

Vulnerable or Powerful, Obedient or Resistant — Character Analysis of Romeo and Juliet

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Abstract. As is known to all the play *Romeo and Juliet* has been studying by numerous scholars with lots of different results. Internationally and domestically, the paper aims to cite some scholars' insightful studies for themes of the play; focus will be on the character analysis of Romeo and Juliet. Based on their studies, I am attempting to apply the methodology of humanism and psychology to study the core point: Are the protagonists Romeo and Juliet vulnerable or strenuous, powerless or powerful, obedient or resistant controlled by the alleged star-crossed fate and patriarchic system in feudal society? And my critical review is proposed.

Introduction

Romeo and Juliet has been regarded as the most well-known love story in the Britain literature. The theme of the play is mainly about love and love is the most important theme for many plays or dramas both all over the world in the history of literary tradition. The main theme of *Romeo and Juliet* focuses on romantic love, and the two protagonists of the play fall in love at first sight. When they met each other for the first time, it was between Romeo and Juliet that the intense passion springs up. In this play, love has the strong and fantastic power which surpasses all other values, such as loyalties and emotions. Besides, the love is a violent, ecstatic, fantastic and overpowering force. In the play, the young lovers are driven to fight against their entire social world: families, friends, ruler and the most important of all is the conventionally social system.

Numerous scholars have been exploring and studying Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet* is undoubtedly included. Some conclude that it is the "doomed fate" that causes the ultimate tragedy, some say it is the "personality flaws", some believe it is the "patriarchy in the man-dominated society", while still others think "the urgent need for justice" motivates the death-marked love. Whether it is the destined fortune or the patriarchy or the protagonists themselves that pave the way for the ultimate sacrifice? Some say Romeo and Juliet are weak, powerless, vulnerable and obedient controlled by the patriarchic system in feudal society, while some believe Romeo and Juliet have been growing from immature to ripening in the struggling course for love and freedom. I've been meditating on the point and hope to find the comparatively harmonious answer among all to convince myself.

Literature Review

Some of the Studies on *Romeo and Juliet*. D. Douglas Waters says In critical discussion of *Romeo and Juliet* in the last three decades or so, there are at least three significant ways of approaching the play: 1) traditional character-study as the key to the tragedy, 2) a recent de-emphasis on the genre of tragedy in favor of discussion of culture, sexual difference, and ideology, and 3) the role of fate as the key to the tragedy. (D. Douglas Waters, 1992:74)

Patriarchy itself evolved from ancient systems of social order based on heroic leadership and strength. Like Christianity, in which priestly fathers commonly exercised worldly as well as

spiritual influence, patriarchy gave a local master superhuman sanction. Elizabethan theorists associated the father with the king and with God himself: it was he who created, defined, and validated his child's personality. He granted and guaranteed the psychic life of all who depended on him. The faithful servant or child could share in the father's righteous potency with a heightened sense of vitality and invulnerability tantamount. [1]

“Reconstituting patriarchal forms to serve their own desires for autonomy, Romeo and Juliet never openly defy their parents. Yet with the wish for autonomy comes a veiled recognition of the suffocating claims their parents make on them. Their parents' will to subsume each child's identity comes unconsciously to seem to the lovers like cannibalism.” [1]. The lovers' mutual worship expresses a generosity, subverted or repressed elsewhere in Verona that balances their self-destructiveness. In their lovemaking, for example, Romeo and Juliet repeatedly fantasize that deathlike self-effacement can lead to apotheosis. Repudiating their own names, loving in darkness, they try to be invisible in hopes of escaping patriarchal control. They imagine innocent self-nullification that excuses their actual defiance of their fathers even as each casts the beloved in the role of life-giving lord... Finally, however, their behavior is equivocal and that nobleness makes their self-effacement perilous.” [1]. “Fully internalized in a vulnerable character, patriarchal conflicts may produce self-murder. And that, I maintain, is what finally destroys Romeo and Juliet. [1]

Weimin Li, an associate professor in the Foreign Languages College of Sichuan argues it unilateral to think the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* is socially or fatedly or morally oriented. “Star-crossed” and “death-marked” love is not the ultimate cause for the tragic ending. Fortunate tragedy is the main clue in the play, through which deeply reflects the tragedy of love, of social system and of mankind, and most important of all, to extol the fatal and undefeatable fighting between man and destiny, and man and society. Fate is undoubtedly the important ingredient, while the purpose of the play is not to tell the conventionally social system, the patriarchic society and the doomed fate are unpredictable and undefeatable, but to sing high praise of ardent and romantic love, and non-stopping fights and struggles in the course of striving for love, as well as the steadily growing mutuality of Romeo and Juliet. Apart from this, Juliet's incomparable bravery and courage to fight against the man-dominated society and patriarchic system. (trans by the author) [2]

Romeo and Juliet has been studying by numerous scholars nationally and internationally with very different results. As what I demonstrate above, some say the star-crossed fortune is unavoidable, some say patriarchy in the man-dominated society finally results the happening of loving tragedy, some think the urgent need for justice motivates the death-marked love, and some say Romeo and Juliet are weak, powerless, vulnerable and obedient controlled by the patriarchic system in feudal society, while some believe Romeo and Juliet have been growing from immature to ripening in the struggling course for love and freedom.

My Research Question. Are the protagonists, Romeo and Juliet, vulnerable or strenuous, powerless or powerful, obedient or resistant controlled by the star-crossed fate and patriarchic system in feudal society? It is the core point that I am to demonstrate in the paper.

Methodology

What is humanism? And humanism is the soul of the play. “Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence (rationalism and empiricism) over acceptance of dogma or superstition.” [3] The term was coined by theologian Friedrich Niethammer at the beginning of the 19th century. Generally, however, humanism refers to a perspective that affirms some notion of human freedom and progress. [3] From what have been discussed, both the international and domestic scholars have given deep and far-fetched explorations of the themes as well as the characterization aspects. Personally I am in favor of the point that Romeo and Juliet have become, step by step, brave, powerful, strenuous and triumphant against the patriarchic system in feudal society. In order to demonstrate further, I plan to apply the methodology of humanism and psychology to give a personal analysis as follows.

Analysis of the protagonists Romeo and Juliet

Juliet from innocence to maturity.

1)The innocent, obedient and premature Juliet: Personally, I think Juliet is the most successful one among all the characters in the play, as the plot goes on, I see a Juliet who grows brave, beautiful, wise and vehement. At the first beginning, Juliet is no more than a young and naïve girl as her father says, “a stranger in the world” who “hath not seen the change of fourteen years”; she should be at least 16, he says, before she will be ready for marriage. The young Juliet has the charm of girls’ directness and she is girlish. It seems that Shakespeare focus on Juliet’s girlish directness to narrate the drama and to tell us she is making progress from innocence to committing suicide. As to Romeo, Shakespeare makes him a young man.

Juliet is a “lamb “and “lady-bird” in the eyes of nurse, and she is very docile and obedient to her mother as she herself says,

“I’ll look to like, if looking liking move:
But no more deep will I endart mine eye
Than your consent gives strength to make it fly”[4]

Juliet is only a naïve and obedient girl who dares to love on the premise of receiving permission from her mother, while she becomes brave and courageous when falling love with Romeo at first sight, “Go, ask his name---if he be married, My grave is like to be my wedding bed” [4]though it’s abrupt and a little bit incredible to hear, yet mocked by fate, the wedding-bed finally becomes her grave.

Unquestionably Shakespeare wishes the play to convey a sense of inevitability. His success at doing so, however, derives not only from the power of coincidence, fate, feud, and stars, but also from the "child" Juliet's forced entrance into adulthood: "too rash, too vanquish, too sudden,"[4] as she herself admits.

2)The independent, wise and maturing Juliet: The sincere, vehement love of them becomes to cultivate Juliet’s personality of being independent and meditative, she says to herself,

“Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.

What a Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,

...

“Without that title, Romeo, doff thy name,
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.” [4]

From her words, I see Juliet stresses on reality but not the name itself. Capulet, a distinguished and renowned patriarchic family undoubtedly values its name and title very much, but Juliet is willing to abandon her name when love is threatened, subconsciously she becomes to fight against the surroundings, which is rightly the humanistic thinking of Shakespeare. At the beginning of Scene 2, Act 3 goes the Juliet’s soliloquy,

“Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds
Towards Phoebus’ lodging! Such a wagoner
As Phaeton would whip you to the west.” [4]

Juliet compares herself to be a Phaeton (son of the sun) to bravely go after her own love and happiness, she is being independent and courageous, but unfortunately Tybalt is killed by her sweetheart Romeo, when hearing the news, she is mixed with anger and sorrow and says,

“Beautiful tyrant! Fiend angelical!

...

So fairly bound? O that deceit should dwell
In such a gorgeous palace” [4]

She cannot conceal her sorrow of losing her cousin and also can not abandon her deep love for Romeo, the only way to release her pain is to scold Romeo with heart bleeding, but when the nurse blames Romeo, she immediately says, “blister’d be thy tongue”, “O, what a beast was I to chide at him!”[4] When reading up to here, I realize the previous obedient, docile and naïve little girl has substituted to be a independent, courageous and maturing lady.

3) The decisive, resolute and matured Juliet: As the plot discourses, Juliet is facing with the most severe time, she is told the plan that Romeo will be poisoned, what's more, she will be arranged to marry Paris, she has no alternative way but pretend to consent her mother's poisonous plan, but for her marriage, she says definitely, "Now, by saint peter's Church, and peter too. He shall not make me a joyful bride!" Having suffered such a series of disasters, she has become painful, irritated and desperate, but when reproved "baggage" by her father, she cries out "Is there no pity sitting in the clouds, that sees into the bottom of my grief." She reproves the nurse "Ancient damnation! Most wicked friend!" in the end of the soliloquy she murmured "If all else fail, I have the power to die." Juliet is confronting the critical moment of her time, on the one hand, she has to restrain her indignation to the family and Paris, pretending to accept the arranged marriage, and on the other hand, she drinks the mysterious medicine with the last ray of hope for their love.

After knowing Romeo has died, Juliet is utterly disheartened and desperate, and she decides to go Here transferred epithet "happy dagger" is used to describe the mood of Juliet is not regretful, or feared but feels free from worldly cares, and gets eternal tranquility and happiness with her sweetheart Romeo.

Romeo from impetuosity to maturity.

1)The impulsive, impetuous, and self-involved young Romeo :In the course of the play, Romeo has grown up and become an adult man. The first time we meet him he is just about a stereotype of the lover. He treasures solitude and cherishes night very much. What's more, he is somewhat depressed, pale, weak and sad. He has been assuming all the attitudes of a rejected suitor, he writes poetry; In his speech there is a wide range of exclamations which are contradictory. At this very juncture, Romeo is the man who knows no more about love than what he has read in the books that he emulates, and in fact he is falling in love with love. Romeo appears at first seemingly pale, alienated and self-involved as "Tut, I have lost myself; I am not here; This is not Romeo, he's some other where." "Ay me! Sad hours seem long...Not having that, which, having, makes them short."[4]

The passion that is from Romeo for Juliet is not the first love: the passion is a successful one and it drives his passion out for another lady or lover, Rosaline, as the sun hides the stars. Perhaps it is a trick to give us a higher idea of the lady, and Romeo actually has no deep idea about what love is, but impulsively blinds his felling as he exclaims,

2)The revivatory, passionate and maturing Romeo: When falling love with Juliet at first sight, this courtly, carefree young Romeo begins to revive, and possesses the capability of the deepest passions of love, the heights of his imagination and expression are equally by Juliet. It is the thoroughness of his loving, his complete lack of conflict or hesitation in any matter that concerns Juliet, the utter commitment with which he abandons himself to the intense, swift passion, which distinguishes him as a lover. In some senses, Juliet has awakened him to be a revivatory, enthusiastic and maturing Romeo. Evidence can be seen from his secret meeting with Juliet and vows to abandon his name and title for sake of winning his honey's heart.

"I take thee at thy word:

Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized;

...

Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love."[4]

3)The calm, brave and matured Romeo: It might be right to say Romeo is not practical or realistic at the first period of time, but with the story developing with time and circumstance, the characters are becoming round, especially when Tybalt is putting him to shame and urging him into fighting , Romeo tries to constrain himself, it is not because of lack of courage and love-sickness. He is brought up and lifted by the love for Juliet to an encompassing love. It is the love that does prevent him from fighting, and he is obviously aware of his new status as a relative of the man who continuously provokes him. The complex and moral principle restrain Romeo from dueling, as well as the secrecy of the marriage.

Romeo is not a coward, he revenges Mercutio's death bravely but traps himself in the biggest trouble, he is desperate and plans to commit suicide while it is love, not else that energizes him to

survive. When he heard Juliet has died, he completely loses the last hope of being alive, and he buys the poison calls it “cardinal and not poison”, at last he drinks up the poison without any hesitation and murmurs,

“O, here Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars

...

Thus with a kiss I die.”[4]

Romeo, the hero of the play, does not make any pause for whatever the reason is. It is either for self-indulgent emotion or a lack of firm belief or conviction. Instead, he goes to seek and look for his love in death with unwavering courage. For him, love has already become the whole life pursuit. For in living, there can be nothing but living without Juliet. Romeo has come to manhood, but his whole identity as a human being lies in loving. From this moment on, Romeo is no longer the previous self-involved, impetuous young man but it is love with Juliet that cultivates him to be the brave, calm, and matured man.

Conclusion

From what have been demonstrated, I believe that Romeo and Juliet have become, step by step, brave, powerful, strenuous and triumphant against the patriarchic system in feudal society. Baptized by the sincere, ardent love, the two protagonists are elevated, from innocent, self-indulgent to independent and wise, and at last, they become resolute, brave and matured. Their love is eternal for they sacrifice themselves but dissolve the long passing down feud between the two big feudal families.

Humanism is a kind of ideology derived from the Renaissance in Europe, which is against the feudalism and Church doctrine, and chant for the freedom and emancipation of mankind, sing high praise of earthly happiness and welfare. They believe love is no doubt the most sublime feeling in the world and everyone has rights to pursue love and enjoy the eternal happiness love brings to people. The dynamic developing characters of Romeo and Juliet are the embodiment of Shakespeare’s humanistic thinking from which Shakespeare’s thoughts and attitude are vividly expressed.

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