

# The glass menagerie



In "The Glass Menagerie", Tennessee Williams uses symbolism to develop characterization. The various symbols that appear throughout the story generally emerge as objects or imagery, and allow the reader to gain insight into the characters' internal personalities and struggles. One of the more predominant symbols Williams uses is the glass menagerie, which consists of small, fragile glass animals. As a whole, the glass menagerie represents the fragility of the Wingfields, but is more directly relevant to its caretaker, Laura. Williams uses one specific member of the glass menagerie, the unicorn, to embody the fragility of Laura and the world she lives in. Williams chose the unicorn, which sits on a shelf among horses, to epitomize Laura's character. A unicorn closely resembles an otherwise ordinary horse with the unique characteristic of a horn, and in much the same way, Laura is an average girl with the unique characteristic of a leg brace. In high school, Laura was a unicorn in a school full of horses, and as a result, she never had much luck at making friends (672).

Instead, Laura escapes her reality by living an introverted lifestyle, free from outside interactions. Williams delves into Laura's character in the final scene during her interaction with the horse she had a crush on in high school, Jim. As Jim and Laura become more closely acquainted, Laura changes and begins to let down her guard. Midway through the final scene, Laura places the unicorn, her favorite piece from the glass menagerie, in the palm of Jim's hand. This symbolic gesture signifies she has lowered her defenses and now trusts Jim. Jim takes the time to admire its beauty and points out that unicorns are extinct in the modern world and that he must feel sort

of lonesome???" as a result of being different from other horses on the shelf (676). This is his way of telling Laura that he understands her situation.

Laura has Jim set the unicorn down on the table instead of the shelf where it came from, because "[t]hey all like a change of scenery once in a while???", indicating that she is enjoying Jim's company and feeling more ordinary (676). Jim and Laura waltz around the room as if the song and dance were a celebration of Laura's new beginning. Suddenly, the horn on the glass unicorn breaks off when Jim dances Laura into the coffee table and knocks the unicorn onto the floor.

Although the glass unicorn meant a great deal to her, Laura dismissed the loss of the horn when she says, "I'll just pretend he had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less 'freakish! Now he will feel more at home with the other horses, the ones that don't have horns?" (677). When the unicorn's horn breaks off, it loses its uniqueness and becomes like the rest of the animals in the glass menagerie. Likewise, Laura gains confidence through Jim and realizes that she is not that different from everyone else, which in turn leads to a new perspective on life. Unfortunately, the symbolism of the broken horn has a dual meaning. As Laura and Jim have polar opposite characteristics, so do the meanings.

After Jim kisses Laura, the ultimate show of affection to her, he immediately shatters her hopes by telling her that he is engaged. Both Laura and the glass menagerie break when they are exposed to Jim. When Laura gives Jim her broken unicorn, it symbolizes her broken heart. Jim takes this "souvenir" and leaves behind a broken girl. In mythology, the unicorn is unique and

frequently aligned with innocence and purity. Tennessee Williams effectively conveys Laura's loss of these characteristics with the symbolism of the unicorn.

The unicorn's part in this play is crucial in gaining a complete understanding of Laura's character, and foreshadows her inevitable digression back into her detached world.