

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Glass Menagerie

by Tennessee Williams

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Note to Teacher

It should be noted that the first five questions in the guide are not based on the play but on the production notes that usually appear before or after the play in most print versions. We recommend that these notes be reviewed before students read the play.

Tennessee Williams's first successful and most popular play, *The Glass Menagerie*, was first produced in 1944. Tom, the play's protagonist and narrator, recounts events that took place in his family's life some five or six years earlier. As the play opens, the audience is reminded that the world has muddled through the Depression, there is turmoil in Europe, and World War II is approaching. While these events have some significance for the play, it has little to do with world events. Yet, there is something about this play that has, for more than seventy years, grabbed the attention and involved the emotions of countless audiences. As you study *The Glass Menagerie*, see if you can identify what there is about it that touches people.

Note: All references come from the New Directions Paperback edition of *The Glass Menagerie*, copyright 1999.

Objectives

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

1. identify the common aim of straight realistic and expressionistic drama and differentiate between the two on the basis of staging.
2. identify and discuss the rationale for the unconventional techniques of staging that Williams employs in the play.
3. trace the development of the following motifs in the play:
 - deception
 - illusions
 - light and shadow
 - escape
 - fragility
4. identify and state the significance of the following symbols:
 - the glass menagerie
 - the unicorn
 - the gentleman caller
 - the fire escape
5. identify which of the three major characters is the protagonist, and present an argument to support that selection.
6. present an argument for the position that Tom, in addition to being an individual, is also representative of the young men of that period in history.
7. demonstrate that all four characters, to varying degrees, live in a world that fluctuates between illusion and reality.
8. identify and discuss the elements that make this play an emotionally moving experience for most viewers and account for its universal appeal.
9. define and cite examples of the following literary terms:
 - symbol
 - allusion
 - irony
 - simile
 - foreshadowing
 - pun
 - flashback

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. The words *illusion* and *reality* are often juxtaposed. Can we, or should we, have just one or the other in our lives? Present a rationale for your opinion.
2. Sometimes, reality becomes overwhelming for Amanda, Tom, and Laura. At those times, how does each try to escape reality? Identify the particular aspect of reality each hopes to escape. In what ways does the act of escaping from reality eventually cause harm for each character?
3. What are some realities today that people wish to escape, and what are some of the common means of escape? What are some popular illusions?
4. What elements of staging are unconventional in this play?
5. How is expressionistic drama similar to and different from realistic drama?
6. The deception motif runs throughout the play. Provide examples in which one character purposely deceives one or more of the other characters.
7. Tom is an interesting character because he has such ambivalent feelings. Identify the two directions in which Tom is pulled, the decision he makes, and the effect that decision has on him.
8. Identify what each of the following symbols represents: the unicorn, the fire escape, and the gentleman caller.
9. In a paragraph, state why *The Glass Menagerie* is an appropriate title for the play.
10. Consider the character of Amanda over the course of the play. What impression of Amanda do you suppose Williams wanted the audience to have at the conclusion?
11. Although this could be described as a pessimistic play, there is also something one must admire about the characters. What is pessimistic about the play's ending, and what is admirable about the characters?
12. In the last scene, why does Laura not get upset when Jim breaks the unicorn while they are dancing?
13. Define and find examples of the following literary terms:
 - symbol
 - allusion
 - irony
 - simile
 - foreshadowing
 - pun

The Glass Menagerie

Production Notes

VOCABULARY

allusion – a hint or suggestion; a passing reference
conception – an idea or notion
contradistinction – drawing attention to something through the use of contrast or opposition
episodic – divided into episodes
expressionism – an artistic and literary movement concerned primarily with emotion and individual experience
fragility – the quality of being delicate or easily broken
fragmentary – broken up into disconnected parts; incomplete
immutable – unchangeable, constant
indistinguishable – impossible to tell apart
inexpressible – impossible to explain or describe
interminably – continuously; without stopping
menagerie – a collection of animals, usually for display or exhibition
nostalgia – a sentimental longing for the past
obscured – not clearly visible; hidden
organic – having the properties of a living thing
penetrating – sharp, keen; incisive
plastic – capable of being molded or sculpted; flexible
preoccupied – lost in thought; distracted
pristine – spotless, clean; pure
radiant – bright, glowing
recurring – happening repeatedly; reappearing
static – not moving or changing; fixed
subtleties – fine distinctions; nuances
tentatively – in an undecided manner; experimentally
tenuous – fragile, delicate
unconventional – not conforming to traditional rules or standards
vitality – energy, liveliness
vivacity – liveliness, energy; enthusiasm

1. What does Williams say is the only valid aim of expressionism?

4. What are Laura's handicaps?

5. When Amanda gives a suggestion to Laura at the end of this act, is Amanda deluding herself or is she giving the daughter practical advice?

6. In this scene, both Laura and Amanda can be accused of practicing deception. What are the deceptions of each?

Scene Seven

VOCABULARY

abashed – embarrassed, self-conscious
abates – decreases, lessens
acutely – intensely, severely
beleaguered – surrounded; under attack
candelabrum – a branched candle holder
decorously – politely, courteously
desolation – misery, despair
dynamic – energetic, lively; vibrant
eclipsed – overshadowed; surpassed
engagingly – in an attractive or charming way
gingerly – cautiously, carefully
indolently – lazily
intimated – suggested, hinted
intolerable – impossible to endure; unbearable
jauntily – cheerfully, self-confidently
luminous – bright; glowing
musingly – in a thoughtful manner
oblivious – ignorant, unaware
perturbation – distress, confusion, anxiety
propaganda – information given to promote a cause or influence others' thinking; misleading information
raptly – in a captivated or awestruck manner
recollection – a memory
reflective – thoughtful
rejuvenated – made young again; revived
reverently – with great respect
rhapsodic – with a feeling of great delight
slackening – letting up; decreasing
stumblejohn – a slang term for an awkward or blundering person
tumult – disturbance, agitation, turmoil
tyranny – unrestrained power; harsh and controlling rule
wistfully – in a sad or thoughtful way

1. What religious elements are introduced into this scene? How does Williams portray Jim at this point?
