**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS IN ST. LOUIS OF THE 1930s**

**Instructors: Tom Mitchell and Joi Hoffsommer.**

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**CLASS OVERVIEW** Playwright Tennessee Williams is thought of as a southern writer, but from twenty years in St. Louis he left behind many stories, plays and poems set in Missouri (and some in Illinois) that are only now coming to light. This course will introduce these works, expanding the appreciation of the writer and the Depression Era in St. Louis. Each session will include a presentation of background information by Tom Mitchell, a class discussion of short selections, and an in-class reading performance by participants led by Joi Hoffsommer.

**MATERIAL:** The instructors will provide short reading assignments for each class meeting handed out prior, and collected afterwards. Some material will be read aloud in class as “in-class performances.” That material will either be handed out or projected for the class to read. Finally, the instructors will also include optional readings available online for follow-up.

**Wed, Feb 1: Overview of Williams’s life and *The Glass Menagerie***

The class will consider the life of Tennessee Williams, 1911 to 1983, and his major works. *The Glass Menagerie* will be contrasted to unpublished works that share similar settings and characters.

READING/VIEWING: *The Glass Menagerie* (re-familiarize yourself with the play as needed)

IN-CLASS PERFORMANCE: “Prologue: The Wingfields of America” (alternative beginning for *The Glass Menagerie*)

OPTIONAL READING:

“The Midwestern Plays of Tennessee Williams” by David Radavich, Tennessee Williams Annual Review, Number 8, 2006.

<http://www.tennesseewilliamsstudies.org/journal/work.php?ID=67>

QUESTIONS:

1. How much was Tennessee Williams’s life like the family depicted in *The Glass Menagerie*?

2. What makes Williams an important American writer to know?

3. What can be gained by examining Tennessee Williams’s life and work from the 1930s in St. Louis?

**Wed, Feb 8: The Simmering Soup of St. Louis in the 1930s**

Pressures of the Great Depression were felt distinctly in St. Louis, a city that was racially and culturally diverse dealing with significant labor challenges. The class will explore how social and political factors swirled around the young Thomas Lanier Williams.

READING: “Corduroy Pants” (story)

IN CLASS PERFORMANCE: “Middle West” (poem)

OPTIONAL READING: “Tom Williams, Proletarian Playwright” by Allean Hale. Tennessee Williams Studies, 1998. <http://www.tennesseewilliamsstudies.org/journal/works/0104hale.pdf>

QUESTIONS:

1. What was happening in St. Louis during the years 1929 to 1939?
2. How did Tennessee (Thomas Lanier Williams) relate to the people, movements and events of that time?
3. How do the Depression Years in St. Louis relate to our own times?

**Wed, Feb 15: Transforming Family to Art**

The middle-class Williams family suffered from marital discord and the pressures of alcohol abuse and sexual repression. Through his writing, Williams approached an understanding of his dysfunctional household.

READING: “Useless”(short story)

IN CLASS PERFORMANCE: “Every Friday Nite is Kiddies Nite.”

OPTIONAL READING: “Tennessee Williams’s Dramatic Charade: Secrets and Lies in The Glass Menagerie” by Gilbert Debusscher (TWAR No 3, 2000) <http://www.tennesseewilliamsstudies.org/journal/work.php?ID=30>

QUESTIONS:

1. Who were the members of TW’s family?
2. What were the attitudes and pressures that influenced family life in the 1930s?
3. How do we understand the Williams’s family dynamics today?

**Wed, Feb 22: The Author in Spite of Himself**

Williams is recognized as an autobiographical writer, though it is in creative transformation of experience that his artistry is revealed. As a young man he expressed frustration with a soul-crushing clerical job and alienation from society.

READING: “Stair to the Roof” (short story)

IN CLASS PERFORMANCE: “*Sacre du Printemps.*” (short play)

OPTIONAL READING: “Introduction to Amor Perdida” by Nicholas Moschovakis and David Roessel, Michigan Quarterly Review, vol XLII, Issue 3, Summer 2003

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0042.315;g=mqrg;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1> “Amor Perdida” by Tennessee Williams <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0042.316;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1;g=mqrg>

QUESTIONS:

1. How did TW use his own experience in his writing?
2. How does TW’s autobiographical influence compare to other writers?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of approaching TW’s writing through his own experience?

**Wed, Mar 1: Beyond the City, Into the Ozarks**

The Williams family escaped St. Louis for summer camps in the Missouri Ozarks, and Tom was a student for three years in Columbia, Missouri at the center of the state. His descriptions of rural Missouri life are a revelation.

READING: “Season of Grapes” (story)

IN CLASS PERFORMANCE: “Summer at the Lake” (one act play)

OPTIONAL READING: “Winds of Change Blew Over the Ozarks” by Kathleen Van Buskirk, OzarksWatch

<https://thelibrary.org/lochist/periodicals/ozarkswatch/ow703c.htm>

QUESTIONS:

1. What is/was the state of Missouri like beyond the city of St. Louis?
2. How did the Williams family experience their state?
3. What is the place of nature in the writing of Tennessee Williams?

**Wed, Mar 8:** **Becoming a Playwright: The Mummers of St. Louis**

The class will explore the artistic climate of St. Louis in the mid-1930s with special attention to The Mummers, a little theatre group that produced Williams’s first plays.

READING: “Something Wild” (essay)

IN CLASS PERFORMANCE: Scenes from “The Long Goodbye” (short play)

OPTIONAL READING: *Tennessee Williams and the Mummers of St. Louis: The Birth of a Playwright* by Tom Mitchell, TWAR No. 10, 2009. <http://www.tennesseewilliamsstudies.org/journal/work.php?ID=94>

QUESTIONS:

1. What were the significant movements in the arts in 1930s St Louis?
2. What does it mean to be part of an artistic ensemble?
3. How do the Mummers of St. Louis compare with theatre groups today?

**Wed, Mar 15: Experimentation and Escape**

Even at a young age, Williams experimented with form and content. Pushing the boundaries of accepted taste often provoked scorn and encouraged the writer to leave St. Louis for personal and artistic adventures.

READING: “Me, Vashya” (short play)

IN CLASS PERFORMANCE: “Act of Love” (short play)

OPTIONAL READING: “The Vengeance of Nitocris” (short story) <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Vengeance_of_Nitocris>

Me, Vashya: (photo of manuscript) <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/items/show/8798>

QUESTIONS:

1. What preconceptions do we have about Tennessee Williams?
2. How did Williams, as a young man and later, experiment in writing?
3. What does it mean to experiment? What are the risks?

**Wed, Mar 22: Age and Perspective**

Tennessee Williams was always aware of mortality and the fleeting aspect of artistic relevancy. In this final session, we will take stock of his career and consider how the St. Louis years are present throughout.

READING: “The Caterpillar Dogs” (short story)

IN CLASS PERFORMANCE: “Joe Clay’s Fiddle” (poem)

OPTIONAL READING: “Tennessee Williams on a One-Night Stand” Audio from the Poetry Foundation

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/76696/tennessee-williams-on-a-one-night-stand>

QUESTIONS:

1. Who were the older people in TW’s experience?
2. How does TW feel about aging and death?
3. Can a young person write effectively about age?

Abbreviated research bibliography

Leverich, Lyle. *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*. Crown Publishers, 1995.

Schvey, Henry I. *Blue Song: St. Louis in the Life and Work of Tennessee Williams*. University of Missouri Press, 2021.

Williams, Tennessee. *Notebooks*. Edited by Margaret Bradham Thornton, Yale UP, 2006.