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"Survival with Honor": The Battle between the Flesh and the Spirit in the Dramas of Tennessee Williams

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“SURVIVAL WITH HONOR”: THE BATTLE BETWEEN THE FLESH AND THE SPIRIT IN THE DRAMAS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

by

KIRBY WATKINS

A Capstone Experience/Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of University Honors College at Western Kentucky University

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KIRBY WATKINS

Under the Direction of Walker Rutledge

ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams struggled his entire life with sexuality and spirituality. His view of God and sex were continuously intermingled in confusion, and the resulting chaos found its way into many of Williams’ plays. This thesis focuses on Williams’ entire career, from his very first plays to some of his last. The theme of flesh versus spirit is examined closely. Williams attempted in many ways to find a balance between the two and his characters exemplify this search.

INDEX WORDS:  CE/T, Tennessee Williams, Flesh, Spirit, Drama, God, Kirby Watkins, Western Kentucky University
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by

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To my family,
my definition of strength
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I would like to recognize Walker Rutledge for his constant support, no matter the situation. This thesis would never have come together without your help.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOREWORD</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. EARLY PLAYS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. MIDDLE PLAYS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. LATE PLAYS</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFTERWORD</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.</td>
<td>Tennessee Williams in his New York apartment, 1948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.</td>
<td>Tennessee Williams in New York City, 1955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.</td>
<td>Tennessee Williams on location for the filming of <em>The Night of the Iguana</em>, 1963</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

In the course of this book I will talk a great deal about love and much of the talk will be about carnal love as well as spiritual love. I have had, for a man so nearly destroyed so often, a remarkably fortunate life which has contained a great many moments of joy, both pure and impure.

“That sensual music…”

I still hear it clearly.

-Tennessee Williams, Memoirs

In much literature, past and present, one can see a great divide rise up between the spirit and the flesh. An immense struggle of humanity exists directly in the midst of this divide. To which side should one belong? Tennessee Williams makes it very clear to the audience that whichever side one chooses, it will always be the wrong decision. It is inherently human to feel incomplete and, furthermore, to seek completion in whatever form it may seem to take. Plato describes in his work Symposium the beginning of mankind. He argues that the gods made man round with four arms and legs, two faces, and two sets of genitalia. The humans soon rebelled against the gods, and Zeus, as a way of humbling these creatures, decided to split them in half—one face, two arms, two legs, and one set of genitalia. The split humans then clove to each other, desiring the other half in order to feel whole again. “Each of us when separated, having one side only, like a flat fish, is but the indenture of a man, and he is always looking for his other half,” Plato writes (34). In Plato’s story, man is searching for a kind of physical absolution. In the same way, Williams’ carnal characters attempt to find completion in an entirely sexual sense. It may not be “love” that the characters are searching for, but rather a feeling of self-worth or meaning in existence.
When this sense of incompletion is not appeased physically, Williams directs his characters to the other end of the spectrum. They soon find the God of Tennessee Williams to be sometimes cruel, sometimes sick or dying, but mostly just invisible and vaguely absent altogether. Still others find themselves hanging in the balance, seeking carnality and also spirituality. Some characters are lost to their search, while others make the decision to endure. There may never be a sense of completion: one may just resign herself to choose one side over another in the hope that while peace and true completion may not be found, perhaps some sort of compromise can be made in her life. It is a truly existential world that these characters inhabit, one that teaches them that life may not have any overarching meaning, but rather only instances of compassion, communication, insight, and if not completion then a distant echo of it.

Note:
The plays reviewed were chosen on the basis of spiritual and sexual content. Some of Tennessee Williams’ most famous plays were omitted for these same reasons. For instance, *The Glass Menagerie* is not included because of its lack of sexual imagery. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* does not make an appearance due to a lack of spiritual issues. *A Streetcar Named Desire* may incorporate both the spiritual and sexual throughout the play, but as it was written very early in Williams’ career, it expresses a battle between the two sides of human nature rather than a celebration of sex. Spirituality in *Streetcar* is defeated brutally by sexuality. Many of the older plays written after *The Night of the Iguana* simply do not adequately address the issues discussed.
Tennessee Williams in his New York apartment, 1948; Photo by W. Eugene Smith
Early Plays

There is a certain redemptive quality lurking about the sexual scenes in Tennessee Williams’ early plays, almost a sort of celebration of the flesh. While this celebration of sex attempts to be fairly humorous, it hides darker commentaries on human isolation. *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), and *Period of Adjustment* (1960), in particular, all feature characters who seem to believe that completion from their lonely lives will be achieved solely in sexual relationships. Williams does not put as much emphasis upon the spiritual as upon the sexual in his early works. Religion is mentioned only briefly in each play. It is almost as if the characters have tried spiritualism and found it lacking. Therefore they turn to sexual relationships to find completion. Williams tends to leave these plays open-ended; the audience is fully aware that these characters cannot continue in their current states. While celebrating the flesh, Williams is also acknowledging that redemption will not be fully realized in sexual relationships.

*Summer and Smoke* (1948)

*Summer and Smoke* plays with the flesh and spirit, but the audience is introduced to characters which can only portray one side. Alma Winemiller, the preacher’s daughter, represents spirituality, while her love interest, John Buchanan, Jr., the doctor’s son, fully illustrates physicality. There are very evident symbols of religiosity in the play. Williams takes care to relate that the sky is of great importance and should resemble “religious paintings of the Renaissance” (Author’s Production Notes). The presence of the stone angel named “Eternity” should be felt throughout the entire play. Then there is Alma herself—the
very picture of spirituality. “My name is Alma and Alma is Spanish for soul,” she constantly reminds the audience in case they have missed the point (I, Prologue). Williams describes her as nervous, a girl who has grown up to feel older than she really is. Not quite sure how to talk to people her own age, she comes across as “affected” or pompous (I, i). Her attraction to John, the embodiment of the flesh with his “fresh and shining look of an epic hero,” is her attempt to reconnect with the world that she has been so cut off from (I, i). Williams cements the earthly qualities of John when Dr. Buchanan, Sr., calls his own son a “drunkard” and a “lecher” (I, i). The fact that Alma is the daughter of a preacher and John is in the medical profession further separates the two. She ingrains herself to think on spiritual issues, always relating matters of the flesh back to religious experience. John, however, does just the opposite. While this may seem an excellent juxtaposition of the two opposing views, Williams fails to unite the flesh and spirit. He seems to present Alma only as one or the other—the embodiment of only the spirit or—at the end of the play—only the flesh. It is not quite that she views sexual matters as irreligious; it is that she does not wish to view sexual matters at all. John warns her that there is another person within her; he tells her, “You have a doppelganger and the doppelganger is badly irritated” (I, i). Alma, of course, does not understand his connotation, much less what a doppelganger is. John exemplifies the exact opposite; he wants nothing to do with spirituality, only matters of the flesh. Even after setting up a date with Alma, he takes Rosa Gonzales “roughly in his arms” by the anatomy chart in his father’s office (I, iv.). The chart is an obvious symbol of John’s physicality, his focus on matters of the flesh.

The constant attraction between the two characters never reaches consummation. John teases Alma and leads her on, always hinting that he has cared very much for her but
frequently gets distracted by more worldly women, as embodied by Rosa Gonzales. John and Alma’s differences punctuate their one date in the entire play; they are both trying to reach out to each other, to feel some sort of completion from their lonely lives but with stunted attempts. When John tells Alma he is thinking of travelling to South America for a more exciting life, she tells him, “I think you’re confused, just awfully, awfully confused, as confused as I am—but in a different way…” (I, vi). It is the truest line she has in the entire play. Both characters are completely lost; one might say that they deserve each other, need each other even, but they can never quite meet on the same plane. Even after an intimate moment in which they finally kiss, Alma begins to decipher the situation through religious views while John focuses mainly on sex:

John. There’s other things between a man and woman besides respect. Did you know that, Miss Alma? (I, vi)

Alma. Some people bring just their bodies. But there are some people, there are some women, John—who can bring their hearts to it, also—who can bring their souls to it!

John. Souls again, huh?—those Gothic cathedrals you dream of! Your name is Alma and Alma is Spanish for soul. Some time I’d like to show you a chart of the human anatomy that I have in the office. It shows what our insides are like, and maybe you can show me where the beautiful soul is located on the chart. (I, vi)

They cannot find a common ground between their two worldviews.

The date is essentially Alma’s sexual awakening. She may run out on John that night when he offers to take her to a hotel room, but the night changes her. She further perpetuates this change when John tells her on the night his father is shot, “I wouldn’t have made love to you. Even if you had consented to go upstairs….I’m more afraid of your soul than you’re afraid of my body….I wouldn’t feel decent enough to touch you…” (II, viii). Alma
understands that John views her as above him because she is so spiritual. She seeks completion in her life and sees its culmination in the doctor, so she changes her outlook. Her father asks her, “What am I going to tell people who ask about you?,” to which she replies, “Tell them I’ve changed and you’re waiting to see in what way” (II, ix). John’s outlook changes as well after his father’s death. He attributes his change to Alma’s influence on his life. Nellie, John’s fiancée and Alma’s former student, exclaims to Alma, “He told me about the wonderful talks he’d had with you last summer when he was so mixed up and how you inspired him and you more than anyone else was responsible for his pulling himself together” (II, x). This information causes Alma to visit the doctor. He explains to her, “We seemed to be trying to find something in each other without knowing what it was that we wanted to find” (II, xi). He recognizes the urge to find some sort of redemption with Alma; however, he cannot find it any longer because his attention to her sexual attributes has changed her.

Alma ends the play beside Eternity, carelessly flirting with a travelling salesman as they make their way to the local casino. She is completely transformed to John’s original state while he has completely converted to her religious state of mind. There is no in-between space for the characters, no common ground. John M. Clum writes in his article “The Sacrificial Stud and the Fugitive Female in Suddenly Last Summer, Orpheus Descending, and Sweet Bird of Youth,” “Her [Alma’s] liberation is her triumph, her cavalier’s plume. It is her beloved John, who moves from wildness to conventional marriage, who is crying when we last see him” (34-35). However, Clum misunderstands the characters. While Alma may be liberated and John may seem to be caged, they are still so alone. Alma will only descend into John’s original emptiness, and John will transcend into Alma’s lonely conservative past despite his marriage. They will not find completion.
The Rose Tattoo (1951)

*The Rose Tattoo* is the story of an Italian widow finding a new love. On the surface, this play simply amuses, showing the descent and then reawakening of a woman completely enamored of her cheating husband. Serafina delle Rose believes that her life is complete before the death of her husband. She is intensely religious—one might say superstitious—and brags about her sexual experiences with Rosario, saying, “Each time is the first time with him. Time doesn’t pass…” (I, i). The death of her husband shatters her confidence. The sad truth reveals that Serafina was never complete; her husband openly had an affair with a blackjack dealer at a casino. His death brings her to a broken state, completely lost without her physical equivalent of love. To compensate for the loss of her sexual life, Serafina reaches to her spirituality. Even this connection is not fully truthful, however. Serafina’s religion relies on relics and artifacts. She has her husband’s body cremated against the will of the church so that she can keep him near as a sort of shrine. She constantly bows beneath a statue of the Virgin Mary, keeping a light lit at all times and asking for a “sign.” Her religion is not one of spiritual fulfillment but rather that of physicality.

Serafina’s relationship with her daughter suffers severely after the death of Rosario. Rosa experiences the grief of her mother in extreme circumstances. Serafina hides her daughter’s clothing so that Rosa cannot go to her own graduation and even forces Rosa’s boyfriend to kneel before the Mary statue and make a vow of chastity. Leland Starnes writes in “The Grotesque Children of *The Rose Tattoo*” that

Serafina’s vehement condemnation of her daughter’s passion for the young sailor is in ironic—and laughable—contrast to her own concern
with sexuality. We soon realize, of course, that this comes about because of the fact that in her own world of intense sexuality she is led to see the same exaggeration in her daughter’s world, and she in effect flails out at chimeras which are largely of her own making….So Serafina forces the young man to pledge chastity while kneeling before the shrine of the Virgin—a shrine which she herself has dedicated to sexual love. (103)

As Ernest Hemingway reminds the reader in *A Farewell to Arms*, love can be a religion (263). Serafina does not find her salvation within these empty symbols, however, or in her daughter. In fact, most of the play she is completely oblivious to her daughter’s actual virtue.

Starnes writes that Serafina experiences a “spiritual rebirth” at the end of the play when she rediscovers a sense of love with Alvaro (105), but one must wonder if she regards this “love” as spiritual at all. She runs to Alvaro because of his resemblance to her dead husband. She does not adore his personality, constantly calling him a “clown.” She succumbs to him once her daughter has left her, possibly for good, but one has a sense that this new relationship cannot last. It is built upon the past, no matter that Serafina has smashed the urn which held Rosario’s ashes. The remains may have been scattered by the wind, but she still holds onto them, no matter how Williams tries to assert that the past has gone. In any case, if she does truly love Alvaro, it is not a spiritual fulfillment. She rejects all spirituality and clings to her flesh, forsaking the Virgin Mary statue for good. For all her hopes, this will not create in her a sense of completion. She may celebrate her flesh at the end of the play, giving in to her sexual desires, but it will not create any redemption for her.

*Period of Adjustment (1960)*
Period of Adjustment shows up nine years after The Rose Tattoo as a sort of attempt at the earlier sanguine celebrations of sex, but Williams fills the play with symbols of irrevocable disaster. The play centers on relationships between married couples. Ralph Bates and his wife, Dorothea, are experiencing a separation during Christmas. George Haverstick, Ralph’s war buddy, has recently married a woman named Isabel, George’s earlier nurse. Ralph is the first character on stage, alone until the Haversticks show up. He then banters with George as Isabel walks inside the house. Almost immediately, George leaves Isabel there, driving away, leaving the audience (and Isabel) to wonder if he will return. He, of course, does, but only after Williams gives the two other characters in the house a chance to introduce themselves. During this moment in the play, Ralph explains to Isabel that he lives in a subdivision called High Point, built “over a cavern” (I, i). This sort of imagery is obvious to the audience. Williams sets up such a “sweet” house as Isabel likes to proclaim, but the playwright dooms it from the start. Placed precariously over a cavern, the foundations are clumsy and weak. It is a rather obvious parallel for the marriages described in the play, but this kind of symbolism works fairly well.

The main problem between George and Isabel, as Ralph sees it, is the awkwardness of sex. Their first night as man and wife was spent in separate “beds” because George frightened his new wife with his lack of tact. The marriage has not been consummated and, according to Big Momma of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, that is where the problems in marriage arise (I, i). George complains of the shakes; it seems to be the same problem that plagues Alma Winemiller of Summer and Smoke. He has great passion in him but no outlet. The end of the play leaves the audience understanding that the marriages will experience some kind of sexual reconciliation. This cannot be said to fix the problems, however; right before the
final scene, there is a tremor unlike any other during the play. The house sinks lower into the cavern and a huge crack appears on the roof (III, i). Sex will not create harmony in these marriages. As Gerald Weales writes in “Period of Adjustment: High Comedy Over a Cavern,” “Anyone tempting to wring a message from the double union of these mismatched pairs should remember that in the typical Williams play the most his characters hope for or get is the momentary comfort of shared warmth” (161).

If the celebration of the flesh will not complete the characters’ loneliness, one must turn to spiritual matters. When Williams discusses spirituality in this play, it is subtle at best. George and Isabel both have their own fantasies of what life should be like. George tries to convince Ralph that the two war buddies should raise Longhorn cattle together. He believes that he can be successful raising animals purely for the use of nostalgic movies. It is not worldly possessions he is looking toward, for the symbols connected with the West are those of freedom and open spaces. Isabel dreams of having a nurse-doctor relationship, or perhaps curing the world with her nursing abilities. She tells George at the close of the play, “The world is a big hospital, and I am a nurse in it, George” (III, i). She has delusions of completion in her dreams; she wants to be needed as a caretaker, yet she often speaks of feeling sick at touching George’s “lecherous” body. Sex will ultimately not be a redeeming factor in their relationship.

***

In spite of the celebration Williams places on sexual relationships, the audience knows that the characters will not find happiness or completion in them. The characters will
seem happy and content for the time being, but disaster awaits them in the very near future. Like the setting of *Period of Adjustment*, their lives rest precariously over a cavern, and eventually their foundations will give way.

The plays may feel incomplete because of the lack of spirituality. Williams touches on a sense of spiritual pursuit with Alma Winemiller, but she cannot make John love her in her current state; he even views her as beyond his reach, something not to be touched. Although even after changing her mindset to become more earthy and physical, she still cannot have what she craves. They are destined never to find completion or salvation in each other. He will marry but never be happy. She will become a sensual woman but, as some critics hint, will simply transform into Williams’ Blanche DuBois. In *The Rose Tattoo*, Serafina delle Rose may find religion in her love, but it is not a lasting one. It is certainly not even real love. She will continue to have sexual relations with Alvaro, but it will not complete her hunger for human interaction. Likewise, every single character in *Period of Adjustment* will be lonely in the future. Sex can only satisfy for so long before spirituality is needed. There must be a common ground, a mixing of the two. Williams has not yet discovered a complete character.
Tennessee Williams in New York City, 1955;
Photo by Alfred Eisenstaedt
Middle Plays

Unlike the early plays and their celebration of sex, the middle plays resort to physical and spiritual violence. Williams employs the image of a sick and terrible God alongside that of spiteful and pitiless sex. Spirituality kills. Sex mars instead of saves. The characters constantly look for some sort of salvation, and if it appears they have found it, it is immediately destroyed. Gone is the celebration of the flesh. It has been replaced by spiritual longing and sexual deviance. The plays *Orpheus Descending* (1957), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) are indicative of this new emotion toward physical and spiritual relationships.

*Orpheus Descending* (1957)

*Orpheus Descending* has all the airs of an ancient Greek play. Williams uses Beulah and Dolly, two women shown at the beginning of the play, as a chorus to relate certain facts through dialogue that would seem expositional if just related to the audience straightforwardly. The sheriff’s wife, Vee, is a picture of spirituality as a sort of blind oracle. Of course, one cannot overlook the play’s namesake: the Greek hero Orpheus descended into hell to save his love from Hades. Williams plays with the idea of a hero in this play with his character Val, a drifter who takes on the role of stud and sacrifice. The play focuses on the relationship between Val and the woman who employs him, Lady Torrance. Lady is an Italian woman in an unhappy marriage to a dying, racist man named Jabe. Val and Lady attempt a sort of redemptive relationship. In her past, Lady lost love, child, family, and home all in the same night when her father’s vineyard was burned to the ground, and she is now
married to the man who was the perpetrator of that act. Val and Lady believe they can find completion in each other. Whether spoken or not, the characters unmistakably yearn toward each other, be it for sexual or spiritual deliverance.

Vee introduces the audience and the other characters of the play to Val. They enter Lady’s store as a Negro Conjure Man screams a Choctaw war cry, which ushers in the spiritual and sexual dichotomous characters almost like a summons. Vee experiences visions that she attributes to God and Jesus; she paints these visions and hangs up the pictures across town, particularly in Lady and Jabe’s store. Often overlooked, she has unmistakable importance in the play. Her influence puts Val and Lady in a position to know each other, and her relationship with Val eventually causes his death. Kimball King writes in “The Rebirth of Orpheus Descending,” “[Vee Talbott] alone recognizes that Val/Orpheus is the resurrected Christ” (140). At one point, for example, she exclaims that his eyes are the “TWO HUGE BLAZING EYES OF JESUS CHRIST RISEN!” (III, ii).

Williams certainly creates a Christ-like figure in Val. Val needs human contact. He is Williams’ first attempt at a character that is not exactly complete but at the very least aware of his incompleteness and enduring past it. Williams postulates in Val the universal human emptiness that can only be momentarily assuaged. Spiritually speaking, Val only connects with Vee on brief occasions, particularly in Act III, scene ii:

Vee. Yes, yes light. YOU know, you know we live in light and shadow, that’s, that’s what we live in, a world of—light and—shadow….

Val. Yes. In light and shadow. (He nods with complete understanding and agreement. They are like two children who have found life’s meaning, simply and quietly, along a country road.)
This is a momentary connection, one of many for Williams, few for Val. As quickly as it occurs, the moment ends as Sheriff Talbott arrives, threatening Val with death. False accusations concerning Val’s relationship with Vee found this threat. However, Val is not innocent of an affair with Lady Torrance. Val may be a Christ figure, but he is also sexuality embodied. The picture of intense spirituality which is tied up in Christ is altered and skewed with the introduction of sexual virulence.

King further states that Val, Lady, and Jabe represent vividly “Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Satan,” respectively (137). While King seems to fully understand the characters of Val and Lady, he mislabels Jabe. Lady’s husband exhibits Williams’ perception of God, not Satan. He lives in the upstairs of the house, his own perverse Heaven, as he knocks on the floor whenever he needs Lady. She calls him “Death,” saying, “Death’s knocking for me! Don’t you think I hear him, knock, knock, knock?” (III, iii). However, unlike a traditional version of God, Jabe does not provide mercy or forgiveness; he does not venture to understand or connect with anyone. Instead, he doles out judgments for the characters, killing his wife and her unborn child, and ensuring that Val will die for his intrusion into the lives of the Torrance family in the same way Lady’s father was destroyed—by fire. One is reminded of fire and brimstone from the pits of Hell. While this may again bring to mind Satan, one must remember from the Holy Bible that God controls Hell—Satan merely resides there. Only God judges; only God can call down fire to destroy his enemies. In this play, Williams reveals his view of God as a cruel, hateful being—sick and deadly.

If completion eludes the spirit, then perhaps it can be found in the flesh. This notion is quickly withdrawn, however. King explains,
Even Williams recognized the hopelessness of reaching the souls of others through sexual contact. In *Orpheus Descending* and *Battle of Angels*, Val confesses that the aftermath of physical intimacy brings an awareness that we are “sentenced to confinement inside our own skin.” Carol similarly speaks of the dangerous aspects of her indiscriminant sexual encounters, which she seeks “because to be not alone, even for a few minutes, is worth the pain.” (141)

These characters understand the emptiness of sexual relationships because of their promiscuous pasts. Val is attempting to escape this life because he finds no completion in it. Carol Cutrere, a wild woman who consistently tries to lure Val to herself, continues to search for her moments of clarification, her “few moments” of alleviating the loneliness (II, i). While Carol realizes that sex will not fulfill her, she is constantly chasing it; she has no conception of anything else, no realization of the spirit or soul.

Lady, however, believes that her sexual relationship with Val brings her back to life. She begs him not to leave her, but once she learns of her pregnancy, she yells, “You’ve given me life, you can go!” (III, iii). Lady appears to have found redemption from her sick, controlling husband in the new life given to her by Val. But because of this newfound salvation, she will be shot and killed by Jabe. She feels vindicated by her pregnancy with Val’s child. There is almost a Clytemnestra feel about Lady, while Val could be said to be her Aegisthus, although he has no preconceived or any overwhelming hateful emotions toward Jabe. Lady does not try to kill Jabe as bluntly as Clytemnestra, but she clearly has no inclination for keeping him healthy, especially once she learns of his participation in the murder of her father.
Walter J. Meserve writes in “Accepting Reality: Survivors and Dreamers in Tennessee Williams,” “[Lady] has been strong to endure this long, and now she can live and survive even with the knowledge that Jabe was one of the group who burned up her father’s orchard with him in it” (256). Meserve talks of Lady as a hero, Williams’ true survivor in the play. Yet, he later remarks that she has endured “only to be shot” (256), which raises the question: is this the most that one can expect from life? Can a person only endure until killed? One must question the quality of Lady’s endurance as well. Her existence before Val is miserable, and her existence after Val is impossible. If Jabe had not killed her, she would have expected fulfillment through her child. One understands that she would have been disappointed. This child is really just a replacement for the one she lost when her father was alive. She cannot survive on her own any longer.

Likewise, Williams must destroy Val; he cannot endure alone, for he has sought solitude with Lady. Before his death, he pleads with her to join him outside of the county, to live together. While he may realize that he can never find completion in another human being, he still believes that being with Lady will save him. Williams does not fully understand just yet that salvation is only found in the moments of understanding, moments of compassion and warmth.

**Suddenly Last Summer (1958)**

Sebastian Venable, essentially the main character of *Suddenly Last Summer*, is dead. Williams builds this play completely on narrative about Sebastian, leaving the audience in a state of slight suspense and confusion throughout the piece. Sebastian appears to be a character who explores his spirituality, but yet again the playwright mars it, as in *Orpheus*
Descending. He consistently takes his view of God and applies it to his homosexual encounters. Catharine Holly, his cousin, tells the story of Sebastian’s last summer, while his mother, Vivian Venable, argues that Catharine’s tale is false and insists that a frontal lobotomy be performed on her.

Vivian begins the play with Dr. “Sugar,” as she calls him, explaining some background information about her son and his relationship with her niece. In this dialogue the audience learns of Sebastian’s, and subsequently Williams’, view of God. Vivian and Sebastian took a trip to the Encantadas and witnessed the hatching of the sea-turtles. Vivian relates this story with great emotion and fervor, soon becoming very distraught as she describes the devouring of the baby sea-turtles by black, carnivorous birds; in this scene Sebastian claims to see God (I, i). “God shows a savage face to people and shouts some fierce things at them, it’s all we see or hear of Him. Isn’t it all we ever really see and hear of Him, now?” Mrs. Venable explains to Dr. Sugar (I, i). This is the God that Williams believes in—a cruel, savage God that destroys the innocent. Sebastian becomes engrossed in this image of God. Catharine explains to the Doctor that she tried to save Sebastian from “Completing!—a sort of!—image!—he had of himself as a sort of!—sacrifice to a!—terrible sort of a….” Dr. Sugar interrupts and asks, “God?” She replies, “Yes, a—cruel one, Doctor!” (I, iv). She cannot save him, however, and Sebastian does become a sacrifice to this terrible image of God. His particularly gruesome death mirrors the scene at the Encantadas as the children that Catharine calls “little black sparrows” (I, iv) devour parts of his body and leave him for dead. In “The Sacrificial Stud and the Fugitive Female in Suddenly Last Summer, Orpheus Descending, and Sweet Bird of Youth,” John M. Clum comments that “Suddenly Last Summer is another expression of Williams’s paganism in
Christian terms, another blasphemous Eucharist” (32). Sebastian becomes the body broken for sin, the flesh eaten for remembrance of past deeds. Sebastian’s spirituality inextricably links with his flesh. “When he decides he will no longer sexually consume these hungry boys, they literally consume him,” Clum writes (32). Catharine further reinforces this idea of consumption when she remarks about Sebastian’s peculiar speaking habits:

Catharine. –We were going to blonds, blonds were next on the menu.

Sister. Be still now. Quiet, dear.

Catharine. Cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blonds, he was fed up with the dark ones and was famished for blonds…Fed up with dark ones, famished for light ones: that’s how he talked about people, as if they were—items on a menu.—“That one’s delicious-looking, that one is appetizing,” or “that one is not appetizing”—“(I, ii)

Sebastian constantly looks for something to appease his insatiable “appetite” but he never seems to find it. Catharine explains to the audience that she procured people for him, she attracted attention in the same way that Mrs. Venable attracted people to the young, homosexual man. He never finds solitude or redemption in any person, or in any moment. He constantly takes little white pills and never really has any sort of discussion with Catharine. He lives for his sexual encounters; perhaps his death eventually frees him, completes him.

Critic Delma Eugene Presley observes that Williams does not deal with the image of God appropriately in this play; she remarks that it “fails to come to grips with the central issue it has raised,” which is God’s relation to man (280). Instead, she argues, “the playwright turns his attention to the interrelationship of mankind” (280). She is absolutely right: Williams does not fully explore the image of God that he has created. Instead, he
makes Catharine’s impending lobotomy the main focus of the play. Presley notes that Williams takes a tremendous question and answers it with a simple statement about “caring for other people” (281) as evidenced when Catharine remarks that there is “no reason for everyone drowning hating everyone drowning” (I, iv). Williams makes a statement about human isolation in this play, but a very vague one. Catharine seems to be arguing for a recognition of suffering in every person, yet nobody can understand her. Only Doctor Sugar at the end of the play will even consider believing her tale. Perhaps she has done exactly what she should have before she is lost forever: she has reached one person, she has found one connection, if only for a moment.

**Sweet Bird of Youth (1959)**

Williams’ *Sweet Bird of Youth* is a bleak, dark play. A sense of hopelessness pervades this work. The main character, Chance Wayne, has spent his life attempting to become a famous actor, yet due to continued failure, he has become a male prostitute. The setting of the play brings Chance back to his hometown, St. Cloud, with his actress mistress, Alexandra del Lago, to win back the heart of his first—and only—love, a girl named Heavenly.

The names in the play connote purity, yet Williams uses them ironically. Heavenly has been corrupted by Chance, inheriting a sexually-transmitted disease which led to what her father refers to as a “whore’s operation” (II, i). The town itself is nothing short of hell, ruled by another portrayal of a sick God, appropriately named Boss. He governs St. Cloud under a sense of Christian duty, as if he were an example of morality for the town, set to judge every member by his own rules. His son and his daughter’s arranged fiancé act as his
henchmen. Boss reminds the audience of Jabe Torrence in *Orpheus Descending*. He has a famous speech that he delivers at every campaign stop, referred to numerous times as the “Voice of God” speech: in it, he outlines to the audience that he believes God called him down from “the red clay hills….to execute this mission….to shield from pollution a blood that [Boss] think[s] is not only sacred to [himself], but sacred to Him [God]” (II, ii). From this standpoint of self-serving morality, Boss orders his thugs to carry out despicable actions, including the random castration of a black male to show the unwavering stance that the white community of St. Cloud has on racial relations. With this makeshift authority, Boss orders Chance’s castration for his part in Heavenly’s sterility.

Two characters who seem to be overlooked are the Heckler, who follows Boss Finley around to expose his hand in his daughter’s operation, and Alexandra del Lago, Chance’s mistress and employer. Both characters exemplify a sort of corrupted endurance. Del Lago remarks that she must “go on,” but the audience knows that she will console herself with life through excessive drug use and casual sex with whomever she can employ. The Heckler continuously stalks Boss in an attempt to discredit his “Voice of God” speech, no matter how often he faces a beating for his words. He tells Miss Lucy, Boss’ mistress:

Heckler. I don’t want to hurt his daughter. But he’s going to hold her up as the fair white virgin exposed to black lust in the South, and that’s his build-up, his lead into his Voice of God speech.

Miss Lucy. He honestly believes it.

Heckler. I don’t believe it. I believe that the silence of God, the absolute speechlessness of Him is a long, long and awful thing that the whole world is lost because of. I think it’s yet to be broken to any man, living or any yet lived on earth, -- no exceptions, and least of all Boss Finley. (II, ii)
What the Heckler tries to explain is that God has become utterly silent, and so Boss Finley can no longer call on Him to justify his actions. However, the Heckler’s willingness to be beaten again and again is tarnished by his hurtful words to an innocent woman, Heavenly, “publicly taunting her over and over again with the fact of her sterility” (Adler 149). His words at every rally include “How about your daughter’s operation? How about that operation your daughter had done on her at the Thomas J. Finley hospital here in St. Cloud? Did she put on black in mourning for her appendix?” (II, ii). “Totally unselfish acts of caring [are] the only antidotes to the Boss Finleys of the world,” claims critic Thomas P. Adler (149). The closest thing the play offers to an “antidote” to Boss Finley is the Heckler, but even he is corrupted. Few examples of these unselfish acts appear in *Sweet Bird of Youth*; one may even argue that they do not exist at all.

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Even throughout these dark, terrible plays, Williams begins to make stronger connections between characters. He recognizes the need for connectivity because only in these small moments can the characters find salvation. Sex as a pure source of completion has been discredited as a damaging force, one that can possibly kill. Pure spiritualism is seen as the worship of a hateful God, one that wants only to strike down human relationships. Characters must turn to each other in an understanding that they are all lonely, all searching for some redemption from their isolation.
Tennessee Williams on location for the filming of *The Night of the Iguana*, 1963; Photo by Gjon Mili
Late Plays

Toward the end of his career, Williams finally seems to understand the source of human completion. He has not found it in sexual relationships alone, for they only provide a false sense of security. And God cannot be fully trusted. Completion, if it can be found at all, must reside in human relationships and can be felt only for brief moments before it slips away. This is particularly obvious in the play *The Night of the Iguana* (1963). After this discovery, however, Williams seems to fall back into old habits as he reiterates the seemingly redeeming qualities of sexual relationships in *Kingdom of Earth* (1968).

The Night of the Iguana (1963)

*The Night of the Iguana* focuses on three main characters: a defrocked priest named Lawrence Shannon, a lusty widow named Maxine Faulk, and a forty-something spinster named Hannah Jelkes. Maxine is the owner of the hotel in which the play takes place, a hotel that Shannon frequently visits when in the midst of one of his numerous breakdowns. The play opens at the beginning of Shannon’s most recent dilemma, which includes a sexual encounter with a sixteen-year-old, a member of a group he has been leading on tours through Mexico. Maxine has just lost her husband but is less grief-stricken than most widows would be, as she banters with Shannon, offering him rum-cocos and sex. In this intense chaos, Hannah makes her appearance with her poet grandfather, Nonno.

Each character’s physical appearance and entrance into the play fully illustrates his/her personality. Maxine is the first one seen on stage, described as “affable and rapaciously lusty” as she presents herself with a half-unbuttoned blouse and tight jeans (I, i).
Fully open with the audience about her sexual history, she explains that she has casual sex
with the Mexican boys she employs. She bases her self-worth on the fleeting love of man.
Yet it is not even the deeper feelings of love that she craves; Maxine wants only the sexual
fulfillment of life. One can see her complete ambivalence to deeper interpretations of love or
commitment when Shannon remarks on her nonchalant attitude towards her husband’s death.
Maxine explains, “Fred was an old man, baby. Ten years older’n me. We hadn’t had sex
together in…” (I,i). Her immediate reflection upon love is solidly anchored in sex. She has
an obvious drinking problem; every tense or problematic situation seems to be easily fixed,
in Maxine’s opinion, by a rum-coco, even if she is the only one partaking of the drink. “How
about a rum-coco? We give a complimentary rum-coco to all our guests here,” she asks Miss
Fellowes; Williams observes, “Her offer is apparently unheard. She shrugs and drinks the
rum-coco herself” (I, i).

Maxine may appear to the reader or viewer to be completely content in her carnal
lifestyle. One may wonder, however, why she chases so diligently after an ex-priest who
continually struggles with whether or not he should return to the church. Perhaps she is
innately searching for a spiritual redemption that she believes must lie within a man like
Shannon. It is appropriate that she will pick him. Shannon was defrocked because of a
sexual affair with one of his congregation. Maxine can identify with him better because of
this sin; as a very sexual person, she therefore feels more comfortable chasing after a
spirituality encumbered with sexuality as well.

Shannon, as previously mentioned, is a mix of two worlds. He constantly tries to
work out a balance between his sexuality and his spirituality. In his conversations with
Maxine, he speaks very carnally, mentioning her bosom or tight pants. He becomes very
frantic around her, stressed out. She cannot understand his spiritual problems, simply because she is not a spiritual being. When he tells her that the “spook” has moved in with him, she merely laughs at him (I, i). Obviously plagued by his spiritual past because it does not coincide with his sexual present, the spook represents Shannon’s conception of past guilt and future uncertainty. With the entrance of Hannah, whom Williams describes as “ethereal, almost ghostly….totally feminine and yet androgynous-looking—almost timeless,” Shannon finds a kind of comfort, “suddenly pacified by her appearance” (I, i). Over the course of the evening, he finds a sort of companionship with Hannah—mostly a spiritual connection, a mutual friendship. He tells Hannah about his conception of God:

Shannon. Yes, I tell you they do that, all our theologies do it—accuse God of being a cruel, senile delinquent, blaming the world and brutally punishing all he created for his own faults in construction….

Shannon. (a touch shyly now) My personal idea of God, not as a senile delinquent, but as a…

Hannah. Incomplete sentence. (II, i)

This dialogue between the characters suggests that God no longer represents a “senile delinquent,” just one simply not present at all.

Williams furthers this implication of a new sort of indifferent, indefinable God through the character of Hannah. She is the result of Williams’ fervent search for spiritual meaning. Not a strong sexual being, Hannah tells Shannon that she has only had two sexual experiences in her life, and neither one involved the action of sex on her part at all. Sexuality presents such a huge dichotomy between the characters. Shannon has always had one companion from each of his tours, and the owner of the hotel now vies for his affection.
Hannah, on the other hand, is chaste—almost the picture of a Virgin Mary. Shannon, then, can be seen as a sacrilegious and self-serving Christ. Even Hannah makes this distinction as she comments on his predicament:

Hannah. Who wouldn’t like to suffer and atone for the sins of himself and the world if it could be done in a hammock with ropes instead of nails, on a hill that’s so much lovelier than Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, Mr. Shannon? There’s something almost voluptuous in the way that you twist and groan in that hammock—no nails, no blood, no death. Isn’t that a comparatively comfortable, almost voluptuous kind of crucifixion to suffer for the guilt of the world, Mr. Shannon? (III, i)

While tied up in the hammock, Shannon has the most meaningful discussion with Hannah. During these moments together, Williams finally understands and explains what completion can be for his characters. Hannah tells Shannon that he needs something to believe in and that she has found her purpose (III, i). “Something like…God?” Shannon asks her. “No,” she replies, “Broken gates between people so they can reach each other, even if it’s just for one night only” (III, i). One night is all they will get to fully connect to each other. These understandings cannot last long; one can only bridge the gap between himself and another person for so long before he has to escape back into his solitude. Williams has always believed this, but he finally makes it clear to the audience and perhaps finally explains it fully to himself through Hannah. “Endurance is something that spooks and blue devils respect,” Hannah tells Shannon (III, i). Even through relationships that Shannon likens to falling down trees, Hannah replies, “I’m a human being and when a member of that fantastic species builds a nest in the heart of another, the question of permanence isn’t the first or even the last thing that’s considered” (III, i). She recognizes that time will change her relationship with
Nonno, that she will not have him forever. She understands, more than any other character, what it will mean to be alone.

Williams ends his play on a very ambiguous note. Shannon will ask to travel with Hannah, but she knows, as well as the audience, that this union would never last. She tells him that it is impractical and that he should stay with Maxine. “We all wind up with something or with someone, and if it’s someone instead of just something, we’re lucky, perhaps…unusually lucky,” she remarks (III, i). Shannon also seems to find his answer for God in the last moments of the play. The Mexican workers at the hotel have caught an iguana and tied it up underneath the veranda. Hannah pleads with Shannon to cut it loose, and because he understands the emotional attachment to something “at the end of its rope,” he will comply, saying, “We’ll play God tonight like kids play house with old broken crates and boxes. All right? Now Shannon is going to go down there with his machete and cut the damn lizard loose so it can run back to the bushes because God won’t do it and we are going to play God here” (III, i). It is the last thing he will ever say to Hannah. Shannon will resort to his liquor and an affair with Maxine to endure. When he has made the trip down to the beach, the audience’s attention turns to Hannah and Nonno. “It is finished?” Nonno will ask before he dies (III, i), echoing the last words of Christ on the cross. Hannah must now endure alone, but the audience is sure of her abilities. After all, she is the most complete character that Williams has ever made.

**Kingdom of Earth (1968)**

Williams relapses, like an addict, into a search for completion through sexuality in his play *Kingdom of Earth*. It would be beneficial and comforting to proclaim that Williams
clung to his new-found existentialism, but the human race is fickle. *Kingdom of Earth* separates the sexual explicitly from the spiritual and pits them against each other in a sort of battle for Myrtle, the main character. The two men of the play are half-brothers, and they fully represent each side of the spectrum. Fragile and feminine Lot identifies mostly with his deceased mother. The other brother is nicknamed Chicken, the son of a “wild beast,” as Lot calls their mutual father. Chicken takes after his father, unlike Lot. Stuck between the two worlds, Myrtle is amiable and lusty, all the while harboring some sexual reluctance. These three characters converge together in an old Southern home about to meet an impending flood.

The two brothers suggest a light-versus-dark theme in the play. Lot is blond and delicate in contrast to the dark-skinned, rough Chicken. Williams introduces Lot as a “frail, delicately—you might say exotically—pretty youth of about twenty” (I, i). Williams always seems to place Lot in areas with “cool light,” making the small man seem ethereal and unreal. Lot can be linked to the spiritual world. He takes refuge in his mother’s parlor and her upstairs bedroom. Myrtle will constantly descend from this room to the kitchen where Chicken dwells, making a move from a sort of Heaven down to Earth. As Foster Hirsch writes in “Sexual Imagery in Tennessee Williams’ *Kingdom of Earth,*” the kitchen happens to be the “only warm room in the house” (172). Chicken can be found in this kitchen for almost the entire play. Williams writes this character in a way that the audience will understand his fierce sexuality. He has a picture of a naked woman tacked up on the wall, and he constantly makes lewd comments about Myrtle. The playwright likens Chicken to an animal numerous times in the play, from his heavy breathing when the newly married couple comes to the house to his name. He tells Myrtle, “There’s nothing in the world, in this whole
kingdom of earth, that can compare with one thing, and that one thing is what’s able to happen between a man and a woman, just that thing, nothing more, is perfect” (VII, i). He sees the world as nothing unless sex is involved, but what is interesting is that sex has become almost a religious experience for him. He talks with Myrtle about being saved and trying to tame our “lustful bodies” when really he sees redemption and release from sin by indulging his (VII, i).

Myrtle begins the play very attached to her new husband, Lot. She tells him that he has touched the maternal cord in her, that she only wants to take care of him (I, i). Upon entering the house, she seems deeply affected by Chicken, first frightened and then eventually “very strongly attracted” (VII, i). Perhaps she is simply afraid of the flood which threatens to destroy the house. She mentions many times to Chicken how scared she is of water. This can perhaps be seen as a sexual fear as well. Hirsch writes that “[Chicken] pushes a cat through a trap door and Myrtle’s fear that the cat will drown in the flooded cellar represents her own fear of water and of Chicken’s sexual threat” (173). To put it in coarse terms, Williams makes a very clear symbol of a fear of a “wet pussy.” Myrtle has become so separated from her own sexuality that being around Chicken is a real and serious concern for her. She soon becomes so overwhelmed by the impending flood that she performs oral sex on Chicken in hopes that he will save her from it, as Lot drifts deeper and deeper into his mother’s past. Her husband can no longer save her from the flood; Lot will die in the parlor dressed in his mother’s clothes long before the flood ever comes. She tells Chicken, however, when he asks her if she has ever been saved religiously, “Why, yais, I have, I have been saved by you” (VII, i).
Williams works with the Biblical story of Lot and his wife as they flee the destruction of Sodom. In the traditional story, God spares Lot and his family from a city condemned of perverse activity on the stipulation that they do not look back. To look back on the city in its destruction is to show regret for leaving. Lot’s wife cannot help herself; she glances back on the city and turns into a pillar of salt. In contrast, Williams’ Lot travels toward destruction; he purposely drives his new wife to a house threatened by flood. It is the effeminate Lot of Kingdom of Earth that cannot let go of his mother’s past. Lot’s wife will be the survivor this time, but one has to wonder what sort of world she will be surviving in. In a way, the Sodomites win in Williams’ play.

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Williams has again created a character capable of surviving alone, except this time sexuality saves him. One might remark that Chicken is simply a sexualized version of Hannah Jelkes. He understands that people can only reach each other in moments—his moments are through sexual experiences. The difference between them is that Hannah does not blame other people for her isolation; she recognizes the loneliness of everyday life and endures past it. Chicken’s solitude has been forced on him because of his mixed racial background. To strike back at the world, he has found that his sexuality can be domineering and fulfilling for him. Myrtle almost has no choice. If she does not perform sex on Chicken, he will not save her from the flood. She maintains that she is attracted to him and that he has saved her in a religious sense, but one has to question her salvation. Sex will not save these
characters forever. They will eventually fail to find a way to endure life. Williams seems to have closed the “gates” that he discovered in *Iguana*.
I’ve had a wonderful and terrible life and I wouldn’t cry for myself: would you?

-Tennessee Williams, Memoirs

The Night of the Iguana is philosophically Tennessee Williams’ most satisfying play. The playwright’s move into existentialism finally culminates in the character of Hannah Jelkes, the only person who will feel loss and loneliness and not be destroyed by it. Although in the Kingdom of Earth Williams seems to lose his existential thread and jump back into a celebration of sexual matters, one cannot overlook the philosophical growth from Summer and Smoke to Night of the Iguana. The Kingdom of Earth may be a disappointment, but as its title suggests, it doesn’t pretend to celebrate a spiritual kingdom. Even in Iguana, the Sodomites still win; Shannon and Maxine will continue their sexual celebration, and Hannah’s endurance will be quietly honored. It is also possible that because of a decline in his career after the production of Night of the Iguana, Williams was attempting to recapture an older style with Kingdom of Earth—a style reminiscent of plays such as Orpheus Descending or A Streetcar Named Desire.

There can be no better way to describe Williams’ feelings toward survival and completion in the human spirit than in his own words at the end of his autobiography. Describing Rose, his sister, he writes, “After all, high station in life is earned by the gallantry with which appalling experiences are survived with grace” (252).
Works Cited


