

The Glass Menagerie: A Study in Symbolism

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In the drama, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), Tennessee Williams reflects upon personal experiences he and his family encountered during the Depression of the 1930's. As a lower class family, the characters are placed in the slums of St. Louis in 1935. The protagonist, Tom Wingfield, is the narrator and Williams' surrogate. Living with his mother and sister, Tom supports them by working in a shoe manufacturing warehouse. He should feel lucky to have this job; however, he despises his work and dreams of leaving to become a Merchant Marine. Unhappy with what life has dealt him, Tom strives for adventure and longs to turn his back on his responsibilities. His mother, Amanda Wingfield, abandoned by her husband almost sixteen years ago, tries to keep her family together through tough times. Although her love and hopes for her children are sincere, her overbearing and outspoken nature often hurts them. Laura, Tom's sister, suffers from neuroses. She has trouble separating fantasy from reality. Without the ability to function in the outside world, Laura becomes a liability to both Tom and Amanda. The gentleman caller, Jim O'Connor, is a friend of Tom's from the warehouse. He is an ambitious young man, who strives for the American Dream through hard work and optimism. Jim offers the Wingfields hope for the future:

Tom: He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from. But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for (23).

Williams gives the reader many emblems throughout the play; there are three of them are especially interesting. The unicorn symbolizes Laura's uniqueness, the picture of Mr. Wingfield represents his strong influence on his deserted family, and Malvolio's coffin trick signifies Tom's suffocating lifestyle.

The unicorn is a symbolic representation of ways that Laura is unique or unusual. The first facet of the unicorn, its horn, refers to ways that Laura is an unusual person, such as in her may escape mechanisms. Laura's escape devices include her glass menagerie, listening to records on the Victrola, and visiting the park and zoo. Laura identifies with her glass menagerie because she has trouble identifying with the real world, the pieces are small and delicate, just as she is. The Victrola is a reminder of Mr. Wingfield; Laura often plays records to avoid the present and thinks pleasantly about the times she had with her father. When Laura stopped going to Rubicam's Business College, she would spend many of her days at the zoo or park. She was a nature lover and thought of these places as very peaceful and beautiful, a sharp contrast to her real life. The fragility of the unicorn, its second part, recalls Laura's delicate psychological condition. Laura's emotional problems caused many difficulties in her life. While in high school, Laura was very self-conscious about the brace she had to wear, as evidenced in the following passage:

Laura: I had that brace on my leg -- it clumped so loud!

Jim: I never heard any clumping.

Laura: To me it sounded like -- thunder!

Jim: Well, well, well, I never even noticed.

Laura: And everybody was seated before I came in. I had to walk in front of all those people. My seat was in the back row. I had to go clumping all the way up the aisle with everyone watching!

Jim: You shouldn't have been self-conscious.

Laura: I know, but I was (93).

Laura suffered all the way through high school. Unfortunately, she scored poorly on her final examinations and dropped out of school. After such a failure, her fragile self-esteem dropped from low to almost non-existent, and she could not face

going back. Six years later, with pressure from her mother, Laura took another stab at education. She enrolled at Rubicam's Business College. However, Laura only made it to the first test. As the test began, she vomited on the floor and had to be carried to the bathroom. Laura never returned to school, and once again her fragile emotions got the best of her. The transparency of the unicorn, its final facet, represents the fact that Laura's problems are easily apparent to anyone who cares to notice them. This is best seen through Jim's evaluation of her:

Jim: You know what I judge to be the trouble with you? Inferiority complex!...Yep -- that's what I judge to be your principal trouble. A lack of confidence in yourself as a person. You don't have the proper amount of faith in yourself. I'm basing that fact on a number of your remarks and also on certain observations I've made (98-9).

Jim, practically a stranger, was able to see right through Laura and recognize her glaring psychological problems. Although the unicorn is the most famous symbol of the play, the picture of Mr. Wingfield strikes the reader as thought-provoking, also.

The picture of Mr. Wingfield is an emblem of his pervasive influence on Amanda, Laura, and Tom. First, the largeness of the portrait suggests Mr. Wingfield's strong hold on Laura, even though he has been gone nearly sixteen years. The "larger-than-life size photograph" looms over the family as a haunting reminder of him (23). This especially torments Laura, who hopes someday he will return. This is evident in her playing of the Victrola. The Victrola brings back pleasant memories of her father; she remembers when times were good and wishes things could be like that again. Second, the grin on Mr. Wingfield's face reminds Amanda of the effect his personality has had on her life. Mr. Wingfield's grin and good looks are what first attracted Amanda to him. He was full of charisma and won Amanda's heart through physical attraction, as Amanda declares: "One thing your father had plenty of -- was charm!" (36). Amanda remembers the pleasant times they shared and, as a romantic, still hopes that he will return. However, more realistic in her situation, Amanda looks at the grin as a painful reminder of his mischievous and devious manner that led to him leaving. The grin signifies Mr. Wingfield laughing at them by abandoning them. This is apparent when Tom states: "The last we heard of him was a picture postcard from Mazatlan, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, containing a message of two words: 'Hello -- Goodbye!' and no address" (23). Finally, Mr. Wingfield's Doughboy uniform mirrors Tom's adventurous aspirations to become a Merchant Marine. Tom longs to break free of his boring life and satisfy his craving for adventure. He rationalizes his plans to abandon his family through heredity: "I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard!" (80). Just as the picture of Mr. Wingfield, Malvolio's coffin trick represents some more of the great symbolism used throughout the play.

Malvolio's coffin trick is a token of Tom's suffocating lifestyle. The first aspect, Malvolio's similarities with Tom, refers to each of their life-threatening situations. Malvolio faces literal death by suffocation if he does not successfully escape the coffin. Conversely, Tom faces figurative death by emotional and spiritual suffocation if he does not find a way out of his present situation. The coffin, the second aspect, symbolizes the lifestyle from which Tom is striving to escape. Tom looks at his life as a "two-by-four situation" (45). He fears living the next fifty-five years of his life working in the basement of a warehouse, performing mundane tasks, and making a mere sixty-five dollars a month. Although he loves his family, he cannot tolerate the thought of spending the rest of his life in a cramped apartment, supporting his family, living with the constant worry of Laura's well-being, and putting up with his mother's frequent nagging. The nails of the coffin, its final facet, represent Laura and Amanda. In his trick, Malvolio escapes from the coffin without disturbing any of the nails; however, Tom knows that that will be impossible for him: "You know it don't take much intelligence to get yourself into a nailed up coffin, Laura. But who in hell ever got himself out of one without removing one nail?" (45). Tom is suffocating in his own figurative coffin, but for him to escape he must disturb Laura and

Amanda. Clearly, Malvolio's escape from the coffin was much easier than Tom's flight from his lifestyle will be.

In conclusion, Williams' play, through well-written symbolism, offers its readers many emblems to study, including the unicorn, the picture of Mr. Wingfield, and Malvolio's coffin trick. This drama teaches the reader about the struggles of the Depression and the effects it had on the people who lived through it. Like Tom, Williams suffered with his own suffocating lifestyle, until he finally escaped to become a playwright. When Williams left home, his sister, Rose (Laura), was devastated. Her neuroses worsened to psychoses, and at age 27 she was lobotomized, which left her a vegetable for the rest of her life. However, unlike his father (Mr. Wingfield), Williams felt much guilt for leaving his family and never completely forgave himself for what happened to Rose. Although what happened to Rose is very tragic, I feel it is hard to blame Williams. Unfortunately, after he left, surgeons performed a lobotomy on her, but if he would have stayed, it would have been as if he was lobotomizing himself. I feel that *The Glass Menagerie* was a wonderful play. With so many tokens throughout the play, each one with many facets, it was truly fascinating to analyze and discuss them.

Word Count: 1610