

Literary Interpretations and Homosexual Identity

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and *Angels in America*: Literary Interpretations and Homosexual Identity

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Tennessee Williams' influential plays during the tumultuous "witch hunts" of the 1950's, particularly *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, paved the way for playwrights like Tony Kushner to openly address and expose the American identity and treatment of homosexuality. Tony Kushner is a self-proclaimed fan of Tennessee Williams, and he is quoted in Douglas W. Powers' article "Lifted above Tennessee Williams' 'Hot Tin Roof': Tony Kushner's 'Angels in America' as Midrash" as saying—"The first time I read Streetcar, I was annihilated" (120). For as John S. Bak says in "Sneakn' and Spyn' from Broadway to the Beltway: Cold War Masculinity, Brick and Homosexual Existentialism," "Williams—always the consummate Broadway playwright who knew well the politics setting commercialism against artistic integrity and who repeatedly portrayed this Cold War identity crisis through

the Fifties—his best literary expression of this emerging queer heterosexual in America" was the first to address such risqué topics of rape and homosexuality (240). The Cold War Era ushered in a strict demand for presenting the American male as hyper-masculine. The characters in Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin*

Roof represent the quintessential 1950's struggle for the appearance of a strong patriarchal family. Whereas, later in the 1990's, Tony Kushner was able to shed a bigger and more revealing light on homosexuality in his play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*.

In David Savran's article, "Ambivalence, Utopia, and a Queer Sort of Materialism: How 'Angels in America' Reconstructs the Nation," he contends,

The play's ambivalence, however, is not simply the result of Kushner hedging his bets on the most controversial issues. Rather, it functions, I believe—

quite independently of the intent of its author—as the play's political unconscious, playing itself out on many different levels: formal, ideological, characterological, and rhetorical. (208)

Kushner chose to set his play in 1980's America, which was also a time of great tragedy due to the AIDS epidemic and issues with the Reagan administration. The influence of Williams on Kushner is apparent when comparing both *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Angels in America*. Further, the plays can be seen as products of the time periods of which they came from.

Although set in different time periods, there are many similarities in which the characters act and react to the homosexual identity. The impact of the sociopolitical pressure during the 1950's and 1980's is illustrated through the characters' actions. The marriages of Brick and Maggie Pollitt and Joe and Harper Pitt show the search for existential identity. Whether homosexual or heterosexual, the characters struggle to accept their identities. Through Williams' and Kushner's plays, we can see the effect history has had on the representation of homosexuality, identity and marriage. By comparing *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Angels in America*, there are distinct elements of similarity and difference that emphasize the confounding nature of the identity crises the characters face. These two plays show the sociopolitical pressures to be "normal," and when the characters cannot fit this mold, they retreat into dysfunctional relationships. American society was not accepting of unconventional sexualities, and this societal pressure created a conflict of identity within the characters who were afraid to act on their sexual desires that did not fit the norms of their respective time periods (Powers 122).

People who do not fit the all-American mold are "othered" by society. In both plays, the conventions of marriage are tested. Maggie and Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* struggle to maintain the appearance of the 1950's patriarchal marriage. In *Angels in America*, Joe and Harper, although decades later, still try to maintain this facade of a happy marriage. Both plays show how societal ideology creates dysfunction and emotional damage within the two marriages. Historically, society views a "normal" marriage as one between a man and a woman, and usually the man is expected to head the household. During the 1950's:

To counter the effects of this post-World War II challenge to American masculinity, political men consciously resorted to poignant heterosexist language or affected masculine sensibilities, both of which helped to project strong national image abroad as much as it

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did stave off sexual suspicion at home...the American male was effectively on trial to prove that he had the muster to earn the respect of a nation built on the myth of the cowboy warrior. (Bak 232)

Due to this pressure in both plays, Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Joe in *Angels in America* attempt to overcompensate by participating in masculine activities in order to prove their manhood. Brick even reminisces about him and Skipper beating up a homosexual in their fraternity. Brick put all his time and energy into professional sports and an athletic identity, and Joe is deep in the political arena of a corrupt and masculine world.

However, their marriages are upheld by a false domination over their wives. Maggie and Harper are both antagonists and challenge their husbands' failures within the household. The wives know there is something different about their husbands. Brick, who only knows what society tells him to be homosexual, does not believe he is. To Brick, it is the physical sexual act which makes someone homosexual. Since he and Skipper only have ever held hands, he believes them to have had only a platonic relationship. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Brick says to Big Daddy, "You think Skipper and me were a pair of dirty old men?" (Williams 947). Brick is constantly bombarded with accusations and questions about his relationship with Skipper. He responds, "Why can't exceptional friendship, real, real, real, deep, deep friendship! between two men be respected as something clean and decent without being thought of as—" (Williams 948).

Joe, on the other hand, admits to himself that his feelings are unconventional. In *Angels in America*, when Harper questions him about where he goes at night, he confesses, "I try to tighten my heart into a knot, a snarl, I try to learn to live dead, just numb, but then I see someone I want, and it's like a nail, like a hot spike right through my chest, and I know I'm losing" (Kushner 83). Both Brick and Joe are in unhappy marriages but feel obligated to uphold appearances in order to fit into society. With a "nation built on the myth of the cowboy warrior," both men try to escape their natural feelings and act in order with societal norms. However, it does not work. Brick goes on a downward spiral into an alcoholic mess, and Joe tries to ignore his feelings completely.

Therefore we see, as Powers suggests:

The patriarchal system (seen in microcosm in *Cat* as Big Daddy's plantation and in a more epic scale in *Angels* as the United States of the Reagan administration) has seduced both men into believing they are its heirs, but because their sexual attraction to other men prevents them from living up to the heterosexual definition of masculinity, they are profoundly confused, tormented, and unhappy. (125)

With this being said, there is no surprise both marriages turn into dysfunctional hot spots. It is interesting to note

the similarities and differences in characters and their reactions to their situations. When looking at Brick and Joe, there is a distinct difference in action in relation to their feelings. They are both in an existential conundrum of identity crises. The two men's "concerted efforts of [a] conscious man to assert himself in spite of all the external social forces working to identify him" end in two different ways, with two different anagnorises.

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Brick uses alcohol to handle staying with Maggie in their marriage and "arrangement." He says he waits for the "switch clicking off in my head, turning the hot light off and the cool night on and—" (Williams 936). This "click" allows Brick to escape from his feelings and deal with his life. While at the same time, the opposite happens to Joe. Joe's identity crisis causes his wife to become a valium addict in order to deal with their marriage. Harper's addiction is caused by her knowledge of Joe's homosexuality. It is not that he is homosexual, but rather, that he will not admit it to her. Harper's and Brick's addictions are juxtaposed with each other as a sign of the changing times. In the 1950's, Brick felt more pressure to stay in his marriage than Joe in the 1980's, because there were more leniencies in gender roles within the household and the stigma of divorce was lessening. Therefore, Harper was able to take on the role of a defiant housewife (Bak 229). For example:

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Kushner translates Williams's play about the conflict between sexuality and power in a patriarchy by historicizing it and therefore making it profoundly political by placing it squarely in the Reagan-White House 1980's (anchored by Roy Cohn), and in a period of greater tolerance of homosexuality than the virulently homophobic 1950's. (Powers 122)

When *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* came out, actors like John Wayne had hold of the Hollywood political scene, and Williams used Brick as an example of the failings of the Cold War identity. At this time in history, many people could not comprehend that they could act against the grain of society (or they were too afraid). Thus, this is the reason why Brick never admits/realizes he might have had deeper feelings than friendship for Skipper and causes him to suffer a life of unhappy alcoholism. On the other hand, Joe "flourishes in the Reagan Era, a time of greater visibility and acceptance of the gay community" (Powers 124). Joe "flourishing" is not necessarily positive. The Reagan administration seemed unwilling to support homosexuals or recognize the AIDS epidemic happening during the 1980's. To some, Ronald Reagan was a wishy-washy president who rarely made his own decisions or issued orders. He was a hollow man (White 705). Joe's immersion in Republican politics and respect for Roy Cohn makes

him naive to reality. With his political stance and work as a Chief Clerk, he is discriminating and oppressing himself without even realizing it. It is only when Louis calls him out on it that he takes a second look at what he has been doing with his life.

In one of *Angels in America*'s most famous scenes, the Louis and Belize diner scene, Louis talks about the lack of actual democracy that happens in America and a hypocritical Reagan administration. In Louis' rambling there is still one prominent notion that has remained strong from the 1950s to the 1980s—heterosexual white male dominance. Louis exclaims, "Power is the object,

not being tolerated. Fuck assimilation... Oh, I mean I suppose there's the monolith of White America. White Straight Male America" (Kushner 96). Louis' attitude is what attracts him to Joe and ultimately forces Joe to face his homosexuality. When Joe finally engages in a

sexual relationship with Louis, he begins to feel free for the first time in his life. He becomes willing to accept his sexual identity and leave societal pressures behind. This is apparent in a conversation with Louis one morning:

LOUIS: Joe? So the fruity underwear you wear, that's...

JOE: A temple garment.

LOUIS: Oh my God. What's it for?

JOE: Protection. A second skin. I can stop wearing it if you...

LOUIS: How can you stop wearing it if it's a skin? Your past, your beliefs, your... (Kushner 203)

The fact Joe is willing to stop wearing his Mormon temple garment shows he is ready to take on a new identity. Joe is ready to break out of society's norms and live his life by his natural feelings. He continues to tell Louis, "I'm actually happy. Actually" (Kushner 203). This emphasizes the effect of freedom to be oneself. Joe finally can leave his inhibitions behind and not feel guilty. Unfortunately, this was not the case for Brick. While Joe acts on his feelings, Brick just stuffs his away. Brick lives in a small world of pain and alcohol and never comes to terms with his identity. The only identity he knew of himself was that of an athlete. Adding to Brick's dismay, his identity was heavily dependent on Skipper as well. Therefore, after Skipper's death and the loss of his athletic talents, Brick has nothing left. Maggie and Harper react to their husbands' identity crises in similar ways; however, the outcomes are different.

Maggie is frustrated with Brick's drinking and hatred of her, but she refuses to leave or accept he will never love her. She continuously tries to get Brick to have sex with her and he refuses. Maggie antagonizes Brick by prying about Skipper, which infuriates him. Maggie tells Brick and Skipper a truth they do not want to admit,

which leads to the death of Skipper. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, before Skipper's suicide Maggie screamed at him, "SKIPPER! STOP LOVIN' MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM HE'S GOT TO LET YOU ADMIT IT TO HIM!—one way or another!" (Williams 911). Brick blames Maggie and partly himself for the death of Skipper. Maggie clings to Brick for financial reasons but for love as well. Despite what has happened, Maggie loves Brick. Her love for him is also shown when she has sex with Skipper. She does this to try to feel closer to Brick, because she is jealous of his and Skipper's relationship. Throughout the play, Maggie tries her best to put on a front for the family to prove to everyone that her and Brick are happily married. Brick has already lost all desire, and he only cares about alcohol.

Harper is the opposite in many ways. Although both wives love their husbands, they deal with their ambiguous sexuality differently. While Maggie is a strong and abrasive character, Harper is milder; but she is aware of Joe's actions in the play (despite her valium addiction). Whereas Maggie spends the entire play trying to uphold the 1950s appearance of a "normal" marriage, Harper rebukes her role as a housewife whose husband is cold and secretive. It is important to note that I believe Joe to love Harper, just not romantically. He has a special sense of caring and love for her, but he cannot fulfill the husband role. Harper's rebellion is first seen when Joe arrives home late again after disappearing. In *Angels in America*, we see how Harper does not try to fix the family, like Maggie does.

For example, in *Angels*:

HARPER: It's late.

JOE: I had a lot to think about.

HARPER: I burned dinner.

JOE: Sorry.

HARPER: Not my dinner. My dinner was fine. Your dinner. I put it back in the oven and turned everything up as high as it could go and I watched till it burned black. It's still hot. Very hot. Want it?

JOE: You didn't have to do that.

HARPER: I know. It just seemed like the kind of thing a mentally deranged sex-starved pill-popping housewife would do. (Kushner 42)

Harper continues to confront Joe about his sexuality, much like Maggie does. However, Harper gets an admission from Joe and wants to leave him. Maggie thinks she knows Brick is homosexual, but she still wants to stay with him. Interestingly, both Maggie and Harper use one thing to try and take control of their marriages—pregnancy. Although they both are not really pregnant, they use the one thing they believe a woman can offer/use to keep a man. They both wish that a baby would reunite them and restore love and sexuality back into their marriages. Both women suffer over the loss of love from their husbands.

Through Williams' and Kushner's plays, we can see the effect history has had on the representation of homosexuality, identity and marriage.

In *Cat*, Maggie exclaims:

You know, if I thought you would never, never, never make love to me again—I would go downstairs to the kitchen and pick out the longest and sharpest knife I could find and stick it straight into my heart, I swear that I would! But one thing I don't have is the charm of the defeated, my hat is still in the ring, and I am determined to win! (Williams 892)

In *Angels*, Harper reacts in a similar way:

I don't understand why I'm not dead. When your heart breaks, you should die. But there's still the rest of you. There's your breasts, and your genitals, and they're amazingly stupid, like babies or faithful dogs, they don't get it, they just want him. Want him. (Kushner 150)

In both 1950's and 1980's America, the societal expectations of marriage and family life may not have been very different. However for Joe in the 1980's, there were many more "out" homosexuals than there were during Brick's time, which may have made it easier for Joe to admit his true feelings. When a person steps out of the role society gave them, they are looked at as abnormal. This "othering" and discrimination causes harmful consequences to the psyche. For both couples, the struggle took its toll. The institution of marriage gives couples a false sense of how each partner is supposed to act. Therefore, when Harper and Maggie are no longer wanted sexually, they completely lose their identity as wives, hence why they try to use a child to bring their husbands back into the bedroom. Childbearing has long been seen as the one thing a woman can offer. So what happens is not only Brick and Joe lose their identity, but as a direct result of the men, the women lose theirs too.

In Ranen Omer-Sherman's article "The Fate of the Other in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*," he contends:

Joe initially thinks he will go to hell for succumbing to homoerotic leanings and thinks he must kill off that buried identity, but he learns to live with the messiness of his once opposed Republican and homosexual selves. In *Angels*, radically disavowing either Self or Other wreaks terrible violence on the individual and society. (17)

The moment Brick and Joe shed their societal masculine identities, their entire existence and surroundings change. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Brick's family thinks they can control and overpower him. In *Angels in America*, Joe goes through a painful self-discovery that hurts the people he cares about the most. Both men cannot come back from where their minds have taken them. They look to father figures and mentors for advice but do not find relief. The characters Big Daddy in *Cat* and Roy Cohn in *Angels* are certainly not sympathetic in any way.

Big Daddy and Roy Cohn represent the hypocritical patriarchal rule in society. Both characters dominate the world around them. Big Daddy is disrespectful to Big

Mama and is quick to tell Brick he cannot even stand to look at her. In arguably one of the most significant parts of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Act II, Big Daddy is trying to talk sense into Brick:

BIG DADDY: All right, then let it be painful, but don't you move from that chair!—I'm going to remove that crutch...

BRICK: I can hop on one foot, and if I fall, I can crawl!

BIG DADDY: If you ain't careful you're gonna crawl off this plantation and then, by Jesus, you'll have to hustle your drinks along Skid Row!

BRICK: That'll come Big Daddy.

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 out you! (Williams 937)

Similarly, Roy tells Joe:

JOE: I left my wife. I needed to tell you.

ROY: It happens.

JOE: I've been staying with someone. Else. For a whole month now.

ROY: It happens.

JOE: With a man.

ROY: A man?

JOE: Roy, please...

ROY: SHUT UP I SAID! I want you home. With your wife. Whatever else you got going, cut it dead.

(Kushner 218-219)

Although both Big Daddy and Roy have had sexual encounters with men before, they still advise Brick and Joe to keep up appearances. This shows how much society ostracizes people who are different. Big Daddy and Roy are both successful men in their own worlds but know that they could never be free and open with their unconventional sexuality. They believe in order to be successful you must conform to society. Therefore, they desperately try to save Brick and Joe from going down what they believe to be the wrong path. One could argue Roy is doing it to save Joe from perhaps contracting the AIDS virus, but Roy is a selfish character and that is not the case. He honestly believes successful men are not homosexual. Even in the face of death, Roy acts like the ultimate hypocritical patriarchal dominating male that he is.

HENRY: Roy Cohn, you are... You have had sex with men, many many times, Roy, and one of them, or any number of them, has made you very sick. You have AIDS.

ROY: AIDS. Your problem, Henry, is that you are hung up on words, labels, that you believe they mean what they seem to mean. AIDS. Homosexual. Gay. Lesbian. You think these are names that tell you who someone sleeps with, but they don't tell you that.

HENRY: No?

ROY: No. Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only; where does an individual so identified fit

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in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simpler: clout.... Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a passionate anti-discrimination bill through City Council. Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry? (Kushner 51)

Roy's opinion here further emphasizes the "cowboy warrior" mentality set back in the 1950's. A successful man is to appear a certain way in society, and being homosexual was certainly not acceptable. Big Daddy and Roy both believe that you can have unconventional sexual encounters behind closed doors, but as long as you return to the facade of a heterosexual man, everything is fine. Unfortunately, for Brick and Joe, this is not possible. Both Brick and Joe are too tortured by their confused identities. Still, "it is also true that human society has become fossilized over time, unwilling to acknowledge the humanity of homosexuals and opposed to a more encompassing vision of America" (Omer-Sherman 22). This scene between Roy and his doctor is also important because it shows "in particular, [how] the drama spoke up for those who saw the fatal contradiction in a nation that claimed the enlightenment mantle of equality for all and yet was still bent on excluding homosexuals from the full rights of citizenship" (Omer-Sherman 10). Roy's words echo "the fatal contradiction" in such a powerful way that one cannot stop but to think about the damage societal expectations have on people. Roy's ignorant definition and opinion of homosexuality also echoes Brick and Big Daddy, because they followed the same line of thinking.

Although *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Angels in America* were written during different time periods, the audience can see how the sociopolitical tensions of each time period affected the way the characters reacted to different situations. When Big Daddy is dying and his fortune is in question, Maggie wants Brick to conform to a "normal"

marriage and have a baby to secure their place in Big Daddy's will. After acting on his sexual desires, Joe is told by Roy (his mentor) to go back to his wife and to save his career as a Chief Justice. In both plays the hierarchy and monetary values attributed to the time periods cause harm to all

the characters. Had this societal pressure and expectation not been there, maybe Skipper would still be alive and Joe would not have lost everything. Unfortunately for Joe, when he goes back to Harper, she leaves because she, unlike Maggie, cannot stand to be "clinging to the hot tin roof."

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