Benjamin Franklin: an American statesman, author, and scientist (1706-90) known for his practical inventions, which include the Franklin stove, bifocal reading glasses, the writing chair, and the lightning rod. Flying a kite during a storm, Franklin was able to show that lightning was indeed a form of electricity

Mr Edison: Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931) was one of the most prolific American inventors. Besides improving many of the devices of others, he invented the gramophone and manufactured the first incandescent lamp

dandelion wine: a slightly alcoholic beverage made from the flower of the dandelion

The Wrigley Building: one of the striking architectural features of Chicago, named after William Wrigley Jr, the inventor of chewing gum

Oh, that Kraut-head!: a pejorative epithet applied to Americans of German origin

La Golondrina: Spanish for 'swallow'. The song, a favourite of the period, is a nostalgic celebration of things that fade with summer

stumblejohn: a blunderer. The word is now obsolete

that was way off the beam: that was a big mistake, or absolutely uncalled for

it's only the shank of the evening: the beginning of the evening

jalopy: an old, rattling car

I'll be jiggered: I'm surprised; that's news to me

Part 3

Commentary

The Glass Menagerie as biography

The Glass Menagerie has been described as 'the most consciously biographical of all Williams's dramas'. It represents the author's effort to come to terms with his past and to transcend or exorcise it. As a 'memory play', it chronicles the story of Williams's last years in St Louis. Much of the information about Williams's early years presented in Part 1 can be traced in the play.* The playwright's childhood relationship with his sister Rose provided the basis for the emotional ties that bind Tom and Laura. Although the girl's name has been changed, the nickname 'Blue Roses' recalls the real-life character. Further, the glass animals that provide the title of the play and a good measure of its symbolism were among the Williams children's toys. The playwright has described them: 'those little glass animals came to represent in my 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.'

In real life, too, Rose took a course in secretarial school but ended up in the park, the museum, and the zoo instead of the classroom. In the play Laura has a physical defect; she is 'crippled'. In actuality the situation was infinitely more painful: at puberty Rose had started to show signs of psychological disturbance which deteriorated into a pathological withdrawal from reality so severe that she had to have a brain operation. This circumstance is poignantly echoed in Laura's gentle reaction to the breaking of the unicorn: 'I'll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less—freakish!' (p.104). Amanda Wingfield is modelled after Tennessee Williams's own mother; Edwina Dakin Williams, who died in June, 1980, was equally obsessed with the greatness of her past in contrast to the shabbiness of her life in St Louis. She also belonged to the D.A.R., of which she was a regent, and insisted on maintaining genteel manners and behaviour at home. In real life, as in the play, she enlisted Tom to bring home suitable gentlemen callers. Such visits as there were invariably turned into embarrassments for Tom and his sister when their mother overwhelmed everybody with her vivacious 'Southern' conversation.

*For many more details taken from real life, the reader should consult the sources of biographical information listed in the bibliography.

The father, whom Williams hated so much that he could not dramatise him except in the gallantly smiling photograph over the mantle, had not actually left the family for a free-roaming existence. But as a travelling salesman he had often been away on business, and even after the move to St Louis, when he became a manager in the company, he doled out money reluctantly—although his salary was good—and kept the family in a state of near-poverty.

Tom is also in part a portrait of Williams. Their Christian names are the same and although the fictional surname of the character in the play differs from that of the author, their initials—T.W.—are identical. Both are enthusiastic admirers of D.H. Lawrence and compulsive smokers, drinkers, and filmgoers. Williams presents Tom as 'a poet with a job in a warehouse': the playwright, too, had been forced to take a job in a local shoe company. The firm's name is ironically altered in the play from 'International Shoe Company' to 'Continental Shoemakers', but the monthly salary—the low amount of sixty-five dollars—is the same as that earned by the young clerk Williams. In real life, too, Williams used to retire to the lavatory to work on poems. More significant than the details of the job and its financial implications, the feelings aroused in Williams by the situation also found their way into the play. The confinement of the young poet in the office compounded with the distress of his home life dominate Tom's entire existence and become his main incentives to action.

Finally, even the drabness of the setting has its roots in Williams's biography, reflecting Williams's horrified reaction to the St Louis environment into which he and his sister had unwillingly been thrust at an early age. But not all the material of the play is autobiographical; the picture is not a strictly accurate one. Williams selected among, compressed, and otherwise modified the raw materials of his immediate experience. In the process, *The Glass Menagerie* ceased to be a personal record of endured hardship and became a compelling fable for the stage. It acquired the exemplary meaning and dignity that belongs only to art, snatching as it does, 'the eternal out of the desperately fleeting'.*

Structure and narrative device

The Glass Menagerie is described by Williams as a 'static' play (p.10), by which he means a drama that has little organic movement other than that of its chronological development. Indeed the play is, in effect, a picture of a situation; the interest depends neither on incident nor action. Williams also says that the play is 'episodic'—that is, it is a play in which the various elements of action are perceived and presented as units distinct and separate from each other rather than forming a continuum or composing a unity. The division of the play into seven scenes of varying length (themselves sometimes subdivided into further scenic units) strongly emphasises the static and episodic nature of the play. The summaries and accompanying comments presented here have attempted to give some notion of this. But Williams has made use of a number of theatrical devices to overcome a damaging impression of fragmentation or stasis: the flexible set, the musical leitmotif, and imaginative lighting effects (see 'The set'). Even more effective than these devices, however, is the use of a narrator. In the play, Tom Wingfield appears in a double capacity, as both narrator of the play and a character in it. Williams carefully establishes the difference between the two functions. As narrator, Tom always addresses the audience directly. In so doing he acknowledges his awareness of its presence across the footlights, presents himself as the contemporary of his listeners and thus provides a historical perspective for the tale he unfolds. As narrator Tom is sometimes costumed differently from Tom the character: in the first and last scenes, he appears dressed as a merchant sailor. In Scenes Three to Six, Tom the narrator speaks from a particular place on the stage. The landing of the fire escape becomes a sort of witness stand from which, part witness and part accused, he delivers his speeches.

The narrator fulfils at least two clear functions; he is a convenient means of exposition, both supplying information and setting the tone and style of the production; and he provides easy continuity between events otherwise disconnected in time. Although the two functions are not consistently distinct, it is easy to determine that Tom is essentially narrator-expositor in Scenes One, Five, and Six and more of a temporal link in Scene Three. In his last appearance, in Scene Seven, his roles as narrator and character finally merge.

As narrator at the start of the play Tom offers almost a textbook example of exposition: he informs us of what we need to know in order to understand the situation of the Wingfields, briefly sketching the geographical, social, and historical background of the action. From him we learn that the story is set in St Louis, Missouri; that the family belongs to the 'huge middle class of America' (the lower middle class, as we later come to realise); and that the time of the play, the late 1930s, is one of national difficulties ('a dissolving economy') and international uncertainties ('in Spain there was revolution'). Much the same information is restated in Tom's speech about the Paradise Dance Hall in Scene Five.

He also introduces the main characters, hinting at the tensions that may make them interesting and the problems that may develop into conflicts. Thus we learn early in Scene One that Amanda and her two children have been deserted by Mr Wingfield and that Jim, although a real character, should also be regarded as a symbol, 'the long delayed

*In 'The Timeless World of a Play', introduction to *The Rose Tattoo* (1951).

but always expected something that we live for'. Later, in Scene Six, Tom as narrator provides us with a full portrait of Jim O'Connor as a preface to Jim's actual appearance on the stage.

In addition, Tom's early comments tell us what kind of a play we are witnessing, providing an exposition of the play itself and its methods. His very first words warn us that it is the play's aim to portray truth, but that we will have to look for this truth beyond theatrical trickery and stage illusion. And a few paragraphs later he introduces the justification for the dim lighting and the background music (two essentially non-realistic elements) that contribute to the 'magic' of the stage presentation: this is to be 'a memory play'. In Scene Three, by contrast, the narrator functions rather as a temporal link between events that are otherwise distant in time. His words inform us of the lapse of time between Scene Two, a winter scene (notice Amanda's reproaches to Laura and Laura's sickness), and Scene Five, a spring scene (as announced by the stage direction, 'it is early dusk of a spring evening'). At the end of the play, the two functions are combined: as narrator, Tom tells us of the outcome of his relationship with his family; as character, he confesses the guilt he feels about abandoning them.

The device of the narrator clearly solves in part Williams's problem of exposition. Without it he could hardly have dramatised the socio-cultural, historical, and geographical background of his tale so early in the play and so economically; neither would one be so immediately aware of Amanda's personal plight. More obviously still, the portrait of Jim in Scene Six could not have been sketched in all its fine detail had Williams attempted to present it in dramatised form late in the play. Moreover, the narrator creates a temporal, historical perspective for events that are indeed 'memories'. Being himself an undisguised convention, he fits the style of the play and allows for a more flexible use of setting and a freer mode of presentation. In other words, as he steps in and out of the frame of the play proper, the narrator indicates that we are dealing with two periods distinct in time—the immediate present of the spectators, and the past of the play's events; moreover, he draws attention to the artificiality of the presentation to encourage us to direct our attention to the emotional truth behind it.

By choosing the narrator from among the characters, Williams integrates this figure more closely into the fabric of the play's events. As a character, Tom is also a participant; his report therefore acquires the ring of authenticity of the eyewitness account. With a narrator who is also a character we get the impression that we are closer to the reality of events, indeed to the truth.

But what is gained in vividness and immediacy must be paid for in other ways. As a participant in the events, Tom may have only a limited or strongly subjective view of them. What we see is in fact seen for us; it is what Tom chooses to show us, and we may have second thoughts about the reliability of the whole report. The method of presentation that Williams has adopted for his play is not, as critics have pointed out, without its inconsistencies, for if Tom is indeed the source of our information, we may well wonder how he himself acquired it. We might argue, for example, that although Tom did not actually witness the exchange between Amanda and Laura in Scene Two, he knows them intimately enough and may have gleaned sufficient information from either of them to piece the incident together in imagination. But could we justify in the same way his presentation of the scene in which Amanda and Laura prepare for the visitor, or of the protracted interview between Laura and the gentleman caller?

In all fairness it should be said here that the play emphatically rejects realistic conventions, and that this kind of logical objection should not therefore be raised against it. Moreover, and this may well be the ultimate argument, in performance the impression of seeing the action from a temporal distance through Tom's memory dissipates as soon as the fourth wall ascends out of sight, and we are emotionally drawn into the play to the extent that we forget about the technicalities of its presentation.

Characters and characterisation

The Glass Menagerie belongs to the broad category of psychological drama. It does not start out with a message; it does not purport to demonstrate a point. Nor does it conclude with a firm recommendation or a verdict. If anything, it teaches understanding of, and compassion for, all four of its protagonists rather than for a single character. The strength of the play is its sensitive creation of characters with whom audiences the world over can identify or sympathise. Williams is not a preacher; he does not use the stage as a pulpit to deliver moral lessons. Through his characters and their story, however, he raises questions that haunt us all: How do we live? What are our values? Why do we act the way we do? Can we be true to ourselves and considerate of the needs of others at the same time?

In his introductory speech Tom states that he has 'a poet's weakness for symbols'. The whole play, including the characters, should be viewed not as a realistic or naturalistic 'slice of life', a photographically accurate presentation of 'life in the late thirties', but as an imaginative and poetic reconstruction of personal memories. Therefore, the student should be alert to the manner as much as to the matter, to characterisation as much as to character. In this section we will consider each character in succession, adopting the point of view of the spectator and looking at their physical appearances, dialogue and actions.

This is how an audience generally discovers characters as the play unfolds: through what they look like, what they say, what they do, and what others say about them. A work of literature rarely develops in the linear fashion of a play in production. When we read or see a play for the first time we are more sensitive to those aspects that appear perfectly realistic. As the drama progresses, what seemed at first perfectly simple or even trivial and irrelevant acquires a deeper resonance. By the time the curtain falls, this new meaning may have supplanted the initial straightforward significance. Upon subsequent reading or viewing, the play will have acquired a different value and may reveal further riches. The student of drama must, then, necessarily adopt an ambiguous position: he must retain the fresh approach of his first experience to let the play progressively reveal its strengths and emphases; at the same time, however, he must be fully aware of later developments in order to discern the skill with which he is being led through the play and the particular meaning of that dramatic itinerary.

The father: a photograph

The father of the Wingfield family does not actually appear on the stage, but he is present in the text of the play from the narrator's introductory words ('There is a fifth character in the play'; p.23) to his final speech ('I left Saint Louis . . . and followed, from then on, in my father's footsteps', p.115). His physical absence is compensated for by the allusions to him that appear in practically every scene and by the blown-up photograph in the living room, in which he appears in a doughboy's First World War cap.

In the course of the play, Amanda stops in front of the picture several times as she reminisces about her husband's charm (p.27), her love for him (p.50), and their first meeting in Blue Mountain amid the jonquils (p.72). For her the picture represents the great love of her life transformed by memory into an eternally young and handsome soldier. But in at least one instance, (p.82), when entertaining Jim O'Connor with her stories of a long-gone South (p.82), she feels uncomfortable about the picture of the smiling gentleman. In the apartment where she has painstakingly tried to recreate the illusion of elegance and gentility to trap a young man into marrying her daughter—to make a gentleman caller into a husband, as the constant juxtaposition of the two motifs reminds us—the husband's grinning portrait both mocks her scheme and offers an uncomfortable prophecy that her past failure to keep a husband will be repeated in her failure to secure a mate for Laura.

To Tom, the picture of his father represents not the past but the future. The tone of his description of the portrait in his introductory speech, both admiring and flippant, foreshadows his eventual imitation of his father. The similarity of their natures and, the play suggests, of their destinies, is emphasised by using in the production a photograph of the actor playing Tom. In the course of the action Tom refers to his father's picture explicitly only once, in his drunken report in Scene Four of the magician's trick that impressed him so much. 'Who in hell ever got himself out of a [nailed-up] coffin?' he asks Laura, and on the back wall, 'as if in answer, the father's grinning photograph lights up' (p.46). The device may seem over-obvious in preparing the audience for Tom's final departure, but the unchanged grin, revealed in full light, may also represent an ironical comment. The doughboy's First World War cap should remind us that if Tom chooses to follow the example of his father, he might well find the adventurous life of which he dreams as a soldier in the Second World War.

Amanda's and Tom's relationship to the portrait, then, is ambiguous. Evoking a beloved memory for Amanda, it is also a foreboding omen of renewed disillusionment; embodying a dream of adventure for Tom, it also foreshadows new entrapment. It is symptomatic that Laura, in a world apart from that of Tom or her mother, does not refer to the portrait at all.

Amanda Wingfield

Amanda is the dominating figure of the play. Her name, the Latin word for 'worthy of being loved', expresses one of her essential traits, her need to give and receive love. This need appears throughout the play and especially in her evocation of the crowd of prominent young planters that were her suitors (pp.26–7): 'Her eyes lift, her face glows, her voice becomes rich and elegiac.' Conversely, her name also suggests that when she feels deprived of loving regard—as is the case in the play—she may turn into, in Tom's words, an unattractive 'ugly—babbling old—*witch*' (p.42). The two aspects of Amanda's personality embedded in her name are already traceable in the unusually long description of her in the playwright's list of characters (p.5), where she is presented as the prototype of the Williams heroine, torn between present and past. Like the lives of Myra in *Battle of Angels* (1939), Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948), Serafina delle Rose in *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), her life is characterised by an intense emotional experience followed by an abrupt decline precipitated by the loss of a life-mate, and like them she tries desperately to recapture an earlier time.

Amanda and the South

Amanda is often described as a person immersed in the past, bewildered by her immediate surroundings, unable to cope with the social and economic reality of the Depression days, and constantly taking refuge

in memories of bygone greatness connected with her adolescence and early adulthood in the South. For Amanda, the South is the lost paradise of her Blue Mountain youth, revealed indirectly and in brief glimpses throughout the play. Amanda's descriptions of her past weave a picture of a graceful, genteel Old South dominated by refined social gatherings and elegant living conditions. She reminisces fondly about leading a cotillion, winning the cakewalk twice at Sunset Hill, and attending the Governor's ball in Jackson (p.71). She waxes rhapsodic about spring pastimes—evening dances, long rides, picnics in the Mississippi Delta region (p.72). Her most compelling recollection of the past is that in which she emerges as the most sought-after girl in the Delta, with seventeen gentlemen callers on the same Sunday afternoon (p.26).

Amanda's vibrant memories of that Arcadian South are qualified by a few sombre touches. The names of places connected with her past introduce the first sobering hints. With its aura of physical and geographical unreality, the name 'Blue Mountain' seems designed to imply that—at least in the context of the play—Amanda's story belongs to the realm of fairy tale. Her introductory phrase, 'One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain' (p.26), clearly reminds us of the 'once upon a time' of legendary stories and reinforces the impression of unreality. 'Sunset Hill', moreover, introduces a nostalgic suggestion of things once brilliant but now slowly fading, perhaps dimmed by distance in time.

The ideal vision of the South is also tarnished by Amanda's reference to the callousness with which elderly unmarried relatives (and presumably all who did not conform to the prevailing social norms) were treated. The idyllic picture is further marred by the intrusion of death, which has taken its toll among Amanda's former admirers. After her long inventory of rich and handsome suitors Tom enquires sarcastically of the last one mentioned, 'What did he leave his widow?'—a question which pointedly emphasises the almost complete disappearance of the human background of his mother's youth. By its very length, Amanda's catalogue of departed suitors hints, beyond the personal tragedies, at the waning of a way of life, that of the planters' aristocracy, and the decay of a society, that of the Old South.

Against this background of social decline, in an atmosphere of lust for life and morbid fascinations, amid young men dying violent deaths in futile quarrels, Amanda's infatuation and eventual marriage to Mr Wingfield became just another example of the rapidly disintegrating structure of the society in which she grew up. Her enthusiasm and elation in reporting the exciting meeting with her future husband should not obscure the fact that her marriage was a breach of the code regulating such arrangements. The efficiency of the rules that had ensured continuity in the past, invoked by Amanda herself as justification for her interest in Jim O'Connor's background, is again sarcastically questioned by Tom: 'Then how did you happen to make a tragic mistake?' Amanda has to concede that 'the innocent look of [Mr Wingfield] had everyone fooled!' (p.64). Tom's critical attitude and Amanda's wistful answer underline the fact that even in the heyday of her youth the careful regulation of refined Southern society was disintegrating. Moreover, the union of a girl representing the predominantly past-oriented agrarian South with a travelling telephone-company man, an exponent of the contemporary technological world, contributes to the picture of the Old South slowly giving way under the pressure of the twentieth century.

Amanda's escapism

Amanda's retreat into memories of the past, her backward glance, is only one aspect of her imaginative way of dismissing the present; the other consists of averting her gaze from her surroundings and, more often than not, looking forward to hypothetical happiness in the future.

Characteristic of this escapism is Amanda's refusal to acknowledge that Laura is peculiar psychologically (p.66); more surprisingly, she even blots out the fact of Laura's physical defect by refusing to call her 'crippled' (p.35, p.65). She protests that her son is not merely a clerk in a warehouse and transmutes both her children against all evidence into people 'full of endowments' (p.49). This pathetic overstatement reveals her proud motherly love as much as her refusal to face life squarely. In spite of constant proof to the contrary provided by her daily life she continues to believe the slogan 'try and you will *succeed*' (p.49), a motto which reveals, as Gerald Weales has pointed out, as blatant an acceptance of the American success myth as Willy Loman's in *Death of a Salesman*.

Amanda's attempt to fly from her depressing tenement life to an idyllic, rosy future is manifest again in the short episode on the fire-escape landing in Scene Five in which the mother, looking at the new moon, expresses her wish for 'success and happiness' (p.58). The moon denotes the unrealisable aspirations of the character that stares at it. Amanda's wish, like the far-away orb, is unattainable. Notice that Tom characteristically introduces a deflating comment about the moon, pointing out its position above the urban Jewish delicatessen, and then proceeds ironically to interpret his mother's grandiloquent prayer as a substitute 'wish for a gentleman caller' (p.58). His remarks indicate his detached attitude towards his mother's sentimentality and romantic dreaming.

Amanda's self-defeat

When the gentleman caller is about to arrive, when the dream of the

future seems about to be realised, Amanda defeats her own purpose by suddenly reverting to her past. Both the refurbishing of the house and the 'resurrection' of the dress are attempts to conceal her shabby present and recapture part of the elegance she associates with her Blue Mountain days. Amanda's knack for entertaining, her outgoing manner, her conversational talents, while underscoring by contrast Laura's defects, soon charm the visitor, who 'after the first shock . . . reacts very warmly—grins and chuckles, is altogether won over' (p.81). Amanda has thus vicariously seduced the man for herself. By becoming for that one evening the girl she once was, Amanda has unwittingly made the occasion a losing battle for Laura. Amanda's 'plans and provisions' (p.52) go up in smoke.

The set and the lighting accentuate the irony of the situation. At centre stage, in full light, Amanda gaily relives her past moments of glory. Jim and Tom are captivated. At stage left, in shadow, Laura lies silent and petrified on the sofa, clenching her hand to her lips to hold back a shuddering sob (p.84). This tableau, then, shows more immediately and more movingly than words that Laura's anxiety and withdrawal have probably been caused, or at least heightened, by Amanda's remarkable social charm. Of this Amanda remains forever unaware. After her great scene with the gentleman caller, she disappears from view. When she emerges again, at the very end of the play, it is to acknowledge that she has made 'a fool of herself' (p.113). But by shifting the blame to Tom's selfishness and his ignorance of the fact that Jim was already engaged to be married, she allows herself to disregard her own self-centredness and the determining role she has played in this particular fiasco and—the whole play now seems to suggest—in the larger human failure of Laura.

Amanda's stature as a character

Amanda is one of the most memorable female characters in Tennessee Williams's work and indeed in the whole of modern theatre. The author describes her sympathetically in his preliminary list of characters as 'a little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place . . . There is much to admire in Amanda, and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at. Certainly she has endurance and a kind of heroism, and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person' (p.5). Most of the time she appears as a silly old woman, ranting about her past; her blind devotion to her children suffocates them and her narrow-minded moral outlook makes her harsh at times. But throughout the play, she remains aware in thought and deed of what her life is. She points out to Tom that 'life's not easy, it calls for—Spartan endurance!' (p.50) and later that 'the future becomes the present, the present the past and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it!' (p.63). In this awareness of life as a struggle and in her acceptance of it on these terms resides Amanda's claim to our admiration. However unreasonable her demands, grotesque her nervous gaiety, or vulgar her mercantilism, they are all superseded by the fighting spirit, the bravura, and the sheer will to overcome harboured in her small frame.

In the epilogue, Amanda is seen 'as though viewed through soundproof glass . . . making a comforting speech to Laura . . . Now that we cannot hear the mother's speech, her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty' (p.114). In this ultimate pantomime is thus confirmed what makes Amanda eminently human and lovable and what it is that justifies her name. Amanda's dignity and endearing loveliness grow from her uncommon endurance in the face of adversity, from her courage to continue to strive for a dream which is unattainable yet worthy, a dream of the past and the future, shattered by reality, but never quite forgotten or forgone.

Tom Wingfield

Tom is, to a large extent, a portrait of the artist as a young man. Williams's description of him in the introductory list of characters provides the key to Tom's whole personality: 'His nature is not remorseless, but to escape from a trap he has to act without pity' (p.5). The desire to escape from the various figurative prisons that threaten to engulf him is the deep-seated motive that prompts all of Tom's actions in the play and renders them consistent.

Tom at the warehouse

The most obvious trap from which Tom is trying to escape is his job at the warehouse, to which he feels chained as the sole provider for his family. To someone like Tom, who holds with D.H. Lawrence that 'man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter' (p.52), the warehouse is a veritable cage that shackles all basic impulses. This appears clearly in Tom's description of his job in Scene Three. The ugliness of the industrial setting, the numbingly repetitive activity, and the alienating effect of the job, turn the warehouse into a box in which Tom experiences death-in-life. Notice his revealing statement: 'I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains—than go back mornings!' (p.41).

The warehouse, then, is a prison in which he and his companions of the lower middle class, 'this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society', are forced to 'exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism' (p.21). The confinement in the warehouse is worse for Tom because he is a poet, unlike his co-workers. He reports that his

companions, at first hostile and suspicious, gradually grew more tolerant of him but never got beyond considering him 'an oddly fashioned dog who trots across their path at some distance' (p.69). The same combination of benevolence and irony is traceable in the nickname 'Shakespeare' (p.68) given Tom by Jim. The alienation and the isolation that characterise Tom's situation at the warehouse are restated near the end of the play when, defending himself against Amanda's reproaches about the gentleman caller, Tom remarks, 'the warehouse is where I work, not where I know things about people' (p.113). From this industrial version of the concentration camp, Tom seeks escape in literary activity. By day he retires 'to a cabinet of the washroom to work on poems' (p.68). His refuge, hardly a place conducive to poetic inspiration, provides an ironic comment on the whole situation: literary work even here is better than the activity in the warehouse!

Tom at home

By night Tom would likewise escape into his poetic world were it not that Amanda's anxiety about his health—prompted both by motherly solicitude and by fear for the family's sole source of income—prevents any creative concentration. Amanda's sermons to Tom at the table and her 'hawklike attention to every bite he takes' (p.24) not only spoil his meals but help to make 'home' a cage as oppressive as the warehouse.

Amanda's over-protective attitude naturally extends to clothing. As Tom is about to leave for the warehouse after yet another painful conversation with his mother in Scene Four she requests that he 'put his wool muffler on', whereupon Tom 'snatches it angrily from the closet and tosses it around his neck and pulls both ends tight' (p.54). The gesture may well be meant as a sarcastic simulation of Amanda's stifling influence on his life.

Another episode connected with clothes also exemplifies Amanda's mothering role and Tom's growing impatience with it. After the violent quarrel of Scene Three, in which Tom compares his mother to a witch, Amanda grabs his arm as he tries to get past her. Tom screams at her 'Don't grab at me, mother!' but catches his arm in the sleeve of the coat that he is struggling to put on. The stage direction informs us that 'he tears the coat off again splitting the shoulder of it, and hurls it across the room against the fragile collection of Laura's glass animals' (p.42). The whole action shows the confinement of Tom's life and his mother's active role in it, foreshadowing the cruel action of escape that will later become necessary. Tom's helpless kneeling beside the scattered debris also hints at the remorse which will haunt him after his departure, a remorse which he acknowledges in his last speech as narrator (p.115).

Tom's self-reproaches, another aspect of the prison-like atmosphere that surrounds him, are grounded in Amanda's belief that he has a moral obligation to serve as substitute head of the family. Sharing with Tom her apprehensions about Laura's future, Amanda sets down as the condition for his release the finding of a suitable husband for his sister: 'as soon as Laura has got somebody to take care of her, married, a home of her own, independent—why then you'll be free to go wherever you please' (p.53). Laura is thus made by her mother into another stifling element of Tom's prison. But the real agent of confinement is Amanda, and the cage of Tom's moral obligation is made all the more binding through her self-effacement—'I don't say me because I'm old and don't matter! I say for your sister because she's young and dependent' (p.53)—and her ostentatious show of solicitude for Laura.

Tom's routes of escape

Caught in Amanda's moral blackmail, Tom in one instance angrily draws a world in which he fancies himself as all-powerful, and where his current imposed behaviour and morality are smashed. This flight of his imagination, inspired less by Tom's real dream than by a desire to oppose and hurt his mother, is contained in the violent outburst against Amanda that immediately precedes his breaking of Laura's figurines. With his evocation of the underworld, Tom blasts at the heart of his mother's dreams. For her 'gentle South' he substitutes a brutal, insensitive northern gang culture; for the halcyon plantation life, a battering urban vision. Notice, however, that in spite of this clash of dreams, both mother and son resort to basically the same escape mechanism to blot out an oppressive reality.

Another example of Tom's attempt to escape from his prison, even temporarily, is his frequent filmgoing. The 'shower of movie-ticket stubs' that falls to the ground as he rummages through his pocket to find his key belies Amanda's suspicion that 'Nobody goes to the movies night after night. Nobody in their right mind goes to the movies as often as you pretend to' (p.41). Tom's addiction to films spotlights the intensity of his restlessness and the increasing difficulty he experiences in controlling it. The 'narcotic of the cinema', as one critic has called it, coupled with bouts of heavy drinking, lets him forget temporarily the oppression of the apartment. He tastes adventure vicariously, becoming a hero at the cinema as he never can at home. His report to Laura at the start of Scene Four on 'the very long programme' and the Malvolio show (pp.44–5) recaptures the essentials of his situation. The financial hardships of the Great Depression, the confinement in the warehouse, the smothering affection of his mother, the moral obligation to his sister, the frustration of his poetic ambitions—all are likened to a living death, an entrapment in a nailed-up coffin. The allusion to the coffin on one hand and the lighted portrait on the other poses Tom's dilemma in drastically clear scenic terms as a choice between death and escape.

For the attentive reader, however, Williams has introduced a skilfully managed touch of dramatic irony. From the start we have been given indications that Tom will not be able to imitate the actor's non-violent escape in real life. The first words of the Prologue—'I am the opposite of a stage magician'—clearly exclude the possibility that Tom will ever be able to emulate Malvolio's trick.

Much the same meaning is implicit in Williams's decision to have Tom wear a sailor's outfit in both the Prologue and the Epilogue. Exhibited at the very beginning of the play, the sailor's clothes have a prophetic value. They announce that despite the various prisons that threaten to detain him, Tom will ultimately manage to 'escape into freedom' and accomplish the destiny that he imagines is before him. His outfit, then, stresses the inevitability of the play's outcome. But the precise nature of the costume (in the acting version specifically described as consisting of a pea jacket and a watch cap, both garments designed to protect sailors in foul weather) indicates that Tom's freedom is 'an ambiguous one, that the romantic dream of escaping into a world of freedom and large vistas' announced by the projected image of a 'Sailing Vessel with Jolly Roger' has been deflated. The universe into which Tom has escaped is described in the Epilogue as a world of alienation, uprootedness, and loneliness. Instead of freedom at sea, Tom has merely found the cold and hostile world of harbours swept by winter and the lonely, aimless wandering of the dispossessed.

The final irony comes with Tom's rueful concluding acknowledgment that he has escaped one prison only to fall into another, that of his guilty conscience, his memories of home, the glass animals and quaint melodies, his sister's gaze. From Prologue to Epilogue Tom thus emerges, like Amanda in her yellow dress, as a dreamer whose romantic visions, although destroyed by reality, linger hauntingly in his consciousness.

Laura Wingfield

Laura is the most pathetic figure of the play. A good deal of her character is expressed in the connotations of the nickname 'Blue Roses' given her in high school by Jim. The unusual combination of words epitomises Laura's whole being. Through its association with the colour blue, the rose is here deprived of its traditional overtone of passion, as is Laura, but it acquires an aura of strangeness and uniqueness which subtly renders the fragile prettiness of the girl and, at the same time, her alienation and estrangement, her difference from the others, her vital inadequacy. Moreover, playing on another meaning of 'blue' Williams here suggests the atmosphere of sadness and melancholy that envelops Laura's slight, hardly real person.

If we turn from Laura's nickname to her physical appearance we find many of these suggestions restated and confirmed. Laura's dress in Scene Two, as described by Williams, adds to the overtones conveyed by her nickname and associates her with yet another flower. In the beginning of the scene, Laura is seen seated in a delicate ivory chair at a small claw-foot table, wearing a kimono of soft violet material. Recalling the violet, a flower which traditionally symbolises modesty, the colour of Laura's dress combines with the daintiness of the furniture to surround her with fragility and shyness. The delicacy with which Laura's association with flowers endows her is again evoked in her confession that she had sought refuge from business school in 'that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers' at the zoo.

Laura's strangeness and vulnerability are further presented as the accelerating factor of her separation from the world. Her limp is the outward sign that marks her as one of those whose excessive sensitivity exposes them to symbolic mutilation in an unfeeling modern world. Laura's brace is the mechanical device that remedies the physical defect but aggravates the moral damage. In high school, as she tells Jim, arriving late for class was humiliating because she imagined that the clumping of the brace attracted everybody's attention to her limp. Laura's physical defect and the mechanical remedy, her limp and her brace, have been identified by many critics as symbols of Amanda's influence on her daughter. Nancy Tischler remarks, for example, that 'It is Amanda's forcefulness that allows Laura to walk at all, but it is also Amanda's example that discourages Laura from walking naturally.'*

Laura's relationship with Amanda

During the elaborate preparation in Scene Six for the gentleman caller's visit, an event engineered to remedy Laura's inability to make social contacts, Amanda produces 'two powder puffs which she wraps in handkerchiefs and stuffs in Laura's bosom' (p.70) to cover up another of the girl's physical deficiencies: 'to be painfully honest, your chest is flat'. But instead of boosting Laura's morale, instead of easing her tension and steadying her delicate balance, all the preparations seem instead to reduce her meagre natural resources and to upset her inner poise.

Amanda's 'bracing' of her daughter finally brings the girl to a state of terror that ultimately defeats the purpose of the gentleman caller's visit. Amanda's social skills contrast unfortunately with Laura's awkwardness. Amanda is a natural hostess; Laura is retiring and shy. This painful difference is evident yet again in a small incident connected with clothes. At one point, Laura puts on 'a shapeless felt hat' and her

*In *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan*, The Citadel Press, New York, 1965, p.99.

mother's 'inaccurately made-over coat, the sleeves too short for Laura' (p.47) to go out to the neighbourhood delicatessen on an errand. The poorly fitting garment on Laura's back represents an unsuccessful attempt to don a personality not her own, to adopt ideas alien to her nature in the hope of coping more adequately with the outside world.

It is symptomatic of her failure in this respect that, as she steps out of apartment in her mother's clothes, she slips on the landing of the fire escape and almost hurts herself seriously (p.47). This seemingly unimportant incident shows that Laura can exist in relative safety on only one level of reality, that of the apartment with her music and glass figurines. Contrary to Amanda's belief that 'Sticks and stones can break our bones, but the expression on Mr Garfinkel's face won't harm us!' (p.47), the hostile reception of an insensitive world—'Mother, they make such faces when I ask them to charge it'—is as painful to Laura as a real fracture.

Another instance of Amanda's ambivalent role in Laura's life is provided by the episode at Rubicam Business College. Here again, Amanda promotes a project financed by the subscription campaign money and designed to transmute Laura, if she cannot be a Southern belle, a wife, and a mother, into a career girl. But Laura cannot cope with the mechanisation of the contemporary world represented by the weekly speed test on the typewriter any more than she can bear the mercenary insensitivity on Mr Garfinkel's face. The first makes her sick; the second causes her to fall.

Laura's refuges: The victrola, the glass animals, and others

The scratchy, old-fashioned music of the gramophone presents Laura with her own world of sounds, her private shelter against the noise of the Paradise Dance Hall. A recognisable offspring of the past-oriented Amanda, Laura takes refuge from the hot swing music and the staccato rhythms of the industrial world in the sentimental melodies of the 1920s. The tunes that are Laura's musical refuge, although different from the melody that serves as a leitmotif for the play as a whole, share some of its characteristics. The girl's preference for the music of the past implies a movement away from actuality that recalls the music-from-afar quality of the leitmotif melody. These tunes, moreover, are recorded on 'those worn-out phonograph records her father left as a painful reminder of him' (p.34). It is thus hinted that Laura's retreat into the music and her huddling beside the old victrola may be part of an unconscious search for a father, her instinctive quest for protection against her overpowering mother.

The role of the melodies as a refuge is underlined once again when Laura must confront the gentleman caller, the representative of a world from which she flees. As the doorbell rings, the tension that has been

building up is too much for her and she begs Amanda not to make her go to the door. When Amanda finally orders her to 'march right to that door!' (p.75), the stage direction notes that 'A faraway, scratchy rendition of Dardanella softens the air and gives her strength to move through it. She slips to the door and draws it cautiously open' (p.76). The opening of the door acquires here a symbolic significance that transcends the mere gesture of welcome. Laura is afraid to let the outsider into her life. The outcome shows her apprehension to have been instinctively right.

Laura's is a universe not only of sound but of glass, centring on the collection of figurines announced in the title. She withdraws to the company of her little animals whenever the outside world becomes threatening. When Amanda mentions the possibility of marriage, a stage direction specifies that 'Laura utters a startled, doubtful laugh. She reaches quickly for a piece of glass' (p.35), seeking protection from her mother's suggestion of matrimony in the tactile comfort of her figurines.

Laura's retreat to a dark corner of the stage, her huddling amidst inanimate objects which she endows with imaginary existence, is indicative of her movement away from real life, of the 'separation' that Williams mentions in his initial description of her and ultimately of her unfitness for existence. That suggestion is further reinforced by her identification with the thirteen-year-old glass unicorn, the figurine dearest to her.

Laura talks about the unicorn with warmth and sympathy, admitting that its singularity may make it feel lonesome and uncomfortable in a world which, as the playwright says, attempts to reduce living creatures to automatons. Her warning to Jim—'Oh, be careful—if you breathe, it breaks!' (p.101)—may well imply that since the unicorn is only an imaginary creature, the act of breathing (a basic manifestation of real life) might be too much of a test for it, as it is in a different sense for her. The unicorn, even more than the glass collection as a whole, is a perfect symbol for Laura. To the characteristic fragility and delicate beauty possessed by all glass figurines, it adds the quality of uniqueness and, as a consequence, almost of freakishness. In it are thus extended the various implications of Laura's nickname, 'Blue Roses'.

The world of music and glass which Laura superimposes on her surroundings conceals their shabbiness from her. Since she shares neither her brother's desire to escape nor her mother's dream of retrieved gentility, the apartment, for her, is not a prison. It is protective and pacifying. Thus the opening of Scene Two, which reveals her alone at home in her dainty chair with her violet dress, washing and polishing her collection of glass to the sound of her favourite music (p.29), provides a picture of perfect serenity. This is the only scene in which Laura seems to attain a quiet happiness.

When her mother's misdirected ambition forces her into the world of business, and when the weekly speed test proves to be more than she can take, Laura, looking for the shelter she usually finds in the company of her little glass animals, seeks refuge at the city zoo. Here again she is unaware of the unpleasant aspect of the place, with its caged inhabitants; to her the cage is rather a means of protection against a threatening outside world. The penguins, her favourite animals, are no less revealing of Laura's deep-seated feelings of inadequacy than is her little unicorn. In them, she unconsciously sees reflected her own limp and general helplessness. She feels akin to them and pathetically states that she visited them every day.

Her other refuge at the zoo, the 'jewel-box', 'that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers' (p.33), obliquely illustrates another aspect of Laura. Her prediliction for the hothouse again implies that she is a beautiful but fragile plant, too frail for the 'winter of the cities' world that her mother describes on learning of her truancy: 'Walking? In winter? Deliberately courting pneumonia in that light coat?' (p.32). When forced to leave the protective apartment for the ugly world of the city, Laura thus instinctively finds her way back to a substitute refuge, a place where she feels comfortable.

The absence in Laura's mind of a resentment comparable to her brother's or an ambition like her mother's, and her indifference to life outside the apartment, are clearly brought out in the episode in which Amanda, elated by her conversation with Tom about a possible gentleman caller, calls Laura out of the kitchen to express her deepest yearnings by wishing on the moon. Amanda's forceful, almost physical insistence elicits only a bewildered reaction from her dreamy daughter, for whom the door that Tom has left open on the outside world exerts less of a fascination than the beloved interior from which she is dragged away. Laura's genuine puzzlement establishes that her mother's aspirations are completely foreign to her quietly serene and contented nature.

When Jim intrudes upon her life and that of the household, he will for a moment throw open the door to replace the old-fashioned music with that coming from the Paradise Dance Hall, and the fragile glow of the glass menagerie with the tinselly cheap flashes of the large glass sphere that hangs from the ceiling there. After his departure, darkness sets in over the remnants of the glass animals: Laura is irremediably broken for having opened the door of her life to let in a representative of the modern mechanised world.

The gentleman caller: Jim O'Connor

The name of the gentleman caller, Jim D. O'Connor, establishes him at the very start as an Irishman. 'The D. is for Delaney', Tom says, eliciting

Amanda's exclamation, 'Irish on *both* sides! *Gracious!* And doesn't drink?' (p.63). More than a preconceived idea about the Irish as a people, Amanda's remark expresses her fear of marrying her daughter to a drunkard like her own husband. Later in the play, her exclamation acquires ironic overtones: in her eagerness to find a suitable partner for Laura she has overlooked a far more obvious obstacle to the marriage than the one brought to her mind by the mention of Jim's name.

Jim is described in the introductory remarks as 'a nice, ordinary, young man' (p.5). In the scene with Laura he is comically identified with a large ruminant as he reflectively chews gum, declaring that he feels 'comfortable as a cow' (p.90). The image conveys Jim's tremendous good nature and gentle humour, but juxtaposed with Laura's shelves of dainty glass figurines, it also suggests a massive insensitivity as compared to the girl's delicate fragility.

Another trait of Jim's physique further stresses the radical contrast between Jim and Laura while simultaneously hinting at an ultimate resemblance between them. His fellow worker, Tom says, has 'the scrubbed and polished look of white chinaware' (p.68). More explicitly still, in his scene with Laura, Jim states, 'I'm not made out of glass' (p.102). The unexpected comparison to chinaware deprives Jim of the shining prettiness conveyed by the imagery of glass surrounding Laura, endowing him instead with the dull, attenuated radiance of the common kitchen dish and reducing him to the ordinary boy that he is. Although the image of chinaware reveals in Jim a kind of commonness and ordinariness, a fibre coarser than Laura's, it nevertheless introduces an overtone of fragility perhaps less conspicuous but equally real. Though Jim may not, as he unequivocally states, be made out of glass, he is all the same breakable.

Jim and the American Dream

In Tom's opening speech, Jim is described as 'the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from' (p.23). The 'world of reality' ushered in by Jim is presented less as the real world of the late 1930s than as a caricature of the American Dream by a shallow, selfish materialist. For Jim, the industrial world of the warehouse is neither an environment that stifles his deeper personal aspirations nor a milieu alienating him from his fellow man. It is not a prison for the 'enslaved' lower middle class but that class's 'rung on the ladder towards success'.* It is symptomatic that while Tom should feel 'an oddly fashioned dog' (p.69) without any point of contact with his fellow workers, Jim has the ear and is the confidant of Mr Mendoza, the foreman.

*Stein, Roger B.: '*The Glass Menagerie* Revisited: Catastrophe without Violence'. *Western Humanities Review* 18 (Spring 1964), pp.141–53.

As a confirmed advocate of the American Dream, Jim is also a great believer in self-improvement through education and has therefore enrolled in a course in public speaking that 'fits you for—executive positions!' (p.77). The lecture on self-confidence, delivered for the benefit of a wondering and mildly bewildered Laura (pp.98–9), is nothing more than an expansion of the cliché which Amanda had earlier urged upon Tom: 'Try and you will *succeed*' (p.49). Jim's infatuation with the dream of a better, greater, and richer life for all is further manifested in his admiration for the Wrigley Building in Chicago and the 'fortune made by the guy that invented the first piece of chewing gum' (p.90). His enthusiastic account of the Hall of Science at the Century of Progress exhibition implies a blind faith in the possibility of infinite material progress secured by technological advances. Jim's ardent profession of faith in electrodynamics builds to a climax: 'Full steam—[His eyes are starry] *Knowledge*—zzzzp! *Money*—Zzzzzzp!—*Power*! That's the cycle democracy is built on! (p.100).

Yet for all its convincing dynamism, Jim's advocacy of the American Dream is full of ironic touches. The discrepancy between his 'strident theme of success' and the less glamorous reality before us is underlined by his own mention of an 'America even more wonderful than the present' in a household composed of a son who is 'a poet with a job in a warehouse' and who plunges the family into darkness because he refused to pay the light bill; a mother, a relic of a brilliant past, who is forced to sell magazine subscriptions and ladies' underwear to make both ends meet; and a daughter whose shyness prevents her from confronting the outside world—all haunted by the memory of a father who was an undistinguished telephone man before he deserted them. Adding further to the irony is the fact that Jim himself seems to have experienced the acme of his dream of success in the past, during his high school days.

An image projected on a screen on the stage obtrusively presents Jim as a 'High School Hero' (p.68), while Tom, as narrator, offers the following introduction: 'In high school Jim was a hero . . . He seemed to move in a continual spotlight. He was a star in basketball, captain of the debating club, president of the senior class and the glee club and he sang the male lead in the annual light operas. He was always running or bounding, never just walking. He seemed always at the point of defeating the law of gravity' (p.68). From Tom's description Jim emerges as the prototype of the 'up and coming American boy'. Naturally energetic, athletically inclined, scholastically gifted, socially popular, Jim 'was shooting with such velocity through his adolescence that you would logically expect him to arrive at nothing short of the White House by the time he was thirty' (p.68). Yet even as Jim's vitality erupts on stage, a series of qualifying touches become apparent.

Even during Tom's presentation, the image on the screen switches from the 'High School Hero' to a mere 'clerk' (p.68), emphasising the idea of decline. In the course of Jim's conversation with Tom it becomes apparent that the former 'captain of the debating club' now needs to take up 'a course in public speaking' (p.77), and that instead of the presidential mansion in Washington he has to make do with a dingy St Louis factory office. All this irony is recaptured in the incident in which he and Laura read *The Torch* together. Jim's high school successes are recorded in the school yearbook, which Jim himself regards with nostalgia. When Laura produces the bound volume Jim exclaims, 'Holy Jeez! *The Torch*!', and the stage direction directs him to accept it reverently (p.95). The very name *The Torch* evokes Jim's flamboyant Promethean youth. But now, as he enters Laura's life for the second time, he is merely carrying an 'old candelabrum melted out of shape' whose few candles produce only a 'flickering light' (p.88). The ironic contrast is underlined when Jim, seated next to the feeble source of light and unaware of the pathetic touch of irony, describes himself as 'in the limelight' (p.90). The gap between the Promethean youth and the shoe-factory clerk, between the intense spotlight outlining the youthful star and the dim candlelight illuminating the gentleman caller, is the stark gulf between promise and actuality. When he hears that Laura wanted him to autograph her copy of *The Torch* but never could summon up the courage to approach him about it, Jim takes the book from her and signs it with a flourish. In so doing he reveals not only his appreciation of Laura's belatedly expressed admiration but also his nostalgic desire to cast himself in the glorious role once again. Through this episode Jim indirectly shows himself to be as much a dreamer as Amanda. The satisfaction he receives from reliving his high-school past parallels Amanda's elation at recalling her Blue Mountain days, and his declaration that one day his signature may be worth something parallels her hope for future material security.

Tom's statement that 'I was valuable to [Jim] as someone who could remember his former glory, who had seen him win basketball games and the silver cup in debating' (p.68) introduces by implication the growing inferiority complex that Jim bluntly acknowledges later in the play: 'You know what I judge to be the trouble with you? Inferiority complex! Know what that is? That's what they call it when someone low-rates himself! I understand it because I had it, too' (p.98). Although Jim goes on finding reasons for his not feeling that way any more and for his thinking of himself as of a superior being, the end of the speech contains some revealing stage directions: '[Unconsciously glances at himself in the mirror] All you've got to do is discover in *what* [you are superior]! Take me, for instance. [He adjusts his tie at the mirror]' (p.99). Beyond his evident narcissism and self-centredness, Jim

obliquely shows through his furtive look in the mirror that he needs the reassurance of his looks and neatly-groomed attire.

Six years of fading illusions and dimming popularity, six years of 'running into interference' (p.68) have brought Jim to doubt, in the innermost recess of his psyche, the possibility of the brilliant future he was once promised. He is not broken but the crack is clearly perceptible. Even while he enunciates the method that might still lead him to the top, he cannot help taking into account that after all that time he is still 'planning to get in on the ground floor' (p.100). His glance at the mirror, then, is an attempt to quell the fears and doubts that rise in him even as he tries to plant some self-confidence in Laura.

Jim, Laura, and the unicorn

Turning from his own uncertain image in the mirror to the strange girl in front of him, the representative of the outside world acknowledges his inability to perceive the reason for her fascination with the glass collection and expresses his misgivings about having to handle the little animals. His statement 'I'm pretty clumsy with things' (p.101), introducing as it does the long scene in which Jim starts probing into Laura's intimate being, is full of ominous forebodings. The only strategy Jim can think of to draw Laura away from her morbid fascination is to invite her to 'cut the rug a little' (p.102) to the waltz music coming from the Paradise Dance Hall. Jim thus lures Laura out of her dream-like universe and invites her to move with him into the world of the alley, to become identified with the innumerable couples moving indistinctly in the flickering light of 'deceptive rainbows' or seeking the relative privacy of the alleyway in search of a fleeting moment of intimacy.

As Jim swings Laura into motion they hit the little table. The unicorn falls to the floor, its horn broken off. In the course of the play the unicorn has come to stand for at least two things: for Laura herself and for the possibility of her escape into an unreal world of glass. The unicorn breaks, then—aptly, it would seem—at the moment when Laura emerges from the world of her lifeless companions and transfers the function of refuge to the person of Jim. The breaking of the unicorn marks the turning point in Laura's life. The flickering, unreal world of glass toys no longer suffices as she feels rising in her a desire to disregard her freakishness, to dance like all the others, to belong to the real world.

The event symbolises a kind of emotional deflowering, an irreversible loss of childlike innocence, the unavoidable mutilation that Williams sees as necessarily accompanying the process of growing up. Laura's reaction to the accident, however, reveals that she is less concerned about what she has lost than about what she vaguely senses might be a gain: 'It doesn't matter. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise . . . It's no tragedy, Freckles. Glass breaks so easily—no matter how careful you

are—the traffic jars the shelves and things fall off them . . . Now he will feel more at home with the other horses, the ones that don't have horns' (p.104). Her surprisingly mild comment brings to the surface her deep-seated desire to 'feel more at home with the others'. Excited at the prospect of being able to identify with the patrons of the Paradise Dance Hall—she is 'laughing breathlessly' (p.103) a moment before the incident—Laura does not reproach Jim with clumsiness but instead indirectly expresses her gratitude to him for his part in ending an era.

Her expression of gratitude is qualified, however, by the fact that she equates Jim's effect on the unicorn with that of the heavy traffic outside. Jim, then, is obliquely identified with the hubbub outside, with destructive trucks and lorries. In this speech of Laura's, Williams masterfully manages to maintain the ambiguous value of Jim at this crucial moment in the girl's life: a potential saviour on the one hand, he is also her possible destroyer. Now that he has charmed her away from her lifeless friends, Jim the parlour psychiatrist imagines a shortcut that would miraculously make Laura come fully alive: 'Somebody needs to build your confidence up and make you proud instead of shy and turning away and—blushing—Somebody—ought to—Ought to—*kiss* you, Laura!' (p.106).

The new breath Jim wants to inspire in Laura is, in his opinion, what will make her capable of living in his world. However, the warning of Laura about her favourite glass animal—'Oh, be careful—if you breathe, it breaks!' still reverberates in the air as Jim draws Laura to him and 'kisses her on the lips'. The revelation of the world of physical intimacy unleashes in Laura a store of hidden feelings whose intensity is conveyed through her changing expression and prolonged silence. As he releases her, 'she sinks on the sofa with a bright, dazed look'; after a moment, when he addresses her, 'she looks up, smiling, not hearing the question' (p.106). As he offers her a piece of candy 'she doesn't seem to hear him but her look grows brighter even' (p.107). Only as Jim proceeds with his revelation about the existence of a fiancée, rhapsodising insensitively about 'the power of love' (p.108), does Laura's blissful look disappear. As the cruel fact dawns upon her that after taking her away from her enchanted sphere, Jim cannot take her any further, Laura is literally thrown off balance by the violent contrast between her expectations and this experience, as successive stage directions make clear: 'Laura sways slightly forward and grips the arm of the sofa . . . Leaning stiffly forward, clutching the arm of the sofa, Laura struggles visibly with her storm' (p.108).

By the end of Jim's speech, the illumination of his passage in Laura's life is completely gone: 'The holy candles in the altar of Laura's face have been snuffed out. There is a look of almost infinite desolation' (p.108). After a pause of crushing despair, Laura 'opens her hand again

on the broken glass ornament. Then she gently takes his hand and raises it level with her own. She carefully places the unicorn in the palm of his hand, then pushes his fingers closed upon it'. What Jim takes with him is the symbol of Laura's short-lived hopes, a souvenir of the normal feelings he aroused in her for too brief a moment. Giving up the broken unicorn, Laura symbolically gives up all hope of ever being an average girl, all desire of ever realising in the outside world the deeper yearnings Jim has aroused in her.

Immediately after surrendering the mutilated glass figurine, Laura retreats to the only refuge still available: 'She rises unsteadily and crouches beside the victrola to wind it up' (p.109). This slight motion underlines Laura's renunciation of the world, making it clear, as Nelson has noted, that 'She will never allow a Jim O'Connor to happen to her again.' A few moments later, when the news of Jim's engagement reaches Amanda, the cameo tragedy of the broken unicorn acquires the larger overtones of a social catastrophe. In Amanda's eyes Jim was, we should remember, the fairy-tale prince who was to put the glass slipper on Laura's foot and make the American Dream come true. His defection prevents Amanda from glossing over the ugly facts any longer: 'The effort, the preparations, all the expense! The new floor lamp, the rug, the clothes for Laura! All for what? To entertain some other girl's fiance! Go to the movies, go! Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job!' (pp.113–4).

The pathos of the situation is enhanced by Amanda's use of words she has hitherto banned not only from her own vocabulary but from Tom's. Her lapse reveals that with the gentleman caller's departure, the dreams and illusions which the spectator had been tempted to share with her, have collapsed. Her last speech leaves the audience and the reader, who know from Tom's conversation with Jim that Tom is about to follow in his father's footsteps, with even less hope than Amanda. The final pantomime, presenting her consoling gestures towards Laura as an endlessly repeated dumbshow, emphasises the profound despair of the play's bleak vision.

The set

The Glass Menagerie is set in St Louis, the principal city of Missouri, a town Tennessee Williams knew well from having spent several childhood years there. The picture of urban life presented in the play bears clear traces of the personal aversion to big city existence Williams conceived when he was forced as an eight-year-old to leave the rural community of Clarksdale, Mississippi, where his grandfather was an Episcopalian minister, to live in St Louis, where his father had been promoted to a managerial position.

'Neither my sister nor I could adjust ourselves to life in a mid-western city . . . in a perpetually dim little apartment in a wilderness of identical brick and concrete structures with no grass and no trees . . . only ugly rows of apartment buildings the colour of dried blood and mustard.'* Although the playwright acknowledged that 'the apartment where we lived wasn't as dingy and poverty-stricken as that in the play',** the set attests to his horrified reaction to the shabbiness of his new surroundings.

'The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hivelike conglomerations of cellular living-units that . . . are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automatism' (p.21). The repellent uniformity of the habitat, explicitly presented by Williams as an architectural extension of the lower-middle-class tendency to social conformity, represents self-imposed imprisonment, the voluntary abdication of personal uniqueness. As a poet—in Williams's view someone endowed with heightened sensitivity and awareness of individual differences—Tom is painfully aware of the squalid sameness of his surroundings, which becomes one of the things prodding him to escape.

The Wingfield apartment overlooks an alley. It is flanked on both sides by other 'dark, narrow alleys which run into murky canyons of tangled clothes-lines, garbage cans, and the sinister lattice-work of neighbouring fire escapes' (p.21). Although these dead-end streets, like the drab rows of apartments, remain unseen by the playgoer, they acquire immediate reality and a definite symbolic meaning for the reader. They make it clear that Tom's final departure in a burst of anger is not an act of deliberate cruelty but rather the desperate act of a man who fears being entombed alive.

Visible on the side of the stage are the landing and first steps of a fire escape which is, unexpectedly, the only means of getting in and out of the apartment, a feature meant to emphasise its prisonlike nature. Even if, at the end of the play, it turns into Tom's route of escape from his unbearable situation, its overtones of liberation are strongly qualified. The fire escape leads Tom away from 'the implacable fires of human desperation' into an existence of aimless wandering and perhaps an involuntary military career in the Second World War.

The interior of the apartment occupied by the Wingfields is revealed, at the end of Tom's opening commentary, through the grim rear wall of the building. It is composed essentially of a living room (downstage), 'which also serves as a sleeping-room for Laura, the sofa unfolding to

*Williams, Tennessee: 'Facts About Me', record cover, *Tennessee Williams Reading from His Works*, Caedmon TC 1005, 1952.

**Quoted in Van Gelder, Robert: 'Playwright with a good conceit', *The New York Times*, 22 April 1945.

make her bed' (p.21), and, on the other side of a second proscenium arch, a dining room (upstage). The dim lighting throughout the play, the dusty curtains and the shabby-genteel furniture reinforce the overtones of poverty in this middle-city prison.

The set so far described might well fit a naturalistic drama. However, Williams was aiming at something quite different, for 'The scene is memory and is therefore nonrealistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic licence. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart' (p.21). Clearly the author intended not realism in this set, but atmosphere. This view is restated, together with Williams's conception of symbolism and 'plastic theatre', in the Production Notes to the play.

The unhappiest of the devices used by Williams in *The Glass Menagerie* to create his 'plastic theatre' was a screen on which images or titles were to be projected—an idea obviously borrowed from the 'epic' forms of Erwin Piscator* and Bertolt Brecht,** which Williams had discovered during his studies at the New School for Social Research, at the time also the academic home of Piscator. The device was intended to help the audience's understanding by 'strengthen[ing] the effect of what is merely allusion in the writing and allow[ing] the primary point to be made more simply and lightly than if the entire responsibility were on the spoken lines' (p.8). Unlike Brecht, who uses the same device to project political or social comments, Williams would have liked, had his producers concurred with his plan, to fill the screen with pictures or slogans that could 'have a definite emotional appeal' (p.8) for the spectators. Thus he wanted the words 'où sont les neiges?'† to be projected during Amanda's nostalgic recollections of Blue Mountain; another phrase, 'the crust of humility', would have appeared in the background on the occasion of her discouraged sermon to Laura after the business college failure.

*Erwin Piscator (1893–1966) was a theatrical director famous for the ingeniousness of his staging techniques. An outspoken sympathiser with the working-class, he used his 'total theatre' innovations—films, newsreels, optical and acoustic effects—for leftist political aims. He remained in the United States from 1939 to 1951.

**Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) is the most outstanding German playwright of the first half of the twentieth century. His theories about epic theatre, influenced by Piscator, led to the development of new acting methods and stage practices such as the famous 'alienation effect', the use of masks, the introduction of songs and slogans and screen projections, interrupting the action of plays with social or moral comments. Brecht's aim was to prevent the traditional identification of spectator and hero: instead, he wanted the audience to remain critically aloof in order better to pass judgement on the characters and the action.

†From the refrain question 'mais où sont les neiges d'antan?' (but where are the snows of yesteryear?) in 'La Ballade des Dames du Temps Jadis' by the French poet François Villon (1431–?63).

In other, less obvious cases, the legends would appear unintentionally ludicrous and would introduce a dismaying note of parody into the most poignant scenes. For example, when Laura is trying to overcome her paralysing shyness and come to dinner with the gentleman caller, Williams wanted the legend to read 'terror'. Then, as she stumbles toward the dining-room table, with Amanda and Tom rushing to her rescue, the screen was to comment 'ah'. Finally, when Jim O'Connor confesses that he is already engaged, destroying Amanda's dreams, the words projected were to have been 'the sky falls'. Fortunately, Eddie Dowling, the first director of the play, sensed how damaging the projections might prove in a play as delicate as *The Glass Menagerie*, and ordered them out. Williams did not dispute the decision and admitted that 'the extraordinary power of Miss Taylor's performance made it suitable to have the utmost simplicity in the physical production' (p.8). He never later insisted that the device be reintroduced on stage, although he included it in the published manuscript.

More felicitous than the intrusive device of the screen was the use of a musical motif composed by Paul Bowles and called 'The Glass Menagerie'. It is like 'circus music, not when you are on the grounds or in the immediate vicinity of the parade, but when you are at some distance and very likely thinking of something else. It seems under those circumstances to continue almost interminably and it weaves in and out of your preoccupied consciousness; then it is the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest. It expresses the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow' (p.9). The melody, connected with the figure of the narrator, contributes to the impression that the events of the play are remote in time, perceived as a memory-misted song that lingers hauntingly in his mind: 'It serves as a thread of connection and allusion between the narrator with his separate point in time and space and the subject of his story' (p.9). A background obligato, it weaves the various episodes together, restating in musical terms at the opening and closing of almost every scene the nostalgia that suffuses the narrator's recollections of Laura's fragile beauty.

The final extra-literary device on which Williams relies in this play is lighting, which he uses to emphasise emotional content. 'In keeping with the atmosphere of memory' (p.9), the stage is dim throughout the play. The Production Notes also, however, call for 'shafts of light . . . focused on selected areas or actors, sometimes in contradistinction to what is the apparent centre' (p.9). In the instance of Tom and Amanda's quarrel, in which Laura is a stunned onlooker, the spotlight is on her figure. Later, at supper, Laura's silently suffering figure on the sofa is again singled out as the visual centre.

Besides isolating the pathetic figure of Laura for emotional emphasis,

the light should moreover tinge her suffering with overtones of purity and sanctity. It should have a quality distinct from the lighting used for characters, 'a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas' (p.10). Quality, intensity, and frequency of light should, then, together with the special melody, reveal not the 'banality of surfaces', as Eugene O'Neill called it, but the reality of the protagonists' inner selves. Light and music help achieve the aim ascribed by Williams, following O'Neill, to all such 'unconventional techniques': 'to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are' (p.7).

Is *The Glass Menagerie* a tragedy?

Critics have often used the word 'tragic' to describe the characters and the events of the play. The above question is therefore legitimate, but the answer cannot be clear-cut or definitive. Much here depends on the reader's conception of tragedy, on the definition he applies, and on his evaluation of the play in comparison with tragedies of the past or with contemporary 'tragic' works. Although the arguments vary from one evaluation to the next, the critical consensus at this point seems to be that *The Glass Menagerie* falls short of tragedy. We should not try to come up with a final answer, but in discussion of the problem the following points should be heeded.

It is generally felt that the characters in the play lack the stature of the older tragic heroes, that their values and their aims in life are not as exalted. Some critics express this succintly by saying that the characters are not 'big' enough. This does not imply that they are not real or that their troubles are unimportant: all four may be experienced as intensely genuine characters, and the shattering of their lives has a great impact on an audience. But they are all failures, personal or social, in their own eyes or in the eyes of others, and as the drama unfolds they experience further failure. As one critic has put it, 'in the course of their drama they all perish a little'.*

Even more damaging to the play's claim to tragic status, the characters all appear to be doomed to fail from the very start. Whatever they do, however valiantly they struggle, however ingenious their strategies, they are never given a real chance; they are never in a position to right things. They appear from the outset as victims of 'circumstance, lost in a world beyond their comprehension—notice Amanda's observation that we live in such a mysterious universe' (p.86)—and overpowered by a situation which they have not created and which they cannot control. Their flight, then, is a desperate fending off of the inevitable, more often than not a retreat before an ineluctable fate. Tom's sailor attire in the Prologue clearly foreshadows the end of the play, reinforcing the sense of immediate doom that makes the destinies of the Wingfields pathetic and pitiable, but not tragic.

*Nelson, Benjamin: *Tennessee Williams: The Man and his Work*, Ivan Obolensky, New York, 1961, p.109.

For tragic greatness rests in part on the ability of the exceptional individual to control or direct his destiny; tragedy further postulates essential awareness and conscious choices. The characters of *The Glass Menagerie* are denied these qualities from the very beginning, labelled as they are as members of 'the huge middle class of America . . . matriculating in a school for the blind . . . having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy' (p.2). For all its surface agitation, their existence is best described as 'passing . . . without any change or adventure' (p.30).

When all is said, Amanda, Laura, and Tom are weak, nervous, and self-conscious characters living outside reality in a world of illusion and make-believe (and we have shown that much the same could be argued about Jim). They are, to use Williams's later words, all guinea pigs in the laboratory of God—the playthings of an all-powerful being who is intent on vexing or destroying them. The universe of the play is completely determined biologically, psychologically, and socially; there is no room for free will.

The end of the play, too, lacks tragic grandeur. It offers no solution, no direction, no message. Neither death nor the courageous facing up to a harder life enhance the stature of the characters; all they manage to do is endure, to live out a fate they cannot alter. The world of *The Glass Menagerie* disappears in 'everlasting darkness', disposed of by a scenic trick, blown out 'not with a bang but a whimper'. It is a world of unalleviated gloom, not of tragic exaltation.

Religious symbolism

Numerous unobtrusive references to the Bible and Christian religious practice are scattered throughout the play. In his thorough analysis of this aspect of the play, Stein* points out that such references are associated with all four characters. Thus Amanda refers to 'Christian martyrs' (pp.38, 55) in both of her telephone conversations and to 'Christian adults' (p.52) in her conversation with Tom about instinct. In her few moments of silent suffering in Scene Four, before Tom apologises, the music is the 'Ave Maria' (p.48), the musical composition to which the words of the Angel to Mary in the Annunciation episode are tradition-

*Stein, Roger B.: '*The Glass Menagerie* Revisited: Catastrophe without Violence', *Western Humanities Review* 18 (Spring 1964), pp.141–53; reprinted in Stephen S. Stanton (ed.): *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1977, pp.36–44.

ally set. 'Annunciation' (p.56) is in fact the word that was to appear projected on the screen at the beginning of Scene Five. Early in the play, Laura says that the suffering look on her mother's face reminds her of 'the picture of Jesus' mother in the museum' (p.33).

The Christian references that cluster around Tom appear primarily, although not exclusively, in his account of the magic act. Malvolio, the magician, may even be considered a caricature of Christ. On his music-hall stage he turned water into wine, as Christ did at the Cana wedding; the rainbow-coloured scarf ironically recalls the biblical sign of God's reconciliation with man after the flood; and the 'wonderfullest trick of all', in which he escapes from a nailed coffin, is a grotesque distortion of the events of Easter, an allusion reinforced by Amanda's refrain of 'Rise and Shine'.

It is around Jim O'Connor, however, that most of the religious symbolism is centred. It is through him that the Christian allusions acquire their keenest meaning. Jim is first introduced through his picture in *The Torch*, a title which immediately associates him with light. Later, on hearing his full name, Amanda exclaims 'That, of course, means fish', a comment which, 'functions not only literally, since Jim is Irish Catholic, but also figuratively, for fish is the traditional symbol of Christ'. For those attentive to the Christian symbolism used by the author, Jim might become identified with Christ, a saviour-figure. The air of expectancy created by the circumstances of the play is reinforced by Tom's description of the family's guest as a Messiah figure: 'he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for' (p.23).

Jim's arrival is accompanied by rain (p.74), underlining the hopes of fertility and renewal connected with his visit. Those overtones are, however, soon contradicted by Laura's unsuccessful attempt to come to the table and the ironic effect, in view of the outcome of the play, of Tom's grace: 'For these and all thy mercies—God's Holy Name be praised' (p.84). Even before the essential scene between Laura and Jim, an incident with symbolic significance strongly qualifies the hopes aroused by the gentleman caller's visit. The failure of the electricity supply after dinner, perhaps a glance ahead to the blackouts that are to come with the Second World War, prompts Amanda's joking question, 'Where was Moses when the lights went out?' (p.85). She thus evokes the figure of another saviour, whose fate it was to bring his flock only to within sight of the Promised Land. The suggestion of failure is reinforced by Amanda's answer to her own question: 'In the dark!' (p.85). Jim's potential as modern saviour is thus indirectly stated even as Williams obliquely hints at the elements that make his success doubtful. The after-dinner scene confirms the ominous forebodings: Jim is an abysmal failure in the role.

For Laura he institutes a modern mock-communion. At the outset of the scene he offers her dandelion 'wine' (p.89), which she shares with him; later, he completes the sacrament, as he is about to tell her the cruel truth, by presenting her with the ironically named 'Life Savers' (p.107), which she has no time to accept. The 'ceremony', moreover, is interspersed with Jim's accompanying advice to Laura, a commentary that Stein has aptly described as 'a Dale Carnegie* version of the Sermon on the Mount—self-help rather than divine help'. The whole scene is delicately suffused with the trembling light of a candelabrum rescued from a defunct Southern church, emphasising the religious overtones.

At the very centre of the final scene and of the Christian symbolism of the play is the unicorn incident. The unicorn is a traditional Christian symbol, usually representing purity. A frequent subject of Christian iconography, it is often represented as the leader of the pure animals and opponent of the serpent, leader of the impure animals. Early Christians even equated the unicorn with Christ himself. In the light of this traditional symbolism, Jim's instrumental role in the disfigurement of the unicorn is the final, decisive denial of his role as Messiah. What he ultimately takes with him is as much an emblem of his identity as a broken, powerless saviour as a souvenir of Laura.

For Laura, the unicorn breaks, appropriately enough, at a moment when the tinsel Paradise across the alley is haloed with an illusory light of salvation (the deceptive rainbow?). When this fades away with Jim's hasty departure, Laura is left with a dark emptiness. Far from being Laura's saviour, Jim destroys the one emblem of the saviour in her existence, leaving her in the dark. The blackout at the end of the play underlines the thoroughly pessimistic outcome.

By virtue of the religious overtones surrounding him, Jim is tentatively cast as a potential redeemer. The redemptive process is interrupted before its completion and the very discontinuity conveys the author's derisive attitude towards man's perennial but futile hope for some kind of salvation from a world and a condition in which he is trapped. It also vividly illustrates Williams's debunking of the religious tradition that fostered this illusion in the West and is now, after two thousand years of preaching, rejected or reduced to forms and formulas, mechanical gestures and empty words that have lost whatever original vitality they may have had and are totally unable to alleviate modern man's predicament. As Stein concluded: 'The bleakness of Williams' vision in *The Glass Menagerie* is complete.'

*Dale Carnegie (1888–1955) was a famous American teacher of public speaking. His book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) had a world-wide success. In it he elaborated methods of developing poise, concentration and self-confidence.