

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof



INTRO

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Born in Columbus, MS, Williams moved to St. Louis, Missouri as a child. His father was a heavy drinker, and his mother was prone to hysterical fits. At age sixteen, the already prolific Williams won five dollars for an essay entitled “Can a Good Wife be a Good Sport?” Williams attended the University of Missouri, where he frequently entered writing contests as a source of extra income. After Williams failed military training during junior year, his father pulled him out of college and put him to work in a shoe factory, which Williams despised. At age twenty-four, Williams suffered a nervous breakdown and left his job. He studied at Washington University in St. Louis and then at the University of Iowa, finally graduating in 1938.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the 1950’s, the Deep South was undergoing some major changes, with African Americans moving out of the South to urban centers in the North in drastic numbers (6 million people moved between 1910-1940 and 1940-1970). The South was beginning to experience more tension between its black and white inhabitants with the early beginnings of the Civil Rights movement, and in farming, cotton dominance was declining as more farmers turned towards soybeans and corn. In other words, many of the things that are taken for granted in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, like the wealth and security of the cotton plantation and the easy relations between the Pollitt family and their black help would likely not have fit into the real Mississippi Delta scene of the 1950s. The play doesn’t explicitly reference any of this, but it’s possible to take Big Daddy’s dying of cancer as a symbol of the Old South’s decline as well.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As with all of Tennessee Williams’s plays, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* contains resemblances to characters from his own life. Just as his mother was a model for Amanda Wingfield’s character in [The Glass Menagerie](#), Williams’s father was a model for Big Daddy’s aggressive character in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Like [The Glass Menagerie](#) and [A Streetcar Named Desire](#) also revolve around tense familial relations as well as memories, dreams, and different characters’ ideas about escape. Arthur Miller’s 1949 play [Death of a Salesman](#) also explores family dynamics and failed dreams.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

- **When Written:** 1955
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 1955
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Family Drama/Tragedy
- **Setting:** Big Daddy’s plantation in the Mississippi Delta, 1950s
- **Climax:** Brick confesses that he hung up on Skipper when Skipper confessed his love to him.
- **Antagonist:** Gooper and Mae

EXTRA CREDIT

Double Ending. After sending his original text to director Elia Kazan, Tennessee Williams wrote a significantly different version of Act III to present on the Broadway stage, following some of Kazan’s suggestions. Kazan had mentioned that Big Daddy seemed too important to disappear after Act II, that Maggie wasn’t clearly likable enough, and that Brick didn’t undergo enough of a character change.

Movie Version. Tennessee Williams apparently hated the 1958 film version of the play, featuring Elizabeth Taylor as Margaret and Paul Newman as Brick. The film version, abiding by Hollywood standards of the time, toned down Williams’s critique of homophobia and sexism.



PLOT SUMMARY

In a suite at Big Daddy’s mansion on his estate, **Brick** showers and dries off as **Margaret** complains first about **Gooper** and **Mae**, and then about Brick’s behavior, which has involved quitting work, drinking, and breaking his ankle while attempting to jump hurdles on a high school track field. Margaret says Brick looks just as fit as he did before he started drinking though, and reminisces about what a wonderful lover Brick used to be.

Margaret tries to get Brick to sign a card for **Big Daddy’s** birthday present, but Brick refuses. The two struggle as Margaret attempts to seize Brick, who pulls away violently and grabs a small chair to shield himself from her. They pause for a few moments before laughing, just as **Big Mama** calls through the door.

Big Mama says she has wonderful news about Big Daddy. She reports that the tests for cancer came back negative, and all he has is a spastic colon. Brick, hiding in the bathroom, doesn’t respond, and Big Mama tells him and Margaret to get dressed before everyone comes upstairs for Big Daddy’s party. Big

Mama then asks Margaret, quietly, whether Brick's been drinking or not, and then asks, more pointedly, whether Margaret makes Brick happy in **bed**, insinuating that it's Margaret's fault Brick has turned to alcohol. Big Mama exits, leaving Margaret indignant and alone. When Brick exits the bathroom, Margaret reveals that Big Daddy and Big Mama were given false reports—Big Daddy is in fact dying of cancer, and Big Mama will be informed after the party.

Restless again, Margaret murmurs that she made her mistake when she told Brick about her fling with Skipper. Brick warns her to stop talking about Skipper, threatening her with his **crutch**, but Margaret continues. She talks about how close Brick and Skipper were, claiming that she and Skipper made love in order to feel closer to Brick. Brick hurls his crutch across the room at her while she hides behind the bed. Margaret informs Brick that she's been to a gynecologist in Memphis and is in perfect shape to bear children. Brick comments that he doesn't see how she could have a child with a man who can't stand her and won't sleep with her.

At this point, the guests arrive in Brick and Margaret's suite, with Big Daddy in the lead. When Margaret attempts to give Big Daddy his present from Brick, another catty exchange between Margaret, Mae, and Big Mama ensues, and Big Daddy bellows for everyone to be quiet. When **Reverend Tooker** finishes a sentence in the silence, Big Daddy turns on him, and when Big Mama comes to the reverend's defense, Big Daddy turns on her instead. She tells him that she's loved him all these years and rushes out of the room with a sob, as Big Daddy says to himself, "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true..." Eventually, Big Daddy asks to see Brick, and they're left alone together.

Big Daddy confronts Brick about his drinking, while also talking about how much better he feels after the health report confirming his lack of cancer. Brick claims that he drinks out of disgust for mendacity, but eventually, he reveals the truth that Skipper confessed his love to Brick over a long-distance call, and Brick hung up on him. Brick also reveals that Big Daddy is the only one who doesn't know the truth of his own health report: that he does have cancer.

Big Daddy, astonished, leaves the room, retreating down the hall. The guests reenter, assuming Big Daddy has gone to bed. They gather around Big Mama to deliver the truth about the health report. Big Mama, in hysterics, rejects the trusteeship Gooper drafted in case of Big Daddy's death and runs to Brick, calling him her "only son." She tells him it would be Big Daddy's dream to have a grandson from Brick. Hearing this, Margaret announces that she is going to have Brick's child, to the delight of Big Mama and the disbelief of Gooper and Mae. Big Mama rushes out to tell Big Daddy, as Mae confronts Margaret about her lie before exiting with Gooper.

Margaret locks away Brick's alcohol and informs him that she won't unlock it until he sleeps with her. She tells him that she

loves him, and Brick responds, "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true?"



CHARACTERS

Margaret – Maggie is the self-proclaimed cat on a hot tin roof of the play's title. She's attractive, ambitious, and desperate to regain her husband **Brick's** attention, which she lost after interfering in his friendship with Skipper (ultimately leading to Skipper's death). She's worked hard to earn her status in life, and she spends the play trying to find a way to stay at the top of the ladder by inheriting Big Daddy's estate, even as Brick drinks away their chances. She's desperate to have a child with Brick, and her desperation makes her shrill and catty—but she's not the only one. Although Maggie's the only self-proclaimed cat in the play, all the characters have desires and regrets that make them jump and just trying to hold on.

Brick – Brick is **Margaret's** husband. Attractive, charming, and once a professional athlete, Brick is now an alcoholic who drinks out of disgust for all the lies people tell to preserve societal harmony. He struggles with his friend Skipper's death, his own role in that death, and the homosexual tensions surrounding their relationship. Despite his alcoholism, Brick is still the favorite child of **Big Daddy** and **Big Mama**, who both believe he most resembles Big Daddy.

Big Mama – Big Mama is **Brick's** mother. She's loud, fat, and devoted to **Big Daddy**, though Big Daddy believes otherwise. She's ecstatic that his health report turns out well, but breaks down when she learns it's all a lie, attempting to find solace in her favorite son, Brick.

Big Daddy – Big Daddy is **Brick's** father. He's aggressive, rich, and can be brutally mean, admitting that he's never cared for anyone in his life except for Brick. He never much cared for Big Mama, and would prefer to chase women. He regrets that money can buy anything, except more life. He believes the health report that says he's going to live, until Brick reveals the secret that he has cancer.

Gooper – Gooper is **Brick's** brother. A successful lawyer with five kids (and another on the way!), Gooper nevertheless remains bitter towards Brick for being the parents' favorite child. He brings the family together for **Big Daddy's** birthday in an attempt to secure his own inheritance of the estate.

Mae – Mae is **Gooper's** wife. She runs in respected social circles, but her family lost all their money at some point, so she's just as eager as **Margaret** to inherit the Pollitt family fortune. **Big Daddy** describes her as "a good breeder," having given birth to five children with another on the way.

Doctor Baugh – Doctor Baugh is the doctor who confirms that **Big Daddy's** test results reveal a malignant growth.

Reverend Tooker – Reverend Tooker also attends **Big Daddy's** birthday party. From the way he talks about memorials, it seems like he's hoping the Pollitt family will offer the church a gift after Big Daddy's passing.



THEMES

In LitCharts each theme gets its own color and number. Our color-coded theme boxes make it easy to track where the themes occur throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, use the numbers instead.

1 LIES

During **Brick** and **Big Daddy's** major confrontation in Act II, Brick confesses that he drinks out of disgust with society's pervasive "mendacity," which he describes as the system in which people live. The system of lies he is referring to pertains to the way society represses and lies about "inadmissible things." In the world of the play, there are two inadmissible things: homosexuality and death, and the action of the play resolves around the repression of Brick's terror about and repression of his possibly homosexual feelings shared with Skipper and Big Daddy's desire to escape death and the family's lie about his health report.

These are not the only lies in the play, either. **Mae** and **Gooper's** behavior during the negotiations also reveals holes in their relationship, despite their desperate façade to appear as a loving, functional unit. Big Mama lies to herself about Brick's likelihood of transforming into a stable family man once he has a child. Finally, the entire play concludes with **Margaret's** final lie when she claims that she is pregnant with Brick's child. Even after telling this lie, however, Margaret remains in one sense the most honest character in the play, as she's determined to make this her lie true.

2 UNREQUITED LOVE AND SEXUALITY

The unrequited love in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* centers on the male characters, especially **Brick** and **Big Daddy**. Brick is the object of unrequited love for his wife **Margaret**, his friend Skipper, and his parents Big Daddy and **Big Mama**. Their energies—sometimes sexual, sometimes protective—propel most of the confrontations in the play, as they bounce off the cold, distant character of Brick. There are other instances of unrequited love as well, such as Big Mama's love for Big Daddy, and the tension between **Mae** and **Gooper**, which hints at possible marital strife beneath their façade. This is summed up in the repeated line at the end of the play, the parallel between Big Daddy and Brick when their women—cats on a hot tin roof, desperate to be understood and to have their love returned—tell Big Daddy and Brick that they love them. Both men, untouchable, respond under their breath to themselves,

say, "Wouldn't it be funny if that were true?" Neither of them men can conceive of their wives loving them.

Sex and sexuality also play a big role in the play, as Brick struggles with both his own possible homosexuality and his real homophobia, believing that accusations of homosexuality tainted the purity of his friendship with Skipper. Brick's alcoholism arises from an inner struggle with his own sexual feelings for Skipper, guilt at his role in Skipper's death by ignoring Skipper's feelings for him, or both, but Williams allows this to remain ambiguous. In any case, it's clear that Brick's views reflect those of a homophobic culture and that he can't stomach homosexual feelings in either himself or his best friend Skipper, calling it an "inadmissible thing". Big Daddy also discusses sex in the play, saying that what he most wants to do is experience "pleasure with women". He doesn't want love, doesn't even seem to believe in love. He wants only pleasure. Finally, Margaret, the play's self-proclaimed cat on a hot tin roof, desires Brick and grows desperate for his attention, which turns her catty and aggressive. Despite this aggression, her sheer desperation and will to achieve what she wants make her an alluring yet heartbreaking protagonist of the play, as she finally stoops to threatening Brick and bartering alcohol for sex.

3 DEATH

Homosexuality is one of the two things that Brick calls an "inadmissible thing". The other is death, and it is explored primarily through the character of Big Daddy. Big Daddy believes that men, particularly wealthy men, have a single overriding goal, which is to not die. He believes that every purchase wealthy men make as being a sort of hopeful but doomed-to-fail effort to buy more life. After getting the positive health report, he seems determined to live to his definition of the fullest: one again ruling his plantation and family as he sees fit and chasing women and sexual pleasure. But when he learns that he does in fact have cancer, all of his assurance, strength, and power disappear. He rushes off in grief and impotent rage, and is not seen again in the play. Only his howls of anguish are heard. For all his wealth and former power, Big Daddy can't face death.

Big Mama seems to believe that Big Daddy will find some solace in the news that Maggie is pregnant, that Big Daddy will find a sense of immortality in the son of his own favored son. It is implied that Big Daddy's howls of rage and sorrow are in response to Big Mama's "happy" news, suggesting that Big Daddy sees only one sort of immortality as worthwhile: his own. He doesn't want to live on through others. He wants to live. And neither he, nor anyone else, can.

4 DIFFICULTY OF COMMUNICATION

Big Daddy and **Brick** also discuss how difficult it is to communicate with others and especially with each other.

Although they both speak, nothing seems to get through. As the play progresses, we see that this is true for all the characters. In the stage directions, they're constantly overlapping each other's words, interrupting, and ignoring others. The difficulty of communication is even evident in how long it takes to get everyone to organize around **Big Mama** in order to tell her about the truth of Big Daddy's cancer. Brick's alcoholism also plays a big role—first, he's focused on drinking until he can hear the “click,” and then once he hears it, he becomes even more detached and removed from the conversations around him.

5 MEMORY, NOSTALGIA, REGRET

The happiest moments in the play are the moments that exist in the past, as the characters recall their prior existences. Both **Margaret** and **Brick** reference the beginning of their marriage as a happy time, for example, though their present reality proves to be anything but happy. Brick also drinks because he can't let go of his relationship with Skipper—and his role in Skipper's decline and death. Brick also speaks about how people like to do the things they used to do, even after they've stopped being able to do them—hence, his accident on the high school track field trying to jump hurdles. Similarly, **Big Daddy** speaks about pursuing women and regrets the fact that he didn't pursue more women in his youth, instead expending his sexual energy on **Big Mama**.

Additionally, Big Daddy and Big Mama's desire for grandchildren from Brick stem from a desire to preserve Big Daddy—they believe that Brick, more than **Gooper**, is Big Daddy's son and image, and a grandson fathered by Brick would represent a kind of immortality for Big Daddy and the masculine family line.

6 WEALTH

Wealth is the biggest issue for **Margaret**, **Mae**, and **Gooper**, bringing them together for **Big Daddy's** birthday celebration. Mae and Gooper cozy up to **Big Mama** and Big Daddy, hoping to inherit the plantation, while Margaret desperately tries to keep the family from judging **Brick's** alcoholism and her own childlessness, so that Big Daddy will still choose to hand his land over to his favorite son, Brick. Margaret, in particular, mentions that she has been poor before, and that avoiding that state is the source of her desperation—she also mentions that being poor has made her honest.

Big Daddy, for his part, describes wealth and greed as failed attempts to acquire immortality. Although he can buy European clocks, sex, and diamonds, he can't buy more life, as his actual health report ultimately proves. Margaret's final lie is also inspired by her desperation to acquire the family's wealth—the moment that she finally stands up to Brick and throws out his alcohol is when Big Daddy's inheritance is on the line; she will

have their child, even if she has to manipulate Brick using his alcoholism.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **red text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BRICK'S CRUTCH

Brick's crutch can take on several symbolic meanings. One explanation is that the crutch represents Brick's dependency on alcohol; he relies heavily on both items to “maneuver” through the play. He also uses the crutch to throw up a defense against **Margaret** in the first scene, wielding it like a weapon—just like he uses alcohol as a defense against family, drinking to escape the family's confrontations. The crutch can also symbolize Brick's nostalgia and longing for the past, since he acquired his injury while jumping hurdles on a high school track field. Finally, critics have also noted that Brick's crutch represents his sexual power or lack thereof, in the moments when Margaret and **Big Daddy** take his crutch away or threaten to.

THE BED

One of the main features of the set, the bed reminds the audience of all the sexual tension and marital strife that exists throughout the play. As **Big Mama** says, the rocks of **Margaret** and **Brick's** marriage lie in that bed. Margaret sleeps there alone at night, as Brick avoids the area and stays on the couch. The very last struggle at the end of Act III takes place around the bed, as Margaret snatches Brick's pillow up from the couch and places it on her territory, the bed. Additionally, Margaret and Brick are staying in the bedroom of the previous plantation owners, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, and the ghost of the relationship between those two men hints at the homosexual tension Brick tries so hard to avoid and deny throughout the play.

THE CONSOLE/LIQUOR CABINET/HI-FI

In addition to the **bed**, Tennessee Williams specifically mentions a giant console in his set directions. The console contains a radio-phonograph, television, and liquor cabinet. As Williams notes, “this piece of furniture, this monument, is 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...” **Brick**, in particular, continually reminds us of the console as he pours himself drink after drink to repress his feelings surrounding his friend Skipper's death. The console represents another sort of crutch

for Brick—it symbolizes the wall that he throws up to avoid facing the ugliness of the situation around him.



QUOTES

The color-coded and numbered boxes under each quote below make it easy to track the themes related to each quote. Each color and number corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1 QUOTES

I'm honest! Give me credit for just that, will you please?

- Speaker: Margaret
- Related themes: Lies
- Theme Tracker code:



When a marriage goes on the rocks, the rocks are there, right there!

- Speaker: Big Mama
- Mentioned or related characters: Margaret
- Related themes: Unrequited Love and Sexuality
- Theme Tracker code:



Hell, do they ever know it? Nobody says, "You're dying." You have to fool them. They have to fool themselves.

- Speaker: Margaret
- Mentioned or related characters: Big Daddy
- Related themes: Lies, Death
- Theme Tracker code:



Yes, I made my mistake when I told you the truth about that thing with Skipper. Never should have confessed it, a fatal error, tellin' you about that thing with Skipper.

- Speaker: Margaret
- Mentioned or related characters: Brick
- Related themes: Lies, Unrequited Love and Sexuality, Death

- Theme Tracker code:



But Brick?!—Skipper is dead! I'm alive!

- Speaker: Margaret
- Mentioned or related characters: Brick
- Related themes: Unrequited Love and Sexuality, Difficulty of Communication
- Theme Tracker code:



One man has one great good true thing in his life. One great good thing which is true!—I had a friendship with Skipper.—You are naming it dirty!

- Speaker: Brick
- Mentioned or related characters: Margaret
- Related themes: Lies, Unrequited Love and Sexuality, Difficulty of Communication
- Theme Tracker code:



In this way I destroyed him, by telling him truth that he and his world which he was born and raised in, yours and his world, had told him could not be told.

- Speaker: Margaret
- Related themes: Lies, Unrequited Love and Sexuality, Death
- Theme Tracker code:



Born poor, raised poor, expect to die poor unless I manage to get us something out of what Big Daddy leaves when he dies of cancer!

- Speaker: Margaret
- Mentioned or related characters: Brick, Big Daddy
- Related themes: Lies, Memory, Nostalgia, Regret
- Theme Tracker code:



When something is festering in your memory or your imagination, laws of silence don't work, it's just like shutting a

door and locking it on a house on fire in hope of forgetting that the house is still burning. But not facing a fire doesn't put it out. Silence about a thing just magnifies it. It grows and festers in silence, becomes malignant.

- Speaker: Margaret
- Related themes: Unrequited Love and Sexuality, Death, Difficulty of Communication
- Theme Tracker code:



ACT 2 QUOTES

Why is it so damn hard for people to talk?

- Speaker: Big Daddy
- Related themes: Death
- Theme Tracker code:



We talk, you talk, in—circles! We get nowhere, nowhere! It's always the same, you say you want to talk to me and don't have a ruttin' thing to say to me!

- Speaker: Brick
- Mentioned or related characters: Big Daddy
- Related themes: Death
- Theme Tracker code:



Yes, boy. I'll tell you something that you might not guess. I still have desire for women and this is my sixty-fifth birthday.

- Speaker: Big Daddy
- Related themes: Unrequited Love and Sexuality
- Theme Tracker code:



Jumping the hurdles, Big Daddy, runnin' and jumpin' the hurdles, but those high hurdles have gotten too high for me, now.

- Speaker: Brick
- Mentioned or related characters: Big Daddy
- Related themes: Difficulty of Communication, Memory, Nostalgia, Regret

- Theme Tracker code:



And I did, I did so much, I did love you!—I even loved your hate and your hardness, Big Daddy!

[...]

Wouldn't it be funny if that was true...

- Speaker: Big Mama, Big Daddy
- Related themes: Lies, Unrequited Love and Sexuality, Death, Difficulty of Communication
- Theme Tracker code:



I'll smother her in—minks! Ha Ha! I'll strip her naked and smother her in minks and choke her with diamonds and smother her with minks and hump her from hell to breakfast.

- Speaker: Big Daddy
- Related themes: Unrequited Love and Sexuality, Memory, Nostalgia, Regret
- Theme Tracker code:



I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hopes that one of his purchases will be life everlasting!—Which it never can be....

- Speaker: Big Daddy
- Related themes: Memory, Nostalgia, Regret
- Theme Tracker code:



Maybe that's why you put Maggie and me in this room that was Jack Straw's and Peter Ochello's, in which that pair of old sisters slept in a double bed where both of 'em died!

- Speaker: Brick
- Mentioned or related characters: Margaret, Big Daddy
- Related themes: Unrequited Love and Sexuality, Difficulty of Communication

•Theme Tracker code:



No!—It was too rare to be normal, any true thing between two people is too rare to be normal.

•Speaker: Brick

•Related themes: Lies, Unrequited Love and Sexuality, Difficulty of Communication

•Theme Tracker code:



Why, at Ole Miss when it was discovered a pledge to our fraternity, Skipper's and mine, did a, attempted to do a, unnatural thing with—We not only dropped him like a hot rock—We told him to git off the campus, and he did, he got!—

•Speaker: Brick

•Related themes: Unrequited Love and Sexuality

•Theme Tracker code:



Why are you so anxious to shut me up?

Well, sir, every so often you say to me, Brick, I want to have a talk with you, but when we talk, it never materializes. Nothing is said. [...] Communication is—awful hard between people an'—somehow between you and me, it just don't—

•Speaker: Brick, Big Daddy

•Related themes: Death, Difficulty of Communication

•Theme Tracker code:



Sit in a glass box watching games I can't play? Describing what I can't do while players do it? Sweating out their disgust and confusion in contests I'm not fit for? Drinkin' a coke, half bourbon, so I can stand it?

•Speaker: Brick

•Related themes: Difficulty of Communication, Memory, Nostalgia, Regret

•Theme Tracker code:



Maybe it's being alive that makes them lie, and being almost *not* alive makes me sort of accidentally truthful...

•Speaker: Brick

•Related themes: Lies

•Theme Tracker code:



Oh, but St. Paul's in Grenada has three memorial windows, and the latest one is a Tiffany stained-glass window that cost twenty-five hundred dollars, a picture of Christ the Good Shepherd with his Lamb in his arms.

•Speaker: Reverend Tooker

•Related themes: Memory, Nostalgia, Regret, Wealth

•Theme Tracker code:



Think of all the lies I got to put up with! Ain't that mendacity? Having to pretend stuff you don't think or feel or have any idea of? Having for instance to act like I care for Big Mama!—I haven't been able to stand the sight, sound, or smell of that woman for forty years now!—even when I laid her!

•Speaker: Big Daddy

•Mentioned or related characters: Big Mama

•Related themes: Lies, Unrequited Love and Sexuality

•Theme Tracker code:



A drinking man's someone who wants to forget he isn't still young an' believing.

•Speaker: Brick

•Related themes: Difficulty of Communication, Memory, Nostalgia, Regret

•Theme Tracker code:



You been passing the buck. This disgust with mendacity is disgust with yourself. You!—you dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it!—before you'd face the truth with him!

•Speaker: Big Daddy

•Mentioned or related characters: Brick

•Related themes: Lies, Unrequited Love and Sexuality

•Theme Tracker code:



ACT 3 QUOTES

Tonight Brick looks like he used to look when he was a little boy, just like he did when he played wild games and used to come home all sweaty and pink-cheeked and sleepy, with his—red curls shining....

- Speaker: Big Mama
- Mentioned or related characters: Brick
- Related themes: Difficulty of Communication
- Theme Tracker code:



Brick, I used to think that you were stronger than me and I didn't want to be overpowered by you. But now, since you've taken to liquor—you know what? —I guess it's bad, but now I'm stronger than you and I can love you more truly!

- Speaker: Margaret
- Mentioned or related characters: Brick
- Related themes: Unrequited Love and Sexuality
- Theme Tracker code:



And so tonight we're going to make the lie true, and when that's done, I'll bring the liquor back here and we'll get drunk together, here, tonight, in this place that death has come into....

- Speaker: Margaret
- Mentioned or related characters: Brick
- Related themes: Lies, Unrequited Love and Sexuality, Death
- Theme Tracker code:



Oh, Brick, son of Big Daddy! Big Daddy does so love you! Y'know what would be his fondest dream come true? If before he passed on, if Big Daddy has to pass on, you gave him a child of yours, a grandson as much like his son as his son is like Big Daddy!

- Speaker: Big Mama
- Mentioned or related characters: Brick, Big Daddy
- Related themes: Difficulty of Communication

•Theme Tracker code:



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded and numbered boxes under each row of Summary and Analysis below make it easy to track the themes throughout the work. Each color and number corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

Margaret marches into the bedroom, undressing, while **Brick** showers in the connecting bathroom. She complains that one of **Gooper's** "no-neck monsters" hit her with a hot buttered biscuit, so she has to change. Brick finishes his shower and reluctantly engages in the conversation, supporting himself on the towel rack as he does so because he has a broken ankle. Margaret continues to complain about **Mae** and **Gooper** (Brick's brother) and their five kids while standing in her slip.

As Margaret talks, Brick barely answers or listens, introducing the audience to how difficult the act of communicating will be throughout the play. Margaret in her slip—and yet ignored by Brick—suggests the coming theme of (frustrated) sexuality. While Brick's ankle, the way he can't just stand upright, suggests his brokenness.



Margaret says that **Mae** and **Gooper** aim to cut **Brick** out of **Big Daddy's** estate, now that they have a report confirming that Big Daddy is dying of cancer. She continues to complain about Brick's behavior, which she says is only making it easier for Mae and Gooper to make a case against giving him part of the inheritance. Brick has quit work, started drinking, and just last night he injured his ankle while attempting to jump hurdles on the high school track field.

Margaret introduces the play's immediate scenario, which revolves around Big Daddy's cancer and his wealth. Margaret is trying to prevent Gooper and Mae from cutting her and Brick out of the inheritance, and this desire to accumulate wealth brings the family together in one place. Brick, meanwhile, is clearly in some sort of freefall.



However, **Margaret** says that **Brick** still has one big advantage—**Big Daddy** dotes on him and dislikes **Gooper** and **Mae**. Margaret also suspects that Big Daddy has a “lech” for her, from the way he stares at her body when she’s talking to him. She continues to tell Brick about the details of last night’s supper, how odious Mae and Gooper were, talking about their children, and how little Big Daddy seemed to care. Brick doesn’t seem to be paying much attention to the conversation, however. Margaret continues on, talking about how Gooper believes he took a step up on the social ladder by marrying Mae, when in reality, her family was only money, and then they lost that too.

As Margaret talks, Brick barely pays attention, and the constant rejection only pushes her to talk more and act cattier. Margaret is very aware of the wealth and status of those around her, including Mae’s background. Margaret also introduces the theme of sexuality when she mentions Big Daddy’s “lech” for her, pointing to her own physical attractiveness, which she hopes Brick will notice.



As **Margaret** continues to make fun of **Mae’s** title as a former cotton carnival queen, she suddenly notices the way that **Brick** is staring at her. Frightened, she asks Brick why he’s looking at her like that. Brick claims that he wasn’t conscious of looking at her, but Margaret continues to speak. She says that she’s aware that she’s gone through a transformation and become thick-skinned and mean.

Margaret alludes to the fact that she used to act differently—nicely—but circumstances have forced her to change. Her reaction to Brick’s stare also emphasizes how much distance there is between them and how little they understand each other.



When **Margaret** recovers and gets **Brick’s** attention again, she tells him that she gets lonely. Brick tells her that everyone gets lonely, but Margaret continues, informing him that living with someone you love can be lonelier than living alone, when the person you love doesn’t love you back. Brick asks whether she would like to live alone, and Margaret vehemently says no—before turning the conversation to more ordinary matters. She asks Brick whether he had a nice shower and offers him an alcohol or cologne rub. Brick says that cologne rubs are nice after a workout, but he hasn’t been working out lately.

Margaret replies that it’s impossible to tell he hasn’t been working out—in fact, she thinks he might have gotten better looking since he started to drink. She starts to mention **Brick’s** friend Skipper before abruptly interrupting herself and apologizing. She starts reminiscing about how wonderful Brick was as a lover and says that if she thought he would never make love to her again, she would find a knife and stab herself in the heart. She hasn’t given up hope, however, and compares herself to a cat on a hot tin roof—trying to stay on the roof as long as she can.

Brick rejects all of Margaret’s advances, returning none of the affection that Margaret shows him. In fact, when Margaret mentions that she’s lonely, rather than offering comfort, Brick asks her whether she’d like to live alone, forcing Margaret to change the topic and reel in her feelings. All conversation between the two is very strained, particularly as Brick makes no effort to engage or be pleasant.



At this moment, as in other moments in the play, the past seems like a much better place than the present. It sounds like Margaret was once happy with their marriage, but circumstances changed, and Brick no longer returns her love. The topic of Skipper is yet another subject Margaret knows she should not talk about, yet another obstacle in conversation, yet another secret or repressed issue.



Margaret again asks what **Brick** was thinking of when he was looking at her. She asks whether he was thinking of Skipper, and Brick ignores her, as Margaret informs him that the “laws of silence don’t work.” Brick drops his **crutch**, and when Margaret tells him to lean on her instead, he loses his temper, yelling that he doesn’t want to lean on her shoulder. Margaret hurriedly hands him his crutch.

Brick is alternately silent and violent, making conversation difficult. He loses his composure particularly when Skipper is brought into the conversation.



Margaret tells **Brick** that they mustn’t shout because the walls have ears—but she believes that a crack in his composure is a good sign. Brick smiles over a new drink he has poured for himself and says he only lost his temper because the “click” hasn’t happened yet. He explains that he gets a “click” that makes him peaceful after he’s had enough to drink.

Brick’s alcoholism is yet another roadblock in his ability to communicate with others. He uses alcohol as a means of dulling his senses and cares about little else, waiting for his “click.”



Brick asks **Margaret** for a favor and tells her to keep her voice down. Margaret whispers that she’ll keep her voice down if he agrees to make this drink his last until after **Big Daddy’s** birthday party, which Brick has forgotten about. She tries to get Brick to sign a card for his present to Big Daddy so that Big Daddy won’t know that Brick forgot his birthday, but Brick resists.

His exchange with Margaret continues to be tense, as he asks her to be quiet so that he can focus on his “click.” He is such a drunk that he has forgotten his own father’s birthday. And yet Margaret doesn’t care that he has forgotten, just that he make it seem like he didn’t so they still have a chance at the money. It is noteworthy that Brick resists lying.



Brick says that they decided on certain conditions when Brick agreed to continue living with **Margaret**, but Margaret retorts that they aren’t living together—just occupying the same cage. She interrupts their argument when she hears footsteps in the hall.

The conditions Brick mentions seem to imply lack of physical contact and not talking about certain things. Note also how physically difficult communication is in the Pollitt household, with frequent interruptions like this one, with Mae coming down the hall.



Mae enters, carrying the bow of an archery set. She asks whether it belongs to **Brick**, and **Margaret** responds that the bow is her Diana Trophy, won at an intercollegiate archery contest. Mae reproaches her for leaving such a dangerous item around children, and a tense exchange ensues as Margaret puts away the bow. Mae tells Brick about her children’s musical performance for **Big Daddy** after supper, and Margaret asks why Mae’s children all have dogs’ names—Dixie, Trixie, Buster, Sonny, Polly. Mae asks Margaret why she’s so catty, and Margaret responds that she’s a cat. Mae starts to explain her children’s names before someone downstairs calls her away.

Mae and Margaret’s relationship is another in which communication fails, though neither party really tries. They both see the other as competition for Big Daddy’s inheritance, so their exchanges are full of catty remarks and only slightly masked insults. Margaret’s Diana Trophy also references her past, before she was attached to this family and marriage. Even back then, Margaret was a determined hunter, as her trophy, named after the Greek goddess of the hunt, symbolizes. The trophy predicts the determination Margaret has to get what she wants in the play. Though it’s significant, too, that Diana was also the goddess of virginity, perhaps symbolizing both Margaret’s former purity and, ironically, her current forced “virginity” due to Brick’s refusal to sleep with her.



Brick tells **Margaret** that being catty doesn’t help matters, and Margaret says she knows that—but she’s eaten up with longing and envy. Brick tells her that she’s spoiling his liquor with her voice, and Margaret says that she feels all the time “like a cat on a hot tin roof.” Brick’s response is that cats can jump off roofs and land on their feet—he advises her to jump and take a lover. She says that she can’t see other men and wishes Brick would get fat or ugly so that she could stand their lack of a sex life.

Brick’s liquor is both a symbol of and means to achieve his escape from the world. By saying she is spoiling his liquor with his voice indicates how his escape is predicated on not communicating. Meanwhile, Margaret again openly pines for Brick, to Brick’s annoyance. It’s this constant rejection that makes her feel like a “cat on a hot tin roof,” constantly jumpy and tense, just trying to hold on.



Margaret locks the door, and **Brick** tells her not to make a fool of herself. He tells her that she agreed to conditions, and she screams that she can't accept them and seizes his shoulder. He breaks away from her and grabs a small chair to block her. They pause before breaking into laughter, at which point **Big Mama** calls through the door.

Margaret acts on her frustrations and tries to use force to get Brick to return her affections, while Brick physically shields himself from her. It is not a coincidence that he uses a chair the way a lion-tamer does. Though they laugh, nothing is resolved. And even in this intense moment, Big Mama interrupts them at the door. The house makes uninterrupted communication impossible.



Big Mama says she has wonderful news about **Big Daddy**. **Margaret** opens the door while **Brick** hobbles into the bathroom, but Big Mama meanwhile has entered through the other entrance, **Gooper** and **Mae's** gallery door. Big Mama tells Brick to come out of the bathroom so that she can give him the good news. Meanwhile, she comments on Margaret wearing only a slip, and Margaret explains that one of Gooper and Mae's children used her dress as a napkin. Big Mama accuses Margaret of disliking children, but Margaret denies it—she says she just likes well brought up children. Big Mama responds that she ought to have some of her own then and bring them up well.

Big Mama comes in to bring news about Big Daddy, but Margaret's slip and the fact that Brick has hidden himself away distract her. Again, communication is delayed. The conversation here also furthers the sense of competition between Margaret and Gooper and Mae, as Margaret seems to be trying to make Mae and Gooper look bad in Mama's eyes. The discussion of children also foreshadows the end of the play.



Big Mama yells for **Brick** again and then discloses that the results of **Big Daddy's** health report were all negative—he's in fine condition, save for a "spastic colon." **Big Mama** is disappointed with Brick's lack of response, saying that she fell on her knees when she heard the news. She tells them to get dressed, since everyone's coming up to their room to celebrate, on account of Brick's broken ankle. One of the black servants interrupts to say that there's a Miss Sally on the phone, and Big Mama shouts into the phone before passing it on to **Margaret** to deliver the news about Big Daddy's health report.

Brick continues to hide himself away from the world, refusing even to speak with his mother. This section is full of miscommunication and confusion, as Big Mama gives her news to an unresponsive Brick and Miss Sally interrupts the scene with her phone call. Meanwhile, Mama's news about Big Daddy's health report introduces the idea of death—in this case it seems to be death avoided.



As **Big Mama** leaves the room, she jerks her finger towards the **liquor cabinet** to ask whether **Brick's** been drinking, and **Margaret** pretends not to understand. **Big Mama** rushes back and tells her to stop playing dumb. Margaret laughs and answers that he might have had a highball after supper. Big Mama tells her not to laugh and that Brick started drinking after he got married. She asks whether Margaret makes Brick happy in **bed**, to Margaret's indignation. Pointing at the bed, Big Mama that when a marriage goes on the rocks, the rocks are there—and leaves the room with Margaret feeling alone and fuming. Margaret rushes to the mirror and asks, "Who are you?" She answers herself in a high voice: "I am Maggie the Cat!"

Big Mama makes assumptions about Margaret and Brick's relationship that make it difficult for Margaret to communicate the truth of the situation—that it's in fact Brick who does not make her happy in bed. And, as will be revealed, the rocks in their marriage are to a large degree in their bed. Margaret's unhappiness stems from the fact that she not only has to deal with Brick's lack of affection for her, but also his family's. As she looks in the mirror she seems to be losing hold of herself. She sees herself becoming permanently the tight, jumpy cat.



Margaret straightens when **Brick** exits the bathroom. She announces that she believes their sex life will revive as suddenly as it stopped, and that's why she keeps herself attractive. She says that other men still look at her and recounts the story of one good-looking man who tried to force his way into a powder room with her at a party. Brick asks why she didn't let him in, and she responds that she's not that common and also wouldn't risk letting anyone catch her cheating. She doesn't want to give him any excuse to divorce her. Brick responds that he'd be relieved to know that she took a lover, but Margaret says that she'll take no chances—she'd rather stay on her hot tin roof.

Margaret tries to make Brick realize how attractive she is by recounting how other men find her attractive. Brick is still indifferent, however, and even pushes her to take a lover, which she refuses to do. She's determined to hang on and get what she wants. It is never entirely clear whether Maggie's refusal to do anything to let Brick divorce her results from her love for him or her desire to gain Big Daddy's money through him. It may be that the answer is both.



Brick tells **Margaret** that she could leave him, but she refuses and adds that he wouldn't have a cent to pay for it except for what he gets from **Big Daddy**, who's dying of cancer anyway. Brick looks surprised and says that **Big Mama** reported that the results were good. Margaret reveals that both Big Mama and Big Daddy were given a false story and that Big Mama will find out the truth after the night's party. In any case, the cancer is malignant, and this is why **Gooper** and **Mae** have been trying to convey Brick and Maggie's shortcomings to Big Daddy before he makes a will.

Margaret reveals the play's big lie—that Big Daddy doesn't have cancer. He does! His coming death has been hidden—been repressed. Big Daddy is dying, and Mae, Gooper, and Margaret are all vying for a piece of his wealth. Brick, meanwhile, had been completely taken in by the lie. This will become more important in hindsight, as Brick's hatred of lying is revealed in Act II.



Margaret says that she'll defeat **Gooper** and **Mae** though. She launches into a rant about having been poor all her life, always having to kiss up to relatives she didn't like, just because they had money. She says this is why she's like a cat on a hot tin roof—it's one thing to be young and poor, but she doesn't want to be old and poor too.

Margaret herself claims that she is sticking with Brick because she wants Big Daddy's money; because she doesn't want to be poor.



Margaret gets visibly upset again, moving restlessly about the room as she says that she made her fatal mistake when she told **Brick** about the “thing with Skipper.” Brick warns her to stop talking about Skipper, but Maggie continues. She says that she and Skipper made love, but they both did it to feel closer to Brick. Brick says that Skipper is the one who told him first. Maggie doesn't see why that matters and continues to speak, as Brick turns and calls to a little girl over the balcony, telling her to get everyone to come upstairs now. Margaret says that she couldn't stop herself from speaking, even if everyone were there.

Margaret brings up the past with Skipper again, and Brick does everything he can to try and stop her, even inviting everyone upstairs when just few moments earlier he couldn't bear even to talk to his mother. At first it seems that Brick can't face the infidelity of his wife, but as she explains that both she and Skipper loved Brick it becomes clear that he can't deal with the possible homosexual aspect to his friendship with Skipper. His comment that Skipper revealed the infidelity to Brick first is an attempt to redeem Skipper, to make him good and pure. Margaret's refuses to give into to Brick's attempt to repress the past.



Margaret remembers a double date they had in school, during which it seemed more like Skipper and **Brick** were on a date, and the girls were chaperoning. Brick interrupts the memory, threatening to hit her with his **crutch**. He says that his friendship with Skipper was the one true thing in his life, and he accuses her of making it dirty. Margaret denies this and says she's aware that only Skipper ever harbored even unconscious sexual feelings for Brick. She reminisces about the beginning of their marriage, which was ideal and happy, but adds that eventually something turned bad. Skipper started drinking, and one evening, Margaret drank with him before accusing him of loving her husband. He slapped her and later that night, they made love—afterwards, Skipper gave in completely to drinking.

Brick continues to try to attack **Margaret** with his **crutch** as she tells this story. She says that she knows what she did was wrong, but that Skipper is dead and she's alive. Brick hurls his crutch at her and misses, just as **Mae** and **Gooper's** daughter Dixie runs into the room with a cap pistol and shouts, "Bang, bang, bang!" Breathless, Margaret tells her that someone ought to teach her manners.

Now the tension really starts to come out. Margaret's story makes clear Skipper's love for Brick. While Brick uses his crutch—his only support in his physical brokenness—to try to shut Margaret up and in so doing preserve his only support in his spiritual brokenness—the idea that his friendship with Skipper was pure and true and had no homosexual overtones. Margaret seems to think that Skipper was the only one who harbored such feelings—and that it was sleeping with her that made him turn completely to drink and then to die. But Brick's desperation to shut her up suggests that perhaps that isn't true.

2 4 5

Like the earlier interruptions by Mae and Big Mama, this one also arrives in the middle of an intense exchange between Brick and Margaret, which doesn't allow them to carry the conversation any further. Margaret urges Brick to let go of the past—the ghost of Skipper—so that he can be with her in the present. It's interesting that the child bursts into the scene shooting an imaginary gun, doing imaginary killing. The children seem to pick up the violence inherent in the family. Also note that Big Daddy's "children"—Gooper, Mae, Margaret, all seem to want him to die so they can get his dough.

2 3 4 5

Ignoring **Margaret**, Dixie asks **Brick** why he's on the floor. Brick responds that he tried to kill her Aunt Margaret, but failed, and asks Dixie to fetch his **crutch** for him. Margaret explains that Brick broke his ankle trying to jump hurdles on the high school track field, and when Dixie asks Brick why he was jumping hurdles, he replies that people like to do what they used to do, even when they've stopped being able to do it.

Margaret tells Dixie to go away, and Dixie points the cap pistol at Margaret, who loses her temper and yells for Dixie to get out. Dixie says that Margaret's just jealous because she can't have children herself. This leaves Margaret shaken, and after Dixie exits, Margaret tells **Brick** that she went to see a gynecologist in Memphis, and the doctor confirmed that she can bear children. Brick says he doesn't know how she's going to have a child by a man who can't stand her, and Maggie responds that she'll figure it out. She wheels around and announces that everyone is coming up to the room now.

Brick's surprisingly honest response to the child reveals how much he still lives in the past. He wants to go back to his days as an athlete, throwing footballs with Skipper, when their friendship was pure, good and (in Brick's mind) uncomplicated. His jumping hurdles was a drunken attempt to go back to those times. But you can't go back; and he broke his ankle trying.

5

Clearly, Dixie has either absorbed what Mae has been saying or been conscripted to help her mother in her "battle" with Maggie. The exchange also once again highlights the issue of children, and along with Maggie's efforts to make sure that she can conceive makes it clear that Big Mama's earlier comment about children was not idle: Maggie bearing Brick a child would play a role in Big Daddy giving them his money. Brick's sexual rejection of Maggie is therefore doubly an issue for her: it hurts her emotionally and sexually, and also affects her ability to get the money she craves. Now it is Maggie looking to stop the conversation by using others as an interruption.

2 4

ACT 2

A group enters, with **Big Daddy** in the lead, followed by **Reverend Tooker** and **Gooper**, who are discussing memorials. Big Daddy interrupts the talk about memorials, asking whether they think someone's going to die. Reverend Tooker laughs awkwardly, as **Mae** and **Doctor Baugh** appear, talking about the children's immunizations. **Margaret** tells **Brick** to turn on the **Hi-Fi**. When he ignores her, she turns it on herself, and Big Daddy shouts to shut it off again. The speaker is turned off immediately, as **Big Mama** enters the room and calls for Brick. Big Daddy shouts to turn the speakers back on again, and everyone laughs, at Big Mama's expense. She herself laughs it off and approaches Brick.

Big Mama fusses over **Brick** and flops down on the couch, pulling the **reverend** onto her as a joke. **Big Daddy** bellows at her to stop joking around, and Big Mama signals the cue for the black servants to bring in Big Daddy's birthday cake and champagne. Everyone except Brick sings "Happy birthday to you," and when that's finished, **Mae** signals at her children to sing another song about how much they love Big Daddy and Big Mama.

Big Daddy is introduced—he is used to being the center of everything, issuing orders, having everyone do his bidding. Reverend Tooker knows that Big Daddy is dying of cancer, and he keeps talking about memorials as a hint to the family, hoping to secure some money for the church after Big Daddy's death. Big Daddy's response shows that he believes the health report—he thinks he's going to live. And so the people surrounding Big Daddy take on a different tone: he thinks it is normal, little fish following after a big fish, but really Tooker and everyone else are sharks drawn by Big Daddy's wealth. Notice also Big Daddy's cruelty toward Big Mama—his effort to drown out her ability to communicate by turning on the radio—and Big Mama's sad response. Their relationship is here revealed: he despises her; she is desperate to please him.

Big Daddy clearly has little patience or affection for Big Mama, though she seems very sincere in her affection for him. The choir of Mae's children is obviously contrived, a naked ploy to get Big Daddy's affection and, therefore, his money. But it raises the issue that the birthday song is contrived too, an example of the kind of lie that people create to depict social harmony and project a non-existent love. Only Brick refuses to participate.

Moved by the spectacle, **Big Mama** again launches into a speech about the wonderful results of the health report. **Margaret** interjects, asking **Brick** whether he's given **Big Daddy** his birthday present yet. **Gooper** bets that Brick doesn't know what the present is, while Margaret opens the package. She sounds surprised as she pulls out a cashmere robe, but **Mae** accuses her of faking the surprise, since she happens to know that Margaret purchased it last Saturday. As the conversation gets cattier, Big Daddy bellows for quiet. The **reverend** unfortunately finishes a sentence in the silence after everyone stops speaking, and Big Daddy turns on him, accusing him of speaking about memorials again.

As the atmosphere in the room grows uncomfortable, **Big Daddy** turns to **Brick** and asks what he was doing on the high school track field last night. In crude language, he asks whether Brick was laying a woman, while **Mae** quickly ushers the **reverend** out on the gallery. Brick denies it, and Big Daddy continues to interrogate him, asking whether he was drunk. **Big Mama** and **Margaret** try to change the subject, drawing attention back to the cake, but Big Daddy bellows in disgust for them to stop. Meanwhile, **Gooper** has retreated to the gallery as well.

Big Mama's speech makes everyone uncomfortable because they know that she's unknowingly telling a lie about Big Daddy's health report, so Maggie interrupts her. Maggie, Mae, and Gooper then get into their maneuvering to try to win Big Daddy's love and money. Big Daddy has no patience for it, or for Tooker. Big Daddy is filling what is clearly his traditional role: whatever he wants, while telling everyone else what to do. Yet Big Daddy's anger at Tooker talking about memorials indicates Big Daddy's intense fear of death.

1 3 4 6

Big Daddy wants to know what happened to Brick last night, and he doesn't mind destroying the conversation in the room in order to do it. Big Daddy's notion of sexuality is crude and masculine. He thinks nothing of asking Brick if he was "laying a woman" in front of Brick's wife. Though perhaps he is being so crude in order to shock the conversation into truth, because he suspects the truth about Brick/Skipper?

2 4

1 2

Big Daddy says that he's tired of **Big Mama** trying to take over because she thought he was dying of cancer. Big Mama tells him to hush, but he continues. He says that he made the plantation as successful as it was by himself, and he refuses to let her take it over now. Big Daddy claims that his colon has been made spastic by disgust for hypocrisy and liars. Big Mama, upset, exclaims that she has loved him all these years, but he doesn't believe her. She rushes out onto the gallery, as Big Daddy says to himself, "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true..."

Big Daddy rejects Big Mama's affection, believing that she has ulterior motives for caring for him. He believes that her affection for him is a lie, an effort to take what he built and have it for herself. The play explores similar ideas with Maggie and Brick, as Maggie seems to love Brick, to be impossibly physically attracted to Brick, and to want the money Brick may inherit. Big Daddy sees love as a lie, though, a way for women to take what belongs to men. Incidentally, Big Daddy's comment that "liars" gave him a spastic colon is more true than he knows: the "spastic colon" is itself a lie, and so it was literally given to him by liars.



Big Daddy asks to speak to **Brick**, and **Margaret** delivers him, exiting onto the gallery with a kiss, which Brick wipes off. At this point, Big Daddy and Brick are the only ones left in the bedroom, and all the others are out on the gallery. Big Daddy compares Margaret and **Mae**, and he and Brick agree that they both look like a couple of cats on a hot tin roof. Brick says it's because they're trying to get a piece of Big Daddy's land, and Big Daddy responds that they have a surprise coming to them—he's not planning to die for a while yet.

Even Brick's small actions—like wiping a kiss—reject Margaret, and Big Daddy notices this. Brick and Big Daddy, when alone, seem to be able to communicate more directly and bluntly than the other characters do. Brick easily reveals what everyone else is trying to reveal: that Mae and Margaret both want a piece of Big Daddy's inheritance. Yet Brick doesn't reveal the real secret, that Big Daddy's belief that he's going to live on for some time is wrong. Their communication is not complete.



Big Daddy hears a sound from the bedroom and asks who's there. **Mae** appears by the gallery entrance, and Big Daddy tells her to stop spying. Mae accuses him of being unkind to those who love him, to which Big Daddy tells her to shut up. He says that he plans to move Mae and **Gooper** out of the room next to Margaret and Brick's, since all they do is spy and report their findings to **Big Mama**. Mae leaves the room dramatically, pressing a handkerchief to her nose.

Here's another example of a supposedly private conversation being interrupted. Even if the topics being discussed in the play weren't so sensitive, conversation would be difficult in this household. Mae accuses Big Daddy of not returning the love of those around him—an accurate assessment in the case of Big Mama, though Mae's own motives for caring for him are suspect. Yet it's important to note that Big Daddy thinks Big Mama has the same motives! For the characters, love and selfishness and become all tangled up.



Big Daddy tells **Brick** that **Mae** and **Gooper** have reported that Brick won't sleep with **Margaret**. He asks whether this is true and tells Brick to get rid of Margaret if he doesn't like her. Brick, meanwhile, has gone to the **liquor cabinet** to freshen his drink, and Big Daddy tells him he has a real liquor problem. He advises Brick to quit drinking and stop throwing his life away. Brick agrees, without really listening. Big Daddy comments that it's hard to truly communicate.

As Big Daddy turns the conversation back to Brick and Maggie—to their sexuality or lack thereof—Brick again retreats into alcohol. Conversations in the play are often paused as he refreshes his drinks or waits for his "click." Big Daddy notices how Brick uses alcohol to block communication, but also how communication is just difficult in general.



Meanwhile, the clock chimes, and **Brick** remarks on how pleasant the chiming sound is. **Big Daddy** says that he and **Big Mama** bought the clock on their European tour. Big Daddy adds that he's lucky he's a rich man because Big Mama bought so many items on that tour. He tells Brick to guess how much he's worth, and when Brick doesn't respond, Big Daddy informs him that he's worth ten million dollars and has 28,000 acres of the richest land on this side of the Nile. He concludes on a somber note, however, saying that a man can't buy his life. He continues to reminisce about his trip to Europe, saying that he has enough money to feed all of Barcelona, and remembers how an Arab woman sent her naked child to him to proposition him for sex. He claims that rich men hoard their money to buy items, however, because they hope that one of their purchases will turn out to be life everlasting.

Brick pours himself another drink and informs **Big Daddy** that he's talking a lot tonight. Brick says that he prefers "solid quiet" and asks whether Big Daddy's through talking to him. Brick tells Big Daddy that they never truly talk—he tries to look like he listens, but he never actually listens. Meanwhile, Big Daddy closes the gallery doors so that he and Brick are alone, and asks Brick whether he's been downright terrified of anything in his life. Big Daddy continues on to say that he thought he really had cancer. With the new health report though, he feels much better.

This is a key speech by Big Daddy, linking his wealth and his health. He sees the source of men's desire for wealth as a hope for immortality. Of course, this is a doomed hope, as the one thing that wealth can't buy is immortality (though one might also argue that the play also demonstrates that it can't buy love). His comment about the Arab women also indicates how he sees sex, perhaps from all women—as something men want, but something women use to get money and comfort. He remembers his trip to Europe with his wife not for its fond memories, not for the time he spent with her or the things they saw and experienced together—he remembers it for the things they bought and what, ultimately, they couldn't buy.

3 5 6

Brick dislikes communication of all kinds. He does not want to interact with people. It may also be that he is uncomfortable with Big Daddy's thoughts about sex. Big Daddy's question about being terrified is important, in that the play posits two things that men are so terrified of that they cannot face or discuss them: death and homosexuality. Or as Brick will later describe them: the "inadmissible things."

2 3 4

Big Daddy announces to **Brick** that he's contemplating "pleasure with women." He says that he slept with **Big Mama** until five years ago, when he was sixty, and he never even liked her. Big Mama bustles through the room on the way to answer the phone down the hall. Big Daddy tells her she should go through a different room, but she just makes a playful face at him and hurries through. Brick has started to hobble towards the gallery doors to leave, but Big Daddy tells him that the talk's not finished yet. Big Mama finishes talking to Miss Sally on the phone, but when she tries to walk back through the room, Big Daddy closes the door and doesn't let her in. After entreating Big Daddy to take back his earlier words about her trying to take over the plantation, she retreats down the hall with a sob.

Big Daddy's cruel treatment of Big Mama even as he tells Brick about his desire to experience "pleasure with women" shows how little he cares for love, either Mama's in specific or in general. Papa sees women as a means to pleasure, not to love. Mama, meanwhile, tries to bear up under his mistreatment—seeming to think that endurance will win Big Daddy's love—but ultimately breaks down under his ill treatment of her. Brick's ongoing discomfort with any topic touching on sexuality makes him once again try to escape, but Big Daddy is dead set on a conversation, on communication.

2 3 4

As **Big Daddy** goes back to contemplating pleasure with women, talking about how he plans to use his wealth to secure a young woman, **Brick** rises with effort. Big Daddy asks Brick what makes him so restless, and Brick responds that the “click” hasn’t happened yet. He explains the click he gets when he drinks enough alcohol, and Big Daddy, astonished, calls him an alcoholic, which Brick calmly accepts. Brick attempts to leave again, saying that this talk is like all the others they’ve had, going nowhere. Big Daddy seizes Brick’s **crutch** and tosses it across the room. Big Daddy continues to talk about his test results and how he believed he had cancer, and Brick makes a wild dash for his crutch.

As Big Daddy comments on his desire for pleasure and a young woman it begins to seem that he may see sex just as he sees wealth: as a way to achieve a kind of immortality, or at least to feel immortal. An aging woman just makes Big Daddy feel his own age. Meanwhile, Big Daddy finally recognizes the extent of Brick's alcoholism, and in throwing the crutch he seems to be symbolically demanding that Brick give up all his "crutches" (including alcoholism) and face and talk with Big Daddy for real.



Big Daddy yells at him to stay, and **Big Mama** rushes in to see what all the yelling is about. Big Daddy tells her to get out, and she runs out, sobbing. **Brick** attempts to hobble towards the gallery again, but Big Daddy takes his **crutch** again. Big Daddy demands to know why Brick drinks and refuses to return the crutch until he gets an answer. He tells Brick that he’ll pour him a drink if Brick says why he drinks. Brick responds that he drinks out of disgust. Big Daddy asks what he’s disgusted with, but Brick refuses to say until Big Daddy pours him a drink. Brick responds that he’s disgusted by mendacity, or lying and liars.

Like Maggie, Big Mama is constantly facing rejection. Brick uses alcohol as a defense, but notice how Big Daddy turns Brick's reliance on alcohol against Brick, in essence holding Brick hostage until he speaks. Maggie will do something similar later in the play. Brick's hatred of liars and lying echoes Big Daddy's comment that liars and hypocrisy are what gave him a "spastic colon".



The children start chanting that they want **Big Daddy**, and **Gooper** appears in the gallery door to ask him to come and see the rest of the family, but Big Daddy shuts him out. He demands to know who’s been lying to **Brick**. Big Daddy says he knows all about mendacity, having had to lie about caring for Big Mama, for Gooper, for **Mae**—in fact, he says the only one he’s ever had any devotion to in his life is Brick. He says there’s nothing to live with other than mendacity. Brick contradicts him, holding up his glass and saying that liquor is something else to live with.

Gooper and the children interrupt this time, breaking up the flow of conversation again. But Big Daddy wants this conversation with his son, the only person who he does love. Though one might conjecture that he loves Brick because he sees himself in Brick—that Brick in this way gives Big Daddy a kind of immortality. So Daddy's love, too, might be selfish. Whatever its source, Brick doesn't return Big Daddy's affection—the entire play is a web of unrequited affections. As for lies, Big Daddy sees them as just something you have to live with. Though it's interesting that Daddy sees himself as the one who is lying, here. He doesn't comprehend that people might be lying to him. Brick clearly would prefer to drink himself to death than to lie or be lied to just to make things look neat and pretty.



Big Daddy informs **Brick** that that’s not living. He says that he couldn’t decide who to make his will out to before the health report came in—to give it to Gooper and Mae or to support Brick as he rotted away. Brick responds with indifference before heading to the gallery door to watch Big Daddy’s birthday fireworks. Big Daddy stops Brick. He says that they shouldn’t leave the conversation there, without being fully honest with each other. Brick says that he’s never lied to Big Daddy, but they’ve never truly talked to each other either. Big Daddy wants to continue the discussion about Brick’s drinking.

Big Daddy is more invested in the conversation than Brick is, showing how much he cares for his son, who doesn't return the affection. Brick is also the only one in the play (other than Big Mama) who is not concerned about Big Daddy's wealth. Big Daddy, well aware of his own material worth and the power that comes with it, is stumped by this indifference.



Big Daddy suggests that **Brick** goes back to sports announcing, but Brick responds that he hates to sit in a glass box watching games he can no longer play. Big Daddy comments that Brick started drinking when his friend Skipper died. There's a silence for a few moments, and then Brick asks what Big Daddy is suggesting. Big Daddy says he's suggesting nothing, but that Gooper and Mae suggested that there was something off about Brick's friendship with Skipper. Brick loses his composure, asking who else has made the suggestion.

Brick again shows regret that he's no longer as athletic as he once was. This nostalgia is painful to him and he has trouble letting go of the past, as evidenced by his ankle injury on the track field. But now Big Daddy really starts to push, probing into what he suspects to be the real source of Brick's alcoholism: Skipper's death. Brick's fear that people are talking about how "off" his friendship with Skipper was indicates his related fears about his own possible homosexuality and his fear that what he thought of as pure society will think of as being dirty.



Brick yells at **Big Daddy** for accusing him, his son, of being a queer. As Big Daddy denies this, **Reverend Tooker** steps in to look for the bathroom. Big Daddy directs him on his way, and continues talking. He says he's seen a lot in his life, and that the previous plantation owners, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, had a special relationship. When Jack Straw died, Ochello stopped eating and died too. Brick wheels around and throws his glass across the room, shouting at Big Daddy. Completely losing his composure, Brick accuses Big Daddy of insinuating that Brick and Skipper performed sodomy together. He charges Big Daddy with comparing Brick and Skipper to a pair of dirty old men like Ochello and Straw. Brick drops his **crutch** and falls without noticing the pain, while Big Daddy helps him up, trying to calm him down.

The characters of this play have an uncanny way of intruding when conversations of reaching their most critical points. Reverend Tooker's interruption, in particular, is timely, since Big Daddy and Brick are debating homosexuality, a taboo subject (especially when it comes to religion). And Brick is very affected by the taboo nature of the subject—he seems to feel shame both that others might think he performed "sodomy" and to fear that perhaps he did have homosexual feelings. It's Brick who sees homosexuality as dirty. Interestingly, Big Daddy seems less concerned. He seems to bring up Ochello and Straw not to attack Brick (which is how Brick takes it) but to say that this is something that happens in life. Notice here how now when Brick loses his crutch his father tries to help him, support him.



Brick says that there was a pledge at his former fraternity who was found attempting to do an "unnatural thing" and was chased off campus. The pledge fled all the way to North Africa. Brick asks why true friendship between two men can't be respected as something pure and decent. **Big Daddy** once again says that it's hard to talk, but instead of letting it go, he asks why Skipper started drinking. Brick decides he's going to tell Big Daddy the truth about the health report. First, though, he grabs another drink and starts telling Big Daddy his version of what happened with Skipper. He says that **Margaret** was jealous of their friendship and started planting in Skipper the idea that he was in love with Brick, and Skipper went to bed with Maggie to prove it wasn't true. When that didn't work out, however, he believed it was true.

The treatment of the pledge in Brick's past deeply affected him, and made clear deeply embedded society's homophobia in his mind. But Big Daddy pushes on, trying to uncover Brick's wounds, to truly communicate. But Brick sees this effort to talk about "inadmissible things" as an attack and decides to attack himself by revealing the truth that Big Daddy doesn't know. First, though, Brick gives a version of Skipper's death that mimics Maggie's earlier version of it. And which makes Maggie the guilty party—the liar who turned Brick and Skipper's friendship into something dirty, by convincing Skipper of her lies.



Big Daddy continues to press **Brick**, believing that he purposefully left something out of the story. Finally, Brick admits that Skipper called Brick long-distance to give a drunken confession of love, and Brick hung up on him. That was the last they spoke to each other. Big Daddy tells Brick that his disgust is really with himself for digging the grave of his friend before he'd face the truth with him.

Big Daddy senses some dishonesty in Brick's story and pushes for the truth. Brick reveals that his difficulty communicating or even talking about homosexuality (in this case hanging up the phone) led to his friend's death. Big Daddy observes that Brick's disgust with liars is actually disgust with himself, as he was unable or unwilling to face the truth of his relationship with Skipper, whatever that truth was.



Brick says that no one—**Big Daddy** included—can face the truth. Brick blurts out that everyone but Big Daddy knows the truth of the health report, for example. As Big Daddy faces this revelation, Brick swings around on his crutches, finally escaping to the gallery. Big Daddy shouts for Brick, and Brick returns to apologize, admitting it's hard for him to understand that anyone cares whether they live or die anymore. Big Daddy passionately condemns all liars before leaving the room and retreating down the hall. Down the hall, there is the sound of a child being slapped. It runs through the room, crying, and out of the hall door.

Big Daddy imagines himself as the bringer of truth. But now he must face the truth himself. And while the truth drives Brick to alcoholism, it drives Big Daddy to grief and rage. Brick is beyond caring about living or dying; but that is all that Big Daddy cares about. And now he must face both his imminent death but also—as his rage at liars shows—the understanding that the people around him knew, and whether out of "love" or selfishness, were making him into something ridiculous—a dying man who did not know it, being preyed upon by those he considers beneath him. The slap of the child is ambiguous, but it can be argued that it demonstrates the way that rage and violence are passed down, or that Big Daddy can't stand the idea of a child living on while he himself dies.

1 3

ACT 3

Everyone but **Brick** trickles back into the room, calling for **Big Daddy**. **Big Mama** says that she believes Big Daddy has left because he was just worn out, but was really very happy to see family. **Margaret** goes to the gallery to fetch Brick, while Big Mama starts to get nervous that the family is gathering around her. **Mae** suggests that Brick said something he shouldn't have said to Big Daddy, and Big Mama wants to know what that might be. Before **Gooper** can say anything, Mae rushes over to Big Mama and gives her a hug, which Big Mama impatiently pushes off. Big Mama starts talking about Brick's drinking, as Brick appears in the room behind her. Brick immediately heads for the **liquor cabinet**.

Margaret tells **Brick** to sit with **Big Mama** as they deliver the news, but he tells Margaret to sit with her instead. **Gooper** and **Mae** reveal the news that **Big Daddy** actually does have cancer. In hysterics, Big Mama calls for Brick, her "only son." This statement offends Mae and Gooper, and Gooper asks what that makes him. Big Mama responds that Gooper never liked Big Daddy. **Reverend Tooker** slips out. **Doctor Baugh** leaves a package of morphine on the table in case Big Daddy has pain, and then he leaves as well.

Big Mama's little lie about Big Daddy being very happy to see the family is a perfect example of the type of mendacity that Brick rejects—the kind of lie that society teaches us to spread in order to maintain social harmony. It's unclear if Mae is expressing true emotion for Mama here, or is just continuing to try to ingratiate herself with Mama while driving a wedge between Mama and Brick. Brick, for his part, after being forced to reveal himself, once again rushes to alcohol to protect himself from feeling anything.

1 3 4

The truth finally comes out to Big Mama, who doesn't handle it well. Her hysterics, however, are further evidence that her affection for Big Daddy is genuine. She even denies Gooper as her son based on Gooper's dislike of Big Daddy. She has, it seems, completely sublimated herself to Big Daddy. Tooker has made his efforts to secure money for the church, now he leaves when things get rough.

1 2 3

Big Mama tells **Margaret** that she's got to help get **Brick** sober again so that he can take hold of the estate, which sends **Gooper** and **Mae** into a panic. They say that Brick is much too irresponsible to take hold of things, and Margaret comes to his defense, saying that Gooper and Mae's campaign against Brick is founded completely in avarice and greed. Gooper, furious, admits that he does, in fact, resent Brick and **Big Daddy's** favoritism, but he knows enough to protect his own interests. Mae and Gooper grow increasingly nasty towards Margaret and Brick as Brick reenters the room. Big Mama tells them to hush, and Gooper signals for his briefcase. He pulls out a large sheaf of papers and says that he's drafted a trusteeship. Infuriated, calling the document "crap" because that's the word Big Daddy uses when he's disgusted, Big Mama tells him to put it away or she'll tear it up.

Gooper and Mae reveal how much of this meeting revolves around Big Daddy's inheritance, as Margaret accuses them of greed. Gooper also references his past—his own unrequited affection for Big Daddy—and reveals his resentment towards his parents for their favoritism. As the situation becomes tenser, communication also breaks down further, with insults coming out into the open.



Meanwhile, **Brick** is drinking and singing to the moon. **Big Mama** says that he looks just like he did when he was a little boy. Big Mama tells Brick that **Big Daddy's** fondest dream would be to have a grandson from Brick. **Mae** responds that it's too bad **Margaret** and Brick can't oblige. In response, Margaret grows determined and says she has an announcement to make. Margaret announces that she and Brick are going to have a child, and Big Mama gasps in happiness, while Gooper and Mae dismiss the news as false.

Brick's alcoholism again acts as a barrier between him and the others, removing him from the conversation. Big Mama still dotes on him, however, even though he's unreachable—she reaches into her memory of Brick in order to love him. Big Mama's comment that Big Daddy would like Brick to have a son indicates another way that Big Daddy might achieve immortality—through the line of his one son whom he loves and in whom he sees himself. Seeing an opportunity, Margaret tells the play's final lie. And just as Mama has clung to every other lie, she clings to this one, likely settling the question of inheritance in Brick's favor—though this isn't said explicitly.



Big Mama rushes out to tell **Big Daddy** the news, while **Mae** screams that **Margaret** is lying about her pregnancy. Mae says that she and **Gooper** can hear Maggie and **Brick** in the room and know that Brick won't sleep with her. Suddenly, a cry of pain and rage fills up the house, and Mae and Gooper run to go see what it is, leaving Brick and Maggie alone in their room.

Mae tries to reveal Margaret's lie, even though she hasn't been entirely truthful throughout the play either, spying and withholding information about Big Daddy's health report. The cries of rage are implied to be in response to Big Mama's news about Maggie's baby, and further imply that Big Daddy doesn't give a crap about "immortality" gained through Brick's baby. Big Daddy wants to live for himself!



Margaret thanks Brick for not exposing her. Meanwhile, Brick continues to drink and finally obtains his “click.” As he stands on the gallery, Margaret grabs all the bottles in the liquor cabinet and runs out of the room with them. When she returns, she faces off with Brick. She tells him that she’s now stronger than him and can love him more truly. Margaret says that she’s locked up Brick’s liquor, and they’re going to make her lie true before she unlocks it. As Brick reaches for his crutch, Margaret grabs it and runs out to hurl it over the gallery before returning, panting. Suddenly, Big Mama runs into the room looking for the doctor’s package. She runs out again after kissing Brick and calling him “Little Father.” As the curtain falls, Margaret announces to Brick that she does love him, and he responds sadly, “Wouldn’t it be funny if that was true?”

Margaret finally takes charge at the end of the play. Earlier Maggie couldn't penetrate Brick's alcohol-based distance; but now she (like Big Daddy earlier) realizes that Brick's dependence on alcohol makes him weak, symbolized by Maggie throwing away his crutch and defense. She can, basically, extort his love for her, at least physically. Love continues to be a function of power—suggesting that the women's love for their men is almost entirely a function of their dependence on them. But now Brick is dependent on her. Further, Maggie realizes that with this power she can be the first character in the play to turn her lie into truth. Even Big Mama's interruption doesn't faze Margaret, who calmly hands Big Mama the medicine before returning her attention to Brick. Mama, meanwhile, goes to "ease" Big Daddy's pain—but his pain is emotional and existential. In essence, Mama is putting Big Daddy on a drug much more powerful than alcohol, and all because of her sincere love for him. Big Daddy wants to live, but Big Mama, now that she has control over him, is going to ensure merely that he survives, all motivated by love. Maggie, in her power, similarly tells Brick her truth—that she loves him—and he, echoing Big Daddy earlier in the play, doesn't believe her. He sees it as just one more lie people tell each other. However, unlike Big Daddy in his earlier scene with Big Mama, Brick is weaker than Maggie at this point. His rejection doesn't matter because she doesn't accept it.



HOW TO CITE

It's easy to cite LitCharts for use in academic papers and reports.

MLA CITATION

Cao, Diana. "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 26 Nov 2013. Web. 26 Oct 2016.

CHICAGO MANUAL CITATION

Cao, Diana. "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." LitCharts LLC, November 26, 2013. Retrieved October 26, 2016. <http://www.litcharts.com/lit/cat-on-a-hot-tin-roof>.

Paul Newman in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1957) HD. Gdunne92. Gdunne92. 18. The Rocks are Right There! Hope Harris. Hope Harris. 48 Vintage Behind the Scenes Photos of Elizabeth Taylor Filming 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' in 1958. Yesterday Today. Yesterday Today. 25. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (1958) - WHRO Cinema 15 Behind-the-Screen. Danny Epperson. Danny Epperson. A 1955 play that won Tennessee Williams his second Pulitzer Prize, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has endured thanks to numerous productions ever since. One of its best known versions was a 1958 film adaptation, directed by Richard Brooks, starring Paul Newman, Elizabeth Taylor and Burl Ives. The story concerns the Pollitt family, and all the ugly family issues that rear their ugly heads as they reunite for the birthday of its patriarch, Big Daddy. Big Daddy, unaware that he's dying of terminal cancer, tries desperately to connect to his angry, alcoholic favored son, Brick, who is married to Maggie *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* TENNESSEE WILLIAMS 1955 AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY PLOT SUMMARY CHARACTER THEMES STYLE HISTORICAL CONTEXT CRITICAL OVERVIEW CRITICISMS SOURCES FURTHER READING

Source for information on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*: Drama for Students dictionary. There are several aspects regarding the setting of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* that bear scrutiny. The entire play takes place in an upstairs bed-sitting room of the Pollitt plantation. In other words, it is a room for sleeping as well as for living. National Public Radio, *All Things Considered: Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* This radio piece aired on March 24th, 2005, and highlights the anniversary of *Cat's* premiere, offering some interesting history as well. Images. Maggie puts on her stockings This is a great pic of Elizabeth Taylor as Maggie the Cat. You will get into the nitty gritty of the themes that appear in many of Tennessee Williams works. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* Online While we can't seem to find a copy of the text of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* online, this site gives you a temporary passport to flip through the pages of the play. There's a great introduction by Edward Albee (famous American playwright) that you won't want to miss.