Summary

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* the cat is Maggie Pollitt, married to Brick, the favorite son of a wealthy plantation owner, Big Daddy, and the hot tin roof is the desperate measure she takes to regain her husband’s sexual interest and to lay claim to her husband’s family fortune. Opposing her are Gooper Pollitt, Brick’s brother, and Gooper’s family, consisting of his pregnant wife and their five children (Williams’s famous “no-neck monsters”). Finally there is Big Mama, whose current status with her husband is much like Maggie’s with Brick.

The estrangement between the silently suffering Brick and his loquacious father is the result of Brick’s dropping out of professional football and sportscasting and his turning to alcohol. Pained by the suicide of his best friend, Skipper, Brick says he must drink until he hears a “click” in his head, a guarantor of relief from his pain. Big Daddy’s inability to understand Brick is fueled by rumors that Brick and Skipper’s closeness was homosexual in nature. The strain between Maggie and Brick is caused by Maggie’s having gone to Skipper to confront him with his possible homosexuality. Shortly thereafter, Skipper committed suicide. Brick’s loss of Skipper is intensified by Maggie’s having made something dirty of what he said was a pure love.

Contrasting strongly with Brick, Gooper is successful both as a lawyer and as a prolific breeder of children. Gooper’s family, particularly his wife, resents Big Daddy’s favoritism regarding Brick and take advantage of every opportunity to change the situation. Thus the battle lines are drawn on what was to be a festive occasion, a celebration of Big Daddy’s sixty-fifth birthday. Maggie, playing on Big Daddy’s favoritism, lies about being pregnant and then attempts to seduce Brick into making her pregnant. In a climactic scene between Big Daddy and Brick, the latter drops a bombshell: the true prognosis of his father’s cancerous condition.

The play exists in several versions, the original having been altered by Elia Kazan for the premiere in New York in 1955. The original version was partly restored in 1974 and completely performed in 1990. In the three major productions, Barbara Bel Geddes, Elizabeth Ashley, and Kathleen Turner, respectively, played Maggie, the different versions allowing each to play distinctively different Maggies. In the original version, Brick does not support Maggie in her lie to Big Daddy, and it is uncertain whether Maggie has wooed Brick from his alcoholism and whether in his own mind Brick was convinced that his feeling for Skipper was platonic. Also, Big Daddy does not reappear on stage after his big scene with Brick.

The play’s structure is unwieldy and irregular, in contrast with the rhythmically expressionistic structure of *The Glass Menagerie* or the rapidly developing tensions in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Maggie’s long speeches are like operatic arias, accompanied by the equally long silences of Brick. Similarly, the towering role of Big Daddy seems at times to vie with Maggie’s. Both have the same purpose: to rescue Brick and to
rehabilitate him.

Despite Maggie’s titular role, her sexual attractiveness, and her sympathy-evoking, if “mendacious,” attempts to triumph over Gooper’s family, it is the strong emotional honesty between Big Daddy and Brick for which Williams writes his most compelling moment in the play. Big Daddy’s sudden and unexpected confrontation with the imminence of his death (at a time when he was looking forward once more to testing his sexual prowess) and Brick’s silent suffering of pain and guilt over Skipper’s death brilliantly counterpoint Maggie’s attempt to create life, even when that attempt involves a distant husband and a lie that she hopes to turn into a truth.

The big scene between Big Daddy and Brick is magisterial in the former’s disclosure of all the lies he has put up with all of his married life and his true feelings toward Big Mama, Gooper, Mae, and their five noisy children. Torn between his hatred of them and his reluctance to make Brick, an alcoholic, the legatee of his will, he insists on honesty from Brick regarding his drinking and his relationship with Skipper. It is Big Daddy’s reference to homosexual innuendoes regarding Skipper that causes Brick to disclose Maggie’s jealousy of his clean friendship with Skipper during their road trips as professional football players. He accuses Maggie of destroying Skipper by suggesting to him a “dirty” relationship. Big Daddy, however, refuses to allow Brick to “pass the buck,” whereupon Brick, inflamed, taunts Big Daddy with the irony of the requisite happy returns of his sixty-fifth birthday “when ev’rybody but you knows there won’t be any.”

One truth after another tumbles from the opera-like duet between father and son, replacing the lies with which both have lived. Big Daddy’s anger is that of a man betrayed, as he leaves the stage howling with rage. Although he does not appear in act 3, he is heard offstage crying out in pain. The scene between Big Daddy and Brick is one of two legendary father-son confrontations in American drama, the other being that between Biff and Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman.

With much of the humor and theatricality of A Streetcar Named Desire, but without its compact structure, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof remains a compelling play. The names of Big Daddy, Maggie, and Brick have been imprinted permanently on the American stage along with those of Amanda, Laura, and Tom Wingfield; Blanche DuBois; and Stanley Kowalski.

**Summary**

The Pollitt family assembles to celebrate Big Daddy’s sixty-fifth birthday. While Brick showers, Maggie describes the birthday dinner, telling how badly Gooper’s five children behaved and how their mother, Mae, used them to impress Big Daddy. Brick comes out of the bathroom on crutches, having broken his ankle jumping hurdles.

Maggie informs Brick that a medical report arrived that day with the news that Big Daddy is dying of cancer. She also explains that Mae and Gooper want to send Brick to a hospital for alcoholics so that they can control Big Daddy’s money. Maggie believes, however, that Big Daddy dislikes Gooper and his family and that he has a “lech” for her.

Maggie admits that she has become “catty” because Brick refuses to sleep with her and she is lonely. She does, however, intend to win back his love. After hinting that Brick’s problems stem from someone named Skipper, she asks Brick to drink less. He replies that he needs to drink until he hears a “click” in his head that gives him peace. Maggie complains that her current situation makes her as tense as “a cat on a hot tin roof.”

Big Mama enters to say how happy she is; she was told that Big Daddy has a spastic colon, not cancer. Brick retreats to the bathroom as she enters. After asking about Brick’s drinking, Big Mama tells Maggie that sexual
problems must be causing their marital troubles and childlessness.

When Big Mama leaves, Maggie again urges Brick to sleep with her; he suggests a divorce instead. Maggie returns to the subject of Big Daddy’s cancer, explaining that the family will tell Big Mama the truth later. Then, ignoring Brick’s anger, she recounts the story of Skipper, Brick’s college friend whose homosexual love Brick cannot or will not return. Maggie says that she forced Skipper to face his feelings for Brick. To prove her wrong, Skipper tried to make love to her but could not. He later died of drink. Maggie reminds Brick that although Skipper is dead, she, Maggie, is alive and able to conceive a child. Brick asks how she plans to do that when he hates her.

At that moment, the family enters, bearing Big Daddy’s birthday cake. Big Daddy becomes annoyed that others, especially Big Mama, appear to be trying to run his life. Since he no longer believes he is threatened by a terminal illness, he announces that he is resuming control of the family. Hurt, Big Mama realizes that Big Daddy never believed she loves him. When she tells him that she loves even his hatefulness, Big Daddy says to himself that it would be funny if that were true.

Eventually, the others drift out, leaving Brick and Big Daddy alone. Although he wants a serious discussion with Brick, Big Daddy talks instead about his trip to Europe. Brick wonders why communication is so difficult between him and Big Daddy. Big Daddy admits that he is afraid of cancer and that he is not ready to die. When Brick acknowledges his alcoholism, Big Daddy asks why he drinks. Because of disgust with the world’s “mendacity,” Brick answers, a reason Big Daddy does not accept. Most lives are based on lies, he says, and Brick must live with this fact. Big Daddy suggests that Brick is drinking because of guilt over Skipper’s homosexuality and death. Brick angrily protests that he did not share Skipper’s feelings or even discuss them; when Skipper tried to explain over the telephone, Brick hung up. That, then, is the real reason for Brick’s drinking, Big Daddy says: Brick is disgusted with himself because he refused to face his friend’s truth. Brick retaliates by telling Big Daddy the truth about his cancer. Shattered, Big Daddy leaves, damning all liars as he goes.

In the original ending, the family and the doctor enter to tell Big Mama about Big Daddy’s cancer. She at first refuses to believe them. Brick, meanwhile, goes to the balcony to drink, but he returns as Gooper tries to persuade Big Mama to sign legal control of the plantation over to him. Angrily, Big Mama refuses. As her final answer, she shouts Big Daddy’s favorite word, “crap.”

Big Mama then urges Brick to give Big Daddy a grandson. To everyone’s surprise, Maggie announces that she is pregnant. Though Mae and Gooper disbelieve the news, they cannot disprove it and finally leave. At that moment, Brick hears the “click” in his head. Maggie refuses to allow him this escape and throws away his crutch, pointing out that she emptied the liquor cabinet. As she turns out the light, Maggie assures Brick that she does love him. Brick says to himself that it would be funny if that were true.

In the Broadway production ending, the family, after much preparation, tells Big Mama the truth about Big Daddy’s cancer. While she tries to digest the news, Gooper explains why Big Mama should give him legal control of the estate. After dismissing Gooper’s legal plans with Big Daddy’s favorite word, “crap,” Big Mama reminds Brick and Maggie that Big Daddy hopes they will have a son.

The loud talk brings Big Daddy back to the room. He relates a crude joke about a fornicating elephant, perhaps to remind Brick that sex is natural and necessary. Maggie then announces her pregnancy. Although Mae and Gooper refuse to believe her, Big Daddy professes to do so. When Brick and Maggie are at last alone, Maggie throws his liquor off the balcony while he watches with growing admiration. Finally, Brick and Maggie sit together on the bed as Maggie vows to use her love to help restore Brick to life.
**Summary: Act I Summary**

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* takes place entirely in the bed-sitting room of the Pollitt plantation home in the Mississippi Delta. The plantation once belonged to a pair of bachelors, and it still shows evidence of their taste for "the Victorian with a touch of the Far East." Big Daddy had once worked for them as an overseer, now he owns the plantation and most of the land for miles around, having spent his life building it into a dynastic empire, "twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile." It is Big Daddy Pollitt's sixty-fifth birthday, and he is in an especially celebratory mood because he has just received the results of exploratory surgery: the pains in his stomach are not due to cancer as he had feared for three years but are merely the pangs of a spastic colon. However, Big Daddy and his wife, Big Mama (Ida Pollitt) have not been told the truth. The rest of the family knows that he does indeed have terminal cancer.

The action takes place in the upstairs bed-sitting room because Big Daddy's younger and favorite son, Brick, broke his ankle the night before while attempting to jump hurdles on the high school athletic track following a drinking bout.

Brick and his wife Maggie are getting ready for Big Daddy's birthday party when the first act opens. It becomes clear that Maggie resents the presence downstairs of her brother- and sister-in-law's brood of five "no-neck monsters" whose very existence are a reproach to Maggie, who has not produced the desired offspring with Brick. She wants and needs this proof of their readiness to take over the plantation, but Brick, who suffers from a disinterest in the plantation and apparently life itself, refuses to sleep with her. His disaffection stems from his unresolved relationship with Skipper, his best friend from college who died from drug and alcohol abuse.

Maggie recounts Skipper's downfall: he began drinking after Brick and he established their own pro football team. A spinal injury kept Brick home for a few away games, which Maggie attended with Skipper. After drinking together Maggie accuses Skipper of being in love with her husband. In response, Skipper attempts to prove his manhood to her in bed, but when he is unable to perform, he assumes that her accusation is right. Skipper abandons his career in pro football to succumb to the world of drugs and alcohol, which kills him. Her story momentarily snaps Brick out of his drunken reverie, and he swings his crutch at her head, barely missing her, and falls, as Maggie reminds him that she, unlike Skipper, is still alive.

They are interrupted by Dixie, one of Gooper and Mae's children. Dixie blurts out that Maggie is jealous because she can't have children. The scene closes with Maggie's announcement that the party guests are arriving.

**Summary: Act II Summary**

Act II begins where Act I left off, with the arrival of Big Daddy, Reverend Tooker, Gooper, and Mae. Big Daddy expresses his lack of enthusiasm for the celebration in a single word, "Crap!" In walks the overweight Big Mama, who good-naturedly tolerates jokes at her expense. Gooper and Mae ostentatiously draw attention to Brick's drinking, which Brick affably ignores. None of the insincere birthday congratulations affect Big Daddy, but Big Mama bursts into sentimental tears—in her relief that Big Daddy does not have cancer. Big Daddy is relieved too but puts his positive feelings into interrogating Brick about the broken ankle, demanding to know if he broke it "layin' a woman."

Eventually the guests depart, leaving Big Daddy and Brick alone to talk. Brick would rather just drink until he feels the "click" that puts him into oblivion. But Big Daddy has a new lease on life, and he wants to have a frank talk with his beloved son. Big Daddy's confessions of sexual appetite and ease with a world of mendacity (lies and untruths) only disgust Brick, who tries to end the conversation. Big Daddy pursues the
issue that he thinks may be bothering Brick, attempting to reassure his son that he will accept whatever kind of relationship Brick had with Skipper. But Brick is too defensive about the issue to appreciate his father's generosity.

Big Daddy then shocks Brick by announcing that it was Brick's rejection of Skipper that killed him (Skipper had called Brick to tell him about his episode with Maggie, but, unwilling to hear such a confession, Brick had hung up on his friend; the rejection was obviously too much for Skipper and the next Brick heard of his friend was the announcement of his death). The revelation of this truth leads Brick to retaliate with his own revelation: that Big Daddy does have cancer—and that all of the assembled party know it. These two men, who share a love for truth and a disdain for mendacity, are too mired in the pain of their private torments to attempt a connection with each other that might ease their respective suffering. The scene ends with Big Daddy's rage, condemning his family and all of the world as "lying dying liars."

**Summary: Act III Summary**

[There are at least three published versions of Act III. The one most often produced is the second version, which Williams revised at the request of producer/director Elia Kazan, who insisted that Big Daddy was too important a character to drop after the second act. The following summarizes Williams's original version. Williams defended it in the preface to the Broadway version as being truer to the character of Brick, who, Williams said, would have been unable to show the kind of dramatic progression that Kazan demanded for the Broadway production.]

Again, no time elapses following the previous act. Everyone is asking where Big Daddy has gone, and Big Mama presumes he has gone to bed. After some prattling about the old man's resilience and Brick's drinking, the younger people get down to the important business at hand: Gooper, Mae, and Maggie want to tell Big Mama the truth about Big Daddy's cancer and then elicit her support in their competing plans to take over the plantation. The tension between Gooper and Mae on one hand and Maggie on the other comes to verbal blows as each sarcastically attempts to reveal the grasping designs of the other. Throughout the scene Brick blandly serves himself drinks and looks longingly out at the cool, detached moon.

Big Mama desperately appeals to Brick, saying that if he would only have a child, Big Daddy would happily leave the plantation to him. Brick fails to respond, but Maggie puts herself on the line with an astonishing announcement that she is pregnant. Gooper and Mae question her honesty while Big Mama runs to tell the news to Big Daddy. The scene ends with Brick and Maggie alone. She has locked up his liquor with the intention of returning it only after he has performed the duty necessary to "make the lie true." The curtain falls as she turns out the light and gently embraces Brick.

**Themes**

**Truth versus Mendacity**

A preoccupation with telling the truth, having the strength to accept the truth, and withholding the truth runs through *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Big Daddy thinks he has just learned the truth when he is told, after extensive medical examinations, that he merely has a spastic colon and not cancer as he had feared. But this is not the truth; his worst fear is realized when Brick, in a moment of anger tells him that he is, in fact, dying. Brick has let out the big secret in response to Big Daddy's unveiling of Brick's secret truth—that Brick drove Skipper to the suicidal use of alcohol and drugs when he hung up on Skipper's attempt to "confess" his homosexual love for Brick. While Brick believed that the confession resulted directly from Maggie's jealous pressure upon Skipper, he also feared that he and Skipper's love would be misunderstood, even though it was the most "true" thing he had ever known.
Rather than face the truth of his role in his friend's death, Brick withdraws from the world, complaining that it is full of lies and liars ("mendacity"). His hatred for mendacity is a trait he shares with his father, Big Daddy, although the two men fail to recognize the extent to which their values correspond. Big Daddy has learned to live and thrive within a world of mendacity. Although he appears crass, he cares about Brick. While Big Daddy has learned to live with lies, his son cannot, turning to liquor to escape not only from liars but also from the horrible truth about Skipper's death. Brick gives no indication of the impact his discussion with Big Daddy has had on him; he remains aloof (and drunk) throughout the rest of the play. It becomes clear that Big Daddy, who lived with mendacity, had a healthier means of keeping himself true than does his son

**Homosexuality**

When *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was first staged, its main theme was widely thought to be homosexuality. Williams denied this, and the play itself, after entering a more sexually permissive era, demands acknowledgment that homosexuality is not its central concern. Brick's love for Skipper, he insists—and both Maggie and Big Daddy affirm—was a platonic, non-physical love. That the physical aspect of their love is never resolved in the play indicates the discomfort and ambivalence over homosexuality that existed in the 1950s. Was Brick in love with Skipper, or was theirs the simple and profoundly deep love of friendship that Brick proclaims it to be? Brick had had a satisfactory relationship—sexual and otherwise—with Maggie until her jealousy of Skipper prompted her to disrupt the careful balance the three of them had achieved. Can two men who love each other also participate in a physical, sexual relationship without harming their status in society? This question reverberates in the play because the answer as to whether or not Brick and Skipper physically consummated their love is precluded by Skipper's death. Writers often "kill off" a character whose actions or presence contradict or threaten society’s most cherished mores, thus raising a question without openly challenging the society with an explicitly stated answer.

**Idealism**

In this play, idealism opposes life itself, with its messiness and its impure combination of good and bad. When Brick tells Big Daddy that he drinks out of disgust with mendacity, he reveals that he is an idealist. Big Daddy explains to his son that he too feels surrounded by mendacity, it thrives in his family, in the church, in his clubs, even in himself, forcing him to make a pretense of liking it all. But Big Daddy is a realist—he keeps his ideals separate from his life. Big Daddy enjoys living: his idea of celebrating his new lease on life is to find a woman, "smother her with minks and hump her from hell to breakfast."

Brick, on the other hand, eschews sexual passion absolutely, looking up at the cool moon as a model of the ideal detachment he wants in his life and relationships. Brick's form of idealism is an escape from life Maggie refuses to let him escape, however. She accuses him of feeling a passion for Skipper so "damn clean" and incorruptible that it was incompatible with life—"death was the only ice box where you could keep it," she tells him. Maggie defies Brick's sterile idealism, his death-in-life oblivion achieved through alcohol, and she demands that he cure it with life—by fathering a child.

**Characters: Characters Discussed**

**Margaret (Maggie) Pollitt**

Margaret (Maggie) Pollitt, a young woman from a poor background married into a wealthy Southern family. Maggie’s hard life has given her the strength and determination to do whatever she must to survive. When she felt threatened by the closeness between her husband, Brick, and his friend Skipper, she accused Skipper of being in love with Brick, then tried to seduce Skipper, leading to Skipper’s suicide and Maggie’s estrangement from Brick. Because of Brick’s alcoholism and irresponsibility, as well as the fact that they have no children, Maggie fears that the Pollitt estate will go to Brick’s brother Gooper and his wife Mae, leaving Maggie and Brick at the financial mercy of their relatives. To prevent this, Maggie announces that she is
pregnant, then blackmails Brick into sleeping with her by withholding liquor from him.

Brick Pollitt

Brick Pollitt, a young alcoholic former football player. Brick is tormented by guilt over the death of his former teammate and best friend, Skipper. Brick and Skipper shared an intimate and ambiguous relationship. When an emotionally distraught Skipper called Brick to confess his love for him, Brick hung up on Skipper, precipitating his suicide. Brick hates Maggie because she tried to seduce Skipper in an effort to come between the men. Brick is disgusted with the hypocrisy, lies, secrecy, and plotting he sees going on around him in the family. Having lost all ambition, he longs only for the blissful oblivion that sufficient amounts of alcohol can provide. Brick is the only member of the family who does not care about inheriting control of the Pollitt empire. Everyone around him plots and schemes for it, with Brick at the center of their manipulations.

Big Daddy Pollitt

Big Daddy Pollitt, the wealthy and socially prominent patriarch of the Pollitt family. Big Daddy is a tough, vulgar, outspoken man who has always maintained firm control over his twenty-eight-thousand-acre plantation as well as his family. Big Daddy derives his power as much from the raw force of his personality as from his accumulated wealth and influence. At the age of sixty-five, he views himself as beyond social norms, finally able to live the way he wants, regardless of family or social pressures. He reveals his renewed sexual fantasies, as well as his disgust with Big Mama, Gooper, Mae, and all the church and social groups he has participated in throughout his life. He feels affection for Brick and tries to discover the cause of Brick’s decline. When Big Daddy is diagnosed with terminal cancer, no one wants to tell him, but Brick accidentally reveals the truth in a moment of anger. Being deceived by his family confirms Big Daddy’s belief that the world is full of hypocrisy and liars, and the shock of his impending death horrifies and enrages him.

Ida Pollitt

Ida Pollitt, called Big Mama, Big Daddy’s wife. Big Mama lives in the shadow of her husband, wanting only to please him and keep the family happy. She endures his harshness and insults because of her love for him, though his verbal cruelty and emotional indifference hurt her deeply. Though essentially a meek person, Big Mama summons the strength of will to resist Gooper and Mae’s attempts to take over control of the plantation, choosing instead to place her trust in Brick.

Gooper Pollitt

Gooper Pollitt, called Brother Man, Brick’s older brother. A lawyer in Memphis, Gooper has helped with running the plantation and considers himself the responsible son, the one most capable and deserving of taking over when Big Daddy dies. To further solidify his position, Gooper has fathered five children in a failed effort to please Big Daddy. Gooper is disgusted by Brick’s lifestyle and feels superior to both him and Maggie, whom he considers a scheming interloper.

Mae Pollitt

Mae Pollitt, called Sister Woman, Gooper’s wife. A former cotton carnival queen, Mae is loud and obnoxious. Having given birth to five children and now pregnant with a sixth, Mae has devoted most of her married life to producing grandchildren for Big Daddy in an effort to ingratiate herself with him and to help Gooper acquire control of the estate. Mae, who realizes that Brick and Maggie have not been sleeping together, is furious when Maggie claims to be pregnant, but she is powerless to expose the lie or change Big Mama’s mind.
Character Analysis: Big Daddy Pollitt

Big Daddy is the center of attention in the Pollitt family, not only because he holds the position of patriarch but because he is dying and his property is up for grabs. Big Daddy has risen from the position of plantation overseer to the owner of the plantation. He thinks he has a spastic colon, "made spastic by disgust" by "all the lies and liars ... and hypocrisy" that surround him. When Big Mama protests that she has loved Big Daddy, in spite of his "hate and hardness" for forty years, he responds with the exact words that Brick speaks to Maggie, "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true."

Big Daddy has been his own man for so long that he has not been "infected by [the] ideas of other people." Thus, remarkable for the era in which the play takes place, Big Daddy does not judge Brick's relationship with Skipper as inappropriate. Unfortunately his acceptance comes too late for Brick, who continues to keep himself emotionally removed from everyone around him. Big Daddy genuinely loves Brick, offering his son the kind of unconditional love for which Brick respects his father. It is this unbounded trust for each other in a world of "mendacity" that ties the two men together and which not one other character in the play possesses or comprehends. Big Daddy's tragedy is not that he must die but that he dies thinking that Brick, just like all of the others, was going to lie about his cancer too.

Character Analysis: Brick Pollitt

Brick has made a virtue of indifference, first as a football star admired from afar by family and friends, then as a dreamy alcoholic, hiding the truth of his complicity in his best friend's death behind a mask of indifference. Brick punishes himself and his wife, Maggie, whom he would rather have take the blame for Skipper's descent into drugs and alcohol. Brick imposes two punishments on himself and on his wife. One is drinking until he feels the "click" releasing him into the welcome oblivion of intoxication; he uses alcohol as a means of escape. The other is sexual abstinence.

Brick knows that his feelings for Skipper were "pure an' true," and he claims disdain for a world that would have called him and Skipper "fairies." But the real source of his guilt lies instead in remembering the night that Skipper called him, drunk, to confess, having been tricked by Maggie into believing himself a homosexual. Brick hung up on him. It was Brick's own rejection that caused Skipper's death, not an uncomprehending world. Brick fails to recognize his guilt until his father forces him to face it. Big Daddy loves Brick and loves the truth too. But Brick tragically misunderstands his father's motives and once more retaliates outward instead of accepting the truth. According to Williams, Brick suffers from "moral paralysis": he cannot rise from the morass of his "spiritual disrepair."

Character Analysis: Ida Pollitt

Sincere, foolish, fat, always laughing "like hell at herself," Big Mama's idea of fun (pulling the Reverend Tooker onto her lap when he extends his hand to help her up from the sofa) is not consistent with the kind of society to which Mae and Maggie aspire. Big Mama laughs the loudest at her husband's insults about her "fat old body" and general incompetence, but she often has to "pick up or fuss with something to cover the hurt the loud laugh doesn't quite cover." She only lamely chastises Brick for drinking and expresses genuine concern for Maggie's childless plight.

Ida is ineffective at bringing her family around to her values of Christian love and forgiveness, loving and forgiving them so absolutely that they ignore her existence. Her laughter at her own expense, however, masks a tender and sincere soul, one that emerges poignantly when she learns that Big Daddy will die of cancer after all. In her genuine grief she gains a new dignity that she retains throughout the rest of the play.
Character Analysis: Maggie Pollitt

Maggie is a pretty southern woman who comes from a humble family and sees a slim but promising hope of getting "something out of what Big Daddy leaves." She has a melodic southern drawl, an indulgent easy tolerance of her husband Brick's alcoholic distance but also a self-confessed "hard" edge, brought about by her desperate situation. It is quite clear which holds the most importance to her between her love for Brick and her desire for a healthy portion of the Pollitt estate: she prefers the money, although she hungers for her husband's attentions as well.

Maggie calls herself a "cat on a hot tin roof" alluding to her precarious position with Brick, who will not sleep with her, and with her brother- and sister-in-law, who have the better claim on the Pollitt estate because of their brood of five "no-neck monster" children. Maggie, with the tenacity of an alley cat, intends to convince Brick to have sex with her to keep them in the running. The bow-and-arrow "Diana trophy" she won in an archery contest at Ole Miss is emblematic of her relationship with Brick and his family—she is the hunter. On stage Maggie is an elegant beauty, alternating between unabashed coquetry and vicious reproach. She is "catty" because, as she puts it, she's "consumed with envy and eaten up with longing."

Character Analysis: Other Characters

Doctor Bough
Doc Baugh's purpose in the play is to authenticate the fact that Big Daddy, does, indeed, have terminal cancer and not a "spastic colon" as Big Daddy has been led to believe. By ignoring the comments around him, Doc Baugh manages to stay out of the family's destructive squabbling; he simply explains the medical reality and leaves a hypodermic package of morphine to relieve Big Daddy's more severe pain when it inevitably comes.

Big Mama
See Ida Pollitt

Brother Man
See Gooper Pollitt

Doc
See Doctor Baugh

Lacey
Lacey is the Pollitts' good-natured black servant. Lacey and Sookey cackle at the family jokes and know enough to wait until after Big Daddy's fit of pique over Big Mama's "horsin" around to bring in the birthday cake and champagne.

Maggie the Cat
See Maggie Pollitt

Dixie Pollitt
Dixie is one of Mae's "brood" of children who run wild through the house and yard when not on display or performing vaudevillian songs as part of their parent's relentless drive to gain Big Daddy's attention and appreciation. Naturally, all of their antics fail to please. Dixie has overheard her parents discuss Maggie's failure to produce a child, and she taunts her aunt with this piece of information when Maggie reprimands her for misbehaving.
Gooper Pollitt
Big Daddy's eldest son. In his race against his brother Brick to win Big Daddy's approval and guarantee his claim on the estate, Gooper stoops quite willingly to calling attention to Brick's drinking problem and general indifference to Big Daddy. Gooper announces to the assembled birthday celebrants that he bets "500 to 50" that Brick does not even know what gift he bought for Big Daddy, knowing that Maggie bought the present since Brick himself would not bother. The older son hopes that by exposing Brick's disdain for their father, Big Daddy will transfer his allegiance to Gooper. But Big Daddy prefers his younger son's honest neglect over his elder son's obsequious fawning.

Mae Pollitt
Mae flaunts the comfortable snobbery of the foolish. She is probably the driving force behind her impassive husband Gooper's persistence in securing Big Daddy's estate, despite Big Daddy's obvious scorn for his elder son. Mae's one shining moment was as the "cotton carnival queen." Now she is squared off against Maggie for the role of future matriarch over Big Daddy's twenty-eight thousand acres of land—and the place in society such a role will accord her. Mae fights with everything she's got: by producing five children (the sixth is on the way) to guarantee the family line, by kissing up to Big Daddy and Big Mama, and by eavesdropping outside of Maggie and Brick's bedroom door in order to report Brick's drinking and sexual abstinence or any other gossip that might discredit their claim to the inheritance.

Sister Woman
See Mae Pollitt

Sookey
Another black servant who serves the Pollitt family.

Reverend Tooker
The stage notes read that Tooker is "the living embodiment of the pious conventional lie." Reverend Tooker spends his time at the birthday party dropping transparent hints about the various endowments other families have given to rival churches when their patriarchs died. His only purpose in sharing Big Daddy's birthday celebration seems calculated to garner his church a generous portion of the Pollitt estate. Tooker's nature is nakedly revealed when an unexpected pause in the general conversation catches him crassly joking to Doc Baugh about the "Stork and the Reaper running neck to neck" in the Pollitt home.

Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation

As the author of The Glass Menagerie (1944), the Pulitzer Prize-winning A Streetcar Named Desire (1951), and many other plays, Tennessee Williams was one of the leading American dramatists of the twentieth century. Born in Mississippi, Williams used the South and southerners as a vehicle for exploring the confusing and even inexplicable minds and relationships of human beings. Although his plays have been criticized as too symbolic and theatrical, as well as philosophically murky, no one disputes his success in creating a gallery of memorable characters who grapple with some of humankind’s most significant issues: love, sex, power, age, family, self-awareness, honesty, the past, dreams, and death.

At once tragic and comic, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, which won the Pulitzer Prize in drama, examines the mysterious and even grotesque interconnections that define a family. The play also delineates the struggle of individuals within the family to define a self. On the surface, the play is realistic: The lapsed time of the story is equal to the time of performance; the characters are complex and human; the situation, a family birthday party, is ordinary. Yet despite the surface realism, the play can better be described as expressionistic. The set Williams calls for is dominated by a large bed and large liquor cabinet symbolizing sex and escape. The language is poetic, and the characters have nearly as many monologues as conversations. The action, too, is
episodic and symbolic. The specific tensions of the Pollitt family are staged in a series of emblematic confrontations: husband and wife, youth and age, past and present, wealth and poverty, homosexuality and heterosexuality, truth and lies, love and hate, life and death.

Williams does not, however, allow the audience to choose one option over another or even to define each term clearly. Although he favors life and honesty, for example, he never promises that either is possible or even always desirable. Each side has its allure and validity. Big Daddy and Maggie are most directly associated with life and truth, yet both have important limitations. Maggie yearns for a child and vows to restore Brick to life; she insists that Brick must value her honesty if nothing else. In many respects, she is the healthiest and most appealing character in the play. In the end, though, she must pretend to be pregnant to affirm life, and that affirmation has as much to do with her need for financial security as with any real desire for children. Nor do the fertile Mae and Gooper represent a viable commitment to life: They have produced only rude, screeching “no-neck monsters” who function as a sort of Greek chorus of futility.

Big Daddy, in the words of Dylan Thomas that Williams uses as an epigram, does not “go gentle into that good night” of death; instead, he clings to life and to truth so fiercely that his energy overflows into the vulgarity and garrulity that make him larger than life. He refuses to allow Brick the refuge of drink and dissembling. Yet despite his powerful life force, Big Daddy is dying; his physical cancer mirrors the metaphorical corruption that touches the whole family and, by extension, the entire South. His dedication to honesty is complicated by his own lifelong “mendacity.” Ironically, it is the self-destructive Brick, whose broken ankle symbolizes his broken spirit and who must rely on both literal and figurative crutches, who voices perhaps the most pertinent questions about honesty: “Who can face truth?” he asks Big Daddy. “Can you?”

Closely connected with the question of life are the topics of sex and homosexuality, which made *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* controversial in the 1950’s and 1960’s but that had come to seem tame by the 1970’s. In this play, Williams neither condemns nor explicitly approves of either homosexuality or heterosexuality. For the most part, he merely shows that society offers no livable place for homosexuals; he suggests, moreover, that sex of any kind is as likely to push people apart as it is to draw them together.

The two endings complicate the final effect of the play. Williams explained that he wrote the second version of act 3 at the request of Elia Kazan, who directed the 1955 Broadway production. Kazan wanted Maggie to be more sympathetic and Brick to be more obviously changed by his confrontation with Big Daddy in act 2. He also believed that Big Daddy was too important and dynamic a character to disappear after one act. Although the new ending offers slightly more hope for a reconciliation between Brick and Maggie, it is less consistent with the development of the first two acts. Williams’s first version works better: Big Daddy, though certainly a powerful character, does not belong in act 3. His last words in act 2—“Christ—damn—all—lying sons of—lying bitches!! Lying! Dying! Lying!”—provide a more fitting thematic end to Big Daddy than his elephant story and his unconvincing acceptance of Maggie’s pregnancy. The change in Brick is even less effective. Williams’s reasons for initially resisting this change make sense: He did not “believe that any conversation, however revelatory, ever effects so immediate a change in the heart . . . of a person of Brick’s state of spiritual disrepair.”

Ultimately, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* presents, rather than corrects, several portraits of “spiritual disrepair.” Although Williams may offer little hope of eventual repair, he does offer a sympathetic understanding of the human condition.

**Critical Essays: Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**
In the course of a single evening characters assemble for emotional fireworks and the explosion of the lies by which they all are living.

It is Big Daddy’s 65th birthday, but he does not realize it will be his last. His two sons and their wives, however, know he is dying of cancer and want him to determine which of them will inherit his huge plantation. Brick has the edge, being his parents’ favorite, yet Gooper and Mae keep pointing to his drinking and his childless wife and then to their own five offspring.

The major force in the play is Brick’s wife, Maggie, whose vitality has survived Brick’s persisting sexual rejection of her. Deeply in love with Brick, she wants to produce a grandchild for Big Daddy. Both she and Big Daddy try to make Brick face the facts of his drinking and his sexual abstention.

Brick started drinking and stopped making love with Maggie when his best friend and fellow football star, Skipper, died. He refuses to acknowledge any sexual element in their closeness, having been so indoctrinated by his society with the idea that a sexual relationship between two men is dirty.

The resolution of the play remains ambiguous, but the well-drawn characters and Williams’ splendidly rhetorical Southern dialogue create high-powered drama, with some superb comedy as well. Maggie (“the Cat”) and Big Daddy remain two of American drama’s most vital and fascinating characters.

**Bibliography:**

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Tennessee Williams*. New York: Chelsea House, 1987. A collection of critical essays that includes thorough discussions of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Ruby Cohn, who examines themes and characters; Robert Heilman, who explores different “levels” of the play; and Esther Jackson, who focuses on the play’s symbolism.


**Critical Essays: Critical Overview**

When *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* opened at the Morosco Theatre in 1955 it starred Ben Gazzara as Brick, Barbara Bel Geddes as Maggie, and folk singer Burl Ives (in his first dramatic production) as Big Daddy. Reviewers considered the play a powerhouse of emotion and they recognized that Williams had broken out of the slump he had been in since his success with *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947. But they refused him unequivocal praise; instead, many of them chided Williams for toying around the edges of the play's "real" topic: homosexuality.
Walter Kerr, writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, praised the performers only to accuse Williams of being "less than candid," of mislaying or deliberately hiding the "key" to the play. Eric Bentley, in *New York* magazine, noted too much concern about how everyone is doing in bed and declared that a writer has a duty not to be vague and unequivocal about his true topic. Although, in a 1955 interview with Arthur Waters for *Theatre Arts*, Williams flatly denied that Brick was a homosexual, a few sentences later he admitted that Brick felt some "unrealized abnormal tendencies" at "some time in his life." Of course, this interview could only serve to reaffirm a belief that Williams was ambivalent about the topic and that this ambivalence carried through to his play. Another fifteen years would pass before Williams would publicly discuss his own homosexuality, and his admission would do little to defray the commonly held opinion that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* fails to engage the topic of homosexuality forthrightly. When the play was revived nineteen years after its initial opening, in a more sexually liberated America, the furor over the topic of homosexuality had abated, and both the language and the Pollitts' dramatic problems seemed more quaint than shocking.

Reviews of the 1974 revival shifted in focus but were no less harsh than the 1955 reviews. John Simon wrote in *New York* that the play was "worthy commercial fare, but not art," and he found fault with symbolism that recurred "ad nauseum." Simon called Brick a "nonentity," whose realization that the mendacity he hates is his own is made ambiguous by Williams's failure to explain whether Brick betrayed "his friend or his homosexuality." Other critics also sought to resurrect the play from overemphasis on the theme of homosexuality, suggesting that the core theme is and always had been about truth. Roger Ashton recognized this in 1955, asserting in his review in the *New Republic*: "Mr. Williams in this play is interested in something far more significant than one man's psychological makeup. He is interested in what may and may not be said about the truth as a motivating source in human life."

From the very beginning, critics have focused on the play's violent passions and language. Marya Mannes in the *Reporter* called the 1955 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* a "special and compelling study of violence." Richard Hayes of *Commonweal* found it little more than an expression of this violence, with no central organizing structure: he judged the play "lacks almost wholly some binding integrity of experience." Robert Hatch writing for the *Nation* concurred, saying that, "without love and hope, discussion of vice and virtue becomes academic."

It is true that the play leaves several important questions unanswered, such as who will inherit the Pollitt plantation, whether Maggie will convince Brick to make the lie of her pregnancy true, and whether Brick will own up to his role in Skipper's death. In fact, director Elia Kazan had asked Williams to rewrite the third act to resolve what he felt was the play's flawed dramatic progression. Even with Williams's revisions to Act III, the play's narrative difficulties persisted. Nevertheless, critics had to admit that Williams had captured an intensity of feeling few others could accomplish. What the play may lack in narrative unity and progression it makes up for in lyric expressionism. The play is an aesthetic paradox: according to *New York Post* critic Richard Watts it is "insistently vulgar, morbid, neurotic and ugly [but it] still maintains a quality of exotic lyricism."

Despite the misgivings of the press, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was a commercial success. It ran for 694 performances and won Williams his third New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize. Today *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is counted as one of Williams's three significant contributions to American theater, along with *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*.

**Essays and Criticism: In Search of Blessings**

Many early critics argued that the central conflict of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is Brick's struggle with homosexuality—his reluctance to either admit his own homosexual tendencies or to understand those of his friend, Skipper. These critics saw Maggie's desire for a child as an attempt to counterbalance Brick's
ambivalence and win him back to his "true" sexual nature. Yet the play is not explicit in explaining his desires or true motivations. Walter Kerr, writing in the New York Herald Tribune, referred to Brick's "private wounds and secret drives" as "a secret half-told" about which Williams is less than candid. Williams defended himself against this accusation by asserting that "The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man's problem. I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that...interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis." In other words, Williams denied that homosexuality per se was the central issue of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Whether or not homosexuality is central, Brick, who appears in every scene of the play, is clearly a pivotal character.

Benjamin Nelson, in his book Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work, argued that the play was not at all about Brick's sexuality but about his idealism and "tragic disillusionment." Brick tells Big Daddy that he drinks out of "disgust" with "mendacity." New Republic critic Roger Ashton also suggested that the play is interested in "truth as a motivating force in human life." Williams's corroborated this reading by saying in a 1957 interview, "I meant for the audience to discover how people erect false values by not facing what is true to their natures, by having to live a lie."

Certainly the characters in the play demonstrate an unusual preoccupation with telling or withholding the truth, about Big Daddy's cancer, about the true nature of Brick's relationship with Skipper, and about Brick's role in Skipper's death. If the play revolves around the revelation of truth or around the characters' ability to withstand or tell the truth, then one expects that these issues will get resolved out at the end. In Big Daddy's case, they are. He receives the truth about his cancer from Brick, howls in rage at those who withheld this truth from him, then goes offstage, ostensibly to die. Unfortunately, this all takes place in Act II with an entire act left in the play. According to the "truth" reading, the third act would show how Brick resolves his relationship to truth and mendacity. This question is left unanswered, however, and a great deal of stage time is spent with Brick's inner thoughts hidden.

The final act, which Williams revised three times to total four versions, has received a great deal of criticism; the majority of negative criticism condemned the act as a poor ending to a powerful play. Many critics have argued that the heart of the play lies in the confrontation between Brick and Big Daddy and that once they say their piece to each other (in Act II), the story is essentially over. Yet the play meanders around and around in a contest between Gooper, Mae, and Maggie regarding the estate. Another reading of the play, one which takes into account the importance of the distribution of property in the play, helps to justify the actions of the final Act. The attention to the estate in Act III may not in fact be a flaw in balance but rather a continuation of an important conflict that actually frames and puts into context the central conflict between Brick and Big Daddy.

A clue to reconciling the secondary characters' conflict over the property with the friction between Brick and his father lies in the inscription Williams included on the title page of the play. It is from Dylan Thomas's poem, "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night"

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan's poem is an exhortation to fight against death, to live fully until the very last moment of life. The last two lines are often quoted when a person is dying. The phrase, "rage, rage" recalls Shakespeare's King Lear in his moment of madness preceding his death. His madness stems from his daughters' rejection of him once he has given them all of his wealth and property; he realizes that they care more for his kingdom and wealth than for him as a person. Wandering cold and alone, he shouts impotently against a storm, "Rage! Blow!" Like King Lear, Big Daddy also recognizes the inherent greed in his offspring, and in the moments before his
death, he too rages impotently ("Lying dying liars!") while his children continue to compete for his fortune.

The first two lines of the Thomas poem also bear relevance to Williams's play. These are the less frequently quoted lines and therefore deserve close attention. They read: "And you, my father, there on the sad height./Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray." Here is a request for the dying father to bless or to curse the child before dying. The presence of these lines on the title page attests to the importance of a dying patriarch's blessing or curse in the play. Much critical interest has focused on the son's errant behavior, his relationship to homosexuality, his drinking, and his concern for truth or mendacity, but few critics address the significance of the father's blessing to this emotionally taut play.

In some of the biblical stories of Genesis (stories with which Williams would have been intimately familiar growing up with his mother's religious family), the dying patriarch would call his sons around him in order to give them his blessing and confer on them his inheritance. Usually the firstborn son would get all or most of the property, unless he had displeased his father or a younger son had distinguished himself in some important way. Thus it was that Joseph, the younger son of Judah, received his father's blessing because Joseph provided for the whole family during a famine. The dying Judah then blessed or cursed his other sons, one by one, according to their deeds.

The framing story of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* clearly involves the distribution of the dying patriarch's property. Maggie introduces the topic within the first three minutes of the play, and the final act is nearly consumed with Gooper and Mae's attempts to wrench the estate away from Brick and Maggie. In addition, the problem of distributing the estate does receive a kind of resolution. Although the patriarch himself does not perform the ritual, the matriarch, Big Mama, assumes his role; she literally uses Big Daddy's language ("I'm talkin' in Big Daddy's language now!") She warns the greedy young people that nothing will be granted until Big Daddy dies, but at the same time, she indicates quite clearly that she intends for the plantation to go to Brick—on the condition that he "pull himself together and take hold of things."

The framing story openly involves the conferral of property, but the imparting of a blessing (or curse), as alluded to in the Dylan passage, is not made apparent. Big Daddy does not appear on his death bed, announcing his legacy and granting his blessings on Brick. Yet there is a moment when Big Daddy *tries* to confer his blessing: during the long duologue in Act II, when he persists, against Brick's wishes, to talk with his son. Big Daddy tries to "straighten out" his son ("now that I'm straightened out, I'm going to straighten out you!") during this talk. He does so in order to bless his son with his new-found philosophy of life.

Brick is a kind of prodigal son who started out as the apple of his father's eye. The star of his high school football team, he went astray when his friend Skipper died. Brick's descent into alcoholism makes him a weak candidate to manage the estate. He is the wayward son, still loved, but unable to assume his father's position because he is "throwing his life away" in drink. Mae and Gooper count on Brick's continued drinking, which will put Gooper in contention for the inheritance. They draw attention to Brick's alcoholism at every opportunity. Big Daddy refuses to give up on his son, however, just as Maggie and Big Mama continue to hope and to nag at Brick.

Unfortunately, Big Daddy is disrupted in his effort to transform Brick, an effort which might have led to a blessing and conferral of property. Big Daddy seems on the verge of blessing Brick's relationship toward Skipper, openly hinting that he would even accept a homosexual relationship ("I'm just saying I understand such....") But Brick cuts him off in mid-sentence, entering into a crescendo of emotion that ends with the abrupt announcement that Big Daddy does, after all, have terminal cancer. This revelation is too much for the father to handle; he departs from the room and from the rest of the play (as Williams wrote it in his first and preferred version).
Does this reading of the play not suffer from the same problem that other readings have? That, in finding the climax in the second act, the third act is superfluous? Although this interpretation does not resolve all of the structural "problems" of the play, it does come to terms with the main focus of the final act: the characters' preoccupation with the distribution of the estate. Furthermore, and rather significantly, the topic of blessings weaves its way through the final scene in a subtle, yet persistent manner.

Early in Act III, Maggie says of Big Daddy, "Bless his sweet old soul," and Big Mama responds, "Yais. bless his heart, where's Brick?" In this simple exchange, the dying patriarch is blessed and the favored son is recalled, reminiscent of the French ritual saying when a king dies, "le roi est mort; vive le roi!" (the king is dead, long live the king!); the old ruler has died and now allegiance is placed with the heir to the throne.

Another blessing comes from the Reverend Tooker, who, as he departs, blesses the family ("God bless you all...on this place"). Although a poor representative of spiritual reverence, his blessing reminds the audience of another way of processing a family death—with greater spiritual feeling and compassion. Mae and Gooper represent the antithesis of benediction when they say that they "have faith in prayer, but...certain matters...have to be discussed." Maggie sarcastically says "Amen" to Gooper's comment that a crisis "brings out the best and the worst" in a family.

The references to blessings in the final act may be slim and tangential, but they contribute to a more coherent appreciation of the play's dramatic progression. For one thing, they cast a more favorable light on Maggie, the character referred to in the play's title. She may be consumed with the thought of material wealth, but she also appears to genuinely love Brick, as she repeatedly claims. Brick declares that he is tired and "wants to go to bed." Although the resolution of his lying in bed with Maggie is not revealed, it can be inferred. Twice Maggie has announced that it is her time to conceive, and Big Mama has pronounced that a child would force Brick to give up drinking and get his life in order. Her wish is the same as the one Big Daddy expresses in Act II before being interrupted by Brick. Big Daddy had wanted to bless his son, and his blessing, although unsaid, presumably may serve to grace his son's marriage bed and the creation of a child.

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Essays and Criticism: Williams's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is, among other related themes, clearly a play about the sexual ambivalence of males toward females. Even the minor characters for whom little or no conflict is presented, are to various degrees or in various ways epicene in nature; the preacher humorously so; the two former owners of the plantation (while they lived) openly and complacently so; and Brick's older brother and foil, shielded by his maternalistic wife's appalling (to Maggie at least) fertility, unconsciously so. (Witness how his and his wife's laments over Big Mamma's lack of affection for him are bluntly explained by the mother: "Gooper never liked Daddy.") Add to this revelation the at least rough similarity between Big Mamma's and Mae's deficient emotional and intellectual development, and Gooper, for what it matters, can be seen as a typically Oedipal son in an obliviously blissful marriage to a woman redolent of his mother if possibly more affectionate.

But there is far more substantial motivation in the play for Big Daddy's preference for Brick as favorite son and heir-apparent than Gooper's repressed hostility for the father, revealed by his transparent hypocrisy and insensitive greed. The reason for Big Daddy's persistent affection for Brick and his reluctance to disinherit him in spite of Brick's childless state and his increasingly irresponsible alcoholism lies in the subtle sexual affinities the father shares with his troubled son.
These affinities are quintessential to the meaning of the play, and Williams in his original version, before acquiescing to a revised third act for Broadway, takes great care to develop them not only through the action but even through form, by a canny (and I think heretofore unnoticed) use of parallel and finally, climactically, identical lines of dialogue.

As the action builds in the brutal second act, Big Daddy shocks his son by alluding to his knowledge of and tolerance for homosexual experiences. When Brick rejects his father's touching attempt to reassure him of his understanding, Big Daddy retaliates by accusing his son of a kind of self-righteous hypocrisy: "You!—dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it!—before you'd face truth with him!" Brick retorts. "His truth, not mine!" Big Daddy summarily concedes the fine point of distinction as irrelevant. But to the reader, it is not irrelevant. Is Brick's assertion justifiable indignation of hysterical repression? Notwithstanding the validity of Williams' observation in his stage directions that "Some mystery should be left in the revelation of a character in a play," which version of the third act has the greater claim to artistic legitimacy depends on the answer to this question; and to answer the question the reader must not just follow the flow of the dialogue that constitutes the action of the play, but observe certain parallel constructions in that dialogue—parallelisms that clarify and extend the meaning of the play through such form. In short, Williams will not sacrifice either the verisimilitude of his action or the realism of his dialogue to give the reader a patently complete psychoanalysis of Brick, but he will reveal more depth of character and meaning to those who will notice the form as well as the function of his art.

To this purpose (and using the lesser example first), the reader should recall Maggie telling Brick how cool, detached, and indifferent he had always been in bed with her, while Big Daddy confesses how he slept with his wife till he was sixty and "never even liked her, never did!" Clearly both father and son had enjoyed a physical competency that surpassed their capacities for psychical union with females.

But far more dramatically, if the original version of the play is used, the reader can find father and son speaking an identical line of dialogue under identical situations: "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true?" That Brick, for the climactic last line of the play, should repeat verbatim to Maggie a line spoken by Big Daddy to Big Momma in the second act of the play is surely no coincidence. The point is not the precise degree of cynicism (unascertainable) contained each time in the line, but simply that the same line is spoken by both men in response to their respective wives' protestations of love.

The play ending with such a subtle parallelism casts a vast additional light (too obvious to be belabored here) on these two main characters, on their poignant relationship with each other and with their wives, and consequently on the play as a whole. The revised third act for Broadway, with its unrealistically sudden, Pollyanna ending, might make for better box office receipts, but Williams' original version attests far superiorly to his creative genius for rich and complex tragedy.


**Essays and Criticism: Review of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was heralded by some as the play in which homosexuality was at last to be presented without evasion. But the miracle has still not happened.

The cat of the title is the heroine, the roof her husband; he would like her to jump off, that is, find a lover. Driven by passions he neither understands nor controls, he takes to drink and envies the moon; the hot cat and the cool moon being the two chief symbols and points of reference in the play. The boy says he has taken to drink because "mendacity is the system we live in." His father, however, explains that this is an evasion: the
real reason is that he is running away from homosexuality. At this point, the author abruptly changes the subject to the father's mortal illness, and he never really gets back to it. One does not of course demand that he "cure" the boy, only that he present him: he should tell the audience, even if he does not tell the boy himself, whether a "cure" is possible, and, if not, whether homosexuality is something this individual can accept as the truth about himself. At present, one can only agree with the father that the story is fatally incomplete.

If some things in Mr. Williams' story are too vaguely defined, others are defined in a manner far too summary and definite. The characters, for example, are pushed around by an obsessively and mechanically sexual interpretation of life. "How good is he (or she) in bed?" is what everyone asks of everyone. Now it seems to me that there are people, even in the world of Tennessee Williams who would not ask this question, especially not of those who are near and dear. And what does the query mean? A girl seems good in bed if you like her; otherwise, she seems bad in bed; and for most of us that is the heart of the matter. Mr. Williams, who apparently disagrees, sends his people to bed rather arbitrarily. The husband's friend, in the new play, goes there with the wife to prove he is not homosexual. She must have been seeing Tea and Sympathy, for she cooperates. In the circumstances we can hardly be surprised that he proves impotent; yet he reaches the startlingly excessive conclusion that he is homosexual; and kills himself. Surely the author can't be assuming that a man is either 100 percent heterosexual or 100 percent homosexual? One wouldn't know; the whole thing is disposed of so grandly in quick, if lengthy, narratives. It is perhaps characteristic that the plot depends for its plausibility upon our not questioning that if a man and woman come together once, a child will result.

Not all the characters are credible. If a girl has a hunch that her husband is homosexual, does she simply clamor for him to sleep with her? Not, certainly, if she is the kind of girl portrayed at the Morosco by Barbara Bel Geddes. Which brings me to the relation of play and production. It seems to be a relation of exact antithesis. When the curtain first goes up, Mr. Williams sends on stage a girl whose dress has been spilled on at dinner; but, so far as the audience can see, the dress is as spotless as it is golden and sparkling. It is the same with her personality and character. From the author: a rather ordinary girl, bornée, perhaps stupid, shabby genteel. From the production: Barbara Bel Geddes, the very type of non-shabby, upper-class gentility, wholesome as a soap ad. It is the same with other characters. Burl Ives may not be right for Williams' shocking vulgarian of a father, but he is handsome and he can act neurotic intensity. It is the whole evening; the script is what is called dirty, but the production—starting with the Mielziner set and its chiefly golden lighting—is aggressively clean.

So what is the function of Mr. Kazan's directing—to mislead? Reviewing my book of NR pieces in The New Leader, Mrs. Kazan says I attribute Machiavellian motives to unmotivated, intuitive acts. That is why I speak here of the function of the directing and not its intention, the result and not the motive. Obviously, the motive is to "make the most of the play"; but the most has been made of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof at the cost, it seems to me, of some conflict with the script. Some directors are content to subordinate themselves to an author and simply try to make his meaning clear. Others bring in extra meanings at the cost of understanding or even obscuring some of the author's meanings. So mystifications and obfuscations take place without Machiavellian intention. And no one, I believe, would deny that Mr. Kazan belongs to the second school. Giving such a "clean" production to such a "dirty" script, he has persuaded some that the dirt is unimportant The show looks wholesome; therefore, it is.

Not that one would prefer to see all this moral squalor spelled out in full natural detail, but that one must not expect uncoordinated double vision to provide a clear picture. In the last act, while the script is resolutely noncommittal, the production strains for commitment to some sort of edifying conclusion. While nothing is actually concluded, images of edification are offered to our eyes. Barbara Bel Geddes is given an Annunciation scene (made of more golden light and a kneeling posture). At the very end, as I said last week,
comes the outward form of that Tea and Sympathy scene without its content. And, in many places throughout, a kind of mutually frustrating activity has the effect of muffling the emotions that are supposed to sound out loud and clear. On the other hand, there are places where director and author stand together. These include all the comic bits. It should not escape notice that Williams is a very gifted humorist. Author and director join forces to help Mildred Dunnock, Pat Hingle, and Madeleine Sherwood create three of those superb tragicomic portraits in secondary roles which are one of the chief attractions of current New York theatre. (I am thinking back to Eileen Heckart in Picnic and Bad Seed, Elaine Stritch and Phillis Love in Bus Stop, etc., etc.) Author and director are together, too, in the best scene of the play—a masterly piece of construction both as writing and as performance—a scene between father (Burl Ives) and son (Ben Gazzara) in which a new and better theme for the play is almost arrived at: that the simple old family relationships still mean something, that, in the midst of all the filth and incoherence and impossibility, people, clumsily, inconsistently, gropingly, try to be nice to each other. In that old goat of a father, there is even some residue of a real Southern gentleman. Anyhow, he is Mr. Williams' best male character to date.

Though I believe the new script is often too naturalistically sordid for theatre, and therefore has to suffer changes Kazanian or otherwise, it is also true that in many passages the writing has its own flamboyant theatricality. The humor, though compulsively "dirty," is, by that token, pungent and, in its effect, rather original. The more serious dialogue, though rhetorical, is unashamedly and often successfully so; the chief rhetorical device, that of a repetition of phrase somewhat a la Gertrude Stein is almost always effective. There is no one in the English-speaking theatre today who can outdo Mr. Williams' dialogue at its best: it is supple, sinuous, hard-hitting and—in cases like the young wife and the father—highly characterized in a finely fruity Southern vein. Mr. Williams' besetting sin is fake poeticizing, fake philosophizing, a straining after big statements. He has said that he only feels and does not think; but the reader's or spectator's impression is too often that he only thinks he feels, that he is an acute case of what D. H. Lawrence called "sex in the head." And not only sex. Sincerity and Truth, of which he often speaks and thinks, tend to remain in the head too—abstractions with initial capitals. His problem is not lack of talent. It is, perhaps, an ambiguity of aim: he seems to want to kick the world in the pants and yet be the world's sweetheart, to combine the glories of martyrdom with the comforts of success. If I say that his problem is to take the initial capitals off Sincerity and Truth, I do not infer that this is easy, only that it is essential, if ever Mr. Williams' great talent is to find a full and pure expression.


**Analysis: Places Discussed**

*Mississippi Delta*

*Mississippi Delta. Fertile farming region of the western part of the state of Mississippi that is bordered by the Mississippi River. Brick and Maggie’s plantation is located in this region, which is dominated by large cotton plantations and strong family traditions. One of these traditions is to pass family plantations from fathers to eldest sons, but only to sons who have children to continue the tradition. In Tennessee Williams’s play, Brick’s father, Big Daddy Pollitt, is dying. He wishes to leave the plantation to Brick but hesitates because Brick has become a drunkard, and his wife, Maggie, has yet to produce the necessary grandson to carry on the Delta tradition.

**Plantation house**

Plantation house. Home of Brick and Maggie, whose large and beautiful bedroom opens on a veranda that encircles the second floor of the house. The room is clearly fit for important people to occupy and hold court;
by the end of the play, the entire seventeen member cast has been received there. Also the place in which marriages are celebrated, the room is ironically a soft and beautiful prison in which Maggie’s desire for Brick goes unrequited. No matter how she appeals to Brick to make love, he rejects her, thereby turning their bedroom into a place where Maggie feels tormented, trapped like a cat on a hot tin roof.

**Analysis: Historical Context**

**Domestic Life in the 1950s**
The year of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof’s* debut, 1955, was an interesting time for male and female relationships, a pre-feminist/pre-gay rights era when ideas about alternative life styles were incubating, though not openly emerging. According to the era's social norms, there simply was no viable alternative for the traditional, mom, dad, and two children family pattern that was portrayed in television shows such as *Father Knows Best*; in reality, few American families came close to this idealized version of life.

The 1950s also saw young people begin to question the dictates of society; many began experimenting with drugs, dress, dance, and language that challenged convention—though in a rather tame way compared to the counterculture movement of the 1960s. Actor James Dean, a role model of disaffected arrogance and diffidence, starred in his two hit films in 1955, *East of Eden* and *Rebel without a Cause*, then died unexpectedly at the age of 24 in a car wreck that September. He was instantly catapulted from film star to mythic icon. Like Dean's popular film characters, it became hip to smoke with a squint, wear a black leather jacket, and stand apart from society in aloof judgement.

**The Beats**
Nineteen-fifty-five was also the time of literary introspection, black turtlenecks, and booze—all hallmarks of what became known as the Beat Generation. The Beats, however, did not include everyone, just a segment of mostly intellectual nonconformists. In 1955 poet Allen Ginsberg (aged 29) read "Howl" to an small but appreciative audience in Berkeley, California. The poem would become a landmark in Beat literature (along with Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*), contributing to the general "hipness" of the literary arts with its jazzy pastiche of the beat life executed in one long, breathless sentence. The phrase the "Beat Generation" had been introduced to the world in a 1952 *New York Times Magazine* article written by John Clellon Holmes, a writer on the periphery of the Beat movement. Holmes explained that for the Beat Generation "the valueless abyss of modern life is unbearable." This was the generation that grew up with the ever-present knowledge that "the bomb" would inevitably be dropped. Drinking and drugs were a common method of escape for a time. Cynicism and idealism fused into a posture of studied indifference—with an element of wistful hope.

**Women in 1950s Culture**
The majority of women in the 1950s wore gut-pinching girdles and accepted their role as home-makers. For a woman of this era to want a career was unique but to want a career and a family was unprecedented. Women were expected to choose one or the other, and most women chose (as they were expected to) the suburban home, two children, and a working husband (who counted on his wife to clean house, make dinner, and take care of the kids). Abortions could be obtained but not easily (in many U.S. states, the procedure was illegal); moreover, not wanting a child was considered a social crime. If a woman finished college, she was expected to have found a husband there, not a job. Most women had children very early in their marriages and lives, and they stayed home to raise them. If they felt disgruntled about their status, they had few avenues for expressing their complaints; women who were restless were seen as "neurotic" and in need of psychological treatment. A child was often seen as a solution to marital stress. It would give both parents something to focus on and make them face reality and their problems.
Analysis: Literary Style

Symbolism
Symbolism is the use of objects to evoke concepts or ideas. Williams has often been accused of excessive symbolism in many of his plays. Obvious symbols in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are the cat, the moon, and Brick's crutch; equally prevalent are the diseases of alcoholism and cancer.

Alcoholism and cancer are linked in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* as two diseases representing problems in the spiritual well-being of their victims. Brick embraces alcohol as a way to keep his guilty feelings from surfacing. At the same time, the alcohol has slowly begun to make a slave of Brick, just as cancer is slowly taking over his father. Alcoholism is a self-imposed form of death-in-life when its victims drink in order to achieve a state of oblivion, as Brick does. It is a disease that will ultimately lead to death as cancer does.

Big Daddy did not choose to have cancer, but his state of illness represents his life—apparently healthy on the outside yet rotting from within. He has all of the trappings of a successful man, but his marriage and family are not equal to his financial success, and his desire to celebrate life by draping a girl in mink and "humping her from hell to breakfast" has a ring of hollowness to it. He has become a shell containing little but disease, as has his son, who has constructed his own shell out of alcohol.

Brick has a broken ankle, itself a symbolic castration, and he hobbles to and fro on the stage using a crutch. The noise and commotion of the crutch draw attention to his constant trips for more liquor. Brick either drops the crutch or has it taken from him no fewer than five times in the first two acts. At different times, Maggie and Big Daddy each withhold the crutch from him in order to elicit a promise or a response, and once Brick refuses to sit with his mother, because he prefers to stay on his crutch. The crutch stands for an emotional scaffolding holding his spiritual and emotional self together, but it is all too clear that it is an inadequate support and can easily be toppled.

Brick avoids his family through drink, preferring the company of the cool, silent moon. In much of literature, the moon represents madness, but in this play it suggests the silent detachment that Brick desires. Yet in a way, his longing for the moon—serene but also inert and cold as death—is a form of madness, because it is a departure from living. Counterpoised against his longing for detachment (death) is Maggie the Cat's longing for life. Cats are scrappy, self-sufficient, calculating. The cat is also a creature, Brick reminds Maggie, who can jump or be thrown from a considerable height and still land on its feet. Maggie is like an alley cat—a survivor—and she offers to share her skills with Brick.

Setting
There are several aspects regarding the setting of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* that bear scrutiny. The entire play takes place in an upstairs bed-sitting room of the Polliti plantation. In other words, it is a room for sleeping as well as for living. This in itself is significant, since accepting one's sexuality, living with it, is one important theme of the play. In addition, the decor of the room and presumably of the rest of the home is also significant. In the "Notes for the [Set] Designer," Williams explains that the home is decorated in "Victorian with a touch of the Far East." These are two polar opposites in terms of the mood they represent. The Victorian era was known for its prim morals, at least on the surface. Women wore long dresses that covered them from neckline to ankle, although the dresses also accentuated and, in some cases even enhanced, the bust and posterior. The play takes place after the Victorian era, so this choice in style deliberately recalls the rigid morals and conflicting attitudes of an earlier time.

The "touch of the Far East" is another deliberate gesture. As Edward Said explained in his 1978 work, *Orientalism*, the Far East has long been associated with wantonness and sensuality. Williams emphasizes the significance of the manor's decor through allusions to the pair of bachelors, presumably a homosexual couple,
who previously owned (and decorated) the mansion. Thus, as Williams explains in the set notes, the room evokes their ghosts, "gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon." Williams wanted his scenery to evoke sensuality and also lend a mood of dignity and grace to his subject. Furthermore, the set has a dreamy, surrealistic atmosphere accomplished with soft lighting and a night sky instead of a ceiling, adding the dimension of timelessness.

**Analysis: Compare and Contrast**

**1955:** In the United States, only 34% of women between the ages of 20 and 54 work outside of the home. Most married women are dependent upon their husbands' or fathers' financial support and women are expected to be full-time homemakers.

**Today:** Nearly 80% of women between the ages of 20 and 54 work outside of the home. Women and men share almost equal wage earnings. In many families, both husband and wife work and share in the domestic duties.

**1955:** Married women are expected to want, and to have, children. A woman who can not produce a child is seen as incomplete by society.

**Today:** Families consist of many combinations of parents who work and care for children, and having children is no longer a must for women, although many women still feel biological and social pressure to bear a child.

**1955:** Society has very strict prejudices regarding open homosexuality. Gay men are forced to hide or repress their sexual activity, leading to the phrase "in the closet."

**Today:** Though there is still considerable prejudice, society is much more accepting and understanding of homosexual relationships. This open culture has led to many gays coming "out of the closet" and publicly proclaiming their sexuality. Many have been encouraged by famous role models such as singer Melissa Etheridge, actor Ellen DeGeneres, and politician Barney Frank.

**Analysis: Topics for Further Study**

Why does Maggie's announcement that she is pregnant seem like a viable solution to her? Will it solve her and Brick's problems?

Research Southern Gothic literature. In what ways is *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* exemplary of this genre?

How have women's economic and social roles changed since the first production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955? In what ways have they remained unchanged?

What elements normally associated with the Antebellum (post-Civil War) South appear in the play? What more modern elements appear? Explain how elements from such diverse eras can coexist in this play.

**Analysis: Media Adaptations**

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was adapted for film in 1958 by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). It was written (with Jame Poe) and directed by Richard Brooks and stars Paul Newman as Brick, Elizabeth Taylor as Maggie, and Burl Ives, who reprises his stage role, as Big Daddy. Both Newman and Taylor received Academy Award
nominations for their performances. Taylor's is considered by many critics to be the definitive portrayal of Maggie the Cat. It is available on videotape from MGM/GBS Home Video.

In 1976 Lawrence Olivier tried his hand at Big Daddy with Maureen Stapleton as Big Mama and the real-life husband and wife team of Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood as Brick and Maggie. Directed by Robert Moore.

Jessica Lange was Maggie in a 1984 television production that also included David Dukes as Gooper, Tommy Lee Jones as Brick, and Rip Torn as Big Daddy. The production is available from MGM and Vestron home video.

**Analysis: What Do I Read Next?**

**King Lear**, William Shakespeare's tragedy about a king who disperses his kingdom to his daughters only to find that they cared more for his wealth than for him. He finds himself abandoned in his old age. Japanese director Akira Kurosawa reinterpreted the Lear story in his 1985 film *Ran*, which involves ancient Japanese royalty in a similar inheritance dispute. American author Jane Smiley adapted the Lear legend in her 1991 novel *A Thousand Acres*.

John Updike's 1960 novel *Rabbit Run* concerns a disaffected salesman who abandons his alcoholic wife and their child to look for "freedom," only to return, guilt-ridden and still dissatisfied.

William Faulkner's character, Quentin Compson, who appears in his novels *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom*, kills himself when he recognizes humankind's essentially evil nature.

In his popular *Tales of the City* series Armistead Maupin offers touching and realistic vignettes of the homosexual lifestyle in San Francisco.

Brett Harvey's *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (1993), recounts the stories of several women as they look back on their coming of age in 1950s America.

**Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading**

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