

The Blue Rose of St. Louis: Laura, Romanticism, and *The Glass Menagerie*

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Laura Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie* hardly qualifies as a Romantic superwoman, a majestic ego eager to transcend the “mereness” of mundane human existence. In his narration of the drama at the same time as he plays a part in it, together with his final, self-centered leavetaking from the domestic misery-cum-ménage of his mother and sister, Tom owns that role. But Laura does represent the kind of person for whom the Romantics of the early nineteenth century felt increasing sympathy: the fragile, almost un-earthly ego brutalized by life in the industrialized, overpopulated, depersonalized cities of the Western world.

This physically as well as emotionally fragile woman of almost twenty-four escapes from her mid-twentieth century urban predicament in St. Louis, as someone of Romantic temperament would, through art and music—through the beauty of her glass menagerie and of the records she plays on her Victrola. Moreover, although she failed to graduate from high school, Laura fondly remembers a choral class she took with Gentleman Jim O’Connor and the three performances of *The Pirates of Penzance* in which he sang the baritone lead. And instead of attending Rubicam’s Business College, as her mother had planned, this high-school dropout went daily to “the art museum and the bird houses at the Zoo. . . . Lately I’ve been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel Box, that big glass house where they raise tropical flowers” (33).

Like a Romantic, then, Laura has a love for Nature in addition to Art—a nature that is artfully memorialized in her collection of little animals made of glass, and that is painfully absent from the area surrounding the Wingfield apartment, which Williams describes as “one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living units that flower as warty growths in over-

crowded urban centers of lower middle-class population" (21). Indeed, even Laura's name signifies her affinity for the natural together with the transcendent: "Laura" is somewhat ironically derived from the laurel shrub or tree, a wreath of which was conferred as a mark of honor in ancient times upon dramatic poets, military heroes, and athletic victors; and "Wingfield" brings to mind the flight of birds across a meadow and on up into the sky.

Jim's nickname for Laura, "Blue Roses," itself signifies her affinity for the natural—flowers—together with the transcendent—*blue* flowers, which do not occur naturally and thus come to symbolize her yearning for both ideal or mystical beauty and spiritual or romantic love. That beauty is also symbolized by Laura's favorite among the animals in her glass menagerie, the fabled, otherworldly unicorn, as well as by the place where Laura has spent many of her afternoons, the Jewel Box, and what she saw there: tropical flowers, which could be said to come from another world, and which can survive in St. Louis only by being placed in the artificial environment of a hothouse. And that love comes to her, however fleetingly, in the person of her namer, Jim O'Connor, who beatifies Laura by emphasizing what is special, even divine, about her and downplaying her physical disability. He opines:

A little physical defect is what you have. Hardly noticeable even! . . . You know what my strong advice to you is? Think of yourself as *superior* in some way! . . . Why, man alive, Laura! Just look about you a little. What do you see? A world full of common people! . . . Which of them has one-tenth of your good points! Or mine! Or anyone else's, as far as that goes—gosh! Everybody excels in some one thing. Some in many! (99)

In this speech Jim adopts a Romantic-subjective view of human creation, as opposed to a naturalistic, deterministic, objective one—ironically so, because he himself appears to be one of the common people with his freckle face, flat or scant nose, and mundane job in the same shoe factory where Tom works, and also because, in his aspiration to become a television engineer, he identifies himself with the utilitarian world of mathematics and machines. Nonetheless, Jim echoes here the same sentiment expressed by Amanda when she misunderstands Tom's own rather Romantic notion of instinct and declares that Christian adults want "Superior things! Things of the mind and the spirit! Only animals have to satisfy instincts!" (52). Just as

surely, Amanda wanted the same “superior things” when she was a debutante in the Mississippi Delta being courted by the sons of plantation owners, but this Daughter of the American Revolution settled instead for marriage to a “commoner” who worked for the telephone company.

Such a union between a woman of superior if by then effete heritage and a man of lower social status yet vital animalism, or let us say the psychosexual conquest of the former by the latter, is the subject of the book of Tom’s that his mother returns against his will to the library, D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Amanda dismisses its heady, equal mixture of Freud and Darwin as the filthy output of a diseased mind, but one can surmise that its obscenity is not the only aspect of this novel that troubles her. Her stated idea of a good read is naturally *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell’s mythic romance of the Old South, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, in which at one point the wellborn Scarlett O’Hara kills a vulgar Yankee intruder who would rape her.

The workaday Jim O’Connor, of course, has no intention of sexually subjugating or psychologically dominating Laura Wingfield. On the contrary, he idealizes rather than reifies her by placing her on a pedestal and equating this young woman with a blue rose. In so identifying Laura, Jim unwittingly recalls that widely recognized Romantic symbol of longing for the infinite, of unrequited yearning for absolute emotional and artistic fulfillment: the blue flower, drawn from the representative novel of early German Romanticism, Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802). This prose romance in two books is about the evolution of a young poet of great potential—in this case, a legendary medieval poet and master singer. It chronicles his apprenticeship to his art and search for the archetypal symbol, the blue flower, which had appeared to him in a dream.

For Heinrich, this flower comes to represent not only his artistic longing but also his loving fiancée, who has mysteriously died by the time the second book of the novel begins; this book, never finished by Novalis, was to have shown Heinrich von Ofterdingen’s transfiguration into a poet, even as the first book depicted his preparation for the artistic vocation. Similarly, *The Glass Menagerie* is about the evolution (if not the artistic maturation) of the poet Tom—a man in his early twenties who is not by accident given by Jim the nickname of “Shakespeare,” one of the heroes of the Romantic movement. *The Glass Menagerie* is also about Tom’s effort, through the art

of this play, both to find himself and to rediscover or memorialize his beloved sister, a blue flower in human form. The character of Tom, of course, is based in part on Tennessee Williams himself, whose given name was Thomas, even as Laura is modeled after Williams's only sister—Rose.

Laura herself happens to think that “blue is wrong for—roses” (106), but Jim insists that it is right for her because she’s pretty “in a very different way from anyone else. . . . The different people are not like other people, but . . . other people are not [so] wonderful. They’re one hundred times one thousand. You’re one times one! They walk all over the earth. You just stay here. They’re common as—weeds, but—you—well, you’re—*Blue Roses!*” (105). As her gentleman caller speaks, Laura is aptly bathed in the soft light coming from the new floor lamp her mother has especially purchased for the occasion—a lamp covered by a shade of rose-colored silk that helps to bring out her “fragile, unearthly prettiness” (85)—and she stands before the living-room sofa, suitably framed by its equally new pair of blue pillows. Moreover, Jim’s words are reinforced by the image of blue roses projected onto a screen or section of wall between the living- and dining-room areas of the Wingfield apartment.

Laura is indeed different, as Jim maintains, but her difference stems from her physical frailty in addition to her fragile prettiness—both of which are symbolized not only by the figurines of her glass menagerie, but also by the “delicate ivory chair” (29) with which Williams identifies Laura in Scene 2. By physical frailty, I am referring not only to the “childhood illness [that] has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, and held in a brace” (5), but also to her frequent faintness, nausea, and colds together with her bout with pleurosis as a teenager. Jim misheard “Blue Roses” when Laura told him, back in high school, that she had had pleurosis, an inflammation of the thin membrane covering the lungs that causes difficult, painful breathing.

His oxymoronic mishearing is similar to Williams’s own “incorrect” hearing of “glass menagerie” for “grass menagerie,” the enclosure where a collection of *live* wild animals is kept—a “mishearing” underlined by the dramatist’s assertion in the “Production Notes” that a single recurring tune [of the play in production] “is . . . like circus music . . . [which paradoxically should be] the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest” (9). Jim’s mishearing for its part suggests the oxymoronic exist-

ence of Laura Wingfield, a young woman of this world who simultaneously, like the lovely but easily broken creatures of her glass menagerie, seems physically unfit for or unadapted to an earthly life. She is too good for this world, the Romantics might say, and for this reason she could be said to be sadly beautiful or bluely roseate, like the soft-violet color of her kimono (29) in Scene 2—the first scene where the screen-image of blue roses appears.

Indeed, Laura's physical as well as emotional frailty betokens an early demise, if not a death-wish on her part—a death that would bestow upon her the ultimate union with Nature so prized by the Romantics and so elusive or unattainable in life. Death imagery may not pervade the surface of *The Glass Menagerie*, but it is at the heart of two poems quoted or invoked by Williams on the screen device included in the authoritative version of the play. The first is “The Ballad of Dead Ladies,” by the medieval French poet François Villon, from which the following, recurring line is projected onto the screen as Amanda and Laura appear onstage for the first time in Scene 1 (24), in addition to being projected later in the same scene when Amanda reminisces about the gentlemen callers she once entertained and would now like her daughter to receive (27). The line reads, “Où sont les neiges [d’antan]?”, or “Where are the snows of yesteryear?” Villon uses snow here as a symbol of worldly life's evanescence as well as its natural provenance-cum-dissolution, its inevitably lost innocence or tarnished purity”; and Williams ironically connects the humble Laura and her humbled Southern belle of a mother with the great but departed women of Villon's part historical, part legendary ballad, among them Joan of Arc.

Like much of Villon's work, this poem elevates death to the status of a supreme law that ineluctably ends all earthly life yet ushers in the eternity of the Christian afterlife—an afterlife unironically intimated, embraced, or augured in so modern a drama as *The Glass Menagerie* by the title of Scene 5, “Annunciation” (56); by the mid winter-to-late spring time frame of the action; and by verbal references in the play to God the Father, the Virgin Mary, Christian martyrs, resurrection, baptism, paradise, grace, souls, and the erstwhile Catholic practice of eating fish every Friday. There are aural references to resurrection as well in the early-morning church bells at the start of Scene 4 (44), and we find a musical reference to Christ's rising from the dead in the song “The World is Waiting for the Sunrise!” from Scene 5

(57). There is no direct reference to Easter in the play, but certainly such allusions to resurrection as Amanda's calls to her son to "Rise and Shine!" in Scene 4 (46), together with Tom's own blasphemous tale to Laura in the same scene (45) of Malvolio the Magician's escape from a nailed up coffin, suggest that *The Glass Menagerie* takes place around the time of this annual Christian commemoration of Jesus' return to life and ultimate ascension into heaven.

The second poem quoted by Williams is less obviously associated with death, since the playwright uses two lines from it—which, again, appear on the screen between the living and dining rooms of the Wingfield apartment—to anticipate, then announce, the arrival of the Gentleman Caller for dinner in Scene 6. The poem is Emily Dickinson's "The Accent of a Coming Foot," which I quote in full:

Elysium is as far as to
 The very nearest Room
 If in that Room a Friend await
 Felicity or Doom—

What fortitude the Soul contains,
 That it can so endure
 The accent of a coming Foot—
 The opening of a Door— (1180, Vol. 3, 1963)

Williams cites this poem's penultimate line first, then the final line as Tom brings Jim home to meet his sister (69, 74).

Now we know that all of Dickinson's transcendentalist-inspired work was composed within the characteristically American, late nineteenth-century range of relationships among God, man, and Nature. Furthermore, she was preoccupied in her poetry with the idea of death as the gateway to the next existence, as a special glory that has something in common with the conventional paradises offered in hymns and sermons of her day. Death for Dickinson means leisure, grandeur, recognition; it means being with the few, rare people whom it was not possible to know fully upon earth: she writes, for example, that "Death is potential to that Man / Who dies—and to his friend—" (420, Vol. 2, 1955). Much of life for her is anguish endured in an anteroom to death, which is but a prelude to immortality.

Although Dickinson speaks again and again of transitoriness and isolation in this world, she is not a mystic or a religious poet. Rather, from the whimsical, domestic, even rococo cast of her mind, she flirts with eternity, she is coquettish with God, forgiving Him for his “duplicity” and sometimes going so far as to be brash with Him. God is indeed a puzzling figure in her work, the Creator who perhaps does not know why He has created. He is burglar, banker, father; gentleman, duke, king: a being personified at times as Death, at other times as a sort of lover.

So too is Jim O'Connor of *The Glass Menagerie* a kind of gentleman, just as he was a champion high-school debater and baritone lead, if he will probably never be a captain of industry. For his part, Laura's absconding father (whose presence as a fifth character of sorts hovers over the play through his larger-than-life-size, beatifically smiling photograph above the mantel) can be called a burglar but not a banker, and a lover of other women if no longer of Amanda. Jim certainly never becomes *Laura's* lover, even though she secretly loves him, since he is engaged to be married to another woman; he does, however, adumbrate the death of Laura, her release from this life and return to nature, together with her rebirth in heaven.

In this sense, Jim is indeed, as Tom describes him in his narration, “the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for” (23). The anticipated arrival of someone or something that will provide a form of religious, political, or existential salvation and release to those who await him or it is a familiar subject of modern drama, from Maeterlinck's *The Intruder* to Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Although, ironically, the “expected something” usually does not arrive, the Gentleman Caller does make an appearance in *The Glass Menagerie*—one that is tellingly heralded by Tom's “annunciation” of his upcoming visit (59); by Jim's association with a traditional symbol of Christ, the fish (61); and by Laura's mentioning of his high-school yearbook picture right after she refers to the picture of Jesus' mother in the local art museum (33-34). Yet it is the Gentleman Caller's departure rather than his arrival that provides a final solution to Laura's problems, for in intensifying her desperation and isolation, Jim's permanent disappearance after Scene 7—in combination with the subsequent disappearance of Tom—could be said to hasten her physical and mental deterioration to the point of death.

“The accent of a coming foot” is, of course, Jim’s, but it is also that of the Grim Reaper, who awaits Laura, his “friend,” in “the very nearest room.” Death will spell her *felicitous* doom, however, for it is identified in Dickinson’s poem with Elysium, which in classical mythology represents the paradisiacal abode of the virtuous and blessed after they die. It is there that Laura may finally know fully Mr. James Delaney O’Connor, a man who on earth remained for the most part a figment of her imagination. It is on earth as well that Laura’s *soul* may have had the fortitude to endure the accent of Jim’s coming foot, his opening of her apartment door, because that accent and that opening would mean not only momentary escape from the prisonhouse of her imagination along with her shyness, but also ultimate, perpetual release from the cellblock of her physically crippled body, the wasteland of her emotionally crippled mind, and the enslavement of urbanized subsistence.

Certainly it is not by accident that Williams gives Laura a June birthday at the same time as he makes Jim’s wedding day the second Sunday in June (111). Through her birth, Laura is thus associated with Juno, the ancient Roman queen of heaven; Juno, the goddess of marriage and childbirth; and Juno, the wife of Jupiter, the supreme deity of the ancient Romans, whose weapon was the thunderbolt that can be heard toward the end of Scene 6 (83). Laura may not marry and bear children on earth, but the implication is that in death she will become, or after death she will be resurrected as, the celestial bride of Jesus if not of James-Jupiter.

And surely her death will paradoxically be hastened by the celebration of her birth, for on that day or near that day the man of Laura’s dreams, Gentleman Jim O’Connor, will marry someone else, the unseen and prosaically named “Betty.” Since Easter is celebrated at some time in the course of *The Glass Menagerie*’s episodic action, Laura’s birthday occurs near Pentecost, or is closer to Pentecost than any other major Christian festival: the seventh Sunday after Easter, the religious holiday marking the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles—and therefore the ideal day to signify or encapsulate the earthly yet transcendent life the chaste Laura Wingfield has led among the lowliest as well as the most noble creatures of God’s menagerie.

As further evidence that Williams conceived of Laura as someone experiencing life-in-death or death-in-life, I offer a third poem from which he

quotes—this time in the stage directions accompanying the screen title “The accent of a coming foot” in Scene 6. The dramatist writes that “It is about five on a Friday evening of late spring which comes ‘scattering poems in the sky’” (69). His direct quotation is slightly inaccurate, but he clearly has in mind “Impressions, IX,” by that romantic anarchist of American poetry, E. E. Cummings. I must refer the reader to this work in its entirety, for its dominant images—of life-in-death or death-in-life, ascent and descent, of dawn’s early light and the candlelight of dusk, the dreams of sleep or the dreaminess of poetry, of harsh city life and the starry, songful life of the mind—recapitulate those of *The Glass Menagerie*. Here I can only offer the first two stanzas:

the hours rise up putting off stars and it is
dawn
into the street of the sky light walks scattering poems

on earth a candle is
extinguished the city
wakes
with a song upon her
mouth having death in her eyes (67)

As I intimated earlier, the lighting of Laura Wingfield—called for most prominently by Williams in the “Production Notes” to the play—is as poetic or expressive as its quotations and signifies just how different or special, if not heavenly, she is in comparison with the Betty O’Connors of this world. Williams writes that “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” (9-10). Furthermore, the playwright sometimes makes Laura the visual focus of our attention “in contradistinction to what is the apparent center. For instance, in the . . . supper scene . . . her silent figure on the sofa should remain the visual center” (9). Beyond this, Williams suggests that the light surrounding Laura, as well as Tom, Amanda, and the Gentleman Caller, show “a certain correspondence to light in religious paintings, . . . where the figures are radiant in atmosphere that is relatively dusky” (10). “Relatively dusky”—that is, “blue,” as in the “deep blue dusk” from which there issues a “sorrowful murmur” in Scene 6 (83) as

a summer-like storm abruptly approaches and Laura becomes too ill to sit down to dinner with Jim O'Connor, her mother, and her brother.

Williams calls for "dim" or "poetic" atmospheric lighting throughout *The Glass Menagerie*, however, not just during the three scenes that occur at twilight or dusk. He writes that such faint illumination is "in keeping with the atmosphere of memory" (9) in this memory play, but it must also be remembered that the time from twilight to dusk—the time of dim or poetic lighting—was the Romantics' favorite because, in its mixture of darkness and light, it is more infinite, more all-embracing, than any other part of the day. In addition, twilight-to-dusk suggested to them a mind that was half awake and half asleep and therefore in sentient retreat from the workaday world, alive to the dreamlike workings of memory. As is Laura's mind toward the end of Scene 5, in the "early dusk of a spring evening" (56), when—in response to her mother's demand that she "make a wish on the [little silver slipper of a] moon" that has just appeared—Laura "looks faintly puzzled as if called out of sleep" (67). Not by chance, the moon appears again in Scene 7, for, in its blending of blackness and brightness, moonlight creates the nighttime equivalent of twilight at sunset.

Twilight can thus be seen as the retiring Laura's favorite time of day, despite the fact that Jim calls it—or its artificial equivalent, candlelight—his favorite after a power outage plunges the Wingfield apartment into what Amanda terms an "everlasting darkness" (87). Jim appropriately comes to his "date" with Laura in Scene 7 "carrying [a] candelabrum, its candles lighted, in one hand and a glass of wine in the other" (88), together with a pack of Life-Saver mints (107). The virtually sacramental wine, in combination with his warmth and charm, gradually "lights her inwardly with altar candles" (97), which is Williams's way of saying that Jim's apparent love has touched Laura's soul by way of her eyes. This naturally is the manner in which romantic or spiritual love, as opposed to animalistic or carnal lust, works, and has been thought to do so since the early Renaissance when the sight of Dante's Beatrice created a hunger for empyreal rather than fleshly beauty: by touching the spirit in emulation of God's love for mankind as well as man's love of God.

When Laura realizes that she has misperceived Jim's intentions or that he has unintentionally misled her, "the holy candles on the altar of [her] face" are accordingly "snuffed out" (108). Indeed, at the end of the play

Laura herself blows out the candles that Jim had brought to their encounter, and she does this in recognition not only of her brother Tom's departure from her life, together with that of her father before him, but also of the Gentleman Caller's leave-taking. The implication is that no gentleman caller will ever enter her life again; none will ever be gentle enough among an American people so crassly materialistic to perceive her inner beauty, to appreciate her love for beauty, to understand her unnatural, if not supernatural, place in a world ruled by science and technology instead of heart and soul. That Laura requires such a man—a man, period—to guarantee her happiness, if not her very survival in an unequal contest with the fittest, is a comment less on the man-made oppressiveness of the patriarchal order or the blind selectivity of the biological one, than on her need-cum-desire to anchor the eternal, unearthly feminine in the world of the temporally masculine. In this man's world, waiting for the second global war of the century after having recently weathered the economic war of the Great Depression, and therefore soon to be lit by lightning from mass bombardments, Laura is figuratively condemned to live out her earthly existence in an "everlasting darkness" that has already literally begun to descend on what will become millions of other human beings.

One of them may turn out to be Tom Wingfield himself, for he is a member of the Merchant Marine in the play's present or framing time of 1943-1944. This means, of course, that he was a sailor on the ships that carried weapons and supplies to our armed forces overseas—ships that were prime, and easy, targets for enemy submarines and cruisers. In *The Glass Menagerie*'s past action of 1936-1937, as remembered by Tom, he twice discusses his imminent joining of the Merchant Marine, and in each instance the image of a "sailing vessel with Jolly Roger" is projected onto the screen (51,78). Now such a vessel is normally a pirate ship flying the traditional skull-and-crossbones flag, which obviously symbolizes death. Yet, as a merchant seaman, Tom will be furnishing food, clothing, and arms to other men and ships, not stealing such resources from them, as murderous pirates would do. So the image of a sailing craft with the skull-and-crossbones flag seems intended both to mock Tom's fantasy of high adventure on the oceans of the world and to augur his own demise, or descent into darkness at sea, at the hands of a *modern* pirate ship, the privateer.

Tom's death will leave the world in the hands of people like Jim O'Connor, the mock-pirate of the Gilbert and Sullivan comic operetta. Jim's real-life adventures, however, will be limited, as he himself says, to accumulating—or dreaming of accumulating—knowledge, money, and power in that order (100). This is the triad on which democracy is built as far as he's concerned, but it is the foundation of rampant capitalism for most of the rest of us. The Gentleman Caller's cravenly opportunistic dream of material success, or coldly rationalistic strategy for achieving monetary gain, may point the direction in which the American-led, postwar free world must go, but Laura and Tom Wingfield's heroically Romantic dream of spiritual or artistic fulfillment doubtless embodies what that world will lose by going there.

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