

***The Rose Tattoo* curriculum guide**

Background

With characteristic comic energy, Tennessee Williams explores the inner workings of the heart. Passion is reignited for a Sicilian seamstress whose love, grief, and anger know no bounds. After the death of her husband, Serafina retreats to the safe haven of memories. But when these memories are shattered by a horrible truth, the widow finds comfort in a truck driver she describes as having “my husband’s body with the head of a clown.” Living in a small immigrant town on the coast, Serafina must struggle to come to terms with her own awakening desire, as well as that of her 15-year-old daughter, whom she can no longer shelter from the perils of love.

Objectives

Students will:

1. Identify key issues in *The Rose Tattoo* including:
 - the idealism of love
 - the thorn-prick of infidelity
 - the effects of grief and depression
 - the resilience of innocence and hope
2. Relate themes and issues in *The Rose Tattoo* to their own lives
3. Identify conflicts and struggles in interpersonal relationships of their own while coming to understand those of the characters of *The Rose Tattoo*
4. Analyze the play’s themes and issues within the character’s geographical, generational, gender and social conflicts
5. Participate in hands-on activities that enhance understanding of the production.
6. Evaluate the Huntington Theatre Company’s production of the play.

Preparation for *The Rose Tattoo*

Tennessee Williams

To get an overview, read aloud “Tennessee Williams – A Life” (page 5). In groups, instruct students to research Williams’ life and works more thoroughly. As they present their findings, make a timeline on the board of significant happenings in his journey as a writer. Suggest that students research what interests them most. Topics include, but are not limited to, a particular decade in his life, influential friends and acquaintances, his prolific writing period (1947-1955), or the production history of one of his plays. Encourage at least one group to gather critical essays regarding his work and to develop a theory for Williams’ enduring popularity as a playwright.

The Immigrant Experience

The Italian immigrant arrived in the United States with hope, expectations and apprehension. Immigrants had to accept the new culture, but the people of that culture also had to accept them. It was not easy. Language, customs and stereotypes could separate them from others. Gradually, Italians accepted the American culture and American culture accepted the Italians. Both were forever changed. Sicilians in Louisiana were not uncommon, and Williams’ placing of the de la Rosas in a coastal immigrant enclave near New Orleans is historically accurate. Italians

accompanied Louisiana's earliest Spanish and French explorers. Neapolitan Enrico de Tonti was with La Salle in 1682 when the French expedition claimed Louisiana for King Louis XIV. The influx into Louisiana continued and grew into the early 1800s, as the colonial holding was admitted to the Union. In 1850, the Pelican State boasted the largest Italian-born population in the United States.

Although Italian-Americans no longer maintain a visible ethnic presence in the city of New Orleans, enough of them have settled in the suburbs to warrant the formation of organizations acknowledging their familial and cultural ties to Sicily. The pockets of Italian culture persisting in present-day Louisiana are the legacy of the Sicilians who arrived in great numbers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Review the play for evidence of Serafina's heritage. How does this influence her character? Her beliefs? Her desires? How does it explain her interest in Mangiacavallo? Take this opportunity for students to learn more about their family's past. Do their parents or grandparents have an immigration story? Have them interview older relatives or neighbors who were not born in the United States and record their journeys on tape or in writing. Brainstorm questions together that will help the students conduct insightful interviews and better understand the immigrant experience. If they are immigrants themselves, encourage them to share their own stories.

Comedy and Tragedy: The Two Faces of Drama

Students are no doubt familiar with the universal depiction of theater: the comedy and tragedy masks. Since the times of the Greeks, when the masks originated, comedy and tragedy have shared the spotlight on the dramatic stage. Even in Shakespeare's most wrenching tragedies, moments of comedy offer relief to the emotionally involved audience member. Williams employs this ages-old technique by making Serafina fairly equal parts comic and tragic. Williams' muse for the character was a multifaceted actress who had the ability, one critic wrote, to "tear a dramatic scene into tatters and in the next instant turn on a brilliant comedy style" (page 7). The director of the Huntington production, Nicholas Martin, comments that, despite Serafina's difficulties, "even at her lowest point, she can laugh at herself" (page 4).

Instruct students to break down scenes in *The Rose Tattoo* by their emotional charges. Is it accurate to say that for every tragic turn, there is a comedic moment to balance it? Provide evidence that Serafina is able to maintain her sense of humor throughout the play. Ultimately, how does the ending of the play support Martin's observation?

KEY ISSUES

The Idealism of Love

Serafina's daughter, Rosa, says to her new love, Jack, that "Everybody is nothing until you love them!" This belief is very much the opposite of her mother's belief; Serafina is now nothing having loved too much and lost. Although Serafina clings to her asceticism and attempts to virtually imprison her blossoming 15-year-old, love reveals itself to be a powerful force. It compels Rosa to cut her wrist to show her love for the sailor; it sends Serafina into a three-year mourning period for a husband she adored; and it redeems the passionate Sicilian when Alvaro persists and wins her heart. What notion of love does Williams eventually succeed in conveying in *The Rose Tattoo*? Can love really conquer all?

The Thorn-Prick of Infidelity

The Rose Tattoo would have been a very different play if it weren't for one character: Estelle Hohengarten. The 1955 film version makes this clear as its opening shot shows Estelle emerging triumphantly from a tattoo parlor and telling two young boys that she just got a red rose emblazoned on her chest. The revelation that Estelle was Rosario's lover sullies Serafina's memory of the man she boasts was only hers. Consider the pivotal roles that Estelle, as well as minor characters Flora and Bessie, play. How does Estelle and Rosario's relationship become so important although it comes to an abrupt end as soon as the play begins? How does Serafina react to the betrayal? How does she contribute to her own suffering? What does she mean when she says she doesn't believe that "the man in my heart gave me horns!" Discuss the concept of cuckoldry and how it applies to Serafina.

Grief and Depression

Though it is not unusual for those who are touched by tragedy to have difficulty recovering, Serafina wallows in the misery for three years after Rosario's death. Rosa points out that she must get properly dressed and rejoin the world. Father De Leo states that "A woman can be dignified in her grief but when it's carried too far it becomes a sort of self-indulgence."

Trace Serafina's emotions and journey toward wellness by connecting lines of her dialogue to main plot points. For example, when she sees the crowd gathered to inform her of Rosario's demise, she can only respond with "Don't speak...Don't speak."

Continue this exercise until you reach her penultimate line, "Two lives again in the body!" How is she able to emerge from her pit of despair? What events, characters or realizations contribute to her recovery?

Innocence and Hope

Director Nicholas Martin maintains that what he finds most intriguing about Williams' intense characters are their ability, despite what happens to them, "to hold onto their childlike hope that things can and will be better." Invite students to discuss how the three main characters, Serafina, Alvaro and Rosa are able to remain both innocent and hopeful despite the circumstances that may embitter them.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

1. During his early years in Clarksdale, Mississippi, Williams was profoundly influenced by "a southern character and a southern mystique" (page 6). How does *The Rose Tattoo* become representative of the South in general and the Gulf Coast of Louisiana in particular? Research this area and its inhabitants and make a case for why the play could not be set elsewhere.
2. Serafina is deathly afraid of the witch's "malocchio" or evil eye, although her daughter insists it's only a cataract. "The strega's" crooked fingers, which Rosa explains are gnarled by rheumatism, are, according to Serafina, the result of the old woman shaking hands with the Devil. Research the origins of Serafina's superstitious beliefs and compile a description of others from around the world. What do Rosa and her mother's differing opinions about their elderly neighbor reveal about their natures and the generational gap between them?

3. Director Nicholas Martin believes that Williams achieved “the most sought-after triumvirate: plays that seamlessly weave together laughter, poetry and danger.” As a class, discuss other literature you’ve studied that has achieved this trifecta. List the works, their authors and the components or qualities that qualify them for this distinction. Of course, William Shakespeare is a good starting point, but explore many genres and time periods. Once you’ve compiled your list, you may be able to draw more detailed parallels between other works and *The Rose Tattoo*.

4. Andrea Martin, who will play the role of Serafina in the Huntington production, declared that she “can’t wait to absorb another life” (page 8). In her preparation for the role, she planned a trip to Sicily to see the region from which Serafina hailed and to immerse herself in Sicilian culture. As a dramaturg for this production, without the budget to send the rest of the actors to Italy, what research and visual stimulation would you provide the directors and the actors at the first rehearsal? Perhaps you could invite Martin to show images from her trip, or you could play a recording of native speakers pronouncing some of the words found in the play, or you could show depictions of various rose tattoos. Be creative and engage your company’s imaginations.

5. Williams was so struck by the raw emotional realism of Anna Magnani’s acting that he was inspired to create the role of Serafina for her. Research other writers who may have written a part exclusively for a particular actor. In a contemporary example, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck wrote the part of the therapist in Boston-based *Good Will Hunting* expressly for Robin Williams, who, like Magnani, won an Academy Award for his efforts. Who is your favorite actor? Write a scene for him or her and present it to the class. How does a muse a powerful motivator for writers?

MASTERY ASSESSMENT

The Rose Tattoo

Act 1

1. Note the prominent features of the setting, particularly the many religious articles. What would you suspect this says about the protagonist of the play?
2. Serafina is deeply in love with her husband. What do we learn about him early in the play?
3. How does Estelle Hohengarten act oddly and scrumptiously in Act I? What do her actions indicate?
4. In the three years since her husband's death, how has Serafina, just as Father De has predicted, wallowed in unhealthy mourning?
5. Discuss Tennessee Williams' stage direction about Serafina: "It is necessary for her, vitally necessary for her, to believe that the woman's [Flora's] story is a malicious invention."
6. Note Serafina's tempestuously emotional but also innocent childlike religious faith in Our Holy Christian Tradition
7. Comment on the validity of Rosa's belief: "Everybody is nothing you lose them."
8. What does Serafina force Jack Hunter to pledge kneeling before the statue of Our Lady?

Act II

1. What does Serafina ask Father De has about her husband's confession?
2. Describe the truck driver Alnaro; compare and contrast him with Serafina's deceased husband.
3. Note before Alnaro's arrival that Serafina began calling on Our Lady to give her a sign.
4. What kind of body does Serafina state that Alnaro possesses? What kind of face?
5. What intimate details about the rare tattoo does Serafina reveal to Alnaro?
6. What hopes and dreams does Alnaro possess?
7. Why does Serafina react so violently to the goat's bleating intrusion into her yard?
8. What does Alnaro state that Serafina has places in the urn with her husband's ashes?

Act III

1. Note at the beginning that Tennessee Williams provides comic relief by Serafina's efforts to get out of the girdle.
2. Alnaro, clearly, is trying most diligently to win Serafina. Describe his "spiffed up" appearance. Unfortunately, how do his plans go awry?
3. Note the grotesquely violent yet comic chase around the house.
4. What exactly does the uncontrolled and passionate Serafina aim to do with the knife striking out of her purse?
5. What horrible truth does Estella reveal to Serafina over the phone?
6. Why does Serafina command Alnaro to drive his truck down the road, to park it, and to return to the house?
7. What is Jack Hunter ashamed of?
8. According to Tennessee Williams, the scene when Alnaro "climbers" over the sleeping Ross on the couch "should be played with the pantomimic lightness, almost fantasy, of an early Chaplin comedy." What is the almost simultaneous reaction of both Ross and Serafina?
9. Comment on Serafina's pronouncement: "A man when he burns, leaves only a handful of ashes. No woman can hold him. The wind will blow him away."
10. How does the play end on a hopeful note for Serafina? And Alnaro? And Rosa?

OPEN RESPONSE AND WRITING

OPEN RESPONSE ASSESSMENT

Instructions for students: Please answer the following as thoroughly as possible in one well-planned and carefully written paragraph. Remember to use a topic sentence supported with compelling examples from the text.

1. What is *The Rose Tattoo* about? What does it have to say to young people today?
2. How do relationships between characters change and evolve from the beginning to the end of the play? Trace one character's conflict, individual crisis and resolution.
3. What does the rose tattoo symbolize? Discuss the real tattoos of Rosario, Estelle and Alvaro and the imagined one of Serafina.
4. Ideas rooted in both Catholicism and superstition are introduced in the play. Decide which has a deeper hold on Serafina and explain why.
5. At times Serafina's passion is "over the top." How is she able to remain, as the director, Nicholas Martin, says, "so like the rest of us"?
6. The women in Serafina's neighborhood are a powerful collective force. Describe their role in the play citing specific examples from the text.
7. In many ways, Rosa's love, Jack, defies the stereotype of a typical sailor. Characterize his function in the play and determine whether he is an escape or a true love for Serafina's daughter.
8. Serafina refers to Alvaro as "a clown." In contrast, he refers to her mainly as "Baronessa!" How is this representative of their relationship?
9. What does the rose-colored silk shirt come to symbolize? How is it fitting that Alvaro ultimately wears the shirt?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Williams is said to blur the distinction between poet and playwright. Craft an essay in which you examine the poetry in his playwriting. Do you agree that he is able to blend the two forms of artistry?
2. Examine the use of color in the play – from the red of the rose tattoo to the black of "the witch's" goat and more. Why does Williams utilize color in this way? Consider the emotional response and associations with the colors.
3. Tattoos are a permanent expression of love. How else could a character show the world how committed he or she is to a lover? Research other famous gestures of devotion (like Van Gogh's lobbing off of his own ear or Shah Jahan's building of the Taj Mahal for his beloved) and evaluate their impacts both on the loved one and society.

4. Rent the 1955 film version of *The Rose Tattoo* starring Anna Magnani and Burt Lancaster. After viewing it and the Huntington production, compare and contrast the two. Be sure to account for the limitations of each medium.
5. Anna Magnani won an Academy Award (an Oscar) for her performance as Serafina. Write her acceptance speech. In it, mention how the character allowed her to display her abilities and pay homage to Williams who handcrafted the role for her.
6. Chaucer's "The Merchant's Tale" is a tale of infidelity. Read it and compare its message to that of *The Rose Tattoo*. Do reactions to this kind of betrayal differ from medieval to contemporary times?
7. Imagine that you just met one of the characters from *The Rose Tattoo*. Write a letter to a friend of yours describing this person. Tell your first impressions as well as how you feel about them after finishing the play. Would you pursue a friendship with this character? Why or why not?
8. Choose a scene in which both Serafina and Rosa appear. After re-reading it, craft two journal entries that discuss what transpired – one from each character's point of view. Try to capture the frustrations of mother and daughter while emphasizing their love for one another.
9. On page 4, the director discusses Williams' treatment of death as a theme. He states his own fascination with how "a person can suffer terrible tragedy, figuratively die, and be born again...it's a cycle. From birth to death to rebirth and so on." Write an essay in which you support Martin's statement about the theme of death in the play or create your own.
10. Serafina is astonished that Alvaro has "a clown face...with my husband's body." What does she mean by this statement? Construct an essay in which you compare and contrast the two loves in Serafina's life and examine why she falls for both.
11. Use one of the following lines from *The Rose Tattoo* as a topic for a short essay:

Rosa: "For the first time in my life I was beautiful. You'd made me beautiful when you *said* that I was!"

Serafina: "Nothing's too good for a man if the man is good."

Alvaro: "You have put your heart in the marble urn with the ashes."
12. Write a critical review of the Huntington Theatre Company's production of *The Rose Tattoo* and submit it for publication in your school newspaper. Be sure to send us a copy!

Name: _____

Date: _____

Handout 1

Vocabulary Matching for *The Rose Tattoo*

Italian words and phrases are uttered throughout *The Rose Tattoo*, lending an authenticity and lyricism to the play. While the meaning is usually made apparent by the context, match the following words with the correct definition to test your understanding.

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|--|------------------------------------|
| 1. strega | A. help |
| 2. malocchio | B. a curse or the evil eye |
| 3. va via | C. daughter, you shouldn't talk |
| 4. sporcacciona | D. I only have you in this world |
| 5. puttana | E. kitchen |
| 6. signore, fermate vi vel nome di Dio | F. whore |
| 7. domani | G. please |
| 8. aiuto | H. slob or pig |
| 9. cucina | I. let's go home |
| 10. basta | J. witch |
| 11. figlia, non devi parlare cosi | K. crazy |
| 12. tesoro | L. tomorrow |
| 13. ho solo te in questo mondo | M. treasure |
| 14. andiamo a casa | N. mister, stop in the name of God |
| 15. pazza | O. eat-a-horse |
| 16. con permesso | P. get out |
| 17. mangiacavallo | Q. happy little bird |
| 18. rondinella felice | R. enough |

Answers: 1. J, 2. B, 3. P, 4. H, 5. F, 6. N, 7. L, 8. A, 9. E, 10. R, 11. C, 12. M, 13. D, 14. I, 15. K, 16. G, 17. O, 18. Q

Name: _____

Date: _____

Handout 2

Methods of Characterization in *The Rose Tattoo*

Definition

Characterization is the way in which a writer reveals information about a character. It is often much easier to describe a character from a story than it is to analyze how that description is conveyed. In order to create characters that seem real and allow us to empathize with them, a writer utilizes two primary methods.

Method One: Direct Characterization

The author directly states facts about a character's personality. This is often found in the stage directions provided by a playwright. This method *tells* a character's qualities.

Method Two: Indirect Characterization

The method more commonly used in playwriting is when a writer reveals a character's personality traits through the character's words, thoughts, actions and through what other characters say and think about him or her. This method *shows* a character's qualities.

Group Assignment

The class should be divided into six groups. Each group should be assigned one of the following characters from *The Rose Tattoo*:

Serafina Della Rose Rosa Della Rose

Estelle Hohengarten Father De Leo

Jack Hunter Alvaro Mangiacavallo

Each group should complete Handout 3 to identify the methods of characterization used for each character. Begin with adjectives to describe the character in column one. Place the adjective in the correct level. An example of a physical description is "pretty;" a social one would be "outgoing" and a psychological quality could be "afraid of love." For column two, textual evidence, a page number from the play and a few key words are sufficient. Then, in column three, decide if the narrator is *telling* the reader the quality (direct) or *showing* it by actions, dialogue, another's comments or inner thoughts (indirect).

Individual Writing Assignment

After recording the methods of characterization and textual evidence for your group's character, answer the following questions in two well developed paragraphs.

1. A stereotype is a conventional character who lacks individuality. He or she is typically two-dimensional and conforms to an unvarying pattern of behavior. Is your character a stereotype or a specific individual? Explain why.
2. A dynamic character changes by the end of the story. A static character remains the same. (Stereotypes are usually static.) Does your character change or remain unchanged. Explain your reasons.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Handout 3

Chart for Methods of Characterization in *The Rose Tattoo*

Assigned Character: _____

Column One:

Column Two:

Column Three:

Description/Quality

Textual Evidence

Direct or Indirect

Physical level

Social level

Psychological level
