

Symbolism set out  
into the world as his  
father



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Symbolism in *The Glass Menagerie* From the beginning, the figure of the narrator shows that Williams' play will not follow the conventions of realistic theater.

The narrator breaks the conceptual "fourth wall" of naturalistic drama by addressing the audience directly. Tom also tells us that he is going to give the audience truth disguised as illusion, making the audience conscious of the illusory quality of theater. By playing with the theme of memory and its distortions, Williams is free to use music, monologues, and projected images to haunting effect.

Tom, as narrator, tells the audience that the gentleman caller is a real person more real, in many ways, than any other character but he also tells the audience that the gentleman is a symbol for the "expected something that we live for," the thing for which we are always waiting and hoping. This naming of a character as both real entity and symbol is characteristic of Williams' work; both of these aspects of the gentleman caller are important to the overall impact of the Play. The allusion to Guernica and the turmoil in Spain, juxtaposed to the uneasy peace in America, establishes a tense atmosphere as the play's background.

There is symmetry between the uneasy peace of the time period and the uneasy peace in the Wingfield house. Just as America stirs restlessly with the uneasy peace before the Second World War, Tom seethes with the need to escape his home and set out into the world as his father did before him. The fire escape, a visually prominent part of the set, is an important symbol for the imprisonment that Tom feels and the possibility of a way out. In his stage

directions, Williams characteristically imbues the fire escape with symbolic weight, saying that the buildings are burning with the “implacable fires of human desperation.” Tom addresses the audience from the fire escape, and his positioning there, standing alone between the outside world and the space of the apartment, points to the painful choice he makes later in the play.

In order to escape, he must escape alone and leave his mother and sister behind. This is the first scene where the audience sees Laura taking care of her glass menagerie. The glass menagerie is the most important symbol for Laura and her fragility. Her engagement with the tiny animals reveals how painfully afraid she is of interaction with other humans. The qualities of glass parallel Laura’s characteristics: like the tiny glass animals, she is delicate, beautiful in her oddness, terribly fragile. The little collection, like Laura, is an entity that is locked completely in the realm of the home. The animals must be kept on a little shelf and polished; there is only one place where they belong. In a similar way, Laura is kept and cared for, dependent on her mother and brother for financial support.

The Blue Roses are another important symbol of Laura. The image of blue roses is a beautiful one and it is the image that is on the screen at the start of Scene Two. But blue roses are also pure fantasy, non-existent in the real world. Laura, like a blue rose, is special, unique even, but she is also cut off from real life. When Tom accidentally breaks some of the pieces in the glass menagerie, the incident foreshadows Laura’s heartbreak later on in the play. The event emphasizes the collection’s fragility, and so metaphorically we are

reminded of Laura's fragility. Tom is the one responsible, and the pain of his position is made clear.

As much as he would like to live his own life, his actions have a great effect on the well-being and security of his mother and sister. By being reckless, he destroys the pretend-world of his sister. Later on, he chooses to live his own life rather than live up to his responsibility for her security.

One of the play's important themes is the conflict between the desire to live one's own life and the responsibility for one's family. Tom's wages pay the bills, but Amanda continues to treat him as a child. She confiscates and returns his books, and during their argument she attempts to control their discussion as an adult controls an argument with a little boy. Tom's fascination with the movies and the magician shows his need for fantasy and escapism.

Tom is always dreaming of fantastic places far from St. Louis, and for now he escapes through the illusions offered by the movie house and the stage magician. He dreams of leaving home, but his responsibilities for his sister and his mother have so far kept him in the Wingfield apartment. What he sees at the magic show is directly connected to the theme of conflict between Tom's responsibility for his family and his need to live his own life. The magician's most impressive trick becomes a symbol for what Tom wishes he could do to make a clean, easy escape, without destroying the coffin or removing any nails. The use of the coffin as a symbol for Tom's predicament shows the depth of his unhappiness.

The magician is able to escape the coffin without the messiness of having to remove nails, which would damage the coffin. Tom can escape, but only at great cost. Metaphorically, he would have to “remove nails,” causing great damage he would have to abandon his sister and mother and leave them to an uncertain fate.

Laura’s vulnerability is emphasized in that symbolic space most closely linked to Tom, the fire escape. Tom will later climb down the fire escape one final time, leaving the apartment forever. Laura stumbles on the fire escape, and the fall symbolizes her inability to fend for herself in the outside world. Amanda is still fixating on the idea of the gentleman caller. She proposes a swap; Tom’s freedom in exchange for a husband for Laura. Amanda is still putting her security into the hands of men; perhaps she sees no alternative. Although her old husband’s irresponsibility and Tom’s increasing restlessness would seem to argue against the reliability of male providers, Amanda is still hoping to find an ideal husband for her daughter.

This hope will prove to be misplaced. Even the gentleman caller, when he finally comes, will be careless with Laura. In Tom’s speech from the fire escape, the symbolic name of Paradise Dance Hall can be read in a number of ways. “Paradise” is an allusion to the lost Garden of Eden, and here the allusion paints the American thirties as a period of innocence before the turmoil of World War II. The dance hall, because it is being described as a memory, creates a sense of loss due to the passage of time. Tom makes yet another allusion to the carnage of Guernica, which has by now become a symbol for the violence in which the entire world will soon be enmeshed. On a personal level, Paradise Dance Hall might symbolize more specific loss that

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Tom has experienced. For the older Tom narrating the play, the fragile world of his family is lost forever.

But for the characters living through the action of the play, the Paradise Dance Hall symbolizes hope. The glass unicorn becomes a symbol for Laura. She, like the unicorn, is odd and unique. Both Laura and the unicorn are fragile: Jim “breaks” both of them.

Laura’s gift of the broken unicorn shows the extent of her affection for him. For Jim, the evening has been insignificant. But Laura has harbored a girlish crush on him for many years; she even saved the program of the play in which he starred and the gift of the unicorn, an item that is a symbol of herself, shows how much she still likes him. For a brief moment, the Wingfield apartment was a place of dreams.

When Amanda experienced a return to her girlhood, Laura was able to show her her glass menagerie, and the place was full of the music from Paradise Dance Hall. But the unicorn is broken, the music of “Paradise” gives way to the sad sounds of the Victrola, and even Amanda is left without defenses against reality. For the first time, she refers to Laura as “crippled,” breaking her own rule, and she seems to acknowledge that Tom will soon leave them. This scene has its share of rose imagery. The new floor lamp has a rose-colored shade; Laura herself is “Blue Roses.” The rose-colored light makes Laura look beautiful; she is bathed in rose-colored light, she is “Blue Roses,” and she is also, in many ways, the surrogate for Williams’ sister whose name was Rose. Williams uses the rose as a motif for Laura to emphasize her delicateness and her beauty, as well as her worth.

The fantastic blue color of the flower shows, however, that Laura is not a being of this world. Tom's closing speech is a great moment. The descending fourth wall puts a powerful but permeable barrier between Tom and his family. They are behind him, behind him in time and in the physical space of the stage, and they are inaudible. Yet he cannot seem to shake the memory of them, and they are clearly visible to the audience. Although he has never explicitly spoken of one of the play's most important themes—the conflict between responsibility and the need to live his own life—it is clear that he has not been able to fully shake the guilt from the decision that he made.

The cost of escape has been the burden of memory. For Tom and the audience, it is difficult to forget the final image of frail Laura, illuminated by candlelight on a darkened stage, while the world outside of the apartment faces the beginnings of a great storm.