

# The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

## “Make the Lie True”: The Tragic Family in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *King Lear*

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Time goes by so fast. Nothin' can outrun it. Death commences too early—  
almost before you're half-acquainted with life—  
you meet the other . . .  
— Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

Men must endure  
Their going hence even as their coming hither,  
Ripeness is all.  
— *King Lear* (V. ii. 9-11)

Families, perhaps the most complicated of human relationships, seem naturally to lend themselves toward tragedy. Tennessee Williams's family tragedy of greed, loyalty, and mendacity, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), has much in common with another timeless family tragedy, William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1605). Although different in setting, staging, and style, Williams's play reflects powerful elements of characterization and dramatic technique from Shakespeare's pattern, exploring the conflicts between parents and children, between husbands and wives, and between jealous siblings. As with *King Lear*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* concerns the imminent inheritance of an enormous piece of land and the wealth and power that accompany it, the personality of the family patriarch who established the family fortune, and his irresponsible children who will inevitably destroy it with their greed.

<sup>12</sup> Although usually iconoclastic, Williams had great respect for Shakespeare, and he frequently returned to Shakespeare's plays. In an interview in 1974, Williams said, "I began to read [Shakespeare] when I was a child. My grandfather had all of Shakespeare's works, and I read them all by the time I was ten" (Devlin, *Conversations* 269). Precocious in his youth and fascinated with language, Williams found Shakespeare inspiring, and he reread Shakespeare repeatedly during his adolescence, frequently identifying with Shakespeare's tragic characters. In one of his earliest attempts at writing, Williams tried to improve upon Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, revising the play into rhyming couplets (Williams and Mead 27). Williams did not complete his project to rewrite Shakespeare, but he certainly learned much about dramatic technique at an early age. Later, in 1935, when Williams was twenty-four, he discovered the plays of Anton Chekov, who Williams would always claim had the greatest influence on his style, but by that time he had already developed a taste for Shakespeare.

<sup>13</sup> During the spring of 1938, his final year at the University of Iowa, Williams had a different kind of encounter with Shakespeare. All students majoring in drama were required to participate in a play, and that year the head of the department chose Shakespeare's *I Henry IV*. Williams, who, despite his dramatic genius, had little talent as an actor, found himself in a tediously minor role, a member of Falstaff's "Charge of Foot." The director, realizing Williams's lack of talent, saw to it that he only delivered one line. About the experience, Williams recalls:

throughout the scene in which I appeared I had to sit on the forestage, polishing a helmet, all the while my throat getting tighter and tighter with apprehension at delivering that one line. I simply had to say that somebody had arrived at the gates. But when my cue came, the sound that issued from my constricted throat was quite unintelligible and would always bring down the house—it was like a mouse’s squeak. They said it was effective, however. (*Memoirs* 46)

Probably this production squelched any latent ambition Williams held for acting, but he identified with Prince Hal, the profligate heir to the English throne who would soon inspire the imagination of his people.

¶14 Critics have noted Shakespearean overtones to Williams’s plays, indicating that Shakespeare influenced his dramatic technique, characterization, and dialogue. David Everett Blythe notes that Williams uses a bit of Shakespearean dialogue from *Othello* in *Night of the Iguana*. Jacob Adler, in “Williams and the Bard,” explores “analogous interests, patterns, and techniques” between the two, and he points out similarities in the ways both playwrights incorporated history, violence, insanity, outsiders, and humor into their drama (38). Ultimately, Adler concludes that Williams found *Hamlet* most affecting because of the parallels between Hamlet’s life and Williams’s life, such as, “A mentally ill girl. A hated (step)father. A young man of exceptional intellect, totally uncomfortable in the world in which he finds himself. A man who (perhaps) pretends to mental illness. A man who in the end is almost attracted to violence” (48). Perhaps Williams’s personal identification with Shakespeare’s most intriguing character explains his tendency to incorporate Shakespearean allusions into his drama.

¶15 Much of the critical dialogue concerning Williams and Shakespeare has focused specifically on one of Williams’s most intriguing characters, Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Esther Merle Jackson says that “like Hamlet, Blanche Dubois reveals her inner nature by playing out her conflicted roles: school-teacher, Southern belle, poet, sister, savior, and prostitute,” and she suggests that the unbearable tension between these polarities leads both Hamlet and Blanche to their imminent destruction (84). Jacob Adler also finds that Hamlet and Blanche have much in common. He says:

Neither Blanche nor Hamlet can bear the world as it is. Both have ideals that make meaningful action in an imperfect world almost impossible. Blanche loses her mind, and Hamlet at least pretends to. Blanche dreams of an ideal world of Southern aristocratic culture, as Hamlet had assumed and expected an ideal world of nobility. Much in Hamlet’s soliloquies would not be inappropriate to Blanche’s feelings. . . . Blanche is that character in Williams who, like Hamlet in Shakespeare, most clearly becomes an archetype. (43)

Philip Kolin, on the other hand, makes a case for Shakespeare’s Cleopatra as a source for Blanche DuBois, and he comments on the parallels between their vanity, coquetry, and destructive sexual desires. Likely, Blanche has been the focus of so much critical attention precisely because she has become an archetypal character, and critics conclude that she, like many Shakespearean characters, symbolizes a particular and perennial aspect of the human condition.

¶16 Although *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has received less critical attention than *A Streetcar Named Desire*, especially from Shakespearean critics, it nonetheless occupies a privileged position in the American imagination, and it has its own archetypal quality. Most of the criticism of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* focuses on the relationships between the play’s three main characters and the roles they play within the family. As George Crandell asks rhetorically, “Is *Cat* primarily a story about a troubled marriage (Maggie and Brick), a possibly homosexual relationship (Brick and Skipper), a father and son’s inability to communicate (Big Daddy and Brick), or a family

squabble over an inheritance (Brick and Maggie versus Gooper and Mae)?" (117). Actually, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a seminal family tragedy about truth, judgment, and greed, and it has much in common with Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Both plays portray a charismatic family patriarch facing his mortality; both plays concern the tension between an unscrupulous set of siblings and a favored sibling; both plays focus on the transmission of an enormous piece of land; and both plays lead to emotionally traumatic conclusions. Of course, the plays have major dramatic differences. *King Lear* sprawls across numerous settings, involves a military invasion, and includes graphic physical violence, but *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* takes place entirely on a battlefield more suited to the twentieth century, a bedroom, and includes graphic psychological violence. Another significant difference separates these two plays. *King Lear* climaxes with Lear's tragic death over the body of his beloved daughter Cordelia. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, on the other hand, climaxes with the prospect of a new generation, mitigating the play's sense of desolation.

¶17 *King Lear*'s central character lends his name to the play, but *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has three central characters, Brick, Maggie, and, of course, Big Daddy. Although he appears on stage only briefly, Big Daddy's presence looms large over all of the characters in the play; they constantly talk to him, about him, or behind his back. C. W. E. Bigsby calls Big Daddy "the image of power, of materiality, of authority," and, indeed, he does rule over his plantation and his family like a king (89). Charismatic and ambitious, Big Daddy acquired his plantation through diligent effort and patience, and, as his relationships with Dr. Baugh and the Rev. Tooker suggest, the community respects his authority, in spite of his coarse demeanor. Unfortunately for Lear, on the other hand, he relinquishes his kingdom to his avaricious daughters in the first scene of the play, diminishing his power and authority for the remainder of the play, but, based on the loyalty his faithful servants show him and the length of his rule, he appears to have been a wise and strong king. The decision, then, to divide his kingdom must have been made under special circumstances, likely precipitated by the impending marriage of his youngest daughter and his advancing age. Big Daddy and Lear find themselves facing exactly the same problem in their respective plays, their legacy. As they face their mortality, they see their families in crisis and their lands in jeopardy, which forces both of them into emotional turmoil.

¶18 Big Daddy and Lear share another unique quality that few other people could understand—they both possess enormous wealth. When talking with his son Brick, Big Daddy gloats that he is worth "close on ten million in cash an' blue chip stocks, outside, mind you, of twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile!" (65). Considering that the play would have taken place soon after World War II, Big Daddy's wealth seems almost absurd, and his children, particularly his sons' wives, lust for their share of the family fortune, which Big Daddy realizes. He says to Brick, "You git a piece of land, by hook or crook, an' things start growin' on it, things accumulate on it, and the first thing you know it's completely out of hand!" (61). In the first scene of *King Lear*, Lear, hoping to prevent future squabbles among his children, divides his kingdom among his daughters based on the pledge of love and affection, and he describes the virtues of each of the three parcels. He gives Goneril an area "With shadowy forests and with champains rich'd / With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads," he gives Regan land of equal size and quality, and he proposes to bestow an even richer tract upon Cordelia, which indicates that his holdings are exceptionally vast (I.i.64-65). Indeed, as the king of Ancient Britain, Lear would have been one of the wealthiest men in Northern Europe at the time, and the size of his entourage after his abdication speaks to his largesse. Moreover, the loyalty he inspires in his subjects implies that his rule has been just and benevolent. But for Lear, as for Big Daddy, his fortune and power become his greatest

liability.

19 Big Daddy and King Lear represent the old regime in their respective plays, and, by the time of the dramatic action, they both face their imminent mortality. For three years Big Daddy has suspected that the pain in his gut came from a cancerous tumor, and over that time he has relinquished partial control of the plantation to Gooper and Big Mama, allowing them to usurp power where he ordinarily would not. But in the morning preceding the play's action, the day of his sixty-fifth and, inevitably, his last birthday, he has visited the Ochsner Clinic for a biopsy. Mae and Gooper have conspired to withhold the true diagnosis from him until after his birthday party, so for a brief moment Big Daddy believes that he suffers from nothing more than a spastic colon, despite the wolf's teeth in his guts. He tells Brick:

Ignorance—of mortality—is a comfort. A man don't have that comfort, he's the only living thing that conceives of death, that knows what it is. The others go without knowing which is the way that anything living should go, go without knowing, without any knowledge of it, and yet a pig squeals, but a man sometimes, he can keep a tight mouth about it. Sometimes he—[*there is a deep, smoldering ferocity in the old man.*]—can keep a tight mouth about it. (68)

Although he feels relieved at the positive diagnosis, Big Daddy has obviously begun to consider his mortality and to consider the disposition of his assets. This latter issue, his estate, seems to concern him even more than his death, because his favorite son, Brick, has become an alcoholic and, thus, could not maintain the plantation, which forces Big Daddy into a dilemma. Big Daddy explains to Brick:

A little while back when I though my number was up—before I found out it was just this—spastic—colon, I thought about you. Should I or should I not, if the jig was up, give you this place when I go—since I hate Gooper an' Mae an' know that they hate me, and since all five same little monkeys are little Maes an' Goopers.—And I thought, No! —Then I thought, Yes!—I couldn't make up my mind. I hate Gooper and his five same little monkeys and that bitch Mae! Why should I turn over twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile to not my kind?—But why in hell, on the other hand, Brick—should I subsidize a goddamn fool on the bottle?—Liked or not liked, well, maybe even—*loved!*—Why should I do that?—Subsidize worthless behavior? Rot? Corruption? (81-82)

To defeat his dilemma, Big Daddy hopes to use his remaining time to resolve Brick's problem, to find the reason behind his alcoholism, and to secure the plantation's future. But, while he gets to the heart of Brick's problem, he finds that he has more pressing problems of his own. In the course of their heated conversation, Brick accidentally tells Big Daddy that he will die soon and that Mae and Gooper, and Maggie, are conspiring to take over the plantation. Big Daddy replies with genuine shock, “[*slowly and passionately*]: CHRIST—DAMN—ALL—LYING SONS OF—LYING BITCHES . . . —Lying! Dying! Liars!” (95). Big Daddy finds the revelation of the plot he had suspected all along even more disheartening than his own dire prognosis, which indicates that he cares for his family and his legacy more than his health.

110 King Lear, hoping to preserve peace in his family and perpetuate his own legacy, proposes to divide his kingdom among his daughters before his death, but fate sends his plans awry, leading to war, suffering, and the end of his line. In his first speech onstage, Lear casts the die, explaining that his advancing years hasten his decision: “Know that we have divided / In three our kingdom, and 'tis our fast intent / To shake all cares and business from our age, / Conferring them on younger strengths, while we / Unburthened crawl toward death” (I.i.37-41). Obviously, Lear has considered his plan well, having previously prepared the map of his kingdom and assembled his daughters and their spouses as well as Cordelia's suitors. His scheme favors Cordelia, his

youngest and favorite daughter, because, in addition to her third of the kingdom she also stands to marry a landed foreign nobleman, either the Duke of Burgundy or the King of France, thus, joining two kingdoms. Since his other daughters, Regan and Goneril, have already married English nobles (Lear's own subjects), they only gain their portion of the kingdom as belated dowry. However, Lear's plan to dispense his lands on a simple pledge of affection falls apart when Cordelia refuses to indulge Lear with a cloying speech. Humiliated and enraged, he banishes her and divides her portion of the kingdom between Regan and Goneril. Like Big Daddy, he finds his family and his land in disorder as he faces his mortality, and, rather than facing his twilight securely bound to his beloved daughter, he leaves himself with only the begrudging mercies his Regan and Goneril. Unwilling to indulge their father's lavish entourage, Regan and Goneril quickly strip Lear of his knights and servants, leaving the once powerful king helpless and pitiful before casting him out into the raging tempest. Like Big Daddy, he curses his children's mendacity more than his own mortality, and he bellows with impotent rage, "you unnatural hags, / I will have such revenges on you both / That all the world shall—I will do such things— / What they are yet I know not, but they shall be / The terrors of the earth!" (II.iv.279-282). Angry and forlorn, Lear charges into the storm, punishing only himself.

¶11 The storm, nature's disorder, has significant meaning in both plays. In the original version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams omitted the storm, but, on the advice of director Elia Kazan, he added a major storm in the Delta for the Broadway production. Just after Mae and Gooper inform Big Mama of Big Daddy's actual condition, ominous storm sounds commence offstage, and servants can be heard frantically preparing for the weather; as Williams's stage directions describe:

*[Thunder clap. Glass crash, off L.*

*[Off UR, children commence crying. Many storm sounds, L and R: barnyard animals in terror, papers crackling, shutters rattling. Sookey and Daisy hurry L to R in lawn area. Inexplicably, Daisy hits together two leather pillows. They cry, "Storm! Storm!" Sookey waves a piece of wrapping paper to cover lawn furniture. Mae exits to hall and upper gallery. Strange man runs across lawn, R to L.*

*[Thunder rolls repeatedly.] (147)*

The storm in the Delta has much in common with the famous storm on the heath in *King Lear*, but Big Daddy, unlike Lear, watches the storm from his veranda. Lear charges into the storm, raging to match the heavens. When asked the King's whereabouts, an observer says:

[He's] Contending with the fretful elements;  
 Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,  
 Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,  
 That things might change or cease, tears his white hair,  
 Which the impetuous blasts with eyeless rage  
 Catch in their fury, and make nothing of . . . (III.i.4-9)

In addition to focusing the audience's attention on the emotional trauma taking place on stage, the storms underscore the magnitude of the changes taking place within the families and foreshadow the violence, both physical and psychological to come.

¶12 The storms also provide the audience with an objective correlative for the internal upheaval taking place within the respective minds of King Lear and Big Daddy. Lear emerges from the storm wet, ruffled, and quite mad. Faced with the precipitous loss of his title, his kingdom, and his family, coupled with his tremendous guilt

for ostracizing his only faithful child, Lear reacts violently, incoherently babbling, cursing his daughters, and blaming his fate on women. He says, “Down from the waist they are centaurs, / Though women all above; / But to the girdle do gods inherit, / Beneath is all the fiends’: there’s hell, there’s darkness, / There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, / Stench, consumption” (IV.vi.124-129). Vilifying his ungrateful daughters, Lear traces their malevolent nature to their gender, using the idiom for female genitalia. In a similarly curious episode from the Broadway version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Big Daddy wanders back onstage to tell a highly inappropriate joke about a little boy at the zoo watching an elephant:

So this ole bull elephant still had a couple of fornications left in him. He reared back his trunk an’ got a whiff of that elephant lady next door!—began to paw at the dirt in his cage an’ butt his head against the separatin’ partition and, first thing y’know, there was a conspicuous change in his *profile*—*very conspicuous*. . . . So the little boy looked at it and said, “What’s that?” His Mam said, “Oh, that’s—nothin’!”—His Papa said, “She’s spoiled!” (151-152)

As Big Daddy tells his joke, Big Mama falls into sobs and the other family members look on in amazement. Obviously, Big Daddy does not seem to be in normal humor, and he certainly does not behave like a man who just minutes before learned of his imminent death. Big Daddy, like Lear, allows his circumstances to overwhelm his reason, which, considering the impotence these usually powerful men feel, would be an appropriate defensive mechanism.

¶13 Brick uses alcohol as his favorite defensive mechanism, a circumstance that greatly complicates his relationship with Big Daddy. Brick and Cordelia share their respective fathers’ affection and favoritism, and they both manage to alienate their fathers, thus contributing to the respective play’s dramatic action. Brick seems to be completely oblivious of anyone other than himself as he crawls deeper into the bottle, and he acts surprised when Big Mama tells him that Big Daddy dotes on him and that only he could continue the family legacy. She says, “Oh, Brick, son of Big Daddy! Big Daddy does so love you! Y’know what would be his fondest dream come true? If before he passed on, if Big Daddy has to pass on, you gave him a child of yours, a grandson as much like his son as his son is like Big Daddy!” (117). Gooper, Brick’s older brother, bristles at the comment, but he recognizes that Big Daddy has always favored Brick, and he hopes to take advantage of Brick’s alcoholism to stake his own claim on the plantation.

¶14 Similarly, in the first scene of *King Lear*, Lear proclaims before everyone assembled, including his daughters and their husbands, that Cordelia has been his joy and that he “lov’d her most, and thought to set [his] rest / On her kind nursery” (I.i.23-24). Cordelia’s sisters profit at her loss, and, unsatisfied to share dominion over the kingdom, each immediately begins conspiring to depose the other, which makes one wonder if they would not have colluded to acquire Cordelia’s land had she received it. Brick and Cordelia, innocently, inhabit a treacherous family dynamic, and only their father’s protection prevents their siblings from destroying them, either physically or financially.

¶15 Perhaps because of their fathers’ protection, Brick and Cordelia have developed idealistic notions of truth that eventually lead to the climax of their respective plays. In the second act of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Big Daddy presses Brick to divulge the reason behind his drinking, and Brick, evasively, answers “Have you ever heard the word ‘mendacity’?,” and he goes on to attribute his condition to the accumulation of lies that his life has become and to the liars who surround him, with the exception of Big Daddy (79). Yet, even in his relationship with Big Daddy, neither party has been entirely forthcoming. While they have never explicitly lied to each other, they, as Brick says, have “never *talked* to each other” (83). Brick’s emphasis on “*talked*” suggests

that his relationship has never developed the intimacy that Big Daddy wished to have, and their one revelatory conversation leads them both to tremendous emotional trauma: Brick faces his sexual confusion, and Big Daddy faces his mortality.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, when Lear asks Cordelia to express her affection for him, she freezes, unwilling to respond in the lavish terms that her unscrupulous sisters have used, and so she simply says “Nothing, my lord” (I.i.87). Her reply seems puzzling, because her sisters have used fawning language, but they speak metaphorically. Goneril says she loves Lear more “than eyesight, space, and liberty,” and Regan says that Goneril’s words “come too short” to describe her love (I.i.56, 73). Regan and Goneril’s conceits seem quite transparent, but Cordelia takes them far too seriously, because she recognizes the falsity between her sisters’ love and their words, so she chooses to speak literally, explaining that she loves her father at his due, but not with the elevated language that her sisters use. Lear, offended, asks her “So young, and so untender?,” and she replies, “So young, my lord, and true” (I.i.106-107). In both plays, the favorite child’s obsession with honesty contributes to the play’s tragedy.

**¶16** In each play, the unfavored siblings’ malevolence also contributes to the dramatic action; in effect, they become the antagonists who perpetrate violence, whether physical or psychological, on the favored child and the father. Mae and Gooper, while not so overtly vicious as their counterparts in *King Lear*, appear quite repugnant. Alice Griffin says, understatedly, that they “have few redeeming traits,” and, indeed, they manipulate, spy, lie, and connive to get control of the plantation (157). They have come from Memphis to the plantation with their five “no-neck” children ostensibly for Big Daddy’s birthday party, but actually they have come expressly to profit from the news of Big Daddy’s cancer. Immediately after giving Big Mama the news about Big Daddy’s prognosis, Gooper presents her with a dummy trust and demands that she have Big Daddy to sign it, effectively transferring control of the plantation to Gooper and Mae. Big Mama objects, and Gooper callously says, “You jest won’t let me do this in a nice way, will yah? . . . I am asking for a square deal, and I expect to get one. But if I don’t get one, if there’s any peculiar shenanigans going on around here behind my back, or before me, well, I’m not a corporation lawyer for nothing, I know how to protect my own interests” (113). Naturally, Big Mama feels completely alienated by Gooper’s behavior, and, since she has more influence on Big Daddy than anyone save Brick, one could surmise that Gooper would only get any share of the plantation through litigation. Regan and Goneril, in a similar moment, learning that Cordelia and the army of France have invaded England for the purpose of securing Lear, quickly mount military action against their sister to prevent her from rescuing her father. Simultaneously, Regan and Goneril conspire with their courtiers to overthrow each other, leading to general strife and mayhem throughout the kingdom. In each case, the unfavored siblings attempt to use force to exact their nefarious, greedy ends, and the resolution comes when their plans have been thwarted.

**¶17** During the course of these insidious plots, Big Daddy and Lear each have one loyal friend who valiantly represents their respective interests in spite of their cruel mistreatment, Big Mama and Kent. Big Daddy constantly abuses Big Mama, calling her names in public and telling her directly that he finds her repulsive, yet she always lavishes him with love. He even castigates her in front of the family for helping to run the plantation. He says, “Ain’t that so, Ida? Didn’t you have an idea I was dying of cancer and now you could take control of this place and everything on it?” (57). When she runs sobbing from the room, he shows no concern for her, but, later, when she learns that he really is dying of cancer, she conclusively reveals her devotion to him. In his stage directions, Williams describes how the moment when Big Mama realizes Big Daddy’s condition should be acted:

[In these few words, this startled, very soft question, Big Mama reviews the history of her forty-five years with Big Daddy; her great, almost embarrassingly true-hearted and simple-minded devotion to Big Daddy, who must have had something Brick has, who made himself loved so much by the “simple expedient” of not loving enough to disturb his charming detachment, also once coupled, like Brick’s, with virile beauty.

[Big Mama has a dignity at this moment: she almost stops being fat.] (103)

When Gooper presents his dummy trust, Big Mama refuses him, saying “CRAP,” just like Big Daddy would. Instead, she begs Brick to have a child who will perpetuate Big Daddy’s legacy, leading Maggie to announce her pregnancy prematurely. In *King Lear*, the embattled Kent steps forward to preserve Cordelia from Lear’s unjust banishment, drawing Lear’s wrath upon himself. Only Kent dares to speak to Lear with reason. He says, “Reserve thy state, / And in thy best consideration check / This hideous rashness. Answer my life my judgement, / Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least, / Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness” (I.i.149-154). Kent foreshadows the play’s tragic trajectory, and Lear threatens Kent’s life, then banishes him from the kingdom. Knowing that he will be needed more now than ever, Kent contrives to disguise himself as the beggar Caius and to find his way into the King’s service. Kent uncovers the conspiracy between Regan and Goneril to eliminate Lear, and he summons Cordelia with the army of France to save Lear. At the play’s end, Lear dies in his arms. In these plays of duplicity and intrigue, the loyalty and love of Big Mama and Kent offers a brief glimmer of redemption.

¶18 Redemption aside, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *King Lear* are tragedies, but they have their moments of comic relief. Lear’s irreverent fool mocks his condition openly and with impunity, and his absurd commentary foreshadows the play’s tragic conclusion. Hearing that Regan and Goneril have exchanged letters concerning the King, the Fool says, “Fathers that wear rags / Do make their children blind, / But fathers that bear bags / Shall see their children kind. / Fortune, that arrant whore, / Ne’er turns the key to the poor. / But for all this, thou shalt have as many dolours for thy daughters as thou canst tell in a year” (II.iv.47-55). The Fool rightly prophesies that, since King Lear has forfeited his power, his daughters will inflict terrible sadness on him within the year. Like the Fool, Reverend Tooker offers a bit of uncomfortable humor to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Ostensibly at the plantation house to offer a bit of comfort to the family, he constantly talks of memorial windows and bequests to the parish, revealing himself to be as greedy and mendacious as Mae and Gooper. In one particularly disturbing moment, Big Daddy overhears Reverend Tooker say to Doc Baugh, “the Stork and the Reaper are running neck and neck!” (54). Obviously, Reverend Tooker knows of Big Daddy’s prognosis, which he probably heard from Doc Baugh, and he seems to be equating Big Daddy’s death with Mae’s sixth pregnancy. But his statement, by the end of the play, proves to have more prophetic import when Maggie reveals her (tentative) pregnancy with an heir to the plantation.

¶19 While almost all of the characters in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* have corollaries in *King Lear*, one character stands apart, Maggie the Cat. On one hand, Maggie has little in common with the other Pollitts, but, on the other hand, she seems to be an amalgam of Big Mama’s devotion, Big Daddy’s charisma, Mae and Gooper’s underhanded determination, and Brick’s coolness. Unlike the Pollitts, however, Maggie’s multi-faceted personality makes her both tremendously complex and quickly adaptable. Maggie’s goal, as revealed in the first act of the play, seems extremely difficult—to make her distant husband love her, to get pregnant, to deal with Brick’s alcoholism, and to preserve Brick’s interest in the plantation. Amazingly, at the end of the play, she appears to be on the verge of succeeding in all of her goals, which indicates that she, more than anyone else,

drives the play. Like many of William's most intriguing characters, as Albert Devlin points out in "Writing in 'A Place of Stone': *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*," she finds herself on the verge of dispossession, but unlike T. Lawrence Shannon, Blanche Dubois, and Amanda Wingfield, she faces her circumstance with cunning. In a sense, she exists separately from the *Lear*-esque frame play taking place around her. When the plantation appears to be in utter crisis, she assumes control of the situation, leading to the play's ultimate climax. In a blatant lie, she announces to the family that she carries Brick's child, virtually willing herself to be pregnant. At that moment, Mae and Gooper's plan to take the plantation crumbles, Big Daddy's last wish is fulfilled, and Brick shows a glimmer of interest in life outside his booze. Alone with her husband, she tells him that they are "going to make the lie true" and conceive a child (158). For the first time in possibly years, Brick agrees, passively, to make love to his wife, and Maggie, with an outsider's perspective, comments on the tragic Pollitts: "Oh, you weak, beautiful people who give up with such grace. What you need is someone to take hold of you—gently, with love, and hand your life back to you, like something gold you let go of—and I can! I'm determined to do it—and nothing's more determined than a cat on a hot tin roof" (158). Ultimately, if anyone triumphs in Williams's play, it is Maggie.

¶20 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *King Lear* conclude with the prospect of a new generation. At the end of *King Lear*, with Lear and all of his daughters dead and no one remaining with a rightful claim to the throne, the Duke of Albany, Goneril's widower could have asserted his own claim on the kingdom, perhaps to be challenged by the King of France. Instead, Albany transfers authority to Kent and Edgar, the faithful defenders of the old regime. Kent, recognizing his own advanced age, defers, giving Edgar sole rule of Lear's troubled kingdom. Edgar accepts his new position with proper solemnity, saying, "The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say: / The oldest hath borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long" (V.iii.324-327). In the wake of terrible suffering and bloodshed, Edgar's ascendancy to the throne gives the play a note of redemption as a new, just regime resolves the anguish plaguing the nation. Maggie's pregnancy lends a similar tone of redemption to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, especially in the Broadway version of the play. The original version ends with Brick, as jaded as ever, merely acquiescing to make love to Maggie, but in the Broadway version, Brick shows genuine interest in Maggie. He even says, as he approaches the bed, the battleground that dominates the stage, "I admire you, Maggie" (158). The play ends here, with Maggie's speech about these weak, beautiful people, but she obviously has assumed power over the entire family at this point. With Big Daddy's death imminent and Mae and Gooper completely out of the picture, she figures, with or without Brick's active assistance, to take control of the plantation and to raise an heir who will, eventually, receive Big Daddy's legacy.

¶21 Ultimately, *King Lear* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are plays about succession. As the old generation faces death, infighting among the young generation coupled with greed, petty jealousy, and dishonesty, leads to tragic ends. In these plays, family members become adversaries, death becomes an opportunity, and sex becomes a weapon. Although remote in temporal and spatial setting, *King Lear* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* have many themes in common, and it seems that Williams kept Shakespeare in mind while writing his play. Yet the similarities between the two plays hardly need to be considered explicitly intentional. Williams may have exploited the family dynamics of *King Lear* for his own purposes, but the extreme relationships in this family have their own seminal value, and almost every audience member in virtually every time, Elizabethan or contemporary, can relate to or conceive of these archetypal characters because every family has its own sense of

tragedy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more on the theme of homosexuality, see Dean Shackelford's article "The Truth That Must Be Told: Gay Subjectivity, Homophobia, and Social History in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*." *Tennessee Williams Annual Review* 1 (1998).

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