

Maddy Kobar

LIT 530: Gender and Text

Dr. Joseph Walker

May 12, 2022

The Gendered Body in Film: Rose in *The Bonfire of Destiny*

*The Bonfire of Destiny* was a 2019 limited drama series on Netflix that revolved around the lives of three French women who were victims in a fire that took place in a Paris Charity Bazaar in 1897. Rose, Alice's maid, was severely burned in the fire, half her body is covered in third degree burns after the first episode. Her body is forever marked by this tragedy. She is the only of the three main female characters that is physically marked by the fire. The other two women, Alice, a young debutante, and Adrienne, Alice's wealthy Aunt, are also deeply affected but their wounds are purely psychological. Rose's entire identity is stolen from her and remade because she is a victim of the fire. Her being a woman and a servant also play into this forced transformation of identity as well over the course of the series.

As a maid, Rose was a close confidante and a mother-like figure for Alice and later, Thomas. Thomas is a small boy who Rose saves from the fire. She gives him to another maid who was waiting outside the bazaar when she goes back into the burning building to retrieve Alice and Odette, Thomas' mother. Odette is killed in the fire, but Alice survives. Rose also survives, but she is pushed into a flaming pillar by a man from the panicking crowd. Alice thinks she sees Rose die, as does the audience during the first episode. When Rose returns to the screen, she is almost unrecognizable. Half her body, including all her hair, was consumed by the flames. She is picked up by Madame Huchon, Odette's mother, who out of grief for her dead daughter and ambition to protect her grandson from her wicked son in law, claims Rose is Odette. Because Madame Huchon is a well known society matron, the hospital staff allow her to take Rose back to her mansion outside the city.

Rose being a working class woman is central to her storyline and why she becomes trapped in Odette's life. Madame Huchon pressures Rose into being Odette. She argues that her grandson, Thomas needs a mother. She also argues that as Odette Rose will be the wealthiest woman in Paris's high society; she can have anything she wants, at least, materially. Madame Huchon also preys on Rose's fear that her

husband, Jean, a coachman, will no longer love her because half her body has third degree burns, most importantly on her face. Rose is called both “monstrous” and “grotesque” because of what the fire did to her. She also no longer has a future as a working woman either; Madame Huchon warns her that no family will hire her because she will terrify their children and guests with her appearance. None of these arguments could be employed against a man in the same position. His looks would not be attacked as harshly as such an injury on a man may be a war wound thus making him a hero not a monster, nor would he be pressured into taking care of someone else’s child. If Jean had been injured so terribly in the fire rather than Rose, this storyline wouldn’t work as well, if at all. In fact, it relies on Rose being a woman, particularly a poor woman that Madame Huchon can guilt into doing what she wants.

Rose’s struggle against Madame Huchon’s influence could be read as a struggle of working class women standing up to the ruling class. Before the fire, Rose was going to go with Jean to America. This dream is stolen from her as she is assumed dead by Jean and Alice’s entire household. Odette’s charred body had Rose’s bracelet on her wrist. Madame Huchon switched their jewelry in the morgue, giving Odette’s jewels to Rose as she is unconscious, healing from her burns in the hospital bed. Though elderly, Madame Huchon is able-bodied while Rose is debilitated by the extreme pain of her injuries. So Madame Huchon has power over her both physically and economically. She tries to test Rose often by pointing out how much wealth and social status she will have as Odette. Rose normally would never be able to experience such wealth because as a maid, she’d be constantly working. From the beginning of the series, the viewers know that Rose isn’t materially driven. What matters most to her is getting back to Alice’s household and telling Jean that she is still alive. Even though she is pressured by wealth, as arguably everyone is, love matters more to Rose. This is frustrating to Madame Huchon who is trying to secure Thomas’ future through having Rose masquerade as Odette.

The turning point is when Rose’s body actually helps rather than hinders her. She realizes that she’s pregnant with Jean’s baby. Madame Huchon wants her to have an abortion because Odette and her husband haven’t slept together since Thomas was born, about four years ago. She fears that Rose’s baby

will reveal her careful plot to have Rose take Odette's place. Rose rebels against Madame Huchon and announces her pregnancy to the party that she attends dressed as Odette, a mask and wig covering her worst burns. The crowd applauds this news and their child is hailed as the "miracle child" and "the phoenix who will rise from the ashes" of the tragedy. Madame Huchon knows that she can't force Rose to give up her baby now that the baby is publically hailed a triumph for the collectively traumatized community. Rose is again pictured as a devoted mother figure, but this time to her own child rather than to the children of others, as she was in her past life as a maid. She refuses to give up her baby because she believes that it is her last remaining link to Jean. She fiercely fights for the life of her child; even going as far as to sleep with Odette's husband so that the baby will appear legitimate. Having another life to fight for, the child she loves, is what gives Rose incentive to fight back against Madame Huchon.

Rose is forced into an unusually difficult position as a burn victim. She is put under the power of a wealthy matron who has an agenda of her own. Even though Odette lives a life of privilege, it is stifling for Rose because she is *not* Odette. Keeping her trapped is the fact that no one looks at her directly and she encouraged to cover her burns so as not to disturb other people. Following the fire, her body is considered a horror and she is not treated like a regular person any more but rather someone to be pitied. She even meets Alice twice as Odette but Alice never looks directly at her, thinking it rude to stare at her friends' injuries. Arguably, Rose had more freedom as a maid than she does as Odette because Madame Huchon tries to control her every move through guilt, threats, and administering morphine.

At the end of the series, Rose becomes Odette on her own terms as Madame Huchon finally surrenders to Rose's wishes, allowing her to keep her baby. All she wanted was Rose's word that she would raise Thomas like her own child. By chance and taking some major risks, Jean comes back to Rose, by being hired by Madame Huchon to work for Odette's husband. Odette's husband is killed after he attacks Jean, suspecting him of having an affair with Rose who he thinks is Odette. Madame Huchon sees how dedicated to her baby Rose is and decides that she can trust Thomas and the family fortune to her. After a period of mourning, Madame Huchon points out that Rose can even marry Jean as Odette.

Even though Rose suffered so much, she gets what she wanted; a chance to start a new life with the man she loves. She could not have been taken by Madame Huchon, if her body wasn't burned. Rose's burns are central to her story following the fire. So Rose's transformation is only possible *because* she is a burn victim. This storyline wouldn't have worked for either of the other two female protagonists. Both Alice and Adrienne weren't burnt and it would be difficult for either of them to be mistaken for other women since they both held high positions in society. Rose had blue eyes like Odette and enough of her face was burned that her "womanly modesty" would require her to cover it. Only Rose or another maid could have been taken to "replace" a wealthy woman like Odette. Class as well as gender informs Rose's story in *The Bonfire of Destiny*. Her story would be a lot less believable if she had been a wealthy woman or a poor man before the fire. In order for her story to work, Rose must be both working class and a woman.

Cited Sources:

- Ramberg, Catherine; Spreuzkouski, Karin. *The Bonfire of Destiny*. TF1. 2019. Netflix.  
[www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com)