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Sacrificial Love and Selfish Love: A Deconstructionist Approach to *Romeo and Juliet*

The tragic tale of *Romeo and Juliet* is one our culture easily recognizes, even a little over four hundred years later. Shakespeare's play is so ingrained in our culture that sometimes we do not even notice the allusion to it. For example, the musical *West Side Story* and the movie *High School Musical* are both re-tellings of the original play but with a slightly different ending and plot line. With *Romeo and Juliet* so ingrained in Western culture, it makes sense that the play itself would follow the ideas of Western culture. Western culture tends to place sacrificial love over selfish love. There are many examples of this in our culture today, such as in the *Hunger Games* in Peeta's and Gale's love for Katniss. Peeta's love for her is sacrificial, because he always puts her life and the lives of those she loves above his own, but Gale's love is selfish, as seen in the end of the series, because he thinks of what he wants but not what she wants, and it gets one of her loved ones killed. Her choice of Peeta over Gale in the end shows that sacrificial love is superior. However, while it seems that Shakespeare follows the ideals of this culture in the beginning of the play by emphasizing sacrificial love as the privileged term through Romeo and Juliet's love towards each other, by the end of the play he has turned sacrificial love into the unprivileged term. In other words, he seems to confirm the deconstructionist theory that transcendental signified, or "an external point of reference upon which one may build a concept or philosophy" is a "great error" in Western philosophy (Bressler 109). Logocentrism is "the belief that there is an ultimate reality or center of truth that can serve as the basis for all our

thoughts and actions” (Bressler 110). This does not make sense when looking upon the binary opposition of sacrificial love / selfish love in *Romeo and Juliet*, because there are so many different interpretations of the play as well as many different themes and meanings. In Western culture, sacrifice, especially for love, is generally seen as positive, and selfishness, regarding love or not, is perceived as negative. Shakespeare challenges this by redefining selfishness as self-love and shows that sometimes sacrificial love can be selfish in nature. It is for these reasons that the true meaning of *Romeo and Juliet* is impossible to determine, as there are many unresolved tensions and ambiguities leaving the reader in aporia at the denouement. Shakespeare turns the chief binary opposition, defined in Western culture as sacrificial love/selfish love, on its head and never resolves it.

The play begins with sacrificial love as the privileged term. The beginning lays out just how dire the situation has gotten between the two families by saying, “where civil blood makes civil hands unclean” and describing them as “two foes” (1.1.4-5). Romeo sacrifices his time, his life, and his reputation just to see Juliet in the famous balcony scene. Not only is he in the Capulets’ garden while his friends are wandering around looking for him, but he decides to woo his greatest enemy’s daughter. The Nurse even informs Juliet that Romeo is her family’s enemy when Juliet inquires as to who he is during the party. She tells her: “His name is Romeo, and a Montague, / the only son of your great enemy” (1.5.145-46). Their love is risky, which is partly what makes it sacrificial, because they are sacrificing their lives for this love to work. Juliet deals with this sacrifice and ultimately finds, “the tragic fatality of finding herself suddenly in love with an enemy, [and] the anxieties of planning for the marriage are mere preliminaries to her sufferings . . . we watch Juliet torn between her feelings of loyalty to her kinsman and her love for Romeo” (Smith 68). She will have to deal with the consequences of her and Romeo’s

sacrifice alone as the play cycles towards a tragic end. Their fear of possible reprove and the anxiety of getting caught drives Romeo to rashly ask Friar Laurence to marry them in secret (2.3.61-67). The Friar agrees only because “this alliance may so happy prove / To turn your households’ rancor to pure love” (2.3.96-97) and thus seals their fate. Friar Laurence tells Romeo that their love may mend the feud between their families, so Romeo and Juliet have sacrificial love towards their families. They are sacrificing their lives for their own love, and to save their families from further conflict. Sacrificial love takes a turn from its “superior position” (Bressler 111) to a negative limelight as the play proceeds to its conclusion.

Selfish love by the end of the play will no longer be the unprivileged term, but rather the privileged term, and shows that:

love also derives from the overall symbolism of the marriage of opposites . . . Two individuals who give and surrender themselves to each other then discover themselves in each other . . . [yet,] when depraved, instead of being the long-sought centre of unification, it becomes a principle of division and death. Its depravity comprises the destruction of the quality of the other person in an attempt selfishly to exploit that person instead of joint enrichment by mutually and unstintingly giving of oneself, so that each becomes both greater and more individual. (“Love” 618 - 19).

Because Romeo gets cast out of Verona, the two lovers are separated but are still willing to risk their lives to be together. Romeo stays longer than he should in Verona just to see Juliet, and she in turn makes plans to join Romeo by faking her death (4.1.55-76). Juliet is willing to leave the life she knows by going to live in exile with Romeo. Not only that, but she takes a step farther by fooling everyone into thinking she is dead, intentionally causing her family to grieve. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *selfish* as “devoted to or concerned with one's own advantage or

welfare to the exclusion of regard for others” (“Selfish 1.a”). This type of selfishness paradoxically shows Juliet’s sacrifices for her love of Romeo as selfish, because she can only see a life with him and disregards her family completely. Her obsessive infatuation with Romeo blinds her to where, in her mind, a life without Romeo would not be a life worth living. Juliet throws her love of her family to the wayside, which is seen earlier in the play when Romeo kills Tybalt. The Nurse explains that her parents are with the slain Tybalt, and asks:

NURSE. Weeping and wailing over Tybalt’s corpse.

Will you go to them? I will bring you thither.

JULIET. Wash they his wounds with tears? Mine shall be spent

When theirs are dry, for Romeo’s banishment. (3.2.129-32)

Juliet is torn between the loyalty and love she has for her family and for her love for Romeo, yet ultimately she selfishly chooses Romeo. This paradox between sacrificial love and selfish love is never resolved by the end of the play.

However, there is another definition of selfishness in the *Oxford English Dictionary* where it states that selfishness is “used . . . as a designation of those ethical theories which regard self-love as the real motive of all human action” (“Selfish 1.b”). In other words, self-love is a type of selfishness. By killing herself, she is not performing selfish love or self-love. However, her suicide could be sacrificial. Some could argue she kills herself because she wants to join Romeo in death, but:

there is no prospect of a heavenly reunion, nor is there any mention of the possibility that the couple might enjoy each other’s company in the tomb. Juliet, it would seem, lacks Romeo’s desire to lie together as corpses. Instead, she concerns herself exclusively with bringing her life to a quick end before the Friar might take her away; she longs for death

itself, and not what might follow upon it. Juliet dies with an apostrophe not to the heavens above, nor to the husband lying in her bosom, but only to the knife that she thrusts into her breast. (Targoff 33)

She merely exclaims, “Oh happy dagger!/This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die” (5.3.174-75). There is no exclamation in her final words of wanting to join Romeo, merely that she wants to die. Her exclamation is for the dagger, instead of for Romeo, and so her selfish love for him ultimately kills her. Her love for Romeo has blinded her so much that she believes a life without him is no life at all, and thus wishes for death, not to join him, but to take away her pain of losing him. In this moment if she truly had selfish love, she would have refrained from killing herself, because she would have loved herself more than Romeo or the prospect of death. These two ideas of selfishness relate to the selfish love Juliet faces. It is this paradox that turns selfish love into the privileged term. Since the consequences of her sacrificial love leads to her death, the text seems to say selfish love is superior. Paradoxically, at the same time, her suicide is selfish, because she does not think of those she leaves behind, namely her family, the Nurse, and the Friar.

Ultimately there is an undecidability in the text, because the “text has many meanings, and, therefore, no definitive interpretation” (Bressler 106). *Romeo and Juliet* could arguably be about love, death, or many other meanings. The text “has multiple interpretations and . . . allows itself to be reread and thus reinterpreted countless times” (Bressler 116). Because of this, the reader is left in aporia, “a point of doubt and indecision” (“Aporia” 36), because the reader is not sure as to what the true meaning of the play is or the meaning behind sacrificial love and selfish love. Nor is the reader sure as to which definition of selfish love the play may mean. The tension between these two types of love is never resolved, and thus it can be concluded that while

Western culture puts sacrificial love over selfish love, Romeo and Juliet challenge this approach and turn sacrificial love/selfish love on its head to exemplify the idea of selfish love/sacrificial love.

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