

# Social Study of the Selected Plays of Tennessee Williams

**Gurdev Singh**

Research Scholar, Singhania University, Rajasthan, India

---

## **OVERVIEW**

Tennessee Williams (March 26, 1911 – February 25, 1983) born Thomas Lanier Williams, was an American playwright who received many of the top theatrical awards for his works of drama. He moved to New Orleans in 1939 and changed his name to "Tennessee", the Southeastern U.S. state, his father's birthplace.

He won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1948 and for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. In addition, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *The Night of the Iguana* (1961) received New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards. His 1952 play *The Rose Tattoo* received the Tony Award for best play. In 1980 he was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Jimmy Carter.

In 1939, the young playwright received a \$1,000 Rockefeller Grant, and a year later, *Battle of Angels* was produced in Boston which failed to achieve success.

Williams moved to New Orleans in 1939 to write for the WPA. He lived for a time in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana; first at 722 Toulouse Street, the setting of his 1977 play *Vieux Carré*. The building is part of The Historic New Orleans Collection. During 1944-45, *The Glass Menagerie* was produced in Chicago and was widely accepted as a success. This was followed by a successful Broadway run. The play tells the story of Tom, his disabled sister, Laura, and their controlling mother Amanda who tries to make a match between Laura and the gentleman caller. Many people believe that Tennessee used his own familial relationships as inspiration for the play. Elia Kazan (who directed many of Williams' greatest successes) said of Tennessee: "Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life." *The Glass Menagerie*

won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play of the season.

He began writing *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) while living at 632 St. Peter Street in New Orleans. He finished it later in Key West, Florida, where he moved in the 1940s. He won his first Pulitzer prize for the play.

Williams followed up his first major critical success with several other Broadway hits including such plays as *Summer and Smoke*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Camino Real*. He received his first Pulitzer Prize in 1948 for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and reached an even larger world-wide audience in 1950 and 1951 when *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* were made into major motion pictures. Later plays which were also made into motion pictures include *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (for which he earned a second Pulitzer Prize in , *Orpheus Descending*, *Night of the Iguana* and *Summer and Smoke*.

Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi, in the home of his maternal grandfather, the local Episcopal priest. He was of Welsh descent. His father, Cornelius Williams, a hard drinking traveling salesman, favored Tennessee's younger brother Dakin, perhaps because of Tennessee's weakness and effeminacy as a child. His mother, Edwina, was a borderline hysteric. Tennessee Williams would find inspiration in his problematic family for much of his writing.

In 1918, when Williams was seven, the family moved to the University City neighborhood of St. Louis, Missouri, where he first attended Soldan High School, used in his work *The Glass Menagerie* and later University City High School. In 1927, at age 16, Williams won third prize (five dollars) for an essay published in *Smart Set* entitled, "Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?" A year later, he published "The Vengeance of Nitocris" in *Weird Tales*.

In the early 1930s Williams attended the University of Missouri, where he joined Alpha Tau Omega fraternity. In the late 1930s, Williams transferred to Washington University in St. Louis for a year, and finally earned a degree in 1938 from the University of Iowa, where he wrote "Spring Storm." Previously, Williams had written *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!* This work was first produced in 1935 by the Garden Players community theater in Memphis, Tennessee. Regarding this production, 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.'" He later studied at the Dramatic Workshop of The New School in New York City.

Tennessee was close to his sister Rose, a slim beauty who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at a young age. As was common then, Rose was institutionalized and spent most of her adult life in mental hospitals. When therapies were unsuccessful, she showed more paranoid tendencies. In an effort to treat her, Williams' parents authorized a prefrontal lobotomy, a drastic treatment that was thought to help some mental patients who suffered extreme agitation.[citation needed] Performed in 1937 at the Missouri State Sanitarium, the operation incapacitated Rose for the rest of her life. Her surgery may have contributed to his alcoholism and his dependence on various combinations of amphetamines and barbiturates often prescribed by Dr. Max Jacobson.

While in New York, Williams worked in many casual jobs including as a waiter at a Greenwich Village restaurant and a cinema usher. Williams worked extremely briefly in the renowned Gotham Book Mart in Manhattan, lasting less than a day.

His first sexual affair with a man was at Provincetown, Massachusetts with a dancer named Kip. He carried a photo of Kip in his wallet for many years. Having struggled with his sexuality throughout his youth, he came out as a gay man in private. When Kip left him for a woman and marriage, Williams was devastated. Williams was outed as gay by Louis Kronenberger in *Time* magazine in the 1950s.

While living in New Orleans, Williams met and fell in love with Frank Merlo, a second generation Sicilian American who had served in the U.S. Navy in World War II. This was his only enduring relationship. Williams' relationship with Frank Merlo lasted from 1947 until 1962. With that stability,

Williams created his most enduring works. Merlo provided balance to many of Williams' frequent bouts with depression and the fear that, like his sister Rose, he would go insane.

Due to Williams' addiction to sleeping pills and alcohol as well as his numerous episodes of infidelity, Merlo finally ended the relationship. However, soon after Merlo was diagnosed with lung cancer and died in 1963. Merlo's death deeply affected Williams and he sank into a deep depression.

He discussed his homosexuality openly on television and in print in the 70s. He released his autobiography *Memoirs* 1975. His personal tragedies as well as alcoholism contributed to his emotional problems. At the insistence of his brother, he agreed to be rebaptized as a Catholic for a short time. His brother also admitted him to a psychiatric ward for treatment related to his addiction problems after a nervous breakdown in 1969.

Williams died on February 25, 1983 at the age of 71. Reports at the time indicated he choked on an eyedrop bottle cap in his room at the Hotel Elysee in New York. The reports said he would routinely place the cap in his mouth, lean back, and place his eyedrops in each eye. The police report, however, suggested his use of drugs and alcohol contributed to his death. Prescription drugs, including barbiturates, were found in the room, and Williams' gag response may have been diminished by the effects of drugs and alcohol.

Williams' body was found by director John Uecker who was identified as his secretary and who travelled with Williams, and was staying in a separate room in Williams' suite.

Williams' body was taken to Frank E. Campbell Funeral Chapel and Williams' funeral took place on March 3, 1983 at Saint Malachy's Roman Catholic Church in New York City. At his brother Dakin's insistence, Williams' body was interred in the Calvary Cemetery, St. Louis, Missouri. Williams had long told his friends he wanted to be buried at sea at approximately the same place as Hart Crane, a poet he considered to be one of his most significant influences.

Williams left his literary rights to The University of the South in honor of his grandfather, Walter Dakin, an alumnus of the university, which is located in Sewanee, Tennessee. The funds support a creative writing program.

When his sister Rose died in 1996 after many years in a mental institution, she bequeathed \$7 million from her part of the Williams estate to The University of the South as well.

In 1989, the University City Loop inducted Tennessee Williams into its St. Louis Walk of Fame.

Characters in his plays are often seen as representations of his family members. Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* was understood to be modeled on Rose. Some biographers believed that the character of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is also based on her.

Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* was generally seen to represent Williams' mother, Edwina. Characters such as Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Sebastian in *Suddenly, Last Summer* were understood to represent Williams himself. In addition, he used a lobotomy operation as a motif in *Suddenly, Last Summer*. The Pulitzer Prize for Drama was awarded to *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1948 and to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. These two plays were later filmed, with great success, by noted directors Elia Kazan with whom Williams developed a very close artistic relationship, and Richard Brooks. Both plays included references to elements of Williams' life such as homosexuality, mental instability, and alcoholism. Although *The Flowering Peach* by Clifford Odets was the preferred choice of the Pulitzer Prize jury in 1955 and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was at first considered the weakest of the five shortlisted nominees, Joseph Pulitzer Jr., chairman of the Board, had seen *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and thought it worthy of the drama prize. The Board went along with him after considerable discussion.

Williams wrote *The Parade, or Approaching the End of a Summer* when he was 29 and worked on it through his life. It seemed an autobiographical depiction of an early romance in Provincetown, Massachusetts. This play was produced for the first time on October 1, 2006 in Provincetown by the Shakespeare on the Cape production company, as part of the First Annual Provincetown Tennessee Williams Festival.

Other works by Williams include *Camino Real* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

His last play went through many drafts as he was trying to reconcile what would be the end of his life. There are

many versions of it, but it is referred to as *In Masks Outrageous and Austere*.

## **Plays**

### **Apprentice plays**

*Candles to the Sun* (1936)

*Spring Storm* (1937)

*Fugitive Kind* (1937)

*Not About Nightingales* (1938)

*I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix* (1941)

*Orpheus Descending* (1945)

*You Touched Me* (1945)

*Stairs to the Roof* (1947)

### **Major plays**

*The Glass Menagerie* (1944)

*A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)

*Summer and Smoke* (1948)

*The Rose Tattoo* (1951)

*Camino Real* (1953)

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)

*Orpheus Descending* (1957)

*Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958)

*Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959)

*Period of Adjustment* (1960)

*The Night of the Iguana* (1961)

*The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* (1962)

*The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* (1963)

*The Mutilated* (1965)

*The Seven Descents of Myrtle* (1968)

In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel (1969)

Will Mr. Merriweather Return from Memphis? (1969)

Small Craft Warnings (1972)

The Two-Character Play (1973)

Out Cry (1973)

The Red Devil Battery Sign (1975)

This Is (An Entertainment) (1976)

Vieux Carré (1977)

A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur (1979)

Clothes for a Summer Hotel (1980)

The Notebook of Trigorin (1980)

Something Cloudy, Something Clear (1981)

A House Not Meant to Stand (1982)

In Masks Outrageous and Austere (1983)

The Knightly Quest: a Novella and Four Short Stories (1966)

One Arm and Other Stories (1967)

One Arm

The Malediction

The Poet

Chronicle of a Demise

Desire and the Black Masseur

Portrait of a Girl in Glass

The Important Thing

The Angel in the Alcove

The Field of Blue Children

The Night of the Iguana

The Yellow Bird

Eight Mortal Ladies Possessed: a Book of Stories (1974)

Tent Worms (1980)

## Novels

The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone (1950, filmed 1961)

Moise and the World of Reason (1975)

## Screenplays

Baby Doll (1956)

The Loss of a Teardrop Diamond (1957, filmed 2009)

## Short stories

The Vengeance of Nitocris (1928)

The Field of Blue Children (1939)

The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin (1951)

Hard Candy: A Book of Stories (1954)

Three Players of a Summer Game and Other Stories (1960)

It Happened the day the Sun Rose, and Other Stories (1981)

The dramatic universe of Tennessee Williams is structured around dualities. The dualities, which plague life, also threaten art and artist. Art is like an X-Ray machine which indicates normal healthy blood cells and exposes the dark spots simultaneously. Life is too complex and complicated to be reduced to a single formula. It is too ambiguous to be presented in a cut and dried fashion. It cannot be painted in black and white. Dualities weave the texture of life. It is this bewildering ambiguousness of life Tennessee Williams celebrates that is so hard to be straitjacketed in one kind of ideological system or the other.

Drama, as an art form, is meant to hold mirror up to nature. All the plays of Tennessee Williams abound in dualities such as illusion- reality, tradition – modernity, body – soul, spirit – flesh, male – female, homosexuality-heterosexuality and realism – expressionism which are woven into bright and dark patterns. Tennessee Williams

himself says, "I have always had a deep feeling for mystery of life and essentially my plays have been efforts to explore the beauty and meaning in the confusion of living" (qtd. in Devlin 28).

Before we proceed any further, it is important to look into the etymological meaning of the term duality. The word dual has been derived from the Latin word 'dualis' which means consisting of two parts and aspects. Encarta World English Dictionary defines duality as, "consisting of two parts, a situation or nature that has two states or parts that are complementary or opposed to each other." For instance, illusion and reality are two aspects of life. Prima facie these are opposed to each other. What is illusory cannot be real and what is real cannot be illusory. But in real life situations, illusion and reality are complementary, supplementary and interdependent on each other. Reality takes its birth from the womb of illusion. The term duality has come to us from 'dualism'.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY-**

Williams, Tennessee. Sweet Bird of Youth, A Street Car Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie. London: Secker and Warburg, 1983.

Five Plays: Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, The Rose Tattoo, Garden District, (Something

Unspoken and Suddenly Last Summer), Orpheus Descending. London: Secker and Warburg, 1962.

Four Plays: The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, Summer and Smoke,

Camino Real. London: Secker and Warburg, 1957.

The Night of the Iguana. New York: New American Library, 1961.

Abrams, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms, Bangalore: Prism Books Pvt. Ltd, 1999

Adler, Jacob H. "Tennessee Williams' South: The Culture and the Power." Tennessee Williams: A Tribute. Ed. Jac Tharpe. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1977.

Atkinson, Brooks. New Voices in the American Theatre. New York: The Modern Library, 1955.

Barksdale, Richard K. "Social Background in the Plays of Miller and Williams." College Language Association Journal

Beaurline, Lester A. "The Glass Menagerie: From Story to Play". Modern Drama 9 (1965)

Boxill, Roger. Tennessee Williams. New York: St. Martin's Press

Bruhm, Steven. "Blackmailed by Sex: Tennessee Williams and the economics of desire." Modern Drama

Canby, Vincent. "Decadence, Ferns and Facades." New York Times"

Corrigan, Mary Ann Roman. Expressionism in The Early Plays of Tennessee Williams. Diss. The University of a Michigan, 1975. U.S.A.: An Arbor Michigan, 1977.

Dusenbury, Winifred. The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama. Gainesville

Encarta World English Dictionary. Special Indian Edition. Chennai: Macmillan India Ltd., 1999.

Gross, Robert F, "Tracing Lines of Flight in Summer and Smoke and The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" Tennessee Williams, A Casebook. Ed. Robert F, Gross. New York

Gussow, Mel. "Tennessee Williams Art and Sex."

Hirsch, Foster. The Portrait of Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams. Port Washington

Kataria, Gulshan Rai. The Faces of Eve: A study of Tennessee Williams' Heroines. New Delhi

Leavitt, Richard F. The World of Tennessee Williams. New York

Murphy, Brenda., ed. Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan: A Collaboration in the Theater.

Park, Young Mock. "Tennessee Williams' self-portraits in Dragon Country." Journal of English Language and Literature

Rasky, Harry. Tennessee Williams: A Portrait in Laughter and Lamentation. New York

Sahu, Dharanidhar. Cat on A Hot Tin Roof: A study of Alienated Characters in The Major Plays of Tennessee Williams

Siegel, Robert. "The Metaphysics of Tennessee Williams".  
Magical Muse Millennial Essays on Tennessee Williams.

The Encyclopedia Americana.

The New Encyclopedia Britannica. 15<sup>th</sup> ed. 1987.

Williams, Dakin and Shepherd Mead. Tennessee Williams :  
An Intimate Biography.