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When Haunting Imagery Becomes A Theme: A Re-reading of Shakespeare's

Romeo and Juliet

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Abstract

Romeo and Juliet is always handled as a poetic work that resides mainly on poetry rather than drama. This concept is apparently based on borrowing from "Romeus & Juliata" an Italian well-known poem that had been attired a dramatic clothing by William Shakespeare. Accordingly, all poetic elements were maintained although Romeo and Juliet was rather presented as a drama that spoke up vehemently and effectively to an emotion-thrilled audience. Precisely, the use of imagery was the main and pivotal point around which the entirety of the play seems to revolve. Indeed, the overuse of imagery has made the play waver precariously between drama and poetry without undermining any. Shakespeare, manipulating his dramatic and poetic talents, managed brilliantly to offset the two genres to serve this outstanding piece.

Key Words:Romeo & Juliet, Shakespeare, Imagery, Light, Dark, Dramatic Structure, Poetic theme.



Introduction & Analysis

Apparently, Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is virtually a poetic work mainly based on imagery.(1) The abundance of poetry makes imagery enjoy a versatile and panoramic form which is actively worked out through the combination of both elements of poetry and drama, though L.C. Knight who discusses certain "preliminary considerations" in Shakespeare believes that the "essential structure of the play has been sought in the poetry rather than in the more easily extractable elements of 'plot' and 'character'.(2) As a result then, Romeo and Juliet has revealed the kind of imagery which confirms its poetic and dramatic presence together with all the other elements.

Caroline Spurgeon, an authority in this regard, thinks that imagery "... gives quality, creates atmosphere and conveys emotion..." (3) in the play. Yet when imagery is articulated in this work, it usually falls within the context of the love story which mainly attributes its effectiveness and dramatic significance to the various, versatile, colorful images involved.

However, the imagery variety and versatility in Romeo and Juliet make the tracking attempt of their development a process not un-difficult to realize. Viewed from this angle, images which are most salient are picked up by multitudes of critics without necessarily ignoring the other secondary images.(4)

On this basis, the "nature imagery" (5) or more precisely the image of "light" and its various derivations seem to enjoy the highest percentage of recurrence in the play. (6) Though regarded quite self-explanatory and expressive of the love theme of the play, the image of "light" has been put into use only when there are certain romantic occasions or expressions of



love feelings. To this Mrs. Spurgeon refers and tries to find some adherent equilibrium between the theme of love and the image of light. She writes :

The beauty and the glory of young love are seen by Shakespeare in the irradiating glory of sunlight and starlight in a dark world. This dominating image is light, every form and manifestation of it .(7)

However, the image of 'light' is always viewed against a dark background which is quite overwhelming in the play, not only in its equal repetition alongside that of 'dark' but also in the great and decisive happenings of the play which are perceived with some virtual correlation to this image.

The present study, therefore, attempts to show that the image of 'dark' is dramatically as effective as that of 'light' with respect to the love theme; it even corresponds more to the tragic nature of the play as it involves depth, subtlety and secrecy.

First and foremost, the bearings of love to the image of 'light' are spontaneously natural. In other words, love is apparently explained and smoothly interpreted through this image. Yet, it seems that Shakespeare does not refrain from employing dark images to express love which is tragic. The 'light' image in this play, it is worthwhile to note, is strongly and organically associated with love, i.e., when love is in its romantic phase, 'light' becomes the inevitably available convincing channel to use. However, the transitional point in the use of the image of 'light' occurs when love is fulfilled through the brief marriage of Romeo and Juliet. So the balance between love and 'light' is disturbed slightly. Love has been independently concluded in marriage: "She (Juliet) still love's sweet bait from fearful hooks. (Act II. Sc. I)". Love now becomes only a means that lends 'power' which is in turn conducive to independent decision of marriage: "But passion lends him (Romeo) power, time,



means to meet tempting extremities with extreme sweet. (Act II. Sc. I)" Love definitely is not like marriage. With marriage there is satisfaction both on the sensual and spiritual levels. And the marriage of Romeo and Juliet is not a different case. In fact Romeo and Juliet are not unsatisfied lovers as is the case, for instance, in John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave Thy song, nor even can those trees be bare Bold lover, never, never, never canst thou kiss Though winning near the goal – yet do not grieve: She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss Forever wilt thou love and she be fair! (8)

The eternal dissatisfaction, however, is achieved in Keats through the "reconcilement of opposite discordant qualities". Ironically enough Shakespeare, William Hazlitt believes, had achieved satisfaction through the "combination of the great extremes."(9) Unlike the Ode, Romeo and Juliet discloses love which passes through a brief phase of suffering and longing after which it is satisfied though temporarily. What thematically ensues is a complete struggle against hatred, on both personal and social levels. This, in turn, entails the image of the 'dark' as a logical representation.(10) 'Dark' hence, establishes itself in all its manifestations as 'light' did before.

It seems, nevertheless, that the image of 'dark' has occurred early in the play and in concordance with that of 'light'. At the outset, we have been introduced to Romeo who escapes from Benvolio to the orchard. Like a recluse, he finds comfort in the loneliness and dark. Old Montague, his father, is worried about him. His worry, indeed, stems from the strange behavior of his son and his disposition to live in the dark. This behavior has led Old Montague to think that his Hamlet-like son suffers from hallucinations.

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However, what adds to the father's worry is that he has vague idea of the actual cause of his son's sadness. So after his reference to Romeo's escape from daylight, Old Montague infers that Romeo's humour proves 'black'. Yet at this early stage, Shakespeare, it seems, makes Old Montague artistically mention and balance the two elements of 'light' and 'dark'. He has maintained a 'reconcilement' between these two conflicting elements which are 'functional' and not 'decorative' as one might assume (11):

But all so soon as the all-cheering sun Should in the farthest east begin to draw The shady curtains from Aurora's bed Away from light steels home my heavy son And private in his Chamber pens himself Shuts up his window, locks fair daylight out And makes himself in artificial night. (Act I, Sc. i)

Romeo, on his part, has fallen victim to the passionate and hopeless love of Rosaline. And his emotional stress seems to gloom him very much. He, therefore, shuns daylight and his favorite atmosphere suitably changes into 'darkness', whether 'natural' of 'artificial'. So when Benvolio wished him 'Good morrow', his response was immediate and interrogative: "is the day so young"? (Act I, Sc. i). Romeo's surprise at the daybreak reflects that he deeply wallows in despair. "light" of "daylight", consequently, disturbs or annoys his mood. Even after the party when Romeo meets Juliet, Benvolio still believes that Romeo's referable image is shaped from 'darkness'.

The heart-breaking experience with Rosaline grasps and enflames Romeo's poetic imagination and left its impact on his option of images when addressing or talking about Juliet. Romeo becomes accustomed to being melancholic, which has been reflexed in the nature of imagery he employs with Juliet. This, as Benvolio points out, is attributed to Romeo's emotional vehemence. So Benvolio comments on Romeo's disappearance,



....he hath hid himself among these trees

To be consorted with the humourous night

Blind is his love, and best befits the dark. (Act II, Sc. i)

It is Romeo's mood which is quite known by his close relative, Benvolio. Romeo has become an introvert. However, Romeo seems unable to resume his ordinary mood without a new love experience, quite meeting his old romantic desire for love. Hence, only accidently Juliet appears in his life to rejuvenate and rekindle all his poetic imagination which motivates and merges various images. Yet 'light' and 'dark' still predominately continue to be repeatedly and equally effective. They exist together in this stage of development and they add, in a parallel manner, to the effectiveness of the whole use of imagery. It is worthwhile to mention that these two images stand as two complementary contrasts. W.H. Clemen points out that the continual use of these images "accounts not only for subtle dramatic effects, but also for several juxtapositions which appear odd at first sight but become clear when judged from the context".(12)

If Romeo past frustrated experience with Rosaline necessitates his lingering on darkness and consequently intensity in the use of 'dark' images, Juliet is always associated with 'light', yet not without a dark surrounding which serves as a reminder of the dark days to come. Old Capulat, her father, for instance, talks of 'stars' to describe the ladies to come to the party and among whom his daughter is one. This metaphorical image is contrasted with and poised against the dark background of the night.

At my poor house look to behold this night Earth treading stars that make dark heaven light. (Act I, Sc. ii)



The use of the image of 'light' assumes its highest point in the famous speech of Romeo at the Capulat's party. Nevertheless, the reaction of Romeo towards the first sight of Juliet is still influenced by the image of 'dark' which imposes anti-oblivious control on Romeo's imagination,

O she doth teach the tourches to burn right
It seems she hangs upon cheek of night
As rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear. (Act I, Sc. i)

Romeo's description of Juliet's beauty is virtually enforced by a new impetus of a ready loving spirit. It signals other words, a start for conflicting powers which, henceforth, will assume the form of 'light' and 'dark' equally. As for the nature of these powers, the young lovers, it seems, realize, more than before, that they are victims to an obsolete and inherited problem: the feud between their two families. Their love which is rather represented by the image of 'light' is framed by the flaming hostility of their families which is naturally depicted by the image of 'dark'. So while the two lovers increasingly realize the inevitability of the integrated fatal love story they have, they also realize that they have become the support of fortune in this respect. They feel that there is no escape from their 'death marked love'; they belong to their families and belong to each other at the same time. (13)

The emphasis on the use of 'light' when Romeo becomes flabbergasted at the sight of Juliet is apparently natural. It quite corresponds to the exceptional moment of stasis which is culminated at the meeting with Juliet. This is a new start for Romeo who attaches high hopes of success on it as he failed before with Rosaline. This new start might even compensate his frus-



tration and suffering for Rosaline. 'Light' and 'dark' here as in other places, are equally balanced against each other

What light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon

Who is already sick pale with grief

That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she. (Act II, Sc. i)

Here the 'sun' and the 'moon' are two contrastive symbols alluding to 'day' and 'night' or to 'light' and 'dark'. Therefore, Romeo seems to feel the burden of darkness which could be spiritual not only material in himself. So he wants Juliet who is rendered henceforth the source of light to remove this darkness. Notice the imperative 'kill' which discloses Romeo's longing to get rid of 'darkness'. Yet 'darkness' still engulfs his imagination.

The image of 'light' is again used by Romeo in what is traditionally called the 'Balcony Scene' to set up an opposite quality against that of the dark background Romeo observes. So love is not more than a glimpse of light in a world that is folded with darkness. And it seems there is no way out of the dark world the lovers found themselves in since the beginning of the relation. Eligibly, Shakespeare deepens the sense of the lovers' awareness towards 'dark' in Romeo who is later joined by Juliet when he makes him talk of the game of deception in which 'the birds' are played at,

...her eyes in heaven

Would through the airy region stream so bright

That birds would ding and think it were not night. (Act II, Sc. i)

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But it is 'night' which Romeo states indirectly as a fact.

In her analysis of Romeo's language, M.M. Mahood asserts in this respect that "Romeo uses pun not only to imply that he has enjoyed a lightening brief happiness before being 'discharged of breath' but also to sustain the image of Juliet's luminous beauty which makes this vault a feasting presence full of light.' (14) So it is quite clear that Romeo strives, though aimlessly every time, to displace darkness which has proven its un-removable effect on his mentality by light which is quite fading.

Romeo's view towards 'dark' has changed so much since is love to Rosaline. In other words, the nature of the image of 'dark' varies before and after the meeting between the two young lovers. Before their meeting, it reflects a state of despair with a special reference to Romeo, but after their meeting it turns intensively romantic. Consequently, the image of 'dark' and its various derivations become sweepingly emotional and natural in the words of the two lovers who find shelter in the darkness of the night to unfold the secret of their romantic affair. Unlike before, Romeo and Juliet speak quite amorously about night. They become more sensitive and more appealing to the darkness of the night which has become 'glorious' and 'blessed' and an infatuating meeting -time. Perhaps, the basic difference, in his view, as referred to previously, is that with Rosaline the night helps to contain his sadness and despair and to keep him away from any possible communication with people. Whereas the same 'dark' is jovially 'blessed' with Juliet. It rather helps him to hide his 'forbidden' happiness as he wants to live un-troubling and untroubled.

His meeting with Juliet at night, therefore, is made necessary by the desire to be alone. This is quite natural, Mrs. Mahood justifies, because peo-



ple usually want to be unseen when they 'seek the satisfaction of their forbidden desires. "And these desires," Mrs. Mahood continues, "are forbidden according to Freud, because amour-passion is inimical to the race, according to de Rougement because it is contrary to the Faith. And with Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, she believes that the shelter of night is something that is indispensable since tragic love is always adulterous." (15)

The lovers, regardless of their problem, could meet, if they want to, in Frair Lawrance's cell at any time. Yet there is no escalation in their crisis which may urge them to jeopardize their relation by meeting during the daytime.

But things change when they marry. Inconsiderate and indifferent lovers like themselves might create more tension between their families owning to the secrecy of their marriage which represents a violation to the traditional and inherited responsibilities of hatred and feud. The tension, however, exacerbates when Romeo kills Tybalt. Night, therefore, becomes the only possible time for Romeo to escape his enemies and to abide by the law pronounced by the Prince.

Juliet, on her part, has no other time but night to meet her fugitive husband though she has no idea of what her husband has done to her cousin. Before her knowing about her cousin's death she used to observe night and darkness romantically. And her observation has been correspondingly reflected in the very matrix of the metaphorical language she uses. The night is her wish because she finds no safer time to meet with her husband.(16) So Juliet, henceforth talks of night and Romeo in an exchangeable manner to mean each other. In other words, the night is welcomed because it virtually means the achievement of a miraculous dream of a teenager to say that the dark colour of night becomes romantically favorable because it represents



'sobriety and civility'. Juliet's meditation over the night and its colour has been embodied in a personified image of a 'matron' who is dressed 'all in black':

....if love be blind

It best agrees with night. Come civil night, Thou sober-suited matron all in black. And learn me how to lose a winning match Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods. Hood my unmanned blood, fating in my cheeks With thy black mantle, till strange love, growing bold Think true love acted simple modesty. Come, night; come, Romeo, come, thou day in night For thou will lie upon the wings of night, Whither than new snow upon a raven's back. Come, gently night; come, loving, black-browed night Give me my Romeo, and 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, And pay no worship to the garish sun. (Act II, Sc. i)

So Juliet begins to be infatuated by the same darkness Romeo has ever loved. The personification of the 'gentle night expresses the same degree of adoration towards Romeo. Hence, Romeo and 'night' have been treated equally and Juliet has dedicated her warm reception to both of them.



After knowing of Romeo's vengeance on Tybalt, Juliet, nevertheless, receives him warmly in her corded 'nest'. This is considered an important sign which marks a moral ability to successfully trespass the family feud. In other words Juliet's love exceeds her belonging to her family. She is now mature and holds responsibility before a husband. Her marital affiliation therefore becomes more solidified and stronger than even her other belonging to family. Though brief, her meeting with her husband at night maintains a legitimacy which should unfortunately be kept a secret for certain considerations justified in the play.

This new situation even intensifies their awareness of darkness. Both of them have a common feeling of staying together. Their shelter is the darkness of the night which obliterates the fact of their unapproved marriage. They want night to be longer because with its continuation they can stay with each other for a longer time without necessarily being interrupted by an intruder that might be conducive to uncovering their secret that leads to some explosive riot between the two families. Their sensitivity towards the daylight and the feeling of being discovered naturally drove them to mentally reproduce images and symbols of dark nature. The reference to the 'lark' which is the 'herald of the mourn' and the 'nightingale' which '…nightly sings on yond pomegranate tree' (Act III, Sc. v) does not depart from this point.

However, the intensification in the problem of Romeo and Juliet assumes a critical point when Shakespeare makes the noble Paris propose to Juliet. Juliet's suffering increases because the proposal of Paris signals a new phase of conflict which she should face more seriously and vehemently. Her conflict becomes diverse. She is, in other words, pushed to another narrow-



er corner where her father proves 'brutal' and her mother 'quite supine' and the nurse 'satanic'.(17) She immediately, therefore, turns to Friar Lawrence. Before that Friar Lawrence had already secretly married to Romeo. The close tie between Friar Lawrence and Juliet stems from the very fact that sinful and 'adulterous' characters always find refuge in religion. So Juliet goes to this pious man because she believes that he is 'the voice of peace and wisdom in the troubled world of Verona.'(18) Juliet's attempt then is very natural on her part. Besides, Friar Lawrence holds some responsibility for what had happened to Juliet. He consequently suggests a way out of the pending bottleneck he had shared in finding out.

To-morrow night look that thou lie alone
Let not the Nurse lie with thee in thy chamber
Take thou this vial, bring then in bed
And this distill'd liquor drink thou off. (Act IV, Sc. i)

This prescription, however, often falls open for controversy. As for the validity and authenticity of the potion, Juliet as well as the audience, on their part, depict some diversion from the realistic line of thought in treating the protagonist's personal dilemma. The 'vial of the distill'd liquor' is rather a poetic solution for a pressing problem quite impossible to be met without violence. What is more important, however, is that 'night' seems to be the most appropriate atmosphere for thinking and pondering quietly on problems and their solutions. Even in his precise description of the power of the 'distill'd liquor', Friar Lawrence uses dark images derived from the same matrix of imagery employed by Romeo. So the "'liquor' is like death when he shuts



up the day of life." Here day and night are associated with life and death. This apparently has relevance to the entire mood that dominates the whole play. Old Capulat, in a similar way, personifies death as a bridegroom who "hath.... lain with thy wife." (Act IV, Sc. v) And Juliet's fake death is accomplished at night. By so doing, Shakespeare wants to prepare the suitable gloomy milieu for the genuine death of Juliet that will follow suit.

However, Juliet's false death represents the first trial which will be backed by another, unfortunately a real one in which misunderstanding or rather lack of accurate information leads to the tragic downfall of the 'star-crossed lovers'.

Coming from Mantua, 'armed against himself', Romeo is heading towards a tragic act which he has thought about repeatedly in case anything befalls Juliet. He, therefore, has no room in mind for any colorful or bright images. Paris, on the other hand, who is also star-crossed seems to fall under the same influence of the fateful tragedy which allows no loophole to escape. Like Romeo then, Paris becomes involved in the same dark world in which Romeo, Juliet, Tybalt, Mercutio and all the rest survive. When he comes to Juliet's grave, overwhelmed by the over-sweeping sadness, he needs a torch to open the grave:

Give me thy tourch, boy. Hence, and stand aloof

Yet put it out for I would not be seen. (Act V, Sc. iii)

Then he realizes that the shabby flickering of light is unnecessary. Perhaps, putting out light can soothe his scathing mood which might be agitated by light. Yet as desperate as the act he comes for, Paris does not realize that



he has been drawing his downfall at the night. The death of Paris, however, seems to shape another one which is tied up to it as a natural consequence: it is the death of Romeo which is followed by that of Juliet.

The morbidity of night-time lies in that night can cover with its black and gloomy mantle all the violent acts that should not be exposed quite clearly before the audience. Few minutes before his suicidal act, Romeo hopelessly announces his desire to lie down with Juliet:

Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee to-night

Let's see for means – O mischief, thou art swift

To enter the thoughts of desperate man. (Act V, Sc. i)

This stress on his desire which could only be achieved 'tonight' does not differ so much from the same desire of Paris when he weeps for Juliet at night. He is, in other words, as desperate as Romeo and he comes to Juliet's grave to mourn her and probably to ponder on suicide:

O woe, thy canopy is dust and stones

Which with sweet water nightly I will dew

Or ,wanting that, with tears distilled by moans

The obsequies that I for thee will keep,

Nightly shall be to strew thy grave and weep. (Act V, Sc. iii)

Nightly, however, both of them fall dead at the end.



Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, the storm of violence has passed but not without sacrifices. It has left nearly everybody quite exhausted and psychologically purged of the sin of hatred. Perhaps, this is, at least, one of the numerous moral intensions behind the drama of Romeo and Juliet. Yet, Shakespeare's imagining of the status of Veronians who are rather cleansed of their evil sin as heart-achingly expressed in the words of their touched Prince, Escalus, is worth noting here:

A gloomy peace this morning with it brings
The sun for sorrow will not show his head
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things
Shall be pardoned and some punished
For never was a story of more woe,
Than this of Juliet and Romeo. (Act V, Sc. iii)

The source of the long night was full of violence which when finished 'a peace that is glooming' is restored. Yet the one who brings this needed peace is the 'morning' which is again a source of light. The concentration on the ever-lasting contrast between dark and light is , indeed, one method of relaying the personal feeling into the center of the image which is reinforced by the linguistic vitality of the playwright. This ability on Shakespeare's part, quoting L.C. Knight, is "felt as the chief clue to the urgent personal themes that not only shape the poetic-dramatic structure of each play but form the figure in the carpet of the canon as a whole." (20)



Notes

- See Caroline Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery. Donald A. Stanffer, "The School of Love", Wolfgang Clement, The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery
- 2. L.C. Knight, Some Shakespearean Themes and an Approach to Hamlet, p. 13.
- 3. See Surgeon, p. 9
- 4. See Stanffer.
- 5. See Clement.
- 6. See Spurgeon, p. 364
- 7. Ibid.
- 8. Keats, p. 344.
- 9. F.W. Batson, English Poetry: A Critical introduction, p. 135.
- 10. Harold Goddard believes that Romeo and Juliet is wrongly thought to be a "tragedy of the access of love. On the contrary, it is a tragedy of the deficiency of it... and this mainly proved through Romeo's behavior towards love."
- 11. Romeo, in Goddard's words, proves himself "less than the perfect lover". See Goddard, The Meaning of Shakespeare, pp. 132, 433.
- 12. David Begeon, Shakespeare, p.11.
- 13. W.H. Clemen, The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery, p. 65.
- 14. Though, in terms of love, Romeo and Juliet belong to each other, they use different types of imagery which indicates the influence of their environment and families on them. Clemen, in this respect, quotes dr. Schemetz as saying: "Juliet's imagery (is) is more tinged by the familiar objects of her life sphere and her child experience, whereas Romeo's imagery appears less concrete and more spiritualized. This subtle differentiation shows that typical features of the character's background and mood shape into imagery. "see Clemen, p. 69.
- 15. M.M. Mahood, Shakespeare's wordplay, p. 67.
- 16. Ibid, p. 58.
- 17. Stanffer, p. 29.
- 18. Goddard, p. 135.
- 19. Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet (Critical Introduction), p. 20.
- 20. See note 1.
- 21. L.C. Knight, p. 14.



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