Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

SUMMARY

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a play in three acts set in the 1950s with action occurring mainly in one room of a plantation home situated on "the biggest estate in the [Mississippi] Delta." Brothers Brick and Gooper have brought their families to the estate to celebrate the 65th birthday of their father, Big Daddy, who has been ill but believes that he is getting better. Only his sons and their wives know that Big Daddy is dying of cancer, and they have not told Big Mama. The childless couple, Brick and Maggie, are goaded frequently by Gooper and Mae, whose five unruly children run all over the house. The first act opens with Maggie rushing into her bedroom to change clothes, because "one of those no-neck monsters hit me with a hot buttered biscuit." As Maggie complains about Brick's five obnoxious nephews and nieces, Brick provides only perfunctory remarks from offstage before he appears to the audience, a handsome and charming man, former football star and sports announcer who has retreated into a haze of alcohol. He is drinking, and he is wearing a cast and walking with the aid of a crutch, having broken his ankle. The first act is mainly a *monologue* spoken by the beautiful but nervous Maggie, who complains about the children, speaks about Big Daddy's cancer, and suggests that Gooper and Mae have produced children simply to ensure that they will inherit the estate. The irony is that Maggie truly loves Big Daddy for his honesty in dealing with people, and he loves her vivacity. Big Daddy also favors Brick over Gooper, but he knows that Brick's drinking, irresponsible nature, and childless marriage would make it hard to justify leaving Brick control of the estate. Unable to decide, Big Daddy has not made out a will.

Maggie's monologue grows in intensity until she reaches the subject that Brick has made taboo: his late friend Skipper, also a football hero, whose friendship with Brick threatened Maggie's married contentment. Long ago, Maggie had confronted Skipper and charged him with "unnatural feelings" for Brick. One night, she drank extensively with Skipper, then gave him the chance to prove that he was heterosexual by offering to sleep with him, but he refused. From that point, Skipper's life had disintegrated into drug and alcohol abuse until he died. Embittered by his friend's death, Brick accuses Maggie of "dirtying" his friendship, "the one great true thing" in his life.

One of the nieces barges into the room and taunts Brick and Maggie for having no children, which makes Maggie beg Brick to make love with her and to conceive a child, because she is in her fertile time of the month. Angered by her demand, Brick shouts at her, "How in hell on earth do you imagine—that you're going to have a child by a man that can't stand you?" Maggie responds, "That's a problem that I will have to work out."

In the second act, Big Daddy enters with the family. Big and coarse, he is a one-time farmer who worked on the plantation for years and inherited it from its former owners, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, two lifelong bachelors who were openly homosexual. Big Daddy's respect for his former employers and his experiences traveling the country as a hobo have given him a tolerance for all kinds of behavior. Disgusted by the scheming of Gooper and Mae, he tries to talk with Brick, who continues to drink until Big Daddy pulls away his crutch and demands to know why Brick drinks. Although Brick ignores his questions, Big Daddy continues to probe. He says he knows that Brick's drinking began with Skipper's death. Brick angrily accuses Big Daddy of thinking "Skipper and me were a pair of dirty old men? . . . fucking sissies? Queer?" Brick then protests that their friendship was "a pure an' true thing an' that's not normal" in a mendacious world. He reveals that Skipper had telephoned him long distance just before his death and confessed drunkenly to his feelings, and that Brick had hung up on him. Big Daddy tells Brick that the disgust he feels "is disgust with yourself," to which Brick replies, "It is Skipper's truth," only to hear Big Daddy chastise him and tell him, "His truth, okay! But you wouldn't face it with him!" Brick becomes incensed and reveals that Big Daddy is dying from cancer, "You told me! I told you!" Big Daddy turns on his heel and walks out, muttering and cursing "all lying dying liars."

In the third act the family tells Big Mama about the cancer diagnosis. Gooper and Mae try to convince her to sign legal papers that would place trusteeship for the estate into their hands, but she surprises them with her vehement refusal to discuss it. Ignoring Gooper and Mae, Big Mama tells Brick and Maggie that Big Daddy would be very proud if "you gave him a child of yours." As Brick remains silent, Maggie boldly looks at her mother-in-law and announces that she and Brick are going to have a child. As Big Mama rushes joyfully to tell Big Daddy, Mae screams that Maggie is lying; she has eavesdropped on their arguments and knows that Brick has rejected Maggie's sexual advances. When Maggie and Brick return to their room, she thanks him for supporting her lie and tells him that they will make the lie come true.
The play as Williams originally wrote it ended with that line, but Elia Kazan, director of the stage production, convinced the playwright to rewrite the ending to bring Big Daddy back on stage. Thus, in the alternate ending that is most often used in staging the play, the family gathers in the living room to give Big Daddy his birthday presents. Big Mama praises the cashmere robe that Brick has given, and Maggie kneels before Big Daddy's chair to tell him that her birthday present is the news that "A child is coming, sired by Brick, and out of Maggie the Cat!" In the face of Mae's protests, Big Daddy touches Maggie and says, "This girl has life in her body. That's no lie." Brick supports Maggie's assertion and, when they return to their bedroom, even expresses his admiration for her when he sees her take his liquor and crutch out of reach. As she turns out the light, she tells him that she will return life and love to him. The play ends as she gently touches his cheek and states, "I'm determined to do it—and nothing's more determined than a cat on a tin roof—is there? Is there, baby?"

CENSORSHIP HISTORY

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* won both the Pulitzer Prize and the Drama Critics' Circle Award for the 1954–55 season, and ran for 694 performances on Broadway, but performances of the play have ignited controversy in the United States and in England. Longtime theater critic John Gassner wrote in 1960 that he had little to say about *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* except to acknowledge that its vivid characterizing power makes most playwrights look like anemic pygmies. If Williams had anything of consequence to say in his family drama he did not manage to get it across." Gould described the play as "blatant with vulgarity," yet approved that it "blares out in praise of the vim and vigor of a healthy sex life." *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* contained subject matter and language that were risqué for the conservative 1950s, and the dialogue is decidedly frank as the characters discuss homosexuality, greed, and sexual desire. When the play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, many members of the theater establishment expressed shock and recalled the controversy that had emerged in 1925 when Hamlin Garland, the senior member of the Pulitzer Prize committee, had refused to recommend *What Price Glory?* because of its earthy language, despite the support of two Pulitzer jurors. He pressured them to vote instead for Sidney Howard's *They Knew What They Wanted.* Although the Pulitzer Prize committee accepted the language of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* critics were less tolerant, and several suggested that the story could easily be told and the realism maintained without the rough dialogue. In a review for the *New York Daily News,* critic John Chapman condemned Williams's dialogue and wrote, "the considerable amount of dirty talk in it was mere boyish bravado and rather pointless." The language in the play led to difficulties with the authorities in New York City two weeks after the play opened. Edward T. McCaffrey, commissioner of licenses, received complaints from numerous individuals but took specific action only after the Children's Aid Society lodged a complaint with his office that the children in the cast were being exposed to "vulgar language" and "unhealthy suggestions" in the play. The commissioner attended the play, then conferred backstage with directors to determine the impact of the language on the child cast members. McCaffrey identified specific passages that he and the Children's Aid Society had found to contain objectionable language, and the directors assured him that the children remained in their dressing rooms while the identified dialogue was spoken on stage.

Although McCaffrey was assured that the children were protected, he demanded that directors cut one off-color joke from the play, claiming that it was gratuitous and added nothing to the action. The directors complied. The joke, which appears in Act III after Brick and Big Daddy have completed their intense discussion regarding Skipper, serves to underscore Big Daddy's earthy nature. As he tells the joke, he uses Brick as his straight man, asking him at intervals, "Ain't that a nice way to put it, Brick?" and "Ain't I tellin' this story in decent language, Brick?" to which Brick replies at one point, "Yes, sir, too fuckin' decent!" The joke concerns a young married couple who take their son to the zoo on a Sunday to look at the animals. They see "this ole bull elephant" who is caged next to a female elephant in heat, and the bull "had somethin' else on his mind which was bigger'n peanuts." The joke describes the manner in which the bull, which "still had a couple of fornications left in him," begins to butt his head against the cage and "there was a conspicuous change in his profile—very conspicuous!" When the little boy asks his parents about the elephant's physiological change, "His mama said, 'Oh, that's—nothin'!—His papa said, 'She's just spoiled!'" McCaffrey also asked that Brick's use of slang regarding homosexuality be edited out, changes with which the directors also complied.

The play ran into greater difficulty with censors in London the following year, because public discussion of the subject of homosexuality was still largely unacceptable, especially on stage. The Lord Chamberlain, still in control of the licensing of plays for performance on the public stage, refused to grant *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* a license for performance, so the producers staged the play at club theaters, among them the Comedy Theatre in Piccadilly Circus in London, which opened...
in 1881 specializing in comic opera but became a private club in the 1950s to avoid the prevailing tendency toward censorship. Such clubs provided private performances for members only.

Further Information


Copyright © 2020 Infobase Learning. All Rights Reserved.