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Foreword to *The Pretty Trap*

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Editor's Note: *The Pretty Trap* was performed at *The Food for Thought Theatre*, located in *The Players Club*, New York City, on October 25, 2005. Kathleen Turner played the part of Amanda.

The Pretty Trap, subtitled “A Comedy in One Act” by its author, is a version of *The Glass Menagerie* that has a happy ending. It should be considered a “spin-off” rather than a “source.” Williams notes on the title page that it is “derived from a longer work in progress, *The Gentleman Caller* [, and] corresponds to the last act of that play, roughly, but has a lighter treatment and a different ending.”

12 It was once usual to suggest a simplified three-stage genesis for Williams’s first great success, in which an initial short story, “Portrait of a Girl in Glass,” developed into a screenplay called *The Gentleman Caller* during Williams’s period working for MGM in 1943, and was in turn revised as the play we now know as *The Glass Menagerie*. In fact, the textual genesis was far more complicated than this simple scheme and began before Williams went to California; though, as usual with his manuscripts, it is virtually impossible to be specific about dates.¹

13 The sheer mass of *Gentleman Caller* manuscripts at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas and the Barrett Library of the University of Virginia can be confusing, but a good place to start understanding the scope of the play is with drafts directly related to the screenplay. Texas has two undated copies of Williams’s general “Description of the Gentleman Caller,” each five pages long, plus a more elaborate seventeen-page “Provisional Story Treatment” dated 31 May 1943 (plus six extra pages of draft, dated 28 June 1943); also, there is a more carefully typed but undated copy of the story treatment in a Liebling-Wood folder which turned up during the sorting of the David Selznick papers. The “Description” has no narrator but opens with a lengthy account of Amanda’s life at Blue Mountain, her gentleman callers, Wingfield’s wooing, and his misadventure with an illicit still which forced the family to leave town. The “play” proper then begins on Christmas Eve with Laura, who is “morbidly shy” (but not in this version disabled), decorating a tree while her brother “Larry” reads poetry aloud; they attempt to attract passing carolers with a candle at the window; and Amanda gives them unsuitable Christmas presents: a six-month business course for Laura and books on salesmanship and “executive personality” for Larry. Laura fails at business college largely because she is bullied by a “hawklike spinster” instructor. Larry’s restlessness is explained by the fact that “The Wingfields . . . were pioneers, Indian fighters, trailblazers in the American wilderness,” and there is “an amusing incidental scene” in which one of his wanderlust poems wins a ten dollar prize from the Ladies’ Wednesday Club. Laura likes the gentleman caller Jim because his freckles remind her of the hero of her favorite Gene Stratton Porter novel (as in “Portrait”), not because she knew him in high school. The lights do not go off, there is no Paradise Dance Hall, little is made of the glass collection, and there is no unicorn to be broken. As in *Stairs to the Roof*, Larry loses his job for smoking on the roof, not for writing poems on cartons; and on the morning after his departure, Laura tries to comfort her mother by volunteering to telephone for magazine subscriptions, but does so too early—at 6:30 a.m.—which makes them both laugh and restores Amanda’s morale.

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The “Provisional Story Treatment” is even further from *Menagerie*. It is divided into three parts linked by Tom as narrator. Part I dramatizes events at Blue Mountain, with scenes of gentlemen callers visiting Amanda, her first meeting with Wingfield, his proposal at a picnic and fight with another of her admirers, and her snubbing of his next visit but sudden decision to elope with him. The narration then bridges to a hotel in Memphis, where Amanda watches boats go down the river and tells Wingfield of her first pregnancy. Wingfield enlists for World War I, and Amanda, pregnant with his second child, returns to Blue Mountain. Wingfield comes home a shell-shocked hero but begins bootlegging, and an elaborate sequence follows in which his still blows up, killing a Negro, and bloodhounds track him to his father-in-law’s church. The dogs attack Laura on the church steps, and Wingfield, rescuing her, is arrested and taken to prison. Part II tells of the family’s life in St. Louis, with the embittered father working in a shirt factory. Laura has been so traumatized by the bloodhounds that she cannot talk until her father delights her into speech by bringing home a Victrola on which he plays *Dardanella*. Amanda objects to the expense of this, and the disgusted Wingfield leaves for good. The narrator then tells of the children growing up over shots of Tom (in this version) reading magazines instead of selling them and brooding despairingly in a warehouse, Amanda selling subscriptions over the telephone, and Laura having nightmares about dogs, failing to recite at school, playing *Dardanella*, polishing her glass collection, and endlessly rereading *Freckles*.

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Part III covers the same sequence as the “Description,” beginning with the Christmas Eve scene. Once more Laura is bullied by her typing instructor, but now the machine clatter is described as sounding like “hounds baying.” There is no poetry prize scene, but again Laura likes Jim solely because of his freckles, and there is no unicorn. Tom’s speech on leaving home is now made to echo his father’s earlier recriminations; and after the scene in which Amanda makes her comically early telephone call, three alternative endings are suggested: either Amanda and Laura return to Blue Mountain, where Laura insists her mother is “just as beautiful as she was—in the beginning”; or Laura is shown welcoming hosts of gentlemen callers at Blue Mountain, like her mother earlier; or one or other of the Tom Wingfields returns: “At any rate—Amanda has finally found security and rest. What she searched for in the faces of Gentlemen Callers.” This “Story Treatment”’s note that Part III “covers the part of the story contained in the stage play ‘The Gentleman Caller’ (‘The Glass Menagerie’)” is proof that the play already existed independently of the film treatment, but the fact that the Selznick version, which is a careful but rather mechanical copy of the Texas draft, must have been made soon after the end of June 1943—well before the play was produced—shows how misapprehension about their order could easily arise. Moreover, both play and film treatment drew on earlier material.

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The discrepancies relate back, in fact, to a more elaborate stage play of *The Gentleman Caller*, which survives in many partial versions but no complete one. The Texas archive contains multiple overlapping drafts, including a 22-page fragment with the title “The Gentleman Caller, or Portrait of a girl in glass (A lyric play),” 29 disorderly pages called “The Gentleman Caller (original and only copy of a rather tiresome play)” and subtitled “(the ruins of a play),” another 20-page fragment entitled “The Gentleman Caller (A Gentle Comedy),” and a composite typescript of 156 pages, plus 40 pages of pencil draft in a notebook and some 254 further draft pages in typescript. Names and details change bewilderingly throughout these drafts: Laura is sometimes called Rose or Rosemary (and once Miriam) and varies between 18, 20, and 23 in age; Tom is often called Larry; Jim has several Irish surnames and hails variously from Oregon, Nebraska, or Wyoming; and the St. Louis

apartment is located on Maple Street (as in *The Pretty Trap*), Enright Avenue, or, most often, Côte Brillante Avenue.

17 The confusion reflects the trouble Williams had controlling his autobiographical material. “It’s the hardest thing I have ever tried to say!”, Tom assures the audience in what he calls the “ruins of a play”:

I’ve written this over ten times and torn it up, I’ve sweated over it, raged over it, wept over it! I think I have it and then it gets all misty and fades away. . . . I must confine myself to a smaller ambition, not all but a little of it.

Similarly, in the notebook pencil draft Tom says:

The original play filled several hundred pages. The top-heavy structure collapsed. And I lay under the ruins like a caterpillar. After a while I picked myself up again. I looked about me. Here and there I picked up a sound particle, a piece that survived. I put these fragments together. Out of the ruins of a monument salvaged this tablet, these remnants of a play, *The Gentleman Caller*.

This shortened version of *The Gentleman Caller* corresponds closely, but again not exactly, to the “Description” of the filmscript.

18 Analysis is complicated further by one-acts that cover only sections of the story. Some of these may have preceded either version of *The Gentleman Caller*. *Carolers, our Candle*, for instance, covers just the Christmas Eve episode and was probably the first part written; *A Daughter of the Revolution* concentrates on Amanda’s comic telephone subscriptions; *If You Breathe, It Breaks* takes place at Blue Mountain, where the widowed Mrs. Wingfield runs a boarding house, and Rosemary, her shy, plain daughter, is teased by the boarders as well as her brother but finds comfort with a middle-aged widower to whom she gives her prized glass unicorn; and *With Grace and Dignity* belies its title in a farcical account of Mrs. Wingfield’s attempt to celebrate her election as regent of the local chapter of the D.A.R.

19 *The Pretty Trap* is much more substantial than any of these. The title page note indicates that it was written while *Gentleman Caller* was in progress, and its similarities to *Menagerie* suggest that it came quite late in the process of composition. Its purpose seems to be to experiment with a box-office happy ending for the story (a temptation that also occurs in other drafts). Jim’s visit here takes place on Sadie Hawkins day (when girls may propose to men), and Laura is shy but not lame; the lights, however, do go out, much more is made of the glass animals than in the filmscript, and the unicorn appears but is not broken. After Jim’s kiss he mentions no fiancée but asks if he may take Laura for a walk; and when they have left, Amanda ends the play exulting to Tom: “Girls are a pretty trap! That’s what they’ve always been, and always will *be*, even when *dreams plus action*—take over the world: Now—now dreamy type—Let’s finish the dishes!” A similar ending occurs in the full-length though fragmentary version entitled *The Gentleman Caller (A Gentle Comedy)*, with the addition that Amanda tells Tom to take out the suitcase he has hidden under his bed and leave now with her blessing: “Then come home and I’ll be waiting for you—no matter how long!”

10 With hindsight, we can see that Williams was right to discard such happy endings, but it is important to bear them in mind when, for instance, we consider the sentimental conclusion of the 1950 film, in which Laura, cured of shyness by her encounter with Jim, has her pick of gentlemen callers, “And the one she chose was named Richard.” It is usual to blame this travesty on Hollywood, noting that the script is credited to Williams and a rewrite man named Peter Berneis. But we can see Williams experimenting with such conclusions in his

drafts, and Texas even has a filmscript of *The Glass Menagerie* by Williams alone in which Laura, cutting business school, makes friends with a little girl sketching in the botanical gardens and eventually falls happily in love with the child's sympathetic art teacher. To do Williams justice, he has scrawled across the cover of this script, "A Horrible Thing! Certified by Tennessee Williams."

¶11 Unlike this filmscript, *The Pretty Trap* works well enough on its own terms as a sentimental romance; but, more importantly, it throws clearly into relief the much subtler achievement of *The Glass Menagerie*.

Notes

¹ For a more detailed discussion of *The Gentleman Caller* mss., see my article: "The Composition of *The Glass Menagerie*: An Argument For Complexity," *Modern Drama* 25 (1982), 409–22; rpt. in *Essays on Modern American Drama*, ed. Dorothy Parker (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987) 12–26.