Danielle Gorman

Brother Bird

ENG 373

16 November 2013

The Loss of Innocence in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*

William Shakespeare is known for his character portrayals. He has an understanding of human nature that rivals even the most knowledgeable psychologists. One of his most successful narrations of the human mind is seen in his well-known play, *Romeo and Juliet*. Written in the early 1590s, this play exercises an acute knowledge of adolescents who are just ripening in age. As teenagers, Romeo and Juliet are seen both as adults and children simultaneously, which not only confuses them as to how they should act, but also as to what is expected of them. Ultimately, Juliet and Romeo each experience a separate loss of innocence—which travels through attraction, obsession, and, finally, sacrifice—that leads to corruption and death on both parts.

“Every tongue that speaks / But Romeo's name speaks heavenly eloquence” (3.2.32-33). Juliet’s story is, perhaps, the most tragic of all of Shakespeare’s heroines. At thirteen years of age—“she hath not seen the change of fourteen years” (1.2.9)—she becomes embroiled in a love story that is beyond her in years and experience. It begins at the Capulet’s party, where “neither had known the identity of the other” and where Romeo had originally meant to woo Rosaline, as he “had resolved to be an onlooker and carry a torch. That torch may have burned symbolically, but not for Juliet” (Levin 3). Romeo spies Juliet, *en masque*, and declares “Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! / For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night” (1.5.50-51). Overlooking the fact that Romeo feels that love at first sight is based purely on the physical, he does exercise the point that initial attraction is the first thing to lead him down the road to his early grave, just as David’s lust after Bathsheba.

The initial attraction begins to transform into obsession during the Balcony scene. At this point, Juliet “calls into question not merely Romeo’s name but—by implication—all names, forms, conventions, sophistications, and arbitrary dictates of society” (Levin 4). The noble house of Capulet is coming in second place behind a Montague in Juliet’s eyes and she’s throwing all the rules out the metaphorical window. The young lovers are “in their beauty and nobility, above the common run of humanity and yet have flaws of character; and they are caught between competing and legitimate principles, the claim of love and the claim of family obligation” (Weinberger 352). However, after Juliet calls their family feud into question, she decides to place that issue on the back-burner, as it were, and move on with her relationship with Romeo, which she sees as more important than a vendetta that has gone on since before her birth. When Romeo is discovered beneath the balcony, Juliet is understandably worried; Romeo poses a threat to the both of them—his life and her purity. Romeo could be caught at any moment by Capulet guards, and Juliet’s no fool—she is skeptical of Romeo’s passionate claims, which could be a mask for more nefarious intentions, indeed, “the possibility that this Romeo is merely an amorous predator clearly crosses the mind of […] Juliet” (Watson). Juliet tells him as much when she refutes his words, saying

Three words, dear Romeo, and then goodnight indeed.

If that thy bent of love be honorable,

Thy purpose marriage, send me word to-morrow,

By one that I’ll procure to come to thee,

Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite. (2.2.142-146)

Her innocence, not without intelligence, is still intact at this point, and she’d like to keep it that way until they are united—at the very least—legally.

After Juliet’s (shall I say shotgun?) marriage to Romeo, Romeo is forced into a duel with Tybalt to avenge Mercutio, whom Tybalt has just slain. Juliet, unaware of the duel, is thinking of Romeo, and saying to herself

Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow'd night,

Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,

Take him and cut him out in little stars,

And he will make the face of heaven so fine

That all the world will be in love with night. (3.2.20-24)

When Romeo stabs and kills Tybalt, Juliet’s remorse is not for her cousin’s death, but for Romeo’s actions. Amidst Juliet’s flowery words comes her nurse, hurrying to share the bad news of her cousins death; however, she does so in such a roundabout way that it confuses Juliet into thinking that both Tybalt and Romeo are dead: “My dear-loved cousin, and my dearer lord?” (3.2.68). Her words show that, though she loves her cousin, Romeo is seen as “dearer” in her eyes. At this point, she is scared for Romeo’s safety and doesn’t seem to give a fig about the repercussions of his actions against her family.

Juliet sacrifices both her maidenhood and her life to Romeo. Her loss of virginity symbolizes her departure from childhood, which she should have stayed in for several more years, regardless of the young marrying age generally practiced in the Renaissance period. Although readers of her story might find her situation achingly romantic, she is, in essence, being *raped* by Romeo. Her consent to sexual relations with him is overshadowed by her blindingly young age. Even though they are married, the issue of age is too absolute to overlook. By sacrificing her virginity to him, Juliet gives that which is most sacred for a young woman to give. This loss of innocence—at the hands of Romeo’s libido—leads, ultimately, to her premature death. Though some scholars believe that “random events [in *Romeo and Juliet*] press towards evil while the willed actions of the protagonists are radically innocent” (Nevo 243), the result of their actions in their demise cannot be overlooked.

Juliet’s loss of innocence further manifests itself in her desire to appear dead to prevent her marriage to Paris because she is already married to Romeo. Distraught, she looks to Friar Laurence for guidance; his solution is for her to die. To that, she replies in agreement, saying such things as “O, bid me leap, rather than marry Paris! / From off the battlement of yonder tower” and “bid me go into a new-made grave / And hide me with a dead man in his shroud; / Things that, to hear them told, have made me tremble,” and finally exclaims “And I will do it without fear or doubt, / To live an unstain’d wife to my sweet love [Romeo]” (4.1.77-78, 84-88). The Friar’s suggestion is a bit less dangerous; he produces a small vial with a concoction of “distilled liquor” and plants for her to consume when she is alone, which will make her appear “stiff and stark and cold, […] like death,” to which Juliet agrees (4.1.94, 103). She is willing to sacrifice her life on the chance that this special drug will put her in a death-like coma so that she can escape from all responsibilities to her family, to Paris, and run away with Romeo to start a new life together, away from the Capulets and the Montagues.

When Juliet awakes to see Romeo’s dead body beside her, she is thrown into a state of panic. She has given up everything—from her family to an easy life with Paris—for Romeo, the man (almost) that she loves. Once he is dead, Juliet performs the greatest sacrifice of all—her life. Unlike the potion, which she had on good authority would only put her in a death-like state, a daggers pierce to the heart will kill her for good; she knows that. With that knowledge, she plunges ahead—literally.

Romeo might claim four years on Juliet, but he is still a teenager. Less is known of his responsibilities to his family, though it can be gleaned from the plot that the expectations of him are similar to those of Juliet—marry anyone *other* than a Capulet. With his slightly more advanced age, and his gender, there is less of him to corrupt than there is for Juliet; however, the innocence destroyed in Romeo is found mainly in the corruption of his honor.

Romeo’s departure from innocence is slightly different from Juliet’s experience. With the initial attraction already discussed, Romeo’s obsession with Juliet is traced through his perseverance in generating a tryst within the grounds of her family’s estate, at the risk of his own life. The Balcony scene is indicative of Romeo’s characterization in that he is portrayed as a surface-deep lover. The two haven’t known each other for more than a few hours—*can that point be stressed any farther?* “The two lovers’ beauty and depth of passion, cut short by their tragic deaths, tend to hide the facts that the two are in the throes of childish puppy love and, to take Mercutio’s point of view, are in heated thrall to their nether parts” (Weinberger 355). As a seventeen year old boy, Romeo is acting under the direction of his hormones, rather than his mind. As a young man who, we can assume, has never had sexual relations, Romeo is all too willing to throw his innocence out the window and experience an act of maturity and masculinity. It seems fairly apparent that Romeo is alright with this change in his life. Romeo’s corruption is found in the fact that he “and Juliet, even after their wedding, are conducting a clandestine liaison that has more in common with a dangerous intrigue than with a licit marriage” (Colaco 138). If we are to assume that he is *not* a virgin, then his loss of honor comes from his determination to deflower Juliet which, in any period of history, is looked upon with a judging eye.

An additional loss of honor is exhibited in the form of the duel between Romeo and Tybalt. Done at a time when the Prince had outlawed dueling, this was “the essential remedy for affairs of aristocratic honor" (Weinberger 357). The Montagues and Capulets are the highest aristocrats aside from the Prince himself. What is strange in this scene is the thoughts of Tybalt particularly; it is interesting to note that “Tybalt considers whether or not killing Romeo would be a sin;” Where Tybalt is generally seen as the hot-head of the characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, it is ironic that he is the one who has second thoughts about the repercussions of his actions (Weinberger 357). Romeo, on the other hand, instantly jumps forward to fight after the death of his friend which—as an admirable gesture—is still immoral and illegal. Tybalt’s maturity is contrasted against Romeo’s and, unfortunately, Romeo is found lacking.

In the final act of *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo is experiencing pleasant thoughts with dark undertones which foreshadow the events of the near future of him and his wife:

I dreamt my lady came and found me dead-

Strange dream, that gives a dead man leave to think!-

And breathed such life with kisses in my lips,

That I revived, and was an emperor.

Ah me! How sweet is love itself possess’d.

When but love’s shadows are so rich in joy! (5.1.6-11)

Romeo soon receives news of Juliet’s ‘death’ and rushes back to find her lifeless body (stabbing an unaccommodating Paris on the way) in the Capulet crypt. Suicide, which is seen as one of the greatest abominations throughout history, is his goal. “The ideas of religion and love and those of Christianity not only work together; they also pull in opposite directions, creating a dramatic tension which is relieved only with the transcendence of love at the very end” (Siegel 372). Romeo is determined to sacrifice his own life because he cannot fathom a life without his wife, so, even though he is willing to sacrifice his innocence in the form of ending his own life, he believes that it is worth it. Love is, after all, the greatest achievement of a life.

It is difficult to ascertain the amount of maturity that Romeo and Juliet contained between the two of them. There are moments when they act as children unafraid of consequences, and other moments when they exhibit wisdom greater than that of their parents. Their situations were unfortunate and their actions dire; however, “passionate love brought destruction and death, but at the same time glorified this love and, in keeping with the doctrine of the religion of love, presented faithfulness in it as the highest virtue” (Siegel 372).

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

Works Cited

Colaco, Jill. "The Window Scenes in "Romeo and Juliet" and Folk Songs of the Night Visit." *Studies in Philology* 83.2 (Spring, 1986): 138-57. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Nov. 2013.

Levin, Harry. "Form and Formality in Romeo and Juliet." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 11.1 (Winter, 1960): 3-11. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 Nov. 2013.

Nevo, Ruth. "Tragic Form in Romeo and Juliet." *Studies in English Literature* 9.2 (Spring, 1969): 241-58. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 Nov. 2013.

Siegel, Paul N. "Christianity and the Religion of Love in Romeo and Juliet." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12.4 (Autumn, 1961): 371-92. *JSTOR*. Web. 29 Nov. 2013.

Watson, Robert N., and Stephen Dickey. "Wherefore Art Thou Tereu? Juliet and the Legacy of Rape." *Renaissance Quarterly* 58.1 (2005): 127-56. Print.

Weinberger, Jerry. "Pious Princes and Red-Hot Lovers: The Politics of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet"" *The Journal of Politics* 65.2 (May, 2003): 350-75. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Nov. 2013.