

Example of critical thinking on blow out your candles in the glass menagerie

[Family](#)



In Tennessee Williams' classic play *The Glass Menagerie*, the work ends with Tom saying, "Blow out your candles, Laura," followed by Laura following suit. This line and accompanying action are highly symbolic gestures, following along with the play's themes of abandonment, the American Dream, family and more. The blowing out of the candles represents, for both of them, the chance to escape the suffocating nature of their life in their apartment with their family and to grow as people. This act being the final action of the play is significant, as it not only represents just how badly Laura needs to escape her life, but of Tom's guilt at leaving her there in the storm. The blowing out of the candle itself is the culmination of many of the other thematic symbols in the play; most of these illustrate the difference between reality and illusion or some kind of escape. Laura has her glass menagerie on which the play (although given its title) seems to barely touch base. Tom loves his movies, and using the thought of adventure to feed his drive to go. Although each character may have different views, there is one symbol that each one has in common. The fire escape represents the bridge between the illusory world of the Wingfields and the world of reality. Although the bridge may seem to be a one way excursion, the direction varies for each character.

Laura's blowing out of the candles is as much about Laura as it is about Tom. Laura is a very passive girl. Her timid ways are a result of her sheltered life. She can never finish anything she starts and has much difficulty dealing with the outside world. To that end, she focuses on the menagerie, a collection of fragile, intricate glass figurines that Laura collects as a hobby. She pours her heart and soul into these figurines, and they mean absolutely everything to

her Laura cares for them at the exclusion of all else, most particularly a social life and the search for a suitor. It is her escape from the harsh realities of life, and with these figures she does not feel alone - " her retreat is into a world of glass and music" (Tischler 365). That is her own fire escape; as Tom retreats to that, Laura retreats to her menagerie.

The candle is representative of the lesson that Laura needs to learn about life - she cannot simply hide herself away for fear of rejection or hurt, as that will not actually be effective, and she will miss out on all the opportunities of life. Basically, life is far too hard to treat yourself like a fragile glass figurine, and the shattering of these figures helps to prove that to Laura, demonstrating to her that she must force herself to become more active in her own life or suffer the same fate as her collection. This is something that Amanda and Tom attempt to hammer into her mind, and something that Jim tries to gently teach her, but that illusion of romance is also shattered when Jim reveals he has a fiancée. All of these small heartbreaks are the reasons Laura stays, but also the reasons she has to leave - all of these prior events of the play lead up to her ultimate decision to heed Tom's suggestion and blow out the candle.

The artifice of her own avenues of escape is revealed late in the play, when her menagerie itself is shattered. Once Jim breaks the unicorn, snapping its horn off, it is revealed that it is simply another horse, showcasing just how alike it was to the rest of the menagerie. Even though it was broken, there is also the possibility of repair and renewal. Laura can also experience this, symbolizing the potential for spiritual renewal and rejuvenation Laura could have if she were to let herself out of her shell and be like the rest of society.

However, Laura “ does not have the refuge” of distance from a situation, letting it get to her incredibly deeply, and so the unicorn does not get a chance to flourish (King, p. 208). Despite this, the one moment when Jim shows her it is okay that the unicorn is broken is important, as it allows her to experience being normal and living comfortably within her skin. The unicorn has lost its uniqueness, as has she in that instance, but it is not a bad thing. Laura gets to live a single minute as a normal, wanted, attractive human being, instead of a flawed or unique creature like the unicorn. Until this point, she merely is “ retreating into a ‘ world of her own,’” making it doubly important that she blow out her candles and move on (King, p. 209). Tom’s need and desire for a better life than the one he has now is what drives this final moment. Tom goes to the movies a lot, as they offer something more than the drab drama that comes from Amanda’s demands and Laura’s shyness. Their dysfunctions drive him away from reality and into the fantasy worlds of films and magic, places where everything turns out all right in the end. These emotional needs are not met at home, and yet Tom lacks the courage to go out and make his own adventure. This leaves these stopgap measures, which merely leave him more bitter once they are over, as they are not permanent solutions. This is the reason he hopes to use Jim as his out, making Jim replace him as man of the house by setting him up with Laura.

The candle ties into all of these other symbols, shining light on an image that Tom simply cannot shake; while he loves his family, he also wants to leave them behind. He is a contradiction, always torn between his loyalty to Amanda et al. and his wishes for a better life on his own. The fact that he

always expresses and contemplates this choice on the fire escape is significant, as it is the furthest point from his family without actually leaving his house. He can never fully decide what to do until the very end of the play, when he chooses to embark on his own adventure.

In the meantime, the candle helps to define the contradictory nature of Tom's character. His escape is a mild form of rebellion for him, as he wants to be able to demonstrate some semblance of individuality, which he does by hanging out on this fire escape and smoking cigarettes. It is only there that he gets a measure of freedom. At the same time, Tom's speech at the end deals mainly with his own guilt in his desire to leave his family, particularly Laura, as he recognizes that his love for her prevents him from leaving: "I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (Williams). To that end, the request to "blow out your candles" comes as a desire for both of them to escape their suffocating lives and become people on their own. The final image of the play, in which we see Laura alone in front of the candlelight, is what Tom will continually see in his head for the rest of his life; the guilt of leaving the poor girl who doesn't know better alone. His request for her to blow out "her candles" (both literally and the figurative 'candles' of the hang-ups that leave her cooped up at home) is as much for him as it is for her. He wants her to live her life, but he also doesn't want to be responsible for her being left behind.

Laura's decision to follow Tom's request to "blow out your candles" shows her following along with Tom's risky yet understandable desire to escape the doldrums of their stagnant apartment life in New York City. Laura's timidity and sheltered nature revolves symbolically around the candle, and Tom's

request for her to blow it out is indicative of his desire for her to spread her wings and fly. Just as Tom uses the fire escape to dream of a better place, Laura's candle represents stagnation, along with her menagerie – instead of going out to find herself, she shelters herself and builds a world around her. By blowing out the candle, all of the other symbols in the play are justified, and Laura is permitted to make something of herself.

Works Cited

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