

## Womanhood and Initiation in *Nineteen Roses* by Mircea Eliade

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**Résumé :** Le roman *Nouăsprezece trandafiri* [Dix-neuf roses, notre trad.] de Mircea Eliade met en évidence un type différent de féminité par rapport à Domnișoara Christina [Mademoiselle Christina, notre trad.], Șarpele [Le Serpent, notre trad.] ou à d'autres textes narratifs de jeunesse. Niculina, d'une part et l'actrice Serdaru, d'autre part, représentent de véritables guides initiatiques pour Pandele ou Laurian, en conduisant ces chercheurs vers la liberté spirituelle à laquelle ils aspirent. Le roman préserve les motifs habituels du texte fantastique d'Eliade (la forêt, la voiture, l'âge changeante etc.), auxquels s'ajoutent d'autres, nouveaux, tels que la robe - garde-robe ou la coiffure changée chaque jour. Même si le roman comporte une dimension « à thèse », les personnages féminins tels que Niculina ont une structure complexe, tributaire, dans une certaine mesure, à leurs valences archétypales.

**Mots-clés :** Mircea Eliade, prose fantastique, personnage féminin, symbole, archétype

What is the place of the woman in a text concerning the salvation from the unholy world and spiritual freedom, in a text as *Nineteen Roses* by Mircea Eliade is? None on the surface, if we think that the transgressive events, connected to the initiation, preserve as central motif the dramatic performance, as the brain of the initiation, Ieronim Thanase, and the man who is to be initiated, the writer Anghel D. Pandele. Yet, in the textual plan of the past, as well as in the initiatic present (both plans having initiatory value), the starting point is the presence of the womanhood, through two women. In the first case, the initiation of Anghel D. Pandele occurs in the companionship of actress Serdaru, named in the text, Euridice. In the second case, all the adventure, the writer is crawled in, begins with the parental benediction that he has to give to his son, at the insistence of his son's fiancée, Niculina.

The novel, a little too anaesthetist by the justified opinion of Eugen Simion [1] sets up, as other “mythic narration” [2] do (Simion:2005), in two plans, concerning two dimension of the Real. In the first plan, curdled by the stories told by the witness and teller Eusebiu Damian, communist Security is interested in the initiatic adventure of Pandele, considering that the writer was crawled into a conspiracy whose role would have been the one of abolishing from the powerful *Number One*, on the background of the tensions between his subordinates, *Number Two* and *Number Three*. A political plot therefore sustained by ingredients as Security agents (Albini), pursuits, surveillances, but above all, the fear that starts to control all the characters that are involved in the story, in a way or another. Nevertheless, the most fearful of them are Eusebiu Damian and Ecaterina, the observers. The stay at the border of the story and life, they never finish their initiatic experiences, but they will be around as long as it is necessary to tell the story.

On the other hand, yet started in a thunderbolt manner, the story receives a mythological consistency: Laurian is searching for his father in the person of Pandele, but the goal of his quest doesn't endorse only to find him, but the break out of another search, the one of the primary mystery, through a remembrance process. For this goal to fulfil a dramatic performance is necessary. The performance is managed by Ieronim, but acted with all her self by Niculina, the way that actress Serdaru acted it in 1938, on may understand. The actress, called mostly Euridice in the novel, is the woman who started Pandele's amnesia. The rehearsals and the performances occur in a far away place, in the mountains, near Sibiu, as we understand later, at a hunting chalet, where one can reach very heavily, as the roads are obstructed by the snow. Besides this, one can reach the Camp only by a light lorry, by a fancy car drove by a driver who embraced a strange asceticism, the asceticism of the word, not wanting to talk to anybody. They also reach the Camp with army trucks, or by chaise/sleigh. The story, though burked by the scholar philosophical explanations, is simple. Pandele leaves with his son and his daughter in law for the Camp where under the influence of Ieronim Thanase, decides to hark back to an abandoned artistic formula – the theatre that he abandoned in his youth – convinced that the dramatic performance is a magic one and can

unveil the ultimate truths. Thus, under the influence of the *Introduction*, wrote by Ieronim and published on the name of Pandeale, in order to gain more impact on the public, the writer composes three plays, hard to decode even by his secretary, Eusebiu Damian. The plays are published at the same time with the artist's *Memories* they were working at before Pandeale's departure in the Camp. In the isolated mountainous space that we are talking about esoteric performances take place. Their reminiscent role is experienced by Eusebiu in his first trip to the Camp, fighting hardly with the sleep, action that unveils, after Eugen Simion's belief, a failed initiation. The second trip to the Camp brings to the young Pandeale's secretary a transgressive experience, connected to the story of love and initiation that Pandeale lived a long time ago. Setting out with the sleigh to the hunting chalet where Pandeale and Euridice (actress Serdaru, who doesn't have another surname in the text) came to a stand, he is apparently abandoned by Pandeale, Niculina and Laurian, being find the next day, almost frozen, by some workers. Neither the chalet, nor the forest exist anymore.

The most interesting and the most mysterious story is the one of love and amnesia that Pandeale experienced. It connects with his artistic life, his dilemma, or love stories that filled his later life. Author of a play in his early years, Pandeale participates, at Sibiu, at the rehearsals for the performance. But the director that introduced it in the theatre agenda is dismissed, and the new director backs of the show. Pandeale thinks that he has written a bad play and gives up the theatre, dedicating himself to the prose. Rereading, after long years, that first dramatic production, he ascertains that, in fact, the text wasn't bad at all, despite the left-handedness specific to artistic inception. Not only has his artistic development called the tune of the staging of the play, but his entire life. Invited to the hunting chalet in Aluraru's forest by actress Serdaru (Euridice), Pandeale wakes up with a tremendous sensation of thirst and when he drinks some water from a ewer he has the revelation that he can never temper his thirst. At the same time he watches to a blond woman at the window of the chalet. The glance at the water in the ewer, the meeting at the window, the failure in drama writing, one of these or all of them together make him forget the events that took part in 1938. He abandons the theatre, the responsibility of a love that yields a son, but most of all, he abandons the quest. In order to return to the last one or for all of them Niculina is sent to him.

The wife of his son becomes, for Luarian as well as for his father, the guide in their way to liberty. The excuse for the woman's break in the life of the writer is the fatherly benediction that Pandeale should give to his son before the wedding. After that, the artist will be drummed into a series of transgressive experiences that will end with his disappearance and his children's. Similar to Sophia for Albini, the woman that Eugen Simions observes that brings the sins to the world as she searches for her father, associated to the witch Circe, Niculina (whose real name, unveiled by Albini, is Elena Niculescu) seems to be an agent of salvation and of the recovering of Pandeale's self. Her story, which Albini tells to Eusebiu Damian, is one of a woman that doesn't hesitate to offer her sexual favours to the ones who could help her in her search. The story doesn't attract the attention of Eusebiu, suggesting that it was a communist mystification of some transgressive destinies. Because Niculina is not the woman that Albini describes. She resembles more to other women in Eliade's works - Marina, in *Pe strada Mântuleasa*, for example; like Marina she can change her name and sometimes her age and headdress. She becomes unrecognizable for a lay eye, as the one of Ecaterina, who gets the impression, at some point, when the performances start in Fântânele street, that the woman she finds asleep on the couch is much older even she looks alike Niculina. The heroine rejects the idea that she is the one found by Ecaterina, babelizing and fearing A.D.P.'s housekeeper. In fact, Niculina-Elena brings to the reader's mind the sacred prostitution, because of her sexual behaviour [3] (Chevalier, Gheerbrandt: 1995), as a symbol and rite of fecundity. But there is more, as the Dictionary stipulates: *Simboliza uniunea cu divinitatea și, în anumite cazuri, unitatea însăși a celor vii, în totalitatea ființei sau participarea lor la energia Zeului sau a Zeiței reprezentate prin prostituata respectivă.*

The signs that the woman shows are unveiling for her initiatic function: she is the one that sends Laurian to his father to receive the benediction for the wedding, she is the one to be seen in a light lorry by Eusebiu, in the moment of her wedding, when the secretary wants to offer a bouquet of nineteen roses, at the request of Pandeale; during the show that Niculina and Laurian perform for the writer and his secretary, the woman carries the two men off their feet not only because she holds in all the arts, from singing, to theatre or dance, but because she is able to change her clothes very easily and without being seen by the viewers. This leads to Eusebiu's belief that Niculina wears a wardrobe-gown: *Dar m-am trezit deodată întrebându-mă cum izbutea Niculina să-și scoată atât de repede rochia, și în atâtea chipuri (...). Nu înțelegeam cum își schimba Niculina tricoul, întâi argintiu, apoi negru, apoi de culoare prunelor coapte, apoi din nou negru* [4] (Eliade: 1994)

The woman seems to know things beyond this world, as Eusebiu asks how could Niculina find out where the key of the house was, and receives from Pandeale an stupendous answer: *Femeile de genul ei au o intuiție drăcească, aproape un fel de divinație* [5].

The character that coagulates the transgressive experiences in The Camp is not Ieronim Thanase (even if his name resembles Thanatos, the angel of death), but Niculina. She is an out of order person, that can't find any place in Romanian theatres, similar for her friends and colleagues to Iulia Hasdeu, Laurian's wife remains mysterious up to the end. She can declaim Odyssey in french (she could do the same thing in greek, but nobody can understand the language), she teaches french and latin, she knows forgot details in Pandeale's past life and so on. All the actors in the Camp are in love with her. Niculina explains the meaning of the events to everybody who takes part in the transgressive experiences. She also can tell why the heroes feel so fearful sometimes.

For Laurian, for the start, for Pandeale after that, Niculina is a guide through the quest of spiritual liberty. She leads the two men in the recollection process, being the single character that is dens from the point of view of archetypal structure in the novel. Mysterious and out of real time, the woman is Luarian's guide up to the moment of their marriage [6] (as Mircea Eliade says in *The art of dying*, the feminine guide should be a virgin or a mistress, Eliade: 2006).

For Pandeale, she is a substitute. Her role is to remake the 1938 transgressive story. It had as protagonist another guide, the actress Serdaru – Euridice. The instruction failed at that time, because the writer glanced into the water he drank from the pot. The woman's features are schematic and dimmed. Moreover, she doesn't have a surname, as Pandeale, in his amnesia calls her Euridice, after the character she acted in his play. Or, by that, the actress hauls a mythological shade, transforming Pandeale into a modern Orpheus. An Orpheus that doesn't descend into inferno in the quest of his lover, but on the contrary, he forgets her as soon as mirrors himself in the water. What he obtains is, according to the *Dictionary of symbols, a reversed image of reality (o imagine inversată a realității*, Chevalier, Gheerbrandt: 1995) [7]. Therefore, he reinterprets the failure of his dramatical play, the liaison with Euridice, ignoring the transgressive experience he had taken part in, returning to a common life (from the perspective of the mythical integration in time). Notorious writer, he abides by his life as a romance collector, his love affairs being known by Ecaterina, his housekeeper. Through Niculina, he will renew the past knowledge track drawing out of his time, from the present time, as neither the chalet, nor the forest did survived at the time of rehearsals and performances in the Camp. It is not very important the fact of winning the spiritual liberty through the performances and the trips in the wood or the fact of being imprisoned into a world he can't understand (like doctor Honigberger). The most purposeful fact is that when a track for knowledge fails, it has to be renewed even if that leads to a confrontation with death, as it is the case of another artist, Gavrilescu, in *La țigănci*.

Niculina is opposed in the text to two other characters: one of them is the vigorous yet fearful Ecaterina, the housekeeper of Pandeale, and witness of the dramatic experiences that take place in the writer's house. Her position is interesting in the text because of the way she

decodes and tells the facts. After Eusebiu leaves for India, the theatre troupe gets installed in Pandele's house. It is an amateur troupe as Albini says and this is the place where events take place. Ecaterina marks down, in her pragmatism and ignorance, the signs that fear her: the old woman that looks alike Niculina, the image of Laurian, when he brings her the bag filled with rabbits, looking ten years younger than he is; the performances that take places with closed doors; the panic of the actors when the housekeeper enters the room with the glasses of water (she was told not to get in during the shows) etc. All of them are signs of transgressive events that occur in the writer's house. Ecaterina can't understand them, she doesn't know anything else but the fact that they provoke her immense fear, very close to the complex of persecution. For example, at the meeting with Eusebiu, she makes sure that she is not followed, and when someone passes near them she asks Eusebiu to cough. Even the meeting has to happen *by chance*.

She is the opposite of Niculina for her pragmatism and for ignorance, but most of all for the obstinacy in the chase for her lover (to whom she will marry eventually) when he runs away from her. Ecaterina is therefore the woman that lacks spiritual appetite, unable to see beyond the surface of things.

In another opposition area rests Valeria, the fiancée, the future wife of Eusebiu. She doesn't totally reject the transgressive signs. She proves this in the moment of Pandele's disappearance: she postpones the wedding because of the superstition of her relatives. The disappearance of the godfather before the wedding is a bad sign, but a worse one would be his death. Nevertheless she doesn't lead herself by the signs as in the moment that she understands that the absence of the godfather threatens her wedding she treads on it in order not her relatives to find the news and baulk the ceremony. Her image is similar to Ecaterina's though as the image of Niculina resembles to the one of the actress Serdaru.

While Pandele's path to knowledge seems to come to an end being complete, the one of Eusebiu remains a simple transgressive experience, unique, but without any consequences in the secretary's life. Its elements, more appropriate to the specific of the fantastic novel, depart from the status of the character. He knows very well the laws of the reality and their transgression seem not only uncanny, but unacceptable [8] (Todorov: 1973). He hesitates in the interpretation of the facts, in front of Albini that he may have dreamed the road to the chalet in the Alunaru's forest. The mystery doesn't invade [9], in terms of Roger Caillois (Caillois: 1971) the real life, but slowly gets into the life of the heroes, according to Mircea Eliade's belief [10] (Eliade: 1992), sacredly unveiling himself through his signs. Those signs are related to the motif of the forest, of the car (therefore of the trip), of the changing age, that we find in other Eliade's short stories. Other motifs complete the signs of the sacred: the wardrobe gown, the hair dress (changing daily), setting everything somehow under the sign of fear. The fear for death or for uncanny that controls the experimenter-hero [11] (Dan: 1978), because he doesn't have anymore the exceptional features of the fairy tale hero. He is a lonely man who, like Pandele, has forgot his place and meaning in the world, he forgot how to live beyond the present day. Therefore he needs a woman...

## Notes

[1] Simion, Eugen, *Mircea Eliade, Nodurile și semnele prozei*, Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2005, pp.299-311

[2] The term is Eugen Simion's.

[3] Chevalier, Jean, Gheerbrandt, Alain, *Dicționar de simboluri*, vol. II, Artemis, București, 1995, p. 130

[4] Eliade, Mircea, *Integrala prozei fantastice*, Moldova, Iași, 1994, p. 158

[5] Eliade, Mircea, *Integrala prozei fantastice*, Moldova, Iași, 1994, p.149

[6] Eliade, Mircea, *Arta de a muri*, Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2006

[7] The mirror has in the symbols dictionary multiple significations: the mirror is associated to the act of getting knowledge, to the speculation, to the discovery of creative intelligence; it is also the symbol of the wisdom. Nevertheless, the reversed image of the reality presumes a wrong speculation. In Eliade's novel, the mirror of the water is similar to the magic mirror that shows people that doesn't exist. The suggestion of the motif in the text is one of anticipating the presence of Niculina. See also the *Dictionary of symbols*, pp. 371-376

[8] by Todorov's definition, *Introducere în literatura fantastică*, București, Univers, 1973.

[9] as Roger Caillois writes in *În inima fantasticului*, București, Meridiane, 1971

[10] Mircea Eliade doesn't give us a definition of the fantastic story, but, in *Sacrul și Profanul*, București, Humanitas, 1992, he concludes that the sacred space has many breakthroughs, privileged places, where the sacred can unveil through his signs. This happens in the primitive minds and it is connected to the miracle. But the fantastic story takes place into the real world, its space is homogeneous and the modern man cannot recognize the sign. Ordinarily, the fantastic story exploits this feature of the character, but in Mircea Eliade's works the path is reversed, as the man has to search for the signs that can unveil the sacred.

[11] The Romanian term is experimentator and is used for the first time by Sergiu Pavel Dan, in *Introducere în literatura fantastică*.

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