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Teaching Tennessee Williams's

The Glass Menagerie

from

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Elizabeth Osborne



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *The Glass Menagerie*

THE GLASS MENAGERIE PREMIERED IN Chicago in 1944 and in New York in 1945. It was an immediate critical success, winning a New York Drama Circle award and establishing its creator as an important playwright.

Tennessee Williams (1911 – 1983) drew upon his own life for some of the details in *The Glass Menagerie* (which was actually a reworking of an earlier short story called “Portrait of a Girl in Glass”). Williams had a sister, Rose, who was mentally troubled and eventually underwent a lobotomy. The procedure destroyed her mind. The difference between sensitive people who thrive and sensitive people who do not, Williams came to believe, comes down to whether a person can use art to cope with his or her pain.

Art as a tool for controlling and reshaping mental pain is therefore an important theme in *The Glass Menagerie*. The protagonist and narrator, Tom Wingfield, is a would-be poet who works in a shoe factory to support his mother and sister; books and writing are his only way to avoid insanity. His battles with his mother over how he uses his mind and spends his life eventually compel him to run away.

Also important to *The Glass Menagerie* are the historical and social details of life in the late 1930s. The play is set in 1937 in St. Louis, Missouri; the events that will soon cause World War II are occurring, but people in St. Louis are mostly unaware of them.

Of course, Williams, who wrote “Portrait of a Girl in Glass” in the early 1940s, then reworked the material into *The Glass Menagerie* soon afterwards, knew about the war. The characters’ “matriculation in a school for the blind” is a deliberate device on his part. Only Tom, who is both narrator and character, living in the present and the past, is aware of what will happen.

The Glass Menagerie was an early example of a new kind of play—one that examined psychological patterns and family relationships through impressionistic, sometimes stream-of-consciousness, presentation. In fact, Williams calls *The Glass Menagerie* a “memory play” because of its dramatic presentation of the memories and impressions of the protagonist, Tom. Just as in memories, some details are exaggerated and some are left out. Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949) would take a similar approach.

The Glass Menagerie was adapted for film and television several times; one of the most popular is a 1973 version with Katherine Hepburn and Sam Waterston. High schools and small repertory theaters also choose to stage the play because it requires only a single, interior set; minimal props; and few actors.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *The Glass Menagerie*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Considering Oedipal Aspects of *The Glass Menagerie*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Oedipal Aspects of *The Glass Menagerie*.
2. As a class, review the information in “Notes on Psychoanalytic Theory.”
3. Have students work in pairs or individually. Each pair or individual will answer the questions on the handout.
4. Reconvene the class and use the following questions to start a class discussion:
 - What role does Jim play in the Oedipal structure of the play?
 - Discuss his relationship to each of the Wingfields, including Mr. Wingfield.

Feminist Criticism Applied to *The Glass Menagerie*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Comparing Views of Love, Courtship, and Marriage in *The Glass Menagerie*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Examining Love, Courtship, and Marriage in *The Glass Menagerie*.
2. Divide the class into four groups or a number divisible by four.
3. Assign to each group, or allow each to choose, one of the characters in *The Glass Menagerie*:
 - Tom
 - Amanda
 - Laura
 - Jim
4. Have each group discuss its character's scenes and then provide the requested information in the chart.
5. Reconvene the class and have each group present its findings.
6. As a class, compose possible one-sentence thesis statements that express the play's assumptions about the role of the woman in love, courtship, and marriage in *The Glass Menagerie*.

NOTE: Students do not need to agree, or even come to consensus. Your class may draft as many potential thesis statements as occur to the class.

NOTE: As an additional activity, you may want to assign one or more of these thesis statements as a writing assignment.

Marxist Approach Applied to *The Glass Menagerie*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Analyzing the Importance of Labor and Capital in *The Glass Menagerie*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: Historical Background of *The Glass Menagerie*.
2. As a class, reexamine the section of the Marxist approach on the importance of labor.
3. Divide the class into four groups or a number of groups divisible by four.
4. Assign to each group, or allow each to choose, one of the following topics:
 - Guernica/Spanish Civil War
 - Labor Unrest in the United States
 - The Great Depression
 - World War II
5. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings to the class.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - Beyond merely establishing “atmosphere” and background, why do you suppose Williams set his play against such a turbulent backdrop? (Remember the play is *set* in 1937, but it was *written* in 1943 – 1944.)
 - What does the background have to do with the lives of the characters?
 - What does the background contribute to the plot?
 - What does the background contribute to the overall theme or meaning of the play?
 - In establishing the backdrop, why does he choose specifically the events and movements he does?
 - Does Williams seem to take a Marxist view of history? If so, what other evidence of this view can you find in the play?