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Occupying a cage:

The construction of femininity in
Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin
Roof*.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Analysis	12
I. Resistance – Maggie the cat	
II. Subordination – Mae	
III. Expiration – Big Mama Pollitt	
Conclusion – Fertility and fortune	26
Works Cited	28

Introduction

Female characters of male writers can be controversial as these roles of women circulate in society through literature while composed from an inherently secondary perspective. Nevertheless this options them for study rather than to be discarded. A renowned writer of female leading characters (Blackwell 10), Tennessee Williams is a major figure in the Western canon of the theatre with seminal works such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and foremost *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* performed regularly on stage as well as included in anthologies for drama students (Arrell 61), which makes his works relevant today. However, Williams' work inevitable portrays women from a male perspective. In reaction to portrayals of women from a secondary perspective, feminist theory critiques that women have been constructed as contingent to men and their meaning derived from what function they fulfill rather than emerging in their own right (de Beauvoir 13). In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* the role of female characters can be understood in similar terms as functional to a household based on heterosexual marriage which includes fulfilling duties of care and motherhood at the cost of independence¹. The consequence of this gender characterization is a representation of women as socially dominated in marriage. The purpose of the present study is to examine how such an appropriation of women operates through an understanding of what it means to be a woman, that is, through a construction of femininity.

The play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a traditional three act Aristotelean tragedy with concentration of time and place over one night in the various rooms of the Pollitt

¹ The present study uses Williams' original version of Act III ending and not the revised version prepared for the Broadway opening in 1955 as the original version is more frequently used thus representing the current significance of the play (Crandell, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" 122).

plantation home for the celebration of their patriarch Big Daddy's 65th birthday. However the plot of the family's gathering has been widely discussed (Crandell, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" 117). While a plurality of conflicts erupts concerning inheritance, substance abuse, transgressive sexuality, illness and death, the clear pattern is that it is the relational clashes of characters and their power inequalities which drive the play. Fundamentally it can thus be understood as a play about family and marriage. Furthermore, this shows the social system of a family and how it establishes the different roles of man or woman, seen through three couples in varying stages of fulfilling its ideal of relational harmony, financial security and childrearing.

The critical focus on Williams' works and with no exception on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has been eschewed towards a gendered perspective which focuses on male characters and male experiences, either through autobiographical or psychoanalytic readings as will be discussed below. This selective focus on male experience has left the question of female experience and the function of women in the play in the periphery and therefore in need of distinct study.

The aim of the study is therefore to achieve a feminist understanding of the role of femininity in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In order to achieve this aim, the study will specifically address the questions of how femininity is constructed in the play by employing the framework of *sexage*. Femininity is conceived of as the qualities attributed to and expected of female characters. It is considered constructed by how it is not an external natural given but something made in the microcosm of the play in the interaction of characters through verbal actions. *Sexage* is a concept from French theorist Colette Guillaumin which refers to how women are appropriated (13), that is, how ownership to

define their own being and behaviour is seized by the needs of men. The study will argue that femininity is constructed as contingent upon the role of caring wives and expectant mothers, passive and subordinate to serve their male partners in a heterosexual marriage. A further assumption of this study is that marriage can be viewed as an economic relationship in which labour is divided between in- and outside of the household resulting in women being domesticated. In effect the construction of femininity in the play appropriates women in the service of men.

Furthermore, the study will address the question of the significance of this construction of femininity for the conflicts of sexuality and inheritance in the play. The analysis focuses on how the three central female characters, Maggie, Mae and Big Mama, are rendered through verbal and nonverbal actions and will demonstrate how a concept of femininity is reified. A feminist reading of these renditions will be guided by the materialist concept of sexage to investigate how conflicts of gender differences in relation to conditions of labour distribution and work conditions can be understood from the perspective of women. As a majority of literary studies of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* have been based on the assumption of male characters' centrality and/or focused on male homosexuality, the present study will challenge this perspective of viewing the role of women in the play as secondary and rather claim that female characters are equally important. The inclusion of femininity in the understanding of the play highlights how a patriarchal worldview is enacted. The study can also add an interpretative dimension to the plot as a critical perspective of gender influence on values on inheritance and distribution of the Pollitt estate. As a feminist perspective has been in the periphery in literary criticism regarding the oeuvre of Tennessee Williams in general and the play *Cat*

on a Hot Tin Roof in particular, this study will be significant in broadening a critical perspective on his art.

Background – Williams’ plots and male orientated literary studies

The persona of Tennessee Williams appearing in biographical, media and literary reports has been a hallmark of sexual and especially homosexual candidness (Williams, “Memoirs” 2) and this aspect tends to be highlighted in studies of his work (Downes Henry 3). Additionally, his plays have been lauded for their psychological realism (Crandell, ““Echo Spring”: Reflecting the Gaze of Narcissus in Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*” 427) and prominence of female main characters (Blackwell 10). In a study of eight of Williams’ most celebrated stage plays, Bauer-Briski (12) found that sexuality is a prominent or dominant aspect; even when not overtly sexual, plot impetus concerns relationship *between* characters rather than conflicts *within* characters. The relational plots of Williams’ plays have in literary studies been read as a covert theme of frustrated homosexuality within a heterosexual matrix where the conflicts erupt and are solved by a direct or implied exposure of transgressive sexuality, as for example the fate revealed of Blanche’s husband in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Williams, “Memoirs” 80). An example of this perspective is Price’s (332) autobiographical reading of Williams’ plays finding expression for the playwright’s homosexuality in the diversity of characters as aspects of the author’s psychological complexity. Unfortunately, this type of reading relies on a male-orientated worldview where writing about females becomes an exercise in stealth. A more recent study by Arrell (68) situates Williams’ continued relevance in academia and on the stage as a referent to the

advancement of gay rights and queer theory in the US in the latter decades of the 20th century. This view is more inclusive towards female characters yet is rather concerned with transgressive sexuality than gender differences or the role of sexuality for femininity and masculinity per say. Nevertheless, there are studies which give prominence to female characters and problematize gender relations in Williams' work. Downes Henry's feminist study of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* reads the binary opposition of gender as challenged by Maggie's characterization and thus the play subverts the preconceived contingent nature of being female (7) while not acknowledging the remaining material inequalities. Furthermore, Sample even declares Williams to be amongst "the most important feminist playwrights" (1) in the portrayal of powerful heroines with liberal sexual behaviour who expose patriarchy's oppression. However, Sample attributes a feminist reading as more relevant with attention to a socio-historical context of the play's realism (5) rather than accounting for how representations of femininity are constructed in the play and patriarchy reproduced. It is important to bear in mind the minority of existing feminist readings of Williams' plays which offer valid means of analyzing gender as transgressive and sexuality as coveted by a range of characters. The plurality of feminist perspectives on *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is certainly not exhaustive but rather offer interesting points of comparison, for example if sexuality is orientated by binary opposition or pleasure-seeking or fertility.

The approaches outlined above warrant a critical reading of Williams' work as past studies have risked being deterministic readings where focus on male experiences excludes the role of women, femininity, and female sexuality. This is especially relevant in his most performed play (Arrell 60) *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* where the focus in literary

studies on covert homosexuality has made the character Brick the focal point for studies regarding sexuality and gender issues. It is the absence of heterosexual behaviour for Brick which has been problematized, as in Bruhm's reading of his rejection of Maggie as central to the development of the play (536). As a result, sexuality has been discussed as situated *within* male characters rather than in the social space *between* all characters. Crandell's psychoanalytic reading of Brick similarly positions Maggie in the periphery as a reflector of Brick's sexual conflict which undercuts her role in the plot (Crandell 437). While homosexuality is certainly a theme of critical significance in Williams' oeuvre, Clum (28) shows that it is contingent upon a context of mid-20th century hostility towards transgressive sexuality. Williams' homosexual characters are often linked to destruction and their roles mirror that of the status of gay rights; throughout his career they move from exposition of consequence as in Blanche's husband in *Streetcar Named Desire* from 1947, to actively declamatory characters, as in the couple in *Small Craft Warnings* from 1972 (Williams "Memoirs" 80). Bloom (3) is furthermore of the opinion that Brick is ultimately an unconvincing character to crop the play around as his conflicts are too solipsistic concerning internal ambivalence of desire which obscures the actions and intentions of other characters; that is, if taken as the central perspective, Brick renders his surrounding superfluous. The preoccupation with "mendacity" (Williams "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and other plays" 71) can be a significant clue that Brick only offers false transparency and distraction from more crucial elements of the play. From de Beauvoir's perspective of women relegated as supplements to men (20) these readings exclude Maggie's already suppressed experience. A similar treatment is bestowed upon the additional female characters Mae and Big Mama. Kolin has shown

how Maggie is the impetus to the plot enabling communication between characters both actively and as a focal point of conflict over the Pollitt estate (76). The subjugation of female to male characters in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* therefore requires a feminist reading which extracts how femininity is constructed to enable this in the play.

The roles of women in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* are generally that of wives and mothers as seen in Mae and Big Mama. For them being a wife who cares for husband and children is equated with femininity with sexuality translated more as fertility than egalitarian pleasure-seeking. Furthermore, domesticity, understood as the care given to the practical matters of the home and as well as satisfying the needs of others, is another prominent feature of femininity in the patriarchal worldview in the play. However, the exception to the designated role of women is Maggie who is questioned for her inability to bear children and care for her husband Brick. The role of Maggie showcases how the patriarchal world of the play is normalized as she is harassed to conform as valuable to men as wife and mother (Eagleton 110). Furthermore, this makes her sexuality a concern for the social community in the play and has further consequences as the Pollitt family's distribution of wealth is made dependent on her producing an offspring. In this way the estate of the Pollitt family is tied to how femininity is constructed and to which extent Maggie conforms to it. There is thus a discourse of femininity suitable for a discursive reading of how a collective of characters create and impose it (Eagleton 111).

The social construction of femininity in marriage

Femininity is the social aspect of the quality of being female understood as a gender coming into existence by how people interact with one another and not by any

predetermined traits. This social aspect being female, termed gender, is assumed in feminist theory as being separate a biological features of being female, termed sex. Nonetheless the female gender is contingent upon the female sex as women are seen as a collective natural group, different from men with a specific function to serve due to their physical bodies. Delphy (7) argues the differentiation is most palpable regarding men to be dominating which in turn is dependent on females then being dominated. In turn this suggests a patriarchal worldview in which power is justified belonging to the group of men. This binary thus operates on a basis of complementarity and opposition and establishes a hierarchy (Delphy 7) which means that women are defined as *other* and lesser than men (de Beauvoir 35). In practical matters this means women are conceived of to feel, think, speak and act in ways men do not and that their way of being is valued as less significant and/or influential. Materialist feminists argue the construction of this binary is not simply cultural or gauged from solely historical circumstances but social able to be reproduced in various institutionalized practices and crucially so in marriage (Leonard & Atkins 75). Marriage can be seen as an economic relationship, Delphy argues from a Marxist perspective which acknowledges the materialist consequences of wealth and work differences in gender relationships (Leonard & Atkins 33), because it rests on a division of labour. Specifically, in marriage, labour can be understood as a means of producing offspring. In this context women are defined as bodies which can bear children. This highlights an essential physical aspect of the social division into men and women. While it has been argued sex and gender are different understandings of femininity, a materialist feminist perspective views the social construction of gender as nonetheless resting on an assumption of biological/physical properties of what is

considered a woman's body (Wittig 103). These properties, for example uterine and ovulatory features, are universalized to mean that the bodies of all women naturally share the function of childbearing. From a materialist feminist perspective the result is that to be a woman is to fulfill the care work and child production of a mother. What this means, Wittig claims, is that "gaining control of the production of children will mean much more than the mere control of the material means of this production: women will have to abstract themselves from the definition "woman" which is imposed upon them" (104). In this way, the material for production in marriage is woman's body emphasized for its closeness to a natural world by being construed as serving a biological function of childbearing. This closeness becomes a claim for domesticity: care and support in the home. Furthermore as domesticity is understood of as a natural constituent of being a woman it is not considered work and remains in materialist terms unpaid labour suppressing the value of women. In this way fertility cannot be understood merely as a separate biological trait but becomes a socially constructed aspect of femininity in a patriarchal worldview. Guillaumin therefore refers to maternity as an "immediate given" of femininity (161) to which any objection is countered by attempts towards conformity from a society which upholds this perspective by naturalizing marriage as between men and women.

Materialist feminism – Sexage and its application to literature

The division of labour in marriage for men and women is thus consigned by gender as a social construction of the physical bodies of women assigned certain functions. This materialist understanding of marriage renders women's labour a service to patriarchy

(Jackson 285). By extension, what it means to be a woman is thereby a concern for the community. Historically fathers have been deemed the proper owner of a child which is upheld by whole communities. An example of this is the stigma of a 'bastard child' and the resulting expulsion from social communities of the mother without a husband assumed to father the children she bears (Guillaumin 160). Furthermore, this means man has ownership of woman's product and by extension of woman herself in marriage (Guillaumin 160). In this way, the family household is similar to a market where genders are coded as goods and services. The marriage contract can be understood as gendered, that is, its foundation is the norm of heterosexuality which serves to justify marriage between men and women as a necessary relationship (Wittig 108). The necessary features of marriage and the social effects of fulfilling or not fulfilling the synonymous roles of woman-wife-mother becomes a useful framework for understanding *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Maggie's formulation of entrapment in her situation with Brick: "I'm not living with you. We occupy the same cage!" (Williams 28) can thereby be read as a symbolic amniotic sac trapping her in expectations of maternity in a social construction of femininity based in a patriarchal worldview.

The materialist aspect of gender relationships is further developed by Guillaumin in the concept of *sexage* (291). Guillaumin claims that the naturalistic discourse about women justifies the suppression into the domestic space by the claim that the inherent nature of women cannot be changed (233). In order to analyse the social construction of femininity in the microcosm of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, more specifically of the Pollitt family, Guillaumin's concept of *sexage* (13) will be employed. This theory is a way to critically analyze how women are physically appropriated as outlined above. This is

understood as how the gender female is socially construction as being a physical body with the function to labour in terms of time, sexuality and care to their male partners, family and homestead. Guillaumin writes:

One must also take into account the concrete dimension of the relationship, namely the appropriation of women's labour power and bodies; appropriation because much of the work performed by women is done so without pay, without contracts specifying time limits and working conditions. This labour, involving the physical, material, emotional and intellectual upkeep of the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped, as well as of able-bodied men, benefits men because it frees them to pursue other occupations and tasks, including paid labour. (13)

In applying a materialist feminist perspective to a literary text the social construction of femininity must be viewed as “involving at least four intersecting levels relating to structure, meaning, everyday practices, and subjectivity” (Jackson 289). The application of this to literary theory is elucidated by the following claim from Jackson that “[g]ender and sexuality are thus socially constructed by what embodied individuals actually *do*” (italics in original, 291) with “attention to material social inequalities and everyday social practices.” (284) which in the present case translate to the verbal and nonverbal actions characters perform in a play.

I. Resistance - Maggie the cat

Maggie can be seen as the eponymous cat struggling to stay in a situation full of demands for her to change. The reference to an animal is suggestive of Maggie resisting the disciplinary efforts to conform of the Pollitt household and thus rejecting its construction of femininity. The cat to begin with can be symbolically read as synonymous with a type of femininity which is powerful and opaque. The association with witchcraft and union with the Devil is perhaps an obvious reference in an historical-cultural context which point to seductiveness and the threat of untamed sexuality embedded in Maggie (Crandell, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" 110). The wildness and independence of cats as pets suggests the failure to domesticate this animal much like the Pollitt family's failure to subvert Maggie. For this reason, Maggie is the focal point for how femininity is understood and reproduced in the play through *sexage* in terms of appropriation of work, care and sexuality, in the service of men.

The work assigned to Maggie as a woman can be gauged from her actions and from the expectations professed upon her. Throughout the play, Maggie is in the position of caregiver for her husband Brick in both a physical and social means. Maggie reflects on the nature of her labour in the household poignantly: "It takes money to take care of a drinker and that's the office that I've been elected to lately" (39). In terms of *sexage* this highlights the contradictory nature of women's work in the household in that it is expected without contract or salary. Maggie's comment is ironic in that she should have been "elected" to the office of caring for Brick and demonstrates her ambivalence to this role. In junction with comments by other characters, it is clear the office she is

referring to is that of wife and the symptoms of the husband is due to shortcomings of this “office”:

BIG MAMA: Something’s not right. You’re childless and my son drinks! (36)

In this way, Maggie’s failure to become a mother is rendered significant in relation to Brick’s behaviour. An extension of implicit responsibilities of care can be seen in several scenes as Brick is passive and Maggie acts on his behalf: presenting a gift to Big Daddy (51), comforting Big Mama (91), excusing his behaviour (94) and speaking for him (102). Veering towards an account of Brick is thereby logical as he is part of her characterization. Aspects of his character which can be construed as an interior conflict and disillusionment with others’ mendacity are only made possible through Maggie’s a priori engagement to his care which is equal in marriage to care for his family as well, something she is even commended for (80). In terms of *sexage* this is rendered as the extension of woman’s responsibility for the domestic space:

BIG DADDY: I didn’t call you Maggie, I called Brick.

MARGARET: I’m just delivering him to you. (55)

Additionally, the work assigned to women as mothers is important in regard to Maggie’s attitude towards children further signifying marriage as a labour contract. The range of epithets she awards children are “no neck monsters” (17), “pigs”,

“like animals” (18), “screaming tribe” (19) and “monsters” (21). Maggie openly ruminates on why Mae and her husband Gooper “give dawgs’ names to all your kiddies?”, (29) “[f]our dogs and a parrot...animal act in a circus!” (30). The children in the play act as vulgar extensions of the animosity felt by Mae and Gooper towards Brick and Maggie as they taunt Maggie: “You’re just jealous because you can’t have babies!” (45). Furthermore, the children serve the theatrical purpose of interrupting or disturbing the character (45, 68, 71, 83). This interruption often tightens tension between characters. As such, the reification of the forced production of women and Maggie’s resistance to motherhood strengthens the notion that it is *her* interpellative space from which the play is constructed, in other words, Maggie’s position on marriage and the expectation of motherhood becomes the perspective from which other characters’ actions and beliefs can be evaluated.

The Pollitt family’s expectations of care and motherhood challenge Maggie’s independence in several ways. A poignant moment is where Maggie is reiterating the events which lead to Skipper’s death, the clandestine trauma which premises Brick’s character, and in effort to refrain her Brick calls up the family to their room (40). Maggie remains in the role of caregiver; she abides all threats of retaliation, verbal and physical, from Brick (42). On a structural level, Maggie carries the exposition of events while Brick hold them back; concretely he is numbed by consuming the liquor which her labour as wife finances with Big Daddy’s condition on them having children. Disregarding the office she does fulfill in caring for Brick, there are circumstances which exclude Maggie from the Pollitt household as can be seen when Gooper directly established the sphere of influence Maggie is entitled to:

MARGARET: I wish you would just stop talking about my husband.

GOOPER: I've got a right to discuss my brother with other members of MY OWN family which don't include you. Why don't you go out there and drink with Brick? (96)

Maggie sees her role as that of contingent upon Brick yet she is not allowed agency beyond being a supplement; family in terms of blood relatives, even ties between antagonistic brothers, is still premiered. In terms of *sexage* this highlights how rights of women are decided by men. Maggie's 'failure' to bear children is the condition on which she is disregarded; it is this crucial factor which acts as her transposition to an accepted member of the household in that once they have children they can take over the estate (94, 101, 102). The connection of motherhood to work in this way of it enabling economic sustenance is poignant. This can be further gauged by how Maggie markets her physical appeal as the goods she can offer when not fulfilling the role of caregiver:

MARGARET: Well, now I'm dressed, I'm all dressed,
there's nothing else for me to do. I'm dressed, all dressed,
nothing else for me to do... (40)

Maggie's appearance is a dominant feature of how she presents herself in contrast to how others construct her and becomes a mark of resistance to the femininity ordained in the play concerning sexual independence. Maggie's insistence on her

appearance as attractive to men is in relation to the youthful features, signaling not yet being a mother, appreciated by the male gaze: “How high my body stays on me!” (37). While Maggie is concerned with this outer quality of her physical body, other characters rather construct her femininity as an internal quality as seen above. However, it is Maggie’s reaction to being looked at which directs her to construct herself in this way. The look Maggie experiences on her is one of a potential sexual partner whether Big Daddy who “drops his eyes to her boobs an’ licks his old chops” (21) or “the best looking man in the crowd – followed me upstairs and tried to force his way in the powder room with me” (37). The issue of sexuality is clearly a point of diversion from expectations and reality to which Maggie objects. The sexuality of women socially constructed in the play as contingent upon men’s desire is not finalized:

BIG MAMA: D’you make Brick happy in bed?

MARGARET: Why don’t you ask if he makes *me* happy in bed?

BIG MAMA: Because I know that -

MARGARET: *It works both ways!* (36, italics in original)

This exchange is telling of the complex issue of sexuality for women in the play. The speculation of happiness in bed is presented as a concern for men and Big Mama seem to insinuate Brick is not satisfied by Maggie. However, Big Mama is significantly cut off leaving her rebuttal ambiguous as to whether she acknowledges Maggie too may not be happy. This offers alternative readings of the role of sexuality for femininity in the play. Maggie’s emphatic response that it is a reciprocal issue of

sexual contentment is not as strongly reiterated at other points of the play where it rather concerns a subject-object relationship as understood in *sexage*. However, the exchange above proposes in line with Sample's thesis (5) that women's sexual experience subverts patriarchal dominance. Maggie is recalcitrant and resists sexuality as a social control exerted by the family. There is even the possibility that Big Mama acknowledges the need for sexual pleasure for both women and men. Maggie has a sense of her own desire which is not conditioned on the need to bear children which means fertility is not a supreme notion of how body and desire can be appropriated. She is reflective about her sexuality and the contaminant lack of satisfaction in Brick's rejection of her, something she ironically refers to as "the martyrdom of St Maggie" (25). The version of female sexuality to have children lacks reference to woman's own desire and is continually discarded by Maggie. Her reference to Brick's handsomeness: "Why can't you get ugly?" and her attempts to seduce him (31, 104) are therefore not attempts to conform to the norm of the Pollitt family but rather an expression of sexual independence (Sample 6). Maggie's continued relationship to Brick despite strains could never be maintained through *his* reluctance or entirely by the economic support from Big Daddy but significantly by Maggie's sexual desire for Brick. In this way sexuality also concerns understanding between two women. Bruhm's position that Brick's rejection is central to the play (536) is thereby not valid when shifting focus to interpret the relationships from a feminist perspective. In fact, in line with Bloom's suggestion (3) Brick functions *more* like an object than Maggie does concerning family life and the norm of heterosexual marriage. Her resistance, while showcasing the *sexage* in operation in the Pollitt family, is also a route to agency.

In this view Maggie can be read as the eponymous cat of the play who tries to remain in a seemingly unbearable situation as a cat on a hot tin roof or a woman who resists patriarchal constructions of femininity. Through Maggie's conflicts with members of the Pollitt family one can perceive the contours of the femininity construct which constitutes woman by the institution of marriage with the sole purpose of and responsibility for caring for her husband and bearing children. Maggie's reflective nature leads her to question the marriage contract which binds husband and wife economically: "I'm not living with you. We occupy the same cage" (28). However, in the play, other levels of social interaction are at play to enhance the image of what the construction of femininity entails by those who abide by it.

II. Subordination – Mae

Mae, also referred to as Sister Woman, embodies the notion of woman as compliment to man regulated by her role in the family as wife and mother. She is subordinate to this construction of femininity in that the range of her actions concerns care for the family: the ideal woman. The first impression of Mae comes from Maggie and reveals the far end of the spectrum of femininity: "Brother Man's wife, that monster of fertility" (20). Maggie continues to state that Mae:

refused twilight sleep! [...] when the twins were delivered!
 Because she feels motherhood's an experience that a woman
 ought to experience fully! ... - HAH! (21)

The image of self-sacrifice is projected onto Mae; besides an introduction as a complement to Gooper she physically suppresses her own needs for the sake of motherhood. Mae thus demonstrates a wife's expected production. Her labour is determined by the structure she is in, an aspect which is further emphasized by Maggie:

MARGARET: Sister Woman! Your talents are wasted as a
housewife and a mother, you really ought to be with the FBI or –
(51)

This statement establishes a contrast to the 'office' Maggie experiences in marriage with 'talents'. Talent as a concept of naturalness is established as meaningful for the role of mother in the play. Furthermore, the contrast is additionally poignant in regard to patriarch Big Daddy's statement that "Gooper's wife's a good breeder, you got to admit she's fertile" (56). Hence, even by way of sardonic comment, Maggie exposes a collective understanding of Mae's womanhood which showcases the construction as an appropriation and service to patriarchy as in *sexage*. Big Daddy's language suggests a view of Mae akin to cattle in a production line. Being a woman as in service to men is realized by labour and time to the point of self-sacrifice being part of the naturalness of being a woman. Mae thus suggests the ideal of femininity as wife synonymous motherhood. Mae can thereby be viewed as embodying the collective notion of women as a natural group (Delphy 8) who disciplines anyone who deviates from it. Mae exerts this social control by publicly shaming Maggie:

MAE: Do you know why she's childless? She's childless because that big beautiful athlete husband of hers won't go to bed with her! (97)

This is a recurring verbal action that suggests not producing children is a failure to conform to femininity. However it is also subtle indication of Mae's possibly sexual jealousy of Brick as a big beautiful athlete and prime partner. The appropriation of subjectivity can be seen that Mae reflects on Maggie in the regard to how she is as an asset in the family to bear children (101). It is symbolic that she celebrates Brick at the expense of Maggie's fault; in a patriarchal sense highlighting her responsibility while excluding his. The condition of inclusion is an appropriated subjectivity as Mae has aligned her actions and views with Gooper to the point where at times their speech is almost inseparable: they fill in the other's sentences (96). This synchrony of Mae and Gooper is indicative of *sexage* in that Mae's existence is contingent upon Gooper. Mae's role in the relationship reveals the economic nature of marriage in a patriarchal society as producing and caring for children are actions traded for social acceptance. In this view, the distribution of the estate is equal to fulfilling the heterosexual marriage contract:

MAE: Big Daddy would never, would *never*, be foolish enough to –
 GOOPER: - put this place in irresponsible hands! (Italics in original, 95)

Their ruminations of responsibility indicate Maggie and Brick's inferred lack of responsibility, the meaning of which becomes the dividing feature of the two couples: children (39, 97). The extension of this reasoning is that a woman not bearing children is irresponsible as it surrenders one's right to property. This showcases the economic function of marriage in which femininity ordains production and labour contingent upon accepting woman's naturalness or 'talents' for care. The simile of family as a business is further emphasized by Gooper who has constructed "a sort of dummy – trusteeship [...] a design a possible feasible plan" (99) to manage the estate, suggestive of the economic discourse which ordains the relationships within the family.

In contrast to Maggie, Mae offers a substantial aspect of what is expected of women in the play by the fact that she has conformed to the social construction of femininity assuming the synonymous roles of wife and mother. The element of self-sacrifice surrounding motherhood which Mae presents signals that in femininity lies a negation of an independent nature. While Maggie struggles with the patriarchal society of the Pollitt family Mae is awarded the social privilege of inclusion and economic sustenance by subordinating to it through producing children and aligning her subjectivity with her husband. The further consequences of *sexage* can be seen in the case of Big Mama for the consequences of expired femininity.

III. Expiration – Big Mama Pollitt

Appellation for Williams can often hold a strong symbolic value and clearly so in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* where characters are named very much for the essence of their

apparition. Ida Pollitt goes by the epithet Big Mama and is designated thus in several ways. Her corpulence is commented upon mockingly throughout the play. However, her bigness is merely a physical property and thus an ironic comment on the contrasting roles of Mother and Father or Big Mama and Big Daddy. While 'Big' Mama is only so in stature Big Daddy is big in all matters of influence. Big Daddy is not identified by any given name which means the only way to relate to him in the play is to that of a patriarch of almost mythical proportion: "richest this side of the valley Nile" (82).

The significance of sobriquets and diminutives in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is in this way a characterization of the family as a hermetically sealed unit; the house is even presented as panoptic where character describe it as having ears (27) and remark that doors are not allowed to be locked (32) emphasizing the whole of the family is greater than its members' individuality. Brick and Maggie' necessary privacy to start a family is compromised by the attention of Mae and Big Mama. In this way, Maggie's situation attracts the full scope of the play as Kolin suggests (76). However, it is not entirely consistent whether she is an appropriated object talked *about* or a subject with an independent voice. The stake appears to be more than Maggie's fate in that her importance as one character is not sufficient for her to be considered the impetus for the action but rather it concerns a structural issue of the function of women and the risks run of losing it. The characterization of Big Mama illustrates this point. A reason for her surveillance can be that her combined age and corpulence makes her superfluous in the Pollitt household: she is no longer attractive (49, 72), can no longer bear children at the age of 63 (64) or need to care for the home (54). In this way, the gender of the parental role is clearly a matter of mutual exclusion: what Big Daddy is, Big Mama is not – a

person with agency. Similarly to the argument made by Downes Henry (7) gender operates on a basis on binary opposition in the play but it is relevant mostly when women have lost their bargaining power of sexuality/fertility. The closest Big Mama comes to bridging the gap is by imitating Big Daddy: “What is it Big Daddy always says when he’s disgusted? [...] “CRAP! I say CRAP too, like Big Daddy” (100). The binary between the other two couples Maggie-Brick and Mae-Gooper fluctuates, even to the point of occasional complementation undercutting the opposition and power imbalance. In contrast to this the only means Big Mama has to assert any power in the household is her contingency to Big Daddy:

BIG MAMA: I’m 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! (99 italics in original)

Big Mama thus represents the defeat under patriarchy as a progression from Mae and Maggie. She lacks resources now that her potential as mother and sexual partner has expired. As a result, her epithet becomes ironic by the diminutive address which cannot be read simply as terms of endearment as it exerts a form of belittling social control in employing Big Daddy’s language of ridicule and dominance:

GOOPER: She’s gonna keep *both* chins up, aren’t you, Big Mama [...] Be a brave girl, Mommy (94)

The lesser space awarded Big Mama in the play is coherent with her diminished importance within the household as an older woman. Yet she is still expected to perform certain work and is in many ways treated as staff by Big Daddy. Similarly to Maggie she is left to handle social relations (64) especially to Big Daddy's "old maid sister Miss Sally" (66). This strengthens the notion of *sexage* that care work is expected of all women and not related to age or status. Furthermore Big Daddy restricts her freedom regarding what rooms she can move through (69) and what she can do or say (49). Big Mama accepts Big Daddy's harshness which means she has internalized the function of servitude to patriarchy: "I even loved your hate and your hardness, Big Daddy!" (55), which can be seen as a significant contrast to Maggie exclaiming indifference as rejection of Brick's controlling malice (42). An alternative to passivity for Big Mama in the expiration of her femininity is understandable a regression to tantrums and emotionality which incapacitates her and inverts the naturalness of woman as provider of care to become an object of it (89, 91, 94, 97). Furthermore, Big Mama's role in the household suggests an aspect of *sexage* in that women are made dependent on men financially. She is relieved of any command of the household (54) and in several turns Big Daddy comments on the fact that Big Mama's actions are contingent upon his wealth:

BIG DADDY: ...couldn't hold that woman with a mule's harness!

Bought, bought, bought! – lucky I'm a rich man. (60)

Coupled with his condescending behaviour towards her, this shows the effect of conforming to femininity and thereby reveals a crucial purpose of its construction: the

subjugation of agency through belittling to enable a gender-based economic relationship. Their marriage is not built upon affection but rather a contract for the good of the estate. The humiliation and ridicule Big Mama is met with is understandable in this context of domination as a precondition for *sexage*. Big Mama's expired function in the household makes her comment tragic considering its root in a patriarchal worldview which suppresses female experience:

BIG MAMA: I think Big Daddy was just worn out. He loves his family, he loves to have them around him [...] He wasn't himself tonight, Big Daddy wasn't himself, I could tell he was all worked up. (85)

Finally, Big Mama offers an important aspect of femininity as to the reason for and consequence of obsolescent in the marriage contract. The only function left for Big Mama is a tragi-comic effect and a regression to the object of care rather than its provider. The disposal quality of Big Mama in the Pollitt household is ironically emphasized by her large physicality and emotional expressiveness. Together these aspects provide an essential part for understanding the construction of femininity as based not only on care work and subservience of subjectivity and sexuality but most significantly on fertility as a means of production in the business of family life.

Conclusion: Fertility and fortune

The construction of femininity in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has in the present study been viewed through a nexus of intersecting levels of everyday actions of care work, what is made meaningful in being a woman of motherhood and sexuality, structures of inequality between men and women, and inferred subjectivity of femininity in the female characters Maggie, Mae and Big Mama. The present analysis of this construction is informed by a materialist understanding of the role of women as devised according to *sexage*, a concept which views the gender relationships as an appropriation of time, body, sexuality and care which make the labour of women contingent upon men, and marriage a contract of coerced production. The social consequences of this are in particular that Maggie is subject to chastisement to conform to the norm of motherhood. The importance of this norm is seen in Maggie's resistance contrary to Mae's subordination and the resulting privilege of access to property. In order for this construction to operate as dominance of women it requires them to be treated as a natural group who share a set of traits, values and actions, which is foremost perpetrated by Mae through negation of independence for the sake of motherhood. Finally Big Mama offers an ironic comment on the disposable element of this role for women as the advance beyond fertile age renders woman's function in patriarchy expired.

This reading is coherent with a materialist feminist understanding of marriage, which has limitations. While feminist readings exist of the play in contrast to a domination of male orientated body of literary study, the present study in taking a materialist direction offers a new way of viewing gender differences as concerned with appropriation of women's work. Nevertheless this rests on a Marxist assumption of how femininity can

be construed and socially dominated and may be less valid in alternative theoretical positions. Alternative feminist readings exist and need to be acknowledged, for example that the independent nature of Maggie's sexuality can be viewed in a different light as concerning pleasure. Female characters can be viewed as attempting to claim their sexual desire and are rejected through male orientated understandings of femininity as passive and submissive.

It has been shown that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* deals with marriage and family based on inequality of work and exploitation of production which can be understood as *sexage*. Viewed in this light its conflicts and characters are problematized and offer new perspectives which shift the interpellative space traditionally given to Brick to Maggie thereby validating her role in the play. In this way the study argues the relevance of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is not necessarily based on coveted transgressive sexuality and internal conflicts of mendacity as traditional literary studies have maintained but can be viably understood as provocative in a materialist sense of the merged aspects of fertility with fortune. As such, the society they inhabit is a patriarchal one and the construction of femininity, while primarily concerning female characters, designates the roles of the whole Pollitt family which Maggie realizes in that they "occupy the same cage" (28).

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