

# The absent father in the glass menagerie

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In the play 'The Glass Menagerie' the audience is presented with three obvious main characters. Each of these characters, Tom, Laura and Amanda, has strong claims to the title of protagonist, but what hangs over the play is the spectre of the Wingfields' absent father. It could be argued that his departure was the catalyst for the events of the play, affecting both the financial security and physiological well being of all the family members. The Wingfields' father is mentioned at the beginning of the play, in Tom's opening monologue. Tom describes their father and a little about his escape from the family. After describing him as "a telephone man who fell in love with long distances" (p14) and a mysterious postcard that he sent to the family saying "hello - goodbye" he states "I think the rest of the play will explain itself." This indicates, right from the start, that the absence of the father has a great impact on the family. He is referred to in almost every scene, maintains a visual presence on stage at all times (in the form of the picture) and is mentioned once again in Tom's closing monologue. Tom's opening and closing comments frame the action of the play, underpinning his importance to the audience as a main character. The iconography that represents the father in the play serves as a constant reminder of his absence to the reader, but more importantly to the characters themselves. The most important piece of imagery on the set is the picture of the father which stays on the mantelpiece, facing the audience throughout the play. It is described in the stage instructions as (the face of) "a very handsome young man in a doughboys First World War cap. He is gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling as if to say 'I will be smiling forever'" and while the interior of the house is described as dim, the fathers portrait is bathed in

light. The picture of the smiling father resembles the past for the Wingfield family - simultaneously representing a time of past happiness, whilst also being a constant reminder of the family's disappointment and feelings of abandonment. The fact that he is smiling and bathed in light represents a happier time to the family, and the fact that they keep it on display suggests that they could still have illusions that he might come back or that they feel that they should pretend that he is still there with them smiling. This picture represents something further for Tom - it represents his future; how he will leave the family in a similar fashion to his father, almost ascending to take his place. As the play is told in retrospective way, The picture is a constant reminder to Tom of his future that might have been different. Another reminder of the father's presence is the victrola music player that he left behind. The victrola is the sanctuary that Laura retreats to when nervous or stressed, For instance in scene two, while she is being chastised by her mother she 'crosses to the victrola and winds it up.' Her mother questions her on this and she remarks 'Oh!' and then 'returns to her seat.' The use of the surprised sound and the stage directions after this suggest that it was a reflex action to move to the victrola. The victrola is a symbol to Laura, a connexion with her father; the fact that she retreats to it instinctively at hard times shows that she still feels, or hopes to feel the protection of her father, reminding the reader once again of his presence in the house. Amanda still wears a bath robe that he left behind, possibly showing her inability to accept his disappearance. These icons represent the presence of the father in the lives of the family, and shows that he is still very much an integral part of their lives. The importance of the father as a character manifests itself in

the effects of his actions on the family as a unit, as well as on the individual members of the family. In the time that this play is set, pre Second World War and post Wall Street crash many families in America went through a period of financial hardship - and with no social security at this point in time it is intimated that the absence of a paternal breadwinner puts a great monetary strain on the family. This is shown through Tom's discontent in his job and how hard he works; (in reference to the rent) "...who makes a slave of himself..." (p29) and Amanda's desperate attempts to earn extra money selling subscriptions to the " Companion" magazine, using unsubtle sales techniques such as " you simply couldn't go out if you hadn't read it" (p28.) As well as making money, both Amanda and Tom vie to take the place of the paternal figure. Amanda takes it upon herself to be the mother and father figure in the family, the provider of sympathy, and the authoritarian, while Tom takes it upon himself to be an independent adult and the main money earner to support the family. This conflict of roles and perception of what is needed in the situation ultimately causes conflict and is a common phenomenon in single parenthood, as well as being a key feature of domestic tragedy - presenting the family as somewhat dysfunctional. An example of this dysfunction is that Amanda tries to curb Tom's (perceived) excessive drinking and smoking: " Promise, Son, you'll never be a drunkard" and " you smoke too much", this tends to bring a reaction of anger or humour from Tom, as he feels that he is an adult, both reactions serving as a brush off of his mothers wishes. It could also suggest that Tom feels he has to become an adult prematurely. The capitalization of the word son in this extract indicates that Amanda is forcefully reasserting her position as the

adult and parent of the family, and when Tom replies in the negative Williams capitalizes his use of the word mother, showing that he accepts, or pretends to accept this. This conflict within the Wingfield family unit is typical of Modern Domestic tragedy presenting the family as somehow corrupt or tense; equally it presents Tom and Amanda manoeuvring for control, another key feature of domestic tragedy. Laura also tries to fill the void left by the father within the family. She presents the calmer side of a paternal figure; attempting to keep the peace in the household and trying to alleviate her mother's and brother's needs; "Mother, let me clear the table." Her humble attitude is symptomatic of her crippling insecurity, brought on primarily by her disability, but also added to by the absence of her father - as said Laura retreats to the victrola, the symbol of her father, in times of stress. Tom and Amanda mention the Wingfield father figure on many occasions, using him to reinforce their arguments. "One thing you're father had plenty of - was charm!" Laura does not mention him once, suggesting that she has been the most affected by his loss, implying that she is in denial. This shows the extent of the damage that his actions have caused on the family. The effect of the father's departure on Tom is different from the effect that it has on Laura and Amanda. Rather than a point of sorrow or hardship for him, it becomes a point of aspiration; throughout the book Tom harbours an increasing desire to follow in his father's footsteps and leave the household. "I'm a bastard son of a bastard!" exclaims Tom, implying that his urge to escape his situation is merely a following what his father has predestined for him. This mirroring of his father's actions would obviously not be possible if his father had not taken the actions that he did. The idea that

the father has predetermined the fate of the Wingfield family is a strong indicator of his place as a main character. Williams' has given the play this feel in several ways, for instance the retrospective way that Tom narrates the story gives it a sense of immovability – you may engage with the characters and want them to make different decisions, but there is no chance of this as it has all already occurred. This adds to the tragic effect of the play and, the way that Tom talking about his father as if it were his fault shows him to be a key character; "...he skipped the light fantastic out of town" the use of the word skipped in this instance implies sarcasm or anger – using a word usually associated with fun to describe a life altering occurrence. As a whole, the father's ' escape, or ' abandonment of the family has detrimental effects and is the catalyst that sets the events of the play in motion. This is typical of domestic tragedy in several ways, showing the disintegration of the family – caused by elements of the past impinging on the present. As the fathers actions, coupled with the turbulent economic situation of the time, determine the plot which ultimately leads to the family's downfall and a tragic ending, it is certainly fair to say that the father is the main character in the play.