

**A Teacher Guide  
to Tennessee Williams' Drama**



*The Glass Menagerie*



UNIVERSITY OF  
SOUTH CAROLINA

**University of South Carolina  
Department of Theatre and Dance  
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# Teacher Guide to *The Glass Menagerie*

## Introduction

THEATRE SOUTH CAROLINA is proud to present Tennessee Williams' American classic drama, *The Glass Menagerie*.

THEATRE SOUTH CAROLINA is offering a special student matinee at 10:00 a.m. on Wednesday, October 29, 2003. Tickets are \$5 each for these matinees. You *must* make reservations by calling marketing director Tim Donahue at 803-777-9353 or faxing your request to 803-777-6669. You may also reach him by e-mail at donahue@sc.edu. Tickets will generally not be available at the door. The scheduled performance may be cancelled if there is not enough interest.

Regular performances of *The Glass Menagerie* are October 24-November 2, Tuesday through Saturday at 8 pm and Sunday at 3 pm.

If after reading this Guide you have additional questions about the play or the production, call Tim Donahue, at 803-777-9353.

## Organization

This Teacher Guide has been divided into five short segments

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## **The Story of *The Glass Menagerie***

### **Characters**

Amanda Wingfield. The mother, she is a woman of great but confused vitality whose husband left her with two children to raise.

Laura Wingfield. The sister, she is mildly handicapped, and, perhaps because of this, afraid to leave the family's apartment. She collects glass animal figurines, the menagerie of the play's title.

Tom Wingfield. The narrator of the play, Tom wants to be a poet but must work in a warehouse to support the family.

Jim O'Connor. A young man who works with Tom, Jim is imbued with the American spirit of self-improvement leading to advancement. When Tom brings him home to dinner as a potential date for Laura, it turns out they knew each other in high school.

### **Synopsis**

All action takes place in the Wingfield's apartment, in St. Louis, Missouri, during the Great Depression.

#### **Scene 1:**

Tom speaks to the audience. He mentions he is the narrator of the play and the other characters are his mother (Amanda), sister (Laura), and a gentleman caller (Jim). He will talk to the audience many times throughout the play, introducing scenes. He walks into the action of the play by joining his mother and sister at the dinner table. After they eat, Amanda recalls that she once had 17 gentleman callers visit her simultaneously in one afternoon.

#### **Scene 2:**

Laura is alone playing with her collection of glass animals when Amanda comes home. Amanda stopped by Rubicam's Business College to check on Laura's progress but was told that there was no student named Laura Wingfield.

Laura tells her mother she was too afraid to go to class. She spent her days at the park, museum, zoo, or a greenhouse where tropical flowers are raised.

Amanda gives up hope that Laura will succeed in a career and sets her sights on finding Laura a man to marry. She asks Laura if she ever liked a boy. Laura pulls out her high school yearbook and shows her mother pictures of Jim. When they had class together in high school, he had asked her, following a lengthy absence, where she had been. She told him she had been out sick with pleurosis, and he thought she said "blue roses." From then on he called her "blue roses."

Scene 3:

Amanda and Tom argue: Amanda returned Tom's library book by D.H. Lawrence without asking him. The argument ends with Tom storming out to the movies and calling Amanda a "babbling old witch."

Scene 4:

It is late at night and Tom is fumbling with his housekey. It slips and falls through the crack in the fire escape and Laura, still awake, lets him in. She helps him to bed.

Several hours later it is early morning; Amanda, not speaking to Tom, asks Laura to get her brother up and go to the store for butter. Laura slips on the fire escape on her way out, but is not injured. Amanda breaks her silence and Tom apologizes.

Amanda asks Tom to find a nice young man where he works for Laura. Tom wants no part of Amanda's scheme, but eventually he relents and says he'll ask someone.

Scene 5:

Tom and Amanda sit on the fire escape and make a wish on the moon. Tom tells Amanda that he has asked someone from work to come to dinner and that he will be coming tomorrow. Amanda springs into action making preparations. She calls Laura out of the kitchen to make a wish on the moon.

Scene 6:

It is the next evening. Amanda is making final adjustments on Laura's new dress, when Laura learns that the caller's name is Jim O'Connor. Laura is horrified to think it may be the same boy she had a crush on in high school. The doorbell rings. It is, in fact, the same Jim O'Connor and Laura, terrified, retreats into the kitchen.

Jim tells Tom he should join him in taking a course in public speaking. Tom tells Jim that he wants adventure and has joined the Union of Merchant Seamen.

Amanda calls the men inside for dinner. Amanda calls to Laura to join them at the table, but Laura faints with fear. She is carried to the sofa and the others sit down to eat.

Scene 7:

The lights flicker and go out, and it is revealed that Tom has not paid the electric bill. Amanda asks Jim to keep Laura company while she and Tom clean up. Jim moves to the living room with a candelabrum and a glass of wine for Laura.

Laura reminds Jim that she once heard him sing. Jim now realizes that Laura is the girl he had called "blue roses," in high school. Jim and Laura reminisce about their years in high school.

Laura shows Jim her glass collection, including her favorite piece, the unicorn. Jim asks Laura to dance. The couple dance through the living room and stumble into the table containing Laura's glass collection. The unicorn figurine breaks, losing its single horn. Jim apologizes, but Laura insists it is all right; the unicorn will no longer be lonely and will now be just like all the other horses.

Jim admits to Laura that he has a girlfriend, Betty, who must be picked up at the train station shortly. Laura, dejected, gives Jim the now hornless unicorn as a "souvenir." Amanda enters from the kitchen with lemonade, and Jim admits he can no longer stay as he must pick up his fiancée.

Jim bids farewell and Amanda summons Tom, informing him that the gentleman caller is engaged. Tom did not know Jim was engaged.

Tom flees to the movies after he and Amanda argue. Tom, once again the narrator, steps out of the story and speaks to the audience. He admits that he did not go to the movies that night, but left forever and never returned. He talks of being haunted by the memory of his sister but he must say goodbye to her in his mind, as he has in actuality.

## About Tennessee Williams

Tennessee Williams is widely considered the greatest Southern playwright and one of the greatest playwrights in the history of American drama. His plays seemed for their time unusually preoccupied with the extremes of human brutality and sexual behavior: madness, rape, incest, nymphomania, as well as violent and fantastic deaths. His plays, with their vivid portraits of often neurotic women and strong sexual content were considered shocking in their day; now his subjects have become nearly commonplace. The best of his twenty-five full-length plays combine lyrical language, intense character portraits, and something he called "poetic realism," the use of everyday objects, which, seen repeatedly and in the right contexts, become imbued with symbolic meaning.

Born Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1911, he suffered through a difficult and troubling childhood. His father, Cornelius Williams, was a shoe salesman and an emotionally absent parent. His mother, Edwina had lived the adolescence of a spoiled Southern belle. Williams was sickly as a child. In 1918 the family moved from Mississippi to St. Louis, and the change from a small provincial town to a big city was very difficult. Williams had an older sister named Rose and a younger brother named Walter. Rose was emotionally and mentally unstable, and her illnesses had a great influence on Thomas's life and work.



During a fight between Cornelius and Edwina, Cornelius made a move towards Rose that he claimed was meant to calm her. Rose thought his overtures were sexual and suffered a terrible breakdown. Her parents had her lobotomized shortly afterward.

Williams graduated from the University of Iowa in 1938. He then moved to New Orleans, where he changed his name to Tennessee. That same year, he won a prize for *American Blues*, a collection of one-act plays. In 1940, *Battle of Angels* (later rewritten as *Orpheus Descending*), became his first full-length and professionally produced play. It failed miserably.

His life and career changed totally in 1944 when *The Glass Menagerie* was produced in Chicago to great success, and shortly afterward was a smash hit on Broadway.

He went to Mexico to work on a play originally titled *The Poker Night*. This play eventually became one of his masterpieces, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It won Williams a Pulitzer Prize in 1947.

His plays continued to receive great success, more often than not, through the 1950s. He wrote works that were well-received by critics and popular with audiences: *The Rose Tattoo* (1950), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Night of the Iguana* (1961), among many others. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* won Williams his second Pulitzer Prize.

The sixties brought hard times for Tennessee Williams. He had become dependent on drugs, and the death from lung cancer of his lover of many years sent Williams into a deep depression that lasted ten years. The later plays are not considered Williams' best. Overwork and drug use continued to take their toll on him, and on February 23, 1983, Williams choked to death on the lid of one of his pill bottles.

## Selected Background to the Play

### The Great Depression

The story of *The Glass Menagerie* is set against the Great Depression. The economic desperation of this era amplifies the stresses in the Wingfield household. Tom as Narrator is telling the story from the future and he knows that the Depression will be followed by the even greater challenges of World War II.

The Great Depression was a large economic slowdown accompanied by large scale unemployment and business failures. It lasted from the stock market crash in October 1929 until World War II. The stock market crash didn't greatly affect the common man until the banks started to fail. By 1933, 11,000 of 25,000 banks had failed. This produced many business failures and caused major unemployment of 12 to 15 million workers—25 percent of the work force by 1932. The depression wasn't limited to the US. Many countries in Europe suffered as well.

Many of the social services Americans expect today did not exist before the Great Depression. There were no government welfare programs, no Social Security and no unemployment insurance. Many common people were desperate for basic housing and food.



For some people, charity-run soup kitchens were a major source of food during the Great Depression. This picture is from circa 1935.

On the other hand, the prices of all things plummeted in the Great Depression so the rich were made even more powerful. There was increased animosity between the social classes. Labor unrest and protests were not uncommon. Some people feared social unrest and revolt as had been seen in Russia and some countries of Europe.

The government began to respond with the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as president. He called for government aid, work projects, and governmental subsidies to help the people. The Roosevelt administration

saw the start of Social Security and other so-called “safety net” programs of governmental assistance. These programs were controversial to those who saw them as steps to a socialist system.

Even during hard times, people need to be entertained. Americans in the 1930s enjoyed many forms of entertainment, particularly if they could do so inexpensively.



Movies became increasingly popular. Comedies, gangster movies, and musicals helped people forget their troubles. In *The Glass Menagerie* Tom Wingfield goes to the movies to escape the realities of his life.

Radio was also wildly popular, offering many kinds of programs, from sermons to soap operas. Entertainment on the radio included comedians such as George Burns and Gracie Allen, popular music, and shows such as *Little Orphan Annie*. The radio gave the people entertainment and hope in some of the worst years of their lives.

Many people turned to music for relaxation. Some songs, such as "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime," sung by Yip Harburg, voiced the hopeless feelings

people were experiencing. Other songs were written to keep people's spirits up and give them hope. Perhaps the most popular of these songs was "We're in the Money," by Al Dubin with music by Harry Warren.

Tom mentions a popular romantic song of the depression era, “Dear Ones, the World is Waiting for the Sunshine.” The lyrics are:

Dear one, the world is waiting for the sunrise.  
Ev'ry rose is covered with dew  
And while the world is waiting for the sunrise  
And my heart is calling you.

Dear one, the world is waiting for the sunrise.  
Every little rose bud is covered with dew  
And my heart is calling you  
The thrush on high his sleepy mate is calling  
And my heart is calling you.

*Written in 1919 with words by Eugene Lockhart & music by Ernest Seitz.*

## D. H. Lawrence

Tom and Amanda have an argument about whether it is proper to read the novels of D. H. Lawrence. Tennessee Williams was a great admirer of Lawrence's work, finding in it reflection for the themes of his own writing: the importance of sexual expression and spiritual—although not necessarily religious—redemption.



English novelist, story writer, critic, poet and painter, D. H. Lawrence is generally regarded as one of the great figures in 20th-century English literature. He saw sex and intuition as a key to undistorted perception of reality and to the unburdening of the individual's frustrations and maladjustment to industrial culture. In 1912 he wrote: "What the blood feels, and believes, and says, is always true." The author's frankness in describing sexual relations between men and women upset a great many people.

Lawrence's best known work is the novel *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, first published privately in 1928. It tells of the love affair between a wealthy, married woman, and a man who works on her husband's estate. The book was banned for a time in both England and the US as pornographic. In England it was first published in unexpurgated form for the first time in 1960 after an obscenity trial.

## Etruscan Art

The Etruscans lived in ancient times in what is now the Tuscan parts of Italy. Their language does not survive so what is known of their culture is what can be gleaned from art and tomb finds and the comments of other civilizations which were often enemies of the Etruscans. Rome did much to not only conquer the Etruscans but to destroy their legacy. When Etruscan art was first discovered, it struck many people as being unusually concerned with sexual matters. However, since that time, more art of ancient Rome and Greece has shown that the Etruscans were not unusual in their interests.

## Unicorn

The image of a unicorn—a horselike creature with a single straight horn growing out of its forehead—goes back to the earliest artworks and myths of Mesopotamia, India and China. The unicorn became a popular subject in Medieval art. An ancient Greek bestiary states that the unicorn is a strong, fierce animal that can be caught only if a virgin maiden is thrown before it. Other legends say that the unicorn's horn can purify water. Thus cups made of unicorn horns—actually the horns of the rhinoceros or the tusk of the narwhal—were highly valued during the Middle Ages.



## Pleuroses and Blue Roses

In an anecdote repeated twice in the play, Laura recalls that she returned to high school after a bout of “pleuroses.” Jim mishears and calls her “blue roses” after her return.

By “pleuroses,” Laura undoubtedly means pleurisy. Pleurisy is an inflammation of the pleura. The pleura is a two-ply membrane that both encloses the lung and lines the chest cavity. Pleurisy can arise from various causes. When pleurisy is painful, it cannot be ignored. Each movement of the chest wall, disturbing the outer layer of the pleura, is felt. Each breath induces a stabbing, knifelike pain.

There are no blue roses. After centuries of attempting to breed a blue rose, it is now known that there are no genes for blue tint in rose stock. The search for a blue rose traces back to stories the Crusaders brought back from the near east of seeing a blue rose. Thus, a blue rose can be thought of as an ideal that doesn't exist in this world or as something unattainable.

## Merchant Marine

The Merchant Marine is the fleet of ships which carry imports and exports during peacetime and become a naval auxiliary during wartime to deliver troops and war materiel.

During World War II the fleet was in effect nationalized, that is, the U.S. Government controlled the cargo and the destinations, contracted with private companies to operate the ships, put guns and Navy personnel on board. During World War II, approximately 243,000 people served in the Merchant Marine and 9,497 died.

## Activities and Discussion

Ideally, the class would read the play before seeing it.

### Activities

View a video of a Depression-era movie. Discuss how it contrasts with the image of the Great Depression offered in *The Glass Menagerie*.

Have students research aspects of the Depression and present reports to the class. Some topics: wages and prices, government responses to the Depression, fashion, styles, effect on minority communities, the Depression in South Carolina.

Study the song lyrics of some 1930s songs. (Lyrics for "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries," and "We're in the Money" can be found in the appendix.) Locate recordings for these songs and play them in class. Discuss how the sentiments of these songs relates to the problems facing people during the Great Depression.

What do you think of the ending of the play? Write a different ending to *The Glass Menagerie*.

The scenes in this play are told as Tom remembers them. Do you think the story might be different if Amanda were telling it? Write one or more of the scenes as one of the other characters might tell them. You may use some of the dialogue from the play, if you wish. OR Write a monologue of how one character would describe another. For example, as time went by, what would Amanda say to friends when they asked her about Tom.

### Ideas for Discussion

Is the play true? Is the play realistic?

Typical of Williams, set design elements take on symbolic significance. Why do scenes take place on a fire escape?

What is the significance of the moment at the end of scene three when Tom, who is trying to leave, breaks part of Laura's glass collection?

The pivotal symbol of the play is the glass menagerie. What are the qualities associated with this image?

What is the symbolic significance of the unicorn? What is the significance of the fact that unicorn gets broken and Laura gives it to Jim as a souvenir?

What is the common denominator of all the characters in the play?

What do you think are the strengths or weaknesses of each character in the play?

Is there anyone in the play who reminds you of someone you know? Whom do you most identify with and why? Whom do you least identify with?

What would you do if you had a mother like Amanda?

What do you think of Tom's act of rebellion at the end of the play? Is he justified in what he does?

At the very end of the play, Tom asks Laura to blow out her candles. What do you think that action symbolizes to Tom?

## Theatre Etiquette

Live theatre distinguishes itself from television and film in a most intimate way. The experience is much like watching the private and personal lives of real people, as if you were in the room with them. You can see and hear them, but they are not supposed to see or hear you.

To make this play enjoyable for all people in the theatre, audiences are expected to please respect the convention that the audience is a silent partner. The actors and the other people in the audience appreciate this polite behavior.

Audience members should also turn off cell phones, pagers, beeping watches, etc., when entering a theatre.

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