https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/menagerie/

**Tom Wingfield**

Tom’s double role in *The Glass Menagerie—*as a character whose recollections the play documents and as a character who acts within those recollections—underlines the play’s tension between objectively presented dramatic truth and memory’s distortion of truth. Unlike the other characters, Tom sometimes addresses the audience directly, seeking to provide a more detached explanation and assessment of what has been happening onstage. But at the same time, he demonstrates real and sometimes juvenile emotions as he takes part in the play’s action. This duality can frustrate our understanding of Tom, as it is hard to decide whether he is a character whose assessments should be trusted or one who allows his emotions to affect his judgment. It also shows how the nature of recollection is itself problematic: memory often involves confronting a past in which one was less virtuous than one is now. Because *The Glass Menagerie* is partly autobiographical, and because Tom is a stand-in for the playwright himself (Williams’s given name was Thomas, and he, like Tom, spent part of his youth in St. Louis with an unstable mother and sister, his father absent much of the time), we can apply this comment on the nature of memory to Williams’s memories of his own youth.

Even taken as a single character, Tom is full of contradiction. On the one hand, he reads literature, writes poetry, and dreams of escape, adventure, and higher things. On the other hand, he seems inextricably bound to the squalid, petty world of the Wingfield household. We know that he reads D. H. Lawrence and follows political developments in Europe, but the content of his intellectual life is otherwise hard to discern. We have no idea of Tom’s opinion on Lawrence, nor do we have any indication of what Tom’s poetry is about. All we learn is what he thinks about his mother, his sister, and his warehouse job—precisely the things from which he claims he wants to escape.

Tom’s attitude toward Amanda and Laura has puzzled critics. Even though he clearly cares for them, he is frequently indifferent and even cruel toward them. His speech at the close of the play demonstrates his strong feelings for Laura. But he cruelly deserts her and Amanda, and not once in the course of the play does he behave kindly or lovingly toward Laura—not even when he knocks down her glass menagerie. Critics have suggested that Tom’s confusing behavior indicates an incestuous attraction toward his sister and his shame over that attraction. This theory casts an interesting light on certain moments of the play—for example, when Amanda and Tom discuss Laura at the end of Scene Five. Tom’s insistence that Laura is hopelessly peculiar and cannot survive in the outside world, while Amanda (and later Jim) claims that Laura’s oddness is a positive thing, could have as much to do with his jealous desire to keep his sister to himself as with Laura’s own quirks.

**Amanda Wingfield**

If there is a signature character type that marks Tennessee Williams’s dramatic work, it is undeniably that of the faded Southern belle. Amanda is a clear representative of this type. In general, a Tennessee Williams faded belle is from a prominent Southern family, has received a traditional upbringing, and has suffered a reversal of economic and social fortune at some point in her life. Like Amanda, these women all have a hard time coming to terms with their new status in society—and indeed, with modern society in general, which disregards the social distinctions that they were taught to value. Their relationships with men and their families are turbulent, and they staunchly defend the values of their past. As with Amanda, their maintenance of genteel manners in very ungenteel surroundings can appear tragic, comic, or downright grotesque. Amanda is the play’s most extroverted and theatrical character, and one of modern American drama’s most coveted female roles (the acclaimed stage actress Laurette Taylor came out of semi-retirement to play the role in the original production, and a number of legendary actresses, including Jessica Tandy, have since taken on the role).

Amanda’s constant nagging of Tom and her refusal to see Laura for who she really is are certainly reprehensible, but Amanda also reveals a willingness to sacrifice for her loved ones that is in many ways unparalleled in the play. She subjects herself to the humiliating drudgery of subscription sales in order to enhance Laura’s marriage prospects, without ever uttering so much as a word of complaint. The safest conclusion to draw is that Amanda is not evil but is deeply flawed. In fact, her flaws are centrally responsible for the tragedy, comedy, and theatrical flair of her character. Like her children, Amanda withdraws from reality into fantasy. Unlike them, she is convinced that she is not doing so and, consequently, is constantly making efforts to engage with people and the world outside her family. Amanda’s monologues to her children, on the phone, and to Jim all reflect quite clearly her moral and psychological failings, but they are also some of the most colorful and unforgettable words in the play.

**Laura Wingfield**

The physically and emotionally crippled Laura is the only character in the play who never does anything to hurt anyone else. Despite the weight of her own problems, she displays a pure compassion—as with the tears she sheds over Tom’s unhappiness, described by Amanda in Scene Four—that stands in stark contrast to the selfishness and grudging sacrifices that characterize the Wingfield household. Laura also has the fewest lines in the play, which contributes to her aura of selflessness. Yet she is the axis around which the plot turns, and the most prominent symbols—blue roses, the glass unicorn, the entire glass menagerie—all in some sense represent her. Laura is as rare and peculiar as a blue rose or a unicorn, and she is as delicate as a glass figurine.

Other characters seem to assume that, like a piece of transparent glass, which is colorless until light shines upon it, Laura can take on whatever color they wish. Thus, Amanda both uses the contrast between herself and Laura to emphasize the glamour of her own youth and to fuel her hope of re-creating that youth through Laura. Tom and Jim both see Laura as an exotic creature, completely and rather quaintly foreign to the rest of the world. Yet Laura’s crush on the high school hero, Jim, is a rather ordinary schoolgirl sentiment, and a girl as supposedly fragile as Laura could hardly handle the days she spends walking the streets in the cold to avoid going to typing class. Through actions like these, Laura repeatedly displays a will of her own that defies others’ perceptions of her, and this will repeatedly goes unacknowledged.

**Jim O’Connor**

An old acquaintance of Tom and Laura. Jim was a popular athlete in high school and is now a shipping clerk at the shoe warehouse in which Tom works. He is unwaveringly devoted to goals of professional achievement and ideals of personal success.

**Mr. Wingfield**

Amanda’s husband and Laura and Tom’s father. Mr. Wingfield was a handsome man who worked for a telephone company. He abandoned his family years before the action of the play and never appears onstage. His picture, however, is prominently displayed in the Wingfields’ living room.

**Themes**

**The Difficulty of Accepting Reality**

Among the most prominent and urgent themes of *The Glass Menagerie* is the difficulty the characters have in accepting and relating to reality. Each member of the Wingfield family is unable to overcome this difficulty, and each, as a result, withdraws into a private world of illusion where he or she finds the comfort and meaning that the real world does not seem to offer. Of the three Wingfields, reality has by far the weakest grasp on Laura. The private world in which she lives is populated by glass animals—objects that, like Laura’s inner life, are incredibly fanciful and dangerously delicate. Unlike his sister, Tom is capable of functioning in the real world, as we see in his holding down a job and talking to strangers. But, in the end, he has no more motivation than Laura does to pursue professional success, romantic relationships, or even ordinary friendships, and he prefers to retreat into the fantasies provided by literature and movies and the stupor provided by drunkenness. Amanda’s relationship to reality is the most complicated in the play. Unlike her children, she is partial to real-world values and longs for social and financial success. Yet her attachment to these values is exactly what prevents her from perceiving a number of truths about her life. She cannot accept that she is or should be anything other than the pampered belle she was brought up to be, that Laura is peculiar, that Tom is not a budding businessman, and that she herself might be in some ways responsible for the sorrows and flaws of her children. Amanda’s retreat into illusion is in many ways more pathetic than her children’s, because it is not a willful imaginative construction but a wistful distortion of reality.

Although the Wingfields are distinguished and bound together by the weak relationships they maintain with reality, the illusions to which they succumb are not merely familial quirks. The outside world is just as susceptible to illusion as the Wingfields. The young people at the Paradise Dance Hall waltz under the short-lived illusion created by a glass ball—another version of Laura’s glass animals. Tom opines to Jim that the other viewers at the movies he attends are substituting on-screen adventure for real-life adventure, finding fulfillment in illusion rather than real life. Even Jim, who represents the “world of reality,” is banking his future on public speaking and the television and radio industries—all of which are means for the creation of illusions and the persuasion of others that these illusions are true. *The Glass Menagerie* identifies the conquest of reality by illusion as a huge and growing aspect of the human condition in its time.

**The Impossibility of True Escape**

At the beginning of Scene Four, Tom regales Laura with an account of a magic show in which the magician managed to escape from a nailed-up coffin. Clearly, Tom views his life with his family and at the warehouse as a kind of coffin—cramped, suffocating, and morbid—in which he is unfairly confined. The promise of escape, represented by Tom’s missing father, the Merchant Marine Service, and the fire escape outside the apartment, haunts Tom from the beginning of the play, and in the end, he does choose to free himself from the confinement of his life.

The play takes an ambiguous attitude toward the moral implications and even the effectiveness of Tom’s escape. As an able-bodied young man, he is locked into his life not by exterior factors but by emotional ones—by his loyalty to and possibly even love for Laura and Amanda. Escape for Tom means the suppression and denial of these emotions in himself, and it means doing great harm to his mother and sister. The magician is able to emerge from his coffin without upsetting a single nail, but the human nails that bind Tom to his home will certainly be upset by his departure. One cannot say for certain that leaving home even means true escape for Tom. As far as he might wander from home, something still “pursue[s]” him. Like a jailbreak, Tom’s escape leads him not to freedom but to the life of a fugitive.

**The Unrelenting Power of Memory**

According to Tom, *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play—both its style and its content are shaped and inspired by memory. As Tom himself states clearly, the play’s lack of realism, its high drama, its overblown and too-perfect symbolism, and even its frequent use of music are all due to its origins in memory. Most fictional works are products of the imagination that must convince their audience that they are something else by being realistic. A play drawn from memory, however, is a product of real experience and hence does not need to drape itself in the conventions of realism in order to seem real. The creator can cloak his or her true story in unlimited layers of melodrama and unlikely metaphor while still remaining confident of its substance and reality. Tom—and Tennessee Williams—take full advantage of this privilege.

The story that the play tells is told because of the inflexible grip it has on the narrator’s memory. Thus, the fact that the play exists at all is a testament to the power that memory can exert on people’s lives and consciousness. Indeed, Williams writes in the Production Notes that “nostalgia . . . is the first condition of the play.” The narrator, Tom, is not the only character haunted by his memories. Amanda too lives in constant pursuit of her bygone youth, and old records from her childhood are almost as important to Laura as her glass animals. For these characters, memory is a crippling force that prevents them from finding happiness in the present or the offerings of the future. But it is also the vital force for Tom, prompting him to the act of creation that culminates in the achievement of the play.

**Abandonment**

The plot of *The Glass Menagerie* is structured around a series of abandonments. Mr. Wingfield’s desertion of his family determines their life situation; Jim’s desertion of Laura is the center of the play’s dramatic action; Tom’s abandonment of his family gives him the distance that allows him to shape their story into a narrative. Each of these acts of desertion proves devastating for those left behind. At the same time, each of them is portrayed as the necessary condition for, and a natural result of, inevitable progress. In particular, each is strongly associated with the march of technological progress and the achievements of the modern world. Mr. Wingfield, who works for the telephone company, leaves his family because he “fell in love with [the] long distances” that the telephone brings into people’s consciousness. It is impossible to imagine that Jim, who puts his faith in the future of radio and television, would tie himself to the sealed, static world of Laura. Tom sees his departure as essential to the pursuit of “adventure,” his taste for which is whetted by the movies he attends nightly. Only Amanda and Laura, who are devoted to archaic values and old memories, will presumably never assume the role of abandoner and are doomed to be repeatedly abandoned.

**Symbols**

**Laura’s Glass Menagerie**

As the title of the play informs us, the glass menagerie, or collection of animals, is the play’s central symbol. Laura’s collection of glass animal figurines represents a number of facets of her personality. Like the figurines, Laura is delicate, fanciful, and somehow old-fashioned. Glass is transparent, but, when light is shined upon it correctly, it refracts an entire rainbow of colors. Similarly, Laura, though quiet and bland around strangers, is a source of strange, multifaceted delight to those who choose to look at her in the right light. The menagerie also represents the imaginative world to which Laura devotes herself—a world that is colorful and enticing but based on fragile illusions.

**The Glass Unicorn**

The glass unicorn in Laura’s collection—significantly, her favorite figure—represents her peculiarity. As Jim points out, unicorns are “extinct” in modern times and are lonesome as a result of being different from other horses. Laura too is unusual, lonely, and ill-adapted to existence in the world in which she lives. The fate of the unicorn is also a smaller-scale version of Laura’s fate in Scene Seven. When Jim dances with and then kisses Laura, the unicorn’s horn breaks off, and it becomes just another horse. Jim’s advances endow Laura with a new normalcy, making her seem more like just another girl, but the violence with which this normalcy is thrust upon her means that Laura cannot become normal without somehow shattering. Eventually, Laura gives Jim the unicorn as a “souvenir.” Without its horn, the unicorn is more appropriate for him than for her, and the broken figurine represents all that he has taken from her and destroyed in her.

**“Blue Roses”**

Like the glass unicorn, “Blue Roses,” Jim’s high school nickname for Laura, symbolizes Laura’s unusualness yet allure. The name is also associated with Laura’s attraction to Jim and the joy that his kind treatment brings her. Furthermore, it recalls Tennessee Williams’s sister, Rose, on whom the character of Laura is based.

**The Fire Escape**

Leading out of the Wingfields’ apartment is a fire escape with a landing. The fire escape represents exactly what its name implies: an escape from the fires of frustration and dysfunction that rage in the Wingfield household. Laura slips on the fire escape in Scene Four, highlighting her inability to escape from her situation. Tom, on the other hand, frequently steps out onto the landing to smoke, anticipating his eventual getaway.

**Context**

**Further Study** Context

Tennessee Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1911. The name given to him at birth was Thomas Lanier Williams III. He did not acquire the nickname Tennessee until college, when classmates began calling him that in honour of his Southern accent and his father’s home state. The Williams family had produced several illustrious politicians in the state of Tennessee, but Williams’s grandfather had squandered the family fortune. Williams’s father, C.C. Williams, was a traveling salesman and a heavy drinker. Williams’s mother, Edwina, was a Mississippi clergyman’s daughter and prone to hysterical attacks. Until Williams was seven, he, his parents, his older sister, Rose, and his younger brother, Dakin, lived with Edwina’s parents in Mississippi. After that, the family moved to St. Louis. Once there, the family’s situation deteriorated. C.C.’s drinking increased, the family moved sixteen times in ten years, and the young Williams, always shy and fragile, was ostracized and taunted at school. During these years, he and Rose became extremely close. Rose, the model for Laura in *The Glass Menagerie,* suffered from mental illness later in life and eventually underwent a prefrontal lobotomy (an intensive brain surgery), an event that was extremely upsetting for Williams.

An average student and social outcast in high school, Williams turned to the movies and writing for solace. At sixteen, Williams won five dollars in a national competition for his answer to the question “Can a good wife be a good sport?”; his answer was published in *Smart Set* magazine. The next year, he published a horror story in a magazine called *Weird Tales,* and the year after that he entered the University of Missouri as a journalism major. While there, he wrote his first plays. Before Williams could receive his degree, however, his father, outraged because Williams had failed a required ROTC program course, forced him to withdraw from school and go to work at the same shoe company where he himself worked.

Williams worked at the shoe factory for three years, a job that culminated in a minor nervous breakdown. After that, he returned to college, this time at Washington University in St. Louis. While he was studying there, a St. Louis theater group produced his plays *The Fugitive Kind* and *Candles to the Sun.* Personal problems led Williams to drop out of Washington University and enroll in the University of Iowa. While he was in Iowa, his sister, Rose, underwent a lobotomy, which left her institutionalized for the rest of her life. Despite this trauma, Williams finally graduated in 1938. In the years that followed, he lived a bohemian life, working menial jobs and wandering from city to city. He continued to work on drama, however, receiving a Rockefeller grant and studying playwriting at the New School in New York. During the early years of World War II, Williams worked in Hollywood as a scriptwriter.

Around 1941, Williams began the work that would become *The Glass Menagerie.* The play evolved from a short story entitled “Portrait of a Girl in Glass,” which focused more completely on Laura than the play does. In December of 1944, *The Glass Menagerie* was staged in Chicago, with the collaboration of a number of well-known theatrical figures. When the play first opened, the audience was sparse, but the Chicago critics raved about it, and eventually it was playing to full houses. In March of 1945, the play moved to Broadway, where it won the prestigious New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. This highly personal, explicitly autobiographical play earned Williams fame, fortune, and critical respect, and it marked the beginning of a successful run that would last for another ten years. Two years after *The Glass Menagerie,* Williams won another Drama Critics’ Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams won the same two prizes again in 1955, for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.*

**Technologies**

**Music**

Music is used often in The Glass Menagerie, both to emphasize themes and to enhance the drama. Sometimes the music is extra-diegetic—coming from outside the play, not from within it—and though the audience can hear it the characters cannot. For example, a musical piece entitled “The Glass Menagerie,” written specifically for the play by the composer Paul Bowles, plays when Laura’s character or her glass collection comes to the forefront of the action. This piece makes its first appearance at the end of Scene One, when Laura notes that Amanda is afraid that her daughter will end up an old maid. Other times, the music comes from inside the diegetic space of the play—that is, it is a part of the action, and the characters can hear it. Examples of this are the music that wafts up from the Paradise Dance Hall and the music Laura plays on her record player. Both the extra-diegetic and the diegetic music often provide commentary on what is going on in the play. For example, the Paradise Dance Hall plays a piece entitled “The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise” while Tom is talking about the approach of World War II.