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Tennessee Williams's Dramatic Charade: Secrets and Lies in *The Glass Menagerie*

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Recent scholarly criticism has remained convinced that *The Glass Menagerie* is “Tennessee Williams’s most autobiographical play, accurate to the imaginative reality of his experience even when it departs from facts in detail” (Parker 3) and that “No one who has reviewed even the bare details of his biography can overlook the obvious similarities between the record of his early life and the events described in *The Glass Menagerie*” (Presley 86); the playwright’s official biographer also contends that “Tennessee Williams had still to prove that this was not a writer’s single *autobiographical* (emphasis mine) success” (Leverich 585). It is futile to dispute the resemblance between biographical facts and dramatic fiction in this play and yet it is worth pointing out that a number of features of the play are not attested in reality and, conversely, that well-established aspects of Williams’s early adulthood are not reflected in the play. Mrs. Edwina Williams, the playwright’s mother, pointed out the many differences between the Williamses and the Wingfields (149-150, 174-175), and Cornelius Williams, the father, is recorded as having failed to discern any similarity between Amanda and Edwina and having resented the accusation of abandoning a family from which, on the contrary, he felt he had been psychologically excluded and ultimately physically exiled (Leverich 567); moreover, literary models other than the members of the Williams family—D.H. Lawrence’s characters in *Sons and Lovers* or Hart Crane, as man and poet—can be discerned as in filigree through the texture of the Wingfield saga (Debusscher 167-188). Therefore, without disregarding the personal, documentary nature of the material but giving equal weight to the omissions, the discrepancies, and the additions—the dramatic strategies—I suggest that *The Glass Menagerie* be termed “autofictional,” i.e. the result of a conflation of real life and fantasy, the poetic (re)arrangement of fact within fiction, the imaginative fictionalization of autobiography.

^{¶2} It has often been reported that in later years when *The Glass Menagerie* had become a classic of the American stage, and together with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, his most often performed and anthologized play, Williams would attend a performance and either doze off or, more disturbingly, sneer incongruously at unexpected moments, finding reasons for loud exasperation where other members of the audience were provoked to quiet sympathy. Had Williams grown aware of pretense, sentimentality, “pseudo-poetic verbiage” (Krutch 424), or was he laughing at family secrets, truths implicit in the text which he, as narrator and stage magician, was concealing under the pleasant disguise of theatre illusion and which he now, in retrospect, found puerile to have even wanted to hide? Was he gloating at those aspects of his earlier situation which the times and his immediate human environment—and, not least, his own tendency to dissimulate—had forced him to relegate between the lines, to leave unspoken, but which his artistic integrity compelled him to include all the same? Could he then have been laughing at his own autofictionalizing strategies, his ingeniousness at dodging without eluding, at revealing without being explicit?

^{¶3} In crossing that space between life and letters, two characters, Mr. Wingfield and Tom, have been reassembled in such a way as to keep from view a constituent trait of their personality and conduct—alcoholism

for one, homosexuality for the other—which nevertheless conditions in fundamental ways the course of the action and their modes of behaviour as well as those of the other characters. Williams seems to have had a problematic relationship with his father, who called him a sissy and terrorized the boy and his sister, Rose. As long as he travelled extensively as a shoe salesman and appeared only temporarily at irregular intervals in the southern rectories of Reverend Dakin where Mrs. Edwina lived with her two children, his influence within the family may have been limited. But with his promotion to an administrative and sedentary job and with the subsequent move of the family to Saint Louis, his thundering presence and drinking bouts became a cause of alarm for his wife and children.

¶14 Leverich reports (192-193) the incident in which Cornelius got involved in a quarrel with another of the company's salesmen who bit off a piece of Cornelius's ear, making an already precarious situation with Rose much worse and putting an end to any prospect of advancement and promotion at the International Shoe Company:

Cornelius was not just a hard drinker, as he liked to think of himself, but in truth, clinically alcoholic. He was resorting to what were open secrets within the family: the familiar, but what he thought to be clever, deceptions, such as hiding a bottle behind the bathtub or in other dark corners. He was on an irreversible course towards self-destruction. No one knew why. It would be too facile to say, well, with a wife like that . . . Edwina in her defense contended that it was because he was a bridled aristocrat. His sisters felt it was because of their mother's early death. Dakin said it was because he liked gin. (192)

Cornelius Williams/Mr. Wingfield is of course absent from the list of dramatis personae in *The Glass Menagerie* but, as if acknowledging his lasting influence on the household and reminding the audience and the protagonists of it, Tennessee Williams transforms him into one of the features of the set, “the blown-up photograph . . . of the face of a very handsome young man in a doughboy's First World War cap. He is gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling, as if to say ‘I will be smiling forever’” (144).

¶15 The picture hangs on the back wall of the family room; it is initially pointed out by Tom as Narrator (145), illuminated several times at strategic moments of the play, and re-introduced periodically (by implication) the alcoholic who was a problem through his presence and became another, after his departure, through his absence. Amanda stops in front of it several times, reminiscing about her husband's charm (158), her love for him (172), and their first meeting in Blue Mountain amidst the jonquils (194). He represents the great illumination of love in her life, the one figure whose influence is not likely to diminish with the passing of time since, as Nancy Tischler noted early on, “Not having seen her husband growing old and ugly enable(d) her to preserve her romantic image of him” (96). But just as many qualifying touches creep into her idyllic picture of Blue Mountain, one of the dominant traits of Mr. Wingfield insistently imposes itself on her memory of him in spite of her attempts to gloss over it: “drinking,” as she demurely calls his alcoholism, is what she is afraid of when she asks Tom to promise “never to become a drunkard” (171) and later to make sure that the Gentleman Caller “doesn't drink. . . . The last thing I want for my daughter's a boy who drinks!” (184). The circumstances of the Wingfield family differ from those of the original Williams family, but the behavioral patterns of a real life family faced with alcoholism are traceable in the fiction. In his recent essay on *Menagerie* in Matthew Roudané's *Cambridge Companion* (1997), Christopher Bigsby describes what Elia Kazan would have called, I think, Amanda's “spine” as being a fundamental need for security (32), which the British scholar then diagnoses

as the result of the Depression. There is ample evidence that the real life Williamses were never as hard up as the fictional Wingfields and so, without denying the effect of the general socio-economic environment as an intensifying element, I tend to see Amanda's insecurity as characteristic of the alcoholic's family.

116 Alcoholism is a disease that affects not only the victim but the whole family as well. Therapists and psychologists have known for a long time that attention must be paid to the entire family in an effort to break the patterns of dysfunction established by years of alcoholic behavior. In dysfunctional families, regardless of whether the cause is alcohol or not, emotions are repressed and twisted; they are either not shared or manipulated in a judgmental, blaming fashion. Dysfunctional families share certain common traits such as attitudes of rigidity, reverence for past traditions to the detriment of the present, insistence on roles and rituals. For a while these were diagnosed as the cause of alcoholism; instead, it is now believed that these are coping techniques that a family adopts to maintain a certain degree of cohesion and integrity and to create a semblance of sanity. The common denominator of the alcoholic, the spouse, and the children is denial: the unwritten law of the alcoholic home is that there is no problem. There is a symptomatic avoidance of the truth. A network of lies binds the family together. Making excuses, avoiding truth, and creating fantasies become a way of life, extending beyond the original cause—the alcoholism—and invading all other issues.

117 In *Menagerie* Williams draws indirect attention to Mr. Wingfield's alcoholism in the two or three instances already mentioned when Amanda reveals her deep-seated fears that Tom might become a drinker or that Mr. O'Connor may already be one, thus indicating that she is well aware that alcoholism is a pattern of family behavior that tends to be repeated by successive generations either through direct filiation, the son taking over his father's drinking habits, or through alliance, the daughter marrying an alcoholic, as did her mother. The original alcoholic, Mr. Wingfield, has abandoned the family a long time ago—probably sixteen years before, in fact—and therefore for much longer than the real-life model. Miss Edwina and Cornelius separated only after the royalties of *Menagerie* had made Edwina financially independent, but the disappearance of an alcoholic from the family circle does not reduce, any more so than his treatment or possible recovery, the problems experienced by the spouse and children. Their behavioral scripts are internalized, so their roles are perpetuated.

118 Amanda still possesses the characteristics of the enabler. She fails to see her situation with objectivity. She is afraid of abandonment and engages in destructive rituals, primarily neurotic nagging. In so doing, she displays the urge to control that is so common to the enabling spouse. It is as if she had a surplus of willpower to compensate for the lack of it in the drinker. Like Maggie, in *Cat*, the co-dependent becomes addicted to the need to control and bears the joyless burden of it. Thus, Amanda is unwilling to allow her children to become adults. She is presumptuous, demanding, and insensitive. She blinds herself to Laura's real physical condition: "Laura, I've told you never, never to use that word!" (157). As she pushes Laura towards Jim, it is clear she has never paused to find out who her daughter really is, nor what her aspirations might be, nor has she ever considered modes of living other than her own. Along the same destructive line, she insists that Tom remain the family's beast of burden: "What right have you got to jeopardize your job? Jeopardize the security of us all?" (163). He is the breadwinner, but she assumes the right to censor his reading material as if he were a child!

119 Amanda is possessed by the overwhelming fear that Tom will follow in his father's footsteps. To Tom, she desperately says, "When I see you taking after his ways! Staying out late—and—well, you had been drinking the night you were in that—terrifying condition!" (172-173). The specter of Mr. Wingfield's unmentioned alcoholism is as constantly present as his laughing photograph. Voiced regularly, her fear is, ironically, what

contributes to drive Tom away. Those who study alcoholic families have found that the children's behavior falls into predictable categories. Although these roles are clear, children can play more than one. In the Wingfield family, Laura is the lost child, and Tom is the responsible one. Typically, in response to the distress in the family, these children, to survive, had to develop coping behaviors. Laura withdraws into a world of her own. Fearful of relationships, painfully shy, feeling inadequate and rejected, she would prefer to walk around Forest Park every day rather than face sure mortification at Rubicam's Business College. Jim's observation is correct: she does have an inferiority complex, a common situation for children growing up in alcoholic homes. Her refuge is to escape from reality.

¶10 Children use fantasy to survive chaos and pain. Children in dysfunctional homes frequently invent "a private world that gives them a way to escape from time to time so they can keep from being pulled into the craziness" (Seixas and Toucha 26). The make-believe world becomes a sanctuary. Laura is happy spending hours playing with her menagerie, identifying with the unicorn, or listening to her scratchy records. Often such a child ultimately finds refuge, as an adolescent, in alcohol. Laura has not found that avenue. But Tom has. The responsible child, Tom is supporting the family. But, as he combines roles, our "Shakespeare" lives in a nether world of poetry and escape, alcohol and dreams of the merchant marine. Amanda's accusation is quite accurate: "You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions!" (235). This is a common family trait. No one confronts reality, because it is so painful.

¶11 Children of alcoholics are heavily burdened by the responsibility of parenting, which usually falls on the older children (Lawson 157). Although in this case the younger child, Tom, being the resident male and not physically handicapped, has shouldered this burden. He feels responsible, yet trapped and deeply resentful; and he feels guilty for his reaction. A common rule in the alcoholic home is "Don't be selfish" (Martin 62). To preserve the dysfunctional system, it is essential that he not address his own needs but sacrifice himself for the family. Failure to do so is punishable by eternal guilt. These messages are sent repeatedly by Amanda. When she senses his urge to flee from her smothering control, she delivers an ultimatum to Tom:

AMANDA: I mean that as soon as Laura has got somebody to take care of her, married, a home of her own, independent—why, then you'll be free to go wherever you please, on land, on sea, whichever way the wind blows you! But until that time you've got to look out for your sister. I don't say we because I'm old and don't matter! I say for your sister because she's young and dependent. (175)

The final interchange between Tom and his mother illustrates the fatal feature of the controlling parent:

AMANDA: Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job! Don't let anything interfere with your selfish pleasure! Just go, go, go—to the movies!

TOM: All right, I will! The more you shout about my selfishness to me the quicker I'll go, and I won't go to the movies!

AMANDA: Go, then! Go to the moon—you selfish dreamer! (236)

In his farewell address to the audience, Tom confesses that his mother's imposition of guilt was effective. To this day he thinks with regret of how he left Laura: "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (237).

¶12

Permanent scars are inflicted on the child in such a warped home. There is a lack of emotional bonding between parent and child (Lawson 156). The stress even on the non-alcoholic parent is so severe that nothing is left for the child. This lack of emotional support is perceived by the child as rejection. Adding to this condition, the negative emotions—anger, resentment, blaming, guilt—are so dominant and so painful in the dysfunctional family that attempts are made by all to become nonfeeling (Ackerman 23). Thus healthy relationships are denied or postponed; the children are emotional cripples. Social and emotional disengagement is a common theme; the home becomes an isolated “habit cage” (Ackerman 16). One research group recognizes a problem of sexual identity in the offspring of alcoholic parents. The inability to express emotions, the lack of love, and the absence of bonding with an appropriate gender role model combine to create a propensity towards homosexuality (Seixas and Toucha 87-88). Tom clearly falls into this category. Amanda even tells Tom she does not want him to take after his father, except for one crucial feature: “The care he always took of his appearance. He never allowed himself to look untidy” (178). This is not surprising. Appearances are very important in the distorted world of the alcoholic family.

¶13 Recognizing the role of the dysfunctional family in *Menagerie* provides a fuller understanding of the dynamics of the play. Williams’s sensitivity and understanding in using these models of typical alcoholic behavior correspond to the findings of many of those who do professional work in the field of alcohol abuse: most of them, as did Williams, grew up in alcoholic homes themselves. Williams’s play reveals the dynamics of alcoholism and its impact on the family unit as clearly as, although more poetically than, the clinical case studies in the abnormal psychology textbooks. Conversely, understanding the alcoholic pattern can enable us to understand Williams with new insight.

¶14 Just as Amanda’s “spine” is the need for security provoked at least as much by her having married an alcoholic as by the socio-economic circumstances of the late Thirties, Tom’s may be viewed as the need to hide his homosexuality from Laura, Amanda, and Jim—and control the inner revolt which is the symptom of it. Williams seems to have been a sexual late bloomer; and his sexuality was, for a while at least, not clearly focused, but by the time he came to write the early drafts of *The Glass Menagerie* he had acknowledged, at least to himself, his homoerotic preference, and his short-lived but intense affair with Kip Kiernan was a thing of the recent past (July-September 1940) (Leverich 371-379).

¶15 In view of this and the progressive public revelation of Williams’s homosexuality culminating in the David Frost interview in 1970 and C. Robert Jennings’s article in *Playboy* in April 1973, it is surprising how little attention has been paid until recently to the sexual orientation of Tom Wingfield, the author’s alter ego in the play. In fact, it is not until the film version of Paul Newman in 1986 that Tom’s homosexuality is taken seriously into account. It took the premise, as stated in Stewart Stern’s useful account *No Tricks in my Pocket: Paul Newman Directs* (11), that both as narrator and character “Tom is meant to be the messenger of Tennessee’s experience of that period” and John Malkovich’s insistence on exploring the acting possibilities from that vantage point, that brought homosexuality into the mainstream of the play’s criticism.

¶16 Tom’s refusal to abide by the meal rituals, and his reluctance to listen to the family saga reveal a rebelliousness, a refusal to conform, to pretend to be and act like the others, to suppress that otherness which nature has planted in him. His restlessness, his impatience, his swearwords, his outbursts, his drinking, and his final flight may all be symptoms of the bottled up frustrations of the gay person in the straight-laced environment created and insisted on by Amanda. His sarcasm is aimed at the modes of courtship and marital

arrangements of the heterosexual world. It is surely not an accident that having heard the “seventeen gentlemen callers” story many times (“Again?” 147), Tom would interrupt to ask a question about the widow of the brilliant Fitzhugh boy with the full knowledge that he is the one who never married. Amanda’s enamored tirade about him and her regrets about a romance that never materialized adumbrate Blanche’s relationship with the enigmatic Allan Gray, which did materialize with tragic consequences. Tom’s irony towards the bygone world of Blue Mountain is tinged with fear or diffidence when it comes to the present, in particular the world of the warehouse. Tom is a solitary figure in the workplace—where his favorite spot is a “cabinet of the washroom” (190); where people talk behind his back—Jim tells him “Mr. Mendoza was speaking to me about you” (200)—and where they call him names—“Shakespeare” is not a charitable nickname for an aspiring poet. He remains separate from his workmates who regard him first “with suspicious hostility” (190) and later with “a smile (provoked by) an oddly fashioned dog who trots across their path at some distance” (191). Is it stretching credibility too far to read the reactions of the warehouse people as a result of the stereotypical perception of the “other” and the “different”? The nature of that “otherness” in the early 1940s had to be presented on the surface as a poetic disposition at odds with the industrial surroundings, but homosexuality may be an equally plausible ground—and moreover not exclusive of the other—to explain suspicion, hostility, aloofness, and estrangement.

¶17 In this alienating milieu Tom does not know anything about anybody. When faced with his mother’s reproach concerning his ignorance about Jim’s marital plans, he counters that “The warehouse is where I work, not where I know things about people” (235). This is as much as to say that there is an unspoken code concerning privacy which he approves of, with the understanding that it also protects him against the unwelcome inquisitiveness of others about *his* marital plans. Bigsby, in keeping with his socio-economic interpretation, feels that it is Amanda who bears the greatest burden in this play: “twice abandoned and left to watch over her daughter . . . she is allowed moments of touching vulnerability when she exposes the nature of her own pain” (42). This reading must, I think, be somewhat qualified if one is willing to accept the view that Tom’s pain stemming from the need to hide carefully an essential part of his nature—ironically, that part in which his puritanical and domineering mother may also have played a major role—has existential roots that go deeper than Amanda’s socio-economic woes.

¶18 In scene IV, when Laura has been sent out on an errand, mother and son are left to discuss future plans: for a moment Amanda bares her heart to Tom by acknowledging her emotional attachment to the unfaithful Mr. Wingfield, a remarkable and unexpectedly moving scene in which she is talking about her deepest commitment. Tom’s unforced willingness to listen to Amanda’s confidence is indicated by the fourfold repetition of “gently” in the stage directions. And he is about to respond in kind, or so the syntactic parallelism leads us to assume. She says, “There’s so many things in my heart that I cannot describe to you. I’ve never told you but I—*loved* your father . . .” (172) to which he reacts, “You say there’s so much in your heart that you can’t describe to me. That’s true of me, too. There’s so much in my heart that I can’t describe to *you!*” (173) with the final pronoun italicized for emphasis.

¶19 Without the final emphasis, Tom’s response sounds like a parallel opening: like Amanda, he is about to reveal a secret that lies buried in his deepest being. And following in her syntactic footsteps, he might complete the thought “I’ve never told you but—I am gay . . .” But of course the italics do insist on the impossibility for Amanda to be the recipient of that kind of confidence. Were she another person, another mother, perhaps, but “*you!*” disqualifies her as an interlocutor. The rhetorical flow is interrupted, as is the confessional mood: “*you!*”

reminds Tom of the nature and limitations of his interlocutor, forces him back into his solitary tête-à-tête with his painful knowledge, and so he leaves his final sentence unfinished: “So let’s respect each other’s—” (173).

¶20 It is not far fetched, I suggest, to fill in the gap with “secrets of the heart.” On the whole, then, and although there can be no absolute certainty in the text itself in this respect, Tom’s burden may be less immediately visible but more intensely unbearable than Amanda’s since there is nowhere he can turn, neither inward nor outward; neither warehouse nor home, where secrets of the heart can be shared. Nor is there anyone or anything he can blame for this state of affairs as *she* can the callous Mr. Wingfield or the economic slump. In later years, then, Williams may have been laughing at the Puritanism, either Amanda’s or Tom’s, or presumably both, that compelled him to adopt all sorts of strategies, in words and deeds, to cover up and hide a state of affairs that had become an open secret first and later no secret at all.

¶21 Prominent among those strategies is Tom’s constant attendance at the movies. Motion pictures are mentioned at six strategic moments in the play, in every scene after the first two, often as a subject of contention between Tom and Amanda. From the beginning, Amanda frowns upon the activity in general and upon Tom’s quasi addiction in particular:

AMANDA: I think you’ve been doing things that you’re ashamed of. . . . I don’t believe that you go every night to the movies. Nobody goes to the movies night after night. Nobody in their right mind goes to the movies at nearly midnight, and movies don’t let out at two a.m. . . . Where are you going?

TOM: I’m going to the *movies*!

AMANDA: I don’t believe that lie! (163-164)

¶22 To his mother’s vehement suspicion and accusation of lying Tom reacts with the famous infuriated speech ending on the “ugly—babbling old—*witch*. . . .” (164), revealing his anger both at being accused—or perhaps nearly found out—and at feeling guilty apparently for jeopardizing his job and therefore, as Bigsby would contend, the financial security of the family. But I would rather believe (by his being reminded through Amanda’s maddening six fold repetition of “the movies,” by his being confronted with Amanda’s well-founded incredulity—after all she and later Laura in scene IV ought to know whether or not in 1936 in St. Louis movies start at midnight and let out at two o’clock—and by his finding no more plausible reaction than the unconvincing stubborn repetition “I’m going to the movies”) that it is the final accusation of being a liar that sends Tom into his prolonged reaction about his life in the underworld. If we disregard as ludicrously exaggerated the overcompensation that makes him project himself in a series of grotesque macho figures (a hired assassin, Killer Wingfield, a dynamic czar of the underworld, El Diablo), the outburst nevertheless contains a reference to “a violin case” which unmistakably reminds us of the short story, entitled “The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin.” In this story, the narrator (easily recognizable as the young Tom Williams at the time when he was reaching puberty) describes his awakening passion for a Richard Miles, the musical companion of his sister. There is also mention of “a double life,” presumably the mask that Tom Wingfield wears to meet the world, in particular the world of his mother and that of the factory, his diurnal personality; and finally a threat (“I could tell you things to make you sleepless”) the exact meaning of which escapes the two interlocutors because of the exaggerated context in which it appears but which could well contain the oblique acknowledgment of his real nightly occupations, and hence of his nocturnal, hidden,

closeted personality, the revelation of which, he surmises and maybe fears or possibly darkly wishes, would quite literally destroy Amanda's entire world and being.

¶23 Does Tom really go to the movies as often as he claims? The “perfect shower of movie—ticket stubs” (166) that falls out of his pocket as he searches for his key at the beginning of scene IV leaves little doubt about this. To his mother's question later in the same scene “Why do you go to the movies so much, Tom?” he evasively answers, “I go to the movies because—I like adventure” (173). The strategically placed hesitation may reveal embarrassment or emphasize the importance to the speaker of what he is about to say and at the same time allow him to pause in his attempt to control the double meaning of his discourse by selecting the vague and all-encompassing “adventure” which cleverly describes and conceals what Tom seeks at the movies. In the next scene we are once again reminded of the anomalous frequency of his movie going:

(He glances at himself in the mirror . . .)

AMANDA (*sharply*): Where are you going?

TOM: I'm going to the movies. (*He goes out the screen door.*)

AMANDA: Not to the movies, every night to the movies!

(She follows quickly to the screen door.) I don't believe you always go to the movies! (188)

¶24 We now catch a glimpse of an unexpected preparation for Tom's nightly activity: he has just finished grudgingly submitting to his mother's grooming of his cow-lick and reassures himself on how he looks before leaving for an activity that takes place in the dark. John Malkovitch goes one step further in that direction, as he brushes his teeth before he leaves the house! What, then, is the real nature of “adventure” in Tom's cinema? Again, there is no clear answer to this question, and the text of the play provides none, but we may look for one in other cinemas in Tennessee Williams's work. In particular those of “Desire and the Black Masseur” (1946) in which Anthony Burns, who, like Tom, a clerk “in the largest wholesale company of the city,” seeks compensation for a life of anonymity and finds it in the back rows of the movie houses, or those in the Joy Rio stories (“The Mysteries of the Joy Rio” (1941) and “Hard Candy” (1953)) in the first of which the ghost of Emil Kroger, the watchmaker, lures his much younger lover and successor, Pablo Gonzales, to the upper reaches of a decrepit movie house into a kind of transcendental embrace; in the later reworking, Kroger has become Krupper and the second, cordoned-off balcony of the cinema is now the setting for what Steven Bruhm recently called “a libidinal economy,” an exchange of hard candies for the sexual favors of starving young men (529-30).

¶25 Cinemas then often figure in Williams's work (and in the short stories more easily than the plays) with dark arenas in which the nocturnal impulses so carefully kept under control in the light are given space to unfurl. That Tom should resort to them so often is then both a measure of his frustration and an indication of the nature of its resolution. The cinema is opposed to the warehouse, and the two environments define the polarities of the outside world for Tom. The warehouse is a place of regulation and isolation, the epitome of a brightly lit material world of reality; the cinema is the place of imagination and freedom where darkness favors temporary togetherness.

¶26 In the very last words of the play, Tom confirms the role of movie going in his life. He is no longer running away from a home dominated by Amanda; in joining the merchant marine he has now found a new form of adventure, yet as he wanders the streets of the unfamiliar cities that constitute his existential itinerary, he confesses symptomatically: “I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger” (237).

The chiasmic disposition of the phrasing suggests that the bar is the proper place to buy a drink and the movies the most likely to address a stranger-one, we assume, on whose kindness one may depend. The short story ("Portrait of a Girl in Glass"), as usual more explicit than the play, has it that if Tom, in his wanderings in the city, stumbles on a souvenir that reminds him of Laura before he has "found companions . . . the night is hers!"

¶27

The Glass Menagerie is Williams's most autobiographical play and, paradoxically, as we get to know the playwright's life more fully, we also come to see its dramatic mirroring deepen. In other words, the painting reveals hitherto hidden shades that confirm the artist's honesty and integrity. The play is now more than fifty years old; it is one of the most often performed in the modern repertoire; together with *Streetcar* it has over the years attracted considerable critical attention of all sorts; yet it continues to fascinate on the printed page as much as on the stage perhaps because it still has not revealed all the secrets of its liars. Perhaps there was always more for Tennessee Williams to have laughed and sighed about during productions of this autofictional play than we'll ever be able to determine.¹

Notes

¹ This essay was first published in the volume "Union in Partition." *Essays in Honor of Jeanne Delbaere*. Liege L3 Press, 1997.

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