

## THE STAFF PHILOSOPHER

### *The Night of the Iguana*

*“Unless the events of life are translated into significant meanings, then life holds no more revelation than death, and possibly even less.”*

-Tennessee Williams, “The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams”

*“Live your life as a work of art.”*

-Friedrich Nietzsche

Tennessee Williams’ gorgeous language and gripping characters reveal a highly personal and profound view about how life is best lived. That vision is never more fully developed than in *The Night of the Iguana* and, more specifically, in the character of Nonno—the rare Williams character whose death is presented as the culmination of a good, flourishing, fully-lived human life.

Williams is no friend of philosophical formulas. Universalize your principles? Maximize utilities? Find the mean between the two extremes? No, thank you. As Maxine, the greathearted proprietor of a decaying Acapulco resort, says, “We’ve got to settle for something that works for us in our lives—even if it isn’t on the highest kind of level.” It must work for trapped and tormented animals, for desperate iguanas at the end of their rope. Williams, if he is a philosopher, is a philosopher for the vulnerable, for the frightened, for the easily wounded. A philosopher for the rest of us.

Of all characters in *Iguana*, it is easiest to identify Tennessee Williams with Shannon. A disgraced Episcopal minister, not only is Shannon at the end of his rope, but his job is hanging by a thread. His options are not pretty. Religion is out. He preached from the pulpit that God is a “petulant, angry old man.” It didn’t go well. Lunacy is more likely; it is the “spook” that Shannon can’t get off his back. Suicide, “the long swim to China,” beckons almost irresistibly. And Williams, in a move that doesn’t exactly look promising, aligns Shannon with none other than Socrates. Socrates, recall, was convicted of two crimes, corrupting the youth and atheism, and he was executed by being forced to drink a hemlock tea. Shannon, for his part, confesses to Hannah that he is guilty of two similar offenses, “fornication and heresy—in the same week,” and wryly suggests that she add hemlock to his tea.

But the point of this allusion is to remind us, brilliantly, of the Socratic insight that the way we think about death—in particular, the way we think about death as the culmination of a good, a flourishing, a fully-lived human life—can be a key to how to live when we are at the end of our rope. Enter the 97-year young Nonno, who “touches something in Shannon that is outside of concern with himself,” so that Shannon is “fiercely...tender with the old man.” Nonno, we realize, is Tennessee Williams in another half-century. Nonno, who has “a good kind of pride,” was once “a fairly well-known minor poet...with a major league spirit.” Even now, he

is a hustler who recites his past poetry for tips, even though he has been laboring on a single new poem for the last twenty years.

As death nears, Nonno proudly completes the poem. It is an ode to an orange tree, where the fruit continues to hang long after “the zenith of its life” has passed. Yet still it hangs, without despair. Finally, obscenely, gravity wins and the decaying orange falls, plummeting to earth, still without despair. In the final stanza, Nonno implores courage to likewise inhabit his own frightened heart.

Nonno, long after the zenith of his life has passed, dies with neither fame nor fortune. More valuable than either are the things that make his death and life exemplary. He has kindness—embodied in his relationship with Hannah, who says, “We all wind up with something...and if it’s someone instead of just something, we’re...unusually lucky.” He has the courage to face a frightening future with dignity. And he persists in living successfully on both the real level *and* the fantastic level (“and which is the real one, really...?”), creating revelatory meanings until the very end. A life well-lived need not be a philosophical formula. It can be a work of art.

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