

Reflections on the Glass Menagerie

Recalling his sister Rose's hobby of collecting small glass articles during her youth in St. Louis, Tennessee Williams stated that these glass figures "By poetic association came to represent, in [his] memory, all the softest emotions that belong to the recollection of things past. They stood for all the small and tender things that relieve the austere pattern of life and make it endurable to the sensitive." On another occasion, he wrote that the glass animals came symbolized the "fragile, delicate ties that must be broken, that you inevitably break, when you try to fulfill yourself."

The Glass Menagerie opened at the Civic Theatre in Chicago on December 26, 1944, and in Williams' words "it was an event which terminated one part of my life and began another about as different in all external circumstances as could well be imagined. I was snatched out of virtual oblivion and thrust into sudden prominence, and from the precarious tenancy of furnished rooms about the country I was removed to a suite in a first-class Manhattan hotel." This success, however, was to be forever haunted by what he had left behind.

1. *Tennessee Williams*
Photograph by Ian Deen
[undated]
2003.0147

Rehearsals for *The Glass Menagerie* in Chicago did not go well, and as late as December 24, Williams was making changes to the dialogue. Initial public interest in the play was minimal, and the day after it opened, the producers were considering closing it down. The play may very well have closed had it not been for two Chicago reviewers: Ashton Stevens of the *Chicago Herald American* and Claudia Cassidy of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. Despite the shaky opening Stevens and Cassidy saw something special in the play, and returned to the theatre again and again. Each time writing glowing reviews for their respective papers.

2. Page from the *Chicago Herald-American*, January 13, 1945
MSS 562, Item 1087

When the play opened with the same cast at Playhouse Theatre in New York on March 31, 1945, it was a well-polished production, and an immediate popular and critical success. The opening night crowd applauded for 25 consecutive bows. The production was directed by Margo Jones and Eddie Dowling and starred Mr. Dowling as Tom Wingfield, Julie Haydon as Laura, and Anthony Ross as the Gentleman Caller. Much of the initial credit for the success of the play was

given to the strong performance of Laurette Taylor as Amanda. Taylor was one of the leading women of the American Theater during the teens and twenties, but had withdrawn from the theater for many years. She was 60 years old when she made her appearance in *The Glass Menagerie*, and billing the play as her come back performance was an effective hook to promote the play.

3. *The Playbill for the Playhouse for The Glass Menagerie*
New York, June 24, 1945
Signed by Laurette Taylor
MSS 562, Item 292

Just two weeks after its New York opening, the play received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the best American play of the 1944-45 season. And on January 27, 1946 the play was honored by the National Theater with a command performance in commemoration of the Roosevelt birthday celebration. In 1948, Sir John Gielgud, directed a London production starring Helen Hayes as Amanda. *The Glass Menagerie*, as well as Tennessee Williams, were achieving international acclaim.

4. *Helen Mackellar in America's Greatest Play*
The Drama Critics Circle Award Command Performance of *The Glass Menagerie*
Washington D. C., January 27, 1946
MSS 562, Item 297
5. *Programme Theatre Royal Haymarket*
For the first performance of John Gielgud's production of *The Glass Menagerie*
London, July 28, 1948
MSS 562, Item 299
6. *[Program] Le Théâtre dans le Monde*
For French production of *The Glass Menagerie*
Paris, [undated]
MSS 562, Item 306

The Glass Menagerie is a poetic, expressionistic play. Events take place in the murky, subjective world of Tom's memory. The action, what there is of it, centers around Amanda's attempt to find a gentleman for her painfully shy daughter Laura who obsesses over her collection of small glass figurines as a method of hiding from the world. In the play, each of the characters are, in their own way, retreating from reality. Amanda escapes into an imagined past in Blue Mountain Mississippi. Tom retreats into the world of motion pictures, and when this is no longer adequate, abandons his mother and sister and the painful reality, which his responsibility to them represented.

Translating the expressionistic feel of the theatrical production to film proved to be a difficult matter, as Irving Rapper discovered in directing the 1950 Warner Bros. film. The picture starred Jane Wyman as Laura, Gertrude Lawrence as Amanda, Arthur Kennedy as Tom, and Kirk Douglas as the Gentleman Caller. Although the film did much to popularize the story

worldwide, it was, over the course of time, considered inadequate by many critics, and by Williams himself.

7. *Movie poster for the Warner Bros. production of The Glass Menagerie*
1950
MSS 562, Item 2289
8. *Lobby card for the Warner Bros. production of The Glass Menagerie*
1950
MSS 562, Item 2213
9. *Lobby card for the Warner Bros. production of The Glass Menagerie*
1950
MSS 562, Item 2214
10. *Spanish language lobby card for the Warner Bros. production of The Glass Menagerie*
[1950]
2003.0147
11. *Letter from Tennessee Williams to Jack Warner, Jerry Wald, and Charles K. Feldman*
[1949]
MSS 562, Item 825
12. *Movie poster for the Warner Bros. production of The Glass Menagerie*
1950
MSS 562, Item 2288

A notable revival of the play commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Broadway opening was produced in 1965. The production was directed by George Keathley, and starred Maureen Stapleton as Amanda, George Gizzard as Tom, Piper Laurie as Laura, and Pat Hingle as Jim. This, and several other productions commemorating the anniversary, reaffirmed the play's importance in the history of American drama. During the 1950's and 1960's, *The Glass Menagerie* was produced more often than any other play at American Colleges and Universities, and became a favorite of community theaters as well.

13. *Theater Poster for the 20th Anniversary production of The Glass Menagerie*
1965
2003.0147
14. *Theater Poster for The Glass Menagerie presented by The First Repertory Company*
By S. Porter
[Undated]
MSS 562, Item 1184

More successful attempts at translating the play to film were done in 1973 and 1987. The 1973 film, which was done for ABC-TV, was directed by Anthony Harvey and starred Katherine Hepburn as Amanda, Sam Waterston as Tom, Joanna Miles as Laura, and Michael Moriarty as Jim. The 1987 film was directed by Paul Newman and starred Joanne Woodward as Amanda, John Malkovich as Tom, Karen Allen as Laura, and James Naughton as Jim.

15. *Press Packet for ABC TV presentation of The Glass Menagerie starring Katherine Hepburn*
1974
2003.0228.2
16. *Movie Poster for Cineplex Odeon Films release of The Glass Menagerie on videocassette*
1987
2003.0228.2

The play was first published by Random House in 1945. Williams added some dialogue and slightly altered the character of the Gentleman Caller for the 1948 acting edition, and these changes are reflected in British first edition published by John Lehmann in 1948. Since then, translations and adaptations of the play have appeared in over 28 different languages, including Albanian, Arabic, Catalan, Chinese, Czech, Danish, Estonian, Farsi, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Kannada, Korean, Marathi, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Slovak, Spanish, Swedish, Tamil, Turkish, and Welsh.

17. *The Glass Menagerie: A Play by Tennessee Williams*
Random House, New York, 1945
First Edition
MSS 562
18. *The Glass Menagerie: A Play by Tennessee Williams*
Random House, New York, 1945
First Edition
Audry Wood's [Tennessee Williams Literary Agent] Copy inscribed by Tennessee Williams
MSS 562
19. *The Glass Menagerie: A Play by Tennessee Williams*
John Lehmann, London, 1948
First British Edition
MSS 562
20. *Glasmengeriet*
Unpublished Swedish translation of *The Glass Menagerie*
1946
MSS 562, Item 991
21. *Die Glas-Menagerie: Ein Spiel der Erinnerung von Tennessee Williams*

- Unpublished German translation of *The Glass Menagerie* by Berthold Viertel
[Undated]
MSS 562, Item 993
22. *El Zoo de Cristal*
Spanish adaptation of *The Glass Menagerie* by Jose Gordon and Jose M. de Quinto
1960
MSS 562
 23. *Lo Zoo di Vetro*
Italian translation of *The Glass Menagerie* by Alfredo Segre
1948
MSS 562
 24. *Pethe Brau*
Welsh translation of *The Glass Menagerie* by Emyr Edwards
1963
MSS 562
 25. *Á Margem da Vida*
Portuguese translation of *The Glass Menagerie*
1964
MSS 562
 26. *Korean translation of The Glass Menagerie*
1963
MSS 562
 27. *The Colour System for Teaching Languages*
Hebrew translation of *The Glass Menagerie* by Mardehai Hochberg
1973
MSS 562

In the production notes, which precede the text of the play, Williams noted that “Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which merely present in appearance.” He chose this wording carefully in order to provide guidance to those staging the play, and to emphasize that this was not a realistic play in the conventional sense, but one that attempts to express the true reality of what Williams was feeling, by having the events take place in the subjective world of one individual’s memory.

Williams’ description of *The Glass Menagerie* as a “Memory Play” reflects this dramatic device, but it is also suggestive of the autobiographical nature of the play. The characters of Amanda and Laura are largely portraits of William’s own mother and sister. And the guilt that the character Tom feels for having abandoned his sister was very much a part of Williams.

A story written by William's mother Edwina when she was a child is strangely suggestive of the life, which she and her children would live. The story is about a King and Queen and their daughter Ethel. The wicked King tries to abandon the child in the wilderness to starve. Edwina's diary for the years 1932-33 document a family terrorized by an often drunk and abusive father. In an entry dated July 26, 1930 Edwina writes "I locked my door. The lock did not hold and he burst in the door with me behind it knocking me unconscious. When I regained my senses, I heard Rose screaming and a strange voice in the hall, and Cornelius telling him to go away."

28. *Ethel*
Short Story by Edwina Dakin Williams
1893
MSS 562, Item 2467

 - 29-33. *Pages from the Diary of Edwina Dakin Williams*
1932-1933
2002-79-L.2

 34. *Edwina Dakin Williams with Rose and Tom*
Ca. 1914
Scan from *Remember Me to Tom* by Edwina Dakin Williams as told by Lucy Freeman
G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1963
- Being only one year apart in age, Rose and Tom [Tennessee] were very close. Being caught together in an abusive family situation probably led to an exceptionally close emotional bond. Rose had frequent verbal confrontations with her father, and in the early 1930's began to see a psychiatrist. Tom had a breakdown of sorts around 1935, and according to Edwina's memoir, the night of Tom's "attack," Rose became delusional and woke up her father and screamed, "You're going to be murdered! We're all going to be murdered!" When Tom left home to attend the University of Iowa, she became even more delusional and withdrawn. At this point her parents decided to have her committed to the State Mental Hospital where the doctors recommended a lobotomy. Her parents, regrettably, agreed.
38. *Tom and Rose Williams playing as children*
Ca. 1916
Scan from *Remember Me to Tom* by Edwina Dakin Williams as told by Lucy Freeman
G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1963

 37. *It gently comes and gently goes,*
The whisper of my sister Rose
Undated manuscript poem by Tennessee Williams
MSS 562, Item 531

 39. *Letter from Edwina Dakin Williams to Rev. W. E. Williams*
June 23, 1930
2002-79-L.1

40. *Rose Williams*
Ca. 1930
Scan from *Remember Me to Tom by Edwina Dakin Williams as told by Lucy Freeman*
G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1963
35. *Post Lobotomy Letter from Rose Williams to Mr. and Mrs. C. C. Williams*
June 25, 1949
MSS 562, Item 852
36. *Post Lobotomy Letter from Rose Williams to Mr. and Mrs. C. C. Williams*
June 6, 1949
MSS 562, Item 851

In a 1941 letter to fellow playwright, William Saroyan, a frustrated Williams complains “My suitcase is getting terribly crowded. (A bleak situation) – Not with little neglected masterpieces, I know—but nevertheless with living material that ought to see the light—short stories, plays—long and short. “Interesting but not suitable.” Among those stories crowding Williams’ suitcase was probably a short story entitled “Portrait of a Girl in Glass” which was eventually published in *One Arm and Other Stories* in 1948. The story is essentially a portrait of his sister Rose, and became the bases for the character of Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*. But the origins of the finished play can be seen in a variety of different works. In 1943 while employed as a screenwriter for MGM, Williams wrote a *Provisional Film Story Treatment of “The Gentleman Caller”* which he described as “primarily a character portrait of an American mother. Amanda Wingfield. It covers a period of time from about 1915 up to the present. It begins and ends in a small town in the Mississippi Delta country, which we will call Blue Mountain. It begins with the entrance into Amanda’s life of the gentleman caller whom she came to marry, the telephone man (who fell in love with long-distance) from Tennessee.” MGM was not interested in this idea, one executive giving the reason that *Gone with the Wind* had treated the subject of southern women to a sufficient degree. But with “The Gentleman Caller” and the “Portrait of a Girl in Glass” Williams was well on his way to completing *The Glass Menagerie*.

41. *Letter from Tennessee Williams to William Saroyan*
November 29, 1941
MSS 562, Item 756
42. *Portrait of a Girl in Glass*
From *One Arm and Other Stories*
New Directions, New York, 1948
43. *Blue Mountain, Mississippi (A Group of Southern Sketches)*
Manuscript Draft, Undated
2000-33-L
44. *Provisional Film Story Treatment of “The Gentleman Caller”*
Manuscript Draft, Undated

2000-33-L, Item 9

45. *Provisional Film Story Treatment of "The Gentleman Caller"*
Manuscript Draft, Undated
MSS 562, Item 574

The Glass Menagerie is perhaps the best expression of Williams's ideas about the theatre. His conception of what he called "a new, plastic theatre" is laid out in the Production Notes to the finished version of the play.

46. *Production Notes from Manuscript version of The Glass Menagerie: A Play in Two Parts*
Manuscript Draft, Undated
MSS 562, Item 575

The significance of the play, and Williams as a playwright, was quickly realized, but the notoriety and wealth that came along with this recognition did not make Williams happy. In a manuscript essay entitled "Some Informal Thoughts on Success," which is almost identical to an essay published under the title "The Catastrophe of Success" in the 1948 British edition, Williams comments on the effects of the success of *The Glass Menagerie*: "I soon found myself becoming indifferent to people. A well of cynicism rose in me. Conversations all sounded like they had been recorded years ago and were being played back on a turntable. Sincerity and kindness seemed to have gone out of my friends' voices." He also remarks with some shame on his growing waistline and the \$125 dollar suits he was wearing. This discomfort with success is probably not that unusual, but in Williams' case some of it may have been guilt over what had happened to Rose, particularly since his success came out of a drama so much based on her real life.

- 47-53. *Newspaper Clippings from Liebling Wood Glass Menagerie publicity file*
1945-46
MSS 562, Items 1088, 1090, 1095, 1117, 1120, 1124, 1136

54. *Tennessee Williams*
Photograph Ca. 1950
2003.0228.1

55. *Tennessee Williams Signing Autographs*
Photograph Ca. 1965
MSS 562, Item 2334

56. *Letter from Audrey Wood, New York to Tennessee Williams, Chicago*
February 15, 1945
2000-33-L, Item 10

57. *Telegram from Audrey Wood, New York to Tennessee Williams, New Orleans*
October 16, 1946
2000-33-L, Item 7

58. *Some Informal Thoughts on Success*
Manuscript draft of essay
Ca. 1948
MSS 562, Item 620

Unlike the sense of finality in Tom's abandonment of his mother and sister in *The Glass Menagerie*, in real life Williams's relationship with his family lingered on. Tennessee gave his mother half of the Royalties from *The Glass Menagerie*, and with this new financial independence she separated from her husband Cornelius. Throughout the remainder of her life she kept up an active interest in the lives of her children. She frequently wrote to Tennessee, and although he often did not reply to her letters, she kept informed about his activities by initiating and maintaining correspondence with his business associates, and friends, such as Marion Black Vaccaro. Rose spent most of the remainder of her life in institutions. She did, however, take vacations to stay with Tennessee. In a letter from Tennessee Williams to Bill Barnes dated July 1, 1976 Williams notes: "As for Miss Rose, I have talked to Dr. Murille on [the] phone and he is right, that she can only take short vacations, needs a 'structured environment' to return to. I'm glad that it's been established that she can get out for weeks at a time, like Zelda Fitzgerald could, but must have an institution to go back to."

59. *Christmas Card from Rose and Tom Williams*
Undated
MSS 562, Item 856
60. *Letter from Edwina Dakin Williams to Tennessee Williams*
November 22, 1967
MSS 562, Item 839
61. *Letter from Jo Healy to Edwina Dakin Williams*
Undated
MSS 562, Item 721
62. *Letter from Tennessee Williams to Bill Barnes*
July 1, 1976
2002-62-L, Item 42
63. *Letter from Marion Black Vaccaro to Edwina Dakin Williams*
May [1959]
MSS 562, Item 784

Later in life Williams was able to look on his troubled family life with a degree of humor. In the last of his plays to be professionally produced during his lifetime, *A House Not Meant to Stand*, Williams tells the story of a late middle-aged couple, Cornelius and Bella McCorkle. Cornelius [a parody of Williams' his own father] is a comical, verbally abusive man who is obsessed with finding his wife's family inheritance which is hidden somewhere in the house. The couple have

three children; their daughter is in a mental hospital, their youngest son is out of work, and their oldest son has just recently died. In the end the buffoonish Cornelius is defeated by the ghost of his eldest son.

64. *A House Not Meant to Stand*
Manuscript Draft
From the Goodman Theatre Production
Chicago, 1981
MSS 562, Item 1002