

The World of the Play:

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Tennessee Williams
Photo: The New York Public Library

Thomas Williams was born in Mississippi in 1911 to a traveling salesman father who never understood his artistic son and to a ceaselessly driven mother with strong Southern roots. When Williams was a teenager, his father found a steady job and moved the family north to St. Louis; Williams hated it there and used writing as an escape from the city he disliked so intensely. He had two siblings but was closest to his older sister Rose, until, as a teenager, she started showing signs of mental illness and was institutionalized.

Williams eventually traveled to New York to write and also went to Hollywood where he was a contract script writer and wrote a short story called “The Girl in the Glass.” Around this time Tom shed his birth name and took a new first name, Tennessee, most likely in homage to his ancestors who had settled in that state generations earlier. Soon after, Williams came back to New York and turned the short story he had written in L.A. into his first Broadway hit, *The Glass Menagerie*.

After winning adoration from the critics for his debut on the Great White Way, Williams left for New Orleans, the city he felt was most conducive to writing. There Williams would dream up some of his most indelible stories and characters, as well as use the city as a setting for the Pulitzer Prize-winning masterpiece, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, titled after a real streetcar that ran by Williams’ window in the French Quarter.

Williams would go on to write a series of hits, including *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. However, after his last success, *The Night of the Iguana*, the critics turned on Williams, savaging every new work he wrote and dismissing his writing altogether. The pain caused by a near-split with Frank Merlo, brought on partially by paranoia and substance abuse, and an increasingly vicious press, thrust Williams into a downward spiral from which he would never really escape. He died, under mysterious circumstances, in a New York hotel in 1983 at the age of 71.



Louis Adams House where Tennessee Williams wrote *The Glass Menagerie*
Photo: Patch Darragh

[Click here to read the official obituary of Tennessee Williams that appeared in the New York Times, February 26th, 1983.](#)

Tennessee Williams

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES

Tennessee Williams drew extensively from his experiences with his family when penning his theatrical masterpieces. Stanley Kowalski from *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Big Daddy from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are both modeled on Williams' own father; *Streetcar*'s fragile Southern belle, Blanche Dubois, is said to be at least partially inspired by the playwright himself. *The Glass Menagerie*, however, was Williams' first and most autobiographical work for the stage—he wrote the play during a time when he was still in the process of transforming himself from Tom Williams into the playwright Tennessee Williams.



Louis Adams House Photo: Patch Darragh



Rue St. Louis Photo: Patch Darragh

The Glass Menagerie is deeply personal, and this new revival's framework emphasizes the autobiographical nature of the play even further. The play centers around a family with Southern roots that is now living in a slightly squalid St. Louis apartment, just as the Williams family did in real life. The narrator and possibly writer of the play is named Tom, just like the playwright himself. Usually Tom is depicted as narrating from some unknown location or perhaps from somewhere in the reaches of his own mind; in this production, he is seen writing in a New Orleans hotel room, further suggesting that he is a stand-in for Williams.

The fictional Tom struggles with a domineering mother, a frail, disabled sister, and an absent father figure who echo much of the dynamic of the real-life Williams family. The vulnerable but overpowering Amanda Wingfield is a dramatized version of Williams' driven mother. Most significantly, Laura is a representation of, and perhaps also a tribute to, Williams' sister, Rose. Tom's troubled but affectionate relationship with his sister, the girl's crippling disabilities, and even her nickname, "blue roses," are all drawn from the closest and most painful relationship in Williams' life.



Keira Keeley and Judith Ivey, Patch Darragh and Judith Ivey in *The Glass Menagerie* Photos: T. Charles Erickson

*"My plays are pleas for the understanding
of the delicate people."
—Tennessee Williams*

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND SOUTHERN GOTHIC WRITING



St. Louis Cathedral Photo: Patch Darragh

The plays of Tennessee Williams are a prime example of Southern Gothic literature. In this type of writing, the action often unfolds in a state of heightened reality and romanticized memory. Unlike most literary styles, this one was applied to the people and concerns of a specific geographical region—the American South. In many of Williams’ dramas that are set in the South, characters, places, and even objects are both themselves and representatives of bigger ideas or archetypes. Williams’ indelible characters are drawn from and inspired by real life and then poetically exaggerated or distorted.

For example, in *Glass Menagerie* Amanda and Laura are real, human characters and, at the same time, twisted (or “grotesque,” as it is often described) versions of the well known Damsel in Distress stock character drawn from Medieval storytelling. The cramped St. Louis Wingfield apartment and fire escape is both the physical setting and a constantly-lurking ghostly symbol of Tom’s feelings of confinement and his nagging desire to break free of his stifling family.

In addition to, Williams, Carson McCullers (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*), William Faulkner (*Light in August*) and Truman Capote (whose *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is a classic example of Southern Gothic sensibility) are among the authors whose work is also part of this literary movement. Williams, however, is perhaps the most famous name associated with Southern Gothic writing, and the one who brought poetically exaggerated versions of real, vulnerable characters onto American stages.



*“It is dimly lighted, it is sentimental,
it is not realistic—in memory
everything seems to happen to music.”
—Tom, The Glass Menagerie*