

**Roundabout Theatre Company**

# The Night of the Iguana



**Study Guide**



# The Night of the Iguana

text by

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## Character Descriptions:

**Maxine Faulk**(mid 40's) - owner of the Hotel Costa Verde, a resort overlooking a beach of Puerto Barrio, Mexico

**Pedro and Pancho**(both 20) - Mexican youths employed at the Costa Verde

**Reverend Lawrence Shannon**(about 35) - former Episcopalian minister currently employed as a tour guide

**Hank**- drives the bus for Blake Tour Company

**Fahrenkopf Family** - German family who are guests at the Costa Verde. They are described to be "like baroque cupids" and include: Herr Fahrenkopf (the father), Frau Fahrenkopf (the mother), Hilda (the daughter), and Wolfgang (Hilda's husband)

**Judith Fellows**(mid 40s) - vocal director for the Baptist Female College in Blowing Rock, Texas

**Charlotte Goodall**(17) - music student on the tour from Texas. She has a brief affair with Shannon in Mexico City

**Jonathan Coffin** (Nonno) - is "ninety-seven years young" and claims to be the oldest living poet. He is Hannah's grandfather

**Hannah Jelkes**(30-40) - proper New Englander raised on Nantucket. She is a painter and "quick-sketch" artist

**Jake Latta** - tour guide sent by Blake Tours to be Shannon's replacement

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## Synopsis:

The play begins with the arrival of the Rev. Lawrence Shannon, at the Hotel Costa Verde. Shannon, a defrocked clergyman turned tour guide, has been employed by Blake Tours to lead a small group of Baptist college teachers from Texas on a trip through Mexico. When Shannon first appears, he is a man "at the end of his rope." He is seeking refuge in the company of his old friend, Fred. Shannon is greeted instead by Fred's widow, Maxine, who informs him that Fred died two weeks prior to his arrival. Maxine is an "affable and lusty" woman, with a "barking laugh," and she immediately considers Shannon as a replacement for Fred.

Their conversation is interrupted by the repetitive honking from the tour bus, where the disgruntled teachers are waiting to resume their scheduled tour. Shannon has taken the bus key and has deliberately diverted from the planned itinerary in order to prolong the imminent loss of his job. Miss Judith Fellows, the spokeswoman of the tour group, charges up the hill to confront Shannon. She is furious about the way the tour has been conducted and is also seeking revenge for Shannon's brief affair with Charlotte Goodall, a seventeen year old music

student. Ms. Fellows claims responsibility for Charlotte as her college vocal director.

As Miss Fellows leaves to make the fateful phone call to Texas, the scene shifts its focus to Hannah Jelkes. Hannah is "ethereal, ghostly, and like a Gothic saint, but animated." Completely broke, she begins to barter for a room for herself and her grandfather, Jothathan Coffin (Nonno). They are making their way around the world through the sale of Hannah's character sketches and watercolors and Nonno's poetry recitations. Shannon takes an interest in the pair, and helps influence Maxine to allow them to stay. Maxine notices an immediate "connection" between Hannah and Shannon. She is obviously jealous and does not hide her feelings as she attempts to find alternate lodgings for the penniless travelers, even though the only other guests in the hotel are a German family.

Meanwhile, the tour group has moved from the bus to the hotel and Hannah and Shannon have dressed for dinner. They appear looking like two actors in a play; Shannon in his frayed clerical garb and Hannah in

**"[The Iguana] doesn't stand for any particular character in the play; perhaps it stands for the human situation" - Tennessee Williams**



her artist's smock, splattered with paint in a "pleasing pattern." They have emerged from their "cubicles" and begin an exploration of the need for companionship and kindness. Hannah and Shannon have known each other for less than twenty-four hours, yet Hannah recognizes Shannon's "need to believe in something or in someone - almost anyone - almost anything...something." Their relationship is based on a one night "communication between them on a verandah outside their... separate cubicles." The communication is possible and necessary even if only for one night. An iguana is captured by Pedro and Pancho, who are Maxine's employees. The iguana is tied up under the verandah for a future meal.

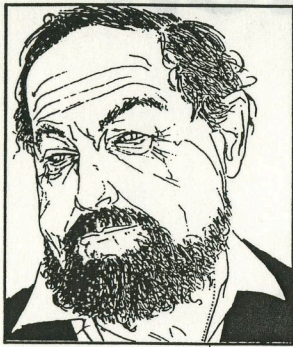
Several hours later, Jake Latta arrives as Blake Tour's replacement for Shannon. As the women leave, Shannon is on the verge of a break-down. He claims he is now ready to take a "long swim to China," which

he mentioned in an earlier exchange with Hannah. Before he reaches the ocean, he is caught by Pedro and Pancho. Like the captured iguana under the porch, Shannon is restrained in a hammock. Hannah attempts to calm him with a mild sedative of poppyseed tea, and proceeds to give Shannon a character sketch of himself "in words instead of pastel crayon and charcoal." Shannon accepts the kindness of Hannah and realizes she is not a sexless, buddha-like being, but a woman. She recognizes Shannon's pain in her own experience, but will not accept him as her companion in travel, or otherwise. Shannon is untied from the hammock, releases the bound iguana, and accepts Maxine's invitation to swim in the ocean. Nonno recites his final poem, which he has been working on and reciting throughout the play. These words are his last. The final image of the play is Hannah's graceful acceptance.



Alan Webb, Margaret Leighton, Patrick O'Neal, and Bette Davis in the Chicago production of *The Night of the Iguana* in 1961, before it moved to Broadway.





**T**homas Lanier Williams was born on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. His father was a traveling salesman, and his mother, the daughter of an Episcopalian clergyman. He also had an older sister named Rose. In 1918, the family moved to St. Louis, MO, where Tom's brother Dakin was born. Williams,

described as a sensitive and physically delicate youth, had difficulty adjusting to his new environment. It was during what he called his "lonely and miserable" boyhood that Williams became interested in writing.

His first published work came in 1927, when he won third prize and \$5.00 in a magazine contest, for his response to the question "Can a good wife be a good sport?" Soon afterwards, in August of 1928, his short story "The Vengeance of Nitrocis" appeared in the magazine *Weird Tales*.

In the fall of 1929, he entered the University of Missouri, where he received additional awards for writing, but failed ROTC due to weakness in his legs from a childhood case of diphtheria. Due to financial problems and his disappointment in Tom's performance, his father removed him from college shortly before his senior year in 1932. Tom began working in the warehouse of the International Shoe Company, where he earned \$65.00 a month dusting shoes and typing order forms. After two years of working at the factory and writing at night, he suffered a nervous collapse and was hospitalized for a month.

In 1935, after a recuperation period in his grandparents' home in Memphis, Tenn., he began studies at Washington University in St. Louis, where he wrote plays for a small theatre group called the Mummers. At this time, his sister Rose, who since childhood had become more and more withdrawn, was institutionalized for schizophrenia and underwent a pre-frontal lobotomy. Williams, who had always felt a close bond with his sister, could not bear to see her deterioration. He decided to transfer to the University of Iowa, where he studied playwriting and earned his B.A. in 1938.

In 1939, Williams' short story "A Field of Blue Children", was published in *Story Magazine*. This was the first work to appear under his new name, Tennessee, a nickname that had been given to him by university classmates because of the accent he had acquired while staying with his grandparents in Memphis. In this year, he also compiled four one-act plays and submitted them to the Group Theatre's American play contest, one of

the most important theatre companies in the country at the time. This collection won a \$100 prize and the attention of agent Audry Wood, who asked to represent him. She helped him to get a Rockefeller grant for playwriting, enabling him to complete *BATTLE OF ANGELS*, produced by the Theatre Guild in 1940.

Although the play closed in Boston before reaching New York, Williams' career continued to develop. Miss Wood promoted his work and got him a job in Hollywood working for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) as a screenwriter. During his short time in Los Angeles, Williams so infuriated the head of the movie studio that he was released from his contract on the condition that he never return to the studio.

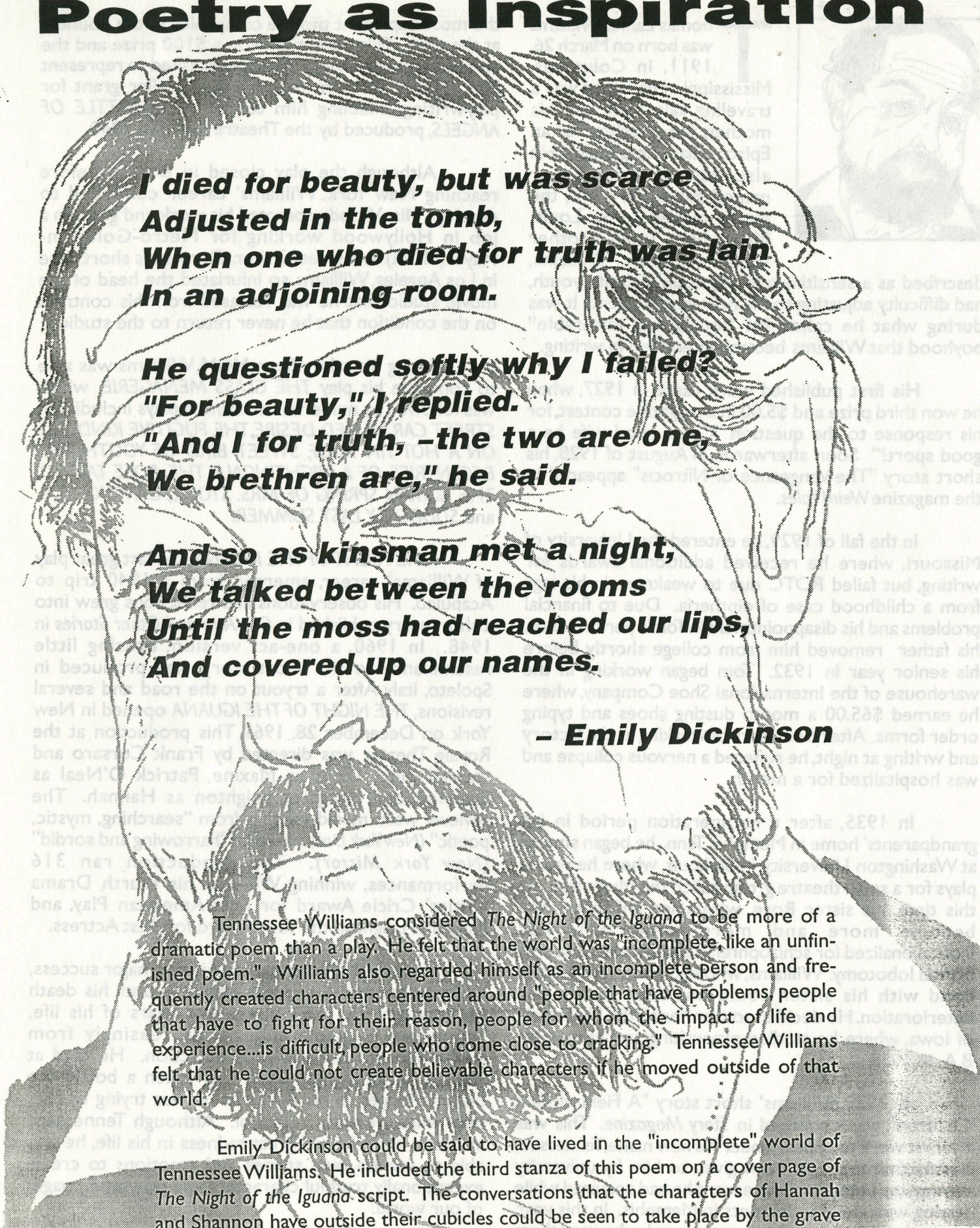
Using his salary from MGM, Williams was able to complete his play *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*, which was followed by numerous acclaimed plays including: *A STREET CAR NAMED DESIRE*, *THE FUGITIVE KIND*, *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF*, *SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH*, *THE ECCENTRIES OF A NIGHTINGALE*, *THE ROSE TATTOO*, *THE ROMAN SPRING OF MRS. STONE*, *CAMINO REAL* and *SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER*.

*THE NIGHT OF THE IGUANA*, the last great play of Williams' career, emerged from a 1940 trip to Acapulco. His observations and reflections grew into a short story published in *One Arm and Other Stories* in 1948. In 1960, a one-act version, bearing little resemblance to the short story, was produced in Spoleto, Italy. After a tryout on the road and several revisions, *THE NIGHT OF THE IGUANA* opened in New York on December 28, 1961. This production at the Royale Theater was directed by Frank Corsaro and starred Bette Davis as Maxine, Patrick O'Neal as Shannon, and Margaret Leighton as Hannah. The reviews were mixed, ranging from "searching, mystic, poetic" (*New York Daily News*) to "harrowing and sordid" (*New York Mirror*). The production ran 316 performances, winning Williams his fourth Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best American Play, and Margaret Leighton the Tony Award for Best Actress.

Although *Iguana* marked his last major success, Williams continued to write regularly until his death on February 25, 1983. In the last years of his life, Tennessee Williams suffered increasingly from depression, alcohol, and drug addiction. He died at the age of 72 in New York City when a bottle cap became lodged in his throat as he was trying to take pills while drinking alcohol. Although Tennessee Williams experienced great sadness in his life, he was able to use his own stories and emotions to create exceptionally truthful characters and powerful images of our world.



# Poetry as Inspiration



***I died for beauty, but was scarce  
Adjusted in the tomb,  
When one who died for truth was lain  
In an adjoining room.***

***He questioned softly why I failed?  
"For beauty," I replied.  
"And I for truth, -the two are one,  
We brethren are," he said.***

***And so as kinsman met a night,  
We talked between the rooms  
Until the moss had reached our lips,  
And covered up our names.***

**- Emily Dickinson**

Tennessee Williams considered *The Night of the Iguana* to be more of a dramatic poem than a play. He felt that the world was "incomplete, like an unfinished poem." Williams also regarded himself as an incomplete person and frequently created characters centered around "people that have problems, people that have to fight for their reason, people for whom the impact of life and experience...is difficult, people who come close to cracking." Tennessee Williams felt that he could not create believable characters if he moved outside of that world.

Emily Dickinson could be said to have lived in the "incomplete" world of Tennessee Williams. He included the third stanza of this poem on a cover page of *The Night of the Iguana* script. The conversations that the characters of Hannah and Shannon have outside their cubicles could be seen to take place by the grave site of truth and beauty.



# Robert Falls on *The Night of the Iguana*

In December 1993, director Robert Falls spoke with students from Roosevelt University prior to the start of rehearsals for *The Night of the Iguana* which he also directed at The Goodman Theatre in Chicago, with Cherry Jones and William Petersen.

"You know Tennessee wrote non-stop. I mean, he was certainly among our most prolific writers. And constantly in his own world, he was always going back and revising, even thirty years later, just revising scenes and changing scenes.

I've been very interested lately in American work. I don't think that we as producers and directors spend enough time really looking at the work of the great American writers.

I think Tennessee Williams has sometimes been eclipsed by fashionable thinking. I think this play is maybe the great Tennessee Williams play. I think it's the most mature. There is a tremendous maturity and autumnal sense to this play -wisdom, acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation- that one finds in the great last plays of any writers. I also feel as a director that this work has never been fully realized in production.

We know in the case of Tennessee Williams that all of these characters really represent sides of himself in a remarkably mature way.

My reading of the play has always been that it's much more poem than it is a piece of dramatic writing. By the third act of this play, it's really an extended two character conversation. He's just forgotten plot -he's dropped plot all together and forgotten about being worried about comings and goings. He's existing in a place of pure poetic inspiration, character, theme, symbolism and metaphor that I think is absolutely exquisite.

I think that there's an appreciation of this play that is coming. There's a critical sensibility in an audience today that's more attuned to complex plays that juxtapose complex things. And I just have the sense that we're ready to hear poetry and accept it as poetic work rather than a piece of drama. Audiences are ready for a more meditative piece than they were when it was written.

I always thought that the play has been burdened by a sort of 1950's method acting, by realism. *Iguana* is so rooted to the specifics of realism.

We decided that it needed all those real things. But then it needed to move into another world. It needed to transcend particularly the images of the people in their cubicles. We wanted to try and dissolve their worlds using scrim so we'd get this very real image of cubicles at first and then you saw through them. By the time we got to the third act, all the walls were scrim, you saw a big moon behind and people moving in their cubicles. It was gorgeous and I hated it! The scrims, the softness, just looked so awful to me. It's what designers of the 50's brought to Tennessee Williams -scrims and moonlight and magic- and it all felt false to me and it's all been done before.

I decided that the visual world of *Iguana* should counterpoint poetry against a set that is almost hyper-real. The jungle is going to encroach, nearly envelop, a very hyper-real, earthy, almost ugly set of shacks perched on a cliff. The beauty is in the surroundings -the water down there, the jungle, tropical flowers- I mean it's oppressive, but beautiful. And then what you've got is just tin roofs and decay. It's falling apart, it's very real.

I actually find this play his most forgiving and beautiful -the ending for me is an enormous release. I love the way the iguana's cut loose, and at the same moment, Nonno lets go of his poem and dies, and Hannah is released into a world that's very terrifying to her. I think that, in the final images of this play, freedom comes. The iguana is released; Shannon and Hannah are released -and they're both met with absolute terror- and absolute hope.

I think that Hannah will be able to face life without her grandfather, but allowing the full terror and sadness of the freedom to occur to her. Shannon will be able to face life again, but perhaps without as much terror as he experienced before.

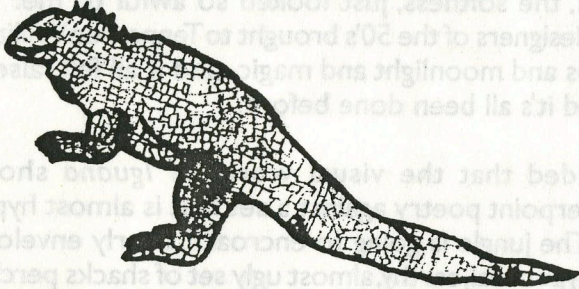
Shannon gets through the night, and that's an enormous victory. Light comes, and that is the enormous small victory for humanity -to make it through the night. The victory of this play is T-I-N-Y! Most of Williams' work is so devastating. It's death and madness and devastation. But this play suggests that because of Hannah and Shannon's contact, they both emerge a little stronger by the end of the night."



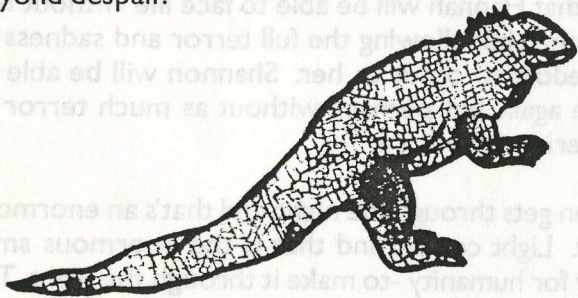


# Projects & Activities

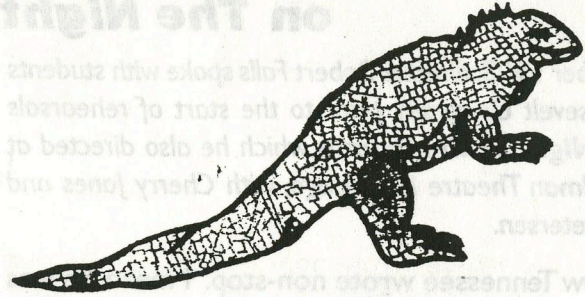
The character of Hannah was a new figure in Tennessee Williams' world. Williams described Hannah as "almost a definition of what I think is most beautiful spiritually in a person and still believable." Hannah could be perceived as a sexless, androgynous being, but she is also quite composed and honest in her presentation as if she cannot be completely effected emotionally. Using either Hannah or someone you know as the basis for a character, write a monologue in his or her voice. Let this character tell you the meaning of life from his or her perspective.



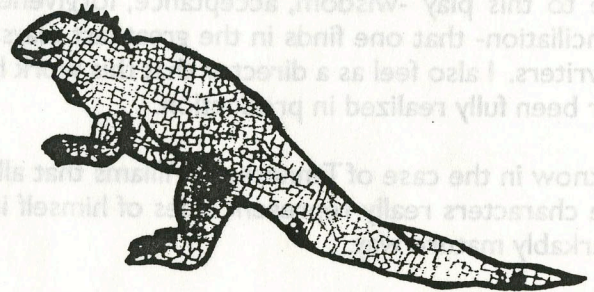
Tennessee Williams explained one of the central themes of *The Night of the Iguana* to be "how to live beyond despair and still live." Many people experience the feeling of being at the "end of their rope," but find they can persevere and forge ahead. Shannon refers to these feelings by personifying them in the form of a "spook" and Hannah refers to hers as a "blue devil." Williams himself described his own "blue devils" to be like "having wild-cats under my skin." Think about these feelings and how to combat them in a visual way. Get together a stack of old magazines and tear out pictures of things, places, and images that evoke positive feelings in you. Create a collage using these images on a large piece of paper. Hang the picture somewhere as a reminder of what helps pull you out of the area of "beyond despair."



*The Night of the Iguana* presents characters dealing with problems of communication and loneliness. These issues are mirrored in Williams' use of "cells" and "small cubicles" in his description of the hotel rooms. These images suggest the isolation and imprisonment of the characters. Design a set or build a model of the stage, considering how the hotel and the surrounding nature reflect and emphasize certain themes and character struggles.



The character of Hannah recognizes Shannon's need for contact. As Tennessee Williams believed, "the only truly satisfying moments in life are those in which you are in contact, and I don't mean just physical contact, I mean in deep, or deeper contact than just physical, with some other human being." Write a short scene that encompasses a conversation between two people as they realize this "contact" between each other. As Tennessee Williams believed, such contact does not need to be physical. He stated "relations - if they're sincere - between people, is the thing I'm most concerned with; the fact that there isn't any absolute in people's feelings for each other."



Tennessee Williams included the third stanza of an Emily Dickinson poem before the actual text of the play. After looking at the entire poem, consider the role the poem might have played in the original conception of the play. Now, take a poem (it could be a friend's or a published poem) and write a scene or short story around it. The story/scene does not have an obvious or direct link to the poem—you may just use it as an inspiration or building block. Examples of poets you could use: Sandra Cisneros, Ranier Maria Rilke, Elizabeth Bishop, William Carlos Williams, Octavio Paz, Robert Frost.

