

# Light and music in the glass menagerie and master harold...and the boys



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Light and music are two elements of drama that can become significant in developing the plot and characters. Certain playwrights may further incorporate stage lighting including directional lighting and setting lighting in order to not only divert attention to the critical area of the stage, but as well to adequately present their ideas. Correspondingly, music as well can be indirectly implemented in plays through the characters' dialogue and allusions to musical pieces; thus, becoming symbolic. Furthermore, this music can be directly presented in the background of the play. Both playwrights, Tennessee Williams and Athol Fugard employ the elements of lighting and music in their respective plays, *The Glass Menagerie* and *Master Harold and the Boys* in order to both intensify the reality of their plays as well as develop the theme of escapism and the accompanying theme of hope and hopelessness.

Williams uses light for stage directions and as a symbol in *The Glass Menagerie* in order to develop his theme of hope; more specifically, to portray Laura's ultimate sense of hopelessness. The stage directions call for "gloomy gray" lighting with a "turgid red glow" and a "deep blue husk". This form of lighting helps construct the images of memory and its unrelenting power as well as its associated mood of nostalgia and deep melancholy. Such a mood is one that alludes to a sense of hopelessness for which Laura experiences. This hopelessness is emphasized through the symbol of light rather than the stage lighting. That is, the following simile is developed where Laura is described to be "like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting". Such a description not only forecasts her inability to maintain confidence but as

well suggests that her beauty is innately tied to her delicacy and the disadvantage she has with her condition. Moreover, it displays the impermanence of hope in her life, as it comes as quickly as it goes. Williams further emphasizes Laura's delicacy through another character—Jim. Upon Jim's arrival to their home, and Laura's refuge, there is a “ delicate lemony light” that appears and eventually a soft light that brings out Laura's “ unearthly prettiness”. As the light symbolizes hope, it becomes evident that Jim provides Laura with a temporary sense of hope upon his arrival. The “ lemony” or yellow color that the light is described through, however, becomes of significance as it becomes cautionary of the damage that Jim will ultimately provoke in Laura. Though Jim enlists hope in Laura by providing her with comments that temporarily raise her self-confidence, he flees abruptly, leaving Laura hopeless once again and thus sparking the argument that the play ends on a rather pessimistic note. Williams underscores this lack of hope through Tim's physical escape from the house; that is, his attempt to escape their reality suggests that he too has withdrawn all his hope in Laura having a better, happier life.

Williams further conveys the very theme of escapism and demonstrates the characters' abstinence from confronting reality by incorporating music in his theatrical piece. Not only does the music hold a great degree of symbolic significance, but it as well provides emotion to the scenes. In the fourth scene, for example, Williams incorporates “ Ava Maria” in the background in order to allude to the harsh responsibilities that Amanda has as a mother. These responsibilities are what ultimately fuel Amanda's desperate efforts in obtaining a better life for her daughter. In the process of doing so, Amanda

feels inclined to escape her reality and own failures as well as the reality of Laura's handicap. As Tom attempts to make his mother face the reality of her daughter's handicap, "the music changes to a tango that has a minor and somewhat ominous tone". The music helps to provide a worrying impression and thus demonstrate Amanda's fear of reality and the consequences that come with confronting reality. Another character whose attitude towards reality is described through music is Laura. That is, as Jim arrives, Laura becomes terrified and begs her mother to open the door, but she refuses and forces Laura to open it. Before reluctantly opening the door, however, she winds the Victoria to play music. Laura attempts to play this music in order to escape from the intense situation—to escape reality. With Amanda escaping from her past, Laura escaping her troubled existence and Tom escaping the house with its responsibilities including the burden of obtaining a better life for Laura, the characters ultimately push each other farther apart as they retreat into their own imaginations. Hence, music aids in conveying not only the idea of escapism but as well in depicting the alienation the characters feel from not only one another, but from society as a whole.

Fugard as well employs light in his play, *Master Harold and the Boys* merely as a symbol for hope. When Hally and Sam discuss ballroom dancing, and whether or not dance is considered a form of art, Hally argues and describes that in his imagination, dancing simply involves people "having a so-called good time". Sam offers another description, claiming that it Hally's imagination "left out the excitement" and that it is "not just another dance...there's going to be a lot of people...having a good time...party

decorations and fancy lights all around the hall...the ladies in beautiful evening dresses!" The lights evidently become symbolic for positivity and hope as the description of such lights aid Sam in defying Hally's pessimistic outlook on ballroom dancing. Fugard associates "fancy lights" with the extended metaphor of ballroom dancing in order to present ballroom dancing in a rather positive and hopeful manner. By doing so, Fugard describes the dreamlike quality that the dance and dancers possess. This sort of description demonstrates the dance as a metaphor for social harmony. The symbolic element of light is again presented at the end of the play when the jukebox "comes to life in the gray twilight". This gray light is incorporated at the end of the play in order to further emphasize the hope for such potential harmony and peace among Blacks and Whites. As gray is midway between black and white, Fugard deliberately incorporates this light as a means of conveying the hope for Blacks and Whites to come together as one. This very idea is further highlighted through Fugard's employment of the motif of music and the corresponding theme of escapism.

Fugard uses music to not only provide movement to the play, but as well to develop theme of escapism; more specifically, escaping reality as attempted by Sam and Willie. Throughout the play, Sam and Willie practice the "waltz" and "foxtrot" for their ballroom dancing. Similar to light, music as well becomes associated with the extended metaphor of ballroom dancing. Thus, the music helps to allude to a dreamlike, collision-free world by which the dancers are capable of enlisting order in a disordered world, and respectively, an ideal society with no "collisions" between Blacks and Whites. Sam and Willie use music and ballroom dancing to escape their

realities; however, Hally interferes with such an escape as he claims “ The truth? I seem to be only one around here who is prepared to face it. We’ve had the pretty dream; it’s time now to wake up and have a good long look at the way things really are. Nobody knows the steps, there’s no music, the cripples are also out there tripping up everybody and trying to get into the act, and it’s all called the All-Comers-How-to-Make-a-[Mess]-of-Life-Championships.” As music becomes a symbol for escaping reality, Hally specifically indicates that there is “ no music” in order to suggest that escaping reality is impossible. Fugard does not, however, allow these words to convey his final message. Rather, he officially ends the play with lyrics of a song sung by Sarah Vaughn called “ Little Man, You’ve had a Busy Day”. This song becomes significant as it suggests that Hally is the little man who was compelled upon adulthood. The little man in the context of the song is in tears because he lost his toys; this seems so simple and foolish to the adult but heartrending to the child. Rather than neglecting his child or disregarding his sadness, the father comforts the child and suggests for him to go to bed. Correspondingly, Sam, who is presented as the ‘ father’ of Hally provides him with unconditional support, and suggests for him to sleep so as to allude to escaping the harsh reality of the apartheid system. Though insulted by Hally’s spitting, he ultimately does not lose hope on Hally waking up and realizing that he can control his life and personal decisions and overlook the system of apartheid.

Both Athol Fugard and Tennessee Williams develop the theme of escapism and theme of hope and hopelessness in their plays Master Harold and the Boys and The Glass Menagerie through their incorporation of light and music

in the form of stage directions and motifs. Though there is an evident similarity in the manner by which the two playwrights develop these themes, there is also an apparent difference in the final meaning that the two are attempting to convey. That is, Tennessee Williams uses light to convey a sense of hopelessness while Athol Fugard employs this light to leave the audience with a more hopeful attitude towards the future by the end of his play. Williams' use of light helps justify the characters' desire to escape their reality and retreat into their fantasy world. Because there is no hope in enhancing their lives, all the characters cope through a complete escape. Fugard offers an antithetical message; rather than the characters' hopelessness propelling them to escaping their reality, it is their ability to escape the harsh reality of the apartheid system that provides them with hope.

The difference in the two plays is further understood through the macrocosmic vision that the two playwrights allude to. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams portrays a sense of hopelessness and an ultimate desire to escape in his play in order to emphasize the way in which individuals viewed the 1940s as an exciting escape from the 1930s. Hence, Amanda, Laura, and Tom become associated with other Americans in the Great Depression who sought relief from their distressing lives by escaping their reality through films, false identities, and fantasies. By making such an association, Williams demonstrates the negative affect of The Great Depression. In *Master Harold and the Boys*, Athol Fugard ends on a more optimistic note in order to send out an anti-apartheid message—a message that transcends the norms of South Africa at the time. He encourages the fight against the racial

segregation as he suggests that society can be a whole and can be harmonious if Blacks and Whites function in unison with each other. Thus, it becomes evident that the manner by which the two playwrights present their themes in their plays correspond with their macrocosmic visions—with and without hope.