THE GLASS MENEGERIE

LONG ANSWERS:

1. **Justify/Explain the title of the play “The Glass Menagerie”.**

**OR**

**What is the importance of the glass figurines in the play “The Glass Menagerie” by Tennessee Williams?**

**OR**

**Explain the use of glass as a symbol in “The Glass Menagerie”.**

**Ans –** “The Glass Menagerie” is a memory play by Tennessee Williams, one of America’s most celebrated playwrights, and was performed for the first time in the year 1944. “The Glass Menagerie” is one of Williams’ greatest plays and one of the most intense in terms of symbolism. The very title of the drama, “The Glass Menagerie”, is an important symbol used by Williams. The glass menagerie, or a collection of glass animal figurines, is the play’s central symbol. Laura’s collection of glass animal figurines represents a number of facets of her personality. Like the figurines, Laura is delicate, fanciful, and somehow old-fashioned. This symbol retains crucial importance because the play itself is entitled on the basis of this symbol. The glass figurines are the creative product of Laura's defected inferiority. It is through this menagerie that Laura succeeds in deflecting her heavy inferiority into the direction of creativity. The glass menagerie could also be analyzed as a symbol of isolation. It is a symbol of the artificiality of Laura’s handicapped and heavily interiorized creativity. These figurines bring a sense of peace and fulfillment to Laura, something which she does not find in the world of reality. She is a shy person with a deformity and it is only in the illusory world surrounded by the glass menagerie that she likes to exist in. The menagerie appears to be a symbol of the reality of illusion, which is overtly pleasingly to Laura. In other words, it is a symbol of escapism.

Among the glass figurines, the unicorn is an important symbol in the play. The theme of illusion is further developed in the play by this glass unicorn. It is Laura’s favorite figure and it represents her peculiarity. As Jim points out, unicorns are “extinct” in modern times and are lonesome as a result of being different from other horses. Laura too is unusual, lonely, and ill-adapted to existence in the world in which she lives. Unicorns have one horn only and are extinct on earth. It is here that Tennessee Williams draws a similarity between the unicorn and Laura. Perhaps, like the unicorn with an aberration on its head, Laura feels that her handicap is an aberration. The unicorn cannot become a normal horse because of its one horn. Similarly, Laura feels she cannot become “normal” with her handicap. It keeps her from participating in life. Laura's existence in the external world is virtually extinct as she remains confined to her own illusory world. Moreover, the characteristic of the glass unicorn that Laura holds dear is that though it is beautiful, it is also easily breakable. It is made of glass and needs to be handled with care. The brittleness of the glass unicorn suggests the fragility of Laura. When the unicorn fell due to the mistake of Jim O'Connor, it broke at once. The breaking of its horn makes it a normal horse. Similarly, Jim’s advances endow Laura with a new normalcy, making her seem more like just another girl. But the violence with which this normalcy is thrust upon her means that Laura cannot become normal without somehow shattering. This breaking away of the unicorn is illustrative of the emasculation and impotence of Jim O'Conner. He could not become a part of Laura’s reality. Thus, the glass made unicorn is one of the most important symbols in the play.

The title of the play, “The Glass Menagerie”, supports the theme of illusions. A menagerie, a zoo, refers to a group of inhuman creatures. In the play, the menagerie that Williams mentions is made of glass. Since the creatures are glass, they are very fragile and not real. The title specifically refers to Laura's collection of glass animals, mainly horses. To escape the harshness of her real existence, Laura spends hours playing with the menagerie. Laura builds an illusory world for herself with the figurines because like glass, which is fragile, she too is too delicate to face the harsh reality of life. Furthermore, the glass menagerie is larger than just Laura's collection. It also represents the fragility of the other characters in the play. All of the Wingfields are strange creatures who are fragile enough to break easily. Each of them burns "with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation." Like animals in a zoo, they are trapped in their dreary existence, barely making ends meet. Like broken glass, their dreams and happiness remain unfulfilled. Tom, for instance, although he managed to runaway, always lives with the guilt of leaving behind his family. He can never be free both mind and soul.

Thus, the title of the play “The Glass Menagerie” justifies the plot. Tennessee Williams skillfully makes use of the symbol of glass and the glass figurines to reveal the flaws and the peculiarities in the personalities of the characters in the play. Symbolism is the part and parcel of “The Glass Menagerie”. Tennessee Williams did not succumb to the temptation of the nineteenth century realism and was well-aware of its limitations. He felt handicapped by the confining power of the 19th century realism and decided to make that mode of realism flexible by adopting the technique of symbolism, a fact that is quiet evident in this play – “The Glass Menagerie”.

1. **Elaborate on the symbolism in “The Glass Menagerie”.**

**OR**

**What are the symbols used by Tennessee Williams in “The Glass Menagerie”?**

**Ans –** “The Glass Menagerie” is a memory play by Tennessee Williams, one of America’s most celebrated playwrights, and was performed for the first time in the year 1944. His work is suffused with symbolism and applies metaphorical ways of expression. Every line of his dramas contains a symbol, and typically, each of these is the component of a larger symbolic theme and involves an overarching symbolic motif. “The Glass Menagerie” is one of Williams’ greatest plays and one of the most intense in terms of symbolism. The very title of the play is a symbol, and symbols occupy almost every sentence. Symbolism is the part and parcel of “The Glass Menagerie”. Tennessee Williams did not succumb to the temptation of the nineteenth century realism and was well-aware of its limitations. He felt handicapped by the confining power of the 19th century realism and decided to make that mode of realism flexible by adopting the technique of symbolism.

To portray the reality of illusion Williams felt a dire necessity of symbolism. The very title of the drama, “The Glass Menagerie”, is an important symbol used by Williams. The glass menagerie, or a collection of glass animal figurines, is the play’s central symbol. Laura’s collection of glass animal figurines represents a number of facets of her personality. Like the figurines, Laura is delicate, fanciful, and somehow old-fashioned. This symbol retains crucial importance because the play itself is entitled on the basis of this symbol. The glass figurines are the creative product of Laura's defected inferiority. It is through this menagerie that Laura succeeded in deflecting her heavy inferiority into the direction of creativity. The glass menagerie could also be analyzed as a symbol of isolation. It is a symbol of the artificiality of Laura’s handicapped and heavily interiorized creativity. These figurines bring a sense of peace and fulfillment to Laura, something which she does not find in the world of reality. She is a shy person with a deformity and it is only in the illusory world surrounded by the glass menagerie that she likes to exist in. The menagerie appears to be a symbol of the reality of illusion, which is overtly pleasingly to Laura. In other words, it is a symbol of escapism.

Among the glass figurines, the unicorn is an important symbol in the play. It is her favorite figure and it represents her peculiarity. As Jim points out, unicorns are “extinct” in modern times and are lonesome as a result of being different from other horses. Laura too is unusual, lonely, and ill-adapted to existence in the world in which she lives. Unicorns have one horn only and are totally extinct on earth. It is here that Tennessee Williams draws a similarity between the unicorn and Laura. Laura's existence in the external world is virtually extinct as she remains confined to her own illusory world. Apart from this, the characteristic of the glass unicorn is that, though beautiful, it is easily breakable. The brittleness of the unicorn suggests the fragility of Laura. When this unicorn fell due to the mistake of Jim O'Connor, it broke at once. The breaking of its horn makes it a normal horse. Similarly, Jim’s advances endow Laura with a new normalcy, making her seem more like just another girl. But the violence with which this normalcy is thrust upon her means that Laura cannot become normal without somehow shattering. This breaking away of the unicorn is illustrative of the emasculation and impotence of Jim O'Conner. He could not become a part of Laura’s reality.

The characters in the play “The Glass Menagerie” are also symbolic. The most practical and realistic character Jim O'Connor is himself a symbolic character. He has been held as an emissary of an external world. For the most part, Jim is realistic. In comparison to other characters, he is somewhat safe from the danger of illusion. It is he who stressed upon the importance of thinking, acting and living in line with realism. No matter how tall a claim of being realistic, his claim suffers serious defects. To overcome his present difficulties and obstacles, Jim has been choosing new fields like radio-engineering and rhetoric. His choice is practical and realistic. But his overemphasis upon the alchemy of the future is dangerously risky. It is an act of illusion to negate the present with the device of the future. In this regard Jim appears to be an unconscious victim of illusion.

Like the glass unicorn, “Blue Roses,” Jim’s high school nickname for Laura, symbolizes Laura’s unusualness, yet allure. The name is also associated with Laura’s attraction to Jim and the joy that his kind treatment brings her. Furthermore, it recalls Tennessee Williams’s sister, Rose, on whom the character of Laura is based. Leading out of the Wingfields’ apartment is a fire escape with a landing. The fire escape represents exactly what its name implies - an escape from the fires of frustration and dysfunction that rage in the Wingfield household. Laura slips on the fire escape in Scene Four, highlighting her inability to escape from her situation. Tom, on the other hand, frequently steps out onto the landing to smoke, anticipating his eventual getaway.

The play is embedded with other minor symbols. The rainbow that comes from the color of Laura's glass menagerie is a symbol of illusion. Glass is transparent, but, when light is shined upon it correctly, it refracts an entire rainbow of colors. Just like the colours reflected from the figure, the glass menagerie fills colour in Laura’s life. The blowing out of light is also a symbol of the forthcoming disappointment resulting from the gradual revelation of the fact that Jim O'Connor is a fiancé of some other girl. The setting used in the play is designed to be symbolic of isolation. Amanda's moral platitudes "rise and shine, rise and shine" symbolizes her conviction that moral purity and refinement is a passport to success. The character "Laura" itself is symbolic of the passing freshness and fragile lushness of Laurel. The grinning portrait of Tom's father could also be symbolic in relation to the other characters. It is symbolic of the embedded memory of betrayal and isolation as reflected in the mind of the character.

Thus, the play “The Glass Menagerie” makes the use of various symbols to express the situation and the flaws in the characters of the play. These symbols are essential to the plot and make the play more interesting and captivating to the audience, as well as the critics.

1. **Attempt a character analysis of Tom Wingfield.**

**OR**

**How is Tom Wingfield a representative of the modern man?**

**Ans –** Tom Wingfield is the narrator and also one of the main characters in the play “The Glass Menagerie”. The play itself is based on Tom’s memory from when he lived with his mother, Amanda and his sister, Laura. The kind of reality Tennessee Williams has captured in this play is the reality that exists in memory. Tom Wingfield is a conscious self. Most of the times, he is seen observing and reflecting on his experiences and his memories. He is a representation of the modern man as his struggles reflect those which a modern man has to face. Tom Wingfield desperately seeks freedom from the repressive and mediocre life he feels systematically enslaved by. Set during the Great Depression, the world Tom is a part of is one of dire uncertainty. People are being confronted with a failed economy, the ripples of which spread tension throughout all facets of daily life. Tom’s family is no stranger to the hardship. Tom supports himself, as well as his mother and sister, on a mere “sixty five dollars a month” by working in a shoe warehouse.

 Tom Wingfield is portrayed as the potentially creative character caught in a conventional and materialistic world. He is the free spirit who had to curb his wings by working at a dreaded and disliked job in a shoe warehouse. Tom has his own independent world composed of those things he considered important - his poetry, his dreams, his freedom, his adventure, and his illusions. All these things were in direct opposition to his mother's world, but Tom's conflict is between his world and the realistic world. Despite having his own desires, Tom is realist enough to recognize his sister's plight. This conflict between the world of harsh reality and the tempting illusory world is also a struggle that modern man faces. The struggle between the burdens and responsibilities in life and the desires of the heart is typical for man. In the play, Tom’s character is mature enough to understand that since his father left them, his mother and sister depended on him to support the family. However, he knew that he had to act without pity or else be destroyed as a sensitive being. Thus, he is forced to leave his mother and sister as if he stayed, he knew he would be destroyed and consumed by their worlds of illusion, deception, and withdrawal.

 Tennessee Williams introduces Tom Wingfield as a “poet” working in a warehouse. Although he does not like his job, he sacrifices his happiness for the sake of his family. Williams notes that Tom “is not remorseless, but to escape from a trap he has to act without pity”. His loyalty, to his sister in particular, compels him to stay. But he leaves unable to stay with the feeling of suffocation. The main events of the play are filtered through the perspective memory of Tom Wingfield. The series of experiences and emotions that are presented in the play are the conscious outcome of Tom Wingfield's reflection on his past. He is torn between his duty to his family and his heart’s desires. He is torn between escapism and a necessity to involve in action, a perfect reflection of modern man and his struggles. He is inextricably trapped in these two disrupting conflicts between these stark opposites. Most of the time, Tom is seen consciously reflecting. But reflection alone does not satisfy him and he is compelled to act as well. Tom eventually chooses to leave his mother and sister and pursue his desires. However, he never settles anywhere because although he is physically free, he could never get over the guilt of leaving his sister and mother behind. The memory of his sister haunts him and he keeps running from the new oppressor – the past.

Tom’s attitude toward Amanda and Laura has puzzled critics. Even though he clearly cares for them, he is frequently indifferent and even cruel toward them. His speech at the close of the play demonstrates his strong feelings for Laura. But he cruelly deserts her and Amanda, and not once in the course of the play does he behave kindly or lovingly toward Laura—not even when he knocks down her glass menagerie. He is also in conflict with his mother over his interest in the arts and literature. His ideal world is of adventure and the aesthetics. However, his reality is that of an employee in a shoe warehouse. Tom suffers because he can neither kill reality nor worship illusion. He had a job and was employed. But his employment was a source of extreme dissatisfaction for him. Hence, with the aim of making a progressive change in his life, he made the hard decision to run away. However, he ended up remaining forever trapped with the guilt of leaving his family. This guilt within him is something he could never run away from and thus, he was never able to be free, both mind and soul. It is his escapist propensity which led to him being seduced by the magic-charm of illusion. Tom knew, by that time, that adventure is the surest way of escaping the confinement and cage of life. That is why, he chose adventure. But he could never escape from the magnetic pull of love and the call of responsibility.

Tom shows that true freedom is just another dragon to chase. One battle, one victory ultimately leads to another struggle. While he breaks free from the chains of his original “trap”, he enters a new world where he must still seek solace from the haunting memories of what he left behind. This running away that becomes a part of Tom’s life is synonymous to the plight of modern man. Every man has their own haunting past which comes forth time and again to the premises of the mind. Williams skillfully highlights through all his characters that a certain detachment from reality is inevitable given the nature of humanity and the world we inhabit. Tom reminds the reader that everyone is running from something.

In conclusion, it could be said that Tom Wingfield is a man caught between illusion and reality, duty and freedom, involvement and escapism, and reflection and action. He is stuck with these problems. He is inextricably trapped in these two disrupting conflicts between these polar opposites. In this regard Tom appears to be representative of the suffering of modern man. The modern man in the twentieth century is wholly torn between these polar opposites. He can't easily distinguish between illusion and reality.

1. **Attempt a character analysis of Laura Wingfield.**

**OR**

**Describe Laura Wingfield as a romantic woman.**

**Ans –** Laura Wingfield is one of the main characters in the play “The Glass Menagerie” by Tennessee Williams. She is the daughter of Amanda Wingfield and sister of Tom Wingfield. Laura’s one leg is shorter than the other. As she is a cripple, she suffers from a terrible inferiority complex. Laura Wingfield is the sort of character who chose the world of fantasy in this mundane world of harsh reality. She has to face the brutal limitations of this phenomenal world and felt oppressed by the harshness of it. She knew that in this world of reality cannot accommodate the greatness of her vision and view. Hence, she longed for the world of fantasy, the world of imagination and the world of isolation. The external world had made her heavily inferior. In her fantasy world, she made full use of her imagination. She manufactured little glass animals like unicorns. However, all those products in her menagerie were breakable, soft and delicate. Although beautiful, they were fragile, just like her. Ignoring the reality, she depended upon her imagination and fantasy. Thus, she resembles a romantic figure. Laura represents the kind of woman who, despite life's hardships, has maintained her love for nature and art as depicted by her collection of glass animals.

 Like a romantic, Laura expresses her love for nature. In the collection of little glass animals she made nature has found its expression. Even Laura's name signifies her affinity for the natural together with the transcendent: "Laura" is, somewhat ironically derived from the laurel shrub or tree, a wreath of which was conferred as a mark of honor in ancient times upon heroes and athletes; and "Wingfield" brings to mind the flight of birds across a meadow. The physically and emotionally crippled Laura is the only character in the play who never does anything to hurt anyone else. Despite the weight of her own problems, she displays a pure compassion—as with the tears she sheds over Tom’s unhappiness, described by Amanda in Scene Four—that stands in stark contrast to the selfishness and grudging sacrifices that characterize the Wingfield household. Laura also has the fewest lines in the play, which contributes to her aura of selflessness. Yet she is the axis around which the plot turns, and the most prominent symbols—blue roses, the glass unicorn, the entire glass menagerie—all in some sense represent her. Laura is as rare and peculiar as a blue rose or a unicorn, and she is as delicate as a glass figurine.

 As an artist Laura represents the artists longing for absolute fulfillment she stands for the fragile, almost unearthly ego brutalized by life in the industrialized, depersonalized cities of the western world. Other characters seem to assume that, like a piece of transparent glass, which is colorless until light shines upon it, Laura can take on whatever color they wish. Thus, Amanda both uses the contrast between herself and Laura to emphasize the glamour of her own youth and to fuel her hope of re-creating that youth through Laura. Tom and Jim both see Laura as an exotic creature, completely and rather quaintly foreign to the rest of the world. Yet, Laura’s crush on the high school hero, Jim, is a rather ordinary schoolgirl sentiment. But it is something a girl as supposedly fragile as Laura could hardly handle as seen from the scene where she spends walking the streets in the cold to avoid going to typing class. Through actions like these, Laura repeatedly displays a will of her own that defies others’ perceptions of her, but repeatedly goes unacknowledged.

 Tom’s attitude toward Amanda and Laura has puzzled critics. Even though he clearly cares for them, he is frequently indifferent and even cruel toward them. His speech at the close of the play demonstrates his strong feelings for Laura. But he cruelly deserts her and Amanda, and not once in the course of the play does he behave kindly or lovingly toward Laura – not even when he knocks down her glass menagerie. Jim's nickname for Laura "Blue Roses" signifies her affinity for natural flowers together with the transcendent blue flowers. This does not occur naturally and thus come to symbolize her yearning for both ideal and mystical beauty along with spiritual or romantic love. That beauty is also symbolized by Laura's favorite among the animals in her glass menagerie, the fabled, otherworldly, unicorn. And that love comes to her, however fleetingly, in the person of her name, Jim O'Connor, who beatifies, Laura by emphasizing what is special, even divine, about her and downplaying her disability.

 A psychotic and a cripple with a great degree of shyness, Laura is shown as someone who constantly withdraws into her world of artificial glass animals. The beauty of the glass menagerie fascinates her and helps forget the pain of real life. But the glass animals are fragile and breakable. It's also a glass of fragile dreams. The moment the glass animal is broken, she is awakened to the reality of life from which she was hiding herself. Moreover, like the glass unicorn, she too is someone who is different from the world of reality. The breaking of the unicorn’s horn makes it a normal horse. The figure of the unicorn has to suffer the loss of its uniqueness – its one horn - to become normal. It is indicative of the fact that Laura cannot become normal without somehow shattering. This breaking away of the unicorn is illustrative of the emasculation and impotence of Jim O'Conner. He could not become a part of Laura’s reality.

 In conclusion, it could be said that Laura embodies a remarkable, romantic ethos. Her dedication to art, her adherence to nature and her effort to attain transcendence collectively signify the imbedded romantic perspective within the play “The Glass Menagerie”. Moreover, the playwright's fascination with symbols, images and the filtration of experiences come through memory.

1. **Attempt a comparison between Tom and Laura in the drama “The Glass Menagerie”.**

**OR**

**How are Tom and Laura different from each other?**

**OR**

**Describe the contrast between Tom and Laura.**

**Ans –** “The Glass Menagerie” is a memory play by Tennessee Williams, one of America’s most celebrated playwrights, and was performed for the first time in the year 1944. In the drama “The Glass Menagerie”, Tennessee Williams presents his life experiences in a direct way. He makes use of some fictional characters in an attempt to develop his life experience. These characters are Laura, Tom, Amanda and Jim. They exhibit some salient contrasting characteristics in the drama. Tom Wingfield is the narrator and one of the main characters in the play. The play itself is based on Tom’s memory from when he lived with his mother, Amanda and his sister, Laura. Laura’s one leg is shorter than the other. As she is a cripple, she suffers from a terrible inferiority complex. Laura Wingfield is the sort of character who chose the world of fantasy in this mundane world of harsh reality. Laura has lived with this disability caused by the disease, and Tom is portrayed as an aspiring poet who, unfortunately, has to work in a shoe warehouse.

Both the siblings differ greatly in their personalities. The first contrast between Laura and Tom is that Laura is portrayed as being innocent while Tom, on the other hand, is portrayed as being guilty. Despite her fragility, Laura is more serene than the other members of her family. She leaves quarrels to her mother Amanda and her brother Tom. The only companion of hers is the glass menagerie that she takes good care of. She is a kind and fragile soul who likes to seclude herself within her illusory world of the glass menagerie. In contrast, Tom is portrayed as a selfish person when he fails to take any obligation for his sister’s matrimony. Although he worked in the warehouse to support his family, he does not seem sincere in his responsibilities. This is evident in the last scene when Amanda angrily reprimands Tom as, a “selfish dreamer”. He invited Jim as a potential suitor for Laura without trying to find out if Jim was already involved with someone. Another instance where his selfishness is portrayed when Tom admits to Jim that instead of paying the family’s electricity bill, he used it to used it to join the Union of Merchant Seamen.

The second contrast between Tom and Laura is that he values independence. Laura, on the other hand, is presented as an overly fearful and sensitive person. Tom had run-away from Amanda’s irritating inquisition and orders and had went to the movies almost every night. Afterward, Tom realized that in such of freedom, he had fallen in love with movies and thus, it became his adventure. He used this adventure to compensate for his dull life and move away from Amanda’s nagging reminders of his daily life. He never liked her instructions on how to eat, what to eat, when to eat, how to improve his life, how to quit smoking, what to read among other directives. This is a clear depiction that Tom was an independent person who valued self-rule more than taking other people’s directions. Tom has his own independent world composed of those things he considered important - his poetry, his dreams, his freedom, his adventure, and his illusions. All these things were in direct opposition to his mother's world, but Tom's conflict is between his world and the realistic world. On the other hand, Laura is presented as an extremely sensitive person who is very nervous to an extent of becoming sick when she attends business school. She only owns a “glass menagerie” that she takes good care of and handles it with tenderness. Tennessee writes, “She is washing and polishing her collection of glass.” The glass figurines are precious to Laura and she likes to surround herself with them. She becomes frightened when Tom and Amanda quarrel and the figurines are her only solace. She also has withdrawn from the real world and created her own make-believe reality. Laura's existence in the external world is virtually extinct as she remains confined to her own illusory world. She, thus, is incapable of being independent because of her overly sensitive nature, and this is why she withdraws from the real world.

Tom is ambitious whereas Laura is not. Tom commits himself to negate Amanda’s directives because he has an ambition of making his life better. Conscious of the “boiling” in himself, Tom recognized that he was obliged to act fast or be muffled by his immediate environment. He is also portrayed as an aspiring poet. On the other hand, Laura does not have too much ambition. Tom’s ambitious nature leads to his escape plans and pursue a life filled with adventure. Laura, on the other hand, retreats from the reality. The only best adventure she likes is spending her days visiting the zoo, playing records or cleaning her glass figures.

Another contrast between the siblings is that Tom is a realist, but Laura is not. Tom’s realism is evident when he recognizes his sister’s plight. He also understands that his mother’s visions of gentlemen callers are false. Additionally, he recognizes that there is no future for him with the warehouse and thus acts void of pity other than getting destroyed if he becomes a sensitive person. Aware of Amanda’s and Laura’s illusion, withdrawal and deception, Tom opts out or else be swallowed by their words. On the other hand, Laura is not real to herself. Because of her overly sensitive tendency, she thinks that everybody is critical of her physical disability. She thus opts to live in an illusionary world of withdrawal. Furthermore, Laura is purely compassionate whereas Tom is portrayed as a cruel brother. This is evident from Scene four when she sheds tears because of Tom’s unhappiness. She truly cares for her brother and his happiness. On the other hand, Tom proves to be cruel to his mother and sister when he deserts them. An instance that displays his cruelty is when he knocks down his sister’s glass menagerie. However, although he leaves his sister to pursue his dreams, he never could get over the guilt of leaving her.

Thus, despite being siblings, both Tom and Laura have strikingly different personalities. However, they do care for each other, although it is only Laura who openly expresses her remorse at Tom’s unhappiness. Tom’s decision to leave is cruel. But the fact that he is never happy even after having the freedom he wanted proves that the guilt of leaving his sister is much larger.

1. **The Glass Menagerie as a memory play.**

**OR**

**Is “The Glass Menagerie” a memory play? Justify your answer with reasonable arguments.**

**Ans –** “The Glass Menagerie” is a memory play by Tennessee Williams, one of America’s most celebrated playwrights, and was performed for the first time in the year 1944. His work is suffused with symbolism and applies metaphorical ways of expression. This play of Williams is considered a memory play as all the actions are narrated from Tom’s memory of the past events. A memory play is a kind of play in which the story is told from the memory of a narrator or one of the characters. The term was used by Tennessee Williams to describe non-realistic dramas, such as The Glass Menagerie. In these dramas, the audience experience the past as remembered by a narrator, complete with music from the period remembered, and images representing the, characters, thoughts, fears, emotions, and recollections projected on a scrim in the background.

In his monologue that opens the play, [Tom](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-glass-menagerie/characters/tom-wingfield) announces, “The play is memory.” The play is Tom's memory of the past, and all of the action takes place in his head. That action is therefore dramatic, sentimental, and emotional, not realistic. As is fitting in a play that is itself a memory of the past, in The Glass Menagerie the past haunts all the characters. Tom sees the past as a physical and emotional restraint that prevents him from living his life. And yet there is something in it that holds him,, making him return to the memory over and over again. His repetitive actions, such as smoking and going to the movies, demonstrate both his desire to escape and the relentless cycle of the past. And the fact that the play itself is a memory he feels the need to transform into a play suggests that Tom has still not escaped that past. [Amanda](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-glass-menagerie/characters/amanda-wingfield) uses her memories like a veil to shield her from reality. She clings to the Southern belle version of herself who received seventeen gentleman callers in a weekend.

“The Glass Menagerie” is a memory play because both its style and its contents are shaped and inspired by memory. Tom is the narrator of the play. The play comes from his memory. In a memory play the playwright enjoys unusual freedom of convention. Tom as a narrator explains to the audience that the playwright usually provides the audience with the illusion that looks like truth. Here he means that the regular dramatist creates a dramatic illusion on the stage which the audience takes for the truth. But he will not follow the conventional tricks of the dramatist. He will offer the audience truth under the pleasant cover of illusion. Under the guise of dramatic illusion, he will tell the audience the story of his own life as memory flashbacks. Here it is hinted that the play is not realistic, but is being presented through the memory of Tom.

A memory play focuses on the past. All the characters in the play live in the past; they “turn back time”. Living in their memories they are trying to escape from the responsibility of dealing with the present. Tom narrates his recent past from the chaos of the latter years of World War 11. [Amanda](http://englishliterature24.blogspot.com/2018/02/how-far-is-amanda-wingfields-obsession-with-the-past-responsible-for-the-doomed-present-in-the-glass-menagerie.html) is haunted by the memory of her youth. She was an extremely popular and pretty young lady but she lost her chances. Now she refuses to understand life and reality. She does not let her children face reality like adults. With this denial of the truth she prevents Tom from becoming a man. She does not want to accept the fact that Laura is crippled. Because of that the young girl cannot become an independent and separate individual.

The play is also a memory of Laura’s infancy. She is like a little girl living in her own world of dreams and illusions. She is very shy and fragile. Laura’s one leg is shorter than the other. As she is a cripple, she suffers from a terrible inferiority complex. Laura Wingfield is the sort of character who chose the world of fantasy in this mundane world of harsh reality. She has to face the brutal limitations of this phenomenal world and felt oppressed by the harshness of it. She knew that in this world of reality cannot accommodate the greatness of her vision and view. Hence, she longed for the world of fantasy, the world of imagination and the world of isolation. The external world had made her heavily inferior. She is so nervous and ashamed that she has trouble facing people from the outside world. She rarely goes out of the house, and spends her time by listening to phonograph records and playing with her collection of miniature animals her “[glass menagerie](http://englishliterature24.blogspot.com/2018/02/what-is-significance-of-title-of-play-the-glass-menagerie.html)”. It is through Tom’s memories that the audience learns of the personality of Laura.

Another memory is of the father, who had left the family sixteen years ago to travel long distances. He never appears onstage but he played a significant role in the lives of Amanda, Laura, and Tom. The phonograph and records that he left behind become part of the fantasy world of Laura. His portrait is constant reminder of happiness in the past. Thus, the play is created by memory and nostalgia. The characters in the play cannot be conscious human beings. For Torn, Amanda and Laura memory is the crippling force that prevents them from finding happiness in the present.

1. **Tennessee Williams and his contribution towards drama.**

**OR**

**Analyze Tennessee Williams as a playwright.**

**OR**

**What is the impact on American drama by Tennessee Williams?**

**Ans –** Tennesse Williams remains one of the most influential and renowned American dramatist of all time. Williams has been regarded as the greatest Southern dramatist and one of the most distinguished playwrights in the history of American drama. Alongside Eugene O’Neill and Arthur Miller, Williams is regarded as one of the greatest American playwrights of the 20th century. His fame and reputation could be undoubtedly attributed to his two masterpieces- “A Streetcar Named Desire” and “The Glass Menagerie” - as well as to a corpus of works including the Pulitzer Prize winner “Cat on a Hot Tin Rooof”. It could be said that with “The Glass Menagerie” of 1944 and “A Streetcar Named Desire” of 1947, he brought to American theater the greatest talent of the post-war generation. Although “A Streetcar Named Desire” won every major literary award, Williams then turned into a self-critical and self-destructive human being. During his long career, Williams never managed to escape from despair and anxiety- the devils that tormented him all his life. Undoubtedly, he became the target of the most ferocious attacks ever recorded in the American theater and he remained depressed till his death in the year 1983.

 While analyzing Williams’ works, critics have noted that his plays possess “the greatest dramatic poetry in the American language”, voicing the widely accepted opinion that Williams brought to the language of the American theater a lyricism radically different from that of other playwrights before or after. He raised the colloquial speech, very frequently the Southern colloquial speech, to the level of poetry, thanks to his sensitivity to verse’s rhythms and patterns, its imagery and symbolism. Tennessee Williams imbued his dialogues with very subtle qualities and the reader or the hearer, subconsciously responds not the real speech but to a speech intensified by such poetic effects as alliteration, rhythm, onomatopoeia, and assonance. Being a Southern writer, Tennessee Williams was accustomed to and in full harmony with the natural rhythm and melody of Southern speech, which is heard particularly in the voices of women, as he himself pointed out.

 Besides indiscernibly intensifying the dialogue of his characters, Williams uses their speech to emphasize their individual qualities. Amanda in “The Glass Menagerie” is too wordy, she never stops talking; Vee’s dialogue in Orpheus Descending that symbolizes her sexual frustration is breathtaking. Even the most illiterate characters created by Williams are as poetic in their speech as the most educated and cultivated ones. Thus, Stanley Kowalski, the “brutish” character in “A Streetcar Named Desire” has his unique rhythms, characterized by repetitions and inflections. Williams considered himself a member of the Southern school, which combined elements of expressionism, impressionism, surrealism, symbolism and naturalism in a special American mixture. The playwright himself stated that the South’s frustration- oppression and poverty have made it the most natural and suitable place for the development of American Gothic.

 Characterization is one of the greatest achievements and strengths of Williams as a playwright. His characters are products of a highly imaginative mind, but at the same time so convincing that one might be tempted to take them out of context and try to develop theories on their Williams created great characters such as Amanda and Laura and Blanche and Stanley - memorable not only as individuals but also when they are contrasted to each other. Williams created exceptional, larger than life female characters. They are beautiful, lively, imaginative but simultaneously fragile and vulnerable. Laura from “The Glass Menagerie” is a fitting example. This fragility and vulnerability is caused because sometimes they rely too much on the comfort of men around them, and when the latter in turn fail or ruin them, they ultimately turn to the kindness of strangers, seeking love, affection and compassion. This is what their creator, Tennessee Williams also longed for and sought almost all his life. It is a well-known fact that he identified himself more with his heroines, a fact proven by him stating that “I am Blanche DuBois!”

 Instead of realism, which puts emphasis on the photographic representation of real life, Tennessee Williams insisted on “plastic theater”, combining all the production elements – dialogue, action, setting, and lighting, even costumes- in a unified and symbolic expression of the truth. This approach, no doubt revolutionary and avant-garde for the time, was outlined by the playwright himself in his introduction to “The Glass Menagerie”. The most essential elements of the plastic theater employed by Tennessee in The Glass Menagerie were the use of a screen where themes, titles and pictures were shown to the audience at critical moments which represented an attempt to bold symbolism.

In this way Williams announced a new era in the American drama, characterized by a unique form, a popular artistic form that incorporated all levels of American culture and life and which was undoubtedly poetic in all its intentions. This search for an expressive concrete form, a form in harmony with the poetic vision became the motive that runs through all of Williams’ works.

1. **Explain the plot of “The Glass Menagerie”.**

**OR**

**Write in brief on the plot of “The Glass Menagerie”.**

**Ans-** “The Glass Menagerie” is a memory play by Tennessee Williams, one of America’s most celebrated playwrights, and was performed for the first time in the year 1944. “The Glass Menagerie” is one of Williams’ greatest plays and one of the most intense in terms of symbolism. The very title of the drama, “The Glass Menagerie”, is an important symbol used by Williams. This seven-scene play concentrates on four characters and contains multiple references to two unseen characters. Tom Wingfield is the Narrator and the son of Amanda Wingfield, the Mother who lives in the past. Laura Wingfield is her daughter and she is a fragile girl who lives in the world surrounded by her glass collection of animals, including her particular favorite, a glass unicorn. The beginning of the play shows the Wingfield family eating dinner in a rundown St. Louis apartment. Amanda insistently reminds her adult son Tom to chew his food thoroughly, annoying Tom to the point that he leaves the table to smoke outside on the fire escape. Amanda proceeds to tell her oft-repeated story of the seventeen gentlemen callers she entertained on a Sunday afternoon at her girlhood home in a Mississippi mansion.

The next scene finds Laura, nearly 24 years old, sitting at her desk in front of her typewriter chart, when a visibly upset Amanda enters. She enrolled Laura in classes at Rubicam's Business College, hoping that a career in business would make Laura self-sufficient. She discovers that Laura stopped attending class a long time ago, because the speed tests on the typewriter terrified her. She confronts Laura about Laura’s dropping out of a local business college. After the fiasco at Rubicam's Amanda gives up on a business career for Laura and puts all her hopes into finding a husband for her. Laura confesses to her mother that she could not cope with the demands of the class, and to disguise her absences took long walks in the city, visiting museums and parks. Later, Amanda asks Laura about a boy she liked in high school, and Laura points him out in her yearbook. Tom gets into yet another argument with his mother. She cannot understand why he goes to the movies nearly every night. Tom responds that he cannot tolerate his soul-draining job at the shoe warehouse. He feeds Amanda’s inner turmoil by claiming he will become an assassin and storms out to the movies once again.

Tom returns to the family apartment much later that night, but cannot find his key to enter because of his drunken condition. Laura, his sister, quietly opens the door from within, and Tom tells her about the adventurous movie and the magic show he saw. Tom concludes the scene by giving Laura a scarf from the magic show. Very early the next morning, Amanda wakens Tom to prepare him for yet another day at his miserable job. She repeats her request to bring home a gentleman caller for Laura. That night, Tom announces to his mother than Jim O’Connor will be coming to dinner the next evening. Amanda and Laura make elaborate preparations for the big dinner. Tom arrives with Jim, and Laura soon recognizes Jim as her former high school “crush.” While the four are eating dinner, the lights go out because Tom has “forgotten” to pay the electric bill. In reality, Tom has used the money to buy a membership in the Merchant Marine, signaling his intent to leave the family as his father did so long ago. Amanda brings out candles, and Laura sits alone with Jim. They intimately talk of her physical handicap, her shyness, Jim’s plans for the future, her collection of glass animals, and Jim’s diagnosis that Laura has an inferiority complex. Jim gently kisses Laura, but almost immediately regrets his action, and explains to Laura that he is engaged and to be married. Jim convinces Laura to dance with him in the living room. Laura feels loved and transported, albeit momentarily, into the real world. While dancing, Jim bumps into Laura’s glass figurines, breaking the horn off the unicorn. Jim’s advances endow Laura with a sense of normalcy, but the violence with which this normalcy is thrust upon her means that Laura cannot become normal without somehow shattering. Eventually, Laura gives Jim the unicorn as a “souvenir.” Without its horn, the unicorn is more appropriate for him than for her, and the broken figurine represents all that he has taken from her and destroyed in her. Jim must leave the Wingfield apartment rather abruptly, for he has promised his fiance that he will meet her later.

After Jim’s departure, Amanda bitterly reproaches Tom for bringing Jim to dinner as the gentleman caller for his sister because Jim is not an eligible bachelor. In his defense, Tom responds that he did not know Jim was engaged. Tom disappears from home the next day, never to return. The way Tom reminisces his past, readers could understand how for the rest of his life, he carries the guilt of leaving his mother and his sister, Laura. Although he is now physically free, the guilt in his heart never let him and perhaps never will let him be free.

1. **Discuss the themes in “The Glass Menagerie”.**

**OR**

**Briefly describe the themes involved in the play “The Glass Menagerie”.**

**Ans -** “The Glass Menagerie” is a memory play by Tennessee Williams, one of America’s most celebrated playwrights, and was performed for the first time in the year 1944. The play involves various themes, among which themes like memory, illusion, escapism, the ordinary against the unique – are some of the notable ones.

Memory is an important theme in “The Glass Menagerie”, a memory play where the audience gets to know about the characters and their lives through Tom’s memories. Since the memory of a person or an event changes with time and is often influenced by emotions, what the audience see on stage is Tom’s version of Laura. Amanda is plagued by the memories of her near-perfect youth which serve as nothing but a reminder of the stark difference between her past and present circumstances. Tom is embittered by the memory of his father’s abandonment and later, he leaves his own. Memory is used as a powerful tool to escape from the present because the past is safe and familiar, the future is not.

Escapism is another important theme in the play. The desire to escape reality is omnipresent in human nature and one gets an insight into it through the characters of the play. Amanda finds her escape from reality in talking and thinking about the days of glory in her past. She clings to her long-gone youth, which makes her a figure of ridicule and embarrassment in the eyes of her children. To avoid dealing with reality, Laura clings to her father’s music and a few souvenirs from high school, which reminds her of Jim. To escape the world of work and business, she walks around the city, taking walks in the park and visiting the zoo. But her most prominent escape from reality lies in her collection of glass figurines. Tom struggles to come to terms with the reality of the times that demand a more pragmatic approach to balance one’s economic needs and individual desire for freedom. He escapes the controlling presence of his mother by going to the fire exit and smoking. At last, his final act of escape is to leave.

In the play, we see a juxtaposition of the unique and the ordinary by comparing the characters of Jim and Laura. Laura’s character represents the unique, pure, and innocent, which is also symbolized by the unicorn in her glass menagerie and the nickname given to her by Jim, ‘blue roses’. The unicorn and blue roses both symbolize rarity and suggest otherworldliness. On the other hand, Jim represents the ordinary, outer world. Jim flirts with her and she learns later that he is engaged. Her contact with Jim exposes her to the ways of the world. She realizes that people don’t always mean what they say. Contact with Jim reduces some of her purity and uniqueness, symbolized by the broken unicorn. Laura’s and Jim’s characters illustrate how the world treats and perceives both the ordinary and the unique.

The act of leaving behind or abandoning one’s family is a prominent theme in the play. The play deals with the aftermath and impact of such an act on those who are left behind. Mr. Wingfield’s going away leaves the family broken. The abandonment deteriorates the economic situation of the family, pushing them into poverty. Mr. Wingfield’s abandonment affects Amanda the most who is left as a single parent after her husband leaves. In her attempts to love her children and shape them into perfect individuals, she nags and criticizes them, unfortunately pushing them away from her. The abandonment affects Tom too, although his reaction to it is confusing. He feels bitter about it, yet intends to do exactly what his father did. In the end, Tom too abandons Amanda and Laura, although the guilt of it never leaves him.

Illusion is another important theme of “The Glass Menagerie”. This theme is also reflected in the title of the play. Almost all the characters in the play resort to illusion as a defense against the harsh realities of life. An illusion is a faulty notion of happiness when life is surrounded by bitter and harsh facts. The play centers around the hopes, despairs, predicament and failure of Wing field family. The Wingfields try to escape from reality to a world of fantasies, dreams and imagination to mitigate the pain resulting from a realization of failure and frustration of actual life. The characters make up worlds of their own, which like Laura’s glass animals are not real. They keep themselves in an illusion made of past memories and dreams, which, like the collection of glass animals is too fragile to last and can be broken once reality intrudes.

The conflict between familial expectations and individual desire also forms an important theme in the play. Tom is stuck with a mundane job that he only does to pay the bills. But he is a man stuck between his individual dreams and his family’s expectations from him. His mother wants him to be the ideal son and brother, to stay and provide for the family. He ultimately leaves in order to fulfill his individual dreams and aspirations but is plagued by regret and guilt for leaving his sister behind. The struggle to break gender stereotypes can also be as a theme in the play. The idea that society should decide what is appropriate for men and women, based on their gender continues to be the root cause of suffering and social evils.

SHORT NOTES

1. **Jim O’Conner** – Tennessee Williams’ stage directions describe Jim as “a nice, ordinary, young man.” Jim works with [Tom](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-glass-menagerie/characters/tom-wingfield) at the warehouse. He and Tom were acquaintances in high school, where Jim was the hero - sports star, lead in the theater productions, class president, etc. The characters in the play “The Glass Menagerie” are symbolic. The most practical and realistic character Jim O'Connor is himself a symbolic character. He has been held as an emissary of an external world. For the most part, Jim is realistic. In comparison to other characters, he is somewhat safe from the danger of illusion. It is he who stressed upon the importance of thinking, acting and living in line with realism. Jim could be considered as Tom’s foil. He is the steady, working man who is neither haunted by the past nor yearns for a seemingly impossible future. Unlike the play’s other characters, Jim does not visibly long for escape from his present situation. Instead, he is content in his working-class, ordinary lifestyle. Jim is pleasant and affable, amused by Tom’s poetic inclinations and sympathetic to his ambitions rather than threatened or confused. When Tom invites Jim over for dinner, he knows that [Laura](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-glass-menagerie/characters/laura-wingfield) knew Jim in high school, but he does not know that she had such a profound crush on him. Jim’s advances endow Laura with a new normalcy, making her seem more like just another girl. But the violence with which this normalcy is thrust upon her means that Laura cannot become normal without somehow shattering. The breaking away of the glass unicorn is illustrative of the emasculation and impotence of Jim O'Conner. He could not become a part of Laura’s reality. After he comes to dinner, Jim exits the Wingfields’ world to return to his fiancée and his real life.

No matter how tall a claim of being realistic, Jim’s claim suffers serious defects. Although compared to other characters, he does not indulge in illusions, he too is not completely free from it. To overcome his present difficulties and obstacles, Jim has been choosing new fields like radio-engineering and rhetoric. His choice is practical and realistic. But his overemphasis upon the alchemy of the future is dangerously risky. It is an act of illusion to negate the present with the device of the future. In this regard, Jim also appears to be an unconscious victim of illusion.

1. **Amanda Wingfield –** In the play “The Glass Menagerie” by Tennessee Williams, Amanda Wingfield is portrayed as the mother of Tom and Laura Wingfield. Amanda was a Southern belle in her youth, and she clings to this romantic vision of her past rather than accepting her current circumstances of poverty and abandonment. However, Amanda does not live in the past. Rather, she lives in her own version of the present that she sees through the veil of memories and illusions. Unlike Tom and Laura, who retreat into their own private fantasies to escape from reality, Amanda lives her daily life through the rose-tinted glasses of her memories and dreams. She hates Tom’s interest in poetry and adventure and calls him a “selfish dreamer”. Perhaps this anger on Tom is also because of her husband, who left about sixteen years ago and never returned. She fears in search of adventure, Tom would also abandon the family like his father, something which he indeed does. Amanda is pragmatic in many ways. For instance, she makes ends meet by selling magazine subscriptions. However, Amanda’s vision of the way she thinks her world should work and the reality of the situation often do not intersect. She constantly nags Tom, and refuses to accept Laura’s peculiarities. She projects her own ideals of femininity onto Laura, rather than accepting or even recognizing her daughter for who she is. Amanda is both a very comic and deeply tragic figure. Her exaggerated, larger-than-life statements and actions are often so out of touch with reality that they seem quite funny. However, her self-delusion and inability to see the world around her is also sad and painful to watch. For example, when the Gentleman Caller comes to visit, Amanda puts on a frilly dress she had worn as a young maiden, slips into a thick Southern accent, and minces daintily around the apartment, as though she were sixteen again. Her actions are absurd, but she cannot see how desperately and pathetically she is acting, which makes the scenario tragic.
2. **Theme of consummeralism –** The play “The Glass Menagerie” is set during the Depression, as is explained in the introduction with the quote, "that quaint period, the thirties." Tennessee Williams notes that the characters in the play were facing "a dissolving economy." From these phrases and the general description of Amanda, it is clear that the family once had money and occupied a higher socio-economic status than they do now. In fact, in discussing her suitors when she was a girl, Amanda mentions them as being vice presidents of banks or possessing huge Government bonds. Amanda is not only yearning for her lost youth and beauty and the many boyfriends that she had. Rather, she is also musing about the money and comfort that could have been hers had she married a different man. Thus, the theme of money and its absence is presented throughout the play.

It is also the lack of money that has forced Tom to work in the shoe warehouse. He has his own dreams and interests. He is a person who loves poetry and is also an aspiring poet. However, to support his family he has to work at a job that he does not like. This poverty is the primary reason for his dissatisfaction. The root cause of his leaving is also this lack of money. If they had been rich and luxurious, he would not have to force himself to work in a shoe warehouse and could pursue his own dreams. His mother would not object to his adventures. Moreover, as Amanda believes, if they have money, it would also interest many young men to date Laura. She knows the value of money and was of the view that if they have the riches, then Laura would have plentiful of bachelors. When Amanda worries about Laura's future, she is not only concerned that Laura will be alone. She is also concerned that Laura will not have money with which to support herself. Amanda knows from first-hand experience how difficult it is to support oneself. For this reason, Amanda enrolls Laura in a business school where she will learn basic office skills that will enable her to get a job. When Amanda learns that Laura has not attended classes but merely walked around in town during school hours, Amanda is extremely upset. She then tells Laura that some girls marry, implying that marriage is another way for Laura to secure her financial future.

The theme of money and its absence is also seen in the way Tom spends the funds that were intended to be used to pay the electricity bill. He uses this money instead to further his dream of registering in the navy, escaping his home and family, and seeing the world. When the lights go out, it as both a figurative and literal closure of one world, as Tom prepares to transition into a different one.