

Mendascularity:
keeping up male
appearances with big
daddy, goober, and
brick



The men of the Pollitt family suffer a great deal throughout *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* by Tennessee Williams, but they would rather die than let anyone know of their pains. This disastrous trait was established in them as children, by the men who raised them, teaching the characters, as most in the society and age Williams writes of were taught, that they must save face, must present themselves to society as men of steel, men of strength, men who could not be touched. This concept of hypermasculinity forces Brick, Gooper, and Big Daddy to never ask for help, never let those who love them know of their feelings, their desires, or their ailments. Hypermasculinity forces the men of the play to not accept their pain, and consequently self medicate in order to be free of their hurt. Through the use of alcohol, reckless obedience, and a combination of denial and morphine, the men of this tale find ways to numb themselves to the realities they live in, they, out of necessity, fall into the act of mendacity.

The most obvious form of self medication is seen in the use of alcohol by Brick. The sound of ice being dropped into a glass is a near constant soundtrack to the play, the smell of Echo Springs wafts through every page. Brick becomes an alcoholic after the death of his dear friend and companion Skipper, and he now cannot be at peace until he drinks enough to have his “click” in his head, “ This click I get in my head that makes me peaceful, I got to drink till I get it. It’s just a mechanical thing, something like a switch clicking off in my head, turning the hot light off and the cool night on and all of a sudden there’s-peace!”(Williams, 84) . This click permits Brick to be utterly numb, to not think of his guilt or to feel the disgust he feels every other moment of every day since he lost Skipper.

Things at the Pollitt house go sour when Big Daddy forces Brick to confront why he drinks, why he can only find peace after several glasses of Echo Spring. Originally Brick claims he does not know, his sense of pride and his masculinity force him to deny any issue even exists, much less provide a reason for the alleged issue. Eventually, out of desire for a drink, he claims disgust is the reason he drinks, and while this has a semblance of truth to it, he states that he feels disgust towards an outward force, towards mendacity (“ Lying and liars” (Williams, 92)), instead of admitting and accepting that the person he is truly disgusted by is himself, and his actions. It is ironic that Brick uses that which he claims to hate, lying, in order to protect himself and his sense of pride, his masculinity. It takes Big Daddy a long time to break down the wall separating Brick’s emotions from the rest of the world, a wall built at a very early age out of need to be as distant and untouchable as he thought Big Daddy was. But when Big Daddy finally breaches Brick’s wall, he releases a flood. “ I’m ashamed, Big Daddy, that’s why I’m drunk. When I’m drunk, I can stand myself.”(Williams, 116) Brick’s emotions, which have been bottled up for long, feelings towards Big Daddy, towards Skipper, and especially towards himself, rush out in waves that crash into that cold bedroom that is the only set in the play. The truth about Skipper, Brick’s guilt and disgust over what he’d done, or rather what he didn’t do, and his rejection of Maggie, all come pouring out of Brick, so catastrophically so that Maggie enters the room, asking, “ Why is everybody yelling about the truth?!”(Williams, 121).

All of Brick’s emotions are legitimate, and could have been felt and then understood and accepted if they had been properly talked through, if he had

sought solace, embraced the love those around him felt for him, but the hypermasculinity inside him and the other male characters caused Brick to hide his feelings, to run from those who loved him, to only feel when he was drunk and pushed up against a wall, to seek comfort from the bottom of a bottle. Brick's true emotions showed when he could not find his click, when his self prescribed remedy failed him, and afterwards he was a better man for it, but still he would rather die than admit to that.

In contrast to his drunk, disobedient, and beloved brother, there is Gooper Pollitt. Gooper is the archetypal "Man's man" in this story, with his white collar job, his loving and almost disturbingly fertile wife, and his myriad of "talented" children, who love their mother, father, and grandparent dearly (if not so much their aunt and uncle). But while he seems to have it all, Gooper suffers just as much as his other family members, for there is still one thing Gooper does not have and desperately desires, Big Daddy's love and approval.

Gooper numbs the pain caused by Big Daddy's lack of love by doing everything Big Daddy asks of him. "Big Daddy wanted me to become a lawyer. I became a lawyer. He said to get married, I got married. He said to have kids, I had kids. He said to live in Memphis, I lived in Memphis. Whatever he said to do, I did." (Williams, 136) He lives in reckless obedience, doing all that his father suggests, being the hypermasculine man he was told to be, without a thought of what he wants from life. But this still does not grant him his satisfaction, he still feels anger towards Brick for being the favorite, despair and confusion towards the lack of pride in Big Daddy's eyes when he sees all Gooper has done, has become, for him. Again irony is <https://assignbuster.com/mendascularity-keeping-up-male-appearances-with-big-daddy-goober-and-brick/>

present, because it is due to Gooper doing everything Big Daddy tells him to that Big Daddy favors Brick, the rule breaker, the independent man. Gooper hides his pain behind his five children and successful career, but he, like all the characters in the play, uses mendacity as a shield to hide behind too, as he claims, “ I don’t give a goddamn if Big Daddy likes me or don’t like me or did or never did or will or will never!”(Williams, 140).

Gooper’s form of self medication is far more subtle than Brick’s, alcohol is easier to see than intentions and plans, but just as present, and more tragic, because Gooper never gets the release, the acceptance, that Brick received, he probably continued to live on in his unsatisfying life with his unsatisfying wife after the final curtain closed, living his life of reckless obedience, telling himself his father would one day be proud, but knowing in his hearts of hearts the mendacity of that statement.

And throughout all these struggles with identity, throughout all the fear over pride and masculine images and hidden emotions and intentions, stands Big Daddy. The boy who created a name for himself, who used to not have a dollar to his name but now owns “ twenty-eight thousand of the richest acre this side of the Valley Nile”(Williams, 184). This man, who his children looked up to as an inspiration for their hyper masculine views, has been able to be this way for so long because of mendacity, money, and straight denial.

Gooper and Brick learned from a master how to hide behind mendacity. Big Daddy is able to maintain his image by faking near everything he does, for the sake of appearances. “ Having for instance to act like I care for Big Mama!...Pretend to love that son of a bitch Gooper and his wife Mae and

those five screechers out there ...Church!-it bores the bejesus out of me but I go!... Clubs!-Elks! Masons! Rotary!-crap!" (Williams, 94) Big Daddy hides who he is and his real emotions behind this manly exterior, created out of lies and a need to be at the top of his society.

Another way Big Daddy numbs himself is through his extravagant use of money. Instead of ever showing love or care for his two boys, he throws gifts and money at them. And while they do grow up never wanting for anything physical, both grow up willing to live without a penny from Big Daddy if only he would show them love. Big Daddy never has to confess any of his emotions if it looks as if he has none, but he still feels an instinctive need to provide for his sons, to give them what he never had, riches and things, but a distant, seemingly loveless, masculine man as a father.

Finally, when money and lies cannot hide the truth, Big Daddy simply refuses to accept the reality of his situation. He denied the existence of Brick's alcoholism for quite some time, as well as his feelings towards most of his family, but most importantly, he denied that which he was feeling on the inside, physically, Big Daddy is dying of cancer, but hides his fear of death behind the shaky notion that his condition is merely a spastic colon, despite the pain wracking through his whole body. Big Daddy is so desperate to seem strong, to live a long, hard working life as a man should, that he rejects his own body's signals, rejects what doctors and his gut are telling him, and claims he is perfectly fine. As Maggie put it, " Nobody says ' You're dying' You have to fool them. They have to fool themselves."(Williams, 12)

Brick, Gooper, Big Daddy, all men of the same family, all men who value masculinity and outward appearance above all else, all men who have to find ways to numb themselves to simply live their lives. The hypermasculine image all these men desire causes them to suppress their true emotions, and therefore live lives they are unhappy with, lives full of self prescribed remedies that don't heal their maladies, merely hide them from view. But on Big Daddy' birthday, all of their raw and suppressed emotions came rising up, and they saw the light of day for the first time. Expressing their emotions led to understanding between these three family members, and they became better men for it. Perhaps the Pollitt family can now live a life free of mendacity, for as they all well know, " There is nothing more powerful than the smell of mendacity."(Williams, 187)

Works Cited

Williams, Tennessee. " Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." The Bedford Introduction to Drama, 3rd Ed. Jacobus, Lee A. Bedford Books. Boston, MA. 1997.