

A Critical Analysis of William Shakespeare's: *Romeo and Juliet*

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DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.8.10.2018.p8235
<http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.8.10.2018.p8235>

Abstract- This study is conducted to explore the artistic values of William Shakespeare's most well-known play: *Romeo and Juliet* and for indicating all the possible sides of the play including characters, setting, plot summary, historical background, themes and other literary figures' perspectives about the play critically. *Romeo and Juliet* has been praised as one of the interesting plays of William Shakespeare not only in English Literature, but worldwide. All the elements of a play has been used scholarly by William Shakespeare. As Connolly (2000) mentioned that "Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* early in his career, between 1594-1595, around the same time as the comedies *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Scholars often group these plays together because they explore the themes of love, courtship, and marriage."

On the other hand, Morris (1985) stated that "Now Shakespeare wrote a new kind of tragedy. It was not about one 'hero' but about two young lovers, the heroine quite as important as the hero; their troubles led to their deaths, and this did not disrupt, but healed, a disordered society. It was fashionable to write 'revenge' plays, but as the critic Professor Levin has pointed out, *Romeo and Juliet* is an 'anti-revenge' play."

The love and hate both go similarly in the play of *Romeo and Juliet*. It means that in the same time, it gives the feelings of sadness and happiness to the audience and readers of it.

Index Terms- *Romeo and Juliet*, historical background, characters, plot summary, theme

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is the art of expressing emotions and feelings as the way they are. Literary figures usually express these through some of the genres in the field (literature) as mainly; *fiction*, *non-fiction* and *play*. These genres include various types of its subtypes as well. Plays *were/are/will be* being performed on the stages in theatres for the audience to convey the main message (that is called theme in literature) about the way of life being drawn by playwright or it is directly related to the writer's emotions regarding to a particular individual and social effect hidden behind the theme of a play.

Shakespeare's artistic works, poetry and plays, have been known as the famous ones of him with having highest artistic qualities in the field of literature and among others: *Romeo and Juliet* is known as William Shakespeare's famous play worldwide. Connolly (2000) declared about the first performance of it as "the first performance of *Romeo and Juliet*

took place in the autumn/winter of 1594, when the playhouses reopened for the first time after a sustained outbreak of the plague had forced the authorities to close all the playhouses in London in January 1593.” He further described that during that time, over 10,000 people in London alone died from the disease, and Shakespeare emphasizes the relevance of the plague for his audience by using it in *Romeo and Juliet* to prevent Friar Laurence’s message from reaching *Romeo* in Mantua.

So it has been indicated that Shakespeare always tried to convey the social real life events not only in his poetry, but in his plays too.

G. Lipson & S. Lipson (2007) expressed that “of the 37 plays written by William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* is the play that appeals most strongly to young people. Although it was written in the language of another century, the conflicts in this play are timeless. Both the consuming urgency of *Romeo and Juliet’s* love and the ill-fated couple’s defiance of their parents evoke a strong sense of identification from today’s teenager.” It makes that clearer that *Romeo and Juliet* is not only a play that people enjoyed in the earlier times, but its joyfulness is still remaining for today, because of the story inside the play can be still applied on the loves of many other couples at this time.

This comedy is structured in tragic manner that makes readers and audience cry that shows the artistic talent of William Shakespeare for connecting all the events in the play as a chain of suspense till the end of it.

II. SOME GENERAL FACTS ABOUT THE ART OF SHAKESPEARE IN *ROMEO AND JULIET*

William Shakespeare’s literary works are not only having the quality to be read and praised in English literature, but in other literature of the world too. Particularly, the

effects of the story in the play of *Romeo and Juliet* is not only the one related to previous centuries, but it can be felt still today. He is not only counted as a greatest playwright, but as a great poet used higher poetic and artistic qualities in his poetry. But in this piece of literary criticism, it has been tried to focus only on what is in *Romeo and Juliet* and how was it written by William Shakespeare?

As it is clear that play is an interesting genre in the field of literature, because it gives audience practical feelings of happiness and sadness in a real-like performance on the stage in theatres. It is not only the thing that whenever someone watch it practically in the theatre and enjoy it, but whenever readers read that on a piece of paper, it can also give them the feeling of pleasure or it will be enjoyable for the readers too. If one studies Shakespearean plays, it can be seen that he expressed social real life matters of his time interestingly. Within that, his higher qualities can be indicated in his plays obviously. For example, whenever a person wants to watch Shakespearean comedies, so they have the power to make you laugh, and on the other hand, whenever one watches his tragedies, so they have the power to make you cry, or if it is in an exaggeration, at least, they can make you sad deeply. Within that, as it is obvious that Shakespeare not only wrote comedies and tragedies (Tragic-comedies in his later life), but his histories can give you historical facts about the historical backgrounds of the Kings of the time. But as it will be impossible to criticize all the three types of Shakespearean plays, so it has been tried to only focus on *Romeo and Juliet* in this critical article.

Sometimes, critics have stated different ideas about Shakespearean plays. So far that I have studied British literature, at that time, Ben Jonson (1572-1637) was

held in a higher position as a playwright. Ben Johnson himself expresses his perspective about William Shakespeare that Shakespeare is a talented, but undisciplined writer.

Within that, critics of the recent centuries expressed their point of views about Shakespeare and stated that he had more natural ability than professional modifications. So in this critical article, it has been tried to only focus on the selected play in in-depth details with expressing self-understanding, including the point of views of other scholars and literary figures.

When someone criticize a play, so it is good for the critic to practically judge the play, because of that play is a live performance that should be performed in theatre and is a live experience. In this case, it will be a bit complicated for the critic in the same time to criticize a play and to watch it. Means that during this condition, you will realize both to enjoy the play and to criticize it. So during criticizing the play, a critic should take notes of the play, characterization, connection of scenes, suspense... and to critically watch it. For this reason, criticizing a play is a bit difficult task in the field of criticism.

As a critic, one should indicate both the high artistic qualities of the playwright and the weak points of that. So in this case, a critic should be the one who fully understands the elements through which a play can be criticized. If not, so some of the parts might be ignored and cannot be judged well. For this reason, it has been tried to indicate positive and negative aspects of the play in this critical article.

III. *Romeo and Juliet* and its plot Synopsis:

Love and hate both go similarly from the start to the end of the play. So it is noticeable that the play is much

about hate as love. Criticizing it practically, it is needed to bring the brief overview of the plot for the better understanding of the readers:

3.1 A brief Plot Overview of the play: *Romeo and Juliet*:

Many years ago in Verona, Italy, there lived two families who hated one another. The Montagues and Capulets had been carrying on a feud for as long as they could remember. Morris (1985) mentioned about the beginning of the play that "Capulet intends to marry his only daughter *Juliet* to the Prince's kinsman, Paris. But she and *Romeo*, a young Montague, fall in love at first sight, and persuade Friar Lawrence to marry them immediately. As he returns from his wedding *Romeo* is challenged by the quarrelsome Tybalt, a Capulet, but refuses to fight his new kinsman. *Romeo's* friend Mercutio fights instead, and is slain. *Romeo* avenges Mercutio by killing Tybalt, and is banished by the Prince."

Actually, *Juliet* loves *Romeo* and praises his love in songs sometimes, but Capulet does not want to do so. So the beginning of hate and jealousy starts from this moment. As further stated by Morris (1985) that "Capulet proceeds with his plan to marry *Juliet* to Paris. Friar Lawrence tries to prevent this by supplying *Juliet* with a drug which will make her appear dead for forty-two hours; meanwhile he will send for *Romeo* to rescue her. The messenger is delayed; *Romeo* learns only that *Juliet* is dead, and determines to die with her. The mourning Paris tries to prevent *Romeo* breaking into *Juliet's* tomb, and is slain. *Romeo* poisons himself, and the waking *Juliet*, finding him dead, stabs herself with his dagger. The Montague and Capulet parents are reconciled, but to no purpose, for all the younger generation are dead."

After the death of their lovely *Romeo* and *Juliet*, it is meaningless for the Montague and Capulet to be in grief, because of that they cannot compensate this disaster with sorrow and they were the only reason prevented *Romeo* and *Juliet* to marry for having a lovely life ahead.

3.1.1 Acts in *Romeo and Juliet*:

Act 1: Hacht (2005) mentions about act 1 as, "Capulet servants, Sampson and Gregory, and Montague servants, Abraham and Balthasar, start a street fight that is joined by Benvolio, a Montague relative, and Tybalt a Capulet relative. Escalus, the Prince of Verona, learns about the fight and angrily decrees a death penalty for anyone caught in further feuding. Benvolio finds *Romeo* and learns that *Romeo* is forlorn because the girl he loves, Rosaline, will not return his affection because she has chosen to remain chaste. Benvolio advises *Romeo* to move on with his life and look at other girls. *Romeo*, however, is quite sure that he cannot forget Rosaline."

So the story of feuding started, and everyone tries to revenge from one another. It means that from this point, it is impossible for the members of both families to live in peace, but instead, they are in the attempt of revenge.

Act 2: "In a very short scene 1, Benvolio and Mercutio try to find *Romeo*, who has climbed a wall to hide in the Capulet orchard. His friends give up when *Romeo* will not respond to their calls." (Hacht, 2005).

Before dawn the next morning, *Romeo* spaces alongside the Capulet orchard. He avoids his friends, who ridicule his lovesickness. He climbs the wall to get a look at *Juliet* once again. When he does it, he hears *Juliet's* soft singing voice that praises his love in the

song in her lips. He recalls this pleasant feelings of love between him and *Juliet*, but regret to belonging feuding families.

Till the end of the senses in Act 2, *Romeo* tries to see *Juliet* many times, and finally, they met one another in Friar Laurence's cell for the third time.

Act 3: "In scene 1, later that day, Benvolio and Mercutio encounter Tybalt and are already sparring with words when *Romeo* arrives. Tybalt attempts to provoke *Romeo* into a fight, but *Romeo* will not fight because, although unknown to the others, he and Tybalt are now relatives by marriage. Instead, Mercutio challenges Tybalt and is killed by a deceitful stab from Tybalt when *Romeo* tries to separate them." (Hacht, 2005).

When the nurse informs *Juliet* of the latest street fight, *Juliet* mourns for Tybalt, even though he had a reputation for provoking his enemies. *Juliet* sends the nurse with a ring for *Romeo*, who has retreated to Friar Laurence's cell.

Because of his daughter's grief, Capulet sets the wedding for Thursday. During wedding, *Juliet* tries her best to keep *Romeo* in her room, but *Romeo* should go far from that because of facing to be arrested.

Capulet is not in the suspect of the daughter's secret marriage, and tells her to be prepared for a wedding with Paris.

Act 4: "Scene 1 is back at Friar Laurence's, where he tells *Juliet* to take a potion that will cause her to appear dead until *Romeo* can come to rescue her and take her away with him to Mantua." (Hacht, 2005)

Juliet sends the nurse away and pretends to pray to ready her spirit for marriage and then she swallows the herb and swoons in her bed. When the nurse comes to call *Juliet* to be ready for her wedding, and Paris also hopes his darling to be awaken for the wedding

ceremony, but in this condition, the nurse finds *Juliet* as she is died.

On Wednesday morning, the Capulets send the nurse to call *Juliet*, but the nurse finds *Juliet* lifeless.

Act 5: "Scene 1 takes place in Mantua as *Romeo's* servant Balthasar arrives, bringing the news of *Juliet's* death. *Romeo* decides to risk his own life by returning immediately to Verona. He buys poison from an apothecary with the intent of dying beside *Juliet*." (Hacht, 2005).

So *Romeo* comes in hurry from Mantua to Verona to kill himself beside *Juliet's* corpse. When *Romeo* arrives, Paris accuses *Romeo* of killing Tybalt and, indirectly, expresses that this is the main root of *Juliet's* death from the deep sorrow. *Romeo* looks at *Juliet* and her pink lips and rosy cheeks with embrace, kisses her and swallows the poison and collapses.

Juliet awakens in this time and finds her only lover, *Romeo* lifeless, because of poisoning. *Juliet* kisses his lips behind the hope of finding a drop of poison to cause her die too because of she is unable to tolerate *Romeo's* deep sorrow. She unsheathes his dagger and plunges it into her chest. Both of their family members arrive at this time and looking to see the tragic moment of their lovely couples lost their lives because of them. So for the honor of the couple, Montague grasps Capulet's hand and promises to stop being enemy of each other. But it is the time that they lost many things, particularly the two lovers.

Finally, the story comes to an end with:

*"A glooming 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;
Some shall be pardoned, and some punished;
For never was a story of more woe*

Than this of Juliet and her Romeo."

(G. Lipson & S. Lipson, 2007)

3.1.2 Characters of the play:

3.1.2.1 Montague family and friends:

Romeo Montague: A young man

Lord Montague: Romeo's father and the enemy of Lord Capulet

Lady Montague: Romeo's mother

Mercutio: Romeo's friend and Prince Escalus's cousin

Benvolio: A cousin and friend to Romeo

Balthasar: Romeo's servant

Abraham: Lord Montague's servant

Friar Lawrence: A Franciscan priest

Friar John: An associate of Friar Lawrence

3.1.2.2 Capulet family and friends:

Juliet Capulet: A 13-year-old girl

Lord Capulet: Juliet's father and the enemy of Lord Montague

Lady Capulet: Juliet's mother

Nurse: Juliet's nanny

Sampson and Gregory: Servants to Lord Capulet

Tybalt: Juliet's cousin

Paris: A young man who wants to marry Juliet; Prince Escalus's cousin

Prince Escalus: Prince and ruler of Verona

Characters convey the main theme of the playwright in a play. In this play, Shakespeare tried to play all the characters greatly. The roles of characters can play an important role for attracting audience's attention to the play while watching it and the attention and suspense of the readers who read the play as a printed version. In

this case, all the characters are given the dialogues and roles very appropriately by the author. Shakespeare composed the roles of *Romeo* and *Juliet* with suspense that attracts audience's/readers' attention in every event passing on. In the same time that they love their families and parents, but they hate the ones who want them to be separated from one another or to live without love. This expresses the power of love and particularly, true love, between *Romeo* and *Juliet*. So in this case, love, can be similarly transferred by the lovers till the end of the play, and each lover wants to die for the other and these are the greatest roles given by Shakespeare to the characters, particularly, main characters *Romeo* and *Juliet*. On the other hand, their families transfer hate till the moment the lovers die for each other. And then they regret about their manner in the past but time cannot be returned back and one cannot see and touch any moment passed. Within that, as mentioned earlier that social real life events have been greatly mirrored in Shakespearean plays. So this play is one of the best example as a mirror of social real life status of love. In this case, the conflict of lover is versus society and that individual versus society. Lovers tried to break social and family borders for reaching their true love for each other, but social and family obstacles prevented them to reach to their dreams for becoming one soul in two bodies. Another vital point to be indicated in this play is the importance of time. The events of the PLOT of the play have been composed with a great suspense in connecting events from start to end as a chain. Next point is that plot is one of the vital element of the play that there should be a logical and chronological order between the events appearing after one another in a play. When a playwright wants to make the play joyful,

he/she should connect each scene of the play with great suspense that attracts the audience's attention during direct performance of the play in the theatre. In this play, the plot and the connection of events has been composed by playwright in a great manner. We know that plot should consist five parts; at the beginning of the play, writer introduces characters and starts the play, it is called (Exposition of the Plot). The second part is rising action. In this part, playwright gives actions to the characters introduced in the first part of the play. The third part is climax. In this, conflicts may also be occurred sometimes, and it is the highest point of the play and the point of greatest suspense. It means that audience and readers reached to the half of the play, and there might be a turning point in the climax that can change the play and the statues of the main character or theme of the play. The fourth part is falling action. In this part, playwright tries to go to the conclusion of the play. So in this case, actions go to the conclusion. The fifth and the last part of the plot is resolution. It ends the play where the conflicts or problems of the play can be resolved.

Based on these points, Shakespeare connected the story of the play into five acts. Each act gives the elements of each part that we have in plot. It means that all the parts of the plot have been kept in mind and composed scholarly in the play of *Romeo* and *Juliet*. So this indicates the highest artistic talent of Shakespeare that he exposed in this play.

Finally, this play can give you the feelings of love and hate similarly. But the suspense between the scenes of all the events in five acts have the power to bring you till the end of the play which is the most important factor to be kept in mind while criticizing a play. Briefly, the

overall structure of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* has been really highly and scholarly organized.

3. 2 Themes of the play:

3.2.1 Love and Hate:

Theme is the central idea of a play that states the main message of the playwright to the audience or readers. As *Romeo and Juliet* is considered as one of the world's greatest love stories, but there is a big amount of hate as well in it. It means that it is the art of William Shakespeare who mixed up the happiness and sadness equally till the end of the plot or the events chained after one another. So for this reason, love and hate go similarly till the end of the play.

3.2.2 Social Barriers:

Romeo and Juliet face many obstacles toward reaching one another's true love, and till the last breath, they tried their best for reaching to the destination. It means that sometimes, traditional and family barriers can stand toward you and if you are not confident on the love and the goals you created for yourself, it will be always possible for your love to be lost. Actually, the play of *Romeo and Juliet* is an indicator of how individual can stand for his/her legal rights to achieve that in their life.

3.2.3 The Problem of Time:

Time is always going on. If you are unable to manage it, you will lose many opportunities in your life. In this case, it expresses the significance of time as well that most of the time, people think as time is not valuable, but in a minute or ever a few seconds, someone will lost his/her life or save that. In this play, one can regret when thinks about *Romeo*, to wait for a few seconds to see *Juliet* and live together.

3.2.4. Historical Context of the Play:

William Shakespeare was living during the Renaissance literary movement in England, and this play is said to be written in that time of literature flowering.

Bloom (2010) stated about the historical place of the play in Elizabethan era, "The story of *Romeo and Juliet* was well known in Elizabethan England, and by the time of Shakespeare's play it had appeared in several collections and in various forms."

This story draws us a clear historical lesson in our mind about the social barrier in that time toward human freedom and struggles of youths for love and passion.

3.3 Critical Overview:

Some critics say about Shakespeare and his plays that Shakespeare composed his plays greatly, but they call him an unprofessional playwright, but talented when compared with his other playwrights of his time, Ben Johnson. As literary effects can not only be felt in one time, one century and one region, but its roots can be reached to the next generations and to the regions far away. This is the reason that many of the literary works have been influenced by others. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* also looks like to be influenced by the earlier literary works.

As Morris (1985) criticized that "Shakespeare did not invent the plots of his plays. He found a likely theme in a chronicle, a poem or a book of tales or biographies, and recreated it to suit his own purposes. There are several earlier versions of the story of *Romeo and Juliet* in French and Italian; and it occurs in an English collection of prose stories which William Painter translated from the Italian in 1567, which Shakespeare may have read."

Morris (1985) further explains, "Not only are many details of the plot the same, but Shakespeare's

language and images often echo Brooke's. Another source is possible; Brooke tells us that he had already, in 1562, seen 'the same argument lately set forth on stage', and it is possible that Shakespeare had seen or heard of the same play, and borrowed from it parts of his *Romeo and Juliet* (for instance, the balcony scene) which do not occur in Brooke's poem."

Holding (1992) explained the historical relationship of this play with other literary works and stated, "Versions of this popular folklore tale exist in many languages but it is clear that Shakespeare closely followed an English translation (1562) by Arthur Brooke, *Romeus and Juliet*. It is possible that Shakespeare was at least aware of another English version by William Painter, 'Rhomeo and Julietta', included in the second volume of his popular collection of prose translations, *Palace of Pleasure*."

Furthermore, Bloom (2010) stated that In *Romeo and Juliet*, a broiling Verona summer provides a volatile backdrop for *Romeo and Juliet's* passion and their families' rancor. Although male aggression fuels the play, *Juliet* blossoms as a sturdy, intelligent woman whose devotion to her love and her ideals makes her heroic.

Concisely, it is mentionable that the play of *Romeo and Juliet* has been organized scholarly and all the elements that a well-organized play should contain can be found in this play. But based on the influences that the earlier literary works may have on the ones later on, some points and shared parts can be seen in *Romeo and Juliet* in relation with other writers.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, all of William Shakespeare's literary works can be recognized as high artistic ones, because

of his natural talent and of the literary movement; Renaissance in Europe, particularly in England. *Romeo and Juliet* is a really interesting play ever written by him. The overall structure of the play, and characterizations are really the facts that gave the play a higher position. Events in the plot have been organized scholarly and there is a higher quality of suspense between connecting the events he woven from the beginning till the end of the play. Within that, the historical background of the play is another aspect that gave the play a higher place in the field of literature. Finally, *Romeo and Juliet* of William Shakespeare can cry and laugh someone in the same time. It is because of the scholarly art that William Shakespeare used in this play.

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