

Extended Essay

English B

Category 3: Literature

Title: The theme, *Love*, in Shakespeare's works, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello the Moor of Venice*

Research Question: To what extent do the characters in Shakespeare's works, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello the Moor of Venice*, play a key role to present the main theme, *Love*?

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Table of Contents

1) <u>A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM.....</u>	4
A- THESEUS AND HIPPOLYTA.....	5
B- HERMIA AND LYSANDER.....	6
2) <u>ROMEO AND JULIET</u>	8
A- MERCUTIO	8
B- THE LOVERS: ROMEO AND JULIET.....	9
3) <u>OTHELLO THE MOOR OF VENICE.....</u>	11
A- IAGO.....	12
<u>CONCLUSION.....</u>	14
<u>RESOURCES</u>	HATA! YER İSARETİ TANIMLANMAMIS.

Introduction

Characters chosen from Shakespeare's well-known plays, portray a significant role to present the main theme, *Love*. As the theme is conveyed through romantic relationships and characters' individual understanding of *love* in Shakespeare's plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*. Each of these plays present a couple that faces different kinds of conflicts. Shakespeare employs these characters to show the prevailing atmosphere, *love*, by reflecting the powerful emotion that is perceived by the characters.

The first play I have chosen to work on is 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' which is a comedy written by Shakespeare in 1595-1596 (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2016), set in Athens. There are several subplots in the play revolving around the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. One of them follows the conflict of four couples; another one involves six amateur actors who are rehearsing a play they perform at the end. I will focus on the plot of the couples as they are the characters that Shakespeare uses to convey *Love*. Despite its being a comedy unlike the other tragic plays I have chosen, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ends in a contented way which is dissimilar to those afore mentioned ones.

The second play I have focused on is the greatest romance story that is known all around the world, 'Romeo and Juliet'. Written between the years 1591-1597(Royal Shakespeare Company, 2016), it is based on an Italian tale called "The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet". That was originally retold by William Painter with the name "Palace of Pleasure". Shakespeare took inspiration from both stories and expanded the plot and developed several new characters for the story and the most important ones are Mercutio and Paris. I wanted to work on it, to learn what made the play 'Romeo and Juliet' so remarkable.

The final play I will concentrate on is Othello the Moor of Venice. Written in 1603(Royal Shakespeare Company, 2016), set in the Ottoman -Venetian war to control the island, Cyprus. The story revolves around two characters, Othello, and Iago. The main reason for me to have chosen this play was the main theme, *love*, being connected with power and jealousy, centring around destructive *love* which is contrasting with the other two plays I have chosen. Iago, plays a key role to convey these themes even though he is not a character that stands out with his relationship to his wife but with his ideas of *love*.

1) A Midsummer Night's Dream

In Shakespeare's play 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' there are four romantic relationships between the characters, Theseus and Hippolyta, Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius and Titania and Oberon. All these relationships are unique. The main reason for this is, all the characters have a different understanding of *love*. Theseus and Hippolyta have a political marriage and while they are wedding out of duty, Theseus also wants a happy marriage. On the other hand, Hermia and Lysander's relationship is true *love* unlike all the other relationships in the play. They love each other and are willing to leave everything just to be together. Helena and Demetrius's relationship can be considered confusing because Helena falls in love and never gives up on Demetrius, he is set on marrying Hermia, until Oberon has made him fall in love with Helena. Titania and Oberon's *love* for each other is so much that they constantly get jealous of each other to the point where they see fit to punish each other.

I will be focusing on Theseus and Hippolyta's and Hermia and Lysander's relationships as these two couples play the key role to convey the main theme, *love*. Hermia and Lysander are the main couple of the play and the nature of their relationship is "true *love*". On the other hand, the other

three couples are simply used as foil characters to highlight the nobility of Hermia and Lysander's *love*.

a- Theseus and Hippolyta

The first characters and relationship we are introduced to in the play is Theseus and Hippolyta. Theseus is the Duke of Athens while Hippolyta is the queen of amazons, and their relationship is based on a marriage of convenience to form an alliance between their nations. For them, this relationship is duty. While, Hippolyta is very neutral and reactionless throughout the play, Theseus is very impatient about the marriage and desires a 'happy marriage', unlike how they have started their relationship which is with war between their nations.

Theseus expresses his impatience in the very beginning of the play by saying:

"Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour

Draws on apace. Four happy days bring in

Another moon. But oh, methinks how slow

This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,

Like to a stepdame or a dowager

Long withering out a young man's revenue" (The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works, 1964, pg. 171)

He compares himself to an impatient son waiting for his stepmom to die so he can get inheritance. Although it is a good comparison to express his impatience, it is very strange to compare marriage with inheritance. We can see how Shakespeare uses Theseus's impatience to convey the theme, *love* and compare it to wealth in terms of value. That is Theseus's understanding of *love* which

very similar to money in nature. People get greedy and impatient about money, and they always expect more, with this comparison, Theseus proves that this is how he feels about *love*.

One can argue that Theseus is only impatient about this marriage because he wants the alliance between their countries to happen quickly. However, in the next lines of the play Theseus says, “But I will wed thee in another key,” (The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works, 1964, pg. 171) meaning they meet under the circumstances of a war. Still, Theseus wants their marriage to be different. Since the opposite of war is love, Theseus wants to have a happy marriage. This is related to Theseus’s understanding of *love*, just because he wants to have marriage of love does not mean love in the classical sense.

A character making a strange comparison for marriage and then saying they want a marriage of love, shows how Shakespeare uses Theseus, to convey a different theme of *love* in a play full of romantic relationships. Shakespeare starts the play off with this rather strange comparison, so the relationships introduced to later in the play leave a more impactful image in the audience as true *love*.

b- Hermia and Lysander

Hermia and Lysander's relationship are the only romantic relationship in the play that is true and traditional love. They fall in love with each other, Hermia against her father's wishes loves Lysander not the man her father wants her to marry. As this is the main relationship of the play, Hermia and Lysander are used the most to convey the theme, *love*, in ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream’.

We are introduced to the couple by Egeus coming to complain to Theseus about their relationship. Hermia was initially meant to marry Demetrius. However, Egeus claims that Lysander “bewitched the bosom” of Hermia and made her “turn her obedience to stubborn harshness” (The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works, 1964, pg. 171). As well as make their love look like it is based on material things like “bracelets of thy hair, rings, gauds, conceits” (The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works, 1964, pg. 171). This is Egeus’s own understanding of *love* showing, he thinks that Hermia must be bewitched and promised beautiful gifts by Lysander to be in love with him. Unlike how their relationship is, Egeus perceives it in another way and conveys his point of view to the reader. Shakespeare uses Egeus’s as a father to convey the main theme, love with an opposing idea of love to make the main idea stand out more and prove it to be more valuable than the opposing idea.

Hermia knowing what’s going to happen to her, still tries to convince her father and Theseus that Lysander is as worthy as Demetrius and stands up for herself. She expresses this in the lines:

“So will I grow, so live, so die, my lord,

Ere I will yield my virgin patent up

Unto his lordship, whose unwishèd yoke

My soul consents not to give sovereignty.” (The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works, 1964, pg. 171)

Hermia refuses to marry Demetrius against her father’s wishes. Hermia is a character that only wishes to marry for love no matter the consequence is as seen in this quote. Shakespeare uses this attribute of her to convey how strong love is to the reader.

In the following lines, Hermia and Lysander talk about what they are going to do about this situation. Lysander uses the expression “True love never did run smooth” claiming that their love is true because it is facing obstacles while encouraging Hermia that all will be well. This proves that Lysander has an optimistic nature. Lysander and Hermia’s characters match and complement each other well as a couple; this characterization shows how Shakespeare uses these characters to highlight the main theme, *love*.

2) Romeo and Juliet

Shakespeare’s most well-known play, *Romeo and Juliet* is a tragic story of lovers who cannot be together because of the rivalry between their families. To convey the main theme, *love* in this play Shakespeare not only used the lovers, Romeo, and Juliet but also characters around them to create two main conflicting notions of love. One being idealistic and intense creating Romeo and Juliet’s relationship the other being lustful and superficial preventing the lovers from being united.

a- Mercutio

Mercutio is the main character Shakespeare used to convey the conflicting idea of love. As Mercutio is one of the closest people to the main character of the play Romeo, he influences the play. Mercutio is a “foil” character used to highlight the characteristics and qualities of the main character, Romeo. (Jones, 1991)

Throughout the play Romeo is lovesick because he cannot be with the one, he loves. However, for Romeo, being with the one he loves does not mean just to be together physically for a sexual relationship; but being together with that person to spend time with his loved one. On the other

hand, for Mercutio this is the opposite as his understanding of *love* is lust. In the line “If love be rough with you, be rough with love.” from act 1 scene 4, Mercutio suggests that Romeo cures his love by picking a woman from the crowd and having sex with her, not understanding what Romeo craves. To Mercutio, love is simply having sex with a woman to satisfy his “natural needs”. Shakespeare uses Mercutio as a foil character to highlight how noble and pure Romeo’s understanding of *love* is by creating a conflicting and opposing character.

In the beginning of act 2 scene 1 Benvolio and Mercutio are looking for Romeo, Mercutio tries to “summon” him by calling him “madman” and “lover” and saying the names of the roman goddess of love. This speech of Mercutio further shows that he is trying to understand Romeo and does succeed in doing so to a certain level. However, he cannot fully do so because of their conflicting perspectives. It is highlighted in act 2 scene 4, when Romeo and Mercutio have an encounter after Romeo talks with Juliet the whole night. Romeo was with the one he loves, he is in a very good mood and as he has gone the whole night Mercutio assumes it is because Romeo was having sex with a woman saying, “such a case as yours constrains a man to bow in the hams.” (The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works, 1964, pg. 775) once again showing the difference between their opposing ideals and proving that he is the foil character for Romeo.

b- The Lovers: Romeo and Juliet

Romeo and Juliet both have a very deep, idealistic, and pure understanding of love and this understanding is the base that their relationship is built upon. Falling in love in a short amount of time may come off like unrealistic to the audience that is why Shakespeare builds their relationship to be idealistic and pure and uses Romeo and Juliet to convey the main theme, *love*.

In act 1 scene 1 the audience is introduced to Romeo and his understanding of love between the lines 165-190 in form of two monologues where he preaches the idea of hate coming from the lack of love. He continues, calling love “a madness most discreet” and puts two opposing terms such as bright and smoke, cold and fire, chaos and well-seeming forms together to make up love, it is shown as a very oxymoron ideal. He doesn’t associate love with material things, nor does he show any sign of seeing love and physical attraction or “natural needs”. This creates a pure and noble *love* as Shakespeare uses Romeo to introduce that ideal. Furthermore, in act 1 scene 5 when Romeo and Juliet meet, the first words they speak to each other is a sonnet. In this scene Shakespeare used the characters Romeo and Juliet to convey the theme *love* with the help of a sonnet illustrating their relationship is noble from the moment they meet and fall in love at first sight. Both singing the sonnet together shows that they have a mutual understanding of love which is why their relationship easily deepens as very idealistic.

Romeo and Juliet being from enemy families does not break their love for each other only makes it more unreachable thus more desirable. Love being unreachable is an occurring theme in romance literature, Shakespeare uses this to strengthen the romance of Romeo and Juliet. In act 2 prologue Romeo and Juliet are called “foes” to each other this statement supports the idea of their love being more desirable because of their status.

In act 2 scene 1 we can see the characters trying to understand Romeo; however, they are unable to because Romeo’s ideal of love is very different to of the others while Romeo and Juliet have almost the same ideal of love that is why they can understand each other and have a healthy relationship Shakespeare uses this as a baseline for their relationship. This proves the purity of their love and justifies their willingness to lose their names and status for each other even though

they just met. We can understand this from Juliet's saying that love has made her richer even though she is already rich, and she is willing to give up the material 'wealth' she has for the 'wealth' that love has given her. We can see that Juliet's character is a main tool to Shakespeare in conveying the theme love from these lines. There is also an indication to Juliet's authenticity from her refusal to act coy with her lover from the lines "Or if thou thinkest I am too quickly won, I'll frown and be perverse" (The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works, 1964, pg. 770)

Being in love makes Romeo realize that the rivalry between their two families is senseless and he gives up on the hate he has for the Capulets and instead tries to love all the members of the family for Juliet. We can understand this from act 3 scene 1 where Romeo encounters Tybalt and says "Capulet- which name I tender as the dearly as my own" (The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works, 1964, pg. 778) because of his love for Juliet. Even when Romeo kills her cousin Juliet doesn't hate him, showing that love is stronger than any emotion even grief. Shakespeare uses the characters Romeo and Juliet to a greater extent to convey the main theme love in the play. Both for their romantic relationship that ends with their death and breaking the hatred between their families and replacing it with love because of their relationship.

3) Othello The Moor of Venice

In Shakespeare's play Othello the Moor of Venice, the main character is blinded by jealousy and manipulated into killing his own wife. The main relationship is between Othello and Desdemona, however, one of the most important characters that is used to convey the main theme as Iago takes advantage of the love between Othello and Desdemona because of his own lack of love. The characters are used to a greater extent to represent the main theme, *love*, however unlike the two

other plays the love represented is destructive love, as it drives Othello mad enough to kill the one, he loves. (Mowat and Werstine, 2020)

a- Iago

From the beginning, Iago's stance to *love* is apparent. He, unlike any other characters in the play is not in search for love but power as he sees love as a weakness that can be exploited. We can understand this opinion from the lines "Ere I would say I would drown myself for the love of a guinea hen, I would change my humanity with a baboon." (The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works, 1964, pg. 949) in act 1 scene 3. He expresses how he would rather be a "lowly animal" such as a baboon than die for love. As in the following lines "Whereof I take this that you call love to be a sect or scion." He clearly shows that he only sees love as lust, a means of satisfying ones "natural needs".

In act 2 scene 1, Iago uses the words "well-tuned" to describe Othello and Desdemona's relationship, harmonious but easily corruptible and fragile. In which it is the aspect that Iago is planning on using against Othello to drive him mad. In the beginning of the play, Othello and Desdemona have a good relationship and are in love with each other but as the play progresses Iago corrupts Othello's romantic love for Desdemona and turns it into destructive love. What gives birth to this conflict in the play is this idea of un-pure and defected idea of love that Iago has as he is trying to project this idea of love onto Othello. Iago makes him believe that love truly is only lust and Desdemona lusts for things that Othello cannot provide for. Shakespeare uses Iago as a key figure causing Othello's attitude towards Desdemona to change, which results in him murdering her. (Mowat and Werstine, 2020)

b- Othello and Desdemona

Shakespeare uses Othello and Desdemona to a greater extent to represent the main theme, *love* in the play, Othello the Moor of Venice. From the very beginning of the play, it gets clearer that Othello and Desdemona are deeply in love and their love is not based on sexual attraction but admiring of each other's minds. As Desdemona explains that she has taken interest in Othello because of his stories and falls in love with him we can understand that she falls in love with every aspect of him because she got to know him very well. Desdemona makes this clear to the other characters through the words "I saw Othello's visage in his mind". On the other hand, Othello is very surprised that she has fallen in love with him as he has not seen himself to be lovable. The way they are introduced to complete each other proves that their love is "well-tuned".

While have a good relationship in the beginning, Iago is determined to break their peaceful love. However, he fails. Iago has made everyone believe that Desdemona does not truly love Othello, making Othello's love to fade, but it does not. Iago breaks Othello's trust and faith in Desdemona but not his love. We can clearly make this out as Othello cannot bare even imagining Desdemona being with other people. This shows that Othello cares about Desdemona and does not want her to be with people other than himself as he loves her. Another sign is Othello's growing jealousy, nearing the end, he cannot even understand that Cassio is complaining about his own lover, Bianca, not Desdemona. "Now will I question Cassio of Bianca" says Iago after he made Othello believe that his wife and his general are having an affair. Cassio complains about Bianca, "indeed loves him" but Othello refuses to understand the topic and thinks that Desdemona loves Cassio and thinks Cassio is bragging about Desdemona. At that moment he is blinded by rage and jealousy. Shakespeare explicitly pulls the reader's attention to Othello's jealousy as he uses his character to

represent the theme *love*. Was Othello not to love Desdemona, he would not be jealous, and he would not be driven mad by the thought of his wife not loving him. (Mowat and Werstine, 2020)

By the end of the play, as Othello is about to kill Desdemona, he says the words “It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.” trying to convince himself that he should kill her for she will “betray more men”. He continues his monologue with the words “I must weep” making it apparent that he is sorry, but his jealousy outweighs it. When Desdemona wakes up, he asks of her sins and she says that her only sin is to love Othello too much which he answers with “Ay, and for that thou diest.” This indicates that they both have loved each other till last breath but Othello has been manipulated by his own love, that is why he has not been able to see Desdemona’s love for him.

Conclusion

The main theme, *love*, is more effectively presented through the characters. As in Shakespeare's plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Othello*, readers are made aware of the theme through the romantic relationships between characters and their unique interpretations. The main characters in each of these plays are couples who deal with different conflicts. Shakespeare uses these characters in various ways to depict the central theme of each play due to the dissimilarities in the relationships and characters he created.

Hermia and Lysander, *Romeo and Juliet*, and Othello and Desdemona are the characters in these plays that are crucial to presenting the theme. Although the nature of each of these relationships are "true love," the characters are forced to resolve conflicts, each with different outcomes. Which is connected to the plays' respective genres: *Othello the Moor of Venice* and *Romeo and Juliet* are tragedies, while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy.

The way these conflicts are resolved has different impacts on the audience. While tragedies were more popular at the time and death of characters symbolized eternal love, today the situation is reversed. That is why the love of Hermia and Lysanders has had more impact on me compared to Romeo and Juliet and Othello and Desdemona, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the conflict is resolved in a manner that can be reflected in today's world. However, the reason for Romeo and Juliet's love becoming popular is the bigger conflict between two families that has been resolved with love and sacrifice opposingly to Hermia and Lysander. On the other hand, Othello and Desdemona's relationship is the perfect example of love being the weakness of a person and people willing to exploit that for power.

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