

Hannah Capek

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ENGL 3000: Shakespeare for Non-Majors

Instructor: Alyssa Miller

Response Paper #1: Film Scene Analysis

“The Symbol of Water Introduced to *Romeo and Juliet*”

In his 1996 *Romeo and Juliet* film, Baz Luhrmann introduces the motif of water, not found in the original Shakespeare text, to reveal impulsive feelings and escalate the initial romantic connection between Romeo and Juliet. When water is introduced to the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, it symbolically adds to the blossoming romance and ultimate tragic death of the two young lovers. As Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Juliet (Clare Danes) begin their love story, the water highlights their passion and allows physical contact while also symbolizing a barrier to their relationship. The water brings about vulnerability and openness as they make vows to marry each other, but the water also foreshadows drowning in love, leading to their ultimate demise. From the Act II scene ii “balcony scene,” it is evident that Luhrmann artistically chose water to facilitate romantic motion, symbolize the vulnerability of impulsiveness, and to hint at the potential for danger in Romeo and Juliet’s hasty, young love.

Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet* takes great creative license to relate the play to modern times while preserving the original Shakespearean language. Through changes to setting and time period, the tone becomes more contemporary to mimic how Shakespeare wrote plays to reflect his time period’s popular culture. The movie takes place in “Verona Beach” as opposed to Verona, and the clothes, cars, weapons, and buildings resemble those of the twenty-first century.

Guns are the weapon of choice instead of swords, and the film portrayed the Montague versus Capulet feud as gang affiliations and violence. Mercutio dresses in drag, and there is drug use not found in the original play. Luhrmann incorporates these elements to demonstrate that Shakespeare's relevance remains true to contemporary issues. Expanding on Shakespeare's text, Luhrmann introduces water to certain pivotal scenes as a visual symbol of exposed love, vulnerability, and sensuality.

The film by Luhrmann chooses to introduce a swimming pool to the well-known "balcony scene" when Romeo and Juliet profess their youthful love and ultimately, their impulsive vows to get married. Traditionally, the balcony would have been a barrier to their conversation; it would keep Juliet guarded above the ground, and Romeo would be below risking his safety to talk to her. They come from separate feuding families, and even though it is risky for them to be together, Luhrmann's pool interpretation puts them at eye-level with each other and allows physical demonstrations of their verbal expressions of love. During their first dialogue in the water, Juliet questions, "What man art thou that, thus bescreened in night,/ So stumblest on my counsel?" and Romeo swims closer to her answering, "My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself/ Because it is an enemy to thee" (2.2.52-53; 55-56). Their body language in the pool matches their conversation; they circle around each other before Juliet is certain that the man is Romeo. The clear water symbolizes that Romeo cannot hide from his name, but he also cannot hide from his love for Juliet. Swimming face-to-face with Romeo, Juliet says, "The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,/ And the place death, considering who thou art,/ If any of my kinsmen find thee here" and Romeo answers her yelling his love cannot be contained and "Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me" (2.2.63-65; 69). Luhrmann adds to this scene's dramatic effect by making Romeo splash loudly and then hold his breath for several seconds

while the security guard checks on the noise. Juliet hides Romeo with her body while he is underwater, which contradicts Romeo's previous declaration of owning his love. Luhrmann expands on Shakespeare's text using the exposing medium of water to highlight the impulsivity of youth in Romeo's change from shouting to hiding in a matter of seconds.

Luhrmann also uses the swimming pool and water to bring more vulnerability and sensuality into the scene as Romeo and Juliet continue to express their youthful love. They stay submerged in the water while Juliet says, "I would not for the world they saw thee here" (2.2.74). Then Romeo swims closer to Juliet and whispers calmly, "I have night's cloak to hide me from their eyes" (2.2.75). Romeo uses the water to hide from the Capulets, but Luhrmann uses the water to amplify Romeo's hasty love and passion for Juliet. With the stage now set and the camera zoomed in on the couple, Romeo and Juliet share their first kiss in the scene. They stand waist-deep in the water, dripping wet while kissing each other passionately. Juliet is in a white dress that is wet and clinging to her body. Luhrmann creatively adds an element of sensuality to the scene that may not be inferred from reading the Shakespeare text. In the pool, the water exposes the vulnerability associated with their youthful love; the water engulfs them just as lust overwhelms their new relationship. Their clothes cling to their bodies, exposing more of themselves as they embrace and kiss each other. The original text leaves the reader to interpret the sensuality of the scene, but Luhrmann uses the addition of a "steamy" pool scene to illuminate how quickly they are intertwined in passion. The metaphor of water and its transparency adds an element of sensuality to the film that exposes their rapid physical connection as opposed to being separated by a balcony as a barrier.

The addition of water as a motif also heightens the characters' emotions as Romeo and Juliet profess vows of love and say goodnight. Juliet first says goodnight to Romeo with, "It is

too rash, too unadvised, too sudden,/ Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be,” Romeo answers and says “O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?” (2.2.118-119; 125). The audience is left to assume he wanted more sexually, and Luhrmann places a dramatic pause before Romeo expresses his desire for their exchange of faithful vows and intent of marriage. This overwhelms Juliet with joy so evident that she tackles him back into the pool, again acting on her rash, romantic feelings towards Romeo. Luhrmann has them fall into the pool for a second time to highlight the impulsiveness and consuming nature of their youthful love. They are engulfed in the water just as they are engulfed and overwhelmed with their desire for each other, and a tone of romantic passion dominates the scene. Back in the water, they embrace and kiss while again immersed in happiness yet flirting with the danger of their hasty decisions. The water is a metaphor of transparency to their recent feelings of love, but as they dive back into their haste, the element of future risk becomes apparent.

Romeo and Juliet by Luhrmann uses a modern-day swimming pool as the landscape for the famous balcony scene where Romeo and Juliet submerge deep into feelings of passion for each other. Romeo and Juliet’s love is new and unexplored: the water’s fluidity allows unified motion and romantic gestures, yet the medium’s transparency symbolizes hindered intimacy due to the uncertainty of their young love and families’ rivalry. Water is also used throughout the film in important scenes for Romeo and Juliet’s relationship. It is the vehicle for their “love at first sight” when they see each other through a fish tank. This interpretation of their initial meeting uses the glass tank to be transparent while also symbolizing their families’ civil feud as a barrier to their relationship. In the film’s ending, Luhrmann replays the pool scene after Romeo and Juliet die in each other’s arms. The film contrasts their untimely deaths with their romantic, flirty entanglement in the pool; it contrasts the overpowering passion of their initial feelings with

the consequences of their hasty decisions. The flashback serves to show the end result of the hasty love and the true danger of their impulsive relationship.

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