A STUDY OF ILLUSION AND THE GROTESQUE IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

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Although the Southern dialect, mannerisms, and setting apparent in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof reveal Tennessee Williams' usual regional focus, the ideas and emotions which the drama involves are by no means geographically restricted but, on the contrary, are of universal import. The play depicts the feelings and consequences of greed, frustration, guilt, desire, and hypocrisy, but most importantly it deals with the conflict between appearance and reality and its resolution in truth. Williams is concerned with man's drive to escape his problems either by totally ignoring them or by effecting a facade of illusion. He emphasizes this need in the opening of the work with a symbolic stage prop—the "huge console combination of radio-phonograph, TV set, and liquor cabinet"—which he describes as "a very complete and compact little shrine to virtually all the comforts and illusions behind which we hide from such things as the characters in the play are faced with." 1 It is this veil of illusion that permits human beings to cope with the "slow and implacable fires of... desperation," 2 and Williams intensifies the growing despair in this play by giving it a stifling, almost claustrophobic atmosphere. Time and setting are extremely confining; the entire action takes place during one hot summer evening in a single bed-sitting-room of a plantation house in the Mississippi Delta. Maggie refers again and again to the lack of privacy in this wealthy Southern family, to the "cage" which is their home. Such a feeling of tightening circumscription only heightens the frantic attempts of these characters to avoid reality and increases the likelihood of an inevitable, shattering destruction of illusion. As Gooper points out, "A family crisis brings out the best and worst in every member of it" (p. 114).

Thus the pervading theme of Williams' drama involves the tension between truth and mendacity, the gradual stripping away of pretense with the ultimate consequences, and the playwright employs various devices to achieve both illusion and exposure. One of his most effective techniques is a use of the grotesque, a term which has come to hold special meaning in twentieth-century literature. It is an outgrowth of the contemporary distrust of any cosmic order, an interest in the irrational, and a frustration at man's position in the universe. In a sense, then, the grotesque is a merging of the comic and tragic; through physical or spiritual deformity and

1. Tennessee Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (New York, 1955), xiii-xiv.
abnormal action, an individual reflects both a comic deviation from the rational social order and a tragic loss of faith in the moral universe. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams employs two types of grotesque characterization to illustrate escape through illusion. The first of these, depicted graphically in characters such as those portrayed by Flannery O'Connor, seems to emphasize physical deformity and to induce a humorous response in its very absurdity, while the second, reflecting the figures of Sherwood Anderson, suggests spiritual or emotional abnormality and invokes a pathetic sometimes even tragic response.

Flannery O'Connor has defined the grotesque character as "man forced to meet the extremes of his own nature," and the twisted personalities of her figures, usually accompanied by a distorted appearance, generate a sinister, frightening, or pathetic effect almost always combined with and highlighted by the comic. Williams makes use of the O'Connor grotesque in the minor characters of his play, figures whose absurd appearance reflects a deformed soul. All of these individuals attempt to ignore or hide the truth of their particular deformity behind a shield of illusion. One such figure is the Reverend Tooker, the personification of religious hypocrisy. Sensing with vulture-like accuracy the presence of decay, the reverend is simply waiting for Big Daddy to die. Attempting to hide his greed with platitudes and weak jokes, the minister nevertheless reveals his obsession with money by his constant references to church donations and memorials for the dead. As Williams describes him, he appears with his "head slightly, playfully, fatuously cocked, with a practiced cleric's smile, sincere as a birdcall blown on a hunter's whistle, the living embodiment of the pious conventional lie" (p. 86). He is grotesque in both appearance and character.

This grotesque hypocrisy is even more predominant in the portraits of Mae, Gooper, and the little "no-neck monsters." The elder son and his wife reveal a desire to inherit Big Daddy's money before his death; their rapaciousness is apparent not only in their inane chatter and overzealous efforts to please, but also in the actual use of their children as levers to draw the old man's attention by emphasizing their fertility in contrast to the sterility of Brick and Maggie. The grotesque antics which Mae and Gooper put themselves and their children through in a frenzied attempt to win approval are so absurd as to become pitiful. Maggie describes the scene with the no-neck monsters "ranged around the table, some in high chairs and some on th' *Books of Knowledge*, all in fancy little paper caps in honor of Big Daddy's birthday," and Mae herself depicts the after-dinner show: "Polly played the piano, Buster an' Sonny drums, an' then they turned out the lights an' Dixie an' Trixie puhfawmed a toe dance in fairy costume with spahklus! Big Daddy just beamed!" (pp. 20, 29). In addi-

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tion to the children's "dawgs' names" and their overall resemblance to an "animal act in a circus," their absurdity is climaxed with a song-and-dance routine for Big Daddy, arranged and conducted by Mae, which achieves the effect of a bizarre "musical comedy chorus" (pp. 29, 52). Although the general impression of these scenes is one of ridiculous farce, there is actually an undercurrent of something quite sinister and frightening; these are, after all, frantic efforts by desperate people to satisfy overwhelming greed.

Williams uses the O'Connor mode to surround his main characters with an outer circle resembling allegorical personifications of vice. These comic grotesques even reflect the medieval emphasis on physiognomy. As he moves from the outer circle to close in on the immediate family, attempting to achieve with characterization the claustrophobic effect of setting, he makes use of the more sympathetic, even tragic, Andersonian grotesque and begins to focus on more complicated personalities. The character of Big Mama provides us with a transitional figure. Actually a more distorted manifestation of the frustrated love theme treated in Maggie herself, Big Mama is at once absurdly comic and sadly pathetic. Her physical description provokes immediate laughter. She first enters huffing and puffing like an old bulldog. She is a short, stout woman; her sixty years and 170 pounds have left her somewhat breathless most of the time: she's always tensed like a boxer, or rather a Japanese wrestler. . . . She wears a black or silver lace dress and at least half a million in flashy gems. She is very sincere. (p. 33)

Her actions are at least as comical as her appearance. Williams emphasizes her grotesque, coy giggling in Big Daddy's direction, her "riotous voice" and "booming laugh," and her "inelegant horseplay" with Reverend Tooker—pulling him into her lap "with a shrill laugh that spans an octave in two notes" and the exclamation: "Ever seen a preacher in a fat lady's lap?" (pp. 50-51). There is another side to this woman, an aspect which renders her less caricature and more human being; she faces the same frustrated love, the same indifference of her husband as does Maggie. Confronted with the cruel reality of Big Daddy's repulsion toward her, Big Mama cries to him, "I did love you—I even loved your hate and your hardness" (p. 59). When the truth of her husband's certain death is revealed to her, her soft response admits of a "great, almost embarrassingly true-hearted and simple-minded devotion to Big Daddy, who must have had something Brick has, who made himself loved so much by the 'simple expedient' of not loving enough to disturb his charming detachment." As Williams points out, "Big Mama has a dignity at this moment: she almost stops being fat" (p. 103). Although each of these char-
acters is allowed for a time to hide behind his grotesqueness, to conceal his true nature behind calculated illusion, each figure is relentlessly and totally exposed. Reverend Tooke's hypocritical piety is revealed; Mae and Gooper finally relinquish the "nice" approach and make their self-interest and resentment shockingly clear, and Big Mama is forced to confront her husband's disgust with her at the same time she learns of his cancer (p. 113).

With his major characters Williams makes use of a different type of figure, one which might be called the Andersonian grotesque. In Winesburg, Ohio, Sherwood Anderson recognizes that implicit in the term grotesque lies a concern with truth. The thesis of the Book of the Grotesque, authored by Anderson's "old writer" reads, "Man made the truths himself and each thought was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful." These same truths, however, serve to make people grotesque. For once a person fails to recognize that there are many truths and begins to take "one of the truths to himself, call[s] it his truth, and [tries] to live by it, he [becomes] a grotesque and the truth he embraced [becomes] a falsehood." Thus, Anderson's grotesques are beautiful in that they pursue an ideal, but they are blind to any but their own ideal or truth and ultimately distort it in their fanaticism. Like Anderson, Williams is able, at least in the major characters of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, to look beneath the surface of the apparently distorted lives of his grotesques and appreciate the truth, the pathos, and even the tragedy there. He is able to taste the sweetness, though bittersweet, of the "twisted apples." The characters of Brick, Big Daddy, and Maggie are spiritually rather than physically distorted, and they invoke not a comic but a pathetic response.

The playwright depicts these figures in the light of their respective abilities to face and cope with reality; of the three, Brick is least able to confront truth. From the beginning of the play, he is described as having the "additional charm of that cool air of detachment that people have who have given up the struggle" (p. 17). His wife elaborates further when she states, "now that you've lost the game, not lost but just quit playing, you have that rare sort of charm that usually only happens in very old or hopelessly sick people, the charm of the defeated" (p. 24). Even his lovemaking is enhanced because he has no anxiety, is really indifferent to it; he simply uses this detachment as a means of escaping reality. Brick's desperation surfaces occasionally, as evidenced by his obsessive drinking, his reckless hurdle-jumping which results in a broken ankle, and his fierce need to keep Maggie at a distance—to the extent that at her touch he

seizes a chair and "raises it like a lion-tamer facing a big circus cat" (p. 32). Perhaps the most striking example of his denial of truth is revealed in his refusal to face his feelings of guilt, the obsession which renders him grotesque. He unequivocably refutes any hint of an unnatural love in his intense relationship with Skipper, rejecting his friend's tormented confession and stubbornly insisting that their feeling for each other was the only "pure an' true" thing in his life. As Big Daddy points out, "You!—dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it!—before you'd face truth with him!" (p. 92). Thus Brick's disgust with mendacity is actually disgust with himself.

As Brick retorts to his father, "Who can face truth? Can you?" (p. 92). This question goes straight to the heart of Big Daddy's character, for the old man is very capable of confronting the truths of those around him but not his own. His peculiar grotesqueness, resulting from lack of self-awareness, is talking without communicating. As he admits to Brick, "we've always—talked around things . . . it's always like something was left not spoken" (p. 82). The root of the problem is that Big Daddy talks but seldom listens. He is astute in his realization of the hypocrisy inherent in the Reverend Tooker's posturing and is acutely aware of the greed, spying, and scheming of his son and daughter-in-law, acknowledging, "I hate Gooper and Mae an' know that they hate me . . ." (p. 81). He openly and directly faces his favorite son's drinking problem, exclaiming, "Why boy, you're—alcoholic!" (p. 73) Most importantly, it is Big Daddy who relentlessly forces Brick to confront the truth about his relationship with Skipper, recognizing that this is the "inadmissible thing that Skipper died to disavow between them" (p. 85). Regardless of his perception into the emotions and motivations of those around him, Big Daddy fails to accept and cope with the reality of his own situation and like Brick is virtually destroyed when the security of his illusion is stripped away. Like his son he misunderstands his wife's real feeling for him, reflecting when she declares such a love, "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true . . . (p. 59)."

When his illusion of a new life of unabashed sensuality is destroyed and he learns that he is dying of cancer, the old man's final words are, "Lying! Dying! Liars!" (p. 95).

Thus it is only Maggie the Cat who is capable of dealing with the complexity of truth. She is, in fact, the only truly honest character in the play, the single character able to recognize and see through appearance not only to the reality of others but also to her own. She is the first to acknowledge Big Daddy's cancer and the ultimate effect his death will have on other members of the family. She realizes that truth sometimes incorporates a lie, that the old man must not know of his disease, for "Nobody says, 'You're dying.' You have to fool them. They have to fool
themselves" (p. 49). She understands fully the motivations behind Mae and Gooper’s visit and macabre performance, noting, “They’re up to cutting you [Brick] out of your Father’s estate...” (p. 17). More importantly, Maggie is able to confront unflinchingly truths about herself. She confesses to her husband,

Brick, I’m not good. I don’t know why people have to pretend to be good, nobody’s good. The rich or the well-to-do can afford to respect moral patterns, conventional moral patterns, but I could never afford to, yeah, but—I’m honest! Give me credit for just that, will you please? (p. 45)

Maggie knows that her frenzied desire for money and security is a result of the deprivation of both as a child. She resents that she has been “so God damn disgustingly poor” all her life and realizes that “You can be young without money but you can’t be old without it” (pp. 41-42). It is this desperate drive for security that makes her “like a cat on a hot tin roof!” (p. 42). Maggie understands that, because she cannot “afford to be thin-skinned any more,” she has “gone through this—hideous!—transformation, become—hard! Frantic!—cruel!!” (p. 22). She is willing to confront her own loneliness, her husband’s indifference toward her, and her part in the Skipper-Brick affair, for it is Maggie who forces the confrontation between Brick and Skipper. Frustrated by all of the pretense, she finally tells Skipper, “Stop Lovin’ My Husband Or Tell Him He’s Got To Let You Admit It To Him!” She accepts the responsibility for her actions—the guilt and the loneliness that come with living with someone “y’love” who “doesn’t love you” (pp. 45, 23). She knows that she destroyed Skipper, and in a sense her husband, by “telling him truth that he and his world which he was born and raised in... had told him could not be told” (p. 45). Maggie also understands that living is a constant struggle to face truth, to affirm love, that it is the attempt that is important, even if the results are only suffering and failure. As she puts it to Brick,

But one thing I don’t have is the charm of the defeated, my hat is still in the ring, and I am determined to win!—What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof?—I wish I knew... Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can... (p. 25)

It is only Maggie who is fully perceptive of the struggle going on around her and within her. She is finally the “only one there who is conscious of and amused by the grotesque,” the only one aware of the true significance of the conflict between illusion and reality (p. 55).
Thus even though Maggie is forced to participate in the grotesque situation of a cat on a hot tin roof, she alone is not totally destroyed because she is always fully attuned to what she is doing, is able to discern the difference between mendacity and truth. She possesses the awareness essential for making moral choices, at times even equating morality with awareness. Unlike the others who are ultimately devastated when their illusions are stripped away, Maggie’s exposure is not necessary because she is willing to accept and cope with truth; hers is already an examined life. She is the cat who “can jump off roofs and land on [her] four feet uninjured!” (p. 31). Regardless of the pain, she will survive. As with Big Daddy’s disease, she will lie when the necessity arises, claiming to be pregnant with Brick’s child in order to endure, but she is still aware of that lie and is willing to accept the responsibility for its consequences. Even here Maggie remains fast to her code of truth, desperately attempting to make illusion real, telling her husband, “And so tonight we’re going to make the lie true . . .” (p. 123). She tries to block all escape from Brick, removing his liquor, his crutch—everything but his indifference—saying softly to him, “Oh, you weak people, you weak, beautiful people!—who give up.—What you want is someone to—take hold of you.—Gently, gently, with love! And—I do love you, Brick, I do!” (p. 123). Thus in a study of the way in which people destroy themselves with their inability to confront their problems and be responsible for their actions, it is both Maggie’s pathetic triumph and tragedy to be unable, by her very nature, to ignore or avoid reality, even though that reality threatens her survival. Although her situation dooms her to fail, she is yet admirable in her very striving. She has acquired the poise of the cat caught on a hot tin roof and is able to recognize the situation as a metaphor for living.