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Search for Conjugal Bliss in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

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Abstract

The conjugal life of Maggie and Brick is on the verge of collapse because the former is heterosexual and the latter is homosexual but Maggie leaves no stone unturned to save such a life. She has to fight on two fronts. Firstly, she has to restore the broken masculinity of Brick into wholeness. She revitalizes Brick's passive and latent physicality with her aggressive sexuality. She tries to arouse his sexual jealousy by mentioning how other men show sensual desire for her. Secondly, her childlessness marginalizes her in the worst way. She passes through endless envy when she compares her childlessness with the five children of her sister-in-law and becomes catty whenever she faces them. It is true that she tells a lie about her pregnancy because she knows that truth will not work in the world she lives. Moreover, her love for her husband is so potent that she succeeds in convincing him to turn the lie into a reality. Maggie is blunt in her love and hatred. She is a strange mixture of kindness and cruelty. In this way she not only outwits all those ready to destroy her marital bliss but also rejuvenates the paralyzed sexuality of her husband with her aggressive sexuality. So love is a force with which Maggie faces her predicament and emerges stronger, happier and better off than before.

Keywords: Brick, Maggie, degeneration, rejuvenation, barrenness, fertility, security, insecurity

Introduction

The domestic life of Brick and Maggie, in *A Cat on Hot Tin Roof*, is at risk because of their sexual incompatibility. Psychologically speaking, Brick is sexually passive and Maggie is sexually active. Brick believes in idealism while Maggie believes in pragmatism. Their conjugal relationship weakens day by day because of their different attitude towards their sexual life. Brick consciously negates his latent homosexuality while Maggie consciously makes him realize his homosexuality. Maggie articulates her disgust for homosexuality while Brick does not find a way to say about his homosexual relations with his friend. The husband becomes neurotic in his negation and the wife becomes ruthless in her assertion. Seen from the Jungian perspective, their married life is bound to be troublesome. Maggie is an “extrovert wife” (Evans 1976: 108) who gives voice to what she feels and observes. She cannot grow blind to the reality of her present childlessness and the poverty of her past. Her existence is threatened and she feels worthless before her fertile and scheming brother-in-law and his wife. Such a fear is visible in her discourse. But she plans masterfully to outwit all those ready to destroy her marital bliss. She uses sex as a sword and shield to defeat and deceive the Goopers, who want to uproot her. On the other hand, Brick is an “introverted-intuitive husband” (Evans 1976: 108) who makes his life a miserable mess after the death of his friend, Skipper. He indulges in self-deception by idealizing and spiritualizing a worldly love. As a result of it, he fails to cultivate a true relationship with himself and yearns for truthfulness without realizing his own “mendacity” (*Five Plays* 57). He is never ready to accept homosexual tendencies in his life. This denial leads him to a severe sexual crisis. He withdraws his physical contact with his wife, but his wife continues to offer him a valuable emotional support. She has the potential to deal with such incompatibility and succeeds in saving her conjugal life.

Discussion and Analysis

The unrequited love of Maggie’s husband makes her a sex-starved woman. She makes love with Skipper to realize Brick’s closeness with this act. She admits to Brick: “Skipper and I made love, if love you could call it, because it made both of us feel a little bit closer to you.... we made love to each other to dream it was you, both of us” (*Five Plays* 26)! Maggie’s life is full of many lacks; her past is poverty-stricken and her present is a loveless marriage. She is deprived of sexual fulfilment and companionship and her childlessness further intensifies her insecurity. She is marginalized by the Pollit family in the worst way. She, in fact, fights for some space in the family. Her husband is not ready to recognize her person. Gooper, the brother of her husband, is scheming all the time to deprive her of all the inheritance while his wife, Mae, keeps on accusing Maggie of being barren. The

other members of the Pollit family remind her on every step that she is childless and that she never belongs in the first place. Even Dixie, the little girl of the Goopers, makes fun of Maggie by sticking out her tongue at Maggie and reminding her of her barrenness. Maggie is badly hurt when Dixie reminds her of the fact that she is jealous of them only because she fails to produce any child. Maggie is not made for swallowing such remarks. She is compelled to ignite Brick's sexuality by saying him how his brother and his sister-in-law proudly make fun of Brick's childlessness in front of their children. Maggie's desire to have well brought up children and pour out all her caressing love upon them reaches its the climax when she expresses the same to Big Mamma. She desires to have a child by Brick because the child not only promises the power of inheritance but also rejuvenates her marital bliss. She is bent upon mothering a Pollitt child so that she can compete with Gooper and Mae for the best position in the family. She thinks and plans positively about whatever life throws at her. This gives her the chance to rise above circumstances and handle them successfully. Her husband is unwilling to have her in the bed and desires to terminate the marriage but she uses every tactic to make a lasting relationship with such a husband. Comparing Maggie's predicament with that of Blanche, Marc Robinson considers Maggie's position more precarious:

Blanche may seem more alone than Maggie, but Blanche at least has the ability to affix herself to another person and stay there a while. Maggie can't even do that—she has neither sister nor a likely suitor. If Brick even so much as notices her flirting with him, he's disgusted. Maggie always feels useless—never more so than when she's reminded that she's bounded in a sexless marriage, and so is doomed to childlessness (Robinson 1997: 45).

Maggie is badly disintegrated in the Politt family because nobody is ready to reintegrate her. She is all alone in her struggle for survival but she dose not lose heart even when nobody supports her. It is the irony of situation that puts her in the most vulnerable position but she faces it quite bravely. Instead of bogging down in the face of testing situation she remains upbeat and approaches the stress of uncertainty with self-belief. Her determination to rejuvenate the dead passions of her husband is insatiable. She engages her strengths and resources in such a way that her limitations turn into her achievements. Her strength lies in the fact that she is capable of seeking possibilities in adversity. It is true that she tells a lie about her pregnancy but she leaves no stone unturned to turn the lie into a reality. She discloses to Brick that she has been to a gynaecologist in Memphis who examined her completely. The report of the doctor shows that they can have a child whenever they desire. She emphatically addresses Brick to bed with her because "this is her time by the calendar to conceive" (*Five Plays* 30). Her problem is how

to have a child by a man who cannot stand her. She engages all her faculties to “work out” (*Five Plays* 30) that problem. She remains adamant and nonplussed in the face of adversity. It is because of such qualities that she is considered as “one of the most determined female characters in modern drama” (Blackwell 1997: 247).

Maggie’s sexual drives may be potent but her love for her husband is equally powerful. This is what urges her to save Brick from the “once-perfect relationship with Skipper” (*Five Plays* 66). Nancy Tischler comments, “Brick, knowing how Maggie forced this intolerable self-realization on Skipper, sees her as his enemy, while Maggie feels that this, like everything she does, was a testimony of her all-embracing love for Brick” (Tischler, 1961: 201). Brick’s instincts are arrested because of his dysfunctional marriage. Such a situation leaves a crippling impact on his psyche and it is reflected by his crutch, which is a “Freudian phallic symbol, the objective correlative of his sexual, emotional and moral paralysis” (Thompson 2002: 63). His sexuality is further crippled when Big Daddy hunts out his homosexuality as he admits to Big Daddy that once Skipper made a long distance call to him and made a drunken confession to him and on which he hung up. Instead of wandering in the illusory world of wine, Big Daddy compels him to face reality with Skipper to avoid disgust with himself and with mendacity. His disgust with mendacity, Big Daddy tells Brick, is disgust with himself: “You – dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it – before you’d face the truth with him!” (*Five Plays* 51). Brick’s masculinity is totally broken when his father accuses him of homosexual inclinations. Under these conditions, Maggie becomes a vital life force to restore Brick’s divided self into wholeness. She becomes kind with Brick and tries to bring him out of the insecurity his masculinity is threatened with. If masculinity is viewed as a power discourse, then Maggie emerges with a lot of masculine traits. Purnendu Chatterjee does not confine masculinities to men only but believes that masculinities are relational and that “Discourses of masculinity are available to, used by and imposed upon both men and women” (Chatterjee 2012: 110). So Maggie succeeds in reviving her marital life with her aggressive discourse.

Dream of Blissful Conjugal Life is realized

Maggie becomes a true symbol of life force when she asserts that “life has got to be allowed to continue even after the dream of life – is – all over” (*Five Plays* 57). She keeps on coaxing and cajoling Brick in spite of the fact that Brick spares no opportunity to berate and belittle her. It is her unconditional love for Brick, “her fierce determination and impassioned sexuality” (Crandell 1998: 114) that enables her to actualize the dream of blissful conjugal life. So love is a force with which Maggie faces her predicament and emerges stronger, happier and better off than before. Viktore Frankl’s comments on the force of love are worth quoting here:

Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him. By his love he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true. (Frankl 2004: 116)

Like a playful sex kitten, as she admits, “I’m Maggie the Cat!” (*Five Plays* 20) she maintains her aggressive sexuality. She becomes bitchy on certain occasions but it is all because of the constant rejection she has been facing. Her desire to mother a child is so potent that everything else recedes in the background. She succeeds in luring her husband to the bed because she wants to fully realize the wonder and beauty of motherhood’s experience. She becomes wild like a feline for her rights because she knows that offence is the best defence:

Maggie struggles to wrench life out of her alcoholic husband with the cunning, persistence, and sensuality of a feline. Maggie, who is the ‘cat’ of the title, has scratched and clawed her way out of poverty, and she is determined to hang on to her marriage, with the tenacity of an alley cat struggling to stay alive in the streets. Maggie can purr also when it becomes necessary. Her attempts to seduce her husband and flatter Big Daddy are catlike. When Maggie walks, her whole body is in motion with feline grace (McGaw & Clark 1987: 100).

She uses every fair and foul means to support “a broken, irresolute man” (*Five Plays* 112), arouse his deadened passions and keep the marriage afloat as Nancy Tischler says: “her lust for life takes brutal forms...” (Tischler 1977: 507). Foul becomes fair for her whenever she tries to seduce the latent sexuality of her husband: “Whether Brick is gay or not, she will do whatever it takes to avoid poverty in her old age” (Krasner 2006: 55). She is as aggressive in her sexuality as her husband is passive. She adopts aggressive male sexual role to revitalizes Brick’s latent physicality. Like a caring and compassionate companion, she talks to Brick with her caressing words. She believes that their sex life will revive as suddenly as it has stopped working, because it has not diminished in the natural and usual way. She leaves no stone unturned to maintain her prettiness so that her husband feels as attracted towards her as other men are. She knows that other men follow her in the most curious manner because her body, her hips and her breast still stay high on her. She prays earnestly that Brick may want her as anxiously as other men want her. She knows that she still turns heads on the streets but the admiration

and attention she gets from the other men is totally valueless for her because she expects the same from her husband. Like an intelligent therapist, she knows about sexual jealousy among men and tries to arouse in Brick as well:

Why, last week in Memphis, everywhere that I went men's eyes burnt holes in my clothes, at the country club and in restaurants and department stores, there wasn't a man I met or walked by that didn't just eat me up with his eyes and turn around when I passed him and look back at me" (*Five Plays* 21).

She knows that her love making with her husband was blissful and heavenly and reminds Brick of the days when they were happy in each other's arms. She romanticizes her past in such a way that leaves some impression on the heart and mind of her unromantic husband. By persuading Brick to become her accomplice in her lie she, in fact, releases him from the shackles of liquor and crutch. In the end she breaks his liquor bottles, locks his cabinet of liquor and throws his crutch. Instead of challenging the forged pregnancy of Maggie, Brick acquiesces by "keeping still" (*Five Plays* 90). Maggie is apt to observe Brick's gallantry which he observes to save the face of his wife. She admits loving gestures of Brick in the most ecstatic manner. Brick's gallantry proves that he is ready to quit the illusory world of alcohol and accepts the relationship of flesh-and-blood. "In the revised Broadway version... Brick expresses his admiration for Maggie and her concluding speech is expanded, emphasizing her strength and thus the likelihood of reconciliation" (Bigsby 2005: 283). She puts up her fight so bravely and succeeds in bringing her husband to her body.

Maggie knows well that truth may not work in her situation. She tells a lie about her pregnancy because she knows that 'mendacity' is way of the Pollitt living. She knows that every member of the family is telling a lie in one way or the other. Maggie not only challenges Brick's homosexuality but also his false and pretentious morality. She knows that people pretend goodness but she dislikes such pretensions. She challenges the conventional moral patterns of the rich who try to hide their dirtiness under the cloak of their moral blackmail. Instead of stressing on morality, she stresses upon honesty. She knows that she was born of a poor family and led a miserable life in the thick of poverty but she is never ready to die poor. That is why she tries her best to grab as much as she can from the property of her dying father-in-law. She convinces Brick that the living is more valuable than the dead. She tells him that Skipper is dead and his father is going to die of cancer so soon but she is still alive and worthy of his attention.

Maggie lives among the people who are either indifferent or unsympathetic towards her. Such a situation coupled with “poverty and economic security cause a stressful life” (Myles 2012: 93) for her but such a stress makes her mentally tough. It is her mental toughness with which she persuades her husband to compromise with her. Similarly, she manages to tell a lie before everybody confidently and announces about her pregnancy ignoring all the repercussions of her lie because such a lie “feeds Big Daddy’s and Big Mama’s appetites for illusion (Cafagna 1997:129). Maggie’s lie may look irrational because her husband is never ready to bed with her. She still ventures because “the instinctual desire lies in the domain of the irrational” (Veyu 2012: 32).

By becoming accomplice to Maggie’s lie Brick, as Tennessee Williams suggests, will go back to Maggie for sheer animal comfort, (Williams 1978: 73). In this way, Brick not only secures his inheritance of twenty-eight thousand acres of the land but also tries to atone for the miseries he brought for Maggie as Robert Heilman suggests, Brick’s earlier refusal to sleep with Maggie is interpreted as his way of punishing her for causing Skipper’s death, then Brick’s resuming sexual relations with Maggie implies that he has stopped blaming her and makes possible his acknowledgment and understanding of his own role – in Skipper’s death and in his and Margaret’s subsequent misery (Heilman 1973: 125). He neither divorces her nor forgives her, but becomes an accomplice to her lie at the end of the play. Arthur Miller compares his condition to that of “Hamlet who takes up his sword and neither fights nor refuses to fight but marries an Ophelia who does not die.” (Miller 1978: 191). Brick’s compromise at the end of the play shows that he gets ready to buy an inheritance by endorsing Maggie’s lie and re-enters the world of normal relations.

Maggie is blunt in her love and hatred. She is a strange mixture of kindness and cruelty. She is gentle and generous with Brick but vengeful and venomous with the Goopers. By highlighting the hawkish intentions of Goopers she succeeds in winning the sympathies of Brick. So Brick agrees with her “to have an heir, because his loathing for a shifty brother and sister-in-law is worse than that for his own unscrupulous wife” (Coleman 1997: 45). Maggie is frank and open about her love making with Brick in the past. She remembers the days when Brick was majestic in his love making. He never showed undue longing or excitement but used to remain calm and composed. His indifference and perfect confidence was natural which made him so lovable. His composure during the love making made him a wonderful lover. Her heart is badly pricked with the pain of loneliness when she misses all those blissful days.

Maggie shatters Brick's sexual illusion with her fearless sexual openness. Maggie is possessive about her husband, aggressive in sexuality, determined to defend her rights and malicious in hatred for her enemies. She tries her best to help Brick come out of the self-inflicted quagmire of guilt and doubt and prays for the day when their marriage will be rekindled. She, at last, rekindles the dead sensuality of her husband and seduces him to bed. Williams believes that "Seduction is too soft a word. Brick [is] literally forced back to bed by Maggie, when she [confiscates] his booze..." (Williams 1975: 169). It is the life force of Maggie with which she seduces the dead sexuality of her husband. She uses every possible weapon, including her body and her voice, to enliven that which is dead in her husband. She is as straightforward about Brick's booze or his relation with Skipper as about the cancerous death of Big Daddy. "Maggie, like cancer, is the harsh reality the Pollitt family must learn to live with. In a family where reality itself is an illusion, she must win Brick back to her bed and secure Big Daddy's rich lands despite her lack of offspring" (Cafagna 1997: 122). Maggie emerges victorious in the final moments of the play. She defeats the impending death of Big Daddy by bringing a new life with her pregnancy. Thus her ultimate triumph, in the words of Bernard Dukore, represents Williams' affirmation of life against death. (Dukore 1963: 98). Similarly, it is the life force with which Maggie's healthy heterosexuality overpowers the sickly homosexual commitment of Brick to Skipper.

Conclusion

Animal instincts find prominent place in the plays of Williams because he measures human psyche by using the Freudian yardstick. The shadows of death and destruction are looming large on the Politts but it is the heated passion of Maggie which becomes their saving grace. The Big Daddy is dying of cancer and his son Brick embraces a living death in booze when he realizes that he has failed to live up to the sexual standards of the society. The dying Big Daddy wants to hand over his inheritance to his favorite son, Brick but Brick is childless. His marriage is on the verge of collapse and he is not even on speaking terms with his wife Maggie because she is a constant reminder of his youthful humiliation. Maggie's lust for life is insatiable. By persuading Brick to become her accomplice she heals his broken spirits of Brick. She tries her best to help Brick come out of the self-inflicted quagmire of guilt and doubt. She succeeds in rekindling the dead sensuality of her husband. Maggie is direct and straightforward and therefore does not depend on the illusionary world of dreams. She is pragmatic and it is natural for such a person to use every possible weapon to achieve her aims. Maggie defeats Mae and Gooper and emerges victorious in the final moments of the play. She defeats the impending death of Big Daddy by bringing a new life with her pregnancy.

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