

# Symbolism in the glass menagerie critical thinking examples

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In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, there are a number of symbols inserted into the play that represent a theme or a character trait that help to portray something deeper about these people than can be normally conveyed through the typical methods of dialogue and direction. In this paper, we will examine five of these symbols and how they are developed throughout the course of the play. It is then made clear just how effectively symbols are used as a visual representations of the character's inner motivations, as well as the messages about society and the human experience that the playwright attempts to identify.

Most of the symbols in the play 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. The overbearing mother Amanda has the countless recall of her "past". 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. The fire escape 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. According to Tischler, "she never steps into the world for fear it would be impossible to bear. She merely stands at the brink and catches what she can of its beauty without becoming a part of it," evidenced by the glass figures (365). 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.

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.’” (King, p. 209)

The fire escape outside Tom’s apartment is used by him to get away from the family, unwind, and think about his life. He lights up a cigarette, stares

out at the city, and contemplates his hopes and dreams. It symbolizes his ideals and his wishes to be in a better place, to do better things with his life. At the same time, it still reminds him of his attachment to his family. He can both look outside to the future he dreams of but still be close to the problems presented by his family and home – of Laura's shyness, of Amanda's overbearing nature, and more. Tom "plans for the future, [but] that plan can only be put into operation to the extent that an attempt is made to abolish both the present and the past." (Blueford, p. 513) He must exorcise his issues regarding his family to move on, but he cannot.

Tom perpetually needs to escape his current life, which he does through distractions. Many of these distractions include going to the movies, where he can put himself in these fantastic situations and not have to deal with the pressures of home. Tom is desperate for new experiences, which the movies can provide, as well as anything that can keep him away from Amanda and Laura's situation, something that provides a great deal of pressure for him. The fire escape allows Tom to bridge the gap between the movies and his home life; it is indicative of his eternal need to run away and start anew. Tom, through the temptations of the fire escape and the outside world, also finds solace and understanding in the illusions and tricks of Malvolio the magician. It offers another sense of wonder and adventure that he cannot get in his daily life. He also uses these examples to illustrate just how trapped and confined he feels at home, talking about a coffin trick that Malvolio performs and how that reminds him of their home. He recognizes his life in the tricks and movies he watches, but he sees Malvolio as a role model, doing something interesting for the delight of others. The magician "

proves to be his savior,” as he allows Tom to participate in a trick and gives him a taste of greatness. (Scheye, p. 386)

The movies and Malvolio symbolize Tom’s need and desire for a better life than the one he has now. Tom is enraptured by these trivial distractions, 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 gentleman caller turns the truck because he can do what Tom could never do by himself: get out of the two-by-four situation without removing the nail.” (Scheye, p. 386)

The fire escape represents a bridge between adventure and unhappiness, showcasing just how undecided he is and hesitant to take the plunge into a new life. The fire escape is where Tom goes when he simply gets sick of the problems at home and wishes for that new life of poetry and excitement. 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. Laura’s retreat into her own menagerie “ drives Tom

out of the tenement. into the world of vagabondage.” (Bluefarb, p. 515)

In the meantime, the fire escape helps to define the contradictory nature of Tom’s character. It helps to represent “ the expression of a man’s desperation to escape the drab present and a past that prevents that present from fulfilling itself in a future.” (Bluefarb, p. 515) Tom knows that he cannot stand his current life anymore, but he cannot bring himself to actually escape it. The fire escape is the perfect place to continue to attach himself to his old life, while still dreaming of the future one he desperately wants to have. It 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.

In conclusion, there are a number of symbols in *The Glass Menagerie* to help illustrate the themes and mindset of the characters. Tom yearns for escape and longs to have more in his life, as uses the movies and magicians to give himself a taste of that. The fire escape showcases his and the family's inability to take real steps towards positive change. The fire escape allows for reflection, contemplation, and potential escape from the doldrums and pressures of their existing family life. All of these symbols and more paint a deeper picture than is presented by the dialogue and staging itself, offering more for the audience to take from the play.

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