

AN ANALYSIS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'  
SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

by

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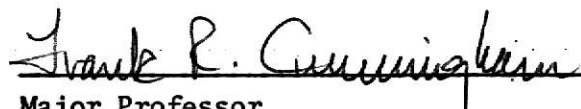
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With his latest play, Small Craft Warnings, Tennessee Williams has added several new facets to his own tradition. There are, to be sure, many aspects of this play that are obviously the product of Williams' pen; in fact, the experienced reader of Williams' drama will find familiar faces and voices nearly everywhere he looks and listens. But Small Craft Warnings is considerably more than mere restatement. The play includes a character who is, as yet, unmarred by the forces that command the desperate world of Williams' earlier work. Furthermore, Williams makes extensive use of the soliloquy in this play, an innovation for him in his longer work.

Williams' corpus has presented, in his own sensational manner, a succession of crushed sensitivity, bestiality, defrocked ministers, crippled athletes, small characters cruelly forgotten, alcoholics, suicides, and the like. These types have illuminated continually the futility of man's search for an understanding of life and for deliverance from the pain that futility causes. And whenever he has created a character who has that understanding, one who embodies a positive alternative to despair, he has also shown a flaw in that character. Small Craft Warnings does indeed employ broken characters. In fact, some of the most pathetic characters he has yet drawn appear in this play. But there is the character I mentioned who has no true place in the tradition drawn from Williams' earlier work. Bobby, an adolescent, is, as yet, unspoiled by the forces that have kept Williams' dramatic world spinning, however askew.

In this paper I shall discuss those aspects of Small Craft Warnings that fit into the tradition. These will include the sensationalism, the closely interrelated characters in each play and, most importantly, the

characters other than Bobby with respect to their lineage in several of Williams' earlier plays. There is a fair amount of criticism available on those plays, and by establishing the filiation of Small Craft Warnings, I hope to make that scholarship relevant to this play as well.

After examining these similarities, I shall explore Small Craft Warnings for its innovation. I shall be most concerned with the character of Bobby, but shall also discuss the impact of the soliloquies I mentioned. These are what seem to me to be the major additions the play makes to Williams' line, and by analyzing them I hope to bring the play into a critically fruitful perspective.

Surely the most commonly recognized feature of Williams' drama is its sensationalism, the result of his using sex and individual attitudes toward sex as a barometer of character. Blanche's monumental insecurity in Streetcar Named Desire, Brick's passivity in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Alma's frigidity and/or John's promiscuity in Summer and Smoke, are all examples of Williams' characters revealing the state of their beings through their sexual attitudes. Small Craft Warnings is the quintessential work in this respect. In this play, Williams' language is more raw than in any of his previous works. Furthermore the allusions to sexual behavior that occur in the earlier plays and establish his reputation as a lurid playwright are not allusions in Small Craft Warnings; Williams has included overt, sexual action in the play. Furthermore there is a homosexual character who not only admits his preference, but discusses it in the play and finally soliloquizes on the "deadening coarseness" of the homosexual experience.

Jurists have given us the phrase "redeeming merit" to identify that mysterious quality a sensational work of art must contain in order to escape

the sentence of pornography. My point is certainly not to prove that Small Craft Warnings is not pornography. But I would like to discuss briefly its redeeming merit. This play is about plain people, in a plain bar. The characters' language, the violence, the sexuality and the homosexuality are all justified by the context of the play. These points all fit well into the idiom in which Tennessee Williams chose to express himself in Small Craft Warnings.

I hasten to make this vindication because an undue amount of attention paid to Williams' candor will detract from the more immediate concerns of the play. During the two acts of its production, Small Craft Warnings presents eight real and often pathetic figures who collectively establish a scale of existence that runs from mindlessness to concession to groping to dim hope to vital wonder, so that intelligent critical exigency requires us to respond to the core of this play, and not ignore the squalidness, but certainly remember it is part of the setting. Moreover, once we recognize the depth of the play and its transcendence of its own sordid shadows, we also recognize that the profanity, the violence, and the sex are all ordinary, even necessary parts of the world these characters populate. The lurid aspects of Small Craft Warnings, then, are contextually justified; the play offers sufficient intelligent, perceptive probings of the human condition to be considered as having "redeeming merit."

There is another dimension of Small Craft Warnings that seems a true descendant of the Williams' dramatic mode. He has almost always employed the family as a dramatic device that assures highly braided relationships among his characters. In the Glass Menagerie, for example, it is Tom's sense of responsibility to his mother and sister that keeps him from

embracing his father's "love for long distance" until the play's end. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is quite similar. In this play about a single family, Williams uses the interrelationships to provide motivation for all of the characters' behavior. The strength of the family unit in this respect is that it supplies a major tension that controls the drama. The various transgressions such as Gooper's greed, Big Daddy's hate for his wife, and Brick's alcoholism are all instantly insidious because they violate fundamental familial relationships. By employing this unit, Williams solves the problem of connecting his characters to provide viable relationships. They are given by the family model, and the corruptions become instantly more recognizable and potent.

This concept of a closely knit group of characters is also present in Small Craft Warnings. The entire play takes place in or around a bar called "Monk's Place." In the introductory directions to the first act, the playwright states, "It attracts a group of regular patrons who are nearly all so well known to each other that it is like a community club. . ." Further, in the second act, Leona, a major character, explains that she is going to leave the "community" and find a new place to live. She explains that all she needs to find is a place to park her trailer and "a night spot to hang out in . . . to booze in, and get acquainted with . . . friends . . ."

What is important to note here, and what links this play to Williams' earlier work is that he again establishes a reticulate group of characters. They are not a family in this play, but they are members of a circle who bring past relationships into the work that establish the base for the conflicts that follow.

As a result of this technique, Small Craft Warnings, like all of

Williams' drama, is extremely taut: each character has some relation to all the others, and the allegiances and conflicts are not isolated or individual, but rather communal or familial. It is one thing for Tom, in The Glass Menagerie, to join the merchant marine, and quite another for him to leave the family he supports to do so; it is one thing for Gooper in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof to be avaricious, and quite another for him to be so over the family estate; similarly, it is one thing for Leona Dawson of Small Craft Warnings to move her trailer up the coast in order to continue her search for a solvent existence, and yet quite another for her to leave the community of "Monk's Place" to do so. In each case the communal concept heightens the import of these characters' actions.

So far I have shown two links that appear to exist rather clearly between Small Craft Warnings and the plays that precede it in Williams' corpus. I should like now to discuss the characters in Small Craft Warnings to show that all but one of them are obvious descendants of the earlier work. The advantages of the earlier criticism are greatest here because most of it has devoted itself to character analysis and categorization. This focus exists because Williams' main strength as a playwright lies in portraying characters who are understandable and frequently moving. The poignancy of his plays grows out of his understanding of people, more than out of an understanding of abstract themes merely orchestrated by dramatic characters.

Before reviewing the characters in Small Craft Warnings to show their relation to the long established groups that comprise Williamsesque characterization, however, I want to stress one point. My analyses will not attempt to show that any of the characters in Small Craft Warnings are exact reproductions of any other characters in Williams' drama. Rather, I shall

demonstrate that the various strains in the characters have appeared before. The figures in Small Craft Warnings are hybrids, not copies; they are predictable, but only insofar as any offspring is predictable. Besides, what really matters is not labeling or identifications, but the recognition of the strains whose importance has already been studied so that that very study can enlighten the reader about Small Craft Warnings.

I shall first discuss Leona Dawson, the most prominent character in the play. She is the struggling sensitivity figure, "the artist," who appears in every one of Williams' plays.<sup>1</sup> She, of all the characters in the play, except Bobby, recognizes beauty. For example, she has had a violin sonata entitled "Souvenir" put on the jukebox. This song is figuratively a "Souvenir" of her deceased younger brother who was a violinist and, as Leona states "too beautiful to live . . . ." His death resulted from "pernicious anemia" and in this we recognize Williams' belief in the tragic frailty of beauty.

Perhaps too fittingly, Leona is a beautician. But she is also a wanderer. She explains her mobility at one point: "An experienced beautician can always get work somewhere." She recognizes a universal need for beauty. This crusade for beauty, however, raises another point about her. She admittedly cannot settle with a man. She reports that

When I live with a person I love and care for in  
my life, I expect his respect, and when I see I've  
lost it, I GO, GO! . . . So a home on wheels is  
the only right home for me.

So that while she can see some purpose to her life, she can never quite realize it. She can recognize and bring beauty, her ideal, to others, but she cannot realize it herself.

Leona, the figure of alienated sensitivity, is at the end of a long tradition in Williams' drama. In Glass Menagerie, Tom writes poems on shoe box covers while working in a warehouse. He recognizes beauty, so much so that he is unwilling to be simply a better shipping clerk. So he joins the merchant marine. Like Leona, he has to resort to seemingly endless travel to preserve his sensitivity.

A Streetcar Named Desire presents Blanche, probably the most pathetic representative of sensitive existence. She is a deep enough character to be viewed as more than simply a flawed seeker of beauty. Indeed she works well as a figure for the decayed Southern tradition in an allegorical reading of the play,<sup>2</sup> or as the tragic reflection of the conflicting Nietzschean Apollonian/Dionysian ideals.<sup>3</sup> But in any case Leona seems greatly akin to Blanche not only in their respective searches for beauty, and not only in the difficulties that search creates, but even insofar as both are wracked with memories of a deceased loved one, for Leona her brother, for Blanche her husband, both of whom were homosexual and creatively inclined.

The Night of the Iguana contains other of Leona's predecessors. There are three figures in this play who are cognizant of a life that transcends mere physicality, Lawrence Shannon, Hannah Jelkes, and her poet grandfather, Nonno. Shannon is a defrocked minister whose career was brought to a halt by his insistence on preaching the "truth":

Look here, I said, I shouted, I'm tired of conducting services in praise and worship of a senile delinquent--yeah, that's what I said, I shouted!

He was judged as having been heretical in this. He then became a tour guide, and was defrocked there, too, because of his insistence on showing his entourage "real beauty":



. . . to make the tour more . . . unique--to make it different from the ordinary, to give it a personal thing, the Shannon touch.

As a result of these dismissals, Shannon hovers on the edge of a nervous breakdown. His status remains uncertain until the end of the play when he stays in Mexico, but even then it is unclear whether his search for beauty has ended or not. What is conclusive from his character, and what connects him to Leona is the duress his concern for beauty has brought him.

Similarly, Hannah Jelkes seems victimized by her search for beauty. A painter, she travels from hotel to hotel with her grandfather selling sketches to tourists. And she is frigid. She seems to have idealized beauty to the point that she cannot admit any human interference into her life, recognizing the frequent sordidness of humanity, but failing to recognize her own shortcoming. She, too, is clearly related to Leona both by her respect for sensitivity and the transience that respect precipitates in the Williams' order.

Hannah's grandfather, Nonno, is another variation of the purveyor of beauty. He is a poet who, at 98 years of age, is struggling to complete his last poem before he dies. He does finish it, and then he dies. He is a simple character, one who is only briefly on stage. But he does add another dimension to the sensitive character in Williams' drama. His life ends as he achieves his union with the aesthetic; when his character is considered with respect to Shannon and Hannah, and to the earlier characters I have mentioned, it appears that Williams points to the elusiveness of beauty, to its realization only with death, the ultimate freedom from human failings, the natural extension of the flights of Tom Wingfield, Blanche Duval, Shannon, his granddaughter, and now, in Small Craft Warnings, Leona Dawson.

An examination of Leona and her predecessors reveals that in his drama Tennessee Williams portrays the troubled plight of sensitivity. The characters who embody this trait are always flawed. His less catastrophic plays cast that flaw as transience: those blessed with an understanding of beauty must move constantly in order to escape contamination by society. His more catastrophic, A Streetcar Named Desire casts that flaw as insanity. The sum of these is that an appreciation of beauty is alien to most of society and must struggle, sometimes fruitlessly, to remain alive. This is the role that Leona plays in Small Craft Warnings.

The second major category that defines Williams' characterization is the antithesis to the sensitivity figure. I refer to those characters who have been referred to as the "sexual specialists,"<sup>4</sup> the "Dionysians"<sup>5</sup> and so forth; I shall use Williams' own term, "Beasts." These clearly are those figures who respond to physicality and are, for thematic purposes, mindless.

There are two such characters in Small Craft Warnings, Violet and Bill McCorkle. Violet, appropriately named, is described as "like a water plant." This carries several associations. First, she is rootless. Indeed this is established in the play. She has lived most recently above an amusement arcade on the California coast, in an apartment procured and appointed by Leona. Violet, it is shown at one point, remembers neither when nor how she acquired this residence. Furthermore, now dispossessed, she drags her suitcase about with her, accenting her nomadic life. What distinguishes her transience from the characters of Leona's lineage is suggested by the other association her metaphoric description carries: she is mindless. Her travels are undirected, seemingly with no rational motivation. She is adrift.

During her wanderings, Violet is liable to wind up in anybody's bed.

She requires no spiritual reward, nothing approaching affection, in fact, she fails even to recognize anyone's concern for her. She seems to capture the total degeneration to physicality; her only need is an occasional chili dog or "Whopper"; her only sign of emotion is her crying, which, devoid of any dignity, becomes merely whimpering, the response of pure disorientation; she is one of the most purely pathetic figures in Tennessee Williams' drama. Her plight is defined by Leona, who, noticing Violet's hand under the table Bill and Steve are seated at, states ". . . She's got some sort of religion in her hands. . . ."

The other "beast" in the play, Bill McCorkle, is as basely physical as Violet but rather than her pathos, he evokes disgust. He views "his sexual prowess as a meal ticket,"<sup>6</sup> and is devoted to nothing more than keeping himself fed. Less than a gigolo, Bill cannot even feign respect for Leona, whose trailer he has shared for the six months prior to the night of the play. He allows Violet to fondle him in front of Leona who then tells him to remove his belongings from the trailer.

Rather than employ one "beast" in this play, Williams has provided two in an attempt, I think to define the "beast" more carefully. Violet, on one hand, is a "beast," yet she has no control over her status. She has no mind to provide herself with a means of control. Bill, on the other hand, is a "beast" who recognizes that fact. At one point during his brief soliloquy, he refers to his penis: ". . . I've never done a lick of work in my life and I never plan to, not as long as Junior keeps batting on the home team." This attitude is altogether different from Violet's. Subsequently where she is pathetic, Bill is loathsome. By bringing these two characters together in Small Craft Warnings, Williams variegates his animalistic character type,

making its assault on sensitivity more concerted.

Both of these characters are at odds with Leona: she is frustrated by Violet's vegetable nature and repulsed by Bill's grossness. This opposition of the sensitivity figure and the beast is another part of the Williams' canon. I have discussed the lineage of the sensitivity figure, I now would like briefly to do the same for the "beasts" to illuminate the struggle.

The grand example of the "beast" to be found in Williams' earlier work is Stanley Kowalski from A Streetcar Named Desire. He is described: "Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes" in the first act of the play and he remains a constant force throughout. Nearly all of the extensive criticism of this play points out the debt Williams owes to D. H. Lawrence for this character, and in fact for Williams' use of the "meat/mind" dichotomy.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, A Streetcar Named Desire explores precisely the theme of what happens when these two forces, represented by Stanley and Blanch, collide. In Streetcar Named Desire the beast emerges unscathed, perhaps strengthened, the sensitive character collapses.<sup>8</sup>

Another play that focuses on this division within humanity is Summer and Smoke. John Buchanan, Jr. is the beast, Alma Winemiller, the beauty. There is also a collision in this play, but curiously, neither figure triumphs or perishes. They switch roles. This reversal has led critics to dismiss Summer and Smoke: they view the change as too abrupt. But what is noteworthy is that Williams has dealt with this dichotomy in man continually, and precisely this rift recurs in Small Craft Warnings. Violet and Bill together form the "beast," and, add an extra dimension to it through their dual characterization. With Leona they comprise the division between sensitivity and physicality.

Another character with a distinct ancestry in Williams' plays is Doc. He has had his license to practice medicine revoked and now makes a living performing abortions. The figure of the failed professional is one of Williams' stocks-in-trade and its function seems to be repeatedly the futility of professional endeavor. I believe Williams attempts to broaden the base of his theme of the difficulty of meaningful existence to include those socially approved with all of his wayward artists and beauticians. Without this breadth, Williams' drama might be read as the plight of eccentrics. By including teachers, athletes, clergymen, and physicians, however, the playwright assimilates a more acutely recognizable stripe of society into his desperate world.

At one point in the first act Doc speaks of the medical procedures that surround birth and death and then reflects

. . . It's hard to see back of this cloud of . . . irreverent . . . paraphernalia. But behind them both are the holy mysteries of . . . birth and . . . death. . . . They're dark as the face of a black man, yes, that's right, a Negro, yes. I've always figured that God is a black man, a Negro miner in the pit of a lightless coal mine, obscured completely by the . . . irrelevancies and irreverencies of public worship . . . standing to sing, kneeling to pray, sitting to hear the banalities of a preacher . . . Monk, did I give you my . . . ?

This passage serves to illustrate the futility of using a particular profession to come to terms with the time between "birth and . . . death." The references to "worship" later in the passage broaden the point to include another profession, creating a blanket charge against any hope of gleaning comfortable philosophy from a vocation.

Doc immediately reminds one of Blanche DuVal from Streetcar Named Desire. A former teacher, she had been fired for her promiscuous private

life as well as for her affair with a student. Blanche viewed her role as a teacher as that of one crusading to keep the art of poetry alive. For herself, it was her means of maintaining contact with a sensitive world. Her profession was, in effect, her attempt at order in her chaotic life.

Brick Pollit from Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is another character who sought deliverance through his profession. In the first act, Maggie states: "You organized the Dixie Stars that fall, so you could keep on bein' teammates forever." Brick had attempted to continue his relationship with Skipper as long as possible, for it was in it that he found the only love he had ever known. His alienation from Maggie and his father was explicit in the play and he sought and failed to make up for it with Skipper as a teammate. Similarly Lawrence Shannon in The Night of the Iguana, as I have already mentioned, had been defrocked once, and discharged once more. I don't intend to imply that his job as a tour guide has professional status, but the literary device of the failure of a job to provide escape from a desperate life recurs.

This failure of a profession to provide an acceptable existence by itself is a line that comes squarely to rest on Doc. The resolution about life that he comes to is the most rhapsodic in the play, but as fruitless as the rest. After his speech just quoted on "paraphernalia" he states, "I'll have a shot of brandy to wash down a Benzedrine tablet to steady my nerves," immediately prior to going out to deliver a baby.

It seems that Williams recognizes the folly of using external matters, such as professions, to provide an internal spiritual balance. The doctor, the minister, the professional athlete, among others in Williams' corpus, are all as achingly unfulfilled as the vagrants, the bohemians, in short--

the unprofessionals. For Tennessee Williams vulnerability afflicts everyone, without respect for position. Just as the rich are pictured as eaten away from within in many of Williams' plays,<sup>9</sup> so are the skilled and trained.

Steve and Monk are two small characters in Small Craft Warnings who complement Doc. Steve, a forty-seven year old short order cook, is also a member of the community. He is "Violet's regular boyfriend between sailors," accepts with anguish his humiliating relationship with her because, as a 47 year old short order cook, he has two choices--"very little, or nothing at all." It is difficult to establish his descendancy from the earlier plays since he is a minor character. His pitiable union with Violet is somewhat reminiscent of that of Mitch and Blanche in Streetcar Named Desire. And his resolution "to be satisfied with the Goddam scraps in this world . . ." and his wail "Life! . . . Throw it to a dog. I'm not a dog, I don't want it," recalls Mitch, too. Furthermore, Steve complements Doc and his line by voicing the same resigned despair and, by doing so, extending the boundaries of that condition to include the small man as well as the more respected professional.

The character of Monk, the owner of the bar, is quite similar to that of Steve. He is a small man, one who expects very little from life. During his soliloquy he reports "these things, these people, take the place of a family in my life." He continues his speech, mentioning his heart trouble, and concludes ". . . I'll die in the night alone, and I hope it don't wake me up, that I just slip away, quietly." Like Steve it is difficult to place Monk in a specific line of Williams' characters because, besides in his brief soliloquy, little is learned about him. But his resignation is recognizable as one of Williams' solutions to the desperate state of humanity.



Another character who is decidedly Williamsesque and yet not quite so easy to label is Quentin. The homosexual is no stranger to Williams' drama, but previously he has generally been offstage. One exception is Miss Fellowes in Night of the Iguana, but her sexuality is left to be implied on stage while Quentin discusses his openly. He can also be seen in the failed professionals inasmuch as he is a writer recently turned to creating pornographic screenplays. And furthermore Quentin is linked to Leona's dead brother, whose unmistakably clear lineage I shall discuss next. Leona, speaking to Quentin states "This kid from Iowa here reminds me a little of how my brother was, and you, you remind me of how he might have become if he lived." Quentin's reply is, "Yes, you should be relieved he's dead then."

Quentin is a conglomerate character whom Williams has used now, I think, because most current attitudes permit sexuality and even homosexuality to be discussed on stage. Williams, even at his formerly most sensational, veiled his use of sexuality, but now, in the wake of drama that parades legions of nudes in front of audiences, he has taken advantage of "liberated" attitudes toward sex.

The final character in Small Craft Warnings who is the end of a firmly established sequence in Williams' drama is Leona's brother, who remains unnamed. He never appears in the play, having died several years before the day of the play. I realize that I might seem to strain terms by referring to a dead man as a character. But he is so prominent in this play, and characters like him in several others, that I think he requires discussion. All of these offstage characters fit a type: they have examined their lives and made their resolution. The most famous of these characters is Mr. Wingfield from The Glass Menagerie, the man who "went to work for the phone



company and fell in love with long distance." But while he is the best known, I think he is the least interesting. He serves merely to foreshadow Tom's resolution; Tom winds up enamored of "long distance," as well. But there is little more to this character, possibly because Williams had only begun this character type in The Glass Menagerie and was to make more of it in subsequent works.

The offstage character is used in A Streetcar Named Desire, but in this play Williams has created a deeper character. Blanche's husband committed suicide after she found him abed with another man. She cherished her memories of him, however, and he came to represent, through Blanche's reports, and an old bundle of poems he had written her, the opposition to Stanley. Where Stanley was brutish, the dead boy was delicate; where Stanley was coarse, the dead boy was refined.

Precisely this character returns in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Skipper, Brick's former friend was explained by Brick as the ideal friend:

Skipper and me had a clean true thing between us!  
Had a clean friendship, practically all our lives,  
till Maggie got the idea you're talking about.  
Normal? No! -- It was too rare to be normal.

Maggie relates later that Skipper had harbored homosexual lust for Brick; it is this lust that drove him to his alcoholic death. Skipper becomes nearly a duplicate of Blanche's husband in that he represents on one hand a pure spirit, one that eludes the rest of Williams' characters, and on the other, a perverted spirit that has led to its owner's demise. Again and again we find characters in Williams' drama who view a sensitive ideal but find it not viable in practice. The offstage character captures this concept and idealizes it in death, or at the very least, "long distance."

Small Craft Warnings, as I have already mentioned, has its own version of the beautiful, blond boy who has degenerated from a sensitive character, to a homosexual, to death. Leona's brother is squarely, even redundantly in this category. Blanche refuses to let Stanley Kowalski read the poems the dead boy wrote, telling him, "The touch of your hands insults them!" Similarly when Leona states that her brother died from "pernicious anemia," and Violet claims "Anemia, that's what I've got!" Leona replies, "Don't compare yourself with him, how dare you compare yourself with him."

The primary addition that Williams adds to his offstage character tradition is that Leona's brother died not at his own hand, but of the "pernicious anemia" she refers to in such detail. I think Williams has purified the character in this respect because previously the spectre of suicide clouded this idealized figure. Admittedly the character is still befuddling because his homosexuality tarnishes him, but the anemia works better to support the notion of sensitivity unable to exist in a sordid world. This latest character simply had not enough of the stuff of life to sustain himself. He remains enigmatic, however, even in Small Craft Warnings despite this further purification. The recurrent homosexuality adds, I think, to the abject desperation that seems to accompany search for a satisfactory existence in the drama of Tennessee Williams.

At this point I would like to introduce the character of Bobby from Small Craft Warnings. By his presence on stage he is modification of the off-stage characters I have been discussing, and more importantly he becomes, through that modification, a new character in Williams' line, one without true precedent. His distinction is that he not desperately adrift and is

not, as yet, tarnished. He is, it seems to me, the first truly hopeful character Williams has created, the first with more than potential deliverance, the first to make the formula for that deliverance manifest on the stage.

Bobby arrives in Monk's Place after having ridden his bicycle from his home in Goldenfield, Iowa to southern California. The "Iowa to Mexico" legend on his shirt identifies his journey. The unusualness of this trip, the name of his home town, and the innocence that pervades his characterization, all suggest that the boy functions dramatically as a mythic figure. He obviously speaks for more than his literal self, and he is considerably less realistic than any of the other characters. What it is he speaks for becomes clear in the last section of Act I. Leona raises the question of Bobby's relation to Quentin, the homosexual. She asks them "what went wrong between you before you came in here . . . ." Quentin answers "Nothing exactly. I just made a mistake, and he did, too." A few lines later after Leona has begun to pry the story from Quentin, Bobby states "Let's shut up about that." And then when Quentin starts to continue the story Bobby interrupts him with this brief speech:

I guess to you people who live here it's just an old thing you're used to, I mean the ocean out there, the Pacific, it's not an EXPERIENCE to you any more like it is to me. You say it's the Pacific, but me, I say THE PACIFIC!

This speech is doubly significant. To begin with it excuses whatever happened (if anything happened at all—the point is ambiguous in the play) between Bobby and Quentin since for the youth it was just an experience. The speech removes a flaw from Bobby's character and permits him to become the manifestation of hopeful existence I mentioned.

A few lines later Quentin states

. . . This boy . . . look at him! Would you guess he was gay? . . . I didn't, I though he was straight. But I had an unpleasant surprise when he responded to my hand on his knee by putting his hand on mine.

Bobby replies,

I don't dig the word "gay." To me they mean nothing, those words.

And Leona adds,

Aw, you've got plenty of time to learn the meanings of words and cynical attitudes. Why he's got eyes like my brother's! Have you paid him?

And Quentin

For disappointment?

As I mentioned, precisely what went on between Bobby and Quentin is ambiguous. What is clear, however, is that the boy is innocent and curious. I referred to his doubly significant speech earlier and mentioned that the first point was that it revealed his innocence. The second, his curiosity, is even more important, indeed I think it is the heart of this newly promising character from Tennessee Williams.

This point becomes quite clear soon after this section I have been referring to. Quentin asks Leona (with reference to the stuffed sailfish that hangs above the bar)

Suppose I woke up and discovered it there, swimming round and round in the darkness over my bed, with a faint phosphorescent glow in its big goggle eyes and its gorgeously iridescent fins and tail making a swishing sound as it circles around and about and around and about right over my head in bed.

Leona exclaims "Hah!" and Quentin pursues the hypothesis

Now suppose this admittedly preposterous thing did occur. What do you think I'd say?

After some bantering with Leona, Quentin finally answers

I'll tell you what I would say, I would say:  
"Oh, well . . ."

Quentin asks Leona and Bobby if they see the point of his story and when they admit they don't he asks them

What is the thing that you mustn't lose in this world before you leave it? The one thing you mustn't lose ever?

Leona offers "Love," to which Quentin laughs.

Bobby tries "Interest," and Quentin replies

That's closer, much closer. Yes, that's almost it. The word that I had in mind is surprise. The capacity for being surprised. I've lost the capacity for being surprised, so completely lost it, that if I woke up in my bedroom late some night and saw that fantastic fish swimming right over my head, I wouldn't be really surprised.

Right after this dialogue Quentin goes into his soliloquy and explains that his homosexuality has a "deadening coarseness," that it is only too expressive of his lost capacity for surprise. Further on in this speech he refers again to Bobby:

This boy I picked up tonight, the kid from the tall corn country, still has the capacity for being surprised by what he sees, hears and feels in this kingdom of earth. All the way up the canyon to my place he kept saying, I CAN'T BELIEVE IT, I'M HERE, I'VE COME TO THE PACIFIC, THE WORLD'S GREATEST OCEAN! . . . as if nobody, Magellan or Balboa or even the Indians had seen it before him; yes, like he'd discovered this ocean, the largest on earth, and, so now, because he'd found it himself, it existed, now, for the first time, never before . . . And this excitement of his reminded me of having lost the ability to say, "My God!" instead of just "Oh, well."

By this point the character of Bobby is in sharper focus. His wonder,

his refusal to accept "words, cynical attitudes," his mythic quest for experience, the enthusiasm that has him put everything "in caps"; all of these things point to the ideal that is cast in his character. Furthermore, his attraction to the ocean has another connotation. Throughout the play the ocean is mysterious. It endangers the "Small Craft" in the bar, but it beckons Bobby. The very life that the other characters are estranged from by their flights, their mindlessness, their corruption, their "coarseness," their misprisions, in short their deadness, is a mine to the boy. He is, as yet, free from all of those trappings.

The vitality of his state is further delineated as the first act closes and the homosexual encounter with Quentin is somewhat cleared up. Bobby explains

That man didn't come on heavy. [Looking at  
Quentin.] His hand on my knee was just a human  
touch and it seemed natural to me to return it.

He then goes into his soliloquy in which he explains that he knew "a man like that" in his hometown who was forced to leave after trying to lure boys into a room "decorated Chinese, with incense and naked pictures." Bobby and some friends broke into the man's room after he left Goldenfield. Bobby reports that the "naked pictures were just . . . pathetic, y'know. Except for a sketch of Michelangelo's David." Here again the boy's eye for beauty amid sordidness is stressed, complementing his "capacity for surprise."

Bobby adds in his soliloquy

On the plains of Nebraska I passed a night with  
a group of runaway kids my age and it got cold  
after sunset. A lovely wild young girl invited  
me under a blanket with just a smile, and then  
a boy, me between, and both of them kept saying  
"love," one of 'em in one ear and one in the  
other, till I didn't know which was "love" in

which ear or which . . . touch . . . The plain  
 was high and the night air . . . exhilarating and  
 the touches not heavy . . .

Bobby then says a few words of good-by and leaves the bar and the play.

This final speech has a number of effects on the play. For one it reintroduces the question of the boy's sexual preference. But by opening that question the speech further points to his purity because as he leaves the play he has made no decision on the matter. He is going to decide for himself after experience. This might indicate to some that the boy is therefore flawed; but instead I think one should accept the concept of sexuality as merely another choice, another aspect of life the boy has yet to meet.

But more importantly than raise a question that can, but I think shouldn't, be answered on abstract moral grounds with no respect for the context of the play, the conclusion to his soliloquy remarks again on Bobby's capacity for questioning, for experience and wonder; he reacted to his experience without Quentin's "deadening coarseness." His last line is "I think I'll drive all night, I don't feel tired," whereby, it seems to me, he leaves with all of those faculties which establish him as a figure for the possible deliverance of himself, and, via his mythic aspects, as emblematic of the hope of all men.

Whereas Bobby is greatly akin to the off-stage characters, he lacks their flaws, and, furthermore he appears on stage. It is entirely possible to speculate that he will acquire the flaws and turn out no differently than the others. But what is essential to note is that so far he has not. Williams paints a character of potential in Bobby. He has done this before, in Lawrence Shannon of The Night of the Iguana and Tom Wingfield of The Glass Menagerie. But their potentials are, first, implicit, since they are

recognized only at the close of the respective plays and, second, the awakenings come after they have lived a great part of their lives. For these two figures the potential is recognized only too lately, and, if fulfilled, it will be so in the netherworld after the plays. Bobby, on the other hand, displays the potential, so much so that he becomes an emblem for the hope of wonder at life's mysteries, a marked departure from the other characters in Small Craft Warnings and the earlier works who seek any means of avoiding questioning those mysteries. They are desperate. Bobby is expectant.

The focus on Bobby as the thematic core of the play is more obvious when the other characters are considered with respect to the importance of the few hours the play encompasses to their characters. For all of them, except Bobby, the action in the play is representative of any day in their lives. They undergo no change or discovery. Leona states that she is through with Bill and is going to move, but her nature is itinerant. Her address might change, but that indicates she has not. Even her brawl with the security guard on the beach is well within the outline of her character.

Monk and Violet establish a relationship by the end of the play, but it, too, is completely continuous of their roles. Each has had a series of one night affairs and the latest one is no different. Violet has not mind enough to change, and as Monk heads up the stairs to join Violet the directions state "maybe feeling a stitch of pain in his heart (but he's used to that) . . . ." And indeed Monk, with this imminent union with Violet, adds nothing more to his character than another round of monotonous relationship and meager hope.

Similarly, Bill and Steve move through the play without having done any more than gone through another hopelessly fruitless day. As soon as Monk



mentions that the law is coming, they exit hurriedly. Neither ever tries, or even considers trying to resolve the stagnancy that pervades his life.

Doc suffers through a crisis in the play when the child he sought to deliver illegally and its mother both die. But this tragedy is simply another mishap to him. He fortifies his nerve with brandy and benzedrine, as he has been doing throughout the play, and flees from the law, as he has also been doing throughout the play.

Quentin, too, is a model of stasis. He is the character who points to Bobby's "Surprise," thereby identifying the solution to the desperation that infects all of the characters except Bobby. And yet, as he leaves the play after all of his enlightening discourse, the note after his parting words is "Desires no further exposure to Bobby." He recognizes the means to a surer grasp on his existence and yet chooses to ignore it.

The extensive use of soliloquy also restricts the characters. Rather than have the characters reveal themselves solely by their interactions, Williams gives each character a time alone under the spotlight. These speeches inform the audience of what is in the character's mind, making more extensive characterization unnecessary. The result is a series of stagnant characters revealing themselves in a monotonous manner.

It is perfectly true that the events of the play are those of any day, for Bobby, too, and that his soliloquy reveals part of his character. But what distinguishes him, and focuses the play on him is that a typical day for this searching character is a day of change, of discovery. His quest for "the poetry of life"<sup>10</sup> is continuous, but dynamic. Of all the characters in Small Craft Warnings, Bobby is the only one for whom the events of the play are meaningful.

Small Craft Warnings was adapted from Williams' earlier one-act play entitled Confessional. In this play, as the characters move to the front of the stage to deliver their soliloquies, the directions mention that they move to the "confessional." This is clearly suggestive of self-revelation, a device that, as I stated, precludes more extensive characterization.

Small Craft Warnings is steeped in an aura of *deja vu*. The opening scene, with Leona hurling profanity in all directions, and Violet practicing her pathetic "religion" is reminiscent of the sensationalism that flares in nearly all of Williams' drama. The characters, too, are clearly related to many others in his earlier plays, both in their quasi-familial bonds, and their individual types. And of course, they are locked in a futile struggle with their own existences. *Man adrift* is Williams' theme again and again, and in Small Craft Warnings he proffers it again.

What saves the play from being merely repetitious is the character of Bobby who, for the first time in the Williams' corpus, is not adrift. His inclusion redeems the play not only because he is not simply a repetition, but because it makes the other characters serve as contrast. Against their predictability, and the manifest characterization provided in the soliloquies, the figure of Bobby is more prominent. Williams repaints his desperate world but then opposes it with a countermanding figure of hope.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Signi Falk, Tennessee Williams (New Haven: College & University Press, 1961), p. 183.

Gerald Weales, "Tennessee Williams," University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, Number 53 (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas E. Porter, Myth and Modern American Drama (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), p. 153.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph N. Riddell, "A Streetcar Named Desire--Nietzsche Descending," Modern Drama, 5 (1963), rpt. in Jordan Y. Miller, ed., Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Streetcar Named Desire, (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 80.

<sup>4</sup>Weales, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>Riddell, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup>Clive Barnes, rev. of Small Craft Warnings, The New York Times, 3 April 1972, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup>Marion Magid, "The Innocence of Tennessee Williams," Commentary, 35 (1963), rpt. in Miller, p. 78.

<sup>8</sup>John T. von Szeliski, "Tennessee Williams and the Tragedy of Sensitivity," Western Humanities Review, 20 (1966), rpt. in Miller, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup>C. W. E. Bigsby, "Tennessee Williams: Streetcar to Glory," The Forties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama (Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1969), rpt. in Miller, p. 104.

<sup>10</sup>Harold Clurman, rev. of Small Craft Warnings, The Nation, 24 April 1972, p. 541.

AN ANALYSIS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'  
SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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The purpose of this report is to explore Small Craft Warnings for its thematic impact. The method is, first, to discuss those aspects of this play that bear significant similarity to Tennessee Williams' earlier major plays. These points include the sensationalistic tone of the play, the closely integrated group of characters, and several character types. Among these types are the struggling sensitivity figure, the "beast," the failed professional, and the hopeless minor character.

After establishing the ties between Small Craft Warnings and the earlier plays, I discuss two aspects of this latest work that seem to be additions to Williams' dramatic mode. The first is a character who represents the possibility of transcending the desperation that characterized Williams' world prior to Small Craft Warnings. The second point is the extensive use of the soliloquy, a facet of this play that is also a new point in Williams' drama.