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The Celebration of Life and Fertility in *The Rose Tattoo*

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Abstract: Tennessee Williams in *The Rose Tattoo* shows a complete different picture of woman in the portrayal of Serafina Delle Rose. Unlike the women characters of his early plays, Serafina Delle Rose is analysed in this paper as a woman who is quite firm in her approach to life. She is served as an antithesis to Williams' own myth of the defeated lady – the likes of Amanda Wingfield and Blanche Du Bois. She is studied as an enormously vital character who triumphs through her sexual instinct. Through her character, Williams shows the victory of sensuality over spirituality; and the power that lies beneath the fragile being of a woman.

Keywords: sensual, sexual repression, fertility, Dionysian element.

The Rose Tattoo (1951) is one of the middle plays of Tennessee Williams. In the middle plays of Tennessee Williams such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) or *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams presents a very different image of women characters. Unlike the frustrated and rather excessively refined ladies like Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and Blanche Du Bois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), women characters in these middle plays are full-bodied natural, forceful and sensual. It can rightly be said that the middle plays established Williams' women characters, as rather a healthy and combative spirit. In this context, a woman like Serafina Delle Rose in *The Rose Tattoo* is pragmatic, natural, sensual, and emerges as conqueror at the end. And in the portrayal of Serafina, there

is also a marked change in Tennessee Williams' attitude toward sexual love. It can be said that Serafina has not been blighted by the outmoded proprieties of a Victorian culture or by the bridling restrictions of a Southern Puritanism. In the play, she is shown as a healthy woman who knows instinctively that sex is the only varied expression of life and understands perfectly that the opposite of passion is death.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to study Serafina Delle Rose as one of the important women characters of Tennessee Williams, who fights against overwhelming odds and who emerges as a natural, sensual and domineering character in the end because of her own conviction about life and love. It is further analyzed that Serafina is Williams' attempt to create a positive and vital character who can find a meaningful existence and refuge from desire. The paper also attempts to show that she is a woman who knows how to survive in a ruthless world as she follows her own different code to achieve her desired goal. Like some of the women characters of August Strindberg, Serafina is a stronger sex and is full of animal vitality. She is also aggressively and violently possessive about her husband. In fact, she is portrayed as a woman for whom sex is a religion and propagation a sacrament.

Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo* is a play celebrating elemental human passions i.e. love, superstition, jealousy and possessiveness. Williams himself describes the play as "the Dionysian element in human life, its mystery, its beauty, its significance" (Williams 1951, 55). In fact, *The Rose Tattoo* was inspired by Williams' pleasure visit in the late forties to Italy, a country he has always idealized as the embodiment of healthy sensuality. In this connection, Nancy M. Tisehler comments:

. . . he [Williams] fell deeply in love with the city [Rome] and the Italian people. Their art, their dignity, their physical beauty, their speech, their zest for life appealed to every anti-Puritanical inch of his being. He found in them something of the excitement, naturalness, color, and anarchy that had stirred him in Mexico. He went back to work on an old one-act play, *Camino Real*, while

he was in the mood of its Latin setting, and also started work on two specifically Italian pieces. One was *The Rose Tattoo*. The characters of the play live on the American Gulf Coast, but their roots are in Sicily. Thus, he was able to combine the South that he knew with the Sicily that he was growing to love... “What I am getting at in the play”, he said, “is the warmth and sweetness of the Italian people”. He felt that Italy had shown him a good way of life. (166-167)

It is also pertinent to say that over the centuries, Italy has helped to lift the spirits of artists and writers with her artistic treasures and warm hearted people. Williams felt more hopeful about human nature as a result of mingling with the Italians. *The Rose Tattoo*, in one way, was directly influenced by the vitality, humanity and love of life expressed by the Italian people.

Serafina Delle Rose, the heroine of the play, is a passionate seamstress living in the Italian quarters and who is passionately in love with her husband, Rosario, a young Sicilian truck driver. Serafina, being tempestuously romantic, idealizes her marriage to a high pedestal. When the curtain rises, Serafina’s first appearance resembles that of a “plump little Italian opera singer in the role of Madame Butterfly”. She has a rose in her hair and is draped in “pale rose with a yellow paper fan on which is painted a rose” (Williams 1951, 2). The description stresses these aspects of her personality which overshadow the others and at the same time establish her as a grotesque character. The frequent reference to “rose” symbolizes the passionate earthly love, which is her dominant endowment. She also harbours the illusion of belonging to strata of society above the average. She looks back with egoistic pride to a past of “aristocratic connections” like other Southern heroines of Williams. It is because her husband was born in a family of small landowners in Sicily, and so he becomes a “baron”. It follows that she is entitled to the title of “baroness” though now her estate is no more than a sewing shop which is also her house. In this regard, it is interesting to note here the comments of Williams as quoted by Leland Starnes:

Italians are like our Southerners without their inhibitions. They're poetic, but they don't have any protestant repression. Or if they do have any their vitality is so strong, it crashes through them. (365)

However, it is this vitality in Serafina that becomes her means of sustenance during her hard times. In her sexual devotion towards her husband, there is a sense of a jubilant affirmation of life; and we are made aware of her spirit of Dionysian freedom when she recounts the ecstatic moments of sex she had shared with her husband, Rosario. Williams in *Where I Live* says:

. . . the Dionysian element in human life [in *The Rose Tattoo*] includes the lyric as well as the Bacchantic impulse [and] it must not be confused with mere sexuality. It is higher and more distilled than that... it is the desire of an artist to work in new forms, however awkwardly at first, to break down barriers of what he has done before and others have done better before and after. . . . (Williams 1978, 55-56)

In the beginning of the play, she is all aglow with the pleasure of knowing that a new life is stirring inside her. Her love towards her husband and her life in general is manifested in every word she utters:

In his hair, Assunta, he has – oil of roses, and when I wake up at night – the air, the dark room's – full of – roses . . . each time is the first time with him. Time doesn't pass. (Williams 1951, 8)

According to Serafina, the basic truth about a married life is the fulfilment of life. She is the woman who adheres to the values, faithfulness, charity and purity of a man-woman relationship (or of a married life). In the play, the love for her husband is richly extended to the fruit of his love, i.e. the baby in her womb. She believes in the human cycle of life; and she is proud and content in the knowledge that

she has dutifully done her part in the procreation of human species. In fact, the character of Serafina is a symbolic representation of the unfettered sexual instinct. This affirmation of sex in the play is a direct reference to the philosophy of sex of D.H. Lawrence. It is pertinent to note here the observation of Williams about D.H. Lawrence's idea of sex:

Lawrence felt the mystery and power of sex, as the primal life urge, and was the adversary of those who wanted to keep the subject locked away. . . Much of his work is . . . distorted by tangent obsession, such as his insistence upon the woman's subservience to the male, but all in all his work is probably the greatest modern monument to the dark roots of creation. (Williams 1971, 56)

It may not be wrong to say that Serafina is a Lawrencian woman to the core. However, in *The Rose Tattoo*, fate plays an important role and had something cruel in store for Serafina who was bubbling with the joy of life. In the play, her kingdom of love is destroyed by the tragic death of her husband, Rosario, in an accident. After the death of her husband, Serafina openly rejects life and leads a solitary existence among the ruins of her kingdom. Throughout her married life, her husband had been the pivot of her existence, so a sudden separation makes her lonely and creates an unbelievable gap in her psyche. And being a naturally sensitive person of intense emotion, Serafina finds it difficult to reconcile with the condition of singleness. Prior to Rosario's death, she and her husband had formed an androgynous whole. But now left alone, she feels incomplete and totally unequipped to cope with the problem of her fragmented life. June Singer (as quoted by Leland Starnes) described the predicament of such woman as "the woman who has defined herself and her personality in terms of her relationship to a man suffers most when she is faced with widowhood" (311). So, after Rosario's death, she snaps all contact with the outside world of reality and retreats to her memory of him to a turbulent arena of sensual restraint. Serafina, despite the protest of Father De Leo, cremates the body of Rosario and keeps the ashes on the shrine of the Madonna. The

marble urn containing the ashes of Rosario is her refuge in this world where she lives in a ‘dream world’ with her late husband. Even her behaviour becomes childlike and ludicrous while her outlandish dress-sense and absent mannerisms instil a sense of civilized superiority in the audience. She becomes an object of force and yet her condition is pathetic. The intensity of Serafina’s love towards her husband is reflected in the words of the Doctor who understands the human psyche better than the “saviour of the soul”, Father De Leo:

Father De Leo, you love your people but you don’t understand them. They find God in each other. And when they lose each other, they lose God and they’re lost. And it’s hard to help them.
(Williams 1951, 18)

Serafina, in this way, dominates the play like a storm with her wildly unstable and nearly driven mad temperament which is caused by the memory of her dead husband. She leads the life of a hermit by closeting herself behind the shutters and darkened rooms, and even preventing her daughter from having a normal girlhood romance. She continues to exalt her husband’s memory and lives in the past. It is because of the intensity of her grief that threatens her own existence. The life of abstinence, she chooses to lead after Rosario’s death is in sharp contrasts to her earlier one of fulfilment. Her exotic self is naturally not in agreement with her present state. And she loses all control of life in the course of time. Williams emphatically shows that Serafina’s condition is painful. This is very clearly seen when Serafina expresses herself:

I count up the nights I held him all night in my arms, and I can tell you how many. Each night for twelve years. Four thousand–three hundred–and eighty. The number of nights I held him all night in my arms. Sometimes I didn’t sleep, just help him all night in my arms. And I am satisfied with it. I grieve for him. Yes, my pillow at night’s never dry – but I’m satisfied to remember. And I would feel cheap and degraded

and not fit to live with my daughter or under the roof with the urn of his blessed ashes, those ashes of rose – if after the memory, after knowing that man, I went to some other, some middle-aged man, not young, not full of young passion, but getting a pot belly on him and losing his hair and smelling of sweat and liquor - and trying to fool myself that *that* was love-making! I know what love-making was. And I'm satisfied just to remember I'm satisfied to remember the love of a man that was mine - only mine! Never touched by the hand of nobody! Nobody but me! - Just me! [She gasps and runs out to the porch. The sun floods her figure. It seems to astonish her. She finds herself sobbing. She digs in her purse for her handkerchief]. (Williams 1951, 40)

The undying love that Serafina has for her husband is so intense that she demands other people also to respect the urn which contains the ashes of her dead husband. Even when the two middle aged spinsters, Flora and Basie, carry on indecent conversations in her house, Serafina shouts at them: “Get out on the streets where you kind a wimmen belong – this is the house of Rasario Delle Rose and those are his ashes in that marble urn and I won't have – improper thing going on here or dirty talk, neither!” (Williams 1951, 37). But after three years of isolation, Serafina is brought back to reality when she learns the bitter truth that her husband had a mistress. Her fanatical worship of her dead husband, whom she literally enshrines, has been shattered by the strong suspicion of his infidelity. The memory of her husband becomes as self-deceptive to Serafina as the dead hand to tradition was to Blanche Du Bois. But the advent of Alvaro Mangiacavall, a young Sicilian truck driver who has the face of a clown and a body like that of Serafina's husband, changes the entire complexion of the play. Alvaro is a young man, around twenty five years of age whose sexual prowess has none of the destructive overtones of man like Stanley Kowalski (in *A Streetcar Named Desire*). The first meeting of Serafina and Alvaro is in scene I of the second Act. Frustration and pain drive Alvaro to Serafina's house where he seeks refuge from his miseries. The sufferers find rapport in

their common misery and childlike warmth grows between them. When Serafina laments that the time of Rasario is over for her as Rosario (her ‘Rose of a man’) is dead, Alvaro assumes her that not only for her but for everyone it is always a time of roses. Alvaro reveals to her the dream of his life which is on the verge of fulfilment:

I am hoping to meet some sensible older lady. Maybe a lady a little bit older than me – I don’t care if she’s a little too plump or not such a stylish dresses! The important thing in a lady is understanding. Good sense. And I want her to have a well – furnished house and a profitable little business of some kind. . . . (Williams 1951, 93)

Alvaro, in this way, in spite of his foolishness, possesses the male shrewdness of a fox and exposes Rosario’s infidelity to Serafina. When confronted by the inescapable truth, she goes into an impassioned rage and smashes the urn containing Rasario’s ashes. In this scene, it can symbolically interpret that Serafina has returned back to reality and life. Taking chances and knowing the economic advantages of marriage with Serafina, Alvaro very shrewdly and honestly offers “love and affection! – in a world that is lonely – and cold”. Alvaro also reminds her, unlike Rosario, of the vital force that keeps everything in the world going on:

. . . I know – I know that’s what warms the world that is what makes it the summer! Without it, the rose – the rose would not grow on the bush; the fruit would not grow on the tree. (Williams 1951, 113)

However, it can be said that Serafina is attracted to Alvaro, but the bonds of matrimony prevent her from responding to him. It is like the recurrent situation of an older frustrated woman meeting a younger and more vital man in the plays of Williams. It is only when Rasario’s adulterous relation with another woman is exposed that she relents to her temptations. Her breaking free, after a long time, from the shackles of sexual repression finally elevates Serafina from her pitiable state. She realizes that the Madonna icon was “Just a poor little doll with the paint

peeling off” (Williams 1951, 125). She accepts Alvaro as her lover at the end. So, Serafina replaces the mythicised lover by a humanized one. This aspect of the play marks the victory of love over time. In this way, love and life triumph over death in the house of Serafina Delle Rose. She realizes that life is too important to reject for a memory and therefore emerge victorious in the end. Hence, it can be analyzed that the main theme in *The Rose Tattoo* is the glory of the life force as manifested in uninhibited sexuality. According to Williams, Roses are symbols of guiltless sensuality. It is interesting to note here that the rose that is tattooed on Serafina’s husband is the mark of his superior virility. Roses are tattooed on Rosario’s mistress and also at the moment of conception, a mystic rose appears on Serafina’s own breast twice. Serafina’s daughter is “Rose” (Rosa) and the dresses stitched on her are roses in colour. And to Alvaro, the rose that is tattooed on his heart is like the heart of the world. All these roses that are tattooed on Williams’ characters in *The Rose Tattoo* made John Mason Brown comment:

. . . not since the Houses of York and Lancaster fended long and publicly have roses been used more lavishly than by Mr. Williams. To Gertrude Stein a rose was a rose was a rose. But to Mr. Williams roses are mystical signs, proofs of passion, symbols of devotion, and buds no less than thorns in the flesh. (23)

In *The Rose Tattoo*, Tennessee Williams drives home the point that it is only through love and the idea of procreation that one can find a meaningful existence. In the play, it is because of Alvaro’s gift of love to Serafina that she can escape the sadness of the past and the folly of the present. Thus, Williams is also trying to say that Serafina’s self-inflicted abstinence of sex in the early part of the play is a kind of sin against everything that is natural and joyful in the human relationship. In conclusion, through the character of Serafina Delle Rose, the play can be summed up as the celebration of fertility and rejuvenation of life.

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