

Glass Games

Filmic Environments and Controlled Characters

In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom Wingfield's only chance at expressing himself is by writing poetry on the back of a shoebox at his warehouse job. Tom consistently yearns to be outside, away from his home, frequenting the cinemas. Contrastingly, in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, Katniss Everdeen is forced to compete outside, desperately wanting to be home with her sister in District 12 as her prize for winning the Games. When adapted to film, both environments are accelerated in realization, being that audiences visually perceive them through image versus reading their descriptions. In Paul Newman's 1987 film adaptation of *The Glass Menagerie* and Gary Ross' 2012 film adaptation of *The Hunger Games*, both established environments—one indoors and one outdoors—highlight the protagonists' yearning to escape control. Tom and Katniss both hold on to family as a motive to break free from what they want.

Through the text of *The Glass Menagerie*, readers immediately picture Amanda, Tom's mother, picked apart and controlled everything he does, initially through the introductory dinner. She rambles on about the specificity by which Tom should be eating his meal, even describing the differences between humans and animals that require or do not require mastication. From the beginning, Tom is criticized for something as simple as human consumption. In reaction, Tom declares he is "getting a cigarette," which prompts Amanda to berate her son further for the habit of smoking (Williams 753). Readers see Tom's tolerance deteriorate throughout the play. One could glean the text for any instance in which Amanda speaks to Tom, and most likely the dialogue would pass judgment or control upon Tom's character, criticizing something Tom should be adjusting about his behavior. It appears that not only is Tom never good enough in Amanda's perspective, but he concurrently has nobody else to ventilate his anxiety to, other than through poetry and cinema.

The Glass Menagerie also contains a tremendously descriptive platform for what the story's mise en scène should look like. Williams describes the exterior of the apartment as

belonging to the “lower middle-class” and being “fundamentally enslaved” (Williams 752). The apartment itself acts as a menagerie, caging Tom from his ambitions in fleeing his controlling mother. Williams’ rhetoric is wide-reaching and intentional—there are a lot of words, and each word placement appears to exist for a reason. In describing the apartment, it is clear that the Wingfield residence is not the tidiest or cordial place in St. Louis. It appears run down and unkept, lacking an attention to maintenance. Additionally, when it comes to Tom’s dialogue, he reiterates that *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play. He acknowledges the description as a recollection rather than a current rendering of his now-abandoned former residency.

Conversely, *The Hunger Games* deals with a different arrangement of environment, one that is set outdoors. Katniss’ home is introduced in the novel as an atmosphere set in a rural District. Katniss as a character discloses the story through a vernacular she is most familiar with: the natural world. Her home is furnished with primitive, outdoor materials—her mattress is woven from canvas, her boots stretched from leather. Not only are the materials purely rugged and naturalistic, but her vocabulary in describing the world she lives in is only familiar to her in words that echo District 12’s environment. For instance, utilizing the verb “cocoon” to describing her mother’s curled, sleeping body and the simile “fresh as a raindrop” to describe her younger sister’s face are relative to her world (Collins 4). Katniss knows cocoons from her hunting encounters with the caterpillars that inhabit them and rain her from her initial encounter with Peeta Mellark—these outdoor entities are well-familiar to her.

Here, Collins progresses the plot from the beginning by concurrently staging the world readers are delving into. Even Katniss’ avid hobby is a key signifier in constructing her realm in Panem. As she hunts throughout the story, Katniss builds herself as a young woman who kills to survive. Katniss keeps her family alive through this kill, forming identity through outdoor environment and foreshadowing the Games she will be forced to participate in. Throughout the story, characters develop through Katniss’ rhetoric and perspective. Characterizations of Peeta, Gale, Effie, and others are shaped through Katniss’ lens; readers are never able to look beyond the first person narrative.

In expository writing, readers engage in both the play and novel through a perspective of the protagonist. Tom relies on memory to illustrate his story, while Katniss relies on natural

substances for her story. Congruently, readers can dissect the text, even in the characters' names. Katniss' surname, "Everdeen," can be transcribed as "evergreen" by its phonetics. With an evergreen tree being a natural element that is expected to withstand force and live forever, the meaning would be useful and even preferred for Katniss in her journey through the Games. For Tom, the phonetics of the surname "Wingfield" derive the words "wing" and field." Wings would duly be an entity useful to Tom to break free and fly away from his St. Louis home, and the idea of an expansive field is far from what the Wingfields reside in throughout the play. In adaptation to film, these literary analyses are realized audibly, giving the auteur a challenge to effectively portray these characters and their environment in the visual and auditory medium. As Elizabeth Banks' Effie calls out "Primrose Everdeen" in her high-pitched, shrill voice, audiences recognize the mocking empowerment of Effie's control, all while audibly supplying the surname's significance.

One aspect of the films that transcends the literary analyses is experienced in the cinematography. Each cinematographic choice is developed through stationary frames—an image of Katniss running through the woods after the start of the Games, Tom striking a match in the Wingfield's abandoned apartment, Laura's moonlit face as she gazes out a window, a throng of extended three-fingered salutes. All of these frames become the story that build environment, replacing Collins' and Williams' thread of words told through the protagonists' voice. Nonetheless, the audience can comprehend the translation from textual narration to image through the auteur's capturing of visual and auditory plot progression. In other words, instead of describing Prim's youthful, raindrop-stricken face, viewers are supplied an image of an innocent girl waking up from a nightmare. In place of Amanda's scolding of Tom to chew his food, audiences hear him reprimanded by Amanda in a harshly instructive, critical manner.

Regarding environment and its impact on film, the "look" or *mise en scène* of the film differentiates depending on the cinematographic choices the auteur makes. For Paul Newman, his rendition chose to remain almost identically faithful to the play's text. The dialogue is almost word for word and the set description is preserved in its visuality. Amanda's controlling ways are witnessed in Joanne Woodward's performance, as her eyes flicker with judgment and her voice sways with a Southern accent when she implores her daughter to find a suitor. Audiences see

Amanda scrutinize her daughter's glass menagerie, a fragile symbol of Laura's selfhood and embodiment of her own interests.

For *The Hunger Games*, Gary Ross' approach in adapting the film's environment is most profoundly encompassed within the Games' arena. At the start of the Games, we see Jennifer Lawrence's Katniss trying to contain her overwhelming anxiety as she ascends into the Games through a translucent tube. When the opening reveals a manicured lawn with an arc of contestants around a large cornucopia that harbors weapons, viewers are pressed with a number of questions regarding the final cut. What would the scene look like if the tubes were altered to a tinted color? Instead of the trimmed field, how would the contestants' running be affected if the grassy terrain was depicted as sandy and gravelly? Or, how would the scene's impact be different if Ross opted not to eliminate sound? Due to these cinematographic decisions, the tameness of the grass and placement of the arch contribute to the precision of the game. All of these choices based around the film's environment would not obstruct the Katniss' motives in winning her way back home, but certainly contribute to the factor that every move she makes is controlled.

Environment in *The Glass Menagerie* is the opposite. The action indoors is trying to be controlled; Amanda attempts to organize the chaotic emotional health of herself and her children, but ultimately fails when Tom departs. On film, the audience feels contained in the restraint of the set. The cinematographic choices are more about the distance viewers travel in environment, rather than the attributes that form the scenery. Audiences are limited to a living room and kitchen, rarely seeing the outside of the apartment. Yes, the furniture and costumes represent late 1930's American culture; however, Newman focuses more on dramaturgical cinema through the environment's range in perimeter rather than artistry in appearance.

Aside from cinematography influencing environment, the output of literary symbols in film can be authored similarly when comparing the two stories and their adaptations. While discussing authorship through adapting stories to film, André Bazin states:

"The standard differentiation among the arts in the nineteenth century and the relatively recent subjectivist notion that an author as identified with a work no longer fit in with

an aesthetic sociology of the masses in which the cinema runs a relay race with drama and the novel and does not eliminate them, but rather reinforces them” (Bazin).

Authorship aside, Bazin identifies translation of literary devices the both stories implement. For instance, *The Glass Menagerie* contains the idea of a collection of glass animals. In *The Hunger Games*, the only striking collection of objects—besides the contestants themselves—are the weapons and health kits assorted under the cornucopia. Both are literary symbols of survival. For Laura, the glass menagerie of animal figurines keep her mental activity going, whereas the weapons and health kits more literally allow Katniss and others to survive. One film, audiences see the assortment of glass animals and survival kits contributing to environment.

Extensively, characters themselves have people in their cinematic journeys that they covet for protection. For Tom, we see his interactions with his younger sister Laura as a reason for sticking with the control of his mother. Particularly, the scene in which Tom pretends he is a magician reveals a moment of compassion emblazoned in his character. Tom feels that if he leaves, he will result as an equivalent to his absent father, failing his disabled sister. Similarly, Katniss covets her younger sister for protection, which is most fruitfully embodied in Rue. In the scene where Katniss lays down Rue’s body to rest with a decorative display of flowers, superficially this is not the best tactical move in the Games. However, knowing that she has a younger sister, audiences exist beside Katniss through the emotional pain, as Rue’s body serves as a reminder in her controlled environment why she must fight to win the game: to be with her sister again.

Socioculturally, the adaptation of environment in *The Hunger Games* illustrates an ugly side of our modern world. In an introductory essay on Ross’ film adaptation, Mary Pharr writes: “Both the Capitol and the Games are artificial constructs, their superficiality revealing the dangerous waste and false values of contemporary America, a media-driven society unable to draw the line between entertainment and reality” (Pharr 14). Pharr encapsulates the artificiality-admired in the world of Panem. Frighteningly, there are striking similarities in the dystopian districts of Panem’s most privileged citizens and our North America today: attention to appearance, elaborate meals, and wacky fashion, to name a few. The story is futuristic and

therefore takes place in a more hypothetical setting than *The Glass Menagerie*, while still containing the familiarity of self-surveillance and control of people.

Newman's film, which recreates an era of the past, doctrines a different environment. The movie theatre that Tom frequents represents a staple of American culture at the time. Set during the Depression era, the world of *The Glass Menagerie* is painful for the protagonist for a different reason than Katniss' in *The Hunger Games*. Tom is not forced to compete in a fight to the death, but he does reside in a nation that glorifies freedom and independence, even during the rough economic decline of the Great Depression. Tom's escape is recognized as a hindrance away from his home life, and the cinemas is the furthest he can travel. George W. Crandell writes: "For Tom, the cinema provides both the impetus and a convenient excuse for escape from unpleasant company and inhospitable surroundings" (Crandell 1). Crandell's point emphasizes that Tom's trips to the cinemas provide him his only chance to be close to gaining the cultural independence that is supplied through free thought and imagination of the American films he consumes.

Along with the sociocultural nature of environments, the sexual standards placed on the films not only takes the most liberty through adaptation, but is also influenced by the environment in each story. For Katniss, her appearance was altered from text to screen through the casting choice of Jennifer Lawrence. Rather than discuss faithfulness of adaptation, it is crucial to recognize the environment's standards placed on Katniss' sexuality. Throughout the film, viewers rarely see her sexuality overtly portrayed, with the kiss between Katniss and Peeta being the most intimate moment in her cinematic journey. The kiss, however, is sheltered inside a cave, hidden from the other players in the Games. The reaction to the kiss from the audience evokes a sense of sexualization, oftentimes seen in reality television shows audiences root for today. When the game-makers prepare Katniss for the Games, they also sexualize her in appearance, with costume playing a role in accentuating her feminine hips. The game-makers equivocate Katniss to the other female Tributes who "are usually touted as scary or sexy" (Balkind 43). These instances provoke the idea of controlling sexuality, with casting playing a key role.

Likewise, Tom's sexuality appears controlled through the rendering of John Malkovich's performance. Gilbert Debusscher highlights that Malkovich's performance in particular illuminates Tom's homosexuality. Debusscher theorizes that this component of Tom's character is unprecedented for the story, remarking that "it is not until the film version of Paul Newman in 1986 that Tom's homosexuality is taken into serious account" (Debusscher 63). Although homosexuality is never overtly mentioned, we see Amanda control Tom's actions in a way that would not surprise audiences if she were to hypothetically facilitate a discussion for Tom to adhere to the time's sexual standards. Additionally, Amanda's obsession with finding a suitor for Laura is integral in contributing to Tom's controlled sexual desires. Debusscher continues by saying, "His sarcasm is aimed at the modes of courtship and marital arrangements of the heterosexual world." (Debusscher 63). Through Amanda's own heteronormative insistences and Tom's rebelliousness against them, viewers see Malkovich's Tom as a controlled sexual being.

Conclusively, Katniss' and Tom's function as protagonist is heavily influenced by their environments. Katniss plays outside for the chance to be with her family, while Tom "plays" indoors, yearning to escape from his family. Similarly, both protagonists want to be removed from control—control of their sexuality, their distance of travel—in order to author their own free existence. On film, the message is delivered in a manner that preserves the integrity of the protagonists' destinations. Family becomes the motive in keeping the characters' imaginations active, ultimately allowing them to survive.

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