief was so influential in the composition of **The Glass Menagerie** to the effect that Leverich has said that the play can be seen as “a study in the duality of male and female in his nature, symbolized by brother and sister.”³⁴

Conclusion

In *The Glass menagerie*, Williams depicts the tragic beauty of spirit, represented by Laura and her glass menagerie. His reverence for the spiritual rather than the physical was heartfelt. For this reason, he was happy about the positive reception *The Glass Menagerie* was given, but felt uneasy about what the response to future plays might be. Leverich writes, “Although pleased with the critical response, Tennessee questioned in a *Time* interview whether ‘the critics will like my future plays as much as this one. In this play I said all the nice things I have to say about people. The future things will be harsher.’”³⁵

Williams expressed himself in the language of symbols. They were not ornaments to his work, but were to his mind the only satisfactory means of expressing himself as an artist, and predate almost every other consideration in the process of composition. Characterization, dialogue, plot and setting were all selected based on their potential to represent symbolically his identity and experience. However, before transforming his life into symbols, he attempted to abstract the world

of his experience into something pure, something elemental and universal, as he insisted all artists should.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura and her glass figures represent spirit, while her brother Tom, who abandons her and becomes a sailor, represents flesh. Laura also represents things Williams considered related to spirituality: the Old South, romantic ideals, which time, industrialism, and the modern world ultimately destroy. Virtually every element of the play serves as a symbol which amplifies the struggle between Laura's values and pursuits versus the adverse forces of reality.

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ملخص البحث

الحيوانات الزجاجة المتوحشه هو تعبير مجازي, وهي واحدة من اعظم مسرحيات الكاتب الكبير ويليامز تتحدث هذه المسرحية عن الطبقة الفقيره في المجتمع وكيفية هروب هذه الفئة من الناس من العالم الحقيقي من اجل التخلص من مشاق هذا الواقع المرير وتعيش في عالم الخيال الذي هو اشبه بالزجاج حيث يكون عالم ضعيف جدا ويتمثل ببطله المسرحيه لورا وهي المالكه لهذه الحيوانات الزجاجية القابله للكسر حيث انها ضعيفه وغير قادره في الدفاع عن نفسها وكذلك ام لوراء اماندا انسانه انانيه جدا ولا تفكر باولادها وانما بنفسها فقط.