

Extended Background

Williams indicates many reasons why he chose to depart from theatrical realism and incorporate expressionist techniques into the play. One reason is because he believes they express a more vivid reality. His justification is that they offer a “closer approach to the truth.” *The Glass Menagerie* moves beyond the confines of the usual theatrical conventions of the day. This “new, plastic” dramatic structure may have been inspired by Williams’ exposure to German expatriate stage director Erwin Piscator’s Dramatic Workshop at the New School in New York. Williams states his belief that this “New Drama,” as it later came to be called, will rejuvenate the American theatre.

His production notes to *The Glass Menagerie* begin by calling it a “memory play,” and thus, present the director with a great deal of latitude in stage direction. Williams hopes to have the ambiance of memory infused into every scene. Memory is nebulous—similar to dream states—and Williams intends *The Glass Menagerie* to be framed in such a way as to make the audience feel that they have entered a dream. In his prologue, Williams offers ideas for creating this atmosphere by incorporating innovative extra-literary accents through ongoing screen projections, lighting, and music.

From scene one onward, Williams underlines the importance of establishing an interior world on stage, one that is “dim and poetic” that resonates in the language of the emotions and nostalgia. Awareness of the past is a key element in this play. Though the play is set in St. Louis, it is infused with remembrances of the American South and laden with remnants from Williams’ past life, especially his character Amanda that haunts the Wingfield household.

Williams’ expressionist intentions are reflected in elements within the play’s highly symbolic setting. One example is the Wingfield tenement complex which expresses the gross uniformity of modern, urban life: “one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centres of lower-middle-class population.” Another is the apartment’s fire-escape with its stairs which conveys man’s ability to move in and out of different realities. It offers respite from the stifling family dynamics within the apartment and also serves as a wishing apparatus: “A fire escape’s landing’s a poor excuse for a porch. ... A little silver slipper of a moon. Have you made a wish on it yet?”

Williams also weighs in on his choice of expressionist characters in this play. For example, Tom in the role of narrator “takes whatever license with dramatic convention is convenient to his purpose”—as do other elements of spectacle. Tom’s character is Williams’ mouthpiece when he has him deliver an elaborate testimonial on the nature of this dramatic experience: “Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, and it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings.”