

The Glass Menagerie as Biblical Allegory

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Abstract

The Glass Menagerie is a memory play written by Tennessee Williams in 1944. The narrator Tom recounts the story about how his mother Amanda tries to find his sister Laura a Gentleman Caller—a possible husband—but ultimately fails. Yet, as entertaining and compelling as this play is, it also features many biblical allusions, such as its characters and plot. Heroine Laura follows the life of Christ in her sacrifice, crucifixion, and resurrection. While Tom and Laura's mother, Amanda, resembles Judas Iscariot from the Bible, the perpetual presence of the seemingly absent father represents God's infinite but invisible existence. Lastly, the storyteller Tom stands for the sinner that dwells among us. Being widely read and acted on the stage, *The Glass Menagerie* spreads the Gospel and the great moments of salvation history through an uncomplicated, heart-rending story. Therefore, this play can disseminate biblical knowledge to others who might otherwise never have contact with the Gospel.

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“I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” is the important premise that sets up *The Glass Menagerie*, a famous memory play written by Tennessee Williams in 1944 (Williams, 1944, p. 4). Bringing the time back to 1930s, the narrator, Tom, tells his memory of his family, of which his mother, Amanda, attempts to find his sister Laura a Gentleman Caller—a potential husband—but eventually fails. Being the center of this play, Laura Wingfield is a vulnerable and timid girl who represents Jesus in multiple ways. This play brought Williams out of obscurity and resembles the Bible primarily in its characters and plot. Adapted to film, television, and radio, *The Glass Menagerie* serves as a medium to spread its “truth,” to disseminate the Gospel to many people through a short, beautifully tragic story.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, biblical allusions are most evident in its characters. Amanda, the mother of Laura and Tom, is similar to Judas from the Bible in their greedy intentions behind the betrayals. After Amanda discovers that Laura has dropped out from her business college, she starts looking for a Gentleman Caller eagerly, a nice young man who can marry Laura and support the family (Williams, 1944). Though Amanda seems to truly care for the future of the family, Tom describes her idea of getting a Gentleman Caller as an “obsession” which “hung like a sentence passed upon the Wingfields” (Williams, 1944, p. 19). It is rather strange for a mother to become exceedingly desperate about having a son-in-law when her paralyzingly shy daughter is “frightened” and “apologetic” toward the very idea (Williams, 1944, p. 19). While Laura is highly self-conscious and reclusive, Amanda does not care about her reactions to the arrangement. This “obsession” of Amanda closely parallels that of Judas; as John says, “The

devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him" (John 13:2, English Standard Version). Her true intention unravels as she tells Tom that he can leave to achieve his dream of becoming a writer "till somebody takes your place" (Williams, 1944, p. 35). However, Tom's "place" is not only taking care of his sister, but also, more importantly, providing for his mother, who makes him work like a "slave" in the warehouse to pay all the bills (Williams, 1944, p. 21). Amanda's ultimate goal is to secure a man who possesses enough wealth to make her live comfortably, not just Laura. Her desire for material comfort leads her to sacrifice her own daughter to an unknown man, just as Judas' greed for 30 pieces of silver prompted him to turn Jesus over to the chief priests, sending him to death (Matthew 26:14-15, New International Version).

Amanda also resembles Judas in her selfishness and egoism. On the day when the Gentleman Caller, Jim O'Connor, arrives for dinner, Amanda puts on her "girlish frock of yellowed voile" which she "wore it on Sundays" for her Gentleman Callers and "had it on the day" when she met their father (Williams, 1944, p. 53). She transforms her role as a matchmaker to become the match itself. Jonquils, a kind of flower that represents narcissism, are also often associated with Amanda throughout the text (Flowers Meaning, 2018). Those descriptions suggest that Amanda's longing for a provider and her egoism overpower her concerns of finding Laura a suitable husband. What's more, she only thinks of her own preferences when questioning Tom on the traits of the Gentleman Caller—neither did she tell Laura of his name until the last minute (Williams, 1944). Her selfishness, wrapped in her thoughtful questions, is similar to Judas' character. He once asks for the reason of not selling ointment and given to the poor, but, as John says, "He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and

having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it” (John 12:4-6, English Standard Version). Their seeming attentiveness envelope their selfish motives and sinful desires.

Along with her self-centeredness, Amanda’s betrayal of Laura manifests in her compelling Laura to confront her most intimidating fear—Jim O’Conor—the only, secret crush of Laura back in high school. Throughout the play, Williams portrays Laura as a terribly diffident girl who is very detached from reality. Her bittersweet memories of Jim are one of the few things she cherishes deeply, and Williams further indicates that reuniting with Jim is the “climax” of Laura’s secret life (Williams, 1944, p. 70). The moment that Laura recognizes her unrequited love is the Gentleman Caller, enormous pressure and anxiety immediately overcome her. However, Amanda disregards Laura’s feelings—“you will not be excused”—and forces Laura to open the door and welcome him in even though she knows Jim O’Connor is Laura’s dreadful nightmare (Williams, 1944, p. 55). Scene six marks the beginning of Laura’s crucifixion, and her struggle escalates as she supposes that Jim does not recognize her at all (Williams, 1944). Sending Laura to the door is also Amanda’s method of labeling her daughter as the target for the Gentleman Caller, just as how Judas kissed Jesus to identify him for the elders and priests (Matthew 26:49). Moreover, a kiss was a common greeting back in Jesus’ time, which parallels to Laura’s forced greeting to Jim (Got Questions Ministry, 2002-2018). Amanda and Judas both betray the person they are closest to in a comparable way.

Consequently, Laura is the Christ figure of the play in her sacrifices for her family. Being jobless and incredibly shy, Laura has only one valuable thing—her virginity—to “trap” a Gentleman Caller and let him carry the financial burden of the Wingfields (Williams, 1944, p.

52). As Jesus' sacrifice secures eternal redemption for the sinners, Laura's is also very significant in the context of the play (Hebrew 9:12). Her marriage will determine her mother's future and her brother's freedom. Understanding that she might waste all her youth, the rest of her life, and her undivided attention on a stranger, Laura doesn't fight against Amanda's scheme or beg Tom to stay. She simply "stares solemnly" at herself in the mirror and endures her mother stuffing "two powder puffs" in her chest (Williams, 1944, p. 53). Her acquiescence and mental strength are similar to Jesus' when He was arrested then crucified. As John says, Jesus declares that "he who ate my bread lifted up his heel against me," which reveals that he predicted Judas' betrayal and his own suffering beforehand (John 13:18). Fearless of death, Jesus never pleads for anyone to set him free from the cross, analogous to how Laura prepares herself to marry an unfamiliar man without any resistance (John 19:30). They are both selfless, not thinking of their own benefit and giving up their life for the good of others.

Likewise, Williams also uses Laura's glass unicorn as a symbol in the play to represent Jesus. Starting from scene one, Williams constantly associates Laura with her glass menagerie to symbolize Laura's fragility and purity. In scene seven, Laura gives away her favorite piece of glass, the 13-year-old unicorn, to Jim O'Connor as a gesture of genuine love (Williams, 1944). While the unicorn is identical to Laura in its connotation of uniqueness and chaste love, it also represents Christ in the medieval legends, as found in the following article: "The unicorn's fierce wildness shows the inability of hell to hold Christ. The single horn represents the unity of God and Christ. The small size of the unicorn is a symbol of Christ's humility in becoming human" (Che Medieval Bestiary, 2011, para. 5). Numbers from the Bible also states, "God

brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn,” which further indicates the similar force the unicorn and God both possess (Numbers 23:22).

Later in the scene, Jim accidentally breaks the unicorn’s horn and makes it become an ordinary creature that is “just like all the other horses” (Williams, 1944, p. 86). This brokenness resembles how God saved mankind by letting himself “become flesh and made his dwelling” among one of humans (John 1:14). Despite that her most cherished piece of glass being shattered, Laura regards the accident as “a blessing in disguise” (Williams, 1944, p. 86), similar to that Jesus’ tragic death is God’s blessing that ultimately pays for mankind’s sins, though it was unclear even to Jesus himself at first.

After Jim leaves for another woman in scene seven, Laura’s heart falls apart like the unicorn, which marks the end of her crucifixion. Her optimism in the devastating ending is comparable to Jesus’ resurrection from the death. During their conversation, Jim encourages Laura to rid her inferiority complex by sincerely telling her that she is pretty because of her individuality (Williams, 1944). His appreciation of Laura is deeply meaningful to her, who becomes aware of the beauty of her unique self for the first time. From then on, Laura possesses enough confidence to live more independently. Just like how Jesus resurrects from His death, how He “has given us new birth into a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3), Laura “lifts her head and smiles at her mother,” obtaining a more positive outlook toward her life regardless the abandonment by Jim and Tom (Williams, 1944, p. 96).

Tom, the narrator (and also Laura’s brother), represents a sinner who has failed Christ but eventually comes to repent. One of the recurring themes in *The Glass Menagerie* is the conflict between freedom and confinement, which is exemplified in Tom’s wish to escape from his own

home and the constant restraints that he feels every moment of his life (Williams, 1944). He “goes to the movies” every night and shuts himself in his room when he is home (Williams, 1944, p. 23). It’s logical to presume that Tom will totally forget about his family once he leaves it behind, but he writes this memory play to record the painful struggle and unhappiness in the past. As it says in his ending soliloquy, Tom is still often reminded of Laura when he sees “the window” filled with pieces of colored glass elsewhere, much like the stained glass of the church windows (Williams, 1944, p. 97). This symbolism is another clue that reveals Laura as the Christ figure. While Tom could finally chase his dreams around the world, he can not free himself spiritually since he is haunted by his sister’s shadows everywhere (Williams, 1944). His spiritual confinement bears a resemblance to the sayings of Galatians, which states, “the Scripture has locked up everything under the control of sin” (Galatians 3:22). Tom is “locked up” by his own irresponsible deeds. Seemingly begging Laura to forgive him, Tom then exclaims that he is “more faithful than he intended to be” to express his apology (Williams, 1944, p. 97). Parallel to the sayings in John, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,” Tom now asks Laura to do the same so that he can enjoy true freedom (John 8:36).

From another perspective, the absent father of the Wingfield household stands for the Christian God who silently oversees the occurrence of every event. Though he doesn’t physically appear as one of the characters, the father is as much involved with the story as the rest of them. His “blown-up photograph,” hanging on the walls of the living room, watches the interactions between the characters from the background (Williams, 1944, p. 4). Even when his portrait is not directly looked at, the father is mentioned mostly in others’ conversations every scene. They often refer to him as “the man who fell in love with long distance” (Williams, 1944, p. 5), which

responds to the assumption that God seems distant to humanity, that he seems to hide his face from us (Psalm 13:1-2). It's also noticeable that the father recurs throughout the play without being called by his first name, which subtly indicates his unearthliness and resembles how Christians often refer to God as a father. Though he is willingly absent, Mr. Wingfield's permanent involvement with the story resembles God's infinite, invisible existence beyond the mundane, corresponding to the sayings in Isaiah—"The Lord is the everlasting God" (Isaiah 40:28).

Being a modernist play, *The Glass Menagerie* ends as a touching tragedy, which also reflects the depressing world in 1930s. However, Amanda and Laura still possess a thin thread of hope after Tom steps out from the room at the end of scene seven. Williams describes the mother as "her silliness is gone," while Laura "smiles" after listening to her comforting speech (Williams, 1944, p. 96). It's open-ended for readers to imagine the upcoming future for them. Amanda also "glances a moment at the father's picture" right before she disappears from the stage (Williams, 1944, p. 96). Her very glance parallels to the way that humans seeking God when they are deep inside an abyss, as Psalm says that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). Humans could never predict God's divine plan for us. Nonetheless, just like how God allows the worst happens to us for the best, that "present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory," Amanda and Laura survive through this adversity and transform into better and more independent women (Romans 8:18).

While many discover the biblical allusions of *The Glass Menagerie*, others often read it as an autobiographical fiction because Williams' sister Rose inspired him to create Laura.

Recalling the time when he wrote the play, Williams said, “I believed I was thinking of my sister,” who was madly in love with a man at that time but later suffered from mental decline and lobotomy surgery (Rader, 1981, p. 152). Williams himself might not understand God’s intention of his sister’s afflictions, but he hoped she would be cured, just as how Laura may recover from her grief and inferiority complex. Though Rose gave Williams the basis to shape Laura as a character, God nonetheless uses his hands to let Laura fit Christ’s life because humans are created in the image of God.

In addition, some assume the few apparent biblical references in *The Glass Menagerie* as Williams’ devices to mock Christianity. While Williams regarded religions as mere inventions of men, he still considered himself under the control of Catholicism, which “tethered” him to morality (Grissom, 2013, para. 2). One of the biblical references appears when Amanda says to Tom, “we can’t say grace until you come to the table” (Williams, 1944, p. 6), which actually serves as a tool to fulfill “the need of one or more persons to communicate with each other” in the beginning scene (Nalliveettil & Gadallah, 2016, p. 204). While most of the conspicuous Christian elements serve for irony, such as the mother calling friends of hers as “Christian martyrs,” Williams’ purpose is to reveal the hypocrisy and pride of Amanda, the Judas of the story (Williams, 1944, p. 20). She looks faithful to God but only thinks of herself, mentally torturing her children for her own ends. These ironic details aren’t meant to ridicule Christianity, but rather only Amanda.

Because of the stage’s lighting and Laura’s association with the unicorn, some may also contend that Laura isn’t suppose to represent Christ but rather the Virgin Mary. In the production notes, it says that the light upon Laura needs to be “distinct from others” and similar to the “light

used in early religious portraits of female saints and madonnas” (Williams, 1944, p. xxii).

Moreover, the unicorn is often portrayed with a maiden, especially the Virgin Mary, during the medieval period (Living Arts Originals, 2008-2011). These striking similarities lead many to see Laura as Mary instead of Christ. However, it’s critical to recognize that the Wingfields first treat the Gentleman Caller, Jim O’Conner, as the savior who can solve their predicament. When the last few pages of the play overthrow the expectations of Jim, readers should realize that he is no longer the Christ figure of the story but Laura. She is the implied savior when she sacrifices herself to free her mother and brother from their burdens. Her position as Christ also works with the rest of the characters and their parallels to the Bible.

As widely acclaimed and discussed as *The Glass Menagerie* was, it’s crucial for more readers to detect the hidden biblical allusions throughout the text. Almost every character in the book relates to the Bible in a certain way, especially heroine Laura, who follows the important footsteps of Christ himself. The mother Amanda resembles the traitor Judas, and the seemingly absent father represents God’s powerful but invisible existence. Being the narrator, Tom is the sinner that rests within each of us. Through *The Glass Menagerie*, more and more people can learn about Christ’s life through this simple story, and to spread the Gospel to every audience and reader of this play.

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