



Ava Gardner and Richard Burton in *The Night of The Iguana* (1964). Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer / Photofest.
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“A Second Place to Dwell”: John Huston’s Film Adaptation of *The Night of the Iguana*

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And I don’t mean just travels about the world, the earth’s surface. I mean . . .
subterranean travels, the . . . the journeys that the spooked and bedeviled people
are forced to take through the . . . the *unlighted* sides of their natures.

—Hannah, from *The Night of the Iguana*

It made me begin to realize that the primary ingredient in psychological
health is love: the ability to give love and to receive it.

—John Huston, *An Open Book*

Introduction

In this article I wish to examine John Huston’s 1964 film, *The Night of the Iguana*, as an adaptation that simultaneously illustrates, opens out, honors, and offers a sympathetic critique of its original. I wish also to explore how Huston molds the material to fit his own predilections, personality, and dramatic preferences, which might sometimes be at odds with those of Tennessee Williams but which do not fundamentally violate the overall intent and integrity of the original. Huston was acknowledged to be one of the most literate of American filmmakers. He relished good dialogue and welcomed the challenge of translating great literature into vivid cinema in a way that would do justice to the original but also stand as a filmic experience in its own right. Almost all of Huston’s films were adaptations; prior to *Iguana*, he had adapted writers of the stature of Herman Melville, Stephen Crane, B. Traven, and Dashiell Hammett, as well as collaborated with major modern authors such as Arthur Miller, Ray Bradbury, Truman Capote, and Jean-Paul Sartre. (Even after *Iguana*, Huston’s literary ambition was to show no sign of diminution: he went on to adapt Carson McCullers, Rudyard Kipling, Flannery O’Connor, Malcolm Lowry, and James Joyce, not to mention the Bible.) A number

of these cinematic interpretations proved controversial, but *The Night of the Iguana* is widely regarded as one of his most successful realizations of a literary classic, as well as one of the best examples of Tennessee Williams on screen.

The Play

In his essay “Valentine to Tennessee Williams,” Kenneth Tynan characterized “the creatures who people his [Williams’s] imaginings” as “desperate women, men nursing troublesome secrets, untouchables whom he touches with frankness and mercy, society’s derelict rag dolls” (267). Tynan’s observations date to 1956, after the premiere of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, but are no less applicable to *The Night of the Iguana*, which premiered five years later. Williams’s play derives from a short story he completed in 1946, though little of the story remains in its theatrical transformation. The play’s action takes place in Acapulco in 1940, and the setting is the run-down Costa Verde Hotel, presided over by the recently widowed Maxine Faulk. Her current guests are a pro-Nazi German family who are celebrating the wedding of their son and daughter-in-law. They are to be joined by an old friend of Maxine’s, a disgraced Episcopalian bishop, Lawrence Shannon, who is now reduced to conducting bus tours across Mexico. His current tour is in crisis because he has become sexually involved with a young woman, Charlotte, whose chaperone, Miss Fellowes, is determined to telephone the tour operator and have Shannon fired. Unexpectedly joining this entourage is an unmarried and impoverished sketch artist, Hannah Jelkes, who is drifting from hotel to hotel and making a slender living from sales of her portraits of the guests. She is escorting her grandfather, Nonno, the world’s oldest poet, who will also give recitations of his work at the guests’ tables for a fee and who is currently at work on his final poem. During a stormy night the main characters will each be brought to a point of emotional and spiritual crisis.

The principal characters are in a familiar Williams mold, though each still possesses individuality. Shannon is a classic example of one of those characters to whom, as Williams once said, one would immediately show the door in real life if he or she came to one’s office for a job, but for whom the theatre can find time to exhibit proper concern and compassion. “His best-loved characters are people like this,” wrote Tynan, “and they are all, in some ways, trapped” (267). Shannon has a job, but he is clinging to it by his fingernails and realizing that if he loses it, his future is bleak. Like a number of Williams’s leading characters (for example, Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* or Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth*), he enters the play emotionally at the end of his rope, a state of mind reinforced by his symbolic connection to the iguana of the title, which is tethered to the porch of the veranda in order to be fattened and later eaten. Shannon will be attracted to the seeming serenity and understanding of Hannah Jelkes, who is a variation on the spinster in *Summer and Smoke* and whom Williams called “almost a definition

of what I think is most beautiful spiritually in a person and still believable" (qtd. in Hayman 184).

For the character of Maxine, Williams always had in his mind the legendary Hollywood actress Bette Davis. Indeed, the stage direction for Maxine's opening laugh—"a single harsh, loud bark, opening her mouth like a seal expecting a fish to be thrown to it" (255)—seems designed to conjure up memories of the typical Davis screen persona, a devouring female who is more deadly than the male. Describing the character of Maxine in a letter to the actress, Williams wrote that "everything about her should have the openness and freedom of the sea . . . Death, life, it's all one to Maxine, she's a living definition of nature: lusty, rapacious, guileless, unsentimental. [. . .] She moves with the ease of clouds and tides, her attitudes are free and relaxed" (qtd. in Griffin 227). Davis clearly relished the prospect of returning to the stage in a role specially written for her by a man she regarded as one of the great dramatists of the age. "Tennessee and I have had a date for years," she wrote, describing him as resembling a "pleasant, middle-class Englishman, florid of face and casual of dress," whose "enthusiasm and humility, plus a feeling of loneliness, make you know why he is the genius he is" (247). Her autobiography, *The Lonely Life* (1962), concludes at the point when she strides onto the stage to shout the play's first line, "Shannon!" "Everything did come up roses," she reflected (256).

Things were not to stay rosy for very long, however. Premiering at the Royale Theater in New York on 28 December 1961, the play was generally well received and was voted the best new play of the season by the New York Drama Critics' Circle. However, although her return had been greeted as a great theatrical comeback, Davis was to leave the production in early April, at short notice, because, according to Donald Spoto, she was "unhappy with the production and her role" (250). Her replacement, Shelley Winters, gave a somewhat different version of events. When she had seen Davis's performance on stage, she was surprised by the way Davis seemed to be playing more to the audience than to her fellow actors. On joining the production, however, she deduced it was Davis's way of dealing with the upstaging tactics of Patrick O'Neal (Shannon) and Margaret Leighton (Hannah), who seemed set on sabotaging the lead performance by stepping on Maxine's jokes. "I never envisaged having to act while defending myself and watching two gifted actors destroy a play," Winters wrote (401). The reliability of this account is impossible to determine; the role of Maxine has consistently been the most difficult to bring off successfully, as the best notices have invariably gone to the actors playing Shannon and Hannah. Nevertheless, even with this imbalance, many critics now regard it as the last of Williams's great works for the theatre; of his post-1960 plays, *Iguana* is the one that is most often revived. Richard Chamberlain scored a personal triumph in the role of Shannon in a New York production in 1976, and Richard Eyre

directed an acclaimed revival at the National Theatre in London in 1992, with Alfred Molina as Shannon, Maria St. Just as Maxine, and Eileen Atkins as Hannah. In his diaries, Eyre wrote that the play reminded him of Gustav Mahler: “agonised, romantic, sensual, lyrical, angry, neurotic, craving peace, and wishing for silence” (176).

From Stage to Screen

Given the critical and commercial success of other screen versions of Williams’s plays up to that point, it was inevitable that a film version of *The Night of the Iguana* would follow its stage debut. At Williams’s request, Gavin Lambert, who had done a fine screen adaptation of Williams’s novella *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1961) for director José Quintero, wrote the first draft of a screenplay. Lambert hoped the film would be directed by Alexander Mackendrick, whose projects since his Hollywood debut, *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957)—at the time, alas, a box-office failure—had all fallen through. According to Lambert, both Williams and Mackendrick had approved his first draft, but he sensed trouble when the film rights were acquired by producer Ray Stark, whose friend John Huston was interested in the project. If Huston was in, Lambert thought, then it would be a takeover, and both his screenplay and the possibility of Mackendrick’s directing would be out. “So it proved,” he wrote. “He [Huston] read my script, told Stark it had too much sex, told me ‘it would make a nice little art film,’ and collaborated with another writer on a new adaptation with (over Tennessee’s protests) a new ‘happy’ ending” (188). Huston later said he thought Lambert’s screenplay had neglected the central issue of the play, which he considered to be the depth of Shannon’s despair and his eventual redemption. For Huston, the play concerned “loose, random souls, trying to account for themselves and finally being able to do so through love” (qtd. in Pratley 143).

With a trusted collaborator, Anthony Veiller, Huston set about creating an adaptation that reflected his great admiration for the play but also, in David Shipman’s words, “eliminated those facets of Williams with which he had no sympathy” (871). One noticeable change was Huston’s updating of the material to the present day, which in turn led to the elimination of the fascist family, which Huston clearly thought was not pertinent to the play’s main concerns. His insistence on a so-called happy ending was to remain a bone of contention between him and Williams—somewhat surprisingly, given that Huston’s endings are famously ironic or wryly accepting of the vicissitudes of fate rather than upbeat in the conventional Hollywood sense.

The other main disagreement was over the characterization of Maxine. Huston viewed the character with great sympathy (more so than did the author, he thought), and this in turn affected his casting, for he thought Ava Gardner would project the kind of earthy yet endearing warmth and sensuality required for the role. Bette Davis would

have loved to have repeated and refined her stage performance on film, but, in terms of Huston's conception, she would have been too threatening. He had directed Davis early in his career, in his 1942 adaptation of Ellen Glasgow's novel *In This Our Life* (1941), and had found the experience rather alarming. "There is something elemental about Bette," he wrote, "a demon within her which threatens to break out and eat everybody, beginning with their ears" (81). It was a quality he found fascinating, but it was not what he wanted from his Maxine.

The Making of the Film

In her autobiography, Ava Gardner, who was working with Huston for the first time, summed up her director's credo as "Do things the hard way wherever possible" (248). As is evident in films such as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), *The African Queen* (1951), *Moby Dick* (1956), *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* (1957), and *The Roots of Heaven* (1958), there was nothing Huston liked more than filming on a difficult location, not simply for the adventure of the experience but because it took his characters (and actors) outside of their comfort zones and compelled them to confront new aspects of themselves. With *The Night of the Iguana*, Huston chose for his location the remote Mexican village of Mismaloya, which was about ten miles from Puerto Vallarta and reachable only by boat. Huston felt that the mood of the piece demanded a location that was sweaty, treacherous, wild, and claustrophobic: the desperation of the characters would be more keenly felt in an environment that added to the actors' discomfort and offered them little prospect of escape. Also, in previous films such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Key Largo* (1948), *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), and *Beat the Devil* (1954), Huston had clearly enjoyed throwing a disparate group of strangers together in a confined setting and watching the sparks fly. *The Night of the Iguana* again gave him this opportunity, as the very casting of the film seemed to make the prospect of fireworks more likely. Richard Burton had been cast as Shannon and was being accompanied on location not only by Elizabeth Taylor, with whom he was conducting a massively publicized adulterous love affair, but also by Michael Wilding, an ex-husband of Taylor's now in charge of Burton's publicity. Deborah Kerr had been cast as Hannah Jelkes, and she was accompanied by her husband, Peter Viertel, a previous lover of Ava Gardner's and author of the novel *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1953), which had been inspired by the making of *The African Queen* and whose egocentric and unflatteringly portrayed central character was a film director possessing a more than passing resemblance to John Huston.

There were two other thematic and symbolic aspects of *Iguana* that might have particularly drawn Huston to the work. Although he professed himself to be an agnostic, some of Huston's films have a strong religious undercurrent. He enjoyed pitting

reprobate masculinity against religious femininity in both *The African Queen* and *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, and he always saw *Moby Dick* as a daringly blasphemous work. The complexities of Shannon's religious anguish would therefore hold some fascination for him; indeed, he followed *Iguana* with *The Bible . . . In the Beginning* (1966), in which he played Noah. (In the following decade, he also made a remarkable adaptation of *Wise Blood*, Flannery O'Connor's coruscating novel about a particularly extreme form of religious zealotry.)

The other aspect of *Iguana* that might have fired his imagination was the symbolic import of the iguana itself. Huston's films are full of animal imagery that comments on or enlarges the main themes. To choose just a few examples out of many: *The Roots of Heaven* is an ecological drama way ahead of its time, which draws a fundamental parallel between the slaughtering of elephants in Africa and the debasement of postwar humanity; the mustang round-up in *The Misfits* (1961) develops into a soul-searing shattering of illusions for the anachronistic cowboys who, as one of them puts it, are left "ropin' a dream"; and the mystery in *The List of Adrian Messenger* (1963) is solved by a bloodhound. Perhaps most resonant of all (in its relation to the main character) is the Gila monster in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, hiding under the rock where Humphrey Bogart's money bags are hidden, as if representing the demons inside his skull. The Gila squats on the bags when the rock is removed, eloquently symbolizing Bogart's defensive venom and paranoia. In a similar way, the iguana will become an extension of Shannon's character and situation.

A final significant piece of casting was Huston's choice of Gabriel Figueroa as his cinematographer. Figueroa was the favorite cameraman of a director whom Huston much admired, Luis Buñuel, and it is likely that Huston was after the same harsh monochrome look of sunshine and shadow that Figueroa had brought to some of Buñuel's great Mexican films, such as *Los olvidados* (1950), *Él* (1952), *Nazarín* (1959), and *El ángel exterminador* (1962). This was probably the reason that Huston clashed with his producer Ray Stark over whether to shoot the film in color or black-and-white. For box-office reasons, Stark favored the use of color; but although Huston had deployed color photography very imaginatively and experimentally in films such as *Moulin Rouge* (1952) and *Moby Dick*, and was to do so later in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967), in this case he felt that the setting itself was so spectacular (sea, sky, beach, jungle, flowers, birds) that color might distract from the real core of the film, which was the story, the dialogue, and the characters. "Looking back now," Huston said in his autobiography, "I think I was probably wrong" (309). Nevertheless, he thought Figueroa's photography had "a dreamy quality to it, and yet it has definition" (qtd. in Pratley 144), very appropriate for a work in which people, as Shannon observes, live on two levels, the real and the fantastic.

The Opening of the Film

Huston's boldest deviation from the play occurs in the first third of the film, which he uses to tell the backstory of Shannon prior to his arrival at Maxine's hotel. This device conveys the buildup of Shannon's desperation, which, by the time he reaches his destination, is at its peak. In the play Shannon's background is revealed in conversations with Maxine and Hannah; Huston draws on these revelations and brings them to visual life, while adding touches of his own and not a little humor. Particularly important in this strategy is a pre-credits preface where we actually see and hear the sermon that brings about his downfall; in the play (act 2) it is simply described, in a conversation between Shannon and Hannah.

The first shot of the film is of the exterior of the St. James Episcopal Church in Virginia. The camera tilts down to a notice that announces the title of the sermon due to be given: "The Spirit of Truth," by the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon. It is a dull day, and rain is pouring from the skies. The shot does more than simply establish a setting; it also establishes a somber premonitory mood. Inside, the church is noticeably full, as if something momentous is anticipated. The Reverend Shannon (Richard Burton) walks hesitantly to the pulpit, giving the impression of a man who is apprehensive about what he has to say. He momentarily turns his back on the congregation to offer a prayer to God. The close-up of him at this point suggests that the prayer is more private than public and seems visually to separate him from the congregation behind him. The play does not specify the text he had chosen for the sermon, but the film shrewdly chooses Proverbs 25.28: "He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls" (*Holy Bible*). Shannon obviously intends the text as a metaphor for his own situation. He starts hesitantly, as if sensing the hostile vibrations around him. Huston's low-angle shot of him at the pulpit, as he struggles with his words, seems not simply a point-of-view shot from the perspective of someone near the front of the congregation: it gives more the sense of a man on the edge, staring into an abyss. In the play Shannon tells Hannah that when he "looked down over all of those smug, disapproving, accusing faces uplifted, I had an impulse to shake them—so I shook them. I had a prepared sermon—meek, apologetic—I threw it away" (303). This conversation also happens in the film, although Huston withholds specific disclosure at that point over what Shannon did to attract such disapproval and prompt such an outburst.

As he begins his sermon, Shannon's fear is palpable, as he acknowledges that "we cannot rule ourselves alone." But then, goaded by what he sees before him (Huston's close-ups of the congregation—elderly, accusatory faces, people whispering among themselves—are very telling), his initial note of apology turns into a kind of manic self-defense. He aligns himself with the spirit of his religious forebears ("men, with

men's hearts . . . they knew hunger and they fed their appetites, appetites that I have inherited") and then turns his sermon into a tirade against what he sees as the twisted Christianity of the community. By this time, many of the congregants are dispersing, and, to speed them on their way, Shannon steps down from the pulpit and continues his denunciation, firing off the accusations like bullets. It sets the tone for a performance that Burton's biographer Melvyn Bragg described as "brilliant: moving, concise, tense, desperate, saying the Tennessee Williams lines greedily, like a man unused to such verbal nourishment" (180). Shannon's meekly apologetic sermon has turned into a religious rant that deliberately expels the congregation from the church and succeeds in driving him out of the building as well. Huston effectively sets the stage for a character who has come adrift from his moral moorings and is now on an anguished and extended sabbatical from the religious life, though clinging to its accoutrements (a worn-out clerical collar, a gold cross suspended from a chain around his neck) like a drowning man clinging to a life raft.

The credits take place against a shot of clouds passing over the moon and of an iguana in close-up against a background of sea and sky. Ostensibly, this is simply illustrative of the film's title, but the shot of clouds passing across the moon could allude to that crucial speech of Hannah's when she talks to Shannon of the "*unlighted* sides of [people's] natures" (353); they find common ground in acknowledging the spooks that have bedeviled their existence. The shot is repeated at the film's most peaceful and poignant moment, when Nonno has concluded the recitation of his completed final poem, and the preceding emotional turbulence subsides into tranquility as the night draws to an end. The shots of the iguana are also significant because, as Bernard F. Dick has noted, they represent one of the principal differences between play and film. In the former, the iguana cannot be shown on stage and is therefore an imaginary symbol; in the film, it is a striking physical presence, looking more frightening and dangerous than it actually is and representing, according to Dick, "the nonconformist (perhaps the artist) whose movements society tries to restrict, because those who deviate from the norm often threaten those who have sworn to uphold it" (267). In this formulation, one sees how the iguana could symbolize not only Shannon but also Tennessee Williams.

When the narrative proper resumes, Huston plays a slight trick on the audience by seeming to repeat the opening shot of the pre-credits sequence, only to reveal that this time the church shown is in Mexico; the story has moved on, both geographically and temporally. The camera tilts down to a figure sitting outside and shading his eyes from the sun with a newspaper—Shannon. It is not clear exactly how much time has passed since we last saw him, but the clerical collar has gone, and he is dressed casually and drinking beer from a bottle. He hides the bottle quickly in a hole in the wall when the American tourists from the Baptist Female College of Blowing Rock, Texas, emerge

from the church to resume their coach tour of Mexico. Shannon is now a travel guide for Blake's Tours, on probation for previous misdemeanors and all too aware that losing his job here would make him permanently unemployable. ("There's nothing lower than Blake's Tours," he will tell Maxine, perhaps unconsciously making a rhyming slogan out of his predicament.) From his uneasiness with the young woman, Charlotte (Sue Lyon, in her first screen appearance since her sensational debut in the title role of Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*), one can surmise the nature of the transgression that has gotten him into trouble in the past. From the hostility shown toward him by Charlotte's chaperone and the group's leader, Miss Fellowes (Grayson Hall), one can also deduce her suspicions and her fears for the young woman in her charge.

Huston extracts maximum humor from the scenes on the coach without letting the narrative momentum falter. He picks up Shannon's line in act 1 of the play about the "butch vocal teacher who organizes little community sings in the bus" (261) and has Miss Fellowes lead the group in a chorus of "Happy Days Are Here Again," the camera zigzagging left and right across the singing passengers to convey their rather forced jollity but stopping when it reaches Shannon, who murmurs "fantastic" (his favorite word) ironically to himself. For Shannon, happy days at that particular time seem a remote prospect. The iguana theme is introduced into the narrative when the coach passes some young men carrying a large lizard-like creature; Shannon explains for the passengers that it is a local delicacy and will later be fattened and eaten.

Huston makes a notable addition to the play when Shannon asks the driver, Hank (James Ward), to stop for a moment on a bridge so they can observe some children swimming in the stream and women washing and drying their clothes against the rocks. Shannon is pausing to draw attention to what he calls "a moment of beauty, a fleeting glimpse into the lost world of innocence." The vision is totally lost on the American tourists, one of whom merely reflects that her brother has a chain of laundromats and that all he wants on his tombstone is a message that says that he "liberated the women of Texas from the bondage of washday." It is not the only moment in the film when Huston will depart from the play to make a pointed contrast between Mexican culture and American values and show greater sympathy with the former. (There is a later scene, for example, when Hank gets into a fight over Charlotte with Maxine's Mexican houseboys; he is completely humiliated, his flailing attempts to throw an effective punch watched with some amusement by the Mexican spectators, who mockingly accompany the fight by rhythmically tapping on the tables with their bottles.) For that moment on the bridge, though, one suspects that Shannon has stopped the coach for his own benefit rather than that of his passengers. When the coach breaks down farther on and he takes the opportunity to run down to the beach for a swim, it is as if, however temporarily, he is reimmersing himself in a world of innocence.

The moment will not last long, for Shannon is joined in the water by a scantily clad Charlotte, making her romantic interest in him ever more apparent and insisting that he hold her hand as they swim back to the beach. This will trigger an unnerving explosion of hysteria by Miss Fellowes when she sees them, in a terrifying moment of inadvertent self-revelation superbly acted by Grayson Hall. Her reaction is out of all proportion to the event. “You *beast!* You *beast!*” she screams at Shannon, slapping Charlotte across the face as the mask of chaperone suddenly slips to reveal a frenzied sexual jealousy.

In a hotel lobby in the early hours of the next morning, Shannon is writing a letter of confession and capitulation to his former bishop. Huston films the moment from a high angle to emphasize the character’s smallness, drawing an extreme visual contrast to the low-angle shot of Shannon in the pre-credit scene to suggest how his overbearing demeanor has now modulated to one of extreme humility. But the letter is never completed, and, in the meantime, Charlotte is effecting a change of tone from solemnity to farce as she dodges Hank on the staircase and steals unnoticed into Shannon’s room. Her ostensible purpose is to reassure him that, even if Miss Fellowes has him fired, Charlotte’s rich father could find him a job or even a church, but her real purpose is more erotic than practical. Meanwhile, a contrite Miss Fellowes, wishing to apologize to Charlotte, has awoken to find that the young woman is not in her bed, though Miss Fellowes has a strong suspicion where she might find her. The concatenations that ensue as Miss Fellowes’s outrage, Charlotte’s defiance, and Shannon’s dithering attempts at conciliation come into collision make for a scene of delicious high comedy without diminishing our awareness of the seriousness of what is at stake. The consequences for Shannon could be catastrophic if Miss Fellowes carries out her threat to telephone her brother, who is a judge, and ask him to investigate Shannon’s past. Now at the point of no return, Shannon will take over the driving of the coach, speeding past the tour’s appointed hotel in town and heading toward Maxine’s hotel as a final refuge. It is the most visually exciting sequence in the film, with suitcases flying off the luggage racks as Shannon swerves along the narrow roads. The dramatic interest is not primarily in where Shannon is heading; the drive essentially is an exciting yet disturbing visual correlative to Shannon’s chaotic and agitated state of mind. Taking the distributor head from the coach, he rushes up the hill to explain the situation to Maxine, whom he sees as his last hope of rescue from what he calls “a busload of man-eating sharks,” from a “precocious Jezebel,” and, last but not least, from suicidal despair.

Adaptation and Interpretation

From this point onward, the film adheres quite closely to the play. Huston removes some of the dialogue and adds his own variations, but the play’s fevered meditation on human need, frailty, and fear of loneliness is still at the heart of this adaptation. In

contrast to his frenzied activity leading up to his arrival at Maxine's hotel, Shannon becomes more of a static observer, literally so for part of the time when he is tied to a hammock to prevent a long swim to China—his euphemism for an attempted suicide. In Esther Merle Jackson's words, he watches "his own vices and virtues parade across the great stage of his consciousness" (86). His virtues lie somewhere between Maxine's worldly sensuality and Hannah's serene spirituality—two sides, or two potentialities, of his personality that he must somehow reconcile. Temptation recurs in the shape of the nymphet Charlotte, who once again steals into his room unnoticed to proclaim her love. This time his rejection of her causes him agitatedly to knock over a bottle of whiskey, his mental distraction then reinforced by his walking barefoot across the broken glass without seeming to notice; in admiration of this gesture of martyrdom (which is probably closer to masochism), Charlotte follows in his footsteps.

Huston always credited Williams, who had showed up on the location, with this imaginative addition to the scene: it lifted the dialogue and made the scene, in Huston's words, "frightening and funny at the same time" (*Open Book* 310). Nemesis still lurks in the form of Miss Fellowes, who has discovered evidence of Shannon's past sexual exploits that could destroy any prospect of future employment. However, unlike in the play, where Shannon retaliates by openly accusing her of lesbianism, in the film he intervenes when Maxine is at the point of doing just that. Even though he has more reason than anyone to dislike and even fear Miss Fellowes, he seems to sense how devastating such an accusation would be and that, in this case, a little self-knowledge could be a dangerous thing. Grayson Hall's performance is very fine here: she seems momentarily to be fighting for breath as the accuser becomes the accused, and her eyes widen in alarm and confusion as she seems simultaneously to grasp both the drift of Maxine's insinuations and Shannon's unexpected intervention on her behalf. Might such a moment be the saving of them both?

The person who notices this and sees its significance is Hannah. It strengthens her impression of Shannon as not a moral reprobate but a fundamentally decent man in need of spiritual help. She has felt the benefit of his kindness in the support he has given her in persuading Maxine to offer her shelter, and also in the tenderness he has shown to her grandfather. She has taken note of his sensitivity when he has talked about "man's inhumanity to God," which are the words not of a disbeliever in God but of an apologist who would implicate himself in humanity's failure to live in God's image. "We've poisoned God's atmosphere," he says. "We've slaughtered his creatures of the wild, we've polluted his rivers. We've even taken God's noblest creation, man, and brain-washed him into becoming our own product, not God's: packed, stacked, and canned." This speech is not in the play, but it is a logical elaboration on his sermon in Virginia, where he attacked what he saw as his congregation's warped conception of Christianity;

incidentally, it is also a theological expansion of the ecological theme of Huston's *Roots of Heaven*, in which Trevor Howard similarly denounces the slaughter of God's creatures by materialistic big-game hunters whose savagery is a form of desecration.

The duet of mutual understanding that develops between Shannon and Hannah during a stormy night of soul-searching is one of the most beautiful passages in all of Williams's work and brings out the best in Huston's superb actors. Richard Burton was always a good listener on-screen, and Deborah Kerr was never better than on those occasions when disclosing a hint of neurosis behind her English-rose exterior. Like Shannon (and like Williams), Hannah knows what it is to wrestle with one's "spooks," or what she calls "the blue devil"—those demons of doubt and despair that strike at the roots of one's existence. But she takes deep breaths and endures, and she gains courage from her endurance. Her delicate description of what she calls her "love experience" with the Australian underwear salesman is delivered with exquisite composure by Kerr, and when Shannon asks whether Hannah was disgusted by the man's request to hold a piece of her clothing, one can hear the voice of Williams behind Hannah's reply: "Nothing human disgusts me, unless it's unkind, violent." In his preface to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams wrote of an "always somewhat thwarted effort to break through walls to each other" (3); the scene between Shannon and Hannah is so touching precisely because one feels that two people have broken down this wall and made contact. In the film this moment seems to release a flurry of what one might call little acts of grace: Hannah releases Shannon from his bondage (in the play, Shannon frees himself); in gratitude and at Hannah's request, Shannon plays God and cuts the iguana free; and Nonno (played with great dignity by Cyril Delevanti) completes and recites his last poem, which, for Huston, "expressed the feeling of the whole work" (qtd. in Pratley 143). The farewell between Shannon and Hannah encapsulates their mutual affection, respect, and goodwill. Shannon generously gives Hannah his gold cross to pawn so that she can continue with her sketching and with her life. She accepts, on the condition that she will mail the pawn ticket to him so that, at some future date, he can redeem it. She has never wavered in her belief in Shannon's ultimate redemption.

The Ending

Three main dramatic events conclude the play: Shannon and Hannah say good-bye; Maxine offers Shannon the opportunity of helping her run the hotel; and Nonno dies after completing his poem. The film retains these events but reverses their order, thereby ending on an upbeat rather than tragic note. In an additional twist, Maxine invites Hannah, as well, to help with the hotel. Huston thought that, at the end, Williams had inconsistently altered his characterization of the heroine and, as he put it, "turned

Maxine into a spider-woman who devoured her mate.” In contrast, he thought that “to be taken in by Maxine was the best thing that could happen to Shannon” (*Open Book* 311). Conversely, reviewing the play for the *New Republic*, Glenn Embrey thought the ending was unconvincing for precisely the opposite reason: “A character [Maxine] we have been forced to see as vulgar, aggressive, and menacing suddenly acquires alluring soft edges,” he wrote; to be believable, he felt this “radical transformation” required “much more than the stage direction and the few lines of dialogue Williams supplies” (207). Such divergence of opinion only serves to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of Williams’s characters and the consequent multiplicity of interpretations they inspire. In *Iguana*, Huston chooses finally to embellish Williams’s anguished compassion with a twist of optimism. At the end of the film, when Maxine suggests to Shannon that they go down to the beach and Shannon doubts whether he can get back up the hill, she says, “I’ll get you back up, baby,” adding, as if to reaffirm her resolve, “I’ll *always* get you back up.”

Perhaps one might mark another quietly optimistic note at the film’s end. When Shannon first arrives at Maxine’s hotel, the person he is seeking is not Maxine but her recently deceased husband, Fred, whom he believes can offer the kind of quiet solace and companionship that at that moment he craves more than anything else. At the end, he is filling Fred’s shoes, both literally and metaphorically. Huston anticipates this development midway through the film, when he shows Shannon with his feet on a desk and the shoes jauntily prominent in the foreground of the frame. After his own dark, transfigured night of the soul, might not Shannon be able to offer similar comfort to those lost souls who turn up at Maxine’s? He still has some way to go before salvation, but he might at last have found a path, for he seems nearer to God at the end, in Maxine’s hotel, than he did at the beginning, in that church in Virginia. It is at least a fresh start, or, to borrow a phrase from Nonno’s beautiful last poem, a “second history.” He has found, as the poem has unwittingly but movingly foretold, “a second place to dwell” (371–72).

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