

The Glass Menagerie ~ Tennessee Williams

Summary of the Introduction

Menagerie – (n) a collection of wild or unusual animals, especially for exhibition

The Glass Menagerie is a **memory play** about a family—the Wingfields. Williams reminds his readers/viewers on several occasions that this play is not intended to be realistic. It is a *memory*, and the lighting, music, characterization, etc. were all created with that fact in mind. Tom is the narrator; he will present his mother and sister *as he remembers them*.

Tennessee Williams said of this play: It is “the saddest play I have ever written. It is full of pain. It’s painful for me to see it.” *Menagerie* resembles his own family life. Williams’s relationship with his mother was deeply troubled, and his sister, Rose, was mentally ill. She had undergone a prefrontal lobotomy prior to Williams’s completion of the play, and it is believed that *Menagerie* represents his “attempt to come to terms with his sister’s illness and perhaps exorcise his guilt over not having taken more measures in trying to prevent the operation.” Tennessee (whose given name is Thomas) is represented by **Tom**, the narrator of the play. His mother is represented by the character **Amanda**, and his sister is represented by **Laura**. The major difference in the Williams/Wingfield families is that Tennessee’s father was a present member of the family. His brother said their father was always home after work, and that was their family’s biggest problem. In an interesting contrast, the Wingfield father is absent, though not forgotten, in the play.

Amanda, Laura, and Tom “live out secret horrors, all the while unsuccessfully trying to conceal or repress their respective demons from each other... each [is] struggling with an individual version of hell.” The father escaped the family long ago and apparently feels no remorse. Tom makes several attempts to escape—whether that be by losing himself in movies or literally escaping in the end. Amanda and Laura have no physical escape from their respective hells; however, they both escape mentally and emotionally—Amanda escapes into memories of the past, Laura into her glass menagerie.

There is an additional character in the play, Tom’s buddy, Jim, who Tom convinces to “call” on his sister. (A long time ago, before social media, a young man would visit a young lady at her home so that they could present himself respectfully to her parents and spend some supervised time with her. This was referred to as “calling on her.”) In fact, the original title for this play was *The Gentleman Caller* so you know Jim’s presence in the play is going to be important even though he plays a rather small role.

It’s also important for you to understand the complicated relationship between Amanda (mother) and Laura (daughter). Amanda was a vivacious southern belle who claims to have had many gentlemen callers in her day. Laura, who is “crippled,” fragile, and shy, has had none. Amanda has high expectations for both of her children: for Laura to defy her nature and become the belle who lands a husband and for Tom to carry the financial weight of the family after the father’s abandonment. “Audiences and readers may choose either to demonize Amanda or regard her as a misguided saint.”

Symbols to pay attention to: yellow jonquils (flowers), glass unicorn in Laura’s menagerie, fire escape

~summarized and quoted from James Bray’s Introduction, pgs. vii-xv