Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

In his Memoirs (1975) Tennessee Williams (1911–1983) admits that if he had to choose his favorite play, it would be *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; and since its opening on Broadway on 24 March 1955, it has remained, through all its permutations, one of Williams's most popular. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is among Williams's "big three," which also includes *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). While Brian Parker points to several biographical parallels in the play, he states that "real life models remain problematic." The seed of the play comes from a short story Williams published in 1952, "Three Players of a Summer Game." The short story has little in common with the plot of the play, but it does contain a husband named Brick who is an alcoholic and his take-charge wife, Margaret.

Williams, who was born Thomas Lanier Williams III in Columbus, Mississippi, and moved to St. Louis, Missouri, in 1919, won his second Pulitzer Prize for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, having won the first for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The inspiration for the title of the play comes from an expression Williams's father liked to use: "You're making me as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof." Critics have also noted the influence of Williams's father in his creation of the domineering character of Big Daddy.

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is one of Williams's most tightly wrought efforts. The action of the play primarily unfolds through the dialogue; the play occurs mostly in one setting, Brick and Maggie's bedroom; and it takes place in real time. The first act belongs to Margaret, or "Maggie," as she confronts Brick regarding his lack of sexual drive, their childless marriage, the knowledge that Brick's father Big Daddy, though he does not yet know it, has terminal cancer, and the problem of Brick's older brother Gooper and his wife May preparing to take Big Daddy's plantation and wealth from him. Maggie has had a brief liaison with Skipper, Brick's former friend and teammate in professional football, who has committed suicide after confessing his homosexual attraction to Brick. The second act belongs to Big Daddy as he confronts Brick with his drinking and his relationship with Maggie and Skipper. During their argument, Brick reveals that Big Daddy has been lied to and is going to die. In the third act, these elements come together as the family meets to discuss the crisis. Gooper, who has children who are potential heirs of the plantation, wants Big Daddy to sign everything over to him; and Maggie, then, lies, claiming she is pregnant with Brick's child. In the end Big Daddy refuses to give up his plantation, wanting to spend his remaining days touring his land; Maggie and Brick go to bed attempting to produce an heir.

In terms of human emotions and motivation, the play is more complex than can be captured in a brief summary. The play concludes with an uneasy resolution: Big Daddy decides to spend the remainder of his days on the land he loves and feels he belongs on while there is an uneasy peace between Maggie and Brick. Whether or not they have taken care of all of their problems is left unresolved, since their only act of resolution is going to bed together. There is also the unresolved situation with Gooper and May and how they fit into the future Big Daddy bequeaths to his family.

Modern criticism of the play tends to center on the issue of homosexuality in the relationship between Brick and Skipper, but other studies of the play may prove more worthwhile. These studies include Jordan Y. Miller's "The Three Halves of Tennessee Williams's World" (1977), Benjamin Nelson's *Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work* (1961), and Roger Boxill's *Tennessee Williams* (1988). Signi Flack and Felicia Hardison Londre provide useful overviews of the play in their critical surveys of Williams's work, and Donald Spoto's biography, published shortly after Williams's death, is a fine resource. Not to be missed is the 1958 film version of the play with Elizabeth Taylor as the definitive Maggie the Cat and Burl Ives as Big Daddy.

**Further Information**


**Primary Works**

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: New Directions, 2004).

Williams's "final" dramatic version of the play, completed in 1974.

Contains two dozen selections with numerous references to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.


Contains both the complete reading version and the acting version of act 3 of the play, which incorporates changes based on suggestions by the director, Elia Kazan.


Details the rewriting of act 3 and explains why the play was Williams's favorite.


Contains characters who appear in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*: Brick, an alcoholic husband, and Margaret, his domineering wife.

**Bibliography**


A bibliographic essay that covers all aspects of the play from autobiographical references to individual characters and symbols. The work contains an extensive bibliography.


Contains thirty-six entries for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

**Biography**


A literary biography that sees the play as a series of dualities: "a world of mendacity, avarice and hypocrisy" paired against a world of "nobility and dignity and tenderness and love and courage" in some of the characters in the play.


An excellent biography of Williams, which includes discussion on the background and history of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

**Criticism**

Sees the central issue of the play as the "subject of the loss in time." Big Daddy and Brick are relics of the past who have no place in the world of a "modern corporate nation."


Reviews the major action of the play and the critical responses to it at the time of its first performance.


Analyzes the play and discusses its reviews and revivals.


Reviews the different versions of the play, noting how each affects the differing perspectives about the play, its meaning, and its characters.


Compares and contrasts Maggie and Brick with Stanley and Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Contends Maggie and Brick's struggle ends happily.


An excellent introduction to the play with several important biographical connections and commentary concerning the different versions of the play.


Sees the themes of the play as "life's inherent corruption and 'mendacity.'" Brick withdraws to a "psychological Death," while Maggie "embraces Life."

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