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## SYMBOLS IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*

### Abstract

*The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams is the first memory play: a unique type of a play that incorporates the playwright's biography into the main plot. Symbolism plays a crucial role in the creation of every memory play as the author hides true meanings in literary symbols. *The Glass Menagerie* is therefore rich in symbols which are instrumental to understanding the play.

This paper aims to present a systematic overview of the symbols that Williams uses in the play. Each symbol has been analyzed in the same chronological order that the author introduces them into his story. An analysis of the symbols will offer the reader better insight into the plot, the main themes, as well as a more comprehensive overview of character development and setting. Moreover, as the memory play is autobiographical in nature, the analysis will also provide better insight into the author's feelings and thoughts during a difficult time in his life: a time when he worked in a shoe warehouse to provide for his mother Edwina and sister Rose.

*Key words* :symbol, symbolism, play, memory play, autobiography, plot, characters, themes, setting

This paper focuses on the symbolism in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. It will show how the symbols help the author create the setting, plot, main themes and each character's development, as he incorporates his own memories into the play. The symbols are analysed chronologically and may be compared and contrasted to others.

The play is the first memory play, which is a type of play invented by Tennessee Williams and later appropriated by Harold Pinter and Brian Friel as well as many other modernist dramatists. As the name suggests, a memory play is a play based on the writer's memory, so it is primarily autobiographical in nature. Tennessee Williams broadens the definition by claiming that the memory

play not only has personal elements but can also allow for “poetic freedom,” enabling an author to change certain elements to highlight or downplay them. “Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the article it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart” (Williams, 1999, p.3). Thus, *The Glass Menagerie* is a subjective description or adaptation of the author’s own memories.

*The Glass Menagerie* is also specifically defined as a memory play by the main character, the narrator Tom, at the beginning of the play itself. He says, “The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic” (Williams, 1999, p.5). The exaggerations and sentimentality based on memories are expressed through symbols, and the symbolic meanings are obvious in all the elements of the play—especially in the plot, the main themes, the development of characters and in the setting.

In *Webster’s Encyclopaedic Unabridged Dictionary* (1996), a symbol (Greek: *symbolon*-sign) is defined as “something used for or regarded as representing something else; a material object representing something, often something immaterial; emblem, token or sign” (p. 1926). Basically, it is something represented by something else. Moreover, Wheeler (2018) explains the literary or contextual symbol as “a unique or original symbol an author creates within the context of an individual work or an author’s collected works” (para 162.) Symbols, and specifically literary symbols, give the author the freedom to enrich the text, add an extra layer to the plot and describe characters more precisely, giving the reader a more vivid insight into the characters’ thoughts, feelings and actions.

Undoubtedly, Tennessee Williams broadens the meaning of the symbols in the play. He even considered his characters as symbols themselves. For example, Tom, the main character and the narrator of the play, stresses the symbolic value of character when he introduces Jim O’Connor, the gentleman caller: “But since I have a poet’s weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long delayed but always expected something we live for” (Williams, 1999, p.5). The character of Jim O’Connor symbolizes hope, an escape from misery and a new life for Amanda, Laura and Tom. The gentleman caller might also be seen as a symbol of the old South. A gentleman caller was usually a young man who was looking for his future wife by visiting young ladies in their homes under the strict supervision of her family. Tennessee Williams was familiar with this Southern custom. Here the gentleman caller, a symbol of hope for all the characters, begins to create the setting of the play and provides the reader with a quick understanding of Amanda as a Southern woman. Indeed, the symbolic gentleman caller is significant, so much so that the original title of the play was *The Gentleman Caller* (Murphy, 2014, p.54).

At the beginning of the play, Williams describes the Wingfields' small apartment. One of its main characteristics is the fire escape. It is the first symbol in the play and it represents the only way in and more importantly—the only way out. Fire exits are mainly used to escape from a burning building, so the fire exit in the play symbolically tells the audience that someone is in danger, in a life-threatening situation, and must escape to safety. Williams describes a fire exit as a “structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fire of human desperation” (Williams, 1999, p.3). Human desperation is the key phrase of his description. The three main characters in the play are desperate to escape from something: Amanda, along with her children, from the fatalistic situation in which she has found herself after being abandoned by her husband; Laura from the terrifying world outside of the tiny apartment, and Tom from the terrifying world inside the apartment. All three characters are symbolically “on fire” and need an escape in order to survive. Not being able to change their lives, all three will psychologically run or withdraw into their own imaginary worlds. Amanda will regress into her youth. Laura obsesses over glass figurines while Tom injects himself into the world of movies, poetry and literature. Although Tom is the only one who actually leaves the apartment at the end of the play, guilt and remorse will follow him wherever he goes.

The next symbol is the photo of Amanda's husband, Mr. Wingfield. He is also Tom's and Laura's father and is described as a “very handsome young man in a doughboy's First World Cap. He is gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling as if to say ‘I will be smiling forever’” (Williams, 1999, p.4). His photo symbolizes the theme of abandonment because he left his family without warning. He simply “fell in love with long distances” (Williams, 1999, p. 5) and left. Once he sent his family a postcard from Mazatlan saying “Hello and Goodbye” (Williams, 1999, p.5). He is a “selfish dreamer” (Williams, 1999, p.96) just like Tom will become. That is why his photo represents not only the abandonment theme but also the selfishness of the male characters of the play and their inability to cope with the difficulties of family life.

Another symbol that represents the abandonment theme is Mr. Wingfield's Victrola. Laura plays it when she feels lonely or alienated from the world. The Victrola belongs to her father so every time she needs a father figure she plays music on it. The Victrola is also a symbol of loss and sadness caused by the selfishness of the male characters. It stands for Laura's father, but as the play is autobiographical in nature, the Victrola doubles as a symbol for Tennessee Williams' father as well (“*The Absent Father in the Glass Menagerie*,” 2018). The father figure Tennessee Williams had in his life made a strong impact on

the creation of his male characters. They are all like his father was: selfish, strict and mostly absent (Smith-Howard & Heintzelman, 2005, pp.376-377).

Amanda, Tom and Laura's mother, mentions Blue Mountain, the plantation in the South where she spent her childhood. It is her emotional, psychological sanctuary. Barnard (2007) comments on the interior design of the apartment, which Amanda has transformed "into her otherworld in several ways by decorating the interior with Blue Mountain memories; by appearing in her Blue Mountain dress and particularly by her evoking Blue Mountain charm with every word she speaks" (pp.30-31).

The name Blue Mountain functions as a symbol in two different respects. First, the colour blue is often affiliated with sadness, melancholy and exhaustion. Blue can also symbolize the general feeling of the characters in the play. Moreover, mountains may symbolize the obstacles before all the characters and their inability to overcome them. Second, the name of the plantation is from Tennessee William's book of poetry *In the Winter of Cities* written in 1946. *Blue Mountain Ballads* consist of four different poems: *Heavenly Grass*, *Lonesome Man*, *Cabin* and *Sugar in The Cane*. In *Heavenly Grass*, the poet longs for heaven and salvation; *Lonesome Man* describes loneliness; in *Cabin* the poet talks about how passion and desire may destroy everything, and finally in *Sugar in the Cane*, he speaks about sexuality and sexual desire. In this case, the Blue Mountain symbolizes sexuality and passion, being destroyed by the passion, the loneliness afterwards, and the need to find salvation and return to heaven. All of this has happened to Amanda. She was driven by (sexual) desire as a young girl so she married a "telephone man," not one of the wealthy southern planters. Her passion destroyed all of her future prospects. Then, after being abandoned by her husband, she was left alone to cope with all the difficulties of her family life. Being lonely and frightened, she retreats into her own inner world, her imagination, in order to find peace and, symbolically, heaven. H. Tatal (2011) concludes that "The Blue Mountain symbolizes Amanda's escape" (p 42).

Even the character names have a symbolism of their own. The name Amanda means "the one who deserves to be loved" ("Amanda," n. d.) but ironically, she is the character who is the least loved. She was abandoned by her husband, then abandoned by her son and ignored by her daughter. She was not loved just like Edwina Williams, Tennessee's mother upon whom Amanda's character was based, was not loved (Jacob, 2013, para.3). Her name is symbolic of what should be but does not come to pass.

Amanda introduces jonquils as a symbol into the play while describing her youth and the particular summer when she met her husband. She points out that "she had the craze for jonquils" (Williams, 1999, p. 54). Jonquils are a type

of narcissus. The Greek myth says that “Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection and subsequently drowned in the lake” (Cartwright, 2019), so the flowers symbolize vanity, and in this way, describe Amanda’s character.

The jonquils, however, also symbolize illness. They come together in order to create the author’s vision of love. For example, the summer when Amanda met her husband for the first time, she had malaria fever but she did not stay in bed. She went to parties and received jonquils from many different gentleman callers. Malaria fever and jonquils were used to describe the action of falling in love. Love is therefore symbolized by the delicate, fragile, beautiful flowers tempered by a threatening health condition that the flowers may cause. A similar thing happens to Laura. She had pleurosis the winter when she fell in love with Jim, who misunderstood her condition and called her Blue Rose. Thus, the combination of flowers and illness symbolizes love in Laura’s case, too.

Indeed, the blue rose may be the most important symbol of all. It may be seen from different aspects. Again, the colour blue symbolizes melancholy and sadness, and a rose represents beauty and fragility. The blue rose is symbolic of a fragile, beautiful yet melancholic character – in this case Laura. Another important element of the blue rose is that it does not occur naturally, symbolizing Laura’s unique personality. She is the character who created her own imaginary world as if she did not belong to the real world like blue roses.

The symbol of the blue rose might stand for Tennessee Williams’s sister, Rose Williams, a very fragile young lady who was the most important woman in his life. J. Bak (2013) explains that “Rose was not only Williams’ muse, now and forever; she was also his security blanket, his small craft harbour, his God so suddenly” (p.3). Laura was modelled after Rose Williams. This is evident when the play is compared alongside biographical data. For example, Rose Williams was sent by her mother Edwina to learn stenography, but she was not able to cope with the workload so she started skipping classes and quit just like Laura Wingfield does. Rose suffered from psychosomatic gastritis because of the pressure her mother and society around her placed on her to “fit in.” Edwina tried to find a gentleman caller for Rose but with no success. Being unable to adapt in 1929, she was sent by her parents to a private sanatorium where doctors performed electrical shock treatment on her in order to cure her from schizophrenia and other mental issues. In 1944, Edwina and C.C. Williams approved a prefrontal lobotomy to be performed on Rose. She was crippled for life and spent the rest of her life in institutions. After the procedure, Rose was autistic and lived in her own world of illusion. Tennessee was devastated when he learned what had happened to his sister. It took him time to find the strength to visit her. He blamed himself for his sister’s fate and was terrified by the possibility of having a genetic predisposition to mental illness.

Despite everything, after his first visit with Rose, he took care of her. He sent her to expensive mental institutions, visited her often and even took her on holidays. She outlived him by thirteen years and was buried beside him in the Calvary Cemetery in St. Louis (Smith-Howard & Heintzelman, 2005, p 379). "Blow out your candles, Laura" is carved on Rose Williams' gravestone, which strengthens the connection between Rose and Laura (Yarbrough, 2012). "Blow out your candles, Laura - and so good-bye" is the last sentence of the play (Williams, 1999, p.97). The words refer to the last time Tennessee Williams says goodbye to his sister Rose, who was lost forever in her world of illusions and madness. Laura, or Blue Rose, as she was called by Jim in *The Glass Menagerie* clearly symbolizes Tennessee Williams's sister Rose.

Symbolically, the name Laura means "the one with laureates", "the winner" ("Laura," 2019), implying that the character Laura manages to escape cruel reality and is victorious over her miserable life in her own way. When asked by her mother where she had been instead of going to school, Laura replied that she had been at the art museum or the Zoo. She also enjoyed going to the movies like her brother Tom. But her biggest joy was spending her afternoons in the jewel-box, a big glass house where tropical flowers grew. The big glass house also symbolizes the glass menagerie she possesses, that is, Laura's psychological need to retreat from the world into her own world. Talat (2011) points out that "Laura is too fragile to move out of her narrow self" (p.40). In this respect, she is very similar to Tom who goes to the movies or to magic shows to escape reality. Even the word "movies" sounds similar to the verb "move" and symbolizes the need for both Laura and Tom to flee, to change, to go far away.

Tom's need to flee from his situation but also his wish protect Laura and Amanda are symbolized by The Malvolo, the magic show Tom was impressed by. During the show, the magician was in a coffin and he managed to escape without removing any nails. The coffin symbolizes Tom's spiritual death, living in the small apartment in St. Louis, working in a shoe warehouse and providing for his mother and sister. The coffin also symbolizes being emotionally and intellectually dead without any future prospects. Tom symbolically wants to escape his "coffin", but he wishes to do so without hurting his mother and sister.

Tennessee Williams, whose real name is Thomas Lanier Williams III, is represented by Tom in the play. According to Smith-Howard and Heintzelman (2005), he felt the same during the period when he worked in a shoe warehouse, lived with his parents and was paid insufficiently (p. 6). The escape from the coffin is a symbol of Tennessee Williams's feeling of entrapment and his urges to run away like Tom's. M. Paller (2005) states that the colourful scarf Tom obtains at the Malvolo Show "represents freedom that Tom wishes for



himself-and for his sister" (p.44). Tom sees receiving the scarf as receiving a one-way ticket out of his problems, but he decides to give it to Laura. In addition to freedom, the scarf may also foreshadow Tom's abandonment of his family.

Not only does Tom retreat from reality into the world of shows, magicians, movies and literature but Laura Wingfield, also unable to cope with the world, creates her own imaginary world. She collects glass figurines—her own glass menagerie. In a conversation with Amanda, Tom describes his sister, "...in the eyes of others-strangers-she's terribly shy and lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house" (Williams, 1999, p. 47). He adds that "She lives in a world of her own-a world of glass ornaments, Mother" (Williams, 1999, p.48). Laura herself talks about her figurines as if they were alive. When introducing Jim O'Connor to her collection she takes her favourite figurine, a unicorn, and says, "This one is one of my oldest. It is nearly thirteen" (Williams, 1999, p.82) and then she adds that "He stays on a shelf with some horses that don't have horns and all of them seem to get along nicely together" (Williams, 1999, p. 83). Laura uses the personal pronoun "he" when referring to the glass figurine. She humanizes the glass figurines so they become her friends and companions. She also adds, speaking about her favourite unicorn figurine, "Hold him over the light, he loves the light! You see how the light shines through him?" (Williams, 1999, p. 83). The light symbolizes the beauty of Laura's personality as she is symbolized by the glass unicorn from the collection. Unicorns are mythological creatures. They belong to fairy tales and fantasy worlds just as, symbolically, Laura belongs to her own fairy tale world of fantasy.

However, after the horn was broken on her favourite unicorn figurine, Laura laments that "Now it is just like all the other horses" (Williams, 1999, p. 86) and she adds, "Maybe it's a blessing in disguise" (Williams, 1999, p. 86). She is aware that she might disguise herself and pretend to be like all the others but she chooses otherwise. She wants to be who she is no matter how different. In order to calm Jim after he accidentally broke her figurine, she concludes, "I'll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less-freakish" (Williams, 1999, p 86). Symbolically, she tells this to Jim who wanted to make her "less-freakish" and gives him the figurine as a souvenir. She does not want it any more as she does not want to change.

On a deeper symbolic level, the glass collection symbolizes the Wingfields. They can all be symbolically seen as fragile (emotionally, spiritually and mentally) individuals who live in their own protected worlds. Amanda, Tom and Laura have created their own inner worlds where they each feel safe. Thus, the play's title, *The Glass Menagerie*, refers to the whole family.

Finally, the storm that happens during the gentleman caller's visit to the Wingfield house is also symbolic. The storm starts while Jim and Laura are having a conversation. It symbolizes the storm of Laura's emotions: happiness, the hope of finding love and disappointment in the end. The storm exchanges light and darkness thereby foreshadowing the end of the play. Tom uses the money for the electricity bill to buy himself a one-way ticket, symbolically speaking, "to the light" and left his mother and sister symbolically and literally "in the dark." He saved himself but he sacrificed Amanda and Laura. In this way, all the male characters represent "selfish dreamers" (Williams, 1999, p.86) whose self-preservation is most important. Haunted by guilt, Tom is reminded of his mother and sister every time he sees glass:

Perhaps I am walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions. I pass the lighted window of a show where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of coloured glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colours, like bits of a shattered rainbow. Than all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes... (Williams, 1999, p.97).

Afterwards, he adds, "I did not go to the Moon, I went much further- for time is the longest distance between places" (Williams, 1999, p.96). This quote stresses the power of time. It is a symbolic way of presenting the alienation of the character from his family.

The last sentence of the play is Tom's goodbye to Laura. He asks her to "blow your candles out" (Williams, 1999, p. 97). The candles in this sentence symbolize Laura's life and Tom's memories of her. At the end of the play, he wants to be at peace with himself. Blowing the candles out symbolizes forgiveness.

To conclude, *The Glass Menagerie* is the first memory play ever written. Understanding the symbols plays a crucial role in offering better insight into the themes, plot, settings and characters. All the symbols give an additional layer and create a plot incorporated within the main plot: Tennessee Williams' autobiographical story is the story of the Wingfields. *The Glass Menagerie* is a masterpiece and one of the main reasons is the author's brilliant use of symbolism in the play. This literary device makes the play one of the most famous plays of the twentieth century and it is no coincidence that it has had five hundred sixty-three performances just in the United States of America. It is an American classic and it is safe to assume that it will be read, watched and analysed for years to come.



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## SIMBOLI U TENNESSEE WILLIAMSOVOJ *STAKLENOJ MENAŽERIJ*

### Sažetak

*Staklena menažerija* je jedna od najpoznatijih drama Tennessee Williamsa. Premijerno je prikazana 1944. godine i od tada predstavlja američki klasik. Ova drama je ujedno i prva drama sjećanja—posebna vrsta drame koja ujedinjuje autorovu biografiju sa glavnom radnjom. Simboli imaju veliku važnost u stvaranju drame sjećanja jer u sebi sadržavaju skriveno značenje unutar očiglednog. *Staklena menažerija* je bogata simbolima koji su važni za dobro razumijevanje.

Glavna svrha ovog rada je predstaviti sistematski pregled simbola koje Tennessee Williams koristi u drami. Simboli su analizirani kronološkim redom da bi se poštovao autorov red uvođenja istih u dramu. Čitatelj će dobiti dobar uvid u radnju, glavne teme kao i razvoja likova te mjesta vršenja radnje. Nadalje, kako je riječ o autobiografskom tekstu analiza simbola će omogućiti bolji uvid u autorova osjećanja i misli tijekom jednog od najtežih perioda njegovog života: vremena kad je živio sa majkom Edwinom i sestrom Rose, skrbio za njih radeći u skladištu cipela i bio usamljenije i očajniji kao nikad prije.

*Ključne riječi:* simbol, simbolizam, drama, drama sjećanja, autobiografija, radnja, likovi, teme, mjesto radnje