



**On hot tin land:  
homosexuality and property in  
Tennessee William's *Cat on a hot tin roof* (1955)<sup>1</sup>**

**Sobre terras de zinco quente:  
homossexualidade e propriedade em  
*Cat on a hot tin roof* (1955), de Tennessee Williams**

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**Abstract**

This article aims to analyze the representation of homosexuality in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a hot tin roof* (1955) with the purpose of demonstrating that the play goes beyond merely dramatizing subjective processes related to the sexuality of the characters Brick and Skipper, but rather constructs them in direct relation to the economic and social structures in which they are both embedded. Drawing on the interpretation that attributes to the figures of Straw and Ochello the "metaphysical origin" of the plantation, as suggested by Bibler (2002), we seek to examine Skipper's suicide and Brick's ensuing alcoholism as formal devices capable of constructing a critique of the socio-historical structures of the American South, where the prevailing social norm restricted the free expression of homosexuality.

**Keywords:** American South; Modern drama; American Drama; Theater.

**Resumo**

Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar como a homossexualidade é figurada em *Cat on a hot tin roof* (1955), de Tennessee Williams, a fim de demonstrar que a peça não se limita a meramente representar processos subjetivos relativos à sexualidade das personagens de Brick e Skipper, mas os constrói em direta relação com as estruturas econômicas e sociais em que ambos estão inseridos. A partir da interpretação que atribui às figuras de Straw e Ochello a "origem metafísica" da *plantation*, como sugere Bibler (2002), procuramos examinar o suicídio de Skipper e o alcoolismo de Brick que dele decorre como recursos formais capazes de construir uma crítica às estruturas sócio-históricas do Sul dos Estados Unidos, cuja norma social restringia a livre expressão da homossexualidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Sul dos Estados Unidos; Dramaturgia moderna; Dramaturgia estadunidense; Teatro.

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## *“The fugitive kind” in Tennessee Williams*

In Tennessee Williams’ work, characters of the “fugitive kind” suffer the multiple consequences of attempting to communicate in a world where there seems to be no place for them. These wanderers always live on the margins of life, excluded due to their sensitivity, artistic inclination, or sexual orientation. Their “abnormality”, rather than suggesting a moral or psychological deviation, is one of the many devices used by the author to shed light on the deformations of societal norms in American society. More specifically, it is the “tensions and contradictions accumulated over time” (Betti, 2012a, p. 16) in the American South that have made this area a privileged space for the manifestation of the country’s main political conflicts since the 1930s, a period during which Williams began his career as a playwright.

In this article, I intend to demonstrate how, in *Cat on a hot tin roof*, a play that premiered on Broadway in 1955,<sup>3</sup> the main conflict of the plot can only be fully understood when the social and historical experience of the American South is taken into consideration. Shaping Brick and Maggie’s marriage, the antagonism between Brick and Big Daddy, and the alleged homosexual relationship between Brick and Skipper, is the heart of the play: a deep awareness of the irreversible decay of Southern society and its traditional values, which hinder any possible resolution for these characters’ struggles.

In the play, the efforts of both Big Daddy and Maggie to get Brick to stop drinking and run the family estate become a formal resource that intensifies the social and historical dimension of the play. In their search for a positive resolution to the succession problem, these characters realize the impossibility of convincing the heir through dialogue alone. Thus, they resort to events from the past as a means of providing substance to the ongoing dramatic action in the present: the play can only move towards a *denouement* by dwelling on the reminiscences of Skipper’s death. This procedure, already identified by Peter Szondi in plays associated with the notion of “drama in crisis”, somewhat functions as an interruption of absolutism of intersubjective absolutism of the present that characterizes bourgeois drama (Szondi, 2001, p. 35). By turning to the past, the play historicizes the

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<sup>3</sup> In the footnotes, references will be made to the final version of the text, published by New Directions in 2004, based on the manuscript prepared by Williams for the American Shakespeare Festival production in 1974, including modifications in relation to the first version (known as “Cat 1”) and the Broadway version, based on the suggestions Elia Kazan made to the text in 1955 (“Cat 2”). For more information on this topic, see Parker (2004).

scenic present, which in turn reinforce the centrality of factors external to the process of constituting (and possibly resolving) dramatic conflicts, rather than emphasizing the psychological effects they might have on these individuals.

Therefore, the desperate and errant actions of the characters, their irascible or introspective behavior, and their animalistic or grotesque characterization do not stem from moral or psychological deviations or pathologies, as suggested by some critics.<sup>4</sup> Instead, these are effects of historical processes that have led to the corruption of the historical fabric within which the action takes place. This device encapsulates the very nature of modern drama, where the external factors acting upon the individual are so intense that it is impossible to distinguish them from their surroundings. Their most intimate impulses are, in fact, the internalization of external factors exerting a centripetal force on them (Lukács, 1965, p. 151), which may manifest as seemingly spontaneous and autonomous actions. As a result of this oppression, the hero is weakened and loses their capacity to act.

### **The metaphysical origin of the plantation**

Although established in the play from the beginning, this device becomes more evident in the second act of *Cat*. At this point, Big Daddy is determined to elicit some kind of confession from his son regarding Skipper, his best friend who committed suicide after declaring his love for Brick. In his search for an “implicit truth” from his son, the father believes there is “something unspoken”<sup>5</sup> in the relationship between the two friends, which he imagines to be the cause of Brick’s apathy and alcoholism. By referring to the past, even before mentioning Skipper’s suicide, the character brings to life a specter that had been presented as a form of stage direction at the beginning of the play and refers to “a tenderness which was uncommon” that lies at the origins of that plantation:

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<sup>4</sup> To cite two examples: John Gassner did not perceive “any specific social passion” in Tennessee Williams (1954, p. 349), while Nancy Tischler (1961, p. 279) argued that his work could not be considered social because he demonstrated “a preference for the personal problems of his characters,” who were not particularly interested in “social problems.”

<sup>5</sup> *Something Unspoken* is the name of a one-act written by Williams between 1953 and 1958, featuring as its protagonist Miss Cornelia Scott, a sixty-year-old spinster from the local elite of New Orleans, wealthy and connected to the Southern past, an old member of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. As the title suggests, the play also deals with a subject considered taboo, which is homosexuality – in this case, female homosexuality – in Southern societies. For comments on the socio-historical representation of the South in this play and others from the same period, see Betti (2012, p. 7-26).

[NOTES FOR THE DESIGNER: *It hasn't changed much since it was occupied by the original owners of the place, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a pair of old bachelors who shared this room all their lives together. In other words, the room must evoke some ghosts; it is gently and poetically haunted by a relationship that must have involved a tenderness which was uncommon.*] (Williams, 2004, p. 15).

For Bibler, the tenderness that existed between the two original owners suggests that at the physical origin of that property, there was a prior “metaphysical” origin, that is, symbolic and spectral, marked by a feeling of affection that lasted a lifetime and still lingered in that environment as a ghostly presence (Bibler, 2002, p. 393). In stark contrast to all other relationships in the play (Maggie and Brick, Gooper and Mae, Big Daddy and Big Mama), this seems to be the only enduring and stable relationship marked by true love on that property (Bibler, 2002, p. 393). From the first time Straw and Ochello are mentioned on, the play goes on to suggest a possible connection between the origin of the plantation and homosexuality itself – or more precisely, *homoaffectivity*.<sup>6</sup> At this moment, however, what is at stake is not the couple’s sexuality but the value that the property holds for Big Daddy. In that space, the efforts of a self-made man turned simple land into a cotton empire. This concern reflects the importance of a patrilineal succession, which originated with the couple of owners and was to be continued by Brick:

BIG DADDY: [...] I made this place! I was overseer on it! I was the overseer on the old Straw and Ochello plantation. I quit school at ten! I quit school at ten years old and went to work like a nigger in the fields. And I rose to be overseer of the Straw and Ochello plantation. And old Straw died and I was Ochello’s partner and the place got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger! I did all that myself with no goddam help from you, and now you think you’re just about to take over. Well, I am just about to tell you that you are not just about to take over, you are not just about to take over a God damn thing. Is that clear to you, Ida? Is that very plain to you, now? (Williams, 2004, p. 79).

Instead of a proper father-son relationship, what is figuratively presented in this passage is a business relationship, to which the fact that the original ownership involved a couple of two men was irrelevant. When Straw died and Big Daddy became Ochello’s partner, the text seems to suggest an association that could be interpreted as a business one, but also potentially as a sexual one, using ambiguous language that, according to

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<sup>6</sup> For the sake of clarity, there distinction between “homoaffectivity” and “homosexuality” is that the former refers to affection between people of the same sex, not necessarily of a romantic nature; the latter refers to sexual relations between people of the same sex. In this play, at various points, there is no explicit reference to “homosexuality”, but rather to relationships of affection between pairs of men: Straw and Ochello, Brick and Skipper, Big Daddy and Brick.

Bibler, might imply Big Daddy also became Ochello's sexual partner (Bibler, 2002, p. 385). Regardless of the possible interpretation, it was the relationship between those men that ensured the success of the property, which Big Daddy seems to aim at restoring by rehabilitating Brick. The character's brief statement also hints at the complex system of labor relations underlying the construction of that cotton empire. When he says he worked on the plantation "like a nigger," the owner characterizes a society where, even after the end of slavery, the presence of Black people in the fields was massive, often under legally sanctioned conditions of subordination, exemplified by the Jim Crow laws, which were in effect from the late 1870s until the mid-1960s. Even under these conditions, however, Big Daddy was able to ascend socially and, at a certain point, take control of the property, since, although he worked "like a nigger", he was not one. This allowed, for example, his incorporation into the affective core of the property, an expression of what W. E. B. Du Bois referred to as the "wages of whiteness," a kind of "psychological wage" that ensured, in the post-abolition South, the superiority of white workers over Black workers, even when they occupied the same positions (Du Bois, 2017, p. 701).

At one point in the conversation between father and son, the patriarch begins a reflection on how Maggie and Mae, despite being very different, behave in a similar, nervous, and anxious manner, "as a couple of cats on a hot tin roof" (Williams, 2004, p. 81). It becomes clear here that Maggie's "cat-like" characteristic, which can also be extended to Mae, is not a personality trait but rather a conduct practiced by two women who share their connection to the heirs of that fortune – two women "squaring off on it, each determined to knock off a bigger piece" of the land (Williams, 2004, p. 82). From a male perspective, the women of the household (Big Mama, Mae, and Maggie) are seen as opportunistic, which is enough to unite father and son: through their scorn for the female figures, they seem to finally bond. The troubled relationship between Brick and Maggie in the first act gives way to a relationship of (homo)affection between the two men. As if attempting to move towards a resolution to the issue of land succession, the father explains to the son what constitutes the nature of a plantation:

BIG DADDY: Brick, you know, I swear to God, I don't know the way it happens?

BRICK: The way what happens, Big Daddy?

BIG DADDY: You git you a piece of land, by hook or crook, an' things start growin' on it, things accumulate on it, and the first thing you know it's completely out of hand, completely out of hand!

BRICK: Well, they say nature hates a vacuum, Big Daddy.

BIG DADDY: That's what they say, but sometimes I think that a vacuum is a hell of a lot better than some of the stuff that nature replaces it with. (Williams, 2004, p. 83)

Big Daddy, when speaking of a natural space in which “things accumulate” at an increasing speed until they get out of hand, refers to the progress and modernization of the countryside. The character's rise to success was accompanied by the expansion of the property, a process that, according to him, seems to lack any intentionality: the untouched countryside starts to be dominated by “things”, namely, cotton. In the economic system of the plantation, monoculture is an expression of the agrarian capital, which can only exist under the principles of accumulation and reproducibility. Thus, the process described by Big Daddy is precisely that of capital reproducibility.

When a landowner acquires a piece of land and begins to exploit it, it produces surplus, generates profit, and, eventually, “the first thing you know” the “vacuum” of nature has been filled with “things” uncontrollable to men. From Big Daddy's perspective, in addition to the cotton fields, the “things” that fill the void of the land are also, metaphorically, expressions of capital itself, such as its “parasites”, whose sole interest is to consume as much of this capital as possible and eventually appropriate it. However, the things that “nature replaces it with” are not exactly the product of nature, as Big Daddy supposes, but of anthropic action.

The process described by him is the result of the exploitation of labor. The fact that Big Daddy conceives all this as a natural process indicates the type of ideology to which the character subscribes. He is unable to realize how the predatory behavior of those trying to sink their “claws” into his land is motivated by the very concentration of capital the plantation entails. As someone who was not born an heir but became a capitalist through social ascent, Big Daddy demonstrates an ignorance of the mechanisms of capital, which, besides reproducing and expanding, attracts and ultimately engulfs a myriad of “things”: people, institutions, desires.

The reference to the ghosts of Straw and Ochello subsequently leads to the discussion about the “Skipper problem.” As Hege L. Næss (2012) demonstrated, these three individuals are among the gay characters in Williams's work who, despite not being part of the present action on stage, act directly from the past to push the dramatic action forward, and about whom one can only learn through the speech of other characters.



Alongside Allan, Blanche's ex-husband in *A streetcar named Desire*, who committed suicide after she discovered his homosexuality, and Sebastian in *Suddenly, last summer*, who was devoured by young men on the island of Cabeza de Lobo, Spain, with whom he maintained sexual relations, Skipper, Straw, and Ochello are examples of "off-stage gay characters" whose absence (Næss, 2012, p. 25) is characteristic of this social group during the period in which Williams wrote. Because they are dead, they cannot speak: this is a symbolic silence, which also refers, in formal terms, to a social experience shared by homosexuals in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s, in the context of McCarthyism.

Although the persecution of communists was the primary focus of this movement, other activities considered subversive were also under official scrutiny. According to historian David K. Johnson (2004), the persecution of gays and lesbians in the federal government during the Cold War in the United States led to the systematic investigation, interrogation, and removal of these individuals from public service. Coined the "Lavender Scare", this expression of McCarthyism was based on the unfounded fear that gays and lesbians could pose a threat to national security because they were vulnerable to immoralities, as were communists (cf. Heatley, 2007). For this reason, in *Cat on a hot tin roof*, Skipper's suicide occurs at the moment when his sexuality is symbolically repressed by his best friend, as we will see below. His death, paradoxically, is the past event that allows his spectral presence to enter the dramatic action: if the hero Brick drinks because of his friend's death, as everyone imagines, Skipper's very existence as a homosexual seems to have had enough force to interrupt a succession cycle initiated with Straw and Ochello. Between the founding couple and Brick's best friend, there is a class difference that not only condemns them to different fates but also ensures the play's central conflict.

### **Homosexuality, mendacity and tolerance**

The device Williams employs to represent homosexuality in the play functions as an intermediary between Brick's psychological dimension and the environment he seems to struggle against: mendacity. When Big Daddy asks why his son is restless and cannot stop drinking, Brick complains that he has not yet managed to achieve "the click" he hears in his head when he drinks, which, as a button, has the power to calm him. After threats

from Big Daddy, who promises to “straighten” his son if he does not quit alcohol,<sup>7</sup> Brick declares that he drinks to kill the disgust he feels for “mendacity”. Big Daddy responds irritably:

BIG DADDY: What do you know about this mendacity thing? Hell! I could write a book on it! Don't you know that? I could write a book on it and still not cover the subject? Well, I could, I could write a goddam book on it and still not cover the subject anywhere near enough!! – Think of all the lies I got to put up with! – Pretenses! 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! – regular as a piston.... Pretend to love that son of a bitch of a Gooper and his wife Mae and those five same screechers out there like parrots in a jungle? Jesus! Can't stand to look at 'em! Church! – it bores the Bejesus out of me but I go! – I go an' sit there and listen to the fool preacher! Clubs! – Elks! Masons! Rotary! – crap!<sup>8</sup> [*A spasm of pain makes him clutch his belly. He sinks into a chair and his voice is softer and hoarser.*] You I do like for some reason, did always have some kind of real feeling for – affection – respect – yes, always... You and being a success as a planter is all I ever had any devotion to in my whole life! – and that's the truth... I don't know why, but it is! I've lived with mendacity! – Why can't you live with it? Hell, you got to live with it, there's nothing else to live with except mendacity, is there? (Williams, 2004, p. 110)

Big Daddy's line could sum up the entire conflict of the play: to him, Big Mama, Gooper, Mae, the children, the Church (represented by the Reverend), and even the fraternal clubs that Big Daddy attends are symbols of mendacity. Because he is not satisfied with Brick's response, however, Big Daddy confesses that he has always felt there was something unspoken between the two, and suggests that this “something” was one aspect of Brick's relationship with his best friend that was “not right exactly”. When Brick asks if his father is insinuating that he and Skipper had a romantic or sexual relationship, Big Daddy replies: “Now, hold on, hold on a minute, son. I knocked around in my time” (Williams, 2004, p. 117).<sup>9</sup> He tells his son, for example, about his life before 1910, when he

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<sup>7</sup> “BIG DADDY: Naw, it won't. You're my son, and I'm going to straighten you out; now that I'm straightened out, I'm going to straighten you out!” (Williams, 2004, p. 102).

<sup>8</sup> Like Freemasonry, the Elks and Rotary are fraternal organizations with objectives ranging from promoting philanthropy and humanitarian services to promoting ethical and political values. They are frequented primarily or exclusively by men associated with political, economic or social power, a status ensured through restricted membership or through donations and financial contributions. The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks is an American fraternal order founded in 1868 in New York; the first Rotary Club was founded in 1905 in Chicago; and the emergence of Freemasonry dates to the late 14th century in Europe and is closely related to the philosophical and political precepts of the Enlightenment and Liberalism.

<sup>9</sup> According to Bibler (2002, p. 389), the ambiguity of the expression “to knock around”, which can mean “to loaf” but also “to fool around” in a sexual sense, suggests that Big Daddy might have also been



arrived at Straw and Ochello's property: he says he traveled the country, slept in hobo jungles and railroad Y's,<sup>10</sup> had "worn his shoes through", slept in wagons of cotton until he was taken in by the farm's owners.

By mentioning his origins in poverty, Big Daddy wants to convince his son that, in the times when he lived on the fringes of society, he had seen "it all", and, therefore, there would be no reason for Brick to be offended by the insinuation that he and Skipper had a homosexual relationship. In his account, Big Daddy reveals that his first contact with homosexuality occurred when he used to live on the margins of society. Subsequently, he was adopted by a homosexual couple whose position in that system was, on the contrary, central. Even though he had "knocked around" in his time, Big Daddy does not seem capable of seeing tenderness in the couple's relationship and refers to it as something abnormal. He recounts that when Jack Straw died, Ochello "quit eatin' like a dog does when its master's dead, and died, too!" (Williams, 2004, p. 117), which left Big Daddy responsible for managing the property. Where there was tenderness and mutual devotion - a love so profound that one could not live without the other - Big Daddy saw the inhuman relationship of dependency between a master and a dog, two beings who, despite maintaining an affectionate relationship, could not even communicate through language.

This brief speech illustrates a central point in the depiction of homosexuality in the play: the experience being described pertains to how certain behaviors or sexual identities carry different values depending on the position they occupy in society. The homosexual practices witnessed by Big Daddy on the periphery of the system were related to conditions of exploitation and poverty; in a central position, however, they occupy a foundational and essential role. The father's stance, while it may reveal a disregard to the kindness and affection there was between Straw and Ochello, somehow links the figures of Brick and Skipper to those of the property owners and suggests that, just as there was a mutual relationship of dependency between the latter, the former also depended on each other: "BIG DADDY: I'm just saying I understand such - / BRICK [*violently*]: Skipper is dead. I have not quit eating! / BIG DADDY: No, but you started drinking. [*Brick wheels on*

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involved in homosexual relationships when he was young. For this reason, Bibler suggests, he tries to convince his son of his tolerance.

<sup>10</sup> "Hobo jungles" were improvised campsites along railroad lines, particularly at Y-shaped junctions of three different lines ("railroad Y's"), where people often slept for days while waiting for a train to depart. These places were commonly frequented by unemployed individuals, or those in social vulnerability, known as "hobos".

*his crutch and hurls his glass across the room shouting.]"* (Williams, 2004, p. 119). What the son perceives as an attack, Big Daddy views as “tolerance”. In both cases, there is a bond of affection so strong that when one party dies, the other stops eating or, in this case, starts drinking. The comparison infuriates Brick, for whom the mere insinuation that there was something sexual in his relationship with Skipper is revolting:

BRICK: Oh, you think so, too, you call me your son and a queer. Oh! 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! [...] YOU THINK SO TOO? [...] You think so, too? You think so, too? You think me an' Skipper did, did, did! - sodomy! - together? (Williams, 2004, p. 119).

If the father seems tolerant and tries to approach his son, Brick reasons in the opposite direction. For him, the accusation being made was that he and his friend had practiced sodomy, a term laden with religious connotations and which refers to immoral and sinful practices – not coincidentally, moments before this statement, Reverend Tooker appears at the balcony doors, “the living embodiment of the pious, conventional lie”<sup>11</sup> searching for the toilet. When Brick recounts an anecdote from the time when Skipper and he were in college, he refers to one of the members of the fraternity they were part of, who was expelled from the campus accused of sodomy and fled to North Africa. The distinction between center and periphery concerning the experience as a homosexual is revisited here: the young man who was accused of homosexual behavior had to flee from a fraternity, a space of power associations in the context of American universities, towards the “edges” of the world. “North Africa”, a vague designation for the periphery of the international economic system, serves here as an allegory for a space of primitivism and disorder.<sup>12</sup>

Big Daddy says that the place he has just returned from is even farther than that: “death's country”, “the other side of the moon”. For this reason, nothing could easily surprise him, which confirms the logic of metaphorical spatialization of homosexuality here. In the space where the characters are – the center of an economic system – there are

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<sup>11</sup> “BIG DADDY: Now just don't go throwing rocks at – [Suddenly Reverend Tooker appears in the gallery doors, his head slightly, playfully, fatuously cocked, with a practised clergyman's smile, sincere as a bird-call blown on a hunter's whistle, the living embodiment of the pious, conventional lie. Big Daddy gasps a little at this perfectly timed, but incongruous, apparition.] – What're you looking for, Preacher? / REVEREND TOOKER: The gentlemen's lavatory, ha ha! – heh, heh...” (Williams, 2004, p. 118).

<sup>12</sup> In *Suddenly last summer* (1958), the place where homosexual activities took place, the *Cabeza de Lobo*, island, in Spain, was also described as a grotesque and wild scenario.

marks of order and social conventions, there is room for tenderness and affection, for partnerships, and for the expansion of capital. In “another” space, a distant one, disorder, sodomy and other deviant sexual behaviors prevail: they are North Africa, “the other side of the moon” (that is, death) or Big Daddy’s past on the streets.

After having seen the other side of the moon, that is, the afterlife, Big Daddy became even more “tolerant” than he was. Even before a near-death experience, however, the character claims to have always lived with “too much space” around him, so he never let himself be infected by what others thought. At this moment, Big Daddy clearly connects homosexuality to the property: “One thing you can grow on a big place more important than cotton! – is tolerance! – I grown it” (Williams, 2004, p. 122). He, who had two homosexual owners as parental figures, claims to have learned that tolerance is more valuable than the land itself. What underlies this statement, however, is the relationship of contiguity between the cotton plantation and Straw/Ochello: indices of the same sign, Big Daddy’s tolerance and the conservation of the land must coexist – under the risk that the absence of tolerance could jeopardize the survival of the property.

### ***“Too rare to be normal”: The “Skipper problem”***

While Big Daddy continuously tries to convince Brick of his tolerance and therefore solve the issue of succession, Brick moves in the opposite direction. As the patriarch forces his son to confess to what he assumes to have been a romantic relationship between him and his friend, Brick insists that there was nothing impure between them. To him, his friendship with Skipper was so pure and ideal that it could not be “tainted” by such an accusation.

BRICK: Why can’t exceptional friendship, real, real, deep, deep friendship! between two men be respected as something clean and decent without being thought of as – [...] Fairies... [*In his utterance of this word, we gauge the wide and profound reach of the conventional mores he got from the world that crowned him with early laurel.*] Skipper and me had a clean, true thing between us! – had a clean friendship, practically all our lives, till Maggie got the idea you’re talking about. Normal? No! – It was too rare to be normal, any true thing between two people is too rare to be normal (Williams, 2004, p. 122-123).

To Brick, the exceptional nature of his relationship with Skipper stemmed from the fact that it was pure and true, while everything around it was false and deceitful, thus making it “too rare to be normal”. The description he makes of their friendship once again brings them closer to Straw and Ochello, between whom there was “a tenderness which was uncommon”, as indicated in the opening stage direction. Despite Brick’s attempts to distance himself from the couple, whom he derogatorily refers to as “sissies”, he reaffirms that his relationship with Skipper was superior to any form of “worldly” normality, just as it was with the couple of landowners, who could only live a lasting romantic life because they transcended “normality”, isolating themselves, at least metaphorically, in the plantation. The rejection of normality, in this case, is synonymous with power: at the heart of an empire, the choice not to adhere to the society’s norms was financially and politically possible. However, for Brick, the weight of social norms seemed more burdensome: “the wide and profound reach of the conventional mores he got from the world that crowned him with early laurel” (Williams, 2004, p. 122) represents the values of a social norm in which there was no room for a tender relationship between two men.

What separates Brick/Skipper from Straw/Ochello is the fact that, although Brick was also raised on the plantation, he had not yet held control over it so far. The world that “crowned him” is the world of Southern high society, where Brick played the role of an American hero, who had to embody the highest moral values of the world he represented. Born and raised during the Second World War, Brick embodied the values of a rapidly expanding society, which, as it exerted its power over other nations and reaffirmed its call to greatness, needed superheroes. What ultimately separates the couple of landowners from Brick and Skipper is the fact that the latter are products of a second generation of the American Dream: they were university students, football heroes, fraternity members. However, what separated Brick from Skipper, was the fact that the former, unlike his best friend, was a member of the Southern elite, which would have afforded him certain privileges.

If Big Daddy learned to be “tolerant”, it is because, in addition to relying on that tolerance to ensure the survival of the estate, he did not bear the burden of being considered “deviant” himself. On the other hand, as a byproduct of social climbing that Brick did not have to experience, Big Daddy was able to witness poverty. In his journey of ascension, the patriarch seems to have understood something that his son hasn’t: only the

force of capital can be stronger than the myths of American society and the conventional morality that rules it. Straw and Ochello, as legitimate representatives of the Southern bourgeoisie, were above any social convention and could afford the privilege of owning their tenderness, however rare it might have been.

By filling the void left by them, Big Daddy also internalized the values that were necessary for the continuity of the estate: the importance of Big Daddy's "tolerance", in this case, is explained by its absolute necessity for the survival of the property, both in the past and now, as he tries to convince his son to take control of the land. By insisting that Brick stop drinking and "straighten up", he reaffirms his commitment to the force of capital, as he is concerned with preparing an heir. To get his son to stop drinking, he first needs to introduce him to this system of "tolerance". In exchange for this "truth" (which the text refers to as "the Truth", in direct opposition to "mendacity") that the father tries to extract from Brick, the son decides to reveal the truth about Big Daddy's diagnosis: "one inadmissible thing for another".<sup>13</sup>

The inadmissible thing that Big Daddy tries to extract from Brick concerns the circumstances of Skipper's death, which up to this point has not been clarified for the reader. The details of this passage are found in the extensive stage direction that Williams incorporated into the final version of the text:<sup>14</sup> "[...] *The thing they're discussing, timidly and painfully on the side of Big Daddy, fiercely, violently on Brick's side, is the inadmissible thing that Skipper died to disavow between them.*]" (Williams, 2004, p. 117.) The process of "disavowing" could be interpreted as repression, in psychoanalytic terms, that is, when an individual unconsciously rejects truth, which, the text suggests, led to Skipper's suicide. By comparing the inadmissible thing that Big Daddy and Brick are discussing (the issue of homosexuality) with the inadmissible thing that Brick will reveal to his father (the truth about Skipper's death), homosexuality and succession are once again connected. From a dramaturgical perspective, the "invasion" of the past concerning Skipper into the scenic present is the element that leads to the *denouement*, as the truth is finally revealed for both son and father.

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<sup>13</sup> "[Brick looks back at his father again. He has already decided, without knowing that he has made this decision, that he is going to tell his father that he is dying of cancer. Only this could even the score between them: one inadmissible thing in return for another.]" (Williams, 2004, p. 123).

<sup>14</sup> This stage direction, perhaps the most important in the play, was introduced by Williams in the final version of the script ("Cat 3") and clarified the issue of Brick's homosexuality and his relationship with Skipper. The passage was written in response to a review by theater critic William Kerr, who criticized the ambiguity and evasion with which the play addressed the theme of homosexuality.

## In search of truth: mendacity as a system

Skipper's suicide, as it is retold and recreated onstage, ultimately informs Big Daddy of the imminence of his own death. In contrast to the mendacity that seems to govern all other aspects of the family, there exists between father and son some form of actual truth: only in death can one be true to oneself, as in life there is nothing but falsehood and lies. To clarify what happened to Skipper, Brick recounts the moment when he called him and made a drunk confession, to which Brick responded by silently hanging up. In the son's detailed account to the father, it becomes clear that, just as Maggie does throughout the entire play, Skipper called his friend in hope of getting closer to him: his confession, rather than a request for the consummation of something, was a cry for help in the face of a situation of oppression that perhaps he could not handle alone. Thus, it becomes clear that what caused the young man's death was his frustrated attempt to symbolically enter the space of power and security that the Brick inhabited. Just as Maggie tries and fails to conceive a child with Brick in order to finally become part of that world, where tolerance and affection supposedly exist, Skipper also unsuccessfully attempted to become closer to his friend – a movement symbolized by the night of frustrated intimacy between Skipper and Maggie. To Big Daddy, this explanation serves as a confession that the disgust his son tries to annihilate is disgust with himself.

BIG DADDY: Anyhow now! – we have tracked down the lie with which you're disgusted and which you are drinking to kill your disgust with, Brick. You been passing the buck. This disgust with mendacity is disgust with yourself. You! – dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it! – before you'd face truth with him!

BRICK: His truth, not mine!

BIG DADDY: His truth, okay! But you wouldn't face it with him!

BRICK: Who can face truth? Can you? (Williams, 2004, p. 127).

If we accept that mendacity is a fact of capitalist social dynamics, that means that Brick has incorporated it as a synonym of social conformation, which in turn confirms Big Daddy's stance: he is not accusing his son of being a homosexual or even implying that he was *indeed* in love with Skipper, but rather of being a coward, as he lacked the courage to oppose mendacity to defend his friend's truth. The heir's inability to face Skipper's homosexuality and support him, despite the possibility that he himself might be accused of being a homosexual, is what in fact led to his friend's suicide. By succumbing to the



accusations made against him, the young man felt compelled to renounce his own life, as to suppress the “inadmissible thing” that supposedly existed between him and Skipper.

His death, then, depicts not the experience of homosexuality, but that of homophobia and repression, which are also expressions of the mendacity that Brick struggles against – even though he apparently cannot associate his action towards Skipper with an unconscious adherence to this system. Through narrative devices, the text does not provide a scrutiny of the psychological dimension of this character, then, but rather dramatizes his moment of crisis, which is a “common crisis”, in which disgust is a response to the system of mendacity. As the explanatory stage direction clarify, what the play attempts to capture is “not the solution of one man’s psychological problem”, but “the true quality of experience in a group of people” who are going through “a common crisis”.<sup>15</sup> When Big Daddy accuses his son of having renounced his friend’s truth, he accuses him of not being as tolerant as he himself always has been, of not having opposed the very mendacity that he so strongly criticizes. The father seeks to point out the inconsistency and contradiction in his son’s position of contesting the immorality he identifies in others and in that structure, while unconsciously adhering to this system and its values. By hanging up the phone and refusing to face Skipper’s truth – not to believe in it, or even to adhere to it, but simply to face it – Brick yielded to the falsity that disturbs him. The same norms and conventions that led to his friend’s suicide were, for him, values to be defended, which in turn pushed Brick into the state of melancholy in which he finds himself.

When Brick states that “mendacity is a system that we live in. Liquor is one way out an’ death’s the other...” (Williams, 2004, p. 129), he demonstrates an awareness that this is not merely a set of social conventions, but a system. More than a trait of a normative society, mendacity corresponds to several elements, both concrete and abstract, that interconnect to form an organized whole, which has the capacity to present itself ideologically as “the truth”. This whole, in the script, is the property being contested, serving as a metonymy for another larger system – the capitalist one – whose symbolic control is being sought after by Maggie and the other competitors in the play. If, for Brick, the only escapes from that system are alcohol and death, it is because the “click” he feels

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<sup>15</sup> “[...] *[The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man’s psychological problem. I’m trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent – fiercely charged! – interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis.]*” (Williams, 2004, p. 117).

when he drinks has the power to symbolically kill it: a way of renouncing the lies that present themselves as truths in this world.

Just as Skipper died to renounce that system, Brick drinks to kill himself slowly. Big Daddy's illness, in this sense, matches his son's alcoholism, because both cancer and alcoholism turn out to be, we conclude, not mere parasites that invade healthy bodies, but the ultimate expression of a *proper functioning* of those organisms, both physiologically (Big Daddy's body) and socially (the plantation, of which Big Daddy is a metonymy). If cancer and alcohol are contiguous signs of mendacity, as our analysis suggests, it is because they are "necessary evils" of a system that relies on lies, corruption, and immorality function: the former leads to actual death, the latter has the capacity to promote death in life and to annihilate truth. This was the case with Skipper, who died for truth; it is the case with Brick, who slowly poisons himself to avoid truth; and it is finally the case with Big Daddy, who will now die because he has known truth.

Common to all three characters is the Oedipal journey towards knowingness that blinds and kills. Just as in Sophocles' classic, their journey towards truth ends up blinding the one who dares to know. If in *Cat on a hot tin roof* that leads to the death of the seeker, it also ensures the survival of the system, for Big Daddy will die, but his property will remain untouched. Symbolically, the patriarch's cancer turns out to be a metaphor to the property itself, which corrodes him from within, but ensures that the actual plantation remains alive and functioning, safeguarding mendacity as the norm. Just as Big Daddy dies slowly, Brick also kills himself gradually, perhaps because he realized – before his father, but after his best friend – that no truth can outlive that norm.

As for Skipper, by invading the dramatic action, this character compels Brick to accept his own truth, so he can finally rid himself of his disgust and conform to the system of mendacity Big Daddy has helped to build, thereby accepting to carry it forward. However, when the protagonist reveals the truth about his father's cancer, he places them on equal footing: "one truth for another". This is because, by the end of the second act, both are moribund, suffering from different expressions of the same "cancer" that is gradually being "expelled" from the organism: for Big Daddy, this turns out to be an autophagic movement, as he is consumed at the moment he attempts to force his son to accept his own truth, which would imply the destruction of the lies surrounding him, and thus, the destruction of the system itself. Symbolically, then, the patriarch is killed and

must die so the property can survive him. Like ashes, the end of the play imposes upon the characters the ruins (still alive, however) of a history of racial and class exploitation that insists on reasserting itself. These ruins, intrinsically linked to Southern traditions, render “self-determination and moral choice” of the characters who inhabit that world “unattainable” (King, 1995, p. 629): this is true for Brick, but also for many other characters in Williams’ works, “fugitive kinds” who flee from their own inability to self-determine or even exist in a society that constantly seeks to preserve itself. In this fictional universe, psychic dysfunctions, alcoholism, and brutality are not attempts to cover up the fractures of a world cursed by its past, which, as is often the case, reappears in the present in the form of a haunting. In human terms, these are the *only possible ways* of existing in a decaying world; in literary terms, they are forms of representing the discrepancy between the imposed social norms and the repressed desire which are byproducts of this very imposition. Within this conflict resides the drama of Tennessee Williams.

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