

Character Studies Conversations  
*The Glass Menagerie*



character  
studies  
**Teacher's Guide**

# Character Studies Conversations – “The Glass Menagerie” Teacher’s Guide

## Introduction

Character Studies Conversations is a guide to be used as a supplement to the assigned reading of the play or viewing of the production live or on tape. The conversations with artists involved with the productions of “The Glass Menagerie” will give a deeper understanding of the themes contained within the story.

## Learning Objectives

After viewing the video, students will be able to explore different views of the action in “The Glass Menagerie” through the eyes of the characters in the play. The guide is divided into two categories: Arts and Humanities. By relating the action and themes in the play to history, art, theater, social studies, human relationships and even science, students will gain a greater understanding and appreciation of these topics. The pre and post discussion questions serve as conversation starters or essay questions that can be assigned.

## Project overview

This video will focus on the relationships created among the characters in “*The Glass Menagerie*.” It is through these relationships that teachers and students will explore the art and humanities topics listed in this guide.

In our materials, students meet professionals who discuss the concepts addressed in Tennessee Williams’ “The Glass Menagerie.” They cite their personal experiences bringing this play to life. We point students toward the greater cultural, social and economic forces at work that shaped the play, playwright and various productions of “The Glass Menagerie.” Using this guide, you can address topics including language arts, social studies, women’s studies, science and technology, politics and media.

**Dakin, Edwina and  
Tennessee Williams**



## **Main Topics**

The main topics covered in this Character Studies Conversation are:

**Topic 1:** Introduction – the basics of this classic American play.

This section discusses the story and the characters that comprise Tennessee Williams' play, including the subject of Amanda Wingfield's forceful, sometimes brutal personality.

**Topic 2:** How do all these characters relate to each other?

Who are the people we are introduced to and what are their roles? This section discusses the nature of the relationships that hold the people in this story together.

**Topic 3:** Where does this story fit within this era?

This section looks at the implications of setting this story in the Great Depression and in the memory of Amanda's grand old Southern childhood. This section also discusses the time period in which the play was written and performed.

**Topic 4:** What impact did this play have on the world of theatre and is there a universal message we can take from this play?

This section shows the impact this production had not only in the world of theater, but also to other forms in the performing arts. It also discusses the impact on our relationships with our family. We can relate the experiences of the characters to our own, people sharing the same world, facing economic and social challenges and finding our own way in the world.



**Edwina & Tennessee Williams**

## Fast Facts

- The Spanish Civil War began in 1936 and did not end until 1939.
- From 1937 to 1945, the Sino-Japanese War raged on, concluding when World War II ended.
- In 1938 the United States had 48 states.
- Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the 32<sup>nd</sup> President of the United States, elected in 1932, was re-elected three more times (1936, 1940, 1944) and died in office in 1945.
- In 1938, Howard Hughes circled the globe in a plane in the record time of 91 hours (3 days, 19 hours) beating the previous record by more than 4 days.
- The artist Freda Kahlo ( two-time wife of Diego Rivera) was discovered in Mexico in 1938.
- Pearl S. Buck won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938 for "The Good Earth."
- Thornton Wilder won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1938 for "Our Town."
- The film version of the best-selling novel "Gone With The Wind" is released in 1939, becoming one of the highest grossing films of all time.
- In 1939, Hitler's Germany invades Poland.
- FDR appoints the first woman to serve in a Presidential cabinet in 1933; Frances Perkins is named Secretary of Labor.
- In 1922, Benito Mussolini's Fascist Party gains power in Italy.
- Emperor Hirohito of Japan orders the 1941 attacks on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, plunging the United States into World War II.
- Joseph Stalin rules the Soviet Union with an Iron Fist from 1922 to 1953.
- Swing and Jazz music rule music clubs, ballrooms, jukeboxes and the radio.

## Vocabulary

**beaux:** A word for boyfriends or gentleman callers

**blanc mange:** A rich dessert made with some starch and sweetened milk, often flavored with almonds and shaped into a mold

**chintz:** A printed and glazed cotton fabric, usually bright colors; a cheap or tacky style

**cloche:** Literally a bell, but refers to a woman's hat in a bell shape, popular in the 1920's and early 1930's

**cotillion:** A fancy or formal dance or ball, often where debutantes make their entrance into society

**jonquil:** A spring flower that resembles a daffodil

**mastication:** Chewing

**menagerie:** A collection of wild or foreign animals, usually kept in cages for exhibition

**portiere:** A curtain that hangs in a doorway

**supercilious:** Arrogant, lordly, superior or overbearing

**tribulations:** Great affliction, trials, or feelings of distress; experiences that test one's endurance, patience or faith

**vivacity:** Characterized by high spirits and animation

**voile:** A fine, sheer fabric used for curtains or women's summer dresses



## **Pre-Video discussion questions:**

### **Arts:**

1. When was Amanda born? Where did she live during her girlhood?
2. How old are her children now? What do they do?
3. Where is Amanda's husband? What did he do?
4. What are Amanda's values? Explain using examples from the text.

### **Humanities:**

1. Who was President when "The Glass Menagerie" takes place? When "The Glass Menagerie" was written?
2. What were the roles of women and men during the Great Depression? During Amanda's girlhood?
3. What was the difference between a small town and a big city during this period?
4. What kinds of media were available to people then? And in Amanda's youth?

## **Post-Video discussion questions:**

### **Arts:**

1. Olympia Dukakis said, "She sees that Tom is depressed and discouraged; I mean, he's in a shoe factory." Who sees Tom as depressed? Why is Tom depressed by working in a shoe factory?
2. Does Tennessee Williams make it clear that the events of the play are actually memories of Tom's? How?
3. Eric Stoltz said, "They created by necessity to survive, in this horrific apartment trap that their mother had created, they created their own world." "They" refers to Laura and Tom. Why is it a "horrific apartment trap?" How can this "horrific apartment trap" be considered a glass menagerie?
4. When Eli Wallach said that Amanda must solicit her friends to squeeze a magazine subscription, what important aspect of Amanda's life was gained/lost? How did this change affect what is important to her children?
5. What do you think the purpose was of having an obvious "staged" play?

### **Humanities:**

1. Ruby Dee said, "The one in a million odds that these dreams are being fulfilled." What dreams are being referred to? Can these dreams be considered an example of the American Dream? What does that ideal mean to specific characters in "The Glass Menagerie?"
2. Is Tennessee Williams' view of Great Depression life positive or negative? Can it be both?
3. Mark Brokaw said, "We all have an idealized version of or vision of how we

grew up and what was good about it." What does this statement mean to you?

4. Molly Regan said, "Because there's nothing out there. It's terrifying." How is this statement appropriate for the time of the play?
5. How is "The Glass Menagerie" like "Our Town?" How is it different?
6. Have you seen a character speak directly to the audience before? Where and when? How did you feel about it?

**Amanda solicits her friends for magazine subscriptions.**



# Group Projects

## Arts:

### Play! Improvisation.

Have students do some improvisation in front of the class as characters from the play. They can choose their own subject matter, or use some ideas from *"The Glass Menagerie"* or *Character Studies Conversations*.

Some ideas:

- Tom confronts his father
- Amanda confronts her husband who abandoned her and her family
- Laura explains her feelings about the menagerie to Tom
- Laura talks to the "animals"; Amanda overhears her and confronts her
- Amanda imagines a conversation with her mother twenty years later telling her how her life turned out
- Amanda happens to wander into a museum on a cold day, only to discover Laura there instead of at secretarial school
- Tom runs into Jim, the Gentleman Caller, at work the next day, and they talk about the night before
- Young Amanda goes on her first date

### Casting Plays – Turn ordinary life into drama!

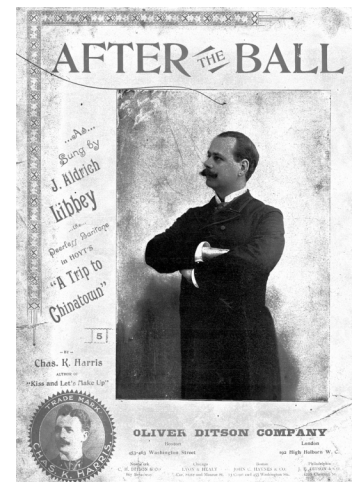
Austin Pendleton said many people believe that casting is 80% of directing. Challenge the class to write and cast a short scene with a beginning, middle and end and then cast a reading using "actors" in the class. They can choose their own subject matter, or use some ideas from *"The Glass Menagerie"* or *Character Studies Conversations*.

Some ideas:

- The role of mothers, then or now
- Depression setting
- A husband or son leaving his family
- Dreaming of the future from the point of view of a character such as Amanda, Tom or Laura
- A play with a character speaking in memory monologues like Tom

### Music in People's Lives

Listen to some of the music that was popular when Amanda was a girl (ragtime, waltz) and the music was probably being played at the night club by their St. Louis apartment (swing, jazz, blues). Compare the two types of music and talk about how music has an impact on the lives of the characters.





## Humanities:

### **Newspaper Article – The Lights Went Out, but the Dinner Went On!**

Write an article covering all the facts of the dinner party, using the power failure as one of the key elements of the piece. You may make up quotations from the four people involved in the event and weave them into your article. Describe the setting, the time, the details of the evening and the conclusion. You could end the piece with a quotation from Amanda about the success or failure of the dinner party.

### **Television Report**

Divide into groups of five students, with each student portraying one of the characters at the dinner party, and someone serving as the television reporter. This is live coverage of an event that has just concluded – the Gentleman Caller is leaving the apartment, so he should be the first one interviewed. Then, continue by interviewing Tom, Laura, and finally Amanda. Be sure your questions allow the viewer to learn everything that happened. Ask Amanda to give you a guided tour of the area where the dinner party took place. The night before class, try timing a few stories on the local news, and see how long it takes to tell them. See if you can tell this story in the same length of time.

### **Women and Fashion**

In Amanda's youth, young women often had their clothes made for them. Have you ever had any item of clothing made especially for you? What was the occasion? Look at some of the fashions of the times covered in Amanda Wingfield's life, from the corsets of the 1890's to the drawn-on seams on the back of women's legs during the war. How is this connected to the social events of the time? Why did the Suffrage Movement also end women's suffering for fashion (albeit briefly)?

### **Amanda fixes Laura's dress**



# Individual student projects

## Arts:

### That's Entertainment!

In "The Glass Menagerie," Amanda, Laura and Tom did not have many ways to entertain themselves at home because many of the items we use for entertainment did not exist yet and because they did not have a lot of money. What did each character do for entertainment? How do you entertain yourself? Do you ever entertain yourself the way they did? Does your entertainment cost a lot of money? If you had no money, how would you entertain yourself?

### Mother/daughter relationship

Look at other mother/daughter relationships presented through TV/film/pop culture. Do you see any relationships inspired by the Glass Menagerie? Have you ever lied to your mother to avoid being punished? What happened? Does your mom want to be a matchmaker for you? Ask your mom what sort of man (or woman) she wants you to date. Would you go out with that person? Do you have to? Have you seen this plot in other shows? What shows? Does Amanda understand that Laura is crippled? Has your mom ever thought you could do more than you think you can?

### Play-writing exercise

- Take an example from your own life
  - Was it a happy occasion?
  - Was it a sad one?
  - Did you feel good or bad about the way it turned out?
  - Change the names and events to protect the innocent!
  - Keep it dramatic even if you have to change the story.
  - Include a symbol.
  - Laura has her glass collection. Amanda has her cotillion dress. What symbol did you create and why?

## Humanities:

### 20<sup>th</sup> Century Changes

Using examples from the play, or from your notes watching *Character Studies Conversations*, find instances where the following events of the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century have or will affect the specific characters in "The Glass Menagerie."

Emigration

Industrialization

Science and Technology

Women's Suffrage and Political Influence

Roosevelt's New Deal

World War II

### **The Migrant Mother**

The photograph that has become known as "Migrant Mother" is one of a series of photographs that Dorothea Lange made in the early winter of 1936 in Nipomo, California. Lange was concluding a month's trip photographing migratory farm labor around the state for what was then the Resettlement Administration. In 1960, Lange gave this account of the experience:

- *I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it. (From: Popular Photography, Feb. 1960).*

Study these photographs. Does this woman look 32? How would Amanda react if she were to meet this woman? How would her children react? How would you react?

### **20 Questions – Oral History Project**

Find an elderly friend or relative to interview. The results of the interview can also be turned into a shared project experience with an art class, or other visuals or communications classes, or with the local library by producing a photocopied book, featuring transcribed quotations and photos from the person interviewed and their family and friends, their town, etc.

Here are some questions you might ask:

- Where and when were you born?
- What year was it when you were my age?
- The play takes place in 1938 – how old were you then?
- Did you go to school? Where and for how long?
- What were your favorite subjects? Your least favorite? Why?
- What kind of work did the people in your family do?
- Did you listen to records or radio? What was your favorite program?
- What kind of dances or music was popular?

- Did you go to the movies? What did it cost? Describe your favorite movie when you were young.
- Did your family have a car? What kind?
- How did the Great Depression affect your life?
- Do you think today's teenagers are different from you as a teenager? In what ways?
- Do you have any photos that you can share from that time?

### **Essay / Research Idea**

- Mrs. Bennett from *Pride and Prejudice* is another matriarch with mixed-up priorities, but in the end only has her family's financial well-being in mind. Write an essay comparing and contrasting Mrs. Bennett from *Pride and Prejudice* and Amanda from *The Glass Menagerie*.
- What would you define as a major theme of "The Glass Menagerie?" Substantiate your answer by using moments in the play.
- The first film version of "The Glass Menagerie" altered the ending to turn it to one that was happier and more optimistic, despite the playwright's objections. Do you think the film was better that way? Why or why not? Do films have an obligation to honor the playwright's story? Try viewing some film versions of the play and write some reviews.

### **Internet Activities**

#### **Interpreting Maps: The American South During the Depression**

Go to: <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/depression/depression.htm>

- Look at the map.
- What happened to the South of Amanda's childhood?
- Is it still as she remembers it?
- Has it changed?
- Can Amanda go back?

Extension exercise:

Search for pictures of the American South during the Great Depression.

#### **Diego Rivera and Art of the WPA**

When most Americans familiar with art think about the Great Depression, they think of great works by Diego Rivera and other social artists who made comments through their art about the oppression of the working class.

Every painting has a story that goes along with it. Research some works from that era by Diego Rivera.

When you look at a painting, ask yourself these questions.

- What are the important details?
- What important details are left out?
- What is centered in the painting? Why?
- What message is the painter trying to give me?

For example, look at Rivera's 1932 work, "Detroit Industry." Could you see Laura working here? Working in close quarters, loud machines, lots of other people...would Laura be happy here? Could she get the job done to the satisfaction of the man in the middle? Are there other women waiting for her job to open up if she fails?

**Amanda's fictional diary: Write it!**

Amanda's girlhood in the Old South is well documented because Southern women were quite famous for keeping diaries. Many of them were published as books. Research some of these women and draw similarities and differences to the childhood Amanda describes in "The Glass Menagerie." Then try to write Amanda's diary as a young girl.



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Write some entries for Amanda's journal. Think of these essential questions:

- What was her day like when she was young?
- How was she treated?

- How did she feel?
- What were some of the big events in her life that shaped her as a person?
- What would she write about her childhood?
- What about her wedding day?
- How would she describe her children in their younger years?
- What other days would she write about?
- How about her life after Tom leaves?
- What would she write about her husband?

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/>

Lesson Plan on interpreting Diaries:

<http://www.learnnc.org/lessons/sky82844252004264>

Some Southern Women: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/branch/menu.html>,

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/felton/menu.html>, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/wright/menu.html>,

### **Movie Night**

Why do you think Tom liked to go to the movies so much? What did a night at the movies mean to people during the Great Depression? Check a website on line for the Oscar winners and nominees for the year 1938. What do you think were some of Tom's favorite films?

Try: [www.popculturemadness.com](http://www.popculturemadness.com)

### **For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls**

*The Glass Menagerie* was parodied by Christopher Durang in a short one-act entitled *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls*, in which Laura is replaced by a wimpy hypochondriac son named Lawrence, and the "gentleman caller" becomes a tough female factory worker with a hearing problem named Ginn. An Introduction to Christopher Durang's *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls* can be found here:

<http://www.christopherdurang.com/FullDurangDurang.htm>

## Assessment questions

- Q1. Amanda has grown children living at home. What is the impact, positive and negative, of having adult children living with a parent? How do you think a single mother feels taking care of her adult children?
- Q2. Amanda and her children live in a small apartment because they do not have enough money to afford a larger one. What kind of privacy do they have in that space? Do you think that the need for privacy changes as one gets older?
- Q3. Laura has a physical disability called pleurosis. How does that affect her? What kind of daily problems does Laura face? What problems would she face today?
- Q4. Amanda tries to earn a living but she does not have many skills. What jobs does she do to try to bring in money? Why was it more difficult for women to earn a living in the 1930's? How have things changed for women to be independent today? How have things stayed the same?
- Q5. Is "The Glass Menagerie" still relevant? What does that mean? What are some examples of other works from the past that are still relevant? What are some examples of current works that won't be "out of style" in two years. What will be out of style? Use examples from film, TV, theatre or music.
- Q6. Have you seen a character speak directly to the audience before, like Tom does? Where and when? How did you feel about it?
- Q7. What types of responsibilities does Amanda want her children to have? What are some ways that people living together can share the responsibilities to keep a home running smoothly?
- Q8. In the South, many rich White girls' clothes were made by poor African-American girls and women. How do you think this made each group feel? How have things changed?
- Q9. Make a list of foods mentioned in the play. Is there anything you have not heard of? What brands still exist today?
- Q10. The Wingfields are a Southern family and eat Southern food. Does your family have any favorite dishes that come from a certain region, country, culture or ethnic group?

## Assessment Questions Answer Key

Q1. Amanda has grown children living at home. What is the impact, positive and negative, of having adult children living with a parent? How do you think a single mother feels taking care of her adult children?

A1. Answers may vary.

Q2. Amanda and her children live in a small apartment because they do not have enough money to afford a larger one. What kind of privacy do they have in that space? Do you think that the need for privacy changes as one gets older?

A2. Answers may vary.

Q3. Laura has a physical disability called pleurosis. How does that affect her? What kind of daily problems does Laura face? What problems would she face today?

A3. Answers may vary.

Q4. Amanda tries to earn a living but she does not have many skills. What jobs does she do to try to bring in money? Why was it more difficult for women to earn a living in the 1930's? How have things changed for women to be independent today? How have things stayed the same?

A4. Answers may vary. In 2007, women still only earned 77 cents to a man's dollar, for the same job.

Q5. Is "The Glass Menagerie" still relevant? What does that mean? What are some examples of other works from the past that are still relevant? What are some examples of current works that won't be "out of style" in two years. What will be out of style? Use examples from film, TV, theatre or music.

A5. William Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Arthur Miller, Lorraine Hansberry, Lillian Hellman and Thornton Wilder are examples of writers. All answers are subjective.

Q6. Have you seen a character speak directly to the audience before, like Tom does? Where and when? How did you feel about it?

A6. Some other examples of speaking directly to the audience include

- "The Fantasticks" (Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt)
- "Our Town" (Thornton Wilder)
- "Talley's Folly" (Lanford Wilson)
- "A View From the Bridge" (Arthur Miller)
- "The Belle of Amherst" (William Luce)
- "Into the Woods" (Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine)



- Q7. What types of responsibilities does Amanda want her children to have?  
What are some ways that people living together can share the responsibilities to keep a home running smoothly?  
A7. Answers may vary.
- Q8. In the South, many rich White girls' clothes were made by poor African-American girls. How do you think this made each group feel? How have things changed?  
A8. Answers may vary, but should include the impact of an adult woman making clothes for someone else's daughter.
- Q9. Make a list of foods mentioned in the play. Is there anything you have not heard of? What brands still exist today?  
A9. Blanc mange, coffee, Purina, shredded wheat biscuit, liquor, salmon loaf, Durkee's dressing, wine, lemonade, macarons. Purina, Shredded Wheat and Durkee's are brands still in operation today.
- Q10. The Wingfields are a Southern family and eat Southern food. Does your family have any favorite dishes that come from a certain region, country, culture or ethnic group?  
A10. Answers may vary. Students may share recipes.

## **Additional resources**

The Library of Congress learning page

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/>

Eye Witness to History

<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/20frm.htm>

Lesson Plan on interpreting diaries

<http://www.learnnc.org/lessons/sky82844252004264>

Maps of the South during the Great Depression

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/depression/depression.htm>

Oscar Nominees through the years

[www.popculturemadness.com](http://www.popculturemadness.com)

Facts about Working Women

<http://history.enotes.com/1930-lifestyles-social-trends-american-decades/working-women>

<http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/2003/iht1020324.html>

## **Recommended film adaptations**

*We do not recommend using "The Glass Menagerie" 1950's film adaptation since the ending was altered against the playwright's advice. The following two film adaptations are recommended because they are faithful to Tennessee Williams' play.*

The Glass Menagerie (1973)

Directed by Anthony Harvey; Starring Katharine Hepburn (Amanda), Sam Waterston (Tom), Joanna Miles (Laura) and Michael Moriarty (Jim O'Connor)

The Glass Menagerie (1987)

Directed by Paul Newman; Starring Joanne Woodward (Amanda), John Malkovich (Tom), Karen Allen (Laura) and James Naughton (Jim O'Connor)

## **Additional resources at [www.films.com](http://www.films.com)**

Character Studies – *Our Town*

Character Studies – *A Raisin in the Sun*

***Much More Information***, Including Lesson Plans, Student Activities, Historical Background about Plays, Playwrights and Characters, Relevance to the Teaching of a Variety of Subjects and Comprehensive, Exclusive Interview Segments Are All Available from Character Studies Productions, [a 501 (c) 3 non-profit education organization] for Educational and Classroom Use.

Character Studies Productions has now created a new division, to develop and distribute expansive **Classroom Guides** [forty pages or more, which include resources, activities & materials that can be selected for use for middle and high school subjects through university level], **Play Guides** [for drama, theatre, performing arts and regional theatre use, as well as for dramaturges working with any production of a play or musical - professional, university, high school or amateur], complete transcripts from our PBS episodes, from our Character Studies Conversations series for Films Media Group, and with America's leading playwrights, actors, directors, lyricists, choreographers and composers, and other exciting, exclusive theatre-related educational materials.

**Visit [www.characterstudies.net](http://www.characterstudies.net) for all the details!**

Character Studies would like to acknowledge our appreciation to the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the Ford Foundation, the Snowdon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, Newman's Own [Paul Newman], Susan Stroman, Ann Reinking and Theatermania for their financial support of this project.

Special Thanks to Rachel Crouse and Kevin Yan

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