

# ASF Study Materials for

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

*by Tennessee Williams*

Director	David Ellerstein
Set Design	Peter Hicks
Costume Design	Brenda Van der Wiel
Lighting Design	Phil Monat
Sound Design	Will Burns

Study Materials written by: Susan Willis  
ASF Dramaturg  
swillis@asf.net

**Contact ASF: 1.800.841.4273**  
**www.asf.net**



# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams

## Characters

The Mother, *Amanda Wingfield*

The Son, *Tom*

The Daughter, *Laura*

The Gentleman Caller, *Jim O'Connor*

(in the script, Williams does not list the characters by name, only by relationship)

Part 1: *Preparation for a Gentleman Caller*

Part 2: *The Gentleman Calls*

*Setting:* An alley in St. Louis

*Time:* "Now"—that is, 1945, the time of the premiere production, and the late 1930s in Tom's memory



Just before the lights go out in Part 2 of the 1945 Broadway premiere production; l to r, Eddie Dowling, Laurette Taylor, Anthony Ross, Julie Haydon; set by Jo Mielziner.

## Welcome to *The Glass Menagerie*

Tennessee Williams became Broadway's darling in 1945 with the premiere production of *The Glass Menagerie*, now an American classic. The play's effective expressionistic technique and skillful, poetic language, its strong, memorable characters, and nostalgic mood made Williams the playwright to watch.

If true, a story does not need to be "real" or realistic, as Williams knew. Truth was always Williams's goal. In this work the playwright experiments with technical effects Brecht would have recognized and thereby engages memory as both a distorting and clarifying lens on the action.

Even more than seventy years later, *The Glass Menagerie* still has the haunting effect of a modern fairy tale, one in which Prince Charming is no longer quite a prince, and though he may kiss the fair maiden, he cannot marry her, so her "some day" may never come. The other male quester does offer one "golden egg" in the form of the tarnished prince, but then leaves home, as fairy tale questers usually do, but this time never to return except in memory. And the witch? She's the mother (often seen as the challenging, denying force in fairy tales,

the one who forces the maturational steps) and on a survival quest of her own, having been abandoned by *her* Prince Charming sixteen years earlier. A limbo or thorn field of fire escapes surrounds them, and escape ultimately takes many forms.

The narrator puts his memory in the context of challenging economic and historical times, when those millions living in or evicted from apartments in alleys in urban America had lived on the edge and were about to be fed into the war machine. Every part of the play makes its glass more fragile and more lovely.

" ... as I thought about it the glass animals came to represent the fragile, delicate ties that must be broken, that you inevitably break, when you try to fulfill yourself."

—Tennessee Williams, 1945

## *The Glass Menagerie* at ASF

Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* holds a special place in the hearts of ASF and its theatregoers. It was the first play performed in the Octagon theatre in December, 1985, when the Alabama Shakespeare Festival opened its beautiful new facility in Montgomery after moving from Anniston, Alabama, ASF's original home since 1972.

A play about moving and memory was apt for ASF at the time. Since then two of the actors in that production, Joan Ulmer (Amanda) and Robert Browning (Tom), both long-time company members, have passed away, so it now becomes a play even more rich with our memories as well as Williams's, and we are happy to have it back on stage in the Octagon this season.

### **About These Study Materials**

The materials contain information about:

- the author
- literary elements (structure, characterization, imagery),
- theatrical style and elements
- historical context
- activities for discussion or prompts (in violet boxes)

Adapt them to your class's level and needs.

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



Tennessee Williams

A play should be “a  
snare for the truth of  
human experience.”

—Tennessee Williams

## About Tennessee Williams

The South indelibly marked the sensibility of Tennessee Williams. “Tennessee” is his adopted, not his given name, and he told many versions of its origin over the years (including that it was the home of his father’s family), yet we know that his heart was formed more to the south, in Mississippi and New Orleans.

For his first seven years, Thomas Lanier Williams grew up in his grandfather’s Episcopal parsonages, mostly in Clarksdale, Mississippi, while his father—a traveling shoe salesman—visited some weekends. At age five a complication from severe diphtheria cost young Tom his mobility for more than a year, changing the rambunctious child into a less active, more reflective boy. Then his father was promoted to a management position with International Shoe Company, and the family moved to St. Louis, living together for the first time and discovering the hazards of his father’s drinking and rages.

Williams remained close to his sister Rose as they negotiated the big city, the taunts at their Southern accents, the more materialistic values, and years of living in flats. As a child, Williams’s father had been sent to a military school and fought in the Spanish-American War, so when his son failed ROTC in college, he pulled him out of school and sent him to work. The young writer kept composing around his duties in the shoe company’s shipping room until a health crisis freed him for eventual graduation from the University of Iowa.

Williams’s writing—poems, stories, and plays—never slackened amid his subsequent travels, and he gained early notice and support in New York, though he eventually spent more time in New Orleans and later at his home in Key West.

His plays often pit what critics call “lost souls”—a dreamer, an artist, an idealist, a fallen, sensitive soul—against the hard edges of the world. At times violent or sexually charged, the plays use powerful imagery and evocative characters facing a harsh world as they seek happiness, redemption, a clearer path to the future or a less wrenching transition from the past. Amid changing times Williams tracked the inner changes and the needs, drives, hopes, and fears that make the human heart the pulsing core of his art.

### A Tennessee Williams Timeline

- **1911:** Thomas Lanier Williams born in Columbus, Mississippi
- **1918:** Williams’s father promoted to a sales manager for International Shoe Company; family moves to St. Louis
- **1929-31:** attends University of Missouri
- **1931-34:** shipping clerk for International Shoe Company
- **1937:** sister Rose institutionalized for schizophrenia
- **1938:** graduates from University of Iowa
- **1939:** first plays gain notice and an award; gets a New York agent
- **1939-44:** Williams travels the U.S., working odd jobs and writing. While briefly an MGM screenwriter in 1943, writes a short story (and rejected screenplay) that then became the play *The Glass Menagerie*
- **1940:** first professional production, *Battle of Angels*, closes in Boston
- **1945:** *The Glass Menagerie* opens on Broadway for an 18-month run, winning NY Drama Critics Circle Best Play award. Williams gave his mother half the rights to the play for life, making her wealthy
- **1947:** *A Streetcar Named Desire* wins Pulitzer Prize and other awards
- **1948:** *Summer and Smoke*
- **1951:** *The Rose Tattoo*
- **1953:** *Camino Real*
- **1955:** *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* wins Pulitzer Prize
- **1959:** *Sweet Bird of Youth*
- **1961:** *The Night of the Iguana*
- **1963-1981:** many more plays and stories
- **1983:** Williams dies in his NYC hotel room

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



Edwina Dakin Williams with  
Rose and young Tom in  
Mississippi

**"Every word is  
autobiographical  
and no word is  
autobiographical. You  
can't do creative work  
and adhere to facts."**

—Tennessee Williams  
in 1977 interview

## Activity

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams is selective with his own memories and creates a domestic scene that never actually existed as written. Why he made the changes he did are matters for critical speculation and open for class discussion:

- what is the effect of excluding the father? Why focus on just Tom, mother, and sister?
- what is the effect of changing the "class" of the apartment and family?
- what is the effect of placing the action in 1937-8?
- what is the effect of changing Laura's challenge?

## ***The Glass Menagerie: "Autobiographical/Autofictional"***

### Williams's Own Family Life

- Williams's given name is Thomas
- His alcoholic and verbally abusive father lived with Edwina in St. Louis long after the children were grown. He had first worked for the telephone company in Mississippi, but switched to sales of men's clothing and then shoes, which became his career
- Williams worked at shoe warehouse from 1931-34, then attended Washington University in St. Louis and transferred to Iowa 1937-38

- Tom's younger brother Dakin was born just after the move to St. Louis

- Williams's mother said even the first apartment she rented for the family was in an upscale neighborhood, though it seemed dark compared to her parents' home in Mississippi. Her husband made a good salary but stinted on the family budget; she never worked outside the home

- Williams's sister Rose had increasing psychological difficulties from late adolescence and was diagnosed as schizophrenic. In 1943, as Williams wrote the play, she had one of the first frontal lobotomies in the U.S.

For a time in childhood Tom was unable to walk, an after-effect of diphtheria

- Rose had several beaux, including one extended relationship with a young executive at International Shoe, who dropped her after her father had a career-stalling barroom fight
- Williams's father verbally abused him, calling his writing useless and him a "sissy" for not pursuing sports; father also stymied his love interests. Williams went to movies and plays; never a sailor; many odd jobs (chicken farm, usher) during travels 1938-44

### The Action in the Play

- The narrator's/son's name is Tom
- Father gone for last 16 years, "a telephone man who fell in love with long distance." Tom is now the man of the house, the only man in the house.
- Setting of Tom's leaving warehouse job and family is c. 1937-38
- Laura and Tom are the only children
- Amanda lives in what the stage directions call a "tenement" off an alley and works in a department store, plus she sells ladies' magazine renewals by phone
- In her youth Laura had pleurosis [*pleurisy* is an inflammation of the membrane that surrounds and protects the lungs (the pleura). A sharp, knifelike pain when breathing in or coughing is the primary symptom of pleurisy] and wore a leg brace; she now has a limp and is very shy
- Laura has no "gentlemen callers"
- Tom verbally battles with Amanda and goes to the movies; leaves to become a merchant sailor

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



**"I guess *Menagerie* grew out of the intense emotions I felt seeing my sister's mind begin to go."**

After many troubled years, Tennessee Williams's beloved older sister Rose (above) was diagnosed as schizophrenic in 1937 and institutionalized. In 1943, around the time he first wrote about her glass menagerie, her parents agreed that Rose be given a frontal lobotomy in a failed effort to help her. Instead she was left institutionalized (which Williams paid for) the rest of her life—"it was as if she had gone on a journey, but remained in sight."

## Activities

- "In memory everything seems to happen to music," the narrator says. What is the effect of that statement and of the music in the play?
- To what extent is music part of your life and memory? Do you shape your memories to music or underscore your life with play lists? Which of your memories most strongly link to music? Why? Choose an example and analyze how the two interrelate.
- Consider what your most powerful memories are and whether they were suddenly triggered or are moments you frequently revisit. Do your memories change?

## The Glass Menagerie and Memory

"The play is memory."

That narrational statement alone accounts for the play's approach to setting, lighting, music, and the framing structure of narration. Unlike realistic plays that work start to finish with suspense about what will occur next, the primary action of this play is over when we begin—we can only discover what it was and perhaps learn why it matters or why it lingers.

The primary memory is Tom's, now a merchant sailor far from St. Louis. He seems rarely to look back but can be jarred by seeing bits of glass that give him a sense of Laura he cannot expunge or evade. Whoever he is now, this is part of who he has been and how he got here.

But many memories flash through the play—the tale of Amanda's distant Sundays in Blue Mountain with 17 gentlemen callers; Laura's memory of the one boy she liked in high school; Jim's memory of being "somebody" at that high school and his need to have someone else recall it, too. Thus the role of the past via memory is a validation, a strategy, an escape, and a haunting refrain—that mental music that Williams describes as "the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest.... express[ing] the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow," at least for the narrator's memory.

Do all memories have a sad or sorrowful undercurrent or just the ones here?

Williams's stage directions suggest that in this play, memory is "nonrealistic" and "takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated ... for memory is seated predominantly in the heart." Scientists might demur on that point, but for Tom this memory tugs always at the heart.

*Tennessee Williams's first home—his grandfather's parsonage in Columbus, Mississippi*

## How Memory Works

Memory is a major topic in high modern literature, starting with Proust's 7-volume *A la recherche du temps perdu* [The Remembrance of Things Past], in which smell and taste trigger deep memories, as science subsequently proved they can.

Memory and/or semi-autobiographical topics also play a large role in the writings of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, and other modernists who pursue the issue of how we know what we know.

Scientists continue to study memory and how it works. Recent theories posit memory as a transfer from the brain's hippocampus to the cortex, or as storing either detailed (episodic) or factual (semantic) information. Newer work suggests memory involves collecting information stored across the brain.

Another theory follows the neuron path activated by memory, discovering that each time the memory is activated "a similar, but not identical set of neurons" is engaged. Thus parts of the memory can deepen and part slip away; indeed, part can distort to shape a fictional past with the credibility of an actual past. Thus, perhaps remembering itself can affect the nature of the memory.

(See <http://www.human-memory.net>)



# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams

**"Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth."**

—Author's Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie*



Expressionism in post-World War I Germany—expressing a state of mind: "The dream-like and twisted corridor is a visual representation of insanity." *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)

## Activities

- Research what scrim is and how it works on stage by showing two different images depending on which side is lit. Find online examples.
- Consider why Williams would want this scrim effect for the top of the play. In how many ways is the outside/inside idea effective?
- Find examples of German expressionism.

## Expressionism: Putting Memory on Stage

Memories have the power of reality, but their reality is a personal version of the past, and the mind has proved it can edit, morph, and otherwise "Photoshop" the past long before computers existed or gained that ability. If memory is subjective and since memory is the subject and means of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, it is no surprise that he should use a theatrical technique emphasizing subjectivity—expressionism.

The term *expressionism* comes from the art world; it countered late 19th-century impressionism—the way things appear in a certain light in a specific moment, such as Monet's paintings of the bridge over the water lily pond in Giverny. By contrast, expressionism:

- wanted the artist's emotion evident in the portrayal
- as well as his own vision of this "reality."

Theatre in Germany before and after World War I embraced this technique,

- anthropomorphizing objects and
- seeking spiritual depths rather than surfaces.

It led to both spiritual quest and political protest in an effort to transform society.



Williams wanted an image of blue roses projected for expressionist effect

**"Truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest ... only through transformation ... into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance."**

—T. Williams

Two main aspects of dramatic expressionism can be seen in *The Glass Menagerie*—

- the story is often told through the protagonist's point of view, and
- the plot is usually episodic.

The early work of Brecht embraced these techniques in the 1920s on his way to his theory of Epic theatre as he used songs, captions, and narration to separate episodes of action—and William's original draft does the same with its projected images and "legends" [text] to begin or appear within scenes.

### Examples of Expressionistic Elements

in the first published text of the play (1945) (these do not appear in the later, revised text)

#### scene 1:

- opens with two scrims in place, one across the front of the apartment, showing the outside, but when backlit letting us see the inside. This scrim is raised once the apartment action starts. There are also scrim curtains into the dining room. This use of scrim suggests we are entering Tom's memories of the apartment.
- image projected on living room wall of Amanda as a girl on porch greeting callers
- legend [text] projected on wall later in scene: "OU SONT LES NEIGES?", part of the famous French phrase, "ou sont les neiges d'antan," *where are the snows of yesteryear?*

#### scene 2:

- opens with legend: "LAURA, HAVEN'T YOU EVER LIKED SOME BOY?"
- image projected at start [before we know its significance]: blue roses
- legend: "THE CRUST OF HUMILITY"
- image projected: Jim as high school hero with silver cup
- image projected: blue roses again

Thus specifics gain significance by being projected on the wall (near the father's picture) as if in the mind's eye.

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



St. Louis fire escapes, 1925

**"It's insane for human beings to work their whole lives away at dull, stupid, routine, anesthetizing jobs for just a little more than the necessities of life. There should be time—and money—for development. For living."**

—Williams (1945)

## The Glass Menagerie: Structure

The play in its original 1945 version has seven scenes and is divided into two parts: "Preparation for the Gentleman Caller" and "The Gentleman Calls." The first part encompasses the first five scenes and the second part the last two. Scene 4 at first included both Tom's inebriated return from the movies and his having to awaken an hour later and talk with Amanda.

The first part of the scene that gets split in the 1948 version, here scene 4, is also the scene Williams added in Broadway rehearsals at the request of co-producer and actor Eddie Dowling, who played Tom/narrator and wanted to show him inebriated. Williams wrote the short scene for him, a scene filled with imagery, linking whiskey, magic, and transformation with coffins and escape—and contrasting Tom's constant need to get *out* with his current need to get *in* at the scene's opening, when at the door he drops his key down the fire escape: "one crack—and it falls through"—an image true for several aspects of the play.

The action is also divided into three temporal pieces by its indefinite time line:

- Scenes 1 and 2 are a Sunday in mid-to late February and the next day, Monday.
- Scenes 3, 4, and 5 are in early spring, apparently several weeks later. They span one night into early the next morning.
- Scene 6 is some weeks later, a Thursday closer to summer. Scenes 7 and 8 are the next night, a Friday, the night of the Gentleman Caller.

### Starting to Consider Structure

Williams foregrounds the role and importance of the gentleman caller in his description of each part of the play and by making that idea the focus of the first scene through Amanda's memories and her dialogue with Laura. We realize *why* she wants a gentleman caller when her plan for Laura's business career fails in scene 2; now she has only one hope for Laura's future—she must marry.

The mother/son conflict flares in scene 3 and drives through the rest of the act. They fight about his life style, the small issues such as posture suggesting there are much larger ones underneath. Amanda knows Tom wants to leave, but first he has to help secure Laura. He tries to accommodate her need.

The Southern entertainment for the urban family dinner goes awry because the caller is Laura's high school crush—and he's now engaged. The action ends without detail of Amanda and Laura's aftermath; we only know Tom's future: leaving, traveling, remembering his sister's face as he knew it then.

### Initial Questions about Structure

- Is there one plot line in the play, or are there two—Tom's and/or Amanda's?
- How many plans and preparations drive the play?
- Compare Amanda's tensions about her children leaving or not leaving.
- How does Tom assess his leaving? How do we?

### More Basic Questions about Structure

- Identify the action and arc of each scene, especially noting the crucial action.
- Compare the opening of each scene with its closing—what has developed or changed? Do those moments help tell the story?
- How do entrances and exits affect the development of each scene?
- How do the characters develop or change in the course of each scene? What do they reveal (or conceal) about themselves? What do we learn?
- What imagery appears in each scene and how is it used?
- What is the arc of action in Part 1? What is each character's arc in Part 1? What is the arc of Part 2? Do any of the character arcs change?

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams

## The Absent Character

- Before Tom becomes an absence, his father already is—he is only a picture on the wall. Why is that picture there? The unnamed father had charm, a smile, a job, a family, and a way out. He was also an alcoholic. What effect might alcohol have had on his behavior? What effect has it had on his wife and family? Do its effects dissipate or disappear if the drinker leaves?



### Activity: Topics to Consider

- What happens at home if Tom stays? What happens at home if Tom leaves? What "survives" in each case?
- Amanda pressures everyone. Why? Is she just a "witch," or is she also pressured? How does she see the family's realities? To what extent is she right or wrong? What are her options, her "tools" to address the needs? What are Tom's? Does Laura have "tools" or want them?
- Everyone in the Wingfield family is an escapist in some way: Tom writes and goes to the movies; Laura polishes her glass and listens to old records; Amanda seems to try to maintain links with the values of her youth. Compare these escapes and the consequences of acting on them.

## The Glass Menagerie: Character

Deciding who the protagonist of the play depends on how we describe the action. Whose action is it? The narrator's, if we take the play as a whole. Within the memory, however, the driving force is Amanda, stymied though she is, with Tom as just one of her children/problems and Laura at the moment the more urgent one.

- **Amanda**—The first voice we hear in memory and the last. She spurs many of the play's actions, intentionally or unintentionally.

Williams describes her as "a little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place"; she has "failed to establish contact with reality." Has she? If so, why? What is important to Amanda? How do her past and her past identity compare to her present and her current identity, her current goals and responsibilities? Why, for instance, is she in the D.A.R.?

"She has endurance and a kind of heroism," the author says—in what way? How does Williams present her as heroic and do we share that view? Does our view of Amanda change and in how many ways during the action? How do her job, her nagging, her planning, her reference to the photo on the wall, her "illusions," and her truths work to define her? Trace the development scene by scene.

**Laura**—Older than Tom but seems younger. Compared to her brother, Laura never "leaves," but in fact has "left" in another way, retreated into a limbo of old victrola records and glass animals within the apartment. Her parents had distinctive and outgoing "charm" when young, but her shyness and self-consciousness (two different dynamics?) keep her from engaging others. Her responses are often negative, "I can't," "I was/will be sick."

- **The narrator**—One of the ones who "escaped," another man who got away—all the men in Amanda's and Laura's lives have left them, the husband/father, Tom, and Jim. For the narrator, this past is gone but not forgotten; Laura lingers. Why does he share this memory with us?

The narrator is outside and beyond the memory action and provides larger historical and socio-economic contexts of the time. Do we feel these pressures in the action of the play?

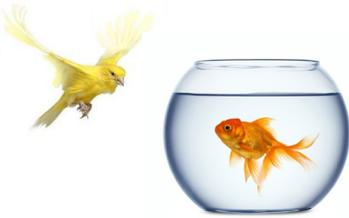
- **Tom**—"To escape from a trap," Williams notes, Tom "has to act without pity." Is Tom the only character who is trapped? If not, does (or can) everyone choose escape? Trap, coffin, fire escape, warehouse parcels, chew, sit up straight, comb your hair—life, Amanda, and society hem him in. What effect do the objective and subjective forces have on him and why? How do we assess someone acting "without pity," especially toward family? What would pity involve? Before he actually leaves, he stages a series of mini-leavings to the movies, so he comes home but doesn't stay home. He says he seeks adventure; is that the whole or major reason? "I'm like my father," Tom tells Jim as he reveals his escape plan. To what extent? Charm? Leaving? Image of a smiling face? Drinking? (Is Tom a "drinker" in the play?) Tom does offer his mother the one thing she most wants at the moment, a gentleman caller for Laura, and then is blamed for the one he brings. How is what one reveals and what one keeps unexpressed from another a part of many dynamics in the play? Who is told which truth, when, and why (including us)?
- **Jim**—"a nice, ordinary, young man" who has a more glorious past than present. How does he approach the future?

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

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The "gentleman caller ... is the most realistic character in the play.... But having a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character as a symbol—as the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for."

—Narrator's first speech



## The Glass Menagerie's Imagery

Critics often call Tennessee Williams "poetic," and *The Glass Menagerie* is a perfect study as to why. Almost every phrase shimmers with evocative potential, from Amanda insisting that Laura "open the door" to Amanda's selling "fiction."

Using these examples as starting points, notice that most of Amanda's actions and ideas are focused on finding Laura an opening to a productive and self-sustaining future—if not business (secretarial), then marriage, the two accepted routes for young women at that time. In Amanda's view, being a "home girl," as Tom calls it, would be pitiable. Gregarious, flirtatious Amanda in her girlhood could not be further from her shy, self-conscious daughter now, yet in ways Amanda does not see Laura is open to love, open to Jim, just as he proves open to her—if circumstances allowed. The "little bit of luck" they needed didn't happen; the "little silver slipper" rising over the delicatessen wasn't enough moon to sustain their wish.

Tom may be the "writer" in the play, but Amanda is the one most dedicated to fiction. Her two telephone calls soliciting renewals to *The Homemaker's Companion* (apparently a publication of romantic escapism) tout the attractions of Bessie Mae Harper's new serial about a girl with a spinal injury who needs an operation from her physician/fiancé who drinks. Physical challenges, alcoholism, and marriage all parallel details in this play, and her description becomes metatheatrical in the later call as she describes Harper's technique:

"Well, how do you think it turns out? Oh, no. Bessie Mae Harper never lets you down. Of, of course, we have to have complications. You have to have complications—oh, you can't have a story without them—but Bessie Mae Harper always leaves you with such an uplift ..."

Amanda could be talking about the play/memory she doesn't know she's in, full of

complications, but as she assures Laura, sure to work out in the end. Or not ... as Tom's narration has already led us to suspect. Is Williams a Bessie Mae Harper?

The first and major imagery is the title's: *glass* and *menagerie*. Glass is usually transparent and often fragile or breakable. Here it is indeed as fragile as the memories that evoke it. Actual glass breaks twice in the play; more than literal glass is vulnerable and gets shattered in the action. Contrasting this idea is *menagerie*, a collection of wild or strange animals, often on display—an excellent description of not only Laura's collection but the three family members in the play, each a unique "species," despite overlapping links of blood, gender, job status, and yearnings, all displayed on stage via memory and production. Amanda denies their "animality" in her rejection of D. H. Lawrence's fiction (as actually happened to Williams when he was 15), but her maternal impulses are as protective as any lioness's. And the outside world is in a primal state.

### Activity: More Images to Consider

- compare the role of movies/lure of adventure for Tom to the romance fiction in the magazine Amanda sells
- Laura's being "crippled" (her term), a "slight defect" (Amanda's term) to the unicorn. Is each character some kind of unicorn, or just Laura?
- how glass animals get broken (twice)
- compare Tom's warehouse job, that numbing mercantile life, with his joining the *merchant* marines
- compare electricity and candlelight as ways of "seeing"; what does "put out your candles" mean?
- the fire escape (about which the initial stage directions add: "for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation") juxtaposed by the *Paradise Club* across the alley, another escape that is no real escape
- overlap of alcohol with magician/escape

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



Rose Williams

## Dreams and Deceptions

- If the narrator calls himself a magician, Amanda calls Tom a "dreamer" and full of "illusion"; she also accuses Laura of "deception." What is the relationship between magic, dream, illusion, and deception in the play?

## Working with the Play's Literary Elements

### The Two Toms: Narrator and Character

- The character Tom is a struggling writer trapped in a menial, mindless job. The narrator Tom later tells us the story of his earlier self—do we think he is just "telling" us or that he "wrote" the play? Is he now a writer? Does our sense make a difference to the way we see the character and the action?
- The narrator is socially and politically aware. What effect do his comments have on our sense of the play's action? How does the larger context work with the family's crises? Is the family impacted by the larger forces?
- The narrator implies that he is a magician; in the remembered action Tom relates his meeting with Malvolio the magician. Compare/contrast the narrator's word-weaving and the remembered action with Malvolio's magic tricks—what is the narrator's/writer's magic?
- Do we see the seeds of the later Tom/ the narrator in the earlier Tom? Do we get the sense that his leaving has fulfilled him? Who is he "now"? Does the narrator privilege his younger self in remembering the action or does his memory seem fairly documentary or objective?
- What is the maturation process and how are family bonds maintained as one's independent identity gets established? What is the potential and what are the problems? Must there be a "break"?
- From the text, how old do you think Tom is during the remembered action? Just out of high school? Older? How would the play's tensions be affected by Tom's not being a late adolescent?

### Genre and Focus

- Is *The Glass Menagerie* a tragedy? a drama (play treating serious issues)? Can it be considered a comedy [he got away! a trickster comedy]? Take a position and argue your point.

*Issues to consider:* If it is a tragedy, and tragedy is the loss of something of great importance with the protagonist one partly responsible for that loss who must recognize that fact, is Tom the protagonist? Is Amanda? Are there two stories—one in the past and one in the present, two dramas or tragedies? Are there two protagonists? Whose play is it?

If the play's comic elements are emphasized, the characters' reality/ depth could be diminished and they could be seen more as stock characters, more two-dimensional. Is that how Williams portrays them? What role do the comic moments Williams writes have on the play?

### Laura and Jim

- How seriously challenged does Laura's shyness and remaining sense of limp, if any, make her? Are these challenges easily overcome with some confidence salve, as Jim suggests, or are their effects deeper? How can we tell in the text? on stage? Is Laura made of "glass"? Will she or does she "shatter" here? Why or why not?
- Is Jim's response to Laura genuine, the potential that she could love and be loved, or is he just a guy getting a free meal and kissing a pretty girl and it means nothing to him? Will he toss that broken unicorn into the nearest trash can? What does their conversation mean to Laura? to Jim?
- Do Amanda's expectations/pressure about gentlemen callers affect Laura and/or Jim? If so, how?

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



The fascinating and mysterious Greta Garbo, film star of the 1930s, whom Tom saw in his many trips to the movies

## Questions Working with Details of Literary Elements/ 2

### Exploring Textual Moments

- Amanda late in the play tells Tom, "but it's not good for you." Does this claim unify her many "nagging"—chewing, posture, not drinking coffee too hot, the cowlick—on a minor scale when her worries may be larger? What is "good"?
- The "glass" image focuses primarily on the figurines, but there are two more "glass" mentions in the play:
  - 1) the narrator's description of the Paradise Club where the lights are turned out "except for a large *glass* sphere that ... would turn about and filter the dusk with delicate rainbow colors,"
  - 2) as Amanda hems Laura's new dress, she tells her, "Now look at yourself in that glass," i.e. the mirror.
 How do these two moments enlighten or deepen the glass imagery in the play? How do they relate to the narration (memory/mirror?) and to Amanda's views and efforts?
- Twice in the play Amanda says, "Don't use that word," once to Laura about *crippled*, once to Tom who says people find Laura *peculiar*. What is the effect at the end when Amanda herself calls Laura "crippled"?

### Pursuing More Details of Imagery

- Consider the relevance of each image in the scene Williams added for Broadway (scene 4): the noise maker, the inebriation, the dropped key, the magician [compare narrator's opening], and each trick described: the transformations of booze, the magic scarf that changes a fishbowl into canaries flying away, and the coffin escape. How does each relate to the action and characters in the play?
- One of Amanda's improvements to the parlor is a "rose-silk shade" for the lamp. Is the color rose significant? What might it imply and link to in her views and efforts?
- Jim carries candy and offers Laura gum and a Life Saver. Connotations?
- Jim quotes from his high school role in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance*: "Better far to live and die / Under the brave black flag I fly." He now advocates the pursuit of knowledge, money, and power. Does his earlier role comment on his current goals? Are Tom's goals and attitude to life the same as Jim's? Is there "piracy" in the play?
- Using Williams's comment about the gentleman caller—"I am using this character as a symbol—as the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for"—what does each character "expect," what does each "live for"?
- What is the long-delayed but always expected something *you* live for?

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



St. Louis, Missouri



## Note on Williams and St. Louis

Perhaps because of his youth in St. Louis, Williams never wanted to return. He asked to be cremated and buried at sea, but his brother Dakin ignored his wishes and buried him beside his mother in St. Louis.

## The Play's Locale: Meet Me in St. Louis

Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, which doubled the land mass of the United States, St. Louis, Missouri, became the gateway to America's West, making it a significant geographic hub in the 19th century of both north/south traffic on the Mississippi River (ask Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer about that) and the east/west exploration and migration trails that began as early as the Lewis and Clark Expedition, which set out from just north of St. Louis, the territory's capital.

In 1910 St. Louis was the fourth largest city in the U.S. and in 1920, when the Williams family were newcomers there, the sixth largest. Since then its rank and population have declined, especially after World War II.

Many German, Italian, and Irish immigrants settled in St. Louis, with roughly divided Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods. Because the city was a brewing center due to Anheuser-Busch and others, Prohibition (1919-33) had a significant impact, but other industries—meat processing, steelmaking, clothing and shoe manufacture, and tobacco processing—continued. It was, however, harder hit than some other cities by the Depression, with higher unemployment rates and a longer return to 1929 levels.



Moreover, coming to a city of 770,000 from a Mississippi Delta town of 7,000 would have been a culture shock for the children. The Williamses may also have been affected by St. Louis's severe pollution—Williams always referred to it as "the City of St. Pollution." By 1910 smoke pollution had already killed some of Forest Park's trees, and evergreens would not grow in the city during the 1920s. In the 1939-40 winter (just after the play's action) there were 177 hours of thick smoke pollution; after natural gas became available and a city ordinance mandated use of cleaner-burning coal, there were only 17 hours of such pollution the next winter.

As Laura discovers, though, St. Louis had abundant parks, and Forest Park—1,371 acres of meadow, streams, and woods—had opened in 1876 and hosted the 1904 World's Fair (called the Louisiana Purchase Exposition) and 1904 Summer Olympics. By the 1930s when the play is set, it offered the public the St. Louis Zoo, the St. Louis Art Museum, the Missouri History Museum, the Muny Opera (an outdoor venue for musical theatre), sports grounds and lakes, plus the Jewel Box, the horticultural center originally built to display plants that could survive the city's pollution.

The renowned St. Louis Zoo (a real menagerie) began with the purchase of the Smithsonian's walk-through Bird House from the 1904 World's Fair; by the 1930s it offered Laura not only penguins but Bear Pits, a Primate House, a Reptile House, an Antelope House, and many more animals.



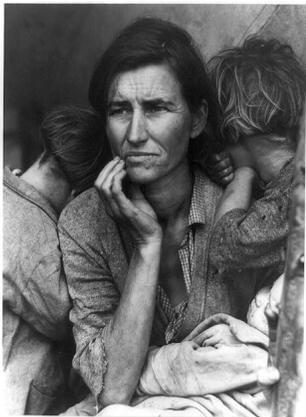
Sites of Laura's walks. Left: a postcard of the Jewel Box; above right, the first Bird House at the St. Louis Zoo

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams

## **Activity: Topics to Discuss**

- In the historical context, are there political or economic primal forces ("animals") involved? Are there vulnerable "glass" creatures in the society? Which groups get the "impact"? Does the historical context of the narrator's discussion work with the play's title and its implications?
- Jobs and household income are major stresses in the play. How do the ongoing effects of the Depression figure in the action? Are "happy days here again" for the Wingfields?
- Tennessee Williams's stint in the warehouse convinced him that too many Americans worked soul-killing jobs for barely more than subsistence wages that did not offer them a chance to "live," just exist. Research the issues behind the labor unrest of the 1930s and assess worker demands versus the corporate profit.



*Dorothea's Lange's famous 1936 image of a hungry migrant family amid a failed crop; the woman is 32 with 7 children*

## Narrator's Historical Context

As specific as the play's inner action is to the experience of one family, the narrator's commentary insists that the action be seen in context of larger national and international pressures and coming events impacting entire populations—the Depression's economy, labor unrest in American cities, and the looming war in Europe.

### **The Depression**

- In 1929 the stock market crashed; fortunes were lost and businesses compromised; spike in unemployment
- By 1932, national income fell 52%
- Unemployment soared from 1/2 million in October, 1929, to 12 million in 1932
- Exports dropped 70%
- There was already vast wealth inequality, government corruption, corporate control of labor (including low wages), and immigration fear surging in the country before the Depression, but as banks failed and jobs disappeared, the situation became dire.
- F. D. Roosevelt, elected in 1932, instituted an array of programs, many federally funded, attempting to ease the crisis. The programs that began to succeed and have lasted include:
  - FDIC (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation) that insures bank deposits up to a stipulated sum
  - Wagner Labor Act that called for collective bargaining in labor disputes
  - Minimum wages and maximum work week laws, at that time 44 hours a week. (Some Southern textile workers had been paid \$10 for a 60-hour work week.)
  - The Social Security Act assisting widows, orphans, and retirees (as had been done in Europe since 1878)
  - Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) authorized the production and sale of electricity to advance the central South, promoting industry and making energy cheaper
  - farming policies to help agriculture

- By 1937 the national income had recovered over 75% of its loss, but the economy did not recover its vigor or full employment until World War II heightened production.

### **Labor Unrest**

- Unemployment was already high before the stock market crash. The unofficial policy of government and judicial backing for corporate strike breaking—including hiring of spies to break up union organizing into the early 1930s—changed during the Depression. Strikes became more frequent, and the founding of the Committee on Industrial Organization (the CIO) under John L. Lewis's leadership gained better wages, hours, and working conditions for auto workers, miners, and steel workers.
- Nonetheless, during the mid-1930s labor unrest rose across the country with walk-outs and sit-down strikes immobilizing production, while industry-hired private detectives and goons still surveilled organizers and brought violence to the strikes.

### **The Coming War in Europe / bombardments**

- The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) is now considered the warm-up to World War II, with Franco's fascist forces relying on their Italian and especially German allies' air power to wreak havoc on government forces.
- Hitler had long been gaining power in southern Germany and in 1933 became Chancellor and then dictator over the German state. He began instituting pro-Aryan, anti-Jewish policies, purged political opponents, and got the army to swear allegiance to him rather than, as formerly, to the "people and fatherland." Hitler's military build-up solved Germany's economic woes, and his policies raised employment and assuaged many workers while he plotted his military domination of Europe.

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams

## Activity: Topic to Discuss

- Picasso's *Guernica* is a masterpiece that protests the violence of war. In it we can see the carnage and destruction, and we can "see" the screams of people and animals. Are there also unheard screams that we "see" or sense in *The Glass Menagerie*? (If so, whose? When? Why?) Are any screams voiced?



Above, the 1937 bomb damage in Guernica; below, Picasso's 1937 mural *Guernica*, a protest against such brutality.



but the civilian deaths were seen as an atrocity, now compared to Dresden and Hiroshima.

## Historical Context / c. 1937-38

The exact date of the play's action has been changed from the autobiographical dates of Williams's life, but most of the play's references offer a range of 1937-38. Note, too, that in 1938-39, Williams first became "Tennessee" Williams, his artistic identity.

### Bookending the Date

The date must be *before* the European onset of World War II, September 1, 1939, since the narrator mentions the upcoming changes that conflict will make in people's lives, and the date must be *after* the attack on Guernica on April 26, 1937, also mentioned. Other 1937 dates referenced include Neville Chamberlain, prime minister of England; he took office in May, 1937. On the local scene in St. Louis, Laura says she walked in Forest Park and often went into the Jewel Box, a lovely, large horticultural center which opened in November of 1936.

Of course, Jim O'Connor also says he went to the Century of Progress world's fair in Chicago "the summer before last"; that fair ran 1933-34, so the exact date varies—as variable as memory.

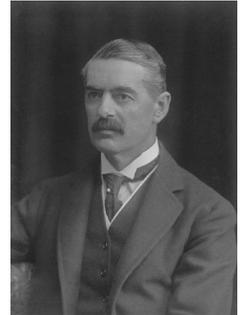
### Europe: Guernica in Spain

The northern Spanish/Basque town of Guernica, a communications center behind the lines in the Spanish civil war, was bombed to near oblivion on April 26, 1937. The civilians of the town were targeted on a market day by both

German and Italian air forces in what historians saw as a German Blitzkrieg aerial strategy to breed terror. The death count, then reported as 1,700, is now believed to have been ±300,

### Chamberlain and Appeasing Hitler

While the U.S. was growing more isolationist, Chamberlain's primary policy as new English prime minister was to keep peace rather than pursue any conflict that might cause war with Hitler in Germany, which would also involve Mussolini in Italy, the Germans' ally, both with expansionist military strategies.



Neville Chamberlain

Hitler planned to annex both Austria and Czechoslovakia. In February, 1938, he pressured Austria to accept union, *Anschluss*. The *Anschluss* itself came a month later with no action, only a note of protest, from England.

Hitler next demanded annexations in Czechoslovakia, and after Chamberlain tried discussions (one at Berchtesgaden, Hitler's summer retreat, mentioned in play), he and the French eventually went to Munich in September, 1938, a meeting which granted Germany the annexations for a promise of peace. History views these actions harshly:

With the advantages of hindsight, the ... policy seems stupid as well as cowardly and dishonorable.

Each time they gave in ..., the allied powers weakened the opposition to [Hitler] in Germany and at the same time lost an ally.

### Activity: Topic for Discussion

- What is the price of peace? On an individual or family level—and very different terms—is the idea of sudden blitzkrieg or negotiating peace rather than pursuing strife also relevant to the action of *The Glass Menagerie*? Is appeasement an issue? Are the larger world events mentioned cognate to the personal actions in any way? Why are they mentioned?

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



*Tennessee Williams working on Battle of Angels in 1938, the play that preceded Glass Menagerie*

## **The Glass Menagerie: Working with the Text / Quotations**

**ACTIVITY:** Explore the narrative, thematic, and/or characterological "truth" of one or more of the following statements. Which seems most important for each character? Which is the most revealing of character?

### **Narrator:**

- "I have tricks in my pocket—I have things up my sleeve—but I am the opposite of the stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion."
- "Across the alley was the Paradise Dance Hall.... Sometimes they'd turn out all the lights except for a large glass sphere that hung from the ceiling. It would turn slowly about and filter the dusk with delicate rainbow colors.... This was the compensation for lives that passed like mine, without change or adventure."
- "I was valuable to Jim as someone who could remember his former glory."
- "I didn't go to the moon. I went much farther. For time is the longest distance between two places..."
- "O, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into a movie or a bar....—anything that can blow your candles out!—for nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura..."

### **Tom (in memory scenes):**

- "You think I want to spend fifty-five years of my life down there in that celotex interior! With fluorescent tubes? ... But I go! for \$65 a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being ever!"
- "You know it don't take much intelligence to get yourself into a nailed-up coffin, Laura. But who in hell ever got himself out of one without removing one nail?"
- "I'll rise—but I won't shine."
- "How come you made such a tragic [mistake]?"
- "Laura is very different from other girls ... She lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house.... Laura lives in a world of little glass animals."
- "I'm waking up .... I'm tired of the movies and I'm about to move."

### **Laura:**

- "Mother's afraid that I'm going to be an old maid."
- "I'm—crippled!"
- "Glass is something you have to take good care of."
- "Now he's just like all the other horses."
- "Glass breaks so easily. No matter how careful you are."

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



Julie Haydon and Laurette Taylor as Laura and Amanda wishing on the moon in the premiere Broadway production, 1945

## *The Glass Menagerie: Working with Quotations / 2*

**ACTIVITY:** Explore the narrative, thematic, and/or characterological "truth" of one or more of the following statements. Which seems most important for each character? Which is the most revealing of character?

### **Amanda:**

- "Eat leisurely. A well-cooked meal has many delicate flavors that have to be held in the mouth for appreciation, not just gulped down. Oh, chew, chew—chew!" [first speech in memory section of play—advice for how to approach the play?]
- "What are we going to do? What is going to become of us? What is the future?" [*us* is also implicitly *you* as she addresses Laura] "Of course, some girls do marry."
- "You're not crippled, you've just got a slight defect.... you've just got to cultivate something else to take its place."
- "That's the only thing your father had plenty of—charm!"
- [about magazine story] "Of course he has a weakness. He has the most terrible weakness in the entire world. He just drinks too much."
- "I think you're doing things that you're ashamed of, and that's why you act like this."
- "Rise and shine!"
- "There's so many things in my heart that I cannot describe to you!"
- "More and more you remind me of your father! ... I know what you're dreaming of. Very well, then. Then do it! But not till there's someone to take your place."
- "Such a little silver slipper of a moon. Have you made a wish on it? ... Now, darling, wish! ... [For] happiness! And just a little bit of good fortune!"
- "...the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it."
- "All pretty girls are a trap and men expect them to be traps."
- "I wasn't prepared for what the future brought me."

### **Jim:**

- "You're going to be out of a job if you don't wake up.... You'll regret it when they turn off the lights."
- "Candle-light is my favorite kind of light."
- "[The Hall of Science at the Century of Progress exposition] gives you an idea of what the future will be like in America. Oh, it's more wonderful than the present time is!"
- "Being disappointed is one thing and being discouraged is something else."
- "Unicorns, aren't they extinct in the modern world?"
- "Well, I'm not made out of glass."

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams

## Williams on Williams

- "It's human valor that moves me. The one dominant theme in most of my writings, the most magnificent thing in all human nature, is valor—and endurance."  
(from a 1945 interview with Jean Evans)

- "What writers influenced me as a young man?  
*Chekhov!*  
As a dramatist? *Chekhov!*  
As a story writer?  
*Chekhov!*

D. H. Lawrence, too, for his spirit, of course, for his understanding of sexuality, of life in general."

- "Some titles come from dialogue as I write a play, or from the setting itself. Some comes from poetry I've read. When I need a title I'll usually reread the poetry of Hart Crane."

- "Literature has taken a back seat to the television, don't you think? ... We don't have a culture anymore that favors the creations of writers ... serious artists. On Broadway, what they want are cheap comedies and musicals and revivals. It's nearly impossible to get serious work even produced...."  
(last three quotes from a 1981 interview with Dotson Rader)

## Some Critics on Tennessee Williams's Work

- from **Richard F. Leavitt**, *The World of Tennessee Williams* (1978)—looking at the full scope of Williams's plays, not just *Glass Menagerie*

"*The Glass Menagerie* contained everything that would become the trademark of a Williams play."

"Tennessee Williams is a dramatist of lost souls."

"His theme is the plight of the individual trapped by his environment, the loneliness and lack of communication between human beings unable to reconcile the flesh with the spirit. It is his special genius to temper extremes of physical violence ... with gentle, loving glimpses of humanity and a passionate concern for dispossessed people living on the border line of despair."

"His lyricism gracefully accentuates the atmosphere of decay which permeates his work.... Other critics have noted that he has never created a character who has recovered from the wounds and desolation of childhood."

---

- from **Gilbert Debusscher**, "TW's Dramatic Charade: Secrets and Lies in *The Glass Menagerie*," *TW Annual Review* (2000)

"I suggest that *The Glass Menagerie* be termed 'autofictional,' i.e. the result of a conflation of real life and fantasy, the poetic (re)arrangement of fact within fiction, the imaginative fictionalization of autobiography."

"Mrs. Edwina Williams, the playwright's mother, pointed out the many differences between the Williamses and the Wingfields ... and Cornelius Williams, the father, is recorded as having failed to discern any similarity



Tennessee Williams

between Amanda and Edwina and having resented the accusation of abandoning a family from which, on the contrary, he felt he had been psychologically excluded and ultimately physically exiled...."

"...the behavioral patterns of a real life family faced with alcoholism are traceable in the fiction [play].... In dysfunctional families, ... emotions are repressed and twisted; they are either not shared or manipulated in a judgmental, blaming fashion. Dysfunctional families share certain common traits such as attitudes of rigidity, reverence for past traditions to the detriment of the present, insistence on roles and rituals.... these are coping techniques.... A network of lies binds the family together. Making excuses, avoiding truth, and creating fantasies become a way of life ...."

"The cinema is opposed to the warehouse, and the two environments define the polarities of the outside world for Tom. The warehouse is a place of regulation and isolation, the epitome of the material world of reality; the cinema is the place of imagination and freedom where darkness favors temporary togetherness."

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



Laurette Taylor in Amanda's "gentleman caller" dress in the 1945 Broadway premiere production of the play.

Consider the implications of Amanda's having and wearing one of her dresses from youth for this dinner. What might Jim think when he walks in for a regular family dinner?

## Activities Working with the Play's Theatrical Elements

### Experiencing the Action

- Below is a bare-bones description of the plot action of each scene. What is the difference between reading such a summary and experiencing the play in the theatre? Do the moments change, deepen, particularize, become moving, funny, or heartbreaking? What difference do actors, set, lighting, sound, costuming make? Pick one or two moments and discuss in detail the difference between plot outline and the experience of the play on stage.

Scene 1: The narrator's memory of his mother and sister; his mother's memory of her 17 gentlemen callers in Moon Lake. Laura says she will have no gentlemen callers.

Scene 2: Amanda confronts Laura with her absence from business college (Plan A for her future). When asked about boys, Laura remembers one she liked in high school. Amanda remembers her absent husband.

Scene 3: Amanda, now in Plan B, getting Laura a husband, fights with Tom about his life, his writing, his escape to the movies; he calls her a witch and accidentally breaks some glass animals on exit.

Scene 4: Tom returns inebriated from movies; Laura lets him in, begs him to apologize.

Scene 5: Before work, Tom apologizes; Amanda says he must find someone for Laura before he joins Merchant Marines.

Scene 6: Narrator aware of larger context; Tom has invited Jim to dinner; Amanda starts to plan; Tom reality-checks her about Laura. They all wish on moon.

Scene 7: Narrator about Jim's past and present. Living room re-decorated; Laura and Amanda dressed in finery. When Laura realizes visitor is Jim from high school, she gets sick and can't sit at table.

Scene 8: Jim talks with Laura, remembers her, advises her, dances with her, breaking the glass unicorn, kisses her, mentions fiancée, leaves. Tom also leaves—for good.

### Expressionism in the Octagon at ASF

- Tennessee Williams calls for expressionistic, not realistic, design elements for the production. He describes sparse but typical furniture and see-through scrim walls on a proscenium (picture frame) stage that let the audience "see into" the apartment from the outside; then the outer scrim rises and the audience is inside—as if the mind remembers it. The Octagon theatre is not proscenium, however; it is a three-quarter thrust—there is audience on three sides of the stage. Moreover, there is no fly space for a scrim. So this production will have to accomplish the memory effect in other ways. Watch closely to see how these effects work—does lighting take a stronger role? does the music have a haunting "Glass Menagerie" theme Williams calls for at key moments?

### Characterization

- As you watch them, do the characters seem equally balanced or are they all filtered and "remembered" through Tom's frustrated self of some years earlier? Or from the view of a distant Tom (more understanding or just absent?)? Does the character of Amanda appear to be a "witch" all the time? Do we ever get to sympathize with and understand her? Is Tom the only one we sympathize with because it's his memory?

How can Tom "remember" the scene between Amanda and Laura about not attending business school (he's not home), or the scene in the living room between Laura and Jim when he was in the kitchen washing dishes? Is this what the stage directions call the "poetic license" of memory?

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



*Tennessee Williams and his mother, Edwina Dakin Williams, years after the play was written*

## **Worksheet for *The Glass Menagerie***

1. In the play the narrator lets us look at the long ago and far away of his family past from a perspective of his here and now. How important is the presence of the past, the memory element of the play? What effect do the narrator and the "now," the time gap, have?
  
2. Williams focuses us on a fractured family—a mother and two young adult children old enough to be independent, with an absent father. What are the goals, dreams, and pressures of the family members we meet and how do they work together or conflict? How do "independence" and "family" work here? What are the family responsibilities and obligations for a parent? for an adult child?
  
3. What issues or questions does the play raise about relationships and life? Which issues arise from the memory action? Do other issues arise from the narration?
  
4. Tennessee Williams gained acclaim for his imagery. Which details of setting, character, and dialogue/language take on the power of imagery—something that taps into the larger issues and significance of the work—in your experience of the play?
  
5. What aspect or moment of the production struck you as memorable or significant and why? Which moment of the play caught your attention and why?
  
6. Where does Tennessee Williams leave us at the end of the play? Does it fall into one of the standard categories of comedy or tragedy? Why?

# THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams



*Photo: Alamy*

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