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FUJITA Hideki

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Tennessee Williams’s *Auto-Da-Fé* is a one-act play collected in the original edition of *27 Wagons Full of Cotton and Other One-Act Plays*, published in 1945. The title of this short play may attract a reader’s notice. It refers to the burning of a heretic by the Spanish Inquisition. *Auto-Da-Fé* is not, however, a period play; it is set in New Orleans in the twentieth century. But it ends with the main character subjecting himself to the gruesome penalty. Thus, the title suggests the way he meets his doom. As we shall see, it is also significant in that it alludes to what he is guilty of; what his “heresy” is.

The narrative opens with the description of the setting. The action takes place on the front porch of Madame Duvenet’s old frame cottage in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans. The opening stage direction is as follows.

*Scene: The front porch of an old frame cottage in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans. There are palm or banana trees, one on either side of the porch steps: pots of geraniums and other vivid flowers along the low balustrade. There is an effect of sinister antiquity in the setting, even the flowers suggesting the richness of decay. Not far off on Bourbon Street the lurid procession of bars and hot-spots throws out distance-muted strains of the juke-organs and occasional shouts of laughter. Mme. Duvenet, a frail woman of sixty-seven, is rocking on the porch in the faint, sad glow of an August sunset. Eloi, her son, comes out the screen-door. He is a frail man in his late thirties, a gaunt, ascetic type with feverish dark eyes.*

*Mother and son are both fanatics and their speech has something of the quality of poetic or religious incantation. (107)*

The front porch suggests “sinister antiquity” and “the richness of decay”; the nearby street is a “lurid” one. In this way, the opening part of the play establishes an atmosphere of ominousness, decay, and decadence. The atmosphere is reinforced by the use of color imagery. As is evident in “pots of geraniums” and the “glow of an August sunset,” the dominant color is red, a color symbolic of danger and carnal passion (Jobes 1327). The color imagery also foreshadows the fire motif.

The opening stage direction also portrays two main characters, Mme. Duvenet and her son, Eloi. What is noteworthy about their characterizations is religious resonances. The mother and the son, who

is an “ascetic type with feverish dark eyes,” are “both fanatics and their speech has something of the quality of poetic or religious incantation.” These religious resonances serve to create the atmosphere of the Inquisition in medieval and early modern times.

The first thing we notice about Eloi is his obsessive fear that “[s]omebody goes in my room and roots through my things” (107). He suspects Miss Bordelon, the boarder, of spying on him. He objects to even his mother going into his room to clean it. The impression here is that he has in his room something he does not want anyone else to see. Indeed, his mother tells him, “[a] person would think that you were concealing something” (108). Later in the play, he says that “Miss Bordelon is standing in the hall and overhearing every word I say” (115); that “[s]he claps her ear to the wall when I talk in my sleep!” (118). The latter statement suggests that his problem has to do with buried, repressed thoughts. He is apprehensive that the thoughts might emerge in the form of dreams in sleep. Considered thus, his room seems to represent his inner world. When his mother says that “I’ll just allow the filth to accumulate there” (108), Eloi reacts strongly to the word “filth.” In view of his paranoiac fear of being spied on and his defensive attitude about the “filth,” we may say that he feels guilty about something that is connected with sex.

Eloi’s overreaction to the word “filth” is followed by his condemnation of the corruption around him. He says to his mother, “[y]ou don’t know how much we’ve been affected already” by “[t]he fetid old swamp we live in, the Vieux Carré! Every imaginable kind of degeneracy springs up here, not at arm’s length, even, but right in our presence!” (109). In this way, he admits that he has been infected by the corruption of the Vieux Carré. He uses disease imagery to describe the infection. He says that decadence is “all in the Quarter” and goes on:

This is the primary lesion, the focal infection, the chancre! In medical language, it spreads by metastasis! It creeps through the capillaries and into the main blood vessels. From there it is spread all through the surrounding tissue! Finally nothing is left outside the decay. (110)

This morbid description convinces us that, as noted in the opening stage direction, he is a “fanatic.” Indeed, Mme. Duvenet tells him, “You mustn’t allow yourself to sound like a fanatic” (110).

The fire motif appears when he says that his neighborhood should be razed:

Mme. Duvenet: You mean this old section torn down?

Eloi: Condemned and demolished!

Mme. Duvenet: That’s not a reasonable stand.

Eloi: It’s the stand I take.

Mme. Duvenet: Then I’m afraid you’re not a reasonable person.

Eloi: I have good precedence for it.

Mme. Duvenet: What do you mean?

Eloi: All through the Scriptures are cases of cities destroyed by the justice of fire when they got to be nests of foulness.

Mme. Duvenet: Eloi, Eloi.

Eloi: Condemn it, I say, and purify it with fire! (110)

He speaks of himself in fire imagery, too: “You just don’t know. You rock on the porch and talk about clean white curtains! While I’m all flame, all burning, and no bell rings, nobody gives an alarm!” (113). This remark foreshadows Eloi’s auto-da-fé at the end of the play. Moreover, what is noteworthy about the above-quoted dialogue between Eloi and his mother is that he speaks of “cities destroyed by the justice of fire.” Clearly, the cities refer to Sodom and Gomorrah, and Eloi likens the Vieux Carré to them. This can be said to contain a hint of what he feels guilty about. As David F. Greenberg observes, “[f]or centuries, biblical commentators have interpreted the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a demonstration of God’s wrath toward homosexuality” (136). The motif of the Inquisition also suggests the problem of sexual deviation. Greenberg states: “Though the Inquisition was primarily concerned with religious apostasy, it put the heat on sexual deviation, too. Pedro de Leon, a Jesuit prison chaplain, recorded fifty-two executions for sodomy in Seville between 1578 and 1616” (311).

In this connection, the mother-son relationship between Mme. Duvenet and Eloi is interesting. Eloi, who is in his late thirties, still lives with his mother. Mme. Duvenet is depicted as a dominating mother who treats her grown-up son like a little child. She tells Eloi:

There are three simple rules I wish that you would observe. One: you should wear under-shirts whenever there’s changeable weather! Two: don’t sleep without covers, don’t kick them off in the night! Three: chew your food, don’t gulp it. (113)

The third rule reminds us of what Amanda Wingfield tells Tom at the dinner table in the opening scene of *The Glass Menagerie*. Mme. Duvenet belongs to the lineage of Williams’s domineering, overprotective mothers including Amanda, Mrs. Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*, and Mrs. Krenning in “Mama’s Old Stucco House.” There is a popular notion that domineering, overprotective mothers are responsible for their sons’ homosexuality (Doyle 270). As a study of the American family in the mid-twentieth century

shows, it was believed that “excessive mothering posed the danger that children would become too accustomed to and dependent on female attention. The unhappy result would be sissies, who allegedly were likely to become homosexuals... Fathers had to make sure this would not happen to their sons” (May 139). But the father is absent from the Duvenet family. He never appears on stage; no mention is made of him. The absence of a male role-model might be sufficient to disturb the son’s masculine development.

The opening stage direction describes Mme. Duvenet as a “fanatic.” Her fanaticism can be seen in her obsession with cleanness, immaculateness, and spotlessness: “I love clean window-curtains, I love white linen, I want immaculate, spotless things in a house” (108). We might say that her prim preoccupation with purity urges Eloi to repress his “impure” thoughts. His fear of his own sexuality has made him, as the opening stage direction remarks, an “ascetic type.” With the growing awareness of what he harbors within himself, however, he bitterly expresses his irritation at his mother: “Your world is so simple, you live in a fool’s paradise!” (113). He goes on: “I stand in your presence a stranger, a person unknown! I live in a house where nobody knows my name!” (113). This remark suggests that he recognizes himself as someone beyond his mother’s understanding and imagination.

As we have seen, *Auto-Da-Fé* contains hints of Eloi’s homosexuality. This play traces his growing and anguished recognition of his own sexual deviation to his mental breakdown and suicidal burning of himself. What has a decisive effect on his self-awareness is “a lewd photograph” which he found fell out of an unsealed envelope while he worked at the post office. According to him, the photograph shows “two naked figures.” Interestingly, Eloi makes no mention of the gender of each person throughout the play. They are referred to just as “the sender” or “a university student” and “the antique dealer,” respectively. He gives no indicators of the gender, not to mention personal pronouns. It is as if he is terrified of the revelation of the genders of the two.

Eloi explains how he felt when he looked at the picture: “I felt as though something exploded, blew up in my hands, and scalded my face with acid!”(116). Another version of the image of burning can be seen here. And this image of burning reminds us of the description of the sexual self-awareness that dawns on the Lutheran minister who serves as a prison chaplain for the one-armed male hustler Oliver in Williams’s short story “One Arm.” The minister’s first glance at Oliver brings back the childhood memory of his first sexual experience. One summer he went daily to the zoo to look at a golden panther, to which he was mysteriously attracted. One night he dreamed that the tongue of the panther “bathed” him, and he awoke “burning with shame beneath the damp and aching initial of Eros”(23). When he visits Oliver, he feels that “here was the look of the golden panther again”(23). The minister’s fascination with the panther is obliquely indicative of his homosexual disposition. Both Eloi and the

minister experience their homosexual awakening with guilt and shame and with a sensation of “burning.”

Eloi reveals that he is irresistibly attracted to the sender of the picture. He behaved like a stalker and “conducted a private investigation”(117). He finally called on the sender to talk in private. What he says about the visit is interesting: “The attitude taken was that I had come for money. That I was intending to hold the letter for blackmail”(117). As David Savran observes, “Tennessee Williams’s most productive years, 1940s and 1950s, were extremely turbulent and trying decades for gay men and lesbians in America”(84). Subjected to “witch hunts,” they lived in constant fear of being exposed, blackmailed, and arrested. Eloi’s pretending to be a blackmailer is a telling indication of what the sender is really like.

He explains what happened in the sender’s room: “And then the sender began to be ugly. Abusive. I can’t repeat the charges, the evil suggestions! I ran from the room”(117). Presumably, the sender became aware of Eloi’s queerness and made “evil suggestions.” Eloi’s running from the room represents his ambivalence about his homosexuality.

Eloi is torn between acceptance and denial of his homosexuality. In a passage, his conflict is given a spatial dimension. He says, “I can’t go back in the house, and I can’t stay out on the porch!”(114). The interior of the house represents his “closet”: the porch as a space outside the house encapsulates the outside world. Eloi’s remark suggests that he can neither retreat to the closet nor continue to act heterosexual nor declare his homosexual identity to the outside world. The emotional conflict drives him self-destructive and, as his mother suggests, turns him into “a saboteur of [him]self”(112). Shocked that her son is talking very wildly, Mme. Duvenet tells him to burn the photograph along with the letter immediately. Thereupon Eloi becomes obviously shaken: “*Eloi fumblingly removes some papers from his inside pocket. His hand is shaking so that the picture falls from his grasp to the porch-step. Eloi groans as he stoops slowly to pick it up*”(119). He starts to do as he is told to, but not only his reluctance but his intense inner conflict is evident:

*He strikes a match. His face is livid in the glow of the flame and as he stares at the slip of paper, his eyes seem to start from his head. He is breathing hoarsely. He draws the flame and the paper within one inch of each other but seems unable to move them any closer. All at once he utters a strangled cry and lets the match fall. (119-120)*

As described above, Eloi cannot burn the picture. This means that he cannot break with what the picture signifies.

The play ends with Eloi’s purifying of himself with fire. He goes quickly into the house, locks the

door after him, and sets fire to the house with the boarder Bordelon inside it.

*Eloi's voice is raised violently. The woman inside cries out with fear. There is a metallic clatter as though a tin object were hurled against a wall. The woman screams; then there is a muffled explosion. . . . There is a sudden burst of fiery light from the interior of the cottage.*  
(120)

This extreme form of self-condemnation recalls “the principle of atonement” Anthony Burns unconsciously has chosen to compensate for his “incompletion” in Williams’s short story “Desire and the Black Masseur.” This principle represents “the surrender of self to violent treatment by others with the idea of thereby clearing one’s self of his guilt”(85). Burns surrenders himself to violent massages by the black masseur of the title and is finally devoured by him. As Dennis Vannatta remarks, the “incompletion” Burns has to atone for can be said to be homosexuality(49). Like Burns, Eloi chooses to clear his self of his “guilt” through his surrender to violent treatment, although the violent treatment is self-inflicted. He burns his “closet” as well as himself.

It is interesting that Eloi involves Bordelon in his auto-da-fé. We may say that the boarder, who, despite never appearing on stage, evokes in Eloi constant fear of being spied on, is presented as a symbol or a force rather than an individual. She represents social surveillance. Eloi’s involvement of her in the burning indicates his anger at the society which stigmatizes homosexuality.

*Auto-Da-Fé* was written and published in the 1940s, and probably because of the homophobic milieu of the decade, Williams seems to shy away from explicit representations of homosexuality. Buried within connotation, however, this short play depicts the main character’s ambivalence and anguish about his homosexuality. The play is a significant piece in that it raises issues related to homosexuality developed later in such plays as *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

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