

Historical, social and
cultural context of
tennessee williams
on 'a streetcar nam...



Thomas Lanier Williams (later to be known as Tennessee) was born on March 26th 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi. He was the first of three children. He had a younger brother, and a younger sister named Rose. Their father was a shoe salesman, and their mother was the daughter of a minister. At the age of 14, Williams discovered writing as an escape from reality. This was at a time when Williams felt acutely uncomfortable. His father called him 'Miss Nancy', obviously not believing that a boy would rather read books, rather than play marbles or baseball. In 1929 Williams became a student at the University of Missouri. But during the Great Wall Street Crash Depression (1931-1934) Williams' father insisted he leave university to work in the shoe industry with him. Although Williams held a secure job, he was unhappy and suffered a breakdown. In 1936 Williams once again enrolled at university, this time attending the State University of Iowa. Once Williams had finished university he continued to write, and travelled all over America whilst many of his plays were receiving awards. Tragically on 24th February 1983, Tennessee Williams died, after choking on one of his barbiturates. Historical -? Although Tennessee lived through as many people would say, life-altering events, such as the American Civil War, and World War II, he failed to mention them in any of his plays. This may emphasise Tennessee's ability to distance himself from reality when writing.? In the American Civil War, the southern states tried and failed to oppose from the Union in order to preserve their 'state rights'. Especially their slavery system which was giving many a reliable income, as this was what their cotton, and tobacco industries were relying on.? The Second World War and the destructive political changes that followed, which led to America having an increased amount of power on the world seemed to pass Tennessee Williams by.? He also <https://assignbuster.com/historical-social-and-cultural-context-of-tennessee-williams-ona-streetcar-named-desire/>

appeared oblivious to the issue of gay rights, which was becoming less uncommonly talked about during his lifetime. Many would think this would have been close to Tennessee's heart considering his sexual status, but he rarely mentioned it within his plays. Although homosexuality is so prominent in his private life, it was never the primary theme of his plays. This may be because of the majority of Williams' life homosexuality was still illegal and not tolerated in most parts of America. Although he seemed to disapprove, he seemed to feel compelled to introduce homosexuality into his plays. Blanche could have found her husband in bed with another woman, but it was not likely to have the same shock reaction. He may have also used this to educate society more about homosexuality. If the audience felt like they had got to know Blanche's husband, and liked him, then they may have come to realise that society is equal. This was very uncontroversial of the time. In an interview, Williams was accused of not dealing with his homosexuality openly, but Williams declared that 'the main thrust of his work was not sexual orientation, but social issues'. This could show a conflict between his morality and sexuality, never to be resolved. Williams seemed to seek truth and beauty in a violent world. I think this is related to the American Civil War, and World War II as there was so many catastrophic, and historical events happening in a short period of time that he didn't feel the need to mention them in his plays, this gave the audience the ability to forget real life and transport themselves. He tried to bring out the best in people no matter what was happening around them. Social -? In the period that Williams was in his element, there were also many other successful playwrights. They didn't seem to affect each other though, because they all expressed different qualities. Arthur Miller, writer of the *Crucible* and *All My*

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Sons was greatly affected by the events occurring, such as the American Civil War, and World War II, that he mentioned them frequently in his plays. Although the writers expressed themselves in what appeared to be completely different styles of writing, they had some similarities. Someone once said 'Miller and Williams' work was like a distant and passionate forest fire'. This may imply that in the sense of a forest fire they were both equally destructive, but in a positive way, as they captured the hearts of many. It was once said that, Arthur Miller was a politically assured poet of the conscience, whereas Tennessee Williams colonised the territory of the person. In my opinion this means that Tennessee was more psychologically or emotionally interested in a character and Arthur Miller was more universal, and focused on the political issues. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche depicts the culture and beauty of the past. This may be related to Williams' past as he felt a huge amount of guilt for not being at home when his parents gave consent for his sister to have a frontal lobotomy, after she continued to become more withdrawn and helpless, and her fantasies of being poisoned and murdered more intense. Some of Williams' characters are almost Christ like in their suffering - often desperate to escape reality, this may be linked to Williams' life, as he carried a lot of guilt due to his sister's frontal lobotomy, and throughout his life suffered from many breakdowns, and drank alcohol and took drugs in excessive amounts. Williams always showed compassion towards his characters and he never judged them. I am of the opinion that this may be because he felt close to them due to the fact that when he escaped reality his characters were the first to comfort him in a way. And perhaps may be slightly related if Williams was discriminated against the fact that he was gay, or his family situation. I

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once read, 'Arthur Miller sees the dignity of his characters in his plays, while Williams sees despair.' I think this means that, as Williams life was clearly so full of despair, he wanted to release it in some way and he vented it through his characters. He depicts the serious situations in life and makes the audience realise that everyone's lives had hidden depths that are quite often negative.