

# The Tennessee Williams Annual Review

## Hoboes, Sissies, and Breeders: Generations of Discontent in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

Claire Nicolay



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Given recent critical interest in the play's McCarthy-era context and its complex treatment of homosexuality, the time seems right to reexamine Tennessee Williams's use of history to discuss gender and inheritance in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. I contend that Williams's *Cat* can be fruitfully read as a parable of the changing American dream and its effects on masculinity, which in turn affects the structure of the family and the lives of women. Particularly, the "Notes for the Designer" and offstage presence of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello; Big Daddy's meditations on his hobo past; the relationship between Brick and Big Daddy and their troubled marriages; Maggie's assumption of power in act 3: all are part of a subtle yet persistent historical narrative. This narrative traces the legacy of homosociality and misogyny as well as the cultural transition from frontier ideals of freedom, self-reliance, and individualism to Cold War imperatives of consumption and conformity. Williams's deliberate elision of homosexual and heterosexual concerns also helps to demonstrate the oppressive state of American patriarchy circa 1954.

¶2 *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has maintained great popularity as a drama rooted in the tradition of theatrical realism and closely focused on the dynamics of family inheritance. Changes done in collaboration with Elia Kazan made the play acceptable to a wide general audience and created a blockbuster: the patriarch Big Daddy's role was emphasized, the character of Maggie was made more sympathetic, the complications of Brick's fraught relationship with his friend Skipper were healed with conventional heterosexuality, and a hit was born.

¶3 Today, the Broadway and film versions of the play are viewed by critics as bowdlerized, and readers are finding fresh inspiration in Williams's 1974 version, which restores the complexity and dark vision of the original. Williams also published an earlier revised version that suggests his discomfort with the revisions he made for Kazan: the 1955 New Directions edition included both the original and Broadway version of act 3 but privileged the former by placing it first. However, despite the pragmatic changes Williams made with Kazan, the play had good bones: some elements of the messier, more ambitious *Cat* remained in the text even before Williams published the New Directions edition. Ultimately, however, the original "Cat Number One," as Williams dubbed it, and the 1975 New Directions version—which follows all of Williams's changes made for the 1974 ANTA Playhouse production—most clearly show what Brian Parker calls Williams's essentially "tragic intention" ("Bringing Back Big Daddy" 94).

¶4 The last twenty years have seen a resurgence of critical interest in this play, corresponding to the rise of new ways of thinking about gender, particularly the emergence of queer theory. The early to mid-1990s were marked by several radical castigations of Williams's supposedly weak gay politics, followed inevitably by responses that analyzed the texts more deeply. Two decades later, the critical discussion of *Cat* is still focused primarily on the murky issue of Brick's sexuality, as well as on the politics of masculinity in the play itself.<sup>1</sup>

¶5

As Michael Paller observes, Williams's best writing creates tension by juxtaposing two contradictory impulses: "his urge to conceal" and "the equally strong need to reveal" (20). In *Cat* Williams maintained a tantalizing ambiguity in his portrayal of Brick as a way to avoid limiting the play's perspective. *Cat* not only observes Brick's tortured love life and raises gay issues but also examines an array of human behavior across the spectrum of sexuality. Clearly Williams was trying to do something more complex than depict closeted homosexuality. As John S. Bak rightly suggests, "Perhaps what is equally plausible is that Williams found it more dramaturgically significant (if not also more politically subversive) to intentionally articulate the uncertainty of Brick's Cold War masculinity, the vagueness with which he, given the various contradictory rules and mores of his society, does or does not understand the limits of his male desire" (227). However, as Douglas Arrell observes, Bak's conception of Brick as heterosexual and, more problematically, as an existentialist hero doesn't fit the evidence in the play: this character is, rather, "someone who cannot face the truth, about himself, his relationship with Skipper, and his responsibility for Skipper's death" (62).

Williams carefully adjusted the dynamics between his characters to suit the play's theatrical needs but left many clues in the text of *Cat* to preserve his complex, subversive agenda. As James Gilbert observes, "In effect, he was seeking an idiom to express the continuities between homosexual, heterosexual, and filial love that pervaded the play" (173). Williams used various strategies, most remarkably the oblique "Notes for the Designer," the characters Straw and Ochello, and Big Daddy's Depression survivor's backstory, to convey this controversial narrative, one that had been pushed underground by the McCarthyite forces at work when *Cat* was first written and under production. As Robert J. Corber observes, *Cat*'s "examination of the closet is part of a larger critique of post-war structures of oppression. Williams seems to have understood that one of the ways in which the discourses of national security contained opposition to the Cold War consensus was by homosexualizing it" (117). Brick, unlike his father before him, has internalized and is controlled by the new wave of anti-homosexual mores.

The generational counterpoise between Brick and Big Daddy helps to clarify Brick's conflict. Although there has been some recent examination of the two men's homosocial bonds, no one has sufficiently examined how Big Daddy's Depression-era perspective serves to underscore Brick's desperate sense of limitation in a prosperous, conformist, postwar society.<sup>2</sup> Critics have analyzed *Cat* in terms of its response to Cold War demands for conformity but have not examined the full social-historical context for this sea change.

Dean Shackelford observes that *Cat* "demonstrates the extent to which society dehumanizes men through its overt homophobia. As such, the play largely demonstrates that a homosocially-oriented social structure is responsible for problematizing homosexuality" (105). I agree and would add that the play examines not only masculine dehumanization but also female dehumanization and denigration: both Big Daddy and Brick are trapped by their perceptions of what patriarchy demands of them and freely project their anger onto the women who love them and who are themselves radically constrained by their roles as "breeders," as Big Daddy jeeringly refers to Mae in act 2. Ultimately, the only solution Maggie finds for her own situation in this patriarchal mess is to usurp Brick's power and make *him* the breeder, the traditionally female role she herself had desired. Thus, although my focus is on the issues of masculinity and male sexuality that have tantalized recent critics, Maggie is also essential to these issues in *Cat* and has therefore a central part in this discussion.<sup>3</sup>

## Verandas in Samoa and Mississippi

Williams's stage directions for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* preserve a collection of subversive, sometimes puzzling ideas that undermine traditional assumptions about the play's realism. As David Savran writes, "The elaborate stage directions provide perhaps the most revealing example of Williams's practice of fracturing the coherence of both the realistic text and the ostensibly stable subject that takes up residence within it" (103). In particular, the lyrical "Notes for the Designer," which reads like a sort of prose poem, contains ideas that complicate the script. In vivid contrast to the enforced heterosexuality of the Broadway and film versions, the "Notes" enshrines the unseen Straw and Ochello and directs that the bed-sitting-room of the play's main action "must evoke some ghosts; it is gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon" (15). As Shackelford writes, "By suggesting they shared a form of marriage . . . Williams illustrates the potential for relationships between two men outside conventional definitions of masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality" (110). Their shadowy but persistent existence in the play offers an alternate history that challenges the status quo, not only suggesting possibilities for the future but also asserting an alternative past that contrasts with the paranoid, conformist present.

¶10 The "Notes" also draws a specific if tentative connection between the plantation set and Robert Louis Stevenson's verandah on Samoa, evoking "the quality of tender light on weathered wood . . . exposed to tropical suns and tropical rains . . . the grace and comfort of light, the reassurance it gives . . ." Why Samoa? Why Stevenson? Williams summarily deprecates this surprising analogy, suggesting that it "may be irrelevant or unnecessary" (15). However, once this lyrical image is conjured, it opens the vista of that bed-sitting-room with teasing suggestions of ethnography and alternate cultures, of isolation and refuge. These unseen characters, whose lives and love are so fleetingly mentioned in the play, are preserved in the room as in a palimpsest, with other lives written over theirs. The past, although very effectively covered over by the bombastic heterosexuality of McCarthyite America, bleeds through this historical rewriting of U.S. intolerance and the subterfuge it demanded of Williams's generation of gay men.

¶11 The image of Stevenson's Samoan verandah implies a comparison of generations. It also suggests historical cycles of change: from the play's vantage point, the specter of Straw and Ochello's personal freedom is as alien as Stevenson's Samoan verandah. By the early 1950s anticommunists had begun to scapegoat homosexuals. As one historian observes, "After the war, which had fostered the emergence of same-sex communities and the increasing visibility of gay men and lesbians, the post war years brought a wave of official homophobia" (May 82). Sexual nonconformity was now defined as a national security threat, and the period was marked by arrest and harassment of homosexuals, which was part of a larger Cold War vilification of the nonmasculine. Like a sepia-tinted image of Stevenson's island home, Straw and Ochello's world is a refuge from contemporary life and suggests a longer view of history as an antidote to Cold War trauma. This gently remembered past puts the turmoil of the estate—and of the larger culture beyond—into perspective.

¶12 The bed-sitting-room is "Victorian with a touch of the Far East," a fitting style for a room influenced by Stevenson (15). It also adds a desirable hint of what would later be known as otherness: difference from the master culture, from the enforced master narrative. Although replete with "a *huge* console combination of radio-phonograph . . . TV set *and* liquor cabinet," which situates the play's action firmly in the present, the bed-sitting-room is still grounded in a lyrical sense of history that contextualizes the play's action (16).

## Big Daddy's American Dream

Big Daddy is often considered the most sympathetic character in *Cat*: a dying man who has fought his way up from poverty, a man who speaks freely in a house of secrecy and deceit. Like Maggie, he is *alive*, and his flaws add dimension and complexity to this character. Despite his appeal—which has been powerfully reinforced by Burl Ives’s iconic stage and screen portrayal—this character is grounded in a powerful homosociality that crosses over into misogyny. Also, despite Big Daddy’s tolerance of homosexuality and vivid insights about the corruption and falsehoods of society, he is nonetheless caught up in capitalist ideology and rigid patriarchal homosociality. He has achieved the American dream of wealth, land ownership, and family, yet now finds himself questioning it.

¶14 Big Daddy comes from an era of economic instability that seems far removed from the privileged plantation wealth and circumscribed culture of Brick’s formative years; the series of economic crises before World War I, the war itself, the Dust Bowl, and the Depression are vague specters by the prosperous Cold War era of the play, kept alive only in Big Daddy’s dialogue. This character, born in the 1890s, has a backstory that would make him part of “the immense army of migrant laborers, usually known as hoboies or tramps, who constituted a significant part of the American workforce in the decades before the 1920s” (Chauncey 78). Despite the spare details in his speeches, it is not difficult to piece together Big Daddy’s experience. He quit school at age ten, rode the rails, and stayed on the road until 1910, sleeping in hobo jungles, railroad YMCAs, and flophouses around the country. All of these experiences signal his experience in “hobohemia,” which George Chauncey describes as part of an early twentieth-century bachelor subculture that rejected domesticity and middle-class materialism. This group, which included seamen, transient laborers, and common laborers, “was based on a shared code of manliness and an ethic of male solidarity” (77–79).

¶15 Big Daddy’s apparent tolerance of homosexuality gives us another glimpse of what was by 1954 a lost world of men riding the rails, camping outdoors, scraping for survival without seeing women for months on end. The early sociologist Nels Anderson, himself a veteran of hobohemia, wrote in 1923, “All studies indicate that homosexual practices among homeless men are widespread. They are especially prevalent among men on the road among whom there is a tendency to idealize and justify the practice.” Anderson also asserts that, on the road, “boys are accessible while women are not,” so “the boy does not need to remain long in hobo society to learn of homosexual practices.” Migrant boys were “invariably approached” by solicitous men and so had to find ways to avoid predators (“wolves”). Tolerance of man-boy relationships among migrants reflected their prevalence: “It is not uncommon to hear a boy who is seen traveling with an older man spoken of as the “wife” or “woman” (Anderson 144–45). Small wonder that Big Daddy found it easy to interact with Straw and Ochello, or that he seems unperturbed by Brick’s possible homosexuality. Big Daddy’s inability to deal with women except on a sexual level also reflects his experience in the hobo subculture.

¶16 Hardened and educated on the road, Big Daddy finally finds his grueling struggle for existence interrupted by lucky chance: “I had worn my shoes through, hocked my—I hopped off a yellow dog freight car half a mile down the road, slept in a wagon of cotton outside the gin—Jack Straw and Peter Ochello took me in. Hired me to manage this place which grew into this one” (118–19). As in a Horatio Alger story, Big Daddy has traveled from rootless poverty to prodigious wealth: his dutiful suffering, resourcefulness, and industry have led to a deserved payoff. His life exemplifies the American ethos of hard work and bootstraps—the school of hard knocks—and the mythos of golden American luck.

¶17

The new Cold War order, with its affluence and increasing control of sexuality and other social behavior, contrasts markedly with the vanished world of hoboemia that Big Daddy evokes. Now the harsh freedom of his workingman's culture has been replaced with the staid and mendacious atmosphere of bourgeois aspirations: the individual struggle to survive and win material success is replaced by the capitalist imperative to consolidate wealth and maintain social control. Moreover, these new, unsatisfying values are integral to the new order, which also threatens to change the meaning of Big Daddy's great achievement: acquisition and mastery of "28,000 acres." Big Daddy's speeches in act 2 reveal his sneaking realization that the American dream has failed him. His disillusion with materialism is expressed in his contempt for the European "fire sale" and Big Mama's compulsive acquisition of European objets d'art. He is horrified at the extreme gulf between rich and poor in ravaged postwar Europe and becomes revolted when he encounters a baby being pimped by its mother in Morocco. In this passage we see the fissures in Big Daddy's American complacency. Rather than question vast inequalities of wealth—which he has also experienced—he flees home to the unexamined pleasures of plantation life. The European trophies have been acquired, only to be squirreled away out of sight.

¶18 Thus despite his discomfort with old-world poverty and inequality, Big Daddy does not reject materialism: he is deeply committed to that part of the American dream. Indeed, he can define himself only as possessor of a vast plantation, and he hoards that ownership exultantly. Although he himself inherited the plantation from a gay couple with no other heirs, Big Daddy clings to the idea of creating a blood dynasty so the wealth and power symbolized by the plantation will remain his in perpetuity. Even his sexual fantasy is materialistic: "I'll strip her naked and smother her in minks and choke her with diamonds!" (98). The aggressive nature of his fantasy is also significant: Big Daddy's desire to strip, smother, and choke his dream girl—albeit with largesse—suggests the inextricable connection between his conception of material and sexual dominance.

¶19 After facing death and believing he has a reprieve, Big Daddy feels alienated from everyone in his family except Brick. The old man is repelled by his wife, hates his oldest son and his family, and complains about the mendacity required of him: "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 . . ." (110). "Pretend to love that son of a bitch of a Gooper and his wife Mae and those five same screechers out there like parrots in a jungle? Jesus! Can't stand to look at 'em!" (112). Despite his contemptuous disgust for his family, Big Daddy feels he has been acting his required role as husband, father, and wealthy pillar of the community.

¶20 Although he claims to live a life of mendacity as he fulfills his social duties, Big Daddy is not quite the actor he considers himself. His antipathy for Big Mama, exacerbated by pain and anxiety, lies right on the surface of the play, requiring her to respond with denial. For example, the stage directions note that he "*is famous for his jokes at Big Mama's expense . . . though sometimes they're pretty cruel and Big Mama has to . . . cover the hurt that the loud laugh doesn't quite cover*" (67–68). He openly mocks her girth and dismisses her statements. When she tries to tone down his obnoxious behavior at the party, he snaps, "You don't know a goddam thing and you never did!" (77). What makes him angriest, however, is the thought that she might have some control over his estate. Convinced that she is trying to usurp his power, he rages, "And you thought I was dying and you started taking over, well, you can just stop now this business of taking over because you're not taking over because I'm not dying" (78). This speech, with its incantatory repetitions of "dying" and "taking over," demonstrates Big Daddy's paranoia about his property, an extension of his self.

¶21 When Big Daddy declares, “I grow tolerance,” he seems proudly in earnest, but there’s strong irony here: he may be tolerant of homosexual love, but of what else? His intransigence and spite against everyone in his family except Brick and Maggie is striking, and his misogyny is underscored by abusive verbal attacks on his wife as well as his crude conception of women as either breeders or sexual objects. Big Daddy’s tragedy is not his impending death but his disillusion and inability to experience reciprocal love. After the party, Big Mama urgently insists, “*And I did so much, I did love you!—I even loved your hate and your hardness, Big Daddy!*” After she runs, sobbing, out of the room, he remarks to himself, “*Wouldn’t it be funny if that was true. . . .*” (80), the line that Brick ironically echoes at the end of Williams’s preferred version. Thus, Big Daddy reveals the marriage’s empty core: “*After all those years,*” as Big Mama says, he can’t see her for what she is, can’t relate to her, and doesn’t trust her. Big Daddy’s detachment from human feeling is remarkable. Not only can he coolly discuss his sexual disgust for Big Mama with their own son, but he also observes others’ emotions with detachment. For example, he bluntly says that Peter Ochello “quit eatin’ like a dog does when its master’s dead” after the death of his partner (119). This statement is striking not only as an example of Big Daddy’s homespun vernacular but also as an indication of this character’s emotional distance. Given what we know of Big Daddy, these words are not unkind—indeed they are positively mild compared to his abuse of Big Mama. However, the analogy of profound human emotion to animal behavior is characteristic of Big Daddy: he cannot understand or feel love but merely recognizes it as a fact of life.

¶22 One intriguing, if facile, element of late twentieth-century criticism of this play is the frequent assertion that Big Daddy is a repressed homosexual or just plainly gay.<sup>4</sup> Such arguments are based very tenuously on three assumptions: that Big Daddy’s bowel cancer, an ailment he shares with two gay characters in the short story “The Mysteries of the Joy Rio,” is symbolically connected to homosexuality; that Big Daddy’s inheritance of the plantation from the gay couple, Straw and Ochello, must have involved some sort of sexual connection; and that Big Daddy’s line “I knocked around in my time” is not a broad, vernacular reference to his hobo past but an oblique acknowledgment of homosexual activity.<sup>5</sup> As Alan Sinfield comments, “Even gay critics interpret Big Daddy’s bowel cancer in *Cat* . . . as the ‘wages of sodomy,’ though it seems to me that Big Daddy has thrived in the wake of his earlier experiences, and his current illness signifies a current (social) sickness” (193). If Big Daddy is indeed confessing homosexual activity in this scene, surely Brick, caught up in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others have called homosexual panic, would respond in horror or at least surprise.<sup>6</sup>

¶23 Given the pervasiveness of homosexuality in early twentieth-century hoboemia, along with Big Daddy’s outsized appetites, Williams clearly leaves open the tantalizing—if obscure—possibility that Big Daddy might have engaged in homosexual acts. However, the character’s lines would have to be substantially revised to support a reading of him as a repressed homosexual or, as in Corber, a victim of homosexual panic. There are simply too many specific details in the play underscoring his crude heterosexual orientation. Take just one example from act 2: When Brick, in an agonized moment, tries to tell “*as much as he knows of ‘the Truth,’*” Big Daddy interrupts to ask, “How was Maggie in bed?” Brick responds “*wryly*”: “Great! the greatest!” In response, “*Big Daddy nods as if he thought so*” (124). With great economy, this brief comic interlude serves to defuse slightly Brick’s anguished speech; demonstrate Big Daddy’s limited understanding of his son and his dilemma; contrast the older man’s rough yet honest essentialism with his son’s self-absorbed idealism; and amusingly confirm Maggie’s belief that the old man “harbors a little unconscious ‘lech’ fo’ me” (23). I find it unthinkable

that Williams would have written this passage for a homosexual character; not only would it ring psychologically untrue, but it would serve no dramatic purpose.

¶24 Though Brick is virtually a case study in homosexual panic, Big Daddy does not fit into this paradigm, because his America is not the same one that Brick inhabits. As Sedgwick points out, the constantly shifting nature of the line between acceptable homosociality and proscribed homosexuality is “an exceedingly potent and embattled locus of power over the entire range of male bonds” (185). In this older character’s formation and experience of masculinity, then, Williams traces an American, even Whitmanian, road not taken: Big Daddy has learned traditional American values like self-reliance and individualism as well as working-class values of physical toughness and homosociality. However, the fact that his life spans two historically and culturally specific versions of masculinity—one grounded in useful frontier myths and identifiably “masculine” work, the other grounded in the preservation of wealth and social identity—reveals ideological conflicts at the core of American culture.

¶25 Although Big Daddy has begun to realize the insufficiency of his dream, he has not given up on it: he clings desperately to his 28,000 acres of land (a talisman in the face of death) and to his desire to create a dynasty. Despite his dawning comprehension of the false essence of capitalism, he still needs an heir to make sense of his striving.

### Brick's American Nightmare

Big Daddy’s hardscrabble American experience—a bleak, aggressively masculine struggle that demands but does not necessarily reward hard work—is foreign to Brick. Ironically, Big Daddy’s plebian efforts (“I worked like a nigger!”) have made his son a child of wealth and privilege, constrained by social expectations that have become more stringent with the Cold War demand for conformity. Rather than fight for survival in a hostile world, Brick plays on the symbolic field of conflict in football, which was lionized in the South during the 1950s. The rules of this male game reflect the era’s strict code of obedience, conformity, and homosociality. Although the homosocial code of Big Daddy’s working-class, Depression-era transience had allowed some sexual nonconformity, the rules of homosociality, as Sedgwick points out, have always been perilously unclear and prone to revision, and Brick’s prosperous, postwar America now demands a rigid, stylized performance of masculinity (185).

¶27 In Brick, Williams created a focal character, passive in his role as an object of desire not only for Skipper and Maggie but also for his doting parents, his fans, and even—although this desire becomes twisted by envy—Gooper and Mae. Brick’s charisma is made potent by his emotional distance: every character in the play is fixated on him, while he remains uncommunicative and self-involved. George W. Crandell cites Brick’s “‘sense of self-importance’ and unique status in the Pollitt family,” his refusal to cooperate, indifference to others, and lack of empathy as clear signals of his clinical narcissism (429–30). I would add that Brick’s narcissism works not only on a realistic but also on a symbolic level: his distance and unattainability make him a symbol of the ultimately unsatisfying American Dream. Big Daddy, in particular, seems to depend on Brick to give his own career an ultimate meaning. On the surface, Brick fulfills everyone’s desires: his beauty, athleticism, wealth, charm, and elusiveness make him an object of universal attraction, but he is ultimately revealed as paralyzed by fright, unable to look honestly at himself and his desires, and unable to participate in love.

¶28

Williams made various stabs at illuminating this famously ambiguous character, and his statement that “Brick is homosexual with a heterosexual adjustment” has perhaps confused as much as clarified. However, this somewhat opaque comment, which has been widely interpreted, becomes clearer in the context of the 1954 letter to Elia Kazan where it appears. In the same sentence, Williams calls Marlon Brando “the nearest thing to Brick that we both know” and suggests that people like Brando and Brick “are often undersexed, prefer pet raccoons or sports to sex with either gender” (*Notebooks* 662, n. 962). Thus, a “heterosexual adjustment” occurs because the subject does not have the requisite desire to pursue his true sexual nature. Brick prefers (or sublimates his desire in) sports and thus avoids social and personal conflict by conforming to heterosexual mores.

¶29 Maggie also attests to Brick’s low level of desire, even in their happier past: “Such a wonderful person to go to bed with, and I think mostly because you were really indifferent to it.” She describes his sexual coolness—his approach to sex is “more like opening a door for a lady or seating her at a table than giving expression to any longing for her”—and concludes that “[y]our indifference made you wonderful at lovemaking—strange?—but true . . .” (30). Both Maggie and Skipper find themselves thwarted by Brick’s coolness but inexorably drawn by the charisma it fuels.

¶30 Brick’s glamour, narcissism, and detachment also create unfulfilled love in others. When Big Mama learns that Big Daddy is terminally ill, she hysterically rejects Mae, crying “*Git away from me . . . I want Brick! Where’s Brick? Where is my only son?*” (147). The unappealing Gooper must certainly have been scarred for life by such treatment. Brick, however, seems caught in the amber of his adolescence: like a teenager, he always turns his head or otherwise rejects his mother’s affection. And although they have a contentious relationship and—until the time of the play—little communication, Big Daddy is also under the sway of his charismatic son. As Maggie declares, “Big Daddy dotes on you, honey” (22). After Big Daddy verbally skewers his family and the “fool preacher,” along with the Elks, Masons, and Rotary, he tells Brick, “You I do like for some reason, did always have some kind of real feeling for—affection—respect—yes, always.” Poignantly he declares, “You and being a success as a planter is all I ever had any devotion to in my whole life!” (110–11). Like the plantation, Brick represents the old man’s ideal of self-reliance. Big Daddy can’t accept Gooper as heir but yearns to “straighten . . . out” his younger son and shower him with the hard-won fruits of his life’s efforts (102). He wants to have it both ways: to choose an heir as Straw and Ochello did but also to continue a blood line.

¶31 Until the confrontation between Skipper and Maggie, Brick’s conformity to the dominant sexual mode had allowed him to avoid self-examination and social conflict. However, Skipper’s confession triggered a panicked response from Brick, who hung up the phone and never spoke to him again, thus leading to Skipper’s self-destruction and death. This tragic series of events has destroyed Brick’s illusions: bereft and guilt-ridden, he can no longer take refuge in the sentimental idea of Greek friendship. As Williams perceives in his discussion of the heterosexually adapted, “if a mask is ripped off . . . that’s quite enough to blast the whole mechanism . . . knock the world out from under their feet, and leave them no alternative but—owning up to the truth or retreat into something like liquor . . .” (*Notebooks* 662, n. 962). This description may be considered a capsule summary of Brick’s storyline in *Cat*.

¶32 In the 1954 letter to Kazan, Williams identifies an “innocence” and “blindness” in the “heterosexually adjusted” people that “makes them very, very touching, very beautiful and sad” (662, n. 962). Brick reveals his own naïveté by his earnest devotion to an idealistic neoclassical mode of friendship with Skipper, which Maggie

tries to validate and which seems to bemuse the earthy Big Daddy, who has “just now returned from the other side of the moon, death’s country,” and is “not easy to shock by anything here” (122). Brick, on the other hand, reveals himself to be horrified by homosexuality and inconsolable at being suspected as gay.

¶33 Brick’s paranoid condition, homosexual panic, is caused by cognitive dissonance: as Sedgwick observes, “the paths of male entitlement . . . required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds” (185). He wishes to interpret his relationship with Skipper in a culturally approved way—as a manly but nonsexual attachment—but the alternative meaning of such a friendship can’t be stifled. Myles Raymond Hurd has documented the “extended parallel” between Brick and Skipper’s relationship and that of Achilles and Patroclus, as well as some of the ambiguities inherent in this classical paradigm. Although the friendship of Achilles and Patroclus is sometimes memorialized in idealized, nonsexualized terms, the bonds have always had an alternate reading: for example, Hurd notes that Patroclus is referred to as Achilles’ “masculine whore” in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* (63). Brick’s naïve construction of a purely nonphysical, spiritual relationship can’t bear the light of scrutiny: when Maggie and Big Daddy try to support his vision of an “exceptional friendship, *real, real, deep friendship!* between two men” as “something clean and decent” (that is, not sexual), it is he who seems dissatisfied with this explanation—his frustration won’t be placated by either Maggie’s or Big Daddy’s acceptance (122, 58).

¶34 Brick’s speeches in act 2 suggest how thoroughly he has been conditioned into homosocial conformity: he raves about “fucking sissies,” “*Fairies,*” and “*Sodomy.*” As Williams comments in the stage note here, his contemptuous epithets help us “*gauge the wide and profound reach of the conventional mores he got from the world that crowned him with early laurel*” (122). Brick reveals little interest in the morality of homosexual behavior; rather, he is obsessed with “how people *feel* about things like that? How, how *disgusted* they are by things like that” (121). He excitedly recounts a typical episode of homosexual panic as performed by his fraternity, which shunned a pledge who supposedly “*attempted to do a, unnatural thing,*” scaring him “All the way to . . . North Africa, last I heard!” (122). The immense distance of exile here indicates the degree of shame.

¶35 Although they differ in their responses to homosexuality, Big Daddy’s and Brick’s homosocial worlds intersect in their misogyny. Both seem to feel they have been roped into marriage: alienated by their women’s financial dependence, these men can’t believe their wives are motivated by true emotion. These suspicions are expressed by their agreement that Mae and Maggie are “squaring off” over the inheritance, by Big Daddy’s insistence that Big Mama is trying to “take over,” and, most strikingly, by their wry refusal to accept their wives’ protestations of love. When Brick echoes Big Daddy in the final line of the play, he expresses both this dark suspicion and the accompanying emotional emptiness.

¶36 Both father and son are incapable of loving their spouses and detached in sex; both have bought into deceptive and unsatisfying American myths of masculinity; and both have been betrayed by the American gospel of prosperity. These men, lonely in their self-absorption, are ironically showered with love they cannot accept. Meanwhile, their devoted women have also become emotionally deformed: Big Mama is clownish and overbearing, while Maggie, as she says herself, has “gone through this—*hideous!—transformation, become—hard! Frantic!*” (27). The plantation has become a substitute for love and happiness, which Brick may disavow but for which Maggie will fight.

## Maggie Usurper

In act 1, Brick demands, “Just how in hell on earth do you imagine—that you’re going to have a child by a man that can’t stand you?” Maggie tartly responds, “That’s a problem I will have to work out” (66). Maggie’s siege—pleading, flattering, bullying, insinuating, promenading—has run up again against the great wall of Brick’s refusal. However, her response here is unexpected and funny, a signal of Maggie’s inner strength and a premonition of the play’s conclusion.

¶138 Despite what Maria St. Just described as the “tri-partite nature of the play”—a dramatic balance among the three major characters—critical discussion of the character Maggie has stagnated as the spotlight remains trained on the men. However, any discussion of the masculine must contend with the feminine as well, even if only for definition and contrast. Moreover, *Cat’s* questioning of the meaning of masculinity suggests the highly structured nature of gender roles. By the end of the play, we see a reversal: if masculinity is defined as the active exertion of power and control, then Maggie has become the man.

¶139 Indeed, I would argue that Maggie, not Brick, is truly Big Daddy’s heir. Maggie’s progress is a female variant of Big Daddy’s: both characters are intelligent, resourceful outsiders who strongly desire not only release from poverty but also material success. Thus they use every means at their disposal to ingratiate themselves with the plantation owner(s) and pursue the symbolic prize of the plantation. As Michael P. Bibler observes, Big Daddy usefully became Straw and Ochello’s inheritor, which remedied their crisis of inheritance (21). Maggie aims to solve the next plantation owner’s crisis of inheritance, using the unwilling services of Brick to offer Big Daddy the only solution he desires. Like Big Daddy before her, Maggie is on the make, forced by impoverished circumstances to fend for herself. Though Big Daddy rose from day laborer to overseer to Ochello’s partner and, ultimately, owner of the plantation, Maggie has far more limited tools and prospects for advancement. As a woman, she is expected to wield soft power through sexual attraction. She shrewdly exploits Big Daddy’s interest in her, which culminates in her melodramatic performance of femininity. Her public declaration of fecundity and promise of an heir is too much for the dying man or his wife to resist. Both he and Big Mama fervently want to believe, and Maggie’s performance is so audacious and assured that even the audience can believe that she will succeed in making good on her claim.<sup>7</sup>

¶140 In the 1952 short story “Three Players of a Summer Game,” a progenitor of *Cat*, Maggie gradually takes power from Brick as he lapses into alcoholism. Vampire-like, Maggie drains Brick’s life force “as though she had her lips fastened to some invisible wound in his body through which drained out of him and flowed into her the assurance and vitality that he had owned before marriage.” The transfer of energy strengthens her: “she became vivid as Brick disappeared behind the veil of his liquor” (14). By the end of the story, she is compared to “some ancient conqueror, such as Caesar or Alexander the Great or Hannibal” parading a noble conquest (44). The symbiosis between these two characters remains in the play, but it has evolved from the obvious parasitism of “Three Players” to a more complex dynamic. Maggie’s character is far more sympathetic and fully drawn than that of her counterpart in “Three Players,” and Williams was happy to develop her characterization even further for Kazan. Maggie’s unrequited love casts her in a softer light; her shrewd analyses of Brick’s problem and of their joint situation are also sympathetic. Although she preys on Brick’s weakness to take control, this step is taken only after she has exhausted a variety of other options. Maggie’s final choice is highly pragmatic: she no longer tries to win Brick on her own terms, no longer seeks his love or attraction, but takes charge to save his potential fortune. In a radical reversal of gender roles, she will force Brick to create her heir, making him the baby-making machine.

¶141 Some critics have complained that *Cat's* conclusion lacks dramatic force.<sup>[8]</sup> This complaint assumes that Brick is the play's protagonist. However, the play's trajectory clearly shows a shift in its attention from Big Daddy and Brick to Maggie. Although Brick is the focus (or as Williams put it, "the mystery") of the play, the play's action belongs to Maggie. When she makes her false declaration of pregnancy, the audience is put into suspense: can she make good on this promise? And if so, how? What will be her final gambit?

¶142 The play's conclusion shows her emotional transition as she shifts from pleading lover to firm but gentle keeper. We watch Maggie discard her last illusions as she "*holds the big pillow forlornly as if it were her only companion, for a few moments, then throws it on the bed*" (172). We learn, along with Brick, that Maggie has seen a doctor and knows she is ovulating. Finally, she makes her audacious move: when she confiscates his bottles and throws away his crutch, the formerly impervious Brick is now helpless. Softly, Maggie exclaims, "Oh, you weak people, you weak, beautiful people!—who give up with such grace. What you want is someone to . . . take hold of you.—Gently, gently with love . . ." In the 1975 version she adds, in an echo of "Three Players," "and hand your life back to you, like somethin' gold you let go of." The final exchange echoes Big Mama and Big Daddy in act 2: like Big Mama, Maggie strenuously protests her love ("I *do* love you, Brick, I *do!*"), which prompts the son, like his father before him, to reply, "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true?" (173).

¶143 By the final scene of act 3, Maggie has apparently manipulated Brick into a final reversal: after refusing to impregnate his wife, he will now presumably become a "breeder," the term mockingly used by Big Daddy in act 2. Both "Cat Number One" and the New Directions 1975 version conclude not with any suggestion of a possible reconciliation between Brick and Maggie but rather with the dark suggestion that Brick will cede control of his life and legacy to Maggie and slip further into his alcoholic refuge, the Pollitt heir will be spawned by coercion, and the legacy of misery combined with wealth will be passed to another generation. There is something very southern and at the same time Chekovian about this ending, suggesting as it does the sense of helplessness and surrender to circumstances, the destructive sense of misplaced pride, and the importance of the plantation/estate over the individual.

¶144 Maggie's pragmatic move, which pushes Brick into the passive role of breeder, shows that she has finally given up hope of gaining Brick's love. There is *some* hope at the play's end, in the strong suggestion that Maggie will produce an heir; as Williams synthesized it in a letter to Maria St. Just: "Life! Maggie!" (*Five O'Clock Angel* 5). Nonetheless, the future looks bleak: Brick will surrender his self-determination, Maggie will forfeit her chance at romantic love, and another child will inherit the family legacy of financial wealth and emotional poverty. The patriarchal imperative so clearly embedded in culture will be served.

### Meeting in "A Place of Stone"

Big Daddy's original dreams have been lost or debased in the attainment of the very wealth that had seemed so essential. When *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is considered as a meditation on how the changing landscape of the American Dream affects masculinity, the structure of the family, and individual lives, Williams's original epigraph from Yeats is profoundly apt. In "To a Friend Whose Work has Come to Nothing," the poet advises a friend to adhere to a masculine, chivalric code of conduct: to suffer failure with silent dignity rather than participate in demeaning public squabbling with a morally unequal foe. Williams used only the final four lines of the poem as the epigraph for early drafts of *Cat*, which both broadens the meaning and makes it more ambiguous: "Amid a place of stone, / Be secret and exult, / Because of all things known / That is most

difficult.” These relatively obscure lines were replaced, apparently at Kazan’s urging, with the most famous lines from Dylan Thomas’s most famous poem: “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.” Critics have read this exchange as emblematic of Kazan’s redirection of the play’s focus from Maggie to Big Daddy. Certainly the Thomas epigraph overtly, even blatantly, spotlights the father, Big Daddy, and his position “on the sad height” of life—which is death. However, a closer examination of the Yeats epigraph reveals not so much a focus on Maggie but a deeper, more ambiguous meditation on the plight of each character in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Each has had dreams vanquished and faces the need to go on. Each can be read as inhabiting the “place of stone” described by Yeats: the bleak, unyielding end of his or her work.<sup>9</sup>

¶146

Big Daddy’s disillusion with the conventional success he pursued so relentlessly throughout his life and his accommodations to society’s mendacious requirements; Big Mama’s sad, repressed understanding of her failure to achieve Big Daddy’s love or respect; Maggie’s similar failure to create a relationship with Brick; even Gooper’s failed dream of inheriting the 28,000 acres: these various goals must all be confronted as Big Daddy’s death draws closer. Most poignantly, Brick cannot bear to examine either himself or his failed relationship with Skipper. His retreat from the fray is not the honorable discretion advocated by Yeats, but rather a tragic fear of engagement in the world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This wave of criticism revitalized the discussion of *Cat*, but some of its excesses have required refutation. Even in 2004, Michael Paller found it necessary to address some of the more contentious issues raised by queer theorists such as John Clum and Nicholas de Jongh.

<sup>2</sup> See Palmer and Bray, especially 168–71, on the complex dynamic between Big Daddy and Brick.

<sup>3</sup> Since I am primarily interested in teasing out Williams’s own ideas about gender and sexuality in *Cat*, I follow Brian Parker’s assertion that the 1975 New Directions version and “Cat Number One” are the only texts clearly approved by the author (“Swinging a Cat,” 1984). Other versions and variations produced by Williams’s collaborations with Elia Kazan are interesting to me primarily as they help to illuminate the playwright’s choices in “Cat Number One” and the 1975 version.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Savran 101, Shackelford 114, Corber 117–18.

<sup>5</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “the phrase ‘knock around’ has had a meaning of ‘To move about, wander, or roam, in an irregular way; also to lead an irregular life’ since the early 19th century.” Of all the examples given in the *OED*, the only possibly sexualized usage refers to a woman: “Mrs. van Neyland’s been a married woman, and she’s knocked around” (1959, McCutchan, *Storm South* xiii, 198).

<sup>6</sup> Sedgwick observes that the “double bind” of antihomosexual enforcement creates “the acute manipulability, through the fear of one’s own ‘homosexuality,’ of acculturated men; and second, a reservoir of potential for violence caused by the self-ignorance that this regime constitutively enforces” (186).

<sup>7</sup> In “Cat Number One,” Big Daddy does not personally witness her revelation, but his presumed response is joyfully articulated by Big Mama.

<sup>8</sup> See Crandell, “*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*,” 117–18.

<sup>9</sup> Williams’s first full-length draft (designated by Brian Parker as Texas 10), very similar to “Cat Number One,” is subtitled “A Place of Stone” and also contains this epigraph. Kazan’s earliest editing has been found on this draft: he deleted the epigraph and inaugurated the series of changes that would foreground Big Daddy’s role (Parker, “Bringing Back Big Daddy” 3). For the equation of the “place of stone” epigraph with Maggie, see Gilbert 179. For Parker’s classification of the play’s many drafts, see “A Preliminary Stemma for Drafts and Revisions of Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.”

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