

# NIGHT OF THE IGUANA - DIE NACHT DES LEGUAN

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Translated from the Norwegian by Esther Greenleaf Mürer

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After winning America's most prestigious literary prize, the Pulitzer Prize—and the Drama Critics' Prize as well—with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Tennessee Williams achieved one of his great popular successes with *The Glass Menagerie*. He later commented on the event in an essay, "The Catastrophe of Success."

Since that time, especially in the last few years, he has had great difficulties; at a certain point all of America turned against him, so to speak, in a flood of public attacks, both in the daily press and in literary magazines. After being a popular literary golden boy he suddenly stood alone, truly with his back to the wall, against the dreadful power which resides in an almost univocal press. The burden of the attack was that he was "unhealthy," "negative," "un-American," that he "rooted around in filth," etc., etc. People no longer liked his latest works, his pessimism, his portrayal of the U.S., his "immorality," his cultural criticism, etc. The campaign against Williams was so violent and so destructive that for awhile it looked as if he had broken down under it. The press accounts told the whole world that he promised to mend his ways; he was said to have stated that his "negative period was over" and that he would write more healthy things in the future.

It is of course possible that a man who stands completely alone can lose heart and give in. But if that is the case, the genuflexion has only been a temporary breakdown for Williams: His real answer to the smear campaign was the play *The Night of the*

*Iguana*, which is currently playing at the National Theater under the Norwegian title "Iguana-natten."

What does this answer sound like?

It is necessary to glance back at a few of his earlier pieces, in particular at those which have contributed to his unpopularity with the critics—first and foremost at two (in my opinion) sovereign masterworks: *Orpheus Descending* and *Suddenly Last Summer*. *The Night of the Iguana* continues and refines the themes of these plays. To be sure, it has roots in all of Tennessee Williams' production—which includes poems, short stories and at least one novel; but here it is natural to look for those roots in the genre which has made him world-famous, in the drama. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is likewise part of the forest which surrounds *The Night of the Iguana*.

Williams' fundamental theme is cruelty in three variants: The cruelty of human beings (the masses' cruelty to the individual), the cruelty of nature (in the animal-organic processes themselves), and the cruelty of God (as the one responsible for the whole cosmic-metaphysical system of cruelty, hunger, decay and death). That his plays to a rather high degree are full of overwrought, ruined and supersensitive people is a logical result of the fact that Tennessee Williams' own meeting with reality, as seen through his writings, has been one big breakdown. And as reality looks today—a world blanketed with a poison gas of hate and dread, and with the slain from Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Hitler's death camps as our time's greatest historic expression—it is hardly any exaggeration to claim that this breakdown has good reasons. The person who walks around today with good nerves, "healthy" and positive, suffers not only from a dulled understanding, but from what is worse: a dulled heart.

In his writing, in his eternal defense of those who think differently, who have different ways of being, Tennessee Williams represents a far higher morality, a far higher and more developed humanity, than do those who accuse him of immorality and lack of faith in humanity.

In a play like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* the theme is still but vaguely worked out; the main character rejects a friend because people think that he is homosexual, and that the friendship must therefore necessarily mean an erotic relationship. The break leads to the friend's suicide, for which the protagonist Brick thinks that his wife must bear the blame and suffer the consequences, since it was she who got him to break

off the friendship. In the course of the play Brick realizes that he himself is the murderer, because he gave in to the collective "morality," the "received opinion" of how objectionable his homosexual friend was. He has knuckled under to the mass, to "the others"—as Sartre calls them—and thereby of necessity becomes the murderer. It is remarkable to find this point of contact with Sartre in Tennessee Williams as well, precisely in the sense that Sartre uses the formulation: "Hell is other people"—the others' collective "morality" and judgment, within oneself. To accept the mob's—the others'—right to make decisions about our own life, our thoughts, our being, our feelings—that is our fall from grace and our true hell. It makes us insensitive, cruel—and finally makes us murderers.

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* Tennessee Williams already shows himself as a humanist of a high ethical caliber.

We find the theme treated with far greater passion in *Orpheus Descending*. The murder is not lacking, but the mass's action is far more cruel, more devilish: the character with a different way of being, the stranger, the singer—the descended Orpheus—is burned alive when the crowd drives him into the burning house. The background for the whole play, and for the love story in particular, is likewise a case of the mass's hate for the individual; the woman's father has been burnt alive by the citizens of the town. The whole thing has a Southern States' atmosphere of racial hatred and lynch law, of Negroes burned and tortured to death, of the mass's cruelty. The theme is intensified in the mythical image of the play's title: Orpheus's descent into the underworld;. The hero, Val, has been made a singer; he is really a poet. But above all he is different from the people in the town—therefore he must be burned. A new Tennessee Williams hallmark is added here: The only wholly sympathetic, wholly good people one meets in the play are the completely neurotic Carol and the religious-visionary amateur painter Vee, two spiritually displaced persons—two half-mad women with no ability to live in the world.

Now Williams' gallery is full: A woman who has seen her father burnt, a nervous wreck in the middle of a breakdown, a painter who has visions of the Holy Ghost, and a descended Orpheus with a guitar—Val, who will be burnt by the normal and decent citizens of the town, by all those who have never had nervous breakdowns, never been shut in, never slept outdoors, never seen the world—and who in their lack of

imagination are without compassion, and therefore have no other form of expression than the diabolical cruelty they muster up when they act collectively.

On top of this horror and this world image, the play has an unusually concentrated poetic power. Is it necessary to recall Hiroshima to maintain that Williams has backing for the picture he gives of the world?

*Suddenly Last Summer* continues the line, but in a different way: in the form of a dazzlingly clear and cool analysis of our Western cultural crisis. The crowd's murder of the individual is not lacking here either; the protagonist, who does not appear in the play at all, is killed on the street by a flock of half-grown boys in a southern land. He was a poet, and his production consists in his writing one poem a year as he travels around the world with his millionaire mother, to squeeze all the refinement and pleasure out of life which they are both still capable of doing.

His relation to the half-grown, hungry boys one can well imagine—and when they kill him in the sun-drenched street they are killing a whole culture, our Western isolated-intellectual world, in one single refined and decadent representative. In its clarity *Suddenly Last Summer* is Tennessee Williams' most sinister play; it too is provided with one single good and healthy character, who here too lives on the verge of the madhouse.

The image of the man who is killed by the flock of boys is enhanced by the fact that he himself collaborates in the murder, but also by another image which sets its stamp on the play: the account of the birds who eat the newly-hatched turtles alive: And the birds are naturally without guilt in their cruelty; they are merely a part of nature, but part of a large nature, of an evil cosmos. These birds are in turn a vision of God—God is evil. He has created this world of suffering and cruelty. Of course this is not Tennessee Williams' conclusion: That God is evil. It exists as a dread, as a possibility for an oversensitive person who in his writing is deeply engaged with the problem of evil in general. Williams' pain is the pain of seeing, suffering at the sight of others' sufferings.

To quote a sentence from *The Night of the Iguana*—which brings us right into the piece which is playing in Oslo now: "When the Mexican painter Siqueiros did his portrait of the American poet Hart Crane he had to paint him with closed eyes because he couldn't paint his eyes open—*there was too much suffering in them and he couldn't paint it.*" [JB's italics] That says what it's all about: The problem is not just

that the world is cruel, evil; on an individual plane it is also this: What is the person to do who feels not only his own pain, but also others'? How can one live in the world? If one wants to quote the Gospels, one would have to say: "How can I overcome the world?"

It is natural that this play—in addition to its poet, its painter, its neurotic in a state of collapse—must also have its *priest*. Here the nervous breakdown and the priest are the same thing, and the priest is not leading a congregation to heaven, but a company of fussy and self-satisfied women on a tour of Mexico: From the shepherd of souls there remains only a tour guide, an immoral, drunken, half-mad tourist leader—who departs from the itinerary and shows the company earth's misery and hell instead of boulevards and fashionable areas. He is naturally accused of being a swine, of showing them swinish things and a filthy world. In reality, or course, he is still a good enough priest as he conducts his well-scrubbed and affluent party through all the misery he can find. He says himself that his first breakdown came when he was showing a tour party of American ladies two poor old Negroes creeping around in a latrine and eating small undigested bits of food which they found in the excrement. "It is unbelievable what people can eat!" he adds. This former priest is half mad because he sees the world—but cannot "overcome the world". To the priest belong the image and the poet and his granddaughter: the poet is aged and his granddaughter, the painter, a virgin of forty. Both figures are drawn with a tenderness and a love of humanity which is rarely found; they are homeless, impecunious, and wholly abandoned to a harsh world, like children exposed in the woods. The rest of the characters are the rulers, "the others," *the murderers*. The Nazi guests (cut in the Norwegian version) who drink champagne because London is burning with women and children and the sick and the old; the imbecile travel party; the nymphomaniac, "strong" hotel keeper, and the two Mexican hotel boys—they are "the world," "the others." But the victim, the one who is to be burned? It is there, but not as a human being; this time the role is left to the image of the two iguanas, two huge lizards who are caught and are to be eaten. But before they die, the hotel boys will have their sport with them; they will put out the animals' eyes, and will burn them with matches. Both the gallery and the theme is there again, as in earlier plays—but varied and deepened. The main change is that the religious question is advanced further this time; but it is unshakably the same as before: Why is the world evil?

In an article like this one cannot do more than point at a few of the thoughts which live in the jungles behind people and reptiles. Of course you may like or dislike Tennessee Williams, you can like or dislike the play; but not to become acquainted with it is to miss one of the most important contributions to a cultural critique of our time. And like everything Tennessee Williams has written for the stage, it is world-class contemporary drama.

I shall conclude these observations with a quote from the tour guide and priest:

The whole world, God's world, has been the range of my travels. I haven't stuck to the schedules of the brochures and I've always allowed the ones that were willing to see, to see!—the underworlds of all places, and if they had hearts to be touched, feelings to feel with, I gave them a priceless chance to feel and be touched. And none will ever forget it, none of them, ever, never!

The speech applies not only to the tour guide, it applies to the play *The Night of the Iguana*, as it applies to Tennessee Williams' writing as a whole.