

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Glass Menagerie

by Tennessee Williams

written by Elizabeth Osborne

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The Glass Menagerie

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. trace the development of the motif of illusion/magic in the play.
2. analyze the fantasy/reality dichotomy in the play and explain how each character fits into it.
3. analyze Williams's use of religious imagery and language in the play.
4. analyze the use of props, music, and lighting to underscore symbols, tone, and theme in the play.
5. examine the "sensitive artist" archetype within the play and explain how Tom uses words and writing as a means of self-empowerment and escape.
6. explain what *pathos* is and how the playwright creates it.
7. analyze Jim O'Connor and Mr. Wingfield as parallel characters.
8. analyze each of the main characters and the relationships between them and explain why each character is static or dynamic.
9. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. determine whether the text makes a general statement about the middle class.
11. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
12. offer a close reading of *The Glass Menagerie* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

The Glass Menagerie

Background Lecture

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Lanier Williams, later known as Tennessee Williams, was born in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1911. His family moved around frequently, first in Mississippi, then to a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, where Williams spent most of his school years. He did not get along with his father, a traveling salesman; his mother, Edwina, was overbearing and somewhat hysterical, although supportive of her son's desire to write. Williams also had a younger brother, Dakin. His older sister, Rose, was one of the most important figures in his life, and Williams and others described her as beautiful, sweet, and highly intelligent. Unfortunately, she also suffered from schizophrenia, which worsened as she got older.

In 1929, Williams graduated from University City High School and enrolled at the University of Missouri. He transferred to several other schools and had to take two years off from college to work, but did finally graduate from the University of Iowa in 1938 with a bachelor of arts degree.

The most devastating event of his life occurred before this, though. In 1937, his parents authorized a prefrontal lobotomy for Rose, who was growing more paranoid and troubled. The procedure involved inserting an ice pick through the patient's eye socket to sever nerves that joined the prefrontal cortex to the rest of the brain; it was supposed to relieve psychiatric strain. Instead, it completely destroyed Rose mentally; she was never able to care for herself again. It also broke Williams's heart and caused him to suffer his own mental collapse.

Williams would later say that the difference between himself and Rose was that he had a way to deal with his fragile mental state—he could write. He turned Rose's suffering into a short story and then a play, *The Glass Menagerie*. Laura, Tom's fragile, sensitive sister in the play, suffers from a personality disorder, just as Rose did; Tom is unable to escape from his memories of Laura and his guilt of abandoning her.

The Glass Menagerie made Williams famous as a playwright. It premiered in 1944 and received excellent reviews. It then won a New York Drama Critics Circle Award. In an essay that accompanies the play, Williams notes that he had difficulty dealing with this new fame and escaped to Mexico for a time to write.

In the 1960s, Williams suffered a mental breakdown. His later works did not receive critical praise, but he continued to write. He died in New York City in 1983.

The Glass Menagerie

Background Lecture: *The Glass Menagerie*

Tennessee Williams called *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) a “memory play.” It is a dramatic rendering of the memories of the narrator, Tom Wingfield; because he is not an objective director or narrator, the play unfolds in an impressionistic, highly symbolic fashion.

The play contains characters very clearly drawn from Williams’s own life, although the play’s purpose is not autobiography. Rather, Williams seeks to show how any artist can engage mental and emotional pain through the process of art itself.

SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY

Tom, as a narrator conscious of his own role in a play, deliberately sets the action in a very specific time and place. The historical events of the 1930s seem very distant to the Wingfields, and yet they are symbolically linked to the internal changes through which the family goes.

In Scene One, Tom describes sporadic labor riots in American cities, the bombing of Guernica in Spain, and the declining economy, establishing the time of the play as 1937. The Great Depression is keeping the country’s economy stagnant. Labor disputes in big cities hint at the unrest that will soon upset the balance of the whole world and start World War II.

- **The Great Depression**

Through the 1920s, there was wild speculation on the stock market all over the world. Eventually, the system collapsed, and the stock market crashed in October of 1929. Unemployment eventually reached 25%. The Great Depression changed the political balance in the United States. President Herbert Hoover, unable to provide solutions to the economic catastrophe, lost the 1932 election to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Roosevelt immediately instituted a series of economic initiatives that are collectively called the “New Deal.” The reforms of the New Deal showed tolerance toward labor unions and workers’ rights. Although the American economy improved a little through the 1930s, 1937 (the year the play takes place) saw another recession.

- **Labor Riots in the United States**

Since the late 1800s, there had been ongoing tension in both Europe and America between large, powerful corporations and groups of workers trying to organize into unions. The unions tried to use the power of numbers to bargain for higher salaries, better working conditions, and better job security; the corporations tried to protect their own interests.

The Glass Menagerie

Scene One

1. What themes and ideas are introduced by the opening stage directions?

2. The stage directions say that the term “fire escape” has “a touch of accidental poetic truth.” How does this image set the mood of the play?

3. The stage directions say that “the play is memory and therefore nonrealistic.” Whose memories will the play present? How does the narrator fit into the structure of the “memory play”?

4. How does Williams weave ideas of magic and illusion into this opening scene?

Scene Two

1. What image of Laura is presented in the stage directions that open this scene? How does Williams emphasize this image?

2. How does the description of Amanda's appearance in the stage directions contribute to the characterization of her?

3. What is significant about Amanda's opening word of this scene?

4. Is Amanda sincere in her confrontation with Laura?

5. What was Laura's reason for deceiving her mother and walking around town instead of going back to the business school? What does this show the audience about their relationship?

6. To what does Laura compare her mother?

Scene Three

1. Where is Tom when he introduces this scene? Why is this significant?

2. Why does Williams include only part of the argument between Tom and Amanda?

3. What is Amanda doing when she first appears in this scene? Why is this important?

4. Who is the “insane Mr. Lawrence” to whom Amanda refers?

5. What particular act seems to have prompted the fight between Tom and Amanda?

6. What does this act mean to Tom?

Scene Four

1. The end of Scene Three was a climax to the first part of the play. How does the author bring the energy level back down in this scene?

2. From the interaction between Tom and Laura at the beginning of this scene, how can we describe their relationship?

3. Tom seems to have a sense of humor and self-awareness in describing to Laura the shows he watched. Give some evidence of his sense of humor.

4. What motif reappears when Tom tells Laura about where he spent the night?

5. Why does the picture of Mr. Wingfield light up right after Tom talks about escaping from the coffin? From what we have seen of Tom's character, might he be able to do the same?

6. Why is Laura so anxious about Tom and Amanda getting along?

Scene Five

1. Why does the screen say “Annunciation” at the beginning of this scene?

2. What allusions does Tom make to the upcoming war in this scene?

3. What is the significance of Amanda saying, “A fire escape’s a poor excuse for a porch”?

4. Describe the way Amanda and Tom’s relationship is developed in this scene.

Scene Six

1. How does Tom describe his relationship with Jim?

2. Describe the language Tom uses to tell the audience about Jim.

3. What allusion is the author making when he speaks of the spring “scattering poems in the sky”?

4. Why do the stage directions describe the dress-fitting as “devout and ritualistic”?

5. What is significant about the way the stage directions describe Laura?

6. Judging by the “Gay Deceivers,” how does Amanda view love?

7. What do the jonquils symbolize for Amanda?
