

SAVAGE HEART: PRIMITIVE MYTH AND ARCHETYPES
IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

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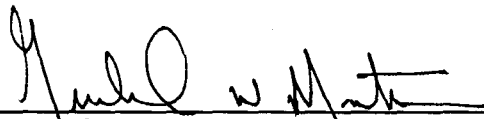
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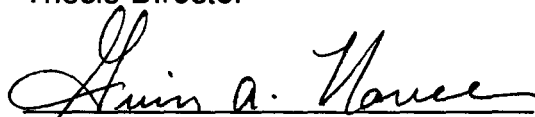
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the faculty of the Master of Liberal Arts program at AUM for their vision in creating a course of study that has both challenged and enlarged my mind. To Dr. Guin Nance I am deeply indebted for literally shepherding me along from beginning to end; and to Dr. Gerald Morton I am especially grateful. From the inception of this project, he believed in its validity and shared my excitement.

I also dedicate this effort to my family. My daughters, Wendy and Lori, have been patient, encouraging, and understanding throughout these two years, and my husband Bev has always believed that I could do anything. Without their love and support, this degree would have been impossible.

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A Note on Primary Materials

I have used two volumes that contain the six plays that are the subject of this thesis. A Streetcar named Desire, Summer and Smoke, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Orpheus Descending, and The Night of the Iguana appear in Tennessee Williams: Eight Plays, collected and published by Doubleday in Garden City, New York in 1979. In addition, Williams' essays, "The Catastrophe of Success," "The Timeless World of a Play," "Person-to-Person," and "The Past, the Present, and the Perhaps," appear in this collection. Suddenly Last Summer appears in Volume III of The Theatre of Tennessee Williams, published by New Directions in 1971. Since there is no consistency of form in these plays, I will refer to them, as well as to the essays, parenthetically in the text simply by page number.

INTRODUCTION: THE MYTHIC PATTERN

[The] lesson of the primitive myths is particularly revealing. It not only shows us that man, turning toward the divinities of life and fecundity, became as it were more and more incarnated, it also shows that early man assumes already, in his way, a history of which he is at once both the center and the victim.

—Eliade, Myths, Rites, Symbols 27

Despite his immense popularity, Tennessee Williams, arguably America's greatest playwright, has often been misunderstood. Numerous critics have summarily criticized him for being too autobiographical and, consequently, too tied to his own life's experiences, for his work to achieve the status of timeless or universal. It is, indeed, unquestionable that Williams wrote out of his background. There are far too many elements in his work that derive either directly or indirectly from his formative years to refute such a conclusion. However, Williams, as his biographer Donald Spoto says, successfully transmuted the raw material of his "own life into the stuff of poetry and drama" (53).

The fact that Williams set the majority of his plays in semi-tropical or tropical climates was neither accidental nor indulgently autobiographical. While some critics may claim that these settings are simply another indication that he could not escape his roots, there is a far deeper significance of such settings than is immediately realized. Certainly, the American South is an apt setting for many of his plays because it is the geographical region with which he was most familiar. "I write out of love for the South," he said in a 1957 interview. "It is out of a regret for a South that no longer exists that I write of the forces that have destroyed it" (Davis 43). However, Williams' setting many of

his plays during the hot, sultry seasons of the South is a fundamental dramatic device that deserves more consideration than is generally afforded. Furthermore, several of his plays, when they are set outside the South, are placed in even hotter, more tropical climates such as Mexico (Night of the Iguana) and the Galapagos Islands and Cabeza de Lobo (the background scenes of Suddenly Last Summer). That Williams deliberately chose these climatic settings is meaningful, for they provide a rich mythic context that lends universality to his work. Williams hints at the significance of these settings in the words of Shannon in Night of the Iguana:

Why did I say "tropical"? Hell! Yes! It's always been tropical countries I took ladies through. Does that, does that—huh?—signify something, I wonder? Maybe. Fast decay is a thing of hot climates, steamy, hot, wet climates, . . . (837)

For Williams, such tropical climates provided an appropriate setting in which to explore what seemed to him a more viable myth than the South had produced.

Because the time-worn myths and themes of the South did not function for Williams or because they failed to provide a workable context of Southern culture, he created his own new mythology by basing his plays upon timeless, primitive, and universal images derived from tropical climates. Joseph Campbell, one of the foremost authorities on comparative mythology, discusses the cultural trappings of such climates in several of his works. In The Power of Myth, for example, he points out that in hot, humid climates there is a prevalence of planting cultures and fertility symbols and rituals. In such cultures "there is a sense of death as not death somehow, [but] that death is required for new life" (102). Although in hunting cultures there is the belief that death brings life, this notion is much more intense in planting cultures because they constantly witness birth and renewal through the cycle of the seasons. Before a

plant dies, its seeds are scattered so that, in a sense, it is reborn. In addition, periodic pruning is beneficial to a plant as the cutting of a limb encourages new growth. Consequently, Campbell adds, in agrarian cultures, such as the South, there arises the notion that all individuals are branches of a bigger plant; there are no actual separate entities (102). Tennessee Williams used this idea of connection in most of his plays as the ideal against which he measured the isolation of the human condition,—“a lonely condition” (Williams, “Person-to-Person” 401)—and pointed out the need for human companionship. In fact, this theme is perhaps Williams’ major focus. It is evident in Blanche DuBois’s final statement, “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers,” as well as in Hannah Jelkes’s poignant statement to Shannon:

Hannah:	. . . I've discovered something to believe in.
Shannon:	Something like . . . God?
Hannah:	No.
Shannon:	What?
Hannah:	Broken gates between people so they can reach each other, . . . (823)

Williams saw the need for tenderness, kindness, and sharing in the chaos of modern life. He says in “Person-to-Person,” “We come to each other, gradually, but with love. It is the short reach of my arms that hinders, not the length and multiplicity of theirs. With love and with honesty, the embrace is inevitable” (403).

Another mythic feature of agrarian societies that comes into play in Williams’ work is a predominance of female worship, a practice that derives from the idea of the Mother Earth. Campbell speaks of the connection between woman and the earth in The Power of Myth:

The human woman gives birth just as the earth gives birth to the plants. She gives nourishment, as the plants do. So woman magic and earth magic are the same The personification of the energy that gives birth to forms and nourishes forms is properly female. (167)

Campbell points out that woman is an archetypal hero because in her fertility she accomplishes the ultimate heroic act, that of giving of herself to create and nurture the life of another (125). The renowned scholar of comparative religions, Mircea Eliade, illustrates this connection between feminine fecundity and Mother Earth, or what he calls the "Universal Genetrix," in several of his works. In Volume I of Myths, Rites, Symbols: A Mircea Eliade Reader he says that "Woman . . . is mystically held to be one with the earth" (204). Moreover, he, like Campbell, sees the relationship between woman and agriculture:

The social and cultural phenomenon known as matriarchy is connected with the discovery of agriculture by woman. It was woman who first cultivated food plants. Hence it is she who becomes owner of the soil and crops. The magico-religious prestige and consequent social predominance of woman have a cosmic model—the figure of Mother Earth. (204-5)

Furthermore, there is ample historical evidence that points to the connection between woman and agriculture. Campbell's discussion of ancient civilizations in The Power of Myth focuses on the fact that from the Neolithic Age numerous figures of the goddess have survived but almost none of the male figure. The Goddess Nut, for example, from the agricultural world of Mesopotamia and the Nile River (the Cradle of Western Civilization) is the mythic creator whose body encompasses the entire universe (167). Eliade notes that there are some primitive religions that see the Mother Earth as being parthenogenic. He points to Hesiod's story of Gaia, who gave birth to Ouranos, "a being equal to herself, able to cover her completely," as a prime example (Patterns 239). According to Eliade, there are indeed several Greek goddesses with the ability

to give birth without the help of the gods. Such stories are the “mythical expression of the self-sufficiency and fecundity of Mother Earth” (Myth, Rites, Symbols 204).

Campbell observes that it is not until the Semite invasions of the great river valleys of the fertile crescent during the fourth millennium B. C. that a transformation from female worship to male worship occurred. These Semitic invaders, either hunters or herders, were accustomed to the ritual worship of animals, the symbolic embodiment of the male principle. Campbell points out, for example, that such animals as the bull, boar, and goat are representations of male power. Ultimately, by 1750 B. C. a predominately matriarchal society had given way to a patriarchal one, as a hunting culture supplanted an agrarian one. This patriarchal orientation remained in place until the female-creator figure emerged again in western tradition in the person of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ. Since that time, a renewed interest in the mythical significance of the female has gradually emerged (Power of Myth 180).

Tennessee Williams’ work reflects such an interest. Nearly any discussion of his plays involves an analysis of his female characters. In a 1974 interview, he explains his fascination with women in terms that suggest their mythic role.

Williams: . . . Women are closer to life, really, they’re more naked, more like naked life.

Interviewer: You mean they are not afraid? as men are?

Williams: They are closer to life, it seems to me. . . . [W]omen seem to me organically closer to love which is where life is, where it began, where it is. (Brown 278)

Thus, it is not surprising that in Tennessee Williams' South, women play such vital roles. Often, they serve the function of truthgiver, or, at least, point us toward a major Williams theme: the need for genuine human compassion and understanding.

A third idea that develops within hot, fertile regions is directly related to the significance of death and rebirth associated with planting cultures—the myth of the sacrifice. Since agricultural societies, or inhabitants of tropical climates, are constantly reminded by the cycle of nature that life comes from death, there ultimately develops the belief that death is *necessary* for rebirth. Again, Campbell focuses on this tendency in primitive societies in his Historical Atlas of World Mythologies:

Out of the rot of fallen wood and leaves, fresh sprouts arise—from which the lesson learned appears to have been that from death springs life, out of death, new birth; and the grim conclusion drawn was that the way to increase life is to increase death. (Atlas, Part 1: Mythologies of the Primitive Hunters and Gatherers 10)

Accompanying the idea of sacrifice is the theme of suffering. Primitive initiation rites, for example, include pain and suffering, which are necessary for the initiate to move from childhood to adulthood or symbolically from a state of innocence to one of experience. It is a sacrifice of one life in order to move to another. Campbell discusses the mythico-ritual theme of suffering of primitive tribes in The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology; Sir James Frazer devotes a large portion of his monumental work The Golden Bough to this theme, as does Mircea Eliade in Patterns in Comparative Religion and Volume I of Myths, Rites, Symbols. It is in this volume, in fact, that Eliade comments on the ritualistic sacrifices of primitive tribes, as well as those of ancient Greece. He finds one of the supreme paradigms of sacrifice in the figure of Dionysus, “who is characterized by his periodic epiphanies and disappearances, by his ‘death’

and his 'renascence'," and who exemplifies the relationship between "the rhythm of vegetation and . . . the eternal cycle of life, death, and rebirth" (182).

Tennessee Williams' plays contain numerous Dionysian-like characters. They are individuals who must be "sacrificed" in order to bring about some element of good or to point us toward a universal truth. By Williams' own admission, Blanche "was a sacrificial victim . . . ; she was a sacrificial victim of society" (Brown 277). It is through her sacrifice, however, that we see the truth that we must deal with the world as it is rather than construct a world of fantasy. Further, we must be *initiated* through suffering to understand what is real.

The rites of initiation, according to Eliade, involve the symbolic death of the former self in order to provide for the new life. "Only in initiation," says Eliade, is death "given a positive value. Death prepares the new, purely spiritual birth, access to a mode of being not subject to the destroying action of time" (Beane 170). Initiation then, or sacrifice, is capable of bringing about a transformation, a heightened sense of what is sacred, or a beatific vision. In Patterns in Comparative Religion, Eliade discusses the initiation rites and required sacrifices of shamans who "ascend" to a cosmic level of existence (i.e., journey to heaven) in order to achieve enlightenment and power (105-7). These shamans, seers, and prophets of primitive times had the ability, says Campbell, of "recognizing through the veil of nature, . . . the radiance, terrible, yet gentle, of the dark, unspeakable light beyond, and through their words and images . . . reveal the sense of the vast silence that is the ground of us all . . ." (Atlas. Animal Powers: Primitive Hunters and Gatherers 10).

Unfortunately, in modern Western culture, there are no such shamans. Nevertheless, according to Campbell, there are those in our society who serve the same purpose of these shamans—the artists. "The mythmakers of earlier

days were the counterparts of our artists,” he says in The Power of Myth (85). Campbell goes on to discuss the fact that environment shapes all myth, both primitive and modern, and that our culture vitally needs those creative individuals who respond to the environment. “Myth must be kept alive. The people who can keep it alive are artists of one kind or another. The function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and the world” (85). Tennessee Williams is one of our modern artists who serves the purpose of shaman or mythmaker.

A paradoxical playwright, Williams felt drawn by two distinctly different forces: to adhere to classic form and to forge new paths for drama. On several occasions he expressed his attempts to follow Aristotelian form. In the foreword to Sweet Bird of Youth, he alludes to Aristotle's catharsis when he responds to critics who have attacked him for the violence in his plays by asserting that “violence is purged by its poetic representation on a stage” (647). Furthermore, he believed Cat on a Hot Tin Roof to be his best play because “it adheres to the valuable edict of Aristotle that a tragedy must have unity of time and place and magnitude of theme” (Memoirs 168). However, Williams felt that modern audiences could no longer accept classical tragedy. In his essay “The Timeless World of a Play,” he says of twentieth-century society:

So successfully have we disguised from ourselves the intensity of our own feelings, the sensibility of our own hearts, that plays in the tragic tradition have begun to seem untrue. (301)

Thus, Williams sought new ways to convey what he believed to be the essential problem of twentieth-century culture: “a truly awful sense of impermanence” (300). In the words of one of his close friends, Dotson Rader, “he married poetry to naturalism and opened drama to subject matter never before touched

upon in our theatre, . . . [yet it was] redeemed and beatified by poetic gifts for dialogue and scene construction unmatched by any other writer” (163-4).

According to Donald Spoto, those plays written during his “golden period” are among the great literary and dramatic works of our time (290). It is in this period that the majority of his plays exhibit the primitive mythic structure and archetypal human truths that raise Williams to the level of a timeless artist. The subsequent three chapters will focus on six plays—Suddenly Last Summer, Orpheus Descending, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Night of the Iguana, Summer and Smoke, and A Streetcar Named Desire—and their embodiment of three primal mythic elements: the inevitable fertility of tropical climates, the resultant matriarchal culture present in such climates, and the notion that suffering and sacrifice ultimately bring about some universal truth. By incorporating this mythic pattern in his plays, Williams created universal works of art that far surpass the limiting label of autobiographical or regional.

THE MYTHIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIMATE AND FERTILITY

What you get in the vegetative traditions is [the] notion of identity behind the surface display of duality. Behind all these manifestations is the one radiance, which shines through all things. The function of art is to reveal his radiance. . . .

—Campbell, Power of Myth 107

In her provocative study, The Broken World of Tennessee Williams, Esther Merle Jackson discusses the importance of the deep South to Williams. Since the South has been, to a great extent and for a variety of reasons, separated from the mainstream of American society, it has held fast to many of those elements common to primitive cultures. “The South,” she says, “much of which retains many characteristics of primitive societies, has developed in its literature a conventional perspective described by some aestheticians as ‘Southern agrarianism.’ Its primordial interpretation of man’s struggle in an unfriendly universe has produced a highly developed iconography” (46). Furthermore, in his essay, “Quest for a Central Theme,” Southern historian David L. Smiley cites several critics who see a direct relationship between the tropical climate of the South and its culture and folkways. As he himself points out, “the idea that the central theme of Southern history may be found in the environment, in a causal relationship between a tropical climate and a peculiar way of life, has been a persistent one” (11-12). Ulrich B. Phillips defines the South as a product of a dictatorial environment, “a place where men’s lives were molded by impersonal forces of climate or geography” (qtd. in Smiley 11). In the words of another Southern historian, George B. Tindall, the South is a region that “has been the seedbed for a proliferation of paradoxical myths” (11).

Thus, Tennessee Williams could find in the South an abundantly rich culture from which to draw both themes and images for his plays. Yet he manages to transcend the stereotypic “myth of the South” that arises from this climate. There are, no doubt, uniquely Southern elements that pervade his work—the plantation, the wealthy planter, the delicate Southern belle, the belief in the values of gentility and grace, as well as the more perverse characteristics such as hypocrisy and violence. However, Williams' plays speak of much more than the Southern experience. They evoke older myths and images, especially through Williams' artful use of climate that helps to make his plays universal. The hot, wet regions that he chose for many of his settings are rich in mythic and archetypal images which lend depth and complexity to his work.

In the majority of Williams' most important plays, the action takes place in the summer. In meticulous stage directions he informs the reader of the ambience that he wishes to convey from the stage. Summer and Smoke, for instance, opens in the middle of a Fourth of July celebration in the Mississippi Delta, one of the most fertile regions of the South. Williams reinforces his opening stage directions through Alma Winemiller's description of the unrelieved heat of this particular summer:

The Gulf wind has failed us this year, disappointed us dreadfully this summer. We used to be able to rely on the Gulf wind to cool the nights off for us, but this summer has been an exceptional season. (221)

The fact that this summer is climatically different from usual indicates that it will be an atypical season for the main characters. Furthermore, there are occasional references to hot afternoons with Alma frantically fanning herself with a palm leaf. These passages are reminders that, for Williams, hot climates

are important, that they serve a valuable function in delineating his archetypal characters.

The precise manner in which climate functions is suggested by Jacob H. Adler in his essay, "Tennessee Williams' South: The Culture and the Power." Pointing out the Dionysian elements in John Buchanan, he says that Summer and Smoke is a play of rituals, and that "John's summer life has a grossly sexual rhythm" that, in truth, disgusts him (34). There is a hint of ritual in Alma's frequent trips to the fountain (Eternity), symbolic of baptism. Williams even describes her in a manner that implies another ritual: "She has a habit of holding her hands, one cupped under the other in a way similar to that of receiving the wafer at Holy Communion" (211). Adler goes on to point out numerous other ritualistic elements in the play:

. . . [S]pecific rituals occur. . . . There are, for example, the faintly satirized Fourth of July celebration; the club meeting, a burlesqued ritual of modern culture; the scene in the bower, a mock ritual of courtship; the much-mentioned ritual of the cockfight, the orgiastic ritual of Rosa's dance; the ritual of a funeral. . . . and [John's] . . . mention of castration is a reminder of further rituals. (34)

Further, it is during the hot summer that John Buchanan's sexual life seems out of control. Mythic scholars, like Campbell and Eliade, have long recognized the relationship between hot, humid climate and sexuality, which is often mythically represented by the fertility rituals associated with agriculture. A dominant archetypal symbol in Western culture, says Campbell, is the plow plowing the earth—symbolic coition (Power of Myth 101). John Buchanan is a representative of sexuality, or man's *physical* nature, while Alma ("Spanish for soul"), like the stone statue of Eternity at the fountain, symbolizes man's *spiritual* nature. In this play, the two are never reconciled. John's sexual escapades occur primarily with his Latin lover, Rosa Gonzales, who seems just as fettered

to the “earth,” or human sensuality, as he is. “Those Latins all dream in the sun,” says Alma, “and indulge their senses” (257). Moreover, Rosa's violent behavior during lovemaking suggests that she, like John, is “earthy” or brutal. In Scene VII, John complains that Rosa has hurt him in the heat of passion:

You never make love without scratching or biting or something.
Whenever I leave you, I have a little blood on me. (267)

Yet, despite its apparent vulgarity, it is their relationship that, in the course of this play, is mythically significant because it is unhampered by modern morality. According to Eliade, “the orgy . . . constitute[s] [a] ritual imitating divine gestures or certain episodes of the sacred drama of the cosmos” (The Myth of the Eternal Return 27). Moreover, it is only when Alma decides to free her “*Doppelgänger*”—to say “yes” to her sensual nature, a symbol of fertility—that she is able to escape the world of illusion in which she has been living. Like Blanche DuBois, who must cover the harsh, naked bulb with a pretty paper lantern, Alma has hidden in the shadow of the puritannical, artistic, and intellectual aristocrat. Although she is too late, when she finally approaches John on the sensual, or more primal, level, she at least recognizes the truth that it is only through honesty and the genuine expression of love that humans can reach out to each other.

As is Summer and Smoke, A Streetcar Named Desire is set in a hot, sultry climate, this time even further South in New Orleans' French Quarter. Here, both the semi-tropical climate and the nearby river suggest fertility. In the opening scene, in which Williams describes the setting, we learn that from the street Elysian Fields “you can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river” (95). It is on this street that Stella, the quintessence of fertility, and Stanley live their blissful life of passion, and it is here that Blanche ultimately confronts the

truth about herself and about life. Joseph N. Riddle points out the mythical ramifications of Elysium. It is a “world of the guiltless, . . . a pre-Christian paradise where life and passion are one and good . . . where life is pursued on a primitive level beyond or before good and evil” (24). It is in this Edenic setting that we first meet Stanley, who is, without a doubt, Williams' most primitive character—what Blanche calls “*bestial*” (140). When he first appears onstage, he is carrying a blood-stained package, which he tosses to Stella, crying out, “Meat!” In the remainder of the play, the character of Stanley is developed completely and consistently with this initial fleshly characterization. As Blanche describes him,

He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something—subhuman—something not quite to the stage of humanity yet!
(140)

Stanley is the archetypal primordial man; he represents the essence of instinctive, unabashed passion, unhindered by the cultural trappings of the civilized world. He also symbolizes fertility, like the phallic streetcar named Desire. His fertility is manifest in the birth of his child, and it is underscored in the final line of the play: “This game is seven-card stud” (197). Stanley is, of course, the stud in this drama, the character whose “game” is, according to Blanche, “brutal desire—just—Desire!!” (139). However, the fragile Blanche is, in reality, not much different; she simply cannot face up to her natural impulses. Rather, she hides behind the veneer of the delicate, virginal Southern Belle who plays her own game of “innocence” with poor Mitch. We see, at various points in the play, though, that Blanche is just as sensual as Stanley. She has had a sordid past back in her hometown of Laurel (representative of Apollo's city), and because of her Dionysian habits, she has virtually been evicted .

Finally, when Stanley and Blanche find themselves alone in the Kowalski apartment, there are additional hints of the influence of climate that suggest the fertility ritual that is to follow. After Stanley comments on her “fine feathers” (181), Blanche responds by telling him that she is on her way to the Caribbean and has just looked through her trunk to find clothes suitable for the tropics. Later in the scene, we are told that “the night is filled with unhuman voices like cries in a jungle” (185). These references underscore the savage and brutal world of the primitive that Blanche has entered and must finally acknowledge. She has lost the world of Belle Reve forever, the dream of entertaining rich gentlemen callers like Shep Huntleigh on the veranda of the plantation that has now fallen into a stranger’s hands. In this play Williams is perhaps acknowledging that the paradoxical South, replete with its many myths of both courtliness and violence, is out of balance and that the characteristics of gentility and kindness are, regrettably, lost. Streetcar may also be viewed as a condemnation of twentieth-century society—a culture that represses natural instincts and thus promotes hypocrisy and deceit. In an attempt both to be true to herself and to her natural instincts—“I didn’t lie in my heart . . .” (178)—and also to embrace the time-worn Southern myths, Blanche ultimately fails in her efforts to merge her two desires. By creating a tropical world of mythic and archetypal images, Williams thus shows us not only the destructive power of a repressive society that denies individuals their right to be fully human but also the failure of the stereotypical Southern myths.

The semi-tropical city of New Orleans is the setting for another of Williams’ plays whose climate serves as a dramatic device to suggest primitive mythic elements. The action of Suddenly Last Summer takes place in the Garden District; however, the all-important background scenes occur in an even

more tropical region—Cabeza de Lobo. The stage directions preceding the opening scene describe the home of Violet Venable, and especially Sebastian's garden,

which is more like a tropical jungle, or forest, in the prehistoric age of giant fern-forests when living creatures had flippers turning to limbs and scales to skin. The colors of this jungle-garden are violent, especially since it is steaming with heat after rain. There are massive tree flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with sundried blood, there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of savage nature . . . (349)

Sebastian's primeval garden is filled with insectivorous plants, such as the Venus's-flytrap, that hint at his own carnivorous nature. Catharine's line, "Cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blonds, he was fed up with the dark ones and was famished for blonds" (375), foreshadows the cannibalism that is ultimately uncovered in the final scene.

Sebastian is a tormented man who attempts to live a life rooted in his instincts. In essence, he is what Campbell says of similar characters, "an image of life living on life" (Power of Myth 67). Sebastian ascribed to what Campbell calls the Zoroastrian ideal of affirming all things, whether good or evil (65). Catharine explains Sebastian's philosophy in Scene Four:

He!—accepted!—all!—as—how!—things!—are!— And thought nobody had any right to complain or interfere in any way whatsoever, and even though he knew that what was awful was awful, that what was wrong was wrong, and my Cousin Sebastian was never sure that anything was wrong!—He thought it unfitting to even take any action about anything whatsoever!—except to go on doing as something in him directed. . . (419)

Indeed, Sebastian, in his numerous attempts to transcend the modern world, attempted to live the instinctive, or primitive, life. For instance, during a previous trip to the Galapagos Islands, he and Violet watched, at Sebastian's insistence,

the annual hatching of the great sea turtles and their subsequent struggle to reach the sea before the flesh-eating gulls swooped down to devour them. Although Violet was repulsed by the scene, Sebastian concluded that in this horrible (but natural) act, he had seen God. In The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology, Campbell comments on such an instinctive phenomenon as the turtles' race to the sea: "No more vivid representation could be desired of spontaneity and the quest for the not-yet-seen. . . . [The tiny turtles] know that they must hurry, know how to do it, and know precisely where they are going. And finally, when they enter the sea, they know immediately both how to swim and that swim they must" (30). In short, they depend on their instincts, not on what they have learned. Sebastian surely identified with the turtles as they instinctively raced to the sea for survival and played to completion the life-and-death cycle. He essentially wished to live a life rooted in instinct, an Edenic, or Elysian, existence unchecked by conventional standards of behavior. He lived for the summer, when he "gave birth" to his annual creation entitled Poem of Summer, a product of his symbolic fertility.

Doctor: He wrote one poem a year?

Mrs. Venable: One for each summer that we traveled together. The other nine months of the year were really only a preparation.

Doctor: Nine months?

Mrs. Venable: The length of a pregnancy, yes . . . (354)

It is fitting indeed that Sebastian has always produced his year's work in the summer, the season of fertility, bounty, and harvest. Like his Venus's-flytrap, he consumes during this time of growth to yield at season's end his annual "fruit." Again, Williams' use of these fecund symbols against a climatic background

that is conducive to fertility suggests that he transcends the realm of the autobiographical artist and enters the world of myth and archetype.

Suddenly Last Summer is not the only one of Williams' plays set in the tropics. In the jungle setting of Night of the Iguana, Williams is perhaps most successful in employing elements of primitive myth as well as numerous archetypal images drawn from and suggesting the basic truths best known to societies of tropical regions.

The action takes place at the hotel Costa Verde, which sits atop a hill in Puerto Barrio. Williams makes clear that this is the Puerto Barrio of the past, replete with primitive Indian villages near rain forests that are "among the world's wildest and loveliest" (741). The hotel sits in the midst of resplendent tropical flora: "shrubs with vivid trumpet-shaped flowers and a few cactus plants, while at the sides we see the foliage of the encroaching jungle" (741). Several rooms are accommodated with mosquito netting, and on the veranda is a canvas hammock that completes this tropical scene. In addition, there are numerous references to the sweltering heat that underscore the tropical ambience of this place. Hannah remarks in Act I, "You have to be careful not to become dehydrated in the hot seasons under the Tropic of Cancer" (766).

In nearly every direction, there are symbols of fertility, from the nearby sea to the wild orchids that grow along the paths. Even Maxine, the hotel proprietor, is, in a sense, a fertility symbol in her tropical rain forest; she constantly reminds us that she lives for sexual gratification. When Shannon complains that she doesn't seem to be grieving enough over her husband's recent death, she retorts: "Fred was an old man, baby. Ten years older'n me. We hadn't had sex together in . . . [a long time]" (745). Furthermore, she often engages in casual sex with one of the young natives who works for her, and

she spends most of her time in the course of this play attempting to seduce Shannon. Even the German family who is staying at the hotel represents raw sensuality. “They are all dressed in the minimal concession to decency and all are pink and gold like baroque cupids in various sizes—Rubensesque, splendidly physical” (747).

It is in this setting, furthermore, that Hannah's grandfather Nonno, “the world's oldest living and practicing poet” (768), produces his final poem, itself a product apparently engendered by the fertile surroundings. The poem, filled with plant imagery, speaks not only of death, but rebirth.

Sometime while night obscures the tree
The zenith of its life will be
Gone past forever, and from thence
A second history will commence. (839)

The image of death and rebirth in this stanza is reinforced in Shannon's abrupt recognition of his history as a tour guide.

It's always been tropical countries I took ladies through. Does that, does that—huh?—signify something, I wonder? Maybe. Fast decay is a thing of hot climates, and I run back to them . . . always seducing a lady or two, or three or four or five ladies in the party, but really ravaging her first by pointing out to her the—what?—horrors? Yes, horrors!—of the tropical country being conducted a tour through. (837)

As Campbell has frequently pointed out, in hot humid climates there arises the notion “that out of rot comes life” (Power of Myth 102). Thus, it is understandable that Nonno's last creative act conveys the idea of rebirth and regeneration since it has been composed in surroundings that contribute to such a mythic belief. Nonno takes on the role of seer, who, like Blake's bard, “present, past, and future sees.” Upon arriving at the hotel, he feels and smells the salty ocean air and exclaims, “It's the cradle of life. Life began in the sea” (762). Like the sea, Nonno seems untouched by time. In fact, he appears to be

rooted in the primeval past. According to Hannah, he “feels that the decline of the Western World began with the invention of the wheel” (764). Nonno’s wisdom seems to focus on the realm of the primordial or prehistoric. From these passages, which suggest primal truths, as well as from the mythic implications of the lush, fertile landscape, it is obvious that Williams, whether consciously or unconsciously, has drawn upon primitive myths and archetypes in order to create his own myth of survival.

As in Night of the Iguana and Suddenly Last Summer, the climatic settings in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and Orpheus Descending are rich in mythic significance. Cat, like Summer and Smoke, is set in the Mississippi Delta, a region, according to Faulkner, that is so rich that a broom handle stuck in the ground would eventually sprout. Although the play is filled with products of the Southern myth—the plantation, the wealthy owner, overt sexism and hypocrisy—Williams uses these images to do much more than merely outline the saga of a Southern aristocratic family. Some of the names, like Big Daddy, Big Mama, Brother Man, and Sister Woman, suggest that these characters are symbolic or even allegorical. Big Daddy is the tyrannical patriarch; Big Mama is the fatuous Southern woman, bedecked with jewels, a sign of her life on a pedestal; Brother Man and Sister Woman, “that monster of fertility” (414), are simply child producers who have spent the majority of their time either creating or chasing their offspring. Nevertheless, it is Maggie the Cat who is the prototypical symbol of fertility. Juxtaposed against her adamant husband Brick, however, the frustrated Maggie is forced to remain merely a fertility symbol rather than be allowed to realize sexual fulfillment.

Williams’ “Notes for the Designer” at the beginning of the play suggest that again he wished to create a tropical atmosphere:

This may be irrelevant or unnecessary, but I once saw a reproduction of a faded photograph of the veranda of Robert Louis Stevenson's home on that Samoan Island where he spent his last years, and there was a quality of tender light on weathered wood, such as porch furniture made of bamboo and wicker, exposed to tropical suns and tropical rains, which came to mind when I thought about the set for this play, bringing also to mind the grace and comfort of light, the assurance it gives, on a late and fair afternoon in summer, the way that no matter what, even dread of death, is gently touched and soothed by it. (409)

Such tropical ambience, as Campbell has pointed out, suggests death and rebirth. From this perspective, it is also significant that on his birthday Big Daddy learns of his impending death. Reinforcing this notion of death and rebirth is Maggie, who announces her "pregnancy." She represents life in the face of death: "*I'm alive! Maggie the cat is— . . . alive! I am alive, alive!*" (438). Furthermore, on this summer afternoon, Maggie pleads with Brick to come to bed with her so that her announcement may come to fruition; she explains, "[T]his is my time by the calendar to conceive" (504). The act of conception is rich in mythic meaning. Eliade points out that it restores "integral wholeness" (Eternal Return 27). In The Power of Myth Campbell relates conception to mystery. "The sexual mystery in India, and in most of the world, is a holy mystery. It is the mystery of the generation of life. The act of generating a child is a cosmic act and is to be understood as holy" (169). Maggie's effort to conceive may be seen in this light. It represents a desire not only to achieve human fulfillment but also, at an archetypal level, to participate in a cosmic, holy mystery.

Sexual references and symbols abound in the plays of Tennessee Williams, indicating his fascination with human sexuality. His most mythically-charged symbol of fertility, however, appears in Orpheus Descending. In this play, it is Val's snakeskin jacket that is symbolic of fertility, death, and rebirth.

When we first meet Valentine Xavier, he enters a store in an unnamed Southern town to the primitive Choctaw cry of the Conjur Man, “as though the cry had brought him . . . [into] the store” (557). He “has a kind of wild beauty about him that the cry would suggest. . . . His remarkable garment is a snakeskin jacket” (557). Campbell points out the mythic significance of the serpent in several of his works. It symbolizes fertility, “immortal energy and consciousness engaged in the field of time, constantly throwing off death and being born again” (Power of Myth 45). For the Aztecs, the serpent Quetzalcoatl was the giver of maize (Hero of a Thousand Faces 358). Thus, the serpent, despite the negative reputation it has acquired in Christian cultures, embodies life-giving properties and is consequently a symbol of fertility.

For Lady, Val represents new life, as he eventually comes to embody the mythic qualities of his jacket. “It’s a sort of trademark; people call me Snakeskin” (572). He represents fertility for the “barren” Lady, who conceives his child. “I have life in my body,” she says; “this dead tree, my body, has burst in flower! You’ve given me life . . .” (637). Soon afterwards, however, both Lady and Val are killed, but Val’s snakeskin jacket remains as a reminder that life goes on. Carol Cutrere enters the store after the brutal murder and takes up the jacket, saying

—Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind (640)

According to Campbell, the shedding and renewal of a snake’s skin is “an obvious image of life” (Power of Myth 45). It symbolizes both the cycle of nature and immortality. Death is simply a necessary part of life. Despite the ignorance, cruelty, violence, suffering, and death that occur in the course of this

existence, life must still be affirmed, and it is this affirmation of life in the face of death which is the basic truth behind the agrarian cultures of tropical climates.

Tennessee Williams clearly recognized man's ongoing struggle in a seemingly chaotic world. Just as he lamented the loss of the old South, he regretted the fact that certain values such as kindness, honesty, and genuine love seem to be impermanent in our modern society. "Horror of insincerity, of *not meaning*, overhangs [us] like the cloud of cigarette smoke and hectic chatter," he says in his essay, "The Timeless World of a Play" (300). Williams attempted to root the themes of his plays in something more permanent and stable, and his choice of the Southern climate provided a setting rich in primal myths and archetypal symbols. Further, that he selected even more tropical settings for a number of his plays clearly suggests that he strived to affix his themes, his "truths," to the primordial and mythic realm, a "world without time" ("The Timeless World of a Play" 299). It is fortuitous, perhaps, that the American South and its climate exhibit many primitive elements upon which he could draw, and it is precisely these elements that provided the stability that he sought.

THE MYTHIC IMPORTANCE OF WOMAN AS ARCHETYPE

Every man carries within him the eternal image of woman, not the image of this or that particular woman, but a definite feminine image. This image is fundamentally unconscious, an hereditary factor of primordial origin engraved in the living organic system of . . . man.

—Campbell, The Portable Jung 173

Any significant discussion of Tennessee Williams' plays seems inevitably to touch on an analysis of his female characters. Critics have gone to great lengths to classify Williams' women and to use this classification to build an analysis of his themes because they are certainly his most memorable characters. Most have generally attempted to place them into one of three broad divisions or categories: those women who have the capacity to endure in the modern world (the New South), or those who cling hopelessly to the almost mythical world of the romantic and cavalier Old South; those who live in the "real" world, or those who are forced to construct a world of illusion because they cannot survive in the brutal, "real" world; and, finally, those prudish Southern Belles who have an aversion to their instinctive sexual urges, or those "earthy," natural women who revel in their sensuality.

That such feminine archetypes exist has been argued by Jungian critics, who have recently presented an array of dreams, myths, and legends to support their contentions. In his illuminating work, Art and the Creative Unconscious, for example, Erich Neumann describes four poles of development for the female character, which are essentially universal forms that may be identified in modern woman as well as in the feminine characters in ancient myth: the Good

Mother, the Terrible Mother, the positive transformative character (one who effects positive change), and the negative transformative character (one who effects negative change). Influenced by Neumann's observations, Williams critic Signi Falk suggests that all of the heroines in the Williams canon fall into one or more groups based on Neumann's archetypes: the Southern gentlewoman, the Southern wench, or the Southern mother (Tischler 494). Characters who come to mind immediately are Alma Winemiller, Laura Wingfield, and Catharine Holly, the perennial virgins, and Blanche DuBois, Maggie Pollitt, and Violet Venable, who are rather distorted amalgamations of both the southern wench and the southern mother. As Nancy M. Tischler points out in her article "A Gallery of Witches," the American South has always venerated its women, a practice that gradually has produced a matriarchal culture (508). Further, mythic scholars like Eliade and Campbell provide explanations for this region's exaltation of its women and thus reinforce a mythic reading of Tennessee Williams' plays. Again, it is the hot, humid climate of the American South and of other tropical settings that serves as the mythic backdrop for his heroines.

According to Tischler, Williams rejected the beloved Southern stereotype: the good wife, the good mother, the loving sweetheart (496), or, in George Tindall's words, "coquettish belles wooed by slender gallants . . . underneath the moonlight and magnolias" (4). These descriptions obviously lend themselves to ridicule and caricature. Consequently, Williams purposely broke with the notion of the Southern Belle. Yet in his rejection of Southern tradition, Williams delved deeper than most of his contemporaries into what Neumann calls the "Archetypal Feminine" (10).

In his Historical Atlas of World Mythologies, Campbell brings together numerous scholars' views concerning the role of women in ancient civilizations, particularly planting cultures. He cites Carl Sauer's work Agricultural Origins and Dispersals, in which Sauer explains that the earliest agricultural societies were "largely developed and organized by their women. It was through them. . . that descent was reckoned and membership in the household determined. [Thus,] matrilineal and matriarchal societies arose" (Campbell, Atlas, Seeded Earth: Planters 12). Women served such a vital function because they were perceived to be closely associated with the life-giving Mother Earth, with fecundity, birth, and rebirth. Further, the climate that was characteristic of the fertile areas of the earliest civilizations was naturally directly related to female veneration since the woman was the giver of life. The tropical ambience that Tennessee Williams employs for many of his settings is therefore actually rooted in a much more primal and universal realm than may at first be apparent. The female characters who seem to dominate his plays are actually archetypes who serve to convey some universal truth. They are, in essence, truthgivers.

Alma Winemiller's role as truthgiver is not obvious until the close of Summer and Smoke when she confronts John Buchanan. Throughout the course of the play, the prudish Alma is measured against other characters who all live out their instinctive urges. Certainly, the other women live the life of the body rather than that of the mind. Rosa Gonzales, in her attempts to hold John with her sexual prowess, is the inversion of Alma, who is constantly associated with the soul, or eternity. Moreover, the youthful Nellie, the "precocious little—imp" (226), exuberant with the pleasures of this life, represents unrestrained passion and innocence. She describes John early in the play as "the wonderfulest person in all the big wide world!" (236). John later apologizes for

her “innocent” behavior: “Excuse her, Miss Alma. Nellie's still such a child” (291). Finally, Alma's mother, Mr. Winemiller's “cross,” is, like Nellie, merely a child who lives for her own selfish pleasures. She is described in the stage directions at the opening of Scene One as a woman who was overindulged as a girl and who has “evaded the responsibilities of later life by slipping into a state of perverse childishness” (216). Throughout Summer and Smoke she is either obstinate in getting what she wants (ice cream, for example; strawberry, not vanilla), or she is downright cruel to her family. These three female characters are almost mirror images of Alma, who, we are told, “had an adult quality as a child,” but is now “prematurely spinsterish” (218). She is the proverbial Southern belle; she teaches piano lessons, leads a weekly book club, and forever disdains the physical life. She, of course, must live in the real world, but she is too fragile, too “weak and divided” (289), to witness, without the use of tranquilizers, the malice and brutality that often occur. Alma seems unreal; she is even accused of using a false accent, and she is frequently ridiculed or mocked by her mother as well as by others in Glorious Hill.

John, on the other hand, is described as a “Promethean figure, brilliantly and restlessly alive in a stagnant society” (216). Through the microscope in his laboratory he has seen a “universe,” “part anarchy—and part order!” (222). Yet, he never really achieves this balance in his own life. Throughout most of the play, his Dionysian urges are far stronger than his Appollonian impulses. He spends more time in Bacchanalian revelry than in the art of healing for which he was formally trained. However, at the close of the play, he begins to realize that life functions on more than a merely physical level. He points to his anatomy chart and admits that there is “an immaterial something” (288), which is the very essence of life that his chart doesn't show. In her overtly puritannical manner,

Alma has pointed John to the truth that man's spiritual nature gives meaning to his physical nature. John says,

. . . it can't be shown on the chart. But it's there, just the same, and knowing it's there—why, then the whole thing—this—unfathomable experience of ours—takes on a new value, . . .”
(288)

He suddenly sees Alma not as the moral prude but rather as a teacher from whom he has learned a very valuable lesson; and Alma in turn discovers that she too must achieve a balance, that she must cease to deny her physical self. Thus, she points the audience to the ultimate truth that it is only through an equilibrium, a healthy balance of head and heart that true happiness and sharing are possible. In the final scene, Alma heads for Moon Lake Casino with the travelling shoe salesman, an act that suggests her movement from innocence to experience, or an affirmation of her own physical nature.

Like Alma, Blanche DuBois cannot face her own sexuality. Unlike her sister Stella, who epitomizes fertility, Blanche denies her sensual nature and feigns the virginal Southern Belle. Her behavior suggests the breakdown of the Old South. She is a poseur who hides her age in the shadows of the soft light of the paper lantern and disguises her promiscuous background by her attitude of purity and gentility and her condemnation of Stella and Stanley's life. Ultimately, she appears both ludicrous and tragic. Yet in her deeply troubled state, she points to the truth that although society may foment hypocrisy and even brutality, such values as kindness and beauty are still necessary. In a 1957 interview with Louise Davis, Williams remarked that “Blanche DuBois had a natural elegance, a love of the beautiful, a romantic attitude toward life. . . . My main theme is a defense of that attitude, a violent protest against those things that defeat it” (45). In her final lines of the play— “. . . I've always depended on

the kindness of strangers”—we witness not only her own personal breakdown in her confrontation with reality, but also we sense the breakdown of Southern romanticism. Davis explains that for Williams, “romanticism stands in direct contrast to materialism. It is a reverence for all that is idealistic and beautiful” (45). It is ironic that there are so many references in the play to Blanche’s hiding of the “truth” when it is she who ultimately points to the truth. Although she strives vainly to be the prototypical Southern belle, she at least holds steadfastly to important values such as beauty and compassion—principles that Williams believed to be rapidly fading from the society of the New South because they were attached to a temporal provincialism instead of a universal mythic construct.

Margaret Pollitt is another of Williams’ heroines who clings to values that seem to be losing their importance in twentieth-century society. Having married into a wealthy, aristocratic Southern family, she rebels against the mendacity and hypocrisy that have become a part of the effete lifestyle of the Pollitt household. Maggie represents Neumann’s Good Mother; by Williams’ own admission, she is “sturdy, strong and resilient. . . . violently, almost possessively, in love with Brick . . .” (qtd. in Waters 35). As she exudes energy, vitality, and sensuality, she stands in stark contrast to the rest of the Pollitts, who have become virtual symbols of lethargy and passivity. Even Big Daddy, the only character who seems to appreciate Maggie’s honesty, is, in his dying, obviously the antithesis of Maggie, who insists repeatedly that she is *alive*.

Perhaps it is due to her constant struggle that Maggie stands apart from the other characters in Cat. Because she has, for the most part, been unaccustomed to the indulgent way of life that the Pollitts take for granted, she is somehow closer to the earth. Williams comments on the value of struggle in his

prefatory essay to The Glass Menagerie entitled “The Catastrophe of Success”: “One does not escape that easily from the seduction of an effete way of life But once you fully apprehend the vacuity of a life without struggle you are equipped with the basic means of salvation” (16). Maggie Pollitt indeed struggled as a child, and she suffers now because of her inability to live out her natural desires with Brick. In her efforts to lure her unwilling husband to bed, she relives the misery that she has experienced during her life:

Brick, y'know, I've been so God damn disgustingly poor all my life!
—That's the truth, Brick! (434)

Campbell sees suffering and conflict as experiences that evoke the “humanity of the human heart.” The medieval idea that suffering removes “man's mind from blind commitment to the goods of this world” (Power of Myth 112) is a notion that Campbell pursues extensively as an archetypal message. In portraying Maggie as the character in conflict, the one who is not blinded to the truth, Williams creates a universal symbol. Maggie reflects Williams' own moral philosophy. “I think I regard hypocrisy and mendacity as almost the cardinal sins,” he said in a 1957 interview. “I believe that honesty, understanding, sympathy, and even sexual passion are good” (qtd. in Ross 40). He also comments directly on the message he wished to convey in Cat:

I meant for the audience to discover how people erect false values by not facing what is true in their natures, by having to live a lie, and I hoped the audience would admire the heroic persistence of life and vitality; . . . (40)

Maggie, therefore, obviously serves the function of truthgiver. She is not only Williams' spokesperson, she is also the character who both sees the truth and points others to it.

Margaret: Brick, I used to think that you were stronger than me and I didn't want to be overpowered by you. But now, since you've taken to liquor—you know what?—I guess it's bad, but now I'm stronger than you and I can love you more truly! (504)

Suffering has made Maggie strong, and because of her strength, she has a greater capacity for compassion. She has, essentially, become the embodiment of life in the face of death, vitality uncorrupted by the self-indulgence and decadence often associated with a “refined,” more “civilized,” lifestyle.

The sexually frustrated female, like Maggie, is a character that appears throughout the Williams canon. She epitomizes Williams' view that the myth of the South, embodied in the form of the Southern belle, is no longer viable. Caught between the socially-accepted world of prudery and decorum and her own desires to live out her natural impulses, she represents the conflict between the Old and the New South, and in her struggle she achieves enlightenment. She recognizes truths that are unattainable to others; she is, as Williams said, “closer to life.” Of course, the “truthgivers” in his plays are not necessarily all female; however, the great majority of those characters who point us to some universal truth or epiphany are women, for they are the ones most venerated in the American South and most directly the product of the myths of agrarian, tropical cultures.

In Orpheus Descending, set in Two River County in a “small southern town” (547), Williams again uses women who fit into archetypal patterns. Throughout the play, Lady Torrence is frequently connected with universal symbols of life. That her name is generic is significant; as a manifestation of life, she is the archetypal female. Moreover, in the play's earlier version, Battle of Angels, the character Lady was named Myra, an anagram of Mary, the ultimate

mother figure. Thus, she, like Maggie in Cat, is in many ways a manifestation of Neumann's Good Mother. Williams frequently associates Lady with obvious images of the earth. When she becomes pregnant with Val's child, she compares herself to a fig tree. "I have life in my body, this dead tree, my body, has burst in flower!" She explains her metaphor:

—We used to have a little fig tree between the house and the orchard. It never bore any fruit, they said it was barren. Time went by it, spring after useless spring, and it almost started to—die. . . . Then one day I discovered a small green fig on the tree they said wouldn't bear! (637-8)

Lady is the personification of the life-giving, fertile earth, an image that appears again in her association with the grapevine. Not only was she the daughter of a vintner, she also has plans to redecorate the confectionery in an imitation of her father's wine orchard.

Artificial branches of fruit trees in flower on the walls and ceilings!—It's going to be like an orchard in the spring!—My father, he had an orchard on Moon Lake. He made a wine garden of it. We had fifteen little white arbors with tables in them and they were covered with—grapevines (576)

The association with the cult of Dionysus is clear. In her efforts to recreate her father's wine garden, she participates in the same affirmation of life inherent in Dionysian festivals that celebrated the power and fertility of nature. Her renewed sensuality and her own fertility manifested in the conception of a child testify both to her sexual abandon and to her participation in the life cycle.

Lady is not only connected with Dionysus, she is also obviously a representation of Eve. That she is tempted by Val, also known as "Snakeskin," is clearly reminiscent of the Genesis story. Behind the curtain, "an Oriental drapery which . . . bears the formal design of a gold tree with scarlet fruit" (547), she lives out her passions. The mythic implications of this scenario, however,

far surpass the simple biblical allusion. The snake is at once a symbol of fertility, regeneration, and immortality (see Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion 164-71). Thus, in her copulation with Val, or "Snakeskin," she participates in a ritual of primordial importance, a ritual that paradoxically brings about both life and death. She lives for physical more than spiritual fulfillment; therefore, she lacks the balance that is necessary, in Williams' world view, for happiness and indeed survival.

The woman in this play who seems to achieve this balance is, surprisingly, Carol Cutrere, Cassandra in the earlier version, Battle of Angels. Unhampered by the demands that society makes on her, she serves the function of truthgiver. From the outset, Carol appears to be the prototypical bohemian, unable to function in the social climate of this small Southern town. In the stage directions of Scene One, Williams describes Carol's elaborate makeup. When Val criticizes her outlandish looks, she explains the motives for her appearance:

I'm an exhibitionist! I want to be noticed, seen, heard, felt! I want them to know I'm alive! (566)

Yet, she is an outcast, befriended only by a Negro Conjure Man whom she calls Uncle Pleasant. Together, they represent primordial man, the reconciliation of opposites (man-woman, black-white, primitive-cultured). They symbolize the balance that Williams views as necessary for survival.

In Scene One, Carol obviously remembers Val from a bar in New Orleans. She recalls vividly his snakeskin jacket and a snake ring, a gift from a "lady osteopath" (561) who supported him for a while. Carol even remembers her conversation with Val in New Orleans when she implored:

“What on earth can you do on this earth but catch at whatever comes near you, with both your hands, until your fingers are broken?” (561)

As she recalls this poignant question, she ponders the ramifications of it:

I'd never said that before, or even consciously thought it, but afterwards it seemed like the truest thing that my lips had ever spoken, . . . (561)

Val, however, either cannot or will not recall such an encounter with Carol. He refuses to admit the truth that she espouses, a philosophy that calls to mind Williams' statement in his essay, “The Timeless World of a Play”: “Snatching the eternal out of the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence” (301). Her message is one of fortitude and endurance. She has followed the dictates of her heart, often to the chagrin of her family and the townspeople. In the first scene of Act One, she explains to Val the reasons that she has been ostracized:

I delivered stump speeches, wrote letters of protest about the gradual massacre of the colored majority in the county. I thought it was wrong for pellagra and slow starvation to cut them down when the cotton crop failed from army worm or boll weevil or too much rain in summer. I wanted to, tried to, put up free clinics, I squandered the money my mother left me on it. And when that Willie McGee thing came along—he was sent to the chair for having improper relations with a white whore—I made a fuss about it. I put on a potato sack and set out for the capital on foot. . . You know how far I got? Six miles out of town—hooted, jeered at, even spit on!—every step of the way—and then arrested! . . . Well that was a pretty long time ago, and now I'm not a reformer any more. I'm just a “lewd vagrant.” And I'm showing the “S.O.B.S.” how lewd a “lewd vagrant” can be if she puts her whole heart in it like I do mine! (566)

The great truth that she has learned from her struggle and suffering is that no matter what happens, we must live—endure. She asks Val to take her to the town's cemetery:

And we'll hear the dead people talk. They do talk there. They chatter together like birds on Cypress Hill, but all they say is one word, and that one word is "live," they say "Live, live, live, live, live!" It's all they've learned, it's the only advice they can give.—
Just live. . . . (567)

To a certain extent, Lady embraced this dictum; but she relied too heavily on physical passion to save her. Carol, on the other hand, seems uncorrupted by fleshly lusts. When the Conjure Man shows her his magic charm, the breastbone of a bird, she is repulsed because there is a bit of flesh still clinging to it. She complains:

[I]t's still tainted with corruption. Leave it a long time on the bare rock in the rain and the sun till every sign of corruption is burned away from it, and then it will be a good charm, . . . (557)

Carol is, like the charm will be with time, uncorrupted because she has been cleansed through her suffering. Like the bird, she represents freedom and lack of restraint, incapable of being bound by earthly lusts. She is almost ethereal. In Act Two, she admits that she is almost too frail for physical passion.

Val: . . . What's this here? A human wrist with a bone? It feels like a twig I could snap with two fingers . . . Little girl, you're transparent, I can see the veins in you. A man's weight on you would break you like a bundle of sticks.

Carol: . . . Isn't it funny! You've hit on the truth about me.
(592)

She goes on to say that the only reason she endures physical passion at all is that "to not be alone, even for a few moments, is worth the pain and the danger" (592). Actually, Carol's desires are more maternal than sexual. As she watches Val caress his guitar, she says, "I'd love to hold *you* that way, with that same—*tender protection!*" (592) She realizes the danger that Val is in and makes every attempt to warn and protect him, but her admonitions go unheeded. Like

the Cassandra of Greek myth, Carol always speaks the truth, but her message is ignored. Williams' intent, however, is that the audience understand the truth that she offers. In one of her last speeches, Williams has her move downstage and speak directly to the audience:

Something is wild in the country! This country used to be wild, the men and women were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts, for each other, but now it's sick with neon, it's broken out sick, with neon, like most other places. . . . (629)

The Old South has passed away and has been replaced by a chaotic, unfeeling world that alienates its people. “Nobody ever gets to know *no body!* We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life!” (583) says Val to Lady, a statement that Williams claimed as his own. “How much of Tennessee Williams is talking there?” asked Mike Wallace in a 1958 interview (Wallace 55). “I think about ninety percent,” Williams replied. The only way ever to escape from this prison of loneliness is through “communication with another person” (56) when “we can feel truly and deeply and passionately for another person” (57). Carol Cutrere's “truth” that she offers to the audience is a universal one that pervades the Williams canon.

Some of his women—Lady, Blanche, and Alma—must suffer in order to realize the truth, and we, the audience, see Williams' new myth at work in the very destruction of these characters. They are broken women because of injustice or unkindness, unfortunately the characteristics of the new age. Other Williams women, on the other hand, like Carol, Maggie, and Catharine Holly, actively fight against these elements of twentieth-century society. They exhibit, in their fortitude, the very qualities that enable them to survive. They are examples of Neumann's positive transformative archetype.

Catharine, in Suddenly Last Summer, is the feminine character who has perhaps the most difficult struggle of all the women in Williams' plays. She knows the truth and persistently holds to it even in the face of her own doom. Violet Venable, Sebastian's possessive mother, is willing to have her niece lobotomized, to have the truth "cut out," in order to preserve her own idealized perception of Sebastian. Violet is the archetypal Terrible Mother in Neumann's catalogue. An Oedipal relationship with Sebastian is suggested in her statement that, without her help, her son could not produce his "Poem of Summer." Long ago, she had abandoned her own husband in favor of her son. Furthermore, Violet's intense jealousy over Sebastian's choosing Catharine, a younger, more attractive woman, to accompany him on his yearly trip is additional testimony to her hovering, destructive relationship with him.

As she escorts Sebastian to Cabeza de Lobo, Catharine assumes the mother-protector role that Violet had always played. She is powerless, however, to save him from what seems to be his inevitable fate. Sebastian's determination to accept all things, never taking "any action about anything whatsoever" (419), eventually causes his own destruction. As she strives to tell the true story about Sebastian and his demise, Catharine is met with not only disbelief, but she faces the possibility of her own ruin as well. Indeed, throughout the play, there are numerous references to Catharine as truthgiver. When she learns that Dr. Cukrowicz plans to give her a sedative, she warns her mother and brother, "I won't have any choice but to tell the truth" (380). In Scene Four, she insists on her story, even though she meets with opposition:

I can't change the truth, I'm not God! I'm not even sure that He could, I don't think God can change truth! . . . (392)

As she begins her frightening story, the doctor implores her just to tell “the truth.” She replies, “the truth's the one thing I have never resisted!” (401) George and Mrs. Holly, however, attempt to convince her to change her story:

. . . [y]ou've just GOT to stop tellin' that story about what you say happened to Cousin Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo, even if it's what it *couldn't* be, TRUE!—You got to drop it, Sister, you can't tell such a story to civilized people in a civilized up-to-date country! (381)

George's futile pleading implies that in a civilized society, such a thing as she describes is not even possible. His motives for persuading Catharine not to tell her story are strictly self-serving; he wants his part of the inheritance that Sebastian has bequeathed him. Nevertheless, Catharine is persistent. “I know it's a hideous story,” she says, “but it's a true story of our time and the world we live in . . .” (382).

In an interview with Don Ross, Williams said of the play that “it's not a realistic play. The set lighting establishes a nonrealistic mood. I hope people will realize it's a moral fable of our times” (52). And in a later interview with David Frost, he commented on the universality of the theme of Suddenly Last Summer. “We all devour each other, in our fashion” (146). Thus, the truth that Catharine speaks of, while at first it seems primitive and perverse, is, according to Tennessee Williams, applicable in modern situations. The cannibal scene set in the tropical ambience of Cabeza de Lobo is symbolic of the spiritual cannibalism that Williams believed to be inherent in twentieth-century society.

According to Tischler, “the predatory female of the Williams world finds [jungle gardens] a natural habitat” (502). That Violet Venable continues to tend her dead son's primitive, tropical garden delineates her role as the devouring mother. Further, in Night of the Iguana, Maxine's hotel is in the middle of a tropical rain forest, a setting that reinforces her function as the “bright widow

spider" (794). Here, as in several other plays, Williams contrasts two feminine types. He juxtaposes Maxine Faulk and Hannah Jelkes, two characters who live opposite lifestyles and who represent two completely contrary philosophies.

Maxine is, at once, a synthesis of both Terrible Mother, as she attempts to dominate all those around her, and Good Mother. There are, to make this point, ample passages in the play in which she is connected to fertility symbols. That her hotel is located in a fertile tropical rain forest suggests her role as earth mother. She provides food and shelter to the visitors at her retreat, and serves almost as a mother figure for Shannon. Whenever he is about to "crack up," he returns to the Costa Verde where Maxine willingly offers herself and all that she owns to Shannon.

Further, she is sexually uninhibited, a woman unashamed of her natural instincts. She can easily move from her husband Fred to the native boys to Shannon, without regard for conventional morality. Like Maggie Pollitt, Maxine readily asserts herself, sometimes almost excessively. As Tischler points out, "her symbols are natural ones of vegetation, water, and animal life—all indications of her archetypal function" (505). She is like Eliade's "Universal Genetrix," but her maternal interest in Shannon is often selfish and salacious. She attempts to tie him down in much the same way as the natives have tied the iguana.

Hannah, however, is a markedly different mother figure. Shannon refers to her in Act Three as "Miss . . . Thin-Standing-Up-Female-Buddha" (819), an epithet that suggests both her strength and her wisdom. In stage directions, Williams describes her in religious terms:

Hannah is remarkable-looking—ethereal, almost ghostly. She suggests a Gothic cathedral image of a medieval saint, but animated. (752)

Unlike Maxine, Hannah, the perennial virgin, has transcended the realm of physical lusts. While Maxine flaunts her sexuality, Hannah appears almost sexless or “androgynous” (752), unhampered by the temptations of the flesh. Yet, she does not as a result seem frustrated or distraught as do Blanche, Maggie, and Alma. Tischler points out the pieta` image in the poignant scene in which Hannah prepares tea for Shannon. “Hannah . . . serves as a cold Oriental madonna, offering him poppy seed tea as he works through his voluptuous crucifixion” (506). Incapable of anything but compassion, she offers Shannon the benefits of her own suffering. Hannah has endured her own personal crisis and now can totally empathize with him as he experiences another “crack-up.” She tells Shannon:

I can help you because I've been through what you are going through now. I had something like your spook—I just had a different name for him. I called him the blue devil, . . . (824)

When Shannon asks how she overcame her “spook,” she replies, “I showed him that I could endure him and I made him respect my endurance” (824). Like that of the other truthgivers, Hannah's message is simply to live, to endure. She has accomplished what none of the other female characters could achieve, and that is happiness and contentment without the need for sexual gratification. As Jeanne M. McGlinn says in her essay entitled “Tennessee Williams' Women,” “In Night of the Iguana, Williams makes a clear statement that sexuality is not a necessary prerequisite to a loving relationship” (523). Williams himself admitted that Hannah is vitally different from his other heroines. “She has come to terms, of a kind, with life, yes. She's a very, very modest person, Hannah, and in that sense, to me, a very beautiful person. I mean Hannah . . . almost as a definition of what I think is most beautiful spiritually in a person . . .” (Terkel

83). In a more recent interview with Jeanne Fayard, Williams again commented on the character of Hannah Jelkes.

JF: Your work, it seems to me, is a quest of the androgynous.

TW: Exactly.
Hannah? She had to pass through the tunnel of despair. She is a Blanche purified of confusion and sensuality. She is nearly detached from life. She feels for others. She accepts everything from others. (209)

Obviously, Hannah is Williams' consummate spokesperson for what he deems the hope for twentieth-century man. Her message is one of kindness, compassion, and endurance, elements that Williams believed passed away with the decline of the Old South, but which a few truthgivers, most often women, convey.

Even his deeply troubled characters convey profound truths that are relevant to modern society. Alma Winemiller compares the human struggle to the architecture of Gothic cathedrals. The upward thrusts of the arched windows and domes are symbolic of earthly struggles; just as the cathedral seems to stretch toward the heavens, we too must transcend our self-imposed limitations. “[T]hat is the secret, the principle back of existence—the everlasting struggle and aspiration for more than our human limits have placed in our reach” (258), she explains to John Buchanan.

Indeed, the world view of Tennessee Williams may at times seem bleak; such perverse subjects as rape, castration, murder, mental breakdown, and, more generally, “man's inhumanity to man,” do abound in his plays. However, he does offer hope and an optimism that is usually conveyed by his female characters, most of whom either become sacrificial victims or convey the truth revealed by their own deaths or the death of another character. Through his

archetypal heroines, Williams reveals universal truths—primordial lessons—for the “weak and divided,” lonely creatures of modern culture.

SUFFERING AND SACRIFICE: PATHS TO MYTHIC TRUTH

Suffering itself is a deception; for its core is rapture, which is the attribute of illumination.

—Campbell, The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology 56

In the Poetics, Aristotle defines what he calls the “Tragic Incident” as it fits into the structure of a tragedy. It “is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds, and the like” (Aristotle 26), misfortunes that occur to a “man like ourselves” (27) and which arouse and purge the emotions of both pity and fear in the audience. This catharsis restores order; it is also the very premise of the function of art in classical Greece—that is, to reconcile reason and emotion and to enlarge, exercise, and refine one's feelings by leading him outside himself (Bate 19).

The Greek belief that suffering and sacrifice serve a vital function in the formation of the “total man” was not new. It is rooted in the primordial experience; indeed, it is a mythic, archetypal theme that is imbedded in the human psyche, the collective unconscious. The Greeks drew upon this idea and articulated it; however, it was understood in much the same light by the primitive tribes that practiced rituals of initiation and sacrifice to restore order or to move from a state of innocence to the realm of enlightenment.

In his Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Campbell posits the proposition that temperate or tropical regions give rise to Dionysian group festivals which celebrate the renewal of nature (Seeded Earth: Sacrifice 33). These societies hold to the belief that death generates life; therefore, the notion

of “self-offering as a way to self-validation” (37) forms the very fabric of these cultures and consequently finds its way into their myths and art forms.

The plays of Tennessee Williams, most of which are set in the temperate climate of the American South or in even more tropical areas, exhibit the same elements of sacrifice that appear in the rituals of primitive planting cultures. There are, indeed, salient examples of primitive rituals within several of his plays, the most obvious of which is the cannibalism in Suddenly Last Summer. In his Historical Atlas of World Mythology, Campbell points out that “cannibalism is a feature commonly associated with the ceremonies of agricultural tribes recognizing the mythological image of a primal being whose body became and is now the universe” (Seeded Earth: Sacrifice 44). While most of Williams' plays do not present sacrifice in such a conspicuously savage manner, there are numerous instances of a character who is destroyed either physically or spiritually and whose destruction restores order and contributes to the enlightenment of that character or other characters in the play. Furthermore, the literal or spiritual deaths that occur are not always *willing* or self sacrifices; nevertheless, the spirit of renewal—the realization that death is a natural and fundamental part of the cosmic order—is evident in the reactions of the characters who experience or witness death. Thus, although Williams' plays may not necessarily possess all of the components of Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, they exhibit a tragic *vision*, a moment of illumination, a sort of archetypal epiphany rooted in the primal human experience.

Chapter Three examined Williams' feminine characters as truthgivers, the idea being that in tropical areas, the female serves a vital, indeed a primary, function in the whole, organic society. Many of Williams' heroines must suffer in order to attain the truths that they convey either explicitly or implicitly. Not all of

those who suffer, however, reach the level of sacrifice. Obviously, Blanche is a sacrificial victim, but Maggie and Catharine represent in their dogged determination the very spirit of survival. Other characters, nevertheless, are clearly sacrificed, either literally or symbolically. When they are male characters, the significance of their deaths or sacrifices is generally revealed by a woman truthgiver. That Williams employs the theme of sacrifice in so many of his plays suggests that he was perhaps in touch with the same creative force that stirred the primitive races of tropical, equatorial climates, the tragedians of Greece's Golden Age, and the societies of both occidental and oriental cultures. As Williams himself said, "I write mainly from my unconscious mind" (qtd. in Wager 129), a statement which would seem to suggest the applicability of the Jungian notion of the collective unconscious.

While there are no characters in either Summer and Smoke or Cat on a Hot Tin Roof who are literally destroyed, there are those who suffer symbolic sacrifice. Certainly, Alma Winemiller, who, Williams tells us in stage directions, "seems to belong to a more elegant age, such as the Eighteenth Century" (221), witnesses the disintegration of her old values. In The Broken World of Tennessee Williams, Esther Merle Jackson compares her to John Buchanan, pointing out that he is "a man who believes in the fundamental morality of a primitive existence—in the 'ethic' of primal man" (138). According to Jackson, Summer and Smoke is a metaphor for the "crisis of modern civilization: its inability to choose, finally, between the lofty ideals of the humanistic tradition and . . . materialistic values" (138). Through the "collapse of [Alma's] moral order" (140), John achieves a redemption, of sorts. He is able to acknowledge the ideas that she has stood for, and he is capable of being honest. In Scene XI, when Nellie announces her upcoming marriage to John, a new and genuine

compassion for Alma is apparent in his words and actions: "I have a respect for the truth, and I have a respect for you—" (288). Up until this time, he has flaunted the fact that he has lived for sensual gratification; now, however, he sees for the first time that Alma's ideals are viable and necessary and acknowledges her role as truthgiver. The destruction of Alma's moral code is apparent when, in Scene XI, she comes to John on "equal terms" (289): "I have changed my mind," she tells him. ". . . the girl who said 'no,' she doesn't exist any more, she died last summer—" (287). In her spiritual "sacrifice" she brings John "around to [her] way of thinking" (288) and teaches him a valuable lesson:

Nellie (to Alma): He (John) told me about the wonderful talks he'd had with you last summer when he was so mixed up and how you inspired him and you more than anyone else was responsible for his pulling himself together, . . . (283)

In addition, Alma admits that even in her own weakness there is strength.

Oh, I suppose I am sick, one of those weak and divided people who slip like shadows among you solid strong ones. But sometimes, out of necessity, we shadowy people take on a strength of our own. I have that now. (289)

Thus, through her "sacrifice," both Alma and John achieve enlightenment. They each learn the cause of their individual suffering and begin living what appear to be changed lives.

Brick Pollitt does not experience the breakdown that Alma does; however, he is, in Williams' own words, "the most tragic figure in the play" (Davis 46). A drama that defines the effects of mendacity, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof delves into the issue of appearance versus reality, a fairly common theme in Williams' work. Although each character has his own view of the nature of reality, and although Brick is the protagonist in this play, it is Big Daddy's death which forces the others to look beyond their own false values and see the truth.

Esther Merle Jackson's comment regarding the play is both appropriate and viable: "The ambiguity of [Big Daddy's] illness symbolizes the whole problem of the play, for it poses the crucial question, not only about Big Daddy Pollitt, but also about the whole of mankind. What is the nature of its illness?" (142). Williams seems to suggest that it is a belief in illusions, or false values, which infects the Pollitts and, on a more universal level, all of mankind. The dying Big Daddy, the crude and powerful patriarch, ultimately sees the failure of money as his savior:

—the human animal is a beast that dies and if he's got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life everlasting!—Which it never can be. . . . (457)

Big Daddy is finally aware that life cannot be bought. The contemplation of his own death has made him re-evaluate his relationship to his family; for the first time, he and Brick are finally honest with each other. Big Daddy tells Brick that he never even liked Big Mama and that he hates Gooper and Mae, who are, according to Williams, "social climbers," products of the "New South" (qtd. in Davis 46). Brick, in turn, admits to Big Daddy that he is an alcoholic, that he drinks because he is disgusted with the mendacity of the effete society into which he has been born. They both acknowledge the fact that they have never lied to each other; but on this occasion, Big Daddy pleads with Brick to open up to him:

Brick: I never lied to you, Big Daddy.

Big Daddy: Did I ever to *you*?

Brick: No, sir

Big Daddy: Then there are at least two people that never lied to each other.

Brick: But we've never *talked* to each other.

Big Daddy: We can *now*. (471)

The conversation that follows is an emotionally-charged one over the relationship between Brick and Skipper. Brick reacts defensively, but Big Daddy responds compassionately: "I'm just saying I understand . . ." (474). Finally, Big Daddy gets to the heart of the matter; he says to Brick, "This disgust with mendacity is disgust with yourself" (479). To "even the score" (477) Brick confesses to Big Daddy that this birthday will be his last. Despite Big Daddy's violent reaction, Brick responds poignantly, ". . . we've been friends . . .—And being friends is telling each other the truth . . ." (481). The melee that follows in the family conference exposes the truth in all of the characters as well as the "*black* thing" (500) that infects the Pollitt family. For Williams, it is the same illness that attacks twentieth-century Americans. "I think that deliberate, conscienceless mendacity, the acceptance of falsehood and hypocrisy, is the most dangerous of all sins," he said in a 1957 interview (Ross 40). Through Big Daddy's dying, the members of the Pollitt household are forced to come to grips with the lies that they have been living. Maggie, of all the characters, best understands that the occasion of Big Daddy's dying is a time to affirm life. She is determined to do what is necessary to turn her lie—that she is carrying Brick's child—into a truth. Thus, Maggie is a survivor in both a personal, and, through her participation in the life cycle, a cosmic sense.

Not all of Williams' characters are willing participants in the life cycle, however. T. Lawrence Shannon, the defrocked Episcopal minister in Night of the Iguana, often appears ludicrous as he participates in his symbolic crucifixion. His emotional "crack up" followed by his retreat to Maxine's womb-like haven is actually a mock sacrifice. Nevertheless, it does serve a vital

purpose. It translates pain into revelation for Shannon, and it strengthens Hannah in her own resolve to bear up to the unkindness and violence that she and her grandfather must continuously confront. “Nothing human disgusts me unless it’s unkind, violent,” she tells Shannon in Act Three (833). Her lesson to him is one of “endurance” (824): to “accept whatever situation you cannot improve” (832). And even though Shannon essentially gives up by staying with the widow in this lush, tropical paradise, he is fortified because Hannah has helped him through his “voluptuous self-crucifixion” (820).

Essentially, the theme of Iguana is, again, appearance versus reality, or what Hannah calls, “the logic of contradictions” (822). Shannon tells Hannah that “we—live on two levels, . . . the realistic level and the fantastic level . . .” (794). When he is forced to live on the realistic level, he crumbles because he cannot function—he cannot serve himself and society at the same time. He has been “defrocked” because of an unfortunate incident with a young, pretty Sunday school teacher who “declared herself to [him]—wildly” (782). The following Sunday the guilt-ridden Shannon shouted from the pulpit:

I'm tired of conducting services in praise and worship of a senile delinquent— . . . All your Western theologies, the whole mythology of them, are based on the concept of God as a *senile delinquent*.
(783)

Essentially, Shannon's numerous breakdowns occur because he is unable to reconcile his own view of God and morality with the views of society. His frequent self-sacrifices ultimately lead him to what he really needs—acceptance and human companionship, or what Hannah calls “still waters” (784).

Williams counterpoints Shannon's gradual decline, his “going through hell” (818), and his renewal, a symbolic “resurrection,” with the aged Nonno's frantic efforts to complete his final poem. Hannah's dying grandfather, who

often appears foolish and embarrassing to her, offers basic truths in his simple lines of poetry. His poems speak of the cycle of life and of endurance that is unhampered by “the shadow that darkens the way—” (789). In his final poem, which he recites just before his death, he expresses his optimism that life goes on, in spite of misfortune and even death. Shannon, in his “tour of God’s world,” is redeemed finally, aided by the compassionate Hannah and the wise Nonno. Hannah, who appears almost incorruptible, provides love and understanding, attributes of the type of god that Shannon seeks. She offers him “a little act of grace” (841) as he struggles to “atone for the sins of himself and the world” (817). For Williams, it is these qualities of kindness and compassion that troubled, twentieth-century man needs, and they are qualities that he feels are lacking in modern society.

It is apparent that Williams uses death or symbolic death in many of his plays so that his protagonists or other main characters may achieve some heightened awareness or experience some universal truth. Williams’ obvious concern with suffering and death may be construed as a function of his “Southern” experience. One of the distinctive elements of the deep South in America is its preoccupation with death and the afterlife. However, not only in the South, but also in other temperate or tropical climates, there abounds the belief that death is necessary to bring about new life or simply a sense of renewal. Because agrarian climates constantly witness the life-and-death cycles of nature, their myths and folkways reflect this same cyclic pattern. Williams tapped into this consciousness that was inherent in the geography of his birth and childhood. In so doing, however, he drew from a more cosmic consciousness, the realm of myth and archetype.

Death is, of course, a natural part of the life cycle, and those characters who accept death or symbolic death may achieve very positive insights from their experience and participation in this cycle. Sacrifice, however, is a much starker example of death as a vehicle to truth, as a means of restoring order. According to Campbell, vegetative cults elicit similar mythologies whose themes include “death as the generator of life” and “self-offering as a way to self-validation” (Atlas. Seeded Earth: Sacrifice 37), the most obvious example being that of the crucified Christ.

In Orpheus Descending, Williams clearly patterns his protagonist on the Christ figure. Critic David Matthew notes that even Val's last name—Xavier—is a pun on the word *savior* (175). He is cloaked in mystery from the time he appears on stage until the time of his violent death. He brings new life to Lady Torrence, but he is ultimately sacrificed by a group of brutal zealots who are bent on making him pay for his “crime.” Jackson points out the similarity between the frenzy of the determined townspeople who lynch Val and the “fever for crucifixion which gripped the Jerusalem of Jesus' day” (145). In her discussion of the moral function of Williams' work, she says that by using the myth of the dying god, “Williams seeks to expose the ruthless savagery still extant in modern man. . . . He shows the death of Val to be the climax of an entire complex of transgressions which, in the private and public consciousness of the community, required a victim” (145). Val is essentially a scapegoat; it is as if he has taken the sins of the whole town upon himself; therefore, his sacrifice is inevitable. Even when he is warned by three people, Carol, Sheriff Talbot, and eventually Lady, that he should flee Two River County, “where awful things take place” (Orpheus 599), he chooses to stay despite the obvious consequences. He accepts his fate and awaits the final resolution—his own

death. Ultimately, both Val and Lady are killed, not surprisingly, on the day before Easter, a date that has Christian, classical, and archetypal allusions. It is a time of the promise of new life, of renewal; it is a season that celebrates at once the notion of death and resurrection and the cycles of nature. Their sacrifice insures new life, just as the snakeskin jacket that Val leaves behind represents regeneration. The great truth that their deaths manifest is that humans are really brutes beneath their civilized exteriors. According to Jackson, in Orpheus Descending "Williams uncovers the Dionysian consciousness which yet lives and thrives in modern America" (146). The savagery that often appears in Williams' plays contrasts sharply with more humane characteristics such as understanding, compassion, and tenderness—elements that Williams sees as man's only true salvation.

The violence and narrowmindedness that are exhibited by the local law enforcement officials and others in this small Delta town are not limited to those who live in the rural backwaters of the American South. In Suddenly Last Summer, Williams explores the brutality of Violet Venable, who represents a wealthy, intelligent, and polite society which is no less corrupt than the society of Two River County. She, like the Pollitts, can afford almost anything. She even attempts to finance her niece's prefrontal lobotomy in order to protect her illusions about Sebastian. She eventually comes to realize, however, that money cannot always hide the truth.

In Suddenly Last Summer, Williams' most primitive and ritualistic sacrifice occurs. Sebastian follows completely his primitive instincts, his baser nature. He lacks the qualities of compassion and tenderness, and he exploits those around him to satisfy his own perverse physical desires. He used his

mother first and then Catharine to attract the attention of young boys. “I was PROCURING for him!” cries Catharine in Scene Four.

She used to do it, too. [Referring to Violet]
Not consciously! She didn't *know* that she was procuring for him in the smart, the fashionable places they used to go to before last summer! . . . We both did the same thing for him, made contacts for him, . . . (412)

Sebastian is, indeed, ruthless in his struggle to satisfy his sensual appetite. He is a personification of his primitive tropical garden, complete with flesh-eating plants. Furthermore, his views of life and God are commensurate with the life that he lives. Sebastian interprets the scene of the carnivorous birds devouring the sea-turtles as a metaphor for all of life. “Well, now I've seen Him!” (357)—meaning God—he concludes after he has watched the spectacle on the beach. For Sebastian, God is the creator of a world in which life feeds on life, where instinct rules. It is a satisfying belief for a man who lives out his impulsive passions, unhampered by conventional morals or ethics. Such a lifestyle proves fatal for Sebastian, however. “He is completely enslaved by his baser nature and this is what destroys him,” said Williams in a 1971 interview with Jeanne Fayard. “His death is a ritualistic death, symbolic” (210). He is literally eaten alive by starving, savage young boys crying out “Pan, pan, pan!” (Suddenly Last Summer 415). Yet he seems to walk into his death willingly, even though he seems terrified near the end. He feels that he is “directed” to be a sacrificial victim. “I tried to save him, Doctor,” Catharine appealed.

Doctor: From what? Save him from what?

Catharine: Completing!—a sort of!—*image!*—he had of himself as a sort of!—*sacrifice* to a!—*terrible* sort of a—

Doctor: —God?

Catharine: Yes, a—*cruel* one, Doctor! (397)

George Niesen points out in his essay, "The Artist Against the Reality," that Sebastian's observations of the carnivorous birds and his own insectivorous plants led him to think death to be the "ultimate purification and the only monumentally significant action in life" (479). His death is significant because it exposes the truth about Sebastian as well as the lies that Violet has shrouded herself in. At the moral level, it depicts the consequences of one who follows too completely his physical instincts. In The Broken World of Tennessee Williams, Jackson suggests that the climax and denouement of the play actually focus on the doctor, whose concern for Catharine reveals a "commitment to moral principle" (147). He must weigh the truth of Catharine's frightening story and "must make the decision as to whether Catharine should be deprived of the 'human ability' to suffer" (147). Even when it perhaps seems easier simply to comply with Violet's wishes and perform the lobotomy, he maintains a moral and ethical position. Jackson sees Dr. Cukrowicz as the personification of Williams' optimism that good will ultimately prevail and that understanding and compassion are potentially stronger than instinctive brutality.

Unabashed brutality, unchecked by conventional standards of twentieth-century society, is probably nowhere more evident in the Williams canon than in the person of Stanley Kowalski. At the surface level, Williams contrasts Stanley's rawness with Blanche's fragility to show the conflict between the demands of modern culture and innate human impulse—the *id* and the *superego*. It soon becomes obvious, however, that Blanche is not nearly as delicate as she first appears. Behind her genteel exterior, she is just as sensual and strong as Stanley.

Several critics have agreed that in Streetcar, the bestial Stanley causes the delicate Blanche's decline. They see the play as essentially a struggle

between man's spiritual and physical natures and Blanche as a victim of mindless brutality and aggression. Such an interpretation, however, detracts from Blanche's role as protagonist in this modern tragedy. Her struggle in this play is not so much with Stanley as with herself. In Bert Cardullo's essay, "Drama of Intimacy and Tragedy of Incomprehension," he asserts that Blanche is naturally opposed to Stanley since their views of life and their relationships to Stella are in conflict. "The inevitability of her doom, however, springs not from the character of this conflict but from her rejection of Allan Grey on the dance floor of Moon Lake Casino many years before" (138). Because she lacked the compassion and understanding to deal with her troubled young husband, he committed suicide, and Blanche is unable to free herself from self-inflicted guilt. She confesses to Mitch in Scene Six:

. . . He came to me for help. I didn't know that. . . . He was in the quicksands and clutching at me—but I wasn't holding him out, I was slipping in with him! I didn't know that. I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself. (158-9)

Instead of expressing compassion for her husband when she discovered his homosexuality, she expressed disgust, a mistake for which she cannot forgive herself. Blanche's reaction, which stems from her inability to accept reality, causes her neurosis, and eventually her downfall. She realizes all too clearly that she denied love and understanding when it was most needed. That she comprehends the significance of human caring is apparent when Mitch comforts her and says tenderly, "You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. . . ," to which Blanche responds, "Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!" (159-60). For Blanche, human companionship, compassion, and understanding are synonymous with God.

Blanche is, probably, the most tragic protagonist in all of Williams' plays. She is not merely at the mercy of forces beyond her control. She has a strength all her own. In an interview with John Gruen, Williams talked of her inner strength:

I think the weak—if they are not just pusillanimous—are compelled to have more strength than those who are overtly strong. They wouldn't survive at all unless they had this inner strength. They may suffer a great deal for it—and I suppose they do. But I've always felt that Blanche was stronger than Stanley Kowalski. (119)

In a later interview with Studs Terkell, Williams spoke of Blanche's decline:

TW: . . . the meaning of the play is that this woman who was potentially a superior person was broken by—

ST: Brutality?

TW: Was broken by society.

ST: Society?

TW: The falsities in it. (81)

Blanche is sacrificed because she once embraced an element of society that she has come to despise—its failure to accept individuals, to care for them despite their inadequacies. From the time since she brought on her husband's suicide, she has retreated into a world of fantasy, unable to deal with her own conscience and her sense of failure. As she says herself, "I don't want realism. I want magic" (177). As a result, she has sought out "the kindness of strangers" wherever she could because she does not love herself. According to Leonard Berkman, she is a tragic heroine in that she has refused "to shirk a responsibility that the conventional society of her time and place would have eagerly excused . . ." (qtd. in Cardullo 141). But since Blanche is, in essence, not a part of conventional society, she must hide behind the genteel facade that society will accept. Beneath the guise of the typical Southern belle, however, is

a woman who has become well acquainted with death. Her life has been a series of small sacrifices. She explains her unfortunate past experiences and the loss of Belle Reve:

I, I, / took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths!
The long parade to the graveyard! . . . (105)

Blanche has striven to live the beautiful dream, but it has failed her. “I . . . fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it!” (104). Stella's statement to Stanley— “. . . it [Belle Reve] had to be—sacrificed or something” (110)—suggests that Blanche and Belle Reve are both remnants of the Southern past, part of a way of life in decline. Her sacrifice is inevitable. Her frequent baths suggest that she is even preparing for some type of ritual. In her confrontation with Mitch, she recognizes that she has been responsible for her own doom:

Blanche: [as if to herself]: Crumble and fade and—regrets—
recriminations . . . “If you'd done this, it wouldn't've cost me that!”
(179)

In Scene Ten, when Blanche is faced with her own sacrifice, she recognizes a very vital truth about herself:

Physical beauty is passing. A transitory possession. But beauty of
the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart—
and I have all of those things—aren't taken away but grow! (184)

Ultimately, Stanley attacks Blanche in a manner that appears primitively savage. He refers to her as “Tiger” and then proceeds to overtake her on this night that Williams describes as “filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle” (185). Blanche's sacrifice is necessary in restoring the order, however primitive, of the Kowalski household, and it also completes the redemption that Blanche has sought since the night at Moon Lake Casino. In the final scene, Williams, through stage directions, states that Blanche leads the way out of the Kowalski flat: “Blanche walks on without turning, followed by the doctor and the

matron. . . " (196). To be sure, Blanche's willingness to meet her fate in order to achieve this order is consistent with her role as tragic heroine. However, the primitive jungle imagery that Williams employs in the rape scene suggests that he tapped into a primal, archetypal basis for sacrifice that transcends a more modern definition of the term and suggests that Blanche's self-sacrifice does more than restore the order of the Kowalski household; it affirms a basic truth about the human condition.

Through such images, Williams conveys his themes against a mythic background with universal implications. The deep truths inherent in primitive agrarian cultures are the same truths that Williams espouses in his drama. Behind the false values of twentieth-century culture lies a basic need for genuine human compassion and kindness, or, as Hannah Jelkes says, "[b]roken gates between people so they can reach each other" (823). In an interview with David Frost, Williams expressed his belief that modern man needs an older romanticism:

Frost: What is your credo?

Williams: That romanticism is absolutely essential. That we can't really live bearably without a good deal of it. It's very painful, but we need it.

Frost: By romanticism do you mean fantasy?

Williams: A certain amount of that and the ability to feel tenderness toward another human being. The ability to love. (142)

The fact that Williams incorporated into his plays obvious images of fertility, the life cycle, and the notions of death and renewal through a commitment to human compassion implies that he, whether consciously or unconsciously, drew from universal symbols to convey a "new" myth which is, in truth, timeless.

CONCLUSION: TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, PLAYWRIGHT OF PRIMITIVE MYTH

Whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he enthrals and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and the transitory into the realm of the ever enduring.

—Campbell, The Portable Jung 321

Conventional critical wisdom is that Tennessee Williams' plays are best interpreted as a product of his background, as artistic accounts of his deeply troubled life. Williams lamented the fact that many audiences limited him as an autobiographical playwright. In his introductory essay to Cat on a Hot Tin Roof entitled "Person-To-Person," he discusses the dilemmas facing him as a writer, pointing out that "it is a pity that so much of all creative work is so closely related to the personality of the one who does it" (401). He explains the problems that an artist must deal with when he writes out of his own experience:

It is sad and embarrassing and unattractive that those emotions that stir him deeply enough to demand expression, and to charge their expression with some measure of light and power, are nearly all rooted, however changed in their surface, in the particular and sometimes peculiar concerns of the artist himself, that special world, the passions and images of it that each of us weaves about him from birth to death, a web of monstrous complexity, spun forth at a speed that is incalculable to a length beyond measure, from the spider mouth of his own singular perceptions. (401)

Williams attempted through his plays to do much more than simply portray his own life on stage. He considered himself a fellow member of the human race—not superior just because he was an artist. He was not polemical in his drama but, rather, sought to expose human weaknesses (his own weaknesses) so that they might be purged. He believed that it is only through facing his faults that man may overcome them. "If there exists any area in which a man can rise

above his moral condition, imposed upon him at birth and long before birth, by the nature of his breed, then I think [he has] only a willingness to know it, to face its existence in him. . . ,” Williams remarked in the Forward to Sweet Bird of Youth. The fundamental weaknesses that Williams believed to be a part of modern culture are obviously worked into his plays. In Streetcar, Cat, Iguana, Orpheus Descending, Suddenly Last Summer, and Summer and Smoke, he decries hypocrisy, mendacity, violence, and unkindness, and he disparages a society that subverts such gentler human tendencies as compassion, sympathy, and genuine communication. These elements of man's nature passed away, Williams suggests, with the decline of the Old South. They were sacrificed in order to make way for a new age, an era that Williams felt desperately needed these virtues. He realized that since the culture of the Old South had essentially died, the myths that were inherent in this culture were no longer viable. Yet he knew all too clearly that modern man, a lonely creature, was doomed unless he could rekindle the human emotions inherent in an older culture. In “Person-To-Person” he conveys his notion that “[p]ersonal lyricism is the outcry of prisoner to prisoner from the cell in solitary where each is confined for the duration of his life” (401). Having recognized the falsity of the traditional myth of the South, Williams strived to delineate a new myth for our culture. It was one based upon primal truths. In the plays that are the subject of this thesis, Williams uses obvious archetypes that were at his disposal in the American South. Since it is basically an agrarian society, it is filled with mythic images that are not limited to its geography. Indeed, *all* temperate or tropical climates share similar myths and legends; thus, in drawing upon these primitive patterns, Williams set his modern plays against a universal, primordial background.

He saw twentieth-century man, stripped of his “refined” exterior, as still a brute, a Stanley Kowalski figure. In the Foreword to Sweet Bird, he makes this telling statement:

We are all civilized people, which means that we are all savages at heart but observing a few amenities of civilized behavior. (645)

It is this conflict, the struggle between natural instinct and societal demands, that poses the dilemma for modern culture. What Williams conveyed in his work is that man should not deny his humanity by placing too many restrictions upon his natural impulses. As both Maggie Pollitt and Carol Cutrere have made clear, the basic instinct for human beings is to *live* and be *alive*, and to truly live, we must not be taken in by the false values of modern society. There must be a new myth, as Jackson points out, one that will “restore meaning to life and which can reconcile the conflict within reality itself” (54).

In the plays of Tennessee Williams, one may find this new myth constructed from timeless and universal themes. It is a myth that is relevant, says Judith J. Thompson, “to an age and culture bereft of a commonly shared mythology” (684). It is rooted in a provincial construct—the South and other tropical regions—but it far surpasses the confines of geography. According to Tischler, Williams’ “signature is in the jungle imagery.” He conveys primitive themes “wrapped in the decadently lavish style of southern rhetoric” (508). His “new” myth conveys truths that are deep within the human consciousness, at the primal level. By drawing upon the mythic archetypes inherent in temperate and tropical climates, Williams had at his disposal certain corollary myths which give his works their rich, multi-layered texture. Among these are archetypes related to agrarian societies, such as the idea of death and rebirth and the notion of woman as both the giver of life and the conveyer of truth. Further, the

myths of suffering and sacrifice, which are experiences that restore order and reveal universal truths, are vital components of the cultures in these climates. Williams' plays embody these primal archetypes in language that is clearly poetic.

Through his personal lyricism, Williams attempted to restore order to a chaotic world. In Camino Real, Williams explains, through the character of Byron, why he was driven to write:

. . . a poet's vocation . . . is to influence the heart in gentler fashion.
 . . . A heart is a sort of—instrument—that translates *noise* into
music, chaos into—order. (77)

While he felt that he was unsuccessful in transmuting the raw material of his “own life into the stuff of poetry and drama,” or, in his words, in “rising above the singular to the plural concern, from personal to general import” (“Person-to-Person” 402), he was successful in conveying what he believed was necessary for the salvation of modern man. Simply put, it is the reconciliation of his intellect and his savage heart, or, in Jackson's words, the relationship between “individual morality [and] societal conflict” (60). Through the ritual of the theatre, Tennessee Williams, a modern “shaman,” employs such primitive themes of suffering, sacrifice, and the resultant truths expressed particularly by women, to convey the tender qualities of communication, charity, sympathy, and understanding—human elements that transcend the boundaries of geography and the limits of the life of one lonely, troubled playwright.

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