

Tennessee Williams



Thomas Lanier Williams was born on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi. The second of three children, his family life was full of tension. His parents, a shoe salesman and the daughter of a minister, often engaged in violent arguments that frightened his sister Rose.

In 1927, Williams got his first taste of literary fame when he took third place in a national essay contest sponsored by *The Smart Set* magazine. In 1929, he was admitted to the University of Missouri where he saw a production of [Henrik Ibsen's](#) *Ghosts* and decided to become a playwright. But his degree was interrupted when his father forced him to withdraw from college and work at the International Shoe Company. There he worked with a young man named Stanley Kowalski who would later resurface as a character in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Eventually, Tom returned to school. In 1937, he had two of his plays (*Candles to the Sun* and *The Fugitive Kind*) produced by Mummerys of St. Louis, and in 1938, he graduated from the University of Iowa. After failing to find work in Chicago, he moved to New Orleans and changed his name from "Tom" to "Tennessee" which was the state of his father's birth.

In 1939, the young playwright received a \$1,000 Rockefeller Grant, and a year later, *Battle of Angels* was produced in Boston. In 1944, what many consider to be his best play, *The Glass Menagerie*, had a very successful run in Chicago and a year later burst its way onto Broadway. 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. His own mother, who is often compared to the controlling Amanda, allowed doctors to perform a frontal lobotomy on Tennessee's sister Rose, an event that greatly disturbed Williams who cared for Rose throughout much of her adult life. 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.

Williams followed up his first major critical success with several other Broadway hits including such plays as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Summer and Smoke*, *A 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 1955), *Orpheus Descending*, and *Night of the Iguana*.

Tennessee Williams met and fell in love with Frank Merlo in 1947 while living in New Orleans. Merlo, a second generation Sicilian American who had served in the U.S. Navy in World War II, was a steadying influence in Williams' chaotic life. But in 1961, Merlo died of Lung Cancer and the playwright went into a deep depression that lasted for ten years. In fact, Williams struggled with depression throughout most of his life and lived with the constant fear that he would go insane as did his sister Rose. For much of this period, he battled addictions to prescription drugs and alcohol.

On February 24, 1983, Tennessee Williams choked to death on a bottle cap at his New York City residence at the Hotel Elysee. He is buried in St. Louis, Missouri. In addition to twenty-five full length plays, Williams produced dozens of short plays and screenplays, two novels, a novella, sixty short stories, over one-hundred poems and an autobiography. Among his many awards, he won two Pulitzer Prizes and four New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards