

4-15-2013

# “Ravaged by Time”: The Effects of the Past and Future on the Present in *The Glass Menagerie*

Lauren R. Moore

Cedarville University, lrmoore@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/english\\_seminar\\_capstone](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/english_seminar_capstone)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Moore, Lauren R., "“Ravaged by Time”: The Effects of the Past and Future on the Present in *The Glass Menagerie*" (2013). *English Seminar Capstone Research Papers*. 14.

[http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/english\\_seminar\\_capstone/14](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/english_seminar_capstone/14)

This Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Seminar Capstone Research Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@cedarville.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@cedarville.edu).

Lauren Moore  
English Seminar  
Dr. Deardorff  
15 March 2013

“Ravaged by Time”: The Effects of the Past and Future  
on the Present in *The Glass Menagerie*

In an essay entitled “The Timeless World of a Play” Tennessee Williams, the author of *The Glass Menagerie*, asserts that inside a play readers are able to briefly engage in “a world not ravaged by time” (62). One can agree that at least *literally* a play is not ravaged by time in the sense that a play’s contents are frozen at the time of its completion. Regardless of how many times one reads a play, textually it remains the same. However, for Tennessee Williams to say that plays are not ravaged by time is almost laughable, as time is one of the primary themes in his own plays. On this topic one critic notes that though he does “not mean to slight Williams’ pronouncement or disagree with his notion of drama’s existing outside of time ... the fundamental irony of Williams’ theory is that his plays are timeless *because of* the very thing to which he objects – the destructiveness of time” (Bray 18). The theme of time is particularly rampant in *The Glass Menagerie*, as Williams showcases the Wingfield family, a family in which each member is veritably paralyzed by their erroneous conceptions of time.

Each of the Wingfields has their own method by which they attempt to avoid living in the present. Amanda, the mother, constantly reminisces about the superiority of her Southern girlhood. She remembers back fondly to a time when she was doted on by seventeen gentleman callers, as compared to her present life in the North where her husband has left her with her two adult children, Laura and Tom (Williams 13-14). Amanda notes “in the South we had so many servants. Gone, gone, gone. All vestige of gracious living! Gone completely! I wasn’t prepared for what the future brought me” (50). Like her mother Laura is also fixated on the past, but instead of a positive memory like her mother’s, Laura focuses on a negative memory from high school. In high school Laura contracted a disease called pleurosis which caused her to develop a limp in one of her legs. Because of this impediment she has a memory of being self-conscious when everyone noticed the sound her leg made as she walked down the aisle during choral

practice (56). This memory develops an inflated importance in her mind, and eventually becomes such a formative memory that it virtually destroys her self-esteem and renders her stagnant in the present. In a subversion of his mother and sister's preoccupation with the past, Tom spends the majority of his time dreaming of a better future. He does this primarily through going to the movies, which propels his desire to escape his family and pursue such adventurous cinematic happenings in his own life. However, realistically the evasion of time is a pursuit that can only ever be attempted, never accomplished, and the play suggests that such a focus on the past or the future is detrimental to life in the present.

At the outset of *The Glass Menagerie* readers are introduced to its status as a memory play. The entire play, save for Tom's occasional narration, is his memories of his family. In his article "The Circle Closed: A Psychological Reading of *The Glass Menagerie* and The Two Character Play" scholar R.B. Parker briefly discusses the memory play, a genre created by Williams, stating that the memory play is important because "we not only see exclusively what the narrator consciously wants us to see, but also see it only in the way he chooses that we should see" (68). In a memory play one receives exactly what they receive in a memory: a subjective estimation of how a moment transpired. At the beginning of *The Glass Menagerie* Tom briefly introduces the readers to the concept of a memory play, saying that it is deemed such because "it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, and it is not realistic" (Williams 11). One can easily transfer these characteristics over to memory itself, and because of its status as a memory play a certain degree of scholarship has of course been undertaken on the manner in which memory and the past affect the Wingfield family.

In addition to simply the basic plot concerns of his work, there is a multitude of autobiographical evidence to suggest that Williams struggled personally with concepts of time

and memory. In her dissertation, *The Pleasant Disguise of Illusion*: *The “Autobiographical” Memory Plays of Williams, Friel and O’Neill*, Ann Farrelly discusses Williams’ family background, a background that is pointedly similar to the Wingfields. Like Amanda, Williams’ mother Edwina was a southern belle who based her entire identity on her status as a southerner. Her obsession with her southern past evidently greatly irritated Williams’ father, Cornelius (Farrelly 20). Farrelly asserts that “Cornelius Williams was a man who intentionally cut himself off from his family” (20) in the same manner as Mr. Wingfield. Cornelius was unable to physically leave the family as Mr. Wingfield, but it was at least partially Edwina’s obsession with her southern past that drove Cornelius to “intentionally cut himself off from his family” (20). Though Cornelius was unable to cut himself off from the family physically, emotionally it appears that he withheld himself in the same manner in which the Wingfields emotionally withhold themselves from one another. Farrelly notes that “the play [reflects] Tennessee Williams’ own fight against the prison of his that threatened to suffocate his future” (12).

Beyond just the evidence of his autobiography Williams also talked a great deal about time generally. He directly stated that his plays are “about memories and the loneliness of them” (Schroeder 107) and admitted that he was “inordinately obsessed of the past” (Bray 8). He also declared himself an “avid collector of memories” (Bray 8).

However, despite the great amount of evidence that lends *The Glass Menagerie* to a biographical reading, the following analysis will not be sifted through a biographical lens. Though *The Glass Menagerie* is an undoubtedly autobiographical play, the copious amount of biographical analyses on it have left remaining critics with little else to say. However, despite the fact that the following analysis will not be biographical, it is important to briefly discuss

Williams' past, as the Williams family is just one pertinent example of a family, like the Wingfields, who have been ripped apart by time.

Apart from the prolific number of readings which analyze the autobiographical nature of *The Glass Menagerie*, explorations on its characters' relationship with time are some of the most prominent. The first this topic is discussed is in Billy Mishoe's *Time as Antagonist in the Dramas of Tennessee Williams*. Mishoe focuses on both the past and the future in Williams' dramas, and "eschews philosophical considerations of time to examine the play in terms of [its] structural patterns, set designs, and staging devices" (Bray 2). He also emphasizes Amanda's southern past as it relates to the family's obsession with reminiscence (Mishoe 29).

Like Mishoe, critic Judith Thompson, in her book *Tennessee Williams' Plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol*, also emphasizes structure in conjunction with the role of memory in Williams' major plays, postulating the existence of a recurring structure throughout William's plays.

The first element of this recurring structure is the opening of the play with a monologue concerning an either "'idyllic', 'demonic' or otherwise mythicized memory of [the] past" (Thompson 1). Through delivering this monologue the protagonist attempts to either regain an idealized memory, or demonize a memory from which he attempts to flee. Because of this memory the protagonist can no longer live in the present, but is instead arrested in the past, "frozen in the act of looking backward in ecstasy or fear" (2). The mythicized element of the memory arises depending on whether the memory is idyllic or demonized. An idyllic memory poses the protagonist as a god or heroic figure, while the demonic memory poses him a guilt-stricken wanderer or an undesiring martyr.

The second part of this structure maintains that partway through the work the characters attempt to reenact the past. In *The Glass Menagerie* we see this in Jim's calling on Laura, as this is a reenactment of Amanda's memory of her seventeen gentlemen callers. However, this reenactment is a demonized memory because it doesn't end in the happy way which Amanda's memory did.

The ultimate unseating of the character occurs at the climax of the play when the character is "divested of [their] mythic or godlike dimensions, stripped of illusions and delusions" (5). Williams builds his characters up as mythic only to remove them from that pedestal throughout the play (5). The crushing of this mythic nature is often symbolized by the destruction of a prop. The primary example of this is Laura's glass menagerie which stands for her "otherworldliness and arrested development" (4). In lieu of fawning over Laura as Amanda's gentleman callers did to her, Jim shatters the enchantment when he breaks Laura's unicorn and tells her of his engagement (22).

Another of the foremost texts concerning this topic is William Bray's dissertation, *The Burden of the Past in the Major and Minor Plays of Tennessee Williams*. Bray individually explores each of Williams' plays in an attempt to prove that "the burden of the past" (1) is the primary motif in Williams' body of work (Bray 3-4). Though *The Glass Menagerie* is one of Williams' most prominent plays Bray dedicates only a small section of his work to it. When he does mention *The Glass Menagerie* he focuses primarily on Amanda's reminiscence of her southern girlhood. Bray mentions Tom and Laura only in passing and in reference to their stilted interactions with Amanda, oddly dismissing two thirds of the Wingfield family from his discussion on time.

Though these are the sole full-length explorations of time in Williams' work, another predominant study is Sam Bluefarb's article "The Glass Menagerie: Three Visions of Time." In discussing the role of time in the Wingfields' life Bluefarb asserts the eternal dominance of the past over the present and future (513). He maintains that the present and future are constantly viewed through the lens of the past, and that the past "actually determines the course that each of these shall take" (513). Amanda's focus on the past results in her attempts to overlay her past onto Laura's life, to essentially endeavor to turn Laura into the girl Amanda remembers herself to have been (514). Bluefarb also asserts that Tom is not actually obsessed with the future, but instead attempts to escape the past and present by focusing on the future. This ultimately places the past in a position of dominance over the future, as it is the past which propels Tom to focus on the future in the first place. Even when he reaches "the future" Bluefarb believes that Tom continues to spend all his time consumed with the guilt of leaving Laura behind (515)

Bluefarb is also one of the only critics who argues that Laura is genuinely disabled, making her the most realistic character in the play, because she is the only one who realizes the true gravity of her situation. In Bluefarb's interpretation, Amanda's attempt to dismiss Laura's disability as insignificant is only a symptom of Amanda's own inability to accept reality (517). The glass menagerie is seen not as a symbol of fantasy, as so many others have viewed it. Instead it is perceived as the one real thing that Laura holds onto, because at least the glass menagerie is more physical than her mother's obsession with the past or her brother's obsession with the future (517). Bluefarb makes the bold assessment that Laura is not focused on the past, present, or the future, but instead exists in a zone where time "[ceases] to have any meaning whatever" (517). Ultimately, Bluefarb sees Amanda as the most pitiable family member because unlike her children she is unable to find any way to escape her obsession with the past, whereas he believes

her children have found their own individual ways to deal with their compulsions, disregarding whether their methods are healthy or not (518).

Like those before it the following analysis will focus at least partially on the role of the past in *The Glass Menagerie*, as it is unavoidably clear that “the burden of the past” (Bray 1) plays a crucial role in the Wingfields’ lives, and that role must be discussed.

Additionally, besides Mishoe in portions, the aforementioned investigations seem to have become monogamously enamored with the role of the past, and either entirely dismiss or otherwise downplay the role of Tom’s fixation on the future. Many scholars reference the past or memory in the titles of their analysis, such as William Bray’s *The Burden of the Past in the Major and Minor Plays of Tennessee Williams* (Bray) or Judith Thompson’s *Tennessee Williams’ plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol*, but Tom’s fixation on the future is rarely, if ever, referenced. In the rare moment when his fixation with the future is mentioned scholars automatically assert that because *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play Tom is currently stuck living in the past despite his textual fixation on the future (Bluefarb 515). They assert that because the play is Tom’s memory the familial obsession with the past has finally overtaken him as well, but there seems to be evidence to suggest otherwise. However, regardless of whether Tom ends the play stuck in the past or the future, it doesn’t affect the fact that it is important to discuss the effects of his extended obsession with the future. This is his state throughout almost the entirety of the play, and it does not seem that Williams would spend so much time focusing on Tom’s obsession with the future if it were not critical to both Tom’s character and the overarching thematic concerns of the play. The following will argue that Tom’s fixation is indeed of great consequence, and ought not to be so readily dismissed.

Most important to note for the following analysis, the aforementioned critics analyze each member of the Wingfield individually, documenting their personal struggles with time. However, little focus has been placed upon how their personal struggles with time complicate the Wingfields ability to function properly as a family, even though the play shows that their inability to live within the present is incredibly destructive to the family as a whole.

If after reading *The Glass Menagerie* one were able to commission a temporally accurate family portrait of the Wingfields not one of them would be looking into the camera. Amanda, would have her head craned over her shoulder, constantly focused on that which is behind her. Her husband, the Wingfield patriarch, would enter the portrait only through the framed photograph of him hanging on the wall in the background, physically absent but still an emotionally charged elephant in the room. Laura would be looking down at the carpet, eyes slightly glazed over, staring at the fragile glass unicorn clasped in her trembling hands, unaware that a picture is even being taken. Tom, would be on the left edge of the photo, his body caught in a blur as he stands up to leave the frame without the photographer's permission, his mother and sister too distracted to note his departure.

Of course, no such physical portrait exists, but one can argue that *The Glass Menagerie* can be seen as the equivalent of a literary family portrait. All literature is a portrait of something, and like a portrait these characters are frozen in time, so focused on time gone by, or time approaching that they are veritably paralyzed in the present. Not one of the Wingfields is focused on the present, and at any point where they arguably are somewhat focused on the present it is a present viewed squarely through the past or future. When Amanda turns her head to the present it is to do nothing more than compare it with the inimitable glories of her southern girlhood. When Laura looks up from her glass menagerie, she is confronted by a present that is

irrevocably scarred by her memories of the past, a present that could have been different if she had not allowed her distorted memories of high school to stop her from making a change. When Tom focuses in on the present it is to do nothing more than lament how dissimilar it is to the glorious future he dreams of.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a portrait as an image “which represents, typifies, or resembles the object described or implied; a type; a likeness.” The main purpose of a portrait is to convey the self which exists beyond the portrait. The Wingfield family portrait is made up of three broken selves, each so focused on either the past or future that it wreaks havoc in the present. *The Glass Menagerie* could be described in a number of different ways, but one cannot deny that at its core the play is ultimately about a family, and the struggles of that family to properly function as a family. The following argues that there is significant textual evidence to suggest that the primary way in which the Wingfields’ atemporal fixations affect them is in the consequential breakdown of communication within the family, and that this breakdown of communication renders them unable to function properly as the family unit they propose to be. Additionally this analysis proposes that through Laura’s gentleman caller, Jim, Williams has embedded a possible solution to the Wingfields’ problems.

In order to discuss how the Wingfield’s atemporal fixations affect their ability to properly function and communicate as a family it is imperative to discuss some basic elements surrounding memory and hopes for the future, in order to build a foundation for their ability to have incredible consequences.

Memories often have rather destructive consequences on individuals primarily because they play a key role in the cognitive formation of the self. Philosopher David Hume, in his *Treatise on Human Nature*, said that “the self is ‘nothing but a bundle or collection of different

perceptions' without any kind of substantial unity, identity, or structure" (Meyerhoff 32). Most of us would not agree with Hume's statement in full, if not out of the belief in some grand narrative which affords us a solid identity, then solely out of an attachment to the self we have always been. However, although one may discount the idea that humans are but a "bundle or collection of different perceptions" (32) there is something valuable to be considered in the concept that our perceptions dramatically affect who we are as individuals.

Psychologists Singer and Salovey discuss what they call "self-defining memories" (9) in their book *The Remembered Self* describing these memories as those which we place a greater importance on and which hold a prominent role in influencing our identities and personalities. Memories in this category are generally either memories of triumph which propel our self-esteem to great heights, or memories of horrific defeat which create within us a sense of inadequacy. These memories are often associated with core beliefs that we have about our personality, or elements of our personality that we are struggling with (Singer 12-14). It's also interesting to note that these memories do not necessarily have to be true in order for them to be incredibly affecting. Singer and Salovey state that some of these self-defining memories often "contain but a kernel of their original truth and may be filled with embellishments [and] false recollections" (13).

This belief about self-defining memories mirrors Laura and Amanda's memories of the past, as there is much to indicate that their self-defining memories are sensationalized. Amanda's story of her southern past sounds almost like a legend when she tells it, and the idea of seventeen gentleman callers showing up to one house in one day is just too grandiose to believe. Bray even asserts that her "mental stability [has] been dangerously undermined" (58). Conversely, when Laura mentions to Jim about how embarrassed she used to be about her disability when she had

to walk into choral practice, Jim says “Oh, a little physical defect is all you have. It’s hardly noticeable even! Magnified a thousand times by your imagination!” (60). Readers can choose to discount Jim’s admission as nothing more than his ignorance of Laura in high school. However, knowing that Tom states in his beginning monologue that Jim is “the most realistic character in the play” (11) makes one think that Jim’s statements are those in the play which we must take most at face value, and his statement is one that indicates that Laura’s disability is not as noticeable as she seems to believe.

These self-defining memories can affect a person in good ways if learn from the mistakes of their past, or they can affect them in bad ways if they allow nostalgia to cheapen the present, or allow fear to paralyze the present. Unfortunately for the Laura and Amanda the effects are of the latter category. As Tom points out in the above quote, these characters’ memories are not realistic. They are founded upon some element of reality, but that reality is a reality “dimly lit” (Williams 11) and unconsciously sensationalized. Whether a memory is factually true or not, it is “true” for the person who is “remembering” it, and a belief can affect us as long as we believe it, regardless of its factual authenticity. Many of us would like to feel a certain control over and objectivity towards our memories, but unfortunately that desire is far from the truth. Our memories are nearly entirely constructed objects, but despite their constructed nature they play a pivotal role in determining the way we perceive ourselves. It is these constructed memories which sadly all but define Amanda and Laura, and the following will show that these memories which are draw them backwards into the past make them unable to communicate with one another in the present.

While Laura and Amanda are fixated on the past, Tom is fixated on the future, and one can propose that actions in the present are defined by our hopes for the future similarly to how

they are defined by the past. Unfortunately there has been very little research done on how a person's dreams for the future affect them, primarily because hopes and dreams have yet to occur, thus making them rather difficult to analyze in the way one can analyze memories which by definition have already occurred. In a fixation on memory a person is trying successfully to escape their memories or lamenting the fact that their past is not their present. Conversely, a person who fixates on the future is generally trying to escape their present, and lamenting the fact that their desired future is not yet their present. Logically one can assume that a person who is always planning and wishing for the future must possess some discontentment with the present. Author John Green actually argues the connectedness of concepts of memory and imagining the future, saying that "imagining the future is a kind of nostalgia. You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you'll escape it one day, and how awesome it will be, and imagining that future keeps you going, but you never do it. You just use the future to escape the present" (54).

In one study done, a man's frontal lobe was removed after an accident and after conducting tests they found that the man could do nearly everything on a test except plan for future events. The man was described as being frozen in a "permanent present" (Gilbert 15). Daniel Gilbert, the author of *Stumbling on Happiness*, agrees saying "how bizarre and surreal it must be to serve a life sentence in the prison to the moment, trapped forever in the perpetual now, a world without end, a time without later" (15). Admittedly, to live in the permanent present would be a great burden, but living in the permanent future as Tom does is also a burdensome state. However, except for the microscopic amount of people who are unfortunately missing their frontal lobes, Gilbert states that the majority of us are at least "part time residents of the future" (16), and this statement is very much true for Tom, though he has perhaps

exceeded the quote and has been promoted to full time, a promotion which no one should congratulate him on.

The preceding pages have documented the ability for both memories and hopes for the future to be incredibly destructive in one's ability to live in the present, and this is certainly true of the Wingfield family. The following analysis will now document evidence to suggest that what the primary problem which the Wingfields atemporal fixations cause is the breakdown of what many consider the fundamental key to any relationship: communication

It has been widely overlooked by critics, but direct references to speech and communication are abundant throughout *The Glass Menagerie*, and at some point within the play every single character references the difficulty of communication. A reader cannot get very far into this play without realizing that these characters have an incredibly difficult time communicating with each other, whether in actions or words. Additionally, nearly all of these references to speech are paired somehow with references to an inability to live in the present.

References to communication initially arise in an early conversation between Tom and Amanda. He is sitting at his desk writing, and when she asks him what he is doing he snaps at her. Amanda is upset by this, and it's interesting to note that her first response to his behavior is to command, "Don't you dare talk to me like that!" (22), and as he continues to yell she tells him to "lower his voice" (22). Both of these are direction references to communication, and particularly Amanda's desire for him to cease communication. Their argument escalates beyond this resulting in the following exchange:

*Amanda:* Don't you dare talk to me like that!

*Tom:* No, I mustn't say anything! I've just got to keep quiet and let you do all the talking.

*Amanda:* Let me tell you something!

*Tom:* I don't want to hear any more.

*Amanda:* You will hear more!

*Tom:* Well, I'm not going to listen (22-23).

It's easy to overlook this as nothing more than a petty screaming match between mother and son, but in every single line in the above exchange there is a reference to communication - more than a half dozen, including *talk, say, talking, tell, hear, and listen*, and this is just *one* of many similar arguments that occur between Amanda and Tom. It's important to note that many of the threats which Tom and Amanda level at one another are based in attempts to silence or revoke their communication with the other. Amanda attempts to revoke his ability to communicate by telling him, "Don't you dare talk to me like that!" (23). Conversely, Tom tells Amanda that he is not going to listen to her, thus revoking her ability to effectively communicate with him even if she persists on talking.

The above argument makes evident Tom and Amanda's inability to communicate with each other, but following the above exchange there is evidence that their lack of communication lies directly in their inability to live in the present. Though the fight is not originally propelled by Tom and Amanda's fixations on the future and past respectively, it is arguably their mocking of the others' fixation that pushes the argument toward its explosive climax.

As this argument reaches its climax Tom makes a customary threat of his and tells his mother that he's going to go to the movies. This might seem insignificant at first, nothing more than a way for Tom to escape the argument. However, it rises in significance later on when Tom explains in the following monologue that movies are his way of escaping the present, and dreaming of a more exciting future:

*Tom:* Yes, movies! Look at them ... All of those glamorous people - having adventures - hogging it all, gobbling the whole thing up! You know what happens? People go to the movies instead of moving! Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventures for everybody in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watches them have them! Yes, until there's a war. That's when adventure becomes available to the masses! Everyone's dish, not only Gable's! Then the people in the dark room come out of the dark room to have some adventure themselves- goody- goody! It's our turn now, to go to the South Sea Islands - to make a safari - to be exotic, far-off! - But I'm not patient. I don't want to wait till then. I'm tired of the movies and I am about to move! (Williams 48).

References to movement are rather important to the discussion, as one can argue that the opposite of “to move” is “to stay”, and Tom clearly does not desire to stay where he is: living in a house with his mother and sister. Instead he wants to move, to have an adventure, just like his father who “fell in love with long distance – so he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town” (11). Tom also notes that he wants to go to the South Sea Islands, a rather interesting choice being that his father’s last letter was from the Pacific Coast of Mexico, and the Pacific Ocean is often referred to as the South Sea, which only further indicates that Tom is focused on the future in the way that his father was. In this instance one sees that Tom’s fixation on the future is his way of avoiding communication with his family. Instead of responding when Amanda begins talking to him, he retreats into his cocoon of the future through the avenue of movies.

Conversely, when Amanda tells him that she doesn’t want him to go to the movies, Tom’s way of coping with his mother’s overbearing presence is to attack her coping mechanism:

nostalgia. In a frenzy produced by his mother's disbelief that he actually spends all his evenings at the movies Tom becomes sarcastic towards his mother and begins an absurd rant about how he is "a dynamic czar of the underworld" (24) and tells her "some night [my friends are] going to blow us all sky-high. And will I be glad! Will I be happy! And so will you be. You'll go up-up-over Blue Mountain on a broomstick! With seventeen gentleman callers. You ugly babbling witch!" (24). Blue Mountain is the name of Amanda's childhood home, the home she remembers so fondly in her memory, and it is once Tom mocks the past that Amanda effectively repeals all prospect of conversation, warning him "[I will] never speak to you again as long as you live until you apologize to me!" (24). Prior to mentioning their atemporal fixations Tom and Amanda were faltering in communication, but it is ultimately their atemporal fixations which shut the conversation down entirely. This exchange makes it clear that both Tom and Amanda esteem their atemporal fixations at a higher value than their communication with each other, because once their fixation is mocked or belittled all communication between the two of them becomes impossible.

At the culmination of this argument Tom begins to stomp out of the house and part of his coat flies off and knocks some animals off Laura's glass menagerie. Since *The Glass Menagerie's* publication critics have seen the glass menagerie as a symbol of a number of different things. Thompson sees the menagerie as a symbol of Laura's "arrested emotional development, and in her inability to cope with the demands of a flesh and blood world" (15), stating that "its frozen animal forms image her own immobilized animal of sexual nature" (15). Another critic view the menagerie as her way of escaping her memories of her disability, saying that her disability "so embarrass[es] her that she retreats from all human contact. She seeks refuge in a world of dreams and glass figures" (The English Journal 209). Either way, whether

the glass menagerie is a symbol for her “arrested development and otherworldliness” (Thompson 4) or a symbol for a retreat into a “world of dreams” (The English Journal 209) due to embarrassment over her disability, it’s important to note what is ultimately causing this retreat is her inability to let go of the past. Most adults do not spend their time playing with toys, but because Laura is stuck in a state of arrested development she spends virtually all her time playing with little glass animals like she is still a child. Also, beyond a simple refuge or retreat the play also seems to suggest that the menagerie is a physical embodiment and extension of Laura, particularly in the stage directions when Williams describes Laura, saying a “fragile unearthly prettiness had come out in [her], she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting” (Williams 42). In the stage directions of this scene Williams notes that as the glass menagerie shatters “Laura cries out as if wounded” (Williams 24). She cries out as if she herself has been physically shattered, because as Thompson indicates, the menagerie is the embodiment of a deeply emotional part of her (15).

Her feeling of being shattered along with the glass menagerie shows her deeply ingrained obsession with the past, but her reaction following the shattering shows that past’s ability to terminate communication. After Tom shatters part of the glass menagerie Amanda runs out of the room, and Tom is left alone with Laura. The stage directions indicate that “he stares at her stupidly for a moment. Then he crosses to the shelf holding [the] glass menagerie. Drops awkwardly on his knees to collect fallen glass, glancing at Laura as if he would speak, but couldn’t” (25). It is important to note that it is only *after* Tom breaks the symbol of Laura’s fixation on the past that communication ceases between the pair. Once again, a fixation on the past has stopped the family from being able to communicate in the present. Tom understands Laura’s love for the menagerie, and symbolically her arrested development due to her self-

defining memory of high school, and as he breaks this symbol it's important to note that he wants to speak, but he can't. He can't speak to Laura, because in this moment he has literally shattered part of her, rendering conversation impossible. Like Tom and Amanda's preceding fight, it is only when a memory of the past is tainted that communication between the family is completely eradicated.

Following this fight it's also interesting to note that until Tom apologizes to Amanda she is unable to communicate with him, and filters all of her communication through Laura. Amanda says to Laura, "tell your brother his coffee is ready", and when Laura goes out of earshot of Amanda to convey this message to her brother she pleads that the two begin speaking to another. This pleading results in the following exchange between Tom and Laura:

*Tom:* She won't to me. It's her that started not speaking.

*Laura:* If you just say you're sorry she'll start speaking.

*Tom:* Her not speaking – is that such a tragedy?

*Laura:* Please – please! (27)

Amanda is offstage during this conversation, but when she enters the stage and runs into Tom she looks at him and says, "Who are you?" (28), as if her anger over his mockery of her past has literally erased him from her memory, as if she has mentally disowned her own son. She leaves the coffee on the table, and he picks it up to drink it, but she will not even look at him as she does so, the stage directions indicating that "she turns her back from him" (28). Even when he burns his mouth on his coffee and gasps she stops herself from turning around to glance at him (28). Both begin to clear their throats, a subtle indication by Williams that they wish to speak but that until the mocking of their atemporal fixations has been renounced, they have lost their voices. And indeed, it is not until Tom apologizes for making fun of her reminiscence,

saying “I’m sorry for all those things I said. I didn’t mean it” (28) that Amanda is once again able to speak to him. It is as if his revocation of the mockery of her reminiscence has unfrozen the conversation. Later on she tells him “if you hadn’t spoken, I would have spoken to you” (29), but she only says this after her son has broken the tension, once again emphasizing her inability to communicate after having her atemporal fixations mocked.

Just in these few brief scenes readers are able to see the consequences which atemporal fixations have placed on the present, and though some of these exchanges between the Wingfields seem passionate, perhaps the strongest evidence of the ability for atemporal fixations to rip apart a family is the Wingfield who is no longer present: Mr. Wingfield. There are not very many references to Mr. Wingfield within the play, but even the brief references that there are seem to reveal his inability to communicate with this own family. The first thing readers learn about him is that he is a “telephone man who fell in love with long distance” (11). His future absence within the family makes it incredibly ironic that he works with telephones, arguably one of the most direct forms of communication. His job is literally to foster communication between others and yet Mr. Wingfield is unable to properly communicate with his own family. Williams is a practiced writer and it seems that the choice of making Mr. Wingfield a telephone man is supposed to directly convey the irony of the Wingfields situation: he works at a telephone company, and yet he is the patriarch of a family who is completely unable to communicate with one another. This is seen foremost in the fact that he quits the telephone company, which one can view as symbolic of his hanging up on communication with his own family (11). Additionally, his inability to communicate with his family is seen in that the last letter that he writes to the family after leaving home says simply “Hello-Goodbye!” (11). “Hello-Goodbye!” is an prime example of faulty communication. In fact, not only is it fault communication, but it is the

absence of communication: a functionary greeting and salutation with no message sandwiched between them. Like Tom, the matriarch of the Wingfield family is so fixated on a brighter future out in the same “exotic” places that his son dreams of that it impedes his ability to communicate with his family, and he cuts off communication in the most final way a person can: abandonment.

In the analysis of the past scenes it has been shown that the Wingfields’ fixations on the past and future have often proved stumbling blocks in their ability to communicate with one another at all, in some moments literally driving them to complete silence. However, in addition to sometimes rendering the Wingfields unable to communicate with one another at all, occasionally their fixations on the past and future also make them unable to communicate *honestly* with one another when they do manage to “communicate”. The following [instances](#) are examples wherein communication is present, but both the verbal and physical statements do not convey the truth of the situation.

Out of all three of the Wingfields Laura is the primary character who maintains a sense of politeness in her speech and behavior, but ultimately these actions are nothing more than deception and a lack of communication masquerading as civility. While Tom’s fights with his mother are frenzied and sarcastic, Laura is much less confrontational in her communication with Amanda. However, despite her quiet demeanor around her mother, their communication is equally stilted, because it does not convey the truth of who Laura is. The primary and most obvious example this devious communication occurs when Laura tells Amanda that she has been spending her days at typing school, when in reality she has been wandering around the streets of St. Louis. Laura enrolled in business school like her mother wanted her to, but the self-consciousness that she has developed over the years due to her disability makes her so nervous

that she becomes sick on her first day and never returns. Instead of telling her mother that she is too nervous to attend school Laura is unable to express her feelings to her mother and instead spends nearly her entire day every day wandering around the city. When Amanda mentions Laura to the typing instructor and realizes that Laura has not been attending school the following conversation ensues:

*Amanda:* From half-past seven till five every day you mean to tell me you walked around the park because you wanted to make me think you were still going to Rubicam's Business College? Why you did all that to deceive me, just for deception! Why? Why? Why? Why?

*Laura:* Mother, when you're disappointed, you get that awful suffering look on your face, like the picture of Jesus' mother in the Museum! (17-18)

To deceive someone is to cause that person to believe something that isn't true – to purposefully communicate misinformation, and in the preceding conversation one can clearly see that Laura has deceived Amanda, once again exhibiting this family's inability to honestly communicate with one another.

However, it's important to note that Laura's purpose in deception lines in her inability to relinquish the past. She lies to Amanda to avoid disappointing her, and the reason Amanda would be disappointed in Laura for skipping business school is because it shows her completely inability to move beyond the past, to move beyond her previous experience in school and start afresh as an adult. One can know this because right before Amanda confronts Laura she snaps "I was under the impression that you were an adult, but evidently I was very much mistaken" (16), indicating that Laura's childishness, and thus her connection with the past, is at the root of her deception. A moment later she once again indicates that a fixation on the past is at the root of the

problem, saying: “What are we doing to do now, honesty, the rest of our lives? Just sit down in this house and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie? Eternally play those worn out records your father left us as a painful reminder of him? We can’t have a business career. No, we can’t have that because that just gives us indigestion” (18). The reason she is unable to interact with the world in any mature way is because she is so fixated on the failures of the past that she sees her potential to survive in the work force today as directly parallel to her ability to survive walking down the chorus aisle. This is made clear in the following conversation between Jim and Laura:

*Jim:* [after several reflective puffs on a cigarette]: What have you done since high school?

[She seems not to hear him.] Huh? [LAURA looks up.] I said what have you done since high school, Laura?

*Laura:* Nothing much.

*Jim:* You must have been doing something these six long years.

*Laura:* Yes.

*Jim:* Well, then, such as what?

*Laura:* I took a business course at business college

*Jim:* How did that work out?

*Laura:* Well, not very - well - I had to drop out, it gave me - indigestion

*Jim* [laughs gently.]: What are you doing now?

*Laura:* I don't do anything - much. Oh, please don't think I sit around doing nothing! My glass collection takes up a good deal of time (59).

As previously mentioned, the glass menagerie has often been seen as a symbol for Laura’s inability to live in the present (Thompson 4). In light of this, this final statement by

Laura may be read as an admission that she has done nothing after high school because she has constantly remained tethered to her memories of the past, and it is those memories of the past, her constantly “amusing[ing herself] with the glass menagerie” which makes her unable to go to school, and propels her to lie to her mother about her behavior.

This is also happens in a number of other brief instances, as well. The first of these occurs when Laura is playing with the glass menagerie as Amanda enters the room and because she knows that Amanda does not like it she pretends that she was playing with something else, once again emphasizing her inability to let go of the past, as well as her inability to physically communicate with her mother an honest picture of herself. Another moment happens when Tom is telling Jim about all his plans for the future that he’s dreamed of when watching movies, but when his mother walks into the room Tom shushes Jim (49), once again exhibiting the hidden nature of atemporal fixations to detract honesty within the family.

The preceding analysis exhibits the detriment that atemporal fixations have been to the Wingfields, the way in which they have caused them to be unable to communicate honestly with one another. However, in addition to the presentation of the problem it also appears that Williams has provided his readers with a solution to the problem, despite the fact that the Wingfields sadly fail to accept the solution. None of the Wingfields seem to understand the damage that their inability to live in the present does to their family. However, when Jim arrives he makes some comments that are easy to dismiss as mere filler lines, but critically important to the analysis once one realizes their significance.

Jim is a friendly young man, a virtual cherubim compared to the Wingfields. At the beginning of the play Tom describes him as “the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world that we were somehow set apart from” (11). Jim is honest in a way that

none of the Wingfields have yet managed, and it's interesting to note that more than any other topic the one thing Jim talks about is his interest in public speaking. The first time Jim brings it up is when he is telling Tom that he ought to consider taking a course in public speaking (47). In his discussions with Laura it becomes clear that Jim is aware of his own faults, and he admits that at one point in his life, like Laura, he too suffered from an inferiority complex (59). However, this inferiority complex ended when he "took up public speaking and developed my voice" (59). This statement is reminiscent of one of the first fights between Amanda and Tom wherein she told him to "lower his voice" (22). Instead of lowering their voices, or silencing their voices, Jim encourages both Laura and Tom to develop their voices. References to speech and communication are rampant throughout the play, and like Williams choosing to ironically make Mr. Wingfield a telephone man, it does not seem likely that Williams would give Jim such an interest in public speaking without a specific reason for it. Both of these men, Mr. Wingfield and Jim, have an interest in some form of communication. However, the one who prospers, the one who is "the most realistic character in the play" (11) is the one who maintains his interest in communication instead of hanging up and "skipping the light fantastic out of town" (11). Jim's comments are easy to dismiss off hand as nothing more than random advice for Laura and Tom, but the repetition of these words makes it seem as if there is more to them than face value. The phrase public speaking arises over half a dozen times throughout the play, solely in the portions which Jim, "the most realistic character in the play" (11) is involved in, and in nearly every instance Jim encourages one of the Wingfields to become involved in public speaking in some way. Merriam Webster defines public speaking "the art of effective oral communication with an audience." To be involved in public speaking is to know how to speak in a way that makes sense to people, in a way that people can understand, and if there is one thing that the Wingfields have

not mastered it is “the art of effective oral communication with an audience” (Merriam Webster), even if that audience is as small as their own flesh and blood. It seems that Williams has juxtaposed Jim’s interest in public speaking against the Wingfield’s complete inability to communicate with one another. Unlike him, they have not developed their voices. They have not learned to express their opinions in ways that are both honest and compelling to those around them. It seems that Williams suggests that perhaps if the Wingfields were able to talk to one another honestly, to communicate the difficulty reality they are all struggling with, that they would realize that they aren’t the only people in the world who are struggling to live in the present, that even their own family members are struggling with the same problems they are. Most of the Wingfields problems have been caused by their inability to do this, by their concealment of their problems, and their escaping into their fantasies instead of learning to speak to one another. It is this kind of honest communication which seems to be the solution that Williams offers up as a solution for the Wingfields problems.

However, the truly sad thing is that ultimately the text indicates that at least Tom does not follow Jim’s advice. We cannot be entirely sure whether or not Laura and Amanda follows Jim’s advice, but from past experience do not make the prospects look good that a man who entered the house very briefly could change things so irrevocably. Tom leaves Saint Louis and follows “in [his] father’s footsteps” (68). It’s also important to note that after this statement Tom says: “I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into a movie or bar. I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger” (68), which are all ways that Tom previously used to avoid living in the present, suggesting that he still has been unable to free himself from his obsession with the future – even now that he has “reached” it. Also, it is sad to note that wherever he is now he is willing to “speak to the nearest stranger” (68) despite the fact that this is something which he was unable

to do with his own family. His final words to the audience and to his family end with the same hurtful salutation as his father: “goodbye” (68), sadly signaling the end of communication, and not the beginning.

At the end of the play readers see that not only has Tom *not* learned from his father’s errors in communication, but he has followed verbatim in his father’s footsteps, just as his sister has followed in his mother’s footsteps. It’s sad because they have the answer and yet they are unable to let go of their atemporal fixations and take Jim’s advice. Ultimately, whether it is a fixation on the past or the future, just like Tom and Laura’s father each of the Wingfields characters have “[fallen] in love with long distance” (50), and like Tom’s now famous statement reads: “time is the longest distance between two places” (68). Even when these characters are near each other, they are not close, because their fixations on time have put up such walls between them. They are unable to live in the present, or relate to those in the present in any coherent way that is not completely colored by the distance of either the past or the future. This effectively ends their communication with each other and only furthers the desire of each character to recede back into their private inner worlds, sequestered away from those who could perhaps help them realize a more fulfilling future.

## Works Cited

- Bray, William. *The Burden of the Past in the Major and Minor Plays of Tennessee Williams*. University of Mississippi, 1983. Print.
- Bluefarb, Sam. "The Glass Menagerie: Three Visions of Time." *College English* 24.7 (1963): 513-518. JSTOR. Web. 23 Nov 2012.
- Farrelly, Ann Dillon. "'The Pleasant Disguise of Illusion': The Autobiographical Memory Plays of Williams, Friel, and O'Neill." MA thesis. University of Dayton, 1999. Print.
- Green, John. *Looking For Alaska*. New York: Penguin Group, 2007. 54. Print.
- "hacker." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, 2011. Web. 15 April 2013.
- Meyerhoff, Hans. "Of Time and the Self." *Time and Literature*. Second Printing. London: Cambridge University Press, 1955. 26-54. Print.
- Mishoe, Billy. "Time as Antagonist in the Dramas of Tennessee Williams" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 1972), p. 29.
- Parker, R.B. "The Circle Closed: A Psychological Reading of The Glass Menagerie and the Two Character Play" *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*. Ed. Robert Martin: 68.
- "portrait." *oed.com*. The Oxford English Dictionary, 2013. Web. 15 Apr 2013.
- Schroeder, Patricia. *The Presence of the Past in the Modern American Drama*. Associated University Presses, Inc., 1989. Print. Thompson, Judith J. *Tennessee Williams' Plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1987. Print.
- Singer, Jefferson A., and Peter Salovey. *The Remembered Self*. New York: The Free Press, 1993. Print.
- "Through a Glass Starkly." *English Journal*. 57.2 (1968): 209. Web. 15 Apr. 2013.
- Williams, Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie*. Acting Edition. New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc., 1945. Print.
- Williams, Tennessee. "The Timeless World of a Play." *Tennessee Williams - New Selected Essays: Where I Live*. John S. Bak. Revised and expanded ed. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2009. 59-62. Print.