

The Function of Light in *The Glass Menagerie*

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### The Function of Light in *The Glass Menagerie*

Tennessee Williams explores the sensitivity to light in *The Glass Menagerie* through explicit statements in the production notes, screen devices, and references to descriptions of characters, especially Laura. The lighting cues as explained by Williams (1944/2011) enhance character and mood, and in practically every scene, Laura dominates the stage even though she has fewer lines.

Williams (1944/2011) develops Laura's character the most through his focus on light. Even though Amanda, Laura's mother, and Tom, Laura's brother, have the most lines, Williams' production notes make it clear in describing Laura that she is the major character: "The light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas" (p. 1289).

One of Williams' most interesting uses of light is the screen device, or screen image, as explained in his production notes:

This device was the use of a screen on which were projected magic-lantern slides bearing images or titles . . . These images and legends, projected from behind, were cast on a section of wall between the front-room and dining-room areas, which should be indistinguishable from the rest when not in use . . . . The purpose of [the screen device] . . . is to give accent to certain values in each scene. (p.1289)

The playwright inserts 42 images into the text using the screen device. Twenty directly relate to Laura, giving her the most emphasis. Thirteen reference Amanda, three reference Tom, and two reference Jim, the Gentleman Caller. Three slides are miscellaneous. These screen devices make it clear that most of the attention is focused on Laura.

Laura has only seven lines in Scene One, so Amanda seems to dominate the scene. However, Williams (1944/2011) writes that "*a shaft of very clear light is thrown on [Laura's]*

*face against the faded tapestry of the curtains*” (p. 1251). This shaft of light asserts Laura’s centrality. The light is not placed on Amanda because to do so would draw attention away from the true focus of the scene.

No direct light cues are provided in relation to Laura in Scene Two, but five screen images call attention to her. As in Scene One, Amanda is the apparent center because of her number of lines. Near the end of Scene Two, Amanda conjures her plot to find her daughter a husband because Laura “won’t have a business career – we’ve given that up because it gave us nervous indigestion” (Williams, 1944/2011, p. 1253). However, Williams focuses the audience on Laura’s love life, or lack thereof, at the beginning of the scene when Williams indicates in the production notes, “*On the dark stage the screen is lighted with the image of blue roses*” (p. 1251). This screen image alludes to Jim, the Gentleman Caller, who had given Laura the nickname Blue Roses when the two were high school classmates.

In Scene Three, the famous fight scene between Tom and Amanda, Tom claims that he goes to the movies because they offer him a sense of escape from his life. Just before the argument ensues, Williams (1944/2011) offers the following stage direction for Laura: “*In front of [Tom and Amanda] stands Laura with clenched hands and panicky expression. A clear pool of light is on her figure throughout this scene*” (p. 1255). In his production notes, Williams further clarifies that Laura is the center of attention in this scene even though she has only two short lines:

In keeping with the atmosphere of memory, the stage is dim. Shafts of light are focused on selected areas or actors, sometimes in contradistinction to what is the apparent center. For instance, in the quarrel scene between Tom and Amanda, in which Laura has no active part, the clearest pool of light is on her figure. (p. 1289)

Williams says more through implication by placing the light away from the apparent center of attention while using it to remind the audience that Laura is the focus of the play. Because the light is meant to maintain “the atmosphere of memory,” the audience understands why Tom directs light at Laura: She dominates his tortured past. According to Holditch (1997), “[Tom] is unable to escape the memory of his sister” (para. 5).

In Scene Six, Williams (1944/2011) connects Laura’s figure with light and glass, offering the following further character description of the young woman as she waits for her first gentleman caller: “*A fragile, unearthly presence has come out in Laura; she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting*” (p. 1268). Although not a literal lighting cue, Williams suggests light once again in relation to Laura by showing how her fragile nature is delicate as glass pierced by light. Furthermore, Laura’s beauty is seen only when the light hits her, like the glass animals she so tenderly cares for.

Tom’s final monologue ends Scene Seven and the play. Myriad references to light create a deeply emotional ending, and the playwright gives the play to Laura by focusing most of the light on or around her character. Because the light in the play consistently references Laura, the implication is clear: Light—not words—speaks for Laura. Even though she has far fewer lines than other characters, through light, Laura is the central figure of the play.

## References

- Holditch, W. K. (1997). The glass menagerie. *Identities & Issues In Literature*, 1. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.apollolibrary.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lkh&AN=103331INI14240209303158&site=lrc-plus>
- Williams, T. (2011). *The glass menagerie*. In S. Barnet, W. Cain, & W. Burto (Eds.), *Literature for composition* (9<sup>th</sup> ed., pp. 1247-1290). Boston, MA: Longman/Pearson. (Original work published 1945)