

Symbolic nature of the glass menagerie english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Stephanie Kelley Steven Remollino ENG-1302-0531N Symbolic Nature of "The Glass Menagerie" Tennessee Williams often articulated his works with dramatic symbols. This blatant symbolism however was not employed as deliberate or intentional decoration or ornamental characteristics of his work. Williams opted instead for symbols that held significance in his own mind. It is said he believed symbolism to be the only adequate means of communicating his work in addition to himself as a proper artist. To perfect the symbolism in his work Williams implemented various intricate aspects such as dramatic characterization, vivid dialogue, symbolic plots, and precise setting design. Fortunately, the aforementioned exact decisions constructed a convention that uncovered his astonishingly extraordinary opinions and exclusive viewpoints. Williams chose to emblematically convey his distinct identity and unique personal experiences in this play, *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams's writings even more predominantly, puts forth to the crowd the conflict connecting spirit with human flesh that he felt had come to intensely portray and describe him as a writer and an individual. Albeit subtly vague, symbolism is obviously William's favored writing technique. This is apparent with the manner that Laura is the strongest wellspring of imagery for the duration of the play and even more so the title of the play is exceptionally symbolic of Laura's fragile delicacy. *The Glass Menagerie* is one of Tennessee Williams' greatly celebrated plays, and one of the most intense in terms of symbolism. The very title of the play is a symbol; furthermore, symbols dwell in nearly each and every line. Be that as it may, despite the clear presence of imagery and symbolic representation, the symbolism in *The Glass Menagerie* has not yet been successfully explicated in its entirety.

by literary scholars. One predominately critical break is the lack of a full-scale inductive methodological approach. Regardless, a portion of the best analyses about Tennessee Williams' imagery and symbolism are for the most part quite enlightening and informative; on the other hand, to an extraordinary degree, the normal viewpoint is basically deductive. In that it returns from Jungian presumptions. Many students and other audiences look for models, myths, and archetypes from within the play itself. Although, I personally opt to analyze the symbolism within the play, in addition to examining William's symbols that prove obviously apparent to most any audience in *The Glass Menagerie*. The symbolism of *The Glass Menagerie* is essentially the culmination of a system Williams had begun creating early in his career. By the time the composition of *Glass Menagerie* had begun, he had already identified his major concerns and most of the symbols he would use to represent them. He knew how he would symbolically portray this story. Every major character in *Glass Menagerie* (and his major plays thereafter) is linked in some way to these concerns and their personal significance. However, because each of his characters is an individual, he alters his classic symbols slightly in each situation. Because of this, I will be discussing the symbols directly associated within this play. One important rationale for the symbolism of *The Glass Menagerie* is often neglected for the most part is because the play is so famously autobiographical. There are countless parallels between it and Williams' own life. For instance, "Tom," the name of one of the characters, also happens to be Williams' legal name. I once read an article about Tennessee Williams and found he was a writer employed in a shoe warehouse, a job which he hated. Additionally, much like

Tom Williams had a friend named Jim Connor; Tom's character has a friend named Jim O'Connor. This shows his writing is symbolic of his reality.

Williams also went to the movies incessantly, as Tom does, where there were organ concerts and vaudeville acts, as there are at the beginning of scene four. This also projects the symbolism of escape found throughout the play. Tom's character often seeks to escape from his life by going out to these places. Essentially, the character is buying time away from reality. This in essence must symbolize William's own need to escape from reality. Williams' work dominates by symbolism, and it forms such an integral part of the structures of his plays that some have called them allegories. Williams himself does so, at one point saying that the struggle between virtue and corruption is the basic, allegorical theme of his plays as a whole.

Nevertheless, *The Glass Menagerie* and Williams other plays are allegorical in nature; however, they are not merely allegories, they are his life experiences. Though some characters are more complex than others, he rarely creates stock characters for the purposes of symbolism. He is, in fact, steadfast in his determination to depict the vast complexity of human nature, which is precisely what drives his artistry generally, including his creation of symbols. Paradoxically, then, there are two sides to his characters. They are both wholly symbols and wholly realistic, a tension best illustrated in the character of Jim. Tom says that he is a "symbol," the "long-delayed but always expected something that we live for," yet he is also flesh-and-blood, as he jokes with Laura and reveals himself to be both narcissistic and supportive. In many respects, Laura is the focal point of the play. The production notes, the final scene, and the final lines of the play are oriented

around her. Moreover, though her mother Amanda is probably the most memorable character, Laura is the most important as far as symbolism in the play is concerned. The very title of the play, the play's dominant symbol, is associated with her, a relationship that the titles of earlier versions reinforce: "If You Breathe, It Breaks" (referring both to the menagerie and to her) and "Portrait of a Girl in Glass." There is, then, a comprehensible symbolic link made between her and her menagerie, which is further established by passages in both the play proper and its symbolism. In Williams' preliminary description of the characters, he says that the distance between Laura and reality increases "till she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf" (Williams, 129). This same paragraph hints at Laura and her glass figures' dark fate: "When you look at a piece of delicately spun glass you think of two things: how beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken" (129). Mutually, these ideas should be integrated into the continuous tune of William's fragile symbolism. This fate additionally reflects in the stage directions in the last act, which describes her "as being like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting" (191). A glass figure adumbrates her fate in scene three. As Tom is seen storming out of the apartment, he heaves his overcoat across the room in his frustration. "It strikes against the shelf of Laura's glass collection, and there is a tinkle of shattering glass. Laura cries out as if wounded" (164). Symbolically, the shattered glass is representative of a fragile broken Laura. Before the symbolism of Laura and the menagerie can be witnessed and understood in its totality, a greater familiarity with the imagery typically associated with

them is essential. Both Laura and the menagerie are linked to the imagery of fragility, as we have seen, but there are other characteristics which are significant. First of all, in the context of the play, they are often set in darkness, yet illuminated by beams of light. In the last act, Laura and Jim stand together on a darkened stage in the spotlight, and she passes her favorite glass figure to him, exclaiming, " Hold him over the light, he loves the light! You see how the light shines through him?" (223). Laura herself is depicted similarly throughout the play, set in darkness, yet illuminated by beams of light; after all, as we have seen, she is " like a piece of translucent glass touched by light"(133). This is realized by the stage directions: Williams asks that throughout the play, though the stage be dim " in keeping with the atmosphere of memory," that the " clearest pool of light" be trained on her figure (133). Another characteristic of both the glass figures and Laura is their typically being set in a musical context; often music is evocative of nostalgia. Williams himself is usually the source of this music, specifically asking directors for a " single recurring tune, ' The Glass Menagerie,'" which is especially prominent " when the play focuses upon Laura and the lovely fragility of glass which is her symbolic image" (133). Between each episode of Glass Menagerie, the music is to return as a " reference to the emotion, nostalgia that is the first condition of the play"(156), At times, Laura provides the context of musical nostalgia; with her continually playing the records her father left her as a " reminder of him" (156). A final noteworthy characteristic is the glass figures' probable polychromes. Above, we read of Williams' " bits of colored glass that were diamonds and rubies and sapphires and emeralds" (237), It is likely that these same colors tint the glass menagerie. Though the

play never mentions the polychromatic nature of the menagerie, polychromy clearly characterizes other glass objects thus, object which is parallel to the menagerie as symbols. In Tom's final speech, just before he is confronted with the specter of Laura herself, he recounts seeing "pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow" (237). In conclusion, Williams portrays symbols of his own nature in the play. Additionally, Laura is the strongest source of symbolism throughout the play. Furthermore the title of the play is undoubtedly symbolic of Laura's characteristic fragility. The Glass Menagerie is one of Tennessee Williams' greatest plays, with passionate and extreme symbolism. So much so, the very title of the play is symbolic, while subtle symbols inhabit almost every sentence.