The effort to escape both the restrictions of time and its demands forms the thematic and motivational basis of Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie*. In attempting to effect such an escape, Amanda, Tom, and Laura Wingfield (the latter with some qualification) eventually find that they can never quite succeed in breaking the bonds of their world. For their visions do not permit a clear view of the nature of time itself, where, as T. S. Eliot once put it:

> ... human kind
> Cannot bear very much reality.
> Time past and time future
> What might have been and what has been
> Point to one end, which is always present.

However, in all three instances—whether in Amanda's yearning for the past, Tom's eager thrust toward the future, or Laura's imprisonment in the jailhouse of her thwarted present—the past dominates as the present or future can never do. The past not only casts its shadow upon the present and the future, but actually determines the course that each of these shall take. Thus the present and, by implication, the future are prevented from taking a course. For while the future has yet to be born, the present is a static, stillborn entity. In this play, the characters do not *live* in the present but in a past and a future that have never quite effected a coalescence in a livable present. Yet if, as in the case of Tom Wingfield, they plan for the future, that plan can only be put into operation to the extent that an attempt is made to abolish both the past and the present.

While the present, in fact, binds past and future, it is somehow always modified, always restricted, always looked upon in terms of the past. Actually, *Glass Menagerie* is a morality play in modern dress—the dress of the split personality; it is a play in which each character personifies, and therefore, in a broader sense, symbolizes a view of time which is not only static, but fails to come to terms with the nature of the flow of time itself.

Amanda Wingfield, the mother, lives in a world that is emotionally bounded by the past. Although she quite literally inhabits the present, she is incapable of inhabiting that present other than in terms of the past. Her life as a vivacious Southern belle can be of significance only if the memory of that life is nourished and kept alive in the fertile earth of her nostalgia. Periodically, she must recall every word, every gesture, every event that ever took place within the context of her East Tennessee girlhood. Amanda Wingfield can never quite extricate herself from the past in order to come to terms with the flow of life in the present, or what that present bodes for the future. Since the past for Amanda dominates the present, the future is untenable (or untenant-able), in spite of her moments of concern for Laura's future.

In order to facilitate her periodic resurrections of the past, Amanda engages in a kind of dramatic monologue, in which she not only reports on past
events, but on what transpired in the
way of who said what to whom:

This is the dress in which I led the
cotillion. Won the cakewalk twice at
Sunset Hill, wore one spring to the
Governor's ball in Jackson... I wore
it on Sundays for my gentlemen callers!
I had it on the day I met your father—
I had malaria fever all that spring. The
change of climate from East Tennessee
to the Delta—weakened resistance—I had
a little temperature all the time—not
enough to be serious—just enough to
make me restless and giddy! Invitations
poured in—parties all over the Delta!—
"Stay in bed," said Mother, "you have
fever!"—but I just wouldn't—I took
quinine but kept on going, going!

On the surface, these long burrowings
into the strata of memory, of digging up
these shards of a prehistoric time, be-
come for Amanda legitimate means of
expressing (and revealing) herself. Tom
suffers through, but never quite resigns
himself to, these long monologues which
Amanda mindlessly inflicts upon him;
Laura listens to her mother as if in a
dream, a dream in which she is no longer
the central character, but rather just
another extension of one of her glass
dolls. Although the effect—so far as the
audience is concerned—is monologue,
Amanda is fully aware that she is talking
to someone other than herself—to who-
ever may be in the vicinity and is willing
to listen to her. Yet, what is technically
a speech in the dialogue of a play is
essentially a monologue once Amanda
Wingfield focuses her concentration
upon it. If a mixing of metaphors may
be permitted, what she seems to practice
so eloquently in these monologues is a
verbal whistling in the dark—the dark
of her suppressed, tenement-bound pres-
ent. Though the time of the play is the
"present" of the dim and distant 1930's,
the play itself, written some ten years
after the end of the Great Depression,
is an excursion into memory; and Ten-
nessee Williams had every right to pro-
nounce it a "memory play," not only
because he has accompanied Amanda
Wingfield on her excursion back into
time, but because he has made his own.

Through the techniques of Tom's ex-
pository confessions to the audience and
Amanda's spiraling monologues, Wil-
liams probes through a two-fold layer of
time. The immediate time-scheme is the
1930's. But once we are safely, though
not quite comfortably, settled in that
era, we are whisked back—through
Amanda's monologue—to a time even
further remote. And each wistful trip
that Amanda takes back into the past
shows us a diminished image of that past
(as though we were looking through the
wrong end of a telescope), an image
which grows smaller with each succes-
sive venture back into time, until at last
the image disappears and Mrs. Wingfield
is left talking to herself.

Amanda's obsession, of course, trans-
lated into the practical everyday world,
is to superimpose her own past on daugh-
ter Laura's future. Essentially, she desires
for Laura the supposed benefits which
she herself enjoyed in that earlier time
of her vanished girlhood: the balls, the
dresses, the attentions, but, above all, the
numerous (if we can believe her) gentle-
men callers. If such a gentleman caller
can be summoned up in this latter day,
he may well turn out to be a likely
candidate for the hand of the hapless,
crippled Laura. Yet beggars, as the ad-
age has it, can't be choosers; they must
take what they can get in this less than
best of all possible worlds. So Amanda,
even while she dreams of the past, must
somehow come to terms with the very
real and annoyingly encroaching present.
To be sure, she still yearns to see Laura
secured in a secure, if meaningless, mar-
riage; still hopes that someday a gentle-
man caller will come bounding across
the threshold with the winsome bouquet.
But now the gentleman caller need not
be the scion of an aristocratic Southern
family, nor need he be the handsomest
blade in town. Amanda will even accept
—as in fact she does—the sparse comfort of one of Tom's fellow workers from the shoe warehouse, a personable, but not overly-dashing chap by the name of Jim O'Connor.

As things turn out, O'Connor is none other than the old idol of high school days whom Laura worshiped from afar when she herself was a freshman. She, because of her lameness perhaps, had remained reticent and reserved in the backwash of high school social life; whereas O'Connor, a star basketball player, a leading member of the debating society, and senior class president, had been in the center of the limelighted whirl. In the years since graduation, however, the young man of promise had somehow failed to fulfill the promise of those earlier years. He is now only a clerk in a shoe warehouse. But he has ambition. And it is this ambition which, one might suppose, will eventually compensate for the lean, post-high school years. Jim hopes to enroll in night school where he will take up radio engineering and public speaking. He will someday make a stunning success of his life, thus fulfilling the promise of those earlier years. This of course is precisely what Amanda is looking for in a young man who may well turn out to be a suitor for Laura's hand.

Having learned about O'Connor's presence in the warehouse, Amanda prevailed upon Tom to bring him home to dinner. Tom is reluctant at first. But Amanda, after some preliminary sparring between the two, finally wins out. Subsequently, she goes through all of the elaborate preparations of sprucing up the run-down apartment for the anticipated visit. However, the upshot of the matter is fiasco. We learn that Jim O'Connor is already engaged, and Laura—whose deeply frozen fear has even begun to show signs of thawing under the warmth of O'Connor's essentially sympathetic nature—now suffers her second and final trauma, and returns to the world of her glass animals.

This is the final touch of pathos that drives Tom Wingfield out of the St. Louis tenement he shares so uncomfortably with mother and sister, out into the world of vagabondage, toward the romance of the sea and the ships, to the presumably freer life of the seafarer. This time he can no longer satisfy himself with the synthetic escape he has, until now, found in the darkened movie houses. This time the romance and the escape must have greater substance. And at first glance it would seem that Tom's escape to sea is essentially a romantic escape, an escape whose vistas point away from Amanda's past and his own present toward a brighter future. So it would appear. Yet, even after he makes the break, he is still tied, through guilt, to his own immediate past which, through the reawakened image of the lost Laura, he has abandoned:

I pass the lighted windows of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass... like bits of shattered rainbow. Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes. ... Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger—anything that can blow your candles out!

Tom Wingfield, then, has never really succeeded in running away from the past. And perhaps he never really meant to. Ostensibly, he was fired from the shoe warehouse for writing poetry on the lid of a shoe box. But this in itself doesn't make of Tom Wingfield a poet. Neither does his running off to sea. For his poetry writing and his seafaring are not so much the gestures of a young man searching for the ultima Thule of romance, as they are the expression of a man's desperation to escape the drab
present and a past that prevents that present from fulfilling itself in a future. Actually, the act of writing that poem on the lid of a shoe box (a shoe box!) may well have been Tom Wingfield’s way, at perhaps the deepest level of the subconscious, of expressing an overwhelming need—the need, perhaps, to bring down on his head the wrath of the warehouse foreman, a gesture not so much of the poet as of the rebel. And of the rebel, let it be said, who somehow cannot make the best of both worlds, but must expiate his “sin” by preferring one world to the other, getting himself fired for it. The act is thus both an act of destruction and of expiation. It is also a rebellion against the deadening romanticism of his mother, of her past, and of all that her past represents—the clamping, limiting strictures on the present. The poetry is only the means, the excuse, the trigger mechanism, which will catapult Tom along the trajectory of his life into the future. For though Tom Wingfield is, on the surface—and only on the surface—poetic, he is not, and probably never will be, a poet! He is entirely too sober, too grimly desperate a man for that. His act of escape is not the impulsive act of the poet, but of the practical man who has, perhaps slowly and by painful degrees, come to realize that the only way out, the only means to survival itself as an individual, lies precisely in such an escape. And while the impulse to escape seems to stem from his much-vaunted romanticism, he is actually far less romantic than his mother Amanda. Even the preparations for his departure—enquiries down at the seamen’s union hall, his surreptitious uses of the household funds to buy his union card—all smack of the careful, deliberate plan rather than of the quick impulsive act. Although Tom possesses all of the accoutrements of the romantic, the writer of poetry (“I was fired for writing a poem on the lid of a shoe box.”), he has, it must be admitted, all of the inner drives and compulsions of the man of the world! If he were the poet, as he himself half seems to believe, he would certainly be sensitive enough—up to a point—to sympathize with, if not actively encourage, his mother’s delusions. But, being the more practical of the two, he not only cannot sympathize with Amanda, he is even incapable of accepting her delusions within the context of her own dilemma. Thus, incapable either of empathy or sympathy, Tom Wingfield, the down-to-earth poet, will have no part of Amanda’s delusions at all.

Laura, unlike her brother and her mother, can face the present—but only to the extent that she recognizes the truth about herself in that present. This would appear to hold a paradox. Yet, in this paradox, as at the heart of all paradox, there lies a kernel of truth. For Laura sees her lameness as a true debility, even if her mother prefers not to:

*Amanda.* Girls that aren’t cut out for business careers usually wind up married to some nice man. . . . Sister, that’s what you’ll do.

*Laura.* But, mother—

*Amanda.* Yes?

*Laura.* I’m crippled!

*Amanda.* Nonsense! Laura, I’ve told you never, never to use that word. Why, you’re not crippled, you just have a little defect—hardly noticeable, even!

As far back as high school days, Laura’s infirmity has affected and thus determined her attitude toward the world. Her entire personality has been forced to turn in upon itself; driven into the mold of her desperation and, finally, resignation with each heavy-footed descent of her lame foot onto the floor of the high school auditorium. When Laura surrenders to the timeless world of her glass animals, it is not simply because she wishes to escape from the world of the present into a world of fantasy and delusion, but precisely because she can look the present fully in the face—if only
for a moment—and know it for what it is: an ugly misshapen lameness, which all of Amanda's euphemisms can never eradicate. Only Jim O'Connor is big enough to look beyond the lameness—possibly, an afterthought now occurs, because he is the one person who sees Laura without any emotional involvement. But it is too much to expect the world—that world of tinsel so effectively symbolized by the Paradise Ballroom across the alley—to do so. Even in Jim O'Connor's case, the readiness to see Laura as a personality rather than the owner of a misshapen foot proves to be a feint, a cruel hoax on Laura's reawakened hopes, and she must again flee to her father's old phonograph records and her little glass animals. The moment that Laura comes face to face with the present—the uncertainty, the insecurity of all life in that present—she turns and runs away. For it has been her experience to see the present not as the stairway leading to those stars of higher hope, but as a broken, cluttered basement of all that is ugly, misshapen, and hopeless. It is the present, with its shattered hope, that lies smashed, no longer a cohesive unit, around her. Curiously, the glass animals, instead of being vague, distant, faerie-like, are the only artifacts in the play that hold any degree of reality for Laura. If they are fragile, they are also strong. And if they are glass, they have a certain quality of transparency which permits their owner the full view of a world that is not bounded by time and lameness. For even in their fragility, they are at least tangible, and therefore, for Laura, reliable. They can be seen, touched, felt, even fondled. And they have more substance than mere memory. They will be there tomorrow, as they were yesterday, as they are today; broken or not, they will always be there.

Thus in this play of time, time has shown us three faces, each of these turned toward the tropism of its own fragmented vision. For Amanda it is a past which sustains the shimmering image of her nostalgia, a past by which the present and possibly the future may be illuminated. For Tom it is a future which offers escape from the shadows of a darkened present, made dark by the dark light of Amanda's past. For Laura, however, it is neither past, present, nor future which holds the semblance of reality; nor does the past or future offer even the simulacrum of a make-believe reality. For time has ceased to have any meaning whatever for Laura; her whole existence turns on a fulcrum of no-time.

As we have noted, between Tom and Amanda, Amanda is the more genuine romantic, manifesting all of the syndromes of that not-so-rare disease. And while Tom's escape is not so much an escape into a world of romance as a plunge into a world of harsher reality, Amanda's escape is drawn farther back into that world where life has never really ceased to be an eternal round of parties and gentlemen callers.

Ostensibly, one should lavish pity on such hapless creatures as Tom and Laura, and perhaps even experience a certain smug satisfaction from Amanda's plight; it seems to be a kind of poetic justice wreaked upon her for having ruined her children's lives. We should perhaps pity the hapless victims of a selfish mother who wanted, above all else, to bury her children in the crypt of her own past. Yet, when all has been said on behalf of the three, it is Amanda that finally invites the truest and deepest pity. For while each of her children has somehow managed to handle his own dilemma in his own way, Amanda can never fully resolve hers. She is ever conscious of the disparity which lies between a present that is meaningless to her and a past that not only gave meaning to what her life once was, but to what it might have been. If these periodic excursions back into the past give
her some sort of dubious solace in the present, it is at best a solace which points up the meaninglessness of that present.

Thus, none of the characters in *Glass Menagerie* can ever truly face the flow of time for any sustained span; they are forever condemned to search for something that is neither of the past, present, or future, but may perhaps be found, someday, within the unfinished meaning of their own fragmented lives.

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**Hart Crane’s Doubtful Vision**

**A Note on the “Intention” of *The Bridge***

**GORDON K. GRIGSBY**

Hart Crane has suffered much from his own candor. In a sense, we know too much about him or, more accurately, we do not use our knowledge wisely. We know a great deal about his personal life—his homosexuality, his drunkenness, his “sundered parentage,” his high-strung temperament; and we know at least as much about his development as an artist—his meager academic education, the fashionable influences to which he responded, his writing habits, the intellectual conflicts between skepticism, despair, and affirmation with which he struggled while creating *The Bridge*. One would think that all this information would be an aid to criticism, would help us to a clearer view of the man and his work. On the whole, it has not. It has been arranged for the convenience of critics into a portrait of the demonic naif. And this distorted portrait has then been used to show that a person like Crane was simply incapable of writing a successful long poem. One of the most common explanations for the “failure” of *The Bridge* is that Crane lost faith in his myth, knew at the end that the whole project was futile, had to admit that his naive affirmation could not withstand “the fashionable pessimism of the hour.”

For thirty years it has been customary to accuse *The Bridge* of two contradictory faults. The fact that this contradiction has gone unnoticed reveals more about the personal tastes and conservative loyalties of the critics than about the poem. *The Bridge* is accused of being (1) oversimple in its vision and (2) not simple enough, that is, ambiguous, dual, and confused—the term is always “confused,” never “complex.” Mistakenly assuming that Crane’s intention was oversimple—a total, indiscriminate affirmation—critics have then condemned it for its complex duality, its vacillation, its merely partial affirmation, its tension between “an over-simplified vision and a tortured awareness of realistic circumstance.”

In one breath Crane is charged with a mindless optimism or idealism; in the next he is charged with including ugly realities and negations that conflict with this idealism and “confuse” the poem.

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Mr. Grigsby, assistant professor at Ohio State University and last year Fulbright lecturer in Iran, has published other articles on Pound and Williams as well as Crane.

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