

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Tennessee Williams



About the play

Set in the Mississippi Delta on a wealthy plantation, the focus is initially set on the stagnant marriage of Brick and Margaret. The secret Brick carries and his lost hopes of being a football star haunt him and affects his relationships with his family. Meanwhile Big Daddy has been diagnosed with terminal cancer. His family hide it from him but it is Brick who reveals the truth.

Context

The setting of the Deep South brings with it all the complicated social hierarchy of a privileged white family. They still have servants and clearly their wealth was supported by the ownership of slaves at one time in history. The racial inequalities of the 1950s are at play here. Against this background the lies and secrets of the Pollitt family are played out. The grapple for wealth amongst the selfish offspring, the failure to live up to expectations and the spectre of cancer create a disillusioned atmosphere that contrasts with the sun of the delta.

First performed at the Morosco theatre on Broadway in 1955, some initial changes were made by the director, Elia Kazan, which led to two versions of the final act of the play. The film of 1958 was highly acclaimed, but some critics felt it simplified the real issues at the heart of the play.

Main characters

Brick - Brick wrestles with his inner demons and uses alcohol to hide away from them.

Margaret - His attractive wife, who is disillusioned with her relationship with Brick but is desperate to fulfil society's expectations of them as a couple.

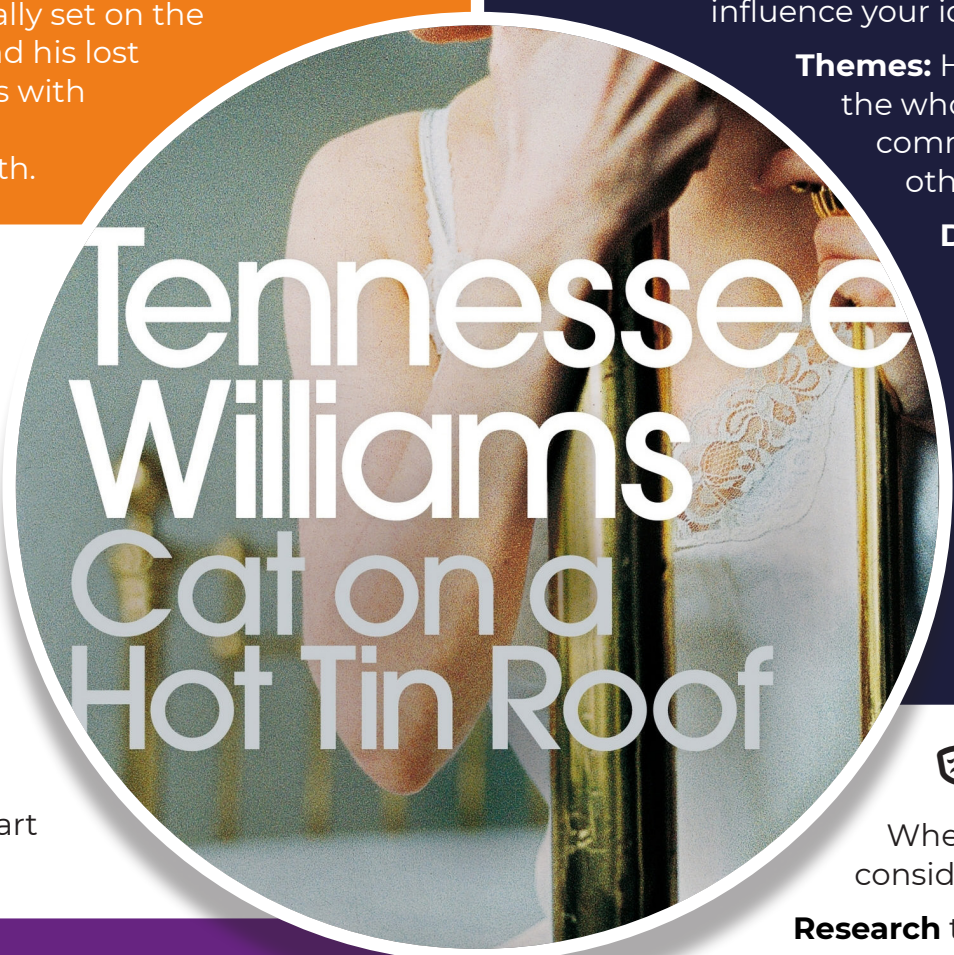
Gooper - Brick's brother, who has fulfilled all his duties as a son and feels he deserves his share of his inheritance.

Mae - His wife. Supports her husband in his intentions. A Mother of a brood of children.

Big Daddy - The Patriarch of the family.

Big Mama - The Matriarch of the family.

The Children - An annoying presence who crudely emphasise that Brick and Maggie have no children.



Design

When approaching the text as a designer, here are some things to consider:

Concept: What is your concept? Production style? Chosen historical period? Research this and how it might influence your design ideas.

How might Williams' detailed stage directions [see Notes for the designer page xv] influence your ideas?

Themes: How are they going to be expressed in your design ideas for the whole play and from scene to scene ? How can your ideas help to communicate what you know about the characters and relationship with others in the play?

Design skills include:

Set & props e.g. Stage space & shape, location, set construct, furniture and large props

Costume e.g. style, historical period, colour, texture of fabric and embellishments

Hair and Makeup e.g. style, colour, accessories, body makeup

Lighting e.g.type of lighting, position of lanterns, colour and intensity

Sound e.g. type of sound (music, sound effects or soundscape), intensity, length of cue and use of effects on the sound

Acting

When approaching the text as an actor, here are some things to consider:

Research the character throughout the play and before its action.

Acting style - This could be naturalistic but versions of the play have used a more exaggerated acting style to emphasise the realism intended by Williams. The exposure of the hidden reality beneath.

Explore the relationships between characters in the given circumstances of the play and each scene.

What are the motivations of the character to behave the way they do? Do they change? Why? What do they really mean when they engage in dialogue or are silent? - Subtext

How do they communicate this to an audience?

Vocal skills e.g. pitch, tone, rhythm, pausing, emphasis

Physical skills e.g. facial expression, posture, gesture, the use of physical levels, the speed of movement

Directing: [in the exam the element of **directing** will focus entirely on the relationship a director has with the actors.]

What type of acting style will be used? What are the conventions of this style and how might you use them in rehearsal with actors?

How might they move in the space? What do the proxemics between characters convey about their relationship? How could you as a director show the relationship between characters in the way they interact physically and vocally? How important is their entrance or exit from a scene and how could you get your actors to communicate this?

Some themes: Alcoholism, Homosexuality, Mendacity, Sex and Fertility, Social Values and Expectations, Wealth and Privilege, Failed Dreams