

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND HIS NEW TALENT IN *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF*

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams is one of the most exciting writers of the contemporary American theatre. His plays deal with the agony and frustrations of modern people. It was his good fortune to have lived during the renaissance of American drama. He has brought a unique lyrical power and beauty to the American stage. Writing was an act of faith for him and he brought a new understanding and respect for the human heart in his plays. His plays are based on facts, present the individual world of a small group of people. He selects rather than invents his cases of the atrocious in human nature.

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof came as a relief to Williams's fans who had begun to fear that his talent was limited to the portrayal of psychopathic Southern belles. This play does not reserve sympathy and love for the doomed misfits. Williams excels in the portrayal of sensitive women characters. He identifies and sympathizes with women characters in their struggle to survive in a hostile male-dominated society. The clash between their illusions and the harsh reality of modern materialistic society gives them a unique heroism. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* Williams, ventured in new directions with renewed energy. His empathy for his characters does not lead him to deflect their inevitable and disastrous courses. In this paper we are going to discover his creative talent in the treatment of the characters especially in the role of Big Mama.*

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof was the most controversial play of the 1954-55 Broadway season. The play also carried off two of the top playwriting awards of the year: Pulitzer Prize and the Drama Critics' Circle Award. The play once again turned to Deep South for its characters. The story is unorthodox and portrays the psychological wounds of the family of Big Daddy Pollitt. Williams selected the generally taboo subject of homosexuality. This subject has been portrayed through the unnatural affection of Brick for his friend Skipper.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof was "something of an emotional bombshell in its honest yet sensitive handling of homosexuality, its grasp of human greed, desire and frustration" (Gould 245). Williams' works have the richness of a compassionate and creative artist. He could hold an audience enthralled with the throb of human emotion. Jean Gould comments on his genius and says: "And whether he is successful or not, he has the sensitivity of the poet, combined with the theatricality of the dramatist and the dedication of the artist, to place him among the foremost of modern American playwrights" (246).

His portraits of mother figures show his deep insight into their character. Big Mama, the mother in the play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, is a shadowy figure in comparison to Amanda of *The Glass Menagerie*. She plays a subservient role to her dominating husband Big Daddy though she possesses all the motherly qualities of love and cares for her sons and their wives. She wants them to live happily and peacefully. At a moment of crisis, she tries to comfort them.

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Some critics agree with Big Daddy in being critical of Big Mama. Nelson says "Big Mama is a foolish old woman, who talks too much, laughs too loudly and seems to say the wrong things all the time" (212) others like Tischler are kinder to her and say: "Big Mama, like Williams' good-hearted, simple-minded, ample-bosomed, loving sensual woman, has given a lifetime of devotion to Big Daddy, laughing at herself for it and smilingly condoning his hatefulness" (200).

Big Mama was deeply attached to her younger son Brick and disliked the wicked intentions and selfishness of her elder son Gooper and his wife Mae. In spite of having five children Gooper and Mae fail to win the approval of Big Mama.

Brick had fallen into the despicable habit of drinking all the time and of being indifferent to his parents and even to his wife Margaret. Big Mama was very sad about Brick's condition and asked Margaret to help her son give up drinking. She was also worried about the future happiness of Brick and Margaret as they were childless and Brick did not do anything to earn a living. Gooper is a lawyer and feels responsible for Big Daddy's property.

Mae, the wife of Gooper, had given Big Mama the information (by peeping through their room) that Brick did not sleep with his wife and that their relationship was mysterious. Big Mama feels that if Brick has a child he will be saved. She was very upset at Brick's strange behavior of hating his wife and avoiding her company.

Big Mama is unhappy with Margaret and asks her, "Fair or not fair I want to ask you a question, one question: D'you make Brick happy in bed?" (Cat 20). Being very simple hearted she realizes that the death of Skipper, another football star and a close friend of Brick, has resulted in his giving up all interest in life. Big Daddy had never shown any love for Big Mama. He always speaks to her in a harsh manner and tells Brick: "I slept with Big Mama till, let's see, five years ago, till I was sixty and she was fifty eight, and never even liked her, never did!" (Cat, 49).

Even though they had slept with each other for forty years Big Daddy was never convinced that Big Mama loved him. This lifelong frustration of Big Mama finds an outlet in her love for her favourite son, Brick. She found much of Big Daddy's charm in him, though Brick was unable to respond to her sincere love and devotion. He shrank from all bonds of human affection and felt that neither his parents nor his wife Maggie loved him.

Big Mama had loved Big Daddy all her life though he had always disliked her. She loved her son Brick who was indifferent to her. The pain of this unfulfilled love makes her play practical jokes and indulge in boisterous behavior. Sometimes the rude remarks of her husband hurt her deeply and she cries, but only in secret. Being a simple-hearted, passive character she never dares to speak harshly to her husband or her son.

Maggie, Brick's wife was the only member of the family who understood her suffering. She loved her husband but he failed to respond to her. Brick hates Maggie because he suspects that she had tried to expose the homosexual relations between him and Skipper. When Maggie hinted about it to Skipper, he committed suicide. Brick holds his wife responsible for his friend's death.

Big Mama's love for Big Daddy becomes evident when she is overjoyed to hear the medical report which said that he is not suffering from any serious ailment. She wants to share this happy news with Brick, who in turn knows the sad truth about the medical report and fails to be excited about it. Big Mama feels let down and hurt at Brick's indifference.

Big Mama had the habit of interfering in the private lives of her sons. When she calls out to Brick loudly and he does not come down she goes to his room and even though the door was locked from inside, she knocks at it continuously and when it was not opened by the couple, Big Mama comes inside the room from the other door. In the same way, at the end of the play also, Big Mama enters their room even though it is dark inside. She constantly interferes in the private talk between Big Daddy and Brick for which she is scolded by Big Daddy. Though Big Daddy had told her strictly not to disturb them, she disturbs them twice or thrice during their private conversation.

Big Mama blames Margaret for the downfall of Brick. According to her something was wrong between them because Brick had started drinking only after his marriage. Brick's rejection of intimacy with Maggie was due to his close-relationship with his friend, Skipper. He wanted to punish Maggie for her disclosure of that intimacy. "For his rejection of sex is not only a symptom of illness, of one kind or another, but also, as we have seen, a punishment of her; and punishing her is his means of declaring that the guilt is hers, and of keeping his eyes off his own guilt" (Heilman 74).

Throughout the play, Brick appears as a depressed selfish boy for whom Skipper and the football game were the only worthy things in life. After the loss of both, he had given himself up to drinks and tried to forget everything in life which could prove to be meaningful. Even though Margaret, Big Mama and Big Daddy give him as much of love as possible, he never shows any sign of gratitude or love for them. He does not give his parents the kind of respect they expect from him. When Big Daddy tells him that Skipper, his friend has committed suicide because of the homosexual relationship between them, Brick becomes furious and without caring for his father, hints to him the shattering truth about the medical report and tells him that he was suffering from cancer and was soon going to die. The truth of the report shocks Big Daddy and he is unable to accept it.

On the other hand, Gooper and Mae, the elder son and his wife along with their five children fail to win the love of Big Mama and Big Daddy inspite of all their tricks, as their love for Big Mama and Big Daddy was based on greed and selfishness. Big Mama loves her husband very much and never rebels against his dominance. Big Mama tells Margaret that the medical report was a strain on Big Daddy as he, too was afraid of having a serious disease. This shows her deep love for him. Big Mama tells Margaret: "Big Daddy tried to hide how much of a load that news took off his mind, but didn't fool me. He was mighty close to crying about it himself!" (Cat 18)

Due to her real affection for Big Daddy she is capable of reading his face and knowing how he felt at heart. Even then Big Daddy always blames Big Mama, who in her turn is always affectionate and devoted to him. "And Big Daddy, certain now that he will live for years, accuses Big Mama of trying to take over the plantation during his illness" (Tischler 203).

She never finds anything objectionable in the behaviour of Big Daddy. For her whatever Big Daddy thinks or does is always perfect. She regards him as an agreeable, caring husband.

Big Mama was the only member in the family whose love for Big Daddy was pure and selfless. At the opening of the play we find her enjoying the birthday party of Big Daddy. Her happiness regarding Big Daddy's health was genuine and she was happy that he was not suffering from any fatal disease. Big Daddy, on the other hand, gives her no sign of gratefulness and love for the birthday celebration. He never encourages her for her good actions and only tries to run her down with his painful comments. She had a long-lasting thirst and wish for his admiration and affection. His comments hurt her much and she sobs secretly without disturbing or letting anyone know about it. Everytime the bitter remarks are passed by Big Daddy she pretends that whatever Big Daddy says is not true and he is only joking. She tries to ignore the seriousness behind the sarcastic remarks of Big Daddy. Several times she tells Big Daddy. "Big Daddy? Big Daddy? Oh, Big Daddy! You didn't mean those things you said to me; did you? ... Sweetheart? Sweetheart? Big Daddy? You didn't mean those awful thing you said to me?—I know you didn't. I know you didn't mean those things in your heart."

Big Daddy was unable to understand and cooperate with Big Mama who was simple at heart and loved everyone at home. Big Daddy had never loved her and had never tried to understand her love for him. She loved him for all his goodness as well as for all his weaknesses. Big Daddy had never cared for her throughout his life. Big Mama says:

In all these years you never believed that I loved you?
And I did, I did so much, I did love you!
I even loved your hate and your hardness, Big Daddy! (Cat 40)

She was a very affectionate and simple woman. She could understand and read the expressions on his face. Every act of Big Daddy enables her to know about him without being told of it by Big Daddy. She says: "Did you all notice the food he ate at that table? Did you all notice the supper he put away? Why, he ate like a hawss!" (Cat 71).

Big Mama cannot hear a word against Big Daddy or Brick. In the opening scene of the play, Big Mama had shown herself as a simple woman without any ambition. The only desires she had in her heart were for the well-being of her younger son, Brick and his wife and the wish for a long life for Big Daddy. Later in the play she attains dignity and maturity.

The celebration of the Birthday Party ends with the most pathetic news for Big Mama and Big Daddy. They were not aware of the true medical report about the disease and were happy at the false medical report. When Big Mama knows the real condition of Big Daddy, she felt very sad and depressed. She was unable to bear it. She blames everyone for lying and joking to her about the false medical report of her husband.

Her shattering misery at losing this huge, vulgar, hateful man reveals "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 male beauty. (Tischler 205).

She cannot withstand this unavoidable and pathetic truth about Big Daddy's fatal disease all alone and therefore needs the help of Big Daddy's loving son, Brick. The sympathy of Brick alone could satisfy Big Mama and make her accept the truth of the report.

In her misery, Big Mama calls for the only other person she loves, telling Brick he must take over the plantation for Big Daddy (Tischler 206).

Big Mama and Big Daddy were partial towards Brick and had never shown a bit of admiration or love for Gooper and his wife who were more responsible than Brick. They never cared for him. They only cared for Brick and wanted to make him give up drinking and smoking.

Big Mama had more faith in Margaret than in Mae because she knows that Mae and Gooper are greedy and are proud of being the parents of five children while Margaret and Brick are childless. Big Mama also hates Gooper and Mae for making fun of Margaret and Brick for having no child. Even though Big Mama dislikes Brick's habit of drinking and smoking, she always favours Brick when Mae and Gooper taunt her sarcastically for his drinking. They want to bring down the reputation of Brick in the eyes of Big Mama.

Margaret knew the taunts and selfishness of Gooper and Mae. As Gooper and Mae knew the real condition of Big Daddy, they had already made arrangements to get the sole inheritance of the large plantation and the money which would be left over by Big Daddy after his death. Margaret was aware of these tricks of Gooper and Mae but she could not do anything about it without Brick's help. While Margaret herself felt sorry for Big Daddy, she was afraid of being poor once again as she had spent the early years of her life in poverty. She feels proud of Big Daddy because he was the man who had risen with his hard labour and had built the biggest and finest plantation in the Delta. This fear of being kicked out of Big Daddy's estate after his death by Gooper and Mae made her tell a lie that she is expecting a baby. This lie is supported by Big Mama and Brick by their silence.

Big Mama and Big Daddy were always aware of the greediness of their elder son and his wife. When Gooper and Mae tried to get the signature of Big Mama on the legal documents about inheritance, she felt very sad because she could not accept the fact that Big Daddy was soon going to die. She was also very angry at the selfish attitude of her elder son Gooper who had already started making preparations for the death of Big Daddy. At this moment Big Mama displayed true courage and refused to sign the papers. She shows unexpected foresight and composure to withstand their greed.

She also knows that Gooper is talented and has a good law practice and can easily earn his livelihood but Brick who is just wasting his life had no talent and needs the help of the others to survive. She boldly refuses to sign the papers and comes out as a new woman with bold and intelligent decisions.

Although Big Mama is foolish she is not a fool. Beneath her giddiness and prating she is a great deal wiser and understanding than most of the characters in the play credit her with being (Nelson 213-214).

At the end of the play she is a totally different person from the earlier one who was simple and foolish. At the moment of crisis she showed her true mettle.

Tennessee Williams delineates the psychology of female characters in a convincing manner. The portrayal of the mother in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is impressive and life like. The wish for all the happiness and good fortune for their children is a basic characteristic of all mothers and Williams has portrayed it vividly in his plays. He also shows how well-meaning mothers can become tyrannical towards their children by nagging.

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