THE MAJOR PLAYS of Tennessee Williams—who died just 25 years ago, in 1983—feature women at their core. But for all their centrality as the emotional focal point of these plays, paradoxically enough, these women are without power in the community they inhabit. It is the men who control events; the women are entirely dependent on the men and use them to achieve their goals. In A Streetcar Named Desire, the strangers on whose kindness Blanche DuBois has "always depended" are exclusively male strangers. In The Glass Menagerie, Amanda and Laura Wingfield depend on Tom for their very survival. And, in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, childless Maggie the Cat lacks any claim to the estate of her husband's family.

In addition to their physical neediness, these women are all emotionally fragile. Some critics have suggested that the women in these plays are actually gay men in disguise. While I doubt that this is the case, it seems the men they're involved with are often closeted homosexuals or at any rate men who strongly prefer the company of other men. As women inhabiting a world of men who are indifferent to their needs and to their womanhood, each of these four women has lost her place in the world irretrievably. The pathos of Blanche DuBois, Maggie the Cat, and Laura and (especially) Amanda Wingfield is that they refuse to acknowledge their state of exile and continue to struggle for a piece of dignity and social standing even when the battle seems lost.

To start with the life of Blanche DuBois from Streetcar: from the opening scene, Williams strongly foreshadows her doom. Blanche first appears on Elysian Fields in New Orleans, quite lost, gazing at a sheet of paper that should be able to reveal whether she's at the right address. The stage directions specify that her appearance is "incongruous with the setting." Once inside the home of her sister Stella Kowalski and husband Stanley, Blanche discovers, among other unpleasant realities, that all-male poker games are a central feature of the Kowalski home. Women are not only barred from playing poker; they are banished from the house when it's being played. One night, when Blanche and Stella return home before the session has ended, Blanche pipes up, "Poker is so fascinating. Could I kibitz?" Stanley replies abruptly, "No, you could not." Shortly after this exchange, an inebriated Stanley assaults Stella during a disagreement about a radio.

"Poker should not be played in a house with women," remarks Stanley's friend Mitch—twice, underscoring its significance. Some critics have seen this statement as a sign of Mitch's sensitivity to women, expressing his desire to protect them from this vulgar business. But the statement may signal something more sinister, a type of "male bonding" that excludes women altogether. As Mark Lilly points out in Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century (1993): "Some gay men will also read the male characters' behavior as signaling a disengagement from women, and therefore heterosexuality itself. This latter point, although it might appear far-fetched, is underscored by such details as the male camaraderie which exists between Stanley and his poker-playing friends and from which the 'womenfolk' are emphatically excluded."

If we see the poker game as a metaphor for the action of the play, an arena where male power is played out, then Stanley and friends have conspired to create a world in which women literally have no place: they can even be barred from their home. The women in the play—Stella, Blanche, and also Eunice—exist solely to satisfy the men's needs. The men are portrayed as sexually attractive but far from lovable. This sexual desirability—an attribute traditionally associated with women—is the main attraction of the men, whose ruthless-ness is accepted by the women as preferable to mere indifference.

In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Maggie the Cat finds herself in a loveless—and sexless—marriage, but craves the security of a normal marriage and family life so much that she's willing to endure any humiliation to acquire it. She pleads for her husband Brick's affections, only to be rejected repeatedly. At one point, Brick even advises her to "take a lover." Later in the play, much later, we learn about the suicide of his beloved friend Skipper, an event that has tormented Brick ever since and turned him into a severe alcoholic. Brick, of course, denies any homoerotic feelings for Skipper, whose homosexuality scarcely seems in doubt, accusing Maggie of "naming it dirty" when she insinuates such a relationship. Even Big Daddy has noticed that there was something "not exactly right ... not exactly normal in your friendship with Skipper [Williams' emphasis]." At this point Brick becomes incensed: "You think that Skipper and me were a pair of dirty old men?" Significantly, this pivotal conversation between Big Daddy and Brick, like Stanley's poker table, is a strictly men's affair that the women would like to infiltrate. Both Big Mama and Sister Woman try at different times to enter the room, only to be batted away by Big Daddy.
In *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda Wingfield, the matriarch of her small family, appears at first to be a woman who takes charge of her family's future—until we learn that it's all an act, endlessly replayed. So far as her daughter Laura is concerned, taking charge amounts to little more than feeble attempts to find her a "gentleman caller." Her dread of the future stems from a well-founded fear that her son Tom will one day abandon the family and leave the two women helpless. Eventually, Tom does leave home to join the merchant marines, choosing this all-male world over his feminized home.

Earlier in the play, Tom brings his best friend home from work. The women naturally assume that Jim is there as a gentleman caller for Laura. But when Jim arrives at the Wingfield home, it becomes clear that he wasn't expecting to meet Laura. "I didn't know Shakespeare [Tom's nickname at the warehouse] had a sister." Far from being an eligible bachelor, Jim mentions in passing that he has a finance. After Jim leaves, Amanda asks Tom how it's possible that he didn't know that his best friend was engaged to be married. How indeed? It does seem odd that Jim would conceal this little detail from Tom until now. My initial sense of this scene was that Tom reacted to the news like a jilted lover. But I also think that the way in which Jim dismisses the presence of a woman outside his friendship with Tom reinforces this idea of an all-male club: no women need intrude.

By the way, the "men only" environment in two of the plays is underscored by references to the military. Williams himself had 4F status due to poor eyesight (not homosexuality!), but he was of course cognizant of the possibilities for male-bonding—as well as the institutionalized homophobia—in the U.S. military. Stanley and Mitch both have a military background in *Streetcar*. Tom Wingfield dreams of serving in the merchant marines in *Menagerie*, an all-male environment if ever there was one, far out at sea. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Brick and Skipper's relationship seems to have been forged almost exclusively in the context of sports teams, a similarly homosocial setting for young men.

The centrality of women in Williams' plays and his deep sensitivity to their plight has led to a widespread consensus that he was an early feminist who may have identified with women because of his own status as an outsider. On the other hand, perhaps there's a hint of misogyny in Williams' fascination with doomed women facing impossible circumstances. This seems to me a central question for our understanding of Williams' plays, one for which there is no easy answer.

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