

# Taoism and Maxine Faulk in Williams' *The Night of the Iguana*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Tennessee Williams created Maxine Faulk in *The Night of the Iguana* as a multi-dimensional and also sympathetic character, and that Maxine's positive qualities are clear in her relationship with Shannon which we see developing throughout the play. Taoism influences her personality just as it did that of her late husband Fred Faulk. Thus a Taoist rather than Christian perspective may provide a clearer and more complete insight into Maxine's character, just as it can help to establish a philosophical framework for the play. The paper will show how Maxine's sea-like personality, which reflects ancient Chinese philosophical images or conceptions of the sea, helps to clarify the play's Taoist theme, as do her Taoist attitudes of "*Mei yoo guanchi*" ("no sweat") that foreshadows Hannah's oriental attitude: "Accept whatever situation you cannot improve." Both of these attitudes help Shannon, the fulcrum of the play, to come to terms with life by accepting the inevitable consequences of any decision or act, and specifically his acceptance of Maxine at the end of the play after he loses his tour-guide job and decides not to return to the church.

**KEYWORDS:** Williams, Maxine Faulk, Shannon, conceptions of the sea, Taoism, Chinese cultural influence

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## I. Maxine's Positive Qualities

Tennessee Williams once openly complained about reviewers' misreadings of his plays and misinterpretations of his characters: "I am always surprised when, after a play has opened, I read in the papers that it was about a decayed Southern belle trying to get a man for her crippled daughter, or that it was about a boozy floozy on the skids, or a backwoods sheik in a losing battle with three village vamps" (*Selected Essays* 25-26). Williams may be justified inasmuch as many reviewers have misunderstood his plays and misread or misinterpreted his characters. Some critics focus on just one side of a character while ignoring his or her other sides. Maxine Faulk in *The Night of the Iguana* is, I would suggest, often misinterpreted, especially as her "aggressive physicality is often a source of comment" (Crandell 151). Two of the few positive readings of Maxine are those of Alice Griffin, who sees that "Maxine is sympathetically portrayed as a lonely woman" (227), and Foster Hirsch, who points out that "Maxine and Hannah are both mother figures, and yet (also unusual for Williams) they are presented as saviors rather than destroyers" (67).

In his comparison between Hannah and Maxine, Hirsch also says: "Hannah is the fair heroine, the saint, to Maxine's whore" (68). Signi Falk describes Maxine "a sexually aggressive older woman . . . who has adopted the attractive twenty-year old Pedro as her lover" (70). Similarly, Jacob Adler claims that Maxine is a "blatantly sexual being" (62), while Louise Blackwell believes "Mrs. Faulk is one of those women who will waste no time in trying to re-establish a satisfactory sexual relationship" (14) and Glenn Embrey thinks that "We are quickly made aware to what excess her sexual appetite runs—she has hired not one but two young Mexicans to serve her desires" (76). In her psychoanalytical interpretation of *The Night of the Iguana*, Judith J. Thompson echoes Embrey's comment that Maxine is "vulgar, aggressive and menacing" (Embrey 77) by claiming that she "represents the negative aspect of the feminine archetype, the 'Terrible Mother,' perceived as 'the womb of the earth become [*sic*] the devouring maw of the universe' and (as Shannon calls her) 'a sort of bright widow spider' who threatens to trap, ensnare, and 'tie up' his sexuality" (160). Quoting Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother*, Thompson goes on to say this "Terrible Mother"—with her negative function of "holding fast, fixating, and

ensnaring,” of “not releasing what aspires toward independence and freedom”—is perceived as being “dangerous and deadly” (160).

However, most of these critics focus on just one side of Maxine’s personality while ignoring or simply refusing to recognize her other, more positive characteristics. Although some of their critical comments may be justified in the context of their arguments, many seem exaggerated or lopsided. Given their largely negative views of her, these critics naturally find the ways in which Maxine’s personality develops, and the ending of the play itself, quite problematic. Emprey claims:

The wonder is that at the end of the play she can abruptly change, somehow, somewhere off stage, into a mellow Oriental goddess. To be believable such a radical transformation requires much more than the stage-direction and the few lines of dialogue Williams supplies. As it stands, the ending comes as quite a jolt. A character we have been forced to see as vulgar, aggressive, and menacing suddenly acquires alluringly soft edges. More than this, throughout the play Shannon has drawn away from the rapacious widow in apprehension; an apprehension the play helps the audience to share; now in a bizarre about-face he willingly agrees to live with her. (77)

Here, however, I will argue that Williams creates Maxine, in *The Night of the Iguana*, as a multi-dimensional character with a fundamentally positive and sympathetic nature. As such she is part of the larger dramatic structure which of course includes the development of the relationship between Maxine and Shannon and their final union. However, here this larger structure, and more specifically this relationship, is interpreted not in terms of traditional Christian categories which critics in general have tended to adhere to, but rather in terms of Chinese cultural values and categories in general, and more specifically those based on Taoism. We can more easily see Maxine as embodying Taoist virtues once we see the whole play as doing so. Reading the play in this way, I will argue, makes Maxine’s union with Shannon at the end much more plausible, for it is Maxine’s positive qualities, which are closely tied to her Taoist philosophy, that finally enable Shannon to accept her as his life partner.

True, Maxine is not an ideal, refined lady from the perspective of the Christian puritanical tradition, but while she is a physically vigorous and sexually active woman on the one hand, on the other hand she adheres to the Taoist philosophy of *mei yoo guanchi* or “no sweat”—that is, the philosophy of taking it easy, not taking life (its ups and downs) too seriously. Thus while Maxine looks like a simple, practical and very “direct” person in the play, she is by no means a one-dimensional or a flat character. On the contrary, Williams has created her as a multi-dimensional, complex character. While she may desire “a satisfactory sexual relationship,” she is hardly “most in need of a mate” when Shannon arrives at the hotel. In fact, Maxine already has “two young Mexicans to serve her desires” (76), as Embrey points out. These two Mexican swimmers are much younger than Shannon and more handsome. Hannah also admires them: “What graceful people they are!” (35). But the fact that Maxine still prefers Shannon to the two young Mexican divers clearly suggests that her desire for the older man is not merely sexual; rather, it also involves something else, even if this is not of the “golden kind” mentioned in Nonno’s final poem (123). Thus Maxine once says to Shannon:

I know the difference between loving someone and just sleeping with someone—even I know about that. We’ve both reached a point where we’ve got to settle for something that works for us in our lives—even if it isn’t on the highest kind of level. (81)

Glenn Embrey claims that “[T]hroughout the play she is coarse and suggestive, and at one point she tells Shannon that her interest in him is primarily sexual” (77), but clearly this is not at all Maxine’s meaning when she says that she and Shannon have “both reached a point where we’ve got to settle for something that works in our lives.” In fact, throughout the play Maxine has tried to convince Shannon to stay with her as her life partner. Clearly Embrey is wrong in thinking that this “something that works for us in our life” (81) is “primarily sexual.” On the other hand, Maxine is a realist, one who knows that while love “on the highest kind of level” is something people also dream of, it is not easily attained in reality; therefore, we need to accept a real-life, everyday love, even if this will not be “of a golden kind” (123). In fact, she also knows that Shannon is more of an idealist—coming as he does from a Christian background—and so she is freely admitting that she cannot really meet his “level.” Like Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or Maggie in

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Maxine is a practical realist, one who longs for a decent, long-term relationship that includes a sexual dimension and is founded on mutual respect. What she is looking for in her relationship with Shannon is above all something decent, even somewhat spiritual, such as mutual respect.

Thus Embrey's view of Maxine as being someone with "frightening" desires whom Shannon "fears . . . will devour him" (77), and his belief that "Shannon's staying with Maxine means he is putting himself in the maw of a devouring monster" (79), seem clearly misplaced. On the contrary, it is clear that what Maxine values above all in her sexual partners is mutual respect. Thus she says to Shannon, speaking of the two young Mexican men: "They don't respect me enough. When you let employees get too free with you, personally, they stop respecting you, Shannon. And it's, well, it's . . . humiliating—not to be . . . respected" (80). She also tells him, speaking of her late husband: "You know damn well that Fred respected me, Shannon, like I did Fred" (80). Fred's sexual life with Maxine may have ended when he started night-fishing all night while Maxine went night-swimming with the two young Mexicans. At the beginning of Act III she says of her married life with Fred: "Don't misunderstand me about Fred, baby. I miss him, but we'd . . . stopped sleeping together" (80). Obviously it may not be mainly the sex with Fred that Maxine misses; it must have been something more spiritual. Thus toward the end of the play she sees mutual respect as the basis for her relationship with Shannon.

The first adjective Williams uses to describe Maxine's personality at the opening of the play is "affable" (7), though critics generally seem not to emphasize or even notice this point. Maxine is not only "affable" but also generous and kind. Towards the end of Act I Shannon openly tells her: "Thanks—generosity is the cornerstone of your nature" (38). Shannon does not exaggerate the point because he knows well that it is Maxine who has generously paid the medical fees for his two previous mental breakdowns; as Maxine says: "I've had to pay for his medical care" (93). Shannon openly praises Maxine's generosity, which forms the bedrock of their relationship and ultimately leads to their union. We also see Maxine's affability, kindness and generosity in her letting Miss Fellowes use her telephone (17), and her offering Miss Fellowes a rum-coco (28) even though the latter once rudely asked her, "Is this man getting a kickback from you?" (17). Although Maxine knows very well that Nonno and Hannah have no money at all to pay her, out

of generosity she still offers Nonno “a Manhattan with two cherries in it,” which she believes will be good for Nonno, and offers Hannah “a little soda with lime juice” (70) even though she considers Hannah her rival, as both of them like Shannon.

Although Maxine is jealous as she senses “the vibrations between” Shannon and Hannah (74), she is also kind enough to let Hannah and her grandfather Nonno stay in her hotel. When Maxine calls Hannah “a deadbeat” at one point (71) and Hannah tries to wheel her grandfather Nonno down the hill and “all the way back into town, [ten] miles, with a storm coming up,” Maxine resolutely tells her “I wouldn’t let you” (72) because “[the] storm would blow that old man out of his wheelchair like a dead leaf” (73). Thus by consistently foregrounding Maxine’s positive qualities—her desire for mutual respect, her generosity, kindness, and compassion—Williams may be preparing us for the developing relationship between her and Shannon, and their final union at the end of the play.

## II. The Taoist Influence and Maxine’s Sea-like Nature

In *The Night of the Iguana*, Williams gives Maxine’s personality some metaphorical characteristics of the sea. His comparison of Maxine’s free and open-minded spirit with the broad, open, freely-accepting nature of the sea not only defines her basic personality, but also helps us to see why Shannon wants to stay with her at the end. In fact, Taoist philosophical views or conceptions of the sea are crucial to the larger Taoist theme that philosophically frames the play. Before exploring the Taoist influence on Maxine’s character, I will first establish the Taoist influence on Williams’ writing and revision of *The Night of the Iguan*.

Ihab H. Hassan argues that “since biography has been the traditional cynosure of scholarly interest, it is in relation to the individual writer that we must begin to examine the idea of influence” (67). One of Tennessee Williams’ relevant biographical details is the fact that he went on a three-month journey to the East in the fall of 1959, and his experiences during this trip had a direct influence on his writing and revisions of the full-length play *The Night of the Iguana*. Already clear from the fact that, after returning home, Williams immediately began working on *The Night of the Iguana*, this influence is reported by his life-long friend Maria St. Just: “Tennessee and Frank went on a trip around the world for three months, returning to spend the

winter in Key West. Tennessee worked on *The Night of the Iguana*" (163). *The New York Times* also reported that his "trip to the Orient left him 'deeply impressed' with Eastern philosophy" (32). It also revived his creative energy and spiritual vitality, as is clear from the following remarks by Donald Spoto:

Although he was exhausted from the long trip [to the East] and the month in New York, there was a sudden resurgence of purpose and energy, rather as if he were fulfilling a New Year's resolution. . . . He devoted himself to an expansion of what would, in the opinion of many, be his last great play—*The Night of the Iguana*. (238-39)

Williams' "sudden resurgence of purpose and energy" was more than just "a New Year's resolution"; it was a spiritual revitalization made possible by his first long trip to the East, a region of the world that had always had a haunting, exotic, mysterious attraction for him, as he wanted not only to explore the enchantment of its culture but also its ancient metaphysics. Williams' interest in Chinese philosophy had started early and with Chuang Tzu, one of the two great Taoist masters (the other being Lao Tzu). In a letter to John Rood, the editor of *Manuscript*, in March 1935 when he was still a university student, Tennessee Williams quoted Li Po's poem about the famous butterfly story of Chuang Tzu: "Chuang Chou in dream became a butterfly / And the butterfly became Chuang Chou at waking / Which was the real—the butterfly or the man?" (*Letters* 75). By quoting this poem about Chuang Tzu's butterfly story together with another Li Po poem, "Tonight I stayed at the Summit Temple," Williams tried to impress the editor with the scope of his reading and knowledge. Williams' citing of Li Po's poem about Chuang Tzu's butterfly story reveals his early interest in Chuang Tzu (also known as Chuang Chou). The fact that Williams had read the book known as the *Chuang Tzu* is later confirmed by his interviewer Dan Isaac, who claimed: "The first thing I had noticed when I walked into his hotel room was a copy of Merton's translation of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. . . . [There were] a couple of others: collections of poems by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gary Snyder. But it was the *Chuang Tzu* that he apparently was reading, *Inner Sources of Serenity*" (Devlin 137). Hence the influence of *Chuang Tzu* on Williams can be clearly established.

In her essay “*In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel: Breaking the Code*,” the well-known Williams critic Allean Hale points out that “for more than a decade [Williams] had been studying Eastern religion. In these Noh-inspired plays, when he feared he was going mad, he seems to have been searching for absolutes in Buddha or Tao” (Hale 159). Hale clearly states that the Eastern “religion” (philosophy) is mainly Taoism, and she even has a picture of the Taoist logo in her essay (152). All the above references directly or indirectly reveal that Williams indeed had an interest in Chinese philosophy and that he had really read *Chuang Tzu*, one of the pivotal Taoist texts along with Lao Tzu’s *The Tao Te Ching*.

This Taoist influence seeps into *The Night of the Iguana*, helping to frame the dramatic structure of the play. Almost all the main characters are affected by it in one way or another. The Chinese cook imported by Shannon for the Faulks’ hotel influences both Maxine and Fred Faulk with his simple, light-hearted philosophy of *Mei yoo guanchi* (82) that derives from Taoism. Fred’s easy-going lifestyle, free of desire, and his request for a sea burial on his deathbed strikingly reflect the style of a typical Taoist hermit. The serene and peaceful manner of the old penniless people dying in the House for the Dying in Shanghai—suggesting a Taoist attitude toward life and death—has clearly influenced both Hannah Jelkes and Nonno Jonathan Coffin.

The following letter of Tennessee Williams, sent to Bette Davis while she was playing the part of Maxine in Chicago in December 1961, can further show how Williams really conceived of Maxine’s personality. On a piece of paper with the heading *Sheraton Hotel, Chicago*, Williams explains:

Everything about her should have the openness and freedom of the sea. I can imagine she even smells like the sea. Time doesn’t exist for her except in changes of weather and season. Death, life, it’s all one to Maxine, she’s a living definition of nature: lusty, rapacious, guileless, unsentimental. . . . She moves with the ease of clouds and tides, her attitudes are free and relaxed. There is a touch of primitive poetry in her: hence the shouting and the echo. These two “echo” bits are moments when a touch of this primitive poetry can be pointed up more. The poetry here is simple, folk poetry—natural, undevised, but lyric. (St. Just 176)

It is not surprising that Williams poetically bestows upon the character of Maxine the features of the sea because the sea is his favorite symbol. All the main characters in *The Night of the Iguana* have something to do with the sea. Williams not only makes both Fred and Nonno choose the sea as their life's destiny, but also describes Shannon's desperate attempt to end his life in the sea, for they see the sea as the ultimate "openness" and "passivity."

From Williams' letter to Bette Davis, we can clearly see that the playwright does not intend Maxine to be negative or terrible in any way. On the contrary, he claims that Maxine is open, free and guileless, "a living definition of nature." As a free and guileless person Maxine openly voices her concerns. She frankly tells Hannah: "I want you to lay off him, honey. You're not for Shannon and Shannon isn't for you" (73). Then she honestly reveals her naked mind to Hannah: "So if you just don't mess with Shannon, you and your Grandpa can stay on here as long as you can" (74).

These direct, raw remarks can show that there is nothing beguiling, nothing devised, nothing tricky in Maxine's behavior and intentions; rather she is simply as open as the sea, and her obvious openness and frankness mirror her natural mind. True, she gets jealous, but even her jealousy is clearly transparent; therefore, it has no dark shadows. All her positive virtues are rooted in her free, open-minded nature that is like that of the sea, and her sea-like nature not only enables her to openly embrace Shannon and develop a very natural relationship with Shannon, but also makes her final union with him plausible at the end of the play. Maxine's sea-like traits are strikingly suggestive of the philosophical meaning of the sea in Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, who like the sea itself have an important presence within, between, beneath the lines.

Chuang Tzu says: "Of all the waters in the world the ocean is the largest. All the rivers have flowed into it" (*Sayings* 190). Chuang Tzu's philosophical insight is that the ocean or the sea is the largest simply because it openly and freely accepts all the water from all the rivers without any resistance and interference. What the sea always does is really *wu wei*—not-doing, inaction; that is, it never *does* anything in the sense of a positive action but just lets all the rivers flow down into it—without any interference—according to their nature. A key principle of Lao Tzu, also adopted by Chuang Tzu, is thus the paradoxical *wei wu-wei*, "doing non-doing," "acting inaction." The ancient Chinese philosopher Kuan Tzu (275-220 BC) echoes this praxis of passive or

indirect action: “The sea does not decline any water to flow in; therefore, it is the largest [thing].”<sup>2</sup> Thus the Taoist philosophers teach people to be tolerant, free-thinking, open-minded, accepting, non-interfering, having no prejudices or hidden thoughts or desires, like the sea itself.

The Taoist Lao Tzu, then, was the Chinese philosopher who not only first conceived the concept of *wu wei* but also first formulated the philosophical concept of the sea: “The reason great rivers and oceans can act as king of [a] hundred river valleys is that they are adept at lying below the valleys; therefore, they can act as king of a hundred valleys (Richter 125). The paradoxical truth that great rivers and oceans can act as king is again due to their open, free and non-interfering nature that can accept all water from anywhere, and so they become the largest *bodies* of water. Water *mirrors* the most humble attitude and is naturally adept at lying in the lowest places. In Chapter Eight of *The Tao Te Ching* Lao Tzu says: “The supreme good is like water. Water is adept at benefitting all things but does not contend; it is located in places loathed by the multitude; therefore, it is close to the Dao” (Richter 13).

If “Tao is Great in all things,” it should not be in noble or beautiful things alone; rather, it should also include ignoble or even ugly things. In answering Master Tung Kuo’s question “Where is the Tao found?” the Taoist sage Chuang Tzu replied:

“There is nowhere it is not to be found.”

The former insisted:

“Show me at least some definite place/Where Tao is found.”

“It is in the ants,” said Chuang.

“Is it in some lesser being?”

“It is in the weeds.”

“Can you go further down the scale of things?”

“It is in this piece of tile.”

“Further?”

“It is in this turd.” (123)

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<sup>2</sup> There is no published translation of the work by Kuan Tzu, so the quotation is a translation of mine from the following work in Chinese. 《管子·第64篇形勢解》：「海不辭水，故能成其大。」

Following Chuang Tzu's logic, Tao is also in the water flowing into the sea, pure or impure. As Taoist concepts of the sea do not resist impure water, Maxine, with all her sea-like traits, also openly receives the aggressive Germans, thus even her indiscretion can reflect Taoist principle of broad openness and acceptance. Naturally Maxine has both pure and impure qualities. With her "rapaciously lusty" personality, she may be "coarse," "aggressive" and vulgar, yet her apparently ambivalent "ambiguities resemble the iguana's concealment of delicate meat under hideous armor" (Casper 201). Hence Maxine's pure and impure qualities can be metaphorically compared with those of the iguana. Deep down in her nature, Maxine is kind, open, tolerant and generous, even though she is somewhat apparently unrefined and coarse. Like the delicate meat of the iguana under its "hideous armor," Maxine's inner positive values are under her unrefined outer manner.

### III. Maxine's "*Mei yoo guanchi*" or "No sweat"

In addition to the other important Chinese allusions in the play—such as Shannon's importation of a Chinese cook to work at the Faulks' hotel in 1936, his plan to commit suicide by "taking the long swim to China," Fred Faulk's Taoist hermit lifestyle, the Taoist attitudes of the penniless old men in the House for the Dying in Shanghai, and Hannah's poppy-seed tea with sugared ginger—Williams establishes the overall dramatic structure of the play with two important Taoist concepts. The first is uttered by Maxine: "All the Chinese philosophy in three words, 'Mei yoo guanchi'—which is Chinese for 'No sweat'" (82). The second comes from Hannah: "[The] moral is oriental. Accept whatever situation you cannot improve" (115).

Not only are these two philosophies closely related, but in terms of the play's plot the former foreshadows the latter, and both are crucial to the story of Shannon as the main protagonist. That is to say, his belief in, and willingness to follow, these two closely-connected philosophies help Shannon to finally come to terms with life by accepting Maxine as his life partner. For after his futile ten-year struggle to return to the Church, and after the bitter experience of losing his final tour guide job, Shannon finally realizes that staying with Maxine is his inevitable end-point in life, an outcome (if not exactly a fate) that he can no longer deny, reject or avoid. In the alchemy that allows Shannon to elude the Grim Reaper and finally face life, Maxine's

Chinese philosophy is the primary and initiating tincture, while Hannah's oriental thinking is the elixir or touchstone.

In different ways, both Maxine's and Hannah's philosophies can be traced back to the fundamental Taoist principle of *wu wei*—allowing things (and processes) to follow their own natures (natural orders) rather than stubbornly opposing these. Thus Shannon's final “decision” to stay with Maxine—or his realization that this had been inevitable, perhaps had been destined, all along—clearly echoes Chuang Tzu's teaching: “To realize that nothing can be done about them and to accept them as fated is excellence in its highest form” (*Sayings* 42). Yet this idea may at first seem different from “no sweat” in the original, literal sense of this American idiom, which is that the task or problem before one can be easily accomplished or solved as it is so easy, so simple and uncomplicated (Makkai 276)—and therefore the one accomplishing or solving it won't need to sweat at all. However, we may also see the realization that “this will be very easy to do (to accomplish, finish)” as being closely related to the idea that finally “this (job, goal, life) doesn't matter” and perhaps that ultimately even “nothing matters”—not even this big project stretched out in front of me that we call “life.” Since then life—the job of living stretched out before me—is “not so serious” we may as well “take it easy.”

In his play, Williams in fact first introduces the literal sense of “sweat” and associates it—as we often do—with hard work. When Shannon asks Maxine to deliver his first letter to the Bishop in Act One, she tells him: “If this is the letter, baby, you've sweated through it, so the old bugger couldn't read it even if you mailed it to him” (20). At the beginning of Act Three the stage directions say: “Shannon *is working feverishly on the letter to the Bishop, now and then slapping a mosquito on his bare torso. He is shiny with perspiration, still breathing like a spent runner* [italics original]” (79). Here “sweat” keeps its literal sense as perspiration, the liquid secreted by Shannon's skin that has wetted his first letter to the Bishop; of course, Williams also gives it, in the same context, its extended or metaphorical sense as the great effort Shannon has put into composing the letter. Thus Williams wants to establish these literal and almost-literal meanings of the word before moving to its more extended meanings as in the phrase “no sweat” and, further out still, its role in the abstract, philosophical Chinese phrase “*Mei yoo guanchi*.”

Thus a little later in the unfolding of his drama, Williams has Maxine convince Shannon to give up his futile attempt to return to the church by giving him “All the Chinese philosophy in three words, ‘Mei yoo guanchi’—which is Chinese for ‘No sweat.’ . . . With your record and a charge of statutory rape hanging over you in Texas, how could you go to a church . . . ?” (82). Later she uses the same phrase again to urge him to give up his tour guide job when Jake Latta is assigned by Blake Tour to replace him: “Well, let him do it. No sweat! He is coming here now” (83). In both cases, Maxine is trying to convince Shannon to accept, in effect, his fate, accept the inevitable consequences of his situation at this moment—a result of his own and others’ past actions and decisions—and now let things continue to go in their own natural way instead of struggling against this flow, stubbornly but futilely.

As such, when Williams says of Maxine, “Time doesn’t exist for her except in changes of weather and season. Death, life, it’s all one to Maxine, she’s a living definition of nature,” he echoes, ethically and aesthetically, Chuang Tzu’s philosophical concept of the unity or oneness of life: “Life is the companion of death, and death is the beginning of life. . . . The conclusion is that all creation is one” (*Sayings* 262); “Death and life are comparable to day and night” (*Sayings* 210). Although physically and emotionally Maxine treats Shannon as her equal, idealistically and spiritually, she is somewhat humble towards him. Like water that is adept at lying below the valleys, she naturally accepts the truth that her idealistic and spiritual standards are lower than Shannon’s; thus she respects him and regards him as being spiritually superior to her, even if she has the strength of being more earthly, more closely tied to the earth and sea.

Therefore, we see Maxine’s two sides in her humble attitude toward Shannon. In spiritual terms she is like the water of Lao Tzu that always takes the lowest place, that of the sea that all the great rivers run down into. Yet this sea is also, in its openness, its freedom and non-resistance, the most open, free and non-resisting place. It is paradoxically the most powerful place inasmuch as it does nothing but to freely accept all the rivers which flow down into it. Here we may also think of the “feminine” theme in Lao Tzu (and also in Chuang Tzu)—thinking now also of female sexuality—for as Lao Tzu says the Tao always takes the “low” place, the low position, and yet it (or she) is at the same time more powerful than everything else in the world. Of course, it

is because of Maxine's sea-like, humble, open, nonjudgmental, non-interfering and totally accepting attitude towards Shannon that he finally agrees to accept her as his life partner by the end of the play.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Reading *The Night of the Iguana* from a traditional Christian perspective, George Hendrick finally concludes: "The Oriental themes become hopelessly confused" (405). Moreover, both as a person and as a playwright, Williams "has been widely discussed but often misjudged and misunderstood" (Stanton 1). In fact, his character Maxine, in *The Night of the Iguana*, is also not only "misjudged and misunderstood" but demonized as a sexual monster. While she never hides her sexual nature and attitude toward life, however, it is clear that Maxine is no mere sex-monger who wants to entrap Shannon purely for sexual purposes, or, for that matter, for the sake of financial security. She is clearly honest with herself, honest with Shannon, honest with anyone she gets to know. Open and free as the sea itself yet also down-to-earth and practical, she sees the world as it is without any illusions. In this sense we may say she is a Taoist who, again like the sea, brings everyone else "into" her, into her emotional and spiritual domain or "body."

If, then, Williams and Maxine are both misjudged or misunderstood, this very likely has something to do with the strong impact Chinese Taoism had on them. By reevaluating Maxine's character from a Taoist perspective, we may see that these themes are in fact clearly, coherently and systematically developed. In the Taoist reading of Maxine, and of the whole play for that matter, we can see that she fulfills a distinct function within the larger dramatic development of the play. Her simple Taoist philosophy of "*Mei yoo guanchi*" or "no sweat" functions as an important dramatic motif, foreshadowing and echoing that other significant and closely-related motif that comes from Hannah: "Accept whatever situation you cannot improve." Both motifs, both philosophies help to frame the Taoist theme that runs through the play's dramatic structure.

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