In *Terrible Honesty*, Ann Douglas argues that moderns felt they needed to find a way to free themselves from the influence, from the control, of their Victorian predecessors, and discusses how their cultural products were means to this end. Free, they created one of the richest cultural periods of all time. But she also argues that moderns well knew that a price would have to be paid for all this self-fulfillment and self-growth. She writes that they knew that at some point the Maternal—the “object” they repressed and beat back—would stage a return and make them pay for their insolence. Some theorists—notably those influenced by object-relations’ thought—argue, however, that how most of us experience our own self-growth and freedom ensures that moderns would *themselves* stage the return to a matriarchal environment—that is, that she wouldn’t need to return, for they would feel compelled to pay her a visit. In this essay I will argue that prominent modernist plays served to both help effect the matricide Douglas argues modernist cultural products produced, and to provide means to temporarily vicariously return to the maternal environment moderns so loathed and feared. Specifically, I will explore how Brick and Margaret in Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and Biff in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, are made to seem empowered moderns who exist outside of a maternal environment, but who risk upon their return to it the loss of their hard-won independence.

Douglas makes a very bold argument in *Terrible Honesty*. She more than argues that modern New York effected cultural matricide, that it warred against mothers and everything maternal—she argues that *modernism itself* was mostly a weapon used in the fight. According to Douglas, moderns preferred, for instance, crisp, precise, straightforward prose that “cut through all the bull,” because it was a prose style opposed to that preferred by Victorian matrons—because it was deemed non-matronly. She believes that moderns were at war against leading matrons of (American) Victorian society, who—according to them, at least—made use of everybody around them, of their children, especially, to service their own needs. She acknowledges that moderns’ successful effort to create a vital, original culture depended on them feeling as if they had, if not slain Her, at least beat back the Victorian Titaness enough to create room for their own growth, but she cannot
fathom—why such a strong need to war against those already deceased before any of them were even born?

Given how she familiarizes us with the difficulties key moderns had with their mothers, given her arguing that the entirety of Hemingway’s opus should be understood as his revenging himself upon his own (222), it is odd Douglas doesn’t consider that they warred primarily with them, rather than with Victorian matrons. She chooses to conflate John Watson’s—the most prominent 20s child psychologist—observations concerning how mothers “attend” to their children and the effect this attendance has upon them, into her larger argument that moderns were at war against the Victorian epoch. But if for many children Watson’s belief that mothers as much harm as help their children is in fact an accurate assessment of their influence upon them, we have reason to believe that moderns needed to make use of whatever handy, of whatever they might produce, to help cope with difficulties arising from efforts to extricate themselves from their control.

According to Ann Hulbert, Watson should be counted amongst a host of child experts in the modern era who believed mothers used their children to satisfy their own unmet needs (Raising America 141). He observed that mothers tend to over-handle their children, kiss them obsessively, “stroke[e] and touch [their] [. . .] skin, lips, sex organs and the like,” and argues that no one should “mistake it for an innocent pastime” (141). In short, he argues that mothers made incestuous use of their children. He argues that children must be kept in separate beds, separate rooms, else suffer the inevitable results of being over-handled (Douglas 43)—debilitation: the child would thereafter have difficulty leaving behind his/her “nesting habits,” and would therefore be unlikely to be able to “conquer the difficulties it must meet in its environment” (141).

Watson’s view of mothers is, we note, about polar opposite the popular Victorian one—nowhere in his writings is one to find a conception of mothers as angels. That is, in his conception of them, mothers are not those who despite all ills somehow still provide moral guidance, while sustaining the warm hearth. Rather, as noted, he understands them as near compelled to make use of their children in some effort to cheer up themselves. His account of mothers should fit very well with those who argue that most women through time (and still today) have been insufficiently nurtured and respected by the societies they grew up in. That is, it should fit well with those who argue that most women grow up in patriarchal societies—societies, that is,
which to a lesser or greater extent set up their female members as suspect, and treat them accordingly. Patriarchy’s effect on encumbering or debilitating female self-esteem is hardly something mother-hating Watson can be imagined concerning himself about, but it is something psychohistorian Lloyd DeMause, a contemporary independent scholar whose conclusions on the effects of mothers’ incestuous handling of their children to some extent mirror Watsons’, is very much interested in. He writes:

[I]mmature mothers and fathers [, that is, mothers and fathers who themselves were not reacted to warmly, affectionately by their own parents] expect their child to give them the love they missed when they were children, and therefore experience the child’s independence as rejection. Mothers in particular have had extremely traumatic developmental histories throughout history; one cannot severely neglect and abuse little girls and expect them to magically turn into good mothers when they grow up. [. . .] The moment the infant needs something or turns away from her to explore the world, it triggers her own memories of maternal rejection. When the infant cries, the immature mother hears her mother, her father, her siblings, and her spouse screaming at her. She then “accuses the infant of being unaffectionate, unrewarding and selfish . . . as not interested in me” [Brazelton and Cramer 11]. All growth and individuation by the child is therefore experienced as rejection. “When the mother cannot tolerate the child’s being a separate person with her own personality and needs, and demands instead that the child mirror her, separation becomes heavily tinged with basic terror for the child” [255].

(DeMause, The Emotional Life of Nations 151)

DeMause argues that since we cannot help but grow in life, that “fears of growth, individuation, and self-assertion that carry threatening feelings of disintegration lead to desires to merge with the omnipotent mother—literally to crawl back into the womb” (94). These feelings of disintegration arise owing to our belief that we will be, that we deserve to be, punished for our growth. Throughout our life we are drawn to make a return to our mothers; but reunion also returns upon us all the troubling feelings that necessitated our leaving her behind in the first place. He writes, “fears of growth, individuation and self assertion that carry threatening feelings of
disintegration lead to desires to merge with the omnipotent mother, literally to crawl back into the womb, desires which immediately turn into fears of maternal engulfment, since the merging would involve total loss of the self” (94).

DeMause clearly does not believe we return to our actual mothers when we experience feelings of growth panic. His interest is in the social sphere, in how, when we feel the need to stage a return to the maternal, we construe our social sphere so that it helps us feel as if we are back within a maternal environment. If he is right in this, moderns, suffering from growth panic and its associated fears of self-disintegration, and feeling the need not only to slay the maternal “beast” but to return to her, may then have used their theaters— with their womb-like surrounds—and their plays—with their involving transports to potentially hyper-real, less distilled, “truer” worlds—for such a purpose, as they provided ideal venues for this quintessential drama to take place. They may have gone to plays like Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, that is, not actually so much for their professed reasons, but more to facilitate their vicarious return to a maternal environment to witness the mother-returned brought back down to size.

Before delineating how in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Big Daddy’s home is actually made to seem a symbiotic, maternal space, lorded over throughout much of the play (especially in the first two acts, but also to some extent in the third) by Big Mama, there is something significant to be said about the particular nature of our likely avatars—Brick and Margaret—who have ventured into it. Though the study of reader immersion in texts has “not been particularly popular with the ‘textual’ brands of literary theory” (15) as “it conflicts with [‘their’] [. . .] concept of language” (92), reader-response theorists and cognitive psychologists who study readers’ involvement in texts generally agree that reading involves the reader (or audience member) in creating a world that “stretch[es] in space, exist[s] in time” (Gerrig 15). The cognitive psychologist Richard Gerrig argues that the text actually “serve[s] as [a] habitat” (15) for the reader, that readers are “placed” within the text as “side-participants or overhearers” (119). He does not believe that “transportation into a narrative world is dependent on narrative skills” (95); but he does believe it depends on how well we identify with the principal protagonists. If Douglas is correct in her characterization of moderns, it seems likely that they would appreciate Brick and Margaret as near kin. Both are loners: Brick shies away from physical contact, from any kind of intimate
involvement in pursuit of the “click” that promises complete detachment, and Margaret imagines herself a cat bent on her own self-interest. And if they were making use of the play to engage a threatening maternal environment, moderns would be pleased that both protagonists seem appropriately equipped for use as avatars. Brick’s name suggests he is all-protected, that he is, with his detachment, with his sense of himself as entirely—as already—defeated, impervious to further debilitation. He is in fact mostly walled against the world, but not completely so. However, as I will explore, the fact that he has a weak spot, that he requires a click before he feels safe, may in the end empower him, for it makes him seem a natural complement to Margaret, the stronger of the two, the one particularly well empowered against incorporation within the maternal surround. Margaret is made to seem akin to a weapon—specifically, to an archer’s bow. She is likened to Diana, Greek goddess of the hunt. And though Henry Popkin is surely right to see Brick—who is likened to a “godlike being” and to “Greek legends” (43)—as akin to the Greek hero Adonis, the handsome athlete (“Plays of Tennessee Williams” 45), he may also, with his one weak spot, be fairly likened to Achilles as well. That is, he might fairly be imagined a man-god whose one weak spot happens to be one the goddess of the hunt would be expected to spot and effectively strike.

He, then, is a barrier, resistant to influences, she—an object that punctures through them. Both should prove problematic for an environment that would remove from them their sense of themselves as individuals. We note this is the threat, according to Watson and object relations-oriented researchers such as DeMause, the mother confronts her children with, and it is the threat Margaret obsesses over in act one. She is set on social climbing, on not falling from her current place on the social ladder into waste. In an effort to make herself feel secure, she declares just how different she is from those she deems well off the ladder—one of these being Gooper’s wife, Mae, whom she claims belongs not above but rather along side the odious, base human lot. Specifically, she deems Mae someone who serves their (i.e., base humanity’s) needs, whose beauty and body is at their service. She depicts her as the carnival queen who must “smil[e], bow, and blow kisses to all the trash in the street” (21). And also as a breeder—she uses the fact that Mae has given birth to five children already with at least one more on the way, to make her seem as responsible as any for gross societal overflow and numbing lack of distinction. She also distinguishes herself from Mae’s children, repeatedly calling them “no-neck
monsters.” They’re monsters, demons of appetite, for lacking the neck needed to
claim some distinction for the potentially determining head. She insists that Mae gave
them dog names, and intending through cruel intent not to make them seem of the
same team but simply of different castes, imagines them a pack she might use in a
hunt. She leads; they would follow. She, a goddess; they—pack animals. She
differentiates herself from them once again, and most effectively, when she likens
herself to a cat, for unlike dogs, cats can’t be conjoined within a pack, and unlike
Mae, the carnival queen, their claim on the aristocratic is intrinsic not farcical.

We note, though, that in act one neither Brick nor Margaret is made to seem
comfortably empowered over those around them; instead, they find themselves hard-
pressed to fend off invasions. Though Brick’s susceptibility to Margaret will end up
helping him feel protected, in act one Margaret’s ability to upset him actually makes
him seem vulnerable. And Margaret’s ability to strike, deflect, dodge, and wound is
put to test in the first act as well; and ultimately she too ends up seeming someone
more at risk of being used than someone who’ll end up managing everyone to her
own advantage. Brick and Margaret have to deal with invaders: first, the no-neck
monsters, whose screams permeate their room, and then Big Mama, who
authoritatively encroaches upon what is ostensibly only fairly mostly their own turf—
their bedroom. Margaret’s first line in the play, “One of those no-neck monsters hit
me with a hot buttered biscuit so I have t’change” (15), foreshadows her subsequent
difficulties in dealing with encroachments throughout the act. Soon afterwards she
comments on their “screaming” (16). The children scream twice in the first act, and
count amongst the numerous unwelcome noises that assault the room. The children’s
screams, Mae’s footsteps, Big Mama’s booming voice, the phone’s ring, croquet
sounds—all encroach upon and also call into question their claim to privacy. We are
made to understand that, though they have their own bedroom, they are hardly
distinguished from the goings-on in the rest of the home.

Their bedroom’s walls aren’t much of a barrier, and neither is its door. Though
Mae asks if she may enter their room, Big Mama attempts entry without asking
permission, and is irritated to find herself refused by their lock. Before she finds an
alternative entry, Brick retreats to the bathroom, shuts its door, and leaves it to
Margaret to deal with her. Margaret tries to assert herself while talking to her, but
cannot rebuke her. By entering unexpectedly through a different—the gallery—door,
Big Mama catches Margaret by surprise. Big Mama’s loud voice, too, “startle[s]” (33)
and unnerves her. Margaret tries to persuade Big Mama there is a need for privacy in a home, but Big Mama replies, “No, ma’am, not in my house” (33). She would advance upon her son, even though Margaret told her Brick was dressing. But seeing her adult son’s naked body is not something to balk her; she argues that she has seen him so countless times before, and clearly understands passage into adulthood more as a test of the familial bond than as confirmation for its rescinding—she for example is driven throughout the play to subject her son to the sort of “kissing and [. . .] fussing over” (50) she subjected him to as a child and well knows he cannot stand. She is however more than willing to show others her own bare body: she lifts up her skirt so that Margaret her see bruises, something she hopes makes clear that she, not Margaret, is the one still so functioning within a comfort zone that she can boast arrogant, blaisé authority even while within “their” bedroom. Even there, it is still most honest if she acts and says as she pleases, very much to the extent of degrading insult: she suggests to Margaret that she (i.e., Margaret) is without child because she can’t please in bed; an affront that clearly fazes Margaret. Big Mama is not successful in her effort to retrieve her son—but Margaret is not responsible for her departure. Instead, someone calls her, and in a proprietary fashion she “sweeps” (37) out of the room herself. And by slamming the door shut on the way out, she loudly conveys her irritation at their efforts to balk her. Only after she has left does Brick exit the bathroom. He actually “hobbles” (37) out, an act we likely cannot but compare to Big Mama’s emboldened exit, and understand as just how right she is concerning her strong stretch over her household. 

Big Mama’s subsequent entrance into a room, which occurs immediately after the intermission at the beginning of act two, proves even more brazen and assertive. We are told that “instant silence [is] [. . .] almost instantly broken by the shouting charge of Big Mama, entering through hall door like a charging rhino” (49). We are also subsequently told that her dress, “her riotous voice, booming laugh, have dominated the room since she entered” (50). She is characterized as a maternal-figure intent on enveloping other people within her enormous body. She is again looking for Brick, to smother him with attention, but instead ends up subjecting the Reverend Tooker to the sort of overwhelming close contact she’d prefer to lavish on her son. She pulls the reverend close to her, “into her lap,” and exclaims in a shrill laugh—“[e]ver seen a preacher in a fat lady’s lap?” (51). Indeed, as nerve-wracking as the first act must have been for matron-weary moderns, the second must have proved even worse. But soon
enough—welcome respite: Big Daddy, believing himself free of cancer, decides it’s time somebody put an end to her influence.

According to Douglas moderns understood the great matriarchs of the Victorian period as Titanesses. She writes that they felt the need to create a god equal in power to the Victorian Titaness, a male god, capable of defeating her. Specifically, she writes: “Really to kill such a god, to finish her off for good and all, the moderns needed another god; to free themselves from the devouring, engulfing mother god, a savage and masculine god was required” (243). She believes Freud’s (conception of the) Father, for instance, was readily embraced by moderns because of Freud’s sense of Him as inherently more dangerous than the Mother. While Freud enabled the Father through fact, artists did so through fiction; and given the way he is portrayed, Big Daddy is himself such an artistic construction, for he rudely manages to tame the maternal-figure Big Mama, who had been near unopposed, was expanding, and looked unstoppable.

Though with the size of his girth it seems absurd he does so, Big Daddy is one of two characters in the play (the other being Margaret) that rails against reckless expansion. Thinking of Mae’s sixth child, Big Daddy complains that once one obtains property how soon “things [. . .] [get] completely out of hand!” (61). He responds to Brick’s conjecture that “nature hates a vacuum,” by arguing that “a vacuum is a hell of a lot better than some of the stuff that nature replaces it with” (61). He is set to inhibit Big Mama’s dominance over the household, her presumptive management of all he understands his own. In a rant he rails not only against her household reign but against her presumptuous use of her body, saying:

I went through all that laboratory and operation and all just so I would know if you or me was boss here! Well, now it turns out that I am and you ain’t—and that’s my birthday present—and my cake and champagne!—because for three years now you been gradually taking over. Bossing. Talking. Sashaying your fat old body around the place I made! I made this place! [. . .] [A]nd now you think you’re just about to take over. Well I am just about to tell you that you are not just about to take over. (58)

Big Daddy’s bullying of his wife to some extent means the end of her dominance through the remainder of act two, but he loses his self-confidence and largely
vanishes from the play once he learns he actually does have cancer. And with his absence, Big Mama returns to prior form. In act three, and after Big Daddy’s declaration that the house is nobody’s but his own, she shows she still believes otherwise. She says, “I said, hush[,]! I won’t tolerate anymore catty talk in my house” (114), and says the equivalent several more times through the remainder of the act. She returns to advancing upon Brick, to physically pressing upon him. We are told that she approaches her son, puts her hands through his hair, ruminates about what he was like when he was a boy, and Brick backs away as “he does from all physical contact” (117). She then insists that they “all got to love each other an’ stay together, all of us, just as close as we can, especially now that such a black thing has come and moved into [their] [. . .] place without invitation” (117).

But if Big Daddy’s attempt at matricide was insufficient, incomplete, Big Mama is still too shaken by what might have seemed both to her and to the audience like another act of matricide—namely, the family’s convergence on her to inform her of the bad news—to be capable of all she managed before. Big Mama has had her time and now Margaret is the one who will impose herself on everyone else. She takes advantage of Big Mama’s lapse to make full claim to Brick. Margaret is ideally suited for such a purpose, for Big Mama actually sees Margaret as an “other”: not part of her brood, she is alien, an outsider. The text actually primes us to imagine her as existing outside the household while still within it. She is a cat who dances on a roof; and also Diana, goddess not only of the hunt but of the moon, an object Brick focuses on in the third act in hopes of distancing himself from the household’ goings-on.

Brick looks to the moon for escape, and at the end of the play he wants Margaret to look over him for the same reason. Sex with her, we note, would involve none of the closeness that so repels him. She says he will satisfy her desires, but we know this is best done when he is detached and uninvolved. In act one, that is, she declared that he was “[s]uch a wonderful person to go to bed with, [. . .] mostly because [he was] [. . .] really indifferent to it” (24). Maggie, too, we note, is singular and alone. There is a sense that their love-making would be very different from the kind Big Daddy “enjoyed” with Big Mama. For though Big Daddy declares he only “humped” his wife, he believes that forty years of such humping left him drained, depleted, in need of revitalization; conversely, sex between Brick and Margaret will be kept to a minimum. And though at the end of the play we know she will become a mother, it is
very unlikely we imagine Margaret as at all maternal. She is shown to loathe young children, in fact, and very likely strikes us as the sort of mother Watson argued children ought to have—specifically, one who would give her child the bare minimum of attention before absconding off elsewhere in a fickle, cat-like fashion.

Another play that served moderns’ need to stage a return to a maternal environment and effect matricide is Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. The plot involves Biff being summoned home by his mother so he might help her with her failing, fraying husband, Willy. Willy’s begrudged before a hundred different villains, but like Big Daddy, his foremost problem is his wife. Big Daddy argues that his wife had slowly taken over, and that forty years of living with her had been a lifetime of living with someone he loathed. He declares he will not be servile to her, but even though he does to some extent beat her back—feeling newly refreshed and ascendant for having done so—he still mentions to Brick that they should keep their voices down for fear of being overheard: that is, there is perhaps *never* a sense in the play that the house he lives in is some kind of manor, ranged over by its lord. Willy may be thought of as someone who, owing to the fact that he could not ignore his wife’s wishes and commit to leaving Brooklyn, found himself trapped within a space managed by her, a munchkin in the home, sport for everything else each time he stepped outside it. Like Big Daddy, within the house he huffs and puffs, he efforts to be proprietary, in a loud and bullying manner, but this just shows how pathetic he’s become.

Because he proved someone who could not get away to some place better suited to him, Willy spends a life perpetually fending off threats, threats enfranchised for grabbing at him while remaining in their own element. While in discussion with Bernard, he voices his suspicion that his real problem, his tragic flaw, is that he cannot escape. He believes that a moment was once presented him where he might embrace a more manly life, but in failing to take advantage of this opportunity he doomed himself to being walled-in for life. He plays back in his mind the moment his brother Ben offered him Freedom—that is, when Ben offered him a chance to join him in Alaska. Ben had gone there, we note, in search of his father. Linda finally persuades Willy he would be better off not leaving, in choosing, instead, to continue on as a salesman, but it seems clear that Linda had her own interests in mind here, and was really working him into relapse. She found contentment in the stable life, and sought its continuation. And in her convincing him to remain, she emasculates him,
makes him a victim of her own accomplishments.

Willy, then, fails to leave behind a life his wife finds comfortable in pursuit of a life that he, rather, would enjoy. He is, then, the sort of pathetic figure moderns feared they might become unless they made their culture wholly inhospitable to matriarchs. As discussed, they managed this by sustaining and legitimizing theories and cultural products that made the Father seem empowered. But they also did so by making themselves seem the sort mothers could not readily be imagined being able to handle, and would in fact likely fear. If her conception of moderns is correct, they must have readily identified with Biff, someone who in his youth, we note, mothers feared (40), and who, unlike his father, found means to leave his old life behind.

Like Brick and Margaret, then, Biff has some ability, some power, which would encourage moderns to use him as a proxy. But just as Brick upon his return to his old home seems at genuine risk of once again being subject to his mother’s plans for him, Biff too is at risk of being caught (out). Linda would have Biff rescue Willy, but as Christopher Bigsby argues, “[t]he price of saving Willy may [. . .] be the loss of his own freedom and autonomy” (Arthur Miller 104). As with Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, the play begins with the mother as highly reckon-worthy. Though there is never a point in the play in which Willy’s interrupting her makes her seem weak (for the most part it works to make her seem very tolerant—and therefore also surely more than fully justified in whatever demands she might insist on him), at this point of the play her own interruptions make her seem commandant. She commands the stage, she commands her sons—and also very effectively makes them feel guilty for their not attending to their father. And so Biff decides that he even though he “hate[s] this city [. . .] [he’ll] stay” (58) and help out.

The means for Biff’s escape from a life he really wants no part of to some extent mirrors that used by moderns to empower their resistance to Victorian morality. According to Douglas, moderns came to understand Victorian morality as built of a shallow appreciation of life’s true variegatedness, and therefore also as discardable. She writes that they did not detach themselves from the responsibility of doing right, but rather had come to understand that “doing right” is a more complicated and sometimes counterintuitive business than their predecessors had assumed. Specifically, she writes: “The older generation was quick to accuse the younger one of lacking moral standards, but in truth the moderns wanted not fewer ethics but more searching ones” (33). Linda manages to control Biff by suggesting that abiding by her
simple request (to stay and help save Willy) is the right thing for him to do. But just like moderns learned to be less intimidated, less impressed, by conventional morality, Biff finds way to not let his mother’s sense of what is right triumph over his own. At the end of the play he would confront his father and tell him, amongst other things, that he intends to once again live the life he wants to lead. He intends to bust through the lies he feels have cloaked and smothered their household all of their lives. Believing him instead intent on more cruelty, Linda tries to dissuade him. Much like before when she denigrated her children for their “inappropriate” behavior, she calls them “animals” and “louses” (124). But while before calling Happy a “bum” and accusing Biff of being selfish and uncaring, helped tame them, Biff is not here deterred. Rather, he casually accepts her brutal characterizations of him as true, apparently grants that he surely is “scum of the earth,” but knowing that doing what is actually right for his father will inevitably suffer her condemnation, still presses on “with absolute assurance” (125).

We note that this sense of Biff as an ultimately disregarding, merciless truth-teller is exactly how Douglas argues moderns preferred to imagine themselves. She argues they “[o]pposed every form of ‘sentimentality,’ they prided themselves on facing facts, the harder the better” (33). Their understanding was that since they sought out the kinds of unsettling truths Victorians at-all-cost avoided, they were their superiors, with no real warrant to look to them for guidance. Biff, as he makes his way past Linda, certainly seems the stronger of the two. His concern to hash it out with Willy makes him once again seem as manly as Texas—it makes him seem someone we readily believe had as a youth frightened the holy dickens out of moms. Linda believes Biff could only succeed in hurting Willy in his confronting him, but in fact the confrontation revives him—only not in a way Linda would delight in. She hoped Biff would help save Willy’s life, keep him, his habitual way of living, afloat. But Willy understood this life as insufficiently masculine, as cowardly, even, and we note that Linda herself thought it sufficiently hampered that she could without pause proclaim him “not great,” someone who, when things went awry, went about “a little boat looking for a harbor” (76). Biff helps make his father feel great again, as he did previously in his youth with his athletic accomplishments and his clear admiration for him. Their confrontation shows Willy the extent to which his son still cares about him, something he had been unsure of for some time. Biff, then, is a relative from afar who offers him great joy—and he clearly does imagine this visit as akin to the
one Ben once paid him. Emboldened, he imagines Ben once again by his side, and persuades himself that one last opportunity still remains to demonstrate he is in fact a provider, a doer, a risk-taker—a real man. Bigsby writes that “Linda trumpets the fact that they have repaid their mortgage as if this was in some way the objective towards which their lives had been directed” (103), and it certainly does seem Linda’s key objective. But it was one Willy never saw realized, for he died before the last payment on the house was made—Linda actually says at the funeral, “we were just about free and clear” (103; emphasis added). The play ends with the two seeming very disparate: not only is Linda alive and Willy deceased, she is left thinking he died just before freedom would come to his rescue.

Willy escapes her understanding and her grasp, and so too Biff: we know he will once again live the life he wants to lead. Just as with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the play ends by making characters moderns likely identified with in the ascendant, and their feared predecessor—the matriarch—depleted, disparaged, disposed. Both plays, then, are ideally fabricated to help produce the merciless displacement of predecessors Douglas argues moderns’ cultural products were actually mostly intended for. But given the extent to which the matriarch in each of these plays is allowed room to range, perhaps they also worked to satisfy a need their freedom and growth ended up empowering—namely, to revisit and re-experience maternal power so potent it could command from you your obeisance and cause more than the errant miss-step in your ongoing efforts to live your own life.

Works Cited


