

How does tennessee
williams present the
character of amanda
in the glass
menageri...



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Unusually for a play, the events in “ The Glass Menagerie” are presented to us through the eyes of an individual. As Tom states himself “ Being a memory play... it is sentimental, it is not realistic”.

When Tennessee Williams wrote the play, the members of his own family hugely influenced his characters, as the play is semi-autobiographical. Therefore we have to keep in mind that everything presented to us is only a subjective truth, and as we see in the character of Amanda these ‘ truths’ are often flawed. Amanda is our focus in the first scene as she faces out at us. Here, we see her treat Tom as a small child. With comments such as “ don’t push with your fingers” and “ chew-chew! ” it is evident that she is very critical and controlling of her son. However, as we see her attitude towards Tom develop, this may be seen as a symptom of hanging on to the last male of household because as her husband has left her because he “ fell in love with long distances”, Tom is the person keeping the family above the breadline.

Her claim that “ all that we have to cling to is each other” is not entirely unreasonable. Perhaps her justified suspicion that Tom is becoming a drunkard like his father is another reason why she is so critical of him. The end of scene four where she catches his arm and then retreats may suggest that Amanda does not only fear for him but is also scared of him. Together with tom’s distant attitude, we begin to warm more to Amanda at this point for the first time in the play.

The way in which Williams structures the play also has a considerable effect on the audience’s impression of Amanda. For example, the first time that we

see her attempt to sell the “ Companion” magazine at the start of scene three, it is likely that we interpret this as no more than comic relief from the intensity of the previous scene, and an example of the “ charm” she had spoken of to Laura. However, when a similar dialogue is repeated at the end of scene four, we have a new attitude towards her. Instead of just being a slightly annoying woman, we see that Amanda has had to resort to this as a way of making some extra money for her family. We have seen her bare her soul to Tom stating “ I - loved your father..

. there’s so much I my heart that I can’t describe to you! ” and now that she is pretence-less to the audience, here is emphasis on not only the social situation of the time, but also her eagerness for herself, and her children, to succeed. The repetition of the dialogue itself creates a sense that nothing moves forward in the Wingfield household. Juxtaposed with the escapist stories Amanda is trying to sell, the fact that she seems to be stuck in an endless rut creates a feeling of sympathy for her. Tennessee Williams makes sure that, in her own way, Amanda is presented as a woman who cares for her children. Unlike Tom’s selfishness in scene three when he states, “ who cares about me”, we see that Amanda’s criticism is a cover up for her anxiety and concern for her children, for example when Tom is scalded by his coffee she “ catches her breath and half turns”.

Despite the fact that she is angry with her son, she genuinely cannot stop loving him. Likewise, her concern for Tom’s appearance in scene five may seem shallow, but with evidence of her vicarious nature in her resolute search to gentleman caller for Laura, one may suggest that through making her son a more sophisticated man, she can present a public impression of

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herself as an upstanding mother. This is emphasised when she wishes on the moon for “ success and happiness for my children”, especially when compared to Tom’s shallow wish for escape. Underneath it all she is thinking realistically about the future of her children for example when she says to Laura “ what is there left but dependency all our lives.

.. is that the future that we’ve mapped out for ourselves? ” With her adamant search for a gentleman caller she may be misguided but at least she is working to push the family forward. In this way she may be called a realist. However, her own form of encouragement (“ charm-vivacity-charm”) sounds rather hopeless as it implies that Laura doesn’t have this and she has to struggle to find something positive to say.

Despite her best intentions she continues to communicate home truths badly, for example in tactlessly patronising Laura with “ we’ve given [business school] up because it gives us nervous indigestion” in reference to her future. It would appear that Amanda’s good intentions seem to bring about her worst traits. For example she uses emotional blackmail on Tom by saying that he can only achieve his dream of joining the marines when “ there’s somebody to take [his] place”. Amanda appears to dismiss what Tom and Laura think are important issues – especially with regards to Laura’s disability and shyness, claiming “ why, you’re not crippled, you just have a little defect – hardly noticeable, even! ” Whilst Jim later supports this, one cannot help think that perhaps she is just ignoring the problems in her home to feed her fantasy that everything is fine, not that she doesn’t care, which may have been our first impression. The “ annunciation” legend at the start of scene five highlights the fact that Amanda has held high hopes for a

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gentleman caller throughout the play. Therefore the fact that she expects love at first sight between Laura and Jim explains her far from sensitive nature when Laura is in terror at Jim's name when she asks Laura " why have you chosen this moment to lose your mind? " Of course the truth here is that it is Amanda that has chosen this moment to recognise Laura's introversion.

When preparing for Jim's arrival Amanda says that she must " feather the nest and plume the bird". Is she ashamed of Laura's current appearance or is she just trying to show off her full potential? The fact that Williams asks for such elements as thunder and prayer in scenes six and seven underlines that as a result of denying the truth. Amanda's nervousness that her grand plan may be going awry increases. In addition, the breaking of Laura's glass unicorn can be seen as more than the effect of Jim on her confidence. As Laura seems to ' mother' her animals, it can be deduced that her comment " the horn was removed to make him feel less-freakish! Now he will feel more at home with the other horses" can also be a reference to Amanda's desire for Laura to be normal. Amanda may be labelled insecure, as it is apparent that she is always concerned with what other people think of her.

" The crust of humility" legend illustrates her middle class concerns and the fact that when she was humiliated at the business college, she blames Laura of " Deception" when she could not have helped her state. Tom's label of " witch" for Amanda goes totally against the reputation that she had built up for herself, and actually exposes her to be quite vulnerable. It would seem that she has to live up to a certain reputation to hide the shame of her husband leaving her – she does not want to be seen as a failure. After

working " like a Turk" in preparation for Jim's arrival she states, " we will
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pass inspection” as if she seeks the approval of a higher being. Her attitude to DH Lawrence’s controversial book for “diseased minds” in scene three shows how, unlike his fans, she is preoccupied with conformity. It appears that Amanda is concerned with her social circle but she herself is alone, as one can imagine that she has to dress up for every DAR meeting in order to fit in.

Another element of Amanda that is linked to her vicariousness is her relationship with her past. When she says “my hopes and ambitions for you” to Laura it is interesting to note that Laura’s wishes have not come into the equation here, and we cannot help feel that Amanda wants Laura to compensate for her own failures. We are told in scene two that her clothing is dated, and in scene six the appearance of both herself and Laura is somewhat reminiscent of her time at Blue Mountain when she would receive “seventeen! – gentleman callers”. Her boastfulness with regards to her youth suggests that it was a happy time and something to be proud of – a stark contrast to her present bleak existence.

The cause of this change is to be found in her bitter references to her estranged husband with the comment “I pick your father!” Amanda is aware of how she made a tragic mistake by marrying Mr Wingfield in saying “past turns to everlasting regret if you don’t plan for it”. The theme of escapism is a very important in this play, and Amanda has had to make many a sacrifice for her family, and this has meant that it is too late for her dreams to be realised. It is clear that her past has had an influence on her as she does not want Jim to be a drunkard or for Laura to become like her. The fact that she herself displays flirtatious behaviour with Jim, from coy laughter

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to ramblings about electricity, is not only evidence of her nervousness about Laura's outburst but also the fact that it has been so long since she has had a male visitor that she wants to feel attractive, or perhaps that she wants to find somebody to share her problems with.

This is something else that had been well hidden by Amanda, as towards the start of the play we are presented with an overdramatic character who engages in "a bit of acting" to gain sympathy. This makes her seem like less of a victim and more of an attention seeker. Amanda has had to hide her own personal insecurities in order to maintain a social grace in order to hold her reputation to the public as well as the morale in her household. Used to the high life, this "Southern Belle" has been left in ruin by the depression and her dreamy husband and has learnt to fight for the survival of her family against the odds. However, her many flaws has meant that an idyllic epic character is not portrayed. As a result, the character of Amanda is presented in such a way that it amounts to a rather tragic yet gallant image of a woman, as not only do we pity her for living in the past, but also it appears that she has become terribly jaded.