

# Understanding aristotle's view of the germans in the night of the iguana



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UA cursory glance over some of Tennessee Williams's most celebrated plays reveals a consistent conformity to Aristotle's rules of tragedy as outlined in Poetics. Plays such as *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* showcase full plots, superb characters, a spectacle that functions in the correct manner, and all the other markings of a true Aristotelian tragedy. However, this general trend appears at first glance to not be present in Williams's later play, *The Night of the Iguana*. The main problem in Aristotle's view and the one that might prevent *Night of the Iguana* from being a proper play in this sense is the wedding party of Germans who appear periodically throughout the show. This repellent and ill-formed group defy nearly all Aristotle's rules for a valid and proper character, and do so in particularly obnoxious and overt ways. Their almost cartoonish defiling of this system could very easily be enough to discredit the play itself from being a proper Aristotelian tragedy. But it does not. This is because the Germans as a group and the show as a whole make far more sense if the latter is interpreted not as part of the branch of Character, but rather as part of the Spectacle.

Before fully exploring why the Germans are much more easily understood as a spectacle, it is necessary to demonstrate how and why they are absolutely not valid as characters. As Aristotle clearly states in Poetics, the four requirements for a character to be complete and proper are, in order of importance, that the character is good, is true to life, has a sense of propriety, and is consistent (27). Beginning with their goodness, it is very clear from the audience's first view of the Germans that they are written to be both abrasive and jarring, if not downright cruel. When Shannon is tied up in the hammock after his fit, Herr Fahrenkopf gawks at him, then proceeds to

mock and insult him, rocking the “hammock like a cradle” and drowning the stage with raucous laughter (Iguana 59). In addition, the fact that the party are clearly passionate Nazis is a strike against their goodness, both in and out of the play. When Shannon sees the group for the very first time, his first comment is “Aw, Nazis,” clearly suggesting that their membership in the Third Reich is enough of a moral sin to dismiss them off hand (8). Their terrible manners and mannerisms continue to show that the group clearly does not fulfill Aristotle's requirement of being “good,” and those specific traits also lead very well into the next rule for characters: their being true to life. The Germans' actions and appearance are so overdone as to be almost ridiculous and grotesque. After Nonno, who very obviously appears to be a rather frail, quiet old man, delivers a poem, the stage directions clearly state that the bridegroom Wolfgang applauds right into the old man's face (39). This shocking breach of etiquette and propriety is so extreme as to be quite unrealistic. In addition, Frau Fahrenkopf is explicitly described as being unrealistic and excessive. When first shown the iguana, she is described as reacting “with exaggerated revulsion” and having a “grotesque attitude of terror” (37). These observations square very neatly with Martin Spevack's commentary in *Tennessee Williams: The Idea of the Theatre*, where he states unequivocally that the Germans in *The Night of the Iguana* are “grotesquely caricatured” (Spevack 228). All of this evidence very clearly shows that German wedding party resoundingly fails the second requirement of being true to life for proper Aristotelian characters. Unfortunately, it only gets worse.

The third requirement as listed above is that for a character to be valid in the eyes of Aristotle, that character must have a sense of propriety. This means that the character must be realistic and understandable within the context of their society, and that the character cannot be radically different from what would be expected of such a person in real life. As one might expect at this point, the Germans most certainly do not fulfill this role. From their first appearance, they seem to be intended for shock value, and are described as making "minimal concessions to decency" and generally being extremely physically revealing and distracting (Iguana 7). This is certainly out of character for 1940, and Shannon's umbrage at Maxine's shirt only being open reveals the level of propriety that was expected at the time. In addition, the requirement of propriety is also broken in the same way that the one regarding the characters' truthfulness to life; the fact that the Germans are very clearly not a realistic group of people, and that their very presence seems to be designed to offend both the other characters' and the audience's senses, demonstrates clearly that they do not meet Aristotle's third requirement for valid characters. The final requirement, consistency, is the only place where it can be argued that the Germans actually do fulfill Aristotle's requirement. However, such an argument is particularly ill-founded, as the thing the Germans are most consistent at is breaking all the other rules of character. Not a very strong defense. In this way, despite the fact that Germans do technically fulfill the requirement of consistency (which Aristotle incidentally describes as the least important of the four), the German wedding party violates Aristotle's requirements for valid characters on a truly impressive scale (Poetics 28). Thus, the short answer to the question of the Germans' validity as characters? Mein Gott, nein!

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Such a breach of Aristotle's rules of character to this extent could easily invalidate *Night of the Iguana* as a whole play from being valid in Aristotelian terms. As part of the branch of Character, the German party stains the validity of all the other characters in the show, and by extension the plot itself. However, this argument is not entirely valid. This is because the Germans are not most clearly understood or analyzed as characters, but rather as part of the spectacle. If this interpretation is explored, the first factor that becomes immediately apparent is the fact the Germans' physical appearance and physical actions are far more important and meaningful than anything they actually say. As stated above, one of the main causes of their seeming grotesqueness is their excessive physicality, such as the aforementioned clapping in Nonno's face, violently rocking the hammock Shannon is tied in, and their generally scanty dressing (39, 59, 8). Their lines, by contrast, primarily extensions of their physical actions, and are not necessary to get the point that they are rude, coarse, and excessive across. In this way, the consistency of their mannerisms and physicality throughout the play is highly reminiscent of the unchanging nature of an ever present set piece, prop, or any other more traditional form of spectacle. In addition to this broader conceptualization of the Germans as part of the spectacle, the group also vindicates this interpretation by fitting very neatly into Aristotle's two main components of a proper spectacle.

With the same intensity that they defy the tenets of characters, the German wedding party definitively upholds and fulfills those of the spectacle. As Aristotle states, the two most important components that the spectacle must have are that it is not at all fundamentally necessary for the efficacy of the

plot and its ability to arouse fear and pity, but that it does help to further the plot in some non-essential manner (Poetics 25). A cursory examination of Night of the Iguana makes it very clear that the Germans are not at all necessary nor fundamental to the plot of the show. They only appear around four times, and each time they are onstage, they are not the primary focus of the scene. Indeed, in an article written for the South Atlantic Review, Norma Jenckes states that “‘ there is no compelling reason’ for the German tourists” to exist in the play at all (Jenckes 9). There are no crucial elements of the plot that rely on the Germans. In fact, they often seem to merely serve as an enhancement to what is already taking place, or, if performed poorly, a distraction to the overall plot. A clear example of this is the scene when Maxine and Shannon get into a fight shoving the liquor cart back and forth. In this moment, there is a definite sense of extreme tension and consternation between the two, and their argument is periodically interrupted with the Germans’ rude and demanding call for more champagne (Iguana 44). This is a perfect example of how the spectacle should function. This fight could very easily take place without the Germans present and nothing would be lost. However, the fact that they are there does add additional levels of chaos and intensity to the scene, thus helping to further the plot in a non-essential manner. Another similar example is towards the end of the play when Shannon has been tied up in the hammock after peeing on the ladies’ luggage. In this example, he is already apoplectic and in the middle of a fit, so there is no question as to whether or not the Germans were essential to this plot point coming to fruition. However, Herr Fahrenkopf’s goading of Shannon, as with the demands for champagne earlier, continues to heighten the stakes of the encounter, again improving

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and aiding the plot, but not in a manner that is essential to its validity. In addition, it is also important to keep in mind that in both of these cases, the words of the Germans are far less important than their physical spectacle, as the feeling of added chaos that they need to bring is generated far more by their loud and obnoxious demeanor and actions than by the specifics of what they say. This only continues to show the ways in which the German tourists can be much more easily understood and their inclusion in the play explained if they are interpreted as part of the Aristotelian spectacle and not as characters.

It is not normal for actual people to be part of the spectacle of a show. However, an interpretation of this nature helps to explain the enigma surrounding the German wedding party in Tennessee Williams's *The Night of the Iguana*. The party very clearly violates all of Aristotle's rules of what character should be, and does so in such a way that would theoretically invalidate the show itself. However, the paradox of the Germans is made clear and understandable if they are treated as part of the spectacle, and the play is vindicated as a valid Aristotelian tragedy as a result. This kind of interpretation creates a wide range of possibilities, and opens the door for a great deal of comparative analysis of Aristotle's tragic requirements.

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