

# Brick's isolation



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In a play, characters are rarely isolated, as they must interact to progress. However, in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the protagonist, Brick, is indeed isolated. This isolation leads to self-knowledge and self-destruction. Self-knowledge is the understanding of oneself or one's own motives. Self-destruction, on the other hand, may be defined as a process of causing irreparable damage to oneself. Brick, the prime focus of the essay, is an enigma. He possesses an inexplicable yet irresistible charm, while at the same time is irresponsible and indifferent. His characterization is portrayed as he develops from a quiet, aloof man with a quality of cool detachment to one openly discussing his disgust with mendacity and the truth behind his drinking. However, though he proclaims his distaste for lies, his isolation causes self-deception more than for anyone else. By drinking and distancing himself from others, he distances himself from the truth about his relationships with Skipper, Maggie, and his family. Throughout the play, his physical, social, and psychological isolation lead to both internal self-knowledge and self-destruction.

Brick experiences pronounced physical isolation in the course of the drama. The room, as a setting, is important in this sense, especially since Brick is crippled and is, thus, unable to leave. He is trapped, like a wounded animal. The room is a symbol of isolation, and as the play progresses, it feels increasingly claustrophobic and suffocating, reflecting the present condition. As tensions in the room grow, Brick finds it more difficult to physically isolate himself, but he does not cease in his efforts. He stays in corners or hides behind his drink. He chooses to stand in the doorway to the gallery, standing neither inside nor outside, but rather between the two rooms. This behavior

reinforces the idea that Brick is stuck in purgatory and indecision. In fact, this metaphor can be linked to the epigraph, where the motif of purgatory is first introduced. In the epigraph, Williams uses a poem where the speaker wants his father to either curse or bless him before he dies; in both situations, the character is stuck. The fact that he is crippled makes it difficult for him to physically isolate himself. His broken ankle is a symbol for him being stuck. He can no longer do what he used to be able to do, and that scares him, but also leads to self-knowledge in that it makes him see himself as a failure. Because he is so honest with himself, he knows this to be true and does not deny it. The crutches are a symbol for the peace and security that alcohol brings him. He relies on them desperately and refuses to part with them like he refuses to part with his past. The theme that you must let go of the past arises, as Brick is haunted by the past, but cannot let it go. He is successful in his persona of cool detachment until someone, like Big Daddy or Maggie, brings up Skipper. He also uses his crutch as a weapon against Maggie, just how she uses the past as a weapon to hurt him and make him feel guilty for Skipper's death. The crutches are an integral part of his self-destruction, as, by refusing the support of Big Daddy or Maggie, they lead him to isolate himself. The crutches are also symbolic of his impotency as they are the only things that allow the metaphorically and literally broken and defeated Brick to move. However, he also achieves self-knowledge. Because he is unable to successfully physically isolate himself from those around him, he realizes that the only way he can achieve peace is by finding other ways to isolate himself.

Brick learns to socially isolate himself. In the stage directions when we are first introduced to Brick, Williams writes, " a tone of politely feigned interest, masking indifference, or worse, is characteristic of his speech with Margaret". The cool detachment and indifference in his tone is part of the persona he developed for himself to alienate himself from the rest. He does not want external conflict, yet he still has an internal conflict regarding Skipper and his failure in life. This conflict leads to actions, like deliberately alienating himself, that cause social suicide, a form of self-destruction. He removes himself so much from social situations that he destroys his own chances at happiness. The motif of lack of communication connects to the theme that human beings' inability to communicate meaningfully with other individuals is one of the tragic situations in modern life. Brick's social isolation shows how this theme manifests itself, and how it leads to self-destruction. For example, Brick and Big Daddy are unable to communicate with each other all their lives, and this causes self-destruction because Brick denies himself the love of his father. When the two finally communicate meaningfully, they better understand each other and are faced with the truth. Brick sees that his disgust with the world is actually disgust with himself and the fear to admit it, which means that self-knowledge is achieved only after ceasing to socially isolate oneself. Because Brick is always either absent or wry in his dialogue with Maggie, he isolates himself from her, but she is the one who could help him. Instead, he exhibits self-destructive behaviour by sabotaging this relationship, as well as his relationships with Big Daddy and Big Mama. These characters want something to change, but Brick does nothing. Social isolation also causes self-destruction in the form of failing to take action. He is aware that his

marital relationship is toxic and his relationship with his family is not solid, yet he fails to take any actions to remedy the issues. A critical sign of self-destructive behaviour is substance abuse, which he exhibits by becoming an alcoholic after refusing to be helped by the people in his life.

Despite his efforts, he can never fully isolate himself physically or socially; however, he does psychologically isolate himself by drinking till he feels the 'click'. The click is symbolic of achieving complete peace, which is Brick's motive. He desires to be in his own world, detached from reality, so alcoholism is symbolic of his internal conflict. He struggles to deal with the day-to-day world, and he knows he has successfully escaped when he is drunk enough. Yet, drinking, as a mental escape, causes self-destruction. In the first scene, Williams writes, "his liquor hasn't started tearing him down on the outside", implying that it has on the inside. He was broken long before the liquor affected him, but the liquor does not help. Brick might be able to put up a front, but he is broken inside, an example of self-destruction caused by isolation. This persona he created is meant to show he has given up the struggle of everyday life and lives only for those moments of peace the alcohol brings him. Arguably, the most important theme of the play is: if one deserts others, there is still hope, but if one deserts oneself, he is utterly forsaken as a human. Brick is able to socially isolate himself, and though the isolation does affect him, his psychological isolation is what ultimately will lead to his downfall (though, in some respects, it already has). He puts himself in an unhealthy mindset by confining himself in his problems and housing self-defeating thoughts. However, by confronting himself with the truth that he is a failure, he achieves self-knowledge. Honesty is one of the

major motifs. By drowning out the lies and focusing on the truth, Brick can make his life more bearable, as he is aware of the lies that bred him, raised him, and sustained him. He understands how entangled he has become in lies, and how mendacity surrounds him. Therefore, Brick knows why he drinks and that he must drink, an aspect of isolation that leads to self-knowledge. He was unable to confront himself when Skipper did, but after successfully psychologically isolating himself, he comes to realize his self-deception, saying, "I've lied to nobody, nobody but myself". By isolating himself physically, socially, and psychologically, Brick gains self-knowledge, but the isolation also leads to self-destruction. The interesting aspect of his character is that, unlike most characters in the play and people in real life, he chooses to be isolated. Maggie or Big Mama, for example, are isolated because of external forces. However, Brick is the one who deliberately isolates himself, despite the consequences of self-destruction. This idea proves he is unhappy and, like the metaphor of jumping the hurdles, yearns for the days in which he had it all, in which he knew who he was, and in which he was accepted and lauded by society. Though Maggie is a cat on a hot tin roof, constantly moving around, Brick is a cat on a hot tin roof, staying in place and burning. His lack of motivation to change his situation and leave the roof is proof of his self-destruction caused by extreme isolation. The way he does manage to leave the roof is by getting drunk enough to feel the 'click', but that is only a short-term solution, as he always ends up back on the roof. As the theme of the work suggests, to truly leave the roof, he must stop isolating himself, and face his problems. He must communicate and be honest with others. Most of all, he must not abandon himself. Instead of numbing the pain, he must let the pain be felt.

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