Cat on a Hot Tin Roof Study Guide

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof by Tennessee Williams

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Introduction

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Tennessee Williams's third significant play (following *The Glass Menagerie* [1944] and A *Streetcar Named Desire* [1947]), was a huge commercial success, running for 694 performances on Broadway. It won Williams his third New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and his second Pulitzer Prize (his first being for *Streetcar).* Elia Kazan produced and directed the play in 1955 at the Morosco Theatre, after asking Williams to revise the third act to improve its dramatic progression. The published play script includes both the original version and the one revised for Kazan, appended by a preface in which Williams defends his original version. He continued to prefer the original, even after making further changes for a 1974 revival.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is rather loosely based on Williams's short story "Three Players of a Summer Game," a narrative that reveals the influence of D. H. Lawrence on the playwright's early work. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,* however, has all of the earmarks of Williams's unique dramas, involving as it does his emotionally biographical themes of ambivalence in sexual orientation, disaffection, and difficulty in maintaining intimate relationships. The play concerns a young man's disaffection and descent into alcoholism following the death of his college friend, and his wife's efforts to make him stop drinking so that he can take over his dying father's plantation.

Although criticized as being overly "violent" and maudlin, the powerful second act, in which the father, Big Daddy, confronts his alcoholic son. Brick, about the nature of his relationship with his friend. Skipper, is. considered a hallmark, of contemporary drama—Williams at his best. In that one long and vivid scene, the playwright portrays a profound relationship of mutual trust and respect, one that nevertheless fails to bridge the two men's weaknesses.

Author Biography

Tennessee Williams (born Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1911) was (he second child of a genteel southern belle and a traveling salesman who came from a long line of frontiersmen and glib politicians. Sickly and weakened by a life-threatening bout with diphtheria, the quiet child preferred books to sports, earning him the scornful nickname "'Miss Nancy" from his robust father. Williams spent his early childhood in Tennessee in the rectory of his maternal grandfather, an Episcopal minister, mostly in the company of his older sister Rose and his domineering mother. Edwina. The conflict between his puritan maternal family and the cavalier sensuality of his father's side of the family warred within him for the rest of his life. This duality fueled his art with tension and plagued his life with bouts of mental breakdowns, addictions, and depression.

Williams's art reflected the emotional currents of his life: guilt over the deterioration of his schizophrenic sister Rose (who underwent one of the first prefrontal lobotomies to be performed in the United States), the masking of his own homosexuality (which he did not reveal publicly until 1970), and his addictions to alcohol and sleeping pills. In his plays, themes of cannibalism, rape, mutilation, sexual frustration, and twisted love disrupt the complacent southern decorum his troubled character struggle to maintain.

Williams published his first short story at age seventeen and established himself as a cornerstone of Southern Gothic drama in his early thirties with *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), a nearly autobiographical version of Rose's stunted social coining out. For the next forty years he would produce a new play every two years, with his most acclaimed works appearing in the early half of this period. *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) both won Pulitzer Prizes. In his heyday, Williams was the *enfant terrible* of contemporary theater: a gifted provocateur who delighted in shocking and titillating his audiences. Ill-health compounded by his addictions led to a complete mental and physical collapse in 1969, and his work, evermore lascivious, never recovered the vitality of his early plays. He died in 1983. eight years after the publication **of** his *Memoirs,* in which he revealed the intimate and sometimes sordid details of his tortured personal life.

Plot Summary

Act I

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof lakes 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 m 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.

Act II

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."

Act III

[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.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is a three-act play showcasing the turbulent lives of the Pollitt family, led by Big Daddy Pollitt. The family lives on a Southern plantation in Mississippi in the mid-1950s. The plot revolves around the two main characters, Brick Pollitt and his wife, Margaret, informally called Maggie. Maggie is the play's namesake, which is attributed to her high spirits and perseverance.

The play opens in Brick and Maggie's bedroom, which also serves as a sitting room in the Pollitt plantation. Maggie enters the room in a huff because she needs to change her dress, which was soiled by a buttered biscuit thrown by one of Gooper's children. Gooper is Brick's brother and is married to Mae. Gooper and Mae's family includes five children with the sixth on the way.

Brick is in the shower and cannot hear Maggie, so he asks her to repeat herself. With increasing agitation, Maggie yells to Brick once more and calls Gooper and Mae's children little no-neck monsters. Maggie says that she would love to wring the necks of the obnoxious children, if only they had any. To Maggie, the children are fat little heads sitting on fat little bodies with no connection in between.

As Maggie undresses, she continues to relate the events of dinner that night, which Brick missed. Brick has recently broken his ankle, which keeps him nearly immobile in the upstairs bedroom. It is Maggie's opinion that Gooper and Mae intend to be named the primary beneficiaries in Big Daddy's will. They have foregone their normal summer hiatus to the Great Smoky Mountains in favor of staying at the plantation in order to endear themselves and their children to the patriarch.

Big Daddy can barely tolerate Gooper and Mae's brood, favoring his younger son Brick. Brick does not have children, which is a situation that Maggie is more than anxious to remedy. Brick emerges from the shower and stands on his good foot while drying his hair with a towel. Maggie tries to get Brick to understand the urgency of the inheritance situation, given the unfortunate news that Big Daddy is dying of cancer. This is new information to Brick, who has not yet heard this report.

Brick has also missed the dinner conversation, which included a discussion of admitting Brick to the Rainbow Hill treatment center for alcoholics, as well as Brick and Maggie's childlessness.

According to Maggie, Brick has done nothing to alter the views of the family with his irresponsible behavior of excessive drinking, quitting his job and most recently his injury from trying to jump hurdles at the high school football field a few nights before. Brick essentially ignores Maggie's voice, but she persists and tells Brick that he is the one with the advantage in the family because Big Daddy dotes on him. It doesn't hurt that

Big Daddy finds Maggie very attractive. Brick finds this vulgar, but Maggie is encouraged because his attraction to her is another positive factor weighing in their favor.

As Maggie talks, she moves to her dressing table but doesn't see Brick staring at her. Maggie continues to say that Gooper thinks that he is more socially advanced because of his marriage to Mae, who came from a prominent family in Memphis. According to Maggie, Mae's family lost all their money but knew how to social climb, which was their only redeeming skill. Suddenly Maggie catches Brick's gaze in her mirror and asks what he is thinking of when he looks at her in that way. It startles Maggie, but Brick denies that his look had any meaning.

Maggie's admission of loneliness does not faze, Brick who casually asks his wife if she would prefer to live alone. Maggie is indignant and intends to stay in her currently unfulfilling marriage until it returns to its former state of satisfaction. An intensely sensual creature, Maggie hopes to kindle a new spark in Brick and suggests that she give him an alcohol rub to relieve his discomfort in the summer heat.

Brick refuses the attention and Maggie wonders out loud why Brick cannot lose his good looks as most drinking men do. If Brick were to become unattractive, Maggie might be able to endure her state of sexual deprivation with a bit more grace.

Maggie tells Brick that he was a wonderful lover, probably attributable to his cool detachment. Probing further, Maggie asks Brick if he was thinking about Skipper, his college football buddy, as he was looking at her in the mirror. Brick is outraged and stands awkwardly to make his way to the bar in the room and accidentally drops his crutch. Brick asks Maggie to pick up the crutch, but she would prefer that Brick lean on her. He refuses the offer and demands the crutch.

Maggie asks Brick to hold off on his drinking until after Big Daddy's birthday party that evening. Brick was unaware of the birthday celebration and bristles at the thought of a family celebration. He even refuses to sign the card to accompany his gift to Big Daddy. Maggie persists about the signature, which makes Brick explode and remind Maggie of the terms under which he agreed to continue living with her. Maggie replies that they do not live together; she and Brick simply occupy the same cage.

The couple is interrupted by Mae, who is carrying a bow from an archery set and demands that it be locked up to eliminate the possibility that one of her children might be injured. The bow is an award Brick won as part of a competition and Maggie challenges Mae to train her children properly to not touch other people's things. Mae launches into a description of her children's entertainment for Big Daddy at the upcoming dinner, but fortunately for Brick and Maggie, she leaves when called by someone downstairs.

Maggie asks Brick to please dress in the shantung suit she has laid out for him, but the cast on his leg prevents Brick from wearing the trousers so he opts for a pair of white

silk pajamas. Maggie cannot stand Brick's indifference for one more minute and pleads with him, wondering how long his lack of affection will continue.

Brick chastises Maggie for her recent behavior and for her voice, which always sounds frantic. Maggie attributes her demeanor to the restlessness of a cat on a hot tin roof. Brick tells her to jump off the roof and take a lover, but Maggie cannot imagine the possibility of being with any other man but Brick.

The no-neck monsters are still performing downstairs, so Maggie slams and locks the bedroom door and pulls the drapes closed for more privacy. Brick rebukes Maggie's advances and reminds her that she had agreed to his conditions, but Maggie cannot live like this anymore. Suddenly Big Mama, Brick's mother, is at the door demanding to know why it is locked. Brick stumbles as quickly as possible to hide in the bathroom. Unable to enter the room, Big Mama uses the veranda and enters via one of those doors.

Big Mama is overjoyed with the news that Big Daddy's disease is not cancer, but only a spastic colon. When she heard such good news, Big Mama fell to her knees and shows them the bruises to prove it. A phone call for Big Mama interrupts her conversation and she speaks to Miss Sally, Big Daddy's sister, to tell her the good news of Big Daddy's diagnosis.

Big Mama wants to talk to Brick, who will not leave the bathroom. She then turns her lecture to Maggie and blames her daughter-in-law for the demise of her marriage to Brick. According to Big Mama, Maggie is the source of Brick's drinking and unfulfilled sexual intimacy. Maggie's outraged response is cut short when Big Mama leaves to say goodbye to dinner guests downstairs.

Brick emerges from the bathroom and Maggie assures her husband that their sex life will return just as quickly as it disappeared, that someday soon Brick will again see her in the same way that other men do. Maggie even shares some information about opportunities for sexual encounters, which she has turned down due to decency and the fact that she wants not one piece of information that could harm her in the event that Brick should one day want to divorce. Brick encourages Maggie again to take a lover but Maggie tells him that she will remain on her hot tin roof for as long as it takes to get Brick back in love with her.

Big Mama's news about Big Daddy's health is in conflict with what Maggie had told Brick earlier and Maggie says that the doctor intends to tell Big Mama the truth about the cancer after Big Daddy goes to bed tonight. Big Daddy is not aware of his terminal illness and the family intends to keep it that way.

According to Maggie, the fact that this is Big Daddy's last birthday will be a double cause for celebration for Gooper and Mae because they will be that much closer to the inheritance they feel should go to them instead of the alcoholic Brick and childless Maggie. Maggie turns introspective for a few moments and admits her genuine fondness for Big Daddy in spite of his coarse demeanor. Big Daddy makes no pretense

about who he is, still a Mississippi boy who once worked as an overseer on this very plantation, until he got the chance to buy it himself from the owners, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello.

Maggie is a realist, though and admits that it takes money to support an alcoholic husband in the style to which he has become accustomed. Maggie grew up very poor and has no intention of living that way for the rest of her life. This is another reason she is a cat on a hot tin roof. According to Maggie, you can be young without money but you cannot be old without it.

As Maggie adds her jewelry to her ensemble, she muses out loud about the moment that Brick must have lost interest in her. Maggie's mistake was in telling Brick about her one night encounter with Skipper. According to Maggie, she and Skipper clung to each other because it made them feel closer to Brick, so they made love. Brick does not want to hear this, but Maggie persists and tells Brick that she understands about the love between Brick and Skipper-that it was pure and not inappropriate like so many people had thought.

Maggie reveals the details of her encounter with Skipper. She told him to stop loving Brick or to at least tell Brick that he needed to let Skipper admit his love for him. That's when Skipper slapped Maggie and disappeared back to his own hotel room. From that point on, Skipper lived stoned on drugs and alcohol. Brick is outraged and tries to hit Maggie with his crutch but misses every time.

Maggie is not trying to condone her own behavior, but she wants Brick to acknowledge that at least she is a person who tells the truth and that she is still very much alive while Skipper is dead. The confrontation is interrupted by Dixie, one of Gooper's little girls, who wonders why Brick and Maggie are fighting. Maggie screams at the girl to leave and Dixie fires a cap gun at Maggie before declaring that she is just jealous because of not being able to have babies.

Maggie's mortification at the hands of one of the no-necked monsters turns softens her and she tells Brick that she has seen a gynecologist and is perfectly capable of having children. She says that in fact, today is a perfect day for Maggie to conceive, a fact which does not stir Brick in the slightest. Brick asks Maggie how she intends to conceive a child with a man who does not love her and she admits that that is a situation she will have to resolve.

Act 1 Analysis

In order to understand the motivations of the characters, it is important to appreciate the culture of America in the 1950s. The role of women is especially critical because it is the force that drives Maggie. Women in general were not encouraged to have careers and their validation in life was found in the successful acquisition of a husband and the production of children. Not wanting these things was looked upon as unnatural. Therefore most women married relatively young and stayed home to raise children.

Mae is the personification of the perfect woman of this era and therefore a threat to Maggie's sense of security within the family, as well as in society. She even tries to make Brick jealous by mentioning Big Daddy's validation of her physical attributes, which translates to the fact that she is in possession of qualities that most men find valuable.

At that time, any dissatisfaction women felt from their established lives was passed off as some sort of psychological problem. Having children was also considered a method for saving a damaged relationship, in that children would bring the couple closer together and better able to mend the bond. This way of thinking, coupled with the fact that women had no economic power, makes it easier to understand Maggie's frantic attempts to reconcile with Brick.

The subject of homosexuality was a taboo subject in this time period, which makes the insinuation of Brick's relationship with Skipper noteworthy as a risk that the author takes. Although Maggie concedes that the relationship between Brick and Skipper was purely platonic, Brick is still haunted by the accusations and is emotionally impotent to participate in his marriage.

Brick now chooses to use alcohol as a crutch to help him through life and his physical injury mirrors the emotional wound he carries. Maggie begs Brick to lean on her, which implies more than the physical motion of getting from one place to another as he hobbles on one foot, but also the emotional support that a wife provides for her husband.

More than once in this first act, Maggie describes herself as being a cat on a hot tin roof, a metaphor encompassing her restless sexual energy, backed up by her finely honed survival skills. Maggie knows that success is measured by staying on the roof and has the endurance skills to prove it.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

As the second act begins, Brick and Maggie are in their bedroom as the rest of the family, Doctor Baugh and Reverend Tooker come in for Big Daddy's birthday party. Reverend Tooker is enumerating the donations left to the church by a wealthy patron who has recently died. Big Daddy bristles at the talk of death, since he has narrowly escaped a diagnosis of cancer.

Big Mama rushes in looking for Brick and chastises him for drinking too much. Big Mama is an overweight, gaudily dressed woman with less than genteel manners. She is an embarrassment to many of the family members, who tolerate her only for her position as the matriarch of the family. Big Mama gives a signal and the household staff members enter, bringing a birthday cake and bottles of champagne. All the no-neck monsters sing a few songs and Big Daddy finally orders them all out into the gallery area off the room.

Big Daddy wants to know how Brick broke his ankle at three o'clock in the morning. Brick denies the allegations that he was with another woman. He had been drunk and was trying to run the high hurdles, which is a good enough explanation for Big Daddy for now.

Big Daddy is annoyed at Big Mama's continual interruptions as he is trying to speak privately with Brick and finally addresses her bluntly to tell her that she is no longer in charge of the plantation now that he is healthy. He relays the story of how he came to live and work on the plantation, when he was rescued by Mr. Straw and Mr. Ochello at only ten years old. From that point on, Big Daddy had worked in the fields, then as the overseer and eventually came to own the twenty-eight thousand acres, stating that he is not about to release it to someone as repulsive as Big Mama.

Big Mama is leveled by Big Daddy's insensitivity and leaves the room sobbing. Big Daddy wants to hold a conversation with Brick about his new lease on life now that the exhaustive tests revealed that he does not have cancer. Big Daddy is interested in having some serious pleasure in the company of women and admits making love to Big Mama always repulsed him and he now intends to make up for lost time.

Knowing that Big Daddy's medical reports are not as innocuous as a spastic colon, Brick repeatedly tries to leave the room to join the others who are in the gallery watching the fireworks in Big Daddy's honor. He will not let Brick leave and will not give him his crutch until the two men address Brick's alcoholism. Brick drinks to dull his senses in a world full of mendacity; the only other option for escape is death and Brick prefers to drink.

Big Daddy tells Brick that he himself knows what living with mendacity is because he has tolerated Big Mama, Gooper, Mae and their children and going to church all these years. The only things Big Daddy has any respect for are Brick and being a good planter. That's why Big Daddy has been puzzled lately about who to leave the plantation to when he dies, but now that Big Daddy has a clean bill of health, that issue is tabled for another fifteen or twenty years.

Once more, Brick tries to leave and Big Daddy pulls him back into the room to address Brick's alcoholism as the reason he quit his sports announcer job. Big Daddy says that Brick started to drink when Skipper died and that there were rumors that the relationship between Brick and Skipper was a homosexual one.

At the mention of this old wound, Brick breaks his cool demeanor and lashes out at Big Daddy for believing such a lie. Big Daddy thinks that the relationship had been a platonic one and understands how two people can reach such a depth of feeling and emotion for each other, but not exhibit it sexually.

Brick decides to tell Big Daddy the real truth about Skipper since they are staring down mendacity in this room tonight. Brick and Skipper were pro football players who Maggie would follow on the road to all the games. Once when Brick was in the hospital for an injury and watching the game on TV, he caught the image of Maggie sitting next to Skipper on the bench. Apparently Maggie filled Skipper's head full of ideas that his relationship with Brick was of a homosexual nature. When Maggie lured Skipper into bed and he could not perform, Skipper was convinced that Maggie's allegations of homosexuality were true.

A ringing phone prompts Big Daddy to remind Brick that something has been left out of the story. That's when Brick admits that he hung up on a drunken Skipper who had called Brick to confess his feelings for him. That was the last they ever spoke and Brick has been wracked with guilt ever since.

Big Daddy is content now that the lie that is central to Brick's alcoholism has been revealed and that Brick's disgust with mendacity is really the feeling he has for himself. Emotionally wounded, Brick now determines to inform Big Daddy of the truth of his medical tests and asks Big Daddy if he himself can face truth squarely. Brick mentions the deceit of all those who have wished Big Daddy many happy returns on his birthday when they know that there will be no more. This news stuns Big Daddy as he realizes that his family and all the doctors have been lying to him. The scene ends as Big Daddy curses all the people around him as lying, dying liars.

Act 2 Analysis

The overwhelming theme in this act is that of truth and lies. Big Daddy has perpetuated a life built on lies as he has tolerated Big Mama all their married life, as well as the obnoxious Gooper and his family. Big Daddy has also attended church for many years,

even though it has bored him thoroughly. He is no stranger to the concept of mendacity, which Brick introduces into their private conversation.

Big Daddy is relieved to find out that his medical tests reveal only a spastic colon, which is a lie the doctors have told to spare him the cancer diagnosis. For some reason, the family has decided to hide the truth, which perpetuates even more mendacity around them. Brick has been living with the guilt of Skipper's death for many years, which was caused by a series of lies and innuendoes. It is never spoken, but inferred that Brick may have reciprocated Skipper's erotic feelings but had never acted on them, which is a lie to some degree. Ironically, Brick's relationship with Skipper was the only pure thing he has ever known.

Symbolically, both Brick and Big Daddy are consumed with fatal illnesses related to deception: Brick's alcoholism as a way to manage the truth, while Big Daddy's cancer destroys his body and the doctors and his family lie to him for what they consider his own good. The author masterfully employs the flashback technique, especially in the character of Big Daddy, who reveals his rise from a childhood of destitution to the wealthy landowner he has become. Several of Big Daddy's monologues reveal a great deal about his past and his character, much more efficiently than if the facts were to be revealed in the form of dialogue.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

The family is beginning to wander back into Brick and Maggie's room and wonders to where Big Daddy has disappeared. Big Mama assumes her husband has gone to bed early, being exhausted from such a full day. She mentions that Big Daddy didn't seem like himself during the evening, but he did eat a huge meal like a man with a healthy appetite.

Gooper and Mae comment that they hope Big Daddy does not suffer from all the food. Big Mama doesn't comprehend their meaning and several times Gooper tries to tell his mother what he means, but Mae stops him with a stern look or a poke in the ribs. Big Mama thinks Big Daddy just needs a good night's sleep since the worry of a cancer diagnosis is over.

The others in the room approach Big Mama tentatively and soon they have surrounded her. Their closeness both irritates and frightens her. Finally, Doctor Baugh tells Big Mama that Big Daddy does have cancer; it is malignant and inoperable, as it has spread to too many organs. Gooper and Mae attempt to console Big Mama who calls out for Brick and declares him to be Big Daddy's favorite child.

This statement sends a wave of panic into Gooper and Mae, who produce a suitcase with some preliminary documents outlining the disposition of Big Daddy's estate. Big Mama is outraged at their lack of sensitivity and demands that the papers be put away. Big Mama is still Big Daddy's wife, not his widow and she will not have such talk in Big Daddy's house while he is still alive.

Doctor Baugh leaves a package with morphine and a hypodermic needle, because Big Daddy will need pain medication very soon. Mae offers to give the injections as she studied nursing during the war and is the most qualified. Gooper and Mae continue to press to have the inheritance defined and Big Mama shares that Big Daddy's plan is to will the land to Brick. This statement launches Gooper and Mae into a speech about how they are more responsible and better qualified, while Brick is an alcoholic and Maggie is childless. Gooper and Mae can hear through the bedroom walls and know that Brick refuses to sleep with Maggie.

Big Mama recovers her emotions, assuming the role of matriarch once again and tells the obnoxious Gooper and Mae that no one will take anything until Big Daddy lets go of it and maybe not even then. She tells all of them that Big Daddy's fondest wish is to see a child of Brick's, a grandson who will be like Big Daddy himself. Maggie senses an opportunity to seal her fortune forever and announces to the family that she is pregnant with Brick's child. Big Mama is overjoyed and leaves to tell Big Daddy the wonderful news. Gooper and Mae accuse Maggie of lying, especially in light of what they hear and do not hear on the other side of the bedroom wall.

After the family has cleared out of the bedroom, Maggie thanks Brick for not exposing her lie and Brick wants to know how she intends to have a child with a man who will not sleep with her. It is the perfect time for Maggie to conceive and she intends to make her lie a truth that night. She locks up Brick's liquor and promises that he can have it back after he has made love to her. Brick can say nothing about her plan and Maggie embraces her husband and declares her love, while Brick smiles and thinks that it would be funny if it were true.

Act 3 Analysis

The author raises the theme of truth again in this scene, as many critical truths are brought to light. Big Mama is finally told the truth about Big Daddy's disease and it is very revealing that she immediately turns to Brick in her moment of shock. Big Mama's admission that Brick is Big Daddy's favorite finally breaks the tension Gooper and Mae have created around the inheritance issue.

Conversely, Maggie's lie about being pregnant will soon turn into a truth that will save her marriage, secure her future and provide Big Daddy with his only dying wish. Big Mama fulfills the role of the indulgent wife and protects Big Daddy's interests wholeheartedly, even though she knows that he merely tolerates her as a wife. Although this is not an ideal marriage, there is at least respect for the other partner, which is another guidepost for marriages of this era.

Maggie's intention to stay in her role as a cat on a hot tin roof is being realized. A passionate nature makes her restless, but also provides the perseverance to outlast all the others around her with less than authentic intentions and motives. True to her word, there is every reason to believe that Maggie will stay on that roof as long as she has to.

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 Mm, 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

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.

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."

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.

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

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 lme, by kissing up to Big Daddy and Big Mama, and by eavesdropping outside of Maggie and Brick's bedroom door m order to report Brick's drinking and sexual abstinence or any other gossip that might discredit their claim to the inheritance

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 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"

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.

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.

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 m 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 Pollitt 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.

Historical Context

Domestic Life in the 1950s

The year of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roofs* 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 m 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 m 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.

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 (ln 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* /too/fails to engage the topic of homosexuality fortnightly. 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 Eha 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 Wilhams's three significant contributions to American theater, along with *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Hamilton is an English teacher at Cory Academy, an innovative private school in Cory, North Carolina. In this essay she discusses the possibility that the play centers not on homosexuality or truth but on the need for blessings conferred by a dying patriarch.

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 m 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, Back, 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 U with a 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 HI 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 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 m 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 Back'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.

Source: Carole Hamilton for *Drama for Students,* Gale. 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Hitzzartl examines sex roles in Williams's play. The critic's primary theme is that of the sexual ambivalence' that the male characters feel toward the female characters, particularly Brick and Big Daddy as they respond to their respective spouses.

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

Source: Jere Huzzard,' "Wilhams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof'* in *the Explicator,* Volume 43, no. 2, Winter, 1985 , pp. 46-47

Critical Essay #3

In this 1955 review, Bentley addresses claims that Cat on a Hot Tin Roof *is among the first dramas to deal with homosexuality. Despite some advances over his contemporaries, however, Williams—in Bentley's view—has not yet approached the subject in a direct or satisfactory manner.*

*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 denned 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 co-operates. 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, bornee, 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 his pleasantness certainly keeps (to use his own vocabulary) the audience from puking. Ben Gazzara may not seem Southern, or a football player, or a TV announcer (the problem husband is all three) but he is handsome and he can act neurotic intensity. It is the same with the whole evening[1] 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[1]? 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 unco-ordinated double vision to provide a clear picture. In the last act, while the script is resolutely non-comittal, 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 tragi-comic 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 rhetoncal, is unashamedly and often successfully so; the chief rhetorical device, that of a repetition of phrase somewhat *a la* Gertrude Stem, 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. Sincenty and Truth, of which he often *speaks* and *thinks,* tend to remain m 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.

Source: Enc Bentley, review of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.* the *New Republic,* Volume 132, no 15, april 11,1955, pp 28-29

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.

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*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.

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 then- sexuality. Many have been encouraged by famous role models such as singer Melissa Etheridge, actor Ellen DeGeneres, and politician Barney Frank.

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 Ms 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.

Further Study

Crandall, George W. *The Critical Response to Tennessee Williams,* Greenwood Press, 1996

This volume contains full-text reprints of newspaper and magazine reviews of Williams's works.

Devlin, Albert J *Conversations with Tennessee Williams,* University Press of Mississippi, 1985.

A selection of interviews spanning forty years covering topics from Williams' s advice to young writers to frank discussions of his problems with drugs and alcohol.

Spoto, Donald *The Kindness of Strangers. The Life of Tennessee Williams,* Little, Brown, 1985

A thorough and scholarly biography of Williams that analyzes the correspondence between his tormented life and his equally anguished drama Williams, Tennessee. *Memoirs,* Doubleday, 1975

An autobiographical account of Williams's personal life that includes much detail about his sexual exploits. The book is useful in the context it provides for much of the playwright's work.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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