

Sweet Bird of Youth



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Born in Columbus, Mississippi, Williams moved to St. Louis, Missouri as a child. Williams's literary career began early: at age sixteen, he won five dollars for an essay entitled "Can a Good Wife be a Good Sport?" Williams attended the University of Missouri, where he frequently entered writing contests as a source of extra income. But after Williams failed military training during junior year, his father pulled him out of college and put him to work in a factory. At age twenty-four, Williams suffered a nervous breakdown, left his job, and returned to college, studying at Washington University in St. Louis but finally graduating from the University of Iowa in 1938. Williams lived in the French Quarter of New Orleans in 1939, writing for the Works Progress Administration. He later traveled to Hollywood to work as a screenwriter. It was also in the late '30s that Williams came out as a gay man. Although he had several serious long-term relationships, many of Williams's romantic affairs were negatively influenced by his addiction to amphetamines, which he tried to use as a way of treating his depression. The playwright eventually died in New York after accidentally choking on a bottle cap. Still, he left behind over 30 plays, including well-known pieces like [A Streetcar Named Desire](#), [The Glass Menagerie](#), and [Cat on a Hot Tin Roof](#). His legacy as a prolific and fearless writer endures to this day.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The landmark Supreme Court Case *Brown v. Board of Education*—which declared the racial segregation of American schools unlawful—took place in 1954, five years before Tennessee Williams published *Sweet Bird of Youth*. During this period, the segregationist Jim Crow laws were repealed as the country sought to achieve a truer form of racial unity. Unfortunately, although the laws of the land spelled out a new era of equality, many racist Southerners vehemently rejected this kind of progress by holding tightly to the idea that whites and blacks should remain "separate but equal" (with an emphasis on "separate"). As such, the 1950s were a time of great turmoil, especially in Southern states, where people like Williams's character Boss Finley refused to accept integration in their hometowns.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

With its explorations of pleasure, sexual desire, drinking, and disease, *Sweet Bird of Youth* recalls Tennessee Williams's 1955 play *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. Brick, the protagonist of *Cat On A*

Hot Tin Roof, is in many ways similar to Chance Wayne, especially because he uses alcohol to escape his emotional demons. In addition, it's worth mentioning that, due to its examination of corruption and lost innocence, *Sweet Bird of Youth* can be linked to the Biblical book of Genesis, one of the first literary accounts of humankind's corruption of innocence via sexual activity.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Sweet Bird of Youth
- **When Published:** *Sweet Bird of Youth* debuted on March 10, 1959.
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** The fictional town of St. Cloud on the Gulf Coast of the United States.
- **Climax:** Refusing to escape St. Cloud with Alexandra Del Lago, Chance Wayne prepares to face Tom Junior, who has been ordered by his father, Boss Finley, to castrate Chance.
- **Antagonist:** Boss Finley

EXTRA CREDIT

The Enemy: Time. Tennessee Williams cultivated the original idea for *Sweet Bird of Youth* from a one-act play he wrote in 1952 called *The Enemy: Time*.

Cast. The beloved American actor Paul Newman (of both big-screen and salad-dressing fame) starred not only in the original stage production of *Sweet Bird of Youth* but also in the 1962 film adaptation of the play.



PLOT SUMMARY

It is morning at the Royal Palms Hotel in St. Cloud, a town on the Gulf Coast. Chance Wayne wakes up next to the middle-aged woman with whom he has been traveling. Getting out of bed, he tries to cure his hangover while she goes on sleeping. As he does so, Dr. George Scudder knocks on the door and asks him why he's returned to St. Cloud. Chance says that he heard his mother is ill—plus, he still has a girlfriend in St. Cloud. With this, he asks how Heavenly Finley is doing, but Scudder ignores him and says that his mother has already died. Because Chance never provides a valid address at which to reach him—he's always traveling—he never got word about his mother's passing. Chance turns the conversation back to Heavenly, but Scudder warns him against pursuing her, and asks if Chance received the letter he sent him after his last visit to St. Cloud.

Chance says he didn't, and Scudder says the letter instructed him to stay away from Heavenly because she went through an "awful experience" because of "past contact" with him. Now, Scudder informs him, Heavenly's father has stated that he will have Chance castrated if he ever returns to St. Cloud. This doesn't deter Chance, who asks Scudder to tell him more about what happened to Heavenly. Unmoved by Chance's wish, Scudder says that he himself is engaged to be married to Heavenly.

Scudder leaves, and woman, called "the Princess," begins to wake up. She can't remember where she is, and asks Chance to tell her his name. Before long, she works herself into a panic, demanding that Chance fetch her oxygen mask. At this point, she and Chance have a long conversation in which Chance tries to jog her memory. There seem to be certain things she actively doesn't want to remember, and when Chance references a "disappointment" she recently suffered, she claims to not recall it. "Can you control your memory like that?" he asks. "Yes," she replies. "I've had to learn to."

Eventually, the Princess reveals who she is and why she's traveling with a young man like Chance, who is quite handsome despite the fact that his hair is thinning and his face looks "ravaged." The Princess, the audience learns, is actually a famous actress named Alexandra Del Lago. Not long ago, she decided to make a comeback. On the night of her movie's premiere, though, she saw her face on the big screen and was mortified by how old she looked. Worse, she heard people whispering behind her, wondering if the image could really be her. Because of this, she jumped up from her seat and ran, tripping on her way out and only exacerbating her embarrassment. As soon as she stood up again, she fled, and she hasn't stopped running. Since then, she has been traveling under the pseudonym "Princess Kosmonopolis," flitting between beach resorts, drinking heavily, popping pills, and smoking hashish to forget that her career has come to a harsh end. During her travels, she met Chance, who was working at a resort in Palm Beach. One day, he smelled hashish drifting from her room, followed the smell, and asked if he could join her for a smoke. Since then, he has been driving her around in her **Cadillac**, taking her from town to town.

As Chance and the Princess talk, Chance secretly sets up a tape recorder. He then rolls her a hashish joint and asks how she was able to get drugs into the country. She explains that she smuggled the hashish into the US on an international boat. After a while, Chance reveals that he has caught her admitting this fact on tape. Understanding that she has been blackmailed, she asks what he wants, and he reminds her that when they met in Palm Beach she signed a contract saying that a Hollywood studio—of which she owns a majority stock share—would cast him in a role. Even though she signed this contract and had it notarized, he still doesn't trust her, so he has recorded her divulgence of incriminating information to ensure

that she follows through with her word.

Chance also wants the Princess to throw a local beauty contest. Using her real name, she'll attract a crowd, host the event, and then name Chance and Heavenly the winners. Then, he explains, she'll call her studio and tell them she has found two actors to star in a movie about youth. Part of why he wants her to do this, he says, is because he needs to win over Heavenly's father, Boss Finley. Boss Finley is a large political figure in St. Cloud, and he has never approved of Chance. Even though Chance and Heavenly have been in love for quite some time—since Heavenly was fifteen and lost her virginity to Chance—Boss Finley has refused to let them marry, believing that his daughter deserves a better man. As such, Chance has spent the last several years trying to become a famous actor so that he can return to St. Cloud and convince Boss to give him his blessing. Unfortunately, this plan has never worked out, and Chance has had to resort to working as a gigolo, sleeping with wealthy older women as a way of sustaining himself.

Hearing this, the Princess agrees to help Chance. However, she has one condition: whenever she wants to have sex, he must oblige. This is because sexual intercourse is the only effective way of getting her to forget her worries. Chance agrees to this, and after jumping back into bed with her to satisfy her needs, he leaves the hotel to drive around St. Cloud in her Cadillac, hoping to impress anyone who sees him passing by.

Meanwhile, Boss Finley speaks to Scudder about Chance's return to St. Cloud. During this conversation, he references an operation Scudder performed on Heavenly after Chance's last visit—an operation that should have been kept secret. To his dismay, people heard about the operation, and now a heckler brings it up every time Boss Finley has a political rally, which he is supposed to have tonight in the ballroom at the Royal Palms Hotel. Wanting Chance removed from town, Boss Finley fetches his son, Tom Junior, and tells him to do whatever it takes to get the job done. Boss criticizes Tom Junior for acting rowdily, but Tom defends himself by pointing out that he has organized the "Youth for Tom Finley club," which is who will be attending the rally at the Royal Palms. He also suggests that his father isn't so innocent himself, bringing up Boss's longtime mistress, Miss Lucy. He then tells Boss that Miss Lucy recently wrote "Boss Finley is too old to cut the mustard" on a bathroom mirror in the Royal Palms Hotel.

Eventually, Boss Finley calls Heavenly to him and says he wants her to accompany him onstage at the rally. In fact, he wants her to wear the "stainless white" of a "virgin" so that people won't speak badly about her and the operation she had. Despite his insistence, she protests, and they start arguing. Before long, though, Boss Finley embraces her and tells her that she's "still" beautiful.

Later that day, Miss Lucy enters the lounge bar at the Royal Palms and tells Stuff—the bartender—about a fight she just had with Boss Finley. Soon after, Chance enters and Miss Lucy tells

him he should leave St. Cloud, but he doesn't listen. Then the heckler enters as well. After putting together that this man is the one who has been disrupting Boss Finley's rallies, Miss Lucy decides to help him sneak into the ballroom when the time is right because she wants to spite Boss Finley after their argument.

In the time that elapses before the Youth for Tom Finley rally, the Princess comes downstairs looking haggard and confused. Chance runs over to her and tries to tell her to go upstairs again, but she says that she saw him out the window when he returned to the hotel in the Cadillac, and she could tell that he had failed in his attempt to impress the people he wanted to impress. She knows what this feels like—knows what it's like to fail—and tries to convince him to leave with her. During this conversation, Tom Junior starts yelling at Chance to come outside and face him. He says that Chance gave Heavenly an STD last time he was in St. Cloud, and Chance reveals that he knew he had this disease but failed to say anything to Heavenly. As a result, Scudder had to perform an operation on Heavenly that left her sterile.

Boss Finley and Heavenly arrive at the hotel. Before her father can stop her, Heavenly rushes into the lounge, where she sees Chance and suddenly halts. The two of them stare at each other for a tense moment before Boss yanks Heavenly back, and a large crowd of Youth for Tom Finley supporters stream through the lounge and into the ballroom. Inside the ballroom, Boss Finley begins his speech. He talks about "pure white blood," claiming that he was called upon by God to keep the white race from "pollution." As he spews racist ideas—arguing against integration in the South—the heckler enters and yells about Heavenly's secret operation. This incites mayhem, and people start to savagely beat him.

Not long after, the Princess stands at the window in her hotel room and looks out at the chaos that has broken out in the aftermath of the rally. Just then, Tom Junior and Dan Hatcher (the hotel's assistant manager) come to her door and tell her she is no longer welcome at the Royal Palms because of her association with Chance. They then search the room for Chance. When they find nothing, they agree to help the Princess get a driver so she can escape. When they leave, Chance slips into the room, and the Princess tries to convince him that they should leave together. However, Chance is too stubborn to do this. Instead, he dials the number of a famous Hollywood reporter (one the Princess knows well) and tells the Princess to inform her that she has found two talented young actors: Chance and Heavenly.

When the Princess starts talking, though, the reporter tells her that her comeback film has been received well, and that everyone wants her to do another movie. Elated, the Princess ignores Chance as he hisses at her to talk about him and Heavenly. Eventually, she hangs up the phone and speaks excitedly about her return to the public eye. Before long,

though, her optimism dips, and she begins to understand that the success of her comeback won't change the fact that she no longer possesses the kind of youthful beauty required to make it in Hollywood. Feeling like this, she implores Chance once more to come with her, telling him that he has lost his youth and urging him to accept this fact and leave St. Cloud behind. As she stands to leave, Tom Junior and his goons appear in the doorway. Once more, the Princess asks Chance to come with her, and when he refuses, she finally leaves. Standing to meet his pursuers, Chance says, "I don't ask for your pity, but just for your understanding—not even that—no. Just for your recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Chance Wayne – The play's protagonist, an aspiring actor who has been in love with the beautiful Heavenly Finley since he was a teenager. When he was growing up in St. Cloud, Chance planned to use his strapping good looks to become rich and famous, deciding that he deserved something more than the average middleclass life for which his friends were all destined. With this cocky self-assuredness, he started acting, which is when he fell in love with Heavenly. As high schoolers, their acting troupe traveled to a competition, and on the way back Chance and Heavenly made love on the train. Since then, Chance has wanted to marry Heavenly, but her domineering father, Boss Finley, has forbidden it, thinking Chance unworthy of his daughter's love. As such, Chance has spent his twenties trying to become rich and famous so that he can return to St. Cloud and finally win Boss Finley's approval. Unfortunately, though, he has been unsuccessful as an actor, forcing him to work as a gigolo and use his attractiveness to score money from rich women. In keeping with this, he has recently returned to St. Cloud with a famous actress, Alexandra Del Lago, whom he tries to blackmail into making him famous. By this point in his life, Chance's hair is thinning, his good looks are fading, he drinks heavily and takes drugs, and he carries a sexually transmitted disease. Thus, he's desperate to finally become famous before he's too old to be successful in the entertainment industry.

Alexandra Del Lago / "The Princess Kosmonopolis" – An over-the-hill actress who has recently tried to make a comeback to the big screen. On the night of her new film's premiere, though, she became convinced that everyone thought she was old and pathetic, so she rushed out of the theater and didn't turn back, effectively running away from her life. Because of this, she is now traveling under the moniker Princess Kosmonopolis. At one point in her travels, she meets Chance Wayne, who joins her on her journey from one fancy resort to the next, all the while devising a plan to force her into helping him become famous in the acting industry. The Princess is a very peculiar

character, someone who is nearly capable of purging her memory to avoid the fact that she's no longer young and beautiful. To help herself do this, she drinks in large quantities and takes all sorts of pills. As a result, it takes her a long time to discover that Chance is trying to blackmail her. When she finally does learn this, though, she doesn't seem to care very much, agreeing to help him as long as he sleeps with her whenever she wants. By the end of the play, the Princess manages to—in a small way—accept the fact that she can't reverse the course of her life, but she's unable to convince Chance to do the same.

Heavenly Finley – The woman with whom Chance Wayne is obsessed. Heavenly has known Chance for a long time—in fact, her first time having sex was with Chance when she was only fifteen. Perhaps because of this, her father—a hard-hitting racist politician named Boss Finley—has always hated Chance. To make matters worse, when Heavenly last saw Chance, they had unprotected sex and Chance transmitted an STD to her without even mentioning anything about the disease. As a result, Heavenly had to have an operation, which George Scudder botched, making her sterile for the rest of her life. Incidentally, Boss Finley has arranged for George Scudder and Heavenly to be married. Boss Finley has also forbidden Heavenly from seeing Chance again. Although Heavenly never outwardly declares her love for Chance, she does point out that if her father hadn't refused to let her marry Chance, then Chance probably wouldn't have gotten an STD in the first place. Regardless, Boss Finley doesn't listen to her, which is rather typical in this play; though Heavenly's presence and beauty drives many of the characters in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Williams does not give her much time onstage, instead making her into a rather flat character who ultimately becomes more of an abstract idea than an actual person.

Boss Finley – A racist local politician, and Heavenly Finley's father. Boss Finley is a rich man who believes Chance Wayne isn't good enough for his daughter. This is why Chance has spent his youth trying to get famous: so that Boss Finley will finally lend him his approval. This, of course, is an unrealistic dream, since Boss Finley is a stubborn and vindictive man, the kind of person who remains wholeheartedly convinced of his own beliefs. In fact, he even claims that he heard the "voice of God" when he was fifteen, insisting that God told him to fight to keep "the pure white blood of the South" from mixing with other races. In keeping with this, he does not condemn the white men who are currently going around St. Cloud castrating black men, which he himself threatens to do to Chance if Chance doesn't leave town immediately. To this effect, he orders his son, Tom Junior, to track down Chance to do his dirty work.

Tom Junior – Boss Finley's loyal son, and Heavenly's brother. Tom Junior has organized a group of rowdy young men like himself in support of his father's political campaign. In keeping

with this loyalty, he doesn't refuse when Boss Finley orders him to track down Chance Wayne to either kill or castrate him (both punishments are mentioned at various times throughout the play).

Miss Lucy – Boss Finley's mistress, who lives on his dime at the Royal Palms Hotel. Whenever Tom Junior or Heavenly bring up Miss Lucy to their father, he pretends he doesn't know who they're talking about, since his affair with her began before his wife died. Try as he might to deny that he knows her, he ends up hearing that she recently wrote "Boss Finley is too old to cut the mustard" on a bathroom mirror. Because of this, he pretends to give her a beautiful diamond clip, but then snaps the jewel box on her fingers right when she's about to take it out, saying, "Now go downstairs to the cocktail lounge and go in the ladies' room and describe this diamond clip with lipstick on the ladies' room mirror down there." To get her own revenge, Miss Lucy helps the heckler sneak into a Youth for Tom Finley event at the Royal Palms Hotel.

Aunt Nonnie – Heavenly's aunt, and the sister of Boss Finley's dead wife. Aunt Nonnie has a soft spot for Chance, so much so that she tries to warn him to leave St. Cloud before Boss Finley catches him. Unfortunately, though, she's unsuccessful, despite how hard she tries to convince him that the town isn't safe for him.

Dr. George Scudder A doctor in St. Cloud who practices at the hospital owned by Boss Finley. Scudder is the first person to visit Chance in the Princess's hotel room, telling him that he should leave St. Cloud before Boss Finley tracks him down and castrates him. He informs Chance that Heavenly went through a "tragic ordeal" because of her contact with him. Although he doesn't reveal it in this moment, Scudder is referring to the fact that Heavenly contracted a sexually transmitted disease after sleeping with Chance. Because of this, Scudder had to perform a secret operation on Heavenly—an operation that went wrong and left her infertile. Despite Scudder's surgical error, Boss Finley has arranged for him and Heavenly to get married.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Heckler – A man described as a "hillbilly" who heckles Boss Finley at seemingly every political event at which the politician speaks. Without fail, the heckler stands up and starts shouting about the operation Heavenly had to rid herself of the STD Chance gave her.

Hatcher – The assistant manager of the Royal Palms Hotel, where Chance Wayne is holed up with Alexandra Del Lago. Despite the fact that Alexandra wants anonymity, Hatcher feeds information about her and Chance's activities to Boss Finley.

Stuff – A bartender at the Royal Palms Hotel who "feels the dignity of his recent advancement from drugstore soda fountain to the [...] cocktail lounge."

Fly – A waiter at the Royal Palms Hotel.

Scotty – One of Chance’s former friends from St. Cloud, who now seems weary of Chance and his life as an opportunistic grifter.

Bud – Another one of Chance’s former friends from St. Cloud.

Violet – Bud’s romantic partner, and one of Chance’s former friends from St. Cloud.

Edna – Scotty’s romantic partner, and one of Chance’s former friends from St. Cloud.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



YOUTH, BEAUTY, AND TIME

In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the inevitability of aging wears on characters who have come to depend on a superficial kind of beauty. Chance, an aspiring actor, has no true talent as a performer. Nonetheless, he has spent his life chasing the minor success he enjoyed as a young man, always believing himself worthy of fame. A ladies’ man and gigolo (male escort), he’s supported himself by exploiting his youthful vitality and appeal, but this can only take him so far, as it’s clear his good looks will soon fade. This is perhaps why he decides to blackmail the famous but over-the-hill actress Alexandra Del Lago: he’s desperate to attain success before he loses his youthful beauty, which is his only asset. Interestingly, Alexandra Del Lago willingly goes along with his scheme—she too understands what it’s like to be terrified of aging, since she feels as if she’s recently lost her status in the entertainment industry because she’s no longer young and relevant. Unable to accept the inevitability of time and aging, then, both she and Chance turn to drugs and sexual debauchery, grasping desperately for happiness. This is because both of them have invested themselves in values that are, in the end, shallow. In turn, Tennessee Williams satirizes the vapid sense of importance people place on youthful beauty, demonstrating that it’s a mistake to invest oneself in something so fleeting.

Chance Wayne and Alexandra Del Lago are in distinctly different situations, but the problems they face are similar. Alexandra (the “Princess”) has at least enjoyed a successful career as a Hollywood star. Now, though, she’s depressed because she’s no longer a gorgeous young actress. Chance, on the other hand, has never actually gotten the fame he wants, though he hasn’t completely lost his good looks. Still, though, time is having its way with him, as his hair is thinning and his

face is “ravaged.” Despite their differences, Chance and the Princess both feel sorry for themselves and worry about their advancing ages. However, Chance still wants to keep trying to become famous, whereas the Princess has resigned herself to the fact that she has lost everything she ever cared about. After he tells her that he wants to use her to become famous, she tells him, “At some point in your life, the thing that you lived for is lost or abandoned, and then...you die, or find something else.” Surprisingly, this sentiment suggests that the Princess is aware of how foolish she was to invest herself so wholeheartedly in youth and beauty, which don’t last. Unfortunately for her, there’s nothing left to “live for,” since she has focused all these years solely on her career as star. Now, it seems, there’s nothing for her to do but “die,” unless she can “find something else.” For her, this means throwing herself into a life of drugged stupor, as made evident by the fact that she smokes hashish while issuing this advice to Chance. As such, she hasn’t truly “found” anything of value, once again suggesting that she simply feels lost now that she can’t depend upon her youth, which is long gone.

As a child and teenager, Chance was incredibly attractive. Because of this, he believed he deserved a special, spectacular life. In fact, not only did he think he deserved this, but he simply *assumed* everything would work out for him, thinking his beauty would attract good things. Having returned to his home of St. Cloud, he looks condescendingly at his peers, who lead ordinary lives. “The girls are young matrons, bridge-players, and the boys belong to the junior Chamber of Commerce and some of them, clubs in New Orleans [...],” he explains to the Princess. “I wanted, expected, intended to get, something better...Yes, and I did, I got it. I did things that fat-headed gang never dreamed of.” The fact that Chance “expected” to get “better” things than the people he grew up with just because he was handsome proves his rather shallow belief that beauty naturally leads to happiness and value.

But despite Chance’s expectations, he *didn’t* go on to “get something better” than his peers. In reality, he garnered only the most minor of successes in the theater world, and his main claim to fame was as a gigolo, which he refers to as “maybe the only [vocation he] was truly meant for.” Regarding this, he says, “I gave people more than I took. Middle-aged people I gave back a feeling of youth.” In this moment, Chance frames youth as a valuable commodity, something that people seemingly *need* and will pay to get (an idea the Princess reinforces by agreeing to help him get famous as long as he sleeps with her). Given this framework, it’s no surprise that he finds himself distraught at the idea of aging.

By the end of the play, Chance finally faces the fact that he can’t stop the passage of time. “Time—who could beat it, who could defeat it ever?” he laments. By this point, he understands on some level that he’ll never be famous, that his looks are gone, and that they were never even enough to make his life

extraordinary in the first place. Faced with this realization, he has little to “live for,” which is why he says, “Something’s got to mean something, don’t it, Princess?” As the critic Lanford Wilson writes in an introduction to the text, this is a play about “the tragic loss of youthful beauty and innocence when that’s all one has to offer.” Even the Princess, who *did* have fame, has lost the “youthful beauty” that defined her life for so long. As such, both she and Chance find themselves reaching in vain for meaning in the wake of their faded youths. In this way, Williams warns that the passage of time remains uninfluenced by superficial concerns of youth and beauty, thereby suggesting that people ought to invest themselves in more authentic, meaningful values.



PURITY AND CORRUPTION

In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the antagonistic Boss Finley sets forth bigoted notions of racial purity as well as patriarchal views regarding womanhood. Not only

does this politician believe whites and blacks shouldn’t integrate or copulate, but he also thinks his daughter Heavenly has been corrupted—defiled—by her pre-marital sexual exploits with Chance Wayne. In other words, Boss Finley loathes what he sees as impurity, and so he brings his racist and misogynistic agenda to bear on the people around him. In turn, this leads him to promote unconscionable acts of violence. By portraying Finley as such a blatantly evil man, then, Williams warns against using the idea of purity to justify hatefulness.

Early on, Boss Finley warns Heavenly that her actions affect his political career. In particular, he scolds her for consorting with Chance Wayne, whom he hates and believes unworthy of his daughter’s love. Because of this dynamic, Chance has always felt he needs to become rich and famous so that Boss Finley will finally relent and allow him to marry Heavenly. To do this, he has spent the last several years trying to become a well-known actor, but because this hasn’t worked, he has resorted to what is essentially prostitution, working as a gigolo to earn money. During his last visit to St. Cloud, he transmitted an STD to Heavenly, forcing her to have a surgical operation that unfortunately went wrong, leaving her sterile for the rest of her life. To Boss Finley, this is the ultimate corruption of his young daughter’s purity. To make him even more furious, people have been taunting him at rallies by referencing Heavenly’s operation, which is why he decides that she must come to his next event dressed in all white. “You’re going to be wearing the stainless white of a virgin, with a Youth for Tom Finley button on one shoulder and a corsage of lilies on the other,” he says. “You’re going to be on the speaker’s platform with me... to scotch these rumors of your corruption.” Boss Finley is so horrified by the idea that his daughter has been “corrupted” that he tries to overcompensate, dressing her up to communicate a message of purity and innocence to voters. Of course, it’s clear the people of St. Cloud already know

Heavenly’s secret, but Boss Finley still insists that she radiate the stereotypical incorruptibility of an unmarried young woman, desperately wanting his daughter to at least act as if she too holds his same ideas of purity in high esteem.

Presenting his daughter as uncorrupted and pure isn’t Boss Finley’s only goal. In fact, he has an ulterior motive driving his decision to have her stand next to him dressed in white—a motive that aligns with his political campaign. “Lookin’ at you, all in white like a virgin,” he explains to Heavenly, “nobody would dare to speak or believe the ugly stories about you. I’m relying a great deal on this campaign to bring in young voters for the crusade I’m leading. I’m all that stands between the South and the black days of Reconstruction. And you and Tom Junior are going to stand there beside me in the grand crystal ballroom, as shining examples of white Southern youth—in danger.” Here, Boss Finley reveals that he wants to use Heavenly to project the bigoted message of racial purity to Southern voters. Not only does he see womanhood as something that can be made impure by others, but he also sees the white race as something that is “in danger” because of the prospect of racial integration. Under this racist interpretation, white Southerners are under threat because they might soon come together with black Southerners. Instead of seeing this as a positive unifying experience, Boss Finley sees it as a corruption of racial purity, investing himself in homogeneity rather than diversity.

There are, of course, other bigoted people in St. Cloud who agree with Boss Finley’s racist ideas regarding corruption and purity. As Chance’s old friend explains at one point, a group of white men overtook a black man “and castrated the bastard to show they mean[t] business about white women’s protection in this state.” This, it seems, is the violent agenda advanced by Boss Finley’s racist rhetoric regarding purity and corruption. In his twisted view, castrating a black man is justifiable as a protection of purity, which is why he threatens to do the very same thing to Chance Wayne: he sees Chance as someone who has corrupted his daughter’s purity. He even unabashedly endorses the use of violence in such contexts. Indeed, when Heavenly ventures that he “wouldn’t dare” hurt Chance, he says, “A lot of people approve of taking violent action against corrupters. And on all of them that want to adulterate the pure white blood of the South.” In this moment, he conflates Chance Wayne’s so-called “corruption” of his daughter with integration, making it clear that the two matters are more or less the same to him even though Chance is white. After all, he believes that both black people and Chance present a threat to purity.

This is obviously a very narrow-minded viewpoint that lacks even the slightest trace of empathy, and the fact that Boss Finley uses such an absurd outlook to justify violence is a clear indication of his lacking moral character. As such, Williams emphasizes the ways in which bigotry and hate can lead to inexcusable behavior, demonstrating that people sometimes claim that certain values (like incorruptibility or purity) are

upstanding when in reality they're only using these values to advance divisive and violent agendas.



LOVE, OBSESSION, AND PLEASURE

Chance Wayne's love of Heavenly drives him throughout the entirety of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, encouraging him to not only endure a number of social disgraces, but also to face down dangerous threats. The only reason he has worked so hard to become famous, he claims, is so that he can return to St. Cloud and earn Boss Finley's blessing to marry Heavenly. However, because this never comes to pass—and because Chance and Heavenly never actually share any intimacy in the course of the play—it's hard to discern whether or not his claims of love are genuine. Though most playwrights might allow a love story like Chance and Heavenly's to triumph over everything else, Tennessee Williams is more interested in exploring how Chance's attempt to court Heavenly actually drives him farther and farther from her. By the end of the play, it's unclear whether his refusal to comply with Boss Finley's orders to leave St. Cloud arises out of his steadfast love of Heavenly or the headstrong vanity he has cultivated as a dashing gigolo and actor. In this way, Williams intimates that the mere idea of love can overshadow a person's actual romantic feelings, ultimately becoming more of a mental fixation than a genuine emotional experience or connection between two people.

Throughout *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Chance's determination to make a life with Heavenly never falters. Until the very end, he tries to carry out a scheme that will make both of them rich and famous, ostensibly enabling them to be together. As he does this, Boss Finley threatens to kill or castrate him unless he leaves St. Cloud. Nevertheless, he doesn't leave, and in the final scene he finally allows himself to be overtaken by Finley's goons, preparing for extreme violence because he's unwilling to give up. Judging by this, it's easy to think that his love for Heavenly is steadfast and authentic. However, it's hard to overlook the fact that he has only visited Heavenly periodically in the last several years, always swooping into town for short stays, making love to her, and leaving again to resume his fast life as an aspiring actor and well-known gigolo. During one such visit, he even gave her an STD he picked up while working as an escort, and although he knew that he had it and that he had probably given it to her, he didn't say anything. "I thought if something was wrong she'd write me or call me," he lamely justifies to Heavenly's brother, Tom Junior, who points out that Heavenly couldn't have reached him even if she wanted to, since he never gives her reliable ways to contact him when he leaves. Not only does this behavior suggest that Chance doesn't care as much about Heavenly as he claims, it also emphasizes how much he has been absent from his lover's life. Although he might argue that he has been off trying to become famous so he can provide for Heavenly, it seems more likely

that he has simply come to enjoy his debauched lifestyle—so much that he doesn't mind abandoning Heavenly even after transmitting a disease to her.

Williams's onstage treatment of Chance and Heavenly's relationship is quite fleeting, yet again suggesting that the supposed "love" flowing between them isn't as strong as Chance would like to think. Indeed, Chance spends the majority of the play talking about his relationship with Heavenly, but the audience only gets to see them together for a few seconds. During this moment, the stage directions note: "At this instant she runs in—to face Chance.... For a long instant, Chance and Heavenly stand there: he on the steps leading to the Palm Garden and gallery; she in the cocktail lounge. They simply look at each other..." Before either of them can speak, Heavenly is ushered offstage again. This is the only interaction they have throughout the entire play. After "a long instant," during which they don't even speak, Heavenly leaves, essentially providing the audience with very little insight into their relationship. Although this moment could be seen as an "instant" of intense emotion, it also hints at a certain tension, as if Heavenly is confronting Chance with her stare (this is, after all, the first time she's seen him since he gave her an STD). Overall, it's difficult to discern whether or not true love exists in their relationship. At the very least, the playwright's decision to keep them from coming together onstage destabilizes the idea that their love is strong, authentic, and capable of overcoming hardship. In turn, Williams forces the audience to judge Chance and Heavenly's relationship based only on Chance's interpretation of their love—an interpretation that, given his unrealistic expectations in other areas of his life, comes to seem less and less reliable.

Part of what makes Chance's supposed love of Heavenly seem inauthentic or unbelievable is the way he conceives of love in general. In a conversation with Alexandra Del Lago, he says, "The biggest of all differences in this world is between the ones that had or have pleasure in love and those that haven't and hadn't any pleasure in love." At first glance, this statement seems rather wholesome, since Chance is arguing that love is something that defines a person. However, it's worth noting that he isn't championing love itself, but rather the "pleasure" that one can derive from love. As such, he approaches love in an unsentimental and unemotional manner, primarily searching for a kind of hedonistic (pleasure-seeking) gratification. If this is what's driving him to work so hard to win Heavenly's hand, it seems he has overestimated his feelings. At the same time, though, sexual or physical pleasure can naturally lead people to think they're in love, so it's unsurprising that Chance mistakes his obsession with Heavenly as a genuine romantic experience. In this way, Williams demonstrates that a person's obsession with pleasure can overshadow—or even replace—the desire to attain true and genuine love.



ESCAPISM AND DENIAL

In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, characters like Chance Wayne and the Princess try to keep themselves from facing difficult thoughts and feelings.

Whether by using drugs or running from city to city, they both actively avoid the fact that their deepest fears—of aging and fading into irrelevance or obscurity—have come true. For the Princess, this means drinking, popping pills, running away from her everyday life, and having sex with a younger man in order to “forget” that her career has come to an end. Chance, though, is in a slightly different predicament. While the Princess at least seems to grasp that she’s distracting herself from a truth she doesn’t want to think about, Chance keeps himself in a state of denial, insisting that he still has a shot at settling down with the love of his life and becoming rich and famous. Even when it’s clear that Chance’s plans have only run him into more trouble, he still doesn’t stop deluding himself, ultimately deciding to stay in St. Cloud despite the fact that Heavenly’s brother and father plan to castrate or kill him. In this way, Williams shows the audience that denial is capable of severely distorting a person’s rationality. By comparing and contrasting the Princess and Chance’s attempts at self-delusion, he suggests that while the desire to escape or “forget” about hardship is perhaps a natural human impulse, denying reality altogether is dangerous and misguided.

In the play’s opening scene, the Princess wakes up in a hotel room with Chance and doesn’t seem to know where she is, who Chance is, or why she’s there. As the two characters begin to talk, though, it becomes clear that the Princess has willfully imposed this amnesia upon herself. She wants to forget that several weeks ago she had an embarrassing moment at the first screening of her new film, which was supposed to be her “comeback” feature and triumphant return to the entertainment industry. However, she thinks this has gone disastrously, and so has run away, choosing to drift between luxury hotels in various beach towns. When Chance references the embarrassing incident at the Princess’s screening, he calls it a “disappointment,” to which she says, “What disappointment? I don’t remember any.” In response, Chance asks, “Can you control your memory like that?” “Yes,” the Princess admits. “I’ve had to learn to.” In this moment, she reveals her eagerness to escape—and even deny—the hardships that have befallen her, somehow willing herself to block out unpleasant thoughts. The fact that she has “had to learn to” do this suggests that she sees her ability to “forget” as a defense mechanism, something that can be used as a tool to cope (or *avoid* coping) with things she’s otherwise unwilling to face.

Despite the Princess’s efforts to completely forget—and thus deny—her “disappointment,” it isn’t long before she’s forced to acknowledge again what happened to her at the screening. “Oh God,” she says while looking out the hotel window, “I remember the thing I wanted not to. The goddam end of my life!” She then

orders Chance to help her into bed and give her some hashish so that she can smoke her memories away. She explains that drugs help her “put to sleep the tiger that rage[s] in [her] nerves,” making it clear that she uses substances to flee her inner demons. Though she can’t quite succeed in permanently denying her troubles, she *can* try to run from them.

Unlike the Princess, Chance doesn’t seem to be aware of the fact that he’s losing any hope of stability or success. Instead of admitting to himself that his chances with Heavenly are slim and his chances of getting famous even slimmer, he dupes himself into thinking that change automatically means progress. As such, he’s able to convince himself that his lifestyle as a gigolo drifter might actually amount to something. “In a life like mine,” he says, “you just can’t stop... once you drop out, it leaves you and goes on without you and you’re washed up.” Interestingly enough, Chance acknowledges that he might end up becoming “washed up” someday. However, he doesn’t admit that this has *already* happened. Despite the fact that his looks are fading, everyone in his hometown hates him, and he can’t even spend a moment with his supposed lover, he still talks about becoming “washed up” as if it hasn’t already happened. His escapist lifestyle enables him to deny the fact that he’s already reached his peak. In this way, Chance justifies his life as a pill-popping, wayward man, mistaking his attempt to deny failure for actual progress.

While the Princess’s attempts to “forget” her woes only go so far, Chance desperately clings to his delusions. Unfortunately, it’s already too late by the time he finally shows any awareness of the fact that he’ll never be able to improve upon his life’s many failures. Indeed, at the end of the play, he begins to see that his attempt to blackmail his way to fame and thus win Heavenly’s love won’t work, and so he becomes jaded and depressed, asking the Princess how to go on when life has no meaning. “I mean like your life means nothing, except that you never could make it, always almost, never quite?” he babbles. However, the audience then sees that his delusional optimism hasn’t completely vanished, as he says, “Well, something’s still got to mean something.” He says this even though it has become obvious that none of his plans will do anything to help him. As such, even when he finally faces the great disappointments he’s been running from his entire life, he still manages to deny that his escapist techniques have all been in vain, instead insisting that they must “still...mean something” after all.

This, it seems, is why Chance refuses to leave St. Cloud with the Princess, who tries to convince him to accept his failure and get out of town before Heavenly’s father and brother injure him: he would rather face physical pain than admit his own shortcomings. In turn, Williams shows the audience that denial and an inability to confront difficult emotions can cause a person to behave self-destructively.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE LAMENT

Throughout *Sweet Bird of Youth*, a “lament”—a melancholy strain of music—sometimes issues faintly from the overhead speakers. The occurrence of this music usually marks a shift in whatever emotional atmosphere the characters are navigating. For instance, when the Princess and Chance talk about his unsuccessful acting career, The Lament fades slowly in: “Something always blocks me...,” Chance says, referring to his acting. “What? What?” the Princess asks. “Do you *know*?” Williams then notes that Chance rises, at which point The Lament “is heard very faintly.” As the strains of music filter down, the Princess says: “*Fear*?” This exchange shows how Williams uses The Lament to hint at deep insecurities and other veiled emotional disturbances that lurk within his characters. When the Princess asks Chance if fear is what holds him back from greatness, The Lament sounds around him, signaling to the audience that this question has struck something raw and painful at his psychological core. In this way, The Lament comes to represent an undercurrent of self-doubt and unexamined emotion that plagues people like Chance and the Princess.



THE CADILLAC

When the Princess agrees to help Chance become famous, she allows him to take her Cadillac for a drive around St. Cloud. When she asks why he wants to do this, he says: “I’m pretentious. I want to be seen in your car on the streets of St. Cloud. Drive all around town in it, blowing those long silver trumpets [...]” Saying this, he openly admits that he wants to impress his old friends and neighbors, who talk about him frequently and wonder where he has run off to, since he’s always leaving St. Cloud. Despite his desire to use the Cadillac as a symbol of success, though, people like Scotty—an old friend—see right through his attempt to impress them. Indeed, when Chance and Scotty get into an argument, Scotty says: “I don’t get by on my looks, but I drive my own car. It isn’t a Caddy, but it’s my own car.” In turn, he makes it clear that nobody believes Chance actually owns the Princess’s Cadillac. Because of this, the car doesn’t represent Chance’s newfound success and prosperity—like he wants it to—but rather his irresponsibility and inability to support himself.



Directions edition of *Sweet Bird of Youth* published in 1959.

Act One, Scene One Quotes

☞ SCUDDER: There’s a lot more to this which we feel ought not to be talked about to anyone, least of all to you, since you have turned into a criminal degenerate, the only right term for you, but, Chance, I think I ought to remind you that once long ago, the father of this girl wrote out a prescription for you, a sort of medical prescription, which is castration. You’d better think about that, that would deprive you of all you’ve got to get by on. [...]

CHANCE: I’m used to that threat. I’m not going to leave St. Cloud without my girl.

Related Characters: Chance Wayne, Dr. George Scudder (speaker), Heavenly Finley, Boss Finley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Dr. George Scudder warns Chance about staying in St. Cloud. Without using any specific names, he reminds Chance that Boss Finley has threatened to castrate him. When he says, “You’d better think about that, that would deprive you of all you’ve got to get by on,” he points out that Chance has failed in his attempts to become a famous actor. Indeed, Chance has become a gigolo, someone who depends upon his ability to have sex. If he were to be castrated, then, he would be “deprived” of the only thing that keeps him afloat financially. What’s more, it’s rather clear that castration would also “deprive” Chance of something else: his sense of self-worth. After all, this is a man who has always believed he’s destined for greatness based solely on the fact that he is attractive. If he suddenly were to lose his sexual appeal to women, he wouldn’t be able to maintain the fantasy that he’s better than other men. In this way, Scudder not only tries to make Chance feel as if he is a “criminal degenerate” who has corrupted Heavenly’s purity, but he also tries to frighten Chance into admitting that he can’t afford to lose his ability to have sex, which is the only thing that enables him to continue sustaining the delusional idea that he is superior to other people.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the New

☞ For years they told me that it was ridiculous of me to feel that I couldn't go back to the screen or the stage as a middle-aged woman. They told me I was an artist, not just a star whose career depended on youth. But I knew in my heart that the legend of Alexandra del Lago couldn't be separated from an appearance of youth...

There's no more valuable knowledge than knowing the right time to go. I knew it. I went at the right time to go. RETIRED!

Related Characters: Alexandra Del Lago / "The Princess Kosmonopolis" (speaker), Chance Wayne

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

The Princess says this to the audience early in the play, once she has recovered her memory. At first, she blocks out any remembrance of the embarrassment she suffered at the premiere of her comeback film, but now she finally explains the progression of her life as an actress. Although the people around her kept telling her that it was "ridiculous" of her to think that she "couldn't go back to the screen or the stage as a middle-aged woman," she felt sure that her age disqualified her from the kind of fame she enjoyed as a beautiful young star. Nonetheless, she eventually relented and returned to the screen, even though she knew in her "heart" that her persona as a celebrity "couldn't be separated from an appearance of youth." The fact that her first attempt to return has failed so miserably (or so she thinks) only reinforces her insecurities about her age, communicating to her that she was right all along. This is why she believes that there's "no more valuable knowledge than knowing the right time to go." Having experienced the pain of failing as an actress because of her age, she now wishes she had truly retired when she first realized she had lost her "appearance of youth."

☞ Well, sooner or later, at some point in your life, the thing that you lived for is lost or abandoned, and then...you die, or find something else. This is my something else...

Related Characters: Alexandra Del Lago / "The Princess Kosmonopolis" (speaker), Chance Wayne

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, the Princess explains to Chance why she started using drugs: she realized that she had lost "the thing" she "lived for." At first glance, one might think that the "thing" the Princess is referring to is the art of acting, but given her obsession with youth, it seems likelier that what she "lived for" was her own beauty. Indeed, she has built a career—and thus an entire life—on her good looks, and now that they have faded, she's left with very little, which is why she uses drugs—she wants to forget the meaninglessness of her new existence. Looking for a distraction, she uses both hashish and sex to escape the feeling that "the thing that [she] lived for is lost or abandoned." As she says this to Chance, she stretches seductively on the bed with a joint between her fingers, a perfect representation of the worldly pleasures she has started to seek out to fill the emptiness of her everyday life.

☞ You were well born, weren't you? Born of good Southern stock, in a genteel tradition, with just one disadvantage, a laurel wreath on your forehead, given too early, without enough effort to earn it...where's your scrapbook, Chance? [...] Where's your book full of little theatre notices and stills that show you in the background of...

Related Characters: Alexandra Del Lago / "The Princess Kosmonopolis" (speaker), Chance Wayne

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

The Princess says this to Chance after discovering that he has blackmailed her by tape-recording her talking about smuggling hashish. Finally understanding what Chance wants from her, she turns a critical eye on him, observing that he must have been born "of good Southern stock" in a "genteel tradition." However, she points out that his beauty—his unmatched attractiveness—has actually hindered him over the years. Indeed, she frames his handsomeness as a "disadvantage" because he benefited from his good looks "too early, without enough effort to earn" the praise and kindness and leniency people showed him because of his appearance. "Where's your scrapbook, Chance?" she asks, insinuating that he must surely miss those days, when he could do whatever he wanted because he still was in full possession of his youthful charm. Now,

she intimates, he surely has nothing but a “book full of” pictures of him standing in the background of various plays, because although these background parts were quite easy for him to attain, he was never able to attain actual success. In this way, she emphasizes the extent to which he has relied too heavily upon a superficial and fleeting thing: beauty.

Whether or not I do have a disease of the heart that places an early terminal date on my life, no mention of that, no reference to it ever. No mention of death, never, never a word on that odious subject. I've been accused of having a death wish but I think it's life that I wish for, terribly, shamelessly, on any terms whatsoever.

When I say now, the answer must not be later. I have only one way to forget these things I don't want to remember and that's through the act of love-making. That's the only dependable distraction so when I say now, because I need that distraction, it has to be now, not later.

Related Characters: Alexandra Del Lago / “The Princess Kosmonopolis” (speaker), Chance Wayne

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Princess outlines the conditions of her agreement to help Chance become famous. She explains to him that he must never speak of “death,” even if she ends up having “a disease of the heart” that makes her impending death quite likely. By saying this, she once again demonstrates her obsession with age and her fear of what time can do to a person. Although she's powerless in the face of time, she resents its unavoidable effects, and so she tries to focus on living intensely by taking drugs and making love whenever she wants. Indeed, she “shamelessly” indulges her desires as a way of escaping her misgivings about her advancing age. This is why she has determined to force Chance to have sex with her whenever she wants: because sexual pleasure is “the only dependable distraction” from death.

Act One, Scene Two Quotes

Yes, well...the others...[...] are all now members of the young social set here. The girls are young matrons, bridge-players, and the boys belong to the Junior Chamber of Commerce and some of them, clubs in New Orleans such as Rex and Comus and ride on the Mardi Gras floats. Wonderful? No boring...I wanted, expected, intended to get, something better...Yes, and I did, I got it. I did things that fat-headed gang never dreamed of. Hell when they were still freshmen at Tulane or LSU or Ole Miss, I sang in the chorus of the biggest show in New York, in *Oklahoma*, and had pictures in *LIFE* in a cowboy outfit, tossin' a ten-gallon hat in the air! [...] And at the same time pursued my other vocation....Maybe the only one I was truly meant for, love-making...slept in the social register of New York!

Related Characters: Chance Wayne (speaker), Alexandra Del Lago / “The Princess Kosmonopolis”

Related Themes:    


Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Chance speaks these words to the Princess, explaining that he has always believed that the stable and responsible lives of his peers are “boring.” Indeed, he thinks—and always has—that he deserves an extraordinary life. “I wanted, expected, intended to get, something better,” he says, unselfconsciously revealing that he sees himself as better than other people. In this moment, it becomes overwhelmingly clear how arrogant Chance truly is, as he sings his own praises, saying: “Yes, and I did, I got it. I did things that fat-headed gang never dreamed of.” Despite his cocky enthusiasm, though, the “things” he has done aren't actually all that significant. He has never even starred in a show, but merely served as a chorus member in a production of *Oklahoma*. And though he has had his picture in *LIFE* magazine, it clearly hasn't won him much attention or success. It's unsurprising, then, that he has had to resort to working as a gigolo: these supposedly extraordinary experiences are, in truth, rather unremarkable, and the only thing that allows Chance to continue thinking he's better than his peers is his own arrogance.

☛ By the time I got out, Christ knows, I might be nearly thirty! Who would remember Chance Wayne? In a life like mine, you just can't stop, you know, can't take time out between steps, you've got to keep going right on up from one thing to the other, once you drop out, it leaves you and goes on without you and you're washed up.

Related Characters: Chance Wayne (speaker), Alexandra Del Lago / "The Princess Kosmonopolis"

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Chance says this to the Princess while telling her his life story. In this passage, he is talking about his stint in the military, when he felt like he was rapidly running out of time. Because he was in his mid-twenties, he feared that he wouldn't leave the military until he was "nearly thirty." This is a terrifying prospect for a man as obsessed as Chance with the importance of youth when it comes to getting famous. If he stayed in the military, he feared, nobody would "remember Chance Wayne." This statement is worth noting, since it reveals Chance's fear of being forgotten. Indeed, he is someone who wants to not only become famous, but also to remain well-regarded in the public eye for as long as possible. But if he never attains the fame for which he believes he's destined, nobody will "remember" him. This is why he believes that "in a life like" his, "you just can't stop." He thinks that he has to "keep going right on up from one thing to the other," because failing to do so means becoming "washed up." Of course, youthful beauty *is* limited, so he's right to think that time might run out before he becomes famous. At the same time, though, a more balanced and psychologically grounded person would most likely understand that worse things can happen than failing to become famous.

☛ I got the idea I wouldn't live through the war, that I wouldn't come back, that all the excitement and glory of being Chance Wayne would go up in smoke at the moment of contact between my brain and a bit of hot steel that happened to be in the air at the same time and place that my head was...that thought didn't comfort me any. Imagine a whole lifetime of dreams and ambitions and hopes dissolving away in one instant, being blacked out like some arithmetic problem washed off a blackboard by a wet sponge, just by some little accident like a bullet, not even aimed at you but just shot off in space, and so I cracked up, my nerves did.

Related Characters: Chance Wayne (speaker), Alexandra Del Lago / "The Princess Kosmonopolis"

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Chance rehashes the thoughts that led to his nervous breakdown when he was in the military. Unsurprisingly, he lived in great fear of getting shot, finding himself unable to stop imagining a bullet passing through his head. What's interesting, though, is that this fear has seemingly very little to do with death itself, and more to do with the fact that getting shot in the head would prevent him from achieving what he believes he's destined to achieve. Indeed, he cowers at the thought of "all the excitement and glory of being Chance Wayne" going "up in smoke." What's more, he imagines "a whole lifetime of dreams and ambitions and hopes dissolving away" in the single instant that a bullet hits him. Once again, then, Chance thinks only of his primary obsession, which is to become famous. Even when considering death, he can't manage to stop fantasizing about the life he thinks he deserves to live because of his youthful beauty.

☛ Princess, the great difference between people in this world is not between the rich and the poor or the good and the evil, the biggest of all differences in this world is between the ones that had or have pleasure in love and those that haven't and hadn't any pleasure in love, but just watched it with envy, sick envy. The spectators and the performers. I don't mean just ordinary pleasure or the kind you can buy, I mean great pleasure, and nothing that's happened to me or to Heavenly since can cancel out the many long nights without sleep when we gave each other such pleasure in love as very few people can look back on in their lives...

Related Characters: Chance Wayne (speaker), Heavenly Finley, Alexandra Del Lago / "The Princess Kosmonopolis"

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

Chance says this to the Princess as a way of explaining his fixation on reuniting with Heavenly and—essentially—living happily ever after with her. When he says that the "great difference" between people is whether or not they've



experienced “pleasure in love,” he frames romantic engagement as a worldly delight, something small and tangible and physical. Whereas love is often presented as a metaphysical connection based on emotional resonance and mutual affection, Chance sees it as something tied to “pleasure,” and although he claims that he isn’t referring to “ordinary pleasure,” he doesn’t quite succeed in delivering a convincing argument to the contrary. In fact, he even presents the distinction between people who have had pleasure in love and people who haven’t as the difference between “spectators” and “performers.” Of course, this makes complete sense, given his obsession with the idea of becoming a famous actor. In this way, the audience sees that Chance’s desire to be admired isn’t all that separate from his desire to be with Heavenly—after all, both the reward of fame and the “pleasure” of love have hedonist qualities that satisfy his various self-motivated desires.

Finley’s feelings might be construed as “incestuous.” Of course, he goes out of his way to say that Boss’s feelings *aren’t* incestuous, but in doing so, he underhandedly suggests that there is an inappropriate dynamic at play—otherwise, he wouldn’t go out of his way to address the matter at all. Furthermore, he says that Boss Finley doesn’t experience any “conscious” incestuous feelings, meaning that he does perhaps harbor *unconscious* incestuous feelings about his daughter. Williams then suggests (though perhaps ironically) that this is natural for a father whose “beautiful young daughter” reminds him of his “dead wife.” In this way, Williams complicates Boss Finley and Heavenly’s relationship by insinuating that fathers are capable of seeing their daughters as sexual beings, whether they mean to do this or not. In turn, readers learn that Boss Finley most likely understands why Chance is so taken by his daughter. In fact, it is perhaps this understanding that makes him want to drive Chance away all the more; he knows what the young man is after.

Act Two, Scene One Quotes

☝☝ *In her father, a sudden dignity is revived. Looking at his very beautiful daughter, he becomes almost stately. He approaches her [...] like an aged courtier comes deferentially up to a crown princess or infant. It’s important not to think of his attitude toward her in the terms of crudely conscious incestuous feeling, but just in the natural terms of almost any aging father’s feeling for a beautiful young daughter who reminds him of a dead wife that he desired intensely when she was the age of his daughter.*

Related Characters: Boss Finley (speaker), Heavenly Finley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This stage note, which takes place in the middle of an argument between Boss Finley and Heavenly, is one of several in-depth notes that Tennessee Williams includes throughout *Sweet Bird of Youth*. What’s most interesting about these asides is how they go beyond the typical constraints of the average stage note, which is normally rather short and straightforward. In contrast, Williams’s notes are informative and searching, as is the case in this passage, when the playwright says: “*It’s important not to think of [Boss Finley’s] attitude toward [Heavenly] in terms of crudely conscious incestuous feeling.*” Rather than simply telling the reader what is happening on stage—how Boss Finley is moving, for example, or what Heavenly is doing as she stands before him—Williams plants the idea that Boss

☝☝ Don’t give me your Voice of God speech. Papa, there was a time when you could have saved me, by letting me marry a boy that was still young and clean, but instead you drove him away, drove him out of St. Cloud. And when he came back, you took me out of St. Cloud, and tried to force me to marry a fifty-year-old money bag that you wanted something out of [...] and then another, another, all of them ones that you wanted something out of. I’d gone, so Chance went away. Tried to compete, make himself big as these big shots you wanted to use me for a bond with. He went. He tried. The right doors wouldn’t open, and so he went in the wrong ones, and—Papa, you married for love, why wouldn’t you let me do it, while I was alive, inside, and the boy still clean, still decent?

Related Characters: Heavenly Finley (speaker), Chance Wayne, Boss Finley

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 51



Explanation and Analysis

Heavenly says this to her father, Boss Finley, in an argument about Chance, whom Boss Finley hates. With these words, Heavenly raises a worthwhile question about culpability and corruption. By faulting her father for both her *and* Chance’s respective downfalls—a botched operation for her and a life of promiscuity for Chance—she destabilizes the notion that everyone ought to be held solely accountable for their own

mistakes. Indeed, she says, “You could have saved me [...] by letting me marry a boy that was still young and clean, but instead you drove him away.” As a result, Chance tried hard to “make himself big as” the men Boss Finley wanted Heavenly to marry, but he was unable to do this, which is why he went down a path of prostitution. If Boss Finley had only accepted him, Heavenly argues, then he would still be “clean” and “decent.” What’s more, *she* would also be better off, because Chance never would have given her the disease that eventually made her infertile. While Williams never actually gives any indication as to whether these accusations are fair, the fact that Heavenly launches them at her father encourages the audience to start thinking about the ways in which people try to escape taking emotional responsibility for their actions. Indeed, in an attempt to feel better about how her life has turned out, Heavenly tries to foist all blame onto her father.

☛ You’re going to be wearing the stainless white of a virgin, with a Youth for Tom Finley button on one shoulder and a corsage of lilies on the other. You’re going to be on the speaker’s platform with me, you on one side of me and Tom Junior on the other, to scotch these rumors about your corruption. And you’re gonna wear a proud happy smile on your face, you’re gonna stare straight out at the crowd in the ballroom with pride and joy in your eyes. Lookin’ at you, all in white like a virgin, nobody would dare to speak or believe the ugly stories about you. I’m relying a great deal on this campaign to bring in young voters for the crusade I’m leading. I’m all that stands between the South and the black days of Reconstruction. And you and Tom Junior are going to stand there beside me in the grand crystal ballroom, as shining examples of white Southern youth—in danger.

Related Characters: Boss Finley (speaker), Tom Junior, Chance Wayne, Heavenly Finley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Boss Finley fully reveals his severe views about purity and corruption. First of all, he demonstrates his desire to present his daughter as the stereotype of an untouched young woman, someone who has never been “corrupt[ed]” by pre-marital sexual encounters. “You’re going to be wearing the stainless white of a virgin,” he tells Heavenly. Of course, he knows all too well that Heavenly isn’t a virgin. In fact, she has already contracted an STD.

Regardless, Boss Finley wants to completely deny this fact by dressing his daughter in the “stainless white of a virgin,” as if he can escape the idea of her “corruption” by ignoring it altogether and acting like she’s still the innocent young girl he wants her to be. What’s more, it’s worth noting the way Boss Finley transitions from talking about Heavenly’s “corruption” to talking about race relations in the South. He seamlessly moves from discussing the “ugly stories” about Heavenly’s operation to referencing the “crusade” he’s leading to keep black and white Southerners from integrating. As such, it becomes obvious that he sees the two topics as intertwined, since they both have to do with what he sees as the corruption of purity.

Act Two, Scene Two Quotes

☛☛ Chance, when I saw you driving under the window with your head held high, with that terrible stiff-necked pride of the defeated which I know so well; I knew that your comeback had been a failure like mine. And I felt something in my heart for you. That’s a miracle, Chance. That’s the wonderful thing that happened to me. I felt something for someone besides myself. That means my heart’s still alive, at least some part of it is, not all of my heart is dead yet. Part’s alive still...Chance, please listen to me. I’m ashamed of this morning. I’ll never degrade you again, I’ll never degrade myself, you and me, again by—I wasn’t always this monster. Once I wasn’t this monster. And what I felt in my heart when I saw you returning, defeated, to this palm garden, Chance, gave me hope that I could stop being a monster. Chance, you’ve got to help me stop being the monster that I was this morning, and you can do it, can help me. I won’t be ungrateful for it. I almost died this morning, suffocated in a panic. But even through my panic, I saw your kindness. I saw a true kindness in you that you have almost destroyed, but that’s still there, a little...

Related Characters: Alexandra Del Lago / “The Princess Kosmonopolis” (speaker), Chance Wayne

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 74



Explanation and Analysis


The Princess speaks these words to Chance, trying desperately to convince him that he won’t ever succeed in his efforts to win over Heavenly Finley and become rich and famous. More importantly, though, this is the first time in *Sweet Bird of Youth* that the Princess speaks positively about the future. Rather than lamenting her faded youth or her

(supposedly) demolished acting career, she acknowledges that her life as a star has made her into a “monster,” someone who can’t empathize with others. Seeing Chance’s failure, though, she is surprised to suddenly experience a rush of emotion. “Not all of my heart is dead yet,” she rejoices, reinvigorated by the idea that she isn’t as much of a “monster” as she thought. As such, she urges Chance to stop his monomaniacal pursuit of fame before it fully turns *him* into a monster. “I saw a true kindness in you that you have almost destroyed,” she says, “but that’s still there, a little.” Under this interpretation, living a life dedicated to youthful beauty—to superficiality—eats away at a person’s “kindness.” Now that the Princess has realized this, she is eager to move on with her life, finally capable of accepting that she’s no longer a desirable young movie star.

☛ All day I’ve kept hearing a sort of lament that drifts through the air of this place. It says, “Lost, lost, never to be found again.” Palm gardens by the sea and olives groves on Mediterranean islands all have that lament drifting through them. “Lost, lost”...The isle of Cyprus, Monte Carlo, San Remo, Torremolenas, Tangiers. They’re all places of exile from whatever we loved. Dark glasses, wide-brimmed hats and whispers, “Is that her?” Shocked whispers...Oh, Chance, believe me, after failure comes flight. Nothing ever comes after failure but flight. Face it. Call the car, have them bring down the luggage and let’s go on along the Old Spanish Trail.

Related Characters: Alexandra Del Lago / “The Princess Kosmonopolis” (speaker), Chance Wayne

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Considering “The Lament”—a musical motif that sometimes can be heard faintly in the background of the play—the Princess talks about her feeling of being “lost.” Although The Lament itself is a wordless tune, she hears lyrics, claiming that the song says, “Lost, lost, never to be found again.” This is most likely a thought that has been running through her head since she first started running from her embarrassing experience at the premiere of her comeback film. Indeed, she herself feels “lost,” as if no one from her past life as a movie star will ever find her again. What’s more, she feels existentially “lost,” too, since she built a life around her youthful beauty, which has faded away and left her to

navigate a new existence. The Princess also frames vacation resorts as “places of exile,” suggesting that people gravitate toward such locations in order to forget about their troubles. Having done this herself, she tells Chance that “after failure comes flight,” ultimately trying to convince him that he has failed to get what he wants in St. Cloud and thus should finally leave.

Act Three Quotes

☛ Of course, you were crowned with laurel in the beginning, your gold hair was wreathed with laurel, but the gold is thinning and the laurel has withered. Face it—pitiful monster. [*She touches the crown of his head.*] ... Of course, I know I’m one too. But one with a difference. Do you know what that difference is? No, you don’t know. I’ll tell you. We are two monsters, but with this difference between us. Out of the passion and torment of my existence I have created a thing that I can unveil, a sculpture, almost heroic, that I can unveil, which is true. But you? You’ve come back to the town you were born in, to a girl that won’t see you because you put such rot in her body she had to be gutted and hung on a butcher’s hook, like a chicken dressed for Sunday....

Related Characters: Alexandra Del Lago / “The Princess Kosmonopolis” (speaker), Heavenly Finley, Chance Wayne

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Princess tells Chance that they are different despite the fact that they are interested in the same things in life. Although they both prize youthful beauty and cherish superficial or fleeting things like fame, there is a fundamental difference between them: talent. “Out of the passion and torment of my existence I have created a thing that I can unveil,” the Princess says, referring to the fact that she is a successful actress who can call upon her skills even when her looks have faded. Chance, on the other hand, has only ever had his looks. As the Princess says, he was “crowned with laurel” as a child because of his handsomeness, but now he has become a “pitiful monster.” Worse, he hasn’t ever cultivated the talent necessary to succeed. Left with nothing, he has “come back to the town [he was] born in” and pathetically tried to regain the affection of a woman he treated poorly—back when he still had his physical appearance to rely upon—but it’s too late to make amends, and his prospects for the future are dim because he has coasted for too long on superficial values

and attributes.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

Chance Wayne awakes in the Royal Palms Hotel and hears flapping bird wings outside the window. Next to him lies an elegant middle-aged woman. When a knock sounds on the door, Chance tells Fly—a hotel employee—to enter, and Fly gives him a remedy for his hangover, which is causing his hands to shake. Chance then goes to the window and opens the shutters, and for the first time the audience fully sees his face: “he’s in his late twenties and his face looks slightly older than that; you might describe it as a ‘ravaged young face’ and yet it is still exceptionally good-looking.” When Chance tells Fly that he’ll add a tip for him on the check, Fly says, “Thank you, Mr. Wayne.” Surprised that Fly remembers his name from when he used to come to local dances, Chance tells him to forget that he has seen him.

Apparently, Fly used to wait tables at the ballroom where Chance went to dances on Saturday nights with Mr. Boss Finley’s daughter. Before long, Fly exits, and a “business-like young man” named George Scudder walks into the room. Scudder reveals that the hotel’s assistant manager called him and told him that Chance had come back to St. Cloud. “So you came right over to welcome me home?” Chance asks, but Scudder ignores him, pointing out that his “lady friend sounds like she’s coming out of ether,” to which Chance replies: “The Princess had a rough night.” He then explains that his companion is “traveling incognito.” “Golly,” says Scudder, “I should think she would, if she’s checking in hotels with you.”

Getting to his point, Scudder asks Chance why he’s returned to St. Cloud. “I’ve still got a mother and a girl in St. Cloud,” Chance answers. “How’s Heavenly, George?” Scudder deflects this question, saying they’ll talk about that later and glancing at his watch—he has to be back at the hospital soon, since he’s now the chief of staff. As such, he rushes on, asking Chance again why he’s returned. Finally answering, Chance says that he heard his mother is sick. “But you said, ‘How’s Heavenly,’” Scudder points out, “not ‘How’s my mother,’ Chance. Your mother died a couple of weeks ago...” He explains that they tried to notify Chance, but that he moves around the United States too much, so they weren’t able to track him down. In his absence, the church took up a collection for her expenses and buried her with a nice headstone.

Tennessee Williams’s initial portrayal of Chance Wayne calls attention to two things. First, he signals that Chance lives a rather rough-edged life, as made evident by his shaking hands and notable hangover. Second, Williams calls attention to Chance’s age. Although he notes that Chance is only in his “late twenties,” he goes out of his way to mention the fact that his face is “ravaged.” In doing so, Williams reveals his interest in the ways that youth and beauty fade away and leave behind the spoils of better times.



The nature of Chance and Scudder’s relationship isn’t readily apparent. However, it gradually becomes obvious that they have a tense dynamic, as Scudder talks to Chance as if he’s disgusted by his sexual exploits. Indeed, Scudder talks as if the Princess—whom he doesn’t even know—should be ashamed to be seen with Chance, as if Chance’s very presence is a corruption of sorts. In turn, Williams foregrounds his eventual exploration of corruption, intimating already that Chance uses romantic intrigue to sully otherwise upstanding women—this, at least, seems to be what Scudder believes.



The fact that Chance doesn’t even know his own mother has died suggests that he is too preoccupied by his own life to bother paying attention to other people, even if they are close to him. Indeed, Scudder is right to point out that Chance seems more interested in this woman named Heavenly than he is in checking on his mother. In turn, the audience sees that Chance’s priorities are a bit misaligned, as he clearly prioritizes his desires over his obligations.



Scudder tells Chance he ought to talk to the Reverend if he has any questions, but Chance merely says, “She’s gone. Why talk about it?” Changing the subject, Scudder says he hopes Chance received the letter he wrote soon after Chance left town, but Chance claims he’s never seen it. Asking Chance to sit, he says, “In this letter I just told you that a certain girl we know had to go through an awful experience, a tragic ordeal, because of past contact with you. I told you that I was only giving you this information so that you would know better than to come back to St. Cloud, but you didn’t know better.” When Chance asks if Scudder’s referring to Heavenly Finley, Scudder refuses to disclose names, merely saying that he came to warn him to leave St. Cloud before the girl’s father and brother heard that he was back in town.

Getting ready to leave, Scudder says he’ll speak to Dan Hatcher—assistant manager of the hotel—and tell him that Chance and his snoozing companion will soon checkout of their room. When Chance demands that Scudder give him more details about what has happened, he simply replies: “There’s a lot more to this which we feel ought not to be talked about to anyone, least of all to you, since you have turned into a criminal degenerate, the only right term for you, but, Chance, I think I ought to remind you that once long ago, the father of this girl wrote out a prescription for you, a sort of medical prescription, which is castration. You’d better think about that, that would deprive you of all you’ve got to get by on.”

Responding to Scudder’s remark about castration, Chance says, “I’m used to that threat. I’m not going to leave St. Cloud without my girl.” Still, Scudder insists that Chance doesn’t have a girl in St. Cloud. “Heavenly and I are going to be married next month,” Scudder says before suddenly leaving the room. Perturbed, Chance makes a phone call to somebody named Aunt Nonnie, and he asks her what happened to Heavenly, but she hangs up without giving him any information.

At this point, the Princess starts to stir and then suddenly bolts upright and gasps, asking for help and demanding to know who Chance is. “I don’t remember who you are!” she laments, but Chance assures her she’ll soon remember and calmly fetches an oxygen mask from her bags. Once he sets her up with the mask, he says he’s surprised she’s still having these “attacks of panic,” since he thought his presence would calm her. “Give me a pill,” she demands, and when he asks what *kind* of pill, she says, “A pink one, a pinkie, and a vodka...” Chance then goes to the phone and calls Mr. Hatcher, trying to explain that they can’t check out because Miss Alexandra Del Lago is “suffering from exhaustion.” As he says this, the Princess shouts: “*Don’t use my name!*”

It becomes even clearer that Chance cares first and foremost about himself and whatever he wants. This is made apparent by the fact that he says, “She’s gone. Why talk about it?” in reference to his mother’s death, instead immediately choosing to focus on other matters, such as his past relationship with a girl named Heavenly (though Scudder won’t yet affirm or deny whether or not the girl to whom he’s referring is indeed Heavenly). What’s more, when Scudder asserts that a girl went through “an awful experience” because of “past contact” with Chance, he casts him once again as someone who corrupts other people.



When Scudder says that there is “a lot more to this which we feel ought not to be talked about,” he mysteriously suggests that he is in cahoots with someone else. Going on to talk about a girl’s father threatening to castrate Chance, it becomes clear that Scudder is most likely somehow involved with this father. In turn, he himself underhandedly threatens Chance. What’s more, the fact that this unnamed girl’s father wants to castrate Chance suggests again that people in St. Cloud see him as someone who corrupts the purity of others, especially through sexual exploits.



Although Williams doesn’t yet reveal why Chance is “used to” the threat of castration, this statement reinforces the idea that he must use his good looks and sexuality to his own benefit. Indeed, that people often want to castrate him once again underlines the idea that he is seen as someone who sexually corrupts others.



Chance is surprised that the Princess has panic attacks in his presence, a sentiment that demonstrates just how much confidence he has in his ability to put people at ease. It’s clear, then, that he’s accustomed to having a certain effect on people, perhaps because he’s used to being seen as good-looking and desirable. On another note, the Princess’s request for drugs and alcohol—after having just woken up—underscores her dependence on substances that help her cope. Indeed, she wants to get high before the day has even truly started, thereby escaping whatever psychological distresses are plaguing her and throwing her into this “attack of panic.”



The Princess insists that Chance hang up the phone. When he does, he tries to tell her what Hatcher said, but she's uninterested, saying, "Please shut up, I'm *forgetting!*" Accepting this, he tells her he wishes he too could simply forget things at will. As he says this, he extracts a tape recorder and sets it up on the floor before returning to the bed, where he sits down next to her. When she asks what he's doing, he lies and says he's looking for his toothbrush. She then discards the oxygen mask, and Chance asks her why she won't see a doctor. "I don't need them," she states. "What happened is nothing at all." She then describes her frequent panic attacks, claiming they're nothing more than "adrenalin" getting "pumped" into her blood.

"You're full of complexes, plump lady," says Chance. "Why do you call me that? Have I let go of my figure?" the Princess asks. "You put on a good deal of weight after that disappointment you had last month," he admits, but she feigns ignorance, hitting him with a pillow and saying she doesn't remember any "disappointment." "Can you control your memory like that?" he asks. "Yes," she replies. "I've had to learn to. What is this place, a hospital? And you, what are you, a male nurse?" To this, Chance explains that he takes care of her but that he's not a nurse.

The Princess tries to get a better look at Chance, saying that she doesn't mind "waking up in an intimate situation with someone," but that she prefers to know what that person looks like, at least. Unfortunately, though, her glasses broke, so she can't quite make him out. "Your voice sounds young. Are you young?" she asks. "My age is twenty-nine years," he replies. He also tells her he used to be the "best-looking boy in this town." This prompts her to finally put on her broken glasses, look at him, and say: "Well, I may have done better, but God knows I've done worse." She then feels his chest and is pleased with what she finds.

The Princess wants to call the manager to ask where she is and who she's with, but Chance tells her to calm down, pulling her to himself on the bed. As she lies against him, she muses, "It gives you an awful trapped feeling this, this memory block...I feel as if someone I loved had died lately, and I don't want to remember who it could be." Chance then asks her if she remembers her own name, but she says she feels like there's some reason why she prefers to keep this secret. "Well, I happen to know it," Chance says. "You registered under a phony name in Palm Beach but I discovered your real one. And you admitted it to me." To this, the Princess says, "I'm the Princess Kosmonopolis." "Yes, and you used to be known as..." Chance says, but the Princess cuts him off.

By saying that her panic attacks are merely "adrenalin" getting "pumped" into her blood, the Princess tries to normalize her anxiety, breaking it down into a tangible biological process and thus making it less likely to overwhelm her emotionally. Of course, while this might help temporarily, it is a rather escapist attitude toward emotional health, and it becomes clear that the Princess is actively trying to avoid her own thoughts. Indeed, she even says she's trying to "forget" something—talking about her panic attacks in this chiefly physiological manner helps her sidestep whatever it is she's trying to put out of her mind.



Once again, it becomes clear that the Princess has forced upon herself a mental block of sorts. Chance, for his part, seems to know exactly what she's trying to "forget," but this doesn't stop him from referencing it, referring to it as her "disappointment." Nonetheless, the Princess is determined to avoid the matter, and so she continues to exist in a state of self-enforced amnesia as a way of denying whatever emotional trauma befell her "last month."



Williams again goes out of his way to present Chance as a strikingly good-looking man, but also makes sure to note that Chance's beauty is fading. Indeed, even Chance himself says that he used to be the "best-looking boy" in town. In this way, the audience understands that Chance has in recent years undergone a gradual transformation as he replaces his youthful looks with his current "ravaged" appearance. Of course, the Princess herself is older than he is, and so she remains pleased by his relative youth.



Although Chance's motivations regarding his relationship with the Princess aren't yet clear, it's obvious that his intentions aren't entirely wholesome, since he actively stops her from calling the hotel manager to ask who he is. What's more, it's worth noting that he leverages her apparent attraction to him in order to keep her from calling the manager. He uses his good looks and charm—his sexual energy—to his advantage by convincing her to come lie in his arms. In doing so, he's able to redirect the Princess's attention, encouraging her to continue her own efforts to deny certain painful memories.



Chance helps the Princess piece together how they met. She says the last place she remembers traveling to is Tallahassee. He confirms that they drove through that city and she decided to get blackout drunk in the backseat while he drove them out of Texas on the Old Spanish Trail. "I didn't stop here," he says. "I was stopped." When she asks if a cop stopped him, he says, "No. No cop, but I was arrested by something." The Princess then goes to the window and looks out at the ocean, which suddenly jars something loose in her memory. "Oh God, I remember the thing I wanted not to. The goddam end of my life!" she shouts, slouching back to the bed and ordering Chance to get out "the stuff."

When Chance fetches "the stuff," he says, "This isn't pot. What is it?" As he sets to rolling a joint, the Princess explains, "What is it? Don't you know what it is, you beautiful, stupid young man? It's hashish, Moroccan, the finest." As a follow-up, he asks how she got it through customs when she came back to the United States for her "comeback," and she explains exactly how she smuggled the drug into the country. She then turns to the audience and says, "For years they all told me that it was ridiculous of me to feel that I couldn't go back to the screen or the stage as a middle-aged woman. They told me I was an artist, not just a star whose career depended on youth. But I knew in my heart that the legend of Alexandra Del Lago couldn't be separated from an appearance of youth..."

Continuing her monologue, the Princess says that there's "no more valuable knowledge than knowing the right time to go," which is why she retired from show business. This, she says, is when she discovered hashish and other drugs that help her "put to sleep the tiger that raged in [her] nerves." Indeed, she claims that she couldn't "get old with that tiger still in [her] raging," so she chose to numb that internal turmoil with drugs and "young lovers." "Me?" Chance asks, and she says, "You? Yes, finally you. But you come after the comeback." Going on, she explains that when she went to the screening of her cinematic comeback, she saw that the "screen's a very clear mirror." Seeing her face blown up unforgivingly on the screen, the audience gasped, and she heard them whisper, "Is that her?"

Proceeding with her story about her cinematic comeback, the Princess explains that she stood up in the theater and ran out. Because she was wearing a long dress, though, she tripped down a set of stairs, and when people helped her up, she simply fled. "Flight," she says, "just flight, not interrupted until I woke up this morning..." Looking at the hashish joint, she says, "Well, sooner or later, at some point in your life, the thing that you lived for is lost or abandoned, and then...you die, or find something else. This is my something else..."

It seems as if Chance has his own personal demons that he can't fully escape. This is perhaps why he feels like he was "arrested by something" in St. Cloud, as if he couldn't possibly pass by without attending to whatever it is that is bothering him. Of course, the audience has already learned that he is a wayward man who seems to travel as a way of escaping his personal demons, but now he seemingly feels the urge to confront whatever it is he's been running from. The Princess, on the other hand, still wants to live in a state of ignorant bliss, but this proves difficult—looking out the window, she remembers what she's been trying to forget, a fact suggesting that pure denial is impossible when it comes to psychological distress.



In this scene, Williams reveals that the Princess is a famous actress. Given that she delivers a monologue about the relationship between fame and youth, it seems likely that what she wants to forget—and the reason she does drugs—must have to do with the end of her career. Indeed, she has always seen her fame as directly related to "an appearance of youth," investing herself in a superficial sense of beauty that inevitably must fade. Since she has built a life that "depend[s] on youth," she now finds herself adrift as a middle-aged woman whose beauty has faded.



The Princess is horrified by the idea that an entire audience would see her as unrecognizable. This embarrassment only reinforces her initial feeling that there's "no more valuable knowledge than knowing the right time to go," and so she suddenly wishes that she called it quits with her acting career instead of making a comeback film. After all, a negative reaction to her looks only confirms her own fears about her faded beauty. This is perhaps why she addresses the actual audience in this moment—by breaking the fourth wall, Tennessee Williams demonstrates just how much the Princess cares about what other people think of her.



What the Princess has "lived for" isn't acting or the art of theater, but youth and beauty. This is why her life seems to come to an end when she's forced to suffer the embarrassment of growing old in the public eye. As a reaction to this, she simply flees, thinking she can escape her troubles by running away, having sex with younger men like Chance, and doing drugs.



“Princess,” Chance says, turning his attention to the hashish, “don’t forget that this stuff is yours, that you provided me with it.” He then goes on to reiterate the fact that she smuggled drugs into the country. “You had a fair supply of it at that hotel in Palm Beach,” he reminds her, “and were asked to check out before you were ready to do so, because its aroma drifted into the corridor one breezy night.” The Princess shrugs this off, saying she’s sure that she must not have introduced the drug to Chance. In fact, she suddenly remembers that drug use was what “brought [them] together” in Palm Beach. “When you came in my cabana to give me one of those papaya cream rubs,” she says, “you sniffed, you grinned and said you’d like a stick too.”

Apparently, Chance gave the Princess a false name—Carl—when they first met, and this makes her suddenly suspicious of him. However, he reminds her that she too has been using a fake name. Acquiescing, she says, “Yes, to avoid getting any reports or condolences on the disaster I ran from.” As she goes to the window, **The Lament**—a strain of plaintive “thematic” music that periodically plays throughout the production—issues faintly from above. Finally, Chance articulates what, exactly, he wants out of his relationship with the Princess. “You said that you had a large block of stock, more than half ownership in a sort of second-rate Hollywood studio, and you could put me under contract,” he says. Apparently, when she first said this, he had her sign a notarized contract. Still, though, he wants to make sure she follows through.

Chance says that he has been conned too many times to fully trust things that might still be “phony.” In response, the Princess admits that she could technically still get out of the contract if she wanted to. “Do you have any talent?” she asks, referring to his acting skills. “I’m not as positive of it as I once was,” he says. “I’ve had more chances than I could count on my fingers, and made the grade almost, but not quite, every time. Something always blocks me...” As he says this, **The Lament** fades back in, and the Princess asks him if fear is what holds him back. “No,” he says, “not fear, but terror.”

Although the Princess has just told a long story about herself—one in which she reveals her deepest insecurities—Chance is rather uninterested. Instead of engaging with her tale, he changes the subject. Although it’s not yet clear to the audience why he brings up drug smuggling now, his abrupt interruption of her story emphasizes his inability to empathize with others. Indeed, rather than listening with kindness to the Princess’s story and talking to her about her emotional troubles, he coldly shunts the conversation in another direction, one that will benefit him somehow, though it’s not yet clear how.



Throughout the play, Williams uses The Lament to signal shifts in the general mood and atmosphere. In this moment, The Lament seems to play because the Princess has once again mentioned “the disaster” from which she has fled, and doing so inspires a strange mood, one that destabilizes the play’s ordinary feeling. Yet again, though, Chance remains completely uninfluenced by the Princess’s distress. Instead of kindly talking to her about what’s going through her head, he reminds her that she promised to help him become famous, once more revealing just how obsessed he is with himself.



Now that it’s clear Chance wants to become a famous actor, it’s easier to understand his intentions and motivations. He expresses a self-awareness in this moment, one that suggests that he understands he’s not especially talented as an actor. Of course, this only increases his desperation, which is why he wants to use the Princess to launch his career. As The Lament plays, the audience sees that he is “terrified” of failure.



“Chance,” says the Princess, “come back to your youth. Put off this false, ugly hardness and...” Before she can finish, he says: “And be took in by every con-merchant I meet?” She then insists that she’s not a “phony,” prompting him to ask what—in that case—she wants from him in order to go through with their deal. Smiling, she calls him to the bed, saying that they ought to “comfort each other a little.” He then reveals that he has recorded their entire conversation, replaying the moment when she admitted that she was in possession of smuggled drugs. Understanding that she’s been blackmailed, she asks Chance what he wants. He then urges her to sign traveler’s checks over to him, but she refuses, saying that first he must have sex with her.

The Princess says she’ll help Chance on the condition that he never mention death or her failing health. Furthermore, he must always give her what she wants (sexually) without question or hesitation. “I have only one way to forget these things I don’t want to remember and that’s through the act of love-making,” she says. “That’s the only dependable distraction so when I say now, because I need that distraction, it has to be now, not later.” Chance then asks if she’s ashamed to demand this sort of thing, and she says, “Of course I am. Aren’t you?” In response, he admits he is, too. Nonetheless, they close the shutters and get into bed together.

ACT ONE, SCENE TWO

While the Princess writes traveler’s checks for him, Chance tells his life story. He says he was born with “a wish or need to be different.” The people he grew up with, he explains, mostly still live in St. Cloud, working in business and leading stable lives with wives and children. “The little crowd that I was in with,” he says, “that I used to be the star of, was the snob set, the ones with the big names and money. I didn’t have either...What I had was...” Interrupting, the Princess shouts: “BEAUTY! Say it! Say it! What you had was beauty! I had it! I say it, with pride, no matter how sad, being gone, now.” Chance goes on, saying that he always felt destined for something better than the average life in St. Cloud. “I wanted, expected, intended to get, something better,” he says.

In this moment, both Chance and the Princess drop all pretenses of treating each other with dignity. Instead, they bluntly state what they want from each other, since each of them wants to use the other as a means to some end. In Chance’s case, he intends to blackmail the Princess into making him famous. In the Princess’s case, she intends to sleep with Chance as a way of forgetting about her troubles and—perhaps—her old age. As such, it’s not hard to see that their relationship is twisted and corrupted by ulterior motives.



In many ways, Chance and the Princess are perfect for one another. Although they’re both seemingly incapable of engaging with one another on a genuine, human level, they each want something that the other has, and see no issue with a transactional relationship. Void of passion or affection, they each use each other to chase something they want, all the while denying the things they fear most. For Chance, this means using the Princess to become a famous actor and thus deny the fact that he’s talentless and running out of time. For the Princess, this means sexually exploiting Chance’s good looks to escape the reality that she no longer has what matters most to her: youth and beauty.



Both Chance and the Princess invest themselves in their own “beauty.” In fact, this superficiality means so much to them that it’s the primary thing they talk about when reflecting upon their respective pasts. Chance, for his part, has always felt that his good looks mean he’s destined for “something better” than the people with whom he grew up. With this, Williams showcases the vapid assumption that beauty entitles a person to success.



Chance tells the Princess that he has done things nobody in St. Cloud has ever done, like sing in the chorus of a big New York show or pose for magazine photos. "And at the same time [I] pursued my other vocation...Maybe the only one I was truly meant for, love-making...slept in the social register of New York!" He goes on to claim that as a gigolo he always gave people more than he ever took, saying, "Middle-aged people I gave back a feeling of youth. Lonely girls? Understanding, appreciation! An absolutely convincing show of affection. Sad people, lost people? Something light and uplifting!" However, he never let this life completely ensnare him, periodically returning to St. Cloud to see Heavenly and to make everybody "buzz with excitement" about his arrival. Before long, though, he was drafted and sent into the Navy to fight in the Korean War.

Proceeding with his life story, Chance admits that he hated the discipline of the Navy. "I kept thinking, this stops everything," he says, explaining that he was eager to leave the military. "By the time I got out," he says, "Christ knows, I might be nearly thirty! Who would remember Chance Wayne? In a life like mine, you just can't stop, you know, can't take time out between steps, you've got to keep going right on up from one thing to the other, once you drop out, it leaves you and goes on without you and you're washed up." After finding grey hairs one day, he had a nervous breakdown and got a medical discharge from the Navy, returning to St. Cloud to find his old friends and fellow townspeople chilly and reserved whenever he spoke to them.

After getting discharged from the Navy, Chance's relationship with Heavenly became vitally important to him. At this point, the Princess interrupts him and asks if Heavenly is the reason he's come to St. Cloud. He confirms this is the case, and shows the Princess a snapshot of Heavenly posing nude on a sandbar. He tells her he took this one night at low-tide when Heavenly was only fifteen; the same age she was when she lost her virginity to him (he was two years older). "Princess," he says now, "the great difference between people in this world is not between the rich and the poor or the good and the evil, the biggest of all differences in this world is between the ones that had or have pleasure in love and those that haven't and hadn't any pleasure in love."

Chance believes he has had an extraordinary life built upon his handsome looks and irresistible charm. In truth, though, it's easy to see that he has only attained a small amount of success in the acting world, which has driven him to become a gigolo. Although he frames this profession as having enabled him to do fantastic things, it's probably more accurate to say that working as a gigolo is something he only does out of necessity.. And yet at the same time, he does seem to derive some sort of pleasure out of his experience, as evidenced by his enthusiasm regarding his ability to give people "a feeling of youth" or "appreciation."



Once again, Chance feels as if he deserves more than the average person. Because he's handsome and charming, he can't fathom the idea of growing old in the Navy. The fact that he has a panic attack after finding several gray hairs only reinforces his obsession with superficial notions of beauty.



When Chance says that the "great difference between people in this world" is whether or not they've had "pleasure in love," he reveals the strange way he conceives of love: not as an emotional experience or true connection between people, but as something that satisfies desire and lust. This is important to keep in mind as Sweet Bird of Youth progresses, since Chance's love for Heavenly often seems as if it has more to do with rather arbitrary pleasures than genuine connection.



Chance tells the Princess that he always has had Heavenly's love to come back to. "Something permanent in a world of change?" she asks, and he says, "Yes, after each disappointment, each failure at something, I'd come back to her like going to a hospital..." Unfortunately, though, Heavenly's father has never approved of him. "Didn't I tell you that Heavenly is the daughter of Boss Finley, the biggest political wheel in this part of the country?" he asks the Princess before going on to explain that Boss Finley believes his daughter deserves a better man than him. Apparently, the last time he was in St. Cloud, Heavenly told him to meet her out on the sandbar, but she wasn't there when he arrived. After a while, she came and circled the sandbar in a boat, shouting things like, "Chance, go away," and "Chance, you're a liar."

Because of his troubles with Boss Finley, Chance explains, he needs the Princess's help. He then tells her what he has in mind: he will show Heavenly the acting contract drawn up by the Princess. Then the Princess will start using her real name, Alexandra Del Lago, in order to attract the press. Once she has the media's attention, she'll announce a local contest "to find a pair of young people to star as unknowns in a picture [she's] planning to make to show [her] faith in YOUTH." Of course, the contest will be rigged so that Chance and Heavenly win, at which point they'll travel to Hollywood. For now, though, Chance says he's going to borrow the Princess's **Cadillac** because he wants to drive around town to attract attention.

Having heard his plan, the Princess calls Chance a "lost little boy," though she admits she wants to help him "find himself." She then tells him to come kiss her. "I love you", she says, then turns to the audience and asks, "Did I say that? Did I mean it?" Regardless, she goes on hugging him. Eventually, he breaks their embrace and sets off to drive around in the Princess's **Cadillac** while she herself waits in the hotel room, wondering when she'll see him again.

ACT TWO, SCENE ONE

Boss Finley meets with George Scudder inside his house and laments the return of Chance Wayne, scowling that the wretched man "had" Heavenly when she was only fifteen. He knows this because he has seen the picture Chance took of Heavenly on the sandbar, which a dishonest photo developer circulated amongst his friends. Hearing Boss Finley's anger, Scudder suggests that he call off the political rally he's planning to have that night, but Finley refuses. He then calls his son, Tom Junior, into the room and asks if Chance has left St. Cloud yet. Tom Junior informs him that Hatcher claims they're still at the Royal Palms. "Is this Hatcher a talker, or can he keep his mouth shut?" Boss Finley asks, and Scudder chimes in to assure him that he told Hatcher to handle the matter discreetly.

Since the Princess uses sexual intercourse as a way of escaping her misgivings about growing older, it's unsurprising that she sees love as "something permanent in a world of change." For her, intimate connection is an outlet for her unaddressed emotional turmoil. This may well be the case for Chance, too, since he believes Heavenly's love is something he can consistently return to, suggesting that he depends upon her affection to help him feel grounded. On another note, Boss Finley's rejection of Chance aligns with the idea that many people in St. Cloud see him as a low-life who will corrupt otherwise good people.



Although Chance claims that he wants to get famous in order to settle his relationship with Heavenly's father, it's hard to deny the notion that his vanity also has something to do with his desire to become a well-known actor. Indeed, he further demonstrates this vanity when he says that he wants to borrow the Princess's Cadillac so that he can simply be seen driving around looking like a big shot in his hometown. Moments of vanity like this ultimately give the impression that Chance wants to be successful just so that he can be admired, not simply for the sake of true love.



When the Princess kisses Chance and says "I love you" to him, she surprises herself. However, her sudden overflow of affection isn't actually very shocking, considering that they want the same things: beauty, fame, and admiration. Further, because she feels old, she relishes his youthful presence, and seemingly mistakes her admiration for love.



Although Chance has mentioned Boss Finley to the Princess, this is the first time the man appears onstage. As the chief antagonist of the play, he reveals his dislike of Chance right away. Indeed, his aversion to Chance seemingly stems from the fact that Chance had sex with Heavenly when she was still quite young. In turn, Williams suggests that Boss Finley is upset by the idea that Chance "corrupted" what he most likely sees as his daughter's purity by bringing her into the world of adulthood before she was ready.



Questioning Scudder's ability to communicate a message discreetly, Boss Finley says, "Discreetly, like you handled that operation you done on my daughter, so discreetly that a hillbilly heckler is shouting me questions about it wherever I speak?" Scudder, for his part, insists that he did everything he could to keep that operation a secret, but Finley changes the subject, saying he merely wants to know if Chance has left yet. To his dismay, Tom Junior and Scudder inform him that Chance is holed up with an old movie star named Alexandra Del Lago, who isn't "well enough to travel." "Okay," says Boss Finley to Scudder, "you're a doctor, remove her to a hospital. Call an ambulance and haul her out of the Royal Palms Hotel." When Scudder asks how he'll justify this, Finley tells him to say that the Princess has something contagious.

Boss Finley states the reason he wants Chance Wayne removed from St. Cloud, saying: "My daughter's no whore, but she had a whore's operation after the last time he had her. I don't want him passin' another night in St. Cloud." He then tells Tom Junior that Chance must be gone by midnight, and when Tom asks if he can borrow his father's boat to carry out this job, Boss Finley merely says that he doesn't want to know the specifics of how Tom plans to remove Chance. Just then, a car horn sounds through the air as Chance approaches in the Princess's **Cadillac**.

When Chance pulls into Boss Finley's driveway, he sees Aunt Nonnie and calls to her, but she pretends to not hear him. Finally, he drives away, and Boss asks Nonnie why she didn't acknowledge Chance. "I hoped you hadn't seen him," she says. She admits that she went to the hotel to warn Chance to leave, but that he wouldn't listen. Finley then accuses Nonnie of showing Chance too much kindness, saying she "aided and abetted him in his corruption of Heavenly." In response, she says, "I remember when Chance was the finest, nicest, sweetest boy in St. Cloud, and he stayed that way till you, till you—" Before she can finish, Finley cuts her off, ordering her to fetch Heavenly.

Although it's left vague what kind of "operation" Scudder performed on Heavenly, it's clear that it was something Boss Finley doesn't want people to know about, since he critiques Scudder for not handling the procedure "discreetly." This obsession with secrecy makes sense, considering that Boss Finley is a political figure who wants to carefully manipulate how he presents himself to the public. What's more, the fact that Heavenly had to get a secret "operation" in the first place—likely having to do with an STD—surely upsets Boss even more, causing him again to face the fact that Heavenly isn't a virgin anymore.



When Boss Finley refers to Heavenly's secret operation as "a whore's operation," he confirms the notion that her procedure—whatever it was—was the result of sleeping with Chance Wayne. What's more, he reveals his deep investment in bigoted ideas of purity and innocence, believing that Chance has corrupted his otherwise perfect daughter, turning her from a girl into a "whore."



Throughout the play, Boss Finley fixates on the idea that Chance corrupted Heavenly. In this moment, though, Aunt Nonnie underhandedly suggests that Boss actually corrupted Chance, and though she doesn't yet make clear how this is the case, the audience can guess that it must have something to do with the way Boss responded to Chance's interest in his daughter. This shift of perspectives is important, as Williams explores the ways people can drive one another away from an original sense of wholeness and wellbeing. Indeed, while Boss Finley believes Chance corrupted Heavenly with his sexual exploits, Nonnie seems to think that Boss corrupted Chance with his hate and prejudice.



When Aunt Nonnie leaves, Boss Finley complains about the fact that everybody he's associated with ends up dragging his name into trouble. This offends Tom Junior, who is proud to have organized the Youth For Tom Finley club for his father's campaign, but Boss Finley points out that the club is just made up of hooligans like Tom, who has gotten his name in the paper several times for unsavory activities like drunk driving. Insulted, Tom Junior brings up his father's "well-known promiscuity" with his mistress, Miss Lucy. "Who is Miss Lucy?" Boss Finley says, playing dumb. "Who is Miss Lucy?" Tom Junior laughs. "You don't even know who she is, this woman you keep in a fifty-dollar-a-day hotel suite at the Royal Palms, Papa?"

Boss Finley denies Miss Lucy's existence until Tom Junior tells him that she recently wrote "Boss Finley is too old to cut the mustard" on a mirror at the Royal Palms. After a tense moment, Boss tells Tom to mind his own business. Just then, Heavenly enters, and Boss Finley sends Scudder and Tom away. Suddenly affectionate, Boss tells Heavenly they need to talk, but she says she can't right now and tries to leave.

When Heavenly tries to leave, a servant gets in her way as he enters and turns on a lamp, which casts a beautiful light onto Heavenly, one that pacifies Boss Finley's anger as he looks fondly at his daughter. Williams notes here that "it's important not to think of [Boss's] attitude toward her in the terms of crudely conscious incestuous feelings, but just in the natural terms of almost any aging father's feeling for a beautiful young daughter who reminds him of a dead wife that he desired intensely when she was the age of his daughter." After a moment, Boss Finley regains his composure and says, "You're still a beautiful girl," and she jokes that "the embalmers must have done a good job."

During this conversation, Tom Junior reveals Boss Finley's hypocritical tendencies. Indeed, Boss Finley adamantly condemns Chance's sexual promiscuity, but he himself apparently has a mistress. In this way, Williams demonstrates that people who criticize others for not upholding certain moral standards are often just as likely as anyone else to transgress against the very same set of values they so ardently advance.



The message that Miss Lucy has supposedly written on the mirror at the Royal Palms refers again to one of the play's main themes: the idea that youth fades. Indeed, Boss Finley must suddenly face the notion that he's no longer young enough to satisfy his lover. Worse, this has been put on public display, disparaging him in the public eye. For someone who cares so much about his image as a politician, this is surely devastating news.



Williams's note about Boss Finley's relationship with Heavenly is strange, as he calls attention to an uncomfortable "incestuous" dynamic while simultaneously trying to normalize this dynamic by saying that "almost any aging father" might feel mildly attracted to his daughter if she looks like his dead wife. In turn, he gives the audience a chance to look deeper into Boss Finley, who clearly harbors some complicated feelings about his daughter's sexuality. What's more, these feelings most likely fuel his desire to keep Heavenly innocent and young; to protect her from sexual beings like Chance (and, perhaps, his own repressed desires). On another note, it's worth pointing out that he says Heavenly is "still" a beautiful girl, implying that she has indeed been corrupted and altered by her past experiences with Chance. Unfortunately for Heavenly, she seems to have internalized this idea, since she herself makes a morbid joke that she has died, suggesting that she believes her operation has changed her for the worse.



Boss Finley complains that Heavenly has become a “subject of talk” and “scandal,” which threatens to defeat his “mission.” Cutting him off, she tells him not to give her his “Voice of God speech,” claiming that he missed his chance to “save” her because he didn’t allow her to marry Chance when she was “still young and clean.” Instead, she says, he “drove him away” and tried to force her to marry “a fifty-year-old money bag,” who was the first in a long line of suitors Boss has tried to get her to marry. Meanwhile, she claims, Chance tried to “compete” for her hand by getting famous, though “the right doors wouldn’t open, and so he went in the wrong ones.” “Papa, you married for love,” she says, “why wouldn’t you let me do it, while I was alive, inside, and the boy still clean, still decent?”

Boss Finley tells Heavenly a story about her mother. When she was ill, he knew she was about to die, so he went out and bought a \$15,000 clip, which he pinned onto her nightgown. Although she protested that the gift was wasted on her, he said, “If you was dying, if there was any chance of it, would I invest fifteen grand in a diamond clip to pin on the neck of a shroud?” In turn, she started to act as if she weren’t dying. Instead, she laughed and took visitors for the rest of the day—until she died at midnight. Instead of burying her with the clip, Boss Finley took it off and returned it to the jeweler. Hearing this, Heavenly sarcastically says, “I guess that shows, demonstrates very clearly, that you have got a pretty big heart after all.”

Before Heavenly leaves the room, Boss Finley tells her that a heckler has been disrupting his political rallies, yelling, “Hey, Boss Finley, how about your daughter? How about that operation you had done on your daughter at the Thomas J. Finley hospital in St. Cloud?” In response, Heavenly apologizes that her operation has caused him trouble, but she also points out that she herself is already humiliated. “I felt worse than embarrassed when I found out that Dr. George Scudder’s knife had cut the youth out of my body, made me an old childless woman,” she says. “Dry, cold, empty, like an old woman.” Because of her sterility, she tells her father, she has decided to join a convent, where she won’t be able to “embarrass” him anymore.

Interestingly enough, Heavenly apparently believes—like her father—that she has lost her purity, that both she and Chance are no longer “clean.” At the same time, though, she raises a difficult question: can other people be blamed for another’s loss of purity? Heavenly believes that Chance went into the “wrong doors” because Boss Finley forced him to do so. Similarly, she blames her father for her own loss of innocence, insinuating that she wouldn’t have had pre-marital sex if he had simply allowed Chance to marry her in the first place. Although these are interesting points to consider, it’s also worth noting that Heavenly’s ideas here ignore her own agency and culpability, effectively foisting all responsibility on her father. In turn, this devalues her own authority, causing her to strip herself of any power or agency she might otherwise possess.



For Boss Finley, relationships are transactional. Rather than taking the time to help his wife through her difficult period of dying, he used his riches to buy her some semblance of happiness. However, he himself isn’t capable of much sentiment, which is why he coldly returned the clip after his wife died. As such, the audience sees that Boss’s romantic relationships have very little to do with actual emotions. In light of this, it’s rather unsurprising that he doesn’t care if Heavenly and Chance are in love or not: he doesn’t care at all about actual romantic feelings.



Heavenly has internalized her father’s ideas about youth, purity, and innocence. Indeed, she believes that George Scudder “cut the youth out of [her] body.” By saying this, she frames “youth” as a tangible thing, something that can be physically removed from the body. In reality, of course, youth isn’t quite so straightforward, and isn’t something a person can simply lose all of a sudden. Nonetheless, her belief that she is a “dry, cold, empty” “old woman” shows the extent to which she believes her sexual encounters with Chance have marred her youthful beauty and personal worth.



Boss Finley is incensed to hear that Heavenly wants to join a convent, telling her that he is a Protestant and that—even though she took to her mother’s Catholicism—he won’t allow her to undermine him this way. Plus, he has a plan for her: she’s going to accompany him tonight to the Youth for Tom Finley rally in the ballroom of the Royal Palms Hotel. “You’re going to be wearing the stainless white of a virgin, with a Youth for Tom Finley button on one shoulder and a corsage of lilies on the other,” he says. “You’re going to be on the speaker’s platform with me, you on one side of me and Tom Junior on the other, to scotch these rumors about your corruption.” When people see her dressed in white like this, he claims, they won’t be able to keep circulating “ugly stories” about her.

Going on, Boss Finley tells Heavenly that he’s relying on his campaign “to bring in young voters for the crusade [he’s] leading.” Adding to this, he says: “And you and Tom Junior are going to stand there beside me in the grand crystal ballroom, as shining examples of white Southern youth—in danger.” Heavenly protests this idea, saying she won’t stand up there with him, and this prompts her father to threaten Chance’s safety, saying, “If you won’t, you won’t. Bu there would be consequences you might not like. Chance Wayne is back in St. Cloud.” He then says that he’s going to “remove” Chance, asking, “How do you want him to leave, in that white Cadillac he’s riding around in, or in the scow that totes the garbage out to the dumping place in the Gulf?”

When Heavenly says that Boss Finley “wouldn’t dare” do something violent to Chance, he says, “A lot of people approve of taking violent action against corrupters. And on all of them that want to adulterate the pure white blood of the South.” He then goes on to tell his well-worn story about how when he was fifteen he came out of the “red clay hills as if the Voice of God” had called him. “I firmly believe He called me,” he says. “And nothing, nobody, nowhere is gonna stop me, never.” Saying this, he leaves to go see Miss Lucy.

Once more, Boss Finley demonstrates his desire for Heavenly to be the symbol of unsexualized purity. However, he also reveals another motive here: not only does he want her to regain her innocence, he wants her to do it publicly so that he can benefit politically from her apparent reformation. In this way, Williams shows the audience that there is very little in Boss Finley’s life that he won’t politicize and manipulate to his advantage. While youth and purity are important to him personally, what he really wants to do is project a message of “stainless white” innocence to the voters he’s trying to win over. In addition, considering that Sweet Bird of Youth takes place during a period of racial integration in the South, this message—of “white” purity—also takes on a racist agenda.



Building upon his statement that Heavenly will represent the “stainless white of a virgin” when she stands next to him at the rally, Boss Finley transitions into a conversation about race relations in the South, explicitly addressing his bigoted belief that “white Southern youth” are “in danger” because of integration. According to him, Heavenly and Tom Junior will symbolize what white Southerners supposedly stand to lose if they integrate with black Southerners. Boss Finley has conflated his own obsession with sexual purity—and the corruption of youth—with the politics of fear regarding racial segregation.



Boss Finley uses his obsession with purity and corruption to fuel a racist agenda, this time making it all the more explicit that he condones “violent action” against people who “want to adulterate the pure white blood of the South.” In turn, the audience sees how truly racist he is, and one gets the sense that he is motivated first and foremost by fear (and certainly not by the “Voice of God”)—indeed, he thinks that he will lose his privileged status if true integration takes place in the South. Rather than interrogating his insecurities, he directs anger at people who he thinks might “corrupt” his way of life, which is why he not only encourages violence against black people, but also against Chance, who he thinks has “corrupted” his daughter. Boss’s hypocrisy is also highlighted by the fact that he invokes the “Voice of God”—who disapproves of adultery—and then immediately goes to see his mistress.



ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

Stuff, the bartender in the cocktail lounge of the Royal Palms Hotel, greets Miss Lucy, who sits down at the bar and tells him that she has just seen Boss Finley. Apparently, he came to see her with a jewel box, which she opened to find a large diamond clip inside. When she went to remove the clip, though, he snapped the box shut on her fingers—bruising one of her nails—and said: “Now go downstairs to the cocktail lounge and go in the ladies’ room and describe this diamond clip with lipstick on the ladies’ room mirror down there.” He then put the box in his pocket and stormed away. Having told Stuff this story, Miss Lucy accuses him of telling people what she wrote on the mirror.

Stuff and Miss Lucy pause for a moment to observe a tall man with a bandage on his forehead enter the lounge. Miss Lucy asks him if he’s with the Hillbilly Ramblers (a band), and he says that he isn’t, though he does refer to himself as a hillbilly. “I come to hear Boss Finley talk,” he says in a raspy, strained voice. Given his beaten demeanor and ominous tone, Miss Lucy asks him if he’s the heckler that has been following Boss Finley around to all of his political rallies. “I don’t heckle,” he says. “I just ask questions, one question or two or three questions, depending on how much time it take them to grab me and throw me out of the hall.”

Knowing the heckler won’t be able to get into the ballroom without a suit jacket—and wanting to get revenge on Boss Finley—Miss Lucy finds a jacket behind the bar and gives it to him, instructing him to sit inconspicuously at a table until it’s time to sneak in. He follows her instructions by hiding his face behind a newspaper and waiting. At this point, Fly comes in looking for Chance and tells Miss Lucy that he (Chance) has returned to St. Cloud with Alexandra Del Lago. Anxious to find the famous actress, Miss Lucy exits just before Chance makes his way into the lounge. Chance picks a drink off the bar, sips it, and critiques Stuff’s skills as a bartender, since he himself used to be the bartender at the Royal Palms.

When Aunt Nonnie comes into the lounge, Chance is happy to see her and suggests they drink a bucket of champagne. Despite his enthusiasm, though, Nonnie leads him to a private corner of the bar and tells him he must leave St. Cloud. In response, he asks why everybody treats him like “a low criminal,” and she tells him to ask *himself* that question, adding that he should also ask his “conscience.” “Oh, Chance,” she laments, “why have you changed like you’ve changed? Why do you live on nothing but wild dreams now [...]?” Hearing this, Chance agrees that life is a “wild dream,” popping a pill and washing it down with a swig from a flask in the middle of his sentence.

When Boss Finley snaps the box shut on Miss Lucy’s fingers, he tries to reassert his dominance. This is because he feels she has taken away some of his power by publicly suggesting that he is too old to proficiently make love. Once again, then, he demonstrates his crippling insecurity. By acting in anger, he reinforces the notion that such insecurities drive him toward “violent action.” His behavior also demonstrates how obsessive he is about controlling his public image. Boss Finley uses rage to escape feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness.



Williams uses the heckler to represent the feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness that Boss Finley can never fully shake. Although Boss projects an outward appearance of power and control, there’s always something threatening his authority (at least according to him). The heckler is then a manifestation of the insecurities that he tries so hard to escape or deny.



The fact that Miss Lucy—Boss Finley’s longtime mistress—wants to help the heckler sabotage his event suggests that the kind of hateful revenge Boss propagates only makes his life even harder. Having heard that she wrote something bad about him in the hotel bathroom, Boss snapped her fingers shut in a jewelry box and mocks her. In turn, she is now retaliating in her own way. As such, Williams suggests that escaping one’s own feelings of insecurity by expressing rage is an ineffective way of dealing with hardship, one that only invites more retaliation and anger.



During this conversation, Aunt Nonnie references the fact that Chance’s obsession with becoming a famous actor is nothing but a “wild dream.” Although she is one of the few people in St. Cloud who advocates for him, even she is unable to deny that he’s coasting on his fading good looks, which she knows won’t ultimately get him very far. Nonetheless, he decides to ignore her concern, instead using drugs and alcohol to deny the fact that a life of chasing fame has “changed” him for the worse.



Talking about what he has become, Chance and Nonnie discuss Chance's past. He reminds her that he directed and acted in a big one-act production that won the state drama contest when he was seventeen. "You went with us as the girls' chaperone to the national contest," he reminds Nonnie. After they reminisce a bit about that trip, Chance mentions that they didn't win, saying they only placed second. "Chance, you didn't place second," Nonnie says. "You got honorable mention. Fourth place." Chance says that he remembers, and adds that they would've won if he hadn't forgotten his lines. Nonnie tells him that his mistake only endeared him to her, mentioning that Heavenly also loved him because of that incident. "It was on the way home in the train that she and I," Chance begins, but Nonnie tries to cut him off, saying, "I know, I—I—"

Despite the fact that Aunt Nonnie doesn't want to hear him tell the story, Chance explains that he bribed one of the conductors on the train to give him and Heavenly a private car, where they had sex for the first time. "I cried in her arms that night, and didn't know that what I was crying for was—youth, that would go," he says. He also adds that in that moment he swore to himself that he'd never place "second" in a contest again. Quickly shifting gears, he shows Nonnie his contract with the Princess, but she's unimpressed, saying, "Chance, even now, if you came back here simply saying, 'I couldn't remember the lines, I lost the contest, I—failed,' but you've come back here again with—" Still, he pushes on, insisting that the Princess's "local-contest-Beauty" will get him and Heavenly famous.

Aunt Nonnie tells Chance that Heavenly won't be able to win a beauty contest because she's "not young" anymore. "She's faded," she says. Chance begins to argue to the contrary, divulging his plan with the Princess to her, but Nonnie tells him to keep his voice down, saying that if Boss Finley catches wind of such ideas, Chance will be in "great danger." Once more, she pleads with him to leave, then gets up and exits the lounge. Left sitting in the lounge, Chance takes out another pill and swallows it with a swig of vodka. As he does so, his old friends Bud and Scotty spot him and start whispering to their partners—Edna and Violet—about him. Hearing this, he calls over to them and says hello, trying to get them to join him in a song they all used to sing, but nobody sings with him.

Chance makes his tendency to delude himself overwhelmingly apparent by claiming that his acting troupe won "second place" in the national contest, when in reality they placed fourth. He wants to think of himself as someone who has always been close to greatness—in fact, he wants this so badly that he actively manipulates his own memory so that he can maintain this narrative about himself. After all, if he continues to believe that he's always been close to achieving something fantastic, his chances of actually becoming famous will seem more realistic. Unfortunately, though, he isn't quite as talented as he likes to believe, as evidenced by the fact that he forgot most of his lines at this national contest. Of course, this only endeared him to Nonnie and Heavenly, a testament to just how easy it used to be for him to charm people.



In this moment, the audience sees the extent to which Chance's obsession with Heavenly is intertwined with his obsession with becoming famous. This is made evident by the fact that his memory of making love to her for the first time also encompasses his promise to himself that he'd never place "second" in a contest ever again. Of course, he once again deludes himself, since he didn't even place second in the national contest, but this doesn't matter to him because he's too preoccupied with the idea of gaining success and Heavenly's love at the same time. As such, it becomes clear that his motivations regarding his relationship with Heavenly perhaps have more to do with his stubborn desire to succeed than with actual love; his desire to win her over is an obsession, not an actual romantic impulse.



When Aunt Nonnie says that Heavenly's youth has "faded," she goes along with the prevailing opinion in St. Cloud that the young woman's operation has ruined her beauty and youth. This doesn't stop Chance, though, since he is obsessed both with the idea of succeeding and with the idea of winning over Heavenly. As such, nothing anyone says will dissuade him from carrying out his plan to become famous in the Princess's rigged contest. However, it's rather obvious that he should probably heed Nonnie's advice to leave, considering the fact that no one in St. Cloud seems to advocate for him. Even his old friends refuse to treat him like they used to, a sure sign that no one will help him stand up to Boss Finley when it comes down to it.



When Chance goes over to join his old friends, Violet and Edna leave, and Bud calls for the check. The two men claim that their partners must not have recognized Chance, but Chance says he doesn't mind getting "snubbed" because he has "snubbed" people himself many times. He then sees Miss Lucy walking through the lounge. She comes over and tussles his hair, which he tells her to never do to a man with thinning hair. "Is your hair thinning, baby?" she asks. "Maybe that's the difference I noticed in your appearance." She goes on to add that she used to not be able to "stand" how attractive Chance was, but now she can "almost stand it." She also mentions that she heard he was working as a beach-boy in Palm Beach, and Stuff—who's passing by—adds that he also heard Chance was there "rubbing oil into big fat millionaires."

Chance is embarrassed by the information Miss Lucy and Stuff have broadcast about his life, and he denies their claims, saying somebody must have been telling lies about him. Conversation then drifts to the Youth for Tom Finley rally that is soon to happen in the hotel ballroom. "He's going to state his position on that emasculation business," Bud says, referring to Boss Finley. Chance, for his part, doesn't understand Bud's reference, so Scotty explains that a group of white men recently castrated a random black man they found on the street in order to "show they mean business about white women's protection." Apparently, Boss is going to address this in his speech tonight, and Bud says that Heavenly will be standing by his side as he does so.

"I doubt that story," Chance says, and Stuff asks him if he really doubts that a black man was castrated. "Oh, no, that I don't doubt," Chance says. "You know what that is, don't you? Sex-envy is what that is, and the revenge for sex-envy which is a widespread disease that I have run into personally." What he doubts, Chance clarifies, is that Heavenly will stand next to her father as he "explains and excuses on TV this random emasculation" of a young black man. After talking about his love for Heavenly and how he plans to take her out of St. Cloud, Chance pops another pill, and his old friends ask him what it was. "I washed down a goof-ball," he says. "When you're not having fun, it makes you have it."

Although the people of St. Cloud are weary of Chance, this doesn't seem to have stopped them from talking about him in his absence. In fact, he has clearly become a hot topic of conversation, though one gets the sense that his fellow townspeople enjoy speculating about his demise. This is made clear when Miss Lucy admits that she no longer finds him as attractive as she used to, almost taking delight in the fact that his hair is thinning. This attitude is most likely derived from the fact that Chance has always been someone who easily cruised through life, coasting on his good looks and never having to work as hard as anyone else in order to get by. Now that his looks have started to fade, though, he's left with very little—something that tickles people who may have always felt that he unfairly benefited from something as superficial as exterior beauty.



At this point, the play begins to engage ideas about racism in a more prominent way, as Williams makes it clear that St. Cloud is currently undergoing a period of bigoted hysteria. This is made evident by the fact that a group of white men have horrifically injured a black man who didn't even commit a crime. These men wanted to send a message about integration, one that warned black men from engaging in sexual activity with white women. As such, Boss Finley's obsession with "pure white blood" manifests itself in the community at large, and the audience begins to understand that his political agenda does little more than promote hate and violence.



Throughout Sweet Bird of Youth, Chance is not a particularly sympathetic protagonist. After all, he seemingly only ever thinks about himself. In this moment, though, he expresses a genuine hope that Heavenly won't actually stand next to Boss Finley and endorse hateful, racist ideals. Chance clearly disagrees with Boss's violent bigotry, thereby humanizing himself somewhat. Indeed, he understands how terrible this act of "random emasculation" is, perhaps because he himself has experienced the "sex-envy" that he believes drives such violence. However, it's worth noting that, although he believes "sex-envy" drove the castration, this opinion overlooks a whole slew of racial considerations that most likely were also factors, and in associating himself with the victim Chance even gives himself a backhanded compliment—that other people hate him because they are jealous. Even in his attempt to empathize, then, Chance isn't quite able to step outside of his own limited perspective.



Changing the subject, Miss Lucy asks Chance to tell her whom he's traveling with. "Miss Lucy I'm traveling with the vice-president and major stockholder of the film studio which just signed me," he brags. As Chance goes on boasting, Bud asks the name of the film he's going to be featured in, and Chance quickly invents a fake title: *Youth*. Before long, though, Bud and Scotty lose interest and try to leave, and Chance starts underhandedly insulting Scotty's profession as a banker, which has made him—according to Chance—fat and slow. "I don't get by on my looks," Scotty says, "but I drive my own car. It isn't a **Caddy**, but it's my own car. And if my own mother died, I'd bury her myself." With this, he and Bud leave.

Once again, Miss Lucy tries to persuade Chance to leave, but their conversation is interrupted when the Princess enters the lounge calling out for Chance, who simply rushes away. Though he hasn't left the lounge, she can't find him, perhaps because her eyes have a "dazed, drugged brightness." In fact, even her dress isn't fully zipped, and she seems confused and haggard. As she teeters around looking for Chance, Miss Lucy offers to help her, and Chance finally comes running over, all the while saying that she should've stayed in the room. As he tries to get her to return to the room, she says, "Chance, when I saw you driving under the window with your head held high, with that terrible stiff-necked pride of the defeated which I know so well; I knew that your comeback had been a failure like mine."

The Princess keeps telling Chance about what she felt when she saw him driving in her **Cadillac**, revealing that she experienced a pang of emotion and affection for him. "I felt something in my heart for you," she says. "That's a miracle, Chance. That's the wonderful thing that happened to me. I felt something for someone besides myself. That means my heart's still alive, at least some part of it is, not all of my heart is dead yet." As the Princess confesses her newfound affections, Dan Hatcher's voice sounds in the lounge. Moments later, he steps into view with Tom Junior and Scotty: they are outside the lounge, which opens onto a small raised balcony. From down there, they yell at Chance to come down to them. As Chance stalls, Boss Finley's arrival is marked by the sirens of police cars escorting him to the hotel.

Chance takes great pleasure in telling his old friends about his impending success. It's worth noting that his make-believe movie—the one that will supposedly make him and Heavenly famous—is called Youth; this isn't surprising, considering that what he wants most is to turn back time so that he can regain his perfect looks. Even though his hair is thinning and his face is "ravaged" now, he still believes he can trick his former friends into thinking that he's young enough to star in a film about youth itself. Of course, they know exactly how old he is, but this doesn't stop him from trying to loop them into his fantasy. What's more, when his friends lose interest, Chance turns on them and mocks their accomplishments, once again acting as if his good looks should automatically entitle him to a better life than his peers. Even though it's clear that someone like Scotty has ended up with a better life, Chance is unwilling to admit his shortcomings, instead doing anything he can to continue denying the fact that he is a failure.



Knowing what it feels like to fail, the Princess recognizes what Chance is unwilling to admit: that he hasn't succeeded in impressing anyone but himself. Despite the fact that he has been driving around St. Cloud in an expensive Cadillac, nobody believes that he has actually become famous or wealthy. In fact, Scotty even manages to guess that the car doesn't belong to Chance at all. Nonetheless, Chance continues on with a "stiff-necked pride," one that keeps him from accepting that none of his plans to become famous will work and that he is merely an unsuccessful man who can no longer benefit from youthful beauty.



The Princess is quite similar to Chance. The primary difference between the two of them is that she has actually enjoyed fame and success, but now she finds herself wallowing in the same kind of self-pity as Chance, since her career has ended and left her with nothing but faded beauty. Unlike Chance, though, she's willing to admit this. Although she wants to escape the embarrassment she suffered at her comeback premiere, she no longer wants to fully deny reality. In turn, she suddenly finds herself capable of thinking about someone other than herself. For her entire life, she has been focused on herself—her career, her youth, her beauty. Now, though, she discovers that she's capable of empathy. Of course, it's worth noting that this form of empathy is in its own way a bit self-centered, since the main reason she begins to care so much for Chance is because he reminds her of herself. Nonetheless, this is perhaps the first time she has ever paused to truly think about another person.



Boss Finley's voice can be heard as he brags about Heavenly to reporters, but Heavenly breaks away from him and runs into the lounge, where she suddenly finds herself facing Chance. "For a long instant," Williams notes in his stage directions, "Chance and Heavenly stand there: he on the steps leading to the Palm Garden and gallery; she in the cocktail lounge. They simply look at each other...the Heckler between them." Suddenly, Boss Finley rushes in and grabs Heavenly and pulls her away. As Chance stands dumbstruck in the wake of this encounter, Hatcher and Tom Junior continue yelling at him to come down to them, suggesting that they meet in the bathroom, though Chance avoids this by saying that he refuses to have conversations in bathrooms.

"I used to leave places when I was told to," Chance tells Hatcher and Tom Junior. "Not now. That time's over. Now I leave when I'm ready. Hear that, Tom Junior? Give your father that message. This is my town." He also adds that Boss Finley was merely "called down from the hills to preach hate," whereas he (Chance) was "born here to make love." As he speaks, Tom Junior becomes enraged, and the other men have to hold him back from murdering Chance on the spot. Seeing this, Chance taunts him, though he also adds that he still has "credit" with him because he's Heavenly's brother. In response, Tom yells, "Don't say the name of my sister!" He then tells Chance once again to come down, but the Princess tries to keep him from doing so.

Still separated, Chance asks Tom Junior to tell him what has happened to Heavenly since he was last in town. "I know I've done many wrong things in my life, many more than I can name or number, but I swear I never hurt Heavenly in my life," he says. In response, Tom asks if Chance is insinuating that somebody else gave his sister a disease. "You remember that time when you came home broke?" he asks. "My sister had to pick up your tabs in restaurants and bars, and had to cover bad checks you wrote on banks where you had no accounts. Until you met this rich bitch, Minnie, the Texas one with the yacht, and started spending week ends on her yacht, coming back Mondays with money from Minnie to go on with my sister. I mean, you'd sleep with Minnie, that slept with any goddam gigolo bastard."

This is a significant moment in Sweet Bird of Youth, as it is the only encounter Chance and Heavenly have with one another. Despite the fact that Chance talks about Heavenly throughout the entire play, Williams only provides the audience with this fleeting moment, in which the two characters don't even speak or touch. Rather than embracing, they simply stare at each other, suggesting that their love is perhaps not as enduring or strong as Chance often makes it sound. Of course, it's impossible to say with total confidence what the true nature of their relationship is, since Williams doesn't provide any insight into their romantic dynamic other than the things that Chance says. Because of this, the emphasis of the play centers on Chance's obsession rather than on the actual specifics of their love story.



Again, Chance takes issue with Boss Finley's message of hate, which the old man advances by using his political platform to endorse racist ideas about purity and corruption. However, when he contrasts himself to Boss Finley, Chance makes the grandiose claim that he was "born here to make love." Although this is true in the sense that Chance has worked as a gigolo the notion that he brings genuine emotional love to the world is debatable, considering how self-centered and obsessed with becoming famous he is.



Williams gives the audience another look into Chance and Heavenly's relationship. This insight only confirms what has already been established: Chance has lived the fast life of a man who swings through town once and a while to see his supposed lover. Although the fact that he kept returning to Heavenly might suggest some kind of genuine love, his multiple absences don't quite align with the kind of romantic relationship normally considered genuine or enduring. Williams suggests that Chance is most interested in the idea of his relationship with Heavenly, meaning that he has never been willing to actually put in the time to cultivate a true romantic connection.



Continuing his rant about Chance's irresponsible behavior, Tom Junior outlines how Chance contracted a disease from the rich woman with the yacht and then passed it to Heavenly. "My little sister [...] had hardly even heard of a thing like that," Tom Junior says, "and didn't know what it was till it had gone on too long." Interjecting, Chance says that he left town before finding out he had the disease, but this only enrages Tom even more. "You found out!" he yells. "Did you tell my little sister?" Chance then claims he assumed she'd write to him if something was wrong, but Tom points out that Chance never gives valid addresses when he leaves. "My little sister, Heavenly, didn't know about the diseases and operations of whores, till she had to be cleaned and cured—I mean spayed like a dawg by Dr. George Scudder's knife," he adds.

Before leaving, Tom Junior warns Chance that he too will "get the knife" if he doesn't leave St. Cloud tonight. Having heard all this, the Princess tries to convince Chance that they should leave. As she does so, **The Lament** drifts through the air, and she stops to consider it. "All day I've kept hearing a sort of lament that drifts through the air of this place," she says. "It says, 'Lost, lost, never to be found again.' Palm gardens by the sea and olive groves on Mediterranean islands all have that lament drifting through them. 'Lost, lost'...The isle of Cyprus, Monte Carlo, San Remo, Torremolenas, Tangiers. They're all places of exile from whatever we loved." Uninfluenced by this, Chance tells her to let go of him, but she points out that she's the only person holding him "back from destruction in this place."

Calling for a wheelchair, Chance has the Princess rolled away by Stuff and a bellboy, making him the only person in the room other than the heckler. For a moment, he breathes heavily and loosens his tie, but then a large group enters and streams through the lounge carrying Youth for Tom Finley banners. Chance watches as the crowd enters the ballroom followed by Boss Finley, Tom Junior, and Heavenly. Just then, Miss Lucy rushes into the lounge and tells the heckler to wait to strike until the lights are dimmed. "I don't want to hurt his daughter," the heckler says when she proposes that he ask a different question, one that won't affect Heavenly. "But [Boss Finley's] going to hold her up as the fair white virgin exposed to black lust in the South, and that's his build-up, his lead into his Voice of God speech."

For the first time in the play, the nature of Heavenly's operation becomes clearer. After sleeping with Chance—who was also at that time sleeping with another woman—she contracted a sexually transmitted disease. Because of this, she had to get an operation that left her sterile. What's most upsetting about this story to Tom Junior (and in general) is that Chance knew he had an STD, but did nothing to inform Heavenly, instead letting her contract the disease herself. Once again, Chance proves his inability to consider others, focusing solely on his own desires. Indeed, what he's most interested in is finding "pleasure in love," and this has nothing to do with building an actual romantic and caring relationship with Heavenly. Living with this kind of mentality, Chance doesn't think twice about wronging Heavenly without even staying to help her through the hardship he has caused.



The Princess's acknowledgement of The Lament is worth considering, since she associates the place itself—the Royal Palms Hotel—with the song's lonely strains of "exile." In this moment, she seems to realize that she can't simply run away from her troubles. Although she has been trying to escape the embarrassment of her comeback by moving constantly, she realizes that she'll never be able to fully leave behind her worries. After all, her demons are chiefly emotional, meaning that they will follow her wherever she goes, even if she visits "the isle of Cyprus" or "Monte Carlo" or any other paradise.



In this scene, the heckler correctly assesses the fact that Boss Finley has conflated the idea of Heavenly's purity with a racist notion regarding integration. Indeed, Boss Finley wants to use Heavenly—dressed in the "stainless white of a virgin"—to show his followers what he believes they stand to lose if they allow blacks and whites to fully integrate. Though the heckler is an antagonistic figure for publicly shaming Heavenly for her sexuality, he also seems to be one of the few characters to see through Finley's posturing to the hateful bigotry beneath.



The heckler says he doesn't believe Boss Finley has heard God's voice. In fact, he doesn't think *anybody* has, since the "silence of God" is a "long and awful thing that the whole world is lost because of." As he finishes saying this, Boss Finley's voice issues from the ballroom. Stuff turns on the TV so they can watch the event from the lounge, and Boss Finley explains that he was called by God to carry out a mission. "And what is this mission?" he asks. "I have told you before but I will tell you again. To shield from pollution a blood that I think is not only sacred to me, but sacred to Him." With this, the heckler rises and enters the ballroom.

Boss Finley spews racist vitriol as Miss Lucy turns down the volume on the TV in the lounge. "I can't and will not accept, tolerate, condone this threat of blood pollution," he declares. Suddenly, the heckler's voice sounds over the TV: "How about your daughter's operation?" he shouts. While he talks about Heavenly, somebody hits him hard, and the ballroom breaks into chaos. The doors burst open and the heckler is thrown down a set of stairs while Boss Finley forges on with his speech. Meanwhile, Chance sits completely still in the lounge, watching the heckler receive a severe beating. Just before the curtain falls, Heavenly comes out of the ballroom and starts sobbing before collapsing to the ground.

ACT THREE

Later that night, the Princess makes a call to the front desk from her hotel room and urgently requests that somebody get her a driver to take her out of this "infernal" place. "Scattered sounds of disturbance" can be heard outside the window, and something is burning in the hotel garden. While the Princess is on the phone, Scotty, Tom Junior, and Hatcher knock on her door and tell her to let them in. When she does, Tom Junior tells her she must leave because of her association with Chance. The three men then force their way inside and search for Chance. When they finish, they tell the Princess that they can arrange to have her driven out of St. Cloud, offering to have a police officer escort her through the mayhem. Just as they leave, Chance sneaks into the room.

If the "silence of God" is a "long and awful thing that the whole world is lost because of," it's unlikely that God would break that silence to talk to Boss Finley, of all people. After all, Boss Finley is a man primarily concerned with advancing a racist political agenda, one that he hopes to use to win his campaign. Nonetheless, he claims that God ordered him to protect white "blood" from "pollution," once again drawing upon his obsession with purity and corruption.



In this final moment of Act Two, Sweet Bird of Nothing descends into chaos. Not only does the heckler receive a serious beating, but the entire ballroom breaks into a fight and Heavenly passes out, unable to handle it all. By showcasing this hectic atmosphere, Williams suggests that the kind of hate propagated by people like Boss Finley only leads to mayhem and discord. Although Boss is a politician—and thus should act for the greater good of his community—he only sows turmoil within St. Cloud. Words like "pure" make his ideas sound almost wholesome, but what he actually forces onto the townspeople is anger, hate, and violence.



When the audience last saw the Princess, she had just heard The Lament. Caught off-guard by its plaintive sound, she realized that beach towns like St. Cloud only offer temporary exile, not true escape. Now, it seems, she intends to act upon that realization by getting ready to leave and asking Hatcher, Tom Junior, and Scotty to help her leave this place, which she now sees as nothing less than hellish ("infernal"). Rather than running away from her past by hiding out and numbing herself with sex and drugs, she has decided to move on. After all, living like a hermit in a fancy hotel won't enable her to forget the fact that she no longer has her youthful beauty, and she seems to—on some level—understand this.



Chance looks like “he has gone a good deal further across the border of reason.” The Princess tells him she’s waiting for a driver, but he insists he’ll drive. “You couldn’t drive through the Palm Garden. Will you listen to me? I listened to you this morning, with understanding and pity,” she says, going on to tell a story of her own. “I remembered young men who were what you are or what you’re hoping to be. I saw [...] [their] eyes, voices, smiles, bodies clearly. But their names wouldn’t come back to me.” This, she says, bothered her, so she started thinking about one man in particular, a man who she once fired because he held her too tightly during a dance scene. Apparently, she saw this man recently in Monte Carlo. “He was with a woman of seventy, and his eyes looked older than hers,” she says.

Continuing her story about the young actor she once fired, the Princess says she found out that the man made a life of hanging out in casinos and bars “like a blind, dying lap dog.” Not long after she saw him, she says, “he drove his Alfa-Romeo or Ferrari off the Grand Corniche. [...] I wonder what they found in [his cracked skull],” she says. “Old, despaired-of ambitions, little treacheries, possibly even little attempts at blackmail that didn’t quite come off, and whatever traces are left of really great charm and sweetness.” Turning to Chance, she tells him that he is the same as this man. “Will you please try to face it so we can go on together?” she asks.

Chance shakes off the Princess, picks up the phone, and dials the operator. As the Princess tries to convince him to leave with her, he asks the operator to connect him to a certain Hollywood reporter with whom the Princess has a close personal relationship. As he tries to connect with this reporter—getting shunted from one number to the next in an effort to track her down—the Princess delivers a self-aware monologue to the audience, saying, “I seem to be standing in light with everything else dimmed out.” She later muses about her faded fame and youth, saying: “Monsters don’t die early; they hang on long. Awfully long. Their vanity’s infinite, almost as infinite as their disgust with themselves...”

Here the Princess tells Chance a cautionary tale about people who never accept their limitations and failures. Having seen that Chance is “a good deal further across the border of reason,” she perhaps feels like she must help him come to terms with the fact that his pursuit to become a successful actor—and to win over Heavenly—is actually working against him. Before long, he will have the sad eyes of a man much older than his actual age, but he won’t have accomplished anything. In this way, the Princess suggests that people can waste lifetimes doing what Chance has been doing during the play: indulging unrealistic fantasies.



When the Princess says, “Will you please try to face it so we can go on together?” she emphasizes just how important it is for Chance to finally accept his own failures. Indeed, he must “face” his shortcomings in order to move on with his life. Of course, this is much easier said than done, especially since Chance is quite adept at deluding himself into believing he has what it takes to become famous.



Similar to how she addressed the audience in the beginning of Act One, the Princess now turns to her spectators and speaks to them directly. This time, though, she’s even more cognizant of her situation, finding herself capable of commenting on the spotlight shining down on her. When she first addressed the audience, she did so simply because she loved attention: it was only natural for her to tell her story to a group of curious listeners. Now, though, she faces the audience as a way of questioning the value of fame. This is why she comments on the lighting, trying to examine how her experience as a performer obsessed with public presentation has influenced her life as a whole.



Finally, Chance gets the reporter on the phone and gives the receiver to the Princess. As he does this, he whispers, “Tell her that you’ve discovered a pair of new stars. Two of them.” Holding her arm tightly, he says, “And lay it on thick. Tell her to break it tomorrow in her column.” Despite this, the Princess starts talking to the reporter about her comeback film. Much to her surprise, she discovers that the movie has actually been received quite well, and that people are saying her “talent” has “grown,” that it has developed “more depth” and “power.” Chance, for his part, listens to her end of the conversation and fervently tries to force her to talk about him. “Talk about me and HEAVENLY!” he hisses. When this doesn’t work, he says, “Hey. Talk about me!”

The reporter on the phone tells the Princess that everybody wants her to star in another film. Dazed and content, she tells the reporter she’ll call her back, at which point she drops the phone and tells Chance that her movie has broken box-office records. Ignoring Chance’s indignation that she didn’t mention him, she starts thinking aloud about how she’ll need to spend a week in a “clinic” and then another week at a ranch before reappearing as an actress. “Get her back on the phone,” Chance orders. “Talk about me and talk about Heavenly to her.” Finally hearing him again, the Princess replies: “Talk about a beach-boy I picked up for pleasure, distraction from panic? Now? When the nightmare is over? Involve my name, which is Alexandra Del Lago, with the record of a—You’ve just been using me. Using me.”

“Chance,” the Princess continues, “you’ve gone past something you couldn’t afford to go past; your time, your youth, you’ve passed it. It’s all you had, and you’ve had it.” In response, he urges her to look in the mirror and admit what she sees. “I see—Alexandra Del Lago, artist and star!” she says. Then she makes *him* look in the mirror, and before he can say what he sees, she says the mirror holds the very same face as the failed actor she knew who drove his car off a cliff. “Face it—pitiful monster,” she says, touching his head. “Of course, I know I’m one too. But one with a difference. Do you know what that difference is? [...] Out of the passion and torment of my existence I have created a thing that I can unveil, a sculpture, almost heroic, that I can unveil, which is true.”

Despite the Princess’s self-awareness—her willingness to look critically at her life as an actress whose livelihood depended on vanity—she can’t resist talking to the reporter about her comeback film. This is because she still needs validation from others. Although her “vanity” is “infinite,” so is her “disgust with [herself]” (to borrow her own words). As such, she finds it impossible to refrain from hearing what the reporter has to say. Meanwhile, Chance acts like a petulant child, insisting that the Princess talk about him and Heavenly. It’s worth noting that when the Princess doesn’t listen to him, he shortens his message, demanding: “Talk about me!” This reveals that he views Heavenly as secondary to him—yet another indication that his love for her is not incredibly genuine.



Chance has a one-track mind throughout the entirety of Sweet Bird of Youth: he wants to become famous, and he wants to succeed in his relationship with Heavenly. The Princess, on the other hand, gradually drifts away from such superficial concerns. However, when she receives positive feedback about her comeback film, she completely forgets all about her newfound resolve to live less superficially. As such, Williams suggests that fame and the idea of widespread popularity can be hard to resist, even if a person recognizes the downsides of living a life dedicated to something fleeting and unfulfilling.



Here the Princess offers a key distinction between Chance and herself. Although they want the same things and are obsessed with similar ideas regarding fame, popularity, and success, Chance has almost nothing other than his youthful good looks, which have begun to fade. The Princess, on the other hand, has actual talent. Indeed, she is a respectable actress, one good enough to push beyond the limits of her own faded beauty. In other words, she has talent and has worked hard to develop that talent, while Chance has only ever gotten by on his appearance.



The Princess says that Chance, unlike her, isn't a "monster" with a "difference," but just a sorry man who's in danger of getting castrated by his lover's brother. Just then, the sound of loud wind rushes through the room, and the Princess and Chance back away from each other. Suddenly, the Princess finds herself exhausted. "Age does the same thing to a woman..." she says, as "something uncertain appears in her face and voice betraying the fact which she probably suddenly knows, that her future course is not a progression of triumphs." Then a sense of resolution creeps into her "fearful, lonely, and tender" eyes: "I am going, now, on my way," she says.

Before leaving, the Princess asks Chance if he's coming or staying. "Staying," he says, loosening his tie. She tugs on his arm, saying that because their names are connected, anything that happens to him will implicate her, so they must stick together. "Whatever happens to me's already happened," he says, prompting her to ask what he's trying to prove. "Something's got to mean something, don't it, Princess? I mean like your life means nothing, except that you never could make it, always almost, never quite? Well, something's still got to mean something."

Slowly, **The Lament** fades in and plays until the end of the play. The Princess tells Chance once more that they must "go on," but he says he can't because he has "gone past" his youth. When she tries to tell him he's still young, he says: "Princess, the age of some people can only be calculated by the level of—level of—rot in them. And by that measure I'm ancient." At this moment, the sound of a ticking clock joins *The Lament*. "Time," Chance says, "who could beat it, who could defeat it ever? Maybe some saints and heroes, but not Chance Wayne." From outside the room, Tom Junior calls the Princess and tells her that her driver has arrived. She rises, opens the door, and confronts Tom.

When the wind whips through the room, the scene's mood changes. Suddenly, the Princess is swept up in a certain kind of strange existential epiphany, as she states that "age" castrates women. When a man gets castrated, he is no longer able to reproduce. Similarly, when a woman ages, she eventually loses the ability to procreate. Although this idea of castration is somewhat tangential to the matters at hand, Williams uses the concept to consider how Chance and the Princess fear that they will be stripped of their ability to do what they think they're destined to do. By talking to Chance about castration, the Princess is forced to think again about the fact that she has lost her youthful beauty. Even though her comeback film has apparently been successful, this doesn't change the fact that she is growing older. Perhaps her first comeback was a success, but there's no telling how long she'll be able to remain in the public eye. In turn, her eyes reflect a "fearful, lonely, and tender" quality as she slowly realizes that her problems haven't all disappeared simply because her comeback went well. However, one thing has changed: she is ready to accept this reality, ready to go "on [her] way."



Although his prospects are quite grim, Chance refuses to leave, as leaving St. Cloud would mean giving up on his efforts to become famous and win over Heavenly. Of course, neither of these prospects seems likely, but Chance is a stubborn man capable of deluding himself into thinking that he has a shot at getting what he thinks he deserves. In this scene, though, a new hint of desperation has edged into his voice, as made clear by what he says about finding meaning in life. "Something's got to mean something, don't it, Princess?" he asks, perhaps feeling like he has wasted too much time and effort to walk away from his pursuits now. Regardless of his multiple failures, then, he decides to stay and face whatever is coming his way.



This is the first time in the play that Chance admits that he has "gone past" his youth. Previously, he only ever alluded to his fading beauty by—for example—referencing his thinning hair. Now, though, he says that his body is full of "rot," making him "ancient." Of course, this is in many ways true, since he has an illness that is no doubt affecting his physical health. By calling this disease "rot," though, he aligns himself with Boss Finley's ideas about the corruption of purity—whereas his body used to be young and healthy, now he sees it as "rot[ten]" and old, as if his very life has corrupted his previously clean form.



“Come on, Chance,” the Princess says, urging him to come with her. Looking up, Chance only shakes his head—after a moment, the Princess finally leaves. Tom Junior then whistles for Scotty, Bud, and another man, who immediately appear and advance upon Chance. As they approach, Chance stands and says: “I don’t ask for your pity, but just for your understanding—not even that—no. Just for your recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all.”

Although Chance’s final words in the play sound as if they carry profound wisdom about the ways all humans are destined to succumb to the unforgiving effects of time, it’s worth noting that this does nothing to address the actual reason why Boss Finley and Tom Junior want to harm him. After all, Boss Finley doesn’t care about how hard it is for Chance to grow old—what he cares about is the fact that Chance treated Heavenly poorly, giving her an STD without even mentioning it and then running off to continue his life of irresponsibility. Even in this last moment, then, Chance is unable to step outside of his own experience to acknowledge that he has harmed others. Instead, he continues to obsess over the fact that his youth is gone, an altogether natural and unavoidable fact of life, but one he can seemingly never come to terms with.





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