

The Night of the Iguana

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A Sermon preached in Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, Columbus, Mississippi, on September 7, 2008, during the Seventh Annual Tennessee Williams Tribute.

On March 1st, 1950, Tennessee Williams wrote in a letter to Gore Vidal from Key West: Yesterday the social leaders of the town dropped in to see us. Grandfather was eating his rice krispies in the dining room. I told him, Grandfather, the Newman Porters are here! He could not see the other end of the room and thought I was merely making some remark about them (it was quite early for a call) and he said, Goodness gracious, what pests those people are!- An awkward moment ensued, as even at 92 there is a limit to what you can get away with.¹

Tennessee Williams's grandfather was Walter Dakin, sometime rector of Saint Paul's, Columbus. Born in 1857, married to Rosina Otte Dakin, graduated from the School of Theology at the University of the South, a parish priest for many years; he died in 1955 at the age of ninety-eight.

The middle stained-glass window in the west wall of the church is dedicated to the memory of Walter Dakin and two other former rectors of the parish. The Reverend Mr. Dakin was anything but a stained-glass figure, however, as his grandson's anecdote suggests. He loved Shakespeare, Manhattan cocktails, silk handkerchiefs, and high church. "He was higher church than the pope," Tennessee Williams said of him.² And he loved to travel. When young Tom Williams was seventeen, his grandfather took him along on a tour of Europe that he led. Years later, his grandson would return the favor.

In an interview with Mike Wallace in 1958, three years after his grandfather's death, TW said, "The two most wonderful people in my life were my grandfather, who was an Episcopal clergyman, and his wife, my grandmother. I was born in the Episcopal rectory and I grew up in the shadow of the Episcopal church. We were brought up in an atmosphere of Southern Puritanism. It's like Northern Puritanism, except that it's more fractious. Also more old-fashioned."³

Another time, he said, "I was devoted to my grandfather. When I was a little boy, he'd be making parish calls and I'd always beg to go with him, so I could hear what everybody said. After I grew up and had a place of my own, I kept him with me at least half the time. He loved Key West. We even went to

¹ Tennessee Williams. *Blanche and Beyond*, adapted by Steve Lawson from *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams*, Vol. II, 1945-1957. ed. Albert J. Devlin & Nancy M. Tischler. 2007: Samuel French, Inc. p. 44

² Tennessee Williams, ed. Albert J. Devlin. *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*. University Press of Mississippi: 1986. p. 333

³ *Conversations*, p.16

Europe together. Such a joy to be with, he was, not the rough sort of man, but gentle and sensitive, like Nonno in *Night of the Iguana*, who he was, of course.”⁴

Which brings us to *The Night of the Iguana*. Several of you have confessed that you haven’t seen or read this play, and you’ve asked what it’s about. I would say that the play is about “a wildly agitated creature”,⁵ “not an attractive creature”,⁶ nevertheless “one of God’s creatures at the end of his rope”, and about how the creature is “cut loose” and “set free” to “scramble home safe and free.” “A little act of grace.”⁷

Come to think of it, in this play, more than one creature at the end of his rope is set free: a lizard, a priest, a poet, a painter, and, as it seems to me, a hotel proprietor.

Then again, one could say that the play is about a poet’s finishing one last poem and being thus set free—just as, and in just the same moment that, the iguana is set free. It is the poet in the play who is modeled on Walter Dakin, so the play can also be seen as a tribute by Tennessee Williams to his late grandfather.

It’s curious that it’s the poet who is modeled on Walter Dakin and not the Episcopal priest in the play. Of course, Larry Shannon, the priest, is “a man of God on vacation”, as Hannah puts it,⁸ shut out of the church, accused of a crime, sacked from his job as a tour guide in the middle of a tour—a man at the end of his rope.

Hannah, the painter and granddaughter of Nonno the poet, penniless and homeless, is also at an end.

In their desperation, they try to reach each other, and in reaching they succeed in setting each other free.

In an interview with Studs Terkel, Tennessee Williams said, “The drama in my plays, I think, is nearly always people trying to reach each other. In *Night of the Iguana*...Hannah and Larry Shannon meet on the veranda outside their cubicles, which is of course an allegorical touch of what people must try to do....the only truly satisfying moments in life are those in which you are in contact, and I don’t mean just physical contact, I mean in deep, a deeper contact than physical, with some other human being....I think it’s the only comfort that we have, of a lasting kind....And I have seen it happen between

⁴ *Conversations*, p. 153

⁵ Tennessee Williams, *The Night of the Iguana*. Dramatists Play Services:1990. p. 36

⁶ *Night*, p. 75

⁷ *Night*, p. 77

⁸ *Night*, p.40

two people. I can't think of any better example than my grandparents who were so close together they were like one person."⁹

Walter is reflected in Nonno. Walter and Rosina together are reflected in Larry and Hannah. No doubt, more than a little of Tennessee Williams is reflected in them as well. And yet another reflected in all of them.

"My work," the author said, "is full of Christian symbols. Deeply, deeply Christian. But. It's the image of Christ, His beauty and purity, and His teachings...."¹⁰

Surely we see the image of Christ in the gentle grandfather, in the compassionate granddaughter. We see Christ in the fallen clergyman who, in the end, gives up his 22-carat gold cross for the relief of the painter and gives up himself to the domesticity of Maxine, the hotel proprietor. And, I believe, we see the image of Christ in Maxine who, despite her rough manner, gives shelter and sustenance to the poet, the painter, and the priest.

Of course, Tennessee Williams was a PK, a preacher's kid, and, like most PK's I've known, he has a dislike for hypocrisy and Phariseeism. And so he shows us the image of Christ in Shannon's challenge to the hypocritical and pharisaical in his congregations, whether of Virginians on a Sunday morning, or of tourists on a bus.

Saint Paul urges us, in this morning's lesson, to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." We can see in the work of Tennessee Williams something of what it means to put on Christ. It means gentleness, compassion, self-sacrifice, generosity, and more. To put on Christ is to reach out to one another, and in reaching one another, to enable one another "to scramble home safe and free."

⁹ *Conversations*, pp. 86-87

¹⁰ *Conversations*, p. 334