



# Homophobia and Family - Leading to Isolation in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

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**Abstract**— *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) by Tennessee Williams is a play about the Pollitt family of the Mississippi Delta and the lies and uncertainty in the family relationships surfacing due to the fight for the land which leads all the characters trapped in human extremities of emotions and isolation. This research paper explores the important themes of Homophobia and Sexual Repression along with the messed-up family relationships leading to human isolation and psychological implications for each member of the family.

**Keywords**— *Homophobia, Norms, Sexual Repression, Uncertainty, Family.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) by Tennessee Williams is a play revolving around the Pollitt family of the Mississippi Delta. It revolves around three couples, Big Daddy and Big Mama and their sons Gooper and Brick with their wives Mae and Maggie respectively. The play revolves around Big Daddy's imminent death and Maggie's and Mae's silent yet evident fight for getting the larger part of the biggest land owned by Big Daddy. This creates a lot of pretences, uncertainties in the family relationships and a lot of lies of the past surfacing up. One of the prominent ones is Brick's relationship with Skipper and the reiterating of it leading to more psychological implications, human isolation and fatal consequences. We will explore the themes of Homophobia and Family Relationships that lead to human isolation and psychological disorders in the play.

## II. HOMOPHOBIA

Though the prominent theme of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* seems to be family tensions and relations, there is a strong indication by the playwright towards the issue of homosexuality and homophobia in society. Considering the period the play was written the second theme seems to be an undertone purposely. The playwright portrays this

important thematic concern through his male protagonist Brick and his relationship with his close friend Skipper.

### 2.1 Internalization of the society's perspectives

A lot of dialogues of the character Brick in the play draw our attention to the fact that Brick himself was in constant denial of his relationship with Skipper and the cause behind it is the internalization of the societal norms and the 'normal sexual preferences' constructed by the society.

The dialogues between Brick and Maggie below and the conversation that follows point to Brick's denial about his relationship with Skipper and terming it as dirty aligning with society's views of it. He had internalized those views so much so that he himself accepted it was not normal and hence was ready to hurt his wife and prove her wrong by stating that he married her.

"BRICK: ...-I had friendship with Skipper.--You are naming it dirty!" "BRICK: Not love with you, Maggie, but friendship with Skipper was that one great true thing, and you are naming it dirty!"

The terms like dirty, not pure, dirty things are used by Brick when someone questioned his relationship with Skipper. Even in his conversation with Big Daddy in Act 2 about his relationship with Skipper, he reiterated the terms in his dialogues, "You think that Skipper and me were a pair of dirty old men?; You think we did dirty

things between us, Skipper an'-- "The use of such terms for queer people in a loud and defensive voice is deep-rooted in the experiences he faced during his lifetime and consented to the control of the society's perspective upon him.

### 2.2 Sexual Repression as a Psychological Disorder

Although not explicitly stated the playwright is making a strong statement about the psychological impact that the indifference and unacceptability of queer relations have on the minds of queer people. As we see in the play, the psychological effect of sexual repression is visible in the characters of Skipper and Brick.

Skipper when faced with his reality by Maggie, tried to prove her wrong by sleeping with her but was not successful in the attempt. This made him fall into the clutches of denial and depression, and soon after confessing it to Brick, the realization of it took a toll on his mind and he died as suggested by Brick.

As for Brick, he wasn't able to admit his sexuality because he was ashamed that it went against society's norms and suppressing his intense emotions led to emotional stress. This repression leads Brick to turn to a coping mechanism for healing and getting through it as he so frequently mentions as the 'click' in Act 2 and Act 3 of the play. The consequence of this sexual repression and the coping mechanism has been explored by Tennessee Williams in the play through the portrayal of homosexuality and alcoholism in his character Brick.

To conclude on Homophobia as being an important thematic concern in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* we see how the society's norms and Brick's family's outlooks toward his relationship with Skipper and the trauma of Skipper's death, made it all the way more difficult for him to accept his reality as the fear of being not normal and being neglected made a home in his mind leading him to turn to alcohol for his rescue and constant state of denial. As for Skipper, he turned to death instead of a coping mechanism to survive in the homophobic world that surrounded him.

The school incident mentioned by Brick to Big Daddy in Act 2 and Margaret's strong statement that concluded as "...and death was the only icebox where you could keep it..." clearly speak for the society's perspective and their idea of normal as far as sexual attractions of a person were concerned.

Thus, the lack of understanding and psychological support from not just the world but their families and friends too led the characters of Brick and Skipper to fall prey to the idea of homosexuality being a crime. This made them hide their feelings not just from the world but from

themselves also leading to the death of one and the conflict in personality, isolation and alcoholism in the other.

## III. REPRESENTATION OF FAMILY

The representation of family in a *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* outlines a lot about the plot of the play. The lies apart from the lie explicitly mentioned the uncertainty of relationships and marriages, the greed and the avoidance of brutal reality by the family members even after being constantly reminded of it lead to fatal consequences of the play. The theme of the family becomes important not only for the fact that it becomes a consequence of a lot of conclusions but also because there are traces of the author's personal life in it. Let's explore each one of the above-mentioned concepts.

### 3.1 The Lie and all The Lies

Everyone in the Pollitt family is in a state of denial about their brutal realities and keeps lying throughout not only to themselves and their partners but also to everyone else in the family. Every person in the family has their hidden agendas and is in a constant state of disbelief and indifference about their truths even after being explicitly confronted with them time and again. One such example of this is in the dialogue between Big Mama and Big Daddy in Act 2 where Big Daddy mentions to Big Mama harshly about being aware of her intentions and taking over the place and asks her that she doesn't need to do it anymore since he is not dying and Big Mama doesn't accept it and keeps reiterating the same dialogue,

"BIG MAMA: Big Daddy? Big Daddy? Oh, Big Daddy!-- You didn't meant those things you said to me, did you? Sweetheart?--I know you didn't. I know you didn't mean those things in your heart. "

The other characters too can't come to terms with their realities, for instance, Big Mama as cited above denies Big Daddy's hatred, Brick is in a state of denial about Skipper and their relationship, and Mae and Gooper are indifferent to Big Daddy's hatred for them and their children and Maggie doesn't accept that Brick doesn't love her. None of the characters in the play is honest with themselves and each other and thus lay trapped in the prisons of their makings. Apart from the lie explicitly mentioned about Maggie bearing a child, the play is filled with lies as Brick rightly pronounces to Big Daddy that mendacity is the system that we live in and the characters in the play revolve around it.

### 3.2 Human Extremities of Emotions and Uncertainty in the Family Relationships

The inadmissible things of Brick's homosexual desires

and Big Daddy's imminent death being repressed, and the lies surfacing along with the hope of family restoration lead to uncertainty in the family relationships that result in fatal consequences. "Why is it so damn hard for people to talk?," states Big Daddy in the play pointing to the evident major issues that contribute to these uncertainties are communication issues and the absence of mutual respect and support. Tennessee Williams through the play and the dialogues of the characters discloses the truth and brutal realities and the unacceptance of it along with the helplessness of other characters thus toying around with the global theme of honesty vs lying. The support for this argument is indicated in the dialogue between Big Mama and Daddy mentioned above. Thus these uncertainties, lies, conflicts, denial of the truth and communication gap suggest that nobody wants to become a real family and the term unity and its importance is a far-fetched reality. No one is there to support each other as a normal family should causing psychological problems and isolation of the characters resulting in family relationships becoming unstable.

### 3.3 The Three Marriages

The representation of the three marriages is similar to the representation of the family filled with lies, uncertainties and denial of the truth. In Brick and Maggie's marriage, there are terms and conditions of being together and constant denial from Maggie's end of Brick not being in love with her. Big Daddy and Big Mama's marriage also is far from the ideal picturization of marriage since in Act 2 when Big Daddy is made aware of the fact that he is not dying, his behaviour towards Big Mama changes and he even accepts that after so many years of marriage he has not been able to love her and wants to sleep with other women. There is also a sense of insecurity and the dominant-subservient binary in their relationship in terms of the power dynamics. The marriage of Mae and Gooper isn't a healthy one either, as it is more of a pretence, the driving force of which is greed. This is evident in the final stages of the last act of the play where Gooper's attitude towards Mae shifts from the usual pretence to reality.

Thus, to conclude the representation of the family uncertainty and the pretence in marriages lead to fatal consequences making every member of the family lay trapped in a prison of their own making. As rightly suggested by the title and the mention of humans being compared to animals, the driving force of the characters of the play are greed and unusual desires going against the ideal family norms.

As stated by Ben Brantley, in NY Times Theatre Review, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is "...perhaps his most impassioned and articulate statement on human isolation, the wrenching problems of communication between people." This research paper identifies the major themes of homophobia in society and its internalization by the characters Brick and Skipper along with the family relationships, lies and miscommunications that lead to this fatal consequence of human isolation and the portrayal of extremities of human emotions throughout the play.

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## IV. CONCLUSION