

# Tennessee Williams's *Moviegoers*, Or the Neglected Gay Aspects of *The Glass Menagerie*

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In scene 6 of *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) Amanda, the domineering mother, while talking to Laura, cries out like this, "Why can't you and your brother be *normal* people? (279, emphasis added). Her hint is clear as regards Laura, the "unmarried sister, who's crippled and has no job" (312). But the question arises: what is "abnormal" about Tom Wingfield, the poet-narrator of the play, who is seemingly an ordinary young man however unhappy he is with his job at the warehouse or however trapped he feels in his female-dominated nuclear family.

At first sight Amanda's biggest problem with Tom is the fact that he too often goes out to the cinema, and his moviegoing serves as a constant topic of argument throughout the play. The importance of this subtle but recurrent motif is overshadowed by Laura's tragedy and has not been given too much critical attention. In the following I would like to examine Tom Wingfield's real, inner dilemma, what his going to the movie actually means and hides, and to analyze the deeper sense that the movie as a metaphor symbolizes in Williams's oeuvre in general.

Tom's frequent visits to the cinema in themselves can hardly be regarded as sinful or abnormal for a young man of his age. His desire to escape from the routine-like, everyday reality to "the narcotic of the cinema" (Nelson 102) is not at all uncommon either; an early literary example of this kind of addiction (in that case to the concert hall) can be observed in Willa Cather's short story, "Paul's Case" (1905), where the gap between reality and illusion cannot be bridged by the young protagonist, and results in his suicide.

If Tom's moviegoing in *The Glass Menagerie* was a common way for a young man to escape from his family or social responsibilities it would not be so overemphasized and would not be typical of Williams whose *Battle Of Angels* was declared "trash" by the Boston Police Commissioner and the Assistant Censor because "Too many lines [had] double meanings" (qtd. in Ford 554). In fact it is precisely in this opportunity for double meanings and readings, the art of encoding the unspeakable and unutterable, that Williams was at his best, and *The Glass Menagerie* is probably the earliest Williamsian example of the phenomenon that something is almost palpably present on the stage even without the slightest mention of it (later this tendency is continued, for example, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Period of Adjustment*).

Williams's trick with double meanings can well be extended to the theme of *The Glass Menagerie*. Foster Hirsch comments on the play as follows, "The qualities of tenderness and lyricism that dominate *The Glass Menagerie* are perennial Williams trademarks, but they are never again to be present without twisted sex and

violence..." (35). Agreeing with much of this statement I would argue only with the implicit assertion that *this* play does not deal with "twisted sex" at all, because if we follow Tom Wingfield to the movies, the end of his journey may well result in something that the play only seemingly does not speak about.

In fact, due to Williams's cunning subtextual strategy, his moviegoing is burdened with suspicion from the very beginning through Amanda's strong disbelief: "I don't believe that you go every night to the movies. Nobody goes to the movies night after night. Nobody in their right minds goes to the movies as often as you pretend to. People don't go to the movies at nearly midnight, and movies don't let out at two a. m." (251). Whenever Tom mentions that he is going to the movies, Amanda reacts like this, "I won't believe that lie!" (252), "Not to the movies, every night to the movies!... I don't believe you always go to the movies!" (272). Amanda is seriously worried about Tom's behaviour and tries to find the explanation to his nightly wanderings, "I think you've been doing things that you're ashamed of. That's why you act like this.... Oh, I can picture the way you're doing down there. Moping, doping..." (251), "you do act strangely" (259). Tom is now really beginning to act furiously when he says, "I'm going to the opium dens! Yes, opium dens, dens of vice and criminals' hang-outs, Mother.... I'm leading a double-life, a simple, honest warehouse worker by day, by night a dynamic *czar* of the *underworld*... *El Diablo!* Oh, I could tell you things to make you sleepless! (252, emphasis original).

Although much of Tom's soliloquy is clearly an overstatement, certain elements are not alien to his nature. At the beginning of the play he introduces himself with the words, "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve," but adds that, contrary to a stage magician who gives "illusion that has the appearance of truth," he gives "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion" (234). In this case, although he is playfully willing to admit that where he regularly goes is probably not the movies, he intends to leave his mother—and possibly the audience—with the illusion that he engages only in drinking or taking dope. Actually he tends to be rather secretive about his private life in a way that seems to be a strong character trait. His "otherness" is emphasized by his "secret practice of retiring to a cabinet of the washroom to work on poems" (273), his colleagues smile at him "as people smile at an oddly fashioned dog who trots across their path at some distance" (273-74), and, as has been cited, even his mother wishes he too were "normal."

In scene 4, during a somewhat deeper conversation between mother and son about the same topic, Tom attributes his secretive behaviour to the general unspeakability of certain things, "You say there's so much in your heart that you can't describe to me. That's true of me, too. There is so much in my heart that I can't describe to *you!*" (259, emphasis original). The key to this sentence is held back throughout the play. However, it seems to be given in a poem, "Photograph and Pearls," published in Williams's *In the Winter of Cities*. The poem portrays the physical and spiritual desire ("unmannerly hunger") of a young man for his friend who serves in the Navy (*Winter* 42). He goes to visit his friend's mother so as to get information about him, and muses upon his photograph on the mother's mantel, thinking of "how the light touches him" (42), and recalling the "almost too painfully clearly remembered narrow blond head" (43). He asks the mother to read his latest letter hoping that "if possibly somewhere, craftily concealed between / the lines / of the seven long pages / may not be half a sentence of something that moth-

ers / aren't told" (43). Beside the unambiguous hints at physical lust between the two young men, the poem concludes with the same motif that seems to be Tom Wingfield's dilemma: the nature of their attachment must be "craftily concealed," the truth must be hidden.

There is a moment in scene 4, however, when it becomes hardly believable that the mother-son conversation is just about the movies:

AMANDA. But, why—*why*, Tom—are you always so *restless*?  
Where do you go to, nights?

TOM. I—go to the movies.

AMANDA. Why do you go to the movies so much, Tom?

TOM. I go to the movies because—I like adventure....

AMANDA. But, Tom, you go to the movies *entirely* too *much*!

TOM. I like a lot of adventure.

...

TOM. Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none  
of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse!

AMANDA. Man is by instinct! Don't quote instinct to me! Instinct  
is something that people have got away from! It belongs  
to animals! Christian adults don't want it!

TOM. What do Christian adults want, then, Mother?

AMANDA. Superior things! Things of the mind and the spirit! Only  
animals have to satisfy instincts! Surely your aims are  
somewhat higher than theirs! Than monkeys—pigs—

TOM. I reckon they're not. (259-60, emphasis original)

With these allusions to love, satisfied instincts and their clash with Christian ideals or morals, the whole movie-talk loses its basis of innocence: this love of adventure no longer seems to be restricted solely to watching films at the cinema. Following the logic of this dialogue we easily return to the starting point of Amanda's "hermeneutical circle": "I think you've been doing things that you're ashamed of" (251). The mention of Tom's "restless," instinctual nature, especially in the context of nightly wanderings and moral questions, recalls the atmosphere of Williams's poems and short fiction where he openly speaks about his homosexual way of life and his nightly cruising in search of carnal love. In his poem, "The Siege," he calls himself a "reckless voyager" who "builds a tottering pillar of his blood," and while walking up the streets led by his instinct he "must that night go in search of one / unknown..." then, before dawn, "follows back the street companioned," while his "veins in crimson cabins keep / the wild and witless passengers of love" (*Winter* 20). The same experience is described in the short story "One Arm," but many other poems or short stories could be cited. In *The Glass Mangerie* we do not get a straight answer to the question of whether Tom Wingfield cruises at night or not, but at the end of the play the motif of the above-mentioned poem suddenly appears underlining the suspicion that yes, he does. As an epilogue, Tom tells the audience what happened to him after Laura's incident with the gentlemen caller:

I traveled around a great deal.... I would have stopped, but was pursued  
by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether

by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass. Perhaps I am walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions.... (313)

This monologue shows us the adult narrator's clearly established gay identity: he is led to the streets by his instincts but he consciously chooses this promiscuous way of life in search for companions.

Another interpretation of Tom's going out may be that he really goes to the movies, but has the same experiences there as Williams's cruising heroes have in the street. Again, we receive no direct answer to this assumption in *The Glass Menagerie*, but in Williams's world the movie is a special place for the secret pleasures of homosexuals. There are too many connections between two short stories and this "memory play" for this to be neglected. "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio" was written in 1941, two years before *The Glass Menagerie* (in 1943), but published only in 1954. As it was written prior to the play, it seems to be possible that Williams had it in mind while working out Tom's character in detail. In the short story Pablo Gonzales, a "very strange" man ("Mysteries" 103) regularly goes to a third-rate cinema called the Joy Rio which "specialized in the showing of cowboy pictures and other films of the sort that have a special appeal to children and male adolescents" (105). Even the name of the Joy Rio was "peculiar enough," and in the "unlighted," "peculiarly dusky" galleries (105) "furtive practices of a lifetime" (104) could be pursued. As the narrator informs us, "there was something a bit special and obscure about Mr. Gonzales' habitual attendance at the Joy Rio," an activity inherited from his late "protector," the old homosexual, Mr. Kroger (106). In "the forbidden region of the upper galleries" (111) "every device and fashion of carnality had run riot in a gloom so thick that a chance partner could only be discovered by touch" (107). There was "an almost sightless existence where the other senses, the senses of smell and touch and hearing, had to develop a preternatural keenness in order to spare one from making awkward mistakes... a mistake of gender" (107). This sultry and erotic place was "his earthly heaven" (112), the site of his "lifelong pursuit of pleasure" (109), and the basic philosophy of the premises was also inherited from his gay "protector": "Sometimes you will find it and other times you won't find it and the times you don't find it are the times when you have got to be careful" (109).

In another short story, "Hard Candy" (written in 1953, published in 1954) the homosexual protagonist, Mr. Krupper, also habitually goes to the Joy Rio where he seeks the company of nameless, "shadowy youths" ("Hard Candy" 360) whose love he buys for money and a fistful of hard candies kept in a paper bag in his pocket. Mr. Krupper's "otherness" is also carefully delineated, the suspicion is gradually aroused, as he has a "certain air... of being engaged in something far more momentous than the ordinary meanderings of an old man retired from business and without close family ties" (356). Williams even cautions the reader—and critic—to be alert so as not to miss his real nature, "To notice something you would have to be looking for something" until "meeting your observation that would strike you as a notable difference" (356). While approaching the Joy Rio Mr. Krupper "undergoes a certain alteration" (357), he does not want "to betray some outward signals" (357-58) but he has "an air of alertness" making "various little gestures, fishing in his pocket for something," he has "that mysterious attitude of expectancy," "painful,

wheezing concentration" till he reaches his destination, "the place where the mysteries of his nature are to be made unpleasantly manifest to us" (358). Before entering the cinema, "the place that attracts him," "we notice him making various little preparations and adjustments" (358). In order to disguise himself he puts on "a pair of dark-lensed glasses, lenses so dark that the eyes are not visible behind them" (358). His going up to the gloomy galleries is similar to an inverse upward descent to Dante's *Inferno* and while he furtively "begins to explore the physical mysteries of the place" (359) on the screen—with an ironic Freudian allusion—"an epic of the western ranges, full of loud voices and gunplay" (360).

Thus the symbolic setting of the movie is of special, metaphorical importance to Williams, it is first and foremost the site of homosexual love, the meeting place of gay subculture. Tom Wingfield's emphasized and frequent going to the movies does not seem to be accidental, just like his writing poetry, it reflects the adolescent quest for self-identity, in this case, gay identity. Since the play clearly has a strong autobiographical quality, the very model for Tom's inner quest for identity must have been the writer himself.

During his search there is a moment when he tires of his way of life, "I am tired of the *movies*.... People go to the movies instead of *moving*.... I am tired of the *movies* and I am *about* to *move*!... I'm starting to boil inside. I know I seem dreamy, but inside—well, I'm boiling!" (282-83). This is the time of awakening and revolt: he decides to quit his job, leave his family and openly live according to his own standards. Escaping from the equally closeted world of the warehouse, his home and the movies, he symbolically "comes out" so as to establish his own identity. His dream of becoming a sailor recalls the homoerotic icon of the young and beautiful sailor so common in Williams's poetry and short fiction, while his leaning over the rail while the image of a sailing vessel is projected on a screen in scene 6 "is a shadowy portrait in Tom Wingfield of Hart Crane himself, at a most critical moment of his life" (Debuscher 121) that is his suicide. The association with Hart Crane, another homosexual, is not at all accidental, since Williams had always been obsessed not only with Crane's poetry but also with his way of life and destiny.

The fact that Tom has found some kind of ideological support for his journey is, again, hidden in the play between the lines, but the subtle motif is definitely there. While describing the latest stage show to Laura, Tom refers to a certain Malvolio the Magician, "a very generous fellow" who gives souvenirs, and while "[*He pulls from his back pocket a shimmering rainbow-colored scarf*]" (255) he says the following:

He gave me this. This is his magic scarf. You can have it Laura. You wave it over a canary cage and you get a bowl of gold-fish. You wave it over a gold-fish bowl and they fly away the canaries.... But the wonder-fullest trick of all was the coffin trick. We nailed him into a coffin and he got out of the coffin without removing one nail.... There is a trick that would come in handy for me—get me out of this 2 by 4 situation! (255)

It is clear all through the play that Tom regards his present way of life as a nailed-up coffin; however, the appearance of the rainbow-coloured scarf in the context of escape and liberation from this coffin is a brave and clear hint at his real identity

more than a quarter of a century before the gay liberation movement is given momentum by the Stonewall Riot in 1969. Just as the pink triangle was an emblem of homosexual identity during the Nazi holocaust and later it became “a political colour for the gay movement” (Lilly 77), the rainbow also has strong gay associations, in fact it has become an agreed signifier of diversity and gayness (see “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Icons” 1). No wonder if it subtly reappears again and again in the play. In the Paradise Dance Hall opposite the Wingfield house the large glass sphere “would turn slowly about and filter the dusk with delicate rainbow colors” (265), and while “in Spain there was Guernica,” and mist was gathering over Berchtesgaden, “here there was only hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars, and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows....” (265). The close connection of sultry eroticism with the rainbow finally reappears in the context of Tom’s nightly cruising and search for companions, “I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow” (313).

The Magician’s souvenir scarf deserves some further intertextual attention and a closer inspection of the Williams oeuvre. In his short story “The Knightly Quest” (written in 1965, published a year later) we get to know Gewinner Pearce, the homosexual protagonist, who takes up arms against a mysterious organization, the Project, which works on the invention of an annihilatory weapon. In Edward A. Sklepowich’s apt formulation,

Gewinner succeeds in destroying the Project in a victory for individual freedom and identity, and then sails off in a spaceship to establish a new, rare community of love and enchantment. His elegant white scarf which doubles as a trysting sheet on his nightly quests for sexual partners is to be enshrined in a special museum, an emblem of his search for love and beauty in this disenchanting world. (537)

The nightly quests of this “Gawain of homosexuality” become “knightly quests,” thus placing “Gewinner’s homosexual cruising in as positive a light as possible” (Sklepowich 537).

We have every reason to presume that Malvolio the Magician’s rainbow-coloured scarf is the early precursor of Gewinner Pearce’s white one, since both of them have liberating effects on the individuals who come into contact with them. This liberation of the self is always in connection with the degree of the individual’s own self-acceptance, inclusive of all his sins and follies. This state may be the result of a long and difficult process. Similar to many of his heroes, Williams had his own lifelong struggle with extreme shyness and depression as well as a lack of self-confidence. In *The Glass Menagerie* it is Laura who suffers more seriously from her outsidership and otherness, and yet it is Tom who manages to break out in his own way. The author’s final message is based on his own inner struggles and experiences while it is encoded in Jim O’Connor’s advice to Laura, “I wish you were my sister. I’d teach you to have some confidence in yourself. The different people are not like other people, but being different is nothing to be ashamed of” (304).

Nowadays, in the age of an almost militantly indoctrinated and cultic honour of “otherness,” Williams’s tender lament may seem to be somewhat naive and melo-

dramatic, yet the point is that he was ahead of his age in this field as well. In his plays, short fiction and poetry he persistently formulated the needs of the different outcasts and outlaws of society well before the gay liberation movement appeared on the scene. During the past decades he has equally become the target of both straight and gay critique. He has been attacked by straight critics for his frequent—and often violent—treatment of (homo)sexuality, while, on the contrary, gay critics have often blamed him for his inhibitions, remorse, and “homophobic discourse” in general (see Clum).

What seems to be certain, however, is that Williams was consciously able to weave the subject of homosexuality even into such an early play as *The Glass Menagerie* despite the fact that the main theme of the play has seemingly nothing to do with any kind of sexuality at all. Behind Amanda’s concerns and Laura’s tragedy he created Tom’s wrestling with his own instincts and self-identity. The social aspects of this struggle are clearly observable at first sight, but the sexual nature of Tom’s dilemma is carefully hidden between the lines. By the metaphorical use of such refined elements as the movie, the scarf or the rainbow, and the frequent intertextual references inside his own oeuvre Williams managed to encode a subtextual realm the weblike quality and real depth of which are probably yet to be explored in detail.

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