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Tennessee Williams

Life and Work

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Thomas Lanier Williams III (March 26, 1911 - February 25, 1983), known by his pen name Tennessee Williams, was an American playwright and screenwriter. Along with contemporaries Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, he is considered among the three foremost playwrights of American drama. He was born in Columbus, Mississippi, of English, Welsh and Huguenot ancestry, the second child of Edwina Dakin and Cornelius Coffin. His father was a traveling shoe salesman who became an alcoholic and was frequently away from home. Williams lived in his grandfather's Episcopal rectory with his family for much of his early childhood and was close to his grandparents.

From 1929 to 1931, Williams attended the University of Missouri in Columbia, where he enrolled in journalism classes. Here he began entering his poetry, essays, stories and plays in writing contests, hoping to earn extra income. After he failed a military training course in his junior year, his father pulled him out of school and put him to work at the International Shoe Company factory. His dislike of his new 9 to 5 routine drove Williams to write prodigiously. He set a goal of writing one story a week. His first submitted play was 'Beauty Is the Word' (1930) followed by 'Hot Milk' and 'Three in the Morning' (1932). In 1936, Williams enrolled at Washington University in St. Louis where he wrote the play 'Me, Vasha' (1937). Speaking of his early days as a playwright and an early collaborative play called 'Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!' Williams wrote - "The laughter... enchanted me. Then and there the theatre and I found each other for better and for worse. I know it's the only thing that saved my life." Around 1939, he adopted Tennessee Williams as his professional name, in acknowledgement of his Southern accent and roots.

Around 1941, Williams wrote 'The Glass Menagerie', which was then staged in Chicago with the collaboration of a number of well known theatrical figures. When the play first opened, the audience was sparse, but the Chicago critics raved about it, and

eventually it was playing to full houses. In March of 1945, the play moved to Broadway, where it won the prestigious New York Drama Critics Circle Award. This highly personal, explicitly autobiographical play earned Williams fame, fortune, and critical respect, and it marked the beginning of a successful run that would last for another ten years. Two years after 'The Glass Menagerie', Williams won another Drama Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer Prize for *A Street Car Named Desire*. Williams won the same two prizes again in 1955 for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Apart from it Tennessee Williams also wrote *The Night of Iguana* (1961), the story of a defrocked minister turned sleazy tour guide, who finds God in a cheap Mexican hotel. "Suddenly Last Summer" (1958) deals with the lobotomy, pederasty, and cannibalism and in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) the gigolo hero is castrated for having infected a southern politician's daughter with venereal disease.

Williams was in ill-health frequently during the 1960s compounded by years of addiction to sleeping pills and liquor, problems that he struggled to overcome after a severe mental and physical breakdown in 1969. His later plays were unsuccessful, closing soon to poor reviews. They include *Vieux Carré* (1977), about down and outs in New Orleans; *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* (1978-79) about a fading bell in St. Louis during the Great Depression.

Williams also wrote two novels, *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* (1950) and *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975), essays, poetry, film scripts, short stories and an autobiography, *Memoirs* (1975). His works won four Drama Critics awards and were widely translated and performed around the world.

On February 25, 1983, Williams was found dead at age 71 in his suite at the Hotel Elysee in New York City. The Chief Medical Examiner reported that Williams had choked to death from inhaling the plastic cap of the type used on bottles of nasal spray or eye solution.

Although each of Tennessee Williams's plays is unique, it is easy to find a connection between the themes they treat. Williams's major concern was no doubt the society's impact on the alien, the outcast, the foreigner but this central theme of his works is closely related to love and romance, desire and sexuality, child-parent relationship and the predicament of the modern family, passing of time and fading of youth, and beauty, isolation, guilt, loneliness, mendacity as well as illusion versus reality.

Another important contribution Williams brought to the American and world stage were the controversial themes that were previously considered taboo - his plays deal with the issues of human brutality and sexuality: madness, rape, incest, cannibalism etc.

A Street Car named Desire is such a shocking play that made the critics label it as "obscene" and unacceptable by the American morals. Williams commented a lot on the extreme violence of his plays, which he viewed as an inherent part of human nature.

