MENTIONING THE MOTHERS: REPRESENTATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD
AS TAUGHT TO ELEVENTH GRADE ENGLISH STUDENTS IN TEXAS
THROUGH THE STUDY OF DRAMATIC LITERATURE

A Thesis

by

HEATHER WILSON MEEKS

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HEATHER WILSON MEEKS

Approved by:

Advisor: Carrie Klypchak

Committee: John Hanners
            Michael Knight, Jr.

Head of Department: John Mark Dempsey
Dean of the College: Salvatore Attardo
Dean of Graduate Studies: Arlene Horne
ABSTRACT

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Heather Wilson Meeks, MS
Texas A&M University-Commerce, 2013

Advisor: Carrie Klypchak, PhD

The in-depth study of American dramatic literature in eleventh grade Texas English classes proves integral in developing students' abilities to readily appreciate different enactments of roles in twenty-first century American families. This study analyzes the portrayal of the mother characters in two of the most commonly taught pieces of dramatic literature to Texas junior-level high school students: The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams and Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller.

Inspired by Deborah Appleman's findings encouraging the use of an appropriate critical lens when analyzing literature for the high school classroom, the current literary analysis examines the mother characters in these mid-twentieth century texts through the broad framework of feminist theory. Using multiple feminist scholars' perspectives allows for the examination of historical, economic, and social intricacies affecting the characters, while interrogating gendered stereotypes in the plays. The findings of this study, therefore, highlight the messages communicated about motherhood to Texas eleventh grade English students as a result of the curricular inclusion of The Glass Menagerie and Death of a Salesman.
The results of the study reveal that both characters offer representations of gendered stereotypes. In Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda Wingfield reflects qualities of “the domineering mother,” such as manipulating and clinging to her children. In Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Linda Loman manifests as “the quintessential housewife” in her subservient behavior and lack of personal agency. Yet when historically and socially contextualized, the characters prove multi-dimensional and communicate additional, more complex messages about motherhood to twenty-first century high school students as well.

As Amanda Wingfield negotiates her position as a single mother, struggling against patriarchal confines and challenging economic circumstances, she proves a protective and self-sacrificing mother who loves her children. Linda Loman steps out of her stereotype to reveal a mother who stands up to her sons, refusing to perpetuate unrealistic expectations of women’s physicality, and encourages kindness through the care she exhibits to her family. Thus, this thesis argues that when fully analyzed, these representations offer complex messages about motherhood that can broaden students’ understanding of the role of the mother in American society.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In Texas, the Texas Education Agency sets the curricular standards for the public school system, and in the eleventh grade, students encounter their first in-depth study of American literature in English III classes. There are many dramatic works that could be considered for incorporation in developing solid curriculums for eleventh grade literature classes as teachers seek to teach students to effectively analyze the themes and characteristics in different periods of modern American drama (Texas Education Agency). However, when choosing dramatic works for study, Texas English teachers most often select canonical texts suggested by educators, policy setters, and curriculum management tools adopted by school districts. Two of the most commonly suggested dramatic texts for study in Texas eleventh grade English classes are The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) and Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller (1915-2005) (CSCOPE).

The above mentioned dramatic pieces can be found in many textbooks approved by the State Textbook Adoption Committee, anthologies commonly used in eleventh grade English classrooms, and school bookrooms across Texas which undoubtedly increases the popularity of curricular incorporation. However, both of these plays were written in the middle of the twentieth century when accepted gendered and familial roles proved different than in twenty-first century American society. Thus, the study of The Glass Menagerie, first produced in 1944 and set in the same year with reflections on events in 1937, and Death of a Salesman, first produced in 1949 and set in the same year with memories of events in 1933, may be communicating more about the place of the mother in the family and society to contemporary public school students than educators have fully considered.
The purpose of the current study is to examine the mother characters in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* with a critical lens. As a public school educator certified to teach both English and Theatre Arts in Texas secondary schools, I recognize the importance of including these two, award-winning, high-quality, engaging, canonical texts in the junior-level English curriculum. Yet it is also essential to determine the broader implications of what teachers may be communicating to twenty-first century students in a cultural sense through the study of this literature. This leads to the primary research question of my thesis: What messages about motherhood do Texas educators offer current eleventh grade English students through the representations of mothers studied in dramatic literature?

**Method**

In this qualitative study, I conduct a literary analysis of Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* as two of the most commonly taught pieces of dramatic literature to Texas high school juniors. Specifically, I analyze the representations and positioning of the mother characters in both texts in order to determine the messages that educators communicate to students about motherhood through the study of these mid-twentieth century plays.

Deborah Appleman’s 2000 text, *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*, and her 2012 article, “What We Teach and Why: Contemporary Literary Theory and Adolescents,” suggest a specific critical theoretical framework for my analysis. Appleman encourages: “Our study of texts is deeply intertwined with the social world in which the text was produced and the social worlds in which we read them” (“What We Teach” 8). Through encountering literature, students will develop an ideology, determining what is important to them, how they categorize people, and how they see male and female roles (2). As
Appleman notes, French literary critic Viviane Forrester effectively argues that men’s visions, or “what men’s eyes see,” still currently dominates the analysis of contemporary literature (Critical Encounters 75). Thus, Appleman reinforces the importance of utilizing an appropriate critical lens that yields more inclusive perspectives when analyzing and instructing literature, such as feminist theory (75).

Appleman posits that “theory provides us with a way of recognizing and naming other visions: how they shape and inform the way we read texts, how we respond to others, [and] how we live our lives” (Critical Encounters 75). A feminist theoretical lens helps illuminate the intricacies of gender—how women are portrayed in literature and the ways in which the text embraces or confronts the roles that men and women play in the real world (3). The broad academic discipline of feminist theory encourages the individual to pay close attention to how portrayals of women reinforce or undermine stereotypes (170). As supported by Appleman’s findings, I employ the work of multiple feminist scholars in order to analyze the mother characters in the plays considered in this thesis, thereby narrowing the focus to get a clearer vision of what educators could be leading their students to believe about mothers and motherhood. By using the theoretical perspectives of a variety of scholars in the discipline, I am able to interrogate the presented gendered stereotypes in the literature, while also considering the economic, historical, and social intricacies affecting the characters of Amanda Wingfield in The Glass Menagerie and Linda Loman in Death of a Salesman.

Significance of the Study

Texas public education has been at the forefront of the political and public landscape in recent years via a perceived focus on standardized test scores and students’ abilities to perform well on state and national examinations. The push for testing core subjects often drives school
officials to encourage students to choose electives that reinforce the tested subject matter. As a result, without the benefit of electives that focus on the social and practical elements of American culture, current students may likely encounter the most thoughtful consideration of their places in society and the family structure through the study of American literature in eleventh grade English classes, as stories reflect, shape, or distort our understanding of individuals and societies in the real world (Pirie 15).

Both The Glass Menagerie and Death of a Salesman are found on eleventh grade reading lists in most Texas public school districts. The plays are also recommended on suggested reading lists compiled by numerous educational experts. For example, E.D. Hirsch, a leading proponent of classic studies, and the developer of Core Knowledge, a curriculum program that focuses on foundational knowledge and a broad humanities grounding, believes in the importance of a common body of knowledge (Core Knowledge). As such, he includes in his list for cultural literacy Miller's Death of a Salesman (Clark 49-50). Additionally, both of the playwrights and their works are documented on the College Board's reading list for the English III Advanced Placement class, a high school course that an academically advanced student can complete and, with the appropriate grade on the final test, receive college credit (College Board). Moreover, the plays in my study are also included on the curriculum list of CSCOPE, a curriculum management tool that is currently used in 875 Texas school districts (CSCOPE). The wide-spread use of CSCOPE in school systems across the state makes its impact on curriculum selection for English III classes undeniable.

Bruce Pirie, author of Reshaping High School English, argues that what is taught regarding literary works in public schools has historically been heavily influenced by study guides, editors' introductions to school texts, and questions at the ends of chapters (14), which
often do not readily include considerations of gendered representations. While it is important to teach a variety of aspects regarding dramatic literature that influential teaching tools tend to address, it is equally important that educators not lose sight of how these works may speak to students about navigating life, forming meaningful relationships, and viewing roles in human cultural groups.

Given the importance of English III dramatic literature courses in helping form many students’ perceptions about societal and familial roles in America, the prominence of *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* in Texas eleventh grade English curriculums, and the lack of gendered interrogation offered by traditionally based teaching tools, the current study can broaden the knowledge of Texas eleventh grade English educators. By illuminating what these mid-twentieth century plays communicate to twenty-first century students about familial relationships, the roles of mothers, and how human beings relate to one another, this thesis holds the potential to significantly influence and enhance instructional practices in Texas public education.

Chapter Breakdown

In the second chapter of this thesis, I provide a review of representative, major, scholarly publications in order to situate my study. There has been much written about the two canonical plays addressed in this thesis as they are classic, award-winning, American dramas. However, there are no existing major publications that analyze what messages that twenty-first century educators may be sending to students through the study of the mother roles in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman*. Thus, my study contributes much needed findings to the current body of published literature.
In Chapter Three, I analyze the character of Amanda Wingfield in Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*. The play is framed through the memories of Tom Wingfield, remembering his life as a stifled poet trapped in a warehouse job while trying to support his mother and rather fragile sister, Laura. Tom’s mother, Amanda, who has been abandoned by her husband, is desperately trying to raise the family’s status. She focuses her attention on her daughter, Laura, who is as delicate as the glass animals that she so lovingly collects and maintains. Amanda bullies Tom into helping his sister find a “gentleman caller” (Williams 8) in hopes that this might provide a more viable future than the business school classes that Laura’s shyness prevented her from completing. Tom invites Jim, his ambitious friend from the warehouse, to come to the apartment for dinner. Amanda is overjoyed when she thinks that a relationship may form between Jim and her daughter, but her hopes are dashed when Jim reveals that he has a fiancée. Amanda turns on Tom, blaming him for being inattentive and selfish; and in his final monologue he states that though he felt guilty about leaving his sister, he had to escape Amanda’s control in order to build a life of his own.

A commanding force throughout *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda represents the stereotype of the “domineering mother” (Presley 37). She relentlessly pushes her children to achieve what she deems to be a better life for the family. Her attempts to control every aspect of her children’s existences, coupled with her tendency to try to live through Tom and Laura, compromise the relationship between Amanda and her children. Yet through contextualizing Amanda’s actions as reactions to societally imposed challenges, a more complex character is revealed. She dominates her children; yet she does so, because she desperately wants for them to lead successful lives.
Chapter Four includes an analysis of the character Linda Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama®, the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award®, and the Antoinette Perry Award® for the best American play of the 1949 season. *Death of a Salesman* focuses on Willy Loman, a Brooklyn salesman struggling with finances and mental health at the end of his career. Always supported by his wife, Linda, Willy has been chasing the American dream of wealth and prosperity throughout his lifetime. The Loman’s eldest son, Biff, has come home to regroup after personal defeats. Their second son, Happy, has returned to his childhood room to reconnect and reminisce with his brother. Neither brother is settled with a family or home of his own; yet rather than accepting responsibility for their own actions, they continue to blame their parents for their problems. Relayed through a series of flashbacks and dream sequences woven into the action, the family drama unfolds. Willy finally views his $20,000 life insurance policy as a “last-resort” plan to provide for his family and is successful in his last attempt at suicide.

In many ways, Linda embodies the stereotype of the “quintessential housewife” through a seemingly blind dedication to her role as a wife and mother (Yao, Zhou and Long 34). Throughout *Death of a Salesman*, Linda often suffers in silence, repeatedly darning socks and holding off the creditors. For much of the play, she attempts to keep her family together by hiding the truth about financial struggles and Willy’s ailing health from her sons, and attempting to protect the members of her family from themselves. Yet she is striving to meet the culturally imposed standards of the time period; and Miller crafts the character to work against the superficially read stereotype at times® seemingly to highlight the complexities of restrictively imposed gendered roles within a family.
In the Conclusion, I summarize my major findings regarding the messages that educators communicate to twenty-first century high school juniors about the mother role via the study of *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* in the Texas public school system. I also describe what I perceive to be the implications of those findings and offer suggestions for future research.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

As award-winning, canonical works, Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* have been analyzed and critiqued by many scholars. No major scholarly literature has been produced, however, about what representations of motherhood teachers communicate to adolescents through the study of these plays. Darlene Larson and Patricia Wright explore the advantages of assisting high school students in the interpretation of sexist stereotypes of women in classic texts in their short article, “Teaching Anti-Woman Classics with a Clear Conscience;” yet they do not specifically interrogate *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* in depth. As reviewed in this chapter, published literature exists regarding approaches to teaching complicated character representations in the high school classroom in addition to separate texts analyzing Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman*; both types of literature prove relevant in situating the current study.

Larson and Wright challenge educators to lead students in exploring sex role stereotypes as presented in classic literature. The authors posit that in real life, women’s personal qualities would be expected to be scattered across a wide scale from mindless to intelligent, devious to straightforward, and dependent to independent (71). Yet the scholars contend that stereotypes are a part of literature, often simply because authors cannot fully develop every character given the brevity of the medium. Thus, when stereotypes appear, Larson and Wright suggest that educators encourage students to analyze the work to explore the author’s purpose for utilizing the stereotype (70). In addition to analyzing the stereotypes represented in the literature, the authors contend that it is equally important to highlight for students when the character no longer
exemplifies the stereotype (71). Larson and Wright point out that because stereotypes exist in literature, students need to be made aware of what stereotypes are and how it focuses attention on only a portion of people's true selves (71).

While stereotypes present a one-dimensional, often clichéd view of a character, stereotypical characters in literature can also be interpreted as symbols. In *Literature, Education, and Cultural Literacy*, Walter H. Clark explores educator E.D. Hirsch's theory that a shared body of knowledge is crucial to communication and that students must be introduced to classic literature and the symbolism associated with these works. Hirsch supports his theory through a compilation of classic literary texts that he believes should be included in the curriculum of English classes in American educational institutions. In his article, Clark reinforces that the study of classic texts should include in-depth analyses of characters and situations in order to know what these texts may say to students (54). Clark supports Hirsch's contention that the explicit meanings of a piece of writing are the tip of an iceberg of meaning; the larger part lies below the surface of the text and is composed of the reader's own relevant knowledge (53).

In her article, *What is the family? Is it Universal?* Diana Gittins contends that society's traditional definitions of family are translated through the dominant cultural norms, and therefore mid-century Western definitions of family and mothering are based on a patriarchal society. The family, as a system, is embedded with symbols, many reflecting the patriarchal ideology of America's Western roots (73). There are a number of important and culturally specific beliefs that make up a strong symbol-system that includes family (73). Through her examination of mothering in patriarchal society, Gittins clarifies that in contemporary American society, the
mother is central to the family system if motherhood is taken to mean both bearing and rearing children (71).

Much of the literature concerning the gender roles portrayed in these two plays reinforces that the mother characters must be defined according to the traditions of their respective eras. As both of these plays were written in the mid-twentieth century and reflect upon earlier decades, it is important to note that the role of motherhood changed as the Industrial Revolution altered the construct of American families. During the Industrial Revolution at the turn of the twentieth century, many families abandoned agrarian lifestyles and relocated to urban centers to find employment in factories. In their text, *Family Life in Mid-Twentieth Century America*, Marilyn Coleman, Lawrence Ganong, and Kelly Warzinik, explore the many changes endured by the American family structure. According to Coleman, Ganong, and Warzinik, the myth of motherhood evolved as men and women developed different spheres for work and fulfillment (137). As men worked in the factories during the day, and women became the sole caregivers of the children, the sentiment of “intensive mothering” (the idea that mothers prove the ideal, preferred caretakers of children) became the societal norm (137). Labor intensive childrearing replaced the practice of the uninvolved mother of the nineteenth century, and the “myth of motherhood,” or the belief that mothering is instinctual and fulfilling redefined the mother’s role in the family unit (137). These ideologies affected how Americans thought about mothers and how mothers thought about themselves (137).

In analyzing the roles of Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, it is important to consider the views of motherhood in historical context. Bonny Ball Copenhaver’s dissertation, “The Portrayal of Gender and a Description of Gender Roles in Selected American Modern and Post Modern Plays,” studies these and other plays in
terms of gendered representations from a feminist perspective. Although Copenhaver does not consider the plays in terms of literature for the high school classroom, she clarifies the importance of contextualizing Amanda Wingfield and Linda Loman for all readers in order to understand the characters' actions and representations. Copenhaver emphasizes that these mother characters try to fulfill roles that would be considered traditional and accepted for their respective cultures (140).

L. Bailey McDaniel, in the article "Domestic Tragedies: The Feminist Dilemma in Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman," claims that Linda is viewed as a powerless woman that exists only to support the three male protagonists. McDaniel suggests that in the middle-class patriarchal setting of Miller's Death of a Salesman, Linda surfaces as a two-dimensional pseudo masochist who rarely if ever acts out of any interest that does not benefit Willy (23). Linda's devotion to her husband and to his delusions is highlighted by her actions throughout the text. She is determined to maintain the illusion of Willy's success, indiscriminate of the consequences of these actions (23).

In "Contextualizing Death of a Salesman," S. H. Smith analyzes the subordination of Linda as a result of the constraints of the patriarchal predominance of the time of the work. Smith determines that Linda manifests differently than the male characters in Death of a Salesman in that she offers no philosophy and no opinion on how life ought to be lived. Her passive, attentive domesticity places her in direct subordination to Willy and her two sons. She does not talk about herself in lieu of focusing on the men in the family (31).

In "Confined Spirits' Struggle: Housewife-mother Figures in Arthur Miller's Early Plays," Xiaojuan Yao, Tiannan Zhou, and Yufei Long explore the depiction of Miller's housewife figures through a feminist lens while historically contextualizing the characters. The
writers specifically analyze the representation of Linda Loman in context of the patriarchal society of the play’s setting. In this piece, Yao, Zhou, and Long further posit that Linda directly reflects the stereotype of the “quintessential housewife” (34).

Copenhaver clarifies that Linda indeed displays characteristics that are in keeping with the traditional image of a passive and dependent woman . . . [who] provides comfort to Willy when he is feeling low, and as the center of Willy’s domestic world, she cooks, cleans, does the laundry, and is the mother to his children (141). While in many ways, Linda’s positioning represents a romantic nostalgia for a time when men were in charge of homes and were the main financial providers, the play also lends itself to the interpretation that these rigid gender roles are restrictive and damaging (138). Linda has lived a life according to her gender’s dictates: she waited at home, comforted her husband and children, and was the glue of the household . . . [and] received no credit for her place within the family (142). Though Linda is a stalwart for her family, her position earns no respect (153).

In his dissertation, “Staging and Upstaging Revolt: The Maternal Function in Twentieth Century Drama,” Thomas Blake examines the role of the “dutiful mother” in twentieth century drama, exploring the relationships between maternal figures and their children through a psychoanalytical lens. Blake presents the archetype of the “dutiful mother” who unconditionally yields to the cultural practices of her time. As the dutiful mother, Linda devotes herself entirely to her husband’s symbolic world (26). As Copenhaver additionally clarifies, Linda cleans up messes and patiently helps Willy on with his jacket, day after day, as a symbol of domesticity, making sure that there are no holes in his armor so he will be protected as he ventures into the world (142).
Blake further claims that when viewed as the dutiful mother, Linda Loman and Amanda Wingfield both illustrate this archetype, albeit manifesting in differing ways (1). Linda perceives her husband as patriarch and head of the family and enslaves herself to paternal authority rather than confront his mental instability (27). In Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda embodies a mother figure grounded firmly in the traditions and values of her time (3). Rather than appearing consumed with protecting the men in her life like Linda, Amanda views her duty to be that of successfully procuring a husband for her daughter, Laura. Copenhaver adds that as a girl in her Southern town of Blue Mountain, Mississippi, Amanda learned that the most important skills involved in accomplishing this task relied on amusing conversation, nimble wit, and a beautiful face—traits that she tries to teach Laura (132). As she manipulates her son, Tom, into bringing home a potential husband for Laura, Amanda engages in completing the more traditional gendered tasks of preparing the home and cooking all the while accrediting those accomplishments to her daughter in the hopes that Laura will be seen as a good potential wife (127). In *Family, Drama, and American Dreams*, Scanlan conducts a comparison of Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*, highlighting that Amanda’s actions seek to instill the traditional patriarchal familial roles with which she has been raised (168). As Copenhaver further clarifies, Amanda views the world through a genteel Southern way of life and in order to understand her character, it is important to understand her ideals (125).

Scanlan labels Amanda as reflective of the domineering mother stereotype—the mother who smothers her children, trying to direct all aspects of their lives (168). McDaniel further describes Amanda as a monster maniac (29). In addition, in Joseph Krutch’s chapter in *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams*, he reviews the premier performance of *The Glass
Menagerie, and suggests that in Amanda, Williams has created a character that is nagging and unreasonable (19). It is clear that Amanda tries to live vicariously through her daughter in The Glass Menagerie, but at the same time, her struggles and over-bearing manner reflect a great need to provide security for her family. McDaniel further clarifies that in the complexity of Amanda, Williams gave audiences a middle-age wife-mother that was anything but passive and uninteresting (29).

Scanlan adds that both plays are psychoanalytically oriented and explore the power struggles inherent in a family system. When comparing The Glass Menagerie to Death of a Salesman, Copenhaver additionally posits that the quest for success and the chase of the American dream are central to conflicts that arise within the family structures conflicts that affect the actions, and therefore the representations, of the characters in the scripts (152). Linda has been condemned for her preoccupation with financial stability for the family, and Scanlan suggests that her fear of materialistic instability prevents Willy from pursuing a career for which he may be better suited (154).

In his article Point of View in Death of a Salesman, Brian Parker analyzes Miller’s use of realism and expressionism to comment on American values. Parker argues that while Linda’s words may sound as if she completely supports her husband, she discourages Willy from following his brother to Alaska in order to pursue what she views as a risky business venture; and she also supports Willy’s self-deceit concerning his sales abilities (36). Parker further clarifies that the play represents traditional American values, and in doing so, Willy and Linda both value financial success (25). As Scanlan additionally offers, Willy’s inability to accept reality, coupled with his unwavering preoccupation with achieving the American dream, has a profound impact on his relationships with family members and creates a dichotomy for Linda.
In addition to mothering her sons, McDaniel contends that Linda must also serve as a maternal role for Willy by protecting and caring for her "impulsive and misinformed male counterpart" (27).

While both women struggle to maintain the ideal middle class lifestyle, McDaniel suggests that *The Glass Menagerie* depicts a family dealing with quickening failure to achieve the American Dream, and *Death of a Salesman* is concerned with a family's loss of status (29). As Scanlan notes, Miller explores the relations between family and society for answers concerning the challenges of the American family, while Williams concentrates on making the "individual's painful relationship to his family vivid and theatrically evocative" (157).

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda has functioned as a single parent for sixteen years. As a result, she has developed the traditionally assumed masculine characteristic of aggression in order to personally and economically survive in a patriarchal society (Copenhaver 126). As Copenhaver suggests, Amanda was prepared to assume the more "traditional role of the entertaining wife, [dependent] upon her husband to provide an income to support the family," but her husband's abandonment of the family thrust her into a more dominant role for which she proved unprepared (126). Thomas Blake notes that without "her own notions of ethical conduct," Amanda relies on the Southern patriarchal culture even when this reliance undermines her own agency and restricts her daughter's development (4). Copenhaver adds that these strict gender roles are "stifling to the characters and behaviors occur in reaction to those constraints" (135).

As classic and popular texts, *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* will continue to be studied in eleventh grade Texas English classes, not only as works of dramatic literature, but also as representations of the American family. It is important that educators
prove keenly aware of the messages that they communicate when guiding students through the analyses of these works. In this regard, the currant thesis contributes in-depth study of the mother roles in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman*, thereby offering findings to the body of existing scholarly literature.
Chapter 3

DOMINEERING MOTHER?: AMANDA WINGFIELD IN *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*

In her article, "Tennessee Williams and the Predicament of Women," Louise Blackwell suggests that Tennessee Williams has chosen to feature women as major characters in his plays more often than men; she continues by noting that Amanda Wingfield, the mother in his play, *The Glass Menagerie*, is one of his most memorable (9). Though Tom Wingfield is the narrator of the play, and as such, it is his memories from 1937 that are brought to life in 1944, it is his mother, Amanda, who leaves the greatest impression in the minds of many readers. First produced in 1944, Williams based *The Glass Menagerie* on a previously written 1943 short story, "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" and a script entitled *The Gentleman Caller* which he completed in 1941 (Bray iv). Williams' play highlights Amanda's struggles to hold together her family after being abandoned by her husband. As a result, she has been charged with raising her two children. Now adults, her children provide significant challenges which she must negotiate. Tom is desperate to escape from the mundane existence of a warehouse job that he keeps to help provide for the family; and Amanda's daughter, Laura, possesses a foot deformity and a debilitating shyness that are almost more than Amanda can handle. Even though Tom's employment has eased the need for Amanda to function as sole provider for the family, she is still compelled to ensure her children's security. She attempts to assist her children in ways that can be interpreted as domineering: enrolling Laura in a business college against her will, ensuring that Tom does not read books Amanda deems inappropriate by returning them to the library, and demanding that Tom provide a potential mate for his sister (Scanlan 166). This chapter analyzes the role of Amanda Wingfield as intersecting with the stereotypical
Amanda’s domineering mother in *The Glass Menagerie*, and will explore what representations of motherhood teachers offer students in a high school classroom from reading the play.

Though the Wingfields reside in St. Louis, Missouri, the remnants of Amanda’s youth in the Mississippi Delta are woven through the play. Amanda reminisces about her gentleman callers on the veranda of a faded plantation, and her Southern, hyper-feminine drawl hangs throughout the piece (Williams 7). While Amanda is limited in employment choices in 1937, she earns money by demonstrating ladies’ undergarments at the local department store and humiliating herself through overbearing attempts to sell women’s magazine subscriptions to her fellow members of the Daughters of the American Republic (Bigsby 34). Tom’s salary at the shoe factory is designated for necessary household bills, yet Amanda uses the payments from her part-time employment to fund attempts to secure Laura’s future. Amanda’s attempt to aid Laura involves enrolling her daughter in Rubicam’s Business College; Amanda’s efforts fail because of Laura’s intense shyness. Subsequently, Amanda then uses the money that she earns for small improvements to the apartment, such as a new sofa and a floor lamp, to enhance what she deems as Laura’s desirability as a mate (Williams 43). In Amanda’s ancestral Southern home, a woman was largely judged on how she kept the house, and Amanda’s improvements to the décor of the Wingfield’s tenement apartment are intended to reflect Laura’s ability to maintain a suitable home for her potential husband.

Amanda wishes for success and happiness for her children but seems incapable of seeing them in a realistic light. In pushing her children toward a future that is based on the definition of success from her past, Amanda becomes aggressive. She proves desperate to aid her children in gaining independence, and that desperation manifests as a domineering mother in many ways. As Williams’s scholar, C.W.E. Bigsby offers, Amanda’s problems are the old, universal ones of
the human heart in its search for reality and meaning of life, yet her actions serve to alienate her children (9). *The Glass Menagerie* problematizes the concepts of love, duty, dreams, and entrapments. According to Felicia Londré, the script can be seen as a play about conflict between generations, posing the question that Williams later articulated in his *Memoirs* and hinted at in several other plays: Why do women bring children into the world and then destroy them? (73).

Tennessee Williams admitted that his family and personal history often influenced his plays (Londré 26). When asked if his mother, Miss Edwina, appeared in any of his plays, he replied: In all of them I guess. I must say she contributed a lot to my writing—her forms of expression, for example. I still find her totally mystifying and frightening. It’s best we stay away from our mothers (Londré 27). However, Londré suggests that no other American playwright has analyzed women with such subtlety and compassion, and Amanda is no exception (23).

Although many of her actions reinforce the perception of the domineering mother, Amanda proves more than this stereotype in *The Glass Menagerie* (Presley 37). Amanda’s plight might be interpreted as an indictment of the 1930s American patriarchal society and the challenging economic realities that she faces as a single parent. In Williams’s character introduction in the play, he describes her as

a little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place. Her characterization must be carefully created, not copied from type. She is not a paranoiac, but her life is paranoia. There is much to admire in Amanda, and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at. Certainly she has
endurance and a kind of heroism, and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person. (xviii)

At different times in the script, Amanda shows traditionally assumed male characteristics, such as “strength and logic” as well as more assumed feminine qualities such as “passivity and dependency” (Copenhaver 126). Amanda struggles to negotiate these various, often competing and conflicting, qualities in her role as a single mother during the 1930s; her seemingly erratic and obsessive behavior is largely a reaction to the challenging social and economic circumstances that she faces.

In order to analyze the mother role as portrayed by Amanda with junior level English students, it is crucial that educators historically and culturally contextualize the literary work to offer students in-depth understanding of the character. Appleman contends that without contextualization through a critical lens, students will “simply cover . . . literature as cultural content or focus . . . exclusively on the skills of reading and writing” (138). Through an exploration of women’s places in society in relation to the historical setting of the play, students will be better able to analyze Amanda’s actions and reactions in regard to her children.

As the economy collapsed during the Great Depression, so did the illusion that there was a guarantee to continue an upwardly mobile future path. In *The Glass Menagerie*, the Wingfield family faces the moment of crisis when the characters can no longer maintain their delusions. By the end of the play, Amanda must face the realizations that she is no longer the Southern belle and that there will be no gentleman callers for Laura (Presley 59). Further, Tom may eventually fulfill his dream to travel the globe by joining the merchant marines; however, it will not be without consequences, as he must leave his sister behind.
The Glass Menagerie becomes an analogy for the struggle that American families experience in challenging economic conditions (57). The apartment in which the Wingfields reside speaks to the change in the economy of the time. Instead of a detached middle-class home, or the grand plantation style house of Amanda’s youth, the family lives in one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower middle class population (Williams 3). In his description of this apartment building, Williams continues to express his opinion that these buildings are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation, and that the quest for individual identity is wrought with difficulty (Williams 3).

The American family in the 1930s, stripped of its economic power and unable to support multiple generations, became the base from which people left to seek their fortunes (Scanlan 18). Throughout the play, Tom struggles to free himself from the economic and emotional demands of his family, longing to leave the St. Louis apartment, travel, pursue his intellectual dream of becoming a writer, and establish his own identity. Yet Amanda reminds him that escape may not be the answer, for in these trying times we live in, all that we have to cling to is each other (31). Amanda fears Tom’s disappearance and the resulting loss of financial support and emotional security. Thus, the farther that he retreats away from the family, the more that she tries to control him.

Tom spends many evenings at the movies, using the fantasy world of film to alleviate the frustrations of his current situation. His frequent outings worry Amanda, and she becomes frantic at the thought of him leaving. The two characters struggle for control as Amanda tries to cling to the known security of the family unit, while Tom strives to claim his independence:
AMANDA: What right have you got to jeopardize your job? Jeopardize the security of us all? How do you think we'd manage if you were... TOM: Listen! You think I'm crazy about the warehouse? (He bends fiercely toward her slight figure.) You think I'm in love with Continental Shoemakers? You think I want to spend fifty-five years down there in that celotex interior! with flourescent—tubes! Look! I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains than go back mornings! I go! Every time you come in yelling that Goddamn Rise and Shine!” “Rise and Shine!” I say to myself, How lucky dead people are! But I get up. I go! For sixty-five dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being ever! And you say self... self's all I ever think of. Why listen, if self is what I thought of, Mother, I'd be where he is...GONE! (23)

No longer able to identify as a wife given her husband’s abandonment, Amanda defines her identity through her role as mother to her children. The possibility of Tom leaving the family threatens not only the financial well-being of Amanda and Laura, but the fragile definition of selfhood that Amanda has created.

In 1930s American society, the father was most commonly deemed the head of the household, working outside of the home to provide financial resources, while the mother stayed at home to care for the household and children. With the absence of her husband, Amanda has been forced to simultaneously perform both roles to some degree. The possibility of Tom leaving represents to Amanda that she would have to fully assume the father’s responsibilities of becoming sole financial provider for the family. While she evidently accomplished this for many years while raising her children, her cultural conditioning leaves her frightened and
panicked at having to again assume this uncomfortable, and what she undoubtedly views to be unnatural, role.

Feminist theorist Carol Gilligan suggests that there are two distinct moral systems: the male representing the \textit{ideal of perfection} which supports the idea that there is a clear and perfect answer to any moral dilemma; and the female representing an \textit{ideal of care} which places relationships above rules in regard to moral decisions (Faludi 340). As a single mother, Amanda again must negotiate both of these conflicting roles. She cares for her children and desperately clings to her past genteel upbringing where hyper-femininity was expected—her primary obligation to charm and entertain guests on a Sunday afternoon. However, due to her husband’s absence in the family, her efforts at fulfilling a more masculine role as well manifests in forceful, often confused decision-making, which can be interpreted as extremely overbearing and insensitive. Regardless of this negatively perceived enactment, Amanda has done her best to negotiate the conflicting social roles while raising her children. If Tom leaves the family, however, she will be forced to fully assume the male position in the family unit, which would successfully negate her female self, which she so immensely prizes.

In \textit{The Glass Menagerie}, Amanda spends a great deal of time and energy making herself attractive for men and encourages her daughter to do the same (14). She reminds Laura that it is important to remain fresh and pretty for potential callers (7). Amanda seeks to embrace her femininity and to validate herself in claiming that as she was growing up, it was helpful to be possessed of a pretty face and a graceful figure and that she was not slighted in either respect (8). As a young woman, Amanda made the most of her resources, including a beautiful face and a shapely figure, to achieve what she viewed as the ultimate assurance of security the procurement of a husband (Copenhaver 132). While Amanda’s marriage did not prove
successful, her upbringing in a patriarchal society and her cultural conditioning reinforces this belief to her. Thus, given Amanda’s ability to marry, she sees these attributes as the most logical goals for Laura in order to secure a stable future.

As the visit from Jim, Laura’s gentleman caller who Tom has arranged to come to the apartment for dinner, draws near, Amanda’s emphasis on the importance of Laura’s feminine physical appearance exacerbates. For example, Amanda produces two powder puffs, wraps them in handkerchiefs and stuffs them into Laura’s bosom (Williams 52). Laura is not prepared for this physical change:

**LAURA:** Mother, what are you doing?

**AMANDA:** They call them “Gay Deceivers”!

**LAURA:** I won’t wear them!

**AMANDA:** You will!

**LAURA:** Why should I?

**AMANDA:** Because to be painfully honest, your chest is flat.

**LAURA:** You make it seem like we were setting a trap.

**AMANDA:** All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be. (52)

While Laura has little understanding as to why someone would want to “trap” a man into a relationship, Amanda sees the move as necessary and expected of a woman if she is to win a man’s attention (Copenhaver 133). Furthermore, Amanda believes that it is her job as mother to teach her daughter the best ways to accentuate those physical attributes that may encourage a sexual desire. During her youth, Amanda absorbed this “darker side of the feminine archetype” in which women believed that they must lure men into relationships (Thompson 18).
Amanda wants to freeze time and remain in an era in which she understands the rules of society (Bigsby 38). It is a disappointment in her present reality that creates the woman who harps on her children’s manners, manipulates their decisions, and is an embarrassment and infuriation to them (22). It is not only her physical attributes that she wishes to retain, but a time when flight bills get paid, [and] where the verandah appropriates the fire escape (Bray xiii). Clinging to her youth serves as a means of escape from her challenging circumstances (xiii).

When the harsh reality of economic and patriarchal constraints become too much for her to bear, Amanda retreats into her Southern belle persona, casting the dim apartment in a gentler light of a rose silk shade (Williams 51). She leaves behind the reality of her shabby and old self, and relives the days of the cotillions and rooms filled with jonquils supplied by her abundance of gentlemen callers (Krutch 19). She softens her tone and fills the apartment with girlish giggles, while encouraging her children to engage in pleasant pastimes and sip lemonade. Amanda’s Southern upbringing prepared her to assume the more traditional role of the entertaining wife, dependent on a husband to provide financial support (Copenhaver 126). The gentlemen of her past have become giants among men for Amanda, because they provided for their families, and she longs for that protection (124).

As Amanda seeks to fulfill the uncomfortable, masculine role of head of the household, her parenting becomes more intensive and desperate (Hays 489). The 1930s patriarchal structure leaves only two choices for a mother such as Amanda in regard to her daughter: assure that she finds a husband, or prepare her for low wage employment. When Amanda attempts to introduce Laura to a suitable partner at a church social fail due to Laura’s anxiety and shyness, Amanda fails a second time at providing stability for her daughter through business school, as Laura’s hands shook so that she couldn’t hit the right keys . . . [she] was sick at the stomach and
had to be carried into the washroom (Williams 14). At the discovery of Laura’s abandonment of her studies at the business college, Amanda sobs and crosses slowly to the wall and removes the diagram of the typewriter keyboard . . . staring at it sweetly and sorrowfully—then bites her lips and tears it in two pieces” (12). She is driven by an economic reality that she may not be able to financially provide for herself and Laura should Tom choose to leave the family as did his father before him. Amanda has also so closely aligned her own identity with that of her daughter’s success that she is distraught; as she tellingly states to Laura: “All of our plans . . . my hopes and ambitions for you are unattainable (14).

After Amanda realizes that her daughter will not be employable, Tom reflects that the idea of getting a gentleman caller for Laura began to play a more and more important part in Mother’s calculations. It became an obsession (19). Due to Amanda’s fear for the future, she manipulates and bargains with Tom requiring him to assist her in locating a husband for Laura; for if he does so, she will release him from what she sees as his obligation to the family:

AMANDA: I mean as soon as Laura has got somebody to take care of her, married, a home of her own, independent why, then you’ll be free to go wherever you please, on land, on sea, whichever the wind blows you! But until that time you’ve got to look out for your sister. (35)

Clearly, Amanda is searching for security, for herself and her family, and she is willing to do almost anything to meet that need (Bigsby 32).

Amanda also repeatedly tries to manipulate her daughter through guilt unabashedly expresses aggravation with Laura throughout the play. Her frustration with Laura is a veiled frustration with her own inability to provide and fulfill the traditionally assumed male role in the household. She questions her daughter: “What are we going to do, what is going to become of
us, what is the future? Amanda’s traditional cultural upbringing has her convinced that she and Laura will be unable to financially survive without the help of a man. As Amanda encourages Laura to seek a husband, she continually refers to their plans and what is to become of us. Her terminology indicates that Amanda cannot imagine herself without a male partner of some kind. Thus, with the fear of Tom’s departure, she must unite herself with her daughter in finding a male partner counterpart—ultimately living through her child.

Although the characterization of the mother role in *The Glass Menagerie* is generally perceived as unsympathetic, Amanda’s love for her children does not go completely unaddressed (Londré 67). During Tom’s final monologue, Williams finally calls attention to Amanda’s softer side, as he highlights that her dignity and tragic beauty appears as she gently and gracefully, almost dancelike” comforts her daughter. Amanda wipes away Laura’s tears, brushes her hair out of her eyes, and restores her daughter’s dignity in response to her fright at the final fight between Tom and Amanda (Williams 96).

There is no doubt that throughout the last six decades that *The Glass Menagerie* has been studied in the high school classroom, Amanda has been assumed to be a domineering, controlling, shrew of a mother. For example in reviewing the answers to short answer study guides from Mary Collins’ *LitPlan Guide for Teachers: The Glass Menagerie*, little positive is said about Amanda’s role as a mother. She is characterized as a nag that ruins dinner by giving constant directions, and her reminiscing about gentleman callers is discussed as incessant talk . . . that is of no benefit (15). Further, the double standard of patriarchal society is evident in Collins’ study guide when she offers an answer as to what angers Tom:

Amanda has taken away from Tom any small privacy he had. He is especially disturbed because he pays all the household bills while she attempts to control
every aspect of his life. He is working a job he hates to support his mother and sister, and yet his mother still attempts to control him. (16)

There is no mention of any sacrifice Amanda may have made in order to raise her children without the help of a husband in the teaching resource. Collins additionally defends the father that abandoned his wife and small children, justifying his actions by stating that he merely "followed where his instincts led him." (17)

Given that traditional teaching tools as exemplified above characterize Amanda as an extremely negative representation of a mother, it remains important that teachers recognize the additional underlying messages about motherhood that exist in the text. Through historical and social contextualization, teachers may guide students to understand Amanda as a multi-faceted character, desperate to provide security for her family amidst challenging circumstances. As a result, Amanda may be revealed as a complex character, as opposed to the one-dimensional stereotype of the domineering mother, thereby reinforcing students’ broader understanding of motherhood in American society.
Chapter 4

QUINTESSENTIAL HOUSEWIFE?: LINDA LOMAN IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* is considered an American classic, and according to Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times*, is a “perennial produced around the world, from Baltimore to Beijing” (1). The play was first produced on Broadway in 1949 for a run of 742 performances and is universally understood as Miller’s most important work (Novick 2-6). Christopher Innes further notes that *Death of a Salesman* is “the one modern play on every high school English curriculum” (61). With its central theme of family conflict, the play appeals to a wide audience base (Austin 47). In his familial structure, Miller portrays only one female role in the family—Linda Loman as a long suffering mother and largely silent partner (Austin 48). Linda has been described as the “quintessential housewife” due to the fact that she serves her husbands and sons, and is limited to domestic duties by societal norms (Yao, Zhou and Long 33). This chapter analyzes the character of Linda Loman in her role as mother to determine how her choices are influenced by patriarchal society and how her positioning in the play reinforces and works against the gendered stereotype of the “quintessential housewife”; through this analysis, the potential representation of a mother offered to high school students through studying *Death of a Salesman* can be explored.

American playwrights have a long history of using the family unit as fodder for their crafts. Yet as Esther Jackson notes in *Death of a Salesman: Tragic Myth in the Modern Theatre*, Miller’s play is “perhaps . . . the most mature example of a myth of [. . . modern family] life” (37). The play’s central characters consist of the traditional American family unit: the father, Willy Loman, the mother, Linda Loman, and the two children, the oldest Biff, and the younger son, Happy. Feminist scholar Kathy J. Whitson explains that the “traditional family . . .
teaches gender roles to its members by illustrating each family member’s place in the overall structure (153). Thus, it is in examining this traditional family structure that high school students look at roles and places in the family as they consider their futures.

At first glance, the Loman family seems to present the “model American family” — a husband who works and comes home to a meal and a wife who loves him. They have two sons who are handsome and athletic and show great promise for a successful future (Copenhaver 138). Willy Loman has spent his adult life providing for his family, traveling the New England territory selling items Miller never identifies, while his wife, Linda, stays home to take care of the domestic and child-rearing duties. Set in 1949, Death of a Salesman highlights the traditional arrangement of the man acting as the primary breadwinner and the woman functioning as the homemaker — an arrangement that is still highly recognized and somewhat idealized in the twenty-first century (Whitson 153). Yet as the Lomans are studied more closely, it is discovered that the family is filled with strife and unhappiness and that each character has his or her way of behaving in order to preserve the illusion of family harmony (Copenhaver 139).

Willy begins the play, entering the stage exhausted from his travels and, as is inherent in the opening stage directions, is thankful to be home. In Miller’s opening description, he succinctly conveys Linda’s foundational relationship with her husband for the reader:

*Linda, his wife, has stirred in her bed at the right. She gets out and puts on a robe, listening. Most often jovial, she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to Willy’s behavior—she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, served her only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within*
him, longings to which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end. (12)

Through this description of a woman living for and through her husband, Miller seemingly restricts Linda from becoming independent or acting on her own behalf to a certain degree (Austin 48). Eminent Miller scholar C. W. E. Bigsby points out that Linda’s deep love and encouragement of her husband’s dreams enable him to sustain his destructive illusions of grandeur (123). She spends much of the play defending her husband and protecting him from his own failures, and Willy’s inability to accept reality has a profound impact on his wife and sons (Scanlan 222).

Linda maintains an extreme devotion to Willy and is even, at times, ready to reject her sons for this man who dreams such strange illusions (Roberts 63). Willy views himself as well-liked with the power to succeed based on personality rather than hard work or talent, yet his limited commissions reflect that this approach no longer assures a path to success (33).

Throughout the play, as Willy struggles against growing older, failing mental health, and losing his place in business, Linda reassures and supports him. She assures that he has everything that he needs and spends much of her time cleaning the house and cooking for the family. She also repeatedly allows Willy to verbally attack her without retort. For example, when she attempts to join a conversation as Willy and his two sons make plans for Biff to talk to his former boss, Bill Oliver, about regaining employment, she is rebuffed by Willy:

LINDA: Oliver always thought the highest of him.

WILLY: Will you let me talk?

BIF: Don’t yell at her, Pop, will ya?

WILLY, angrily: I was talking, wasn’t I?
BIFF: I don’t like you yelling at her all the time, and I’m tellin’ you, that’s all.

WILLY: What’re you, takin’ over this house?

LINDA: Willy

WILLY turning on her: Don’t take his side all the time, goddammit! (65)

When Biff tries to defend Linda against Willy’s verbal attacks, she stands up for her husband, however, informing her son that if he does not have feelings for his father, then you can’t have any feeling for me... [and] I won’t have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue (55).

Linda wants to please her husband, but at the same time, she wants to keep peace in the family. When Willy criticizes Biff for not having settled into a career, Linda rationalizes his situation by telling Willy that Biff is finding himself (16). She desperately tries to justify her son’s lack of ambition and success. Willy later rebuffs her for encouraging Biff, and Biff responds by firmly telling his father to stop yelling at her (65). Taken aback at this show of strength by Biff, Willy retires to his bedroom beaten down” (65). Rather than demonstrate gratitude to Biff, Linda urges him to repair the damage done to Willy in the argument. She tells Biff: Come up and say good night to him. Don’t let him go to bed that way (65). As Linda climbs the stairs to help Willy get ready for bed, Happy comments: they broke the mold when they made her (66). Clearly, Happy admires his mother’s devotion to his father. However, this blind devotion largely results in Linda’s loss of individual identity and agency, which feminist scholar Roberta Trites so aptly describes as the inability to assert... personality and to enact... decisions (6). As well, by giving all of her power and energy to support Willy’s delusion that he is successful when he is clearly unable to support his family, she denies her sons the model to realistically set career and personal goals that will aid them in achieving selfhood.
Consequently, the continued dependency of the sons on their mother and father directly conflicts with the illusion of independent success that is vital to Willy’s survival (Yao, Zhou and Long 35).

While Linda is often perceived as the stereotype of the quintessential housewife, *Death of a Salesman* offers opportunities for students to consider much about the role of the mother. Even as she is seen as a stereotype, when sexist stereotypes are uncovered, it encourages students to probe further into the story and figure out why the author relied on this particular stereotype (Larson and Wright 70).

In order for students to understand Linda’s actions, it is crucial to explore the role of women in American society during the play’s setting. During World War II, many women joined the workforce, but after the war ended, those women were forced to leave their jobs and return to the home. There was an American conservative force in the forties that suggested that women employed outside of the home would undermine families, and that started to propagandize the image of a true woman—a good wife and a good mother (Yao, Zhou and Long 36). In order to support this ideal, newspapers, magazines, and advertisers created a feminine mystique, and the image of the housewife-mother became the goal for most women reducing their identities to social passivity (36). Betty Friedan clarifies that the suburban wife of the time made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scout and Brownies, [and] lay beside her husband at night while secretly fearing the silent question of is this all? (Faludi 169).

Indeed, Linda largely embodies the traditional image of a passive woman dependent on her husband in *Death of a Salesman* (Copenhaver 141). Linda does her best to justify and defend Willy’s ability to provide and care for his family in his role of provider. While
calculating Willy’s commission after he returns from a sales trip, Linda recites the list of bills that need paying. It is clear that the Loman family have acquired the material goods of the American dream earlier in Willy’s career: a middle-class life filled with things such as a refrigerator, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, and automobile. Through Linda’s list of bills, however, it proves apparent that she will not be able to pay the family’s current debts, but she simply replies: “Well, maybe next week you’ll do better” (Miller 36). Thus, she strives to fulfill her societally imposed role of the time of silent caregiver and supportive partner.

When Linda first appears in a memory scene as a younger woman and mother to teenage boys, she enters the stage with a basket of laundry. Willy asks his sons to carry the basket for her, and Biff and Happy agree. As he exits the scene, Biff orders his friends to help hang up the laundry for his mother. As the other boys begin to do as Biff commands, Linda responds with admiration at “the way they obey him” (34). Tellingly, in the play, Willy is also referred to as “the boss” (125). Linda idealizes the idea of men in a household as authority figures. In order to perpetuate this ideal, Linda caters to her husband and often encourages the same authoritative qualities in her sons. Through these actions, she relinquishes her own authority as she continues to imbue the men in the family with all of the power as expected by the cultural conditioning of the patriarchal American society.

In the conclusion of this memory sequence, time has lapsed and Linda begs Willy to discipline teen-age Biff as he is practicing poor behavior, stealing, and not heeding the advice of his parents to study for his final high school examinations. Biff also ignores the help offered by the Loman’s neighbor, Bernard, to help study for the examinations needed to graduate high school and enroll in a university. In keeping with the idealized mother role of the time, Linda relinquishes power in favor of reinforcing Willy’s role as head of the household. Yet Willy
vacillates between bravado and denial regarding Biff. Thus, without agency of her own, Linda remains helpless and powerless as the following exchange illustrates:

WILLY: Where is he? I'll whip him, I'll whip him!

LINDA: And he'll better give back that football, Willy, it's not nice.

WILLY: Biff! Where is he? Why is he taking everything?

LINDA: He's too rough with the girls, Willy. All the mothers are afraid of him!

WILLY: I'll whip him!

BERNARD: He's driving the car without a license!

WILLY: Shut up!

LINDA: All the mothers

BERNARD, backing quietly away and out: Mr. Birnbaum says he's stuck up.

WILLY: Get outa here!

BERNARD: If he doesn't buckle down he'll flunk math! He goes off.

LINDA: He's right, Willy, you're gotta

WILLY, exploding at her: There's nothing the matter with him! (40)

As Linda exits the stage, she is close to tears, but never responds with anger toward her husband or defends herself.

Actress Elizabeth Franz, who won a Tony award for her 2000 portrayal of Linda Loman, explains that though she personally feel[s] anger at the fact that for millennia women's strength was so suppressed that they couldn't do much to heal their men, not to speak of fulfilling their own potential, she had to suspend all such judgments in her portrayal and realize that Linda is unaware of her oppression (Gray 32). Indeed, the character of Linda, as portrayed in Death of a Salesman, has never known an adult life that did not involve caretaking, as she believes this to be
her primary responsibility given societal expectations. She assumes Willy’s life and dreams as her own, never questioning that there could be different paths for her or her sons. As Linda Kintz clarifies, the play effectively critiques the restriction and damage perpetrated by the rigid gender roles of this type of family (Copenhaver 138). Linda’s societally imposed role, which is perpetuated through her blind acceptance of her place in the family, relegates her to the domestic sphere and generally lowers her social status (Whitson 153).

Throughout the play, Linda defends and protects her husband, but her actions do not strictly derive from a sense of duty; Linda does appear to love and to be attracted to her husband. During the opening scene of the play, she meets him in the bedroom, offers to soothe Willy, takes off his shoes for him, and lovingly takes his jacket (13-15). Linda is portrayed as a loyal wife who seeks to comfort and care for her husband as a dedicated mate. Yet Willy has not always been sexually faithful in the marriage. In a memory scene that intermingles with the present reality, Willy kisses The Woman, a secretary of one of his customers, in a hotel room in Boston (39). As the scene begins in the play’s present, Willy tells Linda that “on the road I want to grab you sometimes and just kiss the life out of you” (38). However, Willy’s ailing mental health has confused him; it is not his wife that he kisses, but it is The Woman whom he slaps on the bottom, grabs, and kisses roughly (39). As Willy’s mind fluctuates between reality and memory, Linda sits at the kitchen table reassuring Willy in the present. The Woman then leaves, thanking Willy for the new stockings he has given her, and Willy moves back into the present to join Linda in the kitchen (39).

Silk stockings become a symbol not only of the material comforts of achieving success, but of value in *Death of a Salesman*. In the past, Willy presents new stockings to his mistress as a gift, while his ever-faithful wife must repair her old stockings for the overall good of the
family’s financial security. In the play’s present, Willy can no longer bear the guilt that Linda’s old stockings symbolize and longs for redemption, only to then attack Linda for her sacrifice:

*Linda is at the kitchen table . . . mending a part of her silk stocking.*

LINDA: You are, Willy, the handsomest man. You’ve got no reason to feel that

WILLY, coming out of The Woman’s dimming area and going over to Linda:

I’ll make it up to you, Linda, I’ll . .

LINDA: There’s nothing to make up dear. You’re doing fine, better than .

WILLY, noticing her mending: What’s that?

LINDA: Just mending my stockings. They’re so expensive .

WILLY, angrily, taking them from her: I won’t have you mending stockings in this house! Now throw them out! (39)

In a popular teaching aid series for *Death of a Salesman*, Mary Collins writes in her characterization notes that The Woman is *someone Willy apparently had a not-very-meaningful affair with while he was away on business* (17). It is the discovery of the affair by Willy’s son, Biff, in a memory scene that offers the climax of the play finally revealing the beginning of the downfall of father and son (Austin 48). When Biff fails math for the semester and does not have the credits to graduate high school, his mother hopes that Willy can talk to the teacher (110). However, when Biff arrives at Willy’s Boston hotel room to ask for this help, he discovers his father in the arms of The Woman; Biff is devastated. The illusion of Willy as the perfect and successful father and husband is shattered. While Willy assures Biff that he is nothing to me, Biff breaks down with the realization that Willy has given The Woman his mother’s stockings (121). The relationship between father and son, which ultimately relied on the sham of Willy’s
perfection, completely disintegrates; and the relationship between mother and son can never be completely open because of Biff’s knowledge of the secret that now separates them.

The lesson that Willy teaches Biff through the discovery of the affair and Willy’s treatment of Linda is that The Woman is for pleasure and the mother is to cook, clean, and care for the children. Clearly, as the gift of the silk stockings indicates, Willy reinforces to Biff that the value should be placed on pleasure. As Linda continues trying to live up to the idealized standard of the quintessential housewife, she inadvertently reinforces this idea to Biff.

As mother to two sons, Linda could help her children shape their definitions of women, encouraging them to respect and appreciate the women in their lives, but instead she defers to Willy, who sees nothing wrong with his sons’ objectification of potential mates (169). Biff and Happy refer to women as animals and objects such as pigs, binoculars, and strudels (100). When Biff sees an attractive, confident woman, Happy asks: You want her? to which Biff replies: Oh, I could never make that (100-102). Biff refers to the young woman that his brother indicates as a potential sexual conquest as that rather than her, as if she were a thing and not a person. Moreover, when Biff and Happy abandon their father at a restaurant in favor of pursuing women, Linda responds with: Did you have to go to women tonight? You and your lousy rotten whores! (124). Thus, Linda negates her opportunity to teach her sons to respect women and perpetuates degrading representations in their minds with her derogatory reference.

Willy eventually determines that the only way to financially provide for his family is by committing suicide and allowing the family to collect the money from his life insurance policy. While Linda is aware of his suicide attempts, she is powerless to confront her husband for fear of challenging his authority or embarrassing him. She discovers a hose next to the gas hot water
The stereotype of the quintessential housewife, still prevalent in twenty-first century America, positions the wife and mother against the backdrop of a patriarchal society. She cares for the family, supports her husband in his career and at home, submits to his authority, and never waivers in her steadfastness (Yao, Zhou and Long 33). When analyzing dramatic characters in the high school classroom it is important to consider an author’s purpose in having a character step out of the stereotype (Larson 71). For example, Linda, who has spent her life cleaning for her sons, at one point adamantly states that she will no longer function as their maid (124). Additionally, her sons want her to remain the mother that they remember from childhood, an idealized symbol of their youth, a notion which Linda wholeheartedly rejects in favor of reinforcing a realistic view of women and the life cycle:

**BIFF:** Your hair . . . *He touches her hair.* Your hair got so gray.

**LINDA:** Oh, it’s been gray since you were in high school. I just stopped dyeing it, that’s all.
BIFF: Dye it again will ya? I don’t want my pal looking old. *He smiles.*

LINDA: You’re such a boy! You think you can go away for a year and . . .
you’ve got to get it into your head now that one day you’ll knock on this door
and there’ll be strange people here.

BIFF: What are you talking about? You’re not even sixty, Mom. (54-55)

Finally, as Willy’s mental stability continues to crumble, Linda additionally berates her children at their lack of displayed compassion for their father as an individual. She encourages her sons to listen to their father and remain positive when discussing their respective futures in attempts to ground Willy in reality. While Linda’s constant and problematic attention to Willy repeatedly positions her in a marginalized way throughout the play, in these moments, she draws on her strength; she encourages her children to approach life with understanding for others:

LINDA: Why shouldn’t he talk to himself? Why? When he has to go to Charley and borrow fifty dollars a week and pretend to me that it’s his pay?

How long can that go on? How long? . . . And you tell me he has no character? The man who never worked a day but for your benefit? When does he get the medal for that? Is this his reward to turn around at the age of sixty-three and find his sons, who he loved better than his life . . . What happened to the love you had for him? You were such pals! . . . How lonely he was until he could come home to you! (57)

Abandoning her predominant passivity, Linda challenges her sons’ treatment of, and assumptions about, others.

As a mother, Linda is the representation of an idealized 1940s family life, waiting at home and comforting her husband, but on closer examination, Miller is critical of male
dominance and sympathetic toward the struggle of the homebound mother of the forties (Yao, Zhou and Long 33). While Linda is often seen completing the mundane, repetitive tasks associated with the home, the moments when she steps out of the role of the quintessential housewife serve to highlight the problematic restrictions of this gendered stereotype by contrast.

As twenty-first century students recognize the stereotype of the quintessential housewife in Linda, teachers may build on this familiarity to point out the challenges of this embodiment given Linda’s circumstances, Arthur Miller tellingly asserts that the “women characters in my plays are very complex” (Roudané 370). It is important for educators to encourage their students to explore all aspects of the character of Linda as the mother in Death of a Salesman—her devotion to her family, her societal expectations, and her limited power via accepted patriarchal constraints as she clearly proves to be more than only a quintessential housewife.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Over the course of their high school educations, students are exposed to a wide variety of literary works including, novels, short stories, and dramatic texts. Analyses of these texts serve many purposes: to develop comprehensive and analytical skills, to introduce American and world historical and cultural views, and to encourage students to begin forming a framework for connecting the selections to the human condition. In the state of Texas, drama is included in the English curriculum of all four courses for high school study, but it is in eleventh grade English III classes that American literature proves a focus. Analyzing American literature gives educators the opportunity to lead students in explorations of American culture, but often little focus is given to the messages concerning family structures and the roles of women within those structures that educators offer students through engagement with the literature.

This study analyzes the representations of mothers in two classic American dramas most commonly included in junior-level English III curriculums in Texas: Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. The results reveal several important implications regarding the messages about motherhood communicated to students via the study of dramatic literature. Further, the current study serves as a catalyst for important avenues of future research.

Implications of the Study

*The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* prove important canonical works worthy of study by high school students; however, in teaching a classic without a critical framework, teachers often teach the same texts in the same way year after year without reassessing the changing society and potential effect on the adolescent reader (Appleman, “What We Teach” 6).
Thus, this thesis uses a feminist lens to examine the representation of the mother characters of Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Linda Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. Deborah Appleman suggests that it is important to offer students several ways to look at texts. In doing so, educators help them learn to interpret literature from multiple perspectives and develop more complex ways of thinking as they move from the dualism of early adolescence to the relativism of adult thinkers (6). The representations of mothers offered in these two plays do not necessarily portray the characters in a positive light and prove stereotypical in many ways. Yet close analyses reveal that through contextualization of the mothers, more complex representations exist to offer high school juniors in Texas.

Written by white American males during the mid-twentieth century, both of these plays focus on family dynamics and American societal demands. While they have much in common, the texts portray distinctly different family structures.

Amanda Wingfield serves as the matriarch in Williams' classic, *The Glass Menagerie* and is easily identifiable as the stereotype of the domineering mother. The Wingfields relocated from Amanda's ancestral home in the Mississippi Delta to St. Louis, Missouri, only to be abandoned there by her husband. The play depicts her desperate attempts to control her adult children: her son, Tom, who wants to leave behind his mundane job at a shoe factory for the life of a writer, and her sensitive daughter, Laura, who balances on the brink of a mental breakdown, finding refuge in caring for her glass figurines.

Miller's *Death of a Salesman* presents a struggling middle class family in post-World War II America. Linda Loman, wife to Willy and mother to Biff and Happy, defines her life by the hopes and dreams of her mentally unstable husband, sacrificing her independent agency. She struggles in her relationship with her sons, receiving little respect from the men in the family.
Linda is often characterized as the “quintessential housewife,” as she spends the bulk of her time cooking, cleaning, negotiating and supporting the other characters, and trying to keep her place in the family.

As students historically contextualize the scripts, broader representations of the mother roles occur. Williams and Miller both set their plays in “the present,” with reflections on earlier years, so first production dates remain relevant for students’ accurate understanding. *The Glass Menagerie* debuted in Chicago in 1944, and *Death of a Salesman* was first produced in New York in 1949. American society during the pre- and post-World War II era proved overwhelmingly patriarchal in nature, and this is reflected in the treatment given to the mother characters in both of these plays. During the time period in question, the husband generally functioned as the head of the household and central provider, with his needs and desires determining familial decisions. This societal structure significantly affects both Amanda Wingfield and Linda Loman in their roles as mothers and the representations of motherhood that they provide.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams creates a fascinating character in Amanda as the single mother of the Wingfield family. As a domineering mother, Amanda is represented as manipulative and clinging to her children. She micromanages every aspect of her daughter’s life and attempts to contain her son’s desire for escape from the St. Louis tenement in which the family resides. After her husband abandoned the family when her children were young, Amanda had to accept the role as head of the household—a role that she was ill prepared to embody.

In the traditional patriarchal home, the responsibility of guiding the children in career and matrimonial choices generally belongs to the father. Amanda assumes these responsibilities, but rather than guiding and encouraging her children, her actions and decision-making processes can
be perceived as manipulative. She enrolls her daughter Laura, a fragile girl with an unidentified anxiety disorder and foot deformity, in a business school. Amanda plans for Laura to accept a secretarial position upon completion of the coursework, but Laura’s shyness prevents her from finishing the first day of class. When Amanda becomes aware that Laura had been spending her days in the park rather than in class, Amanda reacts with anger and guilt-inducing disappointment. She gives little thought to Laura’s capabilities and desires, as Amanda then shifts her focus to procuring her daughter a husband. She demands that her son, Tom, bring home a “gentleman caller” as a potential mate for his sister, manipulating and bargaining with him as she proposes that only upon Laura’s successful marriage may Tom leave home to pursue his own dreams. In preparation for the dinner with Jim, the guest that Tom invited from his workplace due to Amanda’s pressure, Amanda places powder puffs into Laura’s brassiere to physically manipulate her daughter’s appearance. Amanda assures Laura that all girls must be a “pretty trap” to lure a man into matrimony (52). In Amanda’s eyes, neither of these actions is manipulative, simply necessary for survival.

The representation of Amanda may further communicate to high school students that mothers cling to their children and try to live through them. Amanda holds tightly to her children as her only hope for financial and societal stability. Amanda repeatedly aligns herself with Laura as she ponders the future. While Amanda is aware of her son’s distaste for his factory job, she clings to the hope that he will continue to help provide for the family during the challenging economic times. When it becomes apparent that Tom intends to follow his father’s model in leaving Amanda and Laura to fend for themselves, Amanda begs him to help her find a husband for his sister. Amanda makes it clear through her words and actions that Laura’s fate, financial and familial, is intertwined with that of her own. If Laura marries, Amanda assumes
that her daughter, through that marriage, will provide security for them both. Out of fear, Amanda clings to her own secure past reliving happier times through Laura’s prospective received courting. She finds solace from the economic and social challenges that she faces in her memories of her Southern home and the long ago afternoons with gentleman callers on the verandah. Thus, in-depth analysis suggests that Amanda’s actions, when historically and socially contextualized, prove a complex human reaction to circumstances that she again views as threatening to her and the family’s survival.

Even as Amanda represents the domineering mother, who manipulates others and clings to her children for survival, her character also represents a protective and sacrificial mother who desperately loves her children. It is her protective nature that drives Amanda in her quest to assure Laura a beneficial future. Whether it is through employment or marriage, Amanda wants more for her daughter than spending days dusting glass animals. She attempts to protect Tom from what she believes to be his self-destructive tendencies, going so far as to return library books that she deems potentially harmful. Amanda sacrifices her dignity through her part-time positions of selling undergarments and magazine subscriptions, and uses her wages to purchase the accessories she believes will assure her daughter’s appearance as an adequate hostess. Her upbringing in a patriarchal society left her unskilled and ill prepared to provide for her two children, yet she does what she can to support her family. Even as it becomes clear that Laura will have no gentleman callers and her son will leave the women in the family, she tenderly comforts her devastated daughter at the end of the play. Through the examination of Amanda’s actions without contextualizing her struggles as a single parent in a strongly patriarchal society, the negative aspects of a domineering mother yields a surface representation; however, upon
closer examination of the text, Amanda can also represent a caring, albeit confused, mother; surviving in a difficult situation.

Linda Loman, the mother in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, is often perceived as the quintessential housewife, completely supporting her husband while validating his delusions that ultimately lead to his suicide, and relinquishing her individuality for her family. Linda’s husband, Willy, is clearly the dominant force in their marriage, and Linda cares for his physical and emotional needs in spite of his dismissiveness. In addition to the traditional duties of the housewife, such as cooking and cleaning, Linda also reinforces Willy’s belief that he can still provide for his family, when according to the family accounts that is clearly no longer possible. Linda additionally buffers the relationship between her sons and her husband, attempting to ensure that the young men constantly validate Willy’s misconceptions, further establishing Willy’s authority as head of the household.

Through Linda’s complete acceptance of Willy’s dominance in the family, she communicates the representation of a subservient wife and mother. Her husband demeans her in front of her sons, and betrays her through his marital infidelity; yet she never wavers in her blind and absolute support of him as expected by societal demands of the time period. She goes so far as to inform her son, Biff, that he if he shows no love and respect for her husband, then he is no longer allowed to visit her at their home. When she discovers the hose near the gas water heater and it becomes clear to her that Willy is considering suicide, she cannot bring herself to permanently remove the hose for fear of humiliating her husband by stepping out of her expected role and challenging him. Linda attempts numerous times to comfort and appease her husband in his times of distress, but ultimately it does nothing to deter Willy from his confused plan to
commit suicide in order to provide life insurance money for his family. She is subservient to the point of the destruction of the family that she so dearly loves.

In examining Miller’s text, it becomes clear that much of Linda’s subservient behavior is connected to her lack of agency. As a result, the representation of Linda may also communicate to high school students that mothers lack the ability to assert individual personality or take decisive action. Linda sees opportunities to address the issue of Willy’s suicide attempts, but wavers on any decision. The person she has depended on for most of her adult life to make decisions for her is unable to direct her in a course of action, and without her husband’s guidance, she is unable to act at all. Throughout the play, Miller weaves in the past through a series of flashbacks, and it is clear that this pattern of inaction has been entrenched in Linda’s behavior for many years. In the past, she acquiesces to her husband’s problematic reactions to Biff’s inappropriate behavior. Though it is clear that she is unsettled by both Biff’s treatment of young women and his lack of integrity, she retreats when Willy insists that the boy is doing nothing inappropriate. In a later scene, the boys, as men, degrade women by objectifying them and referring to them as conquests. Linda’s earlier inaction is in direct correlation with the boys’ later attitudes.

Linda Loman is easily represented as the “quintessential housewife” and the negative connotations associated with that stereotype; yet at times she also breaks the stereotype. Though she spends most of the play cleaning up after the men in her family, she steps out of the stereotypical action informing her sons that she will not be their servant any longer. Additionally, she also begins to clarify Biff’s delusions regarding the necessary outward perfection of women’s physical appearances. He asks her to dye her hair again to restore her youthful appearance, and rather than agreeing to do as he asks, she maintains her stance that he
accept reality. Even in those moments when she appears to problematically support Willy at all costs, her motives can be interpretative as grounded in kindness. She is limited by her accepted, gender restricted role and through her existence in the patriarchal society; yet she remains firmly committed to allowing her husband to maintain his dignity in spite of his decline.

Both of these characters are often taught in high school classroom with a single focus, concentrating on the negative aspects of the mothers. It is easy to represent these women as caricatures rather than complex individuals. Close analyses of Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Linda Loman *Death of a Salesman* reveal, however, that these characters are not one dimensional; rather they are multi-layered representations capable of communicating a variety of messages about motherhood to twenty-first century high school students.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The focus of this thesis is limited to two of the most commonly incorporated plays in Texas English III high school curriculums, as the scope of the study demanded a selection process in order to offer a very specific set of findings that contributes data appropriate to my primary research question. Educators have a broad spectrum of literary texts from which to choose when compiling reading selections for a survey of American literature course, such as English III. As *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* were both written in the mid-twentieth century, the texts represent a similar historical contextualization. Feminist analyses of the mother characters in other commonly incorporated pieces of dramatic literature from varying time periods could yield additional data relevant to my primary research question. For example, *Our Town*, written in 1939 by Thornton Wilder, could be studied, analyzing the representation of Mrs. Webb as a mother who primarily manifests as loyal and loving. Paul Zindel’s *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-In-The-Moon Marigolds*, a Pulitzer Prize® winning dramatic text written
in 1964 would additionally provide further representations of the mother role offered in dramatic literature to high school students in examining the role of Beatrice as an abusive mother.

*The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* were also both written by white, male playwrights. By analyzing plays written by female playwrights that are commonly incorporated into junior-level English III classes, additional data regarding the messages communicated to high school students about motherhood could be determined. For example, as an African-American, female playwright, Lorraine provides a rich character for study in Lena (Mama) Younger, in the 1961 text *A Raisin in the Sun*. Mama is the classic matriarch of a multi-generational family struggling against racism and classicism. *Look Homeward, Angel* by Ketti Frings also offers another character for examination constructed by a female playwright. As the 1958 Pulitzer Prize® winner, this play explores the mother and son relationship and communicates an additional representation of a mother in Eliza Grant, a business woman who takes decisive action.

The current study is further limited to analyses of written text. Future, complimentary research could include an ethnographic study of junior-level, high school students in Texas who study *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman*. This research could yield additional data and provide an understanding of the messages that students receive about mothers via engagement with the texts.

**Mindful Interpretations**

Appleman suggests that a high school English educator’s job is not simply to help students read . . . [an educator’s] job is to help them use the skills of . . . reading to understand the world we live in* (What We Teach 2). With its emphasis on characters in action within specific contexts, the study of dramatic literature lends itself well to understanding societal and
familial relationships. *Family* is a broad, ever-changing concept in the twenty-first century. Yet no matter the form, the family is a basic accepted social unit in American society. Readers and audiences respond so markedly to *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman*, because, as so Miller aptly notes, "family plays touch upon our deepest private feelings" (Scanlan 127).

In exploring the roles of the mothers in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* through a feminist lens, I challenge educators to look beyond the confines of stereotypical, surface representations to encourage broader considerations of these characters by students. As the present study makes clear, Amanda Wingfield and Linda Loman prove complex women negotiating their roles within the family units, as they are simultaneously bound by, and fighting against, the challenges of society in myriad ways. Thus, when fully contextualized, these representations of mother figures can be analyzed in a way that can deepen students' understanding of the role of the mother in American society.
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VITA

Heather Wilson Meeks was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado. After completing her work at Plano Senior High School, Plano, Texas, in 1981, she entered the University of Texas in Austin. In 1983, she transferred to the University of Texas at Dallas and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in May, 1985. During the following years, she served as an English and Theatre Arts teacher for Dallas Independent School District, as well as a Reading teacher for Royse City Independent School District. She completed graduate level courses in English and educating gifted and talented students before entering the Graduate School at Texas A&M University–Commerce in September, 2011 to pursue advanced Theatre studies. She received the Masters of Science in Theatre degree in August, 2013.

While a graduate student at Texas A&M University–Commerce, she was awarded second place in the Texas Educational Theatre Associations Scholars’Debut Papers Project competition in January, 2013. She is a member of the Texas Educational Theatre Association and the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

Permanent Address:  P.O. Box 3011 Commerce, Texas 75429
Email: heather.meeks@ymail.com