

Symbolism in tennessee william's "the glass menagerie" essay sample

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In the first scene of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom admits to a "poet's weakness for symbols." The semi-autobiographical resemblance between Tennessee Williams and Tom has been pointed out by critics (Porter, 1969; Leverich, 1995) and this confession of weakness could well be the dramatist's own, for in this play more than any of his others, he makes a frequent and arguably overt, use of symbols.

The most obvious of these symbols and definitely the most discussed, is his use of Laura's glass menagerie to portray her immersion in an imaginary universe. She spends a lot of her time engrossed in these little animals. She talks to them; she plays with them; she cleans them. The qualities of these creatures and their little closed world parallel Laura and her life. The menagerie "takes up a good deal of my time. Glass is something you have to take good care of," says Laura in Scene VII. And like glass, she too needs to be taken care of and protected. Arthur Ganz (1965) points out that the character of Laura is a development of that of Matilda in *You Touched Me*. Williams had himself described Matilda as having "the delicate, almost transparent quality of glass" (Williams as cited in Ganz, 1965, p. 206) and Laura is clearly no different. She confines herself to the apartment, hardly ever venturing out, immersed in her menagerie and her father's old records which she plays on the phonograph. She is fragile and easily broken. And like the unicorn, she is not a creature of this world but mythical and strangely beautiful. When Tom has a fight with Amanda in Scene III, he accidentally knocks over Laura's collection, which is perhaps a symbolic reminder of his responsibility for the preservation of Laura's world.

The unicorn, as Laura's favorite animal, becomes a special symbol for her. Like 'Blue Roses' - Jim's nickname for her, it does not fit into the natural order of the world but exists in the imagination (Cardullo, 1998). "Hold him over the light, he loves the light! You see how the light shines through him?" Laura tells Jim in Scene VII. Metaphorically, she could be talking about herself as she "shines" in the "light" of Jim's attention. When Jim accidentally breaks the horn of the unicorn, it is symbolic of his effort to draw Laura out and normalize her. Without its telltale horn, the unicorn looks much more like any ordinary horse.

Laura too thinks that it is just as well that the horn has broken because it makes the unicorn look less freakish. She says that "now the unicorn will be like the other animals." She craves for normalcy as well. And Jim, as the outsider, gives her a brief glimpse of it (Ganz, 1965). When he tells her that he is engaged, however, she is terribly hurt and her final gift to him of the broken unicorn is a symbol of her own shattered love. Thompson (1989) describes this as the moment of *anagnorisis* or recognition common to several of Williams's plays when the protagonist is "stripped of illusions and delusions" (p. 5) and faced by reality. "This symbolic moment of demythification, or rite of divestiture, is generally dramatized by a gesture of breaking, rending, or otherwise shattering the concrete symbol" (p. 5). In *The Glass Menagerie*, the symbol takes the shape of the unicorn.

There is another important symbol that Williams uses to add depth to Laura's personality. She is a 'cripple', lamed by a childhood disease. But this physical handicap is also an external symbol of her intensely shy and

nervous personality. The tricky thing about considering this to be a symbol is that her lameness is also the possible cause of her insecurity.

Amanda is an affectionate, if rather demanding and dominating, mother to Laura and Tom. In the face of their straitened circumstances, she often escapes into her memories of an idyllic past in the South when she had "seventeen gentlemen callers call on one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain." E. M. Jackson (1965) talks about Williams' symbolic use of his Southern heritage. He points out how Williams remains on the Southern fringe of American mainstream exploring the marginal Southerners lost in small towns and nurturing their isolation. These are fragile little worlds, which inevitably crack up under the pressure of reality just like Amanda's own world cracked up when her husband deserted her. Yet in her memory, they still represent that ideal time that she always longs to go back to through her dreams of security and a 'gentleman caller' for Laura.

The 'gentlemen caller', which in Tom's words is the "expected something that we live for," takes on the symbolism of a route for escape for Amanda. By finding a husband for Laura, she hopes to put an end to their financial difficulties and find some peace in a more settled life for her daughter. When he finally appears in the shape of Jim in Scene VI, she is as excited by Laura's prospects as by a chance to relive her youth. She dresses up in one of her old girlish outfits from the past. She is talkative and expansive about her heydays. Her exuberance embarrasses Tom but it is a result of her association of the 'gentleman caller' with her own golden years.

It is only appropriate that the caller should have the personality of Jim. In his opening speech, Tom himself mentions this. Jim is a messenger from the real world, Williams' symbol of the American Dream (Haley, 1999). He is a practical and ambitious go-getter who believes in self-improvement. He is fond of praise, sometimes selfish and careless with people's feelings. It is the intrusion of his brand of reality that finally cracks up the Wingfield family.

Tom is the narrator of the play and there are many symbols woven around him to add texture to his personality and his particular dilemma. His choice is an age-old one. The choice between personal freedom and responsibility to one's family. He hates his job at the warehouse, which deadens his appetite for life and is a poet at heart. To get away from the monotony of his job, Tom goes to the movies at night. As Crandell suggests, the "cinema provides both the impetus and a convenient excuse for escape from unpleasant company and inhospitable surroundings" (2001, p. 1). Often he comes back drunk. The movies become a symbol of illusory escape. They are not real and Tom realizes as much when he tells Jim in Scene VI that the movies sedate people and make them content to live through other people's adventures.

Tom's enthusiasm over the magic show he sees is another example of a rather too obvious symbol for temporary escape. But he comments in the beginning of the play that he is "the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth". He is fascinated by a particular trick that the magician performs; he gets out of a nailed coffin without taking out any of the nails. This is exactly the kind of magic trick that

Tom craves. He wants to escape from his current situation, which is as deadening and stultifying as being stuck in a coffin. But he wants to get out without damaging the coffin, that is, his family, which is imprisoning him. When Tom gives Laura the scarf from the magic show, he is perhaps trying to share a bit of its thrill and wonder with her and when he talks of the music from the Paradise Dance Hall, he is dreaming of freedom and the outside world.

Another unobtrusive but constant reminder of the desire for escape, which imbues Amanda and Tom, is the large framed photograph of their father that is a part of the set throughout the play. He is the "telephone man who fell in love with long distances" and abandoned his family. Amanda keeps harping on his desertion over and over again but his visual image serves more to remind the audience of the fact that he was the one who actually got away as none of the other characters have managed to do so far. The Christian symbolism of the absent Mr. Wingfield has also been commented upon by critics. According to Thompson (1989), he embodies the modern day idea of a god who seems largely absent and unreachable.

The fire escape is seen in the background through the performance. The different characters use it differently to enter and exit. Williams makes its symbolism of escape abundantly clear in his stage directions to the first scene. He says, while describing its presence, that it is only appropriate that it should be there as the cramped tenement buildings, the likes of which the Wingfield family lives in, are burning with the "implacable fires of human desperation."

As a symbol, the fire escape is most intimately linked with Tom. He uses it to come and go from his nightly wanderings. He delivers some of his speeches from it. He stands and listens to the music of the Paradise Dance Hall from its stairs. His position on it is representative of his position in life - he is standing in between the outside world and his family.

When Laura uses the fire escape to go out she stumbles on it. She is insecure of the real world and dreads every venture into it. She trips over the hurdle of her business class and fails to find success with her one 'gentleman caller'. Seen as such, all her forays into the universe outside the apartment are flawed with insecurity and failure. Her hopes of a better future are doomed to futility. Likewise Amanda uses the stairs to re-enter her claustrophobic little life in Scene II and she comes heavy with the weight of Laura's failure and deceit after having discovered that she has dropped out of business school. When she calls Laura to it and asks her to make a wish on the "silver slipper of a moon" after discovering that Tom is finally bringing a 'gentleman caller' to dinner, she is hoping for outside forces to intervene and improve their boxed-in, personal lives. All things move from the outside to the inside for Laura and Amanda.

In fact, in the play, it is only to Tom who can use the fire escape successfully. In the end of Scene VII, Tom stands on the fire escape - that metaphorical space between his two worlds and tells us that the day finally came when he used those stairs one last time to never come back. The fire escape becomes Tom's route to freedom and an independent life. Like his father, he becomes

what Williams calls a "fugitive outcast" in *Orpheus Descending* (p. 144); a man who simply runs away from a difficult situation (Daley, 1999).

In the background of the play, the frequent references to World War II and *Guernica* represent the world outside the closed world of this family and its concerns. Its unrest closely matches the unrest in the play. Also audiences would have been aware that the time depicted in the play is the immediate period before war broke out and its effects were felt in America as well. This ominous sense of foreboding this creates symbolizes and anticipates the way the difficulties in the Wingfield family's life are also about to come to a head with Tom's departure.

Perhaps, any discussion of symbolism in *The Glass Menagerie* will always feel incomplete because of the plethora of symbols Williams uses in the play. In the stage directions, Williams even indicates places in the text when slides – such as one depicting a blue rose – should be shown in the background during performance to add depth to dialogue or reinforce the unreal, otherworldly feeling of time gone by. It is worth considering that it is *The Glass Menagerie*'s structure as a memory play that allows it to get away with the rather 'in-your-face' brand of symbolism that Williams employs. The text successfully uses a liberal number of images to create association and significance in much the way real memory does without seeming pretentious. It may be the reason why all these various symbols blend together with ease to create such an evocative and richly expressive atmosphere.

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