Williams’s THE GLASS MENAGERIE

Tennessee Williams drastically revised many of his plays after their premiers and even after their publication, including such well-known works as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Orpheus Descending*. Williams’s first great success, *The Glass Menagerie*, also came under the knife, and with fascinating results.

Three distinct versions of *The Glass Menagerie* exist: the Reading Edition, the Acting Edition, and the London Edition. The Reading Edition was published by Random House in 1945 and represents the earliest published version of the play. Williams virtually overhauled this script for the 1948 publication of the Acting Edition by Dramatists Play Service. With approximately 1,100 differences between the Reading and Acting Editions, these two versions are the most disparate. The play evolved yet again, although not as drastically, for the 1948 London premiere, which version was published later that year by John Lehmann. Because the London Edition is very similar to the Acting Edition—with the exception of scenes 4 and 5—most comparative studies take only the first two versions into account.

Any meaningful encounter with the play requires that one eventually grapple with the differences between the versions. From an academic standpoint, one must consider the critical ramifications of favoring one version over the other two. For those involved in producing the play, the practical question arises of which version to work from or how best to forge a combination of the three without violating the play’s integrity. Whatever the approach, a comparison of the three versions reveals important trends and ideas that Williams pursued over the course of the play’s development.

When comparing the various texts, one immediately sees major revisions in the play’s design as specified by the stage directions. In the Reading Edition, the stage directions indicate the use of screen projections at specific points to amplify or otherwise support the dramatic moment. When Laura tells her mother for the first time about the way Jim used to call her “Blue Roses,” for example, the stage directions call for the image of blue roses to be projected onto the screen as a kind of visual echo. Williams also suggests the use of screen legends, which often repeat lines spoken by the characters as the text inserted in a silent film does. Said the playwright about his own technique, “The legend or image upon the screen will strengthen the effect of what is merely allusion [sic] in the writing and allow the primary point to be made more simply and lightly than if the entire responsibility were on the spoken lines” (Reading Edition xx).

These stage directions, however, have been the target for the most common criticisms of the Reading Edition. The actor’s task is to deliver a line so that its meaning is clear; to repeat the line visually is therefore redundant and
potentially distracting. Lester A. Beaurline notes, “The real weakness of the
device lies in the author’s anxiousness and small confidence in his audience.
[. . .] An air of unreality is one thing but pretentious pointing out of meaning
is another” (29). The artists involved in the earliest productions of The Glass
Menagerie agreed, and the projections disappear entirely from subsequent
versions of the text, leaving the dialogue without its visual reinforcement. The
change indicates a move away from an expressionistic design, toward what
Williams called the “utmost simplicity in the physical production” (Reading
Edition xx)—and in particular toward a reliance on the realistic heart of his
characters to present the play effectively.

The dialogue reflects the same push to emphasize character realism over an
expressionistic design. Amanda’s speeches contain the most apparent revisions,
with entire sections added to the text in the two later versions. For example,
twice during the play, Amanda telephones one of her acquaintances in an attempt
to raise money by selling magazine subscriptions. During the second call, a
scene change in the Reading Edition cuts Amanda’s sales pitch short. In the two
later versions, however, Williams continues the conversation; Amanda realizes
that she has awakened her customer by calling too early, but as a gesture of kind-
ness and pity, the woman takes the subscription anyway. Amanda’s blunder
reveals, among other things, an ignorance brought on by her intense enthusi-
asm—an aspect of character made stronger by the additions to her speech.

Not all of the dialogue revisions are so noticeable. In many cases, Williams
simply reversed the order of words or added something as small as a “No,
Mother” before a line. Yet even the smallest changes follow a pattern within
each edition. Amanda’s lines indicate a more aggressive manner of manipula-
tion overall in the Acting and London Editions as opposed to the Reading Edi-
tion. For example, when Tom asks what the Fitzhugh boy left his widow,
talk as though all of my old admirers had turned up their toes to the daisies!”
(9). But in the two later versions, she says, “He never married! What’s the
matter with you—you talk as though all my old admirers had turned up their
toes to the daisies!” (Acting Edition 14, London Edition 27). Amanda is
defensive in all three versions, but she responds with a counterattack in the lat-
ter two. The exchange serves as a perfect example of how Williams draws
more attention to Amanda’s aggression—something present in all three of the
play’s incarnations but far more pronounced after the revisions.

The other characters’ lines also differ between the versions, particularly in
their dialogue with Amanda. In the later two versions, Tom and Laura address
Amanda with the word “Mother” more frequently than in the Reading Edi-
tion—ten more times apiece for both Tom and Laura. Although each occur-
rence might seem insignificant when viewed separately, the greater frequency
implies a closer attention to the formal and respectful response she provokes

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in her children, no matter how angry, calm, or frightened they are. Even Jim O’Connor’s exchanges with Amanda become more outwardly polite in subsequent versions of the script. When the lights go out in the apartment, their exchange in the later versions lasts longer as Jim responds to her chatter about the fuse with a “Yes, ma’am” or an “I can, ma’am”; in the Reading Edition he says nothing. All of these responses coincide with the progressive strengthening of Amanda’s aggression and dominance in later editions.

The final emphasis on truth in character over experimental design dominates Williams’s reworking of the text. Although many more conclusions are available from this process, I have chosen to highlight the most drastic and those that signify most strongly the pattern of development that the playwright followed from version to version—particularly from the Reading to the Acting Editions. The struggle to produce realistic characters while carefully exploring a nonrealistic method of theatrical expression dominates the playwright’s process and should inform any scholar or artist when approaching this classic text.

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NOTE

1. The Glass Menagerie also exists as two short stories, “Portrait of a Girl in Glass” and “The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin.” For brevity’s sake, this study focuses on the dramatic versions and not the stories.

WORKS CITED


Capote’s BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY’S

The predominant heterosexuality of Holly Golightly’s lifestyle has eclipsed the queer thematics of Truman Capote’s Breakfast at Tiffany’s, and thus the subtle homosexual presence in the novella has gone unnoticed by many scholars. To overlook the queer aspects of Holly Golightly’s world is to miss key moments of the text that provide a better understanding of the novella’s sexual dynamics.