

# Tennessee Williams' The Glass Menagerie

The Glass Menagerie is a memory play, written by a popular American writer, Tennessee Williams. The play was first staged in 1944 and became an instant hit, bringing fortune and popularity, both for the playwright on account of the autobiographical elements he has inserted in it. The story of the play revolves around a mother, her shy and introverted daughter, Laura, and her artist son, Tom. Originally written as *The Gentleman Caller*, the play won New York Drama Critic Award for the author in 1945 and became a masterpiece.

The play starts with Tom Wingfield, Amanda Wingfield's son recalling his life. Amanda is a single mother, whose husband had forsaken the family years back in the past before the play begins. The cast shows Laura and Amanda, both daughter and mother, conversing with their only male member in St. Louis in the year 1937.

The play shows Amanda Wingfield living in a middle-class apartment in St. Louis, taking care of her small family. She recalls her glory days when the boys used to chase her due to her beautiful looks and outgoing personality. This future worry and not-so-bright prospectus of her son, who is working in a warehouse, has become another constant worry for her. Despite seemingly being a budding poet, Tom Wingfield does not find enough time due to his constant worry of everyday preoccupations and penchant for movies that he watches all night. Now her main anxiety is her daughter, Laura, who is crippled and naturally shy, does not seem to win any gentleman's attention. Looking at her daughter's youth, Amanda becomes obsessed with the idea of finding a gentleman for her. At dinner Amanda tells her daughter, Laura, to stay polite and pretty for her gentlemen callers even though she never had any callers and never expected one.

Amanda then proceeds to tell Laura to practice her shorthand and typing. A few days later when Amanda comes home from Laura's school after getting to know that Laura had dropped out several months earlier, she is shocked. Amanda wonders what they will do with their lives since Laura never tried to help her and spends all her time playing with her glass menagerie and her old phonograph records. Amanda decides that to have a gentleman caller for Laura, and Laura reveals that she has liked only one boy in her whole life, a high school boy called Jim.

When Tom goes out to the movies that night, Amanda scolds him and asks him to do something useful other than watching movies. The next morning after Tom apologizes to her, Amanda asks him to find a nice gentleman caller for Laura. A few days later, Tom tells her that he has invited his colleague, Jim O'Connor over dinner. When Amanda comes to know about the arrival of Jim, she becomes jubilant, seeing the prospects of meeting with the future of her daughter. When Jim comes, she starts recalling her own budding youthful period and her own looks. However, Laura senses that she must have been attracted to Jim during her school years. First, she excuses herself to join dinner with them due to her supposed illness but later when she comes into the living room, she sees Jim alone waiting for the electricity.

As they start a conversation, Jim encourages her to think about their past and starts dancing quietly when he accidentally knocks down her menagerie, having her glass animals in it, breaking the unicorn. However, he immediately takes the situation in control by kissing her and paying compliments for keeping such a beautiful menagerie. Following this, he explodes the bombshell about his likely marriage soon. Laura, on the other hand, presents the broken

unicorn to him as a gift after which he departs. Amanda, upon learning this, lashes out at Tom, who expresses his ignorance about such a thing. The play ends on a sad note of Tom leaving the house, asking his sister to extinguish the candles.

### **Major Themes in The Glass Menagerie**

1. **Escape from Responsibilities:** The play demonstrates the theme of escape from the heavy responsibilities of life as Tom desires to avoid family responsibilities like a magician, who shows the ability to escape the box without removing nails from it. The burden of a shy sister and a pestering mother remains heavy on his mind. He wants to remove this burden from his mind and escape to the world of magical fantasy. However, the memory of the family stays with him, reminding him of having family relations with Laura and his mother. On the other hand, both of them could not escape the financial constraints and social pressure due to the well-knit domestic setup. In the end, Tom realizes that this escape from responsibilities does not come without its cost which is loneliness and mental depression.
2. **Family:** The major theme of family and its responsibility is shown through the Wingfield family, Amanda, the mother, Laura, the daughter, and Tom, who's Amanda's son. As the only male member, Tom has to assume the charge of the main breadwinner, though, he shirks taking up the responsibility of the whole family. On the other hand, Amanda constantly feels the stress of finding a suitable match for her daughter, Laura, whose social shyness and isolation are costing the family heavily. In this backdrop, the shadow of the disappearance of Mr. Wingfield is peeping through their mental stress. Tom, therefore, follows suit, but the realization of his being the patriarchal head does not recede.
3. **Abandonment:** The theme of abandonment looms large in the background due to the disappearance of the head, Mr. Wingfield. Amanda has an acute realization of her husband's abandoned presence and on her daughter who suffers from social abandonment. Her son, Tom, too, tries to take this abandonment on him by deciding to leave the family. He tries to hook Jim, but this, too, proves a futile effort on his part. Therefore, his own predicament shows his fear of being abandoned by his dreams and desires in life.
4. **Illusions and Reality:** The play, The Glass Menagerie, shows the theme of illusion and reality through the characters of Amanda and Tom. Her Southern legacy has caused the illusion to Amanda in that she visualizes patriarchy taking up the household responsibility but her son's upbringing in the abandoned household is the stark reality staring in her face. It is because he has a constant reminder of the disappearance of his father, the reality which runs contrary to his presence as the responsible head of the family. Similarly, Amanda feels that the illusion of her being an outgoing girl in her past may be reflected through her daughter Laura, who is, in reality, a socially shy girl, having little prospects of finding a gentleman.
5. **Memory:** The play, The Glass Menagerie, shows the theme of memory and its undertones among all the family members of the Wingfield family. Amanda, the mother of the family, is constantly stuck in her memories of her blissful and pretty youth period, while the memory of her escaping husband makes these memories muddled. Similarly, Tom also recalls his sister by the end, the memory of which haunts him, while Jim is lost in his memories of boyhood, a thrilling period of his life.
6. **Shattering of Dreams:** Despite a broken family, every Wingfield individual dreams about having a good life. Amanda, the mother, dreams of having her daughter married to a gentleman and her son, Tom, taking up the family responsibility. On the other hand,

Tom dreams of having an independent life free from family preoccupations and burdens.

7. **Marriage:** The play also shows the theme of marriage as an institution whose existence and preservation keep the family united and stable. Amanda wants her daughter to have a good gentleman to marry, but she fails, shattering her dreams. It is because Amanda's husband married her but left her, leaving the family in the lurch.
8. **Alcoholism:** The play implicitly shows the theme of alcoholism in that if a person drinks, he is irresponsible as Amanda experiences addiction as she recalls her fleeing husband. Keeping this in mind, she also questions Jim whether he drinks or not, having the point of family responsibility in her consciousness.
9. **Love:** The theme of love in the play is quite implicit through the motherly love of Amanda for her daughter to marry a gentleman and for her son to take up the family responsibility.

### Major Characters in *The Glass Menagerie*

1. **Tom Wingfield:** Tom Wingfield is the representative of patriarchy in the play and shows the memories presented objectively. His direct address to the audience shows his capability of objective evaluation of his situation. At the same time, his duality confuses the audience in understanding his role within the family. His artistic capabilities stand in contrast to his actual achievement for the family in the real world. Although his concerns about his sister, Laura, and mother, Amanda, shows that he takes care of his family, his frequent demonstration of indifference leads to the impressions of the audience about his cruel behavior. His breaking down of the glass menagerie, in the end, shows this cruel behavior, leading to contradictory arguments about him, having no role model in the family to follow.
2. **Amanda Wingfield:** A remnant of the faded Southern beauty, Amanda represents the role of the fading matriarchy after having suffered an economic and social decline. Following her husband's escape from the family responsibilities, she has to take up matters into her own hands despite having little experience of raising a family, the reason that the family is undergoing stress and turbulence. As the extrovert character, she tries to lead her son, Tom, to take up the role of the family head. Yet, she herself stays away from Laura instead of guiding her to mix in the society. Some of the flaws in her character lead to the comic and tragic issues arising in the family. Her failures are apparent from her monologue delivered in response to her children's behavior.
3. **Laura Wingfield:** A very innocent and mentally challenged character, Laura demonstrates compassion when she comes to know the situation of her brother. This behavior stands in stark contrast to the selfish attitude of Amanda, her mother, as well as, her brother, Tom. Her position in the family makes her the center of the play in that her mother and brother, both, are engaged in finding a suitable match for her. Although she is a young girl, her mother's thoughts of her own glamorous past belittle her prospects when Tom brings Jim. Laura, though, seems an introvert and a shy character, shows her will at several moments which defies her real personality built by her mother and brother.
4. **Jim O'Connor:** The character of Jim within the play is interesting and intriguing. He is a gentleman and Amanda encourages him to woo Laura. An ordinary but nice young man, Jim is a hero in Tom's sight since his school days when he used to lead sports and theatrical productions. Having no haunting memories and present stigmas, Jim is a true middle-class young man who does not take fantasies at the face value. Sensing his fall in this abyss,

he extricates himself and returns to his world on the pretext of his being already hooked.

5. **Mr. Wingfield:** The significance of the character of Mr. Wingfield lies in his portrait hanging on the wall in the family apartment despite his shameful flight from the family responsibilities. A symbol of the deceitful patriarchy, he becomes prominent in the play on account of his absence. Amanda's memories of his charm also belittle his patriarchal role due to her wrong choice among the responsible and noble gentlemen of her time.

### Writing Style of The Glass Menagerie

As poetic, symbolic, and spontaneous, *The Glass Menagerie* establishes Tennessee Williams at his best. The characters speak in a lyrical style with spontaneity in their dialogues. The conversation is down-to-earth direct and simple, showing the characters in their true colors. As far as the sentence style and diction are concerned, they are informal and simple. Yet Williams relies heavily on metaphors, similes, and symbols to convey the meanings of the frustration the family members are in after the flight of their family head, Mr. Wingfield.

### Analysis of the Literary Devices in The Glass Menagerie

1. **Action:** The main action of the play comprises the life of the Wingfield family, the desires of Tom and Laura, and the wish of Amanda to marry her daughter to a gentleman. The rising action occurs when Laura allows her mother to decide that she should marry. The falling action occurs when Jim states that he has a fiancée waiting for him and leaves the house.
2. **Anaphora:** The play shows the use of anaphora as given in the below examples,
  - i. In Spain there was a revolution. Here there was only shouting and confusion. In Spain there was Guernica. Here there were disturbances of labor, sometimes pretty violent, in otherwise peaceful cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Saint Louis . . . This is the social background of the play. (Scene-I)
  - ii. Honey, don't *push* with your *fingers*. If you have to push with something, the thing to push with is a crust of bread. (Scene-I)Both of these examples show the repetitious use of some phrases such as "In Spain there was . . ." and "have to push."
3. **Allusion:** The play shows amazing use of different allusions as given in the examples below,
  - i. You simply couldn't go out if you hadn't read it. All everybody *talked* was Scarlett O'Hara. Well, this is a book that critics already compare to *Gone with the Wind*. It's the *Gone with the Wind* of the post-World-War generation! (Scene-III)
  - ii. I'm going to opium dens! Yes, opium dens, dens of vice and criminals' hangouts, Mother. I've joined the Hogan Gang, I'm a hired assassin, I carry a tommy gun in a violin case! (Act-III)
  - iii. They were waiting around the corner for all these kids. Suspended in the mist over Berchtesgaden, caught in the folds of Chamberlain's umbrella. In Spain there was Guernica! (Scene-III)The first example shows alluding to an author and her books, the second to a gang, and the third to Spanish locations. There are some other lurking allusions such as Pygmalion, a Greek mythical figure, Midas touch of King Midas, Biblical allusions of the Annunciation, and allusion of the Clark Gable.

4. **Antagonist:** Amanda seems to be the antagonist of the play as she seems to have still the charm of her husband and the glamor of her personality having encircled her mind that she does not think about other family members.
5. **Antimetabole:** Antimetabole is the reuse of words in the first and second halves of a sentence. The play shows the use of antimetabole as given in the below example,
  - i. 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. (Act-I)
 The play shows the use of antimetabole as the reversely used phrase “Their eyes” show.
6. **Conflict:** The play shows both external and internal conflicts. The external conflict is going on between Tom and Amanda, while the internal conflict is going on in Tom’s mind as he narrates the events of the play.
7. **Characters:** The play, The Glass Menagerie, shows both static as well as dynamic characters. The young man, Tom, is a dynamic character as he shows a considerable transformation in his behavior and conduct by the end of the play. However, all other characters are static as they do not show or witness any transformation such as Laura and Amanda.
8. **Climax:** The climax in the play occurs when Laura comes to know that Jim is the same, her classmate, and faces freezing feelings that she has to get support to sit on the sofa.

**Foreshadowing:** The play shows many examples of foreshadows as given in below,

- i. Tom’s departure from the scene foreshadows his escape from familial responsibilities
- ii. Music foreshadows the dance of Jim and Laura
- iii. Breaking of unicorn foreshadows breaking of Laura’s heart

1. **Hyperbole:** The play shows various examples of hyperboles as given below,
  - i. Like some archetype of the universal unconscious, the image of the gentleman caller haunted our small apartment... (Scene-III)
  - ii. I’m starting to boil inside. I know I seem dreamy, but inside — well, I’m boiling! (Scene-VI)
 Both these examples exaggerate things such as the first one says that the gentleman has become a ghost and in the second Tom says that he is boiling inside which is not possible.
2. **Imagery:** The Glass Menagerie shows excellent use of imagery as given in the below examples,
  - i. He had tremendous Irish good nature and vitality with the scrubbed and polished look of white chinaware. He seemed to move in a continual spotlight. He was a star in basketball, captain of the debating club, president of the senior class and the glee club and he sang the male lead in the annual light operas. (Scene-VI)
  - ii. I didn’t go to the moon, I went much further — for time is the longest distance between two places. Not long after that I was fired for writing a poem on the lid of a shoe-box. I left Saint Louis. I descended the steps of this fire escape for a last time and followed, from then on, in my father’s footsteps, attempting to find in motion what was lost in space. (Scene-VII)
 These two examples show images of nature, color, and feelings.
3. **Metaphor:** The Glass Menagerie shows good use of various metaphors as given the examples below,
  - i. The play is memory. (Scene-I)
  - ii. My devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children!.

(Scene-IV)

These examples show that several things have been compared directly in the play such as the play itself has been compared to things recalled from memory or the mother compared to a witch.

4. **Mood:** The play, *The Glass Menagerie*, shows various moods; it starts with a reflective mood but turns out highly ironic and melancholy at times.
5. **Narrator:** The play, *The Glass Menagerie*, has been narrated by the first person, Tom, who happens to be one of its characters, too. In this sense, it seems a meta-fiction, a narrative within the play but still, it has a dialogue form.
6. **Personification:** The play shows examples of personifications as given below,
  - i. 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. (Scene-VI)
  - ii. Wind blows the white curtains inward in a slow, graceful motion and with a faint, sorrowful sighing. (Scene-VI)These examples show as if the glass and the wind have life and emotions of their own.
7. **Protagonist:** Laura Wingfield is the protagonist of the play as it is her fate that Amanda and Tom are going to decide or not decide.
8. **Setting:** The setting of the play, *The Glass Menagerie*, is the middle-class apartment of the Wingfield family located in St. Louis in 1937.
9. **Simile:** The play shows good use of various similes as given in the examples below,
  - i. Mother, when you're disappointed, you get that awful suffering look on your face, like the picture of Jesus' mother in the museum! (Scene-I)
  - ii. But here there was only hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars, and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows. (Scene-V)
  - iii. Amanda has worked like a Turk in preparation for the gentleman caller. (Scene-VI)
  - iv. A fragile, unearthly prettiness has come out in Laura: she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light. (Scene-VII)The use of the word "like" shows the comparison between different things in the examples. The first example shows this between the mother and Jesus, the second shows between sex with a chandelier, the third between Amanda and a Turk, and the fourth between Laura and glass menagerie.

Reference:

<https://literarydevices.net/the-glass-menagerie/>