

# The matriarch behind william's the glass menagerie

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



When a woman experiences indulgence at its very best in the past and suffers a reversal of fortune at present, she will often be caught in a giddy illusion about what her past is like as she struggles to accept the pains and drudgeries of the present. This trouble with acceptance of her fate is more magnified when she becomes mother, who will often appear to be too overbearing for her children as she will often push them to realize her illusions.

When, in fact, her intention is to give only the best for her children.

This is what Amanda Wingfield's character appears to be in Tennessee William's much-acclaimed play *The Glass Menagerie*. As the matriarch in the Wingfield family, she raised Tom and Laura alone in the dingy St. Louis apartment during the Depression era. Apparently, she has difficulty facing reality, though by the end of the play she does acknowledge Tom's desire to leave and Laura's uncertain future.

She frequently fantasizes about the past, probably exaggerating her own popularity when she was still a young lady in the Blue Mountains.

Her relationship with her son Tom is conflicted, most prominently when she criticizes about his habits and choices in life. Character Background As a young lady who grew in the Blue Mountains, Mississippi in the Southern part of the United States during the late 1800s, Amanda was probably raised in an affluent family that belonged to the prominent plantation owners. In fact, in *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda Wingfield recalled her ostensibly privileged girlhood in the Mississippi Delta with obvious embellishment: " I had malaria fever all that Spring...."

I had a little temperature all the time—not enough to be serious—just enough to make me restless and giddy! Invitations poured in—parties all over the Delta!... I took quinine but kept on going, going! Evenings, dances! Afternoons, long, long rides! Picnics—lovely! So lovely that country in May—all lacy with dogwood, literally flooded with jonquils” (Williams, 53-54). Another display of Amanda’s opulent background is when she prided about seventeen gentlemen callers in one afternoon as she exults in her Southern past. Amanda Wingfield even listed her beaux—“ gentlemen all!...

some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta”—she also cited their financial pedigrees. Champ Laughlin went on to become a vice president of the Delta Planters Bank. Hadley Stevenson, who drowned in Moon Lake, left his widow “ one hundred and fifty thousand in Government bonds. ” Bates Cutrere, who was killed in a shoot-out on the floor of the Moon Lake Casino, died with Amanda’s picture in his pocket, leaving “ eight or ten thousand acres, that’s all” to a widow he never loved. Finally, there was Duncan J.

Fitzhugh, the man with the “ Midas touch,” who became “ the Wolf of Wall Street” (p. 9-10). It is during these reveries of Amanda that *The Glass Menagerie* as a play rises above from the rest. It is in Amanda Wingfield’s memory, “ seated predominantly in the heart,” of her life before she came to an urban industrialized North, which Williams refers to as “ the fundamentally enslaved section of American society” (p. 3). The tragic dimension of the play is centered in Amanda, for neither of her children is capable of seeing, as the mother sees, their starved present in the light of a larger past (Howell, 1970).

In fact, we can see Amanda as an ordinary woman who is somehow transfigured by the memory of her early life in Mississippi and who tries to pass the influence on to her children. She exaggerates her glories, like the number of gentlemen callers, but the idea of a very different way of life is real, and this is enough to establish her as the dominant interest in the play. When she talks of Blue Mountain, her children patronize her and laugh behind her back. "I know what's coming," Tom says. "Yes. But let her tell it," Laura says. "She loves to tell it" (p. 7).

And then Amanda does not mind her son and daughter to relive the high life she recalls as a Southern belle. Tom wants to know how she managed to entertain all those gentlemen callers. She knew the art of conversation, Amanda retorted. A girl in those days needed more than a pretty face and figure, "although I wasn't slighted in either respect"; she had to know how to talk and to discuss significant things. "Never anything coarse or common or vulgar." This is why Amanda somewhat regrets her choice of marrying a telephone man because she might have become a wife of a millionaire.

At the current setting of the play, Amanda is now a fading southern belle abandoned by her husband, a telephone man "who fell in love with long distances" (p. 5), Amanda clings to the past and memories of her genteel girlhood in Blue Mountain. Yet, she also exhibits a fierce determination to overcome her grim circumstances, and often badgers her children about family responsibilities and planning for the future. Amanda's escape from the dreary present is different from Tom's and Laura's.

Amanda thought that together they can try to escape reality, but she in her own way is coming to grips with it, by trying to make a breadwinner out of

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Tom and by securing Laura's future with a career or marriage. " Both of my children—they're unusual children! Don't you think I know it? I'm so—proud!" (p. 31) The gentlemen callers are not designed to reflect her popularity so much as to suggest to her children the larger possibilities that life has to offer which they from limited experience are unable to see. Howell (1970) assumed that only Amanda, as the story progresses, does a definite meaning of the play emerge.

The gentlemen callers begin as a joke; Amanda herself is a joke, in the eyes of her children and of the generation which they represent; but Williams' concept of a very different way of life in his native South enables him to represent the silly mother and her dreams into something which is noble and true. In its larger meaning, Amanda's tragedy becomes a parable of the inadequacy of modern life. Amanda's Relationship With Laura Laura Wingfield is the daughter of Amanda and younger sister of Tom. In *The Glass Menagerie*, she is characterized as an extremely shy, even emotionally disturbed, young woman.

Presented to have a slight physical impairment, Laura has a brace on her leg which makes her feel conspicuous. Her collection of glass animals gives the play its title. She does not work, and she has been unable to complete a typing class because of her nervousness. Although she says she had once liked a boy in high school, she has never had and is unlikely to have any kind of romantic relationship. In the play, Laura's future becomes the central obligation of Wingfield family; someone will have to take care of her.

Amanda expresses eloquently the humiliation of the deserted wife and the unmarried woman in the Southern culture, and she fears that Laura will

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become a “ front porch girl” — one who sits on the porch in the evenings watching others marry and raise their children. Tennessee Williams frequently mentioned this lost lady throughout the play, who is not suited for the marriage game, cannot earn a living in the modern world, and has no role in modern fragmented family units. In an earlier time, she would have been the spinster aunt, shuttled from one family member to another, becoming a collective obligation.

By the 1930s, families rarely lived in great, rambling houses with enough space to accommodate long-term visitors. The shrunken family, isolated from its relatives in its apartment or bungalow, crowded into big cities, had no space for the unwanted dependents. Without that community of concern, Laura becomes Amanda's problem — and Tom's (Tischler, 2000, p. 31). In this regard, readers would distinguish that Amanda's relationship with Laura borders on motherly concern that often becomes too overbearing that it becomes cruel. In fact, Amanda soon reveals herself later in the play as a symbol of the “ devouring mother.

” Though apparently nurturing, she thwarts and hobbles her children, dominating not only their eating habits, but their entire lives, keeping them safely in the nest with her. Portraying herself as a martyr to their needs, she actually requires their submission to feed her own pride, crippling Laura more by her outrageous expectations. Within the play, it is Laura's glass collection that allows us to see the childlike fixation on a private world of make-believe animals and delicacy of this isolated girl. Taking it as a symbol of Laura herself, fragile and beautiful, the author plays with the more specific figure of the unicorn.

Here we see the complete development of a complex idea, hinted at in the dialogue. We know from medieval literature that this mythical figure of unicorns is identified with virgins and therefore with sexuality. Amanda constantly pesters Tom to choose a suitable "gentleman caller" from among his coworkers, and, he eventually agrees to bring his friend Jim O'Connor to dinner. Delighted, Amanda immerses herself in plans for his visit, the prospect of a suitor for her daughter stirring memories of her own beaux in Blue Mountain.

Laura, however, is terrified and becomes physically ill when Jim arrives. In this case, Jim appeared as a spirited young man who believes in the power of self-improvement courses and the future of television. Incidentally, he is also the popular boy for whom Laura secretly had a crush on during high school. Left alone with Laura after dinner, he gradually sets her at ease with his personable manner and eventually persuades her to dance. Their movement is awkward, however, and they bump against the table that supports Laura's glass unicorn, breaking its horn.

Thus, when Jim accidentally breaks off its horn, he has not transformed it into a horse: it remains a unicorn, but is now a damaged unicorn that manages to look like an ordinary horse. In some ways, this is what Amanda has done to Laura, distorted her true childish nature to make her seem like all the normal young ladies being courted by nice young gentlemen. Laura's pained responses to her mother's cruel questions about her plans for the evening expose the anguish that her unwarranted concerns that affected Laura since the beginning of the play. Amanda's Relationship With Tom

As the narrator of the play, Tom has been touted as protagonist of the play. He is a brother to Laura and a son to Amanda. Because of the misery and the machinations of his overbearing mother, Tom too dreams of abandoning the family, as his father had done. He feels trapped between his job, where he often neglects his duties in order to write poetry, and in his home, where he is reprimanded for reading some modern literature which was considered scandalous during those times. Although he claims to go out and watch movies every night, he also probably goes to a tavern, since he sometimes comes home drunk.

Eventually, Tom finally gave in to the badgering of Amanda and agrees to bring a "gentleman caller" home to meet Laura, but he leaves the family that night. Although Tom appears to genuinely care for Laura, his greater desire is to relieve his frustration at his confining situation. When he functions as narrator at a time several years after the action of the play, readers understand that he has escaped physically but not emotionally. As we have said earlier, Tom's relationship with his mother Amanda caused most of the conflicts in *The Glass Menagerie*. At the start, Tom, both narrates and participates in the action onstage.

He advises the audience in his opening soliloquy that "the play is memory" and features characters who are aspects of his own consciousness, tinged by sentimentality. His retrospective commentary continues throughout the play and provides an ironic counterpoint to the unfolding events. In fact, Tom is a poet trapped in a tedious job at a shoe warehouse, Tom dreams of becoming a writer and escapes nightly to the movies, where he vicariously experiences



the adventure he craves. So when Amanda confronts Tom's constant going out to drinking in taverns, with an excuse of going to the movies.

Tom expressed his utter hatred to his mother calling her "ugly-babbling old-witch" (p. 24). As his mother Amanda constantly badgers him to take in the role as the head of the family and help his sister find a man who will take care of her future, we can see Tom's dreams slowly being peeled off. Beaurline (1965) averred that there are a hundred ways that the body of the play depicts Tom's awareness of the essential hopelessness of the Wingfield family and the essential deadness of their beautiful memories. One of the greatest moments in modern theater occurs when Amanda comes on stage to greet Laura's gentleman caller.

Nobody says a word for a few seconds; everyone's eyes are fixed on Amanda's dress—the old ball dress that she wore when she led the cotillion years ago. Before age had yellowed this dress she had twice won the cakewalk, and she had worn it to the Governor's ball in Jackson. The dress, at this moment, suggests the utter futility of Amanda's efforts to find a husband for her daughter. She defeats her own purposes; she cannot resist pretending that the gentleman caller has come to call on her, just as seventeen of them came one afternoon on Blue Mountain. Tom is shocked and embarrassed.

The grotesque sight leaves Jim speechless, and he is a young man proud of his high school training in public speaking. Meanwhile, Laura lies in her bedroom, sick with fear. Another instance of conflict between Amanda and Tom happened when she tried to adjust the lamp for Tom while he is writing. She chides him: "I know that Milton was blind, but that's not what made him

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a genius". Stein (1964) thought that this is Amanda's recognition of Tom's difference from other men and as such establishes one character's attitude toward another. It also underscores our sense of Amanda's well-meaning meddling in Tom's privacy.

Furthermore, it works ironically, for it should suggest to the audience Milton's sonnet on his blindness and add to our sense of the conflict between Tom's desire to escape from home and the drudgeries at work, as it collides with Amanda's belief that they also serve to those who stand and wait. Stein (1964) related that there exists the even broader contrast, inherent in the Milton image, of sight and blindness, of light and darkness. This pattern of imagery is as important to *The Glass Menagerie*, where the conflict between illusion and reality is shaped in terms of what the characters dream of and what they actually are.

In the end, the readers will finally conclude that Tom's animosity towards Amanda stems from the fact offered by these conclusions: a man of imagination seldom finds fulfillment in a shoe factory; a boy seldom becomes a man under the watchful eye of a domineering mother; the break with the past is always painful for the sensitive man; and there is health in this drive to preserve one's integrity and develop to one's maturity regardless of the demands of the family (Crandell, 1996, p. 12). Conclusion What's admirable in this whole play of Tennessee Williams is that all the characters are palpable.

We can almost see a semblance of all our mothers in Amanda Wingfield as she only wanted the best for her children and she just wants to secure their future. Unfortunately, she transformed into an overbearing and garrulous

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mother to both Tom and Laura that caused them to have inner pains because of their mother's actions. As Thompson (2002) observed that this play is "a profusion of symbolic references and a recurrent pattern of anticipation, momentary fulfillment, and ultimate despair", this makes the plot of play larger than life.

Not that *The Glass Menagerie* is a "simple story of one shy crippled girl, a neurotic mother, and a dreamer of a son" or just the "story of just one more broken family", but it is certainly like the glass collection of Laura where we could see through "modern man's alienation from God and isolation from his fellow man." Thus, Amanda's illusion serves up to its purpose as her defense against her present stature and virtually wanted her loved ones out of this quandary.

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