At Chicago's Union Station, on December 17, 1944, the cast of *The Glass Menagerie* assembled with only two weeks left to prepare for the play's debut. The motley group milling on the platform gave no sign of a common purpose; most of the actors barely knew one another. And when the playwright, Thomas Lanier "Tennessee" Williams, returned to the train to retrieve an item he'd left behind, he emerged to find that almost everyone had already left for the hotel; only the actor who would star in the production, Laurette Taylor, remained. Williams called out to her, and she replied; this encounter at Union Station was the start of an enduring friendship. "Then and there," Williams would later recall, "we joined forces."

Taylor hailed a cab for them "with an imperious wave of her ungloved hand, hesitation all gone as she sprang like a tiger out of her cloud of softness." Her confidence would be vital to the production's success or failure, and it was as important to Taylor that the play succeed as it was to Williams. Earlier in her career, Taylor had been known as one of America's greatest actors; her successes in productions of *Peg o' My Heart* and *Outward Bound* had been brilliant, but all such coups had taken place a decade before. She had been absent from the stage for many years by 1944, and she was rumored to have become an alcoholic. Eddie Dowling, the director of the play and also one of its actors, had called the sixty-year-old Taylor out of retirement to play the role of Amanda Wingfield. Taylor had stayed up most of the night reading the script to *The Glass Menagerie*, and by the next morning she'd recognized it as the perfect opportunity to reestablish herself in the public eye.

Indeed, almost everyone who read the script had liked it. Williams' agent, Audrey Wood, had easily persuaded Dowling to produce the play, and Dowling decided to star in the production as well, taking on the role of Tom Wingfield. Julie Haydon—who had played in more than twenty films in the 1930s and provided the screams for Fay Wray in *King Kong* (1933)—agreed to originate the role of the crippled daughter, Laura. The relatively inexperienced Anthony Ross would play Jim O'Connor, "the gentleman caller."

Dowling secured financial backing for the production from a Wall Street broker named Louis J. Singer. Singer was fascinated with the theater, but he had little or no working knowledge of what went into the production of a play—so the budget was tight. The troupe had no access to a theater in New York; rehearsals were held in hotel rooms and apartments, even in Dowling's office. During rehearsals, Williams retreated to his childhood home in St. Louis, hoping to distance himself from the cast; he found actors intimidating and, moreover, dreaded the onslaught of the changes they would want to make to his script.

When the company left New York for the Chicago show, its members asked Williams to join them, as they very much wanted the author to be on hand for the full-scale rehearsals there. These rehearsals were often chaotic, and they frequently led to personality conflicts. Taylor felt from the outset that Dowling was far too old to play her son, and her temper flared as the two bickered. Taylor hadn't memorized many of her lines or practiced the Southern accent called for in her role; Williams remarked that she made the play sound like "The Aunt Jemima Pancake Hour." To further complicate matters, Chicago's Civic Theater was an inconvenient distance from the city's theater district; there was no budget for advertising, and the theater's sound system was crude and ineffective.

As the problems continued to mount, Louis Singer grew increasingly upset. Doubting the play's commercial appeal, he called a meeting and told the group that the script should be changed to end happily. Neither Dowling nor Williams uttered a word in defense of the original, but Margo Jones, "the Texas Tornado," a friend who would also become the play's co-director, objected vehemently, and she warned the financier that if the ending were changed she'd report his "wire-pulling" to every art critic in Chicago. The play's ending remained as it was.

Still, although Singer had backed down on changing the ending, he continued to complain about every expense. In a letter to Audrey Wood back in New York, Jones related that a lack of funds compelled them to sew some of their own costumes; Williams himself contributed $10 for one of the dresses, a week's pay for him at the time. And this was not the extent of the production's troubles; Paul Bowles, who scored the music for the play, remembered flying to Chicago through a terrible blizzard for a dress rehearsal, only to find that the theater was frigid and Taylor had again started drinking.
Despite all this, though, a specially scheduled matinee was staged successfully on Christmas afternoon, for an audience of 400 uniformed members of another touring company. Also in the matinee audience was Williams' mother, Edwina, who had traveled by train from St. Louis alone, to attend.

By now, many members of the company had begun to grasp Taylor's method for assuming the role of the mother in the play. She had learned her "inner search" technique of characterization from her late husband, Hartley Manners, who had been her coach for many years. With little regard for how the troupe felt or how she made them suffer, her technique was to observe how the other players interacted with her character, after which she would "soak" herself in the facets that would be revealed by these exchanges. To solve the problem of Amanda's Southern accent, she imitated Williams himself. With all of the pieces in place, she assumed her character, and the effect was so overwhelming that many of the crew wept at her first rehearsal, including the young playwright himself. Later Williams summarized her performance with admiration: "She was continually working on her part, putting in little things and taking them out—almost every night in Chicago there was something new, but she never disturbed the central characterization. Everything she did was absolutely in character."

On opening night—December 26, 1944—Chicago was again in the grip of a blizzard. In her memoirs, Edwina Williams described her own arrival: "[E]verything seemed to be against the play, even the weather. The streets were so ice-laden we could not find a taxi to take us to the Civic Theater and had to walk. The gale blowing off Lake Michigan literally hurled us through the theatre door." The crowd that braved the storm by no means filled the theater.

When the curtain fell all was quiet, and Williams' mother thought that the audience had not liked the piece; but then the scant audience burst into sustained applause. Although the initial reception of the play was good, its success remained dubious, for its total take in the first week was a mere $3,670. Singer was ready to close the production down. Two Chicago critics, however, the Tribune's Claudia Cassidy and the Herald-American's Ashton Stevens, continued to attend, night after night; both wrote glowing reviews in their columns, and soon other reviewers followed suit. They reminded Chicago readers of past complaints about the low-quality second-string road shows that regularly appeared in their city, and they urged readers to support something truly extraordinary.

Their efforts achieved the desired result, and there was no premature closing. By the third week, calls were coming in regularly for group and individual tickets, and the house was packed every night. Soon the play was grossing $15,000 weekly, almost five times the take of its first week. Williams' abruptly found himself with $1,000, the first real money he had earned in all his years of sacrifice and diligence. Williams had spent most of his adult life working menial jobs, going hungry, and sometimes wandering the streets, homeless, but now those days appeared to be over. And although he remained in awe of Laurette Taylor, the two eventually became close friends. The praise she received for her performance, she graciously turned back to that "nice little guy," reminding people it was his lines that lent to the play its power and beauty. Before the production closed in Chicago, many Hollywood stars stopped off to see it on their way to New York—including Helen Hayes, Katherine Hepburn, Raymond Massey, and Gregory Peck. Some of Williams' classmates from Iowa attended, too, in honor of their friend.

By now, the front-office dilemma had become deciding how long to keep the show in Chicago and which New York offer to accept. Word of the success of the play had traveled quickly to Broadway, and several theaters waited with open arms. The Playhouse Theatre was chosen, and The Glass Menagerie was scheduled to open in New York on March 31, 1945.

But Laurette Taylor's health now seemed to be failing. During dress rehearsals, she was enervated and nauseated, and she seldom made it through more than one scene before pleading illness and taking leave of the stage. This routine went on for several days, and as opening night approached, the entire cast wondered whether she would be able to perform at all; and the aged Taylor did require the help of two people to reach the stage come showtime. Still, once the curtain rose and the lights came up, Taylor was in top form. At the play's end, the cast took a whopping 24 curtain calls. There were numerous cries for the author, too, who, with a boyish crewcut and a button missing from his suit coat, was at last persuaded to take the stage.

Within days, the lines outside the Playhouse were long and theatergoers were purchasing tickets weeks in advance. The cast put on 563 performances during the play's initial run in New York, with Taylor playing the role of Amanda until she became too ill to continue. Also during its New York run, it was voted the year's best play by the New York Drama Critics' Circle, in addition to garnering the Donaldson Award from the magazine Billboard and the Sidney Howard Memorial Award from the Playwrights Company, a major theatrical organization founded in 1937 by five luminaries, including the legendary Max Anderson. Williams' play was a hit now, and he was famous.
Laurette Taylor died in 1946. Williams wrote a penetrating tribute to her for *The New York Times*, the closing paragraph of which hints at Williams' vision of his relationship with the world of the theater:

> I feel now—as I have always felt—that a whole career of writing for the theatre is rewarded enough by having created one good part for a great actress. Having created a part for Laurette Taylor is a reward I find sufficient for all the effort that went before and any that may come after.

**Opening Scenes**

One route to an understanding of Tennessee Williams' unique artistry, of the relationship between his work and his life, is through the strongest influence on his childhood: that of his family. Williams' grandfather, Walter Edwin Dakin, was born in southwestern Ohio in 1857. One of six sons born to Dr. Edwin Francis Dakin, Walter was confirmed at Saint Mary's Episcopal Church in Waynesville, where he later served as a deacon. Although he was named for his father, Walter did not follow in his father's footsteps professionally, for his own inclination was more toward the ministry than toward medicine. In fact, he saw both fields as impractical, and he later studied business and finance at Eastman College in Poughkeepsie, New York. On completing college, he returned to Ohio, where he was married.

Walter Dakin's wife, Rosina Otte, was the daughter of a German emigrant who, since his arrival in the U.S. from Hanover, had developed a substantial tailoring business that would remain in the family for generations. The Ottes were Lutheran, but the Otte children had been educated at a Roman Catholic school, after which Rose had studied at Cincinnati's famous Conservatory of Music, developing a passion for music that would remain with her throughout her life. Her engagement to Dakin followed her return from the Conservatory and a brief courtship; they were married in 1883. Rose's parents had hoped she would marry into a more affluent family, but they soon accepted Walter with great warmth. A year later, on August 19, 1884, Edwina Estelle Dakin was born to the new couple—their only child, and Tennessee Williams' mother.

When Rose's parents decided to leave Ohio, the Dakins went along, settling at last on a farm east of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Walter took a position as superintendent of the Shelbyville Female Institute, a school for girls, located halfway between Nashville and Chattanooga. The Institute offered to Walter both employment and accommodation and to Rose the opportunity to teach music and give piano concerts; some of Edwina's earliest memories were of seeing her mother sweep elegantly across the stage to be seated at the piano. The small house on the Institute's campus was the Dakins' first home away from the extended family.

They later moved to Tullahoma, Tennessee, where Walter became a regular reader at an Episcopal church—apparently with some success, for the minister asked whether he had considered, or would consider, studying for the ministry. Walter quickly replied that he was interested in becoming a minister, and the decision was made. Rose supported her husband's project by taking on extra music students and sewing assignments. Walter did become a minister, and afterward the Dakins traveled, visiting small, failing churches in the hope of breathing new life into them. This kept the family moving from place to place, but because the couple had become so popular to people in the church community, the transitions were relatively painless. As they moved through the South, Edwina, though of course not a true Southerner, quickly adopted the folkways of the South, even developing a soft, slurring accent that she would retain to her last days.

Edwina's was a peaceful and supportive childhood, not particularly marked by discord. She would later regret her inability to provide the same for her own children; "If there is one time in life a person ought to be free from fear," she wrote in her memoirs, "it is when he is growing up."

Edwina attended Wittenberg College—a junior college—and subsequently was offered a scholarship to Harcourt Place Seminary, where she spent three years and, harboring a secret desire to become a stage actor, became involved in a number of theatrical projects. After her graduation from Wittenberg, the Dakins relocated several times, landing at last in Natchez and then in Columbus, Mississippi; the genteel codes and customs of the Old South were still followed closely there, and Edwina felt at home. Although her parents were not wealthy, Edwina played the debutante at countless social functions, and she would later remember attending and giving elaborate parties wherever they went. She was a beautiful young lady, educated and eligible; still, although many eligible young men called at the Dakin home, at the age of 21 Edwina remained single—and a little concerned for her prospects, as many of her friends already were married and had children.

Cornelius Coffin Williams, Edwina's future husband, had come of entirely different stock. Thomas Lanier Williams II, Cornelius' father, was a Tennessee politician born in 1859 who had served as railroad commissioner for that state and as a commissioner for Mississippi at the 1893 World's Fair. He had run three gubernatorial campaigns, all of them
unsuccessful, and his efforts to gain political influence by giving away considerable tracts of land nearly bankrupted his family. His wife died when their son Cornelius was only five years old, after which Cornelius was passed from aunt to aunt. As an adolescent, he was sent first to a seminary school, where he was extremely unhappy, and later to a military academy, where he conducted himself badly enough to spend a good deal of his time in the guardhouse. Openly hostile to authority, he was finally removed from boarding schools altogether; but this did not end his schooling, for he then spent two years at the University of Tennessee. On leaving the University, he enlisted in the U.S. Army in order to take part in the Spanish-American War (1898). It was his time in the military that first introduced him to heavy drinking and other forms of debauchery—including the all-night poker game, which would later result in a major alteration of his fortunes. One suspects he made an effort to collect himself when, in 1906, he was introduced to Edwina Dakin, the daughter of the local minister of Columbus, Mississippi.

At the time, Edwina was seeing a gentleman named Franklin Harris; Harris was not yet officially a suitor, but his calls had become noticeably frequent. In May of that year, Harris brought Cornelius Williams, a young visitor from Memphis, to the Dakin home; Harris assured the family that Cornelius was descended from one of the most elite families of Knoxville. With his considerable girth and military bearing, Cornelius cut an imposing figure. Edwina learned that he had served in the Spanish-American War as a second lieutenant; he was a handsome young man, even though a bout with typhoid fever during the war had claimed most of his hair. At the time, the telephone was the latest technological innovation, so the telephone industry was the perfect milieu for the up-and-coming—and Cornelius worked for the Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph Company, which added respectability to his personal charms. His lineage, too, was to be applauded; he came from the Williams, Coffin, Sevier, and Lanier families, each of which boasted a coat of arms and a rich history. All told, Cornelius Williams made a very acceptable suitor.

The early days of their courtship were punctuated by lapses in contact on his part, to such an extent that between May and August Edwina hardly heard from him. In mid-September, though, Edwina was stricken with typhoid fever and malaria, and during her illness Cornelius impressed her with thoughtfulness and attention, sending roses nearly every day and inquiring constantly about her health. Cornelius proposed to her on several occasions, and each time she turned him down. But he wasn't the kind of man who would take no for an answer—a trait that, as his wife, Edwina would later come to despise—and in time she gave in. (Edwina would never say that she had fallen in love with Williams' father, only that he had swept her off her feet.)

Cornelius had been promoted by this time to a managerial position over three telephone exchanges in Gulfport, Louisiana, so he had no trouble in convincing Reverend and Mrs. Dakin that he was worthy of their daughter's hand in marriage. A sizable wedding was planned, but in the midst of the planning Cornelius' father became gravely ill, and his illness required his son's full attention. Cornelius spent as much time in Knoxville as his work would allow, with little or no time left for Edwina. She was about to give up all hope of ever being married when she received word that he was coming to Columbus with the ring. On June 3, 1907, the two were married by Edwina's father in a very small ceremony at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Columbus. The couple moved to Gulfport, Mississippi, where they lived happily. Cornelius' job paid well, and the two were deeply involved in the social life of the small coastal town.

A year later, Thomas Lanier Williams died; Cornelius would never fully recover from the grief. His mourning followed the same pattern as the rest of his emotional life: he kept his immediate family in the dark, and most of what they ever learned of him came from Ella and Isabel, his father's two sisters.

In 1909, two events caused major change in the lives of the Williams family. The first was Cornelius' break with the telephone company, for reasons never made clear. He moved on to a position as a traveling salesman, which seems to have suited him well. The second event was Edwina's announcement that she was pregnant—to which Cornelius gave little or no response. Since her husband was away from home a great deal, Edwina decided to move from Gulfport back to Columbus in time for the birth. This arrangement was agreeable to all involved, especially Reverend and Mrs. Dakin, who were thrilled to have their only daughter in their home again. Cornelius retained his private life on the road, and Edwina once again began to enjoy social life in Columbus. Still, their relationship can't have been entirely distant, for Rose Isabel Williams was born at the rectory on November 19, 1909 and Thomas Lanier Williams III two years later. The boy who would become Tennessee Williams was born at a small hospital near the rectory on Sunday, March 26, 1911; Edwina would move into the rectory permanently, with the children, soon thereafter.

Little Rose was jealous of the new baby in the early years. "Let's shoo him away, Grandfads," she would say to her grandfather Dakin; "Grandfads" became her pet name for their grandfather, though all three of the Williams children referred to their grandmother Dakin simply as "Grand." Thomas, on the other hand, always adored his older sister, and he followed her everywhere. Her initial jealousy was soon overcome, and the two became inseparable. Both children were...
blue-eyed, their heads covered with blond ringlets, and they were often mistaken for twins. In the absence of their father, the two children came under the influence of their loving mother and grandparents, who read to them as often as possible. The minister's vast library became an object of wonderment. Thomas, who would become Tennessee Williams, remembers his grandfather quoting lines of poetry from memory—and he remembers finding those quotations fascinating.

The beginning of Williams' love of storytelling seems to date to this period; indeed, it is at this point that another storyteller, perhaps the principal storyteller of his childhood, entered the picture. Williams' nurse, Ozzie, was an African-American woman who had just appeared on the doorstep in rags one day, asking for work. Edwina had clothed and fed the girl and employed her at a decent wage, and she would later teach Ozzie to read and write. Ozzie was a spinner of tales, and the children loved her for it. Although the Dakins felt that people of color were racially inferior and should "remember their place"—the attitude was not then uncommon—they were kind to Ozzie and treated her as family. As a young man, Williams described Ozzie as a source of wonderment that rivaled his father's library:

[I]n the evenings, when the white moonlight streamed over our bed, before we were asleep, our Negro nurse Ozzie, as warm and black as a moonless Mississippi night, would lean above our bed, telling in a low, rich voice her amazing tales about foxes and bears and rabbits and wolves that behaved like human beings.

Days at the rectory for Thomas were tranquil—that is, until Cornelius appeared. "Often the voice of my father was jovial or boisterous," he would later recall. "But sometimes it was harsh. And sometimes it sounded like thunder. To a small boy, he looked awfully big. And it was not a benign bigness. You wanted to shrink away from it, hide yourself."

The influences of his father and of his grandfather, both powerful, contrasted sharply. Walter Dakin's constant preaching, along with the gentler influence of both his mother and his other grandparents, fostered a strong Christian conscience. This was in conflict with the wilder, more cavalier disposition of the Williams family, and Thomas found the tension between the extremes of character difficult to manage. The contradictions of his childhood would inform both his work and the rest of his life.

In 1914, the family moved to Nashville, the town in which Williams would later remember feeling the greatest happiness of his childhood. Nashville was a large city, and while the family lived there the adults were kept busier than ever with church business, leaving Rose and Thomas in Ozzie's care more often, and for longer periods of time, than they had done before. When Thomas began his first day of kindergarten, at the age of four, he was enchanted by the room and all the toys; but as soon as his mother left, he wailed for her so loudly that Edwina could hear him from half a block away. She quickly returned and took him home.

In the following year, the family moved to Clarksdale, Mississippi, where once again Reverend Dakin resurrected a dying church. Clarksdale was a rural town, much smaller than Nashville and much less sophisticated than Columbus. It was here that Williams experienced a traumatic event that would change his life forever: in the summer of 1916, he became gravely ill with diphtheria. Death in childhood from diphtheria was not uncommon at the time, and Thomas' illness was severe enough to cause concern; but Edwina's vigilant care—for nine nights she slept by his side, applying ice to his throat to prevent his choking to death—saved her son's life. Still, the bout with diphtheria left Williams with a terrible fear of suffocation. As he recovered, the boy found that he was unable to walk, so he pushed himself about on a miniature car called an "Irish mail" until he regained his mobility. He also learned how to play quiet, solitary games during his convalescence. He'd been a bully before, but now he was much more contemplative. "I was becoming a decided hybrid, different from the family line of frontiersmen-heroes of east Tennessee."

Having very nearly lost him, Edwina became very protective of her son. Cornelius claimed she was turning him into a "sissy" and resented the attention she paid to Thomas, who throughout his life would show symptoms of anxiety and hypochondria. Shortly after his illness, Ozzie disappeared. She was in the habit of working in the cotton fields every summer, so her yearly departure was to be expected, but one fall, for the first time, she failed to return. Although he was told that her leaving was not his fault, the incident tormented him, for not long before her disappearance he had called her "a big black nigger." Williams would feel a tremendous guilt over this for years.

In 1917, the United States entered the war that had escalated in Europe, World War I. By the hundreds, young men were enlisting to join the fighting forces overseas. As a result, many companies were severely shorthanded, and the International Shoe Company, where Williams' father worked, was no exception. Cornelius, exempt from service because of poor eyesight, was asked to fill a managerial position in St. Louis. He accepted the job, and this meant that he would have to move his family from the rectory to a new home in St. Louis. The move would turn Thomas' world upside down.
Cornelius Williams traveled to St. Louis ahead of his family, not to find a residence for them, but rather to begin his new job. Meanwhile, on a sweltering July day in 1918, Edwina and her seven-year-old son arrived in St. Louis by train. (It had been decided that young Rose would remain at home with the Dakins, but Edwina would not go anywhere without her son, so mother and son had traveled to St Louis together.) Cornelius was on hand to meet them and led them out of the station, and to Thomas the crowds were overwhelming. As they left, Thomas reached out to pick a grape from a fruit stand and was startled by a sharp slap. His father's voice thundered, "Never let me catch you stealing again!" Confused that his father would assume his intention had been to steal, Thomas was humiliated. The moment would remain lodged in his memory.

The Williams family settled into a boarding house, and shortly afterward Edwina developed a case of the mumps; the doctor informed her that she was also pregnant. Being pregnant and ill in the heat of a St. Louis summer before the days of air conditioning was almost unbearable, but still Edwina ventured into the city in search of a home for her family. She hated St. Louis from the outset, and every negative incident that occurred heightened this as she retreated into memories of the happier times of her youth. She related anecdotes from these days to Thomas until he knew by heart every incident of her early days. After much searching, Edwina located a six-room apartment at 4633 Westminster, situated at the edge of an exclusive district. The house was spacious and had a somewhat Southern look—both points in its favor—but the Williams apartment faced north, allowing very little light to enter its rooms. After the well-lit, expansive rooms of the rectory, this place seemed dreary at best; but it was better than the boarding house.

Cornelius Williams now felt stifled and uncomfortable at his desk job. The transition from independent, successful traveling salesman to respectable St. Louis businessman with a family to care for was nearly impossible for him, as Edwina recalled: "He was a very restless man.... He would always want to be out doing something." That fall, Williams and his sister were enrolled at the Eugene Field Elementary School. Williams thought it looked like a prison, but in fact he found it worse than a prison. He endured the teasing not only from the other children there, but from teachers as well. They mocked him for being the newcomer, for his Southern accent, for his diminutive stature, and for his reluctance to play the rough-and-tumble games expected of boys. He would admit later how terrified he had been of everyone:

I can remember gangs of kids following me home yelling 'Sissy!'—and home was not a very pleasant refuge. If I had been born to this situation, I might not have resented it so deeply. But it was forced upon my consciousness at the most sensitive age of childhood.

The snobbery of the people in St. Louis was perplexing to the Williams family. In the South prominence was lineage or social standing; it was considered improper or uncouth even to mention a relationship between wealth and reputation. Williams' mother struggled to overcome this by aligning herself as best she could with the upper crust of St. Louis society. This was particularly difficult because Cornelius withheld money as a means of controlling his wife. Although small in size, Edwina stood up to her overbearing husband, berating him for his drinking and long poker nights. He in turn upbraided her for spoiling the children and not disciplining them properly. The bickering between them was constant. Williams was often a target of his father's anger and frustration with his wife. He often called his son a "sissy"; he is known to have said of his son, "Here comes Miss Nancy." These comments confused Williams, who all the while sought his father's love and approval desperately. As he saw no way to bridge the widening gap between them, he grew adept at withdrawing into his own imagination. For his sister Rose, on the other hand, there was no such escape.

In February of their first year in St. Louis, Williams' mother gave birth to a second son, Walter Dakin Williams. (He was named after his grandfather; to avoid the confusion of two Walters, he was simply called Dakin.) At first, Williams' father resented having another mouth to feed, but later he would use Dakin as another weapon against Williams, his sister Rose, and their mother, by showing preference to Dakin by granting him undue favors. In the spring of 1920, Williams' mother grew unwell from the mounting stress of life in the home, and her own mother agreed to take the train to St. Louis to help with the housework for a while. It was also decided that Williams should go to Clarksdale and spend some time at the rectory. During this three-month visit, Williams and his grandfather formed a bond even greater than they had enjoyed before. In the peaceful setting of Clarksdale, Williams excelled at his schoolwork—to such a degree that he advanced from the second to the fourth grade in one school year. Upon his return home, though, he grew to hate St. Louis more than ever, and this hatred extended to his father.
Williams' sister, Rose, once an active and curious young girl eager to win her father's love, became more and more rebellious. She was unable to be the musician her mother wanted her to be, and one attempt at acting (in a school play) nearly devastated her. She seemed to excel at nothing. Her behavior baffled their mother, who now felt alienated from her husband and her daughter. Williams and his sister had been close allies throughout their youth, but Rose's adolescent interest in boys left Williams, who did not understand his sister's physical and emotional changes, feeling rejected and extremely lonely. In all, the Williams family would relocate nine times while in St. Louis, and Edwina used each relocation as an opportunity to improve the family's social standing. One such relocation was initiated in order to place Rose in the affluent Soldan High School and Williams in Blewett Junior High School.

Rose dropped out of school after the first quarter, whereupon her mother and grandmother scraped together enough money to enroll her at Hosmer Hall, a private school for girls. After this second plan failed, Rose was eventually sent to an Episcopal school for girls in Vicksburg, Mississippi—a school of the type that Edwina Williams had attended as a girl—for Edwina was convinced that the discipline at this school would resolve her daughter's rebelliousness. This separation from his sister further isolated Edwina's son, who was already solitary. Edwina noticed that he had begun writing more and more, so she purchased a secondhand typewriter—and from the moment he received the device he never stopped typing. At first he used the "hunt and peck" system, but after a typing course he became a speed typist, a skill that would serve him well throughout his life. Yet the more his mother encouraged his writing, the more his father derided his efforts. In Cornelius' mind, writing—especially poetry—was foolishness and the last thing he wanted his son to be doing. Had it not been for the biweekly school newspaper, The Junior Life, Williams might have been totally lost in the mammoth school setting. His first published piece in this paper, a work entitled "Isolated," appeared on November 7, 1924. Also during this period, he entered every type of writing contest imaginable, and won several of them.

When Williams was eleven, he met Hazel Kramer, a girl from his neighborhood. Two years older than she, he was able to form a comfortable relationship with her that would last for many years. His friendship with Hazel, and his increasing confidence in his own writing, helped him to endure the years of turmoil at home and at school. At the same time, however, Williams began to develop phobias, such as claustrophobia and fears of death and of suffocation. He was handicapped further by an intense shyness that left him unable to look others in the eye without blushing. His inability to control this neurosis further humiliated him.

During Williams' years in high school, his mother was ill much of the time and underwent many surgical operations. The volatile atmosphere in the home had adversely affected him, too, both mentally and physically. Rose, away in Vicksburg, was not told the serious nature of Edwina's various maladies—which explains her light, newsy letters to home. For her own part, Rose did not reveal how miserable she was at the school, where there were no young men to speak of and very little fun was to be had outside the confines of the campus. With Rose away and Thomas busy with school and his typewriter, Cornelius Williams lavished his attention on Dakin, taking the younger boy to baseball games and even allowing him to sit in on a poker game he frequented. Dakin was growing tall; he had become almost a mirror image of his father, and the two seemed inseparable. In the summer of 1926, Williams' mother moved the family yet again, in order to place her son in University City High School, University City being just outside the St. Louis city limits. For ten miserable years the family lived in a crowded flat in a mustard-colored brick building there, at 6554 Enright Avenue. (This dismal place would later inspire the setting for The Glass Menagerie.)

Rose was often invited to visit relatives in Knoxville, Tennessee, where her Aunt Isabel was an undisputed member of the highest social echelon—but her visits may not always have been pleasant ones. Once, when Rose returned home more reticent than before, Williams assumed she'd had a lovers' quarrel. When he asked her about it, she said, "Aunt Ella and Aunt Belle only like charming people, and I'm not charming." Rose began to experience severe stomach pains at this time, as Williams puts it, "[a] shadow had fallen over her that was to deepen steadily through the next four or five years." The fighting in the Williams household expanded to include Rose again, and she fought bitterly with her father, after which she would flee, crying hysterically. When Edwina attempted to take her daughter's side, Cornelius would order the two of them out of the house. Thomas longed to escape his home, and his wish was granted when his grandfather Dakin invited him to tour Europe. The few days they spent in New York before embarking for Europe were devoted to sightseeing. They stayed in the Biltmore Hotel, dined at the Westchester Biltmore Club, and attended a Broadway play. It was the most time Williams had spent alone with Grandfads since his visit to the rectory at the age of nine. Rose remained at home.

While in Paris, Williams had a phobic reaction that terrified him so severely that he thought was going mad. While walking down a street alone, he began to contemplate the complexity of the human thought processes. As though to outpace the idea, he began to walk faster, and by the time he reached the hotel he was drenched with sweat. He told no one of the experience. The anxiety came again while he was in Cologne visiting a cathedral. The panic was so overwhelming that when the others had left he knelt to pray. When he did, he felt a hand placed upon his head—and, as he
described it, "the phobia was lifted away as lightly as a snowflake." He had no doubt that it was the hand of "our Lord Jesus," who he believed had touched him and driven out the madness. His thoughts turned to his friend Hazel; from Paris, he wrote her a note and signed it in French, "I am yours, with a heart full of love."

Williams returned to University City to find a check for $35 waiting for him, for a story accepted by the magazine *Weird Tales*. He was now a paid writer, published in a professional magazine. During his last year at University City High School, he joined the staff of *Pep*, the school newspaper. He wrote a series of travel features taken from the diary he had kept during his trip to Europe. It began to look as though Williams might be able to support himself as a magazine or newspaper writer, but he still longed to be a poet. In the spring, when Williams was scheduled to graduate, he misinformed his mother as to the time of the ceremony; she arrived in the afternoon of June 13, 1929 and soon was irate to learn that the ceremony had taken place in the morning. Williams, meanwhile, cared little for the ceremony or the diploma and was sequestered at the downtown library. This indifference to ceremonies and awards would be constant throughout his life.

After his graduation, there was discussion in the Williams household over where to send their son to college. Washington University was nearby in St. Louis, but Williams chose to attend the University of Missouri in Columbia; he and Hazel planned to attend the same college, with her going in the following year. But just before it was time to leave for the fall semester, his father, knowing that the Dakin side of the family could be counted on to take over, suddenly decided he did not want to foot the tuition bill. And he was right; whenever the family called for help, it was his mother-in-law Dakin who came to the rescue. (Williams would later comment that he had no idea how she could have spared the money, unless she'd been embezzling church funds.)

Conflicting stories abound in the Williams family about Cornelius' ploys to keep his son and Hazel apart. Edwina was certain that her husband had pressured Hazel's grandfather, who also worked at the International Shoe Company, to send Hazel to another college. Biographer Lyle Leverich contends that Hazel's grandfather sided with Cornelius, not wanting his granddaughter to marry Thomas Williams. Whatever the case, Hazel's plan to follow Williams to "Ol' Mizzou" was thwarted, and Williams left for college alone.

**Williams at Ol' Mizzou**

The University of Missouri lay halfway between St. Louis and Kansas City. The small town of Columbia had grown up around the university and, coincidentally, was the home of the Hamilton-Brown Shoe Company—Cornelius' main competitor. The university was renowned for its school of journalism, which Williams planned to enter by his third year. He'd become convinced, through his father's insistence, that working for a newspaper was the only way to earn money writing. Edwina rode the Cannonball Express with him to help find a suitable boarding house in Columbia, and to ensure that her son was settled properly. Meanwhile, back home, his father was pulling strings to get his son into a fraternity. Since Cornelius had been in a fraternity, he believed it fitting that Williams do the same, so Cornelius contacted two cousins who had attended the University of Tennessee and were affiliated with the fraternity Alpha Tau Omega (ATO). The cousins in turn contacted their fraternity brothers in Columbia, who sent a delegation to the boarding house to convey a surprised young Williams to their quarters.

In retrospect, his becoming a part of ATO was a blessing. His shyness was becoming a problem, and belonging to a group gave him the sense of importance that he needed desperately at the time. An article about him appeared in the local newspaper, under the headline "Shy Freshman Writes Romantic Love Tales for Many Magazines." The headline and some of the facts were exaggerations, but the article's description of him was accurate: "He is little more than five feet tall. He has clean-cut features and smooth brown hair. His eyes, which have a look that seems thousands of miles away, add to the unapproachable and reserved appearance which he presents."

Soon after his arrival at school, Williams wrote to Hazel to propose marriage. She replied that they were too young to consider such a thing. (In fact—unknowingly to her shy suitor—she was already interested in another young man.) It was also during his freshman year that Williams wrote his first serious play and became the first freshman to win an honorable mention in the Dramatic Arts Club One-Act Play Contest. All his early work was signed Thomas Lanier Williams. When he came home from school for the summer, he found a job as a door-to-door magazine salesman, teaming up with a young man from Tulsa, Oklahoma. He headed back to Columbia in the fall with great determination and applied himself to his studies.

In general, Williams' first year of college went well. While his fraternity brothers thought of him as odd, he did make friends and become involved in the usual social events. He and his roommate, Smitty, often double-dated. Aside from one
short involvement with wrestling, Williams shunned sports, and he detested his training for the Reserve Officer Training
Corps (ROTC). He was an accomplished dancer and a sought-after partner. He was known particularly for his strange
laugh—he called it his "mad cackle"—which would burst out with a strangled sound at inopportune times. It was
endearing to some and frustrating to others, and it earned him a reputation as the dimwit of the frat house.

During Williams' second summer home, his father put him to work in the typing pool at one of the divisions of the
International Shoe Company (where, incidentally, he would work with a young man named Stanley Kowalski). Life at
home that summer was almost unbearable, for the quarreling was nonstop. At one point Cornelius slapped his sister
Rose across the face, sending her screaming from the house. His father was continuing to withhold needed funds from his
family, pointing to the faltering Depression economy as his excuse. But he continued to enjoy his golf, weekend poker
games, and country-club membership. By now, he was spending entire nights away from the house, giving to Edwina no
indication of his whereabouts. In the fall of his third year, Thomas came home for Thanksgiving; this sojourn included the
worst fight yet, after which Cornelius actually packed his bag and left. (Rose wept all that night, certain that the family
would end up in the poorhouse.) Williams delayed his return to school, not wanting to leave his mother and siblings in
such a disrupted state. Part of him wanted to free his mother from this situation, and another part of him wanted to run
away and pretend that none of it was happening. The strain of it all intensified his already considerable inner discord.

Williams' first taste of the University's journalism program was not pleasant. He hated reporting on dull things—
obituaries or the prices of commodities. In order to spend more time on the writing he loved, he neglected his studies. At
the same time, a girl named Anna Jean had captured his attention. One of the poems he wrote to her was published in the
1932 college yearbook. The biggest disappointment of the year was when his play took only thirteenth place in the
Dramatic Arts Club Contest; had his play won, it would have been produced by the drama school. The loss was hard on
Williams, and several years would pass before he would attempt another play. He was ejected from the ROTC, but he
didn't mind that, for in just one more year his schooling would be over and he would finally be out on his own. Cornelius,
however, took the ROTC failure far more seriously. He felt that the ROTC had tried to "make a man out of" his son,
whom he often criticized for effeminacy, and he considered it evident that his son's failure had been deliberate. Furious,
Cornelius pulled his son out of journalism school and employed him at the shoe factory—dusting samples, typing orders,
and hauling around cases filled with sample shoes.

Back at Home in St. Louis

Williams may well have wished to leave home and find other employment, but the timing was not right for such an
undertaking; the Depression had left thousands out of work, and some were actually starving. In spite of the fact that he
called it "a job designed for insanity" and "a living death," Williams had no choice but to resign himself. He at least had a
job, and the little money he earned was his to keep. He bought his mother a print of the Mona Lisa, which she kept but
never cared for, and then purchased an old car, for $29, whose sounds of operation earned it the nickname "Scatterbolt."

Each night, Williams retired to his attic room with his cigarettes, black coffee, and typewriter and wrote until he could
write no longer. Often he would write all night long. He had stopped dreaming of ever making a living from his writing;
he wrote because he knew no other means of expressing his thoughts on his situation. Away from school and his fraternity
brothers, he was once again a loner. He had acquaintances among the employees at work, but they were not social
companions. His regimen on the weekends was to spend Saturday afternoon at the downtown library reading, buying a
35-cent lunch at a restaurant, and then returning home to work on his story of the week, which he attempted to finish on
Sunday afternoon. He spent the rest of the week mostly on poetry. In January of 1935, he won a competition hosted by the
St. Louis Writers Guild for a story entitled "Stella for Star," and received $10. But on the heels of the good news came the
bad: Williams learned a month later that Hazel Kramer had been married, to a man named Terry McCabe. Although six
years had passed since his proposal, he still loved her deeply, and he was shaken.

Meanwhile, his sister Rose faced one life shattering experience after another, all unknown to her family, leading her to a
total collapse. Her mind became too fragile for her to pursue employment, and every attempt was a dismal failure.
Cornelius berated her constantly for not adding to the family's income. She and Thomas often attended movies and dances
together, but even he could become impatient with her overreactions.

The definitive end to Rose's stability came as the two were coming home one night from a movie, in what was known as a
"service car." Williams became increasingly tense, and he gradually lost the feeling in his hands and developed difficulty
in breathing. As the car passed a hospital, he told the driver to pull into the emergency entrance; he was admitted, and
upon examination it was found he was suffering from exhaustion and needed complete rest. Rose was calm at the hospital,
but once she'd arrived home she lost control, running from room to room crying that they were all about to be murdered.
Edwina would later recall, "It was as though Thomas' slight breakdown had destroyed the slender thread by which she had been hanging on to a reality she could no longer grasp."

Williams was kept in the hospital for a week, and on his return home he found Rose behaving more oddly than ever. One evening, she entered his bedroom and announced a plan: "Let's all die together." And while Rose was causing much worry, Cornelius expressed, perhaps for the first time, sincere concern for his elder son. The doctor assured them that Williams only needed rest, so it was decided that he would spend the summer in Memphis, where his grandparents had moved after Reverend Dakin's retirement. With great joy, Williams submitted his resignation from the shoe company, after which he received a letter from the company commending him on his "sterling qualities." Williams looked forward to this time out of his father's grip. While Cornelius berated Edwina for her possessiveness over Thomas, in truth it was Cornelius himself who held the greater sway. According to Williams, he always entered the house "as though ... with the intention of tearing it down from the inside."

The sojourn in Memphis turned out to be more than just a rest for Williams; it provided a proving ground for his work. There he met a neighbor of his grandparents, Bernice Dorothy Shapiro, who was a member of a little local theater. He wrote a play for the group entitled Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!, to which Shapiro wrote the prologue and the epilogue, for production by her theater group. Williams enjoyed watching the production and listening to the audience's response—laughter in all the right places and then the warm applause—and he returned to St. Louis convinced that playwriting would be his career. He found the family in better spirits than he expected; Edwina had at last convinced Cornelius to purchase a house, a quiet and spacious colonial home close to Washington University, and for a time the move from the crowded apartment seemed to calm the family's tensions. Both parents were now seriously concerned over the health of their two high-strung children. No one made any suggestion that Williams should resume his position at the shoe factory.

When the Webster Groves Theatre Guild announced a one-act play contest in the spring of 1936, Williams quickly wrote a play and entered. His play, The Magic Tower, was chosen for production. On opening night, three plays were performed, with judges on hand to decide the winner. At the close, the winner was announced as Howard Williams, but this person could not be found; the name was erroneous, but Williams, seated in the audience with his mother, Rose, and Dakin, was too shy to speak up. He was finally pushed to the front, where he won a silver plate—although he had hoped that the prize would be in cash.

Williams began to take night classes at Washington University in the hope of gaining enough credits to become a senior and eventually earn an undergraduate degree. There he met Clark Mills McBurney, a poet who would later drop his last name and write as Clark Mills. The two became a "literary factory," as they called it, in McBurney's basement, where they would spend hours writing. Mills introduced Williams to poets he referred to as the "purer voices in poetry"; one of these was Hart Crane, whose work fascinated Williams. In his journals during this time, Williams notes that he swam every morning, a practice that he would continue throughout his life, no matter where he was in the world.

In St. Louis, Williams became associated with a local theater group called the Mummers, a small, impoverished company doing everything within its power just to stay afloat. He wrote for them a quick play called Headlines, which they produced, neglecting to put Williams' name on the program. He seems not to have minded, though, for he went on to work with them on two of his full-length plays, Candles to the Sun and The Fugitive Kind. The former, a drama about coal miners, was particularly well received, and Williams was written up in the St. Louis newspapers.

The calm in the Williams household had been temporary. Rose became interested in a bachelor, Roger Moore, who lived across the street from their new home. He was running for mayor of University City, and Williams and Dakin helped to hand out campaign literature. Roger and Rose began spending a lot of time together, and the relationship appears to have become profound and serious. But Roger lost the election, after which he suffered a nervous breakdown and was taken to a private sanitarium; while there, running from the attendants, he was killed by a passing truck. His death buffeted Rose's already precarious mind.

At this time, the dynamic of the Williams family began to shift, and Cornelius' position to weaken. Despite a few scandals, his job had been secure through the Depression years, and this security had given him strength. But now a fight broke out at one of his Saturday night poker games, and in the melee Cornelius' ear was bitten off. Plastic surgeons grafted skin from his buttocks to reconstruct the ear, and the humiliation of this was a major strain.

While he recovered at home, Cornelius pressured Rose to find employment again, and she did, as a receptionist in a dentist's office. This job lasted only one day, for she became overwhelmed by the business of the office and locked herself...
in the bathroom, and her mother had to be called to come and talk her into unlocking the door. This was Rose's last attempt at employment.

After this came a confrontation between Williams and Rose that Williams would regret for the rest of his life. One evening in their parents' absence, Williams hosted a party which grew wild. Rose, upstairs listening, heard some of the guests making obscene telephone calls. She reported this to her mother, who demanded furiously that Williams never again invite his friends to their house. Williams' anger flared at Rose, and he yelled, "I hate the sight of your ugly old face!" Like his ill-advised words to Ozzie many years before, he could not take these back. Rose was stunned. Following this incident his anxiety came back worse than ever as he watched Rose sink into insanity. She was taken to see one doctor after another, but it was all in vain. Rose's condition seemed to improve when she visited her aunts in Knoxville, but when she returned home it always grew worse. Her hatred for her father was overt, and the doctors warned that Rose might try to take his life. She was committed to a mental hospital, and the family was told that insulin-shock therapy—a treatment, then very new in the United States, in which sufficient insulin was introduced into the bloodstream to cause seizure and thereby reduce symptoms of schizophrenia, mania, or depression—was the only hope. Edwina Williams agreed to the treatment; soon, visitors could hear Rose screaming like a wild animal as they approached her room.

Cornelius didn't know that his son was enrolled for classes in fall semester at the University of Iowa; indeed, he was unaware even that Williams intended to return to college. Once there, Williams would become part of the University's theater department, headed by Professor Edward Charles Mabie. It offered theatrical workshops, where projects were being produced continually, and a full-size theater that included a revolving stage 36 feet in diameter. In order to be part of this school, Williams first had to be accepted; in letters home he made this seem an easy feat, but even though his writer friends in St. Louis wrote letters of recommendation, really he experienced many days of intense concern. He was accepted, on probation because of his poor showing at Washington University.

Williams had longed to be free of his family for some time and was eager to board the train bound for Iowa City. In a letter to Clark Mills, which, like much of his correspondence, he never sent, he wrote, "I feel such a prodigious excitement—in spite of a double sedative—that I must communicate my feelings to someone or else blow up.... But of course the important thing is that I am actually going. I never really believed in its possibility until I got on the train." In one last entry in his journal before his departure, he wrote, "No I haven't forgotten poor Rose—I beg whatever power there is to save her and spare her from suffering."

**Williams in Iowa**

His time away from home did not turn out to be filled with the carefree days he'd dreamed of. His shyness and loneliness followed him to Iowa, as his journal entries indicate ongoing anxiety, constant tension, and heart palpitations. He even went so far as to call himself homesick; although on the surface he disliked dependency, he nonetheless would depend on the assistance of his mother and grandmother for many years to come.

Mabie proved to be a taskmaster, requiring all his students to be involved in every aspect of a play's production. Williams produced enormous amounts of work while in Iowa, maintaining the discipline he'd developed at home. In addition to writing and attending classes, he earned extra money by waiting tables at the cafeteria of the University's hospital. At first he refused offers of the ATO chapter to live at the fraternity house, for it was too far from campus; but he took the chapter up on its offer when it offered a lower rent, and once in his new residence he enjoyed the food, his room, and the camaraderie. It was at the University of Iowa that Williams first decided to use the pseudonym "Tennessee," for which choice he would give various reasons in later years. Among the more romantic of his accounts is this, given in Edwina Williams' *Remember Me to Tom*:

> ... Thomas Lanier Williams ... is a nice enough name, perhaps a little too nice. It sounds like it might belong to the sort of writer who turns out sonnet sequences to Spring.... Under that name I published a good deal of lyric poetry which was a bad imitation of Edna Millay. When I grew up I realized this poetry wasn't much good and I felt the name had been compromised, so I changed it to Tennessee Williams, the justification being mainly that the Williamses had fought the Indians for Tennessee and I had already discovered that the life of a young writer was going to be something similar to the defense of a stockade against a band of savages. (109)

He had to take summer classes to make up failed credits, but Williams finally received his bachelor's degree from the University in the late summer of 1938.
Rose's Final Tragedy; the French Quarter

No plan was in place to guide him after graduation. For a time he returned home to St. Louis, thinking his play Not About Nightingales would be produced by the Mummers; but the group had disbanded due to lack of funds. He then traveled to Chicago to join the Works Progress Administration Writers' Project—a federally subsidized project, in operation between 1936 and 1940, that supported local authors by employing them to record the oral history of pioneers—but was told his family's finances were too secure for him to qualify. Disappointed, he returned to St. Louis once again. After reading about a play contest sponsored by The Group Theater in New York, he packaged all his completed scripts and mailed them. He needed to be alone, to write something new, and he decided at last to try life in New Orleans.

New Orleans was proved to be a positive experience for Williams, and he would come to think of it as his favorite city in the world. Dressed in a conservative suit on arrival late in 1938, he looked like a tourist; but by New Year's Day of 1939 the bohemian life of the French Quarter began to relax his guarded nature. He found accommodation in a boarding house, at 722 Toulouse Street, and although he would soon find himself hungry and alone, still he would count his days there as some of the happiest of his life. The warm, mild climate and inexpensive food and lodging made the Quarter a center for all manner of artists, politicos, and malcontents—and Williams, considering himself among the greatest of these, felt right at home. He walked the streets for hours and enjoyed the Mardi Gras festivities, the museums, the arts, and the people.

The scenes of voodoo cults, Creole people, open restaurants, Basin Street, and Dixieland jazz played over in his mind and would inform his later work. The social and sexual behaviors to which he was exposed there intensified his inner struggle between the Christian teachings of his grandparents and the attraction he felt toward members of his own sex. He began to think once again of moving on.

Accounts differ as to just when came the end to the violent phase of Rose's madness; it may have been while Williams was in Iowa, or during this time in New Orleans, or even as late as 1943, when he was in New York. She was living at St. Vincent's hospital, where her condition had continued to decline. Edwina Williams had lost much: like his brother, Dakin had moved out, and Cornelius—slipping into alcoholism—had totally given up on Rose, whose condition seemed hopeless. A new psychosurgical procedure was being touted as the answer for those confined to mental institutions, as Rose was: the prefrontal lobotomy. In this procedure—which would later be denounced as inhumane and of uncertain therapeutic value and abandoned by most institutions—the surgeon drilled a hole in each of the orbits of the skull and then severed the fibers that connect the frontal lobe to the prefrontal cortex and thalamus. A doctor at St. Vincent's recommended a prefrontal lobotomy for Rose, and Edwina, otherwise out of hope, consented to it. She would later admit that going ahead with the procedure had been a "grave mistake," that lobotomy "destroys something essential in a person's character." Dakin would say it had made Rose into a "mental vegetable." According to Edwina, too, after the operation Cornelius never visited his daughter again. Williams—in whichever phase of his life—was inconsolable. He would set aside a portion of his wealth in later days to ensure Rose's perpetual care.

California: The Parrott Adventure

When musician Jim Parrott moved into the Toulouse Street boarding house, Williams found a fast friend. The two were of about the same size, and both appeared deceptively young. (Williams was now nearing 30, but he still had to give proof of his age in bars.) The two scraped together their meager funds and lit out in Jim's Ford for the glitter and promise of California. Jim's uncle had offered them work on his pigeon ranch, so they even had a prospect of employment. Along the way, the adventurers saw destitute families walking beside the roads even in the desert areas; for most of his life Williams had been shielded from the losses of the Depression, but now he saw it all for himself. And money was short for him, too. When the duo had to choose between gas and food, they chose the food and siphoned gas from other cars to continue the trek. Letters that Williams sent home along the way helped his mother to know where to send the little she could sacrifice from her household account. The financial situation became so bad that Williams even appealed to his father for help; Cornelius told his son to contact a friend by the name of Sam Webb, who was connected with the shoe company. Williams did so.

Jim Parrott left him in Los Angeles, headed for his uncle's ranch. Williams took a room at a YMCA that faced Pershing Square, a small city park overflowing with homeless people, many of whom had set up camp there in desperation after a vain search for work. After a few days, a terrifying loneliness set in, and Williams telephoned Jim and joined him at the ranch. Jim's relatives treated Williams with gracious hospitality. He paid them room and board and helped on the ranch, killing and picking up squab and shoveling manure. Jim, meanwhile, found work at an airplane factory, which prompted Williams to comment in a letter that he believed America was truly gearing up for war.
Through Sam Webb, Williams secured a job working at Clark's Bootery, a shoe store in Culver City. He purchased a second-hand bicycle for the commute, and on every workday he passed the guarded gates of the MGM studios, hardly imagining that one day his name would be very important there. Williams seems to have been industrious—or at least, as his later behavior affirms, to have enjoyed the freedom of his bicycle. "Any boy who would ride a bicycle twenty-four miles a day to work," Webb wrote to Cornelius, "is bound to succeed."

Just a few days before his 29th birthday, Williams received word from New York that his group of one-act plays had won an award that would include a check for $100—a veritable godsend in the lean years of the Depression. The award came from the Group Theater, a group of renowned actors and playwrights that was known for establishing the fame of dramatic works—and whose name therefore carried considerable weight in New York. Once the check was safely in Williams' hands, his mother told all of St. Louis of her son's good fortune, but for the moment the playwright himself was just glad to be paid for his work. Williams did not yet realize that the Group award was a turning point in his career.

The prestige of the Group award also was the impetus for Cornelius Williams to produce one of the few letters he ever wrote to his son—opening with noncommittal talk about shoes but closing with "we were all very proud you won the $100 prize." The letter's signature is a testimony to the distance between father and son: "Affectionately, C.C. Williams."

Agents in New York, aware of the disposition of every major award, began contacting Williams. An offer from Audrey Wood, of the Liebling-Wood Agency, interested him the most; but even after her encouraging letter Williams hesitated, saying he'd like to think about her offer. Whereas many other aspiring playwrights might have taken Wood's hundred dollars and caught the next plane to New York, Williams instead bicycled down the coast to see Mexico, with Jim Parrot along for company. "Flights" of this kind would become a theme in his life whenever self-doubt plagued him, and in time Audrey Wood—with whom Williams' relationship was only beginning—would come to expect them.

Williams and Jim Parrott wiled away the days, living on the $100 prize, and correspondence was brisk between Williams and Wood. The honesty and sincerity of her letters gratified him; "... on the basis of what I have read," she once wrote, "... you are not a finished dramatist, although I do say I think you are highly promising." He accepted her as his agent, and the two would work together for thirty-two successful years.

Williams and Parrott ended up on a chicken farm near the beach at Laguna and enjoyed many carefree days there. Indeed, Williams seems to have experienced real rest and peace at the farm for the first time in recent memory: "It has been years since I have felt so calm and relaxed," he wrote in his journal. The humorous letters written to Wood, who was normally known to be "all business," charmed her, and she became a kind of mother to him—an effect Williams would have on other women in his life as well. At the same time, Wood was busily sending his work to prospective publishers, and eventually she received an acceptance from the prestigious Story. She also submitted his work for a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. In California, Williams began to read the works of D.H. Lawrence. He recalled that Lawrence's widow lived in New Mexico, and he wrote to her; he received no reply, but his fascination with Lawrence was growing, and he began to think of adapting one of Lawrence's stories for the stage.

Parrot and Williams found each other's company less and less congenial, and they parted when Jim chose to move on to Pasadena.

Williams' Conscience Calls Him Home

Low on funds, Williams implied in a letter to his mother that he might hitchhike back to St. Louis; the deception worked, and Cornelius sent money by way of Sam Webb. By now, Williams' conscience was troubling him for leaving his family for such a long period of time; but he dreaded going home and dallied wherever he could. He stopped off at Taos, New Mexico to locate Lawrence's widow, which he did, and through meeting Frieda Lawrence he became even more entranced with the author's legend.

Before beginning the second leg of his journey home, Williams wrote another letter, again hinting to his mother that funds were tight. She again sent him money, but still he hitchhiked from Denver.

No sooner had Williams arrived in St. Louis than he learned that Clark Mills, his poet friend from Washington University, meant to drive with another man to New York and that there was room in the car. Williams accepted their offer of a ride.

When Audrey Wood first met the retiring young man in her outer office, she thought him just another out-of-work actor. His small stature and shy demeanor were not at all reminiscent of the humorous letters or the photos—of a tanned young
man on the beach at Laguna—that she had received from the Williams she knew. After the first awkward moments, though, she took a liking to the young playwright and showed him every possible favor, treating him to dinner and introducing him to influential people.

With war now raging in Europe and the United States claiming neutrality, the country's economy was in limbo. Other than jobs in munitions plants and airplane factories, employment was at a standstill. Even with the help of Wood and her friends, Williams couldn't find work. An entry in his journal reveals his desperation for a strong-willed mentor: "Met lots of people here but nobody does me much good. They're all so involved in their own lives. I need somebody to envelop me, embrace me, pull me by sheer force out of this neurotic shell of fear I've built around myself lately." Only one solution seemed feasible: returning home to his attic, where he could work without fear of destitution. This solution worked, but it was not ideal: "There is a kind of spiritual fungus or gangrene which sets in here after the second or third month's residence," he described it to Wood. "At the end of four you are pronounced incurable and committed to the wholesale shoe business for the rest of your life."

Under the miserable conditions back at home, waiting to see whether the Rockefeller grant would come through, Williams again wrote in the attic. At this point, the writing was his only hope, for nothing seemed to be going right. All his old friends in St. Louis were now happily married, with homes, cars, children, and mortgages. His mother was preparing for Christmas, a time of year that his father loathed. The cataracts Williams had contended with for several years were becoming ever more troublesome.

To make matters worse, his mother continually begged him to go with her to see Rose, a prospect he dreaded more than any other. But how could he refuse? During one visit Rose spouted ceaseless obscenities and laughed the whole time. After the visit, Williams wrote in his journal, "It was a horrible ordeal. Especially since I fear that end for myself." But his mother awakened him on the very next morning with a telegram from Wood; he had received the Rockefeller grant, which would pay out $100 checks for 10 months and thus enable him to continue his work in New York City.

After spending the New Year in Memphis with his grandparents, Williams returned to New York, where he took a room at a YMCA for $7.50 a month. Now funded, he found himself immersed in the professional theater, meeting directors and actors, watching rehearsals during the day, and attending shows each evening. He also attended a seminar on advanced playwriting conducted at the New School for Social Research in Greenwich Village.

In February of 1940, his one-act play The Long Goodbye was produced by student actors at the New School, and the production was mentioned briefly in The New York Times. Williams was introduced to other struggling artists, several of whom—Donald Windham and Fred Melton initially, and then Gilbert Maxwell—would later join forces with him in various ways. Despite the joy of all this exposure, though, Williams felt the constant distractions of the city were keeping him from his writing; he redoubled his efforts, and soon his friends were amazed by his grueling work schedule. He could sit down at his typewriter anywhere and churn out manuscript pages at 90 words per minute, no matter what was going on around him. And his complete lack of attention to mundane details became notorious: laundry and half-eaten food filled the corners of his rooms, and although his friends warned him and gave him carbon paper repeatedly, he often sent out original manuscripts and then forgot where he'd sent them.

**New Influences: Provincetown, Wood's Departure, and Mexico**

By the spring of 1941, not much had improved in Williams' life. He felt himself becoming listless, overweight, and, worse, unproductive. To appease his characteristic need for a change of scenery, he planned a trip to Mexico; but before he could leave, word came that the Guild was interested in his Battle of Angels, so he had to stay close to New York. He told his mother that there might be a production of the play by the fall, and she wrote back with her own good news: his father had finally agreed to purchase a home. After all the years of shifting from apartments to rental houses, they were settling at 53 Arundel Place, still in St. Louis. The two-story house had an attic room that Edwina would prepare just for her playwright son, but Williams would feel no compulsion to occupy it soon.

For the summer, he needed a place to get away and write revisions of Battle of Angels. Wood suggested Provincetown, on Cape Cod, an idea that seemed as good as any other to Williams. ("In those days people were always putting me on trains or buses like I was a pawn in a chess game. Well, I must have wanted it that way. And that's the way I got it.") While in Provincetown, he began the first in a series of letters to Donald Windham—letters that Windham would later publish—that expressed shock at the homosexual lifestyle of Cape Cod, even as he was experiencing an intense inner struggle regarding his own sexuality. He continued to search for someone to love, who might love him in return, and during that summer he found that possibility. His prospect was a dancer known as Kip Kiernan—an expatriate Canadian whose real
name was Bernard Dubowsky. Williams was drawn to the ruggedly handsome Kiernan, and they spent many long hours
together through the summer months. Williams was frustrated with the slow progress of the Battle production, and Wood
had moved to the West Coast, leaving Williams with feelings of abandonment; Kiernan helped him to work through all
these feelings, and he became the focus of Williams' affection. But Kiernan had a girlfriend, whom he loved; as her
distaste for Williams grew, Williams lashed out at her and thereby alienated Kiernan; eventually, the girlfriend turned
Kiernan against him. "I'm always the fugitive," wrote Williams in his journal, "—will be till I make my final escape—out
of life altogether."

In an effort to bolster his flagging spirits, Williams went to Mexico, where he stayed at the Hotel Costa Verde in
Acapulco. The hotel offered hammocks, slung outside the screen doors, and a private beach bordered by a tropical rain
forest. (The beach would become the setting for The Night of the Iguana.) Williams was astonished at the inertia and
indifference of the people he saw there, caused, he believed, by relentless sunlight and strong drink. He also encountered
bands of aggressive Nazis, who repulsed him so completely that he longed to have his own yacht to take him far away
from all humanity. Still, there were worthy acquaintances to be formed there; it is in Acapulco that he met the writer
Gordon Sager, as well as the writer and composer Paul Bowles and his wife, the writer (and committed lesbian) Jane Auer
Bowles. Williams would become lifelong friends with Paul and Jane Bowles, and Paul would compose the musical scores
to The Glass Menagerie in 1945 and Sweet Bird of Youth in 1959. Also while in Mexico, Williams read Carson
McCullers' book The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter; he was so impressed by her writing that he thought his own work
fraudulent by comparison.

**Battle of Angels Fails Painfully**

On his way back to New York, he spent some time in the attic room his mother had prepared for him in their new house in
St. Louis, awaited word of when rehearsals of his play would begin and when and where he would be needed. When the
news came, Williams was drawn into a rush of events such as he had never experienced before—working with the
directors, producers, actors, and stage technicians necessary to the production of a play—all of whom have ideas of how
the production should be done. For a time there was even talk that Joan Crawford considered starring in the play, but only
if she could make major changes to the script. That eventually fell by the wayside, but in general the magnitude of the
experience was overwhelming.

Despite Boston's reputation for a conservative theatergoing audience—the play was somewhat risqué—it was decided that
Battle of Angels would open there. But the choice was a poor one: on opening night, before the play's halfway mark, the
audience was visibly upset, even ready to walk out. A catastrophe of stage effects sounded the play's death-knell: In
rehearsal, a blowtorch that one scene required had not given off enough smoke, so someone had called for more, and the
technical staff had provided it—so much, in fact, that the stage was lost in it and the audience sent choking and gasping to
the exits.

This was Williams' first public failure. He told his mother in a letter that the audience had been non-poetic, but the truth
wasn't quite that simple; when the company met on the following day to talk about resolving the play's problems, it
became clear that the inexperienced playwright had little to contribute to the discussion. Rewrites were forthcoming, but
the play would not be offered in New York at that time, and Williams would work on the script for many years. He
struggled with the fear that no producer who had heard of the failure would take another chance on him; but even aside
from Audrey Wood, he was surrounded by people who believed in his talent.

In January of 1942, Williams underwent the second of his four eye surgeries to correct his cataracts. During his
recovery he moved into an apartment shared by Don Windham, Fred Melton, Paul Bigelow, and Jordan Massee. As
soon as he was sufficiently recovered, Williams traveled to Key West. A widow whom he met there, Mrs. Clara Black, ran
a boarding house called The Trade Winds; she rented an elaborately appointed suite to him for $5 a night. He took to Key
West immediately and mentioned wishing he were rich enough to stay on; and when Mrs. Black offered him the "slave
quarters" in the back for only $8 a week, he took her up on the offer. Thus began Williams' love affair with Key West.

On the surface he seemed happy, but his journals reveal the fears and the loneliness that remained with him wherever he
went. The failure of Battle of Angels was a great discouragement, and money was once again a constant issue. No matter
how much he received, he spent it all and more, and he left a trail of debt wherever he went. Eventually, Audrey Wood
was given power of attorney over his financial affairs, and she doled out money to him incrementally and kept the rest in a
bank account for future need. Back in St. Louis, his mother had invited her parents to live with the Williams family in
their spacious new house; but Cornelius now hated Reverend Dakin, so the tension in the home was worse than ever. On Williams' trip back to New York, he stopped off to see them, but he did not stay long.

**A Few Years Wandering**

The next few years of Williams' life became a hodgepodge of moves, traveling, writing, and taking on any menial job he could find. At one time, Williams worked as an elevator operator in a rundown hotel, and after that he worked as a uniformed usher in a movie theater for $17 a week. He was forced more than once to sell his possessions just to be able to eat. His horrific mood swings determined how well or how badly his writing progressed. Fascinated as he was with the writings of D.H. Lawrence, Williams decided to collaborate with Donald Windham on adapting one of Lawrence's stories for the stage. (The resulting play, *You Touched Me!*, would not see production for many years.)

In the fall of 1941, Williams was once again in New Orleans alone. There he received word that his grandmother was very ill. His mother sent him money to come home, but he did not want to go, even though his grandparents were the members of his family he loved the most. He went anyway.

On his way back to New Orleans, he heard the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor; the United States would soon enter the war in earnest. Williams' poor eyesight earned him a classification of 4-F—ineligible for the draft due to physical shortcomings. (Dakin Williams was eligible, and he would soon be drafted into active service.)

Windham and Williams finished a draft of *You Touched Me!*, and Wood tried unsuccessfully to sell it. Williams headed south once again, this time finding work as a Teletype operator in St. Augustine, Florida at $120 a month. He worked nights; this left his mornings free for writing. During this time, he became acquainted with Margo Jones, a wealthy Texan who loved the theater; Jones had earned the nickname "the Texas Tornado" for her ability to "make things happen" in theaters across the country. In the spring of 1943, Williams had just turned 32 and had no obvious means of supporting himself, and thought himself a failure. Just when everything looked the bleakest, though, he received a telegram from Wood telling him she found him a job as a scriptwriter for the major film studio MGM, offering $250 a week. Williams couldn't believe the proposed wage—"That's dishonest!" he said to Wood—but the opportunity was too good to pass up.

**Life at MGM**

Williams traveled to California by train, a trip that lasted three days and two nights. As soon as he arrived, he found his way to the MGM studios. When Williams was first hired, he was told that he would be rewriting a novel into a screenplay for Clark Gable; however, he soon learned the project had been shelved until Gable returned from service in the war. He further learned that writers in Hollywood were looked down upon by actors and directors. Nearly all the famous writers of the time, especially playwrights, were persuaded to work for the movies only by the lure of sizable paychecks.

Williams was embarrassed at the opulence of the office he was given on the second floor at MGM, and he knew that his lifestyle would never mesh with what was happening in Hollywood. His first assignment was to write a script for Lana Turner, and he was instructed to make it simple. Compared to the deeply moving work he'd been producing, the whole idea was ludicrous. "I feel," he wrote to Audrey Wood, "like an obstetrician required to successfully deliver a mastodon from a beaver." Back in New York, the "Texas Tornado," Margo Jones, finished reading *You Touched Me!* and liked it immensely—but more than the play, she was interested in the future of the playwright himself. Just as Wood was doing, she hovered over him with motherly affection; she made sure he had all the right clothes for the right occasions and built connections for him to "the right people." Williams loved this treatment and hated it; he liked it while it was happening but would always hate himself later for needing others so much. This resentment was beginning to build against Wood, for it was she who did the most for him. For years, he had turned to her for every detail of the management of his career.

Working on the Lana Turner script was one of the most difficult things Williams had ever had to do, for he'd never before had to write on assignment for anyone and he found the conditions difficult. He returned to his own work in the evenings, though, and eventually produced the story "The Gentleman Caller," which would provide the framework for the later *The Glass Menagerie*. The story, which he planned to write for both stage and screen, was based on the tragedy of his sister's life. He didn't believe Rose was truly schizophrenic, he wrote at the time, but that "the petals of her mind had simply closed through fear"; and as the glass figurines in the play represented the precarious balance of the main character's personality, so too did they symbolize the fragmentary nature of his sister's existence. His hope was to interest MGM in this work and in other pieces that he'd written on his own terms, rather than continue to write on assignment; but this wasn't to be. (Many critics agree, in retrospect, that had MGM accepted Williams' story as a movie the piece probably wouldn't have survived past its screenplay.)
Williams continued his assignments for the studio, but between assignments reported to his office ever less frequency, shutting himself up in his apartment instead to write for hours on end. This was the first time he'd ever been able to write while making money, and he made the most of the opportunity. Wood continued to collect his paychecks from the studio, depositing them in a New York bank and doling out to him $100 a week. Although the MGM work wasn't creatively fulfilling, the arrangement was at least financially comfortable.

The situation changed drastically, though, when Williams refused MGM's request to write something for the child star Margaret O'Brien. From that point on the studio "blackballed" him, that is, exerted all possible influence to deny him work. Other writers at the time were allowing their creative energies to be "channeled" by the Hollywood executives—which many called "selling out"—and thereby made a living, but Williams was seduced by neither profit nor prestige. Solitary and introspective, he focused more on the aesthetic concerns of his own work than on commercial credit; he explained to Wood in a letter, "Let's face it! I can only write for love." The studio did not renew his contract, of course, but he continued to receive paychecks for six months after his departure from Hollywood. In fact, MGM would regret the loss of Williams and the manuscript of The Glass Menagerie; Warner Brothers would later profit immensely from the film rights to both that play and A Streetcar Named Desire.

**Williams at Home Again**

In Cleveland, Margo Jones had found a producer for You Touched Me!, the play based on the work of D.H. Lawrence; but the script had been changed so much that she didn't want Williams to see it. As this project evolved, Williams' relationship with Donald Windham became strained and Williams became less enthusiastic about sharing billing or royalties. While Williams was still in Hollywood, his father visited the coast on a business trip. Fearing that Cornelius would appear at his doorstep unannounced—and, presumably, learn something that Williams did not want him to learn—Williams kept his blinds drawn and the door locked. But Cornelius sent word for his son to meet him at his hotel, and there the two had the first private conversation they'd had in many years. Williams emerged from this conversation with a view of his father as a pitiful, lonely old man who, like his son, was desperate for love.

Some time after this meeting, Williams once again felt duty-bound to return home, which he planned to do on his way back to New York. First, though, he paid a visit to Frieda Lawrence in New Mexico to discuss You Touched Me!; he found that she was pleased by what he had written about her husband. Much was the same at home: Dakin was on leave from the service for Christmas, and their grandmother was still gravely ill. But this time Williams needed no money from his mother.

Although Williams' grandmother was quite frail, she helped busily with the housework in preparation for the holidays. On the evening of January 6, 1944, Williams left the house as his grandmother played something by Chopin on the piano; when he returned home, she was dying upstairs. The effect that her dying, and her death, had on him is hard to pinpoint—he had a proclivity for the morose—but he did not attend the funeral, and soon afterward he completed his return to New York.

**The Glass Menagerie: Williams' First Major Success**

He finished a rewrite of "The Gentleman Caller" there and then started a new play, 60 pages of which he wrote in only five days. (In his journals are several passages describing the numerous revisions this manuscript would undergo.) In March of 1944, he received an award of $1,000 from the National Institute of Arts and Letters for Battle of Angels and for a collection of his one-act plays. This award helped to restore his faith in Angels, which had been sorely tested at the play's Boston premiere. Williams spent that summer in Provincetown, where he began to transform "The Gentleman Caller" into The Glass Menagerie. He didn't think the play would have commercial appeal: "Of course I liked the material because it was so close to me," he wrote to Margo Jones, "but for that very reason I doubted that it would come across to others." Still, he gave the new play to Audrey Wood when he returned to New York—and she recognized it immediately as better than anything else he'd written. She searched for a producer the very next day and soon chose the multitalented Eddie Dowling, who by that time had been writing, composing, producing, directing, and performing for almost thirty years. Dowling liked the play but wasn't convinced it would make money; but he was nevertheless able to secure financial backing from Louis Singer.

In the spring of 1945, Menagerie surprised everyone by becoming an instant success in Chicago, and it was quickly moved back to New York. The success in Chicago almost ensured that New York audiences and critics would like the play, and like it they did: the reviewers praised the play's originality and dogged intensity. A telegram Williams sent to his mother at the time read: "Reviews all rave. Indicate smash hit. Line block long at box office. Love, Thomas." She
received a parcel containing legal documents a few days later, and she learned that her son had signed over to her half of all the proceeds from The Glass Menagerie. Williams also made sure that his mother was present at the big party he threw in New York in late April of that year. His father did not want to attend, but his grandfather did; Williams lodged them in one of the finer hotels, and Reverend Dakin turned out to be the life of the party.

The play won many accolades at the time and was chosen for performance at the Franklin D. Roosevelt birthday celebration at the National Theater in Washington, D.C. Despite this success, though, Williams had doubts; he believed that a "yesterday's self" had created Menagerie, and he was unsure that he could now reproduce the circumstances that had made it possible. This dilemma led him back to Mexico, where he began work on The Poker Night, which would become A Streetcar Named Desire.

Even in Mexico, Williams could not quite escape New York. Telegrams arrived regarding the casting for You Touched Me!, which was scheduled to open in Boston in the following fall. By this time, the script bore little resemblance to the original. Williams traveled back to New York and arrived in time for the opening; the play earned uninspiring reviews, and its reception was no less discouraging to Williams than his experience in Boston had been.

The producers decided to move You Touched Me! to the Booth Theater in New York—even as The Glass Menagerie continued to play in town—and the play opened there on September 26, 1945. The reception was tepid from the very beginning, and the production closed on January 5, 1946; the playwright would never again see this work performed in a major venue. Williams saw his collaboration with Windham as a failure, and he decided to work with only his own material from that point on. In welcome contrast to You Touched Me!, Menagerie ran for an entire year, despite the feud between Dowling and Taylor, which had reached its boiling point. (Laurette Taylor would die a few months after Menagerie's close, and Williams would venerate her, in an emotional article for The New York Times, as one of the few performers he'd that he ever met who could truly embody his characters.)

After You Touched Me! closed, Williams spent time in New Orleans writing a draft of the play Ten Blocks on the Camino Real; he submitted the manuscript to Audrey Wood, who told him to hide it forever. Depressed and discouraged, he bought an old Packard and decided to drive back to Taos, New Mexico to see Frieda Lawrence. He stopped in St. Louis on the way. His brother, Dakin, had recently returned from the war and was living at home. Cornelius had retired and now spent most of his time drunk and/or skulking around the house. Reverend Dakin, terrified of Cornelius, seldom ventured from his bedroom upstairs. It was at this time that Dakin, Williams' younger brother, began to suspect that Williams might be homosexual. With a sister who'd gone insane and a father who was an alcoholic, this thought was more than he was willing to tolerate, so he went down to the Air Force recruiting office and reenlisted. "It was a lot rougher at home," he later recalled, "than slug it out in the service during World War II."

Williams was soon to have another of his many close encounters with mortality. He experienced severe abdominal pain before leaving St. Louis for Taos, but his profound fear of death kept him from seeking help of any kind. The pain worsened on the road—and then the Packard broke down. Williams spent a few days in a hospital in Wichita, Kansas, where he was told that he had appendicitis that was not yet acute; by the time he reached Taos, he was convinced he was dying. He wrote a will at a local hospital before the necessary surgery, and as he went under the ether he vociferously announced to all that he was dying. He recovered a few days later.

Williams spent the summer of 1946 in Nantucket, inviting Carson McCullers to join him because he so admired her work. He suggested that McCullers make a play out of her book Member of the Wedding, and the idea appealed to her. The two worked together every morning at a long table set up in the front room of the cottage, Williams on his portable typewriter at one end of the table, and McCullers at the other. Their afternoons were spent swimming, and in the evenings McCullers played the old upright piano or they read each other poetry. In New York, casting took place for The Glass Menagerie, while Wood continued to negotiate for the movie rights. In the fall, Williams gave the play Summer and Smoke to Margo Jones, which she added to her production schedule for 1947. McCullers, on the other hand, had a difficult time finding a backer for her own play—until Williams presented it to Wood. The play would be produced in 1949 and win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award in the following year, but Williams would never take credit for this success or mention it much in any interview.

A Streetcar Named Desire

As Wood read the script for The Poker Night, she knew her client had another hit. Williams and his grandfather were staying together in a hotel room in Key West when Wood requested that he meet her in Charleston to discuss the play with the producer Irene Mayer Selznick, the former wife of the director David O. Selznick and the daughter of the film mogul
Louis B. Mayer of MGM. A deal was struck during this meeting, and Wood wired her New York office with satisfaction: "Blanche is coming to stay with us."

Williams originally wanted Elia Kazan to direct the play, now entitled *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but Kazan wasn't enthusiastic about the script. Luckily, Williams was a friend of Kazan's wife, Molly Day Thatcher, who was an important member of the Group Theatre. It was Thatcher who persuaded Kazan at last to take on the project. And it was lucky for Williams that she did; Kazan was prominent enough in the theater community to outnegotiate the inexperienced Irene Selznick, who was relatively new to the business. In the resulting contract, Kazan reduced Selznick's role in the production to that of an owner and thereby freed himself to work directly with the playwright—giving himself, and consequently Williams, complete artistic control. For his own part, Williams neither understood nor cared about contract negotiations, and the fact that everything turned out so well for him was entirely the result of Kazan's maneuvering. (Kazan would later call *Streetcar* "the best play I've ever done."

Selznick wanted Williams to come to Hollywood to discuss the play, and on his return to California he was treated as a celebrity. She made sure he had the best of everything. He had never been especially impressed by Hollywood ostentation, but in a letter to his grandfather he gushed about everything that was happening. Part of the mission in Hollywood was to network at cocktail parties and brokered meetings, but it was also necessary to find an actor to play the key role of Blanche DuBois. Jessica Tandy was selected; she had performed in a number of plays on Broadway already, as well as a few films, and she would later be hailed by the press for her embodiment of her character in *Streetcar*.

After the Hollywood expedition, Williams returned to Cape Cod to rest. Kazan sent to him a young man from New York as a possible addition to the cast. The young actor had been given bus money, but he'd pocketed this and hitched a ride instead; on arriving at Williams' cottage, he fixed the broken plumbing and the electricity before even reading from the script. Margo Jones, who was there at the time, was ebullient. "Get Kazan on the phone right away!" she exclaimed. "This is the greatest reading I've ever heard—in or outside of Texas!" The actor whose reading had inspired her reaction was Marlon Brando. His charismatic presence so affected Williams, too, that Kazan received "an ecstatic call from [the] author, in a voice near hysteria" and knew that "Brando had overwhelmed him."

For the first time, Williams actually enjoyed play rehearsals. Working with the brilliant and soft-spoken Kazan was a joy. The director understood actors, allowing them the freedom to use whatever was at their disposal to sculpt their character. He worked closely with Williams, asking many questions and suggesting changes, never demanding them, along the way. Expenses for the show were shouldered by a number of celebrities, including Irene Selznick, who put up $25,000. It was decided the play would go on tour before opening in New York, and the plan worked beautifully; audiences in Philadelphia loved it, as did those in dreaded Boston.

The play opened at the Barrymore Theater in New York on December 3, 1947 and was an instant sensation. It would go on to win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, the Donaldson Award, and the Pulitzer Prize—the first play to receive all three. Williams used the money from the Pulitzer Prize to establish a graduate scholarship in his name at the University of Missouri, his alma mater.

Williams took little if any pleasure in this, continuing to battle his familiar personal demons of fear and insecurity, those that would taint the pleasure of even his greatest achievements. He was afraid, too, that getting too comfortable would diminish his creativity. At the height of all the media attention, then, and as he had done before, he quietly disappeared—this time aboard a ship bound for Europe.

During the time of the production of *Streetcar*, Dakin Williams, now a practicing attorney, was asked by Edwina Williams to enact her legal separation from Cornelius. In the contract, Edwina received two hundred shares of Cornelius' holdings in the shoe company, along with his interest in the house. There was never a divorce, nor would they ever see each other again. Edwina had found a certain resolution: "I was happy to have my freedom, the walls of the house had resounded with wrath for too many years and now there was peace at long last." Williams' father left St. Louis to live with his sister Ella in Knoxville. (After a few years, she too would turn him away; "I'm poor, and I need your board money," she would say, "but ... I'd rather starve to death than live with you.")

Now that his mother was emancipated from the almost demonic presence of his father, Williams made a point of including her in as many of his events as possible, such as cast parties and the debuts of his plays. Ever the *flâneur* in Europe, he ended up in Rome and was entranced by the ancient Italian city. In a letter to his mother he said, "To me it is the place where I find the sun not only in the sky, where Italy also keeps it, but in the heart of the people." He rented a small apartment there and worked on revising *Summer and Smoke* and writing another new play. The longer he remained
Plans were being made for *The Glass Menagerie* to open in London, but Williams had his doubts that his work would be accepted there. Nevertheless, his mother and Dakin were invited to attend the premiere—as was his grandfather, who couldn't be persuaded. Edwina and Dakin attended the opening night of the play at the Royal Theater in the Haymarket of London, along with several British dignitaries and members of the royal family. Despite many imploring telegrams, Williams remained in Rome and was conspicuously absent not only from the performance but also from the cast party afterward that was hosted by Lady Sibyl Colfax. Williams was a confirmed Anglophobe, by this time either bored or intimidated by all the hobnobbing, and his instincts were right about the play, which closed before the end of its first run.

Back in the States, Margo Jones had become the producer and director of *Summer and Smoke*, now scheduled to open at the Music Box Theater in New York on October 6, 1948; Williams did attend this one, and he asked Carson McCullers to accompany him to the cast party. The reviews of the play were so very negative that Williams decided to follow the cast party with a "bad-notice party," inviting many of the most notorious literary critics of the time. (If this was meant to influence the opinions of his detractors, the ploy failed, for the show would close before Christmas of that year.)

**Frank Merlo**

Also prior to the play's demise, Williams met and became involved romantically with twenty-six-year-old Frank Merlo, a working-class Navy veteran. Merlo was detail-oriented, and Williams, of course, was not, and the two became a happy kind of "odd couple." For the first time in many years, Williams could attend solely to his writing, for Merlo did the laundry, the cooking, the packing, the cleaning, and even drove Williams wherever he wanted to go.

Williams took Merlo with him on his next trip to Rome, but he was depressed over the failure of *Summer and Smoke* and treated Merlo poorly. Side trips were taken to North Africa, London, and Paris, all while Williams worked on his new novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*. He complained that it was difficult to write well in Italy, as his time there now reminded him of his days of torpor in Hollywood. While in Rome, he spent a good deal of time with his friend Anna Magnani, an actor at the zenith of her success who had the means to entertain lavishly. Since Magnani was Roman and Merlo Sicilian, Williams was able to use them in developing the characters in his novel. He placed Italian characters in the United States, too, in *The Rose Tattoo*, a play about a Sicilian community on the Gulf Coast that Williams called his "love-play to the world."

Williams' friend Gilbert Maxwell thought *The Rose Tattoo* was preoccupied with the symbolism of the word *rose*. References to roses and their color, he thought, and attributions to the characters themselves, appeared with distracting frequency throughout the work; the main character even called her husband "a rose of a man." Williams wanted Kazan to direct this play, but Kazan was tied up with two upcoming film projects. Throughout the writing of this play, too, Williams had envisioned Magnani as the central character, but she felt her English wasn't adequate for a stage drama, in which she might have to improvise at any given moment—and backed out. (She would later play Serafina in the film version of the play and receive an Academy Award for her performance.) The play opened in New York at the Martin Beck Theater to mixed reviews—most critics, like Maxwell, thought the *rose* technique awkward and overstated—but the box office was boosted when several Hearst papers praised the play. While *The Rose Tattoo* won the Antoinette Perry award (the Tony), it would never see the popularity of Williams' other plays.

Williams began spending more time in Key West, taking his grandfather there as often as possible. (Reverend Dakin and Frank Merlo liked each other and got along well.) He rented a three-bedroom house and later purchased a home, which grew into a compound with a pool and a guest house. As he grew wealthier, he discovered that more and more of his assets were vanishing into federal taxes. His money also went habitually to any of his friends who asked for it—and to many who didn't. Wood suggested that he donate to the Authors League Fund, established for impoverished professional writers, to "kill two birds with one stone"; in this way, the money he spent to help his friends would be tax-deductible. He also spent vast sums on his sister Rose, hoping to emancipate her from the state-run sanitarium in which she had been living. He wanted to place her in a private home and was able to install her in a managed-care facility where she would have her own cottage on the wooded grounds of the hospital.

The decade of the 1950s began with the publication of Williams' *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, coincident with the release of the film version of *The Glass Menagerie*. Sales of the novel were meager, to Williams' disappointment, and the screenplay for *The Glass Menagerie*—whose ending had been made more "upbeat" by film executives in Hollywood—
left much to be desired. While the film netted a substantial profit, Williams was far from satisfied with the finished product. (He called it "the most awful travesty of the play I've ever seen ... horribly mangled by the people who did the film-script.") He and Wood determined to be more wary on the next screenplay, which turned out to be for the play A Streetcar Named Desire. They asked Kazan to adapt the play for film, and Kazan agreed. Production began in 1951 with much of the cast from the original stage play. Throughout the months of production, Williams reworked the play that earlier Wood had told him not to show to anyone. The earlier version entitled Ten Blocks on the Camino Real had been shortened to Camino Real. The play was pure fantasy, and Williams soon learned that convincing anyone to try fantasy on Broadway was tough going. Fortunately, by this time Kazan had faith in Williams and his work and was willing to direct the play.

Despite Kazan's work, Camino Real, which opened in New York in March of 1953, earned savage reviews and closed after only sixty performances. The critic Brooks Atkinson saw the play as superbly written but derided Williams' "increasing preoccupation with degeneracy, corruption and horror." Because the play represented a major shift in Williams' thematic approach, Williams was extremely disappointed by the vitriolic response.

To take his mind off of this, Williams agreed to direct a play for his old companion Don Windham—with whom he'd shied away from collaborating since You Touched Me!. The new work, The Starless Air, was slated for an opening in Houston, but there were many squabbles between Williams and Windham and eventually Williams became discouraged enough to resign as director. The backers felt that the play would go nowhere without Williams' name, and the play never made it to New York; the incident drove Williams and Windham further apart. In June of 1953, Williams returned to Europe. While there, he began developing the plot for Three Players of a Summer Game, which focused on life in the South and the complexities of the family unit. As it developed over the following year, this story became one of Williams' masterworks, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

Kazan Directs Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof brought Williams and Elia Kazan together again, but this play would strain their relationship severely; each continued to respect the other's work, but there were many differences of opinion during the play's production. Kazan's ideas for the character of Big Daddy, for example, never meshed with the playwright's vision, and a compromise was reached that in Williams' view could never suffice for the original ending.

During rehearsals for Cat, Williams received word that his grandfather Dakin had died. He interrupted his work and rushed to St. Louis, arriving at the house with a large box containing a blanket of flowers to be placed on the casket—a massive array of violets and white carnations, his grandfather's favorite flowers, in the shape of a St. Andrew's cross. Reverend Dakin was buried in Waynesville, Ohio, where he had been raised, next to his wife. Williams established a memorial room in his grandfather's honor at the theological school of the University of the South, his grandfather's alma mater. The Reverend's effect on his grandson's life had been incalculable, and his loss was difficult for Williams to bear.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof opened at the Morosco Theater in New York on March 24, 1955. It would become Williams' longest-running Broadway play, eventually sold to MGM for $750,000 and made into a film starring Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman; it would earn its author yet another New York Critics' Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize. At first Williams had no idea of the play's success, for, as was his habit at such times, he had first upset everyone around him and then fled the country, again for Rome. Among the victims of this particular bout of anxiety was Audrey Wood, his agent and dear friend, who by now was tiring of his idiosyncrasies—and especially his regular eruptions of temper. Whether he handled success or failure with less aplomb was unclear; he seemed unable to enjoy the success of Cat and, moreover, seemed haunted by it. Around this time, Williams began to support himself with stimulants more powerful than alcohol and black coffee, and his dependency on narcotics grew.

The Stressors Take Their Toll

Battle of Angels—now rewritten as Orpheus Descending—found no warmer welcome in 1957 than it had found in 1940. It closed after 68 performances in the U.S., though it did well in Russia and would run there for seven years. The combination of the disappointment over this play and the emotional turmoil surrounding the death of his father, which also took place in that year, drove Williams to seek psychotherapy. He would say later that the analysis had helped him to know his true nature; but at the time it offered no solutions. The death of Cornelius Williams affected Williams more than he had imagined it would, for both he and his brother Dakin had grown to pity their father, despite Cornelius' often ruthless nature. While Edwina noted in her memoirs that neither son had wept at the death of their father, both contradicted the account. And Williams faced two more important deaths in the following years: Diana Barrymore,
"1942's Most Sensational New Screen Personality" and a close friend, committed suicide in January of 1960 after a brief and tragic life; and a few years later, Frank Merlo was diagnosed with cancer and, after a lingering and painful illness, he died in 1963. Merlo's death sent Williams into the deepest depression he'd ever known. All the while he took pills for sleeping, pills for waking up, and pills to settle his nerves. Wherever he went, the pills went with him. His dependencies became more and more marked; he would later refer to the 1960s as his "Stoned Age."

The project demanding most of his attention at this time was a work that was very close to his heart, The Night of the Iguana. The play, whose setting was modeled on the beach at Acapulco where he had met Paul and Jane Bowles after his alienation from Kip Kiernan, revolved around an older priest; Williams based this character loosely on his grandfather, Reverend Dakin. When the tour of the play started, Williams traveled with the group, working on rewrites daily. For eight weeks, he worked long hours, often without sleep. The reviews on tour were mixed, so no one was sure how the play would be received in New York; all were surprised when it earned another New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. Williams' photo appeared on the cover of Time with the headline "The Greatest Living Playwright in the English-Speaking World." The film version would be shot on location in Mexico in 1964, and it too would become a marked success.

In the spring of 1963, Edwina Williams surprised her son—unpleasantly—by releasing her own book about him, entitled Remember Me to Tom. Williams was not at all happy with the book, especially with the parts about Cornelius, who was no longer present to defend himself against her assertions. The co-writer, Lucy Freeman, admitted that the book had been written hurriedly. During this same year, Williams' play The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore was panned by the New York critics. When he ran off to Key West to recuperate from this latest disappointment, he learned that his house had been opened as a tourist attraction. He then left for Europe, where he learned that his New York apartment had been burglarized. Nothing was going right.

After returning home, Williams took the recommendation of a friend and visited a doctor, who gave him an injection of an amphetamine that was legal at the time. The effect was euphoric; it cleared his head and enabled him to write again. He was told the drug could be purchased as pills, and he acquired it. The trouble with his self-medication, as he would later admit, was that he unwisely took the pills in combination with alcohol—and the effect of this methodology was a style writing that was much more surrealistic, implying the drug, alluding to the drug. As one biographer describes it, Williams' work of this period "is speed all the way through, and the trouble with speed is the letdown."

In 1966, Williams met Bill Glavin, who took the place of Frank Merlo in his life in a positive way—looking after the details of quotidian life. Like others who knew Williams well, Bill was awestruck by his dedication to his work. He also recalled that during this time Williams was becoming addicted to his daily speed injections. One clear indication of Williams' dependence came on a trip they took to Spain together; on their arrival, Williams realized his "medicine" was missing and insisted frantically that they fly immediately back to New York. He had left the bottle on the dresser, and by that time it was obvious that he couldn't be without it. Friends were noticing distinct changes in Williams' behavior by 1968. He was seldom present at the rehearsals of his play The Seven Descents of Myrtle, and when he was present, his manner was erratic, he was on edge, he sweated profusely, and his speech was often garbled. The play was an absolute failure, and his "crackup" (his own choice of terms) came at last in the following year.

Early in 1969, Dakin persuaded his brother to convert to Roman Catholicism, a move that may have been more for Dakin's peace of mind than for his own. In that spring, Williams' play In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel opened in New York, but it closed soon after. The new faith was not helping; Williams had begun to feel that everyone had turned against him, and as the drugs eroded his mind he would sleep up to 17 hours a day. His famous discipline was a thing of the past. He was often incoherent, and his hands constantly shook. He and Bill Glavin had parted company on bad terms, and Williams was once again alone.

Back home in Key West, Williams fell while carrying a pot of boiling coffee and burned his shoulder badly. His brother Dakin was called to the scene, and after surveying what a mess his brother was in, he had him committed to a hospital in St. Louis. The period that followed was a terrible time for both of them. The drugs were taken from him, and, he went into convulsions, nearly dying once from a heart attack. For a man who all his life had feared slipping into insanity like his sister, the entire experience was a nightmare. Williams was kept confined for three months, during the first few days of which he was too furious even to see Dakin, and was released in time for Christmas. He spent the holidays at his mother's house in St. Louis, where he reportedly watched the television film of The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone. Many of Williams' friends would later affirm that Dakin's actions probably had saved his life; but Williams would never fully forgive his younger brother for committing him to the hospital, or for the treatment he had received while he was there. It would be another year or so before the relationship would even begin to heal.
After the Hospital

Everyone, even Williams, felt he had much improved since his hospitalization. He was off drugs and drinking only white wine, and he was once again writing every day. Williams broke off his longstanding relationship with Audrey Wood in 1971—he'd been attacking her verbally, often accusing her of no longer believing in him—and took on another agent, Bill Barnes, who worked with the temperamental playwright as well as he could. Williams' play *Small Craft Warnings*, originally entitled *Confessional*, expressed overtly his homosexuality and the sadness and loneliness that his desires had brought him. He'd not had a successful play for more than a decade, so, with renewed energy, he did his best to promote *Small Craft Warnings*, even acting in it himself. His efforts paid off; the play enjoyed a six-month run and turned a profit.

Doubleday Publishing commissioned Williams to write his memoirs in 1975, paying him an advance of $50,000. The result was no masterpiece; he had permitted Doubleday to edit the book as it wished, Williams said, and the published book was half as long as the original manuscript had been. Like his mother's book before him, it had been written quickly and without careful thought or much attention to detail. He'd rambled through many of its pages, and the events recounted in the book were sometimes inconsistent with the dates he gave for them. Still, for all its faults, the book was eagerly received, and Williams signed copies for four hours straight at Doubleday's bookstore on Fifth Avenue.

Williams had often said he wanted to live a more secluded life, but even in the wake of his published memoirs, that was unlikely to happen. In 1976, Williams granted permission to a Canadian filmmaker, Harry Rasky, to film a documentary about his life. The sensitive and talented Rasky captured Williams' very essence; filmed on location in Key West and in New Orleans, the documentary featured many places where the playwright had lived and worked, and the segments that showed Williams reading portions of his plays were especially moving. The film proved immensely popular in Canada but less so in the United States, where Williams was no longer in vogue. It was eventually aired, but it wouldn't be in demand until after Williams' death a few years later.

The realization of Williams' vision of a private life was deferred even further in the same year by Donald Windham's publication of their correspondence. Williams was shocked, for he'd never imagined in writing the letters that they would one day be available for public viewing.

The Work Continues

Still, his professional writing continued unabated, if less successfully than in the past. He became fascinated with F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Fitzgerald, and decided to write a play about their lives. *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* opened in 1980, around the time of Williams' 69th birthday, but the play hardly survived past its debut. He lost nearly $500,000 on the production, and some said it was the worst thing he'd ever written. A few months later, he received word that his mother had died, and he and Dakin prepared services for her at Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis; it is also around this time that Williams set aside a portion of his estate to ensure that the unfortunate Rose would be cared for until the end of her days. Soon afterward, Williams and Dakin traveled to the White House together, where President Jimmy Carter presented Williams with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor a civilian can receive from the government of the United States. It was toward the end of 1980 that Williams began what would be his last play; *A House Not Meant to Stand*, an exploration of the conditions of society as Williams saw them, opened in Chicago to favorable reviews.

Williams had often said he would work right up until the moment of his death, and so he did; he died abruptly, choking on a small plastic bottlecap after a night of heavy drinking, between February 24 and 25, 1983. He was alone in his hotel room in New York City at the time—at the Hotel Elysée, a name reminiscent of the tenement in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He had said that he wanted his body to be sewn into a white bag and dropped into the sea near where Hart Crane had drowned, but his brother overrode his wishes and buried Williams in St. Louis, a city Williams loathed, for Dakin thought it right that such a popular personality be buried where those who loved his work could visit his grave. And he may have had a point; *The New York Times* summarized Williams' effect on American culture: "Tennessee Williams ... left many mourners: strangers who for forty years depended on him for the most magical evenings in American theater."

Tennessee Williams produced dozens of short plays and screenplays, two novels, a novella, 60 short stories, more than 100 poems, and an autobiography; he proved that, contrary to popular belief, a play of quiet emotion, written with bracing poetic diction, could compete with the commercial productions of Broadway. When asked what it was like to be a writer, he said, "It is like being free.... To be free is to have achieved your life ... [and] it means to be a voyager here and there.... It means the freedom of being." But like success, this "freedom of being" seems to have had a dark side for Williams: "I live like a gypsy," he said. "I am a fugitive. No place seems tenable to me for long ... not even my own skin."
Williams seems never to have been comfortable with himself or his work. His shyness was overpowering, and he was often lonely and afraid, alienated, sometimes even disoriented. But he considered the difficulties of his life the cost of writing as he did, out of his own personal pain. "I have never valued work, created work, that was not personal," he once said. "I think you have to use your life—what you have experienced and felt—as the material for your creative work. Otherwise, you're just manufacturing something that is not deeply rooted in you at all."

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