



*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof:*  
Desire in the Unhappy Family

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Richard Brooks' film version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) came to the screen three years after Tennessee Williams' play was performed on Broadway, famously directed by Elia Kazan. The play was developed, initially, with significant input from Kazan, going on to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and along with its Hollywood counterpart exists as part of a broader 1950s cultural output that struggled with one of the era's prevailing concerns: the disabling of the traditional family structure and the exploration of individual – including female – agency. According to Gerald Gardner, 'no playwright wrinkled more brows and provoked more opposition than Tennessee Williams',<sup>1</sup> and the film was in many ways controversial at the time of its release. This inclination towards provocation can also be seen in other Williams adaptations such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951), *Baby Doll* (Elia Kazan, 1956), *The Fugitive Kind* (Sidney Lumet, 1960) and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (Richard Brooks, 1962). One of these major controversies was the candour with which sexuality, 'unorthodox' desire, and sexual practice were included in dialogue and subtext – something for which the American public was no doubt ready, but the censors were not. As Kenneth MacKinnon writes, 'It was a Broadway play filmed with unusual austerity for its time: largely refusing to "open out" its action, it takes pride in its theatrical origins.'<sup>2</sup> Thus, while it is a film layered with symbolic imagery and aesthetics, much of the film's thematic richness comes from its dialogue and the relationships that circulate within and around the central family structure.

Except for a brief prologue, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* takes place on a single day during a Mississippi heatwave. Brick Pollitt (Paul Newman), visiting his family's home for a birthday celebration, repeatedly rejects his wife, Maggie (Elizabeth Taylor), proclaiming neither romantic nor sexual interest in her. Befitting the film's theatrical staging, Brick has a broken ankle, a physical and visible injury that he suffered in the first scene while drunkenly attempting to recapture the glory days of his sports-hero youth. He is barely mobile beyond the pathetic limping of a drunken cripple. Maggie stays near him, desperate for the marital affection that Brick spurns; there is clearly an emotional injury between them as well. Maggie's belt, a striking band of orange at her waist between her pale skirt and blouse, matches the colour of the whiskey in Brick's glass that he clutches with one hand, his crutch held with the other. As they are seen in the frame, the belt and the whiskey are positioned side by side. This is a powerful visual metaphor: rather than having his arms around his wife, they embrace the two things that signify his physical weakness and his denial of both his wife's love and the fading of his former glory.

True to its theatrical origins and influences, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* continues to circulate around these themes in the claustrophobic expanse of the family house. There are multiple references to containment: Maggie snaps at Brick, 'I'm not living with you! We occupy the same cage, that's all,' then, 'That's the first time you've raised your voice in a long time. Crack in the stone wall?' His sister-in-law, Mae 'Sister Woman' Pollitt (Madeleine Sherwood), openly admits that she violates boundaries of privacy, shouting, 'We occupy the next room and the walls between aren't soundproof!' In addition to the setting, which is as smothering as the sweltering summer heat, the prevalence of such references draws attention to the ideas of privacy and intrusion, physical and metaphorical barriers, public appearances and the darker truths beneath the surface.

The film immediately sets itself up around various cases of perpetuating and living with lies. In the prologue, Brick drunkenly stumbles onto an athletics field and conjures up the sound

of a cheering crowd; as he tries and fails a simple track exercise, it becomes apparent that Brick is holding onto an illusion of his former sportsman days. Brick and Maggie are keeping up appearances in their marriage, although Brick is not interested in intimacy. The doctor soon reveals to Brick that he has lied to Big Daddy (Burl Ives) and the family about Big Daddy's condition – although he told them it was good news, it's actually malignant and terminal. This overarching theme of mendacity extends to all the relationships in the film, and while it is spoken of as something to be avoided, it plagues and is perpetuated by the entire family. The repetition of boisterous songs like 'Dixie's Land', 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' and 'I'll Be a Sunbeam', sung noisily by the large family with facile enthusiasm, takes on an ironic quality. These distinctly celebratory anthems are sung in admiration of the Pollitt family patriarch, while the patriarch himself spurns the love of his family. As MacKinnon writes, 'the family at its most real is at its



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most fictitious<sup>3</sup> because the image of perfection and happiness is deemed a lie.

Among all of this fighting, Brick resists intimacy with his wife, blaming his feelings on her mendacity – her betrayal of him with his best friend and subsequent denial of it. Yet what was buried in the film’s script – adapted by Brooks and James Poe with advice from Williams – was Brick’s supposed homosexual inclinations. In an edited book of letters from the Hays Office giving an overview of the censorship that plagued Hollywood from 1934 to 1968, Gardner says that MGM ‘turned the lead’s homosexuality into hero worship’.<sup>4</sup> The marriage troubles between Brick and Maggie



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were supposedly to do with Brick’s homosexual desire for his best friend Skipper, which became, rather, Skipper’s heterosexual desire for Maggie. This kept the threat to the institution of marriage but redirected it to the less ‘perverse’ element of adultery.<sup>5</sup> And while the intensity of the Hays Code was lagging by the late 1950s, the production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* remained afflicted in an atmosphere where, as Thomas Doherty remarks, ‘Erotic sparks still flew but less visibly, with lower voltage.’<sup>6</sup>

To some degree, the censorship of the script renders the finished film unclear, as the replacement storyline and motive is never fully formed. The original Broadway play was famously created with a lot of input – some of it unwanted, some of it rejected – from Kazan.<sup>7</sup> In Edward Albee’s introduction to the 2004 publication of the text, he wrote that the play ‘is almost as famous for its revisions as it is for its final text’;<sup>8</sup> in the same volume, Brian Parker corroborates that Williams made changes to please Kazan but ‘resented’ them,<sup>9</sup> and perhaps the same could be said of the film. But Brooks’ text is at a disadvantage, as so many films of its day were, as there had to be an alternative storyline created in place of the censored one. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* this was not done entirely successfully, as Williams was unhappy with the final product. The particular plot strain of Brick’s dissatisfaction with marriage is left rather flaccid and unconvincing. When Brick pleads that Maggie not mention Skipper, Maggie exasperatedly replies, ‘The laws of silence won’t work about

that!' The laws of silence pledged by the Hays Code unfortunately don't work about it either, the final script failing to convincingly hide the undercurrent. In some ways, this inability to completely veil Williams' subtext reflects the film's major theme of mendacity, to self and others, and its ultimate destructiveness.

Yet at the time of its release, the film was lauded as a commercial success. Though it was awarded none, it received six Academy Award nominations: Best Actor for Newman; Best Actress for Taylor; Best Picture; Best Director; Best Screenplay; and Best Color Cinematography for William H Daniels. Sympathy for Taylor may also have played a part in the film's reception; Taylor's husband,

dress, designed by Helen Rose – it is as though Maggie is trying to re-create her original marital enthusiasm. Even with the restrained earthy tones of much of the palette, this white dress stands out as significant, and particularly in relation to the colours of Big Mama's (Judith Anderson) forget-me-not blue and Mae's champagne pink. Maggie's white dress symbolises her loneliness, both visually separating her from the family and connoting a desire for a renewed marriage and life. When she first wears the white chiffon dress, her mother-in-law interrogates her both for being childless and having an alcoholic husband. 'Some single men stop drinking when they get married, others start,' Big Mama says, accusing



Mike Todd, whom she had married in February 1957, was killed in a plane crash on 22 March 1958, not long after production began on the film. Todd's private plane was called *Lucky Liz*, yet perhaps the luckiest thing for Taylor is that she stayed home with a cold instead of getting on the plane with him. After Todd's death, Taylor took a month away from the set, and returned to her acting in a role that required certain knowledge of sadness, loss and determination. In an iconic sparring scene together, Brick scowls at Maggie, 'What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof?' She replies, in her calm Southern twang, 'Just staying on it, I guess, 's long as she can.' This determination for success, and desire for survival and independence, is a prevalent concern in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and one that dominates the film throughout.

Consistent with a melodramatic script and its characters, the *mise en scène* has many layers, contributing to the symbolic resonance in the text, particularly the dialogue. Christine Gledhill posits that Hollywood melodrama has 'recourse to gestural, visual and musical excess'.<sup>10</sup> Brooks' original plan was to shoot the picture in black-and-white, but to fully exploit the piercing colours of both Newman's and Taylor's eyes, the production was converted to Metrocolor; as a result, the film's visual palette resonates with meaning.<sup>11</sup> Describing her poverty-stricken upbringing, Maggie recalls that even her wedding dress was an old hand-me-down. When she changes into her party dress – that iconic white chiffon



Maggie of failing at the very thing that, in word and action, she is trying to repair.

The weather patterns intensify the mood and dialogue by invoking symbolism. Taking place on a hot Mississippi afternoon – so hot that Maggie rubs ice cubes over her forearms to cool herself – the day soon descends into darkness and thunderstorms. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the significant juxtaposition of the thunderstorm outside the house with the metaphorical storm inside the house is perceptible, and even mentioned by Big Daddy when he describes the family's fighting as 'hullabaloo'. The tensions within the family and within the couples themselves is clear in the many argument scenes, and indicated by the passions of the universe in the form of heat, storms, rain and thunderous interruptions.

In the film's final act, Brick hobbles down a staircase into the cellar, accompanied by cheerful pianola music that drifts up from a phonograph among the piles of junk.<sup>12</sup> As he descends into the dank dustiness of forgotten memories, the hollow music echoes out, as unfamiliar as all the physical objects, covered in cobwebs – including a larger-than-life photograph of Brick in his days as a football star. This music mocks the facade of happiness and



contentment that certain members of the family have been parading. It eventually plays out, and the needle continues to idly scratch the record. It is in this setting that Brick and Big Daddy conduct the final stage of their battle. Coming to terms with his terminal diagnosis, Big Daddy says, 'The reason why [a man] buys everything he can is because his crazy hope is, one of the things he buys will be life everlasting.' He opens the glass cover of an ornate clock face, then shuts it again, breaking through the cobwebs that blanket it, aware that its stopped time will never restart for him. With symbolic grandeur, Brick begins destroying the 'million dollars worth of junk', including the mounted photograph of his former 'heroic' self. By shattering these discarded artefacts that have symbolised 'love' and 'worth' in Big Daddy's eyes, the son is crying out for the fatherly affection that he never received.

Brick says to his father, with a mixture of sadness and anger in his sharp blue eyes that Newman conveys so well, 'We've known each other all my life and we're strangers.' The complexities in the character of Brick speak to the sensitivities of a generation of men who, rather than existing independently, yearn for the support of their fathers. Without this love, Brick searched for a surrogate patriarchal figure and found it in Skipper.

The suggestion is that without the love of the father, Brick cannot bring himself to accept the love of the wife. But despite all his protestations, there are moments throughout the film that suggest Brick's desperate need to accept affection from Maggie. During an early fight with her, he shuts himself away, and his broken body tenderly leans in to her nightgown hanging on the closed door. He sometimes looks at her with tenderness – but vehemently denies it to her and others, betraying his own disdain for mendacity.

While there is a constant demand for the 'truth' from every character in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, each one, in their own way, is guilty of moral turpitude. Even Maggie, whose character is largely portrayed as a victim, proves that ultimately the best way to win – as she promises she will, in the beginning – is to cunningly outwit dishonesty with deceit. Her final trick – to falsely claim that she is pregnant – is, rather than denied by Brick, corroborated by him. Melodramas, according to Steve Neale, tend 'to deal in terms of subject matter with desire and its vicissitudes'.<sup>13</sup> *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* does this proudly: Brick's desire becomes redirected towards his wife but there's an underlying suspicion that he may only be keeping up appearances. He supports one lie, the pregnancy, to deny a truth voiced by Mae – that he and Maggie are unhappy. In the end, no-one's loneliness, nor their dissatisfaction, is wholly resolved. The ending – Brick's and Big Daddy's acceptance of Maggie's false proclamation as a true one, and the brief implication that Brick may be happy – suggests that nothing, not even



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structures of Hollywood melodrama, can be predicted, because the reunion of desire may or may not be sustained.

In an early version of his play, Williams included an epigraph from a poem by WB Yeats, which after annotations from Kazan was replaced with lines from Dylan Thomas.<sup>14</sup> The epigraph, as it still stands, is as follows:

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,  
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

These lines resonate with the text, with the relationships, and particularly with the fading life of Big Daddy. Yet the 'height' at which the father stands in Thomas' poem is inverted in Brooks' film, whereby Big Daddy's sadness is ironically expounded in the dim and musty cellar, beneath the rest of his family.

In spite of its seemingly uplifting climax, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is like Williams' other works in that it barely even approaches a resolution. MacKinnon writes that the 'happy ending' is only reached by 'Brick's willed immersion within the lie by which this family reproduces itself',<sup>15</sup> and thus the mendacity that plagues the film's core is sustained, not resolved. By reuniting the family and denying narrative and emotional logic, it demands the unravelling of the traditional American family and its values – which can indeed be stifling – in support of the survival of the individual and their desires. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* ultimately returns its characters to relationships that might look pretty on the surface, but contain deeper layers of deceit, in a move typical of socially critical and self-reflective 1950s melodramas. As it ends, it seems the family will return to living together, without love, and as strangers.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Gerald Gardner, *The Censorship Papers: Movie Censorship Letters from the Hays Office, 1934 to 1968*, Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1987, p. 201.
- <sup>2</sup> Kenneth MacKinnon, 'The Family in Hollywood Melodrama: Actual or Ideal?', *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, March 2004, p. 31.
- <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 32.
- <sup>4</sup> Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 187.



- <sup>5</sup> The addenda to the Production Code ruled, avoiding the terminology it despised but with enough clarity, that, 'Sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden'; see Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930-1934*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, p. 363.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 337.
- <sup>7</sup> Brian Parker writes: 'Since there is a complete lack of data about *Cat* in the Kazan archives at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, it is not clear exactly when Kazan became involved in the production' but that he came 'officially onboard' in October 1954; see Parker, 'Swinging a Cat', in Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, New Directions, New York, 2004, p. 178. Alfred A. Knopf's newly released *The Selected Letters of Elia Kazan* (ed. Albert J Devlin & Marlene J Devlin, New York, 2014) contains a suggestion, from materials held in the Harry Ransom Center collection, that Kazan had word of and was interested in Williams' play in September 1954.
- <sup>8</sup> Edward Albee, 'Introduction', in Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- <sup>9</sup> Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 178.
- <sup>10</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, British Film Institute, London, 1987, p. 30.
- <sup>11</sup> Caroline Young, *Classical Hollywood Style*, Frances Lincoln Limited, London, 2012, p. 178.
- <sup>12</sup> The song is 'Some Folks' by Stephen Foster. Although it is only an instrumental version, the lyrics resonate with the film's themes. The song begins, 'Some folks like to sigh / Some folks do, some folks do / Others long to die / But that's not me or you.' Its final lines weigh heavily: 'They'll soon be dead and cold / But that's not me nor you.'
- <sup>13</sup> Steve Neale, 'Melodrama and Tears', *Screen*, vol. 27, no. 6, November-December 1986, p. 12.
- <sup>14</sup> Parker, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-85.
- <sup>15</sup> MacKinnon, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

