

# A THEMATIC STUDY OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' *THE ROSE TATTOO*

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In all his plays Tennessee Williams has been critical to American middle –class protestant culture for its puritanical and hypocritical standard of respectability resulting in the deformity of human personality. He admires the uninhibited sexual behavior which according to him is basic to the proper development of human personality. The repression of it in any form is harmful. Williams has tried to handle this problem not like a psychiatrist or in a Freudian form but as a literary artist who believes in the universal belief that human beings are happy and satisfied when they follow their blood instinct. *Rose tattoo* is one of such plays.

The play was performed at the Martin Beck theatre in New York on May, 3, 1951. The play has inspired critics in different ways. Alan Downer called it “spasmodic”. He criticised the play for its unplanned structure and its fundamentally shallow vision of life. According to John Mason Brown, the theme of the play is ridiculous. As observed by Roger Boxill, “the comedy babbles over with the pukish spirit of sex.” He further states that, “like *You Touched Me*, the play is built on a comic reversal of the Menagerie pattern. As a Williams faded belle Serafina looks back with longing to a past of erotic fulfillment and aristocratic connection”<sup>1</sup>. George Freedley of The New York Public Library Drama Division found the *Rose Tattoo* the warmest and most human of Williams plays. San Francisco chronicle observes that, “the whole play sings a pagan of praise to sexual love but the song never quite reaches the lyric beauty ..... of Glass Menagerie and Summer and smoke.....”.<sup>2</sup> According to Donald Spoto the play is, “strong in charm and humour, but weak in understanding about fears and emotions.....”.<sup>3</sup>

The playwright got this inspiration for the play from the vital humanity and love of life expressed by Italian people. Here for the first time, the theme of the play is far from the frustration and decadence of southern womanhood as general in South. The *Rose Tattoo* shows that rejection of sex in life is a curse. It absolutely upsets the life of a man or woman. Fulfillment of the sex desire on the other hand helps a man or woman live meaningfully. The story deals with that of Serafina delle Rose, a sexually frustrated lady whose uninhibited desires on the matrimonial bed leave no doubt that physical love is more spiritual than religious. Her teenage daughter seems to have the same conviction about love. The setting of the play is between the New Orleans and a Sicilian village near the Gulf Coast.

The opening of the play shows that lady Serafina, a seamstress, is leading a widow life mourning the death of her dear husband. Living in isolation and controlling her desire for sex, she seeks pleasure in the memory of her past happy family life. She is always mourning the

death of her dear husband who was an embodiment of sexual pleasure but he was killed in a police firing. The memory of her past love of her husband never lets be. To think of man is to think of her husband who made love to her every night :

Serafina : When I think of men I think about my husband. We had love together every night of the week. we never skipped one from the night we was married till the night he was killed.....'.<sup>4</sup>

Her conjugal life was fully satisfying. Her satisfaction was the result of the experience of mutual love and normal sexual life of the couple. The normal sexual life was rewarding to Serafiana. She recollects her passionate love making in the following lines.

Serafina : I could up the nights I held him all night in my arms. and I can tell you how many each night for twelve year. Four thousand – three hundred and eighty .....I know what love making was.....<sup>5</sup>

The death of her husband absolutely shatters her. She appears like a slattern. She is dressed in a pink slip and her hair is frowy. She is never property dressed and looks disgusting to her daughter Rose..... She is rather ashamed of the way she lives.

Rose : Mama, You look disgusting.<sup>6</sup>

Serafiana is a lady who detests pleasure only in physical attachment. She feels proud of her husband and she preserves his ashes to keep his memory fresh. Her abnormalities after the death of her husband are terribly shocking to her teenager girl Rose who turns into a rebel. She seeks to escape the horror of her life through her love for a sailor.

The appearance of a truck driver Alvaro who was according to serafiana has the, “clown of a face like that with my husband’s body”<sup>7</sup> creates an emotional crisis in which she is unable to decide which way to move. On one hand there is past memories of her faithful husband and the husband- like man who reminds her of her love making on the other. Her morality is shaken when she learns that her husband whom she worships preserving his ashes in an urn was not loyal to her but had an illegal affair with a lady Estelle who often called him a, “man wild like a Gypsy.”<sup>8</sup> When the illusions about the husband are shed off Serafina accepts Alvaro as her husband substitute and goes to bed with him so as to satisfy her hurt sentiment.

Serafina Now we can go on with our conversation.

The abnormal sexual behaviour of Sarafina like crying in sleep and taking a long sighs due to her repressed sexuality exercises an adverse effect on Rosa. She is anxious to leave her mother because she has been fed up with the abnormalities of her mother. She herself pleads with her lover Jack to seduce her thought they were warned by Serafiana to protect chastity. But Rosa did not feel repentance for what happened between them on the island during their school picnic program.

Rosa: It is the only thing in my life that I want to remember.<sup>9</sup>

Thus her own daughter to whom she has been giving sermons on sex gets disgusted with her mother and rushes out of the house.

In the end we find that the Rose tattoo that was a symbol of love which was lost with the death of her husband is now regained by Serafina with the arrival of Alvaro. Exhilarated at the sight of rose tattoo that was put by Alvaro in his chest she yields to him that night. The play ends with a happy reconciliation when Serafina again accepts that primal life urge and rejects that sad, isolated life without sex and love.

Rosa is very much similar to the sister of the playwright Rose who too was to make love under restriction of her mother and who could not go on dates with boys. For the first time in the play she appears with her real name Rose. The play is dedicated to the playwright's lover Frank Merlo whom he nicknamed "Little Horse." That alludes to the name of Alvaro Mangiacavallo with a name Eta-a-Horse. Thus the play clearly stresses the vital role sex play in human life. The rejection of sex instinct leads to disastrous consequences. Whereas the satisfaction of the passion accounts for health and happiness in human life. The play also shows that the normal unrepressed sexuality is the answer to life's problems.

## REFERENCES

1. Roger Boxil, *Tennessee Williams*, (New York, St. Martin Press, 1987), p.133.
2. "San Francisco Chronicle", Sunday Book Section of August 26, 1961.
3. Donald Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers*, p. 170.
4. Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo*, (London:Seeker and Warborg 1956), p.30.
5. *The Rose Tattoo*, p.38.
6. *Ibid.* p. 125.
7. Joseph Wood Kruth, quoted in Signi Falk, *Tennessee Williams*, p. 160.
8. Harlod Clurman, *The New Republic* (xix, Oct. 25,1968), p.26.
9. *Ibid.* p. 129.