CHAPTER - IV

Theme of the Plays

_Cat on a Hot Tin Roof_, Tennessee Williams’ 1955 Pulitzer Prize winning drama’s focuses the brunt of its powerful attack on Brick Pollitt's retreat from life. In this modern American play the ten basic components of existentialism are readily apparent, and are overtly manipulated to present a conscious struggle with nonbeing. Williams has drawn upon all ten elements of a unique existential-familial form to project his concern for those "beautiful people who give up with such grace."¹ He has translated these ten components:
consciousness, alienation, an affirmation of life, freedom and the
creation of one's own being, angst, dasein, the call of care, human
relationships and spiritual growth, authentic values, and concrete
experience; into a distinctive dramatic form. Williams presents a
unified amalgamation of these views in his treatment of the
dramatic constitutnets: subject, theme, dramatic action,
characterization, dialogue, symbol, set and lighting design, and a
vision of reality. Just as O'Neill develops a spiritual quest in his
*Long Day's Journey into Night*, a quest replete with physical
reminders of consciousness and nonbeing in its establishment of an
environment characterized by the encroaching darkness, Williams
also develops an impassioned family discourse concerned with
nonbeing. He fashions a tempestuous con-frontation between
members of the Pollitt family on a summer's night during the
celebration of Big Daddy's sixty-fifth birthday. A correlation is
made, at least implied, between Big Daddy's eminent demise,
Brick's seclusion in the bottle and the pretense of the family
member's lives.

As has been demonstrated in an examination of O'Neill's *Long
day's Journey* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, the fusion of
these existential components and their conversion into a unified existential-familial dramatic form presents a distinctive vision of reality. The contention here is that Williams' treatment of these same ten existential components and their conversion into the dramatic constituents presents an identical vision of reality, a vision which points to the emergence of an American existential dramatic form. An examination of the critical literature which details Williams' manipulation of the dramatic form in his Cat on a Hot Tin Roof provides a substantial foundation of evidence corroborating such a thesis. This type of overview illuminates the existential foundation of the play.

Eric Bentley in his What is Theatre?, Explores Williams' concern with the inner man, the conscious man, in deference to the external events of the Pollitts' lives. Bentley refers to the finite collaboration between the playwright Williams, set designer Jo Mielziner and director Elia Kazan. In so doing, Bentley identifies Williams' treatment of the physical environment, aligning it with a form concerned with a spiritual necessity. He comments on the playwrights' treatment of characterization, including the development of focus, gesture and spatial relationships which point
to the crystalization of an existential dramatic form. As Bentely notes:

Jo Mielziner’s setting for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* consists of a square and sloping platform with one of its corners, not one of its sides, jutting out towards the audience. A corner of a ceiling is above, pointing upstage. On the platform are minimum furnishings for a bed-sitting-room. Around the room, steps and space suggest the out-of-doors. The whole stage is swathed in ever-changing light and shade; at the outset ribbed light and shade projected on the front curtain suggest sun-light filtering through Venetial blinds.²

Bentley intimates that such an emphasis upon light and shadow working in conjunction with a physical setting removed from the detail of surface reality, promotes a type of drama aimed at externalizing the inner man. This recognition by Bentley aligns Williams' drama with an existential perspective and the subjective nature of consciousness.

*Such is the world of Elia Kazan, as we know it from his work on plays by more authors than one. The general scheme is that not only of Streetcar Named Desire but*
also of Death of a Salesman: an exterior that is also an interior--but, more important, a view of man's exterior that is also a view of his interior, the habitat of his body and the country of his memories and dreams. A theatre historian would probably call this world a combination of naturalism and expressionism, yet one has no impression that it was arrived at by mixture, or even by choice of styles; it is a by-product, or perhaps end product of a certain sort of work which has its own history and identity. It is one of the distinctive creations of American theatre.\textsuperscript{3}

Bentley correlates William's development of dramatic action and Kazan's emphasis upon tableaux as integral elements of a type of drama concerned with consciousness. In describing Kazan's management of the dramatic flow of the script, Bentley states:

He has departed further from naturalism: just as there is less furniture and less scenery, so there is a less natural handling of actors, a more conscious concern with stagecraft, with pattern, with form. Attention is constantly called to the the tableau, to what, in movies, is called the
individual frame... When the man lifts his crippled son off the floor, the position is held a long moment as for a time exposure.4

This concentration upon existence and consciousness, upon the mental and emotional life of the characters and a struggle with an individual confrontation with nonbeing, supplies the dramatic impetus for Williams' play. Big Daddy confesses that his life has been irrevocably altered as a result of his brush with death. It has heightened his self-awareness and his desire to establish a meaningful rapport and a truthful relationship with his son, Brick. It has also urged him to live in the present, partaking full of the joys of life. The self-disclosure he makes to his son in Act Two presents a man turning away from the "poundin', 'smashin', drivin',"5 that has consumed his life:

BIG DADDY

Y'know how much I'm worth? Guess how much I'm worth!

Close on ten million in cash an' blue chip stocks, outside, mind you, of twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile! But a man can't buy back
his life with it, he can't buy his life back, his life with it when his life has been spent, that's one thing not offered in the Europe fire-sale or in the American markets or any markets on earth, a man can't buy life with it, he can't buy back his life when his life is finished ... I'm wiser and sadder, Brick, for this experience which I have just gone through.6

Richard B. Vowles in his article "Tennessee Williams: The World of His Imagery," which appears in a 1958-59 issue of The Tulane Drama Review also cites Williams preference for a physical environment reflecting an inner reality as a primary factor of the play's structure. Vowles connects this reliance upon the "unrealistic", as he refers to it, with a unified dramatic design, particularly with Williams' manipulation of dramatic action:

Appropriately, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is the most fluid of Williams' plays. The pace of entrance and exits on an expressionistic stage is partly responsible for this. It is not simply as Williams suggests, that the set should be unrealistic, that the wall below the ceiling should dissolve mysteriously into air; but characters seem to flow almost
too intricately, in and out of the play, making a kind of
arabesque of the action.\(^7\)

William Sharps's "An Unfashionable View of Tennessee Williams," identifies Williams' use of the individual's self-awareness, his heightened perception of his own being in the work in conjunction with recognition of his own mortality. To sharp, these features of William's approach are fundamental components of his dramatic style and are to be found in some combination in the majority of his plays:

\[\text{Like a most real writers of tragedy, Williams sees man as something unique, special in the universe. The problem in his plays is how the human being can realize this uniqueness... Williams' heros and heroines are confused, they are naive, they fear the grave. Their intelligence is limited, their goals are unsure, but their real struggle for meaning in life is a real struggle that has its parallels in our own living experience.}^{8}\]

Sy Kahn's "Through a Glass Menagerie Darkly: The World of Tennessee Williams," does not allude to the existential aspects of
Williams' work, but makes this correlation explicit. Kahn identifies a pervasive threat found in the majority of Williams' plays. This "horror of nonbeing" is synonymous with the existential concept of angst:

* A second major theme in Williams' work and world is the horror of non-being. Often this is rendered as a sense of an underlying and pervasive terror, not quite explicable or explicit, but frequently felt by the characters who feel haunted, spooked by a sense of impending evil.*

Kahn reinforces his perception of the centrality of this existential theme of angst in the spectrum of Williams' plays. He quotes the playwright's own intent in this regard, emphasizing this undirected fear as a primary component of Williams' approach to dramatic form:

* As far as we know, as far as their exists any kind of empiric evidence, there is no way to beat the game of being against non-being, in which non-being is the predestined victor on realistic levels.*
Kahn also identifies Williams' manipulation of characterization as a function of his concern with nonbeing. He observed that Williams presented characters whose fates are determined by two related factors, an awareness of nonbeing and a determination to assert their humanity through their adherence to authentic values. As Kahn states:

*Williams' lively awareness that death and perhaps nothingness, are the ultimate destiny accounts for his sympathy for those characters who desperately cling to delicate, personal ideals, who assert their "beingness" even though their lives are brief candles doomed to darkness.*

Certainly this recognition of the fear of nonbeing in Williams' work, its emergence in all aspects of his *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* including characterization, theme, set design and dramatic action, and its direct relationship to the development of value systems occupying a central role in the dialogue in plays like *Cat*, provide ample proof of Williams' management of these existential concepts. But it is Kahn's examination of the prevalence of sense of isolation pervading Williams' work, a sense of absolute alienation that
supplies the most conclusive corollary between existential tenets and Williams' creation of dramatic form. Again Kahn quotes the playwright's own recognition of the forces operative in his work. "Each of us is sentenced to solitary confinement in our own skins for life," Williams observed. Kahn draws upon Williams' remarks in the playwright's article "Person to Person", in which Williams describes his characters in terms of "the outcry of prisoner to prisoner from the cell in solitary where each is confined for duration of life."

Brooks Atkinson supplies an additional interpretation of Williams' development of dramatic form which points to his manipulation of existential tenets to project a dramaturgy of the mind, consciousness butted up against the menacing possibility of nonbeing. In his original review of Cat which appears in the March 25, 1955, issue of The New York Times, Atkinson addresses this overt externalization of the human psyche. He addresses Williams' desire to dramatize the individual's necessity to make contact with another member of the family and thereby dispell his isolation. He also relates this thematic tendency to a specific production style in
which the playwright has created extended dialogues characterized by their sense of detachment. These exchanges emphasize the isolation of each family member. They are in many instances addressed directly to the audience, reinforcing this sense of personal alienation. Atkinson states:

*He is interested soley in exploring minds.* **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof** is a delicatley wrought exercise in human communication. His characters try to escape from the loneliness of their private lives into some form of understanding. The truth invariably terrifies them. That is the one thing they cannot face or speak.

The can find comfort in each other only by falling back on lies--social lies, lies about health, lies about the past, lies about the future.

*Most of the play is written in long dialogues without dramatic artifice. Occasionally the actors speak directly to the audience without reference to the other characters.*

Richard F. Leavitt comments on this same emphais upon the individual psyche, isolation and the spiritual deprivation of Williams’ characters as a result of their inability to make contact
with one another. In his *The World of Tennessee Williams* he states, "He would become a spokesman not for the oppressed class, but for the repressed individual."¹⁵ And in comparing Williams' work to Checkhov's, Leavitt observed:

> *Both writers share the same sense of the isolation of human beings and their tragic inability to communicate with each other. As Checkhov's milieu was the dying aristocracy of feudal Russia, so Williams celebrates the antebellum South.*¹⁶

Noted drama critic Bernard Dukore provides an overview of *Cat* in his article "The Cat Has Nine Lives," which appears in a 1963 issue of *The Tulane Drama Review*. Dukore's assessment of the play is not limited to one or two facets of the work, but seeks to examine William's use of imagery, dialogue, characterization, theme and dramatic action. Unlike the majority of critics who have dismissed any investigation of the play's dramatic form after a cursory examination, isolating one or two elements of the script, Dukore provides a unified, comprehensive interpretation of the play.
Dukore points to the existential nature of the dramatic work when he states:

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* deals with death ... and with life.

As Reverend Tooker says at one point, "the Stork and the Reaper are running neck and neck!" The play shows the process of life (growing older, procreating, dying) as it continues in its cycles.\(^{17}\)

It is death, the constant translation and reference to it in each facet of the play which Dukore feels Williams has set at center stage. As Dukore states," ... death serves to offset and to highlight life."\(^{18}\) He also points to Williams' introduction to the play, his inclusion of the poet Dylan Thomas's poem on the title page as an added verification of Williams' intent:

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,*

*Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears*  
*I pray.*  
*Do not go gentle into that good night.*  
*Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.*\(^{19}\)
This overview of the critical literature addressing William's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, although it does not refer to existentialism by name as an organized philosophical perspective, does isolate and identify scattered components of existential ideology. An in-depth analysis of Williams' play, applying the ten major elements of an existential perspective to Williams' conception of dramatic form, his manipulation of the specific dramatic constituents: subject, theme, dramatic action, symbol, dialogue, characterization, set and lighting design, and stage reality; will supply conclusive proof of the playwright's employment of an existential dramatic form. This approach to the work consolidates and expands the critical appraisal of previous scholars. It also offers conclusive proof of Williams' use of a distinct dramatic form in *Cat*, a form virtually identical to the one employed by Eugene O'Neill in *A Long Day's Journey into Night* and Arthur Miller in his *Death of a Salesman*. Such an examination offers an insight into the prevalence of such a form in American dramaturgy.

Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* encompasses the events transpiring in the upstairs bed-sitting-room of a prosperous Southern plantation on one sultry summer's evening. The lives of
the wealthy Pollitt family are concentrated into one stormy night as each member of the family address Big Daddy's impending death and Brick's death-in-life, his withdrawal and growing dependence upon alcohol. Physical action is minimized as the conversation between family members dominates the plot, with these two topics preempting other concerns. Williams has chosen as the subject for his play the malignant and deceitful exchanges between members of the Pollitt family. As death creeps in like a black cloud casting a menacing shadow over the family, it is the inescapable possibility of nonbeing ravaging both Big Daddy's and Brick's lives which Williams addresses. It is this possibility, this threat compounded by the "mendacity" afflicting the lives of the family members and their pathetic inability to contact one another truthfully which fan the flames of conflict in William's *cat*. This juncture of nonbeing and family relationships permeates the drama. Act I is composed almost exclusively of a conversation between Maggie and Brick in which they discuss Big Daddy's cancer and Brick's death-in-life, i.e., his life-denying retreat into the bottle. Williams employs the disintegrating line of communication between family members and their reliance upon pretense, what Big Daddy calls "mendacity," as
the subject for his **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof**. It is the combination of these two corrosive factors which eats away at the spiritual fiber of each member of the family. This damning combination carries with it the threat of nonbeing that both Big Daddy and Brick lament. This emphasis is made clear early in the play as Brick and Maggie discuss Big Daddy's condition:

**BRICK**

*Big Mama said he wasn’t that the report was okay.*

**MARGARET**

*That’s what she thinks because she got the same story that they gave Big Daddy. And was just as taken in by it as he was, poor things ... But tonight they’re going to tell her the truth about it. When Big Daddy goes to bed, they’re going to tell her that he is dying of cancer. It’s malignant and it’s terminal.*

**BRICK**

*Does Big Daddy know it?*

**MARGARET**

*Hell, do they ever know it? Nobody says, ”You’re dying.” You have to fool them. They have to fool themselves.*
In Act II, the quarrelsome family gathers briefly before Big Daddy dismisses them to talk privately with his son, Brick. Once again the subject of Williams' drama gains impetus as it occupies the central topic of conversation between father and son. As Big Daddy explains how his brush with death has altered his life, Williams once again reiterates his central focus of nonbeing, the intimate knowledge of it erupting within the family and the sense of consciousness it evokes:

*BIG DADDY*

*Life is important. There's nothing else to hold onto. A man that drinks is throwing his life away. Don't do it, hold onto your life. There's nothing else to hold onto ...*  

Big Daddy berates the pretense of his own existence telling his son, "What do you know about this mendacity thing? Hell! I could write a book on it!" It is from this thread that Williams weaves his theme. Jean-Paul Sartre's perception of consciousness has been translated from the abstraction of philosophical discourse to the concrete dramatic presentation Williams creates. "Existence precedes essence," as Big Daddy and Brick have lived their lives
with little if any knowledge of their own being. Both have followed a
course life has laid out for them, reacting almost animalistically to
the forces shaping their lives.

Bernard Dukore addresses Williams' development of a
thematic emphasis in the play in his article "The Cat Has Nine
Lives." Dukore stresses the strained relationships between family
members, their sense of isolation and their struggle with nonbeing
as primary components of Williams' drama. He comments upon
Williams' designation of the characters in terms of their family role
as a verification of Williams' presentation of a theme jointly
cconcerned with the family and human contact and with an
affirmation of life in the face of non-being. Dukore states:

Williams is concerned with the mainstream of life, with the
continuatin of life. This means not only aging, but also
procreating, fathering a family. To copulate is to affirm life.
The names are in the play mirror Williams' concern with
procreation and the family, with the mainstream of life.
Only Brick and Maggie are referred to almost exclusively
by their given names or diminutives thereof. The other
adults in the family are designated primarily according to
their functions in the Human Family: Big Daddy, Big Mama, Brother Man, and Sister Woman. Throughout the play, there is an insistence on procreation, the greatness of fertility, the affirmation of life.\textsuperscript{24}

Williams stresses his concern for a conscious affirmation of life in deference to the death-in-life existence Brick has adopted. Big Daddy tells Brick, "Life is important. There's nothing else to hold onto."\textsuperscript{25} The haranguing and bickering of the Pollitt family, Big Daddy's "probing at the sore" which keeps Brick locked in seclusion is indicative of William's employment of an existential theme. He has introduced death into the family home as a harbinger of truth to dispel the "mendacity" of the family's existence. It is this possibility of nonbeing which awakens Big Daddy and moves him to jolt his son to some awareness of the life he is throwing away. As Maggie tells Brick, "... human beings dream of life everlasting."\textsuperscript{26} It is this charade which condemns the family to the petty squabbles over money and power. Although Big Daddy has accumulated vast material wealth, he has yet to make out a will. This procrastination signals his initial ignorance of his own relationship with nonbeing.
But death becomes a vital force in Big Daddy's life, a catalyst moving him toward a sense of consciousness as he begins to evaluate his own existence:

**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 get 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. 27*
It is this omnipresent force, this threat hanging over the family which gives the play its tremendous impact, its focus. Every facet of the production revolves around this central axis. From this thematic thread Williams develops his drama of confrontation. For Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is a poignant confrontation with nonbeing. "The Reaper," as Reverend Tooker refers to death, has shaken Big Daddy from the mundane "poundin" of his life. Even Big Mama comes to a personal relization of nonbeing and the light this enevitability sheds upon the equality of existence:

BIG MAMA

Tonight Brick looks like he used to look when he was a little boy, just like he did when he played wild games and used to come home all sweaty and pink-cheeked and sleepy, with his--red curls shining ... Time goes by so fast. Nothin' can outrun it. Death commences too early--almost before you're half-acquainted with life --you meet the other.28

Williams has translated the existential concept of consciousness into concrete dramatic form. He has adapted this philosophical ideology to the stage, employing it as a primary
thematic thrust in his *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. William Spanos describes this same phenomenon in his *A Case-Book on Existentialism*. He states:

> As terrible as the threat of annihilation is for the existentialist, it often becomes a paradoxically benign agent. For the face to face encounter with death clarifies the absurdity of the human condition and thus activates what Heidegger calls "concern" (Sorage), or what might be called the interrogative mood--the mood that distinguishes man from beast and stone. In other words, the confrontation humanizes the being who like the biblical Job, becomes perilously like the dead objects in the universe of things in his effort to escape death and the absurd.29

The ultimate crisis, the possibility of nonbeing, Big Daddy's introduction to nothingness and Brick's loss of self, his loss of identity resulting from the death of his friend Skipper, forces both men to examine their own lives. It is this impetus which moves the drama forward. The crumbling lattice of family relationships gives way to the pressures of Big Daddy's bout with death and Brick's
struggle with his own self-images. As the scent of death increases, it becomes apparent, as Walter Kerr points out, that this "continued probing at the sore,"\textsuperscript{30} evolves as the raison d'etre for Williams' \textbf{Cat}. In his article "Shutout" Kerr differentiates between the events in the drama and the thematic emphasis Williams consistently develops:

\textit{In a vast plantation bedroom, with the lush greenery of the finest land 'this side of the Valley Nile' barely visible through billowing white curtains, a father and son are having a nervous, finally passionate private conversion.}

\textit{They have been interrupted now and again by a visiting preacher simply searching for a bathroom, by greedy in-laws eager to make their presences felt before father Big Daddy dies of the cancer that is eating away at him. But Big Daddy has roared them all down, banished them to any balcony he could sweep them onto, and then continued to probe at the sore that has made his son, Brick, an idle, perhaps impotent, drunk.}\textsuperscript{31}
It is this urgency, this tenacity of man who has met death and who is determined to hand onto life and to see his son take hold of his life once again that puts the characters through their paces. Big Mama and Maggie also take part in this revival and celebration of life, attempting to reclaim their men from the dead. It is this knowledge which stirs the passions of those concerned. Just as Williams begins his play with Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night," he ends it with the same thematic emphasis incorporating the prerequisite existential tenet of consciousness. Maggie closes the action with:

MARGARET

Oh, you weak, beautiful people who give up with such grace. What you need is someone to take hold of you—gently, with love, and hand your life back to you, like something gold you let go of—and I can! I'm determined to do it—and there's nothing more determined than a cat on a tin roof—is there? Is there, Baby?

Although critics like Eric Bentley connect William's Cat with a type of interior drama externalizing the inner man, and Sy Kahn
identifies the fear of nonbeing as a primary motivating force in the play, no study to date has pursued an investigation of the existential-familial dramatic form the playwright employs. For this reason, an inclusion of a broad spectrum of the critical literature which addresses Williams' use of specific existential tenets will provide an additional verification of the existential foundation of the play. This type of inclusion compliments an examination of Williams’s manipulation of dramatic constituents.

Just as Williams' thematic thrust points to an existential form, his development of dramatic action in the play also signals a conversion on this philosophical perspective into dramatic form. The scope of dramatic action, far from being static, is not characterized by a preponderance of overt events, physical actions that propel the characters toward a central crisis. The crisis exists and is set forth as the play opens. "Big Daddy's dying of cancer," as Maggie tells Brick at the beginning of the play and Brick emerges on stage maintaining a physical and emotional "detachment" from the rest of the family. He continues to consume the stash of "Echo Springs" he taps in Act I. The sequence of dramatic action Williams has devised consists of a series of dredged up moments fraught
with emotion. These instances seem to shed some light on the mysteries of life. These events, tasted touched and experienced again in the telling of the tale, illuminate the "mendacity" of the present circumstances of Big Daddy's and Brick's lives.

Williams has chosen conversation as the optimal medium to stir the crisis toward some resolve. In so doing, he presents in concrete form the externalization of individual consciousness. For both Brick and Big Daddy, isolated on an otherwise empty stage framed by walls which "dissolve mysteriously into thin air,"\(^{35}\) share the seeds of their innermost fears. "Have you ever been scared? I mean have you ever felt downright terror of something?"\(^{36}\) Big Daddy asks Brick. It is not that the dialogue is used traditionally to encapsulate the necessary bits of information, the clues necessary to cement the fabric of the drama. It is this impassioned and frail individual attempt to share the self and to reach out to another human being which exposes the solitary nature of the Pollitts' lives. Big Daddy uses conversation as a means of dispelling the spiritual cell both he and Brick are sentenced to.
Act I is composed almost entirely of a conversation between husband and wife as Maggie attempts to shake Brick from the emotional lethargy threatening their marriage. William's design reflects an emphasis not upon events, but upon the internal turmoil of the family members. His use of conversation as a means of exposing the pretense of the Politts' lives and of getting at the self is indicative of his manipulation of dramatic action to present a dramatic form concerned with consciousness. The frustrated exchanges between Maggie and Brick in Act I reveal Williams' unique combination of dialogue and dramatic action to reflect the playwright's desire to strip away the dead outer layer of skin keeping Brick captive. As Maggie tells Brick:

MAGGIE

Laws of silence don't work ... When something is festering in your memory or your imagination, laws of silence don't work, it's just like shutting a door and locking it on a house on fire in hopes of forgetting that the house is burning. But not facing a fire doesn't put it out. Silence about a thing just magnifies it. It grows and festers in silence, becomes malignant....37
Maggie keeps "picking at the sore" that has spiritually immobilized Brick. She prods and probes, inciting her husband to some semblance of an impassioned response concerning his suspected homosexual relationship with his friend Skippen. Williams has adapted Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the conscious individual's responsibility for his own being to the stage. He has translated this existential tenet into his joint manipulation of dialogue and dramatic action. As Sartre has stated:

*But if existence really does precede essense, man is responsible for what he is. Thus existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him.*

In Act II, Big Daddy dismisses the family so that he can have a private conversation with his son, Brick. Big Daddy, "a Mississippiired neck" given to profanity and vulgarity, is a painfully blunt man determined to have an honest talk with his son, to reach out to him and to set things straight between them at long last. For this aging patriarch of the Pollitt family has glimpsed death and that encounter causes him to reach out to his son. He tries
desperately to retrieve Brick from the "moral paralysis" consuming his life. Big Daddy casts a side the glories and the failures of the past and urges his son toward some realization of the present. He confides in Brick that his brush with cancer has revealed the folly of always living for tomorrow, when tomorrow is no longer a given, but only a possibility. Once again, Williams has devised a scheme of dramatic action that is synonomous with his employment of dialogue in the play. Both are aimed at a type of penetration to cut through the trivial nature of the family's existence, to force Brick from his alcoholic stupor to a vital recognition of the present. Big Daddy is relentless in his effort to contact Brick and to share the present moment, however frightening, with his son. Williams has incorporated the existential tenet of dasein into his development of dramatic action. Martin Heidegger described this facet of an existential perspective as being present, or consciously existing in a situation so that the individual comes to a personal awareness of himself in the world. Big Daddy demonstrates this emphasis in his determination to reach Brick, to remove him from the death-in-life existence he has adapted to the immediacy of the here and now:
BIG DADDY

WAIT! - Brick...

Don't let's --leave it like this, like them other talks we've had, we've always--talked around things, we've talked around things for some rotten reason. I don't know what, it's always like something was left not spoken, something avoided because neither of us was honest enough with the --other...

BRICK

I never lied to you, Big Daddy.

BIG DADDY

Did I ever to you?

BRICK

No sir...

BIG DADDY

Then there is as least two people that never lied to each other.

BRICK

But we've never talked to each other.

BIG DADDY
We can now.  

Act III is also a verbal confrontation, as Gooper and Mae confront the rest of the family with the inevitability of Big Daddy's death. But this impending event is not understood by these two members of the Pollitt family. It is not acknowledged as a personal encounter with nothingness. Interested only in what Big Daddy may leave behind, Gooper and Mae regard Big Daddy's death as an opportune abstraction, something to be calculated and provided for in a legal draft. Gooper is not moved to any realization of his own morality, his personal relationship with nonbeing, a realization which might humanize him and remove him from the petty maneuverings of his own pathetic existence:

GOOPER

Big Daddys is dyin' of cancer an' it's spread through him an' it's attacked all his vital organs includin' the kidneys an' you all know what uremia is, it's poisonin' of the whole system due to th' failure of th' body to eliminate its poisons

MARGARET

Poisons, poisons, venomous thoughts and words! In hearts and minds! That's poisons!
GOOPER

\[I'm\ \text{askin'}\ \text{for\ a\ square\ deal\ an'}\ by\ God\ I\ expect\ to\ get\ one.\ \text{But if I don't get one, if there's any peculiar}\\]
\[\text{shenanigans goin'}\ \text{on\ around\ here\ behind\ my\ back,\ well}\\]
\[I'm\ \text{not\ a\ corporation\ lawyer\ for\ nothin'}!\ I\ know\ how\ to\\]
\[\text{protect\ my\ own\ interests.}\]^{41}

Williams has presented a pattern of dramatic action wedged together in incremental disclosures of the self. For \textbf{Cat on a Hot Tin Roof} is not characterized by the complication and unraveling of a series of external events, not by actions, but by talk. It is a play fueled and controlled by the intimate conversations of husband and wife, father and son. Williams has fashioned his drama of the self to redeem the wasted lives devalued by the "mendacity", the isolation of the family's existence. Roy Alvin Watson identifies this spiritual thrust and Williams' development of dramatic action in his \textbf{Cat on a Hot Tin Roof}, although he does not elaborate upon the playwright's uniform translation of existential tenets into other dramatic constituents. Watson states:

\[\text{But facing truth is early emphasized as the theme of the action. The setting, Williams instructs the designer, should}\]
be dominated by a combination radio, hi-fi, television and liquor cabinet. This piece of furniture should appear as a monument to man's illusions or ways of avoiding facing the truth.42

Several dramatic theorists have commented upon the play's primary concern with getting at the authentic self. Watson viewed this emphasis in Williams' development of dramatic action as the controlling impetus in the drama. In describing the characters' actions he stated, "They have the tenacity to break the wall of liquor of one of the bluster of the other in order to see the other person's thoughts."43 It is this desire to penetrate the "mendacity" of their collective, yet isolated existence, to externalize the self which Williams adopts as the central focus of his existential drama. He wields the dramatic action as a type of emotional ice pick to pierce a false exterior and uncover a festering truth. As Big Daddy finally goads Brick toward some realization of his own feelings he tells his son:

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 have been passing the buck. This disgust with mendacity is disgust with your. You!--dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it!—before you'd face truth with him.44

Dramatic theorist Sy Kahn identified Williams' manipulation of dramatic action in the play as being synonomous with his creation of a dramatic form concerned with consciousness. Kahn stated:

*Thus, the real interest for the audience of lyrical drama is not the plot, not how the play will 'turn out' as is said, but the moment when the major characters reveal themselves in the full reality of their inner disharmony.*45

In characterizing this same diversion away from the traditional chain of events approach to dramatic action, Kenneth Tynan had described Williams' drama as synonomous with the subjective nature of consciousness. Tynan emphasizes this approach to the development of dramatic action as a means of externalizing the spirit.
His plays thus have the static quality of dream rather than the dynamic quality of fact; they bring the drama of mood to what may be its final hothouse flowering.\footnote{46}

William's restriction of physical action in the play coupled with his emphasis upon externalizing the mental and emotional life of the characters epitomizes the playwright's development of an existential dramatic form concerned with consciousness and nonbeing. It is not simply that Williams has his characters verbalize this repetitive theme in \textit{Cat on a Hot Tin Roof}, the way he orchestrates these intense familial discussions personifies the existential nature of the play. For these verbal skirmishes are presented as a means of cutting through what Big Daddy refers to as the "crap" of existence and getting to the truth. Big Daddy pushes his alcoholic son toward self-revelation. He takes his crutch, refusing to pour Brick a drink until his son examines his reason for drinking. Big Daddy demands this introspection, for his brush with the infinite has reduced the frantic cadence, the soul denying glut of acquisition of his life to a pathetic folly ending at the grave. Pushed by this personal knowledge of nothingness, Williams' orchestration of dramatic action in the form of these conversational
thrusts and parries assumes urgency and a type of foreboding. Maggie attempts to contact Brick but he pretends not to hear her. Big Daddy attempts to reach his son but finds that his indifference and the emotional wall between them is slowly paralyzing his son. Brick is suffering from a type of spiritual atrophy exemplified by the failure of these verbal exchanges to reach their mark. Honest and heartfelt communication is difficult if not impossible. It is this quality of Williams' development of dramatic action and dialogue which signals a personal sense of isolation separating the characters. Big Daddy remains remote from Gooper and from Big Mama, although he has "laid her--regular as a piston," for forty years. He is also a stranger to Brick. As if to compound this emotional confusion, Brick's actions reveal that not only is he isolated from Maggie and Big Daddy, but from himself. He no longer knows why he is "disgusted" and drinks, only that he uses this excuse to produce the "mechanical click" which will produce a false euphoria. "Why is it so damn hard for people to talk?" Big Daddy asks Brick. Brick's reply supplies a summary statement of Williams' manipulation of dramatic action and dialogue in the play. The interpersonal communication between family members exposes the
"mendacity" eating away like Big Daddy's cancer at the stuff of life. It is this type of fettered communication that points to the existential foundation of the play, for such a stumbling block negates the individual's capacity to know him or to engage in meaningful relationships with others:

Well sir, ever so often you say to me, Brick, I want to have a talk with you, but when we talk, it never materializes. Nothing is said. You sit in a chair and gas about this and that and I look like I listen. I try to look like I listen, but I don't listen, not much. Communication is--awful hard between people an' somehow between you and me, it just don't--48

William's treatment of dramatic action and dialogue in the play points to the playwright's translation of specific existential tenets into dramatic form. He has employed a pervasive fear of nonbeing as a catalyst to propel these family discussions toward some resolve. He has utilized the existential concept of angst to underscore the spiritual necessity he develops. Existential theorist William Spanos identifies this feeling of angst in his A Casebook on Existentialism Spanos states:
Stripped of the ethical guides deduced from theological or rational systems, the individual is left naked and alone to face in fear and trembling the great void and to adapt King Lear's words to decide whether to make something out of nothing.\textsuperscript{49}

In addition to this impetus connected with the threat of nonbeing which drives the action forward, Williams has also employed the existential tenet of alienation. He has developed these family conversations in terms of their inability to penetrate a false facade and reach the authentic self. William Spanos describes this same sense of alienation in the following manner:

\textit{As a self-conscious, that is free, creature, man constitutes a minority in a cosmos governed by natural law. From a rational point of view, then, he is by virtue of his consciousness, an anomaly.}\textsuperscript{50}

Now that a correlation has been established between Williams' development of subject, theme, dramatic action and dialogue, it is possible to move to an examination of the playwright's manipulation of characterization and how this design is related to an existential
perspective. Williams' restriction of physical action and his emphasis upon the mental and emotional life of the characters lead logically to a continuity of design found in his structuring of characterization in the play. Big Daddy provides the key to an understanding of the fear gnawing at the fabric of the family and a concentration upon the quality of life this fear evokes. He exercises a power and bombast over the family. His motivations for contacting Brick are clear and concern not only these two members of the family, but the entire household. Big Daddy, that mover and shaker of men, the familial fulcrum in Williams' drama, has met death. This possibility has forced him to an examination of the quality of his life. In a similar fashion, Maggie regards Brick's detachment as a retreat from life. Her sole function in the play seems to be to jolt him to conscious-ness. She prods him toward some examination of his own existence. Even Big Mama attempts to contact her son in hopes that he wills for-feit his hold on his stash of "Echo Springs". All are motivated by a conscious affirmation of life. This affirmation coincides with a concern for the quality of life. Big Daddy voices this fear and the concern it evokes:

BIG DADDY
Ignorance--of mortality--is a comfort. A man doesn't have that comfort; he's the only living thing that conceives of death, that knows what it is. The others go without knowing, which is the way that anything should go, without any knowledge of it, and yet a pig squeals, but a man sometimes, he can keep a tight mouth about it. Sometimes he--

(There is a deep, smoldering ferocity in the old man.)

--can keep a tight mouth about it. I wonder if...

It is this fear of nonbeing and the new found concern for the quality of existence that is associated with it which motivates Big Daddy. His character is revealed through the series of actions, in this case conversations that he engages in to reach his son. He is compelled, driven to share the sum total of his existence with Brick. Big Daddy makes a distinction between men and animal which makes the individual responsible for his actions, his life. Williams has structured him as the walking personification of Jean-Paul Sartre's admonition, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." As Big Daddy states:
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! I did all that myself with no goddam help from you and now you think you're just about to take over.53

Big Daddy is able to take responsibility for his own life. Because he now acknowledges the possibility of nonbeing overtaking him, he can expurgate the pretense of his existence moving toward a meaningful relationship with Brick:

BIG DADY

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 and idea of?

Having for instance to act like I care for Big Mama!--I haven't even been able to stand the sight, sound, or even 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!54

In recognizing the lies and the superficiality in his own life big Daddy makes a conscious choice. Once the possibility of his own mortality permeates through his brain he chooses an authentic existence and a meaningful relationship with his son Brick. William Barrett describes the existential tenet Williams has utilized in his development of characterization, in his What Is Existentialism?:

But death--once truly grasped as this possibility--also affords us the first glimpse of a possible authentic existence for man. Confronting death as possible at any moment we are torn out of the context of banal life and
restored to a self, which must face death without disguise.55

In dispelling the "mendacity" of his own existence and revealing the fears, failures and the success of a lifetime, Big Daddy attempts to contact his son. He brings him back to the world of the living. He presses him toward some recognition of the truth surrounding Skipper's death and Brick's dependence upon alcohol. As Williams structures this pivotal character, these motives become a primary factor in the play's overall design. For as critic Bernard Dukore has observed, "... death serves to offset and to highlight life."56 Big Daddy explains this perception when he attempts to share the truth with Brick:

BIG DADDY

Well, I have come back from further away than that. I have just now returned from the other side of the moon, death's country, son, and I'm not easy to shock by anything here. Always, anyhow live with too much space around me to be infected by ideas of other people. One thing you can grow
on a big place more important than cotton!--is tolerance!--I grown it.57

William's development of characterization in the play is dependent upon the existential tenets of consciousness and nonbeing, angst, a personal responsibility for one's own being and a movement toward authentic values. Williams has drawn upon the greater portion of the existential arsenal to instill these concerns in his characters and to provide them with the motivation necessary to face the truth about their own existence and about each other. Such a display of emotion leads logically to the establishment of certain value systems connected with a conscious awareness of death. These value systems become a focal point in Williams' development of characterization in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. As Brick tells Big Daddy:

BRICK

I'm sorry, Big Daddy. My head don't work any more and it's hard for me to understand how anybody could care if he lived or died or was dying or cared about anything but whether or not there was liquor left in the bottle and so I said what I said without thinking. In some ways I'm no
better than the others, in some ways worse because I'm less alive. Maybe it's being almost not alive makes me sort of accidentally truthful--I don't know but--anyway--we've been friends...--And being friends is telling each other the truth. 58

Williams reiterates the symbiotic nature of this union of consciousness and authentic values as Big Daddy strives to derive some tangible sense of meaning in his life. He struggles to build a bridge between himself and his son in hope that at last he can achieve something of lasting worth. Even hobbled with the deceit and the pretense surrounding his own condition, Big Daddy recognizes the spiritual impediment, the shoddy values demeaning his own life, just as they have demeaned his son's existence. Reliance upon material assets has left Big Daddy spiritually bankrupt. This superficial existence has also promoted the false self-image that now haunts Brick. As Big Daddy states:

BIG DADDY

Yes, Sir, boy--the human animal is a beast that dies and if he's got money he buys and buys and buys and I think the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back
of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchase will be life everlasting!--Which it never can be.59

Just as William incorporates the existential tenets of conscience, angst, dasein, responsibility for one's own being, alienation and authentic values in his development of subject, theme, dramatic action, dialogue, and characterization, he also translates additional tenets of this same philosophical perspective into his treatment of symbol in the play. For Williams' overt manipulation of symbol in *Cat* also reflects a type of existential discourse adapted to the theatre. Just as the clock chimes mark the passing of time in the play, the moments which make up an individual existence, so the flickering candles on Big Daddy's cake also mark the celebration of a life and the passing of time. Big Daddy's cancer is indicative of the spiritual decay of the Pollitt family, decay directly related to unconsciousness, to the "lies and liars" who will not face the truth. Williams has infused the play with polar opposites; representing life on one hand, death and nonbeing on the other. Big Daddy's story of the bull elephant and the female elephant "permeatin' the atmosphere about her with a powerful and
excitin' ordor of female fertility,"^60 stand in contrast to the pathetic version of Maggie and Skipper's attempt at love making. Magie describes this feeble attempt at "The little scratch like a shy little mouse at his door."^61 Brick's crutch and his dependence upon alcohol also suggest a dual degeneration, both physical and spiritual, connected with his retreat from life and from the living. And certainly Williams' title reflects the frustration and the urgency of Maggie the cat, of one vitally alive who is surrounded by death. Like the proverbial feline a top the hot tin roof, she is determined to survive. The combination stereo and liquor cabinet is also a physical symbol of the character's refusal to face the truth, to come to grips with the "black thing that has moved into this place without invitation."^62

Roy Alvin Watson addressed Williams' development of symbol in the play in his The Archetype of the Family in The Drama of Tennessee Williams. Watson connected Williams' manipulation of this device with the playwright's emphasis on "facing the truth" and upon death. As Watson stated:
The setting, Williams instructs the designer, should be dominated by a combination radio, hi-fi, television, and liquor cabinet. This piece of furniture should appear as a monument to man's illusions or ways of avoiding the truth.63

The most prominent feature of the physical environment Williams has dictated is the large double bed around which all of the play's action revolves. This article of furniture dominates the set, evoking a sense of sexuality to stand in stark contrast to the multifarious images of death Williams presents in the play. It is symbolic of the life force Williams has placed in opposition to "the Reaper," to Pastor Tooker's references to "memorial windows", to the encroaching darkness outside and finally to Big Daddy's uremia. The marriage bed is Williams' symbolic inclusion of an affirmation of life, a counter-balance to soften the harsh reality of death. It is a physical reminder of the intimate bond between husband and wife, carrying with it the promise of procreation, of regeneration. At the play's end Maggie promises to "make that lie come true." As if bringing Brick to an altar, she prepares to hand his life back to him.
Lastly, Williams' orchestration of the physical setting as a whole, his specifications regarding set design and lighting, also reflect his translation of existential ideologies into dramatic form. The upstairs "bed-sitting-room" he describes is little more than a family cell, designed by the playwright to present those impassioned thrashings of restless beings uncomfortable with the possibility of non-being. This one room seething with the reminders of those who once inhabited it, is used as a family forum, a type of familial confessional to rid its members of the "mendacity" of their existence. Williams' precise description of the set connects his drama with an exploration of the interior region of man's spirit. As he has stated:

The set should be far less realistic than I have so far implied in this description of it. I think the walls below the ceiling should dissolve mysteriously into air; the set should be roofed by the sky; stars and moon suggested by traces of milky pallor, as if they were observed through a telescope lens out of focus.  

Jo Mielziner, who designed the setting for several of Williams' plays, described Williams' visual sense in Designing for the
Theatre. Mielziner believed that Williams was concerned almost solely with a type of drama which externalized the inner man and made his spiritual longings a concrete viability on stage. As Mielziner stated:

*Even as an inexperienced young writer, Tennessee Williams revealed a strong instinct for the visual qualities of the theatre. If he had written plays in the days before the technical development of translucent and transparent scenery, I believe he would have invented it.*

In commenting upon his design for Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Mielziner makes an observation concerning the playwright's conception of dramatic form. His perception of William's interest in consciousness can be applied not only to *Glass Menagerie*, often referred to by many critics as a memory play, but also to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* which displays a similar "obsession":

*My use of translucent and transparent scenic interior walls was not just another trick. It was true reflection of the contemporary playwright's interest in--and at times, obsession with--the exploration of the inner man. Williams was writing not only a memory play, but a play of*
influences that were not confined within the walls of a room.66

The rake of the stage used for the March 24, 1955 opening of the drama at the Morosco Theatre and the type of thrust stage used to present Big Daddy's elephant story, removes the play from the literal confines of illusionary theatre. For if surface detail is included in the vision of reality Williams creates on stage and most certainly it is, these inclusions are used only as a means or a key to unlock the region of the inner man, the conscious man. As Williams has stated:

I once saw a reproduction of a faded photograph of the verandah of Robert Lewis Stevenson's home on that Samoan Island where he spent his last years, and there was a quality of tender light on weathered wood, such as porch furniture made of bamboo and wicker, exposed to tropical suns and tropical rains, which came to mind when I thought about the set for this play, bringing also to mind the grace and comfort of light, the reassurance it gives, on a late and fair afternoon in summer, the way that no matter what, even dread of death, is gently touched and
soothed by it. For the set is the background for a play that deals with human extremities of emotion, and it needs that softness behind it.\textsuperscript{67}

The vision of reality Williams creates on stage is a concrete presentation of a psychological reality dealing with the possibility of nonbeing, the banal nature and the pretense of every day existence. The playwright has subtly welded all of the ten major existential tenets into a cohesive dramatic form. Storm clouds gather outside the Pollitt household at the end of the drama and the shutters of the house rattle with the passion and the intensity of the life and death struggle within. Thunder crackles outside. Big Daddy's admonition to Brick resounds with an amazing clarity as if making a muted summary statement of the play's meaning and form:

\textit{BRICK}

\textit{You know what I like to hear most?}

\textit{BIG DADDY}

\textit{What?}

\textit{BRICK}

\textit{Solid quiet, perfect unbroken quiet.}

\textit{BIG DADDY}
Why?

BRICK

Because it's more peaceful.

BIG DADDY

Man, you'll hear a lot of that in the grave.68

References


3. Ibid., p. 224.

4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.


10. Ibid.,

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 82.

13. Ibid., p. 83


16. Ibid., p. 50.


18. Ibid., p. 98.


22. Ibid., p. 80.


26. Ibid., Act 1, p. 40.

27. Ibid., Act 2, p. 61.

28. Ibid., Act 3, p. 117.


31. Ibid.

32. Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, title page, quoting Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night."

33. Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Act 3, p. 158.

34. Ibid., Act 1, p. 17.

35. Ibid., Foreward, p. VIV

36. Ibid., Act 2, p. 68.

37. Ibid., Act 1, p. 25.

38. Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions, p. 16.

39. Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Act 3, p. 125.

40. Ibid., Act 2, p. 82-83.

41. Ibid., Act 3, p. 113.


43. Ibid., p. 124.

44. Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Act 2, p. 92.


47. Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Act 2, p. 64.

48. Ibid., p. 67.


50. Ibid., p. 5.

51. Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Act 2, pp. 68-69.

52. Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions, p. 15.

53. Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Act 2, p. 58.

54. Ibid., p. 80.


57. Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Act 2, p. 89.

58. Ibid., p. 94.


60. Ibid., Act 3, p. 151.
61. Ibid., Act 1, 45.

62. Ibid., Act 3, p. 117.


64. Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Foreward, p. XIV.


66. Ibid.

67. Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Foreward, p. XIII.

68. Ibid., Act 2, p. 67.