

## THE STAFF PHILOSOPHER

### *The Glass Menagerie*

*AMANDA: You are the only young man that I know who ignores the fact that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it.*

*TOM: I will think that over and see what I can make of it.*

*-The Glass Menagerie, by Tennessee Williams*

Tom Wingfield tells his mother that he will think it over and see what he can make of it. And, assuming Tom to be the young Tennessee Williams, it turns out that what he could make of it—what he could fashion out of it—was *The Glass Menagerie*. It has become one of the most memorable and moving plays in all of theater, in part because it illustrates one small correction to Amanda's admonition. The past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it...or if you do.

Philosophers aim to know truth at the most general level. Williams is a poet-philosopher who declares in his notes to this play that he aims for "a closer approach to truth," "a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are." Or, in words he puts in Tom's mouth, "I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion." What general truth does he seek? Williams explores how any of us is to go about living as a member of humankind when there are no user's manuals and no saviors, and when there are obstacles, traps, and, yes, opportunities at every turn. Philosophers, who labor to banish appearances in favor of reality, call it moral philosophy. Williams calls it "an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest in essence only through transformation."

His imagination suggests, for one thing, that most of us yearn for salvation from our bewilderment, that there is a "long-delayed but always expected something that we live for." We hope, like Malvalio the Magician, to escape from the coffin without removing a nail. The arrival of the gentleman caller represents deliverance for all three Wingfields—and for none more than Tom, who is desperate to escape to adventure, but tethered by obligations. Saviors, alas, are predictably disappointing. Jim O'Connor, in the tradition of his alliterative counterpart Jesus Christ, excited expectations only never to return.

This leaves Tom with two options. He can spend the next fifty-five years working at the shoe company in St. Louis, a loyal brother to his cherished Laura, watching the movies but never moving. Or he can *move*. As a part of her unwinnable campaign to close off option two, Amanda confiscates Tom's "awful book by the insane Mr. Lawrence." D. H. Lawrence and his scandalous endorsement of spontaneous, instinctual behavior resonated powerfully with the young Tennessee Williams. Amanda denounces Lawrence: "Instinct is something that people have got away from! It belongs to animals! Christian adults don't want it!" But Tom has

already set his sights on Lawrence's path, mapped out in antiquity by the Taoists in China and by Diogenes in Greece. Tom would cast aside convention. He would seek adventure. He would follow his instincts. He would *move*.

What makes this play so unbearably sad is that, despite the clarity and irrevocability of Tom's personal choice, Williams' poetic imagination recommends neither option to his audience. The truth that he so vividly expresses is that life often presents us with choices between goods, goods that cannot be weighed on the same scale and compared. We have duties. And we have dreams. They all may brim with goodness, even when they conflict with one another and with themselves. If we are to thrive as members of humankind, the hardest choices we make will eliminate one good in favor of another. But they are not eliminated in memory; for our memories are part of what makes us who we are. And so, they will bring everlasting regret. Dreamers who follow their dreams will be more faithful than they intended to be. Those candles do not go out.

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