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**CRUSHED VIOLETS AND COLLAPSED DAUGHTERS: GUTMAN AND BOSS FINLEY
AND POWER IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' CAMINO REAL AND SWEET BIRD OF
YOUTH**

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

Faith E Rivers
April 2016

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Faith Rivers
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Dr. Richards

ENGL 457

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Crushed Violets and Collapsed Daughters: Gutman and Boss Finley and Power in Tennessee

Williams' *Camino Real* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*

Of Tennessee Williams' many plays, *Camino Real* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* are largely overlooked by critics. When they do analyze these two plays, they typically overlook the characters of Gutman and Boss Finley. These two characters warrant a closer look, however, because they demonstrate some of Williams' most political writing. While some argue that he was an apolitical writer, these two plays – and especially these two characters – prove that he was not, as both *Camino Real* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* are rousing condemnations of the suppressive government of Williams' day. While Williams uses both Gutman and Boss Finley to condemn oppressive government authority, Gutman, a character written during the height of anti-communism, is ultimately more sinister than Boss Finley, a character written during the beginning of the civil rights movement.

Although Williams wrote *Camino Real* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* six years apart, the two plays share similarities. Produced in 1953, *Camino Real* is an allegorical play that draws heavily on the audience's understanding of allusions and literature. The setting is a purgatory-like place where literary characters reside under the control of the ever-present, omniscient authority Gutman. Kilroy, a naïve boxing champion, arrives confused about where he is and the nature of *Camino Real*. Soon enough, however, he realizes the extent of Gutman's power and falls prey to the evil streetcleaners. While *Sweet Bird of Youth*, first produced in 1959, outwardly appears different than the surrealistic, bizarre *Camino Real*, both plays tackle issues of government authority, persecution, and misuse of power. However, unlike *Camino Real*, *Sweet Bird*, set in the 1950s South, touches on racial issues and white anxiety. During the play, Chance Wayne, a washed-up actor, returns to St. Cloud to woo

his one-time sweetheart, Heavenly. She is the daughter of a local politician, Boss Finley, who warns Chance that his continued presence will result in castration. While both Gutman and Boss Finley are periphery characters who differ in many ways, they share similarities and are essential to their texts.

Gutman and Boss Finley similarly suppress people they hold to be deviants. Both characters kill or mutilate people who exhibit deviant behavior. In *Camino Real*, Gutman orders the streetcleaners to kill the Baron, an openly gay man who checks into the “Ritz Men Only” hotel and requests “an iron bed with no mattress” (*Camino* 464) and “metal chains” because he has “been very bad [and] has a lot to atone for” (465). The Baron’s homosexuality is especially deviant because of his sadomasochism, so Gutman suppresses this aberrant behavior by having the streetcleaners kill him: “*The Streetcleaners come through the arch with the Baron doubled up in their barrel*” with “*his elegant white shoes protruding from the barrel*” (471). Boss Finley also suppresses deviant behaviors. While he denies his participation in the castration of an African American male, Boss Finley preaches the necessity of protecting the purity of white blood from intermingling with black: “I can’t and will not accept, tolerate, condone the threat of a blood pollution” (*Sweet Bird* 224). Interracial relationships threaten him, and he warns Heavenly that “a lot of people approve of taking violent action against corrupters” (199), indicating his willingness to act violently against anyone whose behavior he considers corrupt. Both the Baron’s and the black man’s sexuality endangers the established order, so Boss Finley and Gutman suppress it to maintain their power.

Additionally, both authority figures keep their power through dividing the people. Gutman divides people under his control by splitting them along class lines into those who stay in the Siete Mares, the rich, and those who do not, the poor. Gutman tells Jacques, a financially-troubled guest of the Siete Mares, when he protests about hearing shots in the plaza, “Shots were fired to remind you of your good fortune in staying here. The public fountains have gone dry, you know, but the Siete Mares was erected over the only perpetual never-dried-up spring in Tierra Caliente” (*Camino* 447). Those in the Siete Mares are too afraid of losing their benefits to join the peasants and rebel against

Gutman, and he keeps those in the plaza in too desperate a state to unite. Even if they try to rise up, Gutman cuts them off from each other by forbidding the word ‘hermano,’ or brother, which effectively ensures Gutman’s continued power. Boss Finley also keeps his power through division. He segregates the people into black and white, insisting on literal separation of blood, by instilling fear in his voters. He tells Heavenly that she and Tom Jr. must be “shining examples of white Southern youth—in danger” (*Sweet Bird* 199). When Boss Finley positions their whiteness as being endangered by mingling with blackness, he successfully ensures that his voters will look upon those of different races with suspicion and hatred, which keeps them from questioning his power.

To maintain this power, both Gutman and Boss Finley use rhetoric. Boss Finley invokes religious rhetoric to legitimize his authority. He positions himself as called by the voice of God in an oft-repeated speech: “When I was fifteen, I came down barefoot out of the red clay hills as if the Voice of God called me. Which it did, I believe. I firmly believe that He called me. And nothing, nobody, nowhere is gonna stop me, ever” (199). Even when not repeating his speech, he employs religious language to position himself as having divine power. When his children ask questions about his mistress, Miss Lucy, Boss Finley says he feels “crucified” (194); to further establish his authority, he equates himself with Christ and his unjust sufferings. Though Gutman does not invoke God as his source of power, he still uses rhetoric to maintain it. When guards shoot the Survivor and Gutman must defend his actions to the Generalissimo, Gutman uses third person, neutral language to make his actions sound legitimate: “[The survivor has] come back. He was very thirsty. He found the fountain dry. He started towards the hotel. He was politely advised to advance no further. But he disregarded this advice. Action had to be taken” (*Camino* 450). In the similarities of these characters, Williams gives a rousing condemnation of the techniques that authority figures use to maintain their power.

There are, however, striking differences between Gutman and Boss Finley, and one such difference is Boss Finley’s dependence on his image for power. Critic Linda Schulte-Sasse writes,

“Finley’s power is grounded in a tendentiously fascist group structure surrounding his son Tom Jr. and his thuggish organization called ‘Youth for Boss Finley’” (17). However, Boss Finley’s power is not as absolute as Schulte-Sasse indicates. While this organization gives him power, he cannot openly condone their practices because it would damage his image. When Chance Wayne returns to town, Boss Finley tells Tom Jr. that he “wants [Chance] gone by tomorrow” but also insists, “Don’t tell me nothin’” and “I don’t want to know how, just go about it” (*Sweet Bird* 189). Scudder reinforces this, saying that he “can’t afford” to know how Tom Jr. deals with Chance and “neither can your father” (190). Boss Finley must have a spotless image: any disruption delegitimizes his power. His image is also dependent upon his children’s actions. He tells Heavenly, “Honey, you say and do things in the presence of people as if you had no regard for the fact that people have ears to hear you and tongues to repeat what they hear. And so you become an issue” (195-96). He needs his children to be “shining examples of white Southern youth” (199) so he can hold them – and by extension himself – up as worthy of leadership. To maintain his image as being worthy of leadership, he constantly denies the existence of his mistress, Miss Lucy: “Who’s Miss Lucy?” he asks both Tom Jr. and Heavenly (193, 196). He also cannot let people know he is impotent. The shock of hearing that Miss Lucy has written on the mirror at the hotel that he is “too old to cut the mustard” (193) drives Boss Finley into a fury because he links virility and power, and he cannot have one questioned without it reflecting on the other.

Since Boss Finley’s power is dependent on his image, it is fragile. This fragility is clearly evident when the Heckler appears at Boss Finley’s political rally and attacks his image. After the Heckler questions the hypocrisy of putting Heavenly forward as an example of purity, Boss Finley, despite having the Heckler beaten, begins to lose control of the crowd:

Will you repeat that question. Have that man step forward. I will answer his question.
Where is he? Have that man step forward, I will answer his question. ... Last Friday
... Last Friday, Good Friday. I said last Friday, please ... Last Friday, Good Friday, I

have seen [...] a hideous straw-stuffed effigy of myself [...] This outrage was inspired
 ... inspired by the Northern radical press. (225)

Despite trying to turn the crowd's attention back to himself and set himself up as a persecuted messiah with more religious rhetoric, Boss Finley loses control of the crowd, indicated by the large number of pauses and times that he must repeat himself: the Heckler has punctured his image. The stage directions read that Boss Finley "*is trying to dominate the disturbance in the hall*" (225), but the Heckler's brutal beating distracts the crowd and causes a commotion, bringing Boss Finley's power to its knees. Furthermore Boss Finley does not possess absolute power: he does not have power over life and death. The castrations that occur in the play are not seen onstage, and he cannot claim credit for any of them. Moreover, Boss Finley disappears after act two, and Chance, the man who is at the root of Boss Finley's crumbling image, gets the final lines, symbolically indicating that the boss's power is not as great as it may appear.

Conversely, Gutman does not have to bother with or maintain an image to keep his power. He is open about who he is and how he maintains his power – through brute force. Critic Colby Kullman argues that Gutman is just another man at the mercy of those more powerful than him because he "expresses fear of the street cleaners, for no matter how much power he has, he is not [...] immune to death." However, Kullman gives no evidence for his assertion while the evidence from the text points to Gutman having near-absolute power. He controls the Gypsy, as seen when he orders her to bring out Esmeralda to distract the riotous crowd (*Camino* 452). Therefore, by extension, he controls the streetcleaners because the Gypsy tells Kilroy, "The Streetcleaners are waiting for you outside the door" (546). And they dispatch Kilroy: the streetcleaners "*circle about [Kilroy] out of reach, turning him by each of their movements. His swings grow wilder, like a boxer. He falls on his knees still swinging and finally collapses flat on his face. The Streetcleaners pounce*" (577). Gutman can kill whom he wishes when he wishes because through the streetcleaners and the guards, he controls life and death. When the Survivor returns to Camino Real, he approaches the Sietes Mares, and "*Gutman*

whistles. A man in military dress comes out upon the low terrace and fires at the survivor" (444).

Gutman not only controls whether his subjects live or die, he controls their actions. He forces Kilroy into the patsy outfit, despite his protestations: "Don't give me orders. Kilroy is a free agent –" (479). When Kilroy attempts to escape, Gutman's minions catch him, and in the end, Kilroy must wear the patsy outfit. Gutman has such complete control that he can even silence people: "Hush! The patsy doesn't talk. He lights his nose, that's all" (484). Kilroy mutely obeys, and "*the nose goes off and on like a firefly*" as Gutman laughs and demands, "Again! Ha ha! Again, ha ha! Again!" (484). Anyone watching can see that Gutman enjoys watching the pain he causes, but this does not concern him because his power does not come from his image, and it does not matter what his subjects think of him. The residents of Camino Real are totally at his mercy; no one can stand against his power.

Additionally, unlike Boss Finley, Gutman is omnipresent and omnipotent. He is in every scene, unlike Boss Finley, who is only in the second act. Even when Gutman has nothing to do with the action of the scene, he appears at the end and announces the next block. The regularity of his appearances is unrelenting; there is no place to hide from him or escape his presence. He announces the block from various places on the stage, making it feel like he has eyes and ears on everything at all times. Even when Gutman is not there, the audience knows he is never far away and is constantly on edge wondering when and where he will arrive again. His control even moves beyond the confines of the stage as his guards participate in the chase of Kilroy through "*the aisle of the theater,*" "*the back of the house*" (481), and "*the boxes of the theater*" (482). Gutman controls all of the theater, not merely the stage and the actors upon it but also the audience and the space they occupy, making him far more sinister than Boss Finley.

Furthermore, the endings of *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *Camino Real* show that between the two authority figures, Gutman is the more menacing. At the end of *Sweet Bird*, Boss Finley's image collapses because the Heckler exposes Boss Finley as a brutal, manipulative man. The Heckler's beating is partially televised, and even what the television viewers cannot see, they can hear: "*we*

hear a gasp as if the Heckler has been hit,” and there are “sounds of a disturbance” (*Sweet Bird* 225). Heavenly, whom Boss Finley wants to represent the purity of his campaign, “collapses” (226). Her collapse is the last image of act two and the last time the audience sees Boss Finley. Although the Heckler destroys Boss Finley’s image and his power starts to crumble, he still has some power through Tom Jr., who finally corners Chance and prepares to castrate him. However, Tom Jr. does not actually castrate Chance before the final curtain, and Chance gets the last lines, pleading with the audience to identify with him: “I don’t ask for your pity, but just for your understanding—not even that—no. Just for your recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all” (236). Chance breaks the fourth wall in his final lines, something that no one else in *Sweet Bird* does. This bold move calls to mind Gutman’s ability to control even the audience when he speaks directly to them, an ability that Boss Finley does not have but that Chance attempts to grasp. While Williams implies Chance’s impending castration, the audience never sees it, and Chance temporarily possesses the power to communicate openly with the audience, which calls the extent of Boss Finley’s power into question.

At the end of *Camino Real*, however, Gutman keeps his power and stays as ruthless as ever. When critics analyze this lesser-known Williams play, they tend to read its ending as hopeful. Don Quixote and Kilroy venture out beyond the wall into the Terra Incognita right after Don Quixote says, “*The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks!*” (591). Critic Delma Presley reads this as hopeful, writing, “The implication [of this] is that the Camino has been redeemed through the courage of Kilroy who is now, like Christ, an eternal force” (35). Kullman also sees Don Quixote and Kilroy’s exit as positive, writing, “Quixote and Kilroy in *Camino Real* gain the strength and vision to follow in Lord Byron’s footsteps” (675). However, these critics fail to take into account that Gutman speaks the last lines of *Camino Real*: “The curtain line has been spoken! [...] Bring it down!” (591). Gutman still has control over the play, the audience, and Kilroy and Don Quixote, and the final part of his line has multiple meanings. The most obvious is that ‘it’ is the curtain, as

Williams indicates that “*The curtain falls*” (591) after Gutman’s line. He says his last line “*to the audience*” (591), indicating that his control still extends beyond the theatrical world. Furthermore the thing, or things, that must be brought down can also be Kilroy and Don Quixote. Perhaps Gutman orders the guards to shoot the two adventurers as they make their way across the wasteland. Because of Gutman’s last line, the audience does not have the satisfaction of knowing that Don Quixote and Kilroy truly escape. In the end, Gutman remains omnipotent.

Gutman’s omnipotence and Boss Finley’s fragility relate to the historical context of each play. Williams wrote *Camino Real* in 1953 during the height of anti-communism. While there has always been general mistrust of communism in the United States, anti-communism gained popularity after World War II as tensions rose between the Soviet Union and the U.S. These tensions grew into the Cold War, and fear of communist threat infected many aspects of American life, from politics to the movie industry. Historian Haynes Johnson writes that in 1947, “the House Un-American Activities Committee conducted its loyalty investigations into Hollywood,” which sparked “blacklisting, browbeating of witnesses, and [the] ruin of reputations” (127). In particular, little-known senator Joseph McCarthy intensified the public’s fears and spurred a ruthless hunt for communists. Anyone accused of being a communist – politicians, journalists, or everyday citizens – faced discrimination and persecution by the government. Johnson points out that “being on the ‘wrong’ mailing lists, owning the ‘wrong’ books, [or] having ‘politically suspect’ relatives and friends” could have serious repercussions; therefore, Americans tried to avoid any behavior or associations that would make them look unpatriotic (127). Historian Elbert Ventura writes, “The period of [McCarthy’s] campaign from 1950 to 1954 is generally regarded as an era of fear and suspicion in American society.” This fear of the long-reaching arm of the government can be seen in *Camino Real*, as can a condemnation of it.

This historical context suggests why Williams writes an ending for *Camino Real* in which Gutman maintains his power. In the early 1950s, Williams felt acute anxiety about anyone’s ability

to fight against the government in the face of the communist witch hunts. He wrote *Camino Real* at the height of the anti-communist movement while the government attempted to stamp out communism and deviance in general, such as homosexuality, dissidence, or anything un-American. People who supported “racial equality, socialized medicine, labor unions, equalization of economic opportunities, or a large governmental role in the economy” faced the repercussions of the government labeling them communists (Johnson 125). Ventura writes that the hunt for communists extended to Hollywood, and the Association of Motion Picture Producers refused to hire communists, effectively creating a blacklist that “ended up tarnishing many careers, most of them permanently.” Biographer John Lahr writes that Williams’ close friend and the director of several of his hit plays, Elia Kazan, had communist ties that the Government forced him to renounce, but he still “went from cultural prince to pariah” (252). The hunt for communists affected Williams personally as well, because as a homosexual, the government considered Williams to be a deviant. Therefore, the suppression of those around him was that much more threatening to Williams because at any moment, he could be next. Lahr writes that *Camino Real* was “[c]onceived as part protest play,” and it was “a statement about ‘the all-but-complete suppression of any dissident voices’” (255). This governmental censorship and persecution showed no signs of stopping in 1953, which is perhaps why Gutman maintains his omnipotence at the end of the play and Don Quixote and Kilroy do not truly get away, despite the appearance of escaping.

The historical context also affected *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Williams finished this play that deals with government oppression and race in 1959, after McCarthy fell from grace and the public desire to root out communism weakened. However, another key historical event impacted this play: *Brown v. the Board of Education*. This 1954 Supreme Court decision ruled that separate but equal was inherently unequal and struck down segregated schools. Despite the *Brown* decision marking the beginning of desegregation, the South largely refused to change without a fight. Desegregation threatened whites across the United States, and they reacted violently in many cases. Historian

Frederick Sargent writes, “[i]n Mississippi, the most racist state, the ruling [of *Brown*] ignited violence. Gangs of whites committed beatings, burnings, and lynchings” (3). The pushback came from the southern state governments as well as individuals. Historian Chris Bodenner writes that the period after the *Brown* decision “is sometimes referred to as the Second Reconstruction, since the struggle for black equality was largely a battle between the U.S. government in the North and state governments in the South, often enforced through the use of federal troops.” However, the South could not stop the changes brought by the *Brown* decision, which was one of many lawsuits that eventually led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

These events led to Williams constructing Boss Finley as a suppressive but ultimately fragile authority figure. Because Williams wrote *Sweet Bird* in 1959 after the decline of McCarthyism and the passing of *Brown v. the Board of Education*, he felt less anxiety about governmental suppression. However, many in the South still fought against desegregation, making race and anxiety about integration a controversial yet current issue. With *Sweet Bird*, Williams strives to be topical and explore the racial issues of the day, but the southern suppression of African Americans did not affect Williams the way that the hunt for communists did, so he does not construct Boss Finley to be as menacing an authority figure as Gutman. While Williams could see the abuse of authority, he also witnessed the government taking action against southern injustice through legislations such as the Civil Rights Act of 1957 that “focused primarily on voting rights” (Bodenner). Furthermore, he was not as personally invested in the oppression of African Americans. Ultimately, then, because the government did not threaten Williams in 1959 the way it did in 1953, he did not have the same commitment to critiquing its oppression.

While Williams uses both Gutman and Boss Finley to condemn oppressive government authority, Gutman, a character written during the height of anti-communism, is ultimately more sinister than Boss Finley, a character written during the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. These two authority figures share key characteristics – suppression of deviant behavior, division of

those beneath them, and use of rhetoric to maintain power – but Boss Finley’s power is fragile because it depends on his image while Gutman’s power is absolute. The historical context during which Williams wrote these two plays suggests why Gutman is a more powerful and sinister villain. Ultimately, the hunt for communists in the early 1950s affected Williams more personally than the Civil Rights movement in the late 1950s, which led to him constructing Gutman as more threatening than Boss Finley.

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