

Conflicts and Dualities in Tennessee Williams's Play, *The Night of the Iguana*

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The Night of the Iguana is a typical play of Tennessee Williams where he deals with the duality of human nature in contradictory images of light and darkness, man and beast. Problems of the contemporary world he lived in realises him how human beings suffer in the struggle of their goodness; the known and the evil; the unknown that we find in every individual. As Connie Zweig writes in the "Introduction" to *Meeting the Shadow* "Each of us contains both a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a more pleasant persona for everyday wear and a hiding, nighttimes self that remains hushed up most of the time." (XVI). The playwright's concern about life and death, hope and despair, society and individual life are highlighted in this play. Like most of his plays, this play is also written allegorically. Gerald Weales writes in his essay, "Tennessee Williams's Fugitive Kind":

There is no escape in a universe where there is no God and where the other inhabitants are as dangerous as one's own self. (29)

This play is written for such a universe. The playwright himself claims the universe as "part anarchy, part order" (133) in his play, *Summer and Smoke*. Williams perhaps is very fond of using animal images. The struggle of an Iguana, tied up by the Mexican boys is likened to the struggle of human beings. The sexually aggressive Mexican boys enjoy seeing the small lizard struggling to free itself. The Iguana stands allegorically for a man in our society who is troubled by coarse, violent and sexually aggressive people with very little goodness. In this play, Mrs. Maxine Faulk, the widow of Fred, the trip of ladies of a Baptist Female College and the Mexican boys revel in torturing the protagonist Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon in their own ways. Like the Iguana, Shannon too feels he to be unable to free himself. Hannah Jelkes; the heroine of the play tells him to free the Iguana. As Shannon also feels that God can't free the Iguana, he himself plays God and frees it. In this way, by freeing the troubled Iguana probably Shannon freed him. Talking to Hannah, Shannon says:

. . . . Now Shannon is going to go down there with his machete and cut the damn lizard loose so it can run back to its bushes because God won't do it and we are going to play God here. (324)

Gerald Weales in his “Tennessee Williams’ Fugitive Kind” writes about Williams’ characters:

His characters are menaced by three things: by other people, by themselves and by the universe. (24)

Williams followed the morality tradition. But there is a deviation in his plays. Unlike the medieval morality plays his dramas don’t end with a note of poetic justice. The ideal world of his noble characters doesn’t exist anywhere except in illusion. His characters suffer on account of their moral superiority and nobility. So either they accept the reality of this modern society with all the harshness or retreat into illusion whereby they are in a way destroyed. Robert Emmet Jones calls Williams “the poet of decline” (212) in his essay, “Tennessee Williams’ Early Heroines”. Jones comments on Tennessee’s world as:

This world is one of fragile beauty and unnatural horror, of lost dreams and poetic vision of animal sex and refined deviation of first generation Americans and their blue blooded wives, of failures and unhappiness, seldom of success.

It is a world of yesterday and today, practically never of tomorrow. (212)

When the play begins, one can see Mrs. Maxine Faulk; the proprietor of the Costa Verde Hotel and the widow of Fred in her mid-forties. As Williams writes, she is “affable” and ‘rapaciously lusty’. Fred and Maxine are contrasted to each other. Fred is portrayed as a cool and decent man while Maxine is violent, coarse and lusty. Maxine is seen in the first scene with her casual lover Pedro; a Mexican boy of twenty. Maxine flirts with young Mexican boys as she has failed to fulfil her sexual appetite with her husband.

Williams has presented the Mexican boys representing the body or the sensual world. Their activities in the play turn out to be irritating towards the people who have got a spiritual bent of mind, sometimes it is Shannon or sometimes it is Fred. Thus while one set of characters represent the “body” another comprising Shannon, Hannah and Fred clearly constructs the concern with the “Soul”. Williams had an upbringing in a family where there is a split between the puritanical and cavalier forces about which he writes in the essay, “Introduction: Personal Lyricism” in the book *Where I Live: Selected Essays* as “may be accountable for the conflicting impulses I often represent in the people I write about” (vii). The protagonist is Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon a man of 35, comes with a tourist group of eleven school teachers at a Baptist Female College in Bling Rock, Texas. It is the worst trip in his 10 years’ career of a tourist guide. Shannon is having a nervous breakdown as the ladies are not getting out of the bus. Shannon calls these ladies ‘old wet hens’. The youngest of those ladies is

Charlotte Goddall. She had tried to seduce Shannon through her gestures, singing at him, ‘Larry, I love you’. Attracted towards her, Shannon commits an act of adultery. For this Miss Fellows calls a judge in Texas who, Shannon hopes will charge him with statutory rape.

In order to relax, Shannon comes to the Costa Verde Hotel. But here also he couldn’t rest at peace, Mrs. Maxine tries to put him in the place of her dead husband Fred. But he turns down her proposal telling her:

I loved old Fred, but I don’t want to fill his shoes honey. (239)

On this Maxine tells him that she will go on a night swimming with the Mexican boys, who are over-attentive to the lady guests in a night swim. Shannon calls himself ‘an ordained minister’ of the church. Before taking up the job of a tourist guide, he was a preacher. So he repents for his crime. He thinks that he is punished by God in several ways. The defrocked minister of church was made desperate by the trip of ladies and then by Maxine. This harassment causes him to feel God as a “senile delinquent” and “an angry petulant old man” according to western theologies. His circumstances make him a pessimist. He thinks this universe as a destroyer. A critic Lindy Levin writes about the characterisation of Shannon in his essay, “Shadow Into Light: A Jungian Analysis of *The Night of the Iguana*” in these words:

Shannon is the son of a minister and the grandson of a Bishop, and his socialisation is focused on the principles of sin, punishment, and confession. The model of goodness held up for him to emulate is so idealistic that any action or thought that does not fit is forcefully repressed into the unconscious. (87)

To restore faith in the troubled protagonist appears the heroine, Ms. Hannah Jelkes with her grandfather Nonno. Nonno is the oldest living poet and showman with a good kind of pride. Similarly Hannah is characterised as a lady of courage and dignity. To Williams, she looks like a medieval sculpture of a saint. Shannon’s description of Hannah as the “Thin-Standing-Up-Female Buddha” (305) presents her as an epitome of significant virtues. These two characters are the most humane and poetic characters of the play. They are artists of our time, a poet and a painter. They have been travellers for twenty five years. They say that they are not sure of anything in their lives. But they are optimistic people as they sing:

Regret not the glitter of any lost day;
But laugh with no reason except the red wine,
For your must be youthful & foolish and blind. (275)

The activities, thoughts and attitude of Hannah affect the psyche of Shannon deeply. He retains faith in himself. As Gerald Weales writes in his book *Tennessee Williams*, Williams' characters try to escape in two ways; either by running or a temporary surcease, a little comfort found along the road. In the words of Weales:

A group of wanderers gather at Maxine's in Iguana and some of them-Nonno and Shannon, perhaps come to rest. With the possible exception of Shannon, all of these characters either keep moving or are stopped by death or disaster.

Running never frees any of them from the pursuer. (30-31)

In this play Shannon's "one night stands" is a temporary effort at human contact. During their conversation that night, Shannon tells Hannah gratefully:

I am going to tell you something about yourself. You are a lady, a real one and great one. (285)

Hannah is a practical woman. That's why she turns down Shannon's proposal to travel together saying that the morning will show the idea as impractical. She even narrates two of her past encounters when she had gratified her sexual hunger. But Shannon can hardly accept it. Agitatedly when he questions about the morality of her talks, she replies with her practical view of things. Jacob H. Adler writes about her in "*Night of the Iguana: A New Tennessee Williams?*" that "only Hannah displays absolute values retained in a relative world."(68) Hannah tells Shannon about the kind of people living in the society. According to her philosophy, there are some who wish to torture others, but there are also some, who are descent people and want to help others in whatever way they can. She also tells him that he has never trusted others. Then Shannon tells her about his problem that he needs someone to help him. Then he feels much relieved as his burden is unloaded. The play shows that Shannon learns the lesson of believing someone from Hannah. He at first puts all his faith in her and discusses all his problems freely with her. For instance, when Jake Latta comes on behalf of the Blake Tours getting a call from Ms. Fellowes to take back Shannon's trip of ladies, he sees his chances to go back to the church shattered. Shannon had thought that this was his last trip after which he will again be a clergy man. He says that night to Hannah:

I want to go back to the church and preach the gospel of God as Lightning and Thunder and also stray dogs vivisected and ... and ... and ... (270).

But his hopes were dashed away. Then straightening violently with an animal outcry he pulls the chain suspending the gold cross about his neck. At that time also the mentally exhausted Shannon is consoled by Hannah. To comfort himself Shannon goes to the liquor cart. When

he takes some warm drinks, and asks her about this self-indulgence, she replies that his problem is not liquor. She tells him about his real problem:

The oldest one in the world-the need to believe in some-thing in someone, almost anyone – almost anything Something. (308)

Delma Eugene Presley alleged that:

The greatest problem of the play-Shannon's struggle for belief- is ignored in the drama's resolution. (41)

To the critic, even the question of death is solved by Nonno, the aged poet, not Shannon. The last poem of Nonno gives the solution of death as 'Courage'. The concluding lines of this poem say:

O courage, could you not as well
Select a second place to dwell
Not only in that golden tree
But in the frightened heart of me? (325)

When Nonno struggles hard to solve the problem of death all along his life with the final poem, Shannon is struggling to understand and justify his existence in view of his conception of God. Shannon is ambivalent about the existence of God. Even Hannah who is presented with a humane face and possesses some great human virtues is also not sure of God. She says:

.... Since I was far from sure about God. (311)

Hannah tries to solve Shannon's problem of isolation that will solve his problem of belief. Delma Eugene Presley writes about this in detail:

Hannah's point is that the problem of belief will more or less take care of itself if Shannon will try to live in community with someone. (39)

That's why Hannah emphasises that Shannon should live with someone in community. At the end of the play Shannon realises it as true. That's why he accepts the widow Mrs. Maxine as his company to travel together. On the other hand, Hannah also happens to be alone after the death of his grandfather Nonno. But she hopes to solve her problem of isolation by making quick contacts with strangers who turn out to be friends very quickly. After all Hannah is a practical woman. She describes two of her past experiences when she had gratified others, feeding her sex also. She tells it politely as she believes "that everything has its shadowy side". But hearing this Shannon agitatedly questions the moral of her talks. Hannah replies it

with her practical view of things. The conversation between them explains the logic of her talks:

SHANNON: Watch out for commercial travellers in the far East. Is that the moral, Ms. Jelkes honey?

HANNAH: Oh, no, the moral is Oriental. Accept whatever situation you can't improve. (317)

Delma Eugene Presley also writes about the logic of Hannah as:

... Hannah's point of view is an uneven combination of oriental, stoic and Christian sentiment. (40)

The playwright has concluded the play with a practical air. As his protagonist finds out, this universe is an impersonal thing, where the inhabitants live in cooperation with each other. Else, they all will perish. As Gerald Weales (B) writes in his essay:

... It is the universe that has been implicit in all his work, one in which man is a stranger and can find comfort if at all, only in himself and his own kind. (29)

The playwright has brought out some virtues still in his protagonist only after his fall. After committing adultery and then repenting over he learns his lessons about this world, society, people and life. For his decency and his bit of goodness (304), he is even respected by the heroine, Hannah. Similarly, Hannah did not untie Shannon when he was entrapped like the Iguana. Because she knows that Shannon can release himself. She is confident of getting back self confidence in him. In this way, through suffering Shannon learns the lesson of life and gets back his self confidence.

Thus the play in its entirety is caught amidst a network of binaries operating in terms of allegorical as well as symbolic presentation.

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