

FRAGRANCE ON ARTURO ROTOR'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES: DECONSTRUCTING THE BINARIES

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In finding the meaning of fragrance, a literary device used by Arturo Rotor in his short stories "At Last This Fragrance," "Zita," and "Dance-Music" from *Selected Stories from The Wound and The Scar*, I aim to discuss its significance in the context of Christian tradition and metaphysics, and consider, to a certain extent, the cultural and socio-economic facets of Rotor's short stories.

Since the dawn of history, fragrance was deemed among the essentials of life as demonstrated not just in flavoring and enriching ingredients of food and drink, but also by its use "in honor of births... and upon the tombs of the dead" (Morfit 19). Fragrance has always been involved in humanity's endeavors and daily pursuits: "Timeless and universal, scent has been a powerful force in ritual, medicine, myth, and conquest. Perfume has helped people to pray, to heal, to make love and war, to prepare for death, to create. To inspire, after all, is literally 'to breathe in'" (Aftel 3). In the Bible, particularly the nativity, which was depicted in "At Last This Fragrance," the wise men followed the star in the east to find the Christ Child. Along with gold, they brought precious fragrances (myrrh and frankincense) as gifts. And even at death, Christ was endowed with fragrances.

It is against this Christian backdrop that I present the dichotomy of fragrance (life and death, exposition and concealment, etc.) along with the historical and/or religious value of fragrance to the personal history (constructed history that is) of a character in "At Last This Fragrance." In "Zita" and "Dance-Music," on the other hand, the metaphysical aspect—the dichotomy of memory and dream, reality and fantasy, beauty and

ugliness, fragrance and foulness—is explored, since fragrance, as Aftel puts it, “straddles the line between the tangible and the intangible, the earthly and the ethereal, the real and the magical” (20). This essay at heart is deconstructing the binaries of fragrance in Arturo Rotor’s selected short stories: “At Last This Fragrance,” “Zita,” and “Dance-Music.”

“At Last This Fragrance” is a first point-of-view narrative of an intern assigned to work on Christmas Eve. The hospital’s—Rotor understatedly personifies the hospital here—senior resident physician thinks it appropriate that the interns draw lots because “nobody wanted to be on duty on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, or New Year’s Eve” (Rotor 22). The first point of view, which provides a firsthand rendition of events using direct and intimate language, is in parity to the introvert character of the narrator—a trait I find rather inapt in the arena of medicine and healthcare. But looking at it closely, “intern” originates from the Latin word *internus*, which means “inward” or “internal.” What better character to play an “I” narrator but an introvert *intern*.

As part of their pastime, the unnamed character narrator and his colleagues talk about their patients. The narrator explains, “We always remember our patients by the number on their beds or by the diagnosis of their case. Thus, you hear us speak of ‘my No. 42’ or of ‘my diabetes’, ‘my dysentery’” (23). Perhaps in order not to succumb to man’s impotence in the face of death, the story dehumanizes the “victims”: the names are replaced by the disease: humanity is erased.

The character narrator talks about his patient, an unnamed taxi dancer—the life of taxi dancers is also tackled in “Dance-Music” although the term is never mentioned—who is “no longer pretty” and has an advanced “cardiac decompensation,” a disease characterized by the inability of the heart to maintain adequate circulation. “Taxi dancer” is an interesting epithet defined as “a woman employed to dance with patrons who pay a fee for each dance.” A taxi dancer, in other words, is a professional dancer not unlike today’s GROs whose service, i.e., “company,” is paid by male patrons. Putting it in a time-frame perspective, a GRO is the

modern slightly *modified* version of a taxi dancer¹. Although technically speaking, a taxi dancer is not a prostitute but a “professional dancer,” it is safe to deduce that the services—dancing and “entertainment” supposedly—of taxi dancers are breeding grounds for prostitution. While at this, let us see what it did take to be a taxi dancer, and what was expected of her:

The girl... is expected to dance with any man who may choose her and to remain with him on the dance floor for as long a time as he is willing to pay the charges. Hence the significance of the apt name ‘taxi-dancer’ which has recently been given her. Like the taxi-driver with his cab, she is for public hire and is paid in proportion to the time spent and the services rendered (Cressey 3).

The taxi dancer, whose past is unknown, has no companion and comes “with nothing but a square box.” It is a perfume box containing “about a dozen bottles of the most delicate and costly French perfume you ever saw.” The box must be very special to the taxi dancer, “for she will not let it out of her sight” (Rotor 26). On the morning of the 24th of December, the character narrator helps in cleaning the ward, and, with Miss Basa, the head nurse in the ward, creates a *belen*, “a sort of small stage where the story of the Nativity is depicted” (29). The character narrator’s introversion is evident here as he finds it difficult to converse with her; he confesses, “I am too reserved, I suppose... I have never been able to become intimate (28). He then continues working with the others until he realizes that his patient, the taxi dancer, dies with “an indescribably delicious fragrance” (35). In the end he looks anxiously for Miss Basa to tell her what happened.

The straightforward prose of “At Last This Fragrance” brings home its point more potently: the story constructed with ease and simplicity intrinsically is an introspection of life and death in a hospital (where else can you better intertwine life and death than in a hospital scene), as it “expose[s] the inner life of the city” in its broader sense (Hawley 178). Just like the hospital, the