

## The Critical Reception of the Works of Tennessee Williams

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In 1944, a dramatic work written by a young playwright named Tennessee Williams debuted at Chicago's Civic Theatre and shortly thereafter opened on a Broadway stage. The play, titled *The Glass Menagerie*, told the story of the struggles of the Wingfield family through the eyes of the son, Tom, a young man hoping to escape his life in St. Louis and realize his dream of being a poet. It was hugely successful, winning over critics and audiences and catapulting the author to fame. Today, Tennessee Williams is recognized as one of the most important playwrights in the history of American drama, owing largely to the success of this play, which has come to be considered one of Williams's signature works and continues to be studied in classrooms and performed on stages all over the world.

When *The Glass Menagerie* premiered in 1944, critics were struck by the personal nature of the story, which bore an undeniable resemblance to the young playwright's own life. They praised Williams's ability to create dynamic characters of enormous depth, such as Laura, a fragile young woman modeled on Williams's own sister, Rose, and Amanda, a well-intentioned but suffocating mother who, abandoned by her husband, clings to her faded past as a southern belle. The breadth of thematic concerns treated in the work was also lauded. Williams was able to depict simultaneously the struggle of the American family within the urban life of a newly industrialized society and the contradictions inherent to the genteel way of life associated with the antebellum American South. The work also successfully treated more universal themes such as abandonment and the desire to escape, the intense moral conflict between responsibility and self-fulfillment, and the desire for love. In its revelation of a basic plot—the wait for a gentleman caller—and in its unexpected conclusions, *The Glass Menagerie* presented a simple story of enor-

mous depth, a formula that won over popular audiences and critics alike.

Although prior to the composition of *The Glass Menagerie* Williams had written in a variety of forms, including poetry, short stories, and screenplays, following the success of this self-proclaimed memory play Williams exhibited a greater commitment to writing for the stage, presenting plays in a variety of styles until his death in 1983. *The Glass Menagerie* was recognized with a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, and many of the works that followed it received similar commendations. In a relatively short span of time, Williams won two Pulitzer Prizes, three Tony Awards, and four New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards, among countless other accolades. With the success of subsequent works such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), critics began to speculate about Williams's place within the history of American and world drama, and most concurred that he should be named among the most relevant American playwrights of all time. However, what seemed like a path of certain, uninterrupted success wandered off course during the second half of the playwright's career with the production of a long list of plays that were neither critically nor popularly successful.

While the criticism surrounding Williams's oeuvre covers an enormous range of topics and represents an equally broad variation of sentiments, which is to be expected in critical conversations on any work of literature, one concern seems to dominate critics' commentary and pervade analyses of Williams's work: namely, the notion that Williams's success was rooted only in his early works and that all his later works were failures springing from some type of personal and professional decline. In fact, while Williams's work has been examined from countless vantage points—ranging from traditional aesthetic readings to postmodernist, feminist, and sexual approaches—the overall understanding and perception of the author's oeuvre remains one of the most significant and intriguing areas associated with the critical study of his work. This broad issue holds its shape over time because it asks the

fundamental questions that must be asked of all literature: Why is the work important? What value does it have for its audience? In light of the countless writings that are available on the subject of Williams and his work, a chronological consideration or general survey of Williams's plays and their reception helps to present a clearer picture of the trajectory of his works as a whole and also reveals the base from which these critical conversations originate as well as where critical readings of Williams's works begin to diverge, and why.

Tennessee Williams began writing at a young age, and while today he is best known as a playwright, he worked in a variety of forms as a young man and throughout his career. Although his work did not attract significant critical attention until the mid-1940s, his earliest works as a student were generally successful, and Williams received several awards at the start of his career, which no doubt motivated him to continue as a writer. In 1927, he won a prize for his essay "Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?," which was published in the American literary magazine *Smart Set*, as well as an award for a film review. One year later, Williams published a short story titled "The Vengeance of Nitocris," and in 1930, when he was a college freshman, his one-act play "Beauty Is the Word" won honorable mention in a contest sponsored by the school's Dramatic Arts Club.

Despite the success of this first dramatic work, Williams continued to write poetry and short stories, and in 1933 his short story "Stella for Star" won first prize in a St. Louis Writers' Guild contest. However, by 1935 Williams was showing a greater commitment to writing for the stage. His first staged play, a comedic work titled *Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!* was performed by the Rose Arbor Players, a community theater group in Memphis, Tennessee. Although the play failed to generate any significant attention, Williams considered it a success, noting in his memoirs that "it was a great success for the group. . . . the laughter, genuine and loud, at the comedy I had written enchanted me. Then and there the theatre and I found each other for better and for worse" (41-42). During the next few years, Williams wrote additional plays,

including *The Magic Tower* (1936), *Candles to the Sun* (1937), and *Fugitive Kind* (1937), for an amateur theater group called the Mummers. These plays also failed to achieve critical or popular success, although, as scholar and editor Allean Hale points out in her essay “Early Williams: The Making of a Playwright” (15-16), the experience had a profound impact on Williams, compelling the playwright to make intense emotional impact the goal of every work.

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Williams continued to struggle with the negative reception of his works. In 1938, Williams presented a play called *Spring Storm* to his playwriting class at the University of Iowa. It was not well received, and his teacher dismissed it as an amateur work. The Mummers, who had produced several of Williams’s other plays, did not wish to perform it either. The play was subsequently forgotten, resurrected only decades later when a scholar discovered a copy of the play while conducting research in the Tennessee Williams Collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. Upon its rediscovery, critics did revisit the work, but not owing to the play’s success; rather, they took an interest because the play showed evidence of the character types and concerns that would recur in Williams’s later works. A 2004 *New York Magazine* review of a production of the play gave voice to this sentiment, with John Simon explaining, “Tennessee Williams’s early and immature *Spring Storm* is best as a game for Williams fans: How many names, characters, situations, and devices of his later plays can you identify here?”

After moving to New Orleans in 1939, Williams submitted *Fugitive Kind* to the Federal Writers’ Project and began work on a new play titled *Not About Nightingales*. *Fugitive Kind* was not a great success, and *Not About Nightingales* fared even worse, rejected by the Group Theatre and forgotten until actor Vanessa Redgrave uncovered references to the play years after Williams’s death and coordinated its production and publication. Despite these setbacks, Williams received more accolades in 1939, including an award of one hundred dollars from the Group Theatre for a collection of one-act plays called *Ameri-*

*can Blues* (1948) and a one thousand dollar grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. It was also at this time that Audrey Wood, a well-known agent, began to represent Williams.

*Battle of Angels*, Williams's first major production, opened in Boston in 1940, despite being originally set to open in New Haven, Connecticut. The play was a failure, closing in less than two weeks. Presented with an invitation to revise the play and resubmit it, Williams set to work, but even his new version was rejected. He would continue to work on the play throughout his career, presenting an almost entirely reworked version titled *Orpheus Descending* (1957) many years later. Despite this additional rejection and his added failure as a screenwriter during this time, Williams continued to have some success with his dramatic works. His one-act play *Dos Ranchos, or The Purification*, was anthologized in 1942, and in 1944 the playwright received a one thousand dollar grant from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

The following year marked a turning point in Williams's career. With his next work, *The Glass Menagerie*, he turned the heads of major critics and piqued the interest of popular audiences. A family drama inspired by the author's own life, it premiered at the Civic Theatre in Chicago in December of 1944, where it received rave reviews from critics, and later moved to Broadway. Although the Broadway production elicited a more mixed response than had the Chicago production, reviews of the work were still overwhelmingly favorable, and the play won a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award in 1945. The success of *The Glass Menagerie* also gave Williams financial stability, allowing him to devote more time to the creation of new plays.

While *A Streetcar Named Desire* is frequently misidentified as Williams's next work, before *Streetcar* he also wrote, with Donald Windham, *You Touched Me!* (first produced in Cleveland in 1943), a romantic comedy inspired by a short story of the same name by British author D. H. Lawrence, one of Williams's major influences. The play fell short of achieving the same success as *The Glass Menagerie*, shutting down its 1945 New York production after little more than one hundred

performances. It was not until December 3, 1947, under the direction of Elia Kazan, a prominent director and producer who would maintain a long-standing work relationship with Williams, that *Streetcar* opened on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre after a short debut run at the Shubert Theater in New Haven, Connecticut. The play did take some shots from a handful of reviewers who found the themes and plot appalling and considered the play to be little more than a creative demonstration of overt pessimism, but, like *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams's new play was hugely successful, again pleasing both audiences and critics. It received the Pulitzer Prize in 1948, and performances carried on for two years (the longest run of all of Williams's plays), further securing Williams's reputation as one of America's most significant playwrights.

Another Williams play also debuted on Broadway in 1948: *Summer and Smoke*, previously titled *Chart of Anatomy*, which took as its subject the clash between body and spirit. The play, first produced in Dallas, Texas, in 1947, opened at the Music Box Theatre in New York on October 6, 1948. Early productions of the play received mixed reviews and failed to achieve the success of either *The Glass Menagerie* or *Streetcar*. The 1952 Circle in the Square production starring Geraldine Page had greater success, playing a pivotal role in the genesis of the Off-Broadway movement. Still, Williams would continue to work on revisions of the play, presenting it to future audiences as *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* (1964). Williams's next play, *The Rose Tattoo*, did not open until 1950, and, unlike Williams's previous works, it presented a unique hybrid of Dionysian comedy and Greek tragedy that surprised critics and audiences. *The Rose Tattoo* fell short of the success of earlier works, but it was a box-office hit on Broadway, winning a Tony Award for Best Play and, more important, inspiring critics and audiences to take note of Williams's evolving style.

In 1952 Williams received further recognition when he was inducted as a lifetime member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. The works that the playwright produced around this time were in-

dicative of a conscious departure from his earliest works, and Williams seemed to feel more confident about openly experimenting with new styles and techniques. Unfortunately, critics and audiences in general failed to respond favorably to the changes in Williams's work. In 1953, audiences went to see Williams's most unexpected work to date, *Camino Real*, an expanded version of an earlier one-act called *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*, which combined the absurd and the fantastical and abandoned most of the traditional elements associated with realist works and popular drama. Many audience members simply walked out of the theater long before the play concluded. Critics were no easier on the author. This was a failure that affected Williams deeply, one that some critics have suggested pushed him to return to his realist roots with the composition of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* premiered on Broadway after Williams made some revisions that director Elia Kazan requested, and the play attained critical and popular success. Williams was presented with a New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and another Pulitzer Prize. The next grouping of Williams's plays, however, met with mixed success. *Orpheus Descending*, the drastically revised version of *Battle of Angels*, opened in 1957, the same year that Williams's father died. The revisions on which Williams had spent so much time were not enough to please critics or theatergoers, and the play achieved only minimal success. A year later, the double bill *Garden District*, comprising *Something Unspoken* and *Suddenly Last Summer*, premiered Off-Broadway with some success, as did Williams's next work, *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), which received several Tony Award nominations. However, the remainder of Williams's plays presented at the end of the decade—such as the one-act play *I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix* (1959); Williams's only verse play, *The Purification*; and *Period of Adjustment*, a play that Williams later confessed had been conceived under the influence of drugs and that attempted a more mainstream kind of comedy—failed to appease critics. Williams had one last burst of success with *The Night of the Iguana*, which tells the story of a defrocked minister

who takes up employment as a half-rate tour guide. The play, which opened on Broadway in 1961, was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play and won a Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play in 1962.

Although Williams's achievements were consistently acknowledged over the course of the next two decades—he was named a lifetime fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1962; received the National Institute of Arts and Letters' Gold Medal for Literature in 1969, the National Arts Club's Medal of Honor for Literature in 1975, and the Kennedy Center Honors in 1979; won the Common Wealth Award in 1981; and was awarded an honorary doctorate from Harvard University in 1982—the works that followed *The Night of the Iguana* were almost entirely critical disasters. *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, which opened in 1963, ran for only two months, and a subsequent revival ran for a tragic span of three days. Although a third revival of *Milk Train* in San Francisco had some limited critical success, the rest of Williams's plays throughout the 1960s also suffered short runs, leaving audiences and critics to speculate that Williams's career was, in essence, over. The double bill *Slapstick Tragedy* (1966) ran for less than a week in New York. *Kingdom of Earth*, which premiered in Philadelphia and was revised and performed in New York as *The Seven Descents of Myrtle* in 1968, ran for only one month; in a 1996 *New York Times* review of a later production, Ben Brantley noted that, when the work premiered, “critics recoiled in ways that spelled an early death for the play’s run and Williams fell into a suicidal depression.” *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969), which depicts an artist struggling to reignite his career by creating a new style (a subject that critics could not help but recognize as a reflection of Williams's own situation), also received terrible reviews, although some critics noted that it showed more glimmers of hope for future success than perhaps any other of Williams's other later works.

His plays that debuted in the 1970s failed to fare better. *Out Cry* (1971), a revision of *The Two-Character Play* (1967), was performed in Chicago and New York but closed after only a brief series of perfor-

mances, and *The Red Devil Battery Sign* (1975), which ran in Boston, closed within two weeks, with international performances also receiving bitter criticism. Meanwhile, performances of Williams's earlier works, such as *The Glass Menagerie*, *Summer and Smoke*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*, continued to be successful. Works from the latter half of the 1970s also failed, with *Vieux Carré* (1977) closing on Broadway after fewer than five performances; *Tiger Tail* (1978) and *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur* (1979) also closed after limited runs. *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980) was the last of Williams's plays to be performed on Broadway prior to his death; the work, which portrays the relationship between author F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda, also failed to impress critics. Finally, his last plays, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981) and the southern gothic *Some Problems for the Moose Lodge* (1980), which was also performed as *A House Not Meant to Stand* (1981), shared similar fates.

Overviews and surveys such as this one help to provide a global understanding of Williams's work and its critical reception; they also serve another purpose, alerting us to some of the challenges of literary criticism—especially those challenges associated with the criticism of dramatic works. Williams's plays exist not only in print form but also in a variety of incarnations as unique performances with different actors and directors, venues, and audiences—a complexity that creates some obstacles for those seeking a true understanding of the critical reception of dramatic works as a whole. Williams himself recognized the contradictions inherent to the critical reception of dramatic works:

For me the production of a play is only an incident in the life of a play. I mean there's not only the continued work on the play but there are other productions of the play. Sometimes it's a failure on Broadway and it's a success off-Broadway. . . . Sometimes it's a failure in one country and in another country it's a great success. And consequently I feel that a play is dynamic and living far beyond the time of its Broadway opening and the press of the following morning. (*Conversations* 84)

To complicate matters further, Williams revised and reworked his plays throughout his career, keeping them in a state of flux. This habit often contributed to the dour criticism that Williams's work elicited in his later years, with many critics feeling that these works contained no more than recycled character portraits and rehashed themes, resulting in plays that lacked a fresh perspective and were merely disappointing examples of self-plagiarism. John Simon, for instance, wrote in 1977 that "a man who would steal and re-steal from himself is the saddest of failures. Reprehensible as it may be to steal from others, it is at least enterprising: a sign of awareness that the outside world exists. . . . When he does write a play, it is perforce a rehash, or at the utmost a replay of youthful memories" ("Warmed-Over"). Critics such as Alan Rich and Harold Clurman concurred. Rich stated that "a playwright has every right to imitate himself, I suppose, but what is shocking is the ineptitude, the inexactitude of the imitation," and in a review of one of Williams's later works Clurman observed that "there is a certain wretched honesty and boldness in several of the scenes but they also seem tired: the tune has too often been replayed."

In light of such observations, other scholars have also seen contradictions in the criticism of Williams's work, arguing that those same traits that were praised in his earlier works—such as lyricism and symbolism—have also been the impetus for negative criticism of his later works. This theory has been explored by critics and scholars such as Annette J. Saddik and George W. Crandell, and in his book *The Late Plays of Tennessee Williams*, William Prossner uses this concept to argue against Simon, Rich, and Clurman, offering, "Perhaps critics, especially as consumer reporters, are too demanding of novelty, too hungry for this year's rage, too intolerant of yesterday's insights" (109).

In response to these issues, critics have initiated a reconsideration of the overall reception of Williams's oeuvre, including an examination of the earlier criticism of Williams's later works. Critics such as Linda Dorff and Annette Saddik have suggested that Williams's later works might have greater merit than past criticism would indicate, and they

have done more than merely object to the overwhelming negative reception of these works—they have also presented for consideration the possibility that the negative reception of Williams’s later works could be attributed, at least in part, to misunderstandings of the author, misreadings of his work, and earlier critics’ inability to understand or accept works that strayed from prevailing trends in American theater. In 2002, a panel of critics and scholars that included Robert Bray, Allean Hale, Ruby Cohn, Philip C. Kolin, Brenda Murphy, Thomas Keith, and Annette Saddik convened at the Tennessee Williams Scholars’ Conference to discuss these theories on Williams’s later works; their conversation was published that same year in the *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* as a transcript titled “Looking at the Late Plays of Tennessee Williams.”

As for misunderstandings of the author, many critics have noted that the beginning of Williams’s career has often incorrectly been linked to production of *The Glass Menagerie*, thus creating a myth of the playwright’s immediate success and propagating the incorrect notion that his early, uninterrupted success was cut short by an abrupt decline in his later years. Many critical writings and reviews have been littered with the false notion that Williams’s success with *The Glass Menagerie* led seamlessly to the success of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and, subsequently, of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, perpetuating the mistaken idea that Williams’s success was linked only to the output of the first half of his career and relegating all works after *The Night of the Iguana* into a single group associated with mere decline. Prior critical considerations of Williams’s work often neglected those works preceding *The Glass Menagerie* and *Streetcar*, such as *Spring Storm*, *Battle of Angels*, *Fugitive Kind*, and *Not About Nightingales*, as well as those works presented contemporaneously with *The Glass Menagerie* and *Streetcar*, such as *You Touched Me!* and *Summer and Smoke*, that could not be considered critically successful and, thus, would have shattered the myth of seamless success.

In addition to such problematic myths, critics have found evidence

of the playwright being misunderstood in other ways. Williams created works in many different forms, including poetry, short stories, and screenplays, before committing to the composition of dramatic works, and later critics observed several problems that this variety created. First, there were those critics who recognized Williams's origins as poet and, therefore, saw a divide in his work. Second, there were those who overlooked Williams's background as poet altogether, refusing to see him as anything other than playwright, and misread his works because of their misconceptions about his lyricism and technique. Finally, there were those critics who not only seemed incapable of seeing Williams as something other than playwright but who also refused to accept him as anything other than *realist* playwright.

In his edited volume *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams*, George W. Crandell gives voice to the first of these problems, suggesting that Williams's origins as poet created not only a divide in Williams's own work but also a divided critical response to his work. He explains:

Williams's transformation from poet to dramatist . . . as reflected in the critical response to Tennessee Williams, was never wholly complete. Something of the poet always remained. . . . Just as Williams's "artistic personality" may be said to be divided, so too may be the critical response to his plays. (xxvi-xxvii)

Crandell makes note of Williams's deep concern with language and interest in forms that transcended a stage setting, presenting avenues for a reconsideration of these late works (xxvii). There is also proof that Williams himself was aware of how a failure to reconcile his roles as both poet and playwright could affect criticism of his work. In Williams's own words:

The tragedy of a poet writing drama is that when he writes well—from the . . . technical point of view, he is often writing badly. One must learn . . . to fuse lyricism and realism in a congruous unit. I guess my chief trouble is that I don't. (quoted in Leverich 334)

With Williams himself struggling to reconcile the two, it followed that many critics also have been unable to do so.

In her book *The Politics of Reputation*, Annette Saddik presents a parallel point of view: namely, that Williams was boxed in by critics, defined not only as playwright but also as *realist* playwright. Her work suggests that the critical acceptance of a Williams play waned in proportion to the degree of its departure from the realism that had come to be expected of Williams. Furthermore, Saddik encourages critics and readers to ask themselves if the poor reviews of Williams's later works could have stemmed from critics' failure to consider Williams within a vein of experimental and avant-garde theater that included Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Edward Albee (136-50). In fact, Saddik provides proof of Williams's interest in experimental drama and builds a case for arguing that the failure of his later work was the result of critics' and audiences' inability to accept work that departed from straight realism. She notes, too (as countless other critics have), that elements of experimental dramatic form and technique and a desire to create a new kind of theater were already evidenced in Williams's early works—even in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Streetcar*. Indeed, one cannot help but recall Williams's early declarations of his desire to create a new plastic theater or sculptural drama that would better serve modern audiences. Saddik also questions the general reception of avant-garde and experimental theater during Williams's lifetime, reaching the ultimate conclusion that the playwright's "later reputation . . . tells us more about the critical biases in the popular and academic press in this century than about Williams' work per se" (150).

Finally, contemporary criticism presents additional questions for consideration: Were critics correct that Williams's later works were

somehow too personal? Reviews such as Clive Barnes's *New York Times* article on *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* indicate that this was, in fact, a central problem. Other critics have asked whether the works were marred by the author's personal decline and addictions or if he, in essence, traded success for the right to experiment in the hope of creating a new dramatic form. New criticism also suggests that many previous critics have misunderstood Williams's characters, seeing Williams as sadistic, obsessed with desire and death. Critics today continue to revisit these questions.

Despite the pervasive opinion that his work suffered a steady decline, Williams remains at the forefront of the greatest American dramatists. Even those who fail to find success in his later works continue to praise Williams for his vivid characters, his intense portrayal of the human experience, and his courageous treatment of difficult themes. More than twenty-five years after his death, scholars and critics continue to acknowledge his contribution to American drama and to present new reflections on his work. The critical response to Williams's work might then best be characterized as an ongoing conversation, whereby participants continue not only to review past theories and criticism but also to pose new questions and present new responses to his work. These critical writings will, in turn, reveal new avenues for further research and yield a fresh understanding of Williams's work.

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