

# The muted ones: a study miscommunication and Isolation in Tennessee Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The truth behind communication which uncover the hidden veil of incomprehension and internal fractions is one of the highlighted metaphor in Thomas Lanier Williams III literary play Cat on a hot Tin Roof (1955) as the characters seems to suffer in exposing their reality and undressing their personality to one another. This study will be textually limited to T.L. Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), the analysis will be limited to the three key characters Margaret, Brick and Big Daddy as they reveal their lack of the basic elements of communication. Theoretically, this study will be limited to the notion of communication and possible causes of miscommunication. This study will examine the main characters in the selected play to establish their scene of communication. Moreover, this study will investigate the factors which cause the lack of communication in the selected literary play. Finally, this study will highlight the types of communicative relationships which the main characters seem to be sharing. Bricks as the protagonist of the play present the ideal example of the external and internal struggles as he displays the hardship of relationships and communicating with others even family.*

**Keywords:** Communication, Relationships, Prejudices, Mendacity, Isolation

## **1. Introduction**

The foundation of any good relationship lies within understanding and respectable communication among one another, a poor communication and isolation can cause friction within the relationship (Broderick, 1981). The method and structure of communication is being projected as a challenge to any writer who wishes to deliver the authorial intention to the audiences and the connection and easy communication between the characters themselves.

Thomas Lanier Tennessee Williams III is considered as a major name in the western universe of Drama and theatre for his works such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*(1947), *Glass Menagerie* (1944) and the most celebrated play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) which was preformed repeatedly on the American stage (Arrel, p.61). His play is considered as a personal favorite from Tennessee Williams, he also won the Pulitzer Prize of Drama

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(1955) the play highlighted the bitterness of self-limitation and the complex familial dynamics by addressing different American stereotypes within its characterization (Bauer Briski, Senata Karelina, 2002).

*Cat on a hot Tin Roof* (1955) demonstrates the disconnection between the characters as they were based in the same household, linked in heterosexual marriage and restricted with the roles of mothers, wives, and the perfect golden boy. The themes of isolation and lack of communication seems to be only a simple fraction in a multifaceted literary piece yet one that should be recognized and analyzed.

This study will be textually limited to T.L. Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), the analysis will be partial to the three key characters Margaret, Brick and Big Daddy as they reveal their lack of the basic elements of communication. Theoretically, this study will be limited to the notion of communication and possible causes of lack of communication. This study will examine the main characters in the selected play to establish their scene of communication. Moreover, this study will investigate the factors which cause the lack of communication in the selected literary play. Finally, this study will highlight the types of communicative relationships which the main characters seem to be sharing.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 *Cat on a hot Tin Roof* (1955) by Tennessee Williams**

*Cat on a hot Tin Roof* (1955) is a traditional three acts play, best described as "Aristotelian tragedy with connection of time and place over one night in various rooms" (Alexander Wensby, 2014. P.4). The play takes action in Big Daddy's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration yet the language and the plot of the family dynamic had been views and analyzed widely (Crandell, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof".117). The main characters of Big Daddy, Big Mama, Brick and Meggie the so called "no-neck monsters" as they inhabit their own gothic yet dramatic existence to perform a realistic and vivid performance covered in the name of family and home (Chris Jones, 2018).

the play display the brutal conflicts in relation to the constituent abuse, trans-aggressive sexual tension, death, isolation, disconnection and emotional scaring as the characters seems to be in constant power clash which motivates the play. Furthermore, the social classes and family dynamics fabricated the frame of the play as it emphases on the male/female struggles and the internal/external encounter.

Tennessee Williams' person as it appears in the media, reports, books and biography all had been emphasizing his sexual orientation as he was being selected to be the homosexual literary preventive (Williams "Mimorie" 4) thus the notion of sexually and psychological torment tends to be the center of the studies on his works and the main theme in his literary works (Downes Henry, 3). His plays are also being praised for their sociological and psychological realism and its accuracy in presenting the people and life (Crandel, "Echo Spring: Reflecting the Gaze of Narcissus in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a hot Tin Roof*". 427).

Bauer Briski (2002) found in eight of William's literary plays that the ideology of sexuality is a dominate theme, even when there is no sexual activities the plot impetus the different relationships among the characters that

reflects inner sexual content. The theme of frustrated homosexuality framed with heterosexual universe where the characters seems to expose their sexual-aggressiveness as mentioned in Blanche's husband founded in A Streetcar Named Desire when the characters seems to be hide and reveal their inner sexuality to the audience (Williams "Memories", 80).

Alexander Wensby (2015) argues that Williams' plays tend to focus on the male characters rather than centering its attention on the strong female figures lies within the text. The critics in any literary study have a tendency to highlight the gendered perspectives and "Williams' works are no exception" (5) the male characters and the "male experience" are being analyzed psychologically and sociologically leaving the question of the female perspective and the female experience. Nevertheless, Downes Henry study which examined the challenging role of Maggie as a gender opposition hence her role was preconceived as both female/male personas (7). The play truly didn't miss the remark of the powerful female characters and their claim to their liberal sexual existence which break the patriarchal female oppression.

Amy Brooks (2016) mentioned that Cat's "appeal is no mysterious at all" and the play which displays the contradictions of the inner emotional journey throughout its characters using vulgar laughs and despair. The survival instinct which made the play part of the American heritage as it evokes an outlandish conception of family and marriage. Ben Brantley (2017) believed that the play is still considered contemporary for it "demonstrate the poetic language which stripped the play down to its animal essence" as the play was re-performed multiple times for its modern conception of gayness and modest nudity

## **2.2 Miscommunication & Isolation**

The study of marriage and relationships are an interdisciplinary as they are linked with the elements of connection and psychology, the social and the economic status had yet became part of the issues which causes relationship problems (Jacob, 1987). Many critics classify communication as "any type of information transmission" (Beth A. Le Poire, 2005) which leaves the notion of communication responsible for unintentional performances and individuals. The concept of family communication is the most multipart concept of all since family can forum the structure of communication from affection into confrontation.

Communication is defined as the "process of transmitting information and common understanding from one person to another" (Keyton, 2011). The word itself which derived from the Latin word 'Communis' which means 'common' as the definition implies that communication requires the common understanding of the exchanged information. The processes of communication is being determined on the quality and the individuals of the communicating, and lake of the major elements can cause reduce of the communication and its effectiveness (ibid). Hence, relationships can suffer from the lake of the basic communication skills, healthy patterns which consist of specific skills that can help partners to find a link and remain positive.

Lake of communication as mentioned in Frank Finchum (2004) which makes any kind of relationships difficult and causes "negative exchanges" this makes it difficult for the partners to move beyond such difficulties. It's also

worth noting that a healthy communication held different patterns such as the nonverbal exchange and adjusting tone of speaking with eye contact can causes further communication fraction or help to solve such problems. Any lake of communication can make the patterns incompatible and causes frustration in the relationship. Compared to the non-distressed couples, the distressed patterns display more interruptions (Schaap, 1982) they are consistently criticizing and complaining from one another (Fichten & Wright, 1983; Revensdorf, Schindler, Hahlweg, and Vogel, 1984) they also think negatively and with negative explanations (e.g., “let’s just forget the whole thing”; Weiss & Tolman, 1990).

The nonverbal interaction is related with the verbal communication as couples tend to express their emotions clearly if they were happy or distressed. When the patterns are happy they display their pleasurable emotions with laughter and smiles they also tend to be more affection and display warmth. Yet when the couples are unhappy different emotions can be seen such as distress, anger, coldness and tears, being unfaithful and emotional scaring can also results from bad romance. Birchler, Weiss and Vincent (1975) found that the unhappy patterns tend to act with less humor, assent, laughter and smiling as the happy couples.

The concept of belonging which is a multidimensional social aspect in which the person relates to a certain places, things or people (Hill, 2006) when belonging becomes connectedness hence social isolation and emotional distance can haunt the individuals whether psychological and physically even both. Hence, social isolation creates the loss of place within the social group. The literature structure of the social isolation which is accompanied with the emotional manifestation of loss marginality as isolation happens in different psychological and social levels in the individuals.

### **3. Textual Analysis**

#### **3.1 Lack of Communication in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)**

The play parades the three main characters Brick, Big Daddy and Maggie as indifferent characters as they don’t share their own indifferences they prefer to keep them hidden. The characters seem to be liminal in their own space as Maggie is trapped in heterosexual marriage with no love and compassion between her and Brick. Brick find solitude in alcohol as he distances himself from everything and everyone leaving him psychologically and socially isolated from his family and his own wife “BRICK [without interest]: What are they up to, Maggie?” (p.4)

Maggie and Brick share a different type of communication as Maggie seems to be an out-front person, she speaks her mind always and she always expresses her state of mind

“Margaret’s voice is both rapid and drawling. In her long speeches she had the vocal trick of a priest delivering a liturgical chant, the lines are almost sung, always continuing a little beyond her breath so she had to gasp for another. Sometimes she intersperses the lines with a little wordless singing such as “Da-da-daaaaa”” (P.3)

Maggie doesn't seem to have problem to communicate vocally and physically, yet emotionally she and Brick appear to be disconnected. Tennessee Williams' interpretations of the human interaction and their disability to communicate is only one of the many tragic element in the modern social structure; thus, the characters in the play are aware of their nonexistence communication although they are a family yet they believe that such things are acceptable since it's the modern era.

Brick's personal construction which is differ from Maggie's as he appear to be imitated to himself only, unable to express his own ideas and emotions out loud. Both Big Daddy and Brick love and care for each other yet they constantly hurt each other, for them pain and disconnecting is better than facing each other and dealing with the harsh reality of life.

“BRICK: Fresh'nin' up my drink.

BIG DADDY: Son, you know you got a real liquor problem?

BRICK: Yes, sir, yes, I know.

BIG DADDY: Is that why you quit sports-announcing, because of this liquor problem?

BRICK: Yes, sir, yes, sir, I guess so.

[He smiles vaguely and amiably at his father across his replenished drink.]

BIG DADDY: Son, don't guess about it, it's too important.

BRICK [vaguely]: Yes, sir.

BIG DADDY: And listen to me, don't look at the damn chandelier...

[Pause. Big Daddy's voice is husky.]” (P.43)

Big Daddy as mentioned being the fatherly figure won't allow his son to throw his life and ambition away, thus Big Daddy tried to communicate with his son and to show his love and affection to him by telling him to stop wasting his time drinking and to show compassion to his wife.

The lake of communication is also manifested in the type of relationship in which Brick and Maggie seem to share. Across the play Margaret became increasingly irritated and frustrated from her marriage life and her husband. Brick doesn't seem to seek any kind of relationship with his wife as he no longer cares for her and her needs hence he doesn't wish to understand nor communicate with her at all.

“BRICK: Did you say something?

MARGARET: I was goin' t' say something--that I get--lonely.--Very!

BRICK: Ev'rybody gets that..

MARGARET: Living with someone you love can be lonelier--than living entirely alone!--if the one that y' love doesn't love you....

[There is a pause. Brick hobbles downstage and asks, without looking at her:]

BRICK: Would you like to live alone, Maggie?

[Another pause: then--after she has caught a quick, hurt breath:]

MARGARET: No!--God!--I wouldn't!”

(P.9)

Margaret also suffers from communication as she is unable to communicate directly and clearly to Brick; therefore, Brick and Maggie's relationship is built upon the false foundation of love and affection "MARGARET: Understanding is needed on this place" (P.80). Brick's lack of communication comes from the psychological isolation which lies within his own identity confusion; throughout the play he displays different types of characters limited to his own prejudice which destroyed the personal integrity of marriage and loyalty. When Brick was just a young lad the social and familial factors surrounding him was built upon the external affection for his athletic abilities and his physical appearance. Such shallow adoration caused the footballer character insecurities and adopted his own emotional crisis of identity. Brick's physical appearances were the relations for his lack of communication and being emotionally isolated as he was loved and judged by his family and society for it. Brick's identity which was designed around the fact that he was the famous footballer who got to marry the most beautiful woman in the town, such facts were causing limitation to Bricks rather than set him free. He started acting in diffidence as he seek to hide his true emotions and his true self from others that won't accept him and cast him away for his indifference.

"BRICK: Frig Mae and Gooper, frig all dirty lies and liars!--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. Oh, once in a while he put his hand on my shoulder or I'd put mine on his, oh, maybe even, when we were touring the country in pro-football an' shared hotel-rooms we'd reach across the space between the two beds and shake hands to say goodnight, yeah, one or two times we ..." (P.64)

Tennessee Williams' personal life is no different from Brick's theatrical life; William was known for his sexual orientation across the United States thus, he was treated coldness and he was later cast own from his own family and society. Tennessee Williams' character Brick break and expresses such limited as he was defined by his job, social class, marriage and sexual orientation without taking into consideration that his character and his personality might goes beyond such limitations.

Brick social mendacious space which was surrounding everything and everyone, such settings that didn't cared enough for the truth and communication resulted the element of lack of communication and isolation with and within the characters. Brick seems mendacious about his own sexual orientation which causes psychological scaring in the family. The secret of his homosexuality that is kept secret from everyone and even Brick himself as he seem to deny his own nature. Brick keeps on mentioning that his relationship with Skipper was only just male friendship "Well, they're mistaken, it was! It was a pure an' true thing an' that's not normal" (P.64).

Williams' present Brick's revelation on the stage by using a phone call from the beyond to help evoking Skipper's final scene and his true feelings to his friend. Brick starts to confess his and he was only met with harsh rejection. Furthermore, when Big Daddy gives his final words to his son he was disgusted by the lies and illusion surrounding him, Brick started to have breakdown and causing him Trauma. Brick dug his best friend grave and hide himself in rather than admitting the truth.

Brick is the favorite son for Big Daddy and Big Mama and he is the one that have the love and affection of his family, also he is the husband of the beautiful and young Maggie. The play depicts Brick as charming yet unsympathetic character to those around him. The notion of footballer which is viewed as the contrast of homosexual, the American culture displays masculinity of the man as the same as being athletic and plays football such as Brick yet 'footballer' is used to create the external identity and external masculinity before the others. Such person which was created about Brick seems to impression him more and more with an identity that he rejects.

Brick uses alcohol to escape his reality and to forget his own problems, when he is plastered with alcohol it's the only time when he is physically and emotionally isolated and relaxed. Brick believed that Big Daddy didn't love him and that his own worth was laid upon the fact that he was in a good physical shape and he was rich only. Brick through that his economical and physical appearances was the only reason that anyone could love him, Big Daddy never throughout the play displayed any affection or interest to anyone of his own kin.

Brick attempts to create his own version of reality but alcohol and adopting unhealthy life style. Big Daddy never had a reason to suspect his own son and the real reason behind his drinking problem yet feeling isolated and not being understood by his closest people created the empty existence which Brick seems to live in.

Brick and Maggie's marriage is not the only one suffering throughout the play as Big Daddy and big Mama seem to be disconnected from each other. The two individuals lived their entire life together and yet they are unable to understand and sympathize with one another

“BIG MAMA: Oh, Big Daddy, oh, oh, oh, Big Daddy!

BIG DADDY: What's the matter with you?

BIG MAMA: In all these years you never believed that I loved you??

BIG DADDY: Huh?

BIG MAMA: And I did, I did so much, I did love you!--I even loved your hate and your hardness, Big Daddy! [She sobs and rushes awkwardly out on to the gallery.]

BIG DADDY [to himself]: Wouldn't it be funny if that was true ...” (P.39)

Big Mama tried to make an effort to fix her marriage and to communicate with her husband yet all her efforts were met with constant rejection and laughter. Big Daddy never acted like a father and a husband to both Brick and Big Mama hence created the nonexistence relationship between them. The parents and the children developed their own sense of isolation and the created their tragic relationships by enabling them to talk to one another or to communicate.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Communication and understanding each other is the foundation of any good relationship, such important factors seems to be lacking in Tennessee Williams' play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) the play demonstrates diverse notions and social ideologies of isolation, love, relationships, identity and lake of

communication which helped the characters to escape their own imitated existence and to fabricate their own identity.

Throughout the plot of the play the main characters display a diverse method in which they remain unfaithful and disconnected from each other. As the plot set in Big Daddy's estate and the house in which they all grew up in and started their lives in, it seems only appropriate that they reveal their own characters and identity within the same old walls. The family enjoys the whispers behind the curtains and the conspiracies to take over the house after Big Daddy death, the family appears to care about appearances, money and lands rather than love, affection and communication. The play shows the non-interactive relationship in the family as they lie to each other and they hide their true reality from one another. Brick and Maggie relationship is built on the wrong foundation and seems to be lacking different things to which one can barely call it a relationship. Big Daddy tough Brick to keep to himself and to hide his true self and emotions from everyone, thus Big Daddy and Brick's non-existence relationship came crashing down when Big Daddy dies leaving Brick alone with lies and hidden identity. All the characters have their own problems with communication, Maggie has the mind and the will to display her affections publicly and loudly yet she doesn't get the response which she hopes for. Brick losses his sense of selfhood and identity in the bottom of the bottle as he uses alcohol to avoid everything and everyone. Big Daddy instead of acceptance and communication with his son and his wife he acts with coldness and uninterested in their life and their problems.

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