

## **CASE STUDY: *THE HANGING GARDEN* (THOM FITZGERALD, 1997)**

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### **Contrasting styles blended**

A family house and garden in Nova Scotia are the setting for the action, as well as the sources of memory for the main characters. The film is predominantly naturalistic in style but, in counterpoint, we see previous incarnations of William, as a young boy and in his mid-teens, tangibly haunting William, his father and other members of the family, images which represent William's troubled childhood from which he has escaped to Toronto to build a new, confident self. There are other non-naturalistic elements. Humour is added in the critical facial expressions adopted by the ceramic figures of the Virgin Mary. Certain devices are used to indicate and comment on changes of time and scene, such as filling the screen with vivid colour or the use of time-lapse flower photography.

A montage of scenes reveals William's difficult relationship with his father during childhood. Next we cut to William, aged fifteen, carefully watering a clump of Sweet Williams, seen in point of view shot to underline William's fondness for the flowers, while he recites more plant names and seasons to himself. There is a major visual change in William, other than that of gaining in years; William, initially seen as a thin, wiry boy, is now very obese. The viewer is left to ponder what this may mean.

### **Family dramas**

The remainder of the film is divided into three named sections. In the first, 'The Lady with the Locket', we see William's sister Rosemary's wedding ceremony in the garden. As we see William step out of his car, the director reveals his body and face to us only gradually to make us aware that the grown-up William is lean and handsome. Close-ups of his wary eyes as he looks round the house display his feelings about coming back home. His nervous asthma surfaces, and he reaches for his inhaler. Objects underline the change from his teenage self: the formal suit he puts on that is far too big for him, and the photo of his obese younger self is reflected in grandma's display cabinet as he greets her. Most strikingly, he meets up with the teenage William in the garden as he is entering the front of the house, and eyes him uncomfortably. He picks up a sprig of Sweet William that is lying on the path.

William is the object of the gaze of Rosemary, his mother, his father and the groom, Fletcher. This play of looks establishes the reactions of the characters. Rosemary gives a contented smile, while Fletcher and his mother look surprised. His father looks disconcerted. Consequent interactions take place among Scottish jigs and fiddle music, underlining the Nova Scotian locale and William's outsider status. We learn that he left for Toronto ten years previously, and has never been back since. William is introduced to a younger sibling he has never met before.

'What's his name?' asks William.

'Violet', his mother replies. William and his sister are relaxed enough with each other for William to make a joke about her husband 'coming on' to him. Later, William has to drag his drunken father to bed in a strange reversal of the earlier scene of father-son interaction. There is an intriguing point of view shot as William gazes at his father's naked body under the cold shower.

Throughout the film, William's look is that of the outsider looking in on the family hang-ups and dramas, while at the same time the incarnations of his younger selves are central to these dramas. William explains to his mother how he became fat 'because no-one could make me be skinny, it was the one thing you couldn't make me be', and goes on to say that because he was fat that meant 'no

fights, no sport .....and no girlfriends.’ In the light of queer theory outlined later in this chapter, to what extent do these interactions queerify an otherwise conventional family setup?

In reply to mother’s question about whether he has a ‘friend’ in Toronto William talks of being in a happy relationship. To what extent does William become a figure of emotional normality in this film compared with those in his family milieu?

### **Finding yourself**

It is at this point that a perennial theme of lesbian and gay films comes to the fore, that of being yourself, finding out your true nature and needs and acting on them. When William begins talking about having found himself and becoming happy the bitterness of his mother surfaces, the reactions of a person who feels herself a victim. As William goes upstairs, his boy self waves to him, and is left sitting at the table with his mother. Later, halfway through clearing up the rubbish from the wedding reception, the mother flings the contents of a rubbish bag across the garden, walks away and is never seen again in the film.

A time-lapse shot of a flower opening begins the next section, ‘Lad’s Love’. In the first scene, William and Fletcher as teenage boys are sitting in the sun on a jetty. Fletcher takes off his T-shirt to reveal an athletic torso, and lies back. The obese young William lies back with his head on Fletcher’s stomach. There is a distanced view of this scene with sunlight sparkling on the water surrounding the boys. The shot is held in a manner that traditionally connotes romance. Later, there is a long held shot as they eye each other up and slowly undress, and it is Fletcher who initiates a mutual sexual exploration, after taunting the shy, self-conscious William for not taking off his briefs.

### **A queer family?**

With the help of his aunt, the teenage William’s mother arranges for him to lose his virginity to an older local woman in need of extra money. Here, a heterosexual act imposed on a reluctant minor takes on a queerness all of its own. William’s reaction next day suggests mild trauma, not least after Fletcher reveals his shallowness by refusing to meet and talk to William. In the circumstances, William’s emotional need to communicate becomes the norm.

The family situation becomes steadily more fantastic and deviant. This third section of the film is entitled ‘Mums’, perhaps ironically. The adult William goes out, sees his young self hanging from the tree, and caresses the pale, dead face. For the first time, William directly confronts his father over the handling of grandmother. Meanwhile, father seems unconcerned about his missing wife.

A subsequent private conversation in the garden between William and Rosie reveals a major twist in the plot; Violet is, in fact, William’s daughter, the product of his unhappy heterosexual initiation at the age of fifteen. His mother had fought for custody of her, and Rosie suggests that she wants William to take responsibility. William is initially resistant to the idea.

The adult Fletcher, alone with William, makes advances to him, starting to kiss and fondle him. This takes place on the very same jetty where they lay together as boys. In a variation of expected behaviour patterns, it is William again who shows great reluctance, not least because, as he points out, Fletcher is married to his sister. How ‘queer’ is the portrayal of the character Fletcher in his transgression of sexual boundaries?

### **A hanging symbol**

Back in the garden, William sees his hanging former self again. This time, he is more forthright; 'I'm getting to remember why you're so fucked up', he says to the body. He takes decisive action in smashing the statue of the Virgin Mary, thereby fighting back against the belief system of his childhood, in contrast to the way his teenage self merely shrank under the gaze of such statues.

Later, Rosie drags her brother out to watch father desperately hugging the hanging body of his obese teenage son, tears streaming down his face. She desperately makes clear to him that she has to watch this 'every fucking day'. The whole family seems haunted by this image. Even Violet expressed surprise at William not being fat when she first met him.

### **Psychic resolution**

William then takes his most decisive action. As Fletcher looks on, he chops violently with a spade at the rope holding up his dysfunctional teenage self. The body drops to the ground to William's words; 'You been hanging around here too long, buddy'. There is a quick cut to William reclining in the garden, looking at peace with himself, contemplating a Sweet William flower, the other, more positive symbol in this film. This time the wistful Gaelic voice on the soundtrack suggests a different journey into the self.

### **Plot resolution**

Father, totally disconcerted, asks; 'Where is he?' and when William replies; 'I buried him'. As father attempts to scrape the earth away from the burial mound, William stops him, restrains him and sits for a while with his arms around his father. 'Why did you do this? I loved you so much' moans father. What is it exactly that William has done? Is father stuck in some sort of dysfunctional past, resenting the changes in his son? Father is nowhere to be seen as William and Violet drive off. The final shot of the film takes us through the leafiness of the beloved garden to a view of him sitting on a boulder with William as a little boy playing around him. Is this a symbolic view of a man stuck in his own emotional past?