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The Rose Tattoo as Comedy of the Grotesque

Brian Parker



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The source of all laughter is sorrow.

—Mark Twain

I

^{¶12} **T**he *Rose Tattoo* was Williams's first full-length comedy, and is generally interpreted as his most optimistic play, a Dionysian celebration of sexuality that reverses the desire-death pattern of his preceding tragedies. It is considerably more complex than just this, however, both in tone and experimental dramaturgy; and these complicating elements look forward to *Camino Real*, which was his next big achievement (and most significant failure), and to plays that were written later, towards the end of his career.

^{¶13} Williams himself wrote two important introductions to *The Rose Tattoo*, both of which can be found in his 1978 essay collection *Where I Live*. One, entitled "The Meaning of *The Rose Tattoo*," was first published in *Vogue* on 15 March 1951, a month after the New York opening, but was actually written as early as April 1950, midway through the process of composition. This means the essay was commenting on a draft in which the daughter's escape with her sailor boyfriend, instead of paralleling a new romance for her mother (as in the final version), is *contrasted* with Serafina's continued mourning for her dead husband after her one-night stand with Mangiacavallo had proven disillusioning (Williams, "The Meaning").¹

^{¶14} Williams begins "The Meaning of *The Rose Tattoo*" by saying that the play celebrates "the Dionysian element in human life" (55); and it is this that most critics have elaborated on. He goes on to qualify the statement, however, in two important ways. He says that Dionysian experience can be "lyric" as well as "bacchantic," and that it "must not be confused with mere sexuality" because, at its purest, it is manifest in the flight of birds—exemplified in the play by Alvaro's cry of *Rondinella felice* ("happy skylark")—and by children at their play ("The Meaning" 55-57). It was about this time, according to Elia Kazan, that Williams asked Kazan to arrange for an unnamed lady-friend to be artificially impregnated because he wanted to have children of his own but, to quote Kazan, "was not sure he could achieve the physical arousal necessary" (442). This item of gossip is worth remembering when we come to consider the play's conclusion, but more immediately important for our purpose is Williams's further argument in the "Meaning" essay that such lyricism can also be found in the playwright's impulse to experiment dramaturgically:

Finally and incidentally, [he says, the Dionysian urge can be seen in] 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 what others have done better

before and after, and to crash, perhaps fatally, in some area that the bell-harness and rope would like to forbid him.
(56)

He thus associates himself with the play's anarchic goat.

^{¶15} This essay was then superseded, however, by another entitled “The Timeless World of a Play,” which was published in *The New York Times* on 14 March 1951, the day before “The Meaning of *The Rose Tattoo*” appeared in *Vogue*. Both publications were timed to follow up the play's opening on Broadway, but it was the “Timeless World” essay that Tennessee Williams chose—surely significantly—as preface to the play's editions by both New Directions and the Dramatists Play Service. It is one of Williams's best, most eloquent essays, but, oddly for the preface to a Dionysian comedy, it concerns itself mainly with tragedy. The terms “tragic” and “tragedy” occur six times in its four short pages, but “comic” and “comedy” not once. Remembering the originally tragicomic conclusion to Serafina's part of the plot, this emphasis should alert us to the continuing possibility of complexities of tone in the final version of the play.

^{¶16} “The Timeless World of a Play” puts forward two main ideas. The first is an argument that art, like passion, tries to impose stasis on the inexorable flux of time, because “Snatching the eternal out of the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence” (52). The second and closely related idea is Williams's speculation that the best way to combine such passionate stasis with a continued acknowledgement of time is by exploring what he explicitly calls “the grotesque”: “The diminishing influence of life's destroyer, time, must somehow be worked into the context of [the] play. Perhaps it is a certain foolery, a certain distortion towards the grotesque which will solve the problem . . .” (54).

^{¶17} This mixing of contraries is very like an early foreword to *Camino Real*, a text on which Williams was working at the same time. Commenting on the absurd combination of the farcical Kilroy and tragic Camille, he talks there about “the new congruity of incongruities which is the root of power in modern art” (qtd. in Parker, “Documentary” 46). In *The Rose Tattoo* itself there is a similar awareness of such paradoxes (or “quantums”) in his opening stage direction about the trappings of Serafina's religiosity: “Our purpose is to show these gaudy childlike trappings with sentiment and humour in equal measure,” or his comment that in dishabille her appearance should be both “comic and shocking” (270, 321). Put together, such comments seem to mark a point where Tennessee Williams decided as a theatre artist to move away from the poetic realism in which he had established his reputation towards a new sort of dramaturgy that would exploit “the congruity of incongruities,” an experiment he would then take further in *Camino Real*. The weak box-office of both these two plays then discouraged further development along these lines until it resurfaced in the painful cartoon effects of *Gnädiges Fräulein* and other, later plays.

II

^{¶18} In one of the early drafts of *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams says the play should be produced “not with mere realism but with that poetically expressive treatment of realistic detail which has been called the ‘New Realism’ as it is portrayed in the Italian films of Di Sica [sic] and Rossellini” (qtd. in Parker, “Provisional” Texas 2).^[2] It was this element that was emphasized in the original production by a company drawn almost entirely from the New York Actors' Studio, with its emphasis on Lee Strasberg's “Method” realism.

^{¶19} Inevitably, therefore, the influence on *The Rose Tattoo* that has received almost exclusive attention from critics is Williams's delighted discovery of Italy and Italians in real life, and particularly his experience of Sicily

with his partner, the ex-truck driver Frank Merlo, to whom the play is dedicated “in return for Sicily” and whose nickname “Little Horse” is slyly transmogrified into the play’s “Mangiacavallo” (a comic appellation originally attached to the priest, by the way, before being transferred to the trucker). Merlo’s extended family lived just outside Palermo, and it was here that Williams undoubtedly soaked in much of the authentic Sicilian detail with which *The Rose Tattoo* is packed. Even its bizarre humour is anticipated in anecdotes recounted from that time by Maria St. Just:

[Merlo’s] mother was tormented by the size and vociferousness of her family, and used often, after arguments, to climb the fig-tree in the backyard and sulk, sometimes for hours on end. I remember Frankie telling me that after one particularly blinding row, she refused to come down. Having shouted at her, and pleaded with her, her sons eventually took an axe to the tree, and brought the whole thing down, with her in it. Tennessee and I, hearing this story, were whimpering with laughter [but] Frankie was livid. (18-19)

On another occasion, when Merlo was suffering from dysentery in Sicily, his family “brought the goat right into his bedroom and milked it beside the bed and handed him the milk and would not take no for an answer as the goat was a great prize” (St. Just 16).

¶10 There is certainly a strong basis of realism in *The Rose Tattoo*, then, and this must have drawn on Williams’s actual experience of Sicily; but it also seems likely that the play reflects influences from literature as well as life. This is probably impossible to determine, however, as one of the major gaps in current Tennessee Williams scholarship is any reliable information about his reading habits as an adult. Nevertheless, the “Timeless World” essay refers in passing to the elegies of Rainer Maria Rilke, and the play itself has an epigraph from St. John Perse; in addition, in early drafts of the play there are also several bullfight metaphors that may reflect influence from the Spanish peasant plays of Garcia Lorca, which we know Williams admired. More likely as a literary influence on this specific play, however, are Giovanni Verga’s sardonic “verismo” novels and stories about Sicilian village life, since one of Williams’s great literary idols, D. H. Lawrence, published translations of many of the stories and wrote several essays in Verga’s praise. These stories depict an elemental, close-to-nature world of irrational, explosive passion, of spying and malignant neighbourhood gossip, of violent law breaking, and of a prurient attitude to sex that combines paganism with the most rigid and superstitious Catholicism—a combination that is very like that of Williams’s “village populated mostly by Sicilians somewhere along the Gulf coast” (269), which is so different from his other southern locales.

¶11 An even more probable literary influence is Luigi Pirandello, the Nobel laureate considered by Sartre to be the most modern of European writers, whose trauma with a schizophrenic wife might be expected to interest Williams because of his own experiences with his sister, Rose. Pirandello wrote many specifically Sicilian plays as well as Verga-like short stories, including one actually called “The Rose” about the social and sexual desperation of a young widow in a prurient Sicilian village, whose attitudes are symbolized by its dogs in much the same way that the Strega’s goat functions in *The Rose Tattoo* (Pirandello, *Short Stories* 197-213).³ The parallels are not detailed enough for this to be considered a “source,” but I think Pirandello’s direct influence is clearly evident in the ideas of “The Timeless World of a Play.” Drawing on his knowledge of Kant, Hegel, and Bergson, one of Pirandello’s main concerns—in fact, his recurrent major theme—is what he calls “the inherent tragic conflict between life (which is always moving and changing) and form (which fixes it, immutable),” and the human need for both these experiences:

The forms in ourselves by which we seek to arrest and fix this continuous flux are the concepts and ideals which we would like to keep consistent, all the pretenses we create, the conditions, the state in which we endeavor to stabilize ourselves. [But] at certain violent moments, assailed by the flux, all our make-believe forms crumble away miserably. (Pirandello, “Umorismo” 474-75)

After such a collapse, he argues, full trust in life can never be regained, so to survive we are forced into what he called deceptions for the purpose of living. This is the experience behind Pirandello’s famous essay “On Humour” (“Umorismo”), where he distinguishes between the “comic,” which occurs when we understand life’s discrepancies intellectually, and “humour,” which is when we also painfully *feel* them. And in dramaturgy this led to what Pirandello called “teatro del grottesco” (borrowing the term from his older contemporary Luigi Chiarelli, who had taken it from Victor Hugo): a genre, that is, which fuses tragedy and comedy throughout, not only qualifying the former, as in tragicomedy, but also exaggerating the comic until it becomes painful and unnerving—what John Styan calls “dark comedy.” The hallmark of this style in Pirandello is sardonic laughter—the Stepdaughter’s in *Six Characters In Search Of An Author*, for example, or Laudisis’s at the end of *Right You Are (If You Think You Are)*—which is close to Williams’s own black sense of humour, or his personal alternative to tears: a post-tragic combination of pity and derision that is a “rire macabre.” This accurately sums up the tone of such savage comedies as *Gnädiges Fräulein*, but is bleaker, of course, than *The Rose Tattoo*, which in its final version is closer to Verga’s sardonically smiling acceptance than to Pirandello’s pain.

III

^{¶12} Without external evidence, these literary parallels must remain speculative, but the combination of Williams’s stated intention to experiment and his targeting of the “grotesque” as an area in which this will be conducted can help to explain non-realistic aspects of *The Rose Tattoo* that have always provoked criticism: in particular, the play’s looseness of structure; its blatant symbolism; the farcical extremes of its humour; and its apparent use of sexuality as a panacea for grief and lost ideals. A glance at each of these will show just how experimental Williams was being.

^{¶13} His original idea for *The Rose Tattoo* was to have a two-part play, with the first section concerned with Serafina’s husband, Rosario, and his mistress, Estelle Hohengarten; but Elia Kazan (who Williams hoped would direct the play) persuaded him to concentrate only on the scenes of Serafina’s grief and reawakening and to eliminate Rosario completely (Parker, “Provisional” Texas 12). However, by omitting the early scenes, Williams created problems of exposition, which he solved very clumsily by a three-year gap in Act 1 and Estelle’s confession over the telephone in Act 3, which the audience is somehow supposed to overhear. Moreover, there are many extra, sketchily typical characters—the doctor, the schoolmistress, the travelling salesman, even the two floozies (imported from a separate one-act called *A Perfect Analysis Given By A Parrot*)—who are not essential to the plot but serve rather to establish the alien American environment to which the Sicilians must conform.

^{¶14} This is a clue to Williams’s essentially *spatial* rather than linear concept of unity in the play, on which he comments in “The Meaning of *The Rose Tattoo*” essay: “I prefer a play to be not a noose but a net, with fairly wide meshes. So many of its instants of revelation are wayward flashes, not part of the plans of the author but struck accidentally off” (57). Therefore, the initial two-part structure becomes transformed into a technique of repetition, especially doubling, so that everything seems to occur at least twice. This applies not only to the

parallelism of Serafina and her daughter's love affairs but can also be found in constant repetitions of detail. Thus, Serafina claims to have seen the rose stigmata twice; she asks the Madonna for signs twice (with Rose's sailor, Jack, as the answer to the first plea, and Mangiacavallo to the second);^[4] the goat invades her yard twice; she twice beats people away with her broom; there are two comic corset scenes; both Serafina and Mangiacavallo damage and suck their fingers; Rose and Jack return to the darkened house twice; Rose locked in is balanced by Rose locked out; and so on. There are too many such doublings to be accidental; and their effect is to cut right across the sense of linear plot to produce an involuted, self-referential effect that is not unlike the structure of a rose.

¶15 A related device is Williams's experiment with a double chorus: life-affirming children, whose games reflect the action symbolically, are opposed to their censorious, black-clad mothers, whose life-denying attitudes are symbolically internalized by Serafina's tailors dummies, two of whom, dressed as bride and widow, seem perpetually at variance. The circling, centripetal effect of such devices is very like Eric Bentley's description of what he calls Pirandello's "drama of suffering before a crowd," in which there is "a centre of suffering and a periphery of busybodies—the pattern of a Sicilian village" ("Introduction" xviii).^[5] Williams was clearly feeling his way, intuitively, towards a poetic, non-linear dramatic structure.

¶16 Perhaps the play's most important technical breakthrough, however, is a reliance on symbols that anticipates Williams's claim that "symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama" in the foreword to his next play, *Camino Real*. Besides Serafina's dress dummies, there are also her constricting corsets, broken spectacles that allow her to see Alvaro through one lens only, the implied contrast between his eight-ton lorry and Rosario's ten-tonner, their loads of phallic bananas, recurrent wind and wine references indicating passion, a "graduation day" for both mother and daughter, at which Rose's prize is a *Digest of Knowledge* (in two volumes), and so on. Nearly every detail in the play is loaded with symbolic significance, but the main thematic symbols are the goat, the watch, and overwhelmingly, of course, the rose. The goat breaks into Serafina's yard twice: first, when Estelle orders a red silk shirt for her lover who, unknown to Serafina, is Rosario himself; then when Serafina decides to encourage Alvaro's advances; and its bleating is heard offstage in chorus with Alvaro's cries of "Che bella" when he stumbles on the half-naked, sleeping Rosa, and is angrily beaten away by Serafina. This traditional symbol of lust is related to the priest's accusation that Serafina has become an "animal," which she reiterates herself when she decides to accept Alvaro, and is also related to the piggybank that Alvaro shakes and Rose smashes (another doublet). The wristwatch that Serafina buys for her daughter and that Rose twice forgets (yet another doubling) symbolizes the passing of time. By the end of the play, the watch's ticking seems to have stopped, but its significance is extrapolated in urgent train whistles (again twice) and a minor leitmotif of numbers—"all them numbers" (352), as Serafina complains. (In earlier drafts there was even an errand boy called Chico who ran lottery numbers.) And overwhelmingly, of course, there are roses, traditional symbol both of physical and spiritual passion, with funerary ashes as their opposite, and the ruby vigil light, the red silk shirt, and the children's scarlet kite as their symbolic extensions. A standard complaint is that Williams has overdone these rose effects, but the exaggeration is certainly intentional. Proliferation adds a comic dimension to a symbol that could easily be romantically sentimental, and also acts as a grotesque distancing device to ensure an environment that is manifestly non-realistic.

¶17 This dimension of the grotesque was another aspect that Williams worked hard to establish through many revisions. Williams was under constant pressure to make *Tattoo* an unambiguous comedy, and when the play

opened out-of-town in Chicago, his old friend Donald Windham reports that the playwright stood at the back of the stalls counting laughs and constantly adding comic business (Windham 63-64).⁶ By this time their friendship had soured, so Windham assumes that Williams's motives were crudely commercial, but it seems just as likely that he was trying to get the balance right between what he called its "mad comedy" (qtd. in St. Just 37) and his wish to make a serious statement. In the play, he uses the actual term "grotesque" four times: about Serafina with her dummies; about both triumphal processions with the captured goat; and, climactically, for Alvaro's drunken pursuit of the widow, which the stage directions describe as "grotesquely violent and comic." The effect is at its most sustained, perhaps, in the scene where Flora and Bessie, the two "female clowns" (as the text describes them), maliciously disabuse the terribly distressed Serafina about her husband's fidelity, while in the distance the high school band ineptly plays "The Stars and Stripes." The play is packed with vaudeville-like chases and beatings that, in Williams's own words, are simultaneously "comic and shocking"; and Alvaro, with his "air of improvisation" and clown's face on an heroic torso, provides a kind of walking oxymoron of the contradictory effect required. When he stumbles on the sleeping Rose at the end, the stage directions specifically suggest that the actor model himself on Charlie Chaplin (405), who described his own mixture of hilarity and pathos as "tragedy seen in long shot." This grotesque mixture did not suit the method acting emphasis of the first production, but when Milton Katselas revived *The Rose Tattoo* in 1966, he highlighted the play's exaggerated folk elements, and the mixture then worked admirably. Tennessee Williams said he much preferred this to the original realistic production.

¶18

As I have documented elsewhere ("Multiple Endings"), Williams had most difficulty with the conclusion, reworking it more than thirty times. His original plan had been to contrast Rose's escape into passion with her mother's continued mourning for Rosario in spite of Mangiacavallo; and though he was willing to follow Kazan's advice to make the play "a comic-grotesque mass in praise of the male force," he did not want to conclude with the cliché of "sex conquers all" that some reviewers were only too ready to accuse him of. According to Williams, "The meaning of the sign [of the rose] is the transcendence of life over the instruments it uses, their meanness or grandeur: that life, itself, is the hero" (qtd. in Parker, "Provisional" Texas 5 and 17). Also, read closely, the conclusion reveals subtleties that are easily overlooked. It is not because of love for Alvaro that Serafina opts to join him (she even called him "Rosario" during sex), but because she believes she is pregnant again: the "Two lives again in the body" are those of herself and a baby, not herself and Alvaro; and her final cry of "Vengo, amore" (which was originally given to the daughter, Rose) can mean merely "Love, I come," not necessarily "lover." In the stage directions, Alvaro is specifically told not to reappear (though directors often cheat and bring him back in performance), and the red shirt is sent up the embankment towards him not by Serafina or even by her friend, the wise woman Assunta, but jeeringly by the chorus of antagonistic neighbour women; so another element in Serafina's decision has to be an impulsive in-your-face defiance of their malice, of a kind she has practised several times before. The conclusion, in other words, is both lyric and ironic, with perhaps even a tinge of Pirandello's "deception for the purpose of living" since it is impossible for Serafina to know she is pregnant so soon—though Williams said he wanted audiences to accept at least that Serafina herself believed it to be so (Letter to C. Crawford). Whichever way one shades it, in fact, the conclusion is more complex and problematic than any simple happy ending.

¶19 In sum, then: though *The Rose Tattoo* is not wholly a success, it is a more adventurous play in both tone and experimental dramaturgy than it is usually given credit for, and it begins to chart out a new “congruity of incongruities” that Williams would return to strongly at the end of his career.⁷ In praise of the 1966 revival, Henry Hewes commented that this new insight into *The Rose Tattoo* “opens up a green territory in which Tennessee Williams might profitably exercise his talent.” Unfortunately, of course, he was wrong about the profit.⁸

Notes

¹ This essay is preserved in a typescript dated “Key West, April, 1950” in the Cheryl Crawford papers at the New York Public Library. According to Crawford, it was written at her request to respond to reviewers who had considered the play “lewd” at its Chicago try-out (185).

² For the sake of accuracy and concision, ms materials will be identified by my key for them in “Provisional Stemma.”

³ Williams’s “Strega” character is also very like the malicious, spying “Saracena” in Pirandello’s Sicilian play *Cap and Bells*, though the texts have no other resemblances.

⁴ Serafina addresses the Madonna twice more—once when she asks if Mangiacavallo *is* the “sign” after he has lifted her down from a chair, and again when she angrily blows out the votive light—but these repetitions merely emphasize the basic doubling pattern.

⁵ Bentley’s formula is very apt for Serafina who suffers at the centre of a double periphery: an inner circle of censorious Sicilians and an outer circle of threatening Americans.

⁶ Irene Selznick turned *Tattoo* down on the grounds that it was too like *opera buffa*.

⁷ An ironically unintentional mingling of comic and tragic can be found in Williams’s misuse of “cothurnus” in several early drafts. He seems to have believed that this was a name for the Greek god of comedy; actually, of course, it means the buskins worn by actors in Greek tragedy.

⁸ Research for this essay was funded by the Bibliographical Society of America and the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Council of Canada.

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