

The Values of a Society: *The Glass Menagerie*

By

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Set in the American south during the Great Depression, *The Glass Menagerie* is a powerful tale narrated by character Tom Wingfield, who reflects on his memories of family life and the events leading to his departure from the Wingfield home. Tennessee Williams writes the story, set in the 1930s during the Great Depression. It deals with a Southern family living in a city tenement in St. Louis, Missouri. The story reflects the values of the society and a family that belongs to the lower middle class in the late 1930s, a time of struggles and national conflicts. It depicts people who have lost their fortune and must work hard to survive, but who are not able to forget about their wealthy past. The play opens with a description of the Wingfield apartment and its surroundings. Tennessee Williams shows how the architecture of the buildings resembles the life of the people that live there, people living in a mass of human beings without identity. He shows them as isolated, like prisoners in a beehive that destroys their individuality and makes them like cattle. Tom, who is a sensitive person, is aware of this fact and wants to escape to preserve his creativity. He thinks that his creativity will be destroyed if he remains in such a place.

The Wingfields' apartment is like a prison from which Amanda and Laura, Tom's mother and sister, are unable to escape. By the end of the play, they are even more deeply enmeshed in their closed world than they were at the beginning. Amanda's great hope was that Laura would graduate from a business college and pursue a career as a secretary, but once she finds out that Laura was too shy even to attend classes, she pins all her hopes on finding Laura a husband. When that scheme fails too, all hope seems lost. A life of worry, economic insecurity and dependency seems inevitable. As a contrast to this, an image of escape is presented throughout the play, in the form of the photograph of the father that hangs on the wall. However, when Tom follows his father's example and walks out on his family, he finds that however far he travels; he remains trapped by the reach of memory. He cannot forget his sister and her plight. The two women in the play, Amanda and her daughter, Laura, live inside their own illusions because the outside world is too painful for them to face. Amanda lives in another time and place, the genteel, idealized world of the south during her youth. St. Louis during the 1930s is a different proposition altogether, and Amanda fails to make the adjustment. She endlessly repeats exaggerated tales of the south, and her numerous "gentlemen callers." She assumes that what worked for her (even though the man she chose walked out on her) will work for Laura too, even though times have changed. Tom tries to force her to face the facts that Laura is different from other girls, but Amanda refuses to accept this. All she can do is wish on the moon that things would turn out the way she wants them.

Set against the economic frustration of the Wingfield family, which leads to a closed circle of experience, is the ideal of the American Dream, which points ever upward. In spite of her impoverished life in St. Louis, Amanda is a believer in the Dream. She tells Tom that he simply has to work hard, and he will succeed. The poetic, imaginative Tom is not the sort of man to cultivate a normal career leading to success and wealth. Those are not his goals. Jim, Tom's

friend, represents the idea of the American Dream more. He is in love with the achievements and the promise of technology, and he has embraced the spirit of self-help and advancement through education. He believes that his life is on an upward trajectory, and that if he studies and plays his cards right, he can go as far as he wants to go in his career.

Even though the play draws directly on Williams' personal past, it presents situations and conflicts with which everyone can identify. The play reflects the values of the depression society in which it is set and in which it is written. Most readers can identify with the play since they have experienced some sense of entrapment caused by financial need. Many have been raised in families with only one parent. Almost everyone has felt Tom's rebelliousness, his desire to achieve independence, to experience adventure, to escape the boring routines of everyday life. All of us too will have felt something like Laura's conflicting emotions of shyness and longing for romance, her fear of the world and her yearning for connection.