



# TENNESSEE WILLIAMS A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

EDITED BY BESS ROWEN

## A Streetcar Named Desire

**Tennessee Williams** (Thomas Lanier Williams; 1911–83) was a US playwright, whose controversial plays dealt with themes of repressed sexuality and family conflict. Williams was the most popular playwright in America between 1945 and 1960, winning the Pulitzer Prize twice and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award four times.

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TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

*With commentary and notes by*

BESS ROWEN

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and Chris Megson

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## Chronology

- 1911 26 March: Thomas Lanier Williams (later Tennessee Williams) is born in Columbus, Mississippi, the second of three children of mother Edwina Dakin Williams and father Cornelius Coffin Williams. He was particularly close to his mother, older sister, Rose (1909–1996), and his maternal grandfather, Walter Edward Dakin. He suffered from a bad case of childhood diphtheria that lasted around two years from diagnosis to full recovery, but he had an otherwise happy childhood.
- 1919 The Williams family moves to St. Louis and Edwina Williams gave birth to her third child, Tom's younger brother, Dakin (d. 2008). It is this city in general, and the family's apartment specifically, that will later serve as the inspiration for *The Glass Menagerie*. Tom has few friends at school but finds a love of writing. This is also around the time that he began to be teased by local kids and his own father for seeming too feminine or soft. These homophobic comments stuck with him his entire life.
- 1927 May: his first published essay, 'Can a Good Wife be a Good Sport?' appears in the magazine *Smart Set*. Though he is only sixteen, Tom uses his dramatic imagination to write from the perspective of a divorced husband whose wife had been unfaithful.
- 1928 August: his short story, 'The Vengeance of Nitrocin', is accepted by the magazine *Weird Tales*.
- 1929 He enrolls at the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. He joins the fraternity Alpha Tau Omega.
- 1932 Hart Crane, a poet who Tom much admired, dies by suicide.
- 1931–34 The Great Depression (1929–1933) is a difficult economic time for most Americans. Tom's father insists that he leave the University of Missouri and take a job at the

same shoe company where he works. Tom continues writing at night, which eventually leads to a nervous breakdown. But the factory experience provides some inspiration for his semi-autobiographical *The Glass Menagerie* as well as a particular factory worker who inspired the character of Stanley Kowalski.

- 1935 July: his first play, a short farce called *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay*, is produced in Memphis, Tennessee, while Tom recovers from his nervous breakdown.
- 1936–37 An amateur, experimental theatre group called the Mummies at Washington University, St. Louis, produces three of Tom's plays: *Headlines* (a one act), *Candles to the Sun*, and *Fugitive Kind*. Nearby theatre Webster Grove Theatre Guild puts on Tom's one-act, *The Magic Tower* in Webster Grove, Missouri. He also enrolls as a student at the University of Iowa as Tennessee Williams.
- 1937 The Williams family decides to have a prefrontal lobotomy performed on Rose to curb her disturbed behavior. Edwina claims that the decision was made by her husband. Tennessee always regrets not being there to protect his sister.
- 1938 August: he graduates from the University of Iowa with a degree in English.
- 1938–40 Tennessee's desire to write and have new experiences brings him to Chicago, St. Louis, New Orleans, California and Mexico during this period.
- 1939 He wins a special award of \$100 at the Group Theatre Play Contest for *American Blues*, a collection of five one-act plays: *Moony's Kid Don't Cry*, *The Dark Room*, *The Case of the Crushed Petunias*, *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, and *The Long Stay Cut Short, or, The Unsatisfactory Supper*. This win brings him to the attention of famous literary agent Audrey Wood.

- 1940 Audrey Wood helps him get a Rockefeller fellowship of \$1000. Tennessee joins an advanced playwriting seminar at the New School, a private college in New York City.
- After meeting in Provincetown, Massachusetts, he has an affair with dancer Kip Kiernan before Kip breaks it off to marry a woman.
- December: *Battle of Angels* opens in Boston for Broadway tryouts. The play is a flop. The Theatre Guild, recognizing Tennessee's potential, gives him \$2000 to rewrite the play (*Battle of Angels* eventually becomes *Orpheus Descending*).
- 1943 Audrey Wood helps get him a contract as a script writer for MGM film studio. None of his screenplays are chosen. But he does continue to work on play scripts and completes *The Glass Menagerie* during this time.
- 1944 He wins a \$1000 American Academy of Arts and Letters award.
- May: Kip Kiernan dies at the young age of 26. Tennessee is devastated.
- December: *The Glass Menagerie* opens in Chicago.
- 1945 March: *The Glass Menagerie* opens in New York. It wins the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Playwrights Company's \$1500 Howard Memorial Award. In the same month, he sends Audrey Wood a letter about a new play idea that will become *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
- He meets Pancho Rodríguez y González in New Mexico and the two begin a rocky relationship.
- 1947 November: *A Streetcar Named Desire* opens in Boston as a Broadway tryout.
- December 3: *A Streetcar Named Desire* opens in New York City to mostly positive reviews. It runs for 855 performances.

- He wins his second New York Drama Critics Circle Award and his first Pulitzer Prize.
- His parents separate.
- He and Pancho separate.
- 1948 He publishes a short story collection titled *One Arm and Other Stories*.
- He meets and begins a relationship with Frank Merlo.
- October: *Summer and Smoke* opens in New York City.
- 1949 Laurence Oliver directs a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in London.
- 1950 July: *A Streetcar Named Desire* opens in Paris.
- The first film version of *The Glass Menagerie* is released.
- He publishes his only novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*.
- 1951 February: *The Rose Tattoo* opens in New York and runs for 300 performances.
- The film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Elia Kazan, is released.
- 1952 He is elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.
- 1953 March: *Camino Real* opens in New York City and runs for 60 performances. It is not a critical success.
- 1955 March: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opens in New York City and runs for 79 performances. He wins his third Drama Critics Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize.
- 1957 He begins psychoanalysis.
- His father dies.
- March: *Orpheus Descending* opens in New York, and its film version, *The Fugitive Kind*, is filmed.

- 1959      March: *Sweet Bird of Youth* opens in New York City and runs for 95 performances.
- The film version of *Suddenly Last Summer*, a heavily cut and rewritten version of the play, is directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz.
- 1961      December: *The Night of the Iguana* opens in New York and runs for 216 performances.
- 1962      The film of *Sweet Bird of Youth* is released.
- Drugs and infidelities on both sides ends his relationship with Frank.
- 1966      February: *Slapstick Tragedy*, a double-bill of *Gnadiges Fraulein* and *The Mutilated*, runs for only seven performances in New York City.
- 1969      January: Williams converts to Roman Catholicism.
- May: *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* opens off-Broadway and plays only 29 performances. It wins awards from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and from the Academy of Arts and Letters.
- June: The Stonewall Inn in New York City is raided by the police and the patrons fight back. The Stonewall Riots last for several days and mark the beginning of a more public gay rights revolution in America.
- 1972      April: *Small Craft Warnings* opens off-Broadway and runs for 200 performances.
- He begins a relationship with the much younger Robert Carroll, a Vietnam War veteran and aspiring writer.
- 1975      He publishes his *Memoirs* and is elected to a three-year term on the governing council of the Dramatists Guild.
- 1976      Williams is president of the jury at the Cannes Film Festival.

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- 1977 May: *Vieux Carré* closes after only 5 performances in New York City.
- 1977–80 He continues publishing articles and short stories in journals such as *Esquire*, *Time*, and the *New Yorker*.
- 1983 March: Tennessee Williams dies. Despite rumours that he choked on a plastic bottle cap, he actually dies from an overdose of the barbiturate Seconal.

## Introduction

In a letter written to agent Audrey Wood on 23 March 1945, Tennessee Williams excitedly describes working on a new play that has four possible titles and three possible endings. Those titles are: *The Moth*, *The Poker Night*, *The Primary Colors* and *Blanche's Chair in the Moon*. Although *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not mentioned in this list, the interplay he describes between characters then called Blanche and Ralph is easily recognizable. While it is obvious that Williams did not choose any of those titles for his new play, he did select one of the endings he was considering. He writes that the possibilities for the play's conclusion are: 'One, Blanche simply leaves – with no destination. Two, goes mad. Three, throws herself in front of a train in the freight-yards, the roar of which has been an ominous under-tone throughout the play.'<sup>1</sup> Blanche DuBois does not leave, nor does she throw herself in front of a train, but she is committed to a mental institution. Why did Williams choose this path for the play? This question is just one of the many reasons that generations of performers, students and scholars continue to study *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which was Tennessee Williams's second critical success after *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). The play was immensely popular at the time of its premiere, and it has remained relevant and resonant right up until the present moment.

### **Cultural context: the United States in the 1940s**

Like so many other countries around the world, the most significant events influencing the United States of America in the 1940s revolved around the Second World War. Before the US officially declared war, following the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the growing violence in Europe had been reported on and watched anxiously by many citizens. By the time victory was declared in 1945 and US soldiers began to return home, the stage was set for the economic prosperity and 'Baby Boom' that defined the resulting generation. Despite this overall impression of the country's success, these forces did not play out equally for women

or people of colour, for whom wartime had offered opportunities that peacetime had withdrawn. The societal stagnancy of the 1950s – defined by a return to traditional gender roles, middle-class families flocking to suburban, cookie-cutter homes, and feel-good, clean-cut, white family comedies that dominated television – was just around the corner, making the later 1940s a very interesting and transitional time in US sociopolitical history.

In terms of theatre, there is an oft-repeated stereotype that wartime creates a need for escapism, and yet the Pulitzer Prize winning plays of the early 1940s challenge this notion. Although no prize for drama was awarded in 1942 or 1944, Robert E. Sherwood's *There Shall Be No Night*, a tale of a Finnish family's response to possible war with Russia, won the prize in 1941. In 1943, the prize went to Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, which is a complex allegorical story that follows the Antrobus family through human history. Although these plays garnered the most coveted critical success, there were indeed other plays that provided escapism. One of the most popular plays of the decade was Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Oklahoma!*, which opened in 1943. Rodgers and Hammerstein's very first collaboration was a huge success, especially when they began to give away rows of seats to servicemen. The musical represented the rural, plucky America that many of the soldiers recognized as home, and this nostalgic aspect of the show certainly contributed to its popularity.

This brings us to 1945, when a young playwright named Tennessee Williams opened a play called *The Glass Menagerie* at the Playhouse Theatre on Broadway. The play premiered in Chicago in 1944 where it experienced some very crucial critical success. And yet this play, Williams's first major success and still one of his best-known works, did not win a Pulitzer Prize. The award for 1945 went to Mary Chase's play *Harvey*, a whimsical tale about an affable man with a giant, invisible rabbit as a best friend. The choice of this lighter play over more serious fare such as *Menagerie* contrasts markedly with the Pulitzer choices from the previous war years. Aside from the topic itself, there is a strong possibility that Williams was overlooked because he was gay, a topic that will be covered more extensively later in this introduction. Regardless of the reason, the fact that Williams's meditation on Amanda's southern charm, Laura's low self-esteem,

and the Gentleman Caller's confidence in his ability to be upwardly mobile were perhaps a bit too close to home. And so, a play in which Laura is not saved by marriage and single-mother Amanda is not rescued by her son's actions was passed over in favour of Chase's play about inherent good nature and pleasantness triumphing over cynicism. This was a sign of the changing times.

### ***The Glass Menagerie* and the beginning of an era**

*The Glass Menagerie* is an important starting point in a discussion about Williams, not only because of its place at the beginning of his journey in American theatre, but also because of the personal parallels between aspects of the play and Williams's life. Thomas Lanier Williams III was born in Columbus, Mississippi on 26 March 1911 to parents Edwina Dakin and Cornelius Coffin Williams, called 'C. C.' by his friends. He joined older sister Rose Isabel and was followed by younger brother Walter Dakin. When Williams was seven years old, the family moved to St. Louis, Missouri, the location of the Wingfield apartment in *The Glass Menagerie*, because of C. C.'s work at the International Shoe Company. Young Tom, who had not yet named himself 'Tennessee', also worked at that shoe company for a time. Although his father did not leave the family as the patriarch in the play does, C. C. was a difficult man and Tom struggled to have any sort of relationship with him. C. C. especially disliked what he considered his son's lack of masculinity, often calling him 'Nance'. Despite this turbulent relationship with his father, Tom's chosen name of 'Tennessee' is in fact the name of the state where his father was born.

Aside from Williams lending his own name (Tom) and one-time occupation (worker at a shoe factory) to *Menagerie's* narrator, the connection between the character of Laura and Williams's real sister Rose is also important in understanding a recurrent theme in Williams's work. Unlike the shy Laura, Rose was often sexually provocative in conversations to the point where she was taken to multiple doctors before ultimately being lobotomized in 1943. Williams never forgave himself for not at least being present to protect Rose, and this theme haunts much of his writing. Rose's

actual diagnosis is contested. It is generally listed as schizophrenia, although some argue that she might instead have been on the autism spectrum. Rose's mental, or perhaps social, difference was translated to a physical disability in the play, and Laura's nickname of 'Blue Roses' begins a long tradition of rose and flower references in his work. In addition to *The Glass Menagerie*, characters inspired by Rose can be found in *A Cavalier for Milady*, *The Pretty Trap*, *Suddenly Last Summer* and *The Two-Character Play*, not to mention the title of plays such as *The Rose Tattoo*.

### **Williams and the writing process**

Although *The Glass Menagerie* is the most famous version, Williams's one-act *The Pretty Trap* and short story, *Portrait of a Girl in Glass*, are two other approaches to the same characters, plot and circumstances. Unlike many other playwrights, Williams often wrote a short story, one-act play, and full-length play that all involve the same characters but focus on different aspects of a similar storyline. Moving back to *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams's letter to Audrey Wood makes clear that Williams was working out the various specificities of the story although he had already thought of the main points of plot. When reading the impressive amount of one-act plays Williams wrote, one can often spot alternate versions of famous characters or scenarios. Shortly before *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams wrote a one-act play called *Interior: Panic* (1945–1946). This version of the story takes place inside Blanche's mind as she experiences panic and anxiety about her sister's husband, Jack, attacking her. The themes are recognizable, and yet the genre of the play is quite different. Although *Interior: Panic* is clearly sympathetic to Blanche and her extreme discomfort, the distortion the play makes clear that the violence is only in Blanche's imagination.

In this one-act version of the story, Blanche Shannon (later DuBois) has arguably imagined every possible person around her as a threat, including the almost entirely absent Jack (later Stanley). In *Interior: Panic*, Jack leaves Blanche alone, not wanting to make her uncomfortable, and the play ends on a somewhat positive note