

# PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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## Chapter 8: Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)

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E-mail: I am Dakin Williams, the brother of your subject Tennessee Williams and the last of his remaining blood relatives. I appreciate the work you have put in to your site providing insight and resources for those who would research the life of my brother. He was the greatest playwright of the millenium and deserves to be studied every bit as well as William Shakespeare. I have instructed my web site administrator to provide a link to your site from my own website. 2/13/98

"Whether or not we admit it to ourselves, we are all haunted by a truly awful sense of impermanence."  
- TW, "Introduction." *The Rose Tatoo*, 1951

A gifted writer and recipient of many literary awards, Williams is now recognized as an innovator of the new American drama after the end of World War II. Many of his plays have shocked audiences; they display violence, sexuality, alcoholism, rape, homosexuality, and fetishism in terms that were never before seen on the American stage. His pervasive theme is the inescapable loneliness of human condition. His characters are faded men and women, consumed by time and decay; many (like Amanda, Laura, and Tom Wingfield, Jim O'Connor, Big Daddy, Big Mama, Brick and Maggie), have become memorable.

A Contribution for *PAL*:

The playwright Tennessee Williams presents before us the dark world of one-dimensional society of the modern civilization that survives in the midst of exploitation, violation of moral code of conduct, corruption and dehumanized passions of power and intimate relationships. He makes us realize that such worldly circumstances of the tainted world drives the misfits, the rebels, the artist figures or the fugitive kinds to lead lives of depression, alienation and unhappy madness (a sort of severe schizophrenia). It happens due to their failure of adjustment with the worldly norms and they construct make-believe worlds around them through fabricated illusions in order to feel a sense of untrammled freedom. The playwright through his impulsive creative activity provides us with a basic premise to understand with tenderness and fortitude such individuals trapped in their own predicament.

Tennessee Williams derives his themes from psychoanalysis, conferred upon American drama by the influence of Freud's theories given in the books namely *Suppressed Desires* and *Interpretation of Dreams*. Sigmund Freud became popular in America during the early twentieth century. W. David Sievers states: "He contradicted the earlier view that sexual deviation is the form of degeneracy; rather he scientifically named them as abnormal psychic disorders like neuroses,

hysteria, hypochondria, irrationality and hypertension." (*Freud on Broadway: A History of Psychoanalysis and the American Drama*. New York: Cooper, 1970, 36-40) These all occur due to sexual maladjustment and if there is an unconscious repression of sex drive (libido) it results into unconscious conflicts and this psychological dualism of man's nature originates hostile impulses and we find split-personality lives. Tennessee Williams was suffering from Oedipus complex because in his earlier life he could not get attached to his father; he found convincing attraction in his mother. While leading a Bohemian lifestyle in New Orleans, he became aware that he had homosexual tendencies. His unconscious rationalization or repression made him explore the world of gaiety and frivolity. Unconsciously it affected him and it found expression in his writings, in the form of portraits- at times as that of his sister and at others in his own.

In the play *Orpheus Descending* Mrs. Torrance and, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche Dubois symbolically refer to his mental state. In these plays sex, which was considered a taboo, is treated by Williams in a shocking and revolutionary manner. He generated the germ of the new spirit of freedom for woman to find sexual fulfillment (symbolized by the West) and this idea is in conflict with the moral Puritanism of New England. Actually he tries to balance his mental delirium through wish- fulfillment of his repressed desires which had been controlled by the Puritanical code of conduct taught by his mother Edwina Williams.

The extrasensory perception and heightened emotionalism of Tennessee Williams's writings have inspired numerous attempts at interpretations over the years. For readers and critics his plays exude extreme impulsive feelings even after so many years of acquaintance with his work. In spite of increasing concern and criticism there are a number of areas that need to be explored to resolve certain unanswered questions about Tennessee Williams more than about any other major contemporary playwright. Even though the form of the plays is deviated from conventional standards as well as their seemingly secret yearnings shame the society and they are shunned from mainstream society, yet the plays are still held to be more successful due to their inner probing of a lost person in the corrupt and materialistic world of the twentieth century.

The characters in Tennessee Williams's plays attempt to create an aura of illusions in order to either forget the unpleasant reality of human existence or to avoid certain experiences of the past. Sometimes they are also fed up with this material life and the worldly-wise people that inhabit it. Such illusions serve as an escape for them and also enable them to remain disguised in a make-believer world.

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## Primary Works

*Battle of Angels*, 1945; *The Glass Menagerie*, 1945; *Twenty-Seven Wagons Full of Cotton & Other One-Act Plays*, 1946; *You Touched Me!*, 1947 (With David Windham, Suggested By A. D. H. Lawrence Story); *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947; *One Arm and Other Short Stories*, 1948; *Summer and Smoke*, 1948; *American Blues: Five Short Stories*, 1948; *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, 1950 (A Novel); *The Rose Tattoo*, 1951; *I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix*, 1951; *Camino Real*, 1953; *Hard Candy*, 1954; *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1955; *In the Winter of Cities*, 1956 (Poems); *Baby Doll*, 1956; *Orpheus Descending*, 1958; *The Fugitive Kind*, 1958; *Suddenly Last Summer*, 1958; *Sweet Bird of Youth*, 1959; *Period of Adjustment*, 1960; *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More*, 1964; *The Knightly Quest: A Novella & Four Short Stories*, 1966; *Kingdom of Earth*, 1967; *Two-Character Play*, 1969; *Dragon Country*, 1970; *Small Craft Warnings*, 1972; *Out Cry*, 1973; *Eight Mortal Ladies Possessed*, 1974; *Moose and The World of Reason*, 1975 (A Novel); *Memoirs*, 1975; *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, 1976; *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, 1981; *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, 1981; *A House not Meant to Stand* (1982?); *In Masks Outrageous and Austere*, 1983.

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## | [Top](#) | Tennessee Williams: A Brief Biography

### A Student Project by Matthew Thomas

On March 26, 1911 Edwina Dakin Williams and Cornelius Coffin Williams gave birth to their first son, christened Thomas Lanier Williams (Spoto 9). Later in life, Thomas Williams changed his first name to a more recognizable one-- Tennessee. Throughout the course of his life, Tennessee Williams was both a prolific and successful playwright. Williams drew inspiration for his art from something he knew very well: his own life. The plays of Tennessee Williams

contain links to his experiences in the settings, the situations, and the characters. Ultimately, Williams died a tragic and untimely death, but not before leaving a permanent mark on American Drama.

Williams was the second of three children, with an older sister, Rose, and a younger brother, Dakin. Early family life for Williams was an unstable time. He notes in his Memoirs that he was "the victim of a particularly troubled adolescence" and these problems were "clearly rooted in childhood" (11). As a traveling salesman, William's father was continually away on business. Because of Cornelius's absence during these early years, Williams, his mother, and his sister lived with his maternal grandparents. Williams' grandfather was a Reverend, requiring the family to frequently relocate. By the time Williams was fifteen, he had lived in sixteen different houses (Spoto 16). Interestingly, the specific details of his early family life are omitted from his Memoirs, and Williams simply comments that this was a "joyously innocent" period of his life (11). The family eventually settled in St. Louis with their father, which was a very difficult period. Life in St. Louis lacked the comfort and security Williams, his sister, and his mother knew while living with his grandparents. The family was poor and shamed by the sex scandal Williams' father was involved in (Spoto 19).

In 1929 Williams entered college at The University of Missouri at Columbia. His hopes of studying poetry were thwarted by his father, who insisted that Williams major in journalism. Much of Williams' college experience was controlled by his distant father, who not only chose his course of study, but also insisted upon Williams joining the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity, and his extended involvement in the ROTC program (Spoto 31). Academically, Williams's college career was unremarkable, holding a C average, to the displeasure of his father (Spoto 32). In 1931 Cornelius decided that he could no longer support his son's less than exemplary academic career, and Williams was forced to leave school and take a job with the shoe company his father worked for (Williams 36).

The summer of 1934 was a significant period for Williams. It was during this summer that his first play, Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!, was produced. This play, which Williams describes as "a farcical but rather touching little comedy about two sailors on a date with a couple of 'light ladies'" was produced by The Rose Arbor Players, a small company out of Memphis, Tennessee (41). This experience had a profound effect on Williams. It proved to be a sort of salvation for him: "Then and there the theatre and I found each other for better and for worse. I know it's the only thing that's saved my life" (42). This experience initiated Williams into the world of theatre, and it became something that would follow him for the rest of his life, and the source of his notoriety.

In the fall of 1937, Williams returned to academia by way of the Drama Department at the University of Iowa (Williams 42). After graduating from the University of Iowa with a BA in English, Thomas Williams changed his name to that which he is best known by--Tennessee Williams. The choice of "Tennessee" as his new name came, according to

Williams himself, as a result of his family's long history in that area. Williams was "directly descended from Tennessee's first senator, John Williams, hero of King's mountain; from the brother Valentine of Tennessee's first Governor John Sevier; and from Thomas Lanier Williams I, the first Chancellor of the Western Territory" (Williams 12). Donald Spoto, a Tennessee Williams biographer, speculates that the name change was more symbolic of Williams' hard life, creating an analogy between "the defense of a stockade against a band of savages" and Williams' life (67).

Following his college career, Williams was soon recognized by the Group Theatre in New York. Molly Day Thacher was the person responsible for finding new talent to be showcased by the Group Theatre. A writing contest was held for new playwrights, and while Williams did not win the contest, Thacher found his talent extraordinary, and created a special prize of one hundred dollars just for Williams (Spoto 72). Recognition by the group theatre provided the major catalyst Williams needed to launch a successful career. Upon receiving the award, Williams was approached by numerous agents eager to represent him (Spoto 74). And thus began his career as a professional playwright.

Tennessee Williams had a long, productive, and distinguished career. Listed with the title page of his Memoirs, his oeuvre consists of twenty four full-length plays, twenty five short plays, one original screenplay, four short story collections, a book of poetry, and two novels. Three of his plays received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award: The Glass Menagerie, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and The Night of the Iguana. Finally, for Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Williams received high honors in the form of a Pulitzer Prize in 1955 (Gross xii-xvi).

| [Top](#) | The work of Tennessee Williams is highly auto-biographical. By his own admission, his plays contain links to his own life. Some of the most recognizable characters in his works, made famous on stage and screen, are people he encountered placed in situations he experienced. The character Stanley Kowalski from A Streetcar Named Desire, for example, was based on a man by the same name who worked with Williams at the shoe company. The real Kowalski is described as "everything the young poet was not&mdash;at ease in crowds and with strangers, sure of his strength and confident of his ability to charm the ladies" (Spoto 44), which could easily be used as a description of the fictional Kowalski presented in the play. Also, the attraction Blanche has for Stanley, as it is depicted in the play, was similar to that which Williams had for the real Kowalski. Dakin, Williams's brother, explained that "it was clear that Tom had a powerful erotic and romantic attachment to Kowalski: Kowalski's name was often mentioned by Tom, and to see them together was to see a love-struck hero-worshipper and the idol of his dreams" (Spoto 44). No evidence exists of anything more than friendship between the two men, despite the intense feelings Williams had.

The father character in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, known only as Big Daddy, was based on Williams's own father. At points throughout his Memoirs, Williams refers to his father as "Big Daddy." For example, while discussing the summer job he had selling women's magazines after his first year of college, Williams says, "just how this came about I don't recall but certainly I did it only to please, or should I say pacify, 'Big Daddy'" (28). Williams uses this term for his father

to illustrate his father's large and controlling personality. This persona was destroyed in an incident at a poker game, which Williams describes as "the decline and fall of 'Big Daddy'" (36).

The most autobiographical play written by Williams was The Glass Menagerie. Spoto quotes Dakin Williams as saying that:

The events of The Glass Menagerie...are a virtually literal rendering of our family life at 6254 Enright Avenue, St. Louis, even though the physical setting is that of an earlier apartment, at Westminster Place. There was a real Jim O'Connor, who was brought home for my sister. The Tom of the play is my brother Tom, and Amanda Wingfield is certainly mother. (114)

With The Glass Menagerie Williams created a vehicle through which to view his family life. As the quotation by Dakin explains, the situation, the characters, and the setting were all based on actual event and people surrounding Williams, and Williams even used himself as the inspiration for the main character.

Tennessee Williams died February 24, 1983 at the age of 72. The official cause of death was ruled to be asphyxiation, caused by the bottle cap that was stuck in his airway. Due to the various drugs he had ingested that evening (cocaine, alcohol, and others), Williams died alone in his bedroom without calling for help (Spoto 365).

The work of Tennessee Williams is a staple in American Drama. He was a very successful dramatist, who was able to achieve critical acclaim in his lifetime. For his inspiration he drew from his own life experiences, and the people he encountered. And while his death was unexpected, he has gained immortality through his productions on stage and film.

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#### Study Questions

1. Williams's work is considered as one of the most savage indictments of culture in our time. Develop a case explaining the different aspects of this indictment.
2. "By his own admission a rebellious Puritan, Williams is really a moral symbolist who projects the tradition of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner into the present. More than any of these writers, however, he has made the mystery

of sexuality his central metaphor." Explain.

3. "Williams instinctively understands the loneliness of a human being - his or her constant and desperate attempt to escape the reality that is their loneliness - and their subsequent failure to do so." Write an essay on "the inescapable loneliness of an individual" as a major theme in the plays of Tennessee Williams.

"Portrait of a Madonna"

1. (a) Consider the dramatic function(s) of the minor characters, the Porter and the Elevator Boy, in the play.  
(b) Could "Portrait of a Madonna" have been expanded to a full-length work? To accomplish that, what else might Williams have dramatized? Would anything have been lost in the transformation?
2. (a) The director of the original production of "Portrait" had Lucretia exit clutching a doll. What, if anything, would justify such an interpolation in Williams's text, and what might be the impact on the audience?  
(b) Discuss the theater metaphor in "Portrait": the minor characters as onstage audience; the bedroom, scene of illusions, as stage; Mr. Abrams as stage manager/director, etc.  
(c) In what way does Williams's characterization of Lucretia Collins lead the audience to conclude that he considered her story "tragic"?

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