

Unraveling the Character of Rose Armiger

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In Henry James' novel, *The Other House*, a mystery of intrigue and murder unravels upon the character of Rose Armiger. All evidence points to Rose desiring to have Tony Bream all to herself and the only thing standing in her way is his child, Effie, and a deathbed promise to his wife, Julia, to not remarry as long as the child lives. Louis Begley, in his introduction to the novel, brings up passages from the novel that support the evidence of Rose being nothing more than a conniving murderer on her chosen path to marry Tony Bream. In her article, "The Little Hour of Violence: Domesticity and Desire in James's *The Other House*," Jennifer L. Jenkins explicates the novel to uphold the assumption of Rose's guilt in such a way as to depict her as evil and conniving. Jenkins writes, "The plot develops Rose Armiger's obsession with Tony Bream, which leads to the death of the infant daughter who stands in the way of his remarriage" (Jenkins 1). These plot assumptions are easily proven because James has Rose offer so little of her own intentions to the reader. Both authors support their positions extremely well but they have key weaknesses in their argumentation. Rose is not forthcoming about her ambitions or desires for life. Rose's guilt is easy enough to prove but her motive is the real mystery of the novel.

James gives information about Julia's and Rose's childhoods that proves to be exceptionally important to the character analysis of Rose Armiger. Rose tells Mrs. Beever of Julia's horrible step-mother, Rose's aunt, and how cruel she had been to both of them. Since Rose is the older of the two girls, she became the protector of Julia. Of Julia's marriage to Tony Bream, Rose says, "Never was a marriage more of a rescue" (James 23). This is the beginning of understanding that Rose is here to protect Julia.

When it becomes apparent that Julia is dying, Rose must insure that her child, Effie, will not suffer the same fate that Julia and Rose suffered at the hands of an abusive stepmother. Rose does indeed murder the innocent child, not so that Tony Bream is free to remarry, but so that Effie does not suffer the same cruelties that Rose and Julia were forced to endure.

Jennifer Jenkins proposes that Rose has set her intentions on marrying Tony Bream; she writes: “Clearly, Rose’s actions suggest that she aspires to being Tony’s wife, that is, ‘Mrs. Bream,’ as much as his lover” (James 3). She makes this assumption using the fact that Rose has little money to live on, yet, Rose does have a comfortable income. Dennis Vidal, the man who wishes to marry Rose, also has the promise of a great future with which to support Rose financially. Rose actually pays little attention to Tony except to ask about Julia and how she is doing. James writes of Jean Martle’s first sight of Rose at the Bream household, “She could only be Miss Armiger, and she had been such a figure of woe that it was a surprise not to see her in tears” (James 13). Rose is lamenting the fate of Julia and herself. Rose realizes the potential danger that Jean poses for Tony because Tony has already “told us all about your visit” (James 17) including his “...poor little wife” (James 17). Jean’s response to this information, “But I’m not to see *her*, am I?” only serves to let Rose understand the implications of Jean’s attraction to Tony (James 17). This puts Rose in the position of protector and puts her on the defense right from the beginning of the novel. All her intentions from here on out to the end must be to protect Effie from falling into the hands of a stepmother in the case of Julia’s death. It is also interesting to note that until Jean’s arrival on the scene, Rose has spent days with Julia and it is only with the imminent threat of a rival that Julia sends word, through

Nurse, that she will not see Rose at all that day. Julia's wishes seem to point to the suggestion that Rose is to weigh all threats to her child.

As it becomes clear to Julia that she will indeed die, she sends Dr. Ramage out of her room so that she may speak with her husband, Tony, in private. Dr. Ramage and Mrs. Beever are left to converse and wonder what all the secrecy is about. Dr. Ramage says, "Our young friend's exceedingly nervous" and Mrs. Beever responds, "Do you allude to that girl?" (James 28). Mrs. Beever is referring to Rose and Dr. Ramage replies, "I allude to Mrs. Tony" (James 28). Mrs. Beever refers to Rose as being equally so. Both characters have stated that both women are worried, nervous, and generally not in a normal state. While the doctor and Mrs. Beever attempt to unravel the secret meeting of Julia and Tony, Rose states, "I think *I* know what it is" (James 28) and then refuses to tell her thoughts. This is another clue that Rose, who has spent days with Julia, is privy to Julia's thoughts and impending fears. When writing about the deathbed promise that Julia extracted from Tony, Begley writes, "Rose knows why Julia makes this request, having been brought up with her, as though they were sisters, and having shared in her abominable mistreatment by her stepmother; she understands that the dying woman's desire to prevent Tony's remarriage is rooted only in the fear of Effie's falling into the hands of a similarly evil stepmother" (James viii). Instead of delving into the psychological effect of their 'abominable mistreatment,' Begley uses this passage to set Rose up as scheming to procure marriage to Tony at some future date. Begley states that Rose is using this promise as an excuse to murder Effie. A deeper question would wonder exactly what the girls went through in their childhood that made them both so afraid of an abusive stepmother becoming an influence in Effie's life. Begley also writes,

“There is also, as always the financial aspect” (James viii). Begley claims that Rose is living in poverty. The problem with this approach is that later in the novel the reader finds that Rose has supported herself on this ‘meager’ income for four years. Rose doesn’t even come back to visit Tony during that four year period thereby negating both the argument for marriage and the one of her having financial aspirations towards Tony’s money.

Jennifer Jenkins claims, in her article, that Rose is obsessed with Tony: “The plot develops Rose Armiger’s obsession with Tony Bream, which leads to the death of the infant daughter who stands in the way of his remarriage” (Jenkins 1). This assumption is easily proven because James does not give much information about Rose’s desires for the future. Jenkins goes on, “Rose patterns her desire for Tony on Julia’s love for her husband, and she come to hate Julia as her rival for Tony’s affection” (Jenkins 3). This is where Jenkins’s article is in error: she gives no evidence to support the claims of Rose’s hate towards Julia. Jenkins raises the question of Rose hating Julia without giving substantial textual proof of that hate. Jenkins does bring up the fact that Rose recognizes the nature of the prescription that she picks up for Julia but goes no further with this to validly prove that Rose hates Julia. Jenkins makes a strong accusation without strong validation. Furthermore, Jenkins points out that after the death of Julia, four years pass and Rose doesn’t return to Wilverley. She writes, “Only when she realizes that Jean Martle loves Tony does Rose reappear on the scene to vanquish her rival in a series of violent acts” (Jenkins 7). Rose has been gone and been able to support herself for four years and only returns when it seems that Julia’s wishes may be about to be broken. Rose comes back to protect Effie.

After Julia's death, Rose is gone from the picture for a period of four years and only occasionally runs into Tony in town. This gives evidence that Rose is able to support herself and live a life without the money that a life with Tony would provide to her. When she leaves Tony's house, she is also under the impression that Jean Martle and Paul Beaver, Mrs. Beaver's son, will eventually marry and Effie will be safe from the fate of being raised by a step-mother. The party on the occasion of Effie's fourth birthday brings all of the characters back together once again. It is here that Rose feels the threat of Jean turning down Paul's marriage proposal and starts to put into motion steps to ensure her acceptance of Paul. Rose even enlists the help of Tony by asking him to speak to Jean in favor of Paul. It is interesting to note that Dennis Vidal makes an unannounced appearance once again so that all players are now in the scene once again. Rose stands to gain nothing from Effie's death except the assurance that Effie will not be raised by a step-mother. Rose is even convinced that Jean and Tony will marry eventually. There is even some mystery with the appearance of Vidal at this precise moment and causes wonder if he was in on the scheme with Rose to murder Effie. Rose never intended to marry him after all and his part in this rescue of Rose still requires neither marriage nor financial support from him.

Rose did indeed murder Effie. Both Begley and Jenkins give ample evidence of Rose's guilt in the murder. They also bring up qualifying reasons for motive. The biggest problem with both arguments, however, is the aspects of Rose's and Julia's relationship that are left unexplored. By the time the murder was carried out, Rose already knew that Tony did not love her; therefore, her motive could not have been marriage. Rose had already financially supported herself for four years, so the motive

could not have been money either. The only other worry for Rose was that Jean would become Effie's 'stepmother.' Her ultimate motive was to protect Effie from a cruel, abusive step-mother like Julia had suffered. Rose has completed her role as protector of Julia and her child. Tony and Dennis protect Rose from prosecution for the murder because they both realize that she has carried out Julia's wishes, albeit in an unusual way. Both men feel a sense of responsibility towards the murder's circumstances and towards Rose's unfailing devotion to Julia.

There is no doubt that Rose is a strange and different creature with secrets of her own. There is no doubt that Rose murdered Effie. However, there is doubt that Rose had her sights set on marrying Tony Bream or that she needed his money to support herself. Leaving these questions unanswered leaves both Begley's and Jenkins' claims a little hard for the reader to swallow. By the end of the novel, the reader realizes that Rose stands to gain nothing from Effie's death except the assurance that Effie will not be raised by a stepmother and the fact that she fulfilled a promise to Julia.

Works Cited

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