

Mr. Roets

American Literature

April 6th, 2017

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof from the Audience's Perspective

The first written version of the play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, by Tennessee Williams was published in 1958. According to an article published on December 2nd, 2015 called, "Tennessee Williams Biography" on Biography.com, Williams was born on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi and raised mainly by his mother instead of his father who focused more on his work than his family. His parents had a strained marriage and his aggressive father can be seen as inspiration for the character of Big Daddy in the play. Williams started writing in his childhood and he enrolled at the University of Missouri to study journalism but his dad made him come home and work as a sales clerk. Williams later went to the University of Iowa, then moved to New Orleans when he was 28, changed his name from Thomas to Tennessee, and became a great playwright, one of his plays earning him \$100 from the Group Theater writing contest. His first play in 1940 called *Battle of Angels* wasn't a success but its revised version, *Orpheus Descending*, was and became a popular movie. On March 31, 1945, *The Glass Menagerie* opened on Broadway, two years later the play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, won him a Drama Critics' Award and his first Pulitzer Prize. He had more positive praise when he wrote the plays: *Camino Real*, *Cat*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. In the 1960s he was hospitalized after he turned to alcohol and drugs after getting poor reviews. He wrote some plays after he got out including, *Memoirs*, but died from alcohol and drugs in 1983.

According to Brian Parker in the review "Swinging a Cat" published in May 2004, many of the characters in the play were modeled after characters in Williams's life. Williams had a friend named Maria St. Just that used the phrase "no-neck monsters" and can be seen as being similar to the character of Maggie. Not only that, but one of Williams' acquaintances named Margaret Lewis Powell is credited to have had the nickname "Maggie the Cat", which is used in the play as well. Jordan Massie Sr., who was

the father of one of his friends in Macon, Georgia, was called “Big Daddy” because of his size, and used the phrase “nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof”. Parker also agreed with the article on Biography.com, that Williams’ father could be seen as another inspiration for Big Daddy, in addition to Williams’ neighbor G.D.Perry. He had a wife, nine kids, and gained ownership of a 7,500 acre plantation, very similar to Big Daddy. The short story, *Three Players of a Summer Game*, written by Williams in 1952, had an alcoholic ex-athlete named Brick Pollitt, characters named Gooper, and Big Mama who are seen in *Cat*.

The play was written in 1955, during a pivotal time period against homosexuals. According to the article “LGBT History Month: The 1950s and the Roots of LGBT Politics“ written by Beth Sherouse published on October 10, 2014 on the Human Rights Campaign website, this was during the time of “McCarthyism” where America was very much against communism. The “Lavender Scare” was when state and federal governments examined and fired thousands of workers who they thought might be gay or lesbian. They did this because they believed that this group of people were harmful to the United States, and possibly being even more dangerous than communists. By the government oppressing LGBT people, it actually gave the community a voice to speak out against discrimination. The Mattachine Society, founded in 1950, was used to spread gay rights in a time where there was much discrimination. The play has an overall theme of lying and secrets in a family, but an overall undertone is the issue of homosexuality. Brick is assumed to be gay and have had a romantic relationship with his best friend, Skipper. This would be frowned upon during this time period, so that would make sense that Williams would secretly include it in the play. Not only that, but Williams came out as gay himself so he could relate to the character of Brick.

According to the Internet Broadway Database, *Cat* first came onto Broadway at the Morosco Theater on March 24, 1955. This version was directed by Elia Kazan, and produced by The Playwrights' Company. Jo Mielziner and John Harvey were scenic designers and lighting designers, and Lucinda Ballard and Florence Klotz were costume designers. Barbara Bel Geddes played Maggie, Burl Ives

played Big Daddy, Mildred Dunnock played Big Mama, Ben Gazzara played Brick, R.G. Armstrong played Dr. Baugh, Pat Hingle played Gooper, and Madeleine Sherwood played Mae. It was revived on Broadway five more times: in 1974, 1990, 2003, 2008, and 2013. There was an all black cast in 2008 directed by Debbie Allen starring Terrence Howard as Brick, James Earl Jones as Big Daddy, Phylicia Rashad as Big Mama, and Anika Noni Rose as Maggie. This was significant because they transformed normal race rules and replaced all of the main white characters with black actors, and all of the black servant characters with white actors. In addition, the most recent production in 2013 at Richard Rodgers Theater starred Scarlett Johansson, a prominent Hollywood actress, as Maggie, along with Benjamin Walker as Brick.

Brooks Atkinson on March 25, 1955, wrote a review called "Theatre: Tennessee Williams's 'Cat'" in the New York Times about the first Broadway show of *Cat*. He said that

“‘Cat on a Hot Tin Roof’ is the work of a mature observer of men and women and a gifted craftsman. To say that it is the drama of people who refuse to face the truth of life is to suggest a whole school of problem dramatists. But one of the great achievements is the honesty and simplicity of the craftsmanship. It seems not to have been written. It is the quintessence of life. It is the basic truth. Always a seeker after honesty in his writing, Mr. Williams has not only found a solid part of the truth but found the way to say it with complete honesty. It is not only part of the truth of life: it is the absolute truth of the theatre”.

Atkinson spoke very highly of the play as a whole and from the viewpoint of Tennessee Williams as the writer. He also spoke very highly of the actors in the play as well, and simply said “The acting is magnificent”. Ben Brantley had a mixed opinion of the 2008 Broadway version with the all-black cast, as he said in an article called “Yet Another Life for Maggie the Cat” on March 7, 2008 in the New York Times, “The only fiercely charged element at the Broadhurst is Ms. Rose’s Maggie. This “Cat” cries out for more lightning”. He praised Anika Noni Rose and said that she “pretty much runs the show whenever she’s onstage, and when she’s not, the show misses her management”. He saw her as the focal point and highlight of the play, since the rest of the play didn’t seem to reach the same level that she did. In addition, Ben Brantley, on January 17, 2013, had positive comments on the 2013 version starring

Scarlett Johansson. He wrote in an article called, “A Storm From the South, Brewing in a Bedroom” in the New York Times, “She [Johansson] obviously has a strong sense of what she wants to do here and the convictions to follow it through. Her Maggie is, as she must be, an undeniable life force and — as far as this production, directed by Rob Ashford, is concerned — a lifeline”.

The play, *Cat*, is about a family on a Mississippi plantation and the secrets that they keep. Big Daddy, the father of Brick and Gooper, is dying from cancer, but the doctor has been lying to Big Daddy and Big Mama saying he just has a spastic colon. Brick is an alcoholic, retired track player, who broke his ankle trying to jump hurdles. He doesn't have a very romantic relationship with his wife, Maggie (“the Cat”), because he refuses to sleep with her. Maggie admitted to sleeping with Skipper, Brick's best friend from college, and this really puts a strain on Brick and Maggie's marriage because Brick and Skipper most likely had a forbidden romantic relationship. The family is all together for Big Daddy's 65th birthday party and Gooper and his wife Mae talk about Brick and Maggie's relationship. Gooper and Mae's five “no-necked monster” children sing many songs and put on performances for Big Daddy. Big Mama calls Brick her “only son” and they argue over Big Daddy's will because Gooper and Mae believe they deserve the plantation after Big Daddy dies. Brick ends up telling Big Daddy that he does in fact have cancer, and Gooper and Mae tell Big Mama as well, who becomes very distraught. Since Big Daddy is dying, Maggie tries to create good news and lies that she is pregnant with Brick's baby. Mae says that Maggie is lying, but the others believe Maggie.

The plot of the play revolves around the different lies and secrets that are being kept from the family like Big Daddy's cancer, Brick and Maggie's relationship, Big Daddy and Big Mama's relationship, and the truth about Skipper. Truth, or the lack thereof, is the main theme of the play, and Williams uses this idea to run the plot and to create the moods of the characters. For example, the doctor lies to the family and Big Mama tells the family: “We just got the full report from the laboratory at the Ochsner Clinic, completely negative, son, ev'rything negative, right on down the line! Nothin' a-tall's

wrong with him but some little functional thing called a spastic colon” (Williams 44). The doctor told the family that Big Daddy didn’t have cancer, but just a spastic colon, and even after Gooper, Mae, Maggie, and Brick knew the truth, they still lied to Big Daddy and Big Mama. The play shows how prominent the lack of honesty is between all of the characters especially when the truth is revealed. Doctor Baugh says, “But we had this bit of tissue run through the laboratory and I’m sorry to say the test was positive on it. It’s-well-malignant” (Williams 146). Not only that, but Big Daddy says, “-Think of all of the lies I got to put up with!-Pretenses! Ain’t that mendacity? Having to pretend stuff you don’t think or feel or have any idea of? Having for instance to act like I care for Big Mama!-I haven’t been able to stand the sight, sound, or smell of that woman for forty years now!-even when I *laid* her!-regular as a piston” (Williams 110). Big Daddy admits to lying about how he feels about Big Mama. Even though they’ve been together for so long, he doesn’t even like her. The theme of dishonesty continues when Brick and Big Daddy are talking and Brick says,

“‘I never lied to you, Big Daddy.’

‘Did I ever to *you*?’

‘No sir...’

‘Then there is at least two people that never lied to each other’” (Williams 113).

Even this exchange shows how the relationships in the book are based so much upon lies. Brick and Big Daddy both say that they are truthful to each other, but Brick lied to Big Daddy about his cancer, and denied his romantic relationship with Skipper. So even the conversation was an example of dishonesty. Lastly, Brick said, “Maybe it’s being alive that makes them lie, and being almost *not* alive makes me sort of accidentally truthful” (Williams 130). He means that maybe truth can only be found in death. When people are living and aware, they tend to lie and it isn’t until the person is gone, that the truth can completely be shown. Once Big Daddy dies, it is likely that the truth will be able to be revealed. The theme of the lack of truth and honesty in the play is very clearly portrayed to the audience by Williams.

Cat is overall a complex play. There are many different layers like Brick and Skipper's "secret" love affair, Brick and Maggie's struggling relationship, Brick's drinking problem, Big Daddy's cancer, Big Daddy and Big Mama's relationship, and the sibling rivalry between Gooper and Brick to have Big Daddy's favor for his will. There are many different struggles that the characters are going through, and many overlap which shows the complexity of the play. Brick seems to have had a love affair with Skipper, but he denies it and refuses to sleep with his wife, Maggie. The problems don't seem to have an easy solution and there are conflicts that don't get resolved by the end of the play. The play didn't have a snap ending or an ending where the audience feels completely satisfied. At the end of the play Brick doesn't admit to his love affair with Skipper, Big Daddy and Big Mama's relationship isn't addressed, and Big Daddy doesn't make a simple decision for his will either. This makes the play complex and gives the audience a performance that doesn't lack an intricate plot.

The 1958 *Cat* film version with Elizabeth Taylor, Paul Newman, and Burl Ives mostly met the expectations of the audience, but did lack in accuracy to the script. Overall the actors brought the characters to life and seemed to fit their roles well. The way the characters looked, especially Big Daddy, in the film seemed to parallel how they were described in the play. A shortcoming of the film performance is the casting of Judith Anderson as Big Mama, because Anderson isn't big, but rather petite, which makes the movie lose reliability. However, Anderson showed that she was a good fit for the role of Big Mama in her acting skills and the way she carried herself, even if physically she didn't match up. According to Michael Billington in an article called "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof: Tennessee Williams's southern discomfort" at TheGuardian.com, critics were very fond of the film and it even got six nominations for Best Picture, Best Actor (Newman), Best Actress (Taylor), Best Director (Brooks), Best Writing, Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium, and Best Cinematography (Daniels). Even though this is true, Tennessee Williams didn't like the movie. The film took out the emphasis on Brick's homosexuality and took out much of the sexual advances and situations. Brick being gay was a

very important part of the play because not only does it explain the reasoning behind him not wanting to sleep with Maggie, but it was also meaningful to Williams as a gay man himself. By censoring the film of much of the homosexuality and sexuality, in general, and between Maggie and Brick, it took away much of the significance as a cultural text. Homosexuality was a controversial topic in the 1950s and Williams wanted to shine a light on it, but it was taken away from him in the film. Overall the film version accurately followed the script and has become a well known movie over generations.

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