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### Poor little Rich Girl, What Does She Know About Misery? : The Significance and Symbolism of Rose in James Cameron's Titanic

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"Poor little rich girl, what does she know about misery?": The Significance and Symbolism of  
Rose in James Cameron's *Titanic*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This thesis draws attention to and analyzes the various choices made by James Cameron for the characterization of Rose in Titanic, which is currently celebrating its 20th anniversary. While many scholars have defined the hidden meaning behind other directorial aspects, this thesis will take a more interpretive approach in connecting Rose's character journey to her changing appearance on screen, her character defining actions and words, and her overall relationship with Jack. Rose reveals herself as a strong, modern woman throughout the film, and serves as an example of how costume design and dialogue and action mirrors the personal growth of a character.*

*Titanic*. Just the word alone brings back a variety of memories for everyone, whether you saw it on a first date or you and your friends secretly watched it without your parents' knowledge at a sleepover. Either way, you knew you were in for a treat when someone suggested watching it. As a cultural phenomenon, it gave us some of the most epic CGI effects of all time, a brilliant #1 soundtrack, and the ever popular bow pose. As a film, it was the first to reach the \$1 billion mark, the most expensive film ever made, and was the second film to be nominated 14 times, winning 11 at the 1998 Academy Awards (*Titanic* DVD). What it gave us in terms of content has been watered down over the last 20 years, reduced to what is now considered a super long, lovey-dovey tale about a boy and a girl on a ship doomed to never finish its maiden voyage. However, this James Cameron masterpiece is much, much more than that.

James Cameron's 1997 film *Titanic* follows one woman's journey on the luxury liner during its ill-fated maiden voyage. Rose is a 17-year-old first class socialite traveling to America with an ensemble that includes her overbearing mother Ruth, controlling fiancée Cal, and his ex-Pinkerton valet. She is everything the proper 1912 young woman should be: poised, dressed to the nines, and obedient. Through her older self's exposition at the beginning and end of the film, we learn that her outward appearance does not match who she is or how she truly feels. When the societal pressure of her class becomes overwhelming, Rose decides to commit suicide by jumping off of the Titanic. During this attempt, she meets Jack, a third class traveling artist who

lives life to the fullest despite his poor financial situation. They begin a romance that will change both of their worlds forever as the *Titanic* travels across the Atlantic to her doom.

Because of the “star-crossed lovers” component to the film, as with most films, the impact of the female lead as an individual character is largely underwhelming. Rose is viewed as the rich damsel in distress, whose only function is to be saved by the good hearted boy with no money, Jack. Every time you watched the film, you would secretly hope it wouldn’t end the way it does and Jack and Rose would live happily ever after. But, because it doesn't end that way, we are given this extraordinary tale written by James Cameron, a frame narrative film with a large female empowerment undercurrent. Jack and Rose's affair is only the tip of the iceberg.

I have had an obsession with *Titanic* ever since I can remember. I received it as a gift for my fifth birthday and it's all been down-hill from there. What really pulled me in was that it was my first experience with death. Not that I was looking for it, but the humanity component really stuck with me. Even as a child I understood that a large number of passengers had perished in the cold North Atlantic waters that night and that the survivors were forever affected by what they had experienced. On a lighter note, I also loved hearing Jack and Rose say each other's names over and over again. I can't explain it, but they were like peanut butter and jelly to me growing up.

When I got older, I went on to become more interested in the history of the doomed vessel. I began collecting books and reading the official maritime inquiries held by the United States and Britain. I learned the statistics, the crews' names, her sister ships. Soon, the movie began to matter more. While I understood that Jack and Rose's romance wasn't real, the people they represented were, and so were the others characters. The movie provided me with the greatest lesson life can give at an early age: in the grand scheme of things, no one person is more

important or different from anyone else. Despite some differences, whether that be class, race, socioeconomic status, etc., we are all human, and in dire situations, we need to help each other.

Rose displays this the most, being as kind towards Jack and other third class passengers and patient with her fiancé Cal and mother Ruth. I was always drawn to her quick wit and ability to come up with the perfect thing to say in any conversation. And of course, those dresses! When I became her age, I realized that *Titanic* was **her** story, and not her and Jack's. The whole film is about her journey as a young woman trying to be who she wants to be in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I began noticing small things I hadn't before, like the fact that she saved Jack twice, told Cal that even if she didn't end up with Jack she'd rather be a whore than be Cal's wife, and lived on despite everything. Because of the costuming changes and dialogue/action choices made by Cameron and her overall relationship with Jack, Rose is an extremely transgressive character, defying the social ecosystem she is born into and becoming exactly who she wants to be by the end of the film.

### *Literature Review*

#### *Costuming/ Outward Appearance*

Film directors utilize many different production vehicles to convey transformations and attitudes undertaken by their characters. In historical genre films, costuming is often seen as a vital component. Scholar Sarah Street borrows a quote collected from Marsh (1998) said by James Cameron to emphasize his mission to represent the Edwardian and Victorian eras, the years of fashion that were worn by people in 1912, as accurately as possible: "I wanted to be able to say to an audience, without the slightest pang of guilt: This is real, this is what happened, exactly like this." Both the attention to historical accuracy and Cameron's mission to convey a

fictional story clash in his 1997 film *Titanic*. The character of Rose DeWitt Bukater, while attempting to remain true to the fashion in 1912, is fictional. Street analyzes the significance of Rose's wardrobe, focusing on color, style, accessories, and the manner in which they are being put on. Although Street examines the costumes of other characters, her main focus is Rose as she is the main protagonist of the movie. When Rose is first seen, she is in a white and pin striped traveling suit with a purple hat and umbrella. As noted by Street, purple and white were colors associated with the international suffragette movement of the early 20th century. The coloring implies Rose as a modern woman in the context of possible knowledge of current events. Her clothes directly contrast with her mother's, who is dressed in an emerald gown with a dark hat harkening back to the Victorian Era (1837-1901) style of dress (27). Street also says that purple is also a color often associated with royalty, which Cal labels himself and Rose when he gifts her with the Heart of the Ocean necklace in the film. The juxtaposition between Rose and her mother is a secondary conflict in the film, and their interactions further display Rose's inner and outer rebellion according to her narration during her account.

Street also dedicates part of her findings to a significant object: the Heart of the Ocean. Of course, the diamond is central to the plot of the film as it is the subject of Lovett's treasure hunt, a gift from Cal to Rose, and a symbol of Jack and Rose's undying love for each other. The necklace is also a representation of Cal's wealth, as the diamond was originally worn by Louis XVI, and therefore Cal believes owning it and placing it on his other most prized "possession" (Rose) will elevate him to nearly aristocratic status (Street 21). The necklace is also the only thing that Rose is wearing during her portrait scene with Jack where she, as well as her "heart", are fully exposed, an intimacy that is never seen happening between her and Cal. In my analysis of Rose as a transgressive character, the Heart of the Ocean represents Rose's own journey as a

symbol of first class wealth to one of remembrance and endurance. Both Rose and the necklace were once at the top of modern society but at the end of the film are standing on the back of the *Keldysh* over the gravesite of the *Titanic*.

Despite taking a metaphorical approach to the female body, Keila Tyner and Jennifer Ogle (2009) further examine the ways in which women are either held down by their physicality in the context of society, or how they may use their body to empower themselves. Their analysis of general female anatomy and sexuality can be directly related to Rose, as she undresses for Jack both as a rebellion against early 20<sup>th</sup> century conservative society and because she knows she can be her true self around him. Abridged from Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punish* (1997), Tyner and Ogle discuss the "male gaze" and how it affects women viewing themselves and how they view other women. There are two main points of focus: that women internalize the male gaze and think of themselves as the object of men's desire and also try to maintain the appropriate female appearance (111). Rose can be seen experiencing and rebelling against both of these constructions multiple times throughout the film, but is best seen in how she acts depending on who she is with. When she is with Cal and her mother, she is very poised and refined, and when she is with Jack she is carefree to the point of being naked, literally and symbolically.

Tyner and Ogle introduce Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) concept of "both/and", an idea stating that women can gain power by both resisting cultural norms and accommodating them. That is, women have the ability to rise above the standards that society presents to them, but in a subtle and almost non-noticeable way. For example, Rose may be wearing dresses and donning extravagant accessories, but it is with the intentions behind their wearing and situations she is

seen in them that is crucial to discussing her as a dynamic character. I will argue that Cameron applies these progressive feminine concepts through Rose's ensembles throughout the movie.

### *Physicality and Action*

Rose is by no means a damsel in distress. Before the audience is knowledgeable of the trauma she has undergone on the doomed vessel, she is shown as an older woman in a beautiful home with her granddaughter and many pets. Clearly she has been a “success” in life, living to an old age and possessing a beautiful home. Peter Kramer, a professor of television and media studies, uses the words "intelligence", "determination", and "courage" in association with Rose's actions throughout the film (603). Kramer argues that Rose's actions are driven by her emotional bond with one character in the story: Jack. Rose's decision to attempt suicide and jump off of the stern of the ship is what makes Jack step in and convince her to come back over the railing by saying that he will jump in after her, thereby linking their destinies and crossing class lines (604).

Kramer also notes that her decision to meet Jack on the bow of the ship mirrors Jack's camouflage as a first class passenger to speak with her catapults and their romance even further, prompting them to make love in the back of a car in the holding deck. Finally, her fulfillment of her and Jack's deal of “You jump, I jump” when she returns to the ship (despite having two opportunities for safety) solidifies her as a dynamic character separate from the other featured female characters in the film who get on the lifeboats at the time of the sinking. While I can see where Kramer is coming from, Rose could have easily just as well brushed off Jack during their first meeting, but she allows the conversation to continue well past the time it would've taken for her to jump off the back of the ship.

There are more subtle hints at Rose being the most significant character of the film. Kramer goes on to discuss how Rose takes the reins of the story after seeing the images from Lovett's



wreck excursion, and maintains that control by telling her story despite others' interruptions (608). Via her story, Rose changed Lovett and his crew's perspective of the ship from a financial to an emotional viewpoint. Kramer also goes on to say that Lovett and Cameron's journey is similar, drawing from their shared obsession with the *Titanic* and knowing that any association with the legendary ship would bring in some sort of monetary value. Through writing Rose, Cameron recognized the humanity of the story he was writing (609).

For most of the film, events are out of Rose's control. Cynthia Belmont (2007) discusses the role the actual disaster has on the journey of the heroine. Nature is the scariest environment in itself, because it does not conform to societal expectations where humans are above and nature is below, it's the other way around (360). Reading Belmont, I thought Rose can be seen in this way as well. Cal continuously tries to control Rose but he can't and that frightens him, which leads him to go to drastic measures and set up Jack as the thief of the Heart of the Ocean in the second half of the film to win back Rose's favor. In drawing conclusions from her own film analysis of the female leads in *Mimic* (1997), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), and *Volcano* (1997), Belmont states that the heroines she observed "are more environmentally conscious than their male counterparts, which in the context of the films' environmentalist sentiments makes them morally superior" (362). While Rose does not discuss any environmental issues in the film, she nonetheless displays her knowledge by mentioning controversial neurologist Sigmund Freud in a sex joke, calculates the fact that there aren't enough lifeboats for all on board, and discredits Bodine's (Lovett's research partner's) animation of the sinking by saying that "the experience of it was somewhat different" due to his initial lack of empathy for those who suffered. Rose knows more about the *Titanic* automatically when she is speaking to Lovett and his crew because she is the

only one that was there, and won't accept anyone else's analysis because they didn't experience it like she did.

Belmont also stresses that heroines in natural disaster films are limited when they are put into a family unit. Most heroines are immediately written as daughters, with at least one parent missing while also feeling some degree of alienation from the remaining parent (368). She writes about the character of Grace from the film *Armageddon*, who lost her mother and becomes an orphan once her father goes into space. Grace's father is responsible for her job at NASA and once he dies says that she has no place else to go. Rose is in the same boat as Grace before her decision to leave with Jack. In the corset scene where Ruth and Rose discuss their feelings about Rose's forced marriage to Cal, Ruth explains to Rose that unless she gets married, they will both be poor and on the street. Rose's early loyalty to her mother and the uncertainty of what would happen should she end the engagement with Cal hinders her from initially deciding to go with Jack, just like the uncertainty Grace feels about leaving NASA after her father's death. Rose's desire ends up overpowering her fear, and she leaves with Jack.

### *Relationship with Jack*

There are many characters whom Rose interacts with throughout the film, but none come close to Jack. Their romance is the main focus of the film, the window through which all other details and plots are seen. Catherine L. Preston (2000) studied the resurgence of romantic dramas in the 1990s by studying the top thirty romance films on Internet Movie Database for the week ending September 18th, 1998 which include *Sliding Doors* (1998), *As Good As It Gets* (1997), and *Six Days, Seven Nights* (1998) and how it may be beneficial to broaden the definition of exactly what a romance film is. Although *Titanic* is not mentioned in her article, Preston differentiates romantic dramas from romantic comedies discovering four differences: there is the lack of a

confidant, less indication of marriage if any at all, and there is a greater representation of sex and the male and female bodies (238), which are all things that can be found in the film. Neither Rose nor Jack have anyone they really turn to; Jack has a few friends in steerage but Rose hardly ever talks to anyone except for Jack. While Jack and Rose claim they do love each other, they never speak about marriage, just about running away together and Jack teaching her how to live the Bohemian artist lifestyle. And, even if there had been talk of marriage, it wouldn't have been possible because Jack freezes to death. However, at the end of the film, there is a Jack and Rose wedding on the *Titanic*, but whether that is in older Rose's dream or she passed away and went to Jack, it is up to the audience. Rose also tells Jack to take her virginity, and while the audience does not see the sex explicitly happening, there are the steamed windows of the car and sweaty faces of both Rose and Jack after she asks him to put his hands on her. Probably the most recognizable image from *Titanic* is Jack's portrait of Rose's naked body, wearing only the Heart of the Ocean necklace. The film contains the entire drawing scene from start to finish with a flash forward/voiceover by older Rose.

Jack and Rose's relationship is a race against time for the majority of the film as the voyage of the ship is only supposed to be six days. Preston talks about the romantic thriller genre after romantic dramas, tying it in to her larger idea that romance is a versatile film genre, often intertextualizing other genres to appeal to a wider audience. After their initial encounter, it is treacherous for Jack and Rose to see each other as Rose is engaged and they originate from different classes. Cal, Rose's fiancée, also has an ex-Pinkerton valet that he uses to keep a close eye on Rose. Rose's hunt for Jack as the ship sinks is another high intensity moment, where her true self comes out many times (commanding a bellboy to take her to a submerged floor and punching an attendant, just to name a couple). When Cal finds Jack and Rose, he grabs his

valet's gun and begins shooting at them, but the couple escape unscathed. According to Preston (240) and her source Todd Gitlin (64), scenes like these are written into movies to appeal to a broader audience than the typical female audience expecting the standard romance film. Looking through various film genre lenses can provide multiple viewpoints to Jack and Rose's relationship providing for a more in depth analysis, as well as Rose's behavior with Jack in times of relaxation and leisure versus moments in stress and disaster.

Arguably one of the most overlooked qualities between Jack and Rose is their shared love of the future and better things (this happens for Rose later than Jack). Jack is a character sans past, and so he lives in the moment, as pointed out by Peter Chumo (2010). The audience is given what is assumed to be Rose's entire life as she lists the many ways a first class woman is to be brought up a few times throughout the film, but not much is known of Jack's present or his future until Rose. Chumo recognizes Rose as a woman who is on the up and up about modern marvels, such as Picasso and Freud (160), meaning she embraces the future as it comes. Rose also sees in Jack an escape from what she perceives would have been her life, filled with meaningless cotillions and weddings and other extravagant celebrations that she doesn't wish to partake in. Jack shares the same sentiment about time at the first class dinner: "You learn to take life as it comes at you...To make each day count." When Jack and Rose are having a conversation about their future plans, Rose wants Jack to take her horseback riding in the ocean. Then Jack suggests having one leg on each side and although Rose laughs at the idea, she is not turned off by it. Jack's excitement and positivity about each and every day invigorates Rose, igniting their relationship Chumo notes.

After conducting all of the above preliminary research, I came to the following questions:  
Through changes in costuming, various dialogue and action, and her overall relationship with

Jack, what is James Cameron trying to convey about Rose's transgressive nature? What does this analysis signify for other lead female characters in cinema?

### *Method*

Kate Winslet's performance as Rose was lauded by critics, and earned her an Academy Award nomination for Best Actress. Rose begins as a character who has halfway accepted her fate as a static member of first class society, while attempting to hold on to the fire inside of her as an individual who can make her own decisions. Later, we see Rose as a woman of complete conviction, choosing to break the cycle of wealth and choosing to stay with Jack on the sinking vessel. Winslet's portrayal of Rose is mirrored by Gloria Stuart, an actress from the Golden Age of Hollywood who was nominated for Best Supporting Actress. Their portraits of Rose share the character's ferocity and will to go on despite everything she has been through, shown through older Rose's storytelling. It is crucial to remember that the film is Rose telling her story, forcing the audience to wholly trust her words.

In tackling the character of Rose, there is an instinct to immediately search for historical background on the Progressive Era and the state of the world in 1912 both on and off board the *RMS Titanic*. However, this is unnecessary because Rose did not exist as she is a character made up by director James Cameron for the film. Instead, a more cinematic based approach is required, looking at James Cameron and how he presents Rose through various ideals and images on screen.

Making a spreadsheet helps the most when viewing the film at whichever length is deemed appropriate. I found it less taxing to watch the film in one hour increments and section each table off by which hour I was watching the film. Before each table I put the hour of the film I

observed, which Rose (Old/Young) may have been featured in that part, and where she was in context of the sinking. This allows me to keep in mind the frame narrative of the film and that both Roses are truly one in the same, and also to provide further context as to where Rose is in her story. I paused the movie as needed so as to not miss any patterns that may assist me in my analysis.

Fig. 1

*Titanic* (1997) 3.25 hours long

Hour 1 (Old Rose, Young Rose pre-sinking)

<b>Costuming/Accessories</b>	<b>Actions/Words</b>	<b>Jack</b>
-animals/pictures upon arrival to <i>Keldysh</i>	-very polite when she arrives on the <i>Keldysh</i>	-when seeing drawing, flashback to Jack's eyes immediately
-wearing a necklace in every shot	-calls HO a "dreadful heavy thing"	
-examines past accessories from wreck (mirror and hair clip)	-says she is "a dish" in drawing	
-hair in bun	-kind of poo-poo "forensic analysis" of sinking	

See Figure 1 for a portion of the table mentioned. For this thesis, the word "transgressive" is used in line with its definition "to go beyond a limit or a boundary", in that Rose goes beyond the bounds of her social class and gender to be the person that she is. Watching the film I noticed that her personality and wit showed through the most through these categories. When taking note of costuming, I looked at a few crucial details: the color of Rose's outfits, the accessories that accompanied the outfits, the style of dress, the difference between her ensembles and other characters', and what all of it could possibly mean for Rose in her characterization or in the larger connection to the plot.

Observing Rose's actions and dialogue, I noted what she said, whom she said it to and the tone, and other character's reactions to her statements. To emphasize Rose's boundary breaking, I paid even closer attention to the conversations between her and her mother Ruth and with Cal, because they were generally her biggest censors throughout the course of the film. I also looked at her actions to see if they impacted or supported her words, what she was doing when she had dialogue, and if her choices went against the norm of the other women in *Titanic*. Words can do so much, but it is ultimately through Rose's actions and choices in which Cameron shows her tenacity and fortitude as a woman who does not stick to the status quo.

Rose's relationship with Jack is central to the plot of the film and the lens through which the audience experiences the disaster of the *RMS Titanic*. I primarily looked at Rose in the context of her relationship with Jack instead of looking at both characters separately. I noted the things they did together, any points in the plot they may have affected, and which characters the couple interacted with and reactions to their romance. While the categories of Rose's actions and dialogue and her relationship with Jack may overlap, it is generally distinguishable between moments Rose makes decisions based on what happens to her when she's not with Jack and the choices she makes while she is with Jack.

The order of each category is in relation to what happens in the film. For costumes, the empty boxes signifies that the costume hasn't changed since the previous costume listed, and the empty boxes in the column labeled "Jack" might mean nothing of significance has happened since the last full box. On the rare occasion that there is information in all three boxes in a row, it usually means a new scene has started or that it is a significant moment in the film.

*Analysis*

The valuables brought by Rose to the *Akademik Mstislav Keldysh* that are shown at the beginning and end of the film are manifestations of her promise to Jack before his death. Upon arrival to Brock Lovett's research ship *Keldysh*, Old Rose is seen accompanied by her goldfish, pet Pomeranian, and her granddaughter Lizzy. In Jack's last speech to Rose after the sinking, he says, "You're gonna get out of here, you're gonna go on and you're gonna make lots of babies, and you're gonna watch them grow" (IMDB). Because Lizzy is the only grandchild mentioned, it is assumed that Rose had at least one child with her husband Calvert. Her pets could also be considered her "children", considering they traveled with her to the research vessel. The pictures seen in the last few minutes of the film show Young Rose accomplishing everything and more that her and Jack spoke about including ice fishing and horseback riding on the beach. There is also a head shot of Rose presumably from her days as an actress, a picture of Rose standing with one foot in an early model of the airplane dressed in flying garb, and a photo of some sort of graduation. All of these examples encompass Rose's fulfillment of living an exciting and unconventional life, which she planned to do with Jack, making each moment count. It is also important to note that the things she did are more meaningful because it wasn't a part of the story she told to the crew. Her life speaks for itself.

Rose's changing hair styles reflect her openness with herself and with other characters in different scenes throughout the film. In times that her hair is up, Rose is usually with her family, or very early in her friendship with Jack. When first seen, Rose's hair is tied up tightly into a bun when she arrives on the *Titanic*. Her voiceover expresses her outward shell of being prim and proper, but severely distressed within: "Outwardly, I was everything a well brought up girl should be. Inside, I was screaming" (IMDB). Rose's hair is also up at two meals with the first



class, once when she makes her Freud comment at lunch with her mother, Cal, and other rich passengers and another at dinner with her family before her suicide attempt. Her hair is also up like the other women at the table when Jack joins her circle for dinner as a reward for “saving her life” and when she meets Jack on deck for the first time, showing her hesitancy towards him in the beginning of their relationship. Her hair being up also shows her resistance to open up to her mother and Cal.

Rose’s hair is down and undone during scenes where she is particularly emotional with herself or the characters she interacts with, showing her true self and openness. Previous to running to the stern of the ship in her red dining dress, Rose must have unpinned her hair. In that first scene with Jack is where she asks all of her preliminary questions about him, inadvertently stalling her so he could convince her to come back on board. Her hair was also down when Cal gave her the Heart of the Ocean, a metaphor used to show Cal’s need to control Rose like a dog. Her hair was also down in the bow scene, where she first kisses Jack and tells him she trusts him. In addition, Rose’s hair was down for the entirety of the sinking, in which many intensely emotional events take place, such as Rose’s goodbye to Thomas Andrews, her last spout with her mother, her denial of Cal, and of course, the death of Jack. Her hair further shows her evolution as a dynamic character throughout the film.

What is most interesting, however, are the scenes in which Rose is shown with her hair neither up nor down, but somehow halfway. An internal balance in Rose’s character can be seen when her hair is in this style. When her hair is styled this way, it means that she has found an equilibrium between who she is (a first class girl with a mind of her own) and who she wants to be (a third class poor woman who is carefree). When Rose goes to the party in third class with Jack, she shows off her first class skill standing on her two big toes, but also drinks third class

beer and dancing to third class music. It can also be argued that the braid Rose is wearing in which she says to Cal “I am not a foreman in one of your mills that you can command. I am your fiancée” can be considered not up but not down either, because after she says this to Cal, he yells at her, flips the table, and she cowers and cries to her maid Trudy. This scene shows the fire that Rose possesses, but that she is also not at the point in the film that she is ready to leave Cal once and for all. In her final scene, Old Rose’s stark white hair is definitively half up and half down, exhibiting that after all these years she has finally reached a place of balance before tossing the Heart of the Ocean into the sea.

Cameron reflects the tone of the scene in which Rose is featured through changes in her wardrobe. She is shown in stark contrast to her mother when she is seen stepping from the car on the docks before *Titanic* in a white striped purple ensemble. Her mother is dressed in a fur hat with a feather and emerald green velvet reminiscent of the passed Victorian Era while Rose embraces the Edwardian Era style of dress. This contrast establishes the conflict between Rose and her mother that is played out throughout the film. Rose’s most recognized crimson dinner dress from her first meeting with Jack can be interpreted to symbolize her budding female sexuality. However, it also causes her to slip when Jack is trying to pull her over the railing, which means that while Jack and Rose’s meeting is significant, it is not the right time for her to “pursue” Jack in the way she might’ve had she not slipped, screamed, and attracted the quartermaster’s attention. The yellow dress she wears the next day symbolizes friendship and is fitting for the scene where her and Jack have their most expository conversation where he tells her his background and she tells him her troubles in first class.

The wine colored dress worn at the first class dinner Jack attends seems to be her most formal dress of the film, in which Cameron probably wanted her to wear to impress Jack. Solely

wearing the Heart of the Ocean during the drawing scene, Rose literally shows Jack her “heart” and gives all of her to him. The last dress Rose is seen in is an opaque dress with light pastel colors made with sheer and flowy fabric, allowing her to move more freely through the sinking ship, but also establishes her freedom by allowing her to show off her body without being totally naked, a privilege that she gave only to Jack. The last complete outfit we see Rose in before Old Rose finishes her story includes the opaque dress, Cal’s overcoat, and a lifebelt given to her by Thomas Andrews. This outfit is the culmination of Rose’s experience on the *Titanic*: freed by Jack, coveted by Cal with the Heart of the Ocean in the coat pocket, and protected by the love of the friends and acquaintances she made symbolized by the life belt.

Various accessories given to or put on Rose justify her describing the *Titanic* as “a slave ship, taking me [Rose] back to America in chains.” Gloves are a universal way of hiding skin and showing modesty by women, and Rose does that with her wine colored dress but wears white gloves indicating purity and innocence, where her mother wears black gloves, a color usually associated with negativity. Her gloves are not seen in the party in third class, and are taken off between frames when Rose meets Jack on the bow of the ship. This taking off of the gloves shows a release and a freedom from female oppression. Another illustration of Rose’s containment is the scene in which Ruth laces Rose’s corset and the reason for Rose marrying Cal is discussed. Rose even says to her mother during the exchange “It’s so unfair” (IMDB), referencing the hard position women are put into in matters of survival even though it is her mother placing her between a rock and a hard place.

When shown into the artifact room aboard the *Keldysh*, Lovett shows Rose a mirror and hair comb that belonged to her on the ship. The mirror represents her lost need to keep up appearances and the comb as a reminder of who she was when she kept her hair up. As

mentioned above, Rose holds a pessimistic demeanor towards the Heart of the Ocean, calling it "...a dreadful heavy thing" (IMDB). It is given to her as an early wedding present by Cal, who tells her that she will eventually learn to open up to him as his wife. Rose has no choice when these objects are presented, but has the ability to do away with them as Rose is not seen wearing a corset at the time of the sinking and when she places the Heart of the Ocean back at the wreck of the *Titanic*.

Ruth and Cal, as minor antagonists, often attempt to restrain Rose's sharp wit and discourage her from speaking and acting the way she does, adding to Rose's desire to leave. Any time Cal or Ruth scoff or correct Rose, we know she has done or said something she shouldn't have. In the first lunch scene where most of our featured characters are eating and talking together, Rose lights a cigarette. Ruth says "You know I don't like that Rose", and Rose proceeds to blow the smoke towards her mother's face. Clearly annoyed, Cal takes the cigarette and stamps it out. This scene can also be used in reference to Jack and Rose's secret meeting in the gymnasium in which Jack says "They've got you trapped Rose...sooner or later that fire that I love about you, Rose, that fire's gonna burn out...". The imagery here is that like the cigarette, Rose has a fire or passion inside of her and Cal is eventually going to extinguish it.

Seeing images of the *Titanic* prompts Rose to change from a harmless old woman back to a feisty 17 year old. Rose is first seen as a 100 year old woman engaging in pottery while her granddaughter makes lunch. She is surrounded by plants and is hard of hearing, standard concepts associated with old women. Upon arrival to the *Keldysh* she is nice and polite and respectful to Mr. Lovett and his crew, and is even forgetful of their initial meeting on deck. However, when brought into the submarine camera viewing room, Rose begins to show hints of her young self, the Rose inside. After viewing the live footage from the wreck, Rose refuses to

go to rest after she feels faint. She takes Mr. Lovett's "It's okay, just try to remember anything, anything at all" as an interruption, and continues on with her story. Even eighty four years later, Rose's experience on the *Titanic* is still transformative to her character.

Rose is shown to be very knowledgeable of current issues in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and doesn't care about showing it. When Rose and Cal's first encounter of the film appears, Rose shows disdain for the *Titanic*, saying, "It doesn't look any bigger than the *Mauritania*" (IMDB), comparing *Titanic*'s size to another well-known gargantuan ship. She also uses Sigmund Freud to make a sexual innuendo joke towards J. Bruce Ismay, again having to do with size. When she and her family are being given a tour of the ship by the designer Thomas Andrews, Rose does long division in her head. After taking note of the number of lifeboats times the number of passengers, she expresses concern to Andrews that there aren't enough boats for everyone aboard should something go wrong. Rose is also shown to be well versed in French, overlapping Cal when he tells her the English translation of the name of the beautiful blue diamond he gives her. Not to say that women in this age could not be educated, but Rose exhibits knowledge in the fields of mathematics, psychology, and language.

The two scenes shared by Jack and Rose on the stern of the ship juxtapose each other, and show Rose's transformation as someone who runs away from her problems to someone who faces them head on by following her heart. In the first scene shared by Jack and Rose, Rose is about to commit suicide and jump off of the ship. Before that scene, older Rose is heard in a voiceover: "I felt like I was standing at a great precipice, with no one to pull me back, no one who cared... or even noticed..." (IMDB). Rose feels trapped and that there is no way out, but Jack proves otherwise with his discretion. By attempting suicide, Rose would have been avoiding the issues posed by her first class life. Right before the ship goes under, Rose says, "Jack! This is

where we first met!", and rest her head on his chest as the ship begins to tilt. Rose could have easily gotten off of the doomed ship twice, but chose to face the terror with Jack by her side, making sure they both had the best chance of surviving the disaster.

Rose often expresses herself primarily through speech and Jack expresses himself through art which is why the drawing scene is so pivotal; she lets someone else take over. Throughout the film when Rose is venting or talking to Jack, he usually stays quiet and just listens. While this is arguably what any normal person would do, it is important to note that Jack waits and truly takes in what Rose is saying, which is vastly different from Cal and Ruth. During the drawing scene, Rose tries to make small talk, pointing out that Jack is blushing and there is some back and forth conversation. Ultimately, Jack tells Rose to stop moving her mouth and to relax, for the sake of the drawing. Rose does, and they have a conversation, but for once Jack is doing all of the talking by putting Rose onto paper, and interpreting her the way he sees her and the way she sees herself, unlike a "porcelain doll".

There are a couple of instances, however, where Rose is not the hero and in fact acts submissive. Fortunately, these issues are quickly cleared up. In one instance, Cal sets up Jack by having Lovejoy (Cal's valet) slip the Heart of the Ocean necklace into Jack's coat, making it look like he was with Rose just to steal the necklace. Rose believes Cal, but he makes a comment towards Jack's drawing of Rose, and she realizes Jack's innocence. Ruth also guilts Rose into staying with Cal after telling Rose what would happen to them should Rose refuse marriage. Jack fixes that right up however with a speech given in the gym alluded to earlier in the analysis.

Rose's metamorphosis occurs when she witnesses a first class mother instruct her daughter how to lay a napkin on her lap, causing Rose to realize that Jack is right in that only she can save herself from the mundane life of the rich. In this, Jack fulfills the role of a guide or mentor, rather

than a romantic partner. In fact, Jack and Rose's relationship has much more substance than the knight in shining armor, damsel in distress theme it is normally watered down to. As much credit as Rose gives Jack throughout the entire film, she did go back to him on a sinking ship not once, but twice. The first time she says goodbye to her mother and spits in Cal's face, and the second time she jumps out of a lifeboat that is already being lowered and runs to meet Jack on the grand staircase in a "You jump, I jump, remember?" reunion. Jack also doesn't necessarily give Rose what she wants (an easier, less restricting life), but what she needs (freedom to explore). It's not that Rose wants to be poor or third class, she wants the choice to be whoever she wants to be.

### *Conclusion*

Although it is celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, *Titanic* is still a highly relevant and pioneer film because of its usage of CGI, brilliant score, and above all its treatment of its protagonist, Rose. Through her experience on the Titanic, she is shown to be far ahead of her time, and embodies the grace, heart, and will of the modern woman. Like other women today, Rose conveys her developing self through the way she wears her clothes and hair, her words, and by doing what she feels is right for her. Because of director James Cameron's choices in the film, the audience is given a character that is so multi-dimensional, they can visually see her journey on screen in nearly every part of the character.

As stated above, Rose is clearly a fish out of water compared to her first class companions on the ship. Her hair is in a different style with nearly every outfit she wears, she makes crude jokes and is insanely bright, and does not let anyone tell her what to do. Many young people today like Rose take leaps and bounds with individual freedom being a theme in recent years. Like Rose, the contemporary LGBTQ movements, youths are becoming more comfortable with who they are sooner because of how far society has come in recent years. In particular, those who identify

as traditionally male are wearing leggings, heels, dresses, and other items commonly associated with women. The LGBTQ crusade has had major successes in the last twenty years as well, and Rose can be seen as a character from a critically acclaimed film who defies gender norms for her period, just like those in the LGBTQ community.

As analytical as this thesis is, it is limited in its evaluation of symbolism. Frankly, all of the colors and styles mentioned could mean nothing and Cameron and his team could have made these choices just to make Rose look pretty. There are also more featured characters that could be analyzed, such as Jack, Cal, and Ruth and one could completely ignore Rose if desired. Also, instead of looking at Rose's costumes from a film perspective, it would make an even better argument to incorporate a historical angle. Things like the hemline, use of sleeves, early 20<sup>th</sup> century female sexuality could be explored to make a more well-rounded argument.

Many other factors play a part in Rose's revolutionary characterization, such as her actions, dialogue, and her relationship with Jack. Each of those parts can be a case in itself. Every movement, word, and choice Rose makes goes against what everyone else is telling her to do; she saves Jack twice, makes a sex joke about Freud to Mr. Ismay, and says the best line in the whole film to Cal when he tries to get her on to a lifeboat: "I'd rather be his whore than your wife!". Like the costumes, it would be interesting to look at the greater society happening outside of *Titanic* and how Rose's class, ethnicity, or world view fit into everything else happening in pre-World War I United States and Europe. While these three components are undeniably crucial to examining Rose, one may also look at cinematography, movie marketing strategies, and other film industry related categories to prove her as a character who goes against the grain.



As a fan of *Titanic* my entire life, Rose was always an enigma for me from an early age. I didn't understand why she wouldn't just go with Jack the first time he offered until I was older and around her age. Even as a 17 year old in the 21<sup>st</sup> century life is so much more complicated than it seems. At 17 you're still not an adult, you may not be all that confident in who you are as a person, and a lot of people are still trying to tell you what to do because it's in your best interest. Rose was so relatable in that sense, she is just a teen trying to be herself in an age that doesn't yet accept her attitudes and ideas as a young woman, but also being a part of a class where women weren't taken seriously. Her efforts and person are often overshadowed by the romantic tryst she has with Jack, which is sad because we see that happen so much in film. But I think Cameron tried his best to make it clear that Rose is the protagonist and that *Titanic* is **her** story, not hers and Jack's. The strength she has is incredible, to withhold from everyone her story on the doomed ship for over 80 years. It doesn't matter that she is a fictional character, because there are so many people out there in the world looking for something more, something beyond what they have who can relate to her. Because she saved me, in every way a person can be saved, Rose's story will always go on.

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