The Glass Menagerie: Symbols Essay, Research Paper

The Glass Menagerie: Symbols

The play The Glass Menagerie, by Tennessee Williams, Williams uses many symbols

which represent many different things. Many of the symbols used in the play try

to symbolize some form of escape or difference between reality and illusion.

The first symbol, presented in the first scene, is the fire escape. This

represents the “bridge” between the illusory world of the Wingfields and the

world of reality. This “bridge” seems to be a one way passage. But the direction

varies for each character. For Tom, the fire escape is the way out of the world

of Amanda and Laura and an entrance into the world of reality. For Laura, the

fire escape is a way into her world. A way to escape from reality. Both examples

can readily be seen: Tom will stand outside on the fire escape to smoke, showing

that he does not like to be inside, to be a part of the illusionary world. Laura,

on the other hand, thinks of the fire escape as a way in and not a way out. This

can be seen when Amanda sends Laura to go to the store: Laura trips on the fire

escape. This also shows that Laura’s fears and emotions greatly affect her

physical condition, more so than normal people.

Another symbol presented deals more with Tom than any of the other characters:

Tom’s habit of going to the movies shows us his longing to leave the apartment

and head out into the world of reality. A place where one can find adventure.

And Tom, being a poet, can understand the needs of man to long for adventure and

romance. But he is kept from entering reality by Amanda, who criticizes him as

being a “selfish dreamer.” But, Tom has made steps to escape into reality by

transferring the payment of a light bill to pay for his dues in the Merchant

Seaman’s Union.

Another symbol, which deals with both Amanda and Laura, is Jim O’Connor. To

Laura, Jim represents the one thing she fears and does not want to face, reality.

Jim is a perfect example of “the common man.” A person with no real outstanding

quality. In fact, Jim is rather awkward, which can be seen when he dances with

Laura. To Amanda, Jim represents the days of her youth, when she went frolicking

about picking jonquils and supposedly having “seventeen gentlemen callers on one

Sunday afternoon.” Although Amanda desires to see Laura settled down with a nice

young man, it is hard to tell whether she wanted a gentleman caller to be

invited for Laura or for herself.

One symbol which is rather obvious is Laura’s glass menagerie. Her collection of

glass represents her own private world. Set apart from reality, a place where

she can hide and be safe. The events that happen to Laura’s glass affects

Laura’s emotional state greatly. When Amanda tells Laura to practice typing,

Laura instead plays with her glass. When Amanda is heard walking up the fire

escape, she quickly hides her collection. She does this to hide her secret world

from the others. When Tom leaves to go to the movies in an angered rush, he

accidentally breaks some of Laura’s glass. The shattered glass represents

Laura’s understanding of Tom’s responsibilities to her. Also, the unicorn, which

is important, represents Laura directly. Laura points out to Jim that the

unicorn is different, just as she is different. She also points out that the

unicorn does not complain of being different, as she does not complain either.

And when Jim breaks the horn off the unicorn, Laura points out that now it is

like the other horses, just as Laura has shed some of her shyness and become

more normal. When she hands the broken unicorn to Jim, this might represent

Laura handing over her broken love to Jim, as Jim has revealed that he is

engaged to be married.

As can be seen, there are quite a few symbols in this play. And a number of them

have diverse meanings. Most of these symbols have a direct meaning in the

author’s own life. This is understandable seeing that the play is supposed to be

“memory play.” It is obvious that this memory play is based on Williams’ own

memories.