

THE GLASS MENAGERIE - THEMES

1. ILLUSION

2. ESCAPE

3. FRAGILITY

4. LIGHT

5. FAILURE AND THE MYTH OF SUCCESS

We all have illusions. You can hardly live without them. Usually, they are harmless thoughts about, say, last summer's vacation or that very attractive person you just met. Whenever you hold an opinion based on what you think is true, or should be true, rather than what actually is true, that's an illusion. Because illusions sometimes help you deal with painful facts, like good medicine they make you feel better. But when you are disillusioned, the pain returns.

A fire escape symbolically points the way out of the Wingfield apartment. But when Laura uses it, she stumbles. When Tom leaves for good he claims to follow in his father's footsteps, but he is pursued by "something." A powerful love? Guilt? He tried to leave Laura behind, but couldn't. His closing speech reveals how securely he is bound to the past. What conclusion about escape can you draw from the situation in the play? Does the play advise you to make the best of what you've got, because change is impossible? Note Mr. Wingfield's smiling portrait. Does the grin tell you anything?

Jim O'Connor, like the other young people Tom tells you about, is also living in an illusion. When success eludes him he places faith in the future. But the future he counts on is an illusion, for there's a terrible war just around the corner that's going to change the world forever.

Can you think of anyone who embodies the idea of fragility better than **Laura**? Both physically and psychologically, she is fragile. A childhood disease left her with a slight limp. Under the everyday stresses of life, her composure shatters, and she can't complete her typing course. The thought of receiving a gentleman caller makes her sick. How fitting for Laura to keep a menagerie of delicate glass animals of which the unicorn—the "freakish" one—is her favourite.

Because *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play, the setting is dimly lighted. Dim lights keep details from being seen, for details fade from the memory first.

Amanda believes in several common myths about money, success, and working hard. She thinks that money, for example, buys happiness. If she had only married one of those rich gentlemen callers. . . . Then, too, she admires sophisticated society, the "horsey set" portrayed in the magazine stories she sells. Success, in her view, comes from hard work and from saving your money for the future. Amanda is convinced that Tom will be successful if he tries hard. Laura will also succeed if she learns to type. Plan for the future, Amanda advises. Make provisions and save money. To Tom's dismay, she calculates how much money he could save if he stopped smoking. With his savings he could enroll in an accounting course at the university.

The characters in *The Glass Menagerie* are hooked by their illusions. Without illusion, **Amanda** would realize the hopelessness of Laura's condition. In fact, it's *because* of her illusions that Amanda keeps her hopes alive for that "always expected something" to rescue Laura from a life of dependency. Initially, Amanda thinks that a good typing course will help Laura pull herself together. And later in the play, Amanda foolishly counts on Jim to be Laura's prince charming. Amanda, of course, also has illusions about herself. Whether she really entertained seventeen gentleman callers one Sunday afternoon is beside the point. What counts is that she believes it. Illusions, you see, can be very powerful

Tom tries repeatedly to escape from tedium and responsibility.

Jim O'Connor also chases a dream. He tries to sell Tom "a bill of goods" about success, for he's already bought one that says if you work hard, take the right courses, show self-assurance, and believe in the future of capitalism you'll make it big. But Jim has made little progress since high school, and with the war coming on, the path to success is likely to be detoured.

The characters in *The Glass Menagerie* have built their lives on a fragile foundation of illusions. Take away their illusions and which of them would not break?

Amanda indulges at times in reveries about her girlhood

The **electric company** turns off the Wingfields' power. Then the characters must resort to candles, which soften the illumination and add the aura of romance to Jim's visit with Laura.

Light shining through **little glass objects** often gives off tiny spots of rainbow colour. A rainbow, as you probably know from the old song, is something you chase. And in biblical myth, the rainbow is the symbol of a promise. But when you get close it vanishes. It's an illusion, a false promise, like so much else in the play. Tom recognizes the illusory quality of rainbows. He says the pleasures offered by the Paradise Dance Hall were "like a chandelier [which] flooded the world with brief deceptive rainbows." Notice also that the scarf given as a souvenir by Malvolio the Magician is rainbow-coloured. In the end, what is it that keeps Laura embedded in Tom's memory? Shop windows, "filled with pieces of coloured glass . . . like bits of shattered rainbow."

The glass menagerie serves as Laura's means of escape from reality, and **Jim** tries desperately to escape from his dead-end job by taking public speaking and radio courses. Observe that no character in the play makes a clean break from his situation. Correction: only Mr. Wingfield escapes—at the expense of his family's happiness, but that took place before the play begins.

The imaginary world of glass animals provides **Laura's** refuge from reality. But in her case, illusion may be perilous, for her menagerie serves as a substitute for life. How long can she go on playing with the glass collection before disillusion strikes?

In 1939, the time of the play, **world peace** is in a fragile state. The lives of the young lovers who kiss in the alley will soon be shattered by big guns and heavy bombardments.

Tom suffers from illusions, too, by expecting to find adventure in the movies. When he leaves home and joins the merchant navy he anticipates more adventure. Does that fire escape lead to romance and glamour? Note that Tom is haunted by reminders of Laura. Is escape, in the end, an illusion, too?

Tom associates images of Laura with **candlelight**. To rid himself of the haunting memories of his sister, he implores Laura to "blow out your candles." At the same time Tom may be urging Laura out of her dimly lit past. Her world of candlelight and little glass animals will no longer do, for "nowadays the world is lit by lightning."

The theme of illusion is first cousin to the theme of escape in *The Glass Menagerie*, for all the play's characters believe incorrectly that escape from their present situation in life is possible.