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Honors Thesis

Chaos, Fragility, and Change: Revisiting Laura Wingfield

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March 29, 2012

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Abstract

The Glass Menagerie (1944) by American playwright Tennessee Williams is a memory play focused on the Wingfield family of St. Louis. The play develops themes of family dysfunction, failed expectations, and various attempts to escape reality. This project focuses on the character of Laura Wingfield, an introverted, emotionally fragile character who is almost always interpreted as helpless and tragic. However, through a close critical analysis of Laura's interactions with other characters and with key props such as her glass collection, the family's Victrola and candelabra, this project shows that Laura need not be viewed as tragically as critics typically have read her.

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HONS497
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Chaos, Fragility, and Change: Revisiting Laura Wingfield

The Glass Menagerie by American playwright Tennessee Williams debuted at Chicago's Civic Theater in December of 1944. It was Williams's first critical success; *The Glass Menagerie*, Stark Young writes, "presents a glowing, rich opportunity, genuine emotional motivations, a rhythm of situations that are alive, and speech that is fresh, living, abundant and free of stale theater diction" (Young 17). It went on to become one of the most well-known plays of the 20th century, with numerous film adaptations and stage productions. *The Glass Menagerie* is the story of the Wingfield family, denizens of a "hive-like" apartment building in St. Louis, Missouri. Amanda Wingfield and her children Tom and Laura deal with family dysfunction, failed expectations, and various attempts to escape reality. Amanda, obsessed with her own glamorous past as a Southern belle, talks Tom into bringing home one of his coworkers as a potential suitor for shy, slightly crippled Laura. Before evening's end, the family discovers that the coworker, Jim O'Connor, is a former schoolmate of Laura. After a date-like evening together, Jim reveals to Laura that he already has a serious girlfriend. This revelation triggers an explosive fight between Amanda and Tom, and Tom storms out of the house, abandoning his family soon after, never to return. The play has five characters, four who speak and act and move the plot forward and Mr. Wingfield, manifested only in a photograph.

At the start of the play, Mr. Wingfield, Amanda's husband, has abandoned his family many years ago. He is seen only in a picture that hangs in the living room. Tom describes

his father as the fifth character of the play, and indeed, Mr. Wingfield, through his absence, is a catalyst for the events of the play. In his absence, the rest of the family struggles to survive in the face of poverty, dysfunction, and disappointment. Amanda, the matriarch of the family, hides herself in colorful memories of her youth as a popular Southern belle. Tom, her son and the play's narrator, works in a shoe warehouse and feels trapped by his mundane life, desiring rather adventure. Meanwhile, Laura, Amanda's slightly crippled older child, is painfully shy and spends most of her time with her collection of tiny glass animals—her glass menagerie, after which the play takes its name.

The Glass Menagerie is a memory play, one of the most archetypal. Memory plays are framed as the reminiscences of one character. In this case it is Tom Wingfield who narrates the events of the play in several monologues. Tom himself says that “the play is memory...I am the narrator of the play and also a character in it” (5). Another hallmark of the memory play is that it focuses on one life-changing event or period in the characters' lives. *The Glass Menagerie* tells the story of the Wingfield family over a short period of time, chronicling their attempts to create better lives for themselves. Each character suffers from failed expectations—failed expectations of themselves, of their family, and of society at large. Finally, the memory play is very often a reflection of or inspired by the playwright's own life. *The Glass Menagerie* is thought to be Tennessee Williams's most autobiographical play, with aspects of his own family members inserted into the characters of the play. Notably, the character of Laura is loosely based upon Rose, Williams's older sister.

Laura is the delicate, older Wingfield child. She is extraordinarily introverted, choosing to spend her time in solitary activities. Laura is described in the play as

“unearthly,” “delicate,” “nervous,” and “panicky.” Michael Paller writes that “This is...the view many of us have of Laura: sweet, introverted, helpless before the world” (73). This is indeed the case, as many critics see Laura as mentally fragile, a character with inherent instabilities that are brought to the foreground by her family’s circumstances. C.W.E. Bigsby calls Laura a victim of fate, and says that “in stepping into the fictive world of her glass animals, she steps out of any meaningful relationship with others in the present” (37-38). Thomas L. King, arguing against notions of Laura as the emotional center of the play, calls Laura’s actions “the behavior of a severely disturbed woman” (77), while Louis K. Grieff contends,

By the close of *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura has been torn from her fantasy world to become a figure without imaginative protection...it seems certain that her fantasy-world can never be rebuilt. When she blows out her candles, to end the play, the glow of her own imagination is extinguished, and the resulting darkness seems utterly permanent (226).

Not all critics read Laura as pessimistically or even as passively as do the above critics. Michael Paller claims that the notion of Laura as helpless victim “is not...an accurate view of Laura” (73). Instead, to Paller, Laura is an intentional innocent, one who “will have her way in the end and the final image of her in the play, being cared for and comforted by her mother, is the way things will always be for her, because she wants them that way” (74). This view give a modicum of agency to Laura, though it still ultimately condemns her to fragility. Likewise, George W. Crandell writes that “Laura actively resists both the role that society prescribes for women as well as Amanda’s insistence that she conform to it” (9).

Laura is depicted here as something of a rebel, yet “despite Laura’s valiant efforts to resist the male gaze, ultimately, Williams depicts her as lacking the power to subvert it” (10).

There is, however, evidence in the structure of the play itself to suggest that perhaps the tale of the Wingfields is not quite as tragic as Tom, our narrator, would have us believe. The stage directions at the beginning of Scene One state that “The narrator is an undisguised convention of the play. He takes whatever license with dramatic convention is convenient to his purposes” (4). Tom’s purpose, as he states it, is to “give you truth in the pleasant guise of illusion” (4). However, this is also a warning to the reader that Tom is not a reliable narrator. His perceptions of his story may not be entirely trustworthy. Thomas L. King notes that “we see not the characters but Tom’s memory of them—Amanda and the rest are merely aspects of Tom’s consciousness” (208). King also writes that Tom, as subjective narrator, delivers his monologues with the purpose of directing the audience. He says that Tom’s narration and monologues “show us the artist manipulating his audience, seeming to be manipulated himself to draw them in, but in the end resuming once more his detached stance” (85). This places Tom in a nearly divine position, wherein he may twist or even create memories of the other characters in order to satisfy his own emotional desires. If Tom is, as King suggests, a manipulative narrator, it follows logically that he cannot be relied upon to tell the impartial truth about Laura’s situation. Indeed, Tom’s guilt over his abandonment colors his own perception of events. Memory plays take place in the reminiscences of the narrator, and such memories are never perfect, even if the speaker is not purposely altering those memories. In those guilt-ridden memories, Tom has left Laura helpless in a world that is much too harsh for her “fragile, unearthly prettiness” (Williams 67). He is guilty enough about leaving her that, in his mind, her whole destiny is

determined by his abandonment, and so Tom forgets that her life will continue even though he is no longer a part of it.

Laura is best understood in relation to the other characters. *The Glass Menagerie* is, at its core, a play about relationships. Laura's relationships with the other characters produce both her initial paralysis and the changes that she undergoes. Laura's relationship to her father, Mr. Wingfield, sets the stage for Laura's anxieties. He abandoned his wife and children years before, leaving his family in poverty. Laura and Mr. Wingfield are never paired directly, but the effects of his abandonment are clear when Laura is hesitant to buy groceries on credit. "Mother, they make such faces when I do that," she says, expressing her fear of being exposed to ugly, brutal society and of being judged by her economic status.

Each member of the Wingfield family displays painful weakness in some aspect of their lives. Their fragilities force them to create fictions into which they can escape when they can no longer bear the stress of everyday life. Amanda is an abandoned woman struggling to make ends meet with two grown children living in the house. She is not above sacrificing her dignity to keep her home together. In Scenes Three and Four, Amanda sells magazine subscriptions to her friends, cajoling and flattering them in order to secure their renewals. She also demonstrates ladies undergarments at department stores, but is too ashamed to even name them, instead "she indicates a brassiere with her hands" (14).

The result of this stress is that Amanda falls into her memories; she loses her ability to live in the present. Amanda's fragility lies in this inability; she fixates on memories of her youth in order to "ameliorate her pathetic existence" (Bray xiii). Amanda claims that, as a young woman, she was the epitome of the Southern belle, stating that "One Sunday

afternoon in Blue Mountain—your mother received—seventeen!—gentlemen callers! Why, sometimes there weren't enough chairs to accommodate them all" (8). Amanda maintains that, as a young woman, she could have had her choice of any of a number of wealthy, important young men as a husband. The reality of Amanda's tales is suspect, however (the idea of seventeen gentleman callers in one day borders on implausible). Amanda, unable to deal with her life as a part of the working class, swaddles herself in the illusion that she is still a young, attractive, charming member of the Old South gentry. In preparation for Jim O'Connor's visit, Amanda puts on a dress that she had worn as a young lady. Williams describes it as a "girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash" (53). With the image of Amanda in an old, yellowed young woman's dress from a bygone age, her desperate illusion becomes simply pitiful.

Amanda wants her children to have stable, happy lives—a noble goal. Trouble arises when her children have different opinions of what defines stability and happiness. Amanda, whose own life has become so tragic, wants Laura to have the life that Amanda herself abandoned when she married Mr. Wingfield: a life of romantic and financial prosperity. Putting it more strongly, Sam Bluefarb posits that because Amanda is no longer the young, charming Southern belle that she may once have been, she becomes intensely preoccupied with "superimpos[ing] her own past on her daughter Laura's future" (514). While Amanda may be consciously trying to help her daughter achieve a traditionally successful life, on a more subconscious level, Amanda believes that she can relive her youth through her daughter. To that end, she tries to force Laura into situations where Laura will have to interact with other people. She pushes Laura to take classes, to entertain suitors, to become a social creature (the unspoken emphasis is "like Amanda herself"). Amanda enrolls her in

business school, and on the first day of classes, Laura is so petrified that “she broke down completely—was sick at the stomach and almost had to be carried to the washroom!” (14). She stops attending her classes at the business college, instead visiting art museums or the local zoo. These are peaceful, introspective activities well-suited to Laura’s introverted nature. However, Amanda doesn’t understand Laura’s need for solitude, but pins the blame for the failure of her plans upon Laura; attempting to make Laura feel guilty, Amanda asks, “What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren’t prepared to occupy a position...little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life!” (16). Against such stark imagery, Laura can say nothing. She cannot defend herself, but “twists her hands nervously” (16). Laura backs down from defending herself, valuing peace above self-defense or self-expression.

Laura, like her mother and brother, is deeply fragile. This fragility immediately manifests itself visually in the play; Laura is slightly crippled, with one leg shorter than the other. Laura, naturally shy, is ashamed of her disability; she fears that others will judge her poorly for it. She tells Jim that, during high school, she had to wear a brace to support her leg. She says that the “clumping” sound that her brace made “sounded like—thunder!” (75). This brace did nothing to help young, introverted Laura Wingfield; rather, it ensured that she would become even more afraid of society, of the possibility that others might only see her in terms of her faults. Meanwhile, Amanda, in her own delusions, refuses to acknowledge that her daughter has any sort of disability. Laura mentions it to her in Scene Two, “in a tone of frightened apology,” to which Amanda replies, “Nonsense! Laura, I’ve told you never, never to use that word” (5). Amanda’s refusal to admit to her daughter’s disability is a refusal to validate Laura’s fears about society and about herself. Amanda tries

to make her forget that she is less than physically perfect, but all her denial serve only to make Laura feel ashamed for being so.

Tom, the man of the house after his father's abandonment, is much like his father. Mr. Wingfield, according to Tom, "fell in love with long distances" (5). It soon becomes clear that Tom has inherited this love. Tom's own fragility stems from this immense desire for adventure, from his wish to get away from Amanda and her "possessive love," as Thomas P. Adler phrases it (36). Tom works in a shoe warehouse with few opportunities for advancement. He is warned by Jim that "You're going to be out of a job if you don't wake up" (60). A poet and a dreamer, at the end of the play he is indeed fired from his job for writing a poem on the lid of a shoe-box. Like his father, he wants to travel, to see things, to have marvelous escapades. However, Tom is forced to ignore his lust for excitement in order to make it through each work day. His fragility regarding his abandoned desires drives him to find indirect ways of having adventures. He goes to the movies in order to try to satisfy his longing for adventure. Movies and poetry are not enough for him, though, and he constantly thinks about traveling the world, to see strange sights and to take in all that life has to offer. His affinity for adventure and adventure stories only intensifies his anxious longing for a less mundane existence, making him restive and sensitive, easily aggravated by Amanda's endless instructions.

Tom's fights with Amanda are essential to the concept of chaos in *The Glass Menagerie*. Besides being made out of glass, the fact that Laura's collection is a menagerie—an assemblage of animals—points to the communicative chaos that she must endure from her family. The term "like a zoo" is often used in situations of confusion, and

Laura's family is nothing if not confused. Tom's desires throw a restless energy into the household, and they conflict with the wishes that Amanda has for his life. Amanda wants Tom to settle down and be a responsible provider for his family. She cannot understand the logic behind Tom's love of the movies:

Tom: I like a lot of adventure.

Amanda: Most young men find adventure in their careers.

Tom: Most young men are not employed in a warehouse.

Amanda: The world is full of young men employed in warehouses and offices and factories.

Tom: Do all of them find adventure in their careers?

Amanda: They do or they do without it! Not everybody has a craze for adventure. (33-34)

These altercations between Tom and Amanda take place in almost every scene. At one point, Tom calls Amanda a "witch" and at the end of the play, Amanda calls Tom a "selfish dreamer" (24, 96). Their differing perspectives and inability to effectively communicate with each other suggest that their relationship is based largely upon misunderstandings and old grudges.

Both Tom and Laura struggle with their family responsibilities. Tom, as the man of the house, bears the entire financial responsibility of the family. His shoe warehouse job leaves him unsatisfied, and he attempts to find an outlet for his need for adventure.

Amanda dislikes this pattern, as their fights make clear. Tom chafes under her criticism, claiming, "Look!--I've got no thing, no single thing...in my life here that I can call my OWN!" (21) Tom would love nothing more than to escape, to run away to live the adventures that he sees on the screen. It is only his devotions to his family, and specifically to Laura, that keeps him from doing so. However, Tom declares at the beginning of the play that he will forsake his responsibilities. Tom admits his lack of responsibility to Jim telling him that he joined the Union of Merchant Seamen. He tells a surprised Jim that "I paid my dues this month, instead of the light bill" (62). Tom's responsibility becomes his guilt when he can no longer bear its strain. Tom cares deeply for Laura, which makes his abandonment all the worse for him. Whether or not Laura can adapt to his absence, he cannot tell, but he believes that when he is gone, she will not be strong enough to survive in the world.

It is entirely possible that Tom underestimates Laura, who likewise has undesired responsibility thrust upon her by her family's situation. Amanda, desiring stability for her family, pushes Laura first to take business classes, and when that fails, to find a husband who can provide for her the life that Amanda feels she should have. George Crandall argues that

Laura actively resists both the role that society prescribes for women as well as Amanda's insistence that she conform to it...More often than not, Laura's resistance takes the form of a refusal. She refuses to believe that any gentlemen will call for her. She refuses to attend Rubicam's Business College, spending her time instead at the art museum or at the zoo...As much as Amanda seeks to be the focus of attention, Laura actively avoids it. (9)

While Crandall may be correct in pointing out Laura's active resistance to "the conventional role of woman in a patriarchal society," it would seem that, at the beginning of the play at least, Laura's refusal has less to do with intentional feminism and more to do with social and emotional paralysis (9). Because she is so anxiety-riddled, she indirectly challenges patriarchal expectations as manifested in Amanda's insistence that she find a mate.

Later in the play, Amanda tells Laura to answer the door when Tom brings Jim O'Connor home for supper, and Laura is nearly petrified with fear—she physically cannot open the door until she has calmed herself by putting music on her father's Victrola record player. Ostensibly, the whole point of Amanda forcing Laura out into society is so that Laura can find either a decent job or, even better, a decent man. This leads to tension between the two of them, providing many opportunities for clashes of will. When it is revealed that Laura has quit her typing class, Amanda resorts to making Laura feel guilty. She says, "What are we going to do, what is to become of us, what is the future?" (12). Amanda's plea is so pitiful as to be almost grotesquely humorous. She not only fails to realize Laura's need for gentleness (rather than Amanda's well-intentioned yet inept attempts to socialize Laura), she also fails to realize Laura's own gentleness. Between Amanda's meddling and Tom's restless energy, the house is often thrown into a chaos that Laura simply cannot bear. While Tom and Amanda's clashes visibly perturb Laura, Amanda and Laura's own disagreements have a profound effect upon Laura's psyche.

Laura's partially diminished physical status, along with insecurities about her socioeconomic status, love life, and most importantly, family, couple with a natural introversion to produce the anxious, flighty Laura at the beginning of the play. She is, again,

deeply afraid of people and of their possible reactions to her perceived inadequacies. Her response to these fears and perceived inadequacies is to escape. She escapes from the stresses of the business college by looking at art, at gardens, and at animals—in short, beautiful things. Laura's total lack of control over her life drives her to construct a tiny world that she does have control over; this tiny world is her glass menagerie. Laura meticulously cares for her animals, telling Jim that "glass is something you have to take good care of" (80). Laura has put together her menagerie both as a means of escape from her family life and from her own personal fragilities. Indeed, Laura's interactions with the menagerie prior to meeting Jim are the only interactions in which she shows affection or any emotion other than fear. Laura's menagerie, in addition to being a retreat from the chaotic outside world, is the only thing in the world that she has any kind of control over. Beginning with Mr. Wingfield's abandonment, the events and circumstances which drive Laura to anxiety and reticence are situations in which she has no control: her bad leg, her family's financial woes, Amanda's clashes with Tom, and Laura's own differences of opinion with her mother. In response to all this chaos, Laura sets up her menagerie as a way of creating some kind of order amongst the chaos. Michael Paller writes of Laura's menagerie that "Just as Tom has his secret life, Laura has hers, and it provides her with not only a place to escape to, but also a source of strength" (74). The menagerie is obviously nothing more than an illusion of control, but it suffices. In her glass world, Laura can attain, at least temporarily, a modicum of normalcy. Her collection of glass animals is her greatest source of escape. Each of Laura's comforts--her trips to the zoos and art museums, and certainly her menagerie--are essentially fictions, at best static representations of life. In essence, each of Laura's escapes are simply substitutes for the real thing.

While Laura seeks refuge in her glass, Amanda busies herself with constructing her idea of a promising future for her daughter. After Laura's failure to become a successful businesswoman, Amanda decides that, if Laura is ever to meet Amanda's expectations, it must be through marriage. To that end, Amanda convinces Tom to bring home a coworker as a potential suitor for Laura. The exchange wherein Tom tells his mother about the coworker takes place on the apartment's fire escape, away from Laura. Tom expresses his fears about Laura's fragility, saying, "She lives in a world of her own, a world of little glass ornaments" (48). Tom worries very much about his sister's fragile state and the effect that bringing a stranger into the home might have on her. In many ways, Tom was right to suspect that the arrival of a gentleman caller would change his older sister. However, he does not anticipate the transformative effect that the gentleman caller will have. Just as he is arriving with Tom, Laura discovers that he is Jim O'Connor, a boy she knew in high school and the object of her unexpressed romantic yearnings. Nearly catatonic, Laura cannot eat dinner with the others, hiding in the living room while Amanda tries to cover for her, claiming that "Standing over the hot stove made her ill!" (65). Amanda tries to normalize her daughter's behavior to make her seem less strange to Jim. Laura hides alone in the living room until the electricity goes out (the fault of Tom, who failed to pay the electricity bill). Jim joins her, bearing an ornate candelabra. Candles and candle imagery are closely linked to the character of Jim for the rest of the play. All of Laura's combined mental and emotional distress erupts when her mother or brother attempt to draw her into more normal social behavior, and as a result, they either tiptoe around her or charge past her. Jim, a stranger to the fractured home, does neither. Rather, he treats her as a normal person--respectful of her opinions and ideas and sympathetic to her ailments.

Williams tells us that “Laura’s shyness is dissolving in” the warmth of Jim’s company (77). With Jim’s help, she begins to confront her unpleasant memories of high school and the shyness that led to her terrible fear of people. She and Jim talk about Laura’s hesitancy to ask Jim for his autograph on her play program, her bout with pleurosis, and her crippled, braced leg. While Laura hesitates to actually speak of her disability, Jim talks kindly and easily about it, making it seem a near-trivial thing. They also discuss pleasant, mundane things like Jim’s affinity for electro-dynamics and his past romantic foibles. This conversation is the first enjoyable one that Laura has experienced throughout the course of the play, and its effect on her is clear.

Benjamin Nelson describes Laura and Jim’s attraction as a mutual desire for something that will take them beyond themselves. For Jim, Laura’s ethereal beauty and skittish charm take him beyond the quotidian and beyond his materialistic dreams; for Laura, Jim represents a stability that she has never experienced. Nelson writes,

So they come together, for one instant in their mutual need and Jim once more gains control. It’s ridiculous, he convinces himself, I must be crazy; I’m engaged to Betty (wholesome part of the American Dream!) and the sooner I tell this odd girl the better. And so he tells Laura and they have suddenly passed in the twilight, each visibly shaken by this unexpected moment of truth. (89)

While Nelson may be correct in noting that both characters are a little stunned, he fails to grasp what it is that Laura realized in her “unexpected moment of truth.” This realization, it would seem, is not that she will become a dependent, dowdy old maid, as Amanda fears,

but rather that she has the ability to be confident, to interact appropriately with others. She is not permanently damaged. In her time with Jim, Laura sees a glimpse of the kind of person that she can be.

With the entrance of Jim to the Wingfield home, the relational dynamic changes significantly. To the audience, Jim is the most straightforward, rational character of them all. He holds a steady job, talks about society and technology, and doesn't seem to be teetering on the edge of some kind of emotional oblivion. To the fractured Wingfield family, then, his normalcy strikes them as exceedingly odd. Next to Amanda and Tom's relative neuroses and their resultant clashes, Jim seems a soothing, welcome relief to Laura's "panicky" self. Once she becomes comfortable with him, "Jim's warmth overcomes her paralyzing shyness," and she is lit "inwardly with altar candles" (70, 79). Jim recognizes Laura's fragility and, rather than trying to smother it, ignore it, or force past it as Amanda has tried to do, Jim soothes her, affirms her fears, but offers an alternative. He says things like "People are not so dreadful when you know them"; "You don't have the proper amount of faith in yourself"; "Which of [the common people] has one-tenth of your good points!"; and "You're—pretty!" (76, 81, 88). Laura receives from Jim the reassurance and compliments that she does not get from her family.

The most important indicator of this dissolving shyness is the way that Laura's attitude changes toward the menagerie. Earlier in the scene between Jim and Laura, Laura had confessed that "I shouldn't be partial, but [the unicorn] is my favorite one" (83). After Jim teaches Laura to dance, he accidentally knocks over the unicorn and breaks off its horn. Jim expresses his penitence, telling Laura that he is sorry, but Laura says, "I don't have

favorites much. It's no tragedy, Freckles" (86). In this line, Laura not only recants her previous statement, but takes on the flippant tone that Jim uses throughout the play. Laura's reaction differs greatly from the scene when Tom throws his coat into the menagerie's shelf. When Jim breaks what Laura confesses to be her favorite animal, she does not even flinch. If Laura is pretending to not care about her collection just to impress Jim, it is unlikely that she would be so very composed. It is possible that she can be trying to hide her anguish over the damage done to her favorite animal, but there would be cracks in her brave façade were that true. As seen in all of her previous interactions with people, Laura is too emotionally delicate and attached to her menagerie to be anything other than honest about how she feels when her "favorite" piece is broken.

The shattering of the unicorn's horn marks a turning point in Laura's self-perception. Rightly viewed, it can also mark a turning point in the audience's perception of Laura. She no longer needs insubstantial dreams and delicate illusions to get through life. In the act of giving the broken unicorn to Jim, Laura finally completes an act of successful communication with another character. She no longer needs the comfort and escape that the menagerie previously provided. It would be incorrect to ascribe Laura's change in attitude solely to Jim's entrance into her life. He leaves almost as quickly as he has come, and offers her nothing of substance—his life is simply too different from hers. But in the brief moments that they share together, Jim shows Laura that there may be a way that she can free herself from the prison that may well be largely of her own construction.

Tom's confession of anguished guilt over leaving his family in the final moments of the play is paired with images of Amanda comforting Laura in the living room. In his final

monologue, Tom speaks of the way he uprooted his life, now traveling from place to place. He states that, no matter where he goes or what he does, he cannot escape from his memories of Laura. His memories of her push him to continue on, searching for a course of action that will silence those memories. He says, "I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something....Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass....Then all at once, my sister touches my shoulder" (97). Tom feels Laura's presence with him almost unceasingly, his guilt always foremost in his mind. However, his guilt may not be entirely warranted. Previously in the play, when Laura became anxious or frightened by her family's disputes, she retreated to the world of her menagerie; she hid herself in fictions that she created. In this final scene, the stage directions specify that "Amanda appears to be making a comforting speech to Laura, who is huddled on the sofa" (96). In this image, Laura seeks consolation not in imagination, but in human companionship, finding that her menagerie "breaks so easily" and is not really up to the task of bearing her grief (86). When Amanda finishes her speech, Laura "lifts her head to smile at her mother" (96). During Amanda's speech, Laura's hair hides her bowed head like a curtain, but when she raises her head, it seems that her hair falls back to reveal not resignation and heartbreak, but hope.

The presence and the symbolism of the candles in Scenes Six and Seven provide significant visual clues to Laura's internal state. The stage directions talk about being lit inwardly with candles, and the candelabra in the living room mirrors this state. After Jim has left and Tom and Amanda have their final explosive argument, Laura, sitting on the couch, "blows out the candles, ending the play" (96). Concurrently, Tom delivers his final monologue, ending, "Blow out your candles, Laura--and so goodbye" (97). The act of

blowing out the candles in the context of Tom's regretful final monologue is terminal, hopeless; the light being extinguished seems to imply hopelessness, that Laura will never be any more than she is. But taking the action in the context of Tom's monologue is giving approval to Tom's storytelling, no matter how unreliable it may be. Rather, Laura's act of blowing out the candles must be taken in the context of Laura's other actions at the end of the play. In the final scene, Laura abandons her menagerie entirely. Despite the fact that she considered her menagerie to be her children [reference], after one of their number is damaged and removed from the family entirely, Laura makes no move to comfort them or to seek comfort from them as she previously would have. Now, Laura does not retreat to fantasy, but chooses human comfort, human interaction, over the fragile, illusory comfort of her menagerie.

Laura's final act of the play, blowing out the candles, is a suitable closing gesture to the play. Tom's last lines are "For nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura—and so goodbye" (97). It is an appropriate ending to a melancholy play, but it would be erroneous to see this concluding action as solely a visual close for the play. Many critics see it as a symbol of Laura's doomed attempts to break free from her weaknesses, a symbol of the extinguishing of hope. Roger B. Stein says that "at the end of *The Glass Menagerie*...the blackout is even more catastrophic, for it...is also the denial of any final 'Rise an' Shine' for these frail creatures" (141). Taken only in view of Tom's final melancholic words, this argument may be correct. But in the context of the Laura/Amanda segment of the scene, where Laura has lifted her head in hope, the blowing out of the candles also becomes a more positive moment. The candles, lit in service of Jim's expected wooing of Laura, are no longer needed at the end of the play. Laura, awakened to her own

worth and the possibilities of a future outside her imagination, is no longer compelled to cling to the dream of her high school sweetheart. Instead, she can blow out the candles of an unnecessary fiction and transition to a new part of her life. Tom may be trapped in memories of Laura, but there is no evidence to suggest that Laura must be similarly confined.

Of Laura, Sam Bluefarb writes, "When Laura surrenders to the timeless world of her glass menagerie, it is not simply because she wishes to escape from the world of the present into a world of fantasy and delusion, but precisely because she can look the present fully in the face...and know it for what it is" (516-17). Bluefarb says that Laura's mother and brother lack this ability, that they can never "truly face the flow of time for any sustained span; they are forever condemned to search for something that is neither of the past, present, or future" (518). Ultimately, neither Tom nor Amanda move beyond static fragility. Amanda continues to depend upon shadowy memories of her past, losing touch with reality more and more as the world moves into the future without her. Tom, in his insatiable wanderlust and unquenchable guilt, directly professed that he is strangled by the memory (be it real or exaggerated) of his fragile, abandoned sister. Jim O'Connor, the [quote] enters the home and leaves almost as quickly as he has come, hopefully unscathed by his descent into the chaos of the Wingfield's lives. Laura, unlike the other characters, has experienced her delicate, helpless life, but has also glimpsed what her life could be if she was unencumbered by her need for protective illusion--if her fragilities did not hold her back from living life in the present. It would be the most basic kind of presumption to say that, after the events of the play, Laura will go on to become a confident, independent woman. Assumptions of this kind cannot be made because a play is a discrete, finite story.

However, the changes that Laura undergoes during the play in her relationships with those around her and with her precious menagerie point to the beginnings of hope for Laura Wingfield.

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