

Glass menagerie dysfunctional family essay sample



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This paper will discuss and evaluate the characters of The Glass Menagerie as a collection of dysfunctional family. They are scared, mismatch and cannot coordinate in a streamlined way. They seem to be absorbed in their own world.

The Glass Menagerie was an autobiographical play by Tennessee Williams about his mother and sister. The play was launched as the brilliant and controversial career of this unconventional American playwright. Set in St Louis during the depression of 1930s, it is the moving drama of a family's continuous abrasion, under both internal and external pressures. It is a story of a frustrated mother who is inclined to persuade her rebellious son to provide a 'gentleman caller' for her shy, crippled daughter, but her romantic dreams are broken by the interference of harsh reality. This lyrical and complex drama, which was first produced in 1944, is Tennessee Williams' greatest plays.

Laura, who is the fragile one, represents the hopelessness and absurdity of the society, and smashes the charms of the idealist. In this play, she is the heartbroken princess who has lost all her wishes and dreams, but a ray of hope enlighten. But this ray too shatters her momentary dream in to pieces, and she, still remains a piece of glass menagerie. Reluctant to give up the affray, Amanda coax Tom into finding Laura a gentleman caller and he brings home Jim O'Connor, a man he knew indecisively from high school and from his job at the shoe factory. Amanda turns immature in her happiness over this new visitor, but Laura is so bashful that she can't bring herself to the dinner table. The strain of the instance breaks the family's deceptive worlds and forces them to cope with reality. (Berkowitz, 150-53)

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Literary symbols can be both universal and conventional symbols that derive additional meanings through their use in a particular work. The actual animal collection, or glass menagerie, symbolizes each character and the story. Like the glass animals, the character's realities are very fragile and in danger of being shattered. It is also as though the characters are stuck in glass, unable to move or change, also like the glass animals. They are inanimate, as the characters have learned to be to hide and escape from the pain that life has given them. Laura loves the glass animals because her family is like them. It will not take much, like Tom leaving, to shatter their whole world. Laura is symbolized by her fragile collection of glass animals, the glass menagerie. Her favorite animal is the unique unicorn. The unicorn is different because it has a horn. When Laura was in high school, she wore a brace.

The Glass Menagerie enjoys an enviable place and distinctive status in modern literature. Tennessee Williams describes four separate characters, their dreams, and the harsh realities they faced in the modern world. His setting is in St. Louis during the Depression-Era. The story is about a loving family that is constantly in conflict. To convey his central theme, Williams uses symbols. He also expresses his theme through the characters' incapability! of living in the present. The Glass Menagerie demonstrates the need for individuals to liberate themselves from life's disappointments, their own and the responsibility they feel for others. The play is layered in rituals involving dysfunctional family relationships, career dead ends, and aborted childhood innocence.

Because of the heavily autobiographical nature of The Glass Menagerie, the first volume of Lyle Leverich's authorized biography, *Tom: The Unknown*
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Tennessee Williams, might almost be said to be as much the story of that play as it is of the playwright. In Leverich's reconstruction of the dramatist's formative years, the father who is largely written out of the play—absent except for the large photograph in the stage set—was much more central; Leverich argues, in fact, that Tom Williams's unrequited love for his father resulted in a rage against him that helped fuel the son's artistic rebellion and passion to create, and that the son's hatred was actually sublimated love. So life among a dysfunctional family that the biographer terms an "actual menagerie" (xxvi) may have been altogether darker, as might the play itself, than one at first suspects, particularly given the dramatist's description of *Menagerie* in his letters to Donald as a "quiet little play" that, furthermore, "lacked the violence that excites him" (60, 94).

During the course of the play, Tom went to the fire escape to smoke and it provided a quick escape from reality. Tom went to the movies a lot and it provided a quick escape from reality. Tom spent a lot of time along reading and writing literature and it provided a quick escape from reality. In the end, Tom had to break the dysfunctional cycle and spread his wings.

In order for Tom to be a true imitation of his absent father, he is going to have to meet certain criteria. Amanda, Tom's mother, repeatedly adds items to the list of character traits possessed by her nonexistent husband. Tom will have to be a charmer because "One thing your father had plenty of—was charm (Williams 36; sc. 2)!" He will have to be able to convince people that he possesses an undeniable innocence because "That innocent look of your father's had everyone fooled (Williams 64; sc. 5)!" He will have to drink, take pride in his appearance, think of himself first, and fall in love with long

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distances because his father did. If he can do these things, then he will truly be the bastard son of a bastard that he wants to believe that he is. Tom's problem, however, stems from his inability to live up to the example that his father has set for him.

In the simplest of terms, Tom is a nice person. He stays with his family for as long as he does merely because he would feel guilty if he were to leave. Tom realizes that his mother depends on his income to support herself and his sister Laura. He also realizes that Laura might not be able to cope with her life if he left. He knows that his relationship with Laura provides a feeble hold on reality for his sister. The problem is that staying for Laura and Amanda makes it impracticable for Tom to do what will make him happy. Although it seems ludicrous, this situation effectively traps Tom. In the heat of an argument, he tells his mother, " I've got no thing, no single thing — in my life that I can call my OWN (Williams 39; sc. 3)

This overwhelming family loyalty traps Tom in a dead-end job that he loathes. If he would rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out (his) brains (Williams 41; sc. 3) why would he stay? His mother could find work if she wanted. Nothing is truly wrong with Laura, so she could get a job if she chose. Why does Tom have to play the role of breadwinner for this dysfunctional family? Is it not possible for him to just walk away without remorse.

Perhaps Tom cannot leave because he lacks another of his father's qualities: charm. If Tom were charming, he would have friends. He says that Jim " was the only one at the warehouse with whom I was on friendly terms (Williams

68; sc. 6).” Charming people tend to be surrounded by friends. As a social recluse, Tom would not be successful if he attempted to get others to follow his example. Too much time spent in the washroom reading and writing poetry makes it impossible for Tom to make friends with anyone who was not interested in having someone around to remember the glory days. If Tom is not charming, then he fails to follow his father’s example (McCann, 167-70).

In many of Tennessee Williams’ works, characters contain similar ways of life. In his writings, there are many reoccurring dysfunctional family problems. The protagonists of the works are often troubled and lonely characters whose past uncannily affect their future. In *The Glass Menagerie*, a bond is formed between his characters thoughts, morals, views, and actions. Although the works are written with different settings, time periods, and plots, the two plays are brought together by the similarities of their characters. (Falk, 80-83)

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams portrays Laura as a person who is unable to function in the society in which she lives. With only a few exceptions, Williams’ characters are lost souls. Laura finds herself lost in a society that does not accept the fragile, the frightened, the different, the odd, and the lonely. Williams writes, “ She’s older than you, two years, and nothing has happened. She just drifts along doing nothing. It frightens me terribly how she drifts along” (518). Here Williams shows Laura’s lifestyle as being unmotivated and unstable. Laura dropped out of the only business class she enrolled in, and the only activity she has is her daily typewriting, which she does not practice faithfully.

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Williams uses a plethora of symbols to portray the key ideas and difference of dreams and reality especially those of the unicorn in Laura's glass menagerie; the fire-escape and the character of Jim O'Connor. The three key characters Tom, Amanda and Laura are trapped in circumstances which are beyond their control. In order to cope with their difficulties each character creates his or her dreams and to a varying extent lives a life of illusion in order to cope. The reality is that Tom is entrapped in the family as he needed to support them, Amanda is trapped by her two children and Laura is trapped by her physical defect of being crippled. Yet, Amanda's illusions always lie with her past while Toms are related to movies and escape and for Laura her illusionary world lies with the unicorn and her glass collections.

Tom is the narrator and the provider for the family where he is trapped in a situation with family obligations. He has to work in a dreaded job in a shoe warehouse to support the family. As a result, he gives up his dream of traveling or even better to be in the "merchant marines" to travel the world and taste excitement. To further bolster his dreams of illusions of the outside world offering him excitement he craves for. "Going to the movies because-I like adventure. Adventure is something I don't have much of at work, so I go to the movies". In Tom's statement and Amanda's accusations "The more you shout about my selfishness to me the quicker I'll go, and I won't go to the movies" and "Go, then! Then go to the moon-you selfish dreamer!" symbolize a chance for Tom to escape his confinement to the apartment and his family.

The escape from this dysfunctional family is made via the fire-escape. "I am going out for a smoke". Literally, Tom frequently steps out onto the landing <https://assignbuster.com/glass-menagerie-dysfunctional-family-essay-sample/>

to smoke, anticipating his eventual getaway from the coffin-like apartment. Symbolically, the fire-escape represents a “ bridge” between the illusory world of the Wingfield and a world of reality. It is viewed as an escape route from the fires of frustration and dysfunction that rage in the Wingfield household. In a way Tom is quite nimble by being able to escape and go to the movies regularly through the fire-escape. This “ bridge” seems to be a one way passage. For Tom, the fire escape is a way out of the world of the family and an entrance into the world of reality. One time when Laura walked down the fire-escape she slipped which symbolizes her inability to escape her situation of being crippled. “ I’m all right. I slipped, but I’m all right”. “ I’m-crippled” Even Laura herself accepts the reality as she knew it would be impossible to cure her physical defect. In a way, Laura is that she is not only physically crippled but emotionally defected as well.

But most importantly, for it is the name of the play is Laura’s glass menagerie with her favorite fragile figure being the unicorn. Laura dabbles the figures with great tenderness and while she recognizes their fragility, she does not recognize her own fragility. The glass animals represent an illusions world that is her living life. The glass collection provides her with refuge from reality. By choosing the unicorn as her favorite; Laura clearly shows that she lives in a life of illusion. The unicorn is a mythical animal and is therefore unreal. Amanda scorns Laura for deceiving her by pretending to go to business school even though she dropped out. Her reason was that the other students frightened her so bad it made her sick. Laura does not have the courage to live a normal sociable life.

The glass animals represent her hopes and dreams of another life. This fantasy life that Laura longs for is probably why she thought she could get away with deceiving her mother about going to business school. Also, through one of the arguments between Tom and Amanda the breaking of some of her glass collection represents her shattered emotion. When parts of her glass collection broke Laura screams " My glass!-menagerie" where the broken glass represents her shattered feeling as the family is in a turmoil. She turns away from the broken glass because she wants to turn away from reality. Later, when the horn of the unicorn is broken she recovers from her disappointment by saying, " Maybe it's a blessing in disguise". In this incident, it is interesting to note that when the unicorn loses its horn, and becomes like the other glass horses does Laura too break away from her fantasy world and snap into reality and realize she is just like everybody in the world. While this could be her opportunity to become part of the real world, she offers it to him just before his departure and the audience knows that she will retreat back into her world of unreality.

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