

1950s Women in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

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Abstract: This article delves into the resilient voices of women in 1950s America, as exemplified through the character of Maggie in Tennessee Williams' play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Positioned against the backdrop of postwar societal shifts, the study explores how Williams portrays the accomplishments of first-wave feminism through Maggie's voice. The narrative unfolds as Maggie, characterized as a "cat on a hot tin roof," articulates her resistance and assertiveness in demanding economic status, sexual satisfaction, and the autonomy to decide on motherhood. Through Maggie's character, Williams encapsulates the essence of the first wave of feminism, portraying the evolution and strength of women's voices during a transformative period in American history.

Keywords: First wave feminism, 1950s American women, resilient, Cat on a hot tin roof, Tennessee Williams

1. Introduction

American playwright Tennessee Williams emerges as a distinctive voice among dramatists who swiftly responded to the intricate social and political transformations catalyzed by the Second World War. The aftermath of the war ushered in a postwar boom that not only altered societal norms but also gave rise to novel perspectives, influencing elements such as the American dream, economic expansion, the baby boom, and suburban sprawl. Within the plethora of themes Williams explored in his works, the role of women in this evolving landscape remained a central focus. Women, grappling with new societal dynamics, actively contributed to shaping the voice of American women during this era.

In his renowned play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams intricately captures the essence of postwar American women, specifically those of the 1950s, through the character of Margaret, a protagonist who colloquially refers to herself as a "cat." While many literary works from this period tend to portray women as oppressed within a patriarchal society, Williams takes a unique approach by spotlighting the resilience of American women in the 1950s as they sought to assert their rights. This paper aims to illuminate the portrayal of empowered American women in the 1950s, drawing parallels with the ideals advocated by pioneers of the first wave of feminism such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir. Through Margaret's voice in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams provides a lens into the struggle for women's rights during a transformative period in American history.

2. Theory

Within the realm of first-wave feminism, certain feminist writers have left an indelible mark, with two prominent figures transcending their era to profoundly shape the debates of the second-wave movement. Virginia Woolf (1882 - 1941) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908 - 1986) stand out as canonical figures whose influence extends beyond their contemporaneous milieu. Virginia Woolf, acclaimed as an exemplar of the female creative writer, has been the subject of extensive analysis by feminist critics. Her impactful contributions to feminist theory are encapsulated

in two canonical texts. *A Room of One's Own* (1929) pioneers the concept of a distinct female voice and literary production, delving into the social conditions that influence women's writing. In her second feminist work, *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf scrutinizes the intricate connections between male power and professions like law, medicine, and education.

Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist, activist, and trailblazer behind the *Nouvelles féministes* newspaper and the feminist theory journal *Questions féministes*, is renowned for her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir introduces the notion of women's radical otherness, unveiling the process through which patriarchal societies cast women as the "other" or the "second sex." Her work elucidates the distinction between sex and gender, portraying men and women as divergent in their interests and challenging discriminatory practices based on biology, psychology, and economics. De Beauvoir's impactful critique offers a lucid perspective on the societal differentiation between the sexes and condemns the discriminatory treatment women face across multiple domains.

3. Discussion

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof stands as a masterpiece in Tennessee Williams' repertoire, addressing the postwar social issues, particularly those concerning women. The resonant voice of Margaret in the play becomes a pivotal expression of the desires of 1950s women, encompassing both sexual and financial aspirations, echoing the principles advocated by first-wave feminists for women's rights.

The ideology about women in the fifties, "equal but different," suggests that women determined their special qualities and distinct interests from men. Women in the fifties were aware of the changing landscape, realizing that they were no longer defined solely by men and that they could successfully operate in both private and public sectors (Birmingham, 2005, p.8). Margaret articulates her sentiments while in conflict with her husband Brick in the first act: "I am not thin-skinned anymore, can't afford to be thin-skinned anymore," and adds, "I'm not living with you. We occupy the same cage" (Williams, 2004, p.27 &

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35). Margaret is resolute about her transformation, asserting that she is no longer a weak woman to be oppressed. She positions herself as equal to Brick, both being human, yet emphasizes that they are not living together, indicating a distance that underscores their differences. The ideas from Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex* are articulated through Maggie's voice.

Concerning female sexuality in the 1950s was like a bombshell. As the societal norm before regarded female sexuality as a taboo, and women had not been acknowledged as sexual beings; additionally, sexual desire was often associated with masculinity. The exposure and elucidation of female sexuality by scientists, such as Alfred Kinsey's report on the determination of women as sexual beings, contributed to the capability of demanding sexual satisfaction (Stec, 1995, p.128). Margaret is one of the 1950s women who demands sexual satisfaction as her husband rejects to sleep with her. She wanders in sexy clothes, and every now and then, asserts on being sexy; all men around craving for her indicates that women, like men, need and have sexual desire.

America, after the Second World War, experienced a baby boom, marked by a rapid increase in childbirth, which posed risks to women's health due to excessive deliveries. Particularly, women associated with the first wave of feminism advocated for birth control. Margaret Sanger, a key figure in the birth control movement, emphasized the importance of women being the "Mistress of her body" and advocated against forced motherhood (Wardell, 1980, p.739). One of her famous quotes regarding the liberty of women underscores the significance of women having control over their reproductive choices and autonomy:

I know something must be done to rescue those women who were voiceless;
someone had to express with white hot intensity the conviction that they must
be empowered to decide for themselves when they should fulfill the supreme
function of motherhood (Williams, 2004, p.741)

Tennessee Williams, through Mae's five children, vividly depicts the baby boom of that era. Furthermore, Maggie's voice is once again heard, expressing her desire to become a mother and have a baby. In the past, the timing of pregnancy was determined by the husband, asserting his authority. However, in the 1950s, influenced by the birth control movement, women gained control over pregnancy decisions, symbolizing a shift in the power dynamics surrounding reproductive choices.

By the end of the Second World War, men returned to their jobs, and women relinquished their temporary careers from the wartime period. Women's return to the domestic sphere perpetuated the ideology of the ideal woman being one who stays at home, caring for her husband and children. However, the economic growth fueled by massive industrialization and suburban sprawl created a world where goods were both produced and consumed at home (Catalano, 2002, p.45). Magazine advertisements in the 1950s portrayed women wandering around, purchasing cleaning supplies, beauty items, and even larger items like

cars, influencing women in that era to imitate these images. Magazines and newspapers claimed that "everybody looks to mother when it comes to the final decision, " molding women as the dominant figures in the family with power over finances (p.49). The pursuit of economic independence increased among American women in the postwar period. Statistics reveal that in 1947, 65 percent of adult women were married, with 46 percent of them also engaged in employment. However, by 1949, 51 percent of the 17, 167, 000 women were working, indicating a majority in the public sphere (Kalas & Brerensetein, 1996, p.38).

Referring to Maggie as a cat, her persistent efforts to persuade Brick to secure Big Daddy's fortune and her ambitious stance toward financial stability signify the phase of American postwar women in the 1950s. Her resolute voice in seeking financial assets aligns with the Feminist first wave idea regarding the importance of economic independence for women's liberty. As Maggie addressed:

I always had to suck up to people I couldn't stand because they had money
and I was poor as Job's turkey. You don't what that's like.
Well, I'll tell
you, it's like you would feel a thousand miles away from Eco Spring! - And
had to get back to it on that broken ankle...without a crutch! (Williams, 2004, P.55).

4. Conclusion

To summarize, postwar America underwent significant adaptations in response to rapid changes in industrialization, economics, technology, science, and geographical landscapes. As drama often reflects societal shifts, Tennessee Williams' "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" portrays these new societal norms and their impact on women's voices in the 1950s. The term feminism began to emerge during this period, marking the onset of what we now refer to as the first wave feminism. Women advocated for equality, influenced by pioneers of that time such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, who emphasized the importance of economic independence and recognized women as human beings with distinctive sexuality.

Tennessee Williams effectively captures the achievements of first - wave feminism by portraying the postwar American women in the 1950s through the character of Margaret. Williams strategically positions Brick as passive, not actively participating in social life, to amplify Maggie's voice. Describing herself as a "cat on a hot tin roof, " Maggie asserts her resistance in demanding her rights, including economic status, sexual satisfaction, and the decision to become a mother. In the 1950s, the voice of women, likened to a catty demeanor, is not one of oppression or silence; instead, it resounds loudly and stands resilient.

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