

"I have a poet's weakness for symbols." So states Tom Wingfield, narrator and major character in Tennessee Williams's timeless play "The Glass Menagerie". Through the eyes of Tom, the viewer gets a glance into the life of his family in the pre-war depression era; his mother, a southern belle desperately clinging to the past, his sister, a young woman too fragile to function in society, and himself, a struggling young poet working at a warehouse to pay the bills. Williams, through his remarkable use of symbols, is able to effectively express the theme of "The Glass Menagerie" : That of hopeful aspirations followed by inevitable disappointment, having dreams which are destroyed by the harsh realities of the world.

Symbols are a major part of this play, as Tom, the narrator, is a poet, and admits he has a weakness for symbols. One major symbol presented in the story is that of the fire escape, a symbol that has a different meaning and function for each character. For Tom, it is a means of escape from fire, not the type of fire that was considered in its building, but "the slow and implacable fires of human desperation." This is especially true of Tom's apartment. His mother, devastated after her daughter Laura's failure to cope in business college, becomes obsessed with finding her a gentleman caller so that she can marry and be well supported. When this caller finally comes, and it seems like it was meant to be, as they dance and kiss, he announces he is engaged, and dashes their hopes. The ever-fragile Laura, temporarily drawn out of her dream-world shell of her glass collection and the victrola, draws further back into herself. Now a terrible desperation fills the apartment, and Tom decides he must escape the suffocating environment to follow his own calling. The fire escape to him represents a path to the outside world. For Laura, the fire escape is exactly the opposite--a path to the safe world inside, a world in which she can hide. Especially symbolic is Laura's fall when descending the steps to do a chore for her mother, after leaving the security of the apartment. This fall symbolizes Laura's inability to function in society and the outside world. For Amanda, the fire escape is symbolic of her hopes and dreams--hopes and dreams that a gentleman caller will arrive to marry her daughter and leave her well supported. This is the way Jim comes into the apartment, at the time when Amanda's hopes have been peaked. It is symbolic that Laura does not want to open the door when Jim arrives. It shows her reluctance to let an emissary from the world of reality, symbolized by Jim, invade the comfortable non-existence of the apartment, and her insecurity in dealing with the outside world.

Another recurring symbol in the story is that of the glass menagerie itself. This represents Laura's hypersensitive nature and fragility. The first time the menagerie is mentioned in any detail in a symbolic manner is when Tom and Amanda have a heated argument near the beginning of the play. Tom ends it by calling Amanda an "ugly babbling old witch", and struggles to put his jacket on, intent on leaving. When he cannot put the coat on properly, he becomes frustrated with his clumsiness, and flings it across the room, breaking some of the glass collection. Laura "cries out as if wounded". This shows how fragile Laura really is, and how she reacts when even the small balance of her apartment is shifted. Williams also makes the use of this symbol apparent on stage. When Amanda sits down to discuss Laura's future with Tom, the legend "Laura" appears on screen, and the music that begins playing is "The Glass Menagerie". The most prominent use of this symbol comes at the turning point of the story, when Jim is left alone with Laura. The conversation turns to Laura's glass collection, when she remarks "glass is something you have to take good care of.", again showing her fragility. More parallels are drawn between Laura and the glass collection with the introduction of the unicorn. Jim says "Poor little fellow, he must feel sort of lonesome" to which Laura replies "He stays on a shelf with some horses that don't have horns and all of them seem to get along nicely together." The unicorn becomes a symbol for Laura--she is different. When Jim and Laura dance, and Jim accidentally knocks the

unicorn off the table and its horn is broken, it loses its uniqueness. Similarly, when Jim kisses Laura and then shatters her hopes by telling her that he's engaged, she becomes broken-hearted, and less unique. Part of the innocence that made Laura so vitally different is gone, because both Laura and the glass menagerie break when exposed to the uncaring outside world. When Laura gives Jim her broken unicorn, it symbolizes her broken heart that Jim will take with him when he leaves. The unicorn is no longer unique like her, rather it is common now, like Jim, so she lets him keep it. Just as she gives Jim a little bit of herself to take with him, he leaves behind a little bit of himself with her shattered hopes.

Finally, the symbol of rainbows is used throughout the story, but is less prominent and obvious than those of the fire escape and the glass menagerie. Rainbows are traditionally a symbol of hope, and each time the symbol is presented it is in a hopeful situation. For instance, when Tom comes back from the magic show with a rainbow-coloured 'magical' scarf, that can turn goldfish into canaries, who fly away. Just like the canaries, Tom also hopes to fly away, from the imprisonment of his apartment. Next, the chandeliers which create rainbow reflections at the Dance Hall can be interpreted as foreshadowing for the dance between Jim and Laura, which gives Laura hope that her problems are solved. And at the end, when Tom looks at "pieces of colored glass, like bits of a shattered rainbow," he remembers his sister and hopes that he "can blow her candles out". There is also a great irony tied up in this symbol, in that although rainbows seem to be positive signs, they all end in disappointment.

Tennessee Williams has managed to create a powerful play using a combination of different elements, one prominent one being symbolism; the fire escape, as a sense of hope, and an escape both to the outside world and from it; the glass menagerie, a symbol for Laura's fragility and uniqueness; and rainbows, as symbols of unrealized hopes and aspirations. Through these symbols a greater understanding of the theme is realized, and "The Glass Menagerie" is made into a powerful epic.

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