


# An Analysis of the Relationship between Imagination and Reality in The Glass Menagerie through the Semiotics of Visual and Non-Visual Elements: Saussurean and Peircean Approaches

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## Abstract

Tennessee Williams's play *The Glass Menagerie* portrays an American family facing crises in the aftermath of World War I, where the father's absence and unresolved frustrations intensify the difficulties experienced by Amanda and her children, Tom and Laura. Under such circumstances, imagination emerges as a key force that connects the characters and enables them to endure harsh realities. Decoding a theatrical work—given its reliance on a multiplicity of signs—requires an approach that accounts for both its sign-oriented nature and the diversity of its sign systems. Accordingly, this study adopts an integrated framework drawing on the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce and categorizes signs according to their manifestation on stage as visual, non-visual, or intermediary. Employing a descriptive-analytical method and qualitative data derived from library sources, the study pursues three objectives: (1) to examine the characters' interaction with imagination and reality; (2) to compare types of signs, based on their stage appearance, in explaining this interaction; and (3) to evaluate the explanatory capacity of the combined semiotic approach in clarifying the relationship between imagination and reality. The research addresses the following questions: (1) How does the analysis of signs reflect the psychological traits of the characters and their interaction with imagination and reality? (2) What distinctions exist among iconic, non-iconic, and intermediary signs in this representation? (3) What added value does the integration of Saussure's and Peirce's theories provide in explaining this relationship? The findings reveal that imagination and reality are not merely in opposition; rather, "reconstructing reality through imagination" and "integrating imagination and reality" emerge as alternative modes of interaction. Furthermore, the predominance of iconic signs highlights their central role in the play's process of meaning-making. Ultimately, the integrated semiotic approach enables the interpretation of signs as a unified whole within Williams's symbolic play *The Glass Menagerie*.

**Keywords:** Semiotics; Visual and Non-Visual Elements; Imagination and Reality; *The Glass Menagerie*.

## 1. Introduction

The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams (1911–1983) is an autobiographical play that depicts the life of a family struggling with psychological and economic difficulties. Considered Williams's first major and most enduringly popular play, it attracted significant attention from critics and audiences following its successful performances in Chicago and New York in 1945, earning several prestigious awards. As a “memory play,” it presents a dark portrayal of modern, one-dimensional society—a world in which characters retreat into illusion due to their inability to adapt to reality. Consequently, the conflict between imagination and reality constitutes the play's central theme. Imagination, as a dominant thematic element, significantly shapes the characters and produces their complex and varied responses to the harsh realities of post-World War I industrial American society. A detailed examination of the relationship between imagination and reality—rooted in the play's profound characterization—therefore requires a multidimensional analytical approach. In this regard, the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce offer substantial analytical potential for addressing this complexity. The theatrical structure of the play—where signs appear on stage through movement, sound, and visual imagery, collectively generating meaning for the audience—necessitates the classification of signs into visual, non-visual, and mediated forms (those that originate in language or sound but culminate in visual action). Accordingly, this study applies these theoretical approaches to examine the relationship among (1) the psychological characteristics of the characters, (2) types of signs based on their mode of stage appearance, and (3) the adopted theoretical framework, in relation to the central research problem: the relationship between imagination and reality in The Glass

Menagerie. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

How does the analysis of signs represent the psychological characteristics of the characters in The Glass Menagerie and their interaction with imagination and reality? What distinctions exist among visual, non-visual, and mediated signs in this representation? What contribution does the integration of Saussure's and Peirce's semiotic theories make to explaining the relationship between imagination and reality?

## 2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have examined The Glass Menagerie from a variety of critical perspectives; however, theatre and drama have received comparatively limited attention from a semiotic standpoint. This study seeks to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between imagination and reality in the play by integrating the semiotic theories of Saussure and Peirce and by classifying the play's signs according to their mode of appearance on stage (visual, non-visual, and mediated).

## 3. Research Methodology

This study is applied in purpose, qualitative in data type, and descriptive-analytical in method. The research data were collected through library-based research, involving a careful and repeated examination of the complete text of The Glass Menagerie. Throughout this process, all signs relevant to the research problem—the relationship between imagination and reality—were identified, refined through multiple stages, and ultimately narrowed down to 21 key signs selected as the primary sample. These signs were categorized into three principal groups based on the theatrical context of the play and their mode of stage appearance as indicated in the text: (1) visual signs (material and visual elements such as objects, décor, and physical actions); (2) non-visual signs (auditory and linguistic elements); and (3) mediated signs (elements that originate in linguistic or

auditory forms but lead to visual action or effect).

Signs whose isolated interpretation would disrupt the comprehension of the play's overall meaning were analyzed integratively. The theoretical framework combines the semiotic approaches of Saussure and Peirce. Saussure's theory is employed to analyze the semantic dimensions of signs through the distinction between signifier and signified, while Peirce's model is used to identify types of signification (icon, index, and symbol) and to account for meaning through the concept of the interpreter. The classification of signs is not limited to the relationship between signifier and signified but extends to the level of interpretation. In alignment with the research objectives, interpretation is examined in relation to the imagination-reality dichotomy. Accordingly, the analysis of findings is based on decoding each sign through a consistent analytical framework comprising sign type, signifier, signified, interpreter, and supporting textual evidence.

#### 4. Findings

This study aimed to examine the relationship among (1) the psychological characteristics of the characters, (2) types of signs based on their stage manifestation, and (3) the adopted theoretical framework, in relation to the central research problem—the relationship between imagination and reality in *The Glass Menagerie*. The findings indicate the following: A total of 49 signifiers were identified within the analyzed signs, of which 25 are visual, 19 are non-visual, and 5 are mediated. The predominance of visual signifiers (51%) underscores the decisive role of visual elements in the process of meaning-making concerning the imagination-reality relationship in the play.

At the level of interpretation, all signs function as symbols. This finding aligns with Elam's assertion that theatrical signs are inherently symbolic, as well as with Hawkes's view that sign types are context-dependent and shaped by causal relationships. The transformation of iconic and indexical signs at the signifier-

signified level into symbols at the interpretive level can be explained through this contextual framework. By viewing the conventions of the play's world as the relevant context, the symbolic nature of signs within this "textural" system becomes apparent. Peirce's concept of the fluidity of meaning further elucidates character development, as symbolic signs allow for broader interpretive possibilities that depend on learned conventions, habits, temperaments, and mental dispositions of the interpreter. Relatively static signs tend to remain at the level of escapism from reality and typically represent the "contradiction between imagination and reality." In contrast, more fluid signs signify the "fusion of imagination and reality" as well as the "reconstruction of reality." Examples of the first group include signs such as the gramophone associated with Laura and Amanda's narration of youthful memories. Conversely, Tom's intense fascination with cinema—initially functioning as a form of escape—gradually evolves throughout the play and ultimately leads to his permanent departure from home, exemplifying the active reconstruction of reality through imagination.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study employed a descriptive-analytical method and applied the combined semiotic frameworks of Saussure and Peirce, alongside a classification of theatrical signs based on their stage manifestation, to address the following research questions: (1) How does the analysis of signs reflect the psychological characteristics of the characters and their interaction with imagination and reality in *The Glass Menagerie*? (2) What distinctions exist among visual, non-visual, and mediated signs in this representation? (3) What contribution does the integration of Saussure's and Peirce's theories make to explaining this relationship? The findings, derived from the analysis of 21 selected signs using a consistent framework of sign type, signifier, signified, interpreter, and textual evidence, indicate that Laura exhibits the most dynamic interaction between

imagination and reality. This transformation is particularly evident in the analysis of signs associated with her encounter with Jim. Laura evolves from a passive character who retreats into imagination to one who actively accepts reality by the end of the play. Tom undergoes a similar transformation, though of a different nature: after actively pursuing his imagined liberation, he ultimately yields to reality with despair and compulsion rather than serenity or courage. Amanda, by contrast, remains the most static character, showing no significant signs of accepting reality until the conclusion of the play. Overall, the characters experience imagination and reality through processes of reconstructing reality via fabrication and integrating imagination with reality.

Regarding the second research question, the findings demonstrate the dominant role of visual signs, highlighting their strong capacity to convey the play's central concepts—particularly the representation of imagination and reality—through spatial design and deep characterization, thereby enhancing audience engagement. Non-visual signs function primarily as “space-making” elements, such as music and lighting, which appear during moments of imaginative dominance or the intrusion of imminent reality. These elements also contribute to narrative clarity and character development by linking characters to their imaginative experiences across time, primarily through dialogue and monologue. Mediated signs, though non-material, function as “preconscious” triggers of Laura's physical actions and symbolically represent her psychological pressure when confronting reality. In response to the third research question, the findings affirm the analytical value of integrating Saussurean and Peircean semiotics in achieving a multifaceted interpretation of theatrical signs. Concepts such as the fluidity and stability of meaning, along with the modes of signification between signifier and signified, enable a nuanced understanding of interpretability and facilitate the recognition of interconnected sign networks. As a result, this integrated approach allows for a more precise decoding

of theatrical texts such as *The Glass Menagerie*, which inherently comprise diverse and layered sign systems. Ultimately, since all analyzed signs function symbolically at the interpretive level, the play may be understood—within Peirce's framework—as an ongoing and potentially endless cycle of meaning production and reception.

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### **Author's Contribution**

The research was conducted solely by the author.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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