

Flying the Jolly Roger: Images of Escape and Selfhood in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

Lori Leathers Single

One of the more interesting aspects in Williams's concept of a new "plastic theatre" is a metatheatrical technique known as the screen device. According to Esther Merle Jackson, and, more recently, Thomas P. Adler, Tennessee Williams's 1945 preface to *The Glass Menagerie* merits our attention as an important "manifesto" in the history of modern American drama (Jackson 90, Adler 137). In these "Production Notes," Williams called for a "new, plastic theatre 'to replace' the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions" (131).¹ To this end, Williams proposed the use of such non-realistic elements as theme music, unusual lighting, and "a screen on which were projected magic-lantern slides bearing images or titles" (132-134). Although these projections that Williams collectively called "The Screen Device" (132) have been for the most part critically neglected, a closer study of them as they operate in Williams's play supports a new psychological interpretation of *The Glass Menagerie*.

Included in the original script, this device calls for forty three separate "legends" and images to be projected onto the wall between the dining room and the front room of the set during the performance (132). Although Williams's use of projected images is generally assumed to have been influenced by the German director Erwin Piscator, founder and director of The Dramatic Workshop of the New School of Social Research in New York where Williams studied as a young man, actually he first encountered this innovation while a student at the State University of Iowa. In fact, Williams had experimented with the use of projected images as early as 1938 in *Not About Nightingales*. Nevertheless, any discussion of Williams's screen device needs to be contextualized in light of Piscator's work. As John Willett notes "no other director used film so extensively or thought about it so systematically as Piscator, who came to employ front projection, back projection, and simultaneous or overlapping projection from more than one source" (Willett 113). In one Berlin production, Piscator used four projection screens, which makes Williams's proposed use of a single screen, "indistinguishable from the rest when not in use" (132), seem conservative by comparison.

In addition, Williams's use of the projected legends and images in *The Glass Menagerie* differs from that of the two great German practitioners Piscator and Brecht, whose interests in the development of non-realist or "epic theatre" were primarily political (Esslin 23). Instead, Williams was more interested in private issues than public ones. In focusing on the social and political backdrop of the play, C. W. E. Bigsby has convincingly argued that "*The Glass Menagerie* is no more a play of purely private emotions and concerns than Chekhov's *The Cherry*

Orchard” (36). Certainly, the harsh economic and political realities of 1930’s America are a driving force in the action of the play. However, private emotions were the driving force within the playwright himself. In an 1981 interview with Dotson Rader, Williams recalled that “*Menagerie* grew out of the intense emotions I felt seeing my sister’s mind begin to go” (qtd. in Delvin 331). Not only is *The Glass Menagerie* his most autobiographical work, but it is also a public form of personal expiation. Just as Tom’s memory play may be interpreted as his way of exorcising his guilt, Adler believes that Williams wrote the play in order to come to terms with his own sense of culpability over his failure “to do anything to prevent the prefrontal lobotomy performed on his schizophrenic sister, Rose” (Adler 139). Williams suffered guilt for having survived the familial tensions that ultimately destroyed Rose. Like Tom in the play, remorse was the price he paid for his escape. So, where Piscator used projected images to create a public language for addressing political issues, Williams used projected images to create a private language for coping with personal tensions.

Williams was striving toward a style he called “personal lyricism” (qtd. in Jackson 29), a poetic dramatic form that Adler suggests is capable of “delineating and probing character psychology” (126). In his “Production Notes,” Williams wrote:

Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth . . . a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are . . . which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance. (131)

In other words, he wanted to create a poetic dramatic language capable of revealing the reality beyond what on the surface appears to be real.

This was his original artistic vision; however, because of the collaborative nature of theatrical production, many of the unconventional techniques were cut from Eddie Dowling’s original production (1944 Chicago, 1945 New York), resulting in two different published versions of the play. The Acting Edition caters to the American preference for realistic theatre “that asks its audience to make believe they are not making believe by accepting the illusion for the real thing” (Adler 136-7), or theatre in which illusion “has the appearance of truth” (144). In contrast, the Reading Edition with the original didascalia calls for the use of the metatheatrical screen device to break the illusion of reality which is so popular in the realistic tradition of American theatre. These projections are part of Williams’s strategy to reveal the truth behind the mere “appearance” of reality (131).

The Dowling production and the Acting Edition have set the standard for performances of this play, while the more widely published Reading Edition is used as a literary text by students, teachers, and scholars. Although some contro-

versy regarding reading theatrical texts as literature remains, Mary Ann Frese Witt and others have presented convincing arguments for reading the “voice in the didascaliae” (Witt 105).² In fact, Williams invites such practice by including in the Reading Edition a wealth of paratextual information. In addition to the stage directions concerning the screen device, he provides an epigraph from E. E. Cummings, a brief production background, an abbreviated outline of the play, character descriptions, “The Production Notes,” and an essay called “The Catastrophe of Success” (123-41). In fact, he claims to have included the screen device in this edition because it might “be of some interest to some readers to see how this device was conceived” (132). No doubt the most compelling reason for studying the screen device as a written text is that performances using this technique are rare. In brief, Williams’s screen device survives almost exclusively as a written rather than a performed text.

In this written text, the Reading Edition, Williams describes the two-fold function of the screen device as having both a “structural” and an “emotional” value (132). It serves “to give accent to certain values in each scene,” thereby clarifying the narrative line and providing “a definite emotional appeal, less definable but just as important” (132). Actually, the screen device is more complex than Williams’s notes would indicate. According to Pfister’s dramatic theory, both the non-verbal “images” and the verbal “legends,” which make up the screen device, are “epic communication structures” and as such function in the following way:

As far as the aesthetics of reception is concerned, these epic elements have an anti-illusionist function which is intended to counter any identification or empathy on the part of the audience with the figures and situations within the internal communication system, thereby encouraging a posture of critical distance. (71)

In other words, in addition to the structural and emotional values that Williams cites, the screen device by its very nature also functions as a Brechtian distancing technique. It disturbs the illusion of reality and keeps the audience from readily identifying with the characters in the play. As Borny suggests, this critical distance is important because it keeps the audience from reading the play as a “soap-opera” or melodrama (112). Because the play is about familial dysfunction, there are no heroes or villains in *The Glass Menagerie*. In order to understand the truth beneath the surface, the audience needs to maintain its objectivity. Tom’s escape must be viewed as a necessary evil. Williams positions his audience for this perception in the character description; Tom’s “nature is not remorseless, but to escape from a trap he has to act without pity” (129).

In addition to creating a critical distance between the audience and the play, metatheatrical techniques have other characteristics that make them particularly suitable to this play. In his assessment of metatheatrical reception aesthetics, Lionel Abel suggests a number of qualities that underline the appropriateness of

Williams's use of these techniques. According to Abel, metatheatre "glorifies the unwillingness of the imagination to regard any image of the world as ultimate" (113). Given the fact that Williams believes reality to be an "organic thing" (131), mutable and illusive, something that only the poetic imagination can come close to representing, it is fitting that he makes metatheatrical techniques part of his poetic vocabulary. Abel also claims that metatheatre creates the "sense that the world is a projection of human consciousness" (113). In the case of *The Glass Menagerie*, the world is a projection of Tom's consciousness. Rather than standing as a record of what has actually happened, the play represents what happened as Tom remembers it. And memory, as Williams tells us, "takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated" (143); it is subjective and "not realistic" (145). In other words, Williams warns his audience from the beginning that Tom may be an unreliable narrator. As George W. Crandell notes, the "imperfections" of Tom's memory are highlighted by the fact that Tom "remembers scenes he could not possibly have witnessed" (5). For example, Crandell cites Tom's description of the beginning of scene 6, a scene that occurs while Tom is still at work. Once again, Abel's assessment of metatheatre seems to fit nicely with what Williams says he wants to accomplish in this play. Moreover, the subjective nature of Tom's world is all the more reason for the audience to be objective, to maintain a critical distance.

In short, the screen device and other metatheatrical elements that Williams proposed in his original script were suited to the kind of play he wished to present. Nevertheless, the screen device has been controversial from the beginning. Although the use of projected images had been used in opera houses since before World War I, mainstream audiences of the mid-1940s seemed unready for this particular metatheatrical technique. As Brian Parker suggests, "American audiences were familiar with realism and theatricalism separately," but not when used in conjunction as Williams proposed to do in *The Glass Menagerie* (417). At any rate, Eddie Dowling, the original Broadway producer, "considered this device superfluous" (qtd. in Tischler 38), and the success of his production (561 performances) certainly helped to justify his opinion of the screen device.

Jo Mielziner, the set designer, thought that the screen device would be both distracting and redundant. Ironically, these are two of the screen device's intended functions. It distracts the audience's sense of reality within the play by calling their attention to its own theatricality; in so doing, it creates critical distance. The verbal legends are often redundant in that many of them either foreshadow or repeat lines from the dialogue of the play, thereby accentuating specific aspects of each scene. Despite the fact that Mielziner, like Williams, was interested in the renunciation of realism, apparently, he did not like the screen device as Williams conceived it.³

Even more surprising is John Gassner's negative critique of the screen device. Because he taught playwriting at The Dramatic Workshop (1940-1941) while it was under the direction of Piscator, the champion of projection devices, one would

expect him to have been more receptive to the screen device. Instead, Gassner, Williams's former teacher, said "*The Glass Menagerie* was marred only by some preciousness [sic], mainly in the form of stage directions, most of which were eliminated in Eddie Dowling's memorable Broadway production" (qtd. in Borny 103). Nancy M. Tischler reports that Gassner "considered the screen device 'redundant and rather precious.' Williams is 'straining for effect not knowing that his simple tale, so hauntingly self-sufficient, needs no adornments'" (39). Perhaps he felt that the use of epic communication structures was inappropriate in a play that is more concerned with private tensions than public issues.

Since this initial negative reception, critics have voiced a variety of complaints about the screen device. These generally fall into one of three categories: 1) the screen device reflects the playwright's distrust of the performance aspect of the play; 2) it reflects the playwright's distrust of the reception aspect of the play; and 3) it is distracting. Roger B. Stein's comments invoke the first type of complaint when he writes that the "awkwardness" of the screen device is one case "where Williams has failed to develop and then rely upon the dramatic situation" (11). The second and third complaints are voiced by Lester A. Beurline, who claims the "weakness of the device lies in the author's anxiousness and small confidence in his audience. . . . I suspect that if the screen device has ever been tried, it distracted the audience from the actors" (29). John Styan, author of *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, said that "the screen device got in the way of the direct impact of the play's action, and was wisely abandoned" (119).

There is, of course, validity in all three complaints. Williams did intend for the legends and images to "strengthen the effect" of both the written and the spoken lines in order to augment the dramatic situation (132). He also sought to guide the audience's attention by accenting "certain values in each scene" (132). The only aspect that he did not mention in regard to the screen device was the distancing effect. Significantly, all three complaints are directed at standard uses for metatheatrical techniques which suggests a general privileging of realistic over non-realistic techniques. As Borny discovered in his brief survey of the play's critical reception, "critics who prefer the Acting Edition usually do so because that version is more realistic" (106).

However, some critics who take their clue from the "Production Notes" in the Reading Edition argue for the importance of this device on the basis of its non-realistic or metatheatrical functions. As a Brechtian distancing device, it has been championed by Borny and R. B. Parker. According to these two critics, the ironic commentary provided by the screen device creates an important critical distance. Borny says that the device effectively prevents the audience "from empathising too readily with the characters from Tom's past" (113) and that this distance positions the audience to receive the "symbolic truth" of the play (108). Without this irony, he says, "all we have is soap-opera" (112). Parker, in his psychological reading, says the "device achieves more than reducing the sentimental 'nostalgia'" of the play (529); it also sheds light on Tom's "ironic, self-defensive distanc-

ing” from the grief and guilt he feels (529). Moreover, it adds to the sense of ambiguity that, according to Parker, is the key to understanding this play (531). Thomas P. Adler has suggested that the screen device “might also function to replicate how memory works by association as well as to diminish any excessively sentimental response in the manner of a Brechtian distantian device” (138). Delma E. Presley echoes Adler’s observation, saying that the screen device recaptures “the impressionistic qualities of the human memory—Tom’s and ours” (80). Others, like Jackson and Frank Durham, value the device for its symbolic qualities. Durham makes the interesting claim that “the motion picture serves as the symbol determining the overall form of the play” while the screen device operates as subtitles in a silent movie (63). Jackson, an early advocate of the screen device, is mostly concerned with the device’s poetic aspects as part of Williams’s symbolic language for the plastic theatre (90-94).

Although each of these critics has a different interpretation of *The Glass Menagerie*, they all agree that the screen device adds richness and complexity to the play. Borny is “convinced” that rejection of the non-realistic elements “results in a trivialization of the play” (102). Parker says that to “insist, as most critics do, that the projection device is jejune or pretentious is to do Williams and his play a grave injustice” (416). Williams himself claims to have proposed the use of non-realistic techniques, including the screen device, in order to “find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are” (131), and what he achieved was a realistic psychological portrait of a dysfunctional family. Interestingly, only in the last thirty years has the psychiatric community developed the theory and terminology that allows us to discuss Williams’s play in terms of the dynamics of familial dysfunction.

If Tennessee Williams intended *The Glass Menagerie* to hold “its audience through the revelation of quiet and ordinary truths,” as he said in an interview with R. C. Lewis in 1947 (qtd. in Devlin 28), then any interpretation of this work must first begin by asking, “What are the quiet and ordinary truths that *The Glass Menagerie* reveals?” As the play opens, Tom, a narrator who has tricks in his pocket, promises to give us “truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (144), and part of the illusion he weaves are the forty-three legends and images known as the screen device. As mentioned above, this device as metatheatrical technique may function in a number of ways; however, of particular interest is the way it functions as part of Tom’s subjective memory. From a more objective perspective, the non-verbal projection images associated with Amanda, Laura, and Tom function symbolically to reveal the psychological underpinnings of the dysfunctional Wingfield family. In doing so, these projections help Williams position his audience to receive the difficult, but unavoidable truths about such family situations.

Before examining these particular screen images, it is important to establish the familial context that makes them so meaningful. According to Irene and Herbert Goldenberg, co-authors of *Family Therapy: An Overview*, in “families that produce dysfunctional behavior—one or both adults and any of the children may be

assigned roles inappropriately or be treated as if they have only a single personality characteristic . . . instead of a wide range of human feelings and attitudes" (73). Within the dynamics of the Wingfield household, Tom, Amanda, and Laura have assumed certain roles; each character's role is "a rigid and constricted set of solutions to the problem of whom to be and how to act" (Gurman II 450). As in all dysfunctional families, a kind of stasis exists that appears to work as long as everyone stays within their prescribed roles. The roles in this Wingfield family drama/memory play consist of the "rejected parent," the "identified-patient," and the "parentified-child" (Goldenberg 74, 330, 333).

Amanda is the "rejected parent," whose husband abandoned her sixteen years before and who, consequently, "seeks gratification" through her children (Goldenberg 74) and her idealized past. The physically and emotionally crippled Laura assumes the role of "scapegoat . . . the identified-patient who is carrying the pathology for the entire family" (Goldenberg 76). As the one who most clearly has a problem, Laura is the "symptom bearer . . . expressing a family's 'disequilibrium'" (Goldenberg 7). Finally, just as one might expect in a single parent dysfunctional family, the void left by the absent parent is filled by the "parentified-child" (Gurman II 449). In the Wingfield family, the parentified-child is Tom. Although parentification of a child may occur in a number of situations, the Goldenbergs report that more and more frequently they "see the phenomenon when a parent deserts the family . . . [and] the child is expected to fill the parent role, physically as well as psychologically" (Goldenberg 73n2). When the father left, Tom apparently became "the little man of the house." Typical of the conflictual nature of child parentification, Tom is forced to assume the responsibilities that his father abandoned sixteen years ago while never being granted the autonomy that normally accompanies these adult responsibilities.

Ironically, within this stasis of rigidly assigned roles, there is typically a perpetual dance of mask swapping, with each character taking turns at playing the persecutor, the victim, and the rescuer.⁴ In a dysfunctional family system, things appear to happen through the action of the dance, but nothing ever really changes, as illustrated in the discussion of scene 3 below. Amanda will continue reciting the story of the seventeen gentlemen callers:

TOM: I know what's coming!

LAURA: Yes. But let her tell it.

TOM: Again?

LAURA: She loves to tell it. (147)

Laura will continue to polish her glass collection, lost in whatever secret solace it affords her. As she says, “My glass collection takes up a good deal of time. Glass is something you have to take good care of” (220). And Tom will continue going to the movies and writing poems; “Nobody in their right minds goes to the movies as often as you pretend to” (163); “Shakespeare probably wrote a poem on that light bill, Mrs. Wingfield” (209). There will be small rebellions, accusations, recriminations, and acts of contrition, but nothing will ever change. The Wingfield family system is a sort of dance of death, “a nailed-up coffin” (167). In order for Tom to escape from this trap, Williams tells us that he will have “to act without pity” (129).

Given the dysfunctional context I have briefly outlined, Tom, author and narrator of his memory play, is also the “parentified-child” trying to make a clean break from his assigned familial role. At the beginning of the play, he has managed to escape from this role physically, but he remains bound to it by the guilt he feels over rejected parental responsibilities that should have never been his in the first place. His need to lay his past to rest, to exorcise his guilt, affects his choice of the non-verbal screen images linked to Amanda, Laura, and himself. Assuming the play is Tom’s public form of personal expiation and by extension Williams’s as well, it becomes important to look at how these images function symbolically to reveal the psychological truths about the Wingfield family—truths that might at last set Tom free.

As the single parent in the Wingfield household, Tom’s mother represents the cornerstone of this family’s dysfunction. Therefore, it is fitting to begin this discussion with Amanda. After Mr. Wingfield deserts her, she becomes the rejected parent. In order to compensate for the damage her ego sustains by this rejection, she has been, as Williams tells us, “clinging frantically to another time and place,” one that is significantly populated by her younger self and her seventeen gentlemen callers (129). When she is not working at Famous-Barr demonstrating brassieres, she is busy selling subscriptions to a magazine that caters to female visions of romance. Consequently, the images Tom chooses to associate with his mother have to do with Amanda’s idealized past, two slightly different images of her as a young girl (148, 203), and the romantic fantasies, two images of a glamour magazine cover (159, 179), that he correctly senses to be at the core of the family’s dysfunction. In her failed adjustment to her new position as a single parent, she has victimized both of her children in different ways.

She victimizes Tom by assigning to him the inappropriate role of parent/partner. In the parentification of a child, “the child comes to feel responsible for the well-being of the parent(s),” while the parent shows a lack of empathy for the parentified-child (Gurman II 450-51). The larger-than-life photograph of the absent Mr. Wingfield and Amanda’s frequent allusions to “your father” are constant reminders of the role Tom is expected to fill. When Tom apologizes after their big fight, Amanda takes advantage of his remorse to focus immediate attention on her role as the rejected parent.

AMANDA: I've had to put up a solitary battle all these years.
But you're my right-hand bower! Don't fall down, don't fail!

TOM [gently]: I try, Mother. (171)

More than just a simple bid for his sympathy; this is an effort to reposition Tom into his role as the parentified-child, the role he temporarily escapes when he defies her parental authority the previous night. To pull him back into his role, she repeats the theme of us against the world, telling him, "all we have to cling to is—each other" (171). Once back in his role of parent/child, she quickly heaps parental responsibility on his shoulders. Although he is two years younger than his sister, Amanda tries to make Tom feel responsible for Laura's future while his own needs and dreams remain on hold (174-76).

In addition, the implicit incestuous aspect to this parent/child relationship need not be actual for it to work its damage on the child (Goldenberg 74). Without having actually replaced his father in Amanda's bed, he has been forced to be her partner in other equally inappropriate ways. That Amanda, in her accepted role as the rejected parent, has come to depend on Tom to shore up her image of herself as young and desirable is evidenced by the fact that in his anger he knows exactly what button to push. He ends their fight by delivering the *coup de grâce*, "You ugly—babbling old—witch. . . ." (164). Williams's stage directions emphasize her self-absorption by pointing out that she is so "*stunned and stupefied by the 'ugly witch'*" that she hardly notices the damage to Laura's glass collection (165). From Tom's perspective as the parentified-child, the screen image of Amanda as a young girl reflects the seductive nature of their parent/child relationship. He is more than her child. As her confidante, her husband substitute, Tom assumes the role of her "right-hand bower" in every area but her bower.

The screen images associated with Amanda also relate to her victimization of Laura. In her role as the rejected parent, Amanda persistently needs to have her own desirability affirmed. One of the ways she reinforces her own self-image is to accentuate Laura's difference. Despite the fact that Laura's handicap "need not be more than suggested on the stage" (129), Amanda has exaggerated its ugliness by making it an unmentionable in their house: "Nonsense! Laura, I've told you never, never to use that word" (157). Typically in dysfunctional families, "some chance characteristic that distinguishes the child from other family members . . . is singled out and focused on by the others" in a process called "scapegoating" (Goldenberg 74-75). Once the role of the identified-patient becomes fixed, "the basis for chronic behavioral disturbance is established" (Goldenberg 75). By the time of the memory play, Laura's difference has developed into a serious problem, as evidenced by her emotional breakdown at the Rubicam Business College. She has become so withdrawn from the real world that Williams says, "she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf" (129).

Years of listening to her mother's story of the seventeen gentlemen callers has slowly eroded her self confidence. Amanda tells her laconic daughter that it is not enough to have a "pretty face and a graceful figure—although I wasn't slighted in either respect." One must also understand the "art of conversation" (148). If her mother, who had all the qualities of a "pretty trap" (192), could not hold her man, how is Laura supposed to have any hope of trapping and holding a man? Convinced that she cannot hope to compete in the romantic arena, she concedes her failure: "I'm just not popular like you" (150). While Amanda speaks of "our gentlemen callers," and "flounces girlishly," Tom groans twice and Laura, with a catch in her voice, pronounces the dreaded truth: "Mother's afraid I'm going to be an old maid" (150).

In fact, the mother has to some extent set Laura up to be an "old maid" by providing a competitive rather than nurturing environment. Even on the night of Laura's gentleman caller, Amanda jealously tries to upstage her daughter. Just before she enters wearing the same "*girlish frock*" that she has worn for her own gentlemen callers, she announces, "I'm going to make a spectacular appearance!" (193). Significantly, the stage directions state that "*the legend of her youth is nearly revived*" (193). Tom is naturally "*embarrassed*" by his mother's inappropriate dress and demeanor, but Jim "*is altogether won over*" (203). Immediately, the screen image of Amanda as a girl appears; although the seventeen gentlemen callers are missing this time, the image still recalls the seductive powers of his mother in her youth.

Like the images associated with Amanda, Laura's non-verbal screen images also highlight her own failure to adjust to the adult role expected of a person her age, but they do so from a more sympathetic perspective. The depth and complexity of Tom's feelings for Laura are reflected in the fact that most of the non-verbal screen images are associated with her. Although he feels a tremendous amount of love for his sister, he also feels some justifiable resentment. Ultimately, she becomes the one who haunts his memory, the one he cannot completely leave behind. Consequently, the images associated with Laura point out her dysfunction, but they do so more gently and with more forgiveness than the images associated with Amanda.

All three non-verbal screen images associated with Laura are introduced in scene 2, in which Amanda uncovers Laura's "deception" (151), the situation that Tom refers to as "the fiasco at Rubicam's Business College" (159). This stands out as the turning point in the play, because in this scene Amanda begins to realize that Laura cannot cope with the world outside. The screen image of a bee-like "swarm of typewriters" precedes Amanda's revelation of the truth: "you had dropped out of school" (153). Tom's choice of a threatening mechanical screen image is an attempt to see things from Laura's perspective. At the same time, the surrealism of the image highlights her mental instability.

The second image associated with Laura is a "Winter scene in a park" (155). Her crippling shyness caused her to drop out school, so she has spent the time

alone “mostly in the park” (154) visiting the penguins and “the Jewel Box, that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers” (155). This screen image and the solitary activities associated with it suggest a coldness about Laura. Like the image, Laura is lovely but cold and frozen in time. As Tom says, “She lives in a world of her own—a world of—little glass ornaments” (188). Even the glass of her menagerie and the big glass house seem to suggest ice. Like the penguins in the park and the tropical flowers in the big glass house, she is as “peculiar” as a flightless bird and incapable of surviving in the world outside as a hot-house plant (188).

Similarly, the screen image of blue roses symbolizes Laura’s peculiarity and is the most important of the three non-verbal screen images associated with Laura. In addition to Laura and Amanda’s dialogue concerning this nick-name and Jim and Laura’s dialogue concerning the same, this image gets projected three times in the course of Tom’s memory play (151, 157, 227). Just as red is a hot color, blue is a cold color. If red roses are the traditional symbol for romantic love, then blue roses must symbolize Laura’s lack of passion or, as Bert Cardullo has suggested, her desire to transcend this world (82). Although blue is the wrong color for roses, it is the right color for Laura (228). She has no passion for life. She has dropped out of high school, out of business school, and out of life. In order for Tom to exorcise his guilt, he must reject the role of parentified-child and acknowledge the fact that he cannot be responsible for Laura’s future. The coldness of the images associated with her correctly places some of the blame for her condition on Laura. Her withdrawal from life, to a large extent, remains her own choice. As George W. Crandell observes, “Laura actively resists both the role that society prescribes for women as well as Amanda’s insistence that she conform to it” (9). Although the nick-name was originally linked to a physical illness, the screen image becomes linked to a psychological illness.

Whereas Laura’s screen images reflect the complexity of Tom’s feelings for the sister he has abandoned, the one image he associates with his escape reflects the ambiguity he feels for having made that choice. On one hand, the sailing vessel represents the freedom and movement of the open sea and the Union of Merchant Seamen. On the other hand, the vessel is a pirate ship whose Jolly Roger, the skull and cross bones, symbolizes criminality and death. As Cardullo notes, Merchant Marine ships became primary targets when World War II broke out (91), and may be represented as the lightning that Tom refers to at the end of the play. Since the memory play is Tom’s attempt to lay the past to rest, the most telling of screen images is the one he chooses for himself: “A sailing vessel with the Jolly Roger” (173, 200).⁵

On one level, the ship image represents Tom’s desire to move from the claustrophobic confines of the Wingfield’s tiny apartment to the vast open spaces of the ocean. Indeed, Williams establishes the motif of claustrophobia from the very first sentence of the opening stage directions: “The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-

units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers” (143). Significantly, it “is entered by a fire escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth” (143).

For Tom, the claustrophobia is both physical and psychological. There are not enough bedrooms; Laura has to sleep in the living room. In addition to the absence of personal space, the real sense of claustrophobia comes from the way their lives are enmeshed, another common symptom of dysfunctional families (Gurman 449).⁶ This problem is both voiced and demonstrated in the course of Tom’s fight with Amanda.

AMANDA: What is the matter with you, you—big—big—
IDIOT!

TOM: “Look!—I’ve got no thing, no single thing—

AMANDA: Lower your voice!

TOM:—in my life here that I can call my OWN! (161)

They both interrupt each other throughout the argument so that even their voices become enmeshed. Only when Tom becomes physically threatening does she back off (164).

Typical of their dance of death, they switch masks at this point. Tom becomes the persecutor, and Amanda becomes the victim of his rage. However, when he is “pinioned” by his coat, he rips it off and throws it across the room, accidentally breaking part of Laura’s glass collection (164). “Laura cries out as if wounded” (164); Tom gets down on his knees and begins his act of contrition (165). So the scene ends with Tom back in his prescribed role as care-giver to Laura, the identified-patient, as he begins to collect the fallen glass. Given the fact that this family system allows Tom no space to take care of himself, to have a life of his own, it is no wonder that he dreams of wide open spaces and oceans of freedom.

In contrast to this stifling world of female domination, the manly world of the Union of Merchant Seamen represented by the image of a sailing ship seems like a breath of fresh air. Just before Tom confides in Jim about his plans to leave home via the merchant marines, the screen image of a sailing vessel with the Jolly Roger appears for the second time (200), and the stage directions tell us that Tom “looks like a voyager” (201). One can almost imagine the breeze in his hair.

In addition, Tom’s decision to escape into an exclusively masculine world highlights an important gender issue in the play. In the Wingfield household, Tom’s sexuality must be held in check. Amanda will not allow Tom even vicarious access into the world of adult sexuality. She will not allow the “filth” of that “insane Mr. Lawrence” in her house (161). Her outrage over Lawrence masks the

genuine fear that Tom's sexual interests could result in his growing up and leaving home to create his own family. In short, her prudish outrage is not really about sex, but about Tom's independence.

Lawrence may be banned; however, when it comes down to trapping a man for Laura, Amanda openly peddles *The Homemaker's Companion*, with its female sexuality couched in terms such as "delicate cuplike breasts," "creamy thighs," and "bodies as powerful as Etruscan sculpture" (159). Appropriately, in this way Amanda earns the extra money "needed to properly feather the nest and plume the bird" (159). When the long awaited night of the gentleman caller arrives, Amanda transforms her daughter into a "pretty trap" (192) with a new dress (191) and a bra stuffed with "'Gay Deceivers'" (192). "All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be" (192). Ironically, the "tragic mistake" in Amanda's personal life was falling for a pretty trap in the form of the now absent Mr. Wingfield (186): "No girl can do worse than put herself at the mercy of a handsome appearance! I hope that Mr. O'Connor is not too good-looking" (186). As the rejected parent and victim of her own sexuality, Amanda views sex as a dangerous force that must be either suppressed or properly manipulated toward the goal of marriage. Tom's sexuality, having no place in Amanda's plans for Laura, must be suppressed, while Jim's sexuality, having everything to do with Amanda's plans, must be manipulated. Understandably, Tom associates escape with a masculine world.

Significantly, the sailing vessel that symbolizes Tom's escape is a pirate ship, a symbol rich in ambiguity. It represents a special species of ruthless thieves and murderers who are as often knighted as hung for their actions. Our culture's love/hate relationship with the pirate parallels Tom's love/hate relationship with himself and with the sister he has tried unsuccessfully to leave behind. The brutality and criminality generally associated with pirates represent Tom's uneasy conscience, the motivating force behind this memory play. Tom in the present is trying to lay his past to rest, to break the bond of guilt that still hampers his development as an adult.

The boyish naiveté implicit in the pirate ship image is also indicative of Tom's arrested growth. It links him to Jim, the high school star of *The Pirates of Penzance*, an operetta in which a group of unsuccessful pirates fall in love. It also links him to the romanticized pirates and adventures he experiences in the movies. He thinks he longs for adventure, but he really longs for the childhood he was never allowed to have. As the parentified-child, he has been unfairly forced into being a father to his sister by a mother who assumed that Laura was their shared responsibility. As if she were their child, Amanda tells Tom, "We have to be making some plans and provisions for her" (174). Ironically, the parentified-child can never grow up until he/she gives up the responsibilities unjustly placed upon him/her as a child. Tom has to renounce his adult responsibilities toward his family in order to become an adult in his own right.

Consequently, Tom, the narrator, sees himself as both hero and villain for having left home. Although leaving home is the natural step into adulthood from

a normal childhood, Tom's experience as the parentified-child, as a stand-in for the husband of his mother and father of himself and his sister, has made this move toward selfhood almost impossible. It has taken him a long time to muster the pirate-like sense of villainy and daring necessary for him to make his move. As he prepares himself to follow in his father's footsteps, Tom tells Jim "I'm like my father. The bastard son of a bastard! Did you notice how he's grinning in his picture in there? And he's been absent going on sixteen years!" (202). This simultaneous announcement/denouncement of self occurs in scene 6 some time after the morning his father's photograph lights up in response to Tom's question about the nailed-up coffin: "You know it don't take much intelligence to get yourself into a nailed-up coffin, Laura. But who in hell ever got himself out of one without removing one nail? [As if in answer, the father's grinning photograph lights up. The scene dims out]" (167-68).

It takes Tom a great deal of time to work up his anger about his victimization. His explosive speech in scene 3 is the culmination of years of frustration: "You think I'm in love with the Continental Shoemakers? Look! I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains—than go back there mornings! . . . If self is what I thought of, Mother, I'd be where he is—GONE!" (163). What finally pushes Tom over the edge is Amanda's failure to acknowledge the extent of his sacrifice. Amanda cannot face this truth without also acknowledging the injustice of Tom's prescribed role as parentified-child. Her accusations of selfishness are more than he can bear: "The more you shout about my selfishness to me the quicker I'll go, and I won't go to the movies!" (236).

The power and poignancy of *The Glass Menagerie* lie in the revelation of two difficult truths about the Wingfield family. First, Laura is not going to awaken suddenly and begin to participate in the real world. Jim's kiss was just a human kiss and not the magic kiss of a fairy tale prince. The dynamics of this dysfunctional family inhibit self-development and discourage autonomy. Sometimes, as in Laura's case, individual growth is forever arrested; as with the delicate creatures in her glass collection, she remains frozen in time. In the end she lifts her head and smiles at her mother, completely resigned to her role as identified-patient: "Amanda's gestures are slow and graceful, almost dancelike, as she comforts her daughter" (236). Laura has renounced all responsibility for making a life for herself.

Secondly, Tom's decision to leave becomes a matter of self-preservation, a necessary evil. If he stays, he will have to sacrifice his identity in favor of a role imposed on him by the familial dynamics. Tom realizes that his identity and dreams are unimportant to Amanda, the rejected parent, and incomprehensible to Laura, the identified-patient. As the parentified-child, he must sacrifice his self for the financial security of the family. "For sixty-five dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being *ever!*" (64). Tom repeatedly associates his role as bread winner with a living death, a nailed-up coffin, because for him to remain is to commit psychic suicide. As he tells Amanda, "Every time you come in yelling that

God damn 'Rise and Shine!' 'Rise and Shine!' I say to myself, "How lucky dead people are!" But I get up. I go!" (164).

So in the Wingfield family, as with many dysfunctional families, the natural process of leaving the nest, which should be a life-affirming celebration of a person's independence, has been perverted into a sort of exorcism of all family ties. Tom wants a total disassociation with his past, not because he does not love his mother and sister, but because of the pain that love causes him. He wants more than forgiveness; he wants forgetfulness; he wants to wish it all away. This, of course, is no more possible for Tom than it was for Williams himself.

Perhaps the most one can hope for is to make peace with oneself by recognizing the necessity of one's actions. As Adler has suggested, it is possible to view Tom's remembering as a therapeutic process, a way of working through the pain and guilt he feels for having escaped the nailed coffin, for having abandoned his mother and sister (139). In Tom's memory play, as in real life, the process of recovery involves recognizing the dysfunctional familial roles, accepting responsibility for one's own life, and learning to lay the past to rest. If one imagines that through the ritual of this process, Tom will be able to get on with his life, then Laura's final gesture of blowing out the candles can be interpreted as a release. This play is very much about what Williams called "the fragile, delicate ties that must be broken, that you inevitably break, when you try to fulfill yourself" (qtd. in Devlin 10).

¹ All future references to *The Glass Menagerie* will be noted by page number only.

² For more on the current discourse concerning didascalia, see Michael Issacharoff and Robin F. Jones, ed., *Performing Texts* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1988).

³ This does not mean that Mielziner was completely opposed to the use of projected images as is evidenced by his use of projections to leaf out the house and surrounding area in *Death of a Salesman* (1949).

⁴ In transactional analysis, this configuration is called the Karpman Triangle. It is discussed in *Born to Win: Transactional Analysis with Gestalt Experiments* by Muriel James and Dorothy Jongeward in the unit called "The Drama of Life Scripts" as being "illegitimate" when used for the purpose of manipulation (Reading, Ma: Addison-Wesley, 1973. 84-89).

⁵ In Cardullo's romanticized reading of the play, the pirate ship both mocks "Tom's fantasy of high adventure" and "augurs his own demise" (91).

⁶ The Goldenbergs define enmeshment as "an extreme form of proximity and intensity in family interactions in which members are overconnected and overinvolved in each others lives" (329).

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