

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING  
CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS WITH  
AN EMPHASIS ON HIS IDEALS OF PLAYWRITING

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In any discussion of modern theatre since World War II, of the dramas produced, of the playwrights creating the plays, the name of Tennessee Williams stands prominent and confirmed as an influential leader in artistic innovation. Since his first appearance on Broadway, he has strived with unyielding urgency, unimintimidated by critics and condemning ultra-moralists, to present the American public with a fresh, ungarnished, sincere, stunningly honest portrayal of life as he sees it flourishing around him daily. Due to this relentless determinism, Williams has become the catalyst for the major theatrical revolution that has recently occurred.

When Tennessee Williams' poetic drama The Glass Menagerie opened in New York in 1945, a new epoch in the history of the American theater began. As Eugene O'Neill had dominated the first quarter-century of the American drama's life as an indigent form, so Williams was to become the major figure in the second period of the theater's growth.

The influence of his concept of drama, particularly that of his interpretation of character and plot, has materially affected the work of such recent playwrights as William Inge and Edward Albee. Of equal importance has been the impetus which Williams and his interpreters have given to the development of a singular dramaturgy, to the

refinement of a distinctively American art of acting, staging, and designing. Of greatest significance, perhaps, has been his contribution to the development of a popular theatrical form.<sup>1</sup>

The establishment of Williams' dramatic form has undergone changes over the years as he passed through a significant three-stage progression of development.

The playwright has described the first of these as "personal lyricism." The plays written before 1945 are concerned with the essentially poetic problems of self-expression, self-identification, and even self-creation.

In the second phase of his work - a phase commonly regarded as the major period of his achievement - Williams attempts to extend the range of meaning affecting his lyric search for truth. In the preface to Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, he writes that he wishes to objectify the personal vision which is the basis of his lyric form. There emerges in the plays written between 1945 and 1955 a second level of interpretation. In the plays of this middle period, Williams attempts to create a popular myth out of the contents drawn from common experience.

In the plays written since 1955, Williams has attempted to resolve his contemporary reading of recurrent life patterns.<sup>2</sup>

These progressive changes were not deliberately done to accomplish an end; however, Williams was conscious of the natural directions that the inclinations within him were taking.

It is to Williams' Cat, the last play of his second stage and probably the most controversial of all his plays, that this study is devoted. It is aim of this study to analyze the text of Cat, which includes both versions of the third act, the reviews of the critics, and Williams' own comments and thoughts about the play to

better understand the life of controversy the play has experienced. In analyzing the text of Cat, an examination of the theme of mendacity and Williams' use of language, an examination of the two principal characters, Margaret and Brick, and an examination of the rewritten third act that was inspired by director Elia Kazan with the actual textual changes is presented to facilitate a clear understanding of the play. Also an emphasis is placed on highlighting those ideals that have guided Williams' creative mind and set the precedent for many of his contemporaries and the new wave of young playwrights to follow him. Finally, a critical look at reviews of the play is given to explain the nature of the constant, sharp controversies that have haunted the play since its emergence, that have resulted in the following two diverse opinions of Williams' Cat. The first by Rev. Ignatius Butler states: "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof seems to aim directly at being immoral. The entire play is obscene. Not a portion of an act escapes a display of obscene dialogue. There is not one compensating factor in the entire play."<sup>3</sup> Henry Hewes stated the opposite view: "While my own recent review registered certain dissatisfactions with the play, I would certainly admit that it contained the most original, forceful, and recklessly honest writing by an American playwright this season."<sup>4</sup>

It is because of the issues surrounding the play and its third act revision, the only known major play by an outstanding author to undergo revision before production in the recent theatre, and because Williams' revolutionary approach to playwriting in form and content that the study beckons interest, especially in reference to the nature of subject matter and presentation of drama in today's theatre. By using the sources of the text of Cat, reviews and books concerning the play by authors other than Williams, and books on Williams' theory of playwriting, objective judgments have been made or preferences designated about the play and about the issues surrounding it. The judgments arrived at were obtained by impartial evaluation of the texts specified and by consideration of Williams' own intentions in the play. However, my own opinions about the play and its issues have been included in the evaluations. The major factor about Williams' writing that should be remembered in this study is the following:

Williams' anti-traditional approach to drama is not accidental. On the contrary, it represents a conscious effort to mirror new perceptions of reality. The playwright's seeming lack of regard for the Aristotelian imperatives - unity of plot, nobility of character, refinement of language, control of violence, and subordination of spectacle - is but the reflection of his attempt to create a form which is true to the realities of our time.<sup>5</sup>

It should be understood, however, that this study is not exhaustive on the subject, nor does it expect to

receive full agreement from all who read it. It is merely an evaluated study of a controversial play and its tormented author as seen through the sources employed, reporting its information, and explaining the relationships that exist between play, author, audience, and dramatic form.

## II. THE ORIGIN OF CONTROVERSY

From the time of its birth, opening March 24, 1955, at the Morosco Theatre in New York, Tennessee Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof has lived a vivid life of controversy. The range of its acceptance has extended from unqualified "bravoes" and compliments for achievements to extremely opposite outraged condemnations and pleas for censorship and decency. The source in the play for the controversy is primarily in the areas of theme and language rather than in the areas of characterizations and plot; yet it is precisely in these latter areas that the original controversy arose between playwright and director. The result was a revised Act III. To fully understand this situation, a clear knowledge of the reasons for the revision and an insight into the playwright's ideals of playwriting have to be seen as separate but coordinate elements in the play's reception.

Williams, who had worked with director Elia Kazan on earlier plays, presented him with the first typewritten copy of the play. For the other plays, Williams had given Kazan a completely finished script to read and visualize for production. In the case of Cat, the preliminary script allowed Kazan to express freely his



opinions to Williams, including possible changes centering basically in Act III, which would further enhance the play in production and also as literature. Kazan was excited by the play; his suggestions from his point of view were only in the interest of clarity and of dramatic effect. Williams in a note of explanation accompanying the published play expressed Kazan's changes.

The gist of his reservations can be listed as three points: one, he felt that Big Daddy was too vivid and important a character to disappear from the play except as an off-stage cry after the second act curtain: two, he felt that the character of Brick should undergo some apparent mutation as a result of the virtual vivisection that he undergoes in his interview with his father in Act Two. Three, he felt that the character of Margaret, while he understood that I sympathized with her and liked her myself, should be, if possible, more clearly sympathetic to an audience.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore the changes that were introduced were done to add to the dramatic effect of Cat when produced instead of curtailing Williams' personal style. Williams, who preferred the original Act III as written, expressed no resentment at having to rewrite the act, feeling the reception of the playing-script justified the adjustments. Indeed, he considered it a far greater advantage to alter his play to fit Kazan's preferences, thereby disregarding his own point of view in favor of Kazan's, rather than to lose Kazan's enthusiasm and interest in the play.

It is vital to remember that Williams' creative style and motives were left intact by the revised Act III version. The exact textual changes will be discussed and

compared later. The important factors to be defined now are the opinions and ideals Williams holds leading to the controversies that arose from critics about the play.

Williams, who for a decade had been in an experimental stage of playwriting yielding two masterpieces, The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire, finally emerged in 1955 with a true artist's talent wholly unleashed in Cat. The perfected power and style of such an artist was easily recognized and echoed by the critics. "The new play is the work of a mature artist who effortlessly dominates the characters and the theatre. The characters express his theme without any external manipulation on his part, and the play is pure theatre."<sup>2</sup> "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" represents the peak of Williams' playwriting to date in its imaginativeness, intricacy, and scope, in its fullness of life."<sup>3</sup> But while some were hailing his efforts, others were becoming more aghast by the bold and poignant characters, language, and topics he was employing. A typical comment expressing this attitude is the following: "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" is as emotionally naked and relentlessly visceral a play as our theatre has seen."<sup>4</sup> Still others more disturbed by his new openness have declared his writings pornographic in nature for the theatre and/or have dismissed his specific

style because his themes and topics irritate their sense of decency. One critic stated this view most sharply and with brevity, "... in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, there has been a failure of artistic control."<sup>5</sup>

Actually what these reviewers have unconsciously underlined in their reviews for Williams are the symptoms of the factors that he believes has placed his characters in the situations that they are in. He believes that most, if not all of society has lost contact with reality, living in a cozy world of totally self-conforming impressions and illusions, and rejecting or condemning any subjects or people that differ. Their survival depends upon their agility to avoid change and to consummate their status-quo existence. Williams feels quite differently. "Whether or not we admit it to ourselves, we are haunted by a truly awful sense of impermanance."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, when a playwright touches upon issues and people in any way that is beyond their ordinary experience, when he explores the true world of ugliness, cruelty, vulgarity, loneliness, promiscuity, greed, non-communication, when he questions those institutions that have been upheld as eternal or sacred, he places himself and his play on the line of scrutiny before an angry public. Nevertheless, Williams plunges deep, unyielding, into the depths of human nature with its existing problems and shame in search of the triumphs

lying in that vast region of tragedy in today's theatre. Arthur Miller explains this line of thought and action in a playwright's pursuit for honest tragedy: "No tragedy can therefore come about when its author fears to question absolutely everything, when he regards any institution, habit, or custom as either everlasting, immutable, or inevitable."<sup>7</sup>

For Williams, writing is more than just displaying the ills of society in a poetic form; for him it is a therapy, a healthy expulsion from himself of those problems in society which drag men down. He states, "I believe that writing is a purification of that which is sick in the person. I've always found a total release in writing, and it's always been the only cure for me."<sup>8</sup> Williams writes of people then, people very much like himself, troubled in society, troubled about society.

His split personality is divided, more or less, into four different persons, each of whom he has projected with magnificent power and truth in previous dramas. These four are the gentle soul, bruised or broken by the cruelty of living because his illusions do not work; the naive, healthy, exuberant yea sayer to the universe; the romanticist, whose system of illusions still keeps him afloat; and finally, the brutal, primitivistic male animal, of which Stanley Kowalski of Streetcar, is up to now, Williams' most fully rounded projection.<sup>9</sup>

These people ultimately form the basis for all he creates. "Every artist has a basic premise pervading his whole life, and that premise can provide the impulse to everything he creates. For me the dominating premise

has been the need for understanding and tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstance."<sup>10</sup> He does not stop, however, with only portraying troubled people; instead he places them in actual situations, presents an impass, activates their desires and fears, motivates them to tackle life as only they can see it. Arthur Miller shares Williams' yearning desires to expose society and how it is tormenting these people. Kenneth Tynan observed, "Though they take the same theme, Miller and Williams build very differently. . . . What links them is their love for the bruised individual soul and its life of 'quiet desperation'."<sup>11</sup> It is these battered anti-heroes that Williams and Miller give words to utter, sigh, plea, and cry forth to an audience, to a world numbed by its own fears. Most of the critics' strongest disdains criticized these people and circumstances as unreal, groping, insensible, crude, yet the critics failed to hear the real message given forth. Kenneth Tynan believes there is a real message constantly given, one spelled out word by word, movement by movement, scene by scene, in both the works of Miller and Williams; but when delivered directly, it is presented with the character's total emotion and physical strength. "Both reserve their most impassioned utterance for one subject, into which they plunge headlong, sometimes floundering in self-pity, sometimes belly-diving into

rhethoric, but often knifing straight and deep: the subject of frustration."<sup>12</sup> It is in this disruptive element that Williams specializes, which transports him instantly to the threshold of life's vital heartthrobs and heart-misses.

For Williams, life may not be a pleasantry, but it is something every person must grab hold of and wrestle with, living completely. "I love life even though people think I'm indifferent to it, . . . ."<sup>13</sup> Williams once told an interviewer. In his love of life, Williams deals with its problems to help alleviate its oppressive hold on man. He does not think, however, that he has left life in any part to achieve his ends, instead he states, ". . . from my POV (point of view) it was not into sewers but into the main stream of life that I have always descended for my materials and characters."<sup>14</sup> Because he insists on using life and on so visibly exhibiting it to the public eye, Williams was forced by conscience of purpose to declare his reasoning for his plays' contents due to the critics' over-eagerness to condemn and censor his works.

I dare to suggest, from my POV, that the theatre has made in our time its greatest artistic advance through the unlocking and lighting up and ventilation of the closets, attics and basements of human behavior and experience. . . . I think there has not been a very sick but a very healthy extension of the frontiers of theme and subject matter acceptable to our dramatic art, to the stage, the screen and even television, despite the POV of "sponsors."

The POV I am speaking for is just this: that no significant area of human experience, and behavior reaction to it, should be held inaccessible, provided it is presented with honest intention and taste, to the screen, play and TV writers of our desperate time. And I would add that to campaign against this advance in dramatic freedom is to campaign for something that is perilously close to a degree of cultural fascism, out of which came the Nazi book-burning and the "correction" of all the arts in the Russia of Stalin.

The rallying cry of those who want our creative heads on the chopping block is: let's have plays affirming the essential dignity of mankind. It's a damned good platform. The only trouble with it, from my POV, is that we are not agreed about exactly what that high-sounding slogan really means in the way of truth about dignity and mankind.

People are humble and frightened and guilty at heart, all of us, no matter how desperately we may try to appear otherwise. We have very little conviction of our essential dignity nor even of our essential decency, and consequently we are more interested in characters on the stage who share our hidden shames and fears, and we want the plays about us to say "I understand you. You and I are brothers, the deal is rugged but let's face and fight it together."

It is not the essential dignity but the essential ambiguity of man that I think needs to be stated.

There are two kinds of creative work: organic and non-organic. It is possible to reform, to change the nature of a non-organic (synthetic) work in the arts, meaning that work which is produced through something other than a necessity as built into the worker as his heartbeat and respiration. But you could flay the skin off a writer whose work is organic and you still would not get out of him a sincere or workable recantation of his faith in what he is doing, however abominable that work may be, or strike you as being.

The nervous system of any age or nation is its creative workers, its artists. And if that nervous system is profoundly disturbed by its environment, the work it produces will inescapably reflect the disturbance, sometimes obliquely and sometimes with violent directness, depending upon the nature and control of the artist.

Deny the art of our time its only spring, which

is the true expression of its passionately personal problems and their purification through work, and you will be left with a soil of such aridity that not even a cactus plant could flower upon it.<sup>15</sup>

The best way to appreciate Williams' talent and efforts is to consider deeply Kenneth Tynan's comment concerning his work, "Tennessee Williams' genius has no social commitments, but many aesthetic ones."<sup>16</sup>

Tynan, who has studied Williams in depth, further justifies Williams' work by explicating his efforts and desires. He begins by explaining why a playwright, especially one like Williams, stands out from the rest of society.

All writing is an anti-social act, since the writer is a man who can speak freely only when alone; to be himself he must lock himself up, to communicate he must cut himself off from all communication; and in this there is always something a little mad. . . . The theatre, he once said, is a place where one has time for the problems of people to whom one would show the door if they came to one's office for a job. . . . He (Williams) is the most personal of playwrights. Incomplete people obsess him - above all, those who, like himself, have ideals too large for life to accommodate. There is another, opposed kind of incompleteness, that of materialists like the Polack in Streetcar and Big Daddy in Cat; and in most of Williams' work both kinds are to be found, staring blankly at each other, arguing from different premises and conversing without comprehension. In his mental battlefield the real is perpetually at war with the ideal; what is public wrestles with what is private, what drags men down fights with what draws men up. This struggle is an allegory, by which I mean that it reflects a conflict within Williams himself. He cannot bring himself to believe that the flesh and the spirit can be reconciled, or to admit that the highest emotion can spring from the basest source. . . . "What we need is another set of words. Words that can express the natural togetherness of things."<sup>17</sup> For Williams they remain stubbornly apart, and it is this that



gives his writings its odd urgency, its note of unfinished exploration. . . . His work is a pilgrimage in search of a truce.<sup>18</sup>

Whether Williams ever finds those new words in part or whole, he has masterfully controlled every syllable uttered from his characters even with such an inadequate set as he must deal with. "Tennessee Williams' greatest asset as a dramatist is his facility with language. The speech given to his characters at once lays bare the hidden intricacies of nerves and feeling . . . ." <sup>19</sup> "He is gifted with the ability to hold an audience in suspense as he brings a crisis to its climax in a convincing pattern of episodes. He has a feeling for language as a tool for communicating states of being as well as denoting prose meanings." <sup>20</sup> Williams' language is remarkably an outstanding edifice to his command of emotion, expression, and circumstance. Eric Bentley in a review of Cat declared, "There is no one in the English speaking theatre today who can outdo Mr. Williams' dialogue at its best: it is supple, sinuous, hard-hitting and - in cases like the young wife and the father - highly characterized in a finely fruity Southern vein." <sup>21</sup> Another reviewer remarked,

Williams' trade-marks are all there: the spectre of disease, the imminence of death, the cheating implicit in all emotion, the guilt bound up with sex - plus the technical ability to make tragic characters funny.. But a play might have all these things and still be bad; what distinguishes Cat is the texture of its writing. This is dialogue dead to the eyes

alone. It begs for speech so shrilly that you find yourself reading it aloud. "When you are gone from here," says Big Daddy, "you are long gone and no where!" - the words fall from the tongue like "snow from a bamboo leaf," the image by which Zen Buddhists teach their pupils that "artless art" which is the goal of contemplation.<sup>22</sup>

Williams brings his plays to life, full-blooded and lapping with energy, asking from his audience only to honestly listen and see what he has to show them.

It should be realized, though, that any play is a concentrated segment of life, drained of its non-essential elements and presented in a limited time span. Therefore a certain prerequisite is presupposed of any audience.

"An author . . . asks us to ignore improbabilities and impossibilities for the sake of some specially concentrated illustration of a human situation."<sup>23</sup> In this new environment, the life-blood of the situations, the living-air of the characters is provided by the viewer through his perception. "Imagination is the fusing principle of art which brings separated elements together into creation of a new reality."<sup>24</sup> Yet in examining a play such as Cat, one's imagination can easily slide back into a scrutinizing rational world demanding answers far more simply gotten than if they were discovered through thought and careful interpretation of the materials presented. One reviewer who felt Cat offered no answers for the questions it raised spoke of the play as follows: "Too much explodes, too little uncoils; much more is truly highlighted

than truly plumbed."<sup>25</sup> However, an oppositely perceiving reviewer saw the same circumstances and characters as vitalizing. "While the new play leaves a good deal unsaid (rather than unexplained), what the dramatist reveals is as fully exciting as any of the calculated muscularity provided for Marlon Brando in Streetcar."<sup>26</sup> As for which position is correct and should be upheld, R. S. Crane believes personal responsibility and judgment in understanding the plays of today to be a person's best guide. He retorted the following concerning blind or weak acceptance of other's opinions. ". . . the propositions of critics . . . are never either fully intelligible or completely verifiable in themselves as independent judgments or statements of doctrine."<sup>27</sup>

Williams also believes that you cannot feed an audience continually as child, that they must accept their states of being in a real adult world plagued by problems. He hopes to display these problems as aids to the concerned person willing to meet the challenge of responsibility for this life and the state of the society each of us inhabits. When entreated by an interviewer concerning his style, Williams answered with the following:

INTERVIEWER: Do you want to reach your audiences in a new way, somehow touching them in other ways less direct?

WILLIAMS: You mean more allusive than on the nose? Yes. That I'm conscious of more than ever. I've been writing too much on the nose, you know, and I've always sensed the fact that life was too

ambiguous to be . . . . to be presented in a cut and dried fashion. I've always been conscious of that, but I think I'm getting surer now. I think the one beautiful and great thing about the new wave of playwrights is that they approach their subject matter with this kind of allusiveness. The whole attitude of this new wave of playwrights is not to preach, you know. Not to be dogmatic, to be provocatively allusive. And I think that's much truer . . . .<sup>27</sup>

So Williams presented in a mature fashion a play, Cat, hoping to help himself and his fellow man. Some understood, while others fell by the wayside, still trapped perhaps, but more likely held back by their own self-imposed fears and blindness. Therefore a vast realm of critical comments and controversies over the "real" of Williams' Cat, over the aesthetical and cultural worth of the play, quickly arose.

### III. WILLIAMS' COMMUNICATION OF THEME

Certainly countless hours and pages have been devoted to the discussion of whether the original Act III version of Tennessee Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is better or whether the Broadway version inspired by Elia Kazan reached the superiority that Kazan thought it achieved over the original ending. Probability has it that no distinct conclusion will be decided upon or resigned to in the near future as to the more appropriate and successful version. Each Act III version has its faithful believers and successful reviews, as well as its share of dissatisfied critics and faulty aspects. The most important concern here is to illuminate those differences between the two versions, showing their relationships to the rest of the play, and examining the theme of Cat.

The basic skeleton of each version is the same; both open with scenes of disruptive, disturbing arguing among the three family units, during which time Big Daddy is absent, and Brick floats freely in and out of the room. Both revolve around preliminaries in conversation, subjects changing quickly, advancing towards that time when Big Mama will be informed about Big Daddy's actual condition. Both emphasize Big Mama's irritation before and

utter disbelief during the closed family "talk", only to witness her attempt at dismissing from her mind the significance of what has just been said by retreating into her role as subordinate to Big Daddy, the decision-making controller. Both spring Maggie's unexpected announcement to the assembled group, followed immediately by Gooper and Mae's poignant challenges to its validity. Both present Big Daddy momentarily in the final act (one with him on stage, the other with him off) but neither of significant importance, influence, or power. Both flaunt Maggie in a last desperate attempt to retrieve her husband to her side by eliminating his liquor supply, which is returnable to him by fulfillment of her conditional terms.

Though both seem to compose fraternal-looking acts, each leaves the audience with a different attitude towards the characters and the play as a whole. This reaction occurs because of Kazan's three suggested alterations in the original Act III. Briefly restating the changes mentioned in Chapter One, they are 1) a reappearance of Big Daddy in the last act, 2) a character change in Brick resulting from his confrontation with his father, and 3) a more understandable, sympathetic Margaret. It is only after noting the specific changes that the difference in attitudes becomes visible.

Looking more closely at Kazan's first suggested change, Big Daddy's reappearance, Williams' original

concept of authority and controls being directly passed from Big Daddy to Big Mama grows evident. By returning Big Daddy to the stage, the presense of death does not seem as close to him as is indicated at the end of Act II and during the first half of either third act, especially in the Big Mama "informing" scene. Although Big Daddy's presense in the last act is of far less vibrance compared to his earlier appearances, it does not match the dominant awareness of his absense in the original version. In this revised version, his condition is alluded to by his own comments that this is his "soft birthday" and that he desires to view his kingdom once more before he gives it up. But dramatically, nothing could probably surpass Big Daddy's audibly sensed dying off-stage in the arms of Big Mama as he gives over his control and power to her in the original third act. This passing of authority is detected slightly earlier where Big Mama searches for the word Big Daddy uses when he is disgusted, but she quickly abandons the role, because Big Daddy is still alive, and the role is uncomfortable to her.

With the original version, emphasis is placed on another changing of authority; ". . . this passing of controls parallels Maggie's complete domination of Brick."<sup>1</sup> Although Brick in this version is not as accepting, believing, or willing as in the Kazan-inspired Act III, nevertheless at the close of the play, he is totally under

the control of Maggie until such time as he can responsibly handle his commitment in their marriage, and the well-being of himself and his interests. Brick's mellowing from introspection spawned by the confrontation with his father is the basic change in his character. The main noticeable scenes in the revised version where this takes place are when Brick tells Maggie that he has lied to nobody but himself,<sup>2</sup> and again when Maggie asks Brick to come in from the gallery for the first time; he says, "I can't witness that thing in there,"<sup>3</sup> referring to the stifling evasiveness and lies. Also when his father enters the room, for the first time in the play, he recognizes his father's presense and cheerfully greets him, then continues to comment periodically, though clipped and dry. Most startling, he presents a quasi-defense for Maggie's pregnancy lie in response to Gooper and Mae's attack on her. In the original version, he simply remained silent. Finally, the last line of the play in the original version, his, has been dropped. It carried a small final note of pessimism which was out-of-place in the revised version. It was replaced by an earlier line where he states, ". . . I'm drunk, and sleepy - not as alive as Maggie, but still alive . . . ."4

The last suggestion of Kazan's for a more sympathetic Maggie is one Williams tackled more earnestly. He has woven her actions and comments so finely and intricately



into the fiber of the last act that the act would seem useless without her. She did not undergo any major changes in character or appearance; so the new effect she has is difficult to perceive. Generally, all her comments in nature and tone, and her movements on stage, have been precisely thoughtout and placed for maximum advantage. The one scene-stealing gesture of hers that shines forth above all the rest is when she kneels before Big Daddy to announce the child she carries. Indeed Maggie seems to have gained a milder tone of speech overall, collecting her composure into a fortified, uniform, yet calm determinism.

Of the three suggested changes, only the third one of a more sympathetic Maggie has been accomplished successfully. Big Daddy's reappearance in the revised version is almost worthless with the exception of being the object of Maggie's pregnancy lie. Otherwise, Big Daddy's return distracts much from the intention of "passing controls" and death. Brick's character change is made more vivid to the audience yet causes the character to lose some authenticity; he now is weak rather than just giving the impression he may be. Overall, the revision did not improve the play but neither did it hinder it. The characters of Brick and Big Daddy have been slightly impaired, but the theme has gone untouched; the power of mendacity is still evidenced. The original third act

probably best expresses the intentions Williams had for the play.

Williams succeeded in contenting Kazan, however, with the rewritten Act III. The play went on to be successful on Broadway, running for 694 performances, and won Williams the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the Best American Play of the 1954-55 Theatre Season and also the Pulitzer Prize for the Best Play of the 1954-55 Year. But many critics felt Kazan had extended his control beyond its ethical limits, hindering the play rather than advancing its dramatic effect and beauty.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof was eighteen months in the writing. I now think it his best work, but when I first saw it, it struck me as an edifice somehow tilted, like a giant architectural folly. It was august, all right, and turbulent, but there were moments of unaccountable wrongness, as if a kazoo had intruded into a string quartet. When I saw the published text and read, side by side, the original third act and the version that was presented on Broadway, I guessed at once what had happened. The kazoo was Kazan.<sup>5</sup>

Others became resentful that any playwright would allow a director to so interfere. "I do not know which I resent most: the fact that Williams fancied that he poured something vital into his story by having Burl Ives (Big Daddy) recount the now-notorious elephant joke, or that Williams meekly permitted his playscript to be rewritten when he was faced with the likelihood of censorship."<sup>6</sup> Although this particular reviewer misunderstood the nature of Kazan's influence, his remarks were typical of those

on the issue. The factor Williams and Kazan found hard to make clearly explicit to the critics was that Kazan's suggested alterations were merely that and not ultimatums. Many critics considered them to presuppose censorship. However, the reviewer did note the weakest part of the revised Act III which was the elephant joke. Shortly after opening, the joke was replaced by a short speech on mendacity; a summary of the discussion between Big Daddy and Brick on the topic.

Williams explained at the time that he never had been convinced that the elephant story should have been kept in the play beyond the tryout date, implying that it would have been excised anyway. The incredible thing is that it ever was allowed to be in the script at all - not from the smut angle, but simply from the standpoint that it meant absolutely nothing to the play.<sup>7</sup>

The effect of this change on the reviews only ended the comments on the bad taste and useless verbiage the joke was, and nothing else.

Despite the derogatory remarks aimed at Kazan's intervention in the writing of the play, his directorial talents were still recognized and hailed.

Williams' quasi-tragedy needs superlative soloists, superlatively directed. After seeing Peter Hall's production (performed in London) I feel I owe an apology to Elia Kazan. I still prefer the author's third act (here played for the first time) to the modified version approved by Mr. Kazan; but I missed, more than I would ever have thought possible, the galvanic inspiration of Mr. Kazan's direction. Mr. Hall's pace is lethargic: he stresses everything except what needs stressing.<sup>8</sup>

The above report makes light of the nature of drama to

communicate in ways other than by words. ". . . symbols, when used respectfully, are the purest language of plays."<sup>9</sup> It is here that Williams and Kazan worked most effectively since throughout the production, wide use is made of music and lyrical verses. In Act I, Mae has the children sing to Big Daddy "Happy Birthday" and a short nonsense song in honor of the occasion. Brick in the second and third acts whistles sporadically, and also in the final act, he sings to the moon of his envy for its detached position. Kenneth Rowe said of Williams musical insight as symbol, "Tennessee Williams demonstrates a more generalized kind of auditory imagery in his fine sense for the use of background music for mood and thematic reinforcement."<sup>10</sup> During the play, background music or singing is heard: in Act I, the family sings an uncertain rendition of "My Wild Irish Rose" outside the bedroom while inside, an argument between Brick and Maggie is occurring. In Act II, the Big Daddy-Brick confrontation is played to fireworks and songs of gaiety from the lawn, and in Act III, the servants and field-hands are heard singing spirituals and folk hymns after the storm. George Brandt added, "Sometimes they (the atmospherics of Williams' play) are employed in the service of the pathetic fallacy. The thunderstorm in the rewritten (Kazan-inspired) Act III of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof echoes the clamorous battle within the Pollitt

family; and its dying away at the end of the play visually and aurally underlines the upbeat finale."<sup>11</sup> Kazan made excellent use of these factors enhancing them where reasonable by adding lights and luminous glows.

Williams also employed various language symbols in Cat such as: "Glorious Hill High School" (Brick's school where he broke his ankle), suggesting he enjoys being a cripple; "Brother Man and Sister Woman," emphasizing a superficial closeness; "no-neck monsters," describing the offensive nature of the children; "Rainbow Hill" (clinic for alcoholics and dope fiends in the movies), suggesting a forget-about-it dream world; "Echo Spring" (Brick's brand of liquor), denoting Brick's tendency to drink without thinking, awaiting that evasive "click" in his head; and finally "Maggie the Cat" and Brick indicating her hot nature for survival as he ironically envies the cool moon, passivity his mode of mind, nonchalantly letting fate shape his life as he drifts along. These last two images of the hot cat and the cool moon are Williams' two principal symbols in Cat using them as unifying threads throughout the play.

The dominating unifying thread of any play, though, is the theme. For Cat, Williams has chosen the topic of mendacity in people's everyday life and shown its devastating effect upon a family whose sheer existence relies on lying. The theme appears to be quite obvious and

should present no problems in identifying it; however, in certain ways, the theme is so obvious and ordinary that some people and even some critics have overlooked it in search of some deeper theme. As one disappointed reviewer reported, ". . . Cat never quite defines itself as chiefly a play about marriage, about a family, or about a man. And if it means to be a complex of all three, it needs sharper form, greater unity, a sense of something far more deeply interfused."<sup>12</sup> But this is precisely what Williams has done, and done in such a manner as not to be overly dominant at the expense of minimizing the other aspects of Cat. He has expanded the scope of the tragedy to its fullest, which ironically includes a deliberate yet desperate lie that finally enables certain members of the family to face the reality of life again. But to understand with sensitivity the whole impact of the theme, one must first be able to identify with those traits in everyday life that weaken a person, exposing him to the need to shelter himself behind lies for existence. Williams believes the two major traits are more a pattern of life than spoken utterances that establish the seeds of weakness within us. "Fear and evasion are the two little beasts that chase each other's tails in the revolving wire cage of our nervous world."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the sole firm ground remaining in life for our comfort and reassurance is

people. "The only satisfactory thing we are left with in life is the relations - if they're sincere - between people."<sup>14</sup>

In Williams' Cat, however, the relations are not sincere, nor for the majority of the time are even those manufactured comments uttered spoken to one another's face with purpose or meaning. Initially it would appear that this would cause the play's story to falter drastically, but on second examination, it is obvious that this promotes the play's theme and dramatic effect.

But Mr. Williams is not much interested in story. He is interested in the unconscious motivation of people. Despite the surface gaiety of the birthday ritual and the flood of conversation that pours through the house, his characters are people who can hardly communicate with each other. Essentially, each one of them is living in solitary confinement.<sup>15</sup>

Williams is not satisfied, though, to allow his presentation of mendacity to remain idly in view without further conflict. As Kenneth Tynan points out, ". . . Cat on a Hot Tin Roof also explores the impact of truth on illusion, the difference being that where O'Neill thinks pipe-dreams necessary, Tennessee Williams condemns them under the generic heading of 'mendacity'."<sup>16</sup> By doing this, he demonstrates how totally tragic and disdainful these characters are. They are not beyond the point of helping themselves, or even of receiving help, but they reject assistance because that means facing the truth, coming to grips with reality.

The one thing they cannot tolerate is the truth. Although they are not malicious liars, they instinctively lie to each other to preserve their self-respect. In one way or another, each of them is living a protective lie, for the truth is devastating.<sup>17</sup>

The unintentional didactic part of Williams' handling of the theme in this way is that the audience can plainly see itself, maybe not in the characters specifically, but certainly through analogy. Williams feels that our fears and instincts for evasiveness rear back at this association; ultimately we declare such plays unreal.

So successfully have we disguised from ourselves the intensity of our own feelings, the sensibility of our own hearts, that plays in the tragic tradition have begun to seem untrue. For a couple of hours we may surrender ourselves to a world of fiercely illuminated values in conflict; but when the stage is covered and the auditorium lighted, almost immediately there is a recoil of disbelief.<sup>18</sup>

Audiences' openness to understand why these characters are mentally trapped has shown them their own snares. The ability to remove these they have assured themselves they have lost preferring the safety of their own mendacities, fearing the truth. In a letter to a critic friend, Oscar Hammerstein II stated the case.

It is in the discussion of mendacity between father and son which stays with me now and towers over the rest of the play. Too many plays cannot be written to show up the "mendacities" by which we live. The big mendacities must be slain. The smaller mendacities - I should like to have them remain with us a little. Let them remain like springs on an automobile to relieve the shock of the trip. Also before we shed "all" mendacities let us make sure we find out what the truth is.<sup>19</sup>



The fine-crafted use of language by Williams combined with the theme creates a stirring motion in the play and a uniqueness in him.

In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, theme and form are identical. There is no difference between what is said and the way in which it is said. The drama is thoroughly subjective on the part of Mr. Williams; it is also subjective on the part of the characters. Seldom has there been a play in which the expression of thought and feeling has been so complete.<sup>20</sup>

This thorough integration gives a highlighted, uplifting note to the play in the character of Maggie. Williams has had Maggie tackle the truth, and for her that truth is the conception of a child and communication with her husband, Brick. Kay Baxter has noted this in an article of hers on the subject.

It is partly because Williams' heroine, Maggie, for all her defects of character, sees that for her to have a child will do far more than ensure the inheritance for Brick and herself, that this play of Williams' has a quality of hopefulness lacking in most of his work. There is at least a willingness to admit the future. For Williams, too, survival is not enough. There must be communication and there must be mutual recognition of identity.<sup>21</sup>

Another crystal in the play, polished by Williams' careful arrangement of words and entwined emotion centering on the theme, is the Big Daddy-Brick encounter in Act II. Here he so delicately yet perfectly managed the discussion that he also created the germ for a second coordinate, harmonious theme. Eric Bentley captured the idea most clearly.

Author and director are together, too, in the best scene of the play - a masterly piece of construction

both as writing and as performance - a scene between father and son in which a new and better theme for the play is almost arrived at: that the simple old family relationships still mean something, that, in the midst of all the filth and incoherence and impossibility, people, clumsily, inconsistently, gropingly, try to be nice to each other.<sup>22</sup>

Eric Bentley in another article again compliments Williams' use of language, this time on the humor observed in the character of Big Daddy:

The comic element is often the best part of plays that, as a whole, are not considered comedies. This is particularly true of American plays, and, most particularly, of those of the two most prominent American playwrights of the present moment, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee. Williams has often been admired for other, supposedly profounder elements, and when he has been condemned it has been on the grounds that the profundity was spurious. Those who do the condemning should, however, hasten to add that Williams has a fine comic sense and knows how to use it. The Father in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is a comic figure in far more than the fact that he uses scandalous language. Comedy is here used for its classic purpose: to place people in their society, to define them as what Karl Marx said they are, the sum of their social relationships.<sup>23</sup>

Williams' mastery of theme has placed him far in advance of most of his contemporaries as a leader in structuring a well controlled play, woven together in strong bonds of simple beauty. Even though he changed the plot of the third act, and altered the characterizations of three characters at director Kazan's request, still the theme of mendacity and its devastating effect went unimpaired. Whether the changes improved or detracted from the play did not matter, for Williams had constructed a theme based upon universality that was applicable to

all, wealthy or poor, Southern or Northern, intoxicated  
or sober, man or woman, tragic in nature or comic.

#### IV. WILLIAMS' CHESSPIECES IN DRAMA

Regardless of how well or poorly a play has been written, regardless of the ingenuity or lack of it used in the production, regardless of the play's critical reviews or audience reception, regardless of how astutely or awkwardly the characters have been cast, the one element that makes a play personal is the characters. For tragedians, like Williams, it is in this area that the greatest interest and joy of playwriting exists. Given a few people and a conflict, a meticulous, intriguing play will evolve from bud to full blossom. Everything the playwright needs, granted a creative imagination and appreciation for life, is there for molding; to be taken up in his hands and shaped, styled by his eager mind.

Techniques change, but grand themes do not. Whether in a murder trial, a bullfight, a farce like Charley's Aunt, or a tragedy like Lear, the behavior of a human being at the end of his tether is the common denominator of all drama. When a man (or woman) arrives at self-knowledge through desperation, he (or she) has become the raw material for a great play. The stature of the work will depend upon the dramatist's honesty and skill, but its cornerstone is already laid.<sup>1</sup>

This idea Williams embraces wholeheartedly. Arthur Miller wrote: "In the tragic view the need of man to wholly realize himself is the only fixed star, and

whatever it is that hedges his nature and lowers it is ripe for attack and examination."<sup>2</sup> But just because the play is a tragedy does not permit immorality a license to exist as Arthur Miller here comments on the morality of tragedy. "The tragic right is a condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is able to flower and realize itself. The tragic wrong is the condition which suppresses the flowing out of his love and creative instinct."<sup>3</sup> These beliefs the great tragic playwrights have upheld in their works; their numerous successful, remembered plays a glorious testimony to the fact.

The core of tragedy's morality lies in the characters who are thrust against the ills of time, immorality, mortality, human weakness and susceptibility. The challenge is his to accept and blaze forward or let fall to the ground smoldering to a slow death, tormenting its helpless, cowardly victim.

The great and only possible dignity of man lies in his power deliberately to choose certain moral values by which to live as steadfastly as if he, too, like a character in a play, immured against the corrupting rush of time, . . . . .  
 . . . plays in the tragic position offer us a view of certain moral values in violent juxtaposition.<sup>4</sup>

However, simply selecting a premise of moral values and living by them does not reinforce or even establish a clear-cut, easily defined character freed from yielding to temptations any more than it does an actual human

being. The inner thoughts and desires of a person are constantly veiled from our knowledge and often from the person himself when these take the form of unconscious motivations stimulating the person to an action he performs instantly and without thought. Williams expressed his opinions about this idea in the following:

To me the play (in reference here to Harold Pinter's The Caretaker) was about the thing that I've always pushed in my writing - that I've always felt was needed to be said over and over - that human relations are terrifyingly ambiguous. If you write a character that isn't ambiguous you are writing a false character, not a true one.<sup>5</sup>

The character should develop from his initial beginnings in the play if he is to exercise a leading position. Many of the new playwrights in the vein of Williams insist a character cannot be a major character if he is not a developing one. William Archer defined their meaning by saying: "By 'development' of character, I think they mean, not change, but rather unveiling, disclosure . . . . The interest of the highest order of drama should consist in the reaction of character to a series of crucial experiences."<sup>6</sup>

It should be emphasized that the tragic hero must be a person of some stature. In general there is little dramatic value in seeing a small mind or soul involved in tragic circumstances, someone who in his time of crisis simply falls back on clichés, on patterns of behavior that he learned in grade school or Sunday school. The tragic hero must be capable of independent thought and action, capable of new insight, capable therefore of increasing our human understanding and compassion.<sup>7</sup>

The need to change one's moral values or other stabilizing

beliefs is not required for a major character to develop, even extensively in a play. ". . . life is such a mysteriously complicated thing that no one should really presume to judge and condemn the behavior of anyone else!"<sup>8</sup>

Usually with the correct circumstances, time to think, and a person he can communicate with, if the given theme will accommodate an actual change, the major characters of tragedy at least try to reevaluate and restructure the principles of their lives. Arthur Miller remarked, "It is curious, although edifying, that the plays we revere, century after century, are the tragedies. In them, and in them alone, lies the belief - optimistic, if you will - in the perfectability of man."<sup>9</sup> Williams was asked by an interviewer if his characters seemed more tragic to him being placed in a Southern setting; if they were not confined in their availability to change and betterment.

He responded:

Because I know and understand their moods and personalities better and because I am both familiar and in complete sympathy with the flavor and mode of their speech, was his unhesitating reply. But I don't feel that the characters in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof are bound by the setting of the play. Their problems and feelings and the inner tragedy of their whole tortured lives would be very much the same if the story was laid elsewhere.<sup>10</sup>

Of all the things that Tennessee Williams' characters are, they are not stereotyped.

Margaret, Williams' favorite character in Cat, is probably the most like Williams' inner nature and

temperament. He spent more time and effort in the creation of Margaret than any other of his female characters. He displayed his best manipulation of language in her lines.

There is energy of imagination in Tennessee Williams' first speech for Margaret in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, as she opens and kicks shut drawers of the dresser: "Well, I! - just remarked that! - one of th' no-neck monsters messed up m' lovely dress so I got t' - cha-a-ange." It is not only that Margaret's designation of her husband's brother's children is striking verbiage, but that the speech immediately launches the characterization.<sup>11</sup>

Critics have noted, however, that they feel Maggie's nature is too impulsive, overly drawn, and more often than not, suggestively authoritarian than merely determined. Her love for Brick has even been denied, insisting that her shallow words and displays of affection concern solely her interest in superiority and absolute control over her husband. However, more believe her love for him to be overly desirous and physically lusty in extreme terms, wanting to regain a relationship with him more for the physical aspects than for the spiritual and mental ones. As she advances from scene to scene, both feel she grows increasingly more reckless and insistent upon her goal. The following passage is a fine evaluation of how they perceive the character of Maggie as a lowly, unthinking deprived wife acting on impulses.

Her problem, as near as I can grasp it, is that she loves her husband and wishes to resume normal relations with him. This is something I have a good deal of sympathy with, but I must say her tactics



strike me as exceedingly idiotic and entirely unfeminine. Her opening gun, right at the start of Act I, is to enter the bedroom where Brick is sulking. She complains of the heat, removes her dress, strokes her body appreciatively before an invisible mirror facing the audience, and informs her spouse that his father has been observing her with a lecherous gleam in his eye. Now, I submit that the last way any wife might arouse her husband would be to tell him that his father had amorous feelings about her. And certainly any husband of the sensitiveness of Brick would be nauseated by such a vulgar approach.

Mrs. Brick's second gambit is to deny her husband whisky unless he will sleep with her. (Her husband has become an alcoholic so as to bear the pain of existence.) If this is Williams' idea of how human beings ingratiate themselves with one another, I can only say he knows different human beings than I do. But Mrs. Brick's final piece of female strategy is the best yet. Big Daddy has threatened to leave his rich estate to another son, felicitously named Gooper . . . , because Brick has produced no offspring. So she finally flings herself at Big Daddy's feet and falsely announces that she is pregnant. Since it has been made quite clear that Brick is an idealist, sickened by the hypocrisy and cruelty of humanity, how is this sordid lie to bring her husband into her arms?

But with Kowalskian inconsistency, it works. The drama concludes with a highly nebulous embrace and Brick sitting thoughtfully on the edge of the bed. For the life of me, the conclusion seemed utterly crazy.<sup>12</sup>

Both perceptions of Maggie are incorrect. Maggie does gain domination over her husband at the end of the play but only accidentally and only because Brick gave himself over to her. Her determination to look after the welfare of her husband and herself, and reestablish a meaningful relationship in their marriage are her aims, pure in intent. "Because she is violently, almost possessively in love with Brick, doesn't mean she is oversexed or abnormal."<sup>13</sup> Maggie's deliberate lie of

pregnancy is a lie and also a prediction, one Brick and Big Daddy know as well as she is inevitable. It is the one lie which actually carries any power in its message. Truly, Maggie is the guiding agent of Cat, whose very sympathetic nature is spelled out by her trials and common, iron-strength speeches.

Brick, although feeling he has escaped the world of mendacities by drinking, is very much disturbed by the lying and verbal warfare that flourishes so heavily around him. He has taken to not associating with his wife, though he does not hate her, or become angered at her.

His wife loves him, but her physical advances are repugnant to him and he is much too remote to appreciate the desperate humor of her conversation. There is no conceivable method of communication between them, and although it appears to me that Mr. Williams' specific dilemma is a little bizarre, his underlying thought is just as simple as this: the profound and tragic mystery that every man is to every other man in the world, and even to himself,<sup>14</sup>

stated Wolcott Gibbs. Arthur Waters better illuminates the nature of Brick's behavior and his relationship with Maggie.

The playwright is very emphatic to the defense of his central character Brick, the play's lonesome and sympathetic near-alcoholic against whom charges of homosexuality are made. "Brick is definitely not a homosexual," he (Williams) declares, and points out that in one key speech he has Brick's wife attest to her husband's innocence. "Brick's self-pity and recourse to the bottle are not the result of a guilty conscience in that regard. When he speaks of 'self-disgust,' he is talking in the same vein as that which finds him complaining

bitterly about having had to live so long with 'mendacity.' He feels that the collapse and premature death of his friend Skipper, who never appears in the play, have been caused by unjust attacks on his moral character made by outsiders, including Margaret (Maggie), the wife. It is his bitterness at Skipper's tragedy that has caused Brick to turn against his wife and find solace in drink, rather than any personal involvement, although I do suggest that, at least at some time in his life, there have been unrealized abnormal tendencies."<sup>15</sup>

The outward disgust that Brick may have that he never emphasizes to a noticeable degree is the stupidity of the world, a world highly symbolized by his older brother, Gooper, and his family. Arthur Miller calls it, ". . . a world senselessly reproducing itself through ugly children conceived without the grace of genuine affection, and delivered not so much as children but as inheritors of great wealth and power; the new perpetuators of inequity."<sup>16</sup> Big Daddy sees the disgust he believes Brick to have displayed in his drinking, which Brick repeatedly insists aids him to face the world. Eric Bentley states, "His father, however, explains that this is an evasion: the real reason is that he is running away from homosexuality."<sup>17</sup>

The subject of homosexuality at the time of the play's appearance was a hushed subject, and Williams' use of it was extremely avant garde. The insistence by Brick that his relationship with Skipper was strictly a pure friendship between two men, one of the few true relationships of its kind among men still around,

mushroomed into an immense problem. Marion Magid noted at that time, "It seems moreover crucial to the meaning of the play to know whether Brick is weak and self-deluding or whether he is the last example of the pure in heart."<sup>18</sup> Many felt the question of homosexuality was answered early in the play by the reference to the bedroom Brick and Maggie slept in. "Big Daddy had proved it earlier, however, when he put Brick and Maggie in the room where the old homosexuals, former owners of the plantation, had slept and died,"<sup>19</sup> attributes Signi Falk. According to another early reviewer of the opposite opinion, "The ghost of homosexuality is conjured up and laid to rest, but the wraith persists, possibly even longer than the playwright intended."<sup>20</sup> Indeed such a racy topic would continue to linger long after the issue had been answered because people naturally doubt easy solutions for spicy matters in society, and the subject literally makes the play seem to retain its original shock stimulus.

The actual purpose of the topic is a source of dramatic color, a pigment on the sub-theme level. The answer to the question, however, is unobtrusively given by Brick himself in reply to Maggie's quizzing of him early in Act III. "When asked why Big Daddy shouted 'liars,' Brick answered that he did not lie to his father but only to himself - the nearest approach to a clear-cut

statement that Williams allows his character to make."<sup>21</sup> The remaining step forward Brick takes during the play is to protect Maggie from Gooper and Mae's attack on her after her announcement of her pregnancy. ". . . Brick rises to Maggie's defense and finally expresses admiration for her - the only positive stand he takes in the play: his defense of a lie."<sup>22</sup> Definitely the change Brick undergoes in the revised Act III weakens the sturdy constitution he has had throughout the play, and in some intangible way, this weakness seems partially unrealistic. "He (Kazan) felt that Brick should undergo a change of heart after the showdown with his father; and into Brick's lines a certain hollowness began to creep."<sup>23</sup>

Anyone who had sustained non-involvement in the activities that exploded in the Pollitt household only to finally crack is really not so unrealistic for the new playwrights of Williams' school. Indeed he is the tragic hero reworked.

Brick is, in fact, a perfect example of the down-trodden ego, the emotionally weak son of a more willful, more talented, more vital male parent. It is no coincidence that his creator has elected to provide him with a crutch throughout the play. Brick is a cripple, psychologically as well as physically - a wounded animal, a deformed child.<sup>24</sup>

R. H. Gardner says, "The charm of the defeated has replaced the strength of the tragic hero."<sup>25</sup> But no matter how Brick is viewed, the determining of what constitutes realistic behavior will probably only be understood with

certainty by those who have shared his tragic semi-existence as an alcoholic.

Through the characters of Margaret and Brick, Williams places the heart and mind of his play in order, functioning to enlighten audiences on the horrors of a life 1) where alcohol rules one's life, 2) where all the angles and approaches and paths travelled gravely end against a stone wall, 3) where speaking with honesty and sincerity makes the person an outcast in a society that says it is looking for truth, 4) where a family is no shelter to retreat to for love and comfort and understanding, and 5) where greed is as choking as a sterile black vacuum. Williams' characters are real people in real situations, and speak directly to the audience in real, often frightening, sometimes comical, always provocative language.

## V. CONCLUSION

To summarize the influences a great playwright such as Tennessee Williams has had on his contemporaries, on the restructuring of tragic drama in today's theatre, and on the themes employed to convey the revolutionary spirit of honest reality confronting audiences, one must first understand the true nature of tragedy as it was created.

Tragedy is commonly regarded as the greatest and most noble form of drama, an exaltation of the human spirit. In spite of the fact that it generally depicts characters involved in some terrible catastrophe, tragedy gives us a fundamentally optimistic and liberal view of life. The tragic playwright examines life intently and passionately during great crises in the lives of great personalities. From such examination we gain wisdom and insight, moments of great beauty, and admiration for man even in his defeat. Citizens of a mature and healthy nation should be willing to engage in such soul-searching without asking that the facts be colored by romantic hues, happy endings, or other melodramatic techniques.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it is precisely this last statement the general public, including many critics, have refused to accept, preferring to condemn the drama and the playwright rather than examine their own being.

The great tragedies of the past are no different from today's tragedies in the general nature of their themes, their language, or their characters, only in their plots. The factor that has changed is the attitude

in which the audience views the tragic play. Today's theatre audience for Williams, however, seems to be heavily shielded from the reality of life, living in an imagined world of illusionary comfort and contentment. Anything that draws them away from this sense of security extracts from them the strongest scorn and condemnation they are able to muster. Williams' main objective in playwriting is to do just that: draw them out of their imagined worlds back into reality.

He represents a new spirit in local color tragedy: the concern with a fragile character who is beset with an obsession born of frustration and who is engulfed by a callous or cruel world, usually localized in the lower Mississippi region. It is natural for Williams to write of the locale which flowed in upon his youthful mind, and in so doing he achieves an authentic tone in his plays; but his forte is a sensitive insight into frail characters who find life too much for them. Williams' language is responsive to the demands of the situation; he employs striking contrasts; and he uses a partially expressionistic technique to enforce emotional effects.<sup>2</sup>

Because of his persistence to reach the public, unyielding in frankness and honesty for the themes and characters he uses, Williams and his plays have held the limelight of controversy for a quarter of a century. Frank Whiting states about Williams' motive, ". . . within the psychoses and neuroses of his characters he finds great drama and sometimes great illumination."<sup>3</sup> It is this every playwright strives for in his work, and Williams has captured it with mastery and grace of style. But unfortunately, it is not enough to overcome the great



controversy that exists around him.

Indeed, the controversy which has attended his career may well be traced in large measure to his attempt to recover the natural function of the drama as the mirror of popular imagination. Although he shares many of the concerns of a larger group of contemporary dramatists, his theater is not in the literary tradition established by such playwrights as Luigi Pirandello, Bertolt Brecht, Jean Giraudoux, Jean-Paul Sartre, T. S. Eliot, and Thornton Wilder. On the contrary, Williams attempts to recover for drama its primary identity as a pre-literary form. He is committed to a theater that is extraverbal in nature, to a dramatic form that seeks to explore not only rational but also irrational and supra-rational planes of human experience. Williams proposes to mirror the ambiguous reality of his perception in language which can be understood by popular audiences. He undertakes to project those events, ideas, attitudes, and collective feelings that characterize life in the mid-twentieth century into the physical, emotional, moral, and symbolic environment of the common man. He writes of this motive in the preface to The Glass Menagerie: "These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a conception of a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture."<sup>4</sup>

The greatness of Williams resides not in his attempts to change and demoralize society and the culture, the reasons used to condemn him and his works, but in his attempts to change and authenticate the theatre as a reflection of the reality of society and the culture.

Based on the observations and examinations of this study, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof can now be seen as such a play. It will only be after achieving his goals towards public recognition of their real identity, though, that the controversy surrounding him and his plays will cease.

Nevertheless, until that time, Williams will continue to write and have produced plays of the quality of Cat. Plays using characters equal to those one finds on the street, where he works, where he shops, in his home, nameless and evasive. Plays using the language of shallow words and social etiquette, desperate words and survival cries, no words and apathy. Plays using themes reflective of cultural reality, such as mendacity, showing the power and horror these attitudes possess in controlling our lives. Plays encircled by controversy due to the friction between a wholly alive drama and a half alive audience to what is "real" in reality.

## VI. FOOTNOTES

### I. INTRODUCTION

1 Esther M. Jackson, "Tennessee Williams," in The American Theater Today, ed. by Alan S. Downer (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1967), p. 73.

2 Jackson, pp. 81-83.

3 Reverend Ignatius W. Butler, T.O.R., S.T.L., The Moral Problems of the Theatre (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1958), p. 72.

4 Henry Hewes, "Broadway Postscript-- Critics on a Tin Roof," The Saturday Review, April 30, 1955, p. 26.

5 Jackson, p. 78.

### II. THE ORIGIN OF CONTROVERSY

1 Tennessee Williams, "Note of Explanation to 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof'," in Best American Plays, Fourth Series 1951-1957, ed. by John Gassner (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1958), p. 79.

2 Brooks Atkinson, "Williams' 'Tin Roof'," New York Times, April 3, 1955, sec. 2, p. 1.

3 Kenneth Thorpe Rowe, A Theater in Your Head (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1960), p. 223.

4 Henry Hewes, "Broadway Postscript - A Streetcar Named Mendacity," The Saturday Review, April 9, 1955, p. 32.

5 Maurice Zolotow, "The Season On and Off Broadway," Theatre Arts, June, 1955, p. 93.

6 Tennessee Williams, "The Timeless World of a Play," in American Playwrights on Drama, ed. by Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 86.

7 Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," in American Playwrights on Drama, ed. by Horst Frenz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 82.

8 Jim Gaines, "A Talk About Life and Style With Tennessee Williams," the Saturday Review, April 29, 1972, p. 29.

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