

## ANALYSIS

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)

Tennessee Williams

(1911-1983)

“On his sixty-fifth birthday, Big Daddy Pollitt, vulgar, fat, ruthless, and the richest cotton planter of the Mississippi Delta, is surrounded by his family: Brick, his favorite son, a withdrawn, alcoholic ex-football hero, and Brick’s wife Maggie, the passionate, vital ‘cat’ who is unrelenting in her struggle to get what she wants; Gooper, the hypocritical, avaricious elder son whose wife Mae is about to produce their sixth ‘no-neck monster’ child; and Big Mama, his loud, garrulous wife of 40 years.

Maggie, determined to have marital relations with her remote husband and to produce the heir for the plantation, turns on Brick to tell him that she and his closest friend, Skipper, now dead, had slept together because each needed the warmth that Brick’s ‘godlike’ superiority and ideally pure relationship would not provide, and that in forcing Skipper to face the truth of his latent homosexuality she drove him to drink, drugs, and destruction. Soon after, Big Daddy makes Brick see that his alcoholism stems not from a noble disgust with the ‘mendacity’ of the world, but from disgust with himself for refusing to help Skipper when the basic nature of their relationship became evident.

Faced by his own truth, Brick retaliates by telling Big Daddy that he is dying of cancer. Aware that there is no will and anxious to inherit the rich plantation, Gooper and Mae tell Big Mama the truth about her husband’s health and are surprised by her outraged revulsion toward the trusteeship they have had prepared. Wanting to make Big Daddy happy and determined not to be disinherited, Maggie announces that she and Brick are expecting a child, and later that evening, having locked away the liquor, she sets about attempting to make the lie come true, hoping both to rekindle Brick’s desire and to save him from his cold detachment and death-in-life.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83) 127

“*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) is set on a Mississippi plantation owned by ‘Big Daddy’ Pollitt, an energetic planter who rose from a ‘red-neck’ overseer to become a multimillionaire. As the play opens Big Daddy is dying of cancer, a fact known to everyone in his family but his wife Big Mama. His children, who have gone to college and become ‘respectable’ and successful, now gather around to fight over the spoils. An elder son Gooper and his wife Mae have brought their five children to the plantation to win Big Daddy’s sympathy, but the howling and ill-mannered brats only set his nerves on edge. His younger son Brick, an alcoholic, takes little part in the controversy; but Brick’s wife Margaret, the ‘cat on a hot tin roof,’ nervous and sexually frustrated, determines to fight vigorously for her husband’s rights.

The climactic scene occurs when Big Daddy, who has been assured that his illness is curable and that he will soon be well, has a conversation with Brick in which he begins to probe into his son’s reasons for drinking. This reason Brick has scarcely admitted even to himself: it is a secret fear that his affection for a college friend, Skipper, was an unnatural one. Margaret, angry over Brick’s failure to make love to her, has accused him of this, and now under his father’s grilling he realizes it is true. In his desperate effort to get back at Big Daddy he tells him the truth that he is incurably ill of cancer. In a mixture of despair and hot-tempered anger at the lies that have been told him, Big Daddy shuts himself up in his room.

Then, in a family conference, the truth about Big Daddy is told to Big Mama, and Gooper attempts to wheedle her into giving him control of the property. Margaret, seeing her cause failing, tries to rally Brick to help her, but he is apathetic. Finally, in a last desperate effort to win Big Daddy’s sympathy, she sends word to him that she is going to bear Brick’s baby. As the play ends she has determined to make this lie a reality, and in her dogged strength of character she finds the means to force Brick into serving as the father

for her child. The ending is inconclusive, but the implication is that the flighty but courageous Margaret has won her battle against the hostility of her relatives and the apathy of her husband.

For the Broadway production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) Williams was induced to write a new third act which differed considerably from the original printed version, chiefly as the result of suggestions from the director Elia Kazan. The chief difference between the two versions is that the Broadway ending is more specific and leaves less to be conjectured, also that a definite change is shown in the character and attitude of Brick. Some ambiguity was also felt about the characterization of the heroine in the original version. As Williams later wrote, Kazan 'felt that the character of Margaret, while he understood that I sympathized with her and liked her myself, should be, if possible, more clearly sympathetic to the audience.' This sentence is an important clue to the character of Margaret; she is by no means a dangerously hysterical neurotic like the Blanche of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, merely a healthy and normally sexed young woman who has been turned into a 'cat on a hot tin roof' by her husband's inattention. In the Broadway version of the play this point is made clear by Big Daddy's acceptance of Margaret in the final scene."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature* 4  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 413-15

"The famous changes in the last act of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*...had no bearing on the essential flaw of the play (which was the elusive ambiguity of the homosexual theme) but they did introduce into a bleak work a hopeful note of uplift compatible with Broadway's desire to remain well liked. The trespassing of the director on the playwright's domain creates an atmosphere in which dramatic literature is very rarely produced, and it remains the knottiest artistic dilemma of the American stage. It is not to be solved, as Tennessee Williams suggests, by having a 'good psychiatrist in attendance at rehearsals,' but rather by the playwright's strong resistance to commercial pressures when he is certain his work is being cheapened."

Robert Brustein  
"Why American Plays Are Not Literature"  
(Harper & Brothers 1959)

"He was born in Columbus, Mississippi, in the northeastern part of the state, but spent his first six years or so in his Episcopal grandfather's rectory at Clarksdale, in the Delta. His father, a large, boisterous fellow much like the character Big Daddy in his notable *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, was a traveling salesman for the International Shoe Company.... Williams went on a summer tour of Europe conducted by his grandfather. There in Cologne Cathedral he had some sort of mystical experience, or so he thought, which anticipated by several years his joining the Catholic Church....

During [his] college years he experimented widely with literary forms, published poems and stories, and began to write plays. He also experimented with sex and discovered his own orientation to be homosexual.... His penchant for innovation continued undiminished, and often it tried the patience of producers, who believed, rightly or wrongly, that Williams's real talent lay in his genius for exploring and presenting realistically the deleterious effects of modern materialism and prejudice upon persons, like himself, of unconventional sensibilities. By his own testimony, much of what he wrote may be thought of as self-therapy, but the best of it dramatizes a search for love that is universal--love conceived of as acceptance, the kind proffered to Shannon and other characters in *Night of the Iguana* by the selfless Hannah Jelkes."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.  
*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 94-96

Michael Hollister (2015)