

Postgraduate English

www.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

Issue 15

March 2007

Editors: Ollie Taylor and Kostas Boyiopoulos

***The Concept of One-ness in Tennessee
Williams' Kingdom of Earth (The Seven
Descents Of Myrtle)***

Halla Diyab*

* University of Leicester

The Concept of One-ness in Tennessee Williams' Kingdom of Earth (The Seven Descents Of Myrtle)

Halla Diyab

University of Leicester

Postgraduate English, Issue 15, March 2007

Tennessee Williams' *The Night Of The Iguana* (1961) ends with Hannah Jelkes' concept of "home", a fluctuating mental space that is built between two people as a therapeutic alternative to the characters' sense of entrapment within the exterior space.^[1] By building "a nest in the heart" of T. Lawrence Shannon, Hannah helps him endure and accept his subterranean world. However, with his 1968 play *Kingdom of Earth (Earth)*, Williams develops this concept of home into the idea of "one-ness" as a new vision of liberation.

Like other late plays (*Small Craft Warnings* (1972), *In a Bar of Tokyo Hotel* (1969), *Out Cry* (1973) and *House Not Meant to Stand* (1982), *Earth*, rather than presenting a completely new set of themes, marks a change in his mode of expressing those which had long concerned him throughout his dramatic career. His drama at the end of 1960s still explores the theme of minority, but, unlike his early plays (*The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (1955)) that largely deal with it in relation to an identifiable minority group, in his later works Williams moves towards dramatizing the experience of marginality itself.^[2] To achieve this, he starts to explore this experience in all its complexity in relation to a small group of characters alienated from their social world suffering from varying degrees of anxiety.

This is not to imply that Williams in these plays aligns himself with certain schools or movements. In shifting his focus from the individual to a broader view of social relationships, he does reflect a general trend in American thought in the 1960s. But Williams goes beyond identity politics by choosing to shift his dramatic focus from a specifically marginalized group to deal with the experience

of marginality in general, where a group of characters work collectively to reach their liberation. Here, the isolated individuals come together to prevent their solitary alienation. In this way, the concept of minority becomes more abstract, with characters' interacting to create their own space of liberation. Minority, in these plays takes, the form of fluctuating mental space that is created between two marginalized or confined characters who come together to be liberated from their interior confinement. This place will be referred to here as "the circle of one-ness". The use of the word "circle" signifies the circularity of the minority experience in this play where the characters resort to projecting their anxiety onto each other and have no choice but to go on within this endless circle of anxiety and entrapment. This is visualized by certain exterior items on the stage, such as the kitchen table, through which this circle is created. The use of the word "one-ness" does not suggest that characters do not come into conflict with each other but, rather, signifies the integration of two characters and their realization that, despite their differences, they need each other to cope with the exterior hostile space that confines them.

Kingdom of Earth dramatizes the experience of two characters who succeed in creating their circle of one-ness. Here, in *Earth*, we are introduced to the stages of how this circle is created between Myrtle and Chicken. It stands for the fluctuating mental space established between them through their physical contact as an outlet for their bodily confinement. This liminal space is where the experience of minority lies in this play. It is visualized by the "kitchen table", around which the characters' movement is described.

To achieve this, Williams begins by presenting characters that are trapped within their psyche rather than marginalized by a particular situation. In this sense, the play signifies a dramatic transition from *Iguana* towards Williams' later plays regarding the minority experience. In *Earth*, this experience takes a circular form where the characters resort to projecting their anxiety and confinement into each other; the play suggests that they have no choice but to hold to each other within the circle of one-ness. This circularity is developed in his later plays to focus on

language itself, which becomes frustrating because it appears to take the characters nowhere.

The action of the play takes place in a farmhouse on the Mississippi Delta, during the flooding season in early spring. The play opens with the arrival of Lot, a young man suffering from tuberculosis, to his childhood home with his new bride Myrtle, ex-stripper and a sometime whore. They quickly encounter Lot's half brother, Chicken, who is African American, who "rules" over the place. The play depicts the entrapment of these three characters within the house after the flood warning is issued. Throughout the play we are presented with contrasts between the two brothers: Lot is impotent and transvestite, while Chicken is a heterosexual, strong and lusty "wood-colt". Unlike Chicken, who earns his name by drinking the blood of a chicken on the roof, Lot coughs up blood out of his left infected lung because of his TB. Lot has a special arrangement with Chicken: he runs the place for him and goes to him after Lot's death. The play ends with Myrtle involved in fellatio with Chicken on the kitchen table. They both witness Lot's death in the parlor after he has resurrected his dead mother's image by wearing her clothes.

The play establishes two main spatial areas in which the action takes place: the elegant bedroom and the kitchen. Between these two areas, Myrtle is placed, seeking survival from the coming destruction of the flood. Her only escape is to the stairs where her vertical spatial movements visualize her gradually liberated self. Within these spatial areas, the two male characters struggle to get Myrtle who represents an object/outlet of their anxiety and confinement. On the one hand, Lot is confined in his past (which he tries to revive by his cross-dressing, imitating his dead mother, and resorting to the elegant bedroom). On the other hand, Chicken is confined with his African American blood. However, during the course of the play, Chicken succeeds in escaping his confinement by achieving the one-ness with Myrtle. Here one-ness is established as a suggested formula for liberation.

The main concern of this paper is to explore the issues of confinement and liberation by decoding the stage directions and reading bodily and spoken language, as well as visual and aural images. A close reading of the stage visualization of the male's conflict over Myrtle will be discussed in relation to the concept of one-ness. This will be read in relation to the stage as an exterior projection of the characters' interior conflict in order to create, through this "one-ness", a space of liberation.

The opening of the play suggests two spatial dimensions of the Mississippi Delta farmhouse: the ground level and an upper space. The ground consists of four spatial areas: the back wall, a kitchen and "a mysterious little parlor" and "a narrow, dark hall between them" (*Tennessee Williams Plays 1957-1980*, p. 625). The two latter areas constitute the interior which "will be exposed", as Williams puts it, in the setting's description. It suggests that Williams is recounting a metaphorical journey of Myrtle's self-discovery towards her interiority. This interiority stands for her sexuality from which she starts to escape after she gets married to Lot, but which she is nevertheless confined within. This confinement is visualized from the very beginning by the spatial barriers that she has to pass over. The door represents the first symbolic barrier: there is the back door which she "pulls", tumbling off the back steps when it is opened. However, she refuses to enter her "new home ... by the back door" and only finally "stops awaiting out front and comes charging back around the side of the house" to try "the back door". She finds it stuck but then it opens to lead her "straight up" to "the dark, narrow hall" through which she heads straight to the parlor (p. 629). The second spatial barrier is the door to the parlor. It is stuck but after putting her weight against it, she accesses it. The last spatial barrier is the kitchen door, which she cannot access because it is locked by Chicken. This visualizes his territorial dominance over the kitchen by which he can manipulate others. The play establishes the kitchen as his territory where entry and exit is licensed by him.

The "back wall of the house" symbolizes Myrtle's hidden interiority, which is "represented by a scrim" that will "lift when the house is entered" (p. 625).

Williams uses many vivid details to describe her entrance into the house, to show its doubling of the journey into her psyche. In this sense, it is not clear whether the other two characters are there to serve the navigation of this journey – elements in Myrtle's psyche – rather than being real dramatic characters. In other words, Chicken and Lot represent two conflicting oppositions that visualize Myrtle's interior binaries. In the spatial set up of the play, the steps act as a transitional borderline between these two binaries.

Chicken and Lot provide this vision as a prolepsis of her descent into her interiority. On the one hand, Chicken resides in the kitchen area which is identified with invisibility and marginality. It is inhabited by the invisible outcasts: Chicken, "the dark-complected", and the "unmarried colored couples" who were there when Lot's mother was still alive. Positioned spatially in the ground area, its status as a subterranean interiority is maintained. With a "nude girl's body in a calendar picture" a sexual aspect is added to the place. However, it remains the source of light and warmth in the house, as there is no "fire anywhere in this house except in the kitchen" (p. 632). This implies that the kitchen is a stage through which Myrtle must move in order to achieve the reconciliation with her interiority.

To achieve this, she has to violate Chicken's territorial dominance over this area. However, Myrtle fails to recognize that he is the only one who can defeat the spatial entrapment of the flood by going up to the roof. As such, he is described in the stage direction with his "rubber hip boots covered with river slick" as a "suitable antagonist to a flooding river" (p. 625). The word "antagonist" suggests the image of his "boots" as a symbolic, bodily weapon of his resisting body against the flood. So, the only outlet for her is to reconcile with this body through the circle of one-ness. Given this fact, she is incapable of building an equal relation with him. He starts to violate her instead of her controlling him. He actually begins to project onto her his own anxiety resulting from his bodily confinement.

Chicken is confined within his “black-complected” and “colored blood”, which appears to cause his bodily anxiety. He is subjected to the racial gaze of disgust and discrimination. For example, the play starts with a bleak white attitude of this society (the play’s social context) towards Chicken: the white people who flee the flood inform him “sorry we don’t have room for you in the car” (p. 625). He also tells Myrtle in one of his monologues that they don’t sell him “bottle liquor in this country”, but he gets it from an “ole colored man that brews a pretty good brew” (p. 665). Furthermore, when he approaches one of the white girls in the “Dixie Star”, she gives him a “quick, mean look an’ said, ‘Nigger, stay in your place’” (p. 679). He is labeled “colored” and “nigger” as terms which entrap him within his skin color. This entrapment is visualized spatially by him being positioned on the ground level. He never ascends to the upper area. He just moves horizontally on the lower spatial areas of the house: the kitchen, the lower hall, the back door, and the basement.

By contrast, the upstairs area symbolizes the pure, white and genteel southern world, guarded by Lot. Ironically, it is a dark area where “the electric current that makes the lights light ... is temporarily interrupted” (p. 629). The crystal chandelier cannot light the place as its pendants are dusty. The only light that enters is an exterior “fading gray light” through the velvet drapers. Everything on this level is fading, velvet and fragile including the crystal chandelier, the bohemian wineglasses and the gold chairs. This evokes a situation of decay and death in life, which is interiorized by Lot’s body. Lot is diseased with TB and he is only able to stagger around the space. Sitting in the bedroom that is a completely dimmed out area except for a faint and fitful streak of moonlight on him in the rocker, Lot is visualized within the “pool of the moonlight” where his answer is the staggering movement of his “wicker rocker” that they have “on verandahs of old-fashioned summer hotels in the South” (p. 651). This uncertain movement stands for his interior instability due to his bodily confinement within the space of the genteel past.

It is important to the direction of Williams's drama after *Iguana* that this is presented symbolically through his mind more so than as a visual symbol of a lost, southern physical setting. Lot adheres to it by identifying with certain visual symbols including his mother's cigar holder, her clothes, and the house. He builds through the first two memories a point of departure to the past. For example, upon the first meeting with Chicken he removes the holder "from a coat pocket, puts a cigarette in it and lights it" (p. 632). By holding himself up in the house, he maintains the illusion of a continuous past. So, by marrying Myrtle, he tries to use her to revive the image of his dead mother, and to be part of his "revenge plot" against Chicken to regain the house.

This places both Lot and Chicken in a rivalry for Myrtle. This is visualized spatially by Chicken's advances towards Lot to push him to the upper area, and Lot's retreat to the bedroom. For example, at the beginning of the play, when he realizes that Lot has arrived at the house, Chicken rushes to the kitchen to hide: his "frozen attitude by the door was released by the sound of Lot's paroxysm of coughing" (p. 634). He "crosses to a cupboard, takes out a jug and takes a long, long drink" (p. 634). Neither Lot nor Myrtle calls him out of the kitchen; he only comes out when he "is ready". In comparison we see Lot's physical decline through TB by the end of scene one; he staggers and groans to his feet after being pushed to the floor by Chicken. So, he "drags himself up the steep, dark, narrow steps" (p. 650) in retreat to the bedroom. Following Lot, by the end of this scene, Myrtle also "scrambles up the narrow steps to the bedroom door". In this upper area she realizes that she is entrapped spatially, unable to "drive right back to Memphis" because Lot is dying. She is stuck with a sick husband and her only outlet is to fight for her own survival.

Lot's lack of concern dominates the place and puts Myrtle in tension with herself. This is visualized by her vertical movement on the stairs throughout the play, which is symbolic of her hovering between her two oppositions. On the one hand, by going upstairs to the bedroom, she denies her sexuality to display a refined personality. She tells Lot a different version of what is going down in the kitchen

between her and Chicken to keep up her image as a “decent woman”. For example, she lies about her comment on the carving on the table: “I notice a pocket knife and some fresh wood shavings in the middle of the table. Well. That was peculiar but I said nothing about it” (p. 662). Gradually Chicken tries to help her confront this sexual interiority. From the very beginning he tries to reveal her past: “yes I bet. You kick with the right leg, you kick with the left leg, and between your legs you make your living” (p. 645). David Savran in *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers* (1992) supports this line of argument, as he views Chicken as “the embodiment of power and virility” who “disrupts a woman’s life and her affiliations, inaugurates a sexual encounter tinged with violence, and effects her transfiguration”. It is his virility that will, according to Savran, “rejuvenate the force that can suddenly and almost magically awaken sexual desire and transform a woman ... from a state of real or feigned innocence to a wary yet vigorous adulthood” (p. 122).

It is not only Chicken’s “virility” as he uses four exterior visual items to highlight her interiority: the lamp light; the switch-blade knife; the carvings; and the kitchen table. In scene two, the “upstairs bedroom is lighted by an oil lamp” while Chicken is seen throughout the scene in “the very dim-lit kitchen”. Before calling Myrtle, he “turns up the lamp in the kitchen”. The lamp symbolizes the force of light through which he wants to awaken her sexuality. He pushes the lamp “toward her” as the lack of light will “strain her eyesight” from recognizing the sexual carving and inscription on the kitchen table. Finding them “insulting to a clean-livin woman who is not int’rested or attracted to – indecent things in her life”, Myrtle maintains the suppression of her sexuality (p. 660). So, she escapes spatially by her ascending to the upstairs bedroom away from the lamp light.

The switch-blade knife symbolizes two aspects: pleasure and death. With the first blade, Chicken amuses himself by carving some sexual “indecent picture” and “indecent word” into a kitchen table. The other blade implies death from which Myrtle escapes, as it reminds her of the end of the “mobile hot shot” who was stabbed by a knife. So, Chicken’s image, folding the “switch-blade knife” and

putting it “in his pocket”, visualizes him as the catalyst that can control this destructive aspect of sexuality.

The kitchen table is the most significant among these visual items as it represents a symbol where the one-ness (between Chicken and Myrtle) is created. It is a “small square kitchen table” within which Chicken tries to push Myrtle to move, either by giving up his chair or pushing the table towards her (p. 692). First he manages to change her “standing up” to a sitting position. He gets her an “old auto cushion” which he puts on the chair to make her a “nice soft seat” as he knows that “woman don’t like a hard seat”. By sitting “on the edge of the auto cushion”, Myrtle at this point is still on the margin of this area. But when she knows about the set up between him and Lot (that Chicken runs the place for Lot), she resumes the standing up position. However, she rises stiffly with her breathing “audible and rapid” before leaning for support against it. However, not until the sixth scene, does she moves from “standing up” to being seated on the chair, the position that symbolizes her spatial involvement within this circle. Chicken asks her, “do you write standing up”, so she sits down to write the letter by which she declares that “the place and all on it will be Chicken’s, all Chicken’s, when Lot Ravenstock dies” (p. 691).

The portrayal of Myrtle’s hand between Chicken’s after she signs over the paper represents her first visual bodily involvement within this one-ness with Chicken. Holding her shaky hands, he wants her to feel his bodily marks: the “calluses” which he gets from the hard work on this place. Following this, he makes more bodily advances towards her by “sitting in chairs on opposite sides of the small, square kitchen table, chairs angled toward the audience”, till he “rises and moves close to her” (p. 692). Adopting this close position to her body, he asks her: “can you kiss and like kissin’ a man that’s been accused of having some black blood in him”.

Myrtle’s movement after this statement dramatizes her hesitance: “she rises from her chair and pulls it back from the table” (p. 695), where she still has a “typical

southern lower-class dread and awe of Negros". She tries to maintain a spatial distance between them, justifying it by expressing her fear that he swings his "boots with mud on 'em stainin' my blouse" (p. 695). But, her blouse "was awready stained" (p. 695). Here the "stain" stands for a visual symbolic violation of Chicken on her body. So, he asks her to move her chair "back to where it was" in order to be within his dominance again. She submits to his order by moving the chair to where he points out. Thus, the scene ends with Myrtle sitting on the chair "so close to the table that she is between his boots". This signifies the stage of forging of one-ness with Chicken. Through their sexual contact by the end of the scene, they achieve bodily unity.

Philip C. Kolin, in *Sleeping with Caliban: The Politics of Race in Tennessee Williams' Kingdom of Earth* (1996), argues that by the end of the play, Myrtle "has had an epiphany thanks to Chicken, who subsequently becomes her savior/protector". He brings a real light of salvation to her life; thus, "the darkness between the scenes is replaced with light", and this emphasizes "the script's message about a new relationship being born" (Kolin, p. 240). My reading of the play supports this argument of a reinvented relationship, which is integrated within the rebirth of Myrtle's body within her one-ness with Chicken. Therefore, the first words of Chicken after the sexual act are: "let there be light". He echoes God's words in order to announce Myrtle's metaphorical rebirth within this circle. Hence, their one-ness is given a theological rituality achieved through sex. He thinks that "there's nothing in the world, in this whole kingdom of earth that can compare with one thing and that one thing is what's able to happen between a man and a woman". This "thing" for Chicken is perfect and anything else is nothing (p. 701). Having a woman who is physically attracted enough to say "Daddy I want it" enables him to get a "square deal out of life". The use of the word "Daddy" maintains Chicken's God-like characteristics. Here he becomes her force of light whom she cannot stand to be left without. When he goes off she shouts "don't leave me alone here" (p. 679).

Her words imply a clear reference to Chicken as her God-like force within this circle, although from Chicken's perspective he is so obsessed with the evil in himself that he can only conceive a God of wrath and not a God of love. This results in his despair in defending his lustful body and his belief in the Calvinistic doctrines of predestination which entraps him from elevating his spirit. Thomas P. Alder, in *The Search for God in the Plays of Tennessee Williams* (1973), views Chicken as one of the three characters who "become so obsessed with the evil in themselves and in those around them that they transfer this evil to God".

Like Shannon in *Iguana* and Sebastian in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), Chicken denies himself "the possibility of redemption" because of his own distorted image of God. Quoting John J. Fritscher, Alder attributes this "God of Wrath" to the psychic wounds left by Williams' "experience of wrath and love" (p. 48). He develops Fritscher's argument on Williams' "God of love" as the favored one, since the way we conceive of God is also the way we will see our neighbor and ourselves. According to this argument "sin in Williams is not so much an offense against some God, but an establishment of alienation between people which keeps them from meaning God to each other" that in this case prevents "person-to-person goodness" (p. 48).

Chicken develops this fullest exploration of "person-to-person goodness" into what I call person-to-person salvation by offering Myrtle survival and salvation by taking her up to the roof at the end of the play in order to save her from the flood. As this is a "kingdom of earth" rather than a "kingdom of heaven", Myrtle gains bodily rather a spiritual salvation. However, this survival helps her reconcile with her interiority and frees her from confinement within the conflicting binary oppositions from which she suffers at the beginning of the play. So, here the roof represents the spatial area of liberation. It is not staged but we know about what is going on there throughout the dialogue. This maintains the status of salvation as an unseen and mysterious area. It seems that Williams' vision in this play of liberation is abstract. He suggests that it is through one-ness that the characters can transcend their isolated selves in order to be liberated from confinement.

While Myrtle and Chicken survive at the end of the play, content with the more immanent “kingdom of earth”, Lot chases after the decaying “kingdom of heaven” trying to transcend his fluctuating mental space of the past into the heavenly spaces beyond the stage.

This is dramatized by Lot descending the stairs for the first time by the end of the play with the “wide picture hat” and the “crown” which suggests a king-like image. His staggering movements visualize his kingdom’s gradual decaying. Michael R. Schiavi in *Effeminacy in the Kingdom: Tennessee Williams and Stunted Spectatorship* reads this decay in relation to Lot’s transvestism and effeminacy. He views Lot “as anti-body ... gasping for breath”, he is portrayed as a “one-man war with physicality”: “costumed in his mother’s white silk wrapper, he is rendered an unearthly sorcerer wielding a fuming magic wand that defines substance by transforming it to air” (p. 108). On losing “his bodily battle” he collapses in the parlor, bowing as if he was acting throughout the play to an “applauding audience” (p. 108). His audience can be interpreted as his own self, which he cannot transcend until his body confines him to death. This is visualized by his collapse in the parlor, the place which symbolizes his refined southern past. Chicken enters the parlor to “sit gingerly on one of the gilt chairs for a moment”. This symbolizes his violation of Lot’s kingdom of heaven. The act of sitting on the chairs maintains the triumph of his earthy, sexual and animal-like kingdom of earth.

The spatial movement of Myrtle is described as a “retreat” to the kitchen where she moves towards the utensils. She heads the wall where “knife” and “pan” are hanging. This symbolizes her transformation from “the easy life queen” (who brings electronic machines with her at the beginning of the play) into a “hard” woman who appears carrying knives and sharp utensils. She has to change into a hard woman to survive in Chicken’s kingdom as “a man and his life both got to be equally hard. Made out of the same hard thing” (p. 683) In contrast, the fragile Lot dies in a feminized “gauzy white dress” adopting a “kneeling position” which

contrasts with Chicken standing over Lot's "summer gauze apparition" to pronounce: "Chicken is king".

His final words to Myrtle "up, quick" implies that he is the only one who can elevate her up spatially and spiritually. He is her savior from the flood water that approaches with its "great booming sound". Standing behind him unable to be left alone, she is trapped – but also liberated – within this circle, outside of which she feels vulnerable. Within this circle she can belong to this spatial kingdom of earth, while she does not have the power to confront the exterior threat of the flood alone.

Endnotes

[1] In *Iguana* the minority concept does not refer to an organized group or a specific ideology but to characters embodying radical dualities that make the society alienate them due to their inability to trace the dividing line between these oppositions. The members of this category do not see themselves adhering to certain oppositions rather they experience an constant inner conflict as result of their inability to find a balance. It is the search for balance as regards minorities that characterizes Williams' development as a playwright.

[2] The identified minority here refers to Williams' characters who are bodily marked (being black, disabled, homosexual, females etc), and this categories them as minority. Here the concept is related to the typical implication of the concept of minority in general (that has to do with race and gender). While with his later plays this concept is developed to have a metaphorical aspect.