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The Rose Tattoo: Reading Tennessee Williams's Play in a Cultural Context

Rose De Angelis

Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* (1950), which biographers Dakin Williams and Shepherd Mead viewed "as an attempt to bring Italy . . . back home to the United States," is dedicated to the playwright's partner Frank Merlo "in return for Sicily" (qtd. in Gronbeck-Tedesco 64).[1] Merlo brought Williams the kind of homegrown family stability that nurtured the playwright's artistic temperament, and he introduced Williams to members of his extended family who lived just outside Palermo, Sicily, a historic city where, as Brian Parker notes, "Williams undoubtedly soaked in much of the authentic Sicilian detail with which [the play] is packed" (3).[2] Unfolding in a reconstituted Sicilian village along the American Gulf Coast, where many Italians settled, *The Rose Tattoo* begins with a chorus of maternal voices and a description of Serafina delle Rose: a woman who embodies the very paradoxes that define southern Italian life and that permeate the play; she is a woman reflecting Williams's understanding of the "mixing of contraries" and living his feelings of otherness (Parker).[3] In *The Rose Tattoo* Williams highlights some of the ambiguities in southern Italian culture that become even more pronounced in the transplanted Italian—and that seem incomprehensible, even alien at times, to members of his or her host culture.

¶2 *The Rose Tattoo* contextualizes the Italian immigrant for its reader/viewer. As Maria Colacchia writes, "Qui l'italianità dei personaggi emerge dai loro nomi, dale loro abitudini e caratteri" (Here, the characters' "Italianness" emerges from their names, from their habits, from their natures; 123).[4] Serafina represents the historically agrarian Italian immigrant who arrived in America with limited education, no language skills, and idiosyncratic cultural beliefs. Her use of the double negative underscores the language barrier confronting many first-generation immigrants, and she conforms to their Christian-pagan view of Catholicism as the venue for granting favors, healing, and punishing. Moreover, she participates in and later reconciles the Italian Madonna/whore syndrome. In the play, Serafina reinforces the female's role as the traditional wife and mother, nurturer to her husband and children, and role model for the female child. She is the person who will establish the continuity of Italian traditions in America for future generations. Yet she paradoxically exists "'inside and outside the ideology of gender'" that usually limited the agency of the Italian woman and cast the immigrant as an outsider (Lauretis ix). In the play—and later in the 1955 film where Anna Magnani's authenticity and primal energies made Serafina come alive for the audience—Williams explores the passionate complexities of Italians as they are reflected in his protagonist, for "L'Italia è forte nel temperamento di Serafina" (Italy is strong in Serafina's temperament; Colacchia 123).[5]

¶3 *The Rose Tattoo* unfolds, as the production notes make clear, "*somewhere . . . between New Orleans and Mobile*" (9). Italians had been a presence in the area since the 1540s, when four Italian explorers accompanied Hernando de Soto on his travels. In 1718 Italian merchants, builders, and artisans arrived in New Orleans, coinciding with the French founding of the city (Maselli and Candeloro 7, 9).[6] Italian immigrants established rice mills, groceries, and import businesses in the years before and immediately following the American Civil

War—and by the late nineteenth century, when economic hardships brought southern Italians to America in droves, the area became a prominent site for Italian immigration. Between the 1870s and 1930s, more than 4.5 million Italians had immigrated to the United States, most from southern Italy (Mangione and Morreale 31–33). The struggle for an Italian nation free of foreign rule had brought about a unified Italy, but this entity had little mass appeal or consequence in southern Italy, especially since most southern Italians had little or no education or government representation and no voting rights. These were the people who worked and lived without ever realizing the promises of Garibaldi's democratic principles; these were the people who came seeking better opportunities in America. According to Maselli and Candeloro, between 1850 and 1870 "there were more Italians in New Orleans than in any other U.S. city. . . . By the end of the 1890s, more than 2,000 Italians were arriving in the city each year; about 90 percent were Sicilian" (13). In fact, plantation owners in Louisiana, Mississippi, and other areas in the American South aggressively recruited Italian immigrants to work on their cotton and sugarcane fields, creating pockets of Italian settlement (Mangione and Morreale 185; Barry 109–10).

¶4 With no education, no money, and no resources, most of the immigrants who migrated to New Orleans and other communities on the Gulf Coast became seasonal laborers in cane fields, fruit peddlers, and, later, truckers, like the play's Rosario delle Rose and Alvaro Mangiacavallo, Serafina's deceased husband and her lover, respectively. The motivation to work on behalf of the family made Italian immigrants ideal candidates for an American economy, in this case a southern economy that thrived on the exploitation of the masses.7 Louisiana later "placed the stamp of inferiority" on these Italian agricultural workers, as it had on their black predecessors, for doing "the undesirable jobs . . . rated inferior" by the native white community (J. Scarpaci 182).[8] Many of these unskilled laborers would become victims of anti-Italian bigotry and violence.[9]

¶5 In the communities of the Gulf Coast, as in other American communities in which they settled, Italians tended to re-create their home villages, duplicating the customs and traditions of their particular towns and villages. In New Orleans, one particular district populated by Italian immigrants, mostly Sicilians, was called Little Palermo in honor of the Sicilian capital (Mangione and Morreale 185). As Jean Ann Scarpaci notes, "*Campanilismo*, or provincialism, characterized the South Italians. They identified with their village existence. . . . To the Sicilian, his family and town were his prime interests. All else for him was secondary" (177). While the familiar environment preserved ethnic identity, this "group cohesiveness" prevented the first generation of immigrants, people like Serafina, from assimilating into American culture, and it also confirmed their status as a subaltern group (J. Scarpaci 181). In *The Rose Tattoo*, this provincialism, and the status that goes with position and place in the village of origin, is emphasized again and again by Serafina, who establishes her identity as "Baronessa" by claiming that her husband Rosario is the nephew of landed gentry, a *barone* revered by the people of his Italian village. Serafina idealizes, and probably exaggerates, Rosario's pedigree and recasts her position as outsider in positive terms; ironically, the title becomes one of derision instead of distinction for Serafina.

¶6 The play begins with a chorus of Italian names—Bruno, Salvatore, Vivi—with mothers calling their children home to dinner in "the patois of the peasant," which recurs throughout the play (Kolin, "'Sentiment and Humor'" 221). Language is one of the elements that gives the "play its zest and shape[s] its humor," but it is also an indicator of class (221). Language was, and still is, an essential element of the immigrant experience. The daily negotiations between the language of origin and that of the host country became an expression of the intrinsic tension in the everyday lives of immigrant men and women. While *campanilismo* fostered the illusion

of an Italian village in America and created the security of an extended family, it also isolated immigrants from American life and from learning the English language. Unfortunately, one of the consequences of that isolation was that the very language that protected their cultural traditions and reinforced their Italian identity hampered their entry into American society and severely limited the opportunities that might have been available to them had they spoken English well. In the play, Serafina speaks "broken English," for Williams preferred recording the immigrant contortions of the English language by translating much of her dialogue from the Italian.[10] After completing several drafts of *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams was eager to return to Sicily "to hear some of the Sicilian talk at first hand, for the play, and to observe the people. . . . Much of the incidental dialogue and background chatter would be done in Italian" (Williams and Mead 179).

¶7 Serafina's language, with its disregard for grammar, unveils the world of working-class immigrants battling to make themselves understood so that they can survive. Williams employs everyday speech patterns to stress the immigrants' struggle with a series of linguistic limitations: those of the individual regional dialect from which they originated; those of the host country in which they now find themselves; and those arising from the amalgam of the particular American-Italianese created by this odd mixture. In Serafina, Williams, championing the "other," celebrates the primitive sophistication and razor-sharp acuity of first-generation immigrants who could not speak, read, or write proper English but still made themselves understood and relevant in their host country. Each sentence, with its staccato beats, its abrupt starts and stops, and its omissions, reflects the hesitation, the trepidation, and the frustration of each of Serafina's moves forward and backward as she brings her "heart back to life again" (Kolin, "Family of Mitch" 143).

¶8 Serafina's discordant syntax, especially in the use of the double negative—as when she says to her sometime confidant Assunta, "I don't see nothing moving" or "My husband don't need no powder," or when she answers Father De Leo, saying, "I don't step on—noth'n"—indicates that her command of English is not complete (1.1.14, 2.47). However, her linguistic limitations do not hold her back: she negotiates and reconciles the regional dialect of her Sicilian town and the host language with which she now struggles. She speaks up for herself and clearly gets her point across. Her dialogue serves both as a point of comic relief, as a "classic tool of the comedian's art," and as a defensive tactic when her marriage and family are at risk. Her "verbal assaults match her muscular defenses" (Kolin, "'Sentiment and Humor'" 216–17). The language that should define Serafina as an uneducated woman without agency instead sculpts the force and volatility of her nature and provides a "genuinely powerful gender alternative" of the Italian immigrant woman in America (McDaniel 283). Serafina might not have full command of the English language, but she uses the command she has strategically. She can spar with both the Italians and the Americans, young and old. She offsets Assunta's mysticism with her pragmatism, answering her claim that there "is something wild in the air" with a firm "I don't see nothing moving and neither do you" (1.1.14); she engages in verbal jousts with her compatriots, with the schoolteacher who is trying to Americanize her daughter, and with Bessie and Flora, two "men-crazy things," as Serafina calls them, fending off their assaults on her marriage with piercing repartee. She neutralizes Father De Leo's religious dogmatism and Jack Hunter's youthful sensuality with carefully executed wordplay. When Jack introduces himself as "Jack Hunter," Serafina's response—"What are you hunting?"—confirms her wit (1.5.32, 1.6.41). The use of "one-liners . . . well-suited to the Italian temperament" shields Serafina from "an inner circle of censorious Sicilians and an outer circle of threatening Americans" (Kolin, "'Sentiment and Humor'" 217; Parker n5).[11]

¶9 Serafina makes good use of what is usually characterized as an Italian male stereotype—that of *il fesso*. As Jonathan J. Cavallero writes, "*Fesso* literally translates to 'fool' and describes an individual who is ignorant of the reality that surrounds him" (56). It is a label most Italians and Italian Americans want to avoid; however, Serafina profits from a stereotype that should define her as "intellectually inferior [. . . and] socially inept" and makes good use of the proverb *fare il fesso per non andare in guerra* (play the fool to avoid going to war ; Cavallero 57). She might look foolish and act foolishly, allowing those around her to feel secure in their perfect English and sense of superiority, but she lives her life as she sees fit: defying the Church by cremating Rosario and keeping his ashes at home; exiling herself from the community that wants to pity her; re-creating herself as head of household; and stepping outside the moral codes of conduct when Alvaro arrives. While Serafina's actions indulge a "psychological need [for Americans] by depicting an inferior (Italian) people—a people so far removed from 'real Americans' that they were not really Americans at all," she also redefines the relationship between religion and faith, the role of head of household, and, most importantly, the female's sexual position as subject rather than object (Cavallero 57).

¶10 It is the description of Serafina's house at the outset of the play that immediately calls attention to the paradoxes that mark the protagonist and infuse the play. The interior contains a telling "mixing of contraries" (Parker): "religious articles," "the brass cage of a gaudy parrot," "rose-colored carpet," "a small shrine against the wall [. . . with]a little statue of the Madonna," and a kneeling bench with the customary "vigil light" (9). Serafina, with her "*voluptuous figure*," sits with "*plump dignity*" in this cultural menagerie waiting for her husband's return; she blends religious imagery with libidinous indulgence, wearing a "*tight girdle*" that keeps her in "*forced composure*"—the girdle a symbol of how difficult it is for Serafina to keep everything in its proper place (1.1.13–14). By the end of the play, without admitting the difficulty of reconciling past and present, Old World and New World, old and young, Serafina decides to rid herself of the restraint that hinders her agency—in more ways than one.[12]

¶11 The juxtaposition of the Catholic religiosity and secular paganism in her house, the concurrence of the physical and the spiritual, is reinforced in Serafina's interaction with Assunta, a *fattuchiere*, or sorceress of sorts. While Serafina dismisses Assunta's mystical comments about "star-noises," she subscribes to the same reading of signs and belief in the paranormal (1.1.14). She explains the knowledge of her pregnancy in preternatural terms, telling Assunta, "I knew that I had conceived on the very night of conception! . . . That night I woke up with a burning pain . . . on my left breast! . . . On it I saw the rose tattoo of my husband!" (1.1.15).[13] As Judith Thompson writes, "Serafina imbues her experience with miraculous import, elevating her husband to a Christ figure . . . and their sexual union to the level of religious ecstasy" (694). The miraculous appearance of the rose stigmata is simultaneously a sign of religious revelation and sexual celebration for Serafina.

¶12 In Italian culture, marriage defined the Italian woman in purely functional terms, devoid of any sexual potency. In America, the role was somewhat modified by economic and social conditions; however, for the most part, the Italian woman remained circumscribed by Old World social, cultural, and moral values. In traditional Italian culture sexuality is a male prerogative; a good Italian woman is not a sexual being. Unlike many first-generation Italian women, Serafina does not view sex in traditionally religious terms: as a sin before marriage and a duty after it. She sees herself as her husband's emotional, spiritual, and physical partner. In both her private and public life, Serafina deconstructs the traditional imagery of the immigrant Italian woman by

incorporating the aggressiveness and assertiveness usually associated with male subjectivity. Italian men of Serafina's generation typically worshipped a woman's virginity before marriage and revered her spiritual piety after marriage, but often looked for sexual pleasure outside the marriage—hence, the Madonna/whore syndrome, the dichotomy that ensued when the wife satisfied the role of social and spiritual caretaker and divested herself (or was divested of) any physical desire and sexual agency. Rosario delle Rose epitomizes the first-generation Italian male's attitude toward women and marriage. Anthropologist Helen Fisher writes about "an elaborate quasi-institutionalized system of extramarital affairs" in small Italian towns and villages even today; she notes that "although infidelity is commonplace among adults . . . a code of absolute silence prevails. Family life must not be undermined" (75–76). Rosario certainly manages to keep his dalliance with Estelle Hohengarten a secret and his family intact, and he satisfies the 1950s definition of a good husband, which in most cases, especially amongst first-generation Italian immigrants, meant being a good provider.[14] As Serafina makes clear to Assunta, "And money, he gets so much it spills from his pockets! Soon I don't have to make dresses!" (1.1.16).

¶13 In the play, Serafina sees herself as a sexual being within and without the marital bond and reconciles the dichotomy of the woman as either Madonna or whore, even as she subscribes to the androcentric view of marriage that assumes the woman's life will revolve around home and family. She is a dutiful wife and mother, but she refuses to be "overwhelmed by a masculine mystique," to follow the convention of "the Italian woman [who] has historically reduced the power and importance of sexuality by accepting a *mater dolorosa* role" (Rolle 111). In fact, when Father De Leo speaks to her of the women in the community, Serafina tells him: "I don't mix with them women. . . . At thirty years old they got no more use for the letto matrimoniale, no. The big bed goes to the basement! . . . They make the life without glory. Instead of the heart they got the deep-freeze in the house" (2.48–49). She blurs the lines of accepted female behavior within the marriage and eventually outside it, and her relationship to Rosario and later to Alvaro reflects the "sexual-spiritual duality" that "formed a chief strain of ambiguity and conflict in Williams' works" (Prenshaw 27).[15]

¶14 Serafina sees marriage and, more importantly, love-making as a religious experience. As she tells Father De Leo, "I give [Rosario] the glory. To me the big bed was beautiful like a religion" (2.49); but, as Jeanne McGlinn notes, "[T]he idea that making love had consecrated her and her husband is an illusion" (517). Whether Serafina truly believes in the sanctity of their relationship, or whether she deludes herself until she no longer can, when she finally accepts that Rosario has defiled "the big bed"—betraying her and their love—his desecration of their marriage does not elicit the same self-effacing loyalty that would have been customary amongst first-generation Italian immigrant women. She does not sanction the machismo that governs the Italian cultural code of male behavior, and she refuses to foster the illusion of fidelity, privately or publicly.[16] In fact, she decides to act on her desires and satisfy her own sexual needs: she engages in a physical relationship with Alvaro Mangiacavallo, a man whom, at their first meeting, she describes as having her "*husband's body*, with the head of a *clown*" and whom she perceives as a religious omen: he is the man who will replace her dead husband (2.56).

¶15 Alvaro, like two other Italian characters in Williams's work, Paolo in *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950) and Silva Vacarro in *Baby Doll* (1956), represents the sexually charged, dark Italian male, and all three are in part tricksters who use sexuality to achieve their objectives. A lothario whose sexual encounters go to the highest bidder, Paolo engages in a physical relationship with Karen Stone only until a better investment comes along; Silva, whose sexual advances toward Baby Doll are carefully choreographed in contrast to those of the

older and licentious Archie Lee, courts her to exact revenge. Alvaro does not see Serafina as a temporary investment but a long-term one, and he states his intentions straightforwardly: "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 dresser! . . . 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" (2.61). Unlike Paolo and Silva, Alvaro is a fusion of trickster and *fesso*, which is made clear by his willingness to admit his shortcomings: his unmanly behavior, his lack of finances, and his familial relationship to the village idiot. With his actions, Alvaro avoids both Serafina's and the audience's scorn and earns their esteem and trust in his good intentions. The predatory nature of the machismo that defined both Paolo's and Silva's interactions with Karen and Baby Doll, respectively, is counteracted in *The Rose Tattoo* by Alvaro's unsophisticated and unguarded approach toward Serafina. Unlike Paolo and Silva, there is an innate goodness in Alvaro that captures Serafina's heart and the reader's/audience's compassion.

¶16 It is Serafina who assumes a more masculine and forceful approach to their first encounter. She signals the primal nature of their relationship by describing herself as a beast: "Sono una bestia, una bestia feroce! (I am a beast, a ferocious beast; 3.178). Their courtship unfolds as a predatory dance with the music of the parrot squawking and the goat bleating: Serafina "*gasps*" and "*stands panting by the window*," awaiting Alvaro, whose "*white teeth glitter*" as he advances toward her. She first "*retreats*" but then, with an "*awkward gesture*," directs him"*toward the sofa*," saying, "Now we can go on with our—conversation," alternating between ravenous predator and timorous prey (3.1.78–79). Serafina does not sublimate her sexual yearnings, as would be expected of her first-generation female counterparts (who often commented on the "bitterness of such 'duty'"), and she soon finds herself experiencing the "burning again of the rose," or the beginning of a new life (Mangione and Morreale 337; *Tattoo* 3.3.88).[17] Serafina sets the precedent for a renegotiation of gender roles and family relationships in the New World—and at play's end, she and her daughter, Rosa, pursue their men in a reversal of what would be expected of them in the Old World.

¶17 Like many first-generation Italian immigrants, Serafina is a Christian-pagan, believing that religious figures are agents of counsel, vehicles for healing and punishing; historians observe that "southern Italians . . . practiced a folk religion" that often perplexed and sometimes shocked the Irish Catholics who had already established themselves in American society and within the Church hierarchy (Mangione and Morreale 326). The port culture of New Orleans and its vicinity was "much more hospitable to Italian and Sicilian Catholicism" than many other cities in which southern Italian immigrants settled; it provided an environment in which the immigrants could worship their blend of '"Christian and pre-Christian elements of animism, polytheism and sorcery along with the sacraments prescribed by the Church'" (Maselli and Candeloro 59, 326). Serafina believes that the *malocchio* (the evil eye) can inflict harm and that the Madonna in her makeshift shrine gives her signs. Whether it is the flickering candle's chiaroscuro that assures Serafina of the Madonna's intercession on her behalf, or the Madonna's perceived abandonment that becomes the impetus for her amorous liaison with Alvaro, Serafina's self-styled negotiations with (and the public recognition of) the Madonna reinforce the way in which she reconciles the many paradoxes of who and what she is: she is mystical and practical, Madonna and whore, subject and object, idealistic and cynical at the same time.

¶18 Certainly, Serafina's disregard of what Father De Leo calls "pagan idolatry"—the cremation of Rosario's body and the public display and adoration of his ashes—indicates that she, like many others of her generation,

distinguishes between faith and religion (1.3.21). She regards herself as a good Catholic, but she does not put great value on Church law or on the Church's representative, Father De Leo.[18] For many first-generation Italians, relationships with God, Christ, the Madonna, and the saints were personal. When their prayers were answered, they believed that giving thanks must take the form of restitution—ergo, the small shrine with the ever-burning vigil light in Serafina's house.[19] Serafina's religious encounters come across as more personal consultations than spiritual invocations, more business transactions than deferential supplications. Therefore it is not surprising that, when she thinks herself abandoned by the Madonna, her pleas unanswered, Serafina responds with the vehemence of one betrayed by a physical rather than spiritual presence: "Serafina . . . *loved* you!—No, no, no, you don't speak! I don't believe in you, Lady! You're just a poor little doll with the paint peeling off, and now I blow out the light and I forget you the way you forget Serafina!" (3.1.78).

¶19 The "mixing of contraries" continues when Old World superstitions encounter New World explanations as Serafina and her American-born daughter, Rosa, come upon the goat and the *strega* (witch), an eccentric old woman with a "*mop of wild gray hair*," an outsider in her own right (1.1.19). The strega sometimes serves as a signifier of difference between Italian and American, between first-generation pagan beliefs and second-generation scientific explanations, and sometimes as the voice of the American prejudices that plagued the immigrants. When the strega initially appears, Serafina warns her daughter not to look at her. Rosa asks why, and Serafina explains, saying, "She has a white eye and every finger is crooked" (1.1.19). For Serafina, the strega's physical disabilities are indicators of her evil nature; but Rosa gives her mother an educated, rational explanation: "She has a cataract, Mama, and her fingers are crooked because she has rheumatism!" (1.1.19). As Mangione and Morreale point out, "[S]chools were largely responsible for emphasizing the differences between the immigrants and their new country," sometimes creating dual identities for the children of immigrants who found themselves privately Italian and publicly American (221). At school, Rosa has quickly become Americanized, seeing her mother as "a freak of the neighborhood" (1.4.26). Like many children of immigrants, Rosa is getting an education in more than reading, writing, and arithmetic. She is learning about American values, morals, and culture; she is moving toward assimilation and acceptance and is "becoming American by learning to be ashamed of" her parent (Leonard Covello qtd. in Mangione and Morreale 222).

¶20 Unconvinced by Rosa's logic—and perhaps holding on to her own cultural perceptions and the power of those perceptions—Serafina reaffirms her superstitious beliefs, saying, "Malocchio—the evil eye—*that's* what she's got! And her fingers are crooked because she shook hands with the Devil" (1.1.19). The remedy is to have Rosa wash with salt water, and Serafina wards off the malocchio by making "*the sign of the horns*" (1.1.20). Serafina will come to understand that the American school system is a threat to her parental authority; education will disrupt the balance of power between mother and daughter. Serafina will no longer be the sole source of knowledge for Rosa, nor will she influence her decisions. School will create another identity for Rosa, distinct from the one her mother perpetuates at home, and this new American identity will eventually spur Rosa to rebellion. As Serafina tells Miss Yorke, Rosa's teacher, "Your school, you make all this trouble!" (1.4.26).

¶21 While the strega is the marginalized "other" in the community, she ironically also serves as the critical insider, commenting on the actions of this subaltern group of Sicilian men and women. When in desperation Serafina imprisons her child, keeping her from graduation, the stregacomments, "The Wops are at it again!—She got the daughter lock up naked in there all week. . . . I guess she's in trouble already, and only fifteen!—They ain't civilized, these Sicilians. In the old country they live in caves in the hills. . . . More of them coming

over on the boats all the time" (1.4.25). The strega voices the prejudices and the fears of many Americans toward the influx of immigrants, and certainly underscores the xenophobia that marked many a reaction to those who were—and are—different.

¶22 The play ends as it begins: with Serafina pursuing another man; with the juxtaposition of Christianity and paganism; with the confrontation of Italian and American; and with the communal chorus of women who participate in the momentary hedonism of bacchanalian release. Ironically, Serafina convinces herself that Alvaro Mangiacavallo is a sign from the "Madonna Santa," a distorted reincarnation of her husband (2.56); at the same time, she holds this same Madonna personally accountable for her husband's infidelity and the ensuing consequences. The Madonna has betrayed Serafina's faith in her, which gives Serafina permission to transition from grieving widow to lustful lover; and the girdle that has kept her literally and figuratively harnessed is discarded as Alvaro displaces Rosario. In scenes 2 and 3 of the final act, Williams refashions the religious imagery of the rooster crowing three times. This sound should remind the reader/audience of betrayal and death, but in *The Rose Tattoo* the crowing cock signals positive transformation—life beginning, not ending. Both Serafina and Rosa have found love, yet Old World and New World values come face to face when Alvaro, still intoxicated from the previous night's romp, mistakes Rosa for Serafina and finds himself at the mercy of Serafina's attacks. Rosa rebels one more time, questioning the double standard that seems to work one way for her and another way for her mother. Tired of living between two worlds, Rosa decides to leave the Old World traditions behind and race toward a future with Jack, but not before assuring her mother that Alvaro has not touched her. She is still pure as a rose.

¶23 The confrontation not only marks Rosa's transition from child to adult but also from Italian to American, and as an American woman she understands her mother's own needs. In absolving Alvaro of any wrongdoing, Rosa sanctions Serafina's own desires. In the final scene of the play, the women whose maternal voices lulled their children home for dinner become self-indulgent revelers, shouting jubilantly as they toss the "rose-colored silk" shirt that had once been the marker of betrayal in a celebratory dance of desire, rejoicing in the renewal of life and love. "*Peppina flourishes the shirt in the air like a banner*" as the women march Serafina off to consecrate her love, but this is more physical release than spiritual union (3.3.87). Assunta's offering of a glass of wine, another one of Williams's religious inversions in the play, indicates the final restoration and the final reconciliation of contraries: the rose tattoo, once a symbol of ideal love and then of betrayal, becomes a marker of rebirth, the beginning of new life: "Two lives again in the body!" (3.3.88). For Williams, as with T. S. Eliot, the beginning is the end, and the end is the beginning in what Brian Parker calls Williams's "most optimistic play," where the "other" lives in spite of societal sanctions.

Notes

[1] Besides dedicating the play to Frank Merlo, Williams gave him "ten percent of all the profits" (Spoto 173). Loyal, caring, and beloved by all, Frank Merlo was "the deepest intimacy" of Williams's life, even though Williams was unfaithful to him throughout their relationship (Spoto 152).

[2] *The Rose Tattoo* opened first in Chicago, where problems with structure brought Williams back to fine-tune the ending; the play then moved to the Martin Beck Theater in New York, opening to mostly favorable reviews on February 3, 1951, and starring Maureen Stapleton in the role of Serafina. The well-known Italian actress Anna Magnani had been Williams's first choice; he admired her honesty and how she "managed to live within society and yet to remain so free of its conventions" (Williams, *Memoirs* 162). Unfortunately, her prior commitments and her own fears about speaking English on stage prevented her from acting in the New York

premiere. She later starred in the film version (Spoto 161, 169–71; Williams, *Tattoo* 11). In his Sunday, February 11, 1951, follow-up to his review of the play, noted critic Brooks Atkinson called Stapleton's opening-night performance "wonderful" and deemed Williams's writing "poetry," observing that Williams treated the "simple people" of this transplanted Italian village "on their own level as honorable people" (sec. 2:1).

[3] See Peggy W. Prenshaw's article "The Paradoxical Southern World of Tennessee Williams" for a discussion of how Williams's plays are "built upon paradox" (9).

[4] The translation of the Italian here and elsewhere in the article is my own.

[5] In 1956 Anna Magnani won the Academy Award for Best Actress for her role as Serafina in the film version of the play. For an in-depth discussion of the film version of *The Rose Tattoo* and fourteen other Hollywood films made from Williams's work, see Palmer and Bray's *Hollywood's Tennessee*.

[6] There was no Italy as we know it today until unification in 1870. I refer to the residents of Italian regions and city-states prior to unification as Italians. Those who immigrated to America prior to unification were generally skilled artisans, merchants, and builders, primarily from the northern regions of Italy. After unification, most of the Italian immigration (about 80 percent) was from il Mezzogiorno, the area south of Rome (Mangione and Morreale 32).

[7] Williams's lover, Frank Merlo, had been a truck driver before his liaison with the playwright, who nicknamed him "Little Horse." It was Merlo who suggested the name Mangiacavallo, or Eat-a-horse, for what biographer Spoto calls "the Sicilian reviver of life in the play" (173–74). As Spoto writes, "The two loves for Williams in 1950 and 1951 were the spiritual and physical models for the play, and they were . . . his sister Rose and his lover Frank" (171).

[8] While Italians advanced financially in Louisiana, "they did not achieve full social equity until the early 1960s" (V. Scarpaci 75).

[9] On March 14, 1891, instigated by Joseph A. Shakespeare, then mayor of New Orleans, a mob of angry men lynched eleven Italian Americans. See Richard Gambino's *Vendetta* for the story of the state-sanctioned murders of Italian Americans in Louisiana. See also John Barry's *Rising Tide* for incidents of lynchings and violence against Italian immigrants in Louisiana and Mississippi.

[10] In his quest for authenticity, Williams learned a great deal of Sicilian dialect, more, as Spoto notes, than he used in the play (165). Serafina's English is, in most cases, a literal translation of the Sicilian dialect.

[11] See Philip C. Kolin's "'Sentiment and Humor in Equal Measure'" for a discussion of Serafina's language as a comedic convention.

[12] In his essay "The Dog and the Rose," Jack Barbera suggests that Serafina's story "can be considered a personal allegory for Tennessee Williams not just in his need for artistic freedom, but also in his need to be himself, as a gay man" (145).

[13] In her article "*The Rose Tattoo*: A Modern Version of *The Scarlet Letter*," Roberta F. Weldon suggests that Williams was influenced by Hawthorne's novel. She writes, "The most apparent similarity between the novel and the play is in the titles which name the central symbols of the works. . . . [B]oth the scarlet letter and the rose tattoo appear in a natural and a preternatural way. . . . In each work the mark is revealed at a key dramatic moment, from which point it becomes the main device to move the action forward" (71–72).

[14] The 1950s American husband/wife relationship did not fare any better; the woman focused her attention on home and family, and the "husband was the designated leader and hero" (Halberstam 591). For a detailed look at the decade, see David Halberstam's *The Fifties*.

[15] As Prenshaw notes, in many of his plays, such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Summer and Smoke*, Williams "tries to create in some characters a capacity for innocent sexuality, untainted by Puritan repressions . . . , or a heightened, mystical sexuality that can be a saving grace" (27).

[16] In *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950), Williams gives an eroticized view of the machismo that governed the kind of Italian male who saw women as the site of male entitlement—not only through the character of Paolo, Mrs. Stone's young lover, but also in the men who prey on the lonely rich women visiting Rome. In the novella, Karen Stone, a recently widowed American living in Rome, feels the same loneliness and vulnerability we see in Serafina and experiences a similar sexual awakening, but unlike Serafina, she pays for it in more ways than one.

[17] The rose tattoo as symbol paradoxically represents "both the ideal of love and the more debased reality of love" (Weldon 72). For Serafina, it represents the purity of an idealized love and a "life-renewing force," but Rosario, Alvaro, and Estelle compromise the purity of its symbolism (Weldon 72).

[18] Italian anticlericalism, most prevalent among men, stemmed from their distrust of a Catholic Church that had aligned itself with Francesco II, the deposed Bourbon king, during the Risorgimento—as well as from their view of their village priests as "parasites, demanding money of the poor while being supported by the government" (Mangione and Morreale 32, 327). In America, the Catholic Church failed initially to respond to the needs of Italian immigrants, so the resentment and distrust toward priests continued.

[19] One only has to visit *la camera dei tesori* (the room of treasures) in any Church, especially in southern Italy, to understand the Christian-pagan relationship and the Italian obsession with remuneration. Jewelry, hearts, and limbs in silver and gold, and other worldly possessions cover every inch of space on the walls of these rooms, sometimes accompanied by artistic depictions of favors received. Salvatore Primeggia notes that a "cult practice, more common in Italy than in any other Catholic country, is the use of the *ex voto*. An *ex voto* is an object that is brought to the church—most often into its sanctuary—which is symbolic of a vow made to a saint or the Madonna" (75).

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