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**WIVES' GAIN AND HUSBANDS LOSSES: THE IMBALANCE OF MARITAL POWER
IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' _A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE_ AND _CAT ON A
HOT TIN ROOF_**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Kaitlin Gates
April 2016

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Kaitlin Gates
(digital signature)

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Professor Richards

ENGL 457Y

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Wives' Gain and Husbands' Losses: The Imbalance of Marital Power in Tennessee Williams'

A Streetcar Named Desire and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

When it comes to marriage, a balance of power shared between a couple can produce a healthy and successful partnership, but in the canon of Tennessee Williams' writing, such a balance does not exist in his depictions of marriage. The volatile marriage of his parents, Edwina and Cornelius, described by critic John Lahr as a "hothouse of violence," combined with his own tumultuous relationships, created a cynical lens through which he viewed long-term, committed relationships (45). If one looks exclusively at the marriages of Stanley and Stella from *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Brick and Maggie from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, this imbalance of power strongly favors the men who, through physical and emotional means, dominate their respective wives. But by comparing these marriages to that of Big Daddy and Big Mama, also from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams's portrayal of marriage becomes far more complex when examining this imbalance of power and the women's responses. By creating a generational difference between the couples as well as limiting Stella's and Maggie's ability to gain power only to their sexuality, Williams ultimately demonstrates through Big Mama's age and lack of appealing sexuality that power for women in marriage is gained through the incapacitation of men which in turn creates an imbalance of power needed for the wife to gain secure footing.

The age difference between the younger married men, Stanley and Brick, and the older one, Big Daddy, influences the ways all the men exert their power within their respective

marriages. Both Stanley and Brick represent the role young men still in the prime of manhood must live up to when married: to maintain the power in the relationship for as long as possible. In a study looking at how boys learn to become men, critic Simon Forrest notes that “being male becomes about the control of self, but also of physical and psychic space” (229). If one applies this idea to Stanley and Brick, their actions of dominance are extensions of what it means to be a man. Stanley is the “gaudy seed-bearer” who expects to receive exactly what he wants in life (*Streetcar* 265). When walking into a room, he immediately overwhelms it with the sheer physicality of his presence due to the attractiveness of his youthful body. Critic W. Kenneth Holditch sees Stanley as “the ‘New Man,’ opposed to or ignorant of the transcendent; he has pulled Stella[...]to live in the sensual, sexual, broken world” that is filled with violence (158). Stanley’s version of being a husband is to be the primal, almost animalistic man who takes charge of his wife, his home, and his life, and, because of his youth, he can afford to indulge to excess in his sexual appetite and violence. From beating Stella to raping Blanche, Stanley seems to lack a moral compass or an ability to understand that there are boundaries not to be crossed within his marriage to Stella. In one of the few instances that she does attempt to check Stanley, he demonstrates his firm grip on the reigns of this marriage, saying, “Since when do you give me orders?” (*Streetcar* 275).

Brick, on the other hand, struggles with the loss of his immediate youth and ends up controlling Maggie and their marriage through his almost complete emotional attachment to both. Like Stanley, Brick still possesses a youthful physique that keeps Maggie sexually attracted to him. But critic Michael Hooper states that, unlike Stanley, Brick must deal with the fact that “his glory days as a promising high-school athlete and football player are long behind him, as symbolized by the crutch with which he clatters around the stage” (83). His broken ankle,

obtained futilely trying to prove he can still achieve what he used to do, serves as a physical reminder that he has passed through that phase of his life. In dealing with that realization, Brick develops the “additional charm of that cool air of detachment that people have who have given up the struggle,” which gives him the upper hand in his marriage (*Cat* 19). The play ends by highlighting Brick’s ambivalence about the control he possesses over Maggie when he responds to her declaration of love, “Wouldn’t it be funny if it were true?” (166). In a moment where Brick could choose to change his decision to remain emotionally and physically unavailable, he decides not to do so which only makes Maggie more determined to change that. But changing from his course of detachment now would only force Brick to move on from his teenage years, which is not something he is willing to do for their marriage. For both Brick and Stanley, while they exert dominance over the wives differently, both men need this dominance to retain whatever degree of control they have over their own lives. Because they are still relatively young, they cannot afford to give up or share any of the power within the relationships they have because they will not be able to get it back later.

While already past his prime, Big Daddy is an older version of both Stanley and Brick who also dominates his wife but does so differently because of his age. Critic Roger Boxill aptly discusses that with Big Daddy’s “physical appetite, rough eloquence and imposing authority,” he strongly resembles Stanley in that they are “both powerful men, adored by their wives [and] smash through the pretensions of gentility or ritual around them with bare-knuckled realism” (23). To Brick, Big Daddy admits that he too “knocked around in [his] time” in an attempt to allow Brick the space to talk through the relationship he has had with Skipper in order to make sense of what has happened, including negotiating the erotic charge (*Cat* 115). With these similarities, it comes as no surprise that Big Daddy also fights to keep control over his marriage

to Big Mama. But, while Stanley uses violence and sex, and Brick develops detachment, Big Daddy directs verbal insults at Big Mama regarding the one thing she cannot control: the effect of time on her body. In talking with Brick, Big Daddy says, “All I ask of that woman is that she leave me alone, but she can’t admit to herself that she makes me sick” (96). In his eyes, Big Mama cannot provide him with what he needs, but because they are still married, he is stuck with her until one of them dies. He declares that he wants to have sex with a different woman so he can “strip her naked and choke her with diamonds and smoother her with minks and hump her from hell to breakfast,” which demonstrates his vicious mentality towards his sexual interactions with women (96). But this also shows his complete lack of care for Big Mama, the one woman who has remained by his side for decades and looks after him during his illness. While he does not use physical violence, Big Daddy saturates his tactic for retaining power with aggression, making it harder for Big Mama to fight against because her age and the effect it has on her body are not things she can change to regain power within the marriage. While Stanley and Brick can control their wives in the way that they do and have that be effective, the age difference between those two marriages and that of Big Daddy’s requires a different, crueler exertion of dominance to keep Big Mama under his control.

The youthful sexuality that Stella and Maggie possess is the main source of power they have to gain control in their relationships, but even that is something that Stanley and Brick manipulate to their advantage since they are aware of how much their wives desire them sexually. Stella’s marriage with Stanley relies heavily on their sexual relationship as Stella tells her sister, “I can hardly stand it when he is away for a night... When he’s away for a week I nearly go wild!” (*Streetcar* 259). Stella’s addiction to the sexual pleasure Stanley provides helps her survive in the “broken world” he forces her into. With the birth of their son, it indicates that,

regardless of Stanley's violence towards her, Stella's sex appeal enables their relationship to continue. Even though Blanche finds it appalling that Stella has sex with Stanley after he hits her, Stella says simply that "when men are drinking and playing poker, anything can happen," which highlights her tolerance towards Stanley's violent actions (312). She even admits that she is "sort of—thrilled by" Stanley's violence when breaking the lightbulbs on their wedding night (313). If one applies research done on the causes of domestic abuse by Amy Lehrner and Nicole E. Allen to Stella, her reactions to Stanley show she allows for the violence against her because Stanley "lacks the ability to cope with life stressors" that stem from his work and his home environment (225). Critic William Kleb notes that it is through their sexual relationship that "Stella clearly regards herself[...]as Stanley's partner and it is her love for him that validates his role as husband and father-to-be" (38). Her view also helps her cope with Stanley's abuse because he at least responds to her sexually, which is something she partakes in willingly because of her own intense sexual desire for him. But Stella mistakenly places her position of power in the marriage on her ability to provide sexual gratification for Stanley when, in fact, he can and does receive that gratification elsewhere, including violently through the rape of Blanche, all of which diminishes Stella's ownership of sexual acts within her marriage.

While Stella can act on her sex appeal in hopes of gaining power, Maggie tries to revive Brick's attention and desire to engage in those same activities with her, but, because Brick is emotionally detached from her, Maggie's control in the relationship quickly deteriorates. She is an extremely determined, confident, manipulating character who wants to ensure that she and Brick receive the plantation so they can be "old *with* money because to be old without it is just too awful, you've got to be one or the other, either *young* or *with money*, you can't be old and *without* it" (*Cat* 54). The biggest problem Maggie faces is knowing that Brick refuses to

conceive a child with her even though she reminds him of her desire for him. Maggie tells him that she has been “keeping myself attractive...for the time you’ll see me again like other men see me” (49) and even notes that Big Daddy “always drops his eyes down my body when I’m talkin’ to him, drops his eyes to my boobs an’ licks his old chops!” (23). Because Maggie is an attractive woman, it is understood that she has come to rely on her looks to get what she wants in life. Boxill sees Brick as knowing that “he is neither a ‘pure’ nor an ageless being but a creature of frail flesh already defeated in the futile race with time,” which is enough to stop Maggie from successfully achieving her plan of having a child (25). Therefore, her announcement towards the end of the play that “Brick and I are going to—*have a child!*” seems the last and final attempt to sway Brick to finally engage sexually with her to achieve the larger goal (*Cat* 158). Maggie has no other means of gaining power and keeping her position aside from her sex appeal, but Brick has barred that option because of his detachment. Thus, for both Maggie and Stella, their husbands make it extremely difficult to gain power to create a balance of power within marriage. While they both attempt to use their bodies to create an equal partnership, Stanley and Brick either manipulate or reject those advances to remain the dominant leader.

Even though Stella and Maggie still have youthful sexuality, as Big Daddy makes evident, Big Mama cannot use her sex appeal to her advantage because she no longer has any and therefore must rely on the relationships she forms with other familial members to stay relevant within the dynamic of her marriage to Big Daddy. Within their marriage, both Big Daddy and Big Mama take on traditional gender roles, but these roles do not transition as time goes on when Big Mama’s body ages. Researchers Carly D. L. LeBaron, Richard B. Miller, and Jeremy B. Yorgason state that marriages focused on “more traditional gender ideology” are “more likely to perpetuate inequality in the marriage (97). Instead of their marriage evolving into

a new state of recognition of these facts, Big Daddy refuses to see Big Mama expect as what she can no longer provide him. When she enters the stage, she is described as “very sincere,” while her family members interpret her actions as snooping (*Cat* 42). Her insertion into the various conversations around her demonstrates the level of power she perceives herself to have even though, as a woman and wife of Big Daddy, she should allow the men to take charge. Instead, her large personality forces people to acknowledge her when she is in a room even as Big Daddy regards “her with a steady grimace of chronic annoyance” because of the power she takes from him in those instances (66). Even though Big Daddy finds her to be annoying and unattractive and therefore irrelevant to him, Big Mama still views herself as a confidant of Big Daddy, as shown through when he receives the false news that he is free of cancer: “Big Daddy tried to hide how much of a load that news took off his mind, but didn’t fool *me*” (44). Big Mama’s age works against her both as a wife and as an individual. While Stella and Maggie have their youth and sex appeal to work within the marriages, Big Mama is constantly waging a losing battle against Big Daddy to gain recognition of power because she has nothing of value to Big Daddy to bargain with any more.

While their husbands continually hold the power and manipulate them, both Stella and Maggie attempts to permanently regain power within their marriages. By the end of the play, Stella, to keep the life she had with her child and Stanley, has already sent Blanche away after Stanley rapes her. While most read this ending as Stanley keeping a firm grip on the power he has within the marriage, critic Bert Cardullo notes that “Stella does not once speak to Stanley in the last scene of *Streetcar* (even when addressed by him one time)” and sees this as “indicative of the essential silence that will permeate the rest of their lives together” (174). Because Stella now has their child to look after in the wake of Blanche’s departure to the institution, this

“silence” that Cardullo mentions will be easier for Stella to maintain. While she says to Eunice that she “couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley,” it is clear Stella knows that it is true, and, even though she chooses to stay with him, it does not mean things will be the same as they once are (*Streetcar* 405). Cardullo also believes that it is Stanley’s violent lust, “the epitome of this domination and crux of their relationship[,] that frees her [Stella], finally and ironically, to direct her attentions away from him and toward the son born of his lust” (175). Stella decides to embrace Eunice’s advice that “[l]ife has got to go on. No matter what happens, you’ve got to keep on going” (*Streetcar* 406). The only way for Stella to continue in her marriage is to focus on her child and possibly any other children she may bear to keep herself from becoming guilt-ridden. Yet while motherhood provides Stella a level of temporary independence from Stanley while she raises the children, after they grow up to lead lives of their own, this independence will be lost, and she will find herself back in the same power struggle with Stanley.

Maggie’s main path to regain power is to try and conceive a child by any means possible to inherit the plantation, but this determination to prevent both her and Brick from becoming poor struggles against his complete detachment within their marriage. She tells Brick that “one thing I don’t have is the charm of the defeated, my hat is still in the ring, and I am determined to win,” which demonstrates her tenacity and inability let go of her goal (*Cat* 31). When Brick asks her how she is “going to have a child by a man that can’t stand you” and even suggests taking a lover to conceive the child, she responds, “That’s a problem I am going to have to work out” (62). Because Brick rejects Maggie’s use of her body to sway him, she has to resort to the extremes to secure the position of their marriage in the upper middle class. But because Brick is the husband, Maggie cannot take over the decision-making process in regarding their finances

and instead has to rely on her sexuality. She tells Brick that she has “always *liked* Big Daddy... because he *is* what he *is*, and he makes no bones about it” (53). With Maggie’s statement and knowledge that Big Daddy has often glanced at her body with desire, Big Daddy’s story in the Broadway version of the play can be read as his sexual desire for her. He tells a story about an old elephant “with a couple of fornications left in him” (206) excited by the female elephant next door “permeatin’ the atmosphere about her with a powerful and excitin’ odor of female fertility” (205). Since Maggie is willing to do what she can to ensure that she does not become old and poor, it is likely that she would have sex with Big Daddy to make her proclamation of pregnancy a reality or to try and extract money from him to stay in the house. But, similar to Stella’s situation, motherhood would only solve her lack of power for a relatively short time. Neither Stella nor Maggie has discovered any permanent means of gaining power in their marriages that would last long enough to make a difference.

It is only through Big Mama that Williams depicts the best way for a wife to gain female marital power: to grasp it when the man is not physically able to wield it due to failing health caused by sickness or age. While Big Daddy deteriorates from the cancer for three years, he “put up with a whole load of crap around here because I thought I was dying. And you thought I was dying and you started taking over, well, you can stop taking over now” (*Cat* 76). Big Mama can finally gain power because Big Daddy cannot run things himself. She gains the upper hand within their marriage because her health is not failing her. Her vitality is encoded in her presence in the entirety of the play while Big Daddy’s failing health coincides with his relegation to only the second act in Williams’ original play. Big Mama’s power, while momentarily back in the hands of Big Daddy because he thinks he no longer dying, will simply return when he begins to suffer more from the illness. When Gooper talks about his plan regarding what to do about the

plantation after Big Daddy dies, Big Mama exclaims that she is “talkin’ in Big Daddy’s language now; I’m his *wife*, not his *widow*, I’m still his *wife*! And I’m talkin’ to you in his language” in regards to forcing him into silence (155). Big Mama understands how Big Daddy gets things done because she has been focused on the relationships she has with her family to help build her power. She has raised her children and provided gratification for her husband until she is no longer able to do so in his eyes, but the only true way to gain power in her marriage is to wait until time and age catch up with Big Daddy as well and incapacitate him.

Ultimately, all three couples deal with the power imbalance that strongly favors the husband, leaving the wife to struggle to figure out how to gain any kind of position in the marriage. Big Mama represents the position all wives will find themselves in during old age: hoping for the decline of their husband to gain power. Williams depicted the reality he believed to be true in regards to how all relationships work: someone holds all the power, someone does not, and the struggle between the two to gain or keep it. His work depicts the power struggle he saw within the marriage of his parents and through his personal relationships. While the women he writes about are the obvious victims in each of their marriages, all of the characters collectively suffer because Williams did not experience or think a more balanced, loving, and respectful partnership could exist on paper because they did not exist in reality.

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