

CHAPTER II

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

The Glass Menagerie is the story of Amanda Wingfield, a poor lonely woman deserted by her husband; she leads a miserable life with her two children, a crippled daughter, Laura, and a son, Tom. The son is bored with his job in a warehouse, but he is the only support of his mother and sister. He wants to be a poet and often tries to write during his working hours. Amanda tries to avoid the sordid facts of her present existence by living in dreams of her past, when she was gay and happy, with a lot of suitors at her house at the same time. Her loneliness started when she was deserted by her husband, who went away leaving no message. Thereafter, she concentrated her whole life on her two children, trying to control them as much as possible.

Amanda has caused the loneliness of the rest of her family. She is forever fussing about Tom's table manners and urging him to bring home a gentleman caller for his sister. As for Laura, Amanda has always rushed her into activities without regard for her daughter's acute self-consciousness caused by her lameness. Laura is extremely sensitive and shy. She is continually aware of her physical defect. She has to wear a brace on her leg and feels that it makes a horribly loud noise when she walks. She

abandons her course in a business college and is miserable in the Young People's League at church. She wants to be by herself with her precious collection of glass animals, which she treasures as her companions while playing her father's old phonograph records. She might have adjusted to her situation if her mother had not pushed her all the time. Amanda is desperate and lonely because of her insecure financial position and her inability to admit the truth about her children. By her pushing and nagging, she isolates them from her and separates them from each other. One wonders if she did not also drive away her husband.

Amanda is afraid that her son might follow in his father's footsteps. She knows Tom is bored with his work and longs for an adventurous life.

Amanda: . . . I know your ambitions do not lie in the warehouse, that like everybody in the whole wide world - you've had to - make sacrifices, but - Tom - life's not easy, it calls for - Spartan endurance! There's so many things in my heart that I cannot describe to you! I've never told you but I - loved your father. . . .

Tom [gently]: I know that, Mother.

Amanda: And you - 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! Laura says that you hate the apartment and that you go out nights to get away from it! . . . 22

Amanda cannot understand that she herself is the cause of Tom's going to the movies every night, just to get away from her.

Amanda: But why - why, Tom - are you always so restless? Where do you go to, nights?

Tom: I - go to the movies.

Amanda: Why do you go to the movies so much, Tom?

Tom: I go to the movies because - I like adventure. Adventure is something I don't have much of at work, so I go to the movies.

Amanda: But, Tom you go to the movies entirely too much!

Tom: I like a lot of adventure

Amanda: Most young men find adventure in their careers.

Tom: Then most young men are not employed in a warehouse. . . . Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse!

Amanda: Man is by instinct! Don't quote instinct to me! Instinct is something that people have got away from! It belongs to animals! Christian adults don't want it!

Tom: What do Christian adults want, then Mother?

Amanda: Superior things! Things of the mind and the spirit! Only animals have to satisfy instincts! Surely your aims are somewhat higher than theirs! Than monkeys - pigs -

Tom: I reckon they're not.²³



Their conversations always end like this one, in an argument. Amanda expects her son to look after her, to support her, because his father has abandoned his responsibility.

Amanda: What right have you got to jeopardize your job? Jeopardize the security of us all?

How do you think we'd manage if you were -

Tom: Listen! You think I'm crazy about the warehouse? . . . You think I'm in love with the Continental Shoemakers? You think I want to spend fifty-five years down there in that - celotex interior with - fluorescent - tubes. Look, I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains - than go back mornings! I go! 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! For sixty-five dollars a month I give up all that

I dream of doing and being ever! And you say self - self's all I ever think of. Why, listen, if self is what I thought of, Mother, I'd be where he is - GONE! [Pointing to father's picture.] As far as the system of transportaion reaches!²⁴

Amanda is - in a realistic moment - aware that she is the cause of her children's misery. "My devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children! . . . 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!"²⁵

Amanda always overestimates her children's powers, hoping that they will distinguish themselves in the future. She cannot face the fact that Laura is crippled, although Tom does his best to persuade her to accept the truth that Laura is different from most girls. Amanda keeps reminding Laura of her own youthful popularity. One day she discovers that Laura has not been attending classes at the business college, but instead has been visiting the zoo, the museums, and going to the movies. Amanda knows the kind of life they can look forward to if Laura continues to retreat.

So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling? Eternally play those worn-out phonograph records your father left as a painful reminder of him? We won't have a business career - we've given that up because it gave us nervous indigestion! [Laughs wearily.] What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to

occupy a position. I've seen such pitiful cases in the South - barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife! - stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room - encouraged by one in-law to visit another - little birdlike women without any nest - eating the crust of humility all their life!

Is that the future that we've mapped out for ourselves? I swear it's the only alternative I can think of! It isn't a very pleasant alternative, is it?²⁶

Laura's physical defect is probably the cause of her extreme self-consciousness, which has increased to the point that she is literally terrified of any contact with strangers. She became physically ill and threw up on the floor the day of the speed-test in business college. She is so nervous that she cannot sit at the table and eat with the family and the gentlemen caller. Unable to cope with the confused pace of the world, Laura takes refuge in her glass collection and her phonograph records. She is different from most of Williams' other women characters. She is peculiarly shy, but she gets along contentedly enough when left to herself. She enjoys the art museum and the bird-houses at the zoo and the tropical flower exhibits. She is not sexually frustrated. In fact, she is the only character in the play who is not frustrated; even Jim, the gentleman caller, is frustrated because he had a glorious past record of achievement in high school, but has not gone very far since. Laura confesses her suffering to Jim when they are alone together, reminiscing about the class they

were in in high school.

Jim: Now I remember - you always came in late.

Laura: Yes, it was so hard for me, getting upstairs. I had that brace on my leg - it clumped so loud!

Jim: I never heard any clumping.

Laura: And everybody was seated before I came in. I had to walk in front of all those people. My seat was in the back row. I had to go clumping all the way up the aisle with everyone watching!

Laura: I know, but I was. It was always such a relief when the singing started.²⁷

The unicorn, Laura's favourite glass animal, is a symbol of Laura herself. It is very delicate and fragile but out of place in the collection because it is different from all the other animals - the only one of its kind. Jim says of it, "Poor little fellow, he must feel sort of lonesome." Laura replies, "Well, if he does he doesn't complain about it. He stays on a shelf with some horses that don't have horns and all of them seem to get along nicely together."²⁸ When Jim accidentally knocks down the unicorn while he and Laura are dancing, the conversation becomes filled with suggestiveness about Laura's deformity.

Jim: It's lost its -

Laura: Horn! It doesn't matter. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise.

Jim: You'll never forgive me. I bet that was your favourite piece of glass.

Laura: I don't have favourites much. It's no tragedy, Freckles. Glass breaks so easily. No matter how careful you are. The traffic jars the shelves and things fall off them.

Jim: Still I'm awfully sorry that I was the cause.

Laura: I'll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less - freakish! Now he will feel more at home

with the other horses, the ones that don't have horns.²⁹

Laura is greatly disappointed when she learns that the man she had admired since high school days is already engaged to be married. Perhaps if her love had been returned she would have been able to grow out of her nervousness. Perhaps with Jim's encouragement she might have overcome her inferiority complex and shyness. Now she has no alternative except to go on living with her mother. Tom has left to travel with the Merchant Marine. There is no assurance as to their means of support, but the playwright's final description of the two women, as seen in Tom's memory, suggests they may endure with courage:

. . . Amanda appears to be making a comforting speech to Laura who is huddled upon the sofa. Now that we cannot hear the mother's speech, her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty. Laura's dark hair hides her face until at the end of the speech she lifts it to smile at her mother. Amanda's gestures are slow and graceful, almost dancelike, as she comforts her daughter.³⁰