

Cathy ames's manipulative power in east of eden



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“ Sexuality with all its attendant yearnings and pains, jealousies and taboos, is the most disturbing impulse humans have” (Steinbeck 75). To Cathy Ames, a seductively charismatic sociopath, sexuality and the vulnerability that accompanies it is the biggest downfall of humans. She discovers the key to controlling anyone is through such impulses. At age ten she takes advantage of two boys through their sexuality, and then proceeds to frame them to get what she wants. This behavior continues for the rest of her life, as she spends most of it at various whorehouses manipulating the owners until it is clear that she is the one who truly runs the establishment. Cathy feels so comfortable at a whorehouse, a place where she controls people through their sexuality, because she herself possesses no weakness to such impulses, and therefore uses everyone else's vulnerability to gain control. At a young age, Cathy Ames realizes the power she has over other people through their sexuality, and how she can use such a vulnerability to take advantage of them. The first example of this behavior is when she tricks two young boys at the age of ten. While looking for her daughter, Cathy's mother hears giggling coming from the carriage house. Upon walking in, she saw that “ Cathy lay on the floor, her skirts pulled up. She was naked to the waist, and beside her two boys about fourteen were kneeling” and “ Cathy's wrists were tied with a heavy rope” (Steinbeck 76). Cathy's mother is horrified; but the reader knows this incident is clearly Cathy's doing. When the families have a meeting regarding what happened, the boys have a defense that seems ridiculous: “ Cathy, they said, had started the whole thing, and they had each given her five cents. They had not tied her hands. They said they remembered that she was playing with a rope” (Steinbeck 77). To this defense Cathy's father responds, “ Do they really mean to say

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she tied her own hands? A ten-year-old child?" (Steinbeck 77). Mr. Ames' inquiry serves as a rhetorical question to the reader, underscoring the irony of the situation. He asks this question, of course, to make such a notion sound completely foolish. The reader has better insight into Cathy's personality than her father does, however, and knows that Cathy likely manipulated and framed the boys by using her newly discovered sexuality. Cathy's reasoning for doing such a thing becomes apparent in the tone Steinbeck takes towards her character: he believes she is pure evil and everything she does is solely to benefit herself. To Cathy, this event served as an experiment. The reader is unaware of exactly what Cathy says to the boys, but it is obvious that she wanted her way with them and knew how to get it. From a young age she knows that she is able to control people, but uses this event, and people's reactions to it, to judge exactly how far she can take things. When the boys get "whipped to raw cuts" and Cathy gets attention and sympathy, it becomes clear to her—as well as the reader—precisely how much power she has, and how dangerous it will become in the future (Steinbeck 77). As an adult, Cathy first takes advantage of Mr. Edwards, a married man whose livelihood comes from owning a brothel. From the day she meets him, Cathy plans to get whatever she wants from him then proceeds to achieve this goal by using her mock innocence and feminine lure to make him fall in love with her: "He rented a sweet little brick house for her and then gave it to her. He bought her every imaginable luxury, overdecorated the house, kept it overwarm. The carpeting was too deep and the walls were crowded with heavy framed pictures" (Steinbeck 93). Cathy has once again used her seductive mystique to gain control of the situation. She maintains that control in the bedroom: "She convinced him

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that the result was not quite satisfactory to her, that if he were a better man he could release a flood of unbelievable reaction in her. Her method was to keep him continually off balance . . . And when she sensed the near approach of insane, punishing rage, she sat in his lap and soothed him and made him believe for a moment in her innocence. She could convince him" (Steinbeck 94). Steinbeck makes it clear that Cathy knows exactly what she is doing and how far she will go to control a man so " hopelessly, miserably in love" with her (Steinbeck 93). The more " off balance" Mr. Edwards becomes, the more stable Cathy becomes and this stability leads to control. As long as she remains unobtainable, she holds this control. According to Sherry Argov, author of *Why Men Love Bitches*: " A woman is perceived as offering a mental challenge to the degree that a man doesn't feel he has a 100 percent hold on her . . . She's available sometimes; other times she's not. But she's nice. Nice enough, that is, to consider his preferences for when he'd like to see her so that she can sometimes accommodate them. Translation? No 100 percent hold" (5). Cathy Ames does just this to Mr. Edwards to secure her place being in control of their relationship: " She gave him an impression of restlessness, as though she might take flight at any moment. When she knew he was going to visit her, she made it a point to be out and to come in glowing as from some incredible experience" (Steinbeck 94). Cathy realizes that each time she does something like this, it never completely satisfies Mr. Edwards and he falls more in love with her because she is so elusive. As he becomes more smitten, he becomes equally as submissive, losing all his dignity. Cathy knows exactly what to say to put Mr. Edwards in this state. For example, " When she would return in the late afternoon and find him waiting for her she would explain, ' Why, I was

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shopping. I have to go shopping, you know.' And she made it sound like a lie" (Steinbeck 94). Cathy's sexuality and seductive lure put her in control of any situation, and give her power over anyone. The second brothel owner Cathy takes advantage of is Faye, a woman in her sixties who also falls under the spell of Kate, the new name Cathy assumes when she starts working at Faye's. Like Mr. Edwards, Faye finds herself seduced by Kate's sweet and unassuming nature: " Faye, the essence of motherness, began to think of Kate as her daughter. She felt this in her breast and in her emotions, and her natural morality took hold. She did not want her daughter to be a whore. It was a perfectly reasonable sequence" (Steinbeck 223). Kate essentially seduces Faye into treating her much better than she treats the other girls at the house. Faye is happy to take Kate under her wing because Kate knows, like she did with Mr. Edwards and the two boys in the carriage house, exactly what to say to come off as innocent and loveable and therefore get what she wants. When Faye asks about Kate's choice to dye her hair from blonde to black, Kate is " very clever. She [tells] the best lie of all-the truth" (Steinbeck 226). By mixing truth in amongst all her lies, Kate makes everything sound believable, and therefore no one doubts anything she says. When she has everyone's trust in a way this powerful, she can get whatever she wants. What Kate wants out of Faye is her fortune, as Faye has accumulated much wealth from being the owner of a successful brothel for many years. As soon as Faye declares Kate as her daughter and writes her into her will, Kate begins scheming and planning Faye's death. She poisons her slowly over time and simply blames it on an illness. She never raises suspicion because she is so careful in her planning: " At first they had to tie Kate down to keep her from hurting herself. From violence she went into a

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gloomy stupor. It was a long time before she regained her health. And she forgot completely about the will. It was Trixie who finally remembered" (Steinbeck 251). Kate's false front makes the girls think that she is sincerely devastated by Faye's death, when in actuality, she was the one who killed her in order to inherit Faye's money and title. Kate's ruthless seduction and then careful planning help her take over the whorehouse and inherit the owner's six-digit fortune. Cathy Ames, or Kate, as she becomes known later, is by far the most manipulative, conniving, and cunning character in *East of Eden*. She uses her sexuality to control anyone she chooses and to get what she wants from that person. As a child, she frames two young boys when first discovering the power of her sexuality. Later, as an adult, she seduces two brothel owners and achieves overwhelming control over both of them, resulting in the inheritance of a large fortune from one of them. Because she is a sociopath with no real conscience, Cathy is able to live the greater part of her adult life in control of any situation through her scheming manipulation of sexuality. As the two boys and Mr. Edwards learn, that manipulation is dangerous. In Faye's case, it is deadly.

Works Cited
Argov, Sherry. *Why Men Love Bitches*. Avon: Adams Media, 2004.
Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.