

# TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

by David Kaplan



August 1928 *Weird Tales*, "The Vengeance of Nitocris"

*Hushed were the streets of many peopled Thebes. Those few who passed through them moved with the shadowy fleetness of bats near dawn, and bent their faces from the sky as if fearful of seeing what in their fancies might be hovering there. Weird, high-noted incantations of a wailing sound were audible through the barred doors. ... A terrible sacrilege had been committed. In all the annals of Egypt none more monstrous was recorded.*

March 1958 *New York Times*, "Williams' Well of Violence"

*I was sixteen when I wrote "The Vengeance of Nitocris", but already a confirmed writer, having entered upon this vocation at the age of fourteen, and, if you're well acquainted with my writings since then, I don't have to tell you that it set the keynote for most of the work that has followed.*

What probably prompted 16-year-old Thomas Lanier (not yet Tennessee) Williams to submit stories to the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* was the chance of a fee he might receive, if what he wrote was accepted for publication. His tale "The Vengeance of Nitocris," set in ancient Egypt, was published in *Weirds* August 1928 issue: his first story in print. He was paid \$35. That's the equivalent of \$550 today. You could buy a refrigerator in 1928 for \$35.

Williams' "Nitocris" is a 4800-word riff on a 120-word throwaway paragraph from the chronicles of the Greek historian Herodotus in which a Pharaoh's sister from the Sixth Dynasty of Egypt revenges her brother's death at the hands of a mob. "Beauteous" Nitocris (Williams has her wearing lipstick) announces a banquet in an underground chamber, conveniently next to the Nile. In 1958, Williams described what happened next:

*...at the height of this banquet, she excused herself from the table and opened sluice gates admitting the waters of the Nile into the locked banquet hall, drowning her unloved guests like so many rats.*

In 1928 Tom pitched his prose to what would please a *Weird* editor.

*With the ferocity of a lion springing into the arena of a Roman amphitheater to devour the gladiators set there for its delectation, the black water plunged in. Furiously it surged over the floor of the room, sweeping tables before it and sending its victims, now face to face with their harrowing doom, into a hysteria of terror. ... And what a scene of chaotic and hideous horror might a spectator have beheld! The gorgeous trumpery of banquet invaded by howling waters of death! Gaily dressed merrymakers caught suddenly in the grip of terror! Gasps and screams of the dying amid tumult and thickening dark!*

When Williams claimed in 1958 that "Nitocris" set the keynote for the rest of his writing he wasn't kidding. We can hear it as the keynote for another twenty-five years after the *Times* article, until his death in February 1983.

Over the decades between 1928 and 1983, for all his variations in genre and approach or subject matter and style, Williams was a writer with a steadfast personal mythology. Astute readers of "Nitocris" might notice a family resemblance between the Sixth Dynasty's brooding sister with the "monstrous" brother and the Depression Era brooding sister and "monstrous" brother of Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* — and there is an underground tunnel of false hospitality that turns into a trap we can follow out the subterranean banquet hall of Nitocris and climb onto Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* then up the stairs to the New Orleans apartment where Stanley Kowalski presents his visiting sister-in-law Blanche with a one-way ticket back to Mississippi (as devastating to her as "The gorgeous trumpery of banquet invaded by howling waters of death!" in Thebes where "Gaily dressed merrymakers caught suddenly in the grip of terror!"). In case you miss the connection, or rather the disconnect between Nitocris hosting the banquet and Blanche the victim of it, later on in *Streetcar* Stanley makes the irony iconic:

STANLEY: *Lo and behold! The place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor! I say - Ha - Ha! Do you hear me? Ha- ha- ha!*

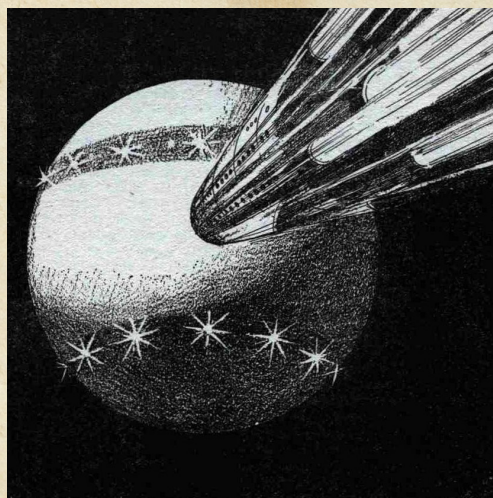
Moving downstream along the river of time, monstrous Brother Pharoah torn apart by the mob on the bank of the Nile for his "terrible sacrilege" is in the same hot water licking the beach at Cabeza de Lobo where Cousin Sebastian is torn to pieces by a mob of boys in Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*:  
Ha!

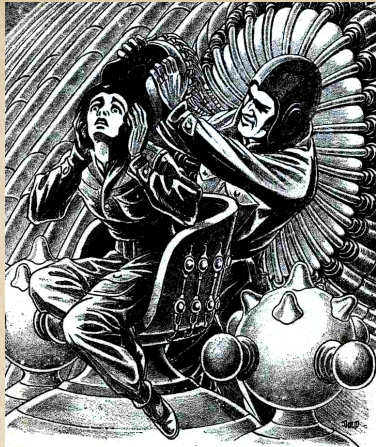
Every month *Weird Tales* dedicated a full-page to defining what they were about. The headlines varied on these pages in 1928: Gripping Fiction (January), Quality Fiction (February) Superb (March) Unique (April), but the copy was more or less the same, including the August "Nitocris" appeared.

*NOWHERE except in the pages of WEIRD TALES can you find such superb stories of the bizarre, the grotesque and the terrible— fascinating tales that grip the imagination and send shivers of apprehension up the spine— tales that take one from the humdrum, matter-of-fact world into a deathless realm of fancy — tales so thrillingly told that they seem very real. This magazine prints the best contemporary weird fiction in the world. If Poe were alive he would undoubtedly be a contributor to WEIRD TALES. In addition to creepy mystery stories, ghost-tales, stories of devil-worship, witchcraft, vampires and strange monsters, this magazine also prints the cream of the weird-scientific fiction that is written today— tales of the spaces between the worlds, surgical stories, and stories that look into the future with the eye of prophecy.*

H.P. Lovecraft (*Weird* published a dozen of his stories) put it this way:

*Weird Tales*, February 1928, "The Call of Cthulhu"  
*The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the*





The pattern of Lovecraft's stories—the inevitable horrific revelation of a willfully forgotten past—could pass for the plot summary of Williams' most famous plays: *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Night of the Iguana*; and if you think it's horrific to abandon your crippled sister, *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams couldn't stop thinking it was monstrous.

What Williams read in pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* (and other pulp fiction magazines with titles like *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Stories*) lingered like Laura. In the January 1928 issue of *Weird* there's "A ghost-tale of New Orleans" titled "The Garret of Madame Lemoyne," the story of a haunted torture chamber that fifty-five years later echoed in the title of Williams' one-act farce of a torture chamber "The Remarkable Rooming-House of Mme LeMonde" set in an attic and submitted for publication in 1982.

There are other coincidences, or perhaps they aren't coincidences. The plots, the structure, and stylings of stories (including the names of characters) that appeared in *Weird*, *Astounding*, *Amazing* and other pulp magazines in and around 1927 and 1928 somehow found their way into Williams' future writing.

If we can agree that Fantasy (with a capital F), as a genre for fiction, sets a story in an alternate universe, unlike our own in time or space or earth-bound logic—and if we can agree that Science Fiction as a genre is speculative fiction based in some way on science, either hypothetical like men from Mars, or technological, like rocket ships to visit Mars—then we might agree to claim that

from his teenage years to the months before his death in February 1983 Williams had completed over twenty-seven plays (eight of them full length) and eight short stories (out of the 49 in the 1994 *Collected Stories*) which could be considered Science Fiction or Fantasy or both.

That's what has been published as of 2023. Among drafts of plays and stories left unfinished at the time of his death, there are 169 pages at Harvard, in the archives that store Williams' late papers, for a full-length play, *The Lingering Hour*, in which all the volcanoes of the world explode, and furtive scientists gather near Mount Etna in Sicily to try to reverse the destruction of the earth. Archives in Austin, Texas, where the bulk of Williams' earlier papers are stored, hold Sci-Fi and Fantasy stories and plays by Williams that date to the late 1920's—and from every other decade Williams wrote.

*Science fiction is not about the future; it uses the future as a narrative convention to present significant distortions of the present.*

Samuel R. Delany, "Some Presumptuous Approaches to Science Fiction" 1984

Tracking the continuity of Science Fiction/Fantasy throughout Williams' writing circumvents the cul-de-sacs of biography, regionalism, sociology, and psychology. Reading and writing science fiction and fantasy freed Williams to amalgamate the implications of biography, regionalism, sociology, and psychology into poetic myth.

*American Science Fiction writers, freed from the strictures of the probable, left to soar in the by-ways of the possible, not bound by the concept of universal human nature, in a country that was itself a potpourri of different cultural behavior patterns, sat contemplating marvelous objects in the theater of the mind.*

Samuel R. Delany, "Critical Methods/Skeptical Fiction" 1969

Williams wanted audiences to contemplate his visions, not all of them marvelous, on physical stages. This year the Festival is presenting seven Sci-Fi/Fantasy plays by Williams and adaptations of six of his Sci-Fi/Fantasy stories.

Published plays by Williams with Sci-Fi and Fantasy elements include: *A Cavalier for Milady*

• *A House Not Meant to Stand* • *A Recluse & His Guest* \* • *Act of Love* • *Aimee Vous Ionesco?*° • *Camino Real*° • *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* • *Kirche Küche Kinder*° • *Me, Vashya* • *Now the Cats with Jeweled Claws*° • *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*° • *Stairs to the Roof*\* • *Steps Must Be Gentle*° • *Ten Blocks on the Camino Real*° • *The Case of the Crushed Petunias*° • *The Chalky White Substance*\*° • *The Demolition Downtown*° • *The Gnädiges Fräulein*° • *The Municipal Abattoir*° • *The Mutilated*° • *The Pronoun 'I'*\*° • *The Remarkable Rooming House of Mme LeMonde*° • *The Red Devil Battery Sign* • *The Strange Play*\* • *This is an Entertainment* • *Vieux Carré*° • *Will Mr. Merriwether Return from Memphis?*°

Unfinished plays by Williams with science fiction and fantasy elements include *Masks Outrageous and Austere* • *The Lingering Hour* • *The Men from the Polar Star*\*.

Published fiction by Williams with Sci-Fi and Fantasy elements includes: "The Vengeance of Nitocris,"\* written 1927, published 1928 ; "The Eye That Saw Death,"\* written c. 1928, published 2015; "Stair to the Roof," written c. 1936, published 2023; "The Angel in the Alcove,"\* written 1943, published 1948; "The Yellow Bird," written 1947, published 1948; "The Poet," published 1948; "Chronicle of a Demise,"\* published 1948; "The Coming of Something to the Widow Holly,"\* begun 1943, published 1953; "The Knightly Quest,"\* begun in 1949, mainly written in 1965, published in 1966; "A Recluse and His Guest," published 1970; "It Happened the Day the Sun Rose," published 1981.

All dates of composition are approximate. There are also finished and unfinished unpublished short stories from each decade.

\* Sci Fi/Fantasy texts by Williams we're presenting this season.

° Sci Fi/Fantasy texts by Williams we've presented in seasons past. <https://www.twptown.org/archives>

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