

Son of the South



Thomas Lanier Williams was born in 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi. His father traveled frequently for a shoe company, leaving Williams, his older sister Rose, and his younger brother Dakin, to be raised by their overprotective mother, Edwina. Only 16 months apart, Williams bonded strongly with the shy, reclusive Rose.

When the family moved to urban St. Louis, Missouri, Williams felt like an outcast in school and suffered from bouts of depression. It was difficult for him to adjust to the city and he began to write because, he said, “I found life unsatisfactory.” In truth, life was hard for the entire family. His parents’ marriage was rocky, and Rose—suffering from schizophrenia—eventually underwent a lobotomy, an invasive brain operation that was thought to be a cure at the time. Rose was never the same after the procedure.

As Williams got older, he studied poetry, worked odd jobs, attended several different colleges, and wrote plays—several of which were produced at the University of Iowa. A southerner by birth, he naturally set most of his plays in the American South. Basing his characters on his life and the lives of his family, the “outsider” Williams turned his sense of isolation and pain into crushing words. Then at 28, he decided to move to New Orleans and essentially reinvent himself, changing his first name from Thomas to Tennessee.

Throughout his life, Williams struggled to fit in and find some kind of emotional peace. He turned to alcohol and drugs to dull his pain—even after he had become a successful playwright. Williams once said that “success and failure are equally disastrous.” Sadly, he never enjoyed his fame and wealth.

Over the course of his long career, this 1979 Kennedy Center Honoree won nearly every major theater award for drama including the Pulitzer Prize—and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1980. He remains one of America’s most popular and frequently produced playwrights. Tennessee Williams died of complications from drug and alcohol abuse on February 25, 1983.

“Truth in the Pleasant Disguise of Memories”

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the gritty story of a Depression-era family is told with poetic language, dreamlike music, and nonrealistic set design. Nothing is exactly real. The audience watches much of the onstage action through a thin, semi-transparent curtain called a scrim. Williams intended that the curtain depict “an atmosphere of memory.” In fact, Williams lets us know immediately that the play will be dreamlike—and then tells us exactly how the play works.

The play opens with Tom Wingfield—the narrator and Williams’ alter ego—telling us: "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion." With these words, Williams clues us into his writing process.

Meet the Real Williams Family



Williams’ autobiographical play is set during the Depression in a lower-middle class St. Louis neighborhood, similar to the neighborhood in which Williams grew up. The Wingfield family—mother Amanda, son Tom, and daughter Laura—live in a dim, cramped apartment that faces an alley, as did the Williams family.

But the similarities between the real Williams family and fictional Wingfield family don’t end there:

- The fictional Tom—like the young Williams—dreams of being a writer, but works at a dreary shoe warehouse and longs to escape. (Interestingly, Williams worked for a shoe company, just like his father did).
- Williams’ father was absent much of the time. The fictional Mr. Wingfield has abandoned his family and appears onstage only as a portrait.
- Like Williams’ mother Edwina, Amanda runs the household and clings to memories of her Southern youth in order to escape the reality of her life.
- Both Edwina and Amanda were from wealthy families and proud of their Southern heritage.
- Both women married men who came from less wealthy families. Both men were salesmen.
- Edwina was overprotective of her children—just like Amanda.
- Williams’ sister Rose was shy, in poor health, and had a glass collection—just like the fictional Laura.

The comparison between Rose and the fictional Laura is particularly heartbreaking. It was Rose’s schizophrenia that haunted Williams and comes up time and again in his plays. He wrote *The Glass Menagerie* soon after Rose was forced to have a lobotomy. The operation left her barely functional and she spent the remainder of her life institutionalized. Williams never forgave himself for not protecting Rose from having the operation. His guilt clearly runs deeply through *The Glass Menagerie*—especially at the end of the play when Tom says: “Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!”

Why the Play Endures: Production

The Glass Menagerie is considered to be Williams’ masterpiece not only for its story and characters, but also because of its inventive, theatrical elements including:

- **The play's form and structure.** Tom, the play's narrator, directly addresses the audience at the beginning of the play. (This is sometimes called "breaking the fourth wall.") He also directs some action from the stage. For example, just before Amanda delivers a monologue about her gentlemen callers, Tom "motions for music and a spot of light on Amanda."
- **Language.** The characters speak in lyrical, poetic language. The characters are so self-deluded that they can only speak in a heightened, elaborate way. At one point, Amanda tells Tom, "I know your ambitions do not lie in the warehouse, that like everybody in the whole wide world—you've had to—make sacrifices, but—Tom—Tom—life's not easy, it calls for—Spartan endurance!"
- **Metaphor.** The fire escape outside the Wingfield apartment is a metaphor (or a symbol) for something else. In his stage directions, Williams tells us that the fire escape is "a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation." Tom often goes on the fire escape to smoke, foreshadowing his final escape. Another metaphor is Laura's unicorn. It's unusual, rare, and delicate—just like Laura. After Jim accidentally breaks the unicorn, it looks just like an ordinary horse—and Laura has no use for it anymore. She gives the ordinary-looking horse to the ordinary Jim and retreats into her fantasy world of the glass menagerie.
- **Visuals.** Williams makes use of projections—of both photos and words—that comment on much of the action as it happens. The projections were included in the play's 1944 Chicago premiere, but were not used in the original Broadway production in 1945. Descriptions of the projections appear in the published script.
- **Lighting.** Williams is very particular about the lighting design used in the play. In the play's opening, Tom tells us, "Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic."
- **Music.** A particular tune (called "The Glass Menagerie") recurs throughout the play. The piece was written specifically for the play. Sometimes the characters hear the music...and sometimes they don't. In the play's original production notes, Williams says that the music "serves as a thread of connection and allusion between the narrator with his separate point in time and space and the subject of his story." And as Tom says in the opening of the play, "In memory, everything seems to happen to music."