



[Cat on a Hot Tin Roof](#), by Tennessee Williams

In A Nutshell

Written in 1955, in the midst of the *Leave It To Beaver* era in America, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* garnered Tennessee Williams his second Pulitzer Prize. The play is about a Mississippi family and was written during a time that was in love with good ole family values and the shock-value of blue jeans. Following the destruction and chaos of the two world wars, much of America trended toward the concept of the stable nuclear family. Think June Cleaver's hair and *Pleasantville* black-and-whiteness.

However, in the years preceding the creation of *Cat*, two highly controversial books about the sex lives of humans were published. These books were known as The Kinsey Reports, and they discussed the intricate and often shifting nature of human sexuality. One of the most controversial concepts that these books stirred up was the concept of the fluidity of sexual orientation. The Kinsey Reports claimed that 10% of the American population at the time was gay. The credibility of the data used by the Kinsey Reports was hotly disputed, and the books were widely criticized, but they are associated with the marked shift in the way Americans conceived of sexuality. In a way, these reports put Sex on the map.

Kinsey Reports aside, we all know that we get the real truth from magazines, and sometimes from the movies. (Right?) But Hollywood producers and writers still operated under the strict censorship brought about by the Production Code of 1930. The Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, provided strict and carefully worded guidelines as to what could or could

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not be discussed or modeled in American films. These guidelines prohibited any mention or discussion of homosexuality, as homosexuality was considered a form of "sex perversion." Thus, when *Cat* was transformed into a major motion picture, replete with the drool-inducing Elizabeth Taylor (in a slip) and Paul Newman, all hints or discussions of homosexuality were omitted from the script. That's kind of like taking Napoleon Dynamite out of *Napoleon Dynamite*.

In addition to sexuality, Williams also addresses the decaying American South and America's dark history of slavery, the horrors of which continued to eat away at the country through acts of intolerance, injustice, and racism in the 1950s. *Cat* takes place on a cotton plantation in the post-WWII era. In this time, the South saw a marked shift in its economy: formerly completely dependent upon agriculture, it now became smitten with industrialization and cities. The Old South's agricultural history became more of a scary ghost than a memory. The play was written in the same year that the American Civil Rights movement began, a movement invigorated by the major Supreme Court decision of the previous year, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ensured the desegregation of American schools.

Tennessee Williams is considered by some to be one of the most influential architects of 20th century American drama...he created bedrooms, lots of bedrooms with tin roofs. Like us, Tennessee had a cool name. Like us, Tennessee had a crazy family, he was kind of obsessed with just how loco families can be when they get together, and he saw family as a kind of ant farm that could be studied and that could reveal truths about the bigger ant farm that is American society.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 *Cat* was widely criticized for having no clear protagonist, no clear team or cause to support. Each character seems to show us both his/her goodness and his/her ugly underbelly (with the exception of the annoyingness that is the Gooper clan). Do you agree with this criticism? To whom are we meant to relate in this play?
- 2 Some people feel *Cat* is about a man who struggles with his sexuality. Others disagree completely and feel that it is a commentary on the changing American concept of family. Still others believe *Cat* comments on American history. Tennessee Williams says in a stage note in Act II, "the bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man's psychological problem. I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent —fiercely charged! —interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis" (II.1135-1140). Do you believe Tennessee Williams here? What do you think this play is about?
- 3 Maggie the Cat definitely knows how to get what she wants through manipulation, flirtation, and insinuation. However, she tells Brick at the end of Act One, "I'm honest! Give me credit for just that, will you *please*?"(II.1146) Is Maggie honest?

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