Tennessee Williams – An American Playwright
Adapted from the biography by Jon C. Hopwood

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams, III in Columbus, Mississippi, on March 26, 1911, to Cornelius Williams, a traveling salesman who denigrated his sensitive son, who was homosexual, as “Miss Nancy,” and the former Edwina Dakin, who like many of her son’s heroines thought of herself as a Southern belle. He first began to write while afflicted with paralysis as a child, which affected him between the ages of five and seven, turning him into an invalid for two years. At the age of 13, his mother—who encouraged his writing—gave him a typewriter.

The young Tom Williams wrote his first play Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay! when he was a teenager, in 1935. He became a published writer at the age of 16, winning third prize (and $5) for his essay “Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?” in a contest run by the magazine Smart Set. The magazine Weird Tales published his short story “The Vengeance of Nitocris” in 1928.

When young Tom Williams was 17, the family moved to St. Louis, where it existed in reduced circumstances during the Great Depression. It was a “setting” that would influence his first masterpiece, The Glass Menagerie. He went to the University of Missouri-Columbia for his higher education, where his fraternity brothers gave Ham the nickname “Tennessee” due to his deep southern accent. Later, he transferred to Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, but did not take his degree until he was 28 years old, from the University of Iowa, where he matriculated in the school’s writing program.

He moved to New Orleans in 1939. He renamed himself “Tennessee,” ostensibly in homage to the state of his father’s birth. In New Orleans, Williams lived in the French Quarter, where he labored for the Works Progress Administration’s writers program. His first play, A Battle of Angels, failed in Boston during tryouts in 1940. (He later reworked it as Orpheus Descending which debuted on Broadway in 1957.) Though the play failed, it made Williams known, and he worked as a contract writer, briefly, for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, where he sketched out the play that would become The Glass Menagerie, his first great success.

Tennessee was close to his sister Rose, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia after accusing her father of making sexual advances towards her. Rose was institutionalized, eventually spending most of her life in mental institutions. Cornelius and Edwina Williams permitted Rose to receive a prefrontal lobotomy (a removal of part of the brain), which was performed in 1937 and which incapacitated her. Tennessee Williams was haunted by his sister’s tragedy for the rest of his life and never forgave his parents for authorizing the operation.

Tennessee Williams suffered from depression, and he feared going mad. He was briefly institutionalized in 1969 after a severe nervous breakdown, and never forgave his younger brother Dakin for allowing him to be put into a madhouse, which was a nightmare, according to his 1975 memoir. Part of Williams’ problem, aside from his alcoholism, was that in the 1960s, he had become addicted to prescription drugs.

Tennessee Williams died on February 25, 1983, after choking on the cap of a bottle of eye drops that became lodged in his throat. (Williams was plagued by eye problems much of his adult life.) He was 71 years old. That his plays continue to be revived successfully on Broadway and on stages all over the world more than a half-century after their debuts is testament to his greatness as a dramatist.

Response questions on reverse ➔
Answer the following questions regarding the life of playwright Tennessee Williams in complete sentences, using specific evidence from the article.

1. Describe Tennessee Williams’ relationship with his parents.

2. Identify two of Williams’ accomplishments.


4. Do you think Tennessee Williams ever was able to enjoy his success as a playwright? Explain.