

A
COMPANION
TO

THE

GLASS

MENAGERIE



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Tennessee Williams



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INTRODUCTION

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' IMPACT ON THE AMERICAN THEATRE

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Blue Roses. A fire escape. The looming image of a father long gone. There's a reason why Tennessee Williams' (1911-1983) *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) sits neatly in the "canon" of twentieth-century American theatre and drama. Williams' dramatic works—equal parts realism and symbolism—inspire readers and audience members to question reality. Can we trust these characters at face value? Are these relationships authentic? Is the play truthful in its portrayal or, in the case of *Menagerie*, is the plot recalled through the eyes a specific individual and thereby presented with a slant of bias? While we can never truly know the answers to these questions, it is this invitation for interpretation that continually excites theatre makers and audience members alike. You will never see the same *Menagerie* twice.

Williams sits in an exclusive club of mid-twentieth-century American playwrights who have helped shape the identity of American commercial theatre, a group that includes the likes of Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), Arthur Miller (1915-2005), and Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965). Usually through a lens of realism, this generation of theatre makers wrote plays that explore the psyche of the average American in search of an unobtainable "American dream." The characters are relatable, and so are their struggles. Often grappling and challenging a social construct such as class, race, financial success, and religion, the plays' themes are immediately recognizable to the average American. While we may not be able to resonate with every play, people could come to the theatre and see themselves represented in some way.

So how does Williams fit within this group of influential playwrights? What impact did he make on twentieth-century American theatre? Williams' plays present to us an ideal, the glimmer of hope for humanity through the narratives of self-destructive, often brooding characters. Unlike many of his contemporaries who focus on social issues, Williams' plays are an evaluation of the soul. As we see clearly in *Menagerie*, the characters' existence is plagued by an imprisonment to the past. And yet they yearn for a better future. Amanda Wingfield, for example, believes that this bright future is linked to a re-creation of the past. The major problem with this ideal, however, is that one can never fully recapture the past. Perhaps Williams is telling us that an ideal future is unobtainable but that we should still try to achieve one anyway?

Williams plays with form in order to truthfully tell the stories of his characters. In his most famous plays—*Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), to name a few—Williams begins with a heightened sense of realism but does not rely strictly on realism as a medium. One of his most famous characters, *Streetcar's* Blanche DuBois, speaks to this very sentiment. She declares, "I don't want realism. I want—magic! . . . Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I do misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that's a sinful, then let me be damned for it!" (*Streetcar* 84). Like Blanche, Williams misrepresents reality to his audience. In *Menagerie* this manifests in several different ways, most notably the element of memory that permeates through the plot. Tom, our narrator and a player within the world of the play, recalls the plot from his own point of view. As Thomas L. King writes, we must always remember that "Tom is the only character in the play, for we see not the characters but Tom's memory of

(continued)

them—Amanda and the rest are merely aspects of Tom’s consciousness” (208). Though the play may seem rooted in realism, it is in its entirety an illusion concocted in the mind of one character. All characters, indeed all actors must conform to the illusory nature of Tom’s memory in order for the play to work.

Because he begins with realism, we could perchance see ourselves in this world. Perhaps we could even see ourselves interacting with these characters. As Marvin Spevack argues, Williams uses “seemingly recognizable people, seemingly recognizable situations, seemingly recognizable issues” and imbues them “with a quality far beyond their immediate recognizability” (231). But just as we become invested in the realistic world of his plays, Williams skews reality. He encourages artists producing his plays to experiment with unconventional techniques in the creation of the world of his plays.

In the production notes to *Menagerie*, for instance, the playwright argues that realism is not enough to capture what he is doing in his plays. He writes, “Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance” (“Production Notes” 7). Since Williams’ plays focus mainly on the psyche of his characters, he must manipulate the form in order to fully understand the characters’ subjective minds. To do this, he writes in a way that could be perceived as realistic, and challenges those producing his plays to manipulate reality through design aesthetics, acting choices, and the overall vision for the show.

In a recent article, *American Theatre Magazine* declared Williams one of the most produced playwrights of the 2018-2019 season. Unsurprisingly, his name is on this list almost every year. There is a reason why Tennessee Williams is one of the most produced playwrights of all time, and this is because arguably more than any other playwright, he marries realism with the endless possibility of subjective, surreal, and symbolic theatre making. He allows those producing his plays to create art in a non-prescribed way. “When a play employs unconventional techniques,” writes Williams, “it is not, or certainly shouldn’t be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are” (“Production Notes” 7). To produce a Williams piece is to explore what it means to be human. Such is the impact of Tennessee Williams on American drama.

Works Cited:

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- King, Thomas L. “Irony and Distance in *The Glass Menagerie*.” *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1973, pp. 207–214.
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TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Lanier “Tennessee” Williams III was born on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi. His father, Cornelius Coffin “C. C.” Williams was a traveling shoe salesman. Due to some health complications as a young boy, Tennessee did not exhibit the same energy as other boys his age. Because of this his father, an abusive alcoholic, was disappointed by his son and deemed him effeminate. Tennessee’s mother, Edwina Dakin, empathized with her son and protected him from his father’s abuses. At times, Tennessee considered his mother rather overbearing in her protections. Tennessee also had an older sister, Rose Isabel Williams, and a younger brother, Walter Dakin Williams. The Williams family moved to St. Louis when Tennessee was seven years old because his father took a job at a shoe factory.

Struck with a love for writing from a young age, Tennessee attended the Missouri School of Journalism in 1929, but his father forced him to drop out of school and work at the shoe factory after his grades fell. Overworked and unhappy, he had a physical and mental breakdown. Nevertheless, Tennessee continued to work at the shoe factory for several years before returning to school at Washington University and then the University of Iowa. He graduated in 1938 with a BA in English. His experiences at school and especially at home and in the shoe factory provided him with inspiration for many of his plays, including *The Glass Menagerie*.

Tennessee found great success with *The Glass Menagerie*, which is the play that launched his career in the theatre. The play was inspired by a short story he wrote in 1943 called *Portrait of a Girl in Glass*. He adapted the story into a screenplay called *The Gentleman Caller*, but it was rejected by major movie studios. He wrote *The Glass Menagerie* after this. The play found great success with audiences and critics when it premiered in Chicago in 1944. It transferred to Broadway soon after and shot Tennessee into super-stardom.

Throughout his career, Tennessee wrote several critically acclaimed plays. However, he also wrote many plays that were not commercially or artistically successful. Over the course of his four-decade relationship with the theatre, Tennessee battled major depression as a result of what he perceived as his failures. Additionally, Tennessee explored his homosexuality from his young adulthood. He had several major loves in his life, all of which ended in heartache. Tennessee encountered bouts of depression for most of his life, and eventually turned to drug use to numb his sadness. He died on February 25, 1983 in New York; he choked to death on the cap to a bottle of medication. Though he encountered many negative things in his life, Tennessee Williams is remembered and celebrated for the legacy that he left on the American theatre.

Biography loosely adapted from *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*, by John Lahr and *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, by Lyle Leverich.

MAJOR PLAYS BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

The Glass Menagerie (1944)

A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)

Summer and Smoke (1948)

The Rose Tattoo (1951)

Camino Real (1953)

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955)

Orpheus Descending (1957)

Suddenly Last Summer (1958)

The Night of the Iguana (1961)

THE GLASS MENAGERIE: WILLIAMS' AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

THE CHARACTERS

Amanda Wingfield: Laura and Tom's mother. Overbearing and always talking about her past.

Tom Wingfield: Amanda's son and Laura's brother. Longing to be free from his home life.

Laura Wingfield: Amanda's daughter and Tom's brother. Physically and emotionally fragile.

Jim O'Connor: Friend and co-worker of Tom's. Tom and Laura's high school acquaintance.

THE SETTING

The play is set in a run down apartment in St. Louis, circa 1937. In this production, the design team has created a non-realistic version of the apartment. In his production notes, Williams indicates that an expressionistic approach is best suited to get at the truth of the play, so the creative team has taken their cue from the author. Rather than showing the audience every element of the setting, this design is expressionistic – it evokes the *feeling* of the apartment and leaves it up to the audience to imagine their own version of this unhappy home.

THE STORY

As the play opens, Tom Wingfield, the play's narrator, addresses the audience. He explains that the events that are to follow are fragments of his memory. Set in a cramped St. Louis apartment in the 1930s, Tom's story revolves around his troubled relationship with his overbearing mother Amanda and his shy and fragile sister Laura, who walks with a limp due to a childhood illness. Tom's father abandoned the family years earlier, and Tom must support his mother and sister by doing a job he detests at a shoe factory.

As Tom steps into the action of the play, the personalities and tribulations of the family members spring to life: Amanda's desperate and often outrageous attempts to relive her idealized past and better the lives of her children; Laura's extreme reclusiveness and withdrawal from reality; and Tom's fiery desire to escape the burdens placed on him by his family and circumstances.

When Amanda asks Tom if he will bring home a "gentleman caller," or potential suitor for Laura, and promises that once Laura is married he will be free to leave home for good, the stakes rise for each of the characters. As Jim O'Connor, Tom's co-worker from the factory and Laura's high school crush, enters the story, the dreams and hopes of the characters come to the surface in a shattering conclusion.

(Summary from the Lincoln Center's Teacher Resource Guide on *The Glass Menagerie*).

CONNECTIONS TO WILLIAMS' LIFE

Many scholars and historians say that more than any other of his works, *The Glass Menagerie* is Tennessee Williams' most autobiographical play. It is, after all, a "memory play." In a memory play, the main character narrates the events within the play, all of which come from her or his own memories. The world we see on stage is the world through the main character's eyes. The list below points out some of the elements of Tennessee's life that permeate within his very first major play:

Tennessee/Tom: It is often said that Tom is a dramatized version of Tennessee Williams. Many elements of Tom's life match up with the playwright: their home in St. Louis, their jobs in a shoe factory, and their dysfunctional families, to name a few.

Rose/Laura: Since he had a complicated relationship with his parents, Tennessee was incredibly close to his older sister, Rose. While he was at college at the University of Iowa, Rose became more and more mentally and physically unstable. She was eventually diagnosed with schizophrenia and admitted to a sanitarium. Rose was eventually given a pre-frontal lobotomy, which left her mentally disabled for the rest of his life. Many argue that Laura is based off Rose.

Edwina/Amanda: Williams had a complicated relationship with his mother. The daughter of a preacher, Edwina lived her life according to a strict set of rules. She was often described as overbearing, a hysteric who used bouts of fainting and non-stop talking for manipulation. Laurette Taylor, the actress who played Amanda in the original production asked Edwina after she saw the play, "Well, Mrs. Williams, how did you like yourself?"

Fathers: Williams' father was a traveling salesman and was often not at home. When he did return, he was abusive to his family and often drunk. In the play, Tom's father abandoned his family, though his image looms over the home.

MAJOR THEMES

Below are themes that may be of interest for discussion and/or writing exercises.

Illusion vs. Reality: Each of the characters in this play have a tough time living in reality. They often live their lives within an illusion fueled by memory and nostalgia for the past.

- *In what ways are the characters unhappy with their realities? Is their unhappiness justified? How do they cope with this unhappiness?*
- *In which moments of the play are characters forced to accept reality?*
- *Which aspects of *The Glass Menagerie* are the most realistic? Which are the most unrealistic? What function does non-realism serve in this play?*

Traps and Escape: All of the character seem trapped in their reality and long to escape in different ways.

- *How are these characters trapped by their environment, gender, class, family role, and circumstances?*
- *Are they truly trapped? How can they escape their circumstances? Are there any consequences to escaping? Is freedom truly possible for them?*

Reliable vs. Unreliable Narrator: Because this is a memory play, we are seeing the world through Tom's eyes.

- *Can we trust Tom? Do you think Amanda is as overbearing as she is portrayed? Or do you think we are only seeing her as Tom imagines her?*
- *Does knowing that Tom is both narrator and character change how you see the world of the play?*

Connections to Our Own World

Do you see any connections between the themes or ideas in *The Glass Menagerie* and our world today? Is this play timeless? How might the struggles of the characters play out today?

ANALYZING THE SCRIPT

BUILDING THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

Before a play becomes a fully realized production, each member of the production team (actors, director, designers, etc.) must first analyze and understand every aspect of the script. Things to analyze include structure, genre, themes, and language. Below is a list of elements of dramatic literature to analyze when creating a theatrical production, as well as questions to connect these aspects back to *The Glass Menagerie*:

Dramatic Action: The series of events in the play that drive a character toward her or his ultimate desire. Dramatic action moves the plot forward.

- Choose a character from *The Glass Menagerie*. What are the events in the play that drive her or him toward her or his ultimate goal?

Language: Communication, usually through the spoken word.

- How is language used in this play? Are the characters hearing each other?
- How is subtext (words left unspoken in a play) practiced by each character?

Imagery and Symbolism: Mental pictures created through an association with our senses. Images and symbols tend to have hidden meaning that can inform us about the world of the play and the message of the production. For example:

- The Glass Menagerie - How does Laura represent the glass animals within her menagerie? What does the unicorn represent? How does the breaking of its horn function as a symbol?
- The Photo of the Father - What does the photo of their father represent? Why do they keep a photo of him if he abandoned them? In this production, there is not a literal picture of the Father. Why might the creative team make the choice to include a more abstract version of this image instead of a literal one?
- Discuss the meaning of some other symbols and images in the play: the movies, the victrola, the fire escape, the Paradise Music Hall, Laura's physical disability, blue roses

CREATING A CHARACTER

TRICKS FOR THE ACTOR

Activity: Break down a scene in the play to analyze the arc for each character. There is more to portraying a role than simply getting on stage and reciting lines. The actor must understand the character's background (given circumstances), what the character wants (the super-objective or objective), and how they will get what they want (actions or tactics). This section provides tools for actors to help them develop a character from the page to the stage.

Super-objective: The ultimate want or desire for each character throughout the play

- What is each character's super-objective? How does this desire inform their actions?

Objective: The goals that characters want to pursue in the moment. Each objective leads them to their super-objective.

- Choose a specific moment or scene in the play. What is each character's objective? Who or what is standing in the way of this objective?

Conflict: The tension that exists between characters and the pursuit of their objectives. Conflict makes drama.

- What is the conflict that stands in the way of each character reaching her or his super-objective?

Actions/Tactics: How the character achieves their objectives to overcome conflict and obstacles.

- What actions do each of these characters take in this scene to overcome the conflicts and obstacles that are preventing them from achieving their objective?

Activity: Choose a character from *The Glass Menagerie*. Using evidence from the script, see if you can decipher each of these guideposts. Michael Shurtleff's "Guideposts for Actors" provides performers the necessary steps to building a character. Every actor should be able to decipher each of these steps when building their character for the stage.

- **Relationship:** What is my relationship with other characters? How do I feel about the characters?
- **What Are You Fighting For?** (Conflict): What am I fighting for?
- **The Moment Before:** What events happened in my life that led me to this moment? What happened right before this particular moment? How did I get here?
- **Humor:** The coin of exchange between human beings that makes it possible to get through the day. There is a bit of humor in every scene because humor makes us human.
- **Opposites:** Whatever you decide is your motivation in the scene, the opposite of that is also true and should be a part of your motivation.
- **Discoveries:** What is new in every scene? What is different about this experience than from other experiences I have had in my life?
- **Communication and Competition:** Communication - Am I sending out and getting back feelings, or am I just talking? Is my mode of communication effective in getting what I want? Competition - I am right and you are wrong. You must change your point of view to match up with mine.
- **Importance:** What is emotionally important to me?
- **Find the Events:** What happens? What are the events that occur throughout the play that helps me get to my ultimate desire?
- **Place:** How do I feel about where I am?
- **Game Playing and Role Playing:** What game am I playing in this moment to get what I want? What role do I assume in order to best play this game?
- **Mystery and Secret:** After you've figured out the above guideposts, add to it with what you still do not know about the character.

(Adapted from *Audition* by Michael Shurtleff)

RESOURCES

BIOGRAPHIES:

- *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*, by John Lahr
- *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, by Lyle Leverich
- *Memoirs*, by Tennessee Williams

ACTING RESOURCES:

- *Audition*, by Michael Shurtleff
- *Practical Handbook for the Actor*, by Melissa Bruder
- *Tips: Ideas for Actors*, by Jon Jory

SCRIPT ANALYSIS RESOURCES:

- *Script Analysis for Actors, Directors, and Designers*, by James Thomas
- *Script Analysis for Theatre: Tools for Interpretation, Collaboration and Production*, by Robert Knopf

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS CRITICISM AND AMERICAN THEATRE HISTORY:

- *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, edited by Matthew C. Roudané
- *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, edited by David Krasner