The Rose Tattoo Study Guide

The Rose Tattoo by Tennessee Williams

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Contents

The Rose Tattoo Study Guide....1
Contents....2
Introduction....4
Author Biography....5
Plot Summary....6
Act 1, Scene 1....11
Act 1, Scene 2....13
Act 1, Scene 3....14
Act 1, Scene 4....15
Act 1, Scene 5....18
Act 1, Scene 6....21
Act 2, Scene 1....23
Act 3, Scene 1....25
Act 3, Scene 2....28
Act 3, Scene 3....29
Characters....31
Themes....35
Style....37
Historical Context....39
Critical Overview....41
Criticism....42
Critical Essay #1....43
Critical Essay #2....47
Critical Essay #3....59
Adaptations....70

Topics for Further Study......71

Compare and Contrast......72

What Do I Read Next?......73

Further Study......74

Bibliography......75

Copyright Information......76

Introduction

Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo* was first staged in Chicago in 1950, premiered in New York City in 1951, and was a success with audiences. It is Williams's most light-hearted play, an homage, many say, to his beloved sister Rose and to Frank Merlo, whom Williams loved.

The drama chronicles events separated by three years in the life of its main character, Serafina Delle Rose. Serafina is characterized by her boastful pride, and the play's drama and humor revolves around whether she will learn humility.

What a close reading of the play suggests is that it is a mixed genre play. What this means is that it blends together distinct dramatic forms. The play synthesizes comedic elements, elements borrowed from ancient Greek tragedy, and elements that invoke ancient Greco-Roman celebrations of the god Dionysus. The play's comedy rests on its bawdiness and the way the characters get themselves into ridiculous fixes. Its nod to the classic, tragic form is that Serafina has a major flaw, like all tragic heroes. The play's focus on virility is its primary Dionysian element, as Dionysus is associated with life, love, virility, and intoxication. Dionysus is also, significantly, the god of right worship. He punishes mortals who think they are as great as gods or who refuse to give the gods their worshipful due. The two classic strains of the play work together in the way that the lusty Serafina is at once a celebration of life and a character whose flaw is self-worship.

Like many of Williams's plays, *The Rose Tattoo* is set in the U.S. South, Williams's birthplace. It stands out, however, for its cast of characters, who are Italian Americans with Sicilian roots.

Author Biography

Tennessee Williams, a major twentieth-century U.S. playwright, was born Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. Williams began writing as a child, publishing in junior high and high school publications. He continued publishing as he pursued his bachelor's degree, which he did leisurely, attending three different undergraduate institutions between 1929 and 1938. He decided to focus his creative energies primarily on drama during this period, although he wrote poetry, short stories, and novels throughout his life.

In 1939, Williams sent a set of one-act plays as a competition entry to the Group Theatre in New York, which was run by prominent members of the New York drama scene. They were impressed, awarded him prize money, and invited him to move to New York with the promise that they would help him further his career. The experience and contacts Williams gained in New York proved to be invaluable, and with the Broadway premiere of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944, Williams's career was launched. This phenomenal critical and box-office success was soon followed by another, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Both plays won New York Drama Critics Circle Awards and *A Streetcar Named Desire* won a Pulitzer Prize.

The Rose Tattoo, which premiered on Broadway in 1951, was Williams's third great box-office success. While certain prominent critics did not enjoy it as much as the public did, it nevertheless consolidated his position as a leading dramatist of the time and won a Tony Award. Indeed, Williams's popularity was such that many of his plays were adapted into films. These movies, most of them made in the 1950s and 1960s, helped define the cinematic era, even if Williams was never quite pleased with most of them.

Williams was a major force in drama internationally for many years, and he lived an active life. He traveled constantly within the United States and to Europe and had many loves. Despite his ongoing travel, he also stayed close to his family. He was particularly fond of his grandfather and particularly protective of his sister Rose, who was incapable of working.

By 1970, Williams's popularity with the public and critics had waned. Nonetheless, he wrote until his death, and many of his plays were produced, though not on the scale and to the acclaim of his earlier plays. His major plays continue to be regularly performed. Williams died in New York City in 1983.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

The Rose Tattoo opens with a view of a cottage, on whose front steps three neighborhood children sit. The children's mothers are calling them home to dinner, and the play's main character, Serafina delle Rose, appears on stage. She is looking for her own daughter, the twelve-year-old Rosa.

Next, Assunta, an old woman who practices "a simple sort of medicine," arrives on the scene. Over the course of her and Serafina's conversation, it is revealed that Serafina is deeply in love with her handsome husband, that she is extremely proud of his virility, that she is pregnant, and that her husband is a trucker who, while posing as a legitimate operator, in fact smuggles illegal goods.

Assunta leaves and another character, Estelle Hohengarten, is introduced. Serafina takes in sewing for cash. Estelle wishes her to make a shirt for a man with whom she is in love. Because Estelle behaves oddly and surreptitiously steals a framed photograph of Serafina's husband, these actions indicate that the man with whom she is in love and with whom she is having an affair is Serafina's husband, Rosario delle Rose.

The scene ends with a neighbor's goat running into Serafina's yard. This upsets Serafina as she is frightened of the woman who owns the goat, a character referred to as the "strega." Rosa states that by "strega" Serafina means witch. The scene ends with the strega cackling maliciously at Serafina's discomfiture and with Serafina exclaiming that the strega has given her the "evil eye": "Malocchio! Malocchio!"

Act 1, Scene 2

Scene 2 is very brief. It is dawn, and Serafina is sewing, since Estelle has told her that if she has the shirt done by the next day, she will pay her substantially more than her usual price. A priest, Father De Leo, and various neighborhood women are gathered outside Serafina's house. The police have shot Rosario, and they are deciding who must tell her. At the same time, since Rosario never came home the night before, and since Serafina can hear them outside talking, they are saying that she knows the truth already.

Act 1, Scene 3

Scene 3 takes place at noon the same day. A funeral wreath is on Serafina's door. A doctor and Father De Leo converse; Serafina has lost the baby. Father De Leo cautions the doctor to advise Serafina not to cremate her husband. The doctor notes that the body is already cremated, since after Rosario was shot, the truck crashed and caught fire. Yet, Father De Leo believes that if the body is not buried, Serafina will put the ashes of her husband in an urn and worship them like a pagan object.

Next, Estelle Hohengarten arrives in black mourning clothing. The neighborhood women, who have been inside with Serafina, leave the house and swoop around Estelle. Unlike Serafina, they know about Rosario's affair. They banish Estelle from Serafina's garden.

Act 1, Scene 4

This scene takes place three years later. It is graduation day for local teens, including Rosa, Serafina's daughter. Neighborhood mothers are at Serafina's door, asking for their daughters' graduation dresses, which Serafina has been commissioned to sew. She is not responding to their knocks. Inside, Rosa is nude. Her mother has locked away all of her clothes to prevent her from leaving the house. She has done this because Rosa went to a dance and met a young man in whom she is showing interest.

Miss Yorke, a teacher from the local high school, walks up at the same time Serafina bursts out of the house screaming that Rosa has cut her wrists. Miss Yorke investigates and finds that Rosa has just given herself a scratch to scare her mother. She tells Serafina to let Rosa dress for graduation. Rosa does, and she is beautiful in her white dress. Assunta, who is also present, convinces Serafina to hand over the other dresses, which Serafina does once the women assure her they have the money for them.

Act 1, Scene 5

Left alone after everyone has gone to the graduation ceremony, Serafina is worried she will miss it. She tries to pull herself together by beginning to get dressed, but her efforts are comically disastrous. In the previous scene, Serafina was dressed in a soiled pink slip and her hair was a mess. Clearly, in the three years since her husband's death, she has, just as Father De Leo predicted, wallowed in an unhealthy mourning. Her futile attempt to dress indicates that she has forgotten how to arrange herself in a presentable manner.

As Serafina continues her struggles, two new characters enter the scene, Bessie and Flora. They are, according to Williams's stage directions, "two female clowns of middle years and juvenile temperament."

The women want to pick up a blouse Flora commissioned. Serafina is distracted and searches for the wristwatch she wants to give Rosa for a graduation present. She tells Flora she was too busy making graduation dresses and does not have the blouse ready. Flora is angry because she is on her way to a parade in New Orleans and had been counting on the blouse. She threatens to complain to the Chamber of Commerce. Bessie, too, is irritated as this delay has caused them to miss the earlier train. Serafina becomes angry herself, and the women begin brawling. One outcome of this altercation is that Flora tells Serafina that the husband she was so proud of and always boasts about was having an affair with Estelle Hohengarten. Serafina is devastated, sensing that Flora is telling the truth. The two women leave.

Act 1, Scene 6

Rosa is back from the graduation ceremony with Jack Hunter, the young man she is sweet on. They are discussing that night's graduation party and believe Serafina is out because the house is dark. Rosa expresses her attraction to Jack, teaching him the Italian word for "kiss" and then kissing him all over his face. But, Serafina is in the house and makes her presence known. Rosa insists that she meet Jack.

When Rosa enters the house with Jack, she is embarrassed at her mother's appearance. She quickly brushes her mother's hair and applies some powder to her face.

Serafina is in a daze, and Rosa thinks this is due to a combination of shock over her fake suicide attempt and exhaustion over having had to make so many dresses. She and Jack try to rouse Serafina by telling her about the graduation ceremony. Jack tells how Rosa was given a prize, recited a poem, and how the crowd emitted a collective sigh of awe over her beauty as she walked up to the podium.

Serafina is finally roused, but only so as to begin interrogating Jack. She insinuates that he is after her daughter's innocence and asks how this can be when her daughter is only fifteen. Jack, who is a sailor and brother of one of Rosa's classmates, protests and insists that his intentions are honorable. Serafina finds out that he is a Catholic and makes him swear before her statue of the Virgin Mary that he will respect her daughter. He does swear.

The two young people leave with friends for the island at which the post-graduation party will take place, and Serafina has forgotten once again to give her daughter the watch.

Act 2, Scene 1

The second act of the play is one long scene whose events take place two hours after the previous scene. Serafina is mooning about her garden, making a spectacle of herself, giving expression to her doubt and despair. Father De Leo arrives and tries to reason with her, telling her to pull herself together, to think of her daughter. Serafina asks him if he knows if her husband was having an affair. He refuses to discuss the issue, and Serafina becomes belligerent. Her anger attracts local women, who finally must drag her away from the priest.

As Serafina begins calling on the Virgin Mary to give her a sign, a traveling salesman arrives at her door. He is delivering his sales pitch when a truck is heard approaching. A truck driver, a "very good looking" Italian, approaches, speaking angrily. The salesman forced the Italian off the highway when passing him, quite unnecessarily given the breadth of the roadway, calling him a number of derogatory names in the process. The trucker, Alvaro, wishes to fight the salesman, even if this leads to a complaint and the loss of his job, because he feels the man has been exceptionally insulting and disrespectful. The salesman's response is to drive his knee into Alvaro's groin.

Alvaro, doubled over, stumbles into Serafina's house, sobbing. Serafina begins sobbing too, if mostly for her own reasons. Over their communal weeping, Serafina sees that

Alvaro's jacket is torn, offers to sew it, and Alvaro worries that he will be fired and unable to care for what he calls his "three dependents" (his mother, sister, and father).

As Serafina sews, they converse. Serafina explains that her husband is dead, and she thinks, as she speaks, of how Alvaro has her husband's grand body but the aspect of a "clown." Alvaro, despite his good looks, has protruding ears, and Williams's stage directions indicate that he acts clownishly: "There is a startling, improvised air about him; he frequently seems surprised at his own speech and actions, as though he had not at all anticipated them."

Serafina also tells Alvaro about her husband's rose tattoo and boasts about him. It becomes clear that there is an attraction between Serafina and Alvaro. Alvaro, when he speaks, is practically asking Serafina to become his partner in life, if not in so many words, and Serafina is struggling to reconcile her attraction to Alvaro and her loyalty to her dead husband. They part with Serafina telling him to return and pick up his jacket later in the evening after his delivery rounds.

Act 3, Scene 1

Alvaro arrives with chocolates and is spiffed up after a visit to the barber for "the works," and Serafina is waiting, nicely cleaned up herself. Serafina discerns that Alvaro has rose oil in his hair, which disconcerts her, as her husband used to do the same thing. A bit later, Alvaro tells her he has a tattoo, a rose on his chest. This shocks Serafina even more, until Alvaro admits that he had it done that very day since she told him about her husband's tattoo. Alvaro, clearly, is trying most diligently to win Serafina, but his plans go awry when a condom falls out of his pocket.

At the sight of the condom and the thought of what their relations might lead to, Serafina commands Alvaro to leave. He is dismayed and begs her to reconsider. Serafina relents, telling him that her day has been terrible since she found out that her husband may have been cheating on her. As it turns out, Alvaro knows Estelle and where she works as a blackjack dealer, and he offers to telephone her to find out the truth once and for all. Over the phone, Estelle admits to the affair. The truth finally out, Serafina throws the urn of her husband's ashes to the floor and herself into Alvaro's arms. She tells him to drive his truck down the road, to park it, and to return quietly so nobody will know that she is having him stay the night.

Act 3, Scene 2

It is dawn the next day. Rosa and Jack are returning from their excursion. Jack is feeling guilty because he and Rosa have been intimate, even if they have not made love. He is thinking of the promise he made to Serafina. Yet, as in the previous scene between the two, it is Rosa who is the one most eager for intimacy. She is angry at her mother for the promise her mother extracted from Jack and tells him she will go into town to meet him the next day before his ship sails.

Act 3, Scene 3

The time of this scene, the play's last, is three hours later. It is early morning and Rosa wakes on the couch in the living room where she fell asleep. Alvaro emerges from Serafina's room, sees the drowsy, half-awake girl, and leans over her in shock and awe at her beauty. He is half-awake himself and appears to believe he is dreaming. Rosa, waking fully, screams, shocking Alvaro into realizing she is a real person. Serafina comes rushing out of her room and, in guilt over being caught with Alvaro, pretends he is an intruder and screams for him to leave. Rosa knows better, though, and tells her mother to calm herself. Alvaro in the meantime is expressing his love for Serafina, and Rosa blurts out that she plans to meet Jack before he sets sail. At first, Serafina objects, but then she tells her daughter to go, humbled before her daughter's certainty.

The neighborhood in the meantime has been roused by Serafina's earlier shouting about an intruder, and Assunta and the local women are watching events unfold. Rosa runs off and the women begin commenting on the presence of Alvaro and his rose tattoo (since his chest is bare). Serafina asks Assunta where the ashes of her husband have gone, because she wishes to retrieve them. Assunta tells her the wind blew them away. The local women are laughing at Serafina, but she does not mind. She believes she has conceived during her night of love, and the play closes with Alvaro and Serafina speaking to each other lovingly.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

This play takes place in a village somewhere on the Gulf coast between New Orleans and Mobile. It is populated mostly with Sicilians. The first scene is evening and the stage is set with a cottage in need of some repair. The semi tropical location includes palm trees and pampas grass. The interior of the cottage is a bit gaudy with many religious articles and pictures; rose wallpaper and a rose carpet; everything is bright and overdone. There is a sign in the window that says "Sewing" and there are dressmaker's dummies inside the house.

As the scene opens, Serafina Delle Rose is sitting on the sofa waiting for her husband Rosario's return. She is a little plump and stuffed into her silk dress and she is wearing much jewelry. Her daughter, Rosa Delle Rose appears and tells her mother that she is catching lightning bugs. Suddenly, an old woman, Assunta appears and enters the house. She is an herbalist and practices alternative medicine from the old customs.

She tells Serafina that she has a powder to put in her husband's coffee to make him more potent and Serafina replies that he does not need that. Then she shares with the old woman how she knew that she had conceived just a few weeks ago. She had awakened with a burning pain on her left breast—a pain like a needle—quick, hot little stitches. When she turned on the light she saw the rose tattoo—Rosario's mark--and that is when she knew that she had conceived.

The old woman tells her that everything for her has to be different, that she needed signs and a wonder for all things, even talking to Our Lady. Serafina says that She gives her signs.

They return their talk to Rosario who is a truck driver and is making his last run tonight for the Brothers Romano. She is pleased he is quitting them because what he hauls underneath the bananas is not right even though he makes much money from it. Soon they will have their own house with all the modern appliances. She will be uneasy though until he returns tonight and she again smells the rose oil that he puts on his hair.

Assunta leaves and Serafina returns to the sofa rubbing her hands over her stomach luxuriously and exclaims that she is big with life! It is marvelous! Then a woman named Estelle appears and inquires about her sewing. She has a piece of silk from which she needs a shirt made by tomorrow. It is for her lover and she will pay double for the request and then offers even to pay her three times the normal rate.

Rosa yells out that the black goat is loose and Serafina steps outside to help. All alone in the parlor, Estelle takes the picture of Rosario, shoves it into her purse and runs from the house just as Serafina is coming back in.

Serafina yells to Rosa not to look at the Strega—the one they call a witch because she has a white eye and each one of her fingers is crooked. Even worse, she can give you the evil eye. She yells at her daughter to get into the house quickly as the old witch approaches. As she gets closer, Serafina crouches and covers her eyes while the old woman cackles. Serafina makes the sign of the horns with her other hand to ward off the evil eye.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

Williams is setting the scene of a very strong Sicilian culture, even though the play takes place in modern day in the South. The culture and superstitions of the home country are intact— Serafina's adoration of her husband, the evil eye from the witch, and the rose tattoo— all setting up the dynamic for the rest of the play.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

It is just before dawn the next morning. There is a priest named Father de Leo and several women wearing black shawls, including Assunta, standing outside Serafina's house. Inside it is dim but the sound of the sewing machine can be heard whirring away. They see Serafina holding the rose-colored silk and then she clutches her throat.

The group is discussing who should tell her what they have come to say and they agree that the priest should do it. They know that she will know why they have come once she sees them.

Serafina hears their voices and her eyes freeze with fright. The group climbs the stairs to the porch and Assunta opens the door. Serafina gasps at them not to speak. She stumbles backward, turns and runs out the back door. Soon she is seen from around the side of the house and she stops and stares into the distance.

Again, she wildly admonishes the group not to speak a word to her. Assunta does approach her, Serafina slumps to the ground and the old woman embraces her.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Serafina's worst fear has come true—her beloved Rosario is dead. The priest and the women have come to comfort her, yet she will not let them speak because if she does not hear the words there is still hope that this news may not be true.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

Now it is noon of the same day. A doctor and Father de Leo are in discussion. The doctor tells him that Serafina has lost the baby. She is a strong woman but must rest and he gives morphine and needles to Assunta to inject Serafina if she should try to get up.

The priest wants to make sure that Rosario's body must not be cremated because that is an abomination of the Catholic Church. The doctor does not see the point because his body is already badly burned. Apparently, he had been shot in the head during his last run for the Romano Brothers and when his truck crashed, his body burned in the flames of the accident.

The woman Estelle comes up to the house dressed in black, wearing a veil and carrying a bouquet of roses. She has come to see the body and the men tell her that it is a closed casket. In addition, the widow knows nothing about her and she is to leave immediately. The women know about her though and start hissing at her to leave at once. They begin to attack her, taking the roses from her hand and beating her with them. The thorns catch on her veil, which is then torn from her face. She is sobbing that she must see the body and the priest firmly repeats that no one will be viewing the body. Estelle finally leaves and the others return inside except Rosa. She picks up the roses and the veil, places it over her head, and begins to cry hysterically. A little boy is bouncing a ball nearby and she suddenly jumps up, tears off the veil and smacks him crying out that her papa is dead.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

It is clear now that Rosario's last run for the Romano Brothers has ended tragically just as Serafina had feared. She wants his body cremated so that she can keep the ashes with her always but the Church has intervened and will not allow it. Estelle's appearance now validates that Rosario had been her lover; the shirt Serafina was sewing would have been a gift to her husband from this woman.

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

This scene takes place on a June day three years later. A group of mothers has gathered outside Serafina's house demanding the graduation dresses that she has sewn for their daughters. However, Serafina has barricaded herself in her house. The women say that maybe if they call her Baroness she might open the door, but to no avail. All week long, she has promised them their dresses tomorrow, tomorrow, but graduation day is now here and they still do not have their dresses. What were their daughters to wear?

A woman called Peppina tells of one visit to the house where she hears Serafina's daughter Rose calling to her from inside the house. When she turned to look, she could see that Rose was naked. Can you believe it—naked! Rose had asked the woman to call the phone number she gave her and ask for Jack and to tell him that her clothes had been locked up so she could not get out of the house. Then Serafina had grabbed the girl, pulled her away from the window and slammed the shutters right in her face!

The other women wanted to know what was wrong with the girl and who was this boy Jack? Where did she meet him? Apparently, he was a sailor she met when she went to a high school dance. He was the brother of a friend. At any rate, Serafina found out and locked her daughter in the house. She could not even get out to take her examinations.

Now, the women try to decide who will approach Serafina's door this time. They even consider getting the police but do not really want more trouble. However, some of the women have paid in advance and want their dresses for their daughters. What are they supposed to wear to graduation—a couple of towels and a rose in their hair?

Suddenly, they are distracted by noise in the house—a scream and running footsteps. The front door opens and Serafina saunters out. She is wearing a dirty, pink slip and her hair is unkempt. She shouts Aiuto! Aiuto! and retreats back into the house.

That is when Miss Yorke appears in front of the house and joins the others. She is an old-maid-high-school-teacher, and she reminds the group of women that she can understand Italian and knows what they are muttering about her. She is allowed direct entry into the house, which completely outrages the little group of mothers left on the sidewalk. The Strega finds this very amusing and cackles at the lot of them.

Suddenly the door is thrown open again and Serafina reappears acting almost demented. She is frantic because she thinks that her daughter has slit her wrist. She runs into the yard screaming for someone to get the doctor—someone take the knife away from Rosa!

Miss Yorke very calmly tells her that Rose has not cut her wrist and asks Serafina to come back inside please. She begs the women to leave as she tries to drag Serafina

back into the house but they are fixed and they will not leave without the dresses. Once the two women are back inside, Miss Yorke again reassures Serafina that Rose has not cut her wrist and asks the girl to please show her mother that she is ok.

Rose appears with a handkerchief tied around one wrist and Serafina screams at the sight of it. Rose resists her mother's attentions, tells her that she is ashamed of how she lives— that she never dresses, and talks to the urn of ashes as if her father was still alive.

Miss Yorke intervenes and asks for the key to the closet so that Rose can get her dress and go to the graduation. She wonders why she has locked up Rose's clothes to begin with and Serafina still thinks Rose has cut her wrist. Again, Miss Yorke assures her that this is not the case—she has a minor skin cut, a scratch. However, the girl must surely be exhausted from all the recent drama.

Rosa tries to explain that all she asked was that Jack could come to the house so she could meet him---that is when her mother locked up all her clothes. Miss Yorke is concerned because Rosa has consequently missed all her final examinations but she will be allowed to graduate with her class because of her past good grades.

Serafina is still ranting that Rosa has cut her wrist and Miss Yorke has taken about all she can of these emotional outbursts. However, Serafina is also tired—she blames the teacher and the school for the trouble with her daughter. If they had not held this dance, her daughter would never have met this sailor.

Rosa emerges from the back room dressed in her graduation gown and she and Miss Yorke leave for the high school. Serafina begs her daughter not to go and her daughter yells back that she had better not go into the street dressed only in her dirty, pink slip. Serafina continues to admonish Miss Yorke for her part in the dance at the school and for what will be, she is sure, the ruination of her Rosa.

Miss Yorke does not understand how such a madwoman could have such a sweet daughter as Rosa. She really does not deserve her. Rosa is completely mortified at the scene in front of her teacher and finally just runs away. Miss Yorke follows her and Serafina watches the two of them walk down the street together.

Assunta sees an entrée and pleads with Serafina to release the graduation dresses to the women who are still waiting. She tells them that the names are pinned to the dresses and they can go in and get them. The women emerge with the frothy confections and as they scatter, Serafina stands before a mirror and repeats what her daughter has called her—disgusting.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

Clearly, Serafina's grief has not diminished much over time. If anything, she has taken on the demeanor of a mad recluse, talking to the ashes of her dead husband and refusing to dress and go out into public. Her daughter has risen above the misery, even

though she is embarrassed by it, and apparently is a good student who has won the respect of people at the school, especially Miss Yorke who has decided to intervene on Rosa's behalf. It is not clear just yet why Serafina is so opposed to Rosa seeing Jack. Is it because her daughter is too young, or is she trying to protect her from the pain that comes from loving someone and then losing him one day?

Act 1, Scene 5

Act 1, Scene 5 Summary

Serafina feels validated by Rosa's comments and stares at herself with revulsion in the mirror. She grabs a girdle and holds it up for inspection; drops it and tries on a hat but takes it off; she is frantic for something to make her feel attractive. She grabs a dress off one of her dressmaker dummies but it will not fit over her hips. She can hear the high school band begin to play in the distance and she becomes even more flustered because she cannot find anything to wear and she knows she will be late for the ceremony.

Her anguish is about to be exaggerated with the arrival of two female clowns, Flora and Bessie. They are middle-aged but have very juvenile demeanors. They have come for a polka dot blouse that Serafina was supposed to have finished by today for Flora. Bessie is perturbed that they have had to make this stop because they will probably miss their train to New Orleans.

Serafina runs out of the back bedroom mumbling something about a wristwatch… where was the wristwatch? She hears Flora banging on the door and rushes to open it. When she realizes who it is, she tells them not to bother her; she is late for her daughter's graduation ceremony and she cannot find the watch that was to be her gift.

Flora demands to pick up her blouse and Serafina tells her that it is not ready; she has had fourteen graduation dresses to make! They will not take no for an answer because Flora intends to wear that blouse in the American Legion parade in New Orleans and she is not leaving without it. She grabs up the unfinished blouse and demands that Serafina sit down and finish it. In addition, if she does not they will report her to the authorities and her license will be revoked. They are even more outraged when they discover that she has no license.

She relents and sits down at the sewing machine and swears that if she misses the graduation ceremony, the women will be sorry, very sorry. The three women hear a train whistle and panic sets in until Flora tells Bessie that there will be another train in 45 minutes. Bessie is beside herself with excitement to get to New Orleans; she's been told that they're even dropping paper bags filled with water out of hotel windows… can you imagine!

The two women continue with their stories of revelry and risqué behavior perpetrated by some Legionnaires. Serafina warns them not to talk of such things in her house in front of the ashes of her dear husband.

Then they hear some singing from outside and it is some Legionnaires. They begin singing *Mademoiselle from Armentieres, parley-voo!* and the men return with the next chorus. They laugh and applaud but Serafina is outraged and rushes to the window and

slams the shutters closed right in front of their faces. She reminds them of their manners and that she won't have any improper behavior in her home, the home of her dead husband, Rosario Delle Rose.

Serafina cannot stand the way they go on and on with their dirty talk about men; they are man-crazy, and she will not have such talk in her house! The other two women of course think she is just jealous. She quickly responds that she surely is not jealous because she knows what it is to have had the best: not the third best or even the second best, but the best. She held him in her arms every night, from the night they were married until the night he was killed in his fruit truck making a delivery for the Romano Brothers. Maybe that is why she is not man crazy. Her only concern now is the happiness of her daughter, now she is going to be late for the ceremony and she has lost her gift.

Bessie wants to leave but Flora will not take the insult without responding. Serafina tells them to go to New Orleans. Take their man-crazy selves out of her house. She is not interested at all in that kind of life. She remembers her husband who had a body like a young boy and thick black hair and skin as smooth as a rose petal.

Flora tells her that he was a rose all right, the rose of a gangster and he was shot smuggling dope under the bananas in his truck. Serafina continues in her devotion to her dead husband's memory. He came from a family of landowners—he was noble. She loved him for twelve years and she is satisfied that she has had the best. She still grieves for him but is content to remember. So how could she possibly want some pot-bellied old man and try to convince herself that that would be love. It was not possible. She is satisfied to remember the love of Rosario who was hers alone… never touched by anyone else. She runs out to the porch and tries to collect herself.

From inside the house, she hears the two women challenge her that someone else had touched him… Estelle Hohengarten… that blackjack dealer from Texas. Bessie wants to leave but Flora continues. Everybody but Serafina knew about the affair Rosario was having with Estelle for the past year.

Serafina remains on the porch and is struck senseless by their comments. The high school band is playing in the background as Serafina turns around with her dress unzipped in the back. Maybe the women should just leave her in her ignorance. However, Flora will not let it die. She tells about the rose tattoo that Rosario had on his chest and how Estelle had gone to New Orleans and had a rose tattooed on her chest as well.

Almost under her breath, Serafina calls her a liar. Then she begins to scream more vehemently that they are liars. She comes back into the house, slamming the door so hard that the cottage shakes. Serafina rushes at them with a broom. Bessie is able to escape but she keeps hitting Flora about the hips and shoulders. Bessie is outside screaming bloody murder and the high school band strikes up *The Stars and Stripes Forever.* Finally, the two women run off vowing to have Serafina arrested.

Serafina closes herself in her house until it is dark and the only light is the candle in front of the statue of the Madonna and the stripes of sun coming in from the shutters. She goes into a demented haze calling the women liars; remembering the day Estelle showed up with the rose-colored fabric; she was going to miss graduation. She begs for help from the Madonna and asks repeatedly for some kind of sign.

Act 1, Scene 5 Analysis

Serafina's sense of herself is fragile at best. She has let her physical appearance deteriorate during her mourning period and the comments from her daughter are enough to push her over the edge. Her whole life has been built around her daughter now that her husband was gone. She is still in mourning for the life she used to have. She has constructed a fragile shell of existence that keeps getting shattered by outside forces. Her daughter wants to bring a boy home. Now the two women show up at her door and tell her that her husband had been unfaithful to her. It is unthinkable to her but could their allegations be true? If that was true, was her whole life with her husband a lie?

Act 1, Scene 6

Act 1, Scene 6 Summary

The cottage is dark now except for the candle at the Madonna's feet. Serafina is there but cannot be seen, only heard. She is asking the Lady to give her a sign. Suddenly, there are noises from outside; Rosa has come home and is making plans to go on a picnic with her friends. She is with Jack and they enter the house thinking that Serafina must have gone out.

Rosa tells him that she wants to tell him an Italian word… bacio. He does not know what it means and she informs him with kisses until he pulls away from her. She is amazed at what the last week has brought… she did not know the thrill of boys just a few days ago. She reminds him of what he said to her on the dance floor the night they met: honey, you are dancing too close. She said that her girlfriend taught her how to dance with boys that you have to press up close. Then when he told her she was beautiful, she had to run to the ladies room to look at her face because for the first time in her life she did feel beautiful.

She wonders why Jack has stopped laughing and joking and gotten so serious. He tells her that she is somewhat *wild.* And then he changes the subject to the handkerchief with her blood on it and wants to take it back to the ship with him to show the guys what a beautiful girl was willing to do for his sake.

Suddenly Serafina mutters something from out of the dark and the couple draws apart abruptly. Rosa wants her to meet Jack but he would prefer to wait outside. Rosa opens the shutters and sees that her mother is in a disheveled state of undress and she is once again embarrassed. She hurriedly throws a robe on her and begins to brush her hair and put some powder on her face. Serafina is unfazed by it all.

Slowly, Jack moves closer to meet Rosa's mother but Serafina collapses again with a moan and Rosa hurriedly begins making excuses for her. Serafina tells Rosa to shut the front door, that there had been policemen out there because of some trouble. Jack interjects that they missed her at the graduation but that he had brought her some roses and hoped she liked them.

Rosa makes Jack describe the graduation to Serafina just to fill in the awkward pause in this awkward afternoon. Rosa asks Jack to go get her prizes so she can show her mother and when he is gone, she desperately tries to find out what has happened there this afternoon. When Jack returns, he is carrying two big books tied with white satin. The first is *The Digest of Knowledge*—everything from abracadabra to zoo. Serafina wants to know where her diploma is and tells her to put it in the drawer with her father's clothes.

Jack is still trying to lift the encounter and tells Serafina that the audience gasped when Rosa walked onstage to recite her poem. He asked her how it felt to be the mother of the prettiest girl in the world.

Serafina wants time alone with Jack to grill him on his intentions with Rosa and sends her daughter out to get dressed for her picnic. He tells her of how they met at the school dance, how they went ice-skating and how they went to the movies and ate popcorn. She is incredulous that a sailor would be content with these mild activities with a young girl who is still a virgin. He admits that he, too, is still a virgin and gains some respect in her eyes. Nevertheless, she makes him kneel in front of the statue of the Madonna and swear not to take advantage of her innocence. He does so and Rosa is mortified when she hears this conversation.

Mercifully for Rosa, her friends are back to pick her up for the picnic and she and Jack leave to join them. Serafina is back in her fog again and starts mumbling about the wristwatch again… it is a Bulova with 17 jewels in it. She winds it, puts it to her ear, then glares at it, and launches once again into her please to the Madonna to give her a sign.

Act 1, Scene 6 Analysis

Obviously, Serafina has not gone to the graduation. She is too crushed by the allegations made about her husband by Flora and Bessie. Her world is so dark all of a sudden, not even any light from the shuttered windows anymore. There is an element of hope though in the flickering candle in the votive. She is torn because she wants her beautiful daughter to be happy and popular but she is suddenly jaded by the realities of life and she does not want her daughter caught up in them. Therefore, she does the best she can do; keep a votive candle lit, put the fear of God into the sailor, and keep asking for a sign.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

It is now two hours later on the same day. Serafina comes out onto the porch in a slip, which now has wine stains on it. It is hard for her to stand but she is too restless to sit. She is still asking the Madonna for a sign when Father de Leo approaches the house. He chastises her for wearing only her undergarments outside and tells her that it is no wonder that the other women in the neighborhood are avoiding her. He knows that she was in grief over her dead husband but it has been three years and she needs to get some control over herself. However, he is not surprised that she has gone off the deep end because she started in that direction when she broke the rules of the Church and had her husband cremated.

The priest has come in response to Serafina's call earlier that day. He tells her that he could not come until now because he had to baptize the mayor's son. Moreover, maybe he would be quicker about coming to her if she would come to confession. He tells her to get her life together; she is still a young woman and could love again and have more children. She used to be so beautiful when she would come to Church all dressed up but now it is a sin the way she has let herself go.

He points out some women in the neighborhood who could be her friends if only she would allow it. She does not want anything to do with them. They have deep freezes for hearts. They have lives without glory. Their husbands are forced to live without the love they need, which to her is glory. Her bed and her husband were her religion. She lives with his memory to keep her and all she wants is for the Madonna to give her a sign that the rumors about her husband are not true.

She challenges the priest to tell her if her husband had ever confessed to any affair. Of course, what is said in the confessional is a private matter and he will not reveal anything. She threatens to break the marble urn containing his ashes and the whole dramatic scene is too much for the elderly priest. He tells her that she is not a respectable woman; she is an animal. She starts to hit him and some of the neighboring women come to his rescue and lead him away from any further attacks from Serafina.

She returns to her porch steps and again begs the Madonna for a sign. That is when a novelty salesman walks up to her house. He is overweight, loud and dressed garishly. He tries to get her to listen to his sales pitch but a young man calling him a road hog interrupts him. The young man is Alvaro, a 25 year-old Italian, very good looking man. He is short but massively built and he is a bit awkward but charming.

The salesman tries to continue but Alvaro will not let him. He accuses him of running him off the highway a little while ago. He drives a truck for a fruit company. He delivers bananas. When they were on the road, he signaled the man to pass him but he did not,

he just kept on his bumper the whole time until Alvaro's truck went off the road. The two engage in a brief fight and the salesman tells him that he will report him to his boss.

Alvaro knows that this will mean he will lose his job because he has been warned before. He rushes into Serafina's house and breaks into sobs. She cannot console him and she also begins to cry—it is a blessed relief to her after all she has been through today.

She realizes that his jacket has been torn in the fight and she offers to mend it for him. He cannot stop crying. He has three dependents and he knows he will lose his job. His tears embarrass him but she tells him that he has nothing about which to be embarrassed. When she opens the shutters to begin mending his jacket, she sees his torso, and gets caught up short for a minute. She tells him that he reminds her of her dead husband, not so much in the face but in his stature.

They have some Asti and talk for a while about his job and his dependents—an aunt, his father and a grandmother. She tells him that the priest was against her having her husband cremated and he thinks it was the right decision; bodies decay but ashes stay clean forever. She had never thought of it that way but he is right.

She tells him about the rose tattoo on the night she conceived the child that she lost the night her husband died. She does not know why she is confiding all these things to this young man.

He calls the fruit company to talk to his boss and learns that the salesman did indeed report him and that he has lost his job. He is upset, especially with the three dependents and tells her that his wish is to meet an older woman who is understanding and has a little business of her own. To that woman he would give undying love and affection.

Serafina tells him to open the drawer in a bureau and take out a shirt wrapped in tissue. It is the rose-colored shirt that she made three years ago. She gives him the shirt as a gift. She tells him to come back later tonight to see if his jacket is finished. If the shutters are open and the light is on, he may come in. If the shutters are closed, do not stop because that means that her daughter is home.

Serafina speaks to heaven and asks Rosario to forgive her for thinking that such a lie about him could be true.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Serafina is oblivious to all the attempts to make her more respectable. She does not pay attention to her daughter, to her priest, and especially the women of the neighborhood. She is starved for love, not admonitions. In addition, she sees a spark of what she used to have in the swarthy Alvaro. He is not as handsome as her Rosario is but he is built the same and she feels a spark ignite inside again. He, on the other hand, is well aware of his good looks and senses right away how vulnerable Serafina is, yet he is in a desperate situation and it looks as if he intends to take advantage in some way.

Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

It is now evening and Serafina sits on her sofa dressed, as she was when she was waiting for Rosario the night he was killed. She struggles with the discomfort of her girdle and hides behind a dividing curtain when she hears Alvaro coming up the steps. To hide her embarrassment, she starts to arrange wine glasses on a try and he comes in offering to help. He comments that he did not expect to see her looking so pretty; that she was a nice young widow. She notices that he has been to the barbershop and then she smells the rose oil in his hair and retreats from him a bit. He tells her he will wash it out but that is not necessary she says.

They sit in the parlor and he is distressed when she chooses another chair instead of sitting by him on the sofa. He tells her that the suit he is wearing was one that he bought four years ago to get married in. However, the wedding never took place because he had given the girl a zircon instead of a diamond and she had it appraised and that was the end of that!

He tells Rosa that she is not like that girl because she has sincere eyes. He teasingly wants to tell her fortune from her palm but she will not allow it. He says that he sees two men in her life: one very handsome, the other not handsome and with ears that are too big but not as big as his heart. This man also has three dependents, no, actually four… the one that every man has, his biggest expense, worst troublemaker and chief liability.

Serafina is put off by the hint of vulgarity and asks about the candy box that he has brought with him. She thanks him for the chocolate but he should not have because she is too fat already. She is not fat to him, just plump and very pleasing. He reaches out to pinch her arm and she flinches.

Alvaro decides to change the subject and he asks about her daughter who Serafina says has the eyes and wild blood of her father. She is only fifteen but has a sailor for a boyfriend and just this morning she cut her wrist with a kitchen knife. She had to relent and meet this man and he swore that he was Catholic and she made him swear in front of the Madonna that he would not ruin her daughter.

Alvaro can sympathize with her concern but tells her that eventually she will have to deal with her daughter's innocence being compromised. He asks if the sailor has a tattoo because most of them do. Would he like to guess what kind of tattoo he has? She says probably a South Sea girl or a big heart with Mama written across it. He unbuttons his shirt to show her—it is a rose. Serafina gasps and has to go outside for some air and some support as she clings to a porch column.

She tries to steady herself and tells her that it is not his rose tattoo that has forced her outside but the heat inside the house. It normally does not start to cool off inside until

about midnight. Alvaro sees an entrance and teases her about not sleeping with any nightgown or covers. He touches the small of her back and she recoils telling him of the Strega next door who is always watching.

Alvaro persists because it has been so long since he has felt the softness of a woman. He follows her back inside, and eager for a distraction, opens the box of chocolates. He tells her to eat it before it melts in her hands but she declines. He tells her to feed one to him. She does so and her fingers are sticky. He grabs her and licks the chocolate off her fingers and she protests his little intimacy.

He still persists and says that in spite of the heat, he is cold; but he senses the sweet warmth of Serafina across the room. She essentially calls him a shameless flirt and he swears that he it is winter in his heart because he does not have a sweet lady in his life. He shoves his hands in his pockets as a dramatic statement of how he is forced to stay warm. When he pulls them back out, a condom falls out of his pocket and onto the floor. He is aghast when he realizes that she has seen it.

She is shocked. He can talk sweet but has vulgar intentions. She tells him to take it with him and go down to the Square Roof, which is a bar with gambling. He begs her to forgive him and falls to his knees in front of her. She cannot abide the insult to her dignity and breaks away from him, he pursues and finally he drops to his knees and pounds the floor saying that everything in his life turns out this way.

She tells him to get up off the floor and then wants to know when he got the rose tattooed onto his chest. He tells her that he got it just this evening. She accuses him of doing it to be like her dead husband but he says he wanted only to be close to her. She is incensed by his act of getting a tattoo and some chocolates to fool her. Actually, he has had the chocolates since his ill-fated romantic interlude four years ago. She tells him that he should learn a lesson from all this: never try to fool women.

He accuses her of being a widow too long and that is why she is so cold. However, she says the day is the problem. Some other day she might have been different. She tells him about Estelle Hohengarten and he knows her as working at the Square Roof. She demands that he take her there and calls a cab. She then puts a large knife in her purse and waits for the taxi.

The taxi comes but drives by her house and Alvaro tries to console her. He says he will call Estelle and ask her directly about Rosario. When she comes on the phone, she tells Alvaro that the rumor is true. Serafina grabs the phone, declares that she was his wife and that Estelle was lying. The woman tells her to come down to the club and see the rose tattoo on her breast if she does not believe her. Serafina throws the phone down in horror and Alvaro helps her to the sofa.

The room is spinning for Serafina and Alvaro chops some ice for her head. Outside, a small boy is counting… seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five, ninety, ninety-five, one hundred… ready or not you will be caught!

Upon hearing this, Serafina grabs the marble urn, throws it against the wall and covers her face in shame. Now her body has gathered strength and she tells Alvaro that she no longer needs the ice; he will now see how a woman can be strong like a man. She goes out on the porch and begins telling Alvaro goodbye… loud enough so that the neighbors will hear. Offside, she tells him what she is doing, that he should play along, then return without his truck, and enter through the back door. They part for several minutes for the neighbors' sakes and soon he is cooing at her at the back door. She has turned out the lights and she tells him that the moonlight is enough as they move toward the sofa.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

Alvaro thinks that Serafina will be the answer to his problems. She is vulnerable and he has done everything he can think of to capitalize on her weaknesses in order for her to like him and take him into her house and her life. His advances are unwanted at first but when she finally gets proof that Rosario had been unfaithful to her, she relents and allows herself to open the door to her heart again. Could Alvaro be the sign for which she has been asking from the Madonna?

Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

The night has passed, and Rosa and Jack come back to her house at dawn. They both seem very sad and Rosa says that that had been the happiest day of her life and this night the saddest. A moan erupts from the house and Rosa says it is her mother dreaming about her father. She is upset because her mother is making love in her sleep and she herself seems to be headed for the same fate—always dreaming about it but never actually doing it. Jack tells her that her mother just wants her to be practical and not see him through rose-colored glasses. Sounds and moans continue from the house.

Jack has to leave but she desperately tries to tell him that she is old enough to love him and he tells her that he has restrained himself all day but that she needs to forget about him and wait until she is a little older before acting on her feelings.

She asks him what time he has to be back on the ship. When he tells her 5 o'clock, she wants to know what he will be doing until then. He plans to get a hotel room, get loaded and get—he does not finish his sentence but she knows what he means. She coyly tells him to look for her at the Greyhound station at noon and he groans and says that he has never felt anything so sweet in all his life as the feel of her body in his arms.

Jack breaks away from her, runs in the direction of town, and Rosa enters the house, takes off her dress, falls on the couch and cries.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

Rosa has been out all night with Jack but apparently, her mother's worst fears have not come true. They feel strongly for each other but Jack's cooler head has prevailed. Rosa is a passionate, young woman, is ready to live her life and does not want to live like her mother on faded memories.

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

Three hours later, the light is still dusky and Rosa is asleep on the couch. From the back of the cottage, a man coughs and bedsprings groan as someone moves to get up. Alvaro staggers out into the front room with a bottle of Asti in one arm. He wears only his pants and thinks that he is still dreaming as he sees the girl lying on the couch. He drops to his knees and crawls over to her in the fear that she might disappear if he were to become too obvious.

She wakes, sees him crouching over her and screams. Immediately Serafina is in the room screaming too. She screams at Alvaro to get out, treating him like a stranger who has broken into their home. He tries to reason with the two, saying that he was sorry, he did not mean any harm, he was just dreaming.

Serafina demands that he get dressed and a couple minutes later, he is seen running away from the house, half clothed. He yells that he loves Serafina and she throws a teakettle at him. In the meantime, Rosa is getting dressed in the undergarments that her mother had made for her and was saving for her wedding. Serafina tries to explain Alvaro to no avail and finally relents and tells the truth. He had a rose tattoo and had rose oil in his hair and, except for the face, he reminded her so much of Rosario.

Rosa calls her mother a liar and a hypocrite and says that she sees her now how her father must have—and she holds up the piggy bank to illustrate her point. She then breaks the bank, saying that she needed some money. Serafina realizes now that Rosa is leaving her to be with Jack. As she exits the house, Serafina calls out to her about the wristwatch but the girl never returns.

Assunta comes in and Serafina tells her that she has broken the urn and that the ashes are everywhere but Assunta says that there are no ashes anymore. The wind has taken them. When a man burns, no woman can keep him. The wind must blow him away.

The neighborhood women are delighting in the sight of Alvaro on the road; still shirtless, his rose tattoo is showing. Serafina is on the porch, one hand hovering over her breast. She tells Assunta that she was feeling the burn of the rose on her breast and that surely meant that she had conceived. She is happy now that she has life again in her body and she hears Alvaro still calling to her. He is not visible at this point but she calls back to him and leaves her house to follow his voice.

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

Rosa comes home to find that her mother has spent the night with Alvaro and this is the ultimate in hypocrisy to her. While outraged, she realizes that her mother is just a woman with real needs and passions and almost feels sorry for her. She also has

resolved to go to be with Jack because her passions will not wait either. Serafina has lived all her life dreaming or remembering a rose, the symbol of perfection. However, life is not perfect; life is short, too short to waste on living in the past.

Characters

Assunta

Assunta is a wise old woman who sells herbal and other remedies to the local Sicilian American population, and she appears to be Serafina's only true friend. She listens to Serafina boast and rant, gives her advice, helps her in times of need, and ignores her when she is rude.

Bessie

Bessie, along with her counterpart Flora, is described in Williams's stage notes as a "clown" of middle age and "juvenile temperament." She has commissioned some sewing from Serafina, and, when she finds it is not finished on the day promised, she becomes angry and informs Serafina about Serafina's husband's infidelity. As far as Serafina is concerned, Flora and her friend are man-chasers and generally immoral.

Bruno

Bruno is one of a group of small children who appear on and off again in the play. These children have small speaking parts, but they are a significant presence on stage, as they convey the way that the play's celebration of life rests on more than a celebration of love, sexuality, and passion. Their wild, free, and innocent play conveys a sense of life that is essentially creative and pure.

Father De Leo

Father De Leo is a stock representation of a good priest in the play. He appears during moments when Serafina is behaving in an antisocial and self-destructive manner, with the goal of bringing her back into the fold and making her see reason. He is a character defined by his profession, a priest who sees his role as the care of his community.

Rosa Delle Rose

Rosa is Serafina's daughter. She has inherited her father's startling good looks, and, like her mother, she is passionate. She is also quite precocious for her age, as she is certain about her love for Jack Hunter despite her tender age of fifteen.

While Rosa is genuinely fond of her mother, they are quite different in many respects. Much of their difference rests on Rosa's having been conventionally educated in the United States, whereas Serafina retains the culture of her peasant Sicilian background.

Rosario Delle Rose

Rosario, Serafina's husband, never appears on stage, but he is an important element in the play. Serafina talks of him being extremely good-looking, very manly, and a great

lover. This combination of attributes contributes to the play's celebration of the beauty of life, love, sexuality, and passion.

Rosario's character also conveys a cautionary message, because he is deceitful. He fools Serafina into thinking that she is his only love and smuggles illegal goods under the cover of his legitimate trucking operation. The duplicity of his character points to Serafina's task in the play. She must distinguish between that which truly deserves worship and that which does not.

Serafina Delle Rose

Serafina is the play's main character, a woman whose problem is her untoward worship of her husband and, by extension, of herself. She begins the play boasting of her husband Rosario's beauty, virility, and love for her, while the neighborhood knows he is having an affair with Estelle Hohengarten. Serafina's boastfulness and ignorance of Rosario's true character make her an object of fun. However, since she is a sympathetic character and one whose boasting revolves around things relating to love and passion, her character contributes to the play's celebration of the life.

Rosario is killed at the play's start, and in the three years that separate the play's opening and concluding events, Serafina has continued to worship her husband and the memories she has of him. This unhealthy, excessive mourning has quelled Serafina's nature, which is passionate and revels in life, not death.

Serafina regains her lust for life when she learns the truth about her husband and a new man, the character Alvaro, enters her life. She also learns an important lesson in discovering her husband's deception, which is that nobody, including herself, is perfect.

Whatever Serafina does, she does to excess: at the play's start she is overdressed; in the middle of the play, when she is unhappy, she is slovenly. When she loves, she worships; when she is happy or angry, the whole neighborhood knows.

The Doctor

The Doctor appears only once in the play, to tend to Serafina after she learns of her husband's death. The conversation he has with Father De Leo at this time is significant, because it underscores the play's focus on the sacred nature of life and love. As Father De Leo rightly worries whether Serafina will funnel her worship of her husband into a worship of his memory, the doctor cannot understand how this could ever be a problem. The doctor's inability to understand Serafina suggests his utterly profane nature. This man of science believes only in the facts of the physical world, where Father De Leo and Serafina are imbued with a spiritual sense that certain things are sacred.

Flora

Flora is Bessie's friend and accompanies her to Serafina's house to pick up a blouse. Flora is dismayed when Bessie tells Serafina about Rosario's cheating. For this reason, she seems kinder than the more hotheaded Bessie.

Giuseppina

Giuseppina, along with Peppina and Mariella, is a neighborhood woman who interacts minimally with Serafina. Giuseppina and these women appear on stage mainly to comment on the play's events, most especially on Serafina's follies. Their role in the play is much like the role of the chorus in ancient Greek tragedy; they are a group of figures whose purpose is to reflect on unfolding events from the sidelines. This commentary either reiterates what is happening for dramatic effect or else conveys the point of view of the community at large. Giuseppina and her counterparts make up a comedic as opposed to a tragic chorus of women, since their point of view conveys how much the community takes delight in Serafina's misadventures. Serafina's misfortunes afford these onlookers pleasure because her pride and arrogance offends them.

Estelle Hohengarten

Estelle is the woman whom Serafina learns was having an affair with her husband. Estelle appears on stage only twice, both times briefly. She is a foil or contrast to Serafina in the way she symbolizes death and order where Serafina symbolizes life and chaos. Estelle is austere in both person and dress, in contrast to Serafina's excess and love of decoration. Estelle is a blackjack dealer at the local casino, which is where, presumably, she and Rosario originally meet.

Jack Hunter

Jack Hunter is the young man with whom Rosa is in love. He is a sailor and one of her school friend's brothers. Serafina is suspicious about his intentions in regards to her daughter, but he appears to be as much in love with Rosa as she is with him.

Alvaro Mangiacavallo

Alvaro is a Sicilian immigrant who appears in Serafina's life three years after her husband's death, and Serafina and he fall in love. Like Serafina's dead husband, Alvaro is a handsome truck driver who delivers bananas. Unlike her husband, he is clownish in his behavior. Yet, he is likeable. He wishes to be married to someone like Serafina who busies herself making money, as he himself is dedicated to work and has three dependents (a mother, father, and sister).

At first, Alvaro's nature repels Serafina, but she quickly comes to appreciate his good qualities, one of which is his admiration for her. Alvaro's last name, Mangiacavallo, means, roughly, "to eat a horse," symbolizing his great lust for life.

Alvaro's similarity to and difference from Rosario is significant and indicates Serafina's development in the play. Since Serafina meets Alvaro after she learns about her husband's deceit, she sees Alvaro as he really is, ordinary, as opposed to how she saw her husband, perfect. In other words, Alvaro's character is as much a product of Serafina's point of view as it is a product of his own qualities. If she were still deluded as to the true nature of her husband, she might have seen Alvaro as another god, as her husband's reincarnation.

Mariella

Mariella is a neighborhood woman who, along with Giuseppina and Peppina, comments on Serafina's actions and conveys the point of view of the local Sicilian American community at large. The group's commentary heightens the drama and comedy of the play by emphasizing particularly important and ridiculous turns of event.

Peppina

Like Mariella and Giuseppina, Peppina is a neighborhood woman who functions to comment on Serafina's actions. She and they believe that Serafina needs to learn humility and so they are not overly concerned when Serafina suffers.

The Salesman

The salesman appears only once in the play and serves to demonstrate how Italian immigrants were subject to poor treatment. As he is trying to sell his wares to Serafina, Alvaro appears on the scene explaining how the man forced his truck off the highway, for no good reason, uttering ethnic slurs in the process. This suggests the salesman's hypocrisy. He is polite to immigrants to whom he is trying to sell goods, but at the same time he secretly despises them.

The Strega

The strega is the old woman who lives next to Serafina and whose goat always strays into her yard. Serafina is convinced the old woman is a witch, despite Rosa's insistence that she is being superstitious. Every time Serafina sees the strega, she makes a special gesture to protect herself against the woman's supposed evil powers, which affords the old woman a great deal of malicious pleasure. The woman's maliciousness is evinced also in her frequent disparaging comments about the doings of the "wops" who live around her. The word "wop" was an ethnic slur for Italian immigrants at the time.

Themes

Pride

One of Serafina's defining characteristics is her pride. She is excessively proud of her husband, Rosario, and seems to think that his glory reflects on her. This is shown in her boasting. She boasts about Rosario's beauty, virility, and family. She claims, for example, that he was a baron in Sicily, though few believe her.

While on one level, Serafina's boastful pride is ridiculous and humorous, on another, it constitutes the play's nod at classical Greek tragedy. In classical tragedy, the hero always has a significant tragic flaw, and hubris, or pride, is often that flaw. However, while in ancient drama the flaw is a factor contributing to the play's tragic events, in Williams's play, Serafina overcomes her weakness. Her change of heart comes about partly because she accepts that her husband was not perfect after all. Further, she signals, in her love for Alvaro, that she is not so glorious and is capable of loving someone who is not perfect.

Humanity

The Rose Tattoo is a very human play, despite its borrowings from the austere, heroic tradition of classical tragedy. Serafina may have a character flaw that is reminiscent of the hubris that besets so many classical heroes, but she is far more a comedic figure than a tragic one. In having Serafina learn that she is ordinary, and in depicting her as essentially ridiculous, Williams fondly suggests that humans are, precisely, quite ridiculous most of the time and hardly grand at all. The element in the play that best encapsulates Williams's notion of humanity is the play's many references to clowns and clown-like behavior. A clown is a figure who makes people laugh, usually by suffering terrible indignities. In other words, Williams suggests that at the same time that people suffer terribly they are poor creatures whose lives are comic misadventures.

Idolatry

Williams evokes ancient (pre-Christian) Greco-Roman religion in his play, through its focus on sexuality and virility and through the many references to wine. Specifically, he gestures toward the god Dionysus (Greek) or Bacchus (Roman). This god was the caretaker of many things, for example wine, creative intoxication, sexuality, passion, regeneration, male sexual potency, and right worship. Serafina is, in one guise, what would have been known in ancient times as a "bacchante," as her worship of her extremely virile husband is akin to a worship of male sexual potency, and hence Bacchus in general.

In gesturing toward this god, Williams in some sense resuscitates him approvingly. The play is a celebration of life, sexuality, and passion. Yet, the play also makes it clear that Serafina worships her husband inordinately. Indeed, when he dies, she puts his urn of ashes on her mantle and seems to think of it as an object to be worshipped in her

husband's stead. In a sense, Serafina treats her husband as a god when he is alive and the urn as an object of worship when he is dead. Since idolaters are persons who worship things not approved of by those practicing official religion, Serafina is an idolater in the play. She elevates her husband and his remains in an improper manner.

Serafina learns proper conduct by the play's end, as she learns that neither her husband nor she are deserving of worship. Yet, she retains her lust for life. In remaining passionate and in having learned who and what properly deserves adulation, Serafina develops over the course of the play into a truly proper worshiper of Dionysus, as this god not only represents the life force but right worship as well.

Life and Death

The Rose Tattoo sets up a particular opposition of life and death in the opposition of Serafina and Estelle. This duality associates chaos and excess with life and order and restraint with death.

Serafina evokes a chaotic, burgeoning life force in many ways. Her elaborate outfits, hairstyle, and jewels are gaudy at the play's opening, but endearingly suggestive of a passionate, happy nature at the same time. Her husband's virility and her own fertility, in conjunction with her healthy plumpness and interest in sex, suggest the ongoing nature of life. Her cluttered house further suggests chaos at the same time that it serves as a hive of purposeful productivity, since Serafina runs a business from home.

Estelle Hohengarten is in every way Serafina's opposite, embodying forces that counter those that Serafina expresses. Where Serafina is plump and drawn to the gaudy, Williams's stage directions describe Estelle as slim and dressed in clothes suggestive of minimalism and restraint: "She is a thin blonde woman in a dress of Egyptian design." Ancient Egyptian art and clothing are known for their simplicity, their severe abstraction, and for the many rules that govern their design.

Estelle is linked to death because she first appears in Serafina's life the day Rosario is killed, and she is on stage only one other time in the play, namely the next day at Rosario's wake. Death counters life, then, as order counters chaos, as the definitive cessation of all open-ended creativity, activity, and productivity.

Style

The Bawdy and Slapstick

This mostly light-hearted play is funny largely owing to its bawdy humor and slapstick action. Bawdy humor refers to uncomplicated wit that focuses on bodily functions. In this play, the bodily function at issue is sex, with Serafina boasting continuously of her husband's wonderful performance in bed and her own lusty enjoyment of the sexual act. One particular bawdy element is Rosario and Alvaro's job, which is to transport bananas. The way in which this fruit conjures the male sex is blatant and silly, and therefore bawdy.

The slapstick dimension of the play is another reason why it is comedic. Slapstick humor is physical comedy, as when characters trip over things, have things fall on their heads, behave outrageously, and so forth. *The Rose Tattoo* is replete with slapstick events. Serafina frequently parades in a state of semi-undress for all to see, stumbles around her house as she tries to squeeze herself into a girdle, and generally makes a fool of herself.

Symbolism

Williams employs many symbols in this play. Symbols are objects, names, or persons in an artwork that suggest many things as opposed to just one. Primary among the play's symbols are the character names, which are suggestive of the rose flower (Rosa and Rosario), Rosario's and Alvaro's rose tattoos, and Serafina's dress-shop mannequins.

Red roses are commonly associated with love and passion, and Williams exploits these associations to their fullest. The play's focus on life, physical passion, and the spiritual communion between lovers is made amply evident through its plethora of roses. Serafina's certainty that a rose tattoo temporarily appears on her bosom the night she conceives a child with her husband hints at Williams's desire to suggest a spiritual dimension to sex and love, the manner in which the closeness between lovers makes them mystically one and the same.

Serafina's group of mannequins suggest social censure and the importance of communal life, among other things. They suggest social censure because, as a group of figures, they are doubles for the group of neighborhood women who believe that Serafina is too proud for her own good. They suggest the importance of community because in standing in for the neighborhood women, they point to how Serafina has isolated herself from the larger community.

Primitivism

Primitivism refers to a particular way in which artists working within European traditions in the early and mid-twentieth century used other cultures and these cultures' artworks in their own work. Art from distant lands was upheld as embodying a beauty and artistry

that suggested a greater closeness to nature and to truth. For Western artists, the works pointed to something that had been lost and was yearned for. This was a simple way of life, one in touch with the simple and the sacred. Western artists admired these works and adopted their forms. Yet, it is now understood that these artworks signified entirely different things in the cultures from which they sprang, that the cultures Western artists imagine (appreciated for their simplistic truth in art were merely imagined cultures. In seeking the truth in art, certain Western artists manipulated the truth by taking foreign art out of its cultural context and then attributing value to it based on Western aesthetic sensibilities.) were just that, imagined cultures. Consequently, this primitivism seems naïve in retrospect, obscuring the complexity of these cultures and their peoples, and obscuring as well the way that cultures of all kinds necessarily impose upon individuals any number of constraints in the interests of upholding tradition and social order. Williams's play is primitivist in the sense that he employs a cast of Sicilian American characters of peasant roots and depicts them as persons controlled by elemental forces and largely devoid of self-reflection. These characters do not appear to think; they appear merely to act. And when they act, their actions follow from the controlling power of elemental forces, such as the sexual impulse, hate, love, envy, jealousy, and so forth. These Italian immigrants might be Westerners, but since they come from peasant stock they are to be understood as primitives. Williams's play is primitive in the sense that he employs a cast of Sicilian American characters of peasant roots and uses them to represent the importance of the elemental things in life.

Historical Context

The Rose Tattoo was composed in the late 1940s, in the period following World War II, which U.S. intervention had hastened to an end with the first deployment of nuclear warheads in history, the dropping of two atomic bombs in Japan. The citizens of the many countries decimated by this war lived in its pall during the 1940s, while the United States' more peripheral involvement meant that U.S. citizens were less severely affected. U.S. culture flourished diversely in the 1940s, leading to the cultural phenomenon of the 1950s, when U.S. popular culture swept the world.

The 1940s in the United States are noteworthy for numerous developments. This was the beginning of U.S. suburban life, when developers began responding to a housing need that urban, inner-city spaces could not accommodate. These new homes, moreover, were furnished like homes never before, as household timesaving appliances such as washers, dryers, vacuum cleaners, and the like became widely available and affordable. Television also made its first appearance in the 1940s.

In the social and political arenas, U.S. citizens began witnessing the first upheavals of what would become the civil rights movement. For example, the first African American baseball player was admitted into the major leagues in 1947; this was Jackie One major political development of the 1940s was the "Red Scare," which followed from the post-WWII inception of the Cold War between the United States and the United Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.). This war was "cold" because it did not involve warfare. Rather, it was an ideological contest, a world battle of belief. The United States was committed to the spread of capitalism; the U.S.S.R. was committed to the spread of communism. The Red Scare in the United States refers to the way in which the hunt for communists within the United States reached a level of hysteria, with persons being called forth to testify about their political beliefs or those of their friends and colleagues. Many believe this development went against the grain of the United States' belief in free speech, thought, and dissent. Many persons were prevented from holding jobs or pursuing their professions owing to either their beliefs or simply suspicions about them.

At the same time, drama, film, and the arts in general were flourishing in the United States. When Williams entered the dramatic scene, he had much to live up to, as notable U.S. playwrights such as Carson McCullers, Clifford Odets, and Thornton Wilder, for example, were at the height of their creative powers. Like the work of these other dramatists, Williams's is, on the whole, highly serious, and so *The Rose Tattoo* stands out in Williams's body of work for its broad comedy.

The Rose Tattoo's fond treatment of its group of Sicilian American characters points to Williams's conviction that Anglo-American culture at the time was marred by racial and ethnic prejudice. Thus, the play's unsympathetic characters display a disparaging attitude toward the Sicilian immigrants that was consistent with the prejudices indicative of American reality.

At the same time, some Americans looked down on Italian immigrants or their children, others welcomed the cultural contributions of Italian Americans. There were few singers more popular than Frank Sinatra or Dean Martin at the time, for example. There was a vogue for things Italian in the 1940s and 1950s, partly owing to the success of Sinatra and others, and also due to the importation of Italian films into the United States. Italy was experiencing a golden age in cinema, and many Italian actors were courted by Hollywood to star in U.S. made, English language films. One of these actors, Anna Magnani, was cast in the film version of *The Rose Tattoo*.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Overview

The Rose Tattoo, which was a box-office success on Broadway, followed two other major Broadway successes for Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The play's popularity with the public garnered it a Tony Award, with critics, on the whole, seeing it as a less successful play than the two previous successes.

William Hawkins's mixed review is typical of critical reaction following the play's Broadway opening. Writing for the *New York World-Telegram and The Sun,* he states that in "its favor the play has atmosphere and warmth." Yet, he writes, "the humor often seems glued to the surface, and passages of the play are endlessly chatty and repetitious." Other critics thought the play's bawdy humor worked awkwardly with its other, more serious intentions, or that the comedy was crude as opposed to bawdy. According to Margaret Marshall writing for the *Nation,* the play descends "into cheap farce which must be seen to be believed. The absurd and the vulgar contend for place."

Yet, in an essay from *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute,* entitled "Sentiment and humor in equal measure": Comic Forms in *The Rose Tattoo*," Philip C. Kolin argues that a proper understanding of the play's comedy is crucial for appreciation. He states that the play is "an experiment in comedy," in which various comedic forms are juxtaposed and blended. These forms, says Kolin, "range from slapstick humor, including farce, music hall antics, and vaudeville to folk, satiric, and romantic comedy, and, occasionally, tragicomedy." More recently in "The Family of Mitch," in *Magical Muse: Millennial Essays on Tennessee Williams,* Kolin has written on the character of Alvaro. He argues that Alvaro is one of Williams's plays' "unsuitable suitors," a "loser who becomes a winner," as Williams is interested in resisting the conventional romance formula in which suitors are perfectly manly and gentlemanly.

Most commentary on the play touches on its Dionysian dimension, its celebration of life and sexuality. For example, in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama,* C.W.E. Bigsby states that the play is about the "resilience of the human spirit, the undeniable power of the will to live and the primacy of the sexual impulse."

The Rose Tattoo is one of Williams's plays that continues to be revived, and what audiences see each time depends upon the interpretation and vision of the director in question. Also affecting critical and audience reception is the prevailing cultural climate. Thus, for example, when the play was revived in New York City in 1966, critics were more appreciative. Their more positive response, says Kolin, follows from the fact that theater in the 1960s had taken an absurdist turn: "In the 1966 revival of *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams' comedy had evidently changed for reviewers—it had become appropriately grotesque. If they would not assent to it as it was, they could at least praise the absurdist elements, in vogue in avant-garde theater both here and abroad."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Dell'Amico is an instructor of English literature and composition. In this essay, Dell'Amico discusses major symbols in Williams's play.

As Philip C. Kolin observes in *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute, The Rose Tattoo* is "an experiment in comedy," a blending of many comedic traditions. Slapstick, farcical, and bawdy elements are predominant, as the play is a strung together series of ridiculous events revolving around Serafina Delle Rose, a woman whose major preoccupation is her handsome husband's virility. Williams's play is a comic celebration of what the ancient Greeks or Romans would call the Dionysian elements of life, a celebration of eros, creative intoxication, virility, and regeneration. The play also celebrates fertility, however, and so Williams adds to the Greco-Roman mix.

Williams's idiosyncratic and playful experiment stands out within the context of his work as a whole, as most of his other plays are serious dramas shot through with tragedy and eruptions of violence. Yet, tying this play to Williams's other works is its development of the sacred nature of life and love. This theme is never the primary theme in his other works, but Williams's treatment of love and sexuality throughout his career is intense, usually revolving around religious and psychological themes. Also tying the play to Williams's other works is its dense symbolism, which is the subject of this essay. Symbols are things, persons, events, names, or images in an artwork that evoke a number of related associations, and they reflect and inform a work's themes.

In the published version of the play, Williams's stage notes indicate that *The Rose Tattoo* opens with a view of what will be the play's only setting, Serafina's house and garden. Her cottage, he writes, is "in a village populated mostly by Sicilians somewhere along the Gulf Coast between New Orleans and Mobile." The setting is semi-tropical, with palms trees waving gently in a soft wind, "tall canes," and a "fairly thick growth of pampas grass." A folk singer at the edge of the stage sings and strums on a guitar as the curtain rises, and then, "in voices near and distant, urgent and tender, like the variable notes of wind and water," the sound of mothers' voices calling their children home to dinner is heard. It is just before dusk, "prima sera" or "first dusk" in Italian, and Venus, "the female star," burns with "an almost emerald lustre" above.

Three of the children being called home to dinner are sitting on Serafina's front steps; they are Bruno, Salvatore, and Vivi. One holds "a red paper kite," one a "hoop," and the third holds "a doll dressed as a clown." The children are "in attitudes of momentary repose," Williams writes, "all looking up at something—a bird or a plane passing over—as the mothers' voices call them." Bruno speaks first:

BRUNO: The white flags are flying at the Coast
Guard Station.
SALVATORE: That means fair weather.
VIVI: I love fair weather.

The weather of comedy is spring, "fair weather," which is mostly what the play delivers; yet, the statuesque stillness of these children announces what will be an accompanying, muted undercurrent of drama and even tragedy in the play.

Williams's children, and birds and song, are recurring symbolic elements in the play's evocation of life. The innocence of children, the flight and song of birds, and the song of humans are all things that connote life's beauties and joys. These various symbols are suggestive of freedom, creativity, joyous rhapsody, and spontaneity, qualities that join Williams's other evocations of life as those that are expressed in passions, emotions, and love.

The children's toys also resonate symbolically. The hoop evokes the circle of life or nature's unending cycle. It also refers to Serafina's womb, the way she is a celebration of female fertility in the play. Contributing further to Williams's evocation of sacred womanhood and fertility is the "female star" Venus and Serafina's experience of conception as a miracle.

The second toy, the kite, reminds us of children's play, of a gleeful immersion in play's pursuit. The kite's color refers to the redness of the rose flower and evokes, as well, the free flight of birds and the wind that carries the women's songs. The third toy, the clown doll, is the first of the play's many clowns. It works with Alvaro's, Bessie's, and Flora's clownishness, not to mention Serafina's, and evokes Williams's comedic view of humanity in *The Rose Tattoo*. Clowns, traditionally, have sad faces and suffer hilarious mishaps. Even as Serafina suffers terribly the death of her beloved husband, Williams seems to say, she remains a mortal whose misadventures are also comic.

In a sense, Serafina's task in the play is to see herself as a clown, to dispel all the illusions she has about herself. This self-delusion is shown in the way she elevates herself and her husband into living gods. She proclaims that her husband is royalty, a baron, and is convinced that the Christian goddess, the Virgin Mary, sends her signs. In fact, Serafina's idea that her conceptions are miracles suggests how she puts herself on a par with the Virgin Mary, whose conception of Jesus Christ is a miracle in Christianity. Serafina believes, further, that the neighborhood women should recognize her exceptional qualities.

Serafina is simultaneously the heart of the play's celebration of life and an element in the play's comedic farce. Her self-aggrandizement is comic because she is, clearly, a very ordinary woman. She is vain, squeezing herself into over-tight girdles; her husband, sadly, is deceitful; and, she lives a modest life in a cottage. The neighborhood women's derision puts Serafina in her place, showing up her ridiculous, overblown boasting.

The women in the play also contribute to the play's celebration of life, however, because even as they are right in criticizing Serafina, it seems that Serafina is right to criticize them. She accuses them of having given up on love and romance. Serafina, and the audience by extension, see them as people who have lost touch with life's sacred, joyous dimension.

The dressmaker dummies are symbolically the women's doubles in the play, but more than this as well. Williams imagined a group of seven dummies on the set:

An outdoor sign indicates that Serafina, whose home
the cottage is, does "SEWING." The interior furnishings
give evidence of this vocation. The most salient
feature is a collection of dressmaker's dummies.
There are at least seven of these life-size mannequins,
in various shapes and attitudes. [They have pliable
joints so that their positions can be changed. Their
arms terminate at the wrist. In all their
attitudes there is an air of drama, somewhat like the poses of declamatory
actresses of the old school].

These dummies' immobility, stark forms, and truncated arms suggest death, and so they add to the undercurrent of drama and tragedy in the play. They are like statues, too, so they further suggest the children's presence and postures in the play, postures that are similarly carefully choreographed so as to add a dramatic undercurrent to the play. In acting as a reminder of the group of neighborhood women, the dummies connote both Serafina's unhealthy, deluded isolation and the women's suppressed, death-like lives.

Williams, thus, does not banish death from his play about life. Rosario dies; there is a wake; the mannequins beckon as reminders of death; and Serafina is a widow. Also ominously juxtaposed against the play's celebration of life is the presence of evil, conveyed by the play's goat. Goats, especially in a Greco-Roman context, symbolize evil, death, eros, and sexual licentiousness. The play's goat thus suggests that there are violent and excessive strains of love and passion, strains allied with death and not life.

In addition to symbolizing evil into the play, the goat adds to its comedy. The goat belongs to Serafina's unlikable next door neighbor and frequently escapes, or is let loose, and marauds through Serafina's yard. Its owner and numerous children flood Serafina's yard on a mad chase for the goat, with Serafina orchestrating events from her porch. These bursts of chaos and boisterousness are comic, classic farcical chase scenes.

The central symbol of the play, however, is the red rose flower, to which the symbol of wine is related. Serafina only drinks of the wine of the red grape from Sicily, and she parades in scenes in a pink slip with its bodice stained with wine. Wine is the gift of the god Dionysus, the drink of creative intoxication and the elixir of love. Serafina's stain is like a big rose on her chest, and so she has a rose tattoo like Rosario and Alvaro. She is bursting with life and is an embodiment of the life force and sexuality. The deep red of the red rose flower is the color of blood and its scent is intense and sweet; it is associated with love, romance, and all manner of passionate life.

The rose flower is the central symbol in Williams's densely symbolic play. It is a plethora of roses, a bouquet from Williams to the public at large.

Source: Carol Dell'Amico, Critical Essay on *The Rose Tattoo,* in *Drama for Students,* Gale, 2003.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Kolin explores Williams' turn to comedy and his other motivations in The Rose Tattoo.

When *The Rose Tatto* made its Broadway appearance on 3 February 1951, Tennessee Williams did not have a reputation as a comic writer. Quite to the contrary, his two hits, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, had, according to *Life,* established him as a dramatist who "could write only about doom-ridden damsels." For his comic efforts in *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams was promptly whipped. As the reviewer in *Newsweek* put it, "there is an uneasy feeling that his new play is sometimes funny without quite intending to be." Williams' humor was labeled in the basest terms. The more serious events in act one "descend into cheap farce which must be seen to be believed," wrote Margaret Marshall in *The Nation.* The reviewer for *Time,* contemptuous of the rapid changes of mood, renamed the play Banana Truck Named Desire. F. W. Dupee ("Literature on Broadway," *The Partisan Review,* May 1951, p. 334) quickly summarized the critical opinion of Serafina and much else in the play when he said it was "farced-up."

In the 1966 revival of *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams' comedy had evidently changed for reviewers—it had become appropriately grotesque. If they could not assent to it as it was, they could at least praise the absurdist elements, in vogue in avant-garde theater both here and abroad. Williams' play had been acceptably reclassified through making virtues of its earlier vices. Absurdity by any other name is just as meet for neurotically-conditioned audiences. Henry Hewes offered an explanation for the approval: "Now it very probably was not Mr. Williams's intention to write *The Rose Tattoo* as a grotesque comedy, but that is what this new presentation seems, and that is why it appears not in the least bit dated" (*Saturday Review,* November 1966). Jan Kott, who has found Shakespeare so relevant to our "absurd" world, would readily have approved of the change. Yet, regardless of the revival, and perhaps because of it, critics, with a few exceptions, have dismissed *The Rose Tattoo* as one of Williams' lesser accomplishments, better left on the rose heap. Ruby Cohn has given the play its death-knell: "He probably intended *The Rose Tattoo* to be something of a saturnalia, a joyous celebration of sex, but (when we are not simply bored) we tend to laughed *at* rather than *with* the celebrants. To his credit, though, the play was and is still good box office."

Why in 1950-51 did Williams write a work which seemed in so many ways to differ from his previous, and successful, plays? Biography provides a few clues. Williams had just returned from a sojourn in Italy, the land of warm sunshine and fiery passions, and said, "I have never felt more hopeful about human nature as a result of being exposed to the Italians" (quoted in *Saturday Review,* March 1951). While in Sicily Williams must have soaked up enough local culture to write knowledgeably about the folklore, language, and characters of the region and create the Dionysian elements he claims to have captured in the play (*Vogue,* March 1951). Birds, children, goats, sky, fruit, earth, sun, and air—all are found in *The Rose Tattoo*.

Biography aside, Williams' neglect yet strong flair for the comic is found not only in *The Rose Tattoo* but elsewhere in his work. In a provocative article ("The Comic Tennessee Williams"), Charles Brooks calls Williams "an essentially comic playwright" whose "greatest power and appeal derive from a comic vision which he seems unwilling to trust fully." In his review Hewes had said that comedy—even the more grotesque variety—could "open up a green territory in which Tennessee Williams might profitably exercise his talent." Classifying Williams' play by genres—tragedies or comedies—is gross oversimplification. Comedy is as difficult to define as tragedy. Socrates long ago said (in *The Symposium*) they were similar, often reaching the same ends; and Aristotle unfortunately never discussed that tragedy which, like a comedy, has a happy ending. *The Rose Tattoo* is easier to type than other Williams' plays because of both its virtues and its faults. It successfully dramatizes the fulfillment of hope and love. The play is an experiment in comedy, a potpourri of comedic forms, sometimes blended and sometimes juxtaposed. Comic forms range from slapstick humor, including farce, music hall antics, and vaudeville to folk, satiric, and romantic comedy, and, occasionally, tragicomedy. Even sadness is assimilated into the comic vision.

The Rose Tattoo has characteristics of low comedy or farce. But within this broad category are elements of vaudeville, Chaplinesque humor, and vestiges of the commedia dell'arte. Though dissatisfied reviewers and critics have lampooned Williams for his cheap and unsophisticated displays, jests and clowning are part of his stagecraft from his early works to his middle ones (*Camino Real*) to his late ones (*Gnädiges Fräulein*). Williams is a shrewd man of the theater, keenly aware that laughs as well as tears sell tickets. He incorporates many comic gags, verbal and physical, to entertain and cajole his audience, and, at times, make them feel superior to his characters.

One of Williams' greatest achievements as a comic dramatist is his use of dialogue, though Ruby Cohn observes: "Larded with Italian phrases and locutions, the English is surprisingly grammatical, the vocabulary extensive, and the emotions self-consciously expressed." Regardless of Serafina's regular syntax, the play is fastmoving, speeded along by a series of one-liners that are the classic tool of the comedian's art. These are hurled at and by Serafina, some of them as cutting as the knife she will use on Estelle, others as sharp as a courtier's rapier.

These one-liners are well suited to the Italian temperament. Angered by Serafina's delay in sewing their daughters' graduation dresses, local mothers pounce on her. One of them exclaims: "Listen, I pay in advance five dollars and get no dress. Now what she wear, my daughter, to graduate in? A couple of towels and a rose in her hair?" She thus makes sport of both the Delle Rose name (and emblem) and Serafina's impoverishing profession. When Rosa stands naked in the window, her clothes hidden by her suspicious mother, Williams demonstrates his agility with an Italian pun when a neighbor says: "In nominis padri et figlio et spiritus sancti. Aaahh!" *Figlio,* the child of naked vulnerability, such as Rosa is judged to be, replaces the *filio* of the invocation. Later, Rosa catches her mother in an embarrassing lie when Serafina explains Alvaro's presence by saying he was chased by the police. Rosa shrewdly inquires: "They chased him into your bedroom?" And the disarray in which Serafina finds herself after her boisterous fight with Father De Leo gives rise to even more humor because of the sham

politeness with which the salesman addresses her: "I see directly to merchants but when I stopped over there to have my car serviced, I seen you taking the air on the steps and I thought I would just drop over . . ."

Serafina's verbal assaults match her muscular defenses. At the start of the play, Serafina can counter the potion-selling Assunta's attempts to bring aphrodisiacs when they are not wanted by observing that it is not the sound of Venus that the old woman hears: "Naw, them ain't the star-noises. They're termites, eating the house up." To those who say she is improperly, scantily dressed, Serafina proclaims: "I'm dressed okay; I'm not naked!" Her invectives are charged by her shrewish wit. High school for her is as "high as that horse's dirt out there in the street!" Equally facile retorts face Jack Hunter, as Serafina, punning on his name, asks: "What are you hunting?—Jack?" But Serafina reveals her own narrow limits and calls down laughter on her head when she utters the understatement of the play: "But we are Sicilians, and we are not cold blooded." Serafina's claim to recognize religious denominations in body types is of course ridiculous. Yet she bounces back into control when she plays a game with Alvaro. When he tells her of his previous amorous mishap because he gave the girl a fake diamond (a zircon), Serafina responds that she too would have slammed the door in his face. Williams see the folly of his characters' lives and captures it in their dialogue as well.

With Alvaro, Williams invents another comic portrait in prose. Alvaro's description of this family and their petty vices sounds almost as if it came from Eudora Welty's pen: "One old maid sister, one feeble-minded grandmother, one lush of a pop that's not worth the powder it takes to blow him to hell.—They got the parchesi habit. They play the game of parchesi, morning, night, noon. Passing a bucket of beer around the table. . . ." Alvaro's wry detachment from his inherited handicaps fills out the picture of his family. He asks Serafina what in his heritage as the grandson of a village idiot he has to be thankful about: "What have I got to respect? The rock my grandmother slips on?" Williams is at his best in these comic vignettes, as the comments exchanged between Bessie and Flora well illustrate. The two prigs, eager for some sexual titillation, discuss one such prank that may promise pleasure: "I heard, I heard that the Legionnaires caught a girl on Canal Street! They tore the clothes off her and sent her home in a taxi!" Of course they disavow any interest in this nonsense, but they obviously enjoy it.

The Rose Tattoo also shows a mastery of other standard comic conventions, including physical deformities. Serafina's exaggerated ego and passion match the rotundity of her shape. Hers is a big, often stricken body, described as a "heavy, sagging bulk." Her hips have exceeded their girlish limits, suggesting a comparison to a "parading matador." Moving to the other side of the ring, Williams labels her a bull. She is like a "strange beast in a cage." All these remarks suggest that Serafina is like an animal in heat, her plump body always charging her enemies or her lover. Her struggles with her girdle call attention to the incompatibility of her form and the restraint she seeks to impose on it. In these pantomimes, Serafina is both laughable buffoon and frustrated lover. The girdle represents an impediment to her passions; and the more she struggles, the funnier are her attempts. Nor has Williams spared other parts of her anatomy. Her hair is wild, greasy, always out of control like Serafina herself. No make-up, it seems, will help. Rosa's "cosmetic enterprise" does not improve her mother; it leaves her only with a

"dazed look." Serafina's deprecatory gestures, signs of her ethnic background and feverish anger, also make her look ridiculous.

Her new lover, Alvaro, and his body are also exploited for comedy. This clown seems like an appropriate visitor to the carnival booth that is Serafina's house. He is as awkward as Serafina is accusatory. His ears stick out, he is short, and he hitches his shoulders—traits that certainly call attention to his comic torso. Williams refers to him as one of the "glossy young bulls" as if to emphasize his sexual powers. Alvaro is doubtless the bull in the dress shop. He is so clumsy that he drops everything from ice cubes to condoms. His trance after his first night with Serafina has "the pantomimic lightness, almost fantasy, of an early Chaplin comedy." Like the silent movie star, Alvaro finds mischief where he least expects it. He collides with Serafina's furniture and, finally, her daughter. Thinking he is raping her daughter, Serafina lunges at him, beating him all the way out of the house. Alvaro scurries around the house with "his shirttails out" much as Chaplin tries to evade the comic Furies hounding him.

The fight and the ensuing chase—the two most common and oldest comic tricks—fill up much of the action in *The Rose Tattoo*. Serafina tells Alvaro that "I had two fights on the street," but she underestimates the number of her quarrels. She battles with her daughter, jerking her away from the window; she does much the same with her clownish customers, except she chases them out of the house with a broom. She is forever fighting with the Strega whom she orders "Getta hell out of my yard!" Not even the clergy is exempt; with Father De Leo Serafina is "on the point of attacking him bodily" when he is rescued by her neighbors. On stage these incidents elicit laughter. Yet they also point to the turmoil inside Serafina. She is out of control, as her anger and the shrewishness arousing it demonstrate. One beating, though, which does not fit with the rest is that given Estelle early in the play by Serafina's neighbors. As she comes to see Rosario's body, "The bouquet of roses is snatched from her black-gloved hands and she is flailed with them about the head and shoulders." Though not comic, this incident precipitates and parallels other quarrels. Serafina's revenge lasts so long and is so violent that we automatically seek a cause: The community punishment of Estelle anticipates Serafina's punishment of the community. The difference between the two beatings shows how funny Serafina's struggles have become.

These quarrels often result in chases among objects with people falling down or being torn apart. The slapstick humor is transparent; the angrier characters become, the less successful are their attacks. But when Serafina gets into the act, all discord follows. At first she locks Rosa in the house; then a little later Rosa is locked out of it, having to run around outside. The neighborhood children often flee in panic when Serafina threatens them. In her fury, she pursues her customers, Bessie and Flora, turning over a table. The most obvious flight, however, is the goat chase, a sign of Serafina's passionate dilemma. Next comes Father De Leo, who is hounded by the widow. Then another goat chase. The pattern—chase after chase—characterizes the comic deception befalling Serafina and pinpoints Williams's hilarious if conventional source of comedy. The opportunities for improvisational comedy are unlimited here.

Alvaro's arrival brings more chases and even greater damage. His precursor, the salesman, signals further debasement for Serafina. The new product he offers "explodes in Serafina's face." The scene recalls Punch and Judy antics, but it prefigures the eruptions with Alvaro. While talking to him about vicious rumors, Serafina hurls a glass to the floor. Twice, in a few minutes, she explodes at Alvaro, both times chasing him for his life and crushing anything in her way. First, "she springs up and runs into the parlor. He pursues. The chase is grotesquely violent and comic. A floor lamp is overturned. She seizes the chocolate box and threatens to slam it into his face if he continues toward her." After a few calm moments, Serafina disrupts the peace when she hurls the phone to the floor. She even addresses the Blessed Virgin with "explosive gestures." The second time, the termagant flies at Alvaro "like a great bird, tearing and clawing at his stupefied figure" in retaliation for his bumping into Rosa. Alvaro is the butt; even when he walks he "topples over."

But this rampage provides no release for Serafina; nor was it meant to. These chases only increase her frustration and rekindle the fires of her anger. For it is herself Serafina chases most often. She lunges, plunges and trounces all over; but, as Williams deftly points out, "she swiftly and violently whirls about in distraction." In desperation for clothes, she grabs at her dummies, one of which collapses. She tears things apart and threatens death to those who cross her. But she can have no honest release until she breaks the urn holding Rosario's ashes. All the other acts may be gratuitous, there for the laughs pure and simple, but when she "seizes the marble urn and hurls it violently into the furthest corner of the room," she finally can escape from the whirligig of the time past and confront the love Alvaro has to offer. She can break away from the comic captivity of her previous actions; she can stop being "dressed in the rags of a convict." Inserted among the other humorous acts, destruction of the urn may at first seem to be the result of Serafina's rage. But Williams has juxtaposed this act with other slapstick gestures to suggest how it differs from them and how, in effect, it points to the climax of the play. Within Williams' slapstick comedy is more serious business, but an appreciation of the relationship between events, however foolish, reveals the unity.

Among the most obvious but, surprisingly enough, least valued elements in *The Rose Tattoo* is the folk comedy. The passions of Rosa Gonzales, her revengeful father, and the symbolic cock fight of *Summer and Smoke* are examples of Williams' use of folk habits. Natives appear in both *Camino Real* and *The Night of the Iguana*. And insofar as his plantation caste in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* or *Sweet Bird of Youth* comprise separate, regional and rural subcultures, Williams reveals some knowledge of folk drama, twentieth-century style. Because of their obvious "foreignness" and importance, the Italians and Sicilians of *The Rose Tattoo* stand out most distinctly in Williams' use of folk materials. Their language, religion, and superstitions give the play its zest and shape its humor. Their music permeates the play, since a folk player appears at all the major breaks. Although living in the American South, Serafina and her neighbors lost not a whit of their native hopes and fears in steerage. They are close to the earth and to the animals and the children bred on it.

The lingo of these southern Europeans—the patois of the peasant—is liberally sprinkled throughout *The Rose Tattoo*, often adding to both the romantic and the humorous

depiction of Serafina and her neighbors. Born of "contadini," Serafina becomes a "baronessa" even if her estate is no more than the sewing shop which is also her house. The Sicilian vocabulary makes Serafina's ire even more passionate and her love more earthy. Alvaro is a "cretino," a "buffone," or, even worse, a "maleducato" when he alarms her, but he is her "amore" at the end of the play; and her once intractable daughter is her "carissimo." The small house on Front Street, with the highway before it, is closer to Palermo than to New Orleans.

This language also reflects the many superstitions and taboos that prey so humorously on Serafina's psyche. Her goattending neighbor is always addressed as the Strega, the witch. So foolish is Serafina that she believes this spindly, hairy-legged creature possesses evil powers. She has "malocchio," an evil eye according to Serafina, though to the less impressionable Rosa it is only a cataract. When the Strega touches Rosa, Serafina at once supplies a folk cure—the girl must "wash [her] face with salt water and then throw the salt water away!" The Strega takes her place alongside Williams' other hags, comic and serious. She is part of the tradition which produced the blind woman selling flowers for the dead in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Leona in *Confessional;* they serve as reminders impending doom. The Strega, moreover, infrequently serves as the play's narrator, pointing out comically Serafina's excesses—"The Wops are at it again"—while she and her rampaging goat are also grotesque. The "little procession" of her and the goat home really begins in her having let him loose in the first place. The superstitions associated with her must be judged against those of Assunta, the "fattuchiere" with her miraculous aphrodisiacs, and the more prosaic powers of the "imported Sicilian spumanti." The artifacts of this culture—goat, potions, wine—are among the leading stage symbols, however much they are abused through repetition and obviousness. From them Williams tries to create a comic (and folk) atmosphere; they are the legerdemain of his dramatic artifice.

Even the plot of *The Rose Tattoo* reads like a series of folk motifs, many of them documented in the Stith Thompson index. A duped widow who strikes out at all around her because of their mockery of her love finds a solution to her problems with another man who, in many ways, is the muscular though comic reincarnation of her deceased husband. At first, Serafina is attracted to Alvaro because, as she claims, he has "My *husband's body,* with the head of a *clown!*" Alvaro is the lover disguised as a fool, an old motif that Williams adopts for his own purposes by fusing suitor and fool into one role. Alvaro's disguise is laughable to Serafina who at first fails to see the love he brings.

The mysterious attraction is demonstrated through the rose symbolism. The rose appears in folk beliefs as a magical love-producing object. In fact, it is the talisman which often draws a lover to a woman, though Williams uses it to draw the woman to the man. The sexual bonds between Rosario and Serafina need little comment. But an even more interesting folk motif about roses is associated with Alvaro. Even though Serafina is already aroused by Alvaro, when he has the patronymic emblem of her first husband emblazoned on his chest, she finds Rosario Delle Rose again, or a more faithful though less attractive version of him. In essence, her "rose" has been transformed into a human being, a folk motif which is at the center of Serafina's discovery of self and the audience's demand for comedic harmony. Folklore also

associates sexual powers with roses. By eating a rose, according to one superstition, a woman could conceive. Serafina's pregnancy by Rosario and her conception after sleeping with his humorous incarnation, the Tattooed Alvaro, recall the motif. As long as Serafina has a rose in her life, she does not need the sexual stimulation promised by Assunta's potion.

Much in *The Rose Tattoo* derives from the conventions of romantic comedy. Williams, who elsewhere is the frustrated romanticist or the rebellious puritan, here successfully gives the upper hand to the forces of love and nature. The fecundity of nature and man, and the desire, voiced by all romantic comedies, to unite every eligible female with every suitable man, frequently appears. Williams' pastoral setting—on the Gulf Coast between the magic city of New Orleans and the port of Mobile—displays a territory of passion and a land of sexual fulfillment. References to vegetation are numerous, and fruitful. The "Author's Production Notes" call for "palm trees," "tall canes with feathery fronds and a fairly thick growth of pampas grass." Rosario hauled bananas for the Romano Brothers; and Alvaro arrives with "a great golden bunch of bananas." The shape of this fruit leads Henry Popkin to see it as a phallic symbol, which seems appropriate for the context. Estelle Hohengarten's last name, which literally means a high garden, likewise suggests the fruitfulness of sex. The young Jack Hunter gives Rosa a bunch of roses for her graduation. And Serafina more than once breaks open a bottle of spumanti, highly suitable for the Bacchic entertainment serving as a preamble to love. Above the fertility of the earth shines Venus, "the female star with an almost emerald luster," and this star appears above Serafina's porch near the end of the play "still undimmed."

The surge toward fertility—and reproduction—is even stronger among the characters for whom this vegetation serves as a background. The play begins and ends with Serafina pregnant, once by her unfaithful husband and once by her foolish paramour, Alvaro, Serafina's rejection of the creative rhythms of life brings only reminders of how fruitful she should be. Father De Leo cautions her: "You are still a young woman. Eligible for—loving and—bearing again!" Later in the play, Alvaro tells her, in his awkward proposal, that his old maid sister wants nephews and nieces. Serafina can be happy only when she is loved and loving—whether it is every night with Rosario or not quite so often with Alvaro. Serafina's comic problem rests in acknowledging and triumphing over obstacles to love. She must ignore Estelle's illicit affairs and forgive Alvaro's fumbling attempts to use contraceptives.

If the specific pastoral location lends itself to romantic comedy, so too does the particular time of the action. It is June, near mid-summer, the time of love passion, fulfillment, weddings. It is a highly festive day on the calendar. Even the clowns Bessie and Flora are eager to see the Veterans Parade in New Orleans. But it is also a highly symbolic day—Rosa's graduation day and Serafina's as well. This occasion suggests Rosa's development, her commencement of sexual maturity. As Rosa tells Jack, "Just think. A week ago Friday—I didn't know boys existed!" It is her initiation, so to speak, receiving the *Digest of Knowledge* and Jack Hunter's pristine love on the same day. Their trip to Diamond Key (the place name suggesting some kind of engagement) in a sense charts their rite of passage into sexual maturity, soon to be concluded in a New

Orleans hotel room. But on this very special day, Williams reminds his audience, they are the quintessence of young love. As Brooks Atkinson said in a New *York Times* review of the original production, their affair "has all the lyric rapture and sincerity of young poetry. As sheer writing, it is one of the finest things Mr. Williams has done."

But as in so many other romantic comedies, the young lovers are frustrated in meeting and marrying. Usually, a blocking figure, some pitiful and laughable parent, stands in their way. This is one dimension of Serafina's role. She is the obstacle to their love as well as a blatant contrast to it. It is hard to agree with Charles Brooks who sees Serafina as "the healthy one in the play" and Rosa as the "sentimental" embodiment of her mother's faults who "weakens an otherwise fine comedy." If nothing else demonstrated how wrong this view of Rosa is, Serafina's reactions to graduation day would certainly be enough. To the embittered widow, the festive day brings only anxiety and fear. She tries to spoil the holiday at first by locking her daughter up; the celebration, she thinks, is the public declaration of all the wrong things the high school did to Rosa. Even when Rosa is released through the intervention of Miss York [*sic*], Serafina still cannot participate in the ceremonies. She tries to attend, but she never does, for she is detained by her customers. And the music she hears does more to annoy than uplift her. When Rosa returns, elated by her honors, Serafina tries to fight off the future she brings with her diploma by saying: "Va bene.—Put it in the drawer with your father's clothes." Serafina hopes to keep Rosa in the stagnant past with the memory of Rosario. Rosa's youthful innocence and Rosario's faithfulness are tied together. Serafina does not want change. As she tells Jack Hunter: "Two weeks ago I was slapping her hands for scratching mosquito bites. She rode a bicycle to school. Now all at once—I've got a wild thing in the house." Graduation day has caused all of Rosa's problems and most of Serafina's trouble.

But Serafina, like so many other foolish parents in comedy, has problems both more serious and more comic than those she anticipates. She tries to protect Rosa from sexual abuse and dishonesty. Yet she herself is the victim of one of the oldest and funniest deceptions of romantic comedy. She has been cuckolded by Rosario and refuses, until shown otherwise, to believe it. In setting up a shrine to her late and beloved husband, she makes a mockery of her injunctions to Rosa not to trust a boy. Her religious fanaticism is, therefore, not without humor. Even her name suggests some comic duplicity. Not only does it imply her own nocturnally amorous ability ("sera fina"—"fine nights"), as Ruby Cohn has pointed out, but Williams may have had an actual Saint Seraphina in mind when he decided to name his heroine. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* states that Saint Seraphina was a virgin who "led a religious life in her parental home and was an example of piety, charity, mortification, and patience during a long serious illness. . . . "

The Saints: A Concise Biographical Dictionary says she was associated with white violets, which "were found to be growing on the board on which she had lain." The widow Delle Rose is hardly a young, suffering virgin, and the contrast between her activities and those suggested by her holy namesake emphasize the folly of her devotion. Her wifely piety and the shrine she erects come in for constant comic attacks.

Her house is noted more for brawls than prayers. In fact, at one point it even turns into a kind of "casa privata."

But it is her opposition to Rosa and Jack that makes Serafina a foe to love. Only when she relents and sends her daughter off with a blessing does she overcome her own ignorance and accept love herself. Breaking Rosario's urn and honoring Rosa's desire to love Jack indicate the change. She moves from hostile enemy to confidant, from a blocking figure to a woman who can see the world romantically. Serafina graduates by throwing off the bonds of the past, which enshackled her in buffoonery, and accepts the love and promise of the future.

The use of festivity in *The Rose Tattoo* derives from some of the major elements of romantic comedy. These include the so-called "green world" which the lovers inhabit, the opposition of the parent to their love, the easy comic deception of the parent, the hypocrisy of the parent's advice, and the holiday occasion giving rise to these opposing views. Unlike other comic butts, though, Serafina finally joins the lovers' cause. Williams' tone of satire is replaced by a strong and unmitigated sense that harmony will finally reign.

Much in *The Rose Tattoo* does not quite fit into the categories of vaudeville, farce, or romantic comedy. The serious moments of grief early in the play, the agony Serafina encounters in act two, and the union of Serafina and Alvaro at the end of the play amidst tears and laughter, defy comic label. Shifting tones and modes, many of them branded as Williams' faults, suggest that *The Rose Tattoo* is a tragicomedy, a genre that allows comedy full and varied play, even giving it the last word, while acknowledging the undercurrent of tragic love and pain.

The playwright's inability to write pure comedy throughout the play may explain why *The Rose Tattoo* is a tragicomedy. Williams may have explained his play as a Dionysian celebration, a dream of life's juices flowing through herbs, children, and lovers, but his preface on "The Timeless World of the Play" turns the reader's eye in another direction. There Williams speculates about "plays in the tragic tradition" and discusses his own version of catharsis by which "our hearts are wrung by recognition and pity," a strange introduction for a saturnalian comedy. But perhaps these autobiographical assessments to some extent explain the work. Williams wants us to laugh and suffer with Serafina; she is both the dummy bride and the dummy widow. He wants "sentiment and humor in equal measure," an almost impossible feat in an age grotesquely divorcing the two and a difficult task for a playwright whose comedy usually reflects irredeemable futility. Still, as Henry Hewes recognized when seeing the 1966 revival, "we laugh at the ridiculousness of the events at the same time that we recognize the characters' agonizedly sincere involvement in them." Laughter may provide a better catharsis than either pity or fear.

Coarse, vulgar, foolish love exists alongside more noble kinds. The Strega, Estelle, and the taunting children get billing with Alvaro's shrewd recognition that Serafina laid her "heart in the marble urn with the ashes" and Rosa's advice that "Everybody is nothing until you love them," perhaps the topic sentence of the play. Serafina is likewise the

nothing turned to everything, comic scapegoat and sympathetic heroine. Williams debases and enthrones her, often at the same time. She sinks into "comic desolation," and her appearance is at once "comic and shocking." Her former beauty is often mentioned, nowhere more poetically expressed than in Father De Leo's description of her as being "like a lady wearing a—piece of the—weather!"

But his view is challenged by her present appearance; she has become a hobgoblin scaring the children away. Williams seems to transfer some of his former heroines' problems to Serafina. Statues ("The Grotesque Children of The Rose Tattoo") has concluded that, "In terms of Williams's typical character deployment, Serafina is actually a direct descendant of Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and of Alma Winemiller in *Summer and Smoke*." Although Serafina lives in her own world, a victim of her own dreams, the affinity with Williams' earlier female characters is tenuous. Serafina is much more adaptable than, say, Blanche DuBois. Serafina throws off the deception in time to marry Alvaro. But it is too late for Blanche and her Alvaro (Mitch), whom she loses too soon and wants too late. In short, Serafina is a complex, often contradictory figure whose failures and successes in love combine farcical comedy with tragic implications. The rapid changes, especially after Alvaro reveals his rose tattoo in act three, are characteristic of and suitable for a tragicomedy.

Another major feature of tragicomedy is surprise, the unexpected resolution of the tragic dilemma that leads to a happy ending. Poorly used, this deus ex machina, the manipulation of events, can descend to cheap melodrama. But Williams has made some attempts to prepare his audiences, and characters, for the unexpected comedic resolution of events. The numerous references to the Blessed Mother, whom Serafina at first worships, then rebukes, then adores, suggest that these Sicilians feel providence can work out their problems. And Williams cautioned his crew and cast not to scoff at the "religious yearnings" these people feel. Everywhere, Serafina looks for signs. In sympathy with her, the audience should too. It is significant that the play begins and ends with Assunta saying that "it is impossible to tell me anything that I don't believe." The appearance of Alvaro is just that strange event which, on the face of it, seems incredible, for as he tells Serafina: "If strange things didn't happen, I wouldn't be here. You wouldn't be here. We wouldn't be talking together." Some have dismissed *The Rose Tattoo* as a contrived work, with Williams pulling all the strings in open view of the audience. And while there is some truth to the stricture that Alvaro is clumsy, and even stupid, his gift of love to Serafina does bring her out of despair and back into the world of love. Just as Serafina is filled with joy waiting for her first husband when the play begins, she is flowing over with excitement and love when running to meet her second husband as the play closes. That they rush to meet each other on the embankment signals their ascendancy over the neighborhood and the individuals who ridiculed and railed at them. Alvaro's strange and comic visit to Serafina's house results in the triumph of love.

The theme of time adds to both the tragic and the comic dimensions of the play. In his preface to *The Rose Tattoo*, Williams says that if time is arrested the events on stage acquire more tragic worth and contribute to the dignity of the characters. Were *The Rose Tattoo* pure tragedy, such observations might clearly apply. But the cessation of

time for Serafina is both cause and effect of her comic debasement and our sympathy for her. When she is bound by time, or restlessly fights its pull, she is most pathetic and least likely to accept a new and fruitful life.

The time of the play may be the present, but for Serafina it is, until Alvaro's successful wooing, always the past. Before she learns of Rosario's death, she rapturously recalls her previous nights of love. All time is measured by and included in her husband's embrace. "Each time is the first time with him. Time doesn't pass . . ., " she tells Assunta. But when Assunta reminds her of time's witness, the clock, Serafina has only contempt for it: "No, the clock is a fool. I don't listen to it. My clock is my heart and my heart don't say tick-tick; it says love-love!" The action reveals both how foolish and how sad Serafina's sense of time is when Estelle imposes another interpretation on the same hours: "Tomorrow's the anniversary of the day we met . . ., " she tells Serafina, who is of course unaware of Rosario's infidelity.

Serafina is not concerned with the future, despite reminders of time's passing. She tells Assunta that Rosario will no longer conceal drugs under his load of bananas. "Tonight is the last time he does it! Tomorrow he quits hauling stuff for the Brothers Romano." Tomorrow never comes, even though Williams manipulates stage time so as to make years pass between scenes three and four of act one. All of a sudden, it is "a June day, three years later." (One recalls the passing of sixteen years between acts in Shakespeare's tragicomedy *The Winter's Tale.*) Williams admits that "The diminishing influence of life's destroyer, time, must be somehow worked into the content of . . . [the] play," Serafina's struggle against it or imperception of it causes her grief. Williams' critical views are at odds with his dramaturgy, not an unusual conflict considering that sometimes his dramatic criticism fails to provide the most trusty guide to the work it discusses. When Serafina understands and appreciates time's changes, she is saved. Until then, she has only memories, views of the past which remove her from time's obligations and successes. As she tell Alvaro, "The memory of a love don't make you unhappy unless you believe a lie that makes it dirty." She clings to the lie because it protectively confines her in a beautiful past. She dwells on the social honors of the past. Rosario's uncle was a baron; she is a baronessa. But this claim brings only ridicule. She forestalls giving the mothers their daughters' dresses, promising them "Domani-domani-domani," even though, ironically enough, the dresses are done. In front of Bessie and Flora, she speaks of her previous work for them but spurns future jobs. When Serafina snarls at Flora that she is "late for the graduation of my daughter," the angular prig cruelly retorts: "You got plenty of time." Serafina has plenty of time except that all of it is recounted in her past sexual feats.

It is with Rosa that Serafina's distorted sense of time is more carefully treated. So harassed is Serafina that she never attends the graduation exercises; instead, she sits in the gloomy shadows of her house, surrounded by the manikins of both bride and widow, images of time past and time present. Ironically, the time-fettered Serafina buys Rosa a Bulova watch for her graduation present. But as Rosa leaves, the "gift still ungiven," the action means Serafina's sense of time cannot be transferred to her sexually unhindered daughter. That the watch does not work properly to begin with is further proof that this present represents Serafina's own limits; she has been frozen in

time and must be unlocked from the past. Starnes has argued that when the watch does work, "time's passing and the transience of all meaning are now all she can see"; and that when the watch ceases ticking "Time has been arrested for her again, and is significant of Serafina's spiritual rebirth." This view runs counter to the unfolding of events, for it is only when Serafina gives up on the defective watch that she can run to Alvaro who offers her a new love which relieves her from her past folly.

In this role as time's new man, the new watchman of Serafina's heart, some of Alvaro's silliness vanishes, and much of his thematic significance is stressed. Though an awkward lothario, Alvaro plans for the future. Although his dreams are not as grand as Jim O'Connor's, Alvaro seeks security in the household of an older, financially stable and physically developed woman. But his youth and sexual prowess make him attractive to Serafina; he can offer her new hours of pleasure in bed while granting her wish not to be saddled with "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." With Alvaro, Serafina's heart will again be in step with the fluidity and fruitfulness of time. Licking the chocolate from her fingers, Alvaro reminds Rosario's widow that "You're as old as your arteries, Baronessa. Now set back down. The fingers are now white as snow!" This ridiculous gesture is symbolically an act of purification, or a preview of sexual delights awaiting Serafina. When she protests his advances, Alvaro says, "Is it my fault you have been a widow too long?"; and he even agrees to "go out and come in the door again" if the day is wrong. Timing is important for Alvaro, for he is conscious of his past failures in love. Once Serafina exorcises the lie from her memory, comes back into time, and accepts Alvaro's youthful love, she can escape the sadness of the past and the follow of the present. Giving assent to the passing of time shifts characters and audience away from tragedy and into the joy of comedy.

The Rose Tattoo is not one of Williams' best plays, but it does show his ability to write fulfilling comedy, comedy which is indebted to a number of different dramatic traditions. From farce and slapstick humor, Williams takes the lively action of his play—fights, chases, one-liners, grotesque characterization. But he dignifies, or at least tones down, some of these antics by incorporating elements of romantic comedy. Rosa's attempts to run away with Jack Hunter are successful only when Serafina finds love herself. That recognition is placed within a tragicomic frame, allowing Williams to introduce more serious moments into the play. All this action is set within a folk community from which Williams derives further comedy. If the play never won critical approval, possibly Williams was too ambitious, too eager to make sure his play left no comic form untouched.

Source: Philip C. Kolin, "'Sentiment and Humor in Equal Measure': Comic Forms in *The Rose Tattoo,*" in *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute,* edited by Jac Tharpe, University Press of Mississippi, 1977, pp. 93-106.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Starnes explores the regional and ethnic melange Williams mixes to give his characters their odd dialogue and bearing in The Rose Tattoo.

That realism should be the convention fundamental to the work of Tennessee Williams is altogether logical. Until his late adolescence, Williams had little opportunity to see any form of theater other than the American cinema, and this form, of course, is firmly grounded in the realistic approach. Even the external shape of Williams's theater shows especially clear evidence of this cinematic influence: a succession of episodes, "fade-outs" and "fade-ins," background music, gauze scrims, and expressive lights focussed to simulate "close-ups"—all devices immediately recognizable as film technique, itself a more poetic kind of realism.

Often clearly aspiring to the conditions of poetry, Williams creates for himself an advantage which is not always available to other dramatists who start from the realistic or naturalistic base: like Synge and O'Casey, he puts his words into the mouths of an essentially imaginative people who speak in the rhythms and colorful imagery of a region favorable to poetry. Even more to the point for our present subject, by staging his dramas in a realm just so much apart from "average" American life as the deep South and by having his characters speak in the distinctive language of that realm apart, Williams succeeds in distancing his plays from the purely realistic mode to a degree sufficient to justify and disguise a certain characteristic exaggeration and distortion of reality which permeates his entire canon. Under the speech of most of his characters there runs the faint but unmistakable thorough bass of grotesque folk comedy. The tone provided by this suggestion of the comic folk tale varies according to Williams's intention, and, accordingly, the success of its effect depends upon the amount of distance he would have us put between the characters and ourselves.

Williams's opening scene in *Orpheus Descending*, for example, is an excellent study of his use of regional elements for these ends; we have only to examine the craftsmanship in this Prologue to an imperfect play to perceive how ingeniously (and how meticulously) this restless perfectionist has always gone about the business of constructing the artistic reality he thought indispensable to the coming to life of his vividly theatrical people.

The set represents in nonrealistic fashion a general drygoods store and part of a connecting 'confectionery' in a small Southern town . . . Merchandise is represented very sparsely and it is not realistic . . . But the confectionery, which is seen partly through a wide arched door, is shadowy and poetic as some inner dimension of the play.

Then immediately, before this nonrealistic background, we hear language of such color that we realize the realm in which our action will take place is indeed very much apart.

DOLLY. Pee Wee!
BEULAH. Dawg!
DOLLY. Cannonball is comin' into th' depot!
BEULAH. You all git down to th' depot an' meet
that train!

Pee Wee and Dog, "heavy, red-faced men," verify the initial comic impression with a gag line as they "slouch through . . . in clothes that are too tight for them . . . and mud-stained boots."

PEE WEE. I fed that one-armed bandit a hunnerd
nickels an' it coughed up five.
DOG. Must have hed indigestion.

As Pee Wee and Dog go out the door, Beulah begins the play's exposition:

I wint to see Dr. Johnny about Dawg's condition.
Dawg's got sugar in his urine again, an as I was
leavin' I ast him what was the facks about Jabe
Torrance's operation in Mimphis.

When a few lines later Beulah begins her monologue, which "should be treated frankly as exposition," Williams says, "spoken to audience . . . she comes straight out to the proscenium, like a pitchman. This monologue should set the nonrealistic key for the whole production." The exposition is thus delivered in the idiom of folk comedy and takes advantage of the comedic possibilities in its theatricalist style. Beulah first describes with grim relish the circumstances of Papa Romano's death; as she expounds at some length upon her convictions concerning the faithlessness of most marriages, her manner is that of back-fence gossip. But as she thus prepares a mordantly ironic background for our first view of Lady and Jabe Torrance, the tone of the scene modulates from what at first appeared to be cracker-barrel comedy to the extreme grotesque.

BEULAH. Then one of them—gits—*cincer* or has
a—stroke or somethin'?—The other one—
DOLLY.—Hauls in the loot?

The comic grotesquery of these women is obviously essential to Williams's initial exposition of both characters and situation. As a kind of comic chorus, they provide not only environmental context in terms of which we are to interpret events, but, in their comic hypocrisy, an objective view of both the appearance and the reality of the principal characters and their predicament as well. When Jabe Torrance, mortally ill with cancer, returns from the hospital they greet him with mendacity the ironic significance of which the audience immediately perceives.

BEULAH. I don't think he's been sick. I think he's
been to Miami. Look at that wonderful color in
his face.

DOLLY. I never seen him look better in my life!
BEULAH. Who does he think he's foolin'? Ha ha
ha!—not *me!*

There are two groups of women, and two women in each group. Williams even arranges their lines so as to verify the comic effect he intends us to see in this visual repetition by having them echo each other's words in almost music-hall style.

BEULAH. Lady, I don't suppose you feel much like
talking about it right now but Dog and me are so
worried
DOLLY. Pee Wee and me are worried sick about it.
LADY. About what?
BEULAH. Jabe's operation in Memphis. Was it
successful?
DOLLY. Wasn't it successful? . . .
SISTER. Was it too late for surgical interference?
EVA. Wasn't it successful?
BEULAH. Somebody told us it had gone past the knife.
DOLLY. We do hope it ain't hopeless.
EVA. We hope and pray it ain't hopeless. (*All their
faces wear faint, unconscious smiles.*)

We are reminded of T. S. Eliot's similar handling of verbal repetition in *The Cocktail Party* when Julia tells the story of Lady Klootz and her son who could hear the cry of bats. But Williams's use of the device here, of course, is probably intended as comic suggestion of repetition as it is usually heard in the classic chorus.

It is obvious that Williams is nowadays more concerned than ever with this matter of distance between his characters and his audience. The recent unfortunate production of *Slapstick Tragedy* and Williams's own remarks about his intentions in that work indicate that he is in the process of experimentation and is therefore, we should hopefully say, in transition. Some critics have gone so far as to argue that *Slapstick Tragedy* should not have been given professional production. The two short plays are indeed more clearly akin to thumbnail sketches than to finished canvasses, and each has been written with baffling incompatibilities of content and style. But whatever the aesthetic shortcomings of this latest effort, we are forced to observe in *Slapstick Tragedy* that Williams again instinctively seeks the freedom from the strictures of photographic realism that grotesque comedy allows him, and his natural antic gifts have always been such that we should be encouraged to believe that it is within the realms of such comedy that he may eventually find the new mode he seeks. *The Rose Tattoo*, which was first produced in 1951, endures as a model of Williams's stylistic integrity, and it is appropriate that such a play should have been chosen for successful revival in the 1966-67 season at New York's City Center. In this surprisingly profound play, Williams of course again resorted to the creation of his own realm and to the writing of the language of that world, both of which provided aesthetic distance for the characters inhabiting that realm and explained or justified their exaggerated behavior. His context was the South again—the Gulf Coast

between New Orleans and Mobile—and it was, moreover, an Italian community within that area. We were thus twice removed from "normal" reality, and Williams worked with extraordinary effectiveness within the self-imposed limitations of that reality.

In production, it would be unwise if not impossible to attempt to minimize the distancing effect that the national or regional characteristics of Williams's central characters should have upon an audience. This ethnic identity is manifestly Williams's keystone for the structure of his characters, and in *The Rose Tattoo* he stresses it repeatedly and purposefully in every scene of the play:

JACK. Mrs. Delle Rose, I guess that Sicilians are
emotional people . . .
BESSIE. I'm a-scared of these Wops.
THE STREGA . . . They ain't civilized, these Sicilians.
In the old country they live in caves in the hills
and the country's run by bandits.

Williams wants us to see clearly that he is writing about a special people with a special set of given circumstances: "they ain't civilized"; they are "wild," "emotional," "childlike," and they do everything "with all the heart." So it is, then, that our introduction to Serafina Delle Rose takes place in "an interior that is as colorful as a booth at a carnival." Indeed, we cannot avoid noticing the extreme and vivid uses of color; such Van Gogh audacities are apropos for the broader statement that Williams wants to make. Moreover, the set in which Serafina sits is scarcely more colorful than the lady herself. As vivid as a circus poster, she

looks like a plump little Italian opera singer in the role
of Madame Butterfly. Her black hair is done in a high
pompadour that glitters like wet coal. A rose is held in
place by glittering jet hairpins. Her voluptuous figure
is sheathed in pale rose silk. On her feet are dainty
slippers with glittering buckles and French heels . . .
She sits very erect, . . . her ankles daintily crossed and
her plump little hands holding a yellow paper fan on
which is painted a rose. Jewels gleam on her fingers,
her wrists and her ears and about her throat.

This, it scarcely need be said, is exaggeration. It is enthusiastic—and not actually terribly extreme—intensification of an already intense person for the purposes of vivid theatrical examination of her being. Quite obviously, the actress entrusted with the performance of such a role should have at least a working knowledge of the bigger, more "operatic" styles of acting and should not, as was unfortunately the case with Maureen Stapleton in both New York productions, be circumscribed by an earthbound naturalism which allows few if any glimpses of the theatrical size ultimately attainable in this characterization. While the Serafina Williams describes has not actually left the realm of naturalism, those characteristics which mark her individuality are stressed to just such a degree that they verge upon or actually become both theatricalist and

comically grotesque; and by this preliminary visual presentation of the character and the realm she inhabits, we are alerted to expect the comic incongruity which ensues in her subsequent actions.

And so it is that our introduction to Alvaro Mangiacavallo, Serafina's thematic antagonist, is accomplished in a scene which borders upon farce and which makes heavy use of national characteristic for comedic effect. Alvaro, sobbing in pain and frustration because he has been kicked in the groin during a fight with an irate salesman, flees into the house to hide his shame, and Serafina, weeping in sympathy, offers to repair his torn jacket. The scene is audacious in its comedy—comedy which is, moreover, ingenious as expositional device—as the two characters continue a conversation which would probably be unexceptional if it were not for the fact that each of them is shaking with sobs. "Stop crying so I can stop crying," Serafina says. "I am a sissy," says Alvaro. "Excuse me. I am ashame." At some point in our laughter, however, it might occur to us to ask if perhaps the exaggeration of national or folk characteristic had not been carried to too great an extreme and whether we might have passed altogether into the realm of the stage Italian and from thence into mindless farce. The question, surely, is not as primly academic as might at first appear, as upon its answer depend our interpretation of this play and our evaluation of the spiritual worth of these persons. Critical reaction to the play at its first appearance in 1951 was such as to provide reason to conclude—at that time, at any rate—that Williams's work here was at least uneven or uncertain. For example, Margaret Marshall, reviewing the play in *The Nation,* said that "in the second act the serious mood quickly evaporates; and the proceedings descend into cheap farce which must be seen to be believed. The absurd and the vulgar contend for place . . ." Kenneth Tynan, always a great admirer of Williams, found "the play's complex structure—short scenes linked by evocative snatches of music—too poetic for its theme," and George Jean Nathan simply said that the play was "sensational sex melodrama, pasted up with comedy relief . . ." Such critics at that time, then, asked whether Williams had not indeed drawn his ironies and exaggerations with too bold a stroke in this play. They apparently assumed that to push the protagonist so far into comic or grotesque incongruity as to make this incongruity his or her dominant dramatic value was to risk making the character so childlike or of such an inferior level of sensibility as to become a target for the destructive laughter of superiority. A playwright of Williams's genre is limited by his protagonist's perception, they believed, and so, then, is the force of his play. *The Rose Tattoo* was thought by many at that time to be a less significant play—"just a comedy"—because Williams had resorted to farcical exaggeration which all but destroyed any serious thematic intent. Some writers went so far as to deny the probability of any really new or valuable insights into the condition of human suffering in the "vulgar farce" of "child-minded Sicilians," and others questioned the likelihood that "the psychological aberrations of the universe can be quickly settled on one big bed." We can enjoy Serafina, they implied, and we can even sympathize with her on occasion, but we cannot see her as representative of anything significant in reality after having laughed at her shenanigans for three acts.

It is interesting and even a little amusing to compare such reactions with those of the writers who received the play with surprised enthusiasm when it was revived at City

Center last season. Laughter which had in 1951 been deplored as destructive or emblematic of cheap farce was now seen to be either a mark of the play's timelessness or the work of a skillful director who had managed through perceptive reinterpretation to bring the play up to date. Walter Kerr decided that the play had "outwitted time. Outwitted 16 years, anyway, and likely to improve the score further." Henry Hewes, writing for the *Saturday Review,* perhaps best exemplified this new vision of the play when he said that it "probably was not Mr. Williams's intention to write *The Rose Tattoo* as a grotesque comedy, but that is what this new presentation seems, and that is why it appears not the least bit dated." Hewes said, moreover, that to emphasize the grotesquery, the director, Milton Katselas, concentrated on creating the "wild and irrational" surroundings for Williams's fable, and, as a result, "everything that happens is ironic—so that we laugh at the ridiculousness of the events at the same time that we recognize the characters' agonizedly sincere involvement in them." And yet, in 1951, as Williams waited for his play to open at the Martin Beck Theatre, he had said, "I always thought of [*The Rose Tattoo*] as funny in a grotesque sort of way"; and in his famed Preface to the play he had specified grotesquery or "a certain foolery" as the probable stylistic solution for the playwright who would satisfy the peculiar conditions laid down for him by his modern, skeptical audiences.

What Hewes and a surprising number of critics both in 1951 and in 1966 have failed to realize is that comedy is and always has been an essential part of the typical Williams drama. A certain amount of laughter may, or indeed *must,* be at the expense of the Williams protagonist, as it is clear that Williams has always meant us to see that even the noblest human being is often guilty of ridiculous incongruity and is thereby laughable. Most of the modern writers—certainly those of the so-called Absurdist genre—find that they have to reduce the protagonist (when there is one) to imperception in order to make the point they want to make. The concomitant feeling of superiority toward the protagonist in such case is, we recognize, a necessary part of Absurdist technique: we must be kept aloof and at a distance from the characters, because their actions and not the characters themselves are the important things, and our involvement with them as people would serve to establish the existence of values or of a coherence that the play was written to deny. But Williams does not typically concern himself with the faceless protagonist of Absurdist or surrealist farce. In *The Rose Tattoo*, he clearly wanted to acknowledge and accept the limitations imposed upon him by characters of "instinctive"—rather than rational—sensibility, and to see this condition as altogether fundamental to his design. "Our purpose," he said, "is to show these gaudy, childlike mysteries with sentiment and humor in equal measure . . ." In any but the most superficial reading of *The Rose Tattoo*, one cannot help but be struck with the frequency of references concerning the childlike qualities of these characters, and most particularly of Serafina and Alvaro. "Their fumbling communication," Williams says, "has a curious intimacy and sweetness, like the meeting of two lonely children for the first time." Serafina, having climbed upon a chair to reach a bottle of wine, "finds it impossible to descend . . . Clasping the bottle to her breast, she crouches there, helplessly whimpering like a child." The acceptance of the childlike characteristics of Williams's characters is not only fundamental to their proper interpretation and performance, but leads as well—almost syllogistically—to comprehension of the symbolism of the play, and from thence, as in any poetic work of integrity, back again to

even deeper understanding of the characters. Having once conceded that most of Williams's Romantic symbolism is appropriately akin to association psychology one finds the logic of this statement somewhat nearer to hand.

Thus, by way of penetrating Williams's almost Wordsworthian concept of the importance of the childlike element in Serafina and Alvaro, it is, strangely enough, most pertinent to consider first the significance that he would have us see in the Strega's black goat. Normally an easy "symbol" of sexual desire, the goat makes a significant appearance to objectify Serafina's emotional situation at several pivotal points in the action—once, for example, when Rosario's mistress, Estelle Hohengarten, appears to order the silk shirt; again after Alvaro and Serafina have discovered their attraction for each other in Act II; and as an offstage bleat when Serafina makes her desperate assignation with Alvaro in Act III. The device as staged is grotesquely comic, and each time the goat escapes to run wild in Serafina's backyard the incident begins in farcical pandemonium and evolves finally into a ludicrous parody of a Bacchic procession, with a "little boy. . . clapping together a pair of tin pan lids . . . wild cries of children . . . the goat's bleating . . . and farther back follows the Strega . . . her grey hair hanging into her face and her black skirts caught up in one hand, revealing bare feet and hairy legs."

Having once established an aural connection between the goat and the "wild cries of children," Williams goes on to introduce these child sounds almost as choric amplification at subsequent points when something happens to stir Serafina's wild passion for Rosario. Alvaro unwraps the rose silk shirt, and the cries are heard again; Serafina suffers the desperate urge to smash the urn containing her husband's ashes as a little boy's cries parallel her excitement outside the window. And at the end of Act II when Serafina lifts her eyes to the sky and begs the dead Rosario's forgiveness for believing the "lie" about his infidelity, "a little boy races into the yard holding triumphantly aloft a great golden bunch of bananas. A little girl pursues him with shrill cries. He eludes her . . . The curtain falls."

Obviously then, the connection between children and goat is more than merely aural. For Williams, their significance is reciprocal and complementary; they are altogether thematic, and as lyrical devices they symbolize or objectify in tangible form both "lyric and Bacchantic impulses" which Williams sees embodied in their purest crystalline state in his Sicilians. *The Rose Tattoo*, he said,

> is the Dionysian element in human life, its mystery, its beauty, its significance . . . Although the goat is one of its most immemorial symbols, it must not be confused with mere sexuality. The element is higher and more distilled than that. Its purest form is probably manifested by children and birds in their rhapsodic moments of flight and play . . . it is the limitless world of the dream. It is the fruit of the vine that takes earth, sun, and air and distills them into juices that deprive men not of reason but of a different thing called prudence.

Serafina and Alvaro are Italian, and, for Williams, "the Italians [reveal] a different side of human nature than any I [have] ever known. I think Italians are like our Southerners without their inhibitions. They're poetic, but they don't have any Protestant repressions. Or if they do have any, their vitality is so strong, it crashes through them. They live from the heat."

It follows, then, that Williams's portraits of these Sicilians—and particularly that of Serafina—will reveal them as vivid embodiments of these impulses. These are Serafina's special set of given circumstances; she is at the outset, like Williams's Southerner, a more intense person than most, a creature from a realm apart. And, again like Williams's Southerner, being thus unique, she excites Williams with motivation and material for the creation of another intensely theatrical person. As almost pure distillation of those elements of human character most meaningful to Williams she will necessitate from him a bolder stroke of the brush, a more daring use of color, a stronger contrast of light and shade—or, to vary J. L. Styan's metaphor, a wider swing of the pendulum of dramatic balance on both sides of the neutral reality. And as crystallization of those grotesque human characteristics more typically instinctive than rational, more visceral than cerebral, and more childlike than mature, she will inevitably commit certain of the comic incongruities usually attributed to children and will be "criticized" accordingly by the corrective laughter of her "civilized" audiences. Our laughter at Serafina, then, is as Williams would have it: in our very act of laughing we are to verify her freedom from "prudence," "empiric evidence," and "civilization." In the first few pages of the play, this Dionysian freedom is acknowledged immediately as we sense her gusty vitality and her intensely sexual devotion to her husband; we perceive that she is aware of life, that she reaffirms life and rejoices in it, and in so doing she prepares us for laughter that is free and full. Then, as we, the audience, realize that we see a reality above and beyond her limited or childish conception of it, we naturally react to her at first in much the same way that we respond to persons we recognize as being of inferior sensibility; as we realize that she in effect inhabits a world that is out of step or incongruous with "the everyday man's" reality, we criticize her with the laughter of superiority and consider her as by definition comic. Henri Bergson would probably have described her behavior as "mechanical" as she ignores or is unable to recognize fact as it appears before her but rather chooses to continue to act upon the conventions and maxims peculiar to her world, even as they are disproved or denied:

JACK. It is a hard thing to say. But I am—also a—
virgin . . .
SERAFINA. *What? No.* I do not believe it.
JACK. Well, it's true though . . .
SERAFINA. You? A sailor?
SERAFINA. What are you? Catholic?
JACK. Me? Yes, ma'am, Catholic.
SERAFINA. You don't look Catholic to me!

And, of course, Serafina's vehement condemnation of her daughter's passion for the young sailor is in ironic—and laughable—contrast to her own concern with sexuality. We soon realize, of course, that this comes about because of the fact that in her own world

of intense sexuality she is led to see the same exaggeration in her daughter's world, and she in effect flails out at chimeras which are largely of her own making. Moreover, the incongruous contrast between the enormity of the effort she expends and the size of the problem with which she is dealing—what Freud would term the "quantitative contrast"—causes her to be seen as a grotesquely comic character. Thus, in her eyes, no sailor, regardless of how young, can be innocent; tight trousers must inevitably signify sexual license; a spring dance at a high school is manifestly given for purposes of sensual indulgence; and a school picnic chaperoned by teachers becomes a maenadic orgy: "The man-crazy old-maid teachers!—They all run wild on the island!" So Serafina forces the young man to pledge chastity while kneeling before the shrine to the Virgin—a shrine which she herself has dedicated to sexual love.

The scene at the beginning of Act III in which we see Serafina struggling frantically, "with much grunting," to get the girdle from around her knees before Alvaro arrives is almost pure vaudeville; by Joseph Wood Krutch's definition, our protagonist is here reduced to the status of a clown. Speaking of the typical farcical character, Krutch says that "the climax of our amusement coincides with the climax of his discomfort, or worse. The chief personages in farce usually are—or are put in a situation where they seem to be—clowns. And a clown is a butt, or victim. In high comedy we usually are laughing at ourselves; in farce, at somebody else." But more to the point of our present discussion —in allowing us this glimpse of Serafina, Williams achieves another of his bold critical strokes whereby we are made to scrutinize the protagonist from the objective viewpoint that such grotesque comedy provides.

But to make endless catalogue of Serafina's comic incongruities would profit us but little; most of them could be analyzed, if analysis were needed, by reference to the "quantitative contrast" idea, or some version thereof, and to the Freudian "release of inhibitive energy." In any event, the resulting laughter is gratifying to Williams, as it is in all senses Dionysian. However, the essential fact concerning this laughter has yet to be said. It is simply that having criticized Serafina to such an extent and from such a superior vantage point, we end by retaining a clear image of her dignity and worth: she remains, when all is said and done, a person of some stature and significance. Of course, it must be said that it is altogether indicative of Williams's success in this play that we are able to say of Serafina, after having laughed long and loudly at her, that we recognize her genuine and sizable capacity for love, and that it is in very point of fact this same extraordinary characteristic which is the significant element in her downfall. It is, in a sense, her *hamartia,* her tragic flaw.

In recognizing Serafina's special stature in this respect, we perceive in her being a universal in which we all share, and we sympathize. Even as we are led to laughter by Serafina's extremities of behavior in her loss of control after Rosario's death—

[Rosa] crouches and covers her face in shame as Serafina heedlessly plunges out into the front yard in her shocking déshabille, making wild gestures . . . As Serafina paces about, she swings her hips in the exaggeratedly belligerent style of a parading matador.

—we recognize an extremity which is as peculiar to tragedy as it is to comedy. Even as we are made to laugh by the incongruity of her actions—or, as by them we see our own standards of "normal," adult reality reaffirmed—we see the intensity of the grief which alone could cause such behavior; in our very act of laughing we seem almost heartlessly—but how effectively—to verify the extent of this visceral being's feeling. Hers is a love and a grief so great they threaten her destruction; by this fact alone she suggests a greatness, and in that tragic flaw is centered the principal tension of *The Rose Tattoo*.

With Rosario's death, Serafina's predictable reaction was to attempt to continue her worship in as close an approximation to its former pattern as possible. In so doing, of course, she chose to continue in blind devotion to her dead husband and became a prisoner of her own self-deception. Instead of association with living beings, she chose the motionless dummies of the dressmaker; instead of love bestowed on the living, she chose adoration before the ashes of the dead; and instead of actuality and engagement in the present, she chose memory and nostalgia for the past. It is interesting, then, to note that in speaking thus of Serafina, we find her to be another of Williams's variations of the "weak, beautiful people who give up with such grace," and around whom he structures his every play. In terms of Williams's typical character deployment, Serafina is actually a direct descendent of Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and of Alma Winemiller in *Summer and Smoke*. But, on the other hand, like Blanche DuBois, she is an active protagonist rather than a passive, and to her in turn will come thematic antagonists—like Alvaro—who will contest her view of herself and who will thereby provide the means for a gradual, cumulative view of her character.

In our admission that Serafina's remarkable capacity for love triumphs over her more comedic aspects—or, rather, by having us concede that those very childlike characteristics which make her comic also give Serafina stature—Williams succeeds in having us reaffirm for him that fact about human relationships which is woven somehow into most of the work of this avowed Romanticist and which, however phrased, expresses what remains for him man's closest approximation to a dependable absolute: the human being transcends his own pathetic insignificance only when he puts himself aside to love another person. In loving another, Williams would have us see in *The Rose Tattoo*, man most nearly succeeds in conquering the ultimate enemy of all significance, time. Before Rosario's death, Serafina says of her life with him:

Time doesn't pass . . . My clock is my heart and my
heart don't say tick-tock, it says love-love!

At the end of Act I, however, after Rosario has been killed, Serafina winds her daughter's watch before her shrine, and glaring fiercely at the watch she pounds her chest three times and says:

Tick-tick-tick! . . . Speak to me, Lady!
Oh, Lady give me a sign!

With love gone from her life, time's passing and the transience of all meaning are now all she can see.

Then, at the end of the play, when Serafina has re-entered life through the discovery of new love with Alvaro,

she holds the watch to her ear again. She shakes it a
little, then utters a faint, startled laugh.

Time has been arrested for her again, and Williams, the supreme Romanticist, would have us see the stopping of her daughter's watch as significant of Serafina's spiritual rebirth.

Love is itself unmoving,
Only the cause and end of movement,
Timeless . . .

Source: Leland Starnes, "The Grotesque Children of *The Rose Tattoo,*" in *Modern Drama,* No. 12, February 1970, pp. 357-69.

Adaptations

The Rose Tattoo was made into a feature film in 1995 directed by Daniel Mann and starring Anna Magnani as Serafina and Burt Lancaster as Alvaro.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history of vaudeville in any major U.S. city. To what other forms of comic and popular entertainment is it related?

Compare and contrast the cultural presence and importance of the gods Dionysus (Greek) and Bacchus (Roman) in ancient Greece and Rome.

Research the history of Italian American immigration in the United States. A possible focus could be Italian American immigration within the southern United States.

Explore evolving representations of one U.S. ethnic minority in U.S. film and/or television. In light of your research, would you say representations of minorities in American films has become more or less accurate over time?

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Italy, where Williams traveled more than once during the 1940s, is attempting to recover from the devastating events of World War II.

Today: Italy is a major tourist destination now that global travel is common.

1940s: Televisions make their way into people's homes and new, televised dramatic forms such as the situational comedy (sit-coms) are developed.

Today: Most U.S. citizens tune into a favorite television comedy or drama each day of the week.

1940s: Musical films and plays become a dominant form during the Great Depression and continue to be popular during WWII, partly in response to a need for levity and temporary escape from grim circumstances.

Today: Musicals continue to be popular fare on Broadway. They are being performed in smaller off-Broadway productions as well, and various prime-time television shows are beginning to incorporate musical interludes.

1940s: Italian Americans contribute diversely to U.S. culture and often are depicted in film and drama so as to highlight a greater cultural expressiveness.

Today: Italian-American Mafia culture continues to fascinate the U.S. public since the release of Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy, 1972-1990. Television shows like the Sopranos, airing on HBO, enjoy widespread audience appeal.

1940s: Racial segregation and ethnic prejudice are prominent in the United States.

Today: Tensions are still felt among the various ethnic populations of the United States although great progress has been made. Immigration remains a heated issue.

1940s: Method acting encourages greater emotional expressiveness in acting, partly by schooling actors to identify with the characters they are representing. Method acting is based on the idea that actors achieve greater verisimilitude when they do not rely solely on technique, but rather attempt to imaginatively become their characters as well.

Today: Most actors' training today is diverse, taking from and crossing various techniques and methods.

Robinson who played for the Brooklyn Dodgers. By the mid-1950s, African Americans were fully mobilized, with leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. organizing numerous effective demonstrations that resulted in the full desegregation of U.S. institutions by the late 1960s.

What Do I Read Next?

Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* was first staged in New York City in 1947 and remains one of his most celebrated works. Its main character, Blanche DuBois, is a sensitive and compromised Southern woman who succumbs to madness, overwhelmed by guilt and an inability to adapt to a changing world.

The Night of the Iguana (1960) was one of Williams's last great successes. This play explores a set of socially marginal characters who find redemption despite their weaknesses and disappointments.

Carson McCullers's novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) grows, like Williams's work, out of a strong Southern tradition in U.S. literature. This novel, like the Southern tradition in general, has strong gothic and grotesque overtones.

The Sound and the Fury (1929), by William Faulkner, is set in the U.S. South, as are most of Williams's plays. Like Williams, Faulkner explores the tensions within Southern U.S. culture, especially as this culture's regional values conflict with those of the broader, national U.S. culture.

The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennes-see Williams (1985), by Donald Spoto, is a highly readable biography and a thorough treatment of Williams's life and works.

Further Study

Grant, Michael, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans,* New American Library, 1962.

Grant's classic presentation and discussion of central ancient Greco-Roman myths and religious practices includes commentary about the god Dionysus.

Mangione, Jerre, and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience,* HarperCollins, 1992.

As the title of this work suggests, its authors consider the history of Italians in the North American region from the days of European exploration to the present.

Martin, Robert A., *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams,* G.K. Hall, 1997.

Martin provides students of Williams with an excellent source book containing contemporaneous reviews of the plays, critical essays on individual plays, and essays that discuss Williams's work as a whole.

Voss, Ralph F., ed., *Magical Muse: Millennial Essays on Tennessee Williams,* the University of Alabama Press, 2002.

The set of essays that make up this recent volume covers topics of interest to readers of Williams ranging from the literary to the biographical.

Williams, Tennessee, *Memoirs,* Doubleday & Company, 1975.

Memoirs is Williams's engaging autobiography.

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Bigsby, C. W. E., *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama,* Vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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