

**Sexual Repression and Family Degradation  
in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof***

الكبت الجنسي والتفكك الأسري

في مسرحية تينيسي ويليامز قطرة على سطح صفيح ساخن

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## Abstract

The greatest American dramatist who accurately captures the culture and way of life of his day is Tennessee Williams. This paper aims to analyze the events in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) according to the subject of sex, alcoholism, and family degradation and how these subject lead to shatter the Pollitt's family bonds. In the play, Williams intricately weaves the themes of sexual repression and family degradation into the fabric of the Pollitt family's dynamics. The play centers on Maggie's yearning for intimacy and Brick's emotional withdrawal, highlighting the profound impact of societal expectations on their relationship. Brick's alcoholism serves as a means of escapism, masking his unresolved feelings about his sexuality and the death of his friend, Skipper.

As the people work through their toxic relationships, long-buried grudges and betrayals are revealed, and the façade of stability and wealth comes away. The fight against the weakening of family ties is exemplified by Big Mama's who attempts to keep the family together, while the desire for inheritance fuels already-existing tensions. In the end, Williams exposes the harmful aspects of materialism and suppression, showing how these factors lead to psychological distress and the breakup of family ties. The play offers a compelling examination of the intricacies of desire and the transience of interpersonal bonds. The family also makes pointless attempts to give their lives purpose and coherence.

**Keywords:** repression, alcoholism, degradation, escapism, homosexuality

## Introduction

Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, addresses contentious issues that spark considerable debate among critics, contributing to his formidable reputation as a playwright. (Abbas, 2022). The story revolves around the life of the family who are housed together for Big Daddy's birthday celebration and the news that Big Daddy is ill and dying of cancer. The whole family was shocked by the unexpected news concerning his health, albeit in quite different ways. The other family members are "dying" to inherit their beloved husband's possessions and legacy, and while Big Mama is surprised that he is passing away, they argue on who is the true blunder. Except for Brick, who seems to be unable to find anything in his life to remain attached to, they all want the same thing: the land combined with a guaranteed life of luxury for the remainder of their days. The play's title alludes to the lifestyles of the family living under one roof.

Living on the tin roof is not viable when it becomes too hot. That metaphor might also imply that the family members' behaviors have gotten intolerable, that they lead miserable lives, and that they fabricate their connections. We discover during the play that the majority of family relationships are founded on falsehoods. Brick is unable to tolerate his spouse. The major characters in Williams' plays are usually failures figures as normal passionate people who are eventually frustrated for being bodily, mentally or emotionally exhausted by heartless and abusive people (Alzoubi, 2018). One can examine themes of victimization and disillusionment within the context of the family members, which are present in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* as well. In that play, other characters who stand in for "society" abuse Maggie and all other family members psychologically and emotionally (Jabbar, 2021).

After all these years, Big Daddy still can't seem to stand his wife and doesn't even love her; in fact, the only thing that makes him want to remain with her is the fact that she gave birth to his cherished son Brick. As a result, the intense heat of the roof serves as a metaphor for the intense bonds that the family's members must uphold, even if none of them can withstand the heat any more. As long as they can withstand the strain, they will battle for what they desire. She is feeling this way because of her marriage to Brick. She knows that lately, her conduct has been catty, she is referred to as Maggie the Cat, at the very beginning of the play she speaks these words expressing how she feels: "I feel all the time like a cat on a hot tin roof"(Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, henceforth COHTR, Act. I). but she justifies it by saying that it's a protective mechanism she uses in her battle with the outside world.

The simplest way to demonstrate Brick's indifference towards Maggie is to observe his reaction to her statement; he tells her to jump off the roof and claims she is free to leave him in search of a partner who can fulfill her needs. Referring to herself as "Maggie the Cat," she identifies with the resilience of a cat that, despite having nine lives, always manages to bounce back and fight again. The scorching tin roof symbolizes her marriage to Brick, marked by sexual dissatisfaction. Since her ill-fated decision to have an affair with Brick's closest friend, he has refused even to acknowledge her presence. Their relationship is also symbolic of the anguish, horror, contempt, and disgust that Brick feels toward her. A cat on a hot tin roof will struggle to win her husband back, even if it means breathing her last and making the hot tin roof intolerable to stand on. At that time, her strength of character becomes evident because, despite having lost every battle with her husband, she is determined to keep fighting and not give up on their marriage. She is unwilling to give up not

just on her marriage but also on Big Daddy's legacy following his passing. She was raised in poverty and has never seen luxury; in one of the statements, she declares that she would not age in the shadow of her husband's indifference.

At that point, Mae, a different female character in the play who has given birth to five children so far, with a sixth on the way, enters the picture and joins the battle for Big Daddy's land on the grounds that her husband has the same rights as Brick. Her strength is her money-grubbing avarice; she won't give up until her spouse receives what is his due as well. Maggie and Mae share the same desires—money and a luxurious lifestyle—and they have also shown themselves to be stronger than their husbands. This is evident in the fact that they frequently speak for their husbands when talking about Big Daddy's legacy and what they are willing to do. As a result, the two ladies are also always at odds with one another, whether it is because of money or jealousy over their constantly contrasted marriages. Not to mention that Big Mama is a crucial female character who in some ways portends Maggie's life in the future should she choose to stay with Brick. The only other female character who is unable to put up with the frequent arguments in the home is Big Mama, Big Daddy's estranged wife. Big Mama finds it intolerable that when she learned that her husband was terminally ill, everyone's main concern was over who should inherit their father's belongings. Her husband is what she desires beyond everything else. she presents the true royal lover to her husband among the characters of the play: “Oh, you know we just got to love each other an' stay together, all of us, just as close as we can...”(COHTR, Act III) Big Mama's statement portrays the perfect family and how members should interact with one another, but regrettably, everyone in her immediate vicinity knows that her family's situation is far from ideal.

## Sexual Repression and Its impact on the Pollitt's Family in the Play

Williams's sexual preference has bearing in this play and his writing career. Despite the fact that he had to conceal his homosexuality at the time, he included it into some of his plays. The play obviously contains sides of Williams' specific life, particularly the facets of mental uncertainty, alcoholism and homosexuality (Adhikary, 2020). Furthermore, he favored the social outcasts in his plays, making misfits significant. As a writer who was homosexual and had to conceal his sexual orientation at the time, he felt a sympathetic connection to them because of his sexual situation. Additionally, "sexuality as a means of transcending aloneness, human isolation, and the need for a nonjudgmental compassion for those whose moral systems are different from one's own" (Adler 2) are some of the recurring themes in his work. This portrayal is crucial in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, since it reflects Williams's fears about homosexuality and the South, his upbringing, and the ideals he was meant to inherit. In this play, Williams attempts to transfer his autobiographical elements through the major characters such as Brick Pollitt, and Skipper, Brick's deceased friend.

The play addresses themes like sexual repression and complex relationships, reflecting Williams' personal struggles with sexual identity within his conservative family. Williams's sexuality was a source of profound inner turmoil, particularly in the context of his family's disintegration and societal pressures. The breakdown of Brick and Maggie's marital relationship is characterized by significant stress, emotional repression, and sexual frustration. They are emotionally distant,



with Brick consistently rejecting Maggie's attempts to restore their closeness. Throughout the play, Maggie, often referred to as "the cat," strives to win back her husband but finds herself unable to overcome the challenges posed by their unhappy marriage. The play's title *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* alludes to Maggie's predicament, in which she struggles with a sexual yearning that her husband does not share and is stuck in for the duration of their marriage. Maggie is deeply rejected by Brick from any physical relationship because of his own psychological issues, despite the fact that Brick's refusal to have sex with her leaves her feeling frustrated. Maggie indicates that she needs love and physical intimacy to affirm her life and her sense of femininity.

The Relationship between Brick and Skipper leads clearly to destroy the life of Maggie both sexually and emotionally. Brick's complicated friendship with his late buddy Skipper is a major source of his emotional and sexual suppression. Brick makes it obvious that Skipper is involved in the activity even if he isn't physically there since the couple brings him up frequently.— “Maggie, shut up about Skipper. I mean it, Maggie; you got to shut up about Skipper” (COHTR, Act. I) Despite the play's lack of clarity on their relationship, it is strongly implied that Brick felt deeply—possibly even sexually—for Skipper but was unable to communicate these sentiments because of social conventions. This equivocal connection is largely responsible for Brick's emotional depression following Skipper's passing. Big Daddy learns of the gossip that has been circulating regarding Brick's gay liaisons with his pal Skipper “one thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton!- is tolerance!- I grown it” (COHTR, Act II). Skipper is dead because the father often tries to convince his son that everything has to come to an end. Skipper committed himself, and Brick feels responsible for his passing because he thinks Maggie's attempts to get

Skipper to admit his affections for Brick were a factor in Skipper's suicide. Brick's emotional and sexual suppression is made worse by this guilt, which also keeps him apart from any efforts at closeness or love with Maggie. Social Pressures: The play is set in the traditional American South, where it is frowned upon for people to reveal their sexuality, particularly if they identify as homosexual. Brick is imprisoned between his inner urges and the demands of society, which exacerbates his condition of sexual suppression. Brick turns to alcoholism as a way out of his repressed emotions due to his sexual and emotional suppression. Brick's effort at psychological and sexual anesthesia is reflected in his addiction, as drinking provides him with a sense of escape from the emotional and sexual realities around Skipper and his disintegrating marriage. Through the play's events, we learn that Tennessee explored his homosexuality through the characters Brick and Skipper, emphasizing his struggles with repression and his desire to keep their connection a secret from others because it was socially forbidden.

Williams explains clearly about Brick's sexuality case to *The New York Herald-Tribune* in April, that Brick his sexual orientation was not inherently "normal." He qualifies that "... Brick's overt sexual adjustment was, and must always remain, a heterosexual one. He will go back to Maggie for sheer animal comfort .... He is her dependent" (Williams, 1955. 72-73). Maggie has a great need for close, physical interactions, in contrast to Brick. She makes a persistent effort to woo Brick and reintegrate him into a romantic and sexual relationship. This shows Brick's desire to escape the limitations placed on their married life and is a kind of revolt against the sexual restriction she is going through. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* effectively illustrates the impact that sexual suppression may have on interpersonal interactions. Brick and Maggie's lack of emotional and



physical closeness exacerbates their emotions of annoyance and loneliness and serves as a stark reminder of how suppression can ruin relationships and prevent sincere communication between people. Brick's suppression gets even worse as the play hints quietly that he could be having identity issues related to his sexual orientation. This suppression is fundamental to his personal life and shows up in every facet of his relationships since he is unable to reconcile his feelings for Skipper or express any sexual desire.

### **Family Degradation in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof***

Tennessee Williams is more interested in examining the interpersonal relationships within the family than in examining psychological issues. He explains in the stage note of *Cat* that “the bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man’s psychological problem. I’m trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people” (Alzoubi, 2018). Williams was raised in an unstable home with a complex and bitter relationship between his parents, Edwina,

an authoritarian and socially obsessed woman, and Cornelius, a harsh and indifferent traveling salesman who was frequently absent from the family. Williams suffered from feelings of neglect and emotional pressures as a result of his parents' constant arguments. The breakdown of the Williams family had a significant impact on Williams' life and literary works, including his well-known play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. It is a classic three-act tragedy set at the Pollitt plantation mansion. It revolves around a single night spent in several rooms celebrating the 65th birthday of their patriarch, Big Daddy. However, there has been much discussion over the family gathering's plan (Crandell, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, P 117). The play revolves around the power dynamics between people and their relational issues, despite the fact that a variety of conflicts involving inheritance, drug misuse, transgressive sexuality, sickness, and death arise. Thus, it might be seen as a drama about marriage and family at its core. Additionally, this illustrates the family's social structure and how it defines the many roles that men and women play, as seen through the eyes of three couples who are at different phases of realizing the family's ideals of stable finances, harmonious relationships, and raising children.

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams tackles a number of topics, the most important of which being maintaining the shadow of the presumed family as a whole and autonomous entity. For instance, one may discover that the family patriarch, Big Daddy, is suffering from an incurable illness and will eventually pass away. However, other family members choose not to tell him about his fatal condition in order to preserve the family's legacy and avoid dividing his fortune, which causes the family to split up (Alzoubi, 2018).

The dispute in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is about a man named Brick who has renounced his part in a particular domestic contract. His departure

has caused agitation in the contracts of three intermarried families: Brick and Maggie, Big Daddy and Big Mama, and Gooper and Mae. George Peter Murdock was among the first to describe the shape of the Postwar American family. He observes:

The family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It contains adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults (Coleman, 2014. 958).

The main theme that the author addresses in the play that has been chosen for this study is conflicts between families. Nonetheless, the author shows how the Pollitt family of the Mississippi Delta is a dysfunctional and disintegrated family from the outset of the play, which has psychological repercussions and causes isolation (Humlová, 2011). The dramatist has shown Big Daddy's impending death and Mae's obvious struggle for control of the family property, which Big Daddy, the patriarch, owns. However, other family members choose not to tell Big Daddy about his illness in order to preserve the family's legacy and avoid sharing his fortune, which causes the family to split up (Alzoubi, 2018). They also keep his illness a secret from his wife, who they call Big Mama. They inform her that Big Daddy has a diagnosis of "a spastic colon" and that he would recover quickly (Ferrante, 2021).

After the play's events have drastically changed before the second act's last scene, Big Daddy is devastated to learn that his son Brick won't survive for another year because of his incurable illness (cancer) as he notes: —How about these birthday congratulations, these many, many happy returns of the day, when everybody but you knows there won't be any!! (COHTR, Act II, P 152). Comparing this scene to the play's opening and ending, highlights the conflicts and relationships within the family.

William has worked extremely hard to maintain the love and harmony in the play's first half, but in its second half, everything is altered to depict the reality of American families that are dysfunctional and incompatible (Timilsina, 2020). Williams' *The Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* makes clear that families are emotional systems in which members have a strong bond with one another and differences in how one member is assigned responsibilities affect how the others are assigned responsibilities (Anderson 2016).

However, Williams has qualified Big Daddy with many potent attributes, including dominance, masculinity, and patriarchy, making him a significant and prominent figure in his creative works (Adhikary, 2020). Big Daddy does not trust Gooper and Mae, even though they act as though they love each other “Pretences! Ain't that mendacity?” (COHTR, Act II). To convince Big Daddy to pass on his plantation and land to them rather than to their competitors, Margret and Brick, they staged a false attraction towards him (Tipton, 2005). This occurrence raises many questions and concerns about the relationships between each member of the family (Carmichael, 2017).

Given that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* centers on a family of people experiencing emotional breakdown and a lack of communication, it is evident that the play mirrors the familial issues Williams encountered. Characters' tense relationships, like Maggie's with her husband Brick, represent the conflicts and struggles Williams experienced as a family man. Through the portrayal of individuals experiencing inner conflict and loneliness, Williams shares his personal agony with the audience throughout the play. Brick, a character struggling with addiction and emotional repression, serves as a reflection of Williams's own psychological turmoil and profound sense of loneliness. In a similar vein,

Maggie "the cat" symbolizes a powerful, rebellious spirit that is also beset by feelings of abandonment and a need for affection.

The play's central protagonist struggles to face up personal and familial realities as the conflict centers on emotional suppression and family secrets. This illustrates how Williams' own family broke down and how he chose to ignore and deny the emotional problems he went through. Brick and "Big Daddy's" complicated connection is a reflection of Williams' own difficult relationship with his father. Brick suffers from a sense of neglect and repression, reflecting Williams' views toward his father, who was neither loving or encouraging, whereas Big Daddy is a strong and controlling figure. Big Daddy's deteriorating health and approaching death, which represent illness and death in the play, might be interpreted as a metaphor for Williams' own family's emotional death, which he faced.

One of the primary means of escaping life's pressures and sorrows is through excessive alcohol consumption, a path that Brick followed after the death of his gay friend Skipper. This heavy drinking has turned Brick into a shallow and irresponsible partner, neglecting the intimacy that his wife, who deserves it more than anyone, truly needs. (Hariharan, 2015). Brick's alcoholism and subsequent unhappiness are therefore attributed on Maggie by Big Mama, despite the fact that all of the family members were aware of Brick's homosexuality and his relationship with Skipper (Alzoubi, 2018). In order to escape the pressures of life and the shocks surrounding his family, Brick managed to hide his true self in the present by drinking alcohol, which transports him to a world of unconsciousness and illusions to forget what is around him.

## Conclusion

Tennessee Williams employs *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to explore the impact of social conventions on interpersonal relationships, highlighting how the degradation of family dynamics and sexual repression can lead to significant mental distress. The hardships of the characters offer a moving commentary on the intricacies of human desire and the brittleness of familial bonds. The play effectively expresses Williams's inner psychological and sexual issues, and he also illuminates the ways in which conservative culture suppresses sexual identity and personal wants.

One of the primary factors contributing to family disintegration in the play is the interplay of psychological and societal influences, coupled with the pursuit of wealth that comes at the expense of the father and brother, as exemplified by the character of Cooper. Cooper and his ambitious wife are attempting through various unscrupulous means to seize the fortune of Big Daddy. Despite the excessive flattery from his wife, May, and all the manipulative tactics used, the father remains aware of the schemes unfolding around him. All family members are distant from one another. Their preoccupation with material matters has destroyed the joy of living in the present.

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