

A STUDY GUIDE FOR

Theatrical Outfit Presents

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

By Tennessee Williams



OCT 29 – NOV 23, 2025

produced by
THEATRICAL OUTFIT

84 Luckie St. NW, Atlanta, GA 30303 | www.theatricaloutfit.org



The Story

As the play opens, Tom Wingfield, the play's narrator, addresses the audience. He explains that the events that are to follow are fragments of his memory. Set in a cramped St. Louis apartment in the 1930s, Tom's story revolves around his troubled relationship with his overbearing mother Amanda and his shy and fragile sister, Laura, who walks with a limp due to a childhood illness. Tom's father abandoned the family years earlier, and Tom must support his mother and sister by doing a job he detests at a shoe factory.

As Tom steps into the action of the play, the personalities and tribulations of the family members spring to life: Amanda's desperate and often outrageous attempts to relive her idealized past and better the lives of her children; Laura's extreme reclusiveness and withdrawal from reality; and Tom's fiery desire to escape the burdens placed on him by his family and circumstances.

When Amanda asks Tom if he will bring home a "gentleman caller," or potential suitor, for Laura and promises that once Laura is married he will be free to leave home for good, the stakes rise for each of the characters. As Jim O'Connor, Tom's co-worker from the factory and Laura's high school crush, enters the story, the dreams and hopes of the characters come to the surface in a shattering conclusion.

The Writer and The Backstory



TENNESSEE WILLIAMS was born Thomas Lanier Williams in Mississippi in 1911. During his early childhood, Williams' family lived with his grandparents in rural Mississippi while his father traveled for work as a salesman. When Williams was seven, his father took a job at a shoe factory in St. Louis, Missouri. Adjusting to life in a cramped city apartment was difficult for Williams and his siblings, Dakin and Rose, as well as for his mother. As tensions grew between his alcoholic father and unhappy mother, Williams sought refuge in the imaginary worlds he created with Rose, and in the poems and short stories he began to write at the age of 12.

In 1929, Williams enrolled in the Missouri School of Journalism. However, in 1932, when his grades began to slide, his father removed him from school and forced him to take a job at the shoe factory where he was employed. For months, Williams worked at a job he hated during the day and spent his evenings writing, often straight through the night. These constricting circumstances led Williams to have an emotional and physical breakdown. He eventually returned to school and graduated from the University of Iowa in 1938. While he was away at college, his sister, Rose, became more and more unstable, and eventually was admitted to a sanitarium where she was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

In 1943, Williams completed a short story with characters inspired by his mother and Rose called "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" that he later adapted into a screenplay called *The Gentleman Caller*. When MGM Studios rejected the screenplay, Williams adapted it into the play that became *The Glass Menagerie*. That same year, Rose was given a pre-frontal lobotomy, a now-obsolete brain operation that was used to treat mental illness. This operation left her mentally disabled for the rest of her life.

The following year, *The Glass Menagerie* was produced in Chicago where it received accolades from the critics and became an instant success. The following Spring, it opened on Broadway to sold-out audiences, running for 563 performances and skyrocketing Williams from obscurity to fame.

Throughout his life, Williams would write two novels, two books of poetry, 15 screenplays, an autobiography, numerous essays, and 70 plays, including: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, and *The Night of the Iguana*. During his career, he won two Pulitzer Prizes for drama, four New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards, a Tony Award, and he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Jimmy Carter. He died when he was 73 years old in 1981.

Resources on the Elements of Style in Williams' work

Because Williams' approach to writing was such a radical departure for American theatre, there are a multitude of online resources about the stylistic elements of Williams' writing, and specifically, *The Glass Menagerie*. In particular, his use of *poetic language* and his innovations in the genre of the *memory play* and *plastic theatre* are referenced as follows:

| Poetic Language |

"Williams, much more than any other American playwright, succeeded in finding a poetic diction for the stage. I immediately identified with that ambition, with the desire to write language that simultaneously sounded like spontaneous utterance but also had the voluptuousness in daring, peculiarity, quirkiness, and unapologetic imagistic density of poetry."
- Tony Kushner, Playwright

Resources:

University of Texas: **Q and A: Playwright Tony Kushner Speaks About the Influence of Tennessee Williams** An interview with esteemed playwright Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*) in which he discusses Williams' legacy and how it has influenced his writing.
<https://sites.utexas.edu/ransomcentermagazine/2011/05/19/q-and-a-playwright-tony-kushner-speaks-about-influence-of-tennessee-williams/>

National Endowment for the Humanities: **Why Expressionism? "The Glass Menagerie": A Common Core Exemplar** A three-lesson curricular unit that explores the role of expressionism and the poetic devices in *The Glass Menagerie*.
<https://edsitement.neh.gov/curricula/why-expressionism-glass-menagerie>

| Memory Play |

"My way into the concept of a memory play is simply an invitation into symbolism, in which nothing is actually real, but rather a resonance of something. The rainbow light that comes through their window from the Paradise Ballroom is the neon imprint of modernity cast across the cracking belle epoque veneer of their antique furniture, hauled up from Blue Mountain Mississippi twenty years previously. The whole play shimmers with unreality. Glass animals dancing by candlelight." - Matt Torney, from his Director's Notes on Theatrical Outfit's production of *The Glass Menagerie*

Resources:

ArtsEdge/The Kennedy Center: **Memory Play Lesson Plan**
A multi-faceted lesson plan focused on *The Glass Menagerie* that explores the structural and technical devices of the memory play.
<https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/lessons-and-activities/lessons/9-12/memory-play-in-american-drama/>

Utah Shakespeare Festival: **What is the Underlying Truth?**

An essay analyzing *The Glass Menagerie* and Williams' creative use of memory as a means to explore the humanity and psychology of his characters.

<https://www.bard.org/study-guides/what-is-the-underlying-truth>

| **Plastic Theatre** |

“His sensitivity to emotional ambience helped him fashion what he termed ‘plastic theatre’: theatre as a unified system fusing language, staging, music and casting into a whole gestalt. His plastic theatre mingled expressionistic memory and fantasy, Chekhov’s psychology, Ibsen’s social realism, O’Neill’s mythic imagination, Faulkner’s history-stunned South and Williams’ own symbolic imagination. With a bit of gothic melodrama thrown in for fun, his productions sharply diverged from mainstream theatre’s conventional, linear narrative.” - Sarah Churchwell, *The Guardian*

Resources:

The Guardian: **Tennessee Williams Review: John Lahr’s ‘compulsively readable’ biography**

A book review highlighting significant content from John Lahr’s seminal biography of Williams, including Williams’ invention of “plastic theater,” a dramatic departure from the theatrical realism of the time.

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/oct/29/tennessee-williams-mad-pilgrimage-of-the-flesh-john-lahr-review>

Tennessee Williams Studies: **“The Sculptural Drama”: Tennessee Williams’ Plastic Theater**

A scholarly article breaking down the components of plastic theater and examining the ways Williams integrated them into *The Glass Menagerie*.

<http://www.tennesseewilliamsstudies.org/journal/work.php?ID=45>

Exploratory Questions and Activities for *The Glass Menagerie*

1.) Ask students to choose a character and collect three images and/or objects that they feel are representative of their character, reminding them to think symbolically as well as literally.

As a class, look at the web of images and have students compare and contrast the different ways their classmates chose to visually represent the characters. What were the similarities and differences? What symbolic elements stand out? What thematic elements stand out? Are there similarities among the characters? Ask students to comment on why the images and objects have been placed in a “web.”

2.) Ask students to think about a time in their past when they were disappointed—by someone, some thing, or themselves. Have students share some examples. Next, ask students to choose and reflect upon a significant family event from their past in which they were disappointed. Students should choose an event that they are comfortable sharing with the group. Give them two minutes of quiet time (they can close their eyes) to call up their memories of this event.

Ask students to share something about the experience of reflecting back on this event. How easy or difficult was it? Did pictures come into their mind or specific sounds or smells? Did it bring up certain emotions? Were there certain details that were very clear? Were there specific details they couldn’t recall?

Have students go back to this memory again and write about it, including as many details as possible. Ask for student volunteers to share their stories with the class, and discuss the following:

- Do you feel as disappointed as you did when this event originally happened, or have your feelings changed?
- Did this event influence or change you in any way?
- How might your other family members see this event differently?
- If your life story was a play and you were going to stage this “memory scene,” how would you stage it so that the audience would understand it as a memory?

3.) As a class, identify what a monologue is. Have students read Tom’s final monologue of *The Glass Menagerie* (found here: <http://www.monologuedb.com/dramatic-male-monologues/the-glass-menagerie-tom-wingfield/>) and notate when the language is conversational and when it becomes poetic. Have students identify examples of imagery, symbolism, and metaphor in the poetic language, and answer the following:

- Who is Tom talking to?
- Why is he expressing these thoughts and feelings at this moment in time?
- Why might a playwright use monologues in a play? What effect do they have on the audience?

Have students return to their written account of their family memory, and choose one or two sentences from it to adapt into a poetic monologue, using symbolism, imagery, metaphor, alliteration, and any other poetic devices they are familiar with.

4.) Have students imagine the character Laura five years after the play ends. Brainstorm some ideas about what her life might be like three years after Tom leaves. Create a scene or monologue that explores this stage of her life.

5.) Make copies of an excerpt from Scene Three of *The Glass Menagerie*. (A good three-page excerpt for this exercise would be starting with Tom's "What in Christ's name am I..." and ending with Amanda's "You're going to listen, and no more insolence from you! I'm at the end of my patience!")

Place one chair at the front of the room, and ask for three student volunteers to read and act out the scene. Have the actors simply read the scene aloud for the class once as a practice round. For round two, explain to the actors that as they read the scene a second time, they will use the chair to show who has the most power at each moment. The character with the most power should claim the chair (by sitting on it, standing on it, holding it, etc.). When they lose power, they lose the chair. In many instances, more than one character might be in conflict over who gets the chair.

Before the actors go through the exercise, ask the class to make predictions about what they think they will see. Who will be sitting the most? Who will get the chair the least?

After the actors go through the exercise, discuss the following:

- How did the use of the chair help illustrate the power struggles between the family members?
- What did we learn about the power dynamics between the characters?

6.) Ask students to choose one of the four characters from *The Glass Menagerie* that they feel connected to; the character they understand the most.

Have students consider the following as they watch each character in the production:

- How are they trapped by their external circumstances?
- How are they trapped by the other characters?
- How are they trapped by their own beliefs, obligations, fears, and insecurities?
- What are some of their escape options?
- What will be the consequences if they try to escape?

After discussing these aspects of their chosen character, provide them with two options for a culminating project:

- Create a symbolic visual representation of their character's trap.
- Create an "Escape Plan" for their character that outlines actions they will take to get out of their painful situation.



“One of the **immortal masterpieces** of 20th-century theatre”

- THE WASHINGTON POST



“Tennessee Williams’s greatest play”

- TIME OUT

THE GLASS MENAGERIE
By Tennessee Williams

WINNER OF _____

- 1945 New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Best American Play
- 2014 Drama League Award for Distinguished Revival of a Play
- 2014 Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Revival of a Play

NOMINEE _____

- 2014 Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play
- 2017 Olivier Award for Best Revival of a Play

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MEET THE CAST

 Terry Burrell* [she/her] (The Mother)	 Devon Hales* [she/her] (Her Daughter)
 Matt Mercurio [he/him] (The Gentleman Caller)	 Stephen Ruffin* [he/him] (Her Son)

Georgia Performance Standards

Dramatic Writing Standards (9-12):

TAHSTL.RE.1 Evaluate various aspects of dramatic arts literature using appropriate supporting evidence.

- a. Compare and summarize theatre literature from various historical periods, cultures, and styles.
- b. Develop and apply a set of comprehensive criteria for theatre text analysis.
- c. Compare and contrast theatre texts to live/film performance.
- d. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone.)
- e. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

English Language Arts (11-12):

ELAGSE11-12RL3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

ELAGSE11-12RL4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

ELAGSE11-12RL3: Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

ELAGSE11-12RL5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

ELAGSE11-12RL10: By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.