

Suppressing homosexuality in cat on a hot tin roof

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Suppressing Homosexuality in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof When Tennessee

Williams' play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was adapted for the big screen in 1958 by director/screenwriter Richard Brooks, the version seen by film audiences was very different from the one that had taken Broadway by storm three years earlier. Because the filmmakers were restricted by the Production Code, the moral guidelines that determined the acceptable content of movie releases in Hollywood, some of the more controversial material had to be excised and altered from the original play. The biggest change in the movie adaptation of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was the decision to remove all direct references to the possible homosexuality of the main character, Brick, from the screenplay. In sanitizing the script, however, Williams' message—that the underlying homophobia in American society ultimately destroys those who struggle to accept their own sexuality—is sadly lost. The basic plot of the play remains in the film: “Big Daddy,” the overbearing patriarch of the Pollitt family, is dying of cancer, but only his children—Brick and his wife, Maggie, and Gooper and his wife, Mae—are fully aware of the dire circumstances of his health. Due to Big Daddy's impending death, Maggie, Gooper, and Mae spend their time scheming as to how best to secure Big Daddy's inheritance for themselves. This plotline creates the backbone of the play's theme, which is that every character in the play is lying, either to himself (in Brick's case) or to everyone else. But Big Daddy's health is not the only lie on the table in the play—there is also the question of Brick's sexuality and his relationship with his now-deceased friend, Skipper. In the play, Brick is very bitter toward Maggie about her implications that his friendship with Skipper was anything less than pure. He tells her, “One man

has one great good true thing in his life. One great good thing which is true! —I had a friendship with Skipper.—You are naming it dirty!” (I. 982-985). Brick is very conflicted about his feelings for Skipper. He labels the relationship as merely being a heartfelt friendship, but his knee-jerk reaction to any hint that it may have been sexual—that it may have been “ dirty”— indicates that Brick is unwilling to accept his own innate homosexuality. He is disgusted by Big Daddy’s insinuation that his friendship with Skipper could have been something more: “ You think me an’ Skipper did, did, did!— sodomy!—together?” (II. 1208-1209). The thought is reprehensible to Brick, and, like Skipper, his inability to accept his own nature is ultimately his undoing. Skipper kills himself from the shame of his “ unnatural” urges, and similarly, Brick must find some way to escape his feelings. Instead of choosing death, however, Brick chooses to continue living in a sham marriage with Maggie and drowns his misery in alcohol. But in the film version, any suggestion that Brick was in love with Skipper is suppressed. Instead, Maggie is shown as being jealous of the time Brick spends with Skipper, and tries to seduce Skipper in order to drive a wedge between the two friends. While in the play Maggie does succeed in sleeping with Skipper as she attempts to prove that he is homosexual, the movie’s Maggie gets scared and leaves without trying to consummate anything with her husband’s friend. This change allows Maggie and Brick to reconcile with a brightly-false “ happily ever after” at the end of the movie, while the play’s ending is much bleaker, with Maggie forcibly ensuring that she will become pregnant, despite Brick’s apathy for her, in order to secure Big Daddy’s fortune. The restrictions of the Production Code make the film version of Cat

on a Hot Tin Roof much less powerful than Williams' original vision. The social commentary about America's general disgust for homosexuality is toned down in the movie to the point that the film loses some of the effectiveness that makes the play an exercise in uncomfortable honesty. The characters are made to seem more compassionate and less realistic in their passions and interactions with one another, which further dilutes Williams' message about the inevitable human flaws that make us judge the actions of others. In the end, the movie version of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof suffers from forced censorship and is unable to recapture the playwright's honest and frank portrayal of the ways in which sexual suppression can do more harm than good. Works Cited Williams, Tennessee. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002. Print.