

103 QUOTATIONS



Tennessee Williams

(1911-1983)

Tennessee [Thomas Lanier] Williams is the greatest American playwright after Eugene O'Neill. He grew up emotionally unstable after his father, a traveling salesman, moved his family to St. Louis in 1918. Williams blamed him for being puritanical. His fragile sister withdrew from reality altogether, resulting in a prefrontal lobotomy. His first successful play, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), is about his sister. His next play *Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) is considered by most critics his best—and perhaps it is, as theater. However, his experimental play *Camino Real* (1953) is a greater literary achievement, his rendition of spiritual malaise in the tradition of “The Waste Land” (1922) by T.S. Eliot. In this play Williams is a Modernist (1) in his Expressionism, (2) in his existentialism, (3) in affirming a way out of the wasteland and (4) in subordinating his homosexuality to general humanity. After the play flopped commercially, Williams never attempted another one so ambitious as literary art and his vision became more Postmodern, as in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). Throughout his career, except for his greatest literary achievement, he attained immense commercial success on stage and in the movies with characterization, exotic moody atmospheres, dramatic intensity, and theatrical effects—*Summer and Smoke* (1947), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Night of the Iguana* (1961). Williams spent most of his life luxuriating in his glory, wealth and leisure—mostly in New Orleans, New York, Rome, and Key West, where he owned a home. One night, alone in a hotel room near Broadway in New York City, he inhaled the cap of a decongestant bottle and choked to death.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, the 1930s, politics, religion, human nature, confession, life, Existentialism, morality, gallantry and grace, women, sex, love, cages, the theater, art, writing, symbolism, Expressionism, Modernism, characters, basic theme, success, other writers, Postmodernism, old age, death:

YOUTH

I was brought up puritanically. I try to outrage that puritanism.

Young, gifted, and destitute.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

Kill my demons, and my angels might die too.

I've always depended on the kindness of strangers.

Friends are God's way of apologizing to us for our families.

There are intensities that one cannot live with, that he has to outgrow if he wants to survive.

I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action.

Security is a kind of death.

I had too much glory.

THE 1930s

To begin with, I turn back time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy.

POLITICS

Revolution only needs good dreamers who remember their dreams.

RELIGION

All your Western theologies, the whole mythology of them, are based on the concept of God as a senile delinquent.

HUMAN NATURE

I think most of us are disturbed.

Humanity is just a work in progress.

All of us are guinea pigs in the laboratory of God.

We are all sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life.

We are all civilized people, which means that we are all savages at heart but observing a few amenities of civilized behavior.

I don't believe in villains or heroes—only right or wrong ways that individuals have taken, not by choice but by necessity or by certain still-uncomprehended influences in themselves, their circumstances, and their antecedents.

There are no "good" or "bad" people. Some are a little better or a little worse, but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice. A blindness to what is going on in each other's hearts.... Nobody sees anybody truly but all through the flaws of their own egos.

I think that hate is a feeling that can only exist where there is no understanding.

A line can be straight, or a street, but the human heart, oh, no, it's curved like a road through mountains.

The human animal is a beast that dies but the fact that he's dying don't give him pity for others.

We have to distrust each other. It is our only defense against betrayal.

Why is it so damn hard for people to talk?

CONFESSION

When something is festering in your memory or your imagination, laws of silence don't work, it's like shutting a door and locking it in a house on fire in hope of forgetting that the house is burning. But not facing a fire doesn't put it out. Silence about a thing just magnifies it. [echo of Hawthorne]

LIFE

Luck is believing you're lucky.

Enthusiasm is the most important thing in life.

Time is the longest distance between two places.

Time goes by so fast. Nothin' can outrun it.

The past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it.

Life is an unanswered question, but let's still believe in the dignity and importance of the question.

Life is all memory, except for the...present moment that goes by you so quickly you hardly catch it going.

Time rushes towards us with its hospital tray of infinitely varied narcotics, even while it is preparing us for its inevitably fatal operation.

What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof? I wish I knew.... Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can.

EXISTENTIALISM

Make voyages. Attempt them. There's nothing else.

Life is partly what we make it, and partly what is made by the friends we choose.

Once you fully apprehend the vacuity of a life without struggle you are equipped with the basic means of salvation.

What on earth can you do on this earth but catch at whatever comes near you, with both your fingers, until your fingers are broken.

MORALITY

Deliberate cruelty is unforgivable.

I don't believe in "original sin." I don't believe in "guilt."

All cruel people describe themselves as paragons of frankness.

Mendacity is a system that we live in. Liquor is one way out and death's the other.

[Deliberate cruelty]: It is the most unforgivable thing in my opinion, and the one thing in which I have never, ever been guilty.

The only thing worse than a liar is a liar that's also a hypocrite!

GALLANTRY AND GRACE

A high station in life is earned by the gallantry with which appalling experiences are survived with grace.

[Compare the motto of Hemingway, “grace under pressure”]

WOMEN

I know all about the tyranny of women.

All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be.

SEX

The Venus flytrap, a devouring organism, aptly named for the goddess of love.

I cannot write any sort of story unless there is at least one character in it for whom I have physical desire.

Here there was only hot swing music and liquor, dance halls...and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows.

But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant.

LOVE

Everybody is nothing until you love them.

When so many are lonely as seem to be lonely, it would be inexcusably selfish to be lonely alone.

Hell is yourself and the only redemption is when a person puts himself aside to feel deeply for another person.

You see how cloudy the glass must become through which we look at each other. That’s how it is in all living relationships except when there is that rare case of two people who love intensely enough to burn through all those layers of opacity and see each other’s naked hearts. Such cases seem purely theoretical to me.

All my life I have been haunted by the obsession that to desire a thing or to love a thing intensely is to place yourself in a vulnerable position, to be a possible, if not a probable, loser of what you most want. Let’s leave it like that. The block has always been there and always will be, and my chance of getting, or achieving, anything that I long for will always be gravely reduced by the interminable existence of that block.

The strongest influences in my life and my work are always whomever I love. Whomever I love and am with most of the time, or whomever I remember most vividly.

I’ve never met [anyone] that I couldn’t love if I completely knew him and understood him, and in my work I have at least tried to arrive at knowledge and understanding.

The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks.

Go, then! Go to the moon—you selfish dreamer!

CAGES

A prayer for the wild at heart kept in cages.

“I’m not living with you. We occupy the same cage.” [Maggie]

Caged birds accept each other, but flight is what they long for.

THE THEATER

The theatre is a place where one has time for the problems of people to whom one would show the door if they came to one's office for a job.

ART

All good art is an indiscretion.

WRITING

Why did I write? Because I found life unsatisfactory.

If the writing is honest it cannot be separated from the man who wrote it.

A play is a phoenix and it dies a thousand deaths. Usually at night. In the morning it springs up again from its ashes and crows like a happy rooster.

Unskilled and awkward as I was at this initial period of my playwriting, I certainly had a moral earnestness which I cannot boast of today.

When I stop working the rest of the day is posthumous. I'm only really alive when I'm writing.

SYMBOLISM

Symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama.

EXPRESSIONISM

I don't want realism. I want magic! [Expressionism] Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be the truth. And if that's sinful, then let me be damned for it!

Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion.

The scene is memory and is therefore nonrealistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart.

MODERNISM

Quixote raises his lance in a formal gesture and cries out hoarsely, powerfully from the stairs: "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks!" Quixote goes through the arch with Kilroy. [Into the waste land]

CHARACTERS

Some mystery should be left in the revelation of character in a play, just as a great deal of mystery is always left in the revelation of a character in life, even in one's own character to himself.

I have found it easier to identify with the characters who verge upon hysteria, who were frightened of life, who were desperate to reach out to another person. But these seemingly fragile people are the strong people really.

BASIC THEME

The crying, almost screaming, need of a great worldwide human effort to know ourselves and each other a great deal better, well enough to concede that no man has a monopoly on right or virtue any more than any man has a corner on duplicity and evil and so forth...[is] the basic, allegorical theme of my plays as a whole.

SUCCESS

Success is shy—it won't come out while you're watching.

Most of the confidence which I appear to feel, especially when influenced by noon wine, is only a pretense.

The apparent failure of a play sends me back to my typewriter that very night, before the reviews are out. I am more compelled to get back to work than if I had a success.

When people have spoken to me of "genius," I have felt the inside pocket to make sure my wallet's still there.

Luxury is the wolf at the door and its fangs are the vanities and conceits germinated by success. When a writer learns this, he knows where the danger is.

Success and failure are equally disastrous.

OTHER WRITERS

Thank you, Mr.—Chekhov.

On the Encantadas we saw something Melville *hadn't* written about.

"I have the misfortune of being an English instructor. I attempt to instill a bunch of bobby-soxers and drugstore Romeos with a reverence for Hawthorne and Whitman and Poe."

Hemingway had a remarkable interest in and understanding of homosexuality, for a man who wasn't a homosexual.... Have you ever read "A Simply Inquiry"?.... The final line in Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream* is one man saying I love you to another. It didn't mean they'd had homosexual relations.

William Saroyan wrote a great play on this theme, that purity of heart is the one success worth having.

POSTMODERNISM

It is no longer safe for a man to even declare [his ideals].

OLD AGE

In memory, everything seems to happen to music.

You can be young without money, but you can't be old without it.

There comes a time when you look into the mirror and you realize that what you see is all that you will ever be. And then you accept it. Or you kill yourself. Or you stop looking in mirrors.

The public Somebody you are when you "have a name" is a fiction created with mirrors and...the only somebody worth being is the solitary and unseen you that existed from your first breath.

They told me to take a streetcar named desire and then transfer to one called cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian fields!

DEATH

There's a time for departure even when there's no certain place to go.

Death is one moment, and life is so many of them.

Eternity! Didn't it give you the cold shivers?

To be free is to have achieved your life.

