

The Glass Menagerie, by Tennessee Williams  
The Tragic Effects of the Past

In The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams creates a world in which the characters are disillusioned by the present. Amanda, Tom, and Laura achieve this disillusionment by resorting to separate worlds where they can find sanctuary. Each character develops their own world, far away from reality.

Amanda frees herself from the harsh realities of life by constantly reminding herself of the past. To begin with, she continuously repeats the story of the "one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain" when she received seventeen gentlemen callers (1195). Furthermore, she keeps a "larger-than-life-size" photograph of her husband over the mantel who left the family when the children were young. When Jim came over for dinner, Amanda wears the "girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash" that she wore on the day she met her husband (1222). Amanda obsesses with the past, and at the same time damaging the children psychologically.

Constant allusions to the past have psychologically affected Tom and Laura, trapping them into Amanda's lost world. Tom and Laura fail to survive in the present because they are always trying to live through the past. However, the past no longer exists, causing them distress in their journey through life. Tom is unsuccessful with his job at the warehouse and Laura cannot seem to fit in with the outside world. These personal downfalls in life drive Tom into a life of poetry and movies, and Laura into a world of glass figurines.

Tom is unsatisfied with his work at the warehouse and feels his life lacks adventure. Therefore, he finds it through writing poetry and watching movies. When business is slow at the shoe warehouse, Tom goes to the washroom to work on his poetry. Tom finds adventure in poetry because he is able to create and control his own world. Along with poetry, Tom retreats to the movies every evening to fulfill his adventurous nature. Amanda questions Tom, "why do you go to the movies so much, Tom?" Tom replies, "I go to the movies because I like adventure. Adventure is something I don't have much of at work, so I go to the movies" (1210). Tom's obsessions with adventure leaves him no time or energy to concentrate on his present responsibilities at work. Therefore, he leaves Amanda and Laura for the Merchant Marines, a place where he can live out his dreams for adventure. However, he cannot forget Laura, "I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (1247).

Laura's problem, according to Jim, is her "inferiority complex" (1237). However, she finds confidence in the old records she plays on the victrola and in her glass menagerie. Laura enjoys listening to old phonograph records that used to be her father's and she retreats to the victrola every time she experiences a problem. For example, she resorts to the victrola when Amanda finds out she has not been attending business school. In addition, when Jim informs Laura that he is engaged, she retreats to the victrola again. Having nothing to do at home, Laura takes care of her glass ornaments. Taking care of the glass figurines give her a sense of control (something she has never experienced in her life. She can manipulate the glass figurines any way she desires, thereby fulfilling her "inferiority complex" (1237). However, her dependency on Tom and Amanda, leave her tragically unfit to survive in this brutal world.

Being unaware of the present, Amanda, Tom, and Laura, live in worlds far from reality. Amanda dwells in her past, a past filled with popularity and success. Tom retreats to his poetry and movies to experience adventure he cannot find in his ordinary life. Laura finds confidence playing old records on the victrola and controlling her glass collection. All these simulated worlds that the characters retreat to, leave them unprotected from the reality of the world. Being unprepared, Amanda, Tom, and Laura are tragically lost in their own dream worlds, far away from the present.

