

Character analysis of the glass menagerie

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



Tom Wingfield Tom's double role in *The Glass Menagerie*—as a character whose recollections the play documents and as a character who acts within those recollections—underlines the play's tension between objectively presented dramatic truth and memory's distortion of truth. Unlike the other characters, Tom sometimes addresses the audience directly, seeking to provide a more detached explanation and assessment of what has been happening onstage. But at the same time, he demonstrates real and sometimes juvenile emotions as he takes part in the play's action. This duality can frustrate our understanding of Tom, as it is hard to decide whether he is a character whose assessments should be trusted or one who allows his emotions to affect his judgment. It also shows how the nature of recollection is itself problematic: memory often involves confronting a past in which one was less virtuous than one is now. Because *The Glass Menagerie* is partly autobiographical, and because Tom is a stand-in for the playwright himself (Williams's given name was Thomas, and he, like Tom, spent part of his youth in St. Louis with an unstable mother and sister, his father absent much of the time), we can apply this comment on the nature of memory to Williams's memories of his own youth. Even taken as a single character, Tom is full of contradiction. On the one hand, he reads literature, writes poetry, and dreams of escape, adventure, and higher things. On the other hand, he seems inextricably bound to the squalid, petty world of the Wingfield household. We know that he reads D. H. Lawrence and follows political developments in Europe, but the content of his intellectual life is otherwise hard to discern. We have no idea of Tom's opinion on Lawrence, nor do we have any indication of what Tom's poetry is about. All we learn is what he

thinks about his mother, his sister, and his warehouse job—precisely the things from which he claims he wants to escape. Tom’s attitude toward Amanda and Laura has puzzled critics. Even though he clearly cares for them, he is frequently indifferent and even cruel toward them. His speech at the close of the play demonstrates his strong feelings for Laura. But he cruelly deserts her and Amanda, and not once in the course of the play does he behave kindly or lovingly toward Laura—not even when he knocks down her glass menagerie. Critics have suggested that Tom’s confusing behavior indicates an incestuous attraction toward his sister and his shame over that attraction. This theory casts an interesting light on certain moments of the play—for example, when Amanda and Tom discuss Laura at the end of Scene Five. Tom’s insistence that Laura is hopelessly peculiar and cannot survive in the outside world, while Amanda (and later Jim) claims that Laura’s oddness is a positive thing, could have as much to do with his jealous desire to keep his sister to himself as with Laura’s own quirks.

Amanda Wingfield

If there is a signature character type that marks Tennessee Williams’s dramatic work, it is undeniably that of the faded Southern belle. Amanda is a clear representative of this type. In general, a Tennessee Williams faded belle is from a prominent Southern family, has received a traditional upbringing, and has suffered a reversal of economic and social fortune at some point in her life. Like Amanda, these women all have a hard time coming to terms with their new status in society—and indeed, with modern society in general, which disregards the social distinctions that they were taught to value. Their relationships with men and their families are turbulent, and they staunchly defend the values of their past. As with Amanda, their maintenance of

genteel manners in very ungentle surroundings can appear tragic, comic, or downright grotesque. Amanda is the play's most extroverted and theatrical character, and one of modern American drama's most coveted female roles (the acclaimed stage actress Laurette Taylor came out of semi-retirement to play the role in the original production, and a number of legendary actresses, including Jessica Tandy, have since taken on the role). Amanda's constant nagging of Tom and her refusal to see Laura for who she really is are certainly reprehensible, but Amanda also reveals a willingness to sacrifice for her loved ones that is in many ways unparalleled in the play. She subjects herself to the humiliating drudgery of subscription sales in order to enhance Laura's marriage prospects, without ever uttering so much as a word of complaint. The safest conclusion to draw is that Amanda is not evil but is deeply flawed. In fact, her flaws are centrally responsible for the tragedy, comedy, and theatrical flair of her character. Like her children, Amanda withdraws from reality into fantasy. Unlike them, she is convinced that she is not doing so and, consequently, is constantly making efforts to engage with people and the world outside her family. Amanda's monologues to her children, on the phone, and to Jim all reflect quite clearly her moral and psychological failings, but they are also some of the most colorful and unforgettable words in the play.

Laura Wingfield The physically and emotionally crippled Laura is the only character in the play who never does anything to hurt anyone else. Despite the weight of her own problems, she displays a pure compassion—as with the tears she sheds over Tom's unhappiness, described by Amanda in Scene Four—that stands in stark contrast to the selfishness and grudging sacrifices that characterize the

Wingfield household. Laura also has the fewest lines in the play, which contributes to her aura of selflessness. Yet she is the axis around which the plot turns, and the most prominent symbols—blue roses, the glass unicorn, the entire glass menagerie—all in some sense represent her. Laura is as rare and peculiar as a blue rose or a unicorn, and she is as delicate as a glass figurine. Other characters seem to assume that, like a piece of transparent glass, which is colorless until light shines upon it, Laura can take on whatever color they wish. Thus, Amanda both uses the contrast between herself and Laura to emphasize the glamour of her own youth and to fuel her hope of re-creating that youth through Laura. Tom and Jim both see Laura as an exotic creature, completely and rather quaintly foreign to the rest of the world. Yet Laura's crush on the high school hero, Jim, is a rather ordinary schoolgirl sentiment, and a girl as supposedly fragile as Laura could hardly handle the days she spends walking the streets in the cold to avoid going to typing class. Through actions like these, Laura repeatedly displays a will of her own that defies others' perceptions of her, and this will repeatedly goes unacknowledged.