West Side Story With Romeo And Juliet Essay, Research Paper

What would Romeo and Juliet be like if Juliet hadn’t died? What if Paris killed

Romeo, instead of vice versa? What if instead of occurring several centuries

ago, it took place on the streets of New York City during the 1950s, with a

bunch of fresh-faced youths posing as street toughs and dancing and singing

their hearts out? Well, just take a look at West Side Story, and you will have

your answers. It is impossible for anyone familiar with both texts to not note

the obvious major similarities between the two plays. From the opening scenes in

both, up through the rumble in West Side Story/death of Mercutio in Romeo and

Juliet, the plays mirror each other (Poelstra). It isn’t until the last part of

West Side Story, where Tony, our modern-day Romeo, dies and Maria, Tony’s

Juliet, doesn’t (unlike the two star-crossed lovers of Shakespeare’s work), that

the major difference between the two works becomes apparent. Granted, instead of

tension between feuding families, West Side Story offers prejudice between

races, as illustrated between street gangs, the Jets and Sharks. Some of the

characters in West Side Story are carbon copies of those in Romeo and Juliet:

Maria (Juliet), Tony (Romeo), Bernardo (Tybalt), Lt. Schrank (Prince), and Anita

(Nurse). Others appear to be a composite of characters, namely Riff, a

combination of Benvolio and Mercutio, and Doc, who appears to fulfill the role

of Friar Laurence (possessed somewhat of a peacekeeping nature: "You

couldn’t play basketball?", he asks, when informed of their upcoming

"war council" [Laurents 57]) yet, at the same time, it is implied in

the film version, not the play that he is a pharmacist, and there was, after

all, an apothecary in Romeo and Juliet . The tomboyish Anybodys, a Jet wannabe,

would best fit into the role of Balthasar (although Doc’s character fits into

this role marginally as well), since it was she who aided Tony in escaping after

the rumble, which resulted in the deaths of Riff and Bernardo, as well as later

informing the other Jets that Chino, the Paris of the Sharks, had a gun and was

hunting down Tony. In the opening act of Romeo and Juliet, Sampson and Gregory,

servants of Capulet, harass Balthasar and Abraham, servants to the Montagues.

"I will bite my thumb at them; which is a disgrace to them, if they bear

it," boasts Sampson (I.i.48-50). In the opening scene of West Side Story,

several Sharks, the Puerto Rican gang led by Bernardo, harass A-rab (notice the

similarity in name to Abraham), a white dude, a Jet, and therefore, an enemy of

the immigrants. In no time at all, other Jets, led by Riff, rush to A-rab’s

side. No words are exchanged between the gangs, since it is, after all, a

musical, and they basically just jump around in exaggerated fashion.

Nevertheless, the scene, like the opening of Romeo and Juliet, sets the stage

for the remainder of the production. It is here where Lt. Schrank and his

faithful compatriot, Officer Krupke, happen on the scene to break apart a

potential rumble just like Escalus, Prince of Verona, did in Romeo and Juliet:

"If ever you disturb our streets again, your lives shall pay the forfeit of

the peace" (I.i.103-4). Or, as Schrank would phrase it, "I got a hot

surprise for you: you hoodlums don’t own the streets" (Laurents 6).

Following the altercation between the gangs, it is decided by Riff that the time

has come to take care of the Puerto Ricans once and for all, "clean em up

in one all-out fight!" (Laurents 10). Riff will challenge them at the dance

at the gym later that night. But, he wants his old pal Tony, who founded the

Jets with him, in as his Lieutenant (Laurents 12). So, he goes to fill in Tony,

who has made a sincere effort to forsake the gang life by becoming gainfully

employed at Doc’s candy store. This is where another parallel occurs: just as

Benvolio talks Romeo into attending the ball at the Capulets, Riff talks Tony

into attending the dance at the gym. Prior to the dance, a sweet-faced

seventeen-year-old gal, fresh up from Puerto Rico, prepares for her first big

social event in America. Here, even the exact act and scene (I/iii) are the same

as in Romeo and Juliet, where Lady Capulet and the Nurse speak to Juliet of her

possible impending marriage to Paris. The dance, where Tony and Maria first

meet, is comparable to the Capulets’ ball, where Romeo and Juliet first

encounter one another. At the Capulets? ball, it seems to be Romeo who falls

in love at first sight, since he spots her before she eyes him: "What lady

is that, which doth enrich the hand of yonder knight?" (I.v.44-5). After

exchanging a few words, Juliet becomes smitten with the loquacious youth, yet

she doesn’t reveal this until the balcony scene. Tony and Maria, on the other

hand, notice each other at the very same moment, falling head over heals in

love. Shortly thereafter, Bernardo "is upon them in an icy rage" (Laurents

31), telling Tony to "Go home, American". Bernardo then reveals that

Maria is his sister. "Couldn’t you see he’s one of them?" Bernardo

asks Maria (Laurents 32). "No; I saw only him," she replies. Juliet’s

exclamation at such a revelation was much more poetic: My only love sprung from

my only hate! Too early seen unknown, and known too late! Prodigious birth of

love it is to me, That I must love a loathed enemy. (I.v.140-3) Bernardo orders

Maria to go home, after which he approaches Tony, who is still intoxicated by

the lingering image of his new-found love (Laurents 35). Riff sidelines

Bernardo, mentioning the possibility of a rumble. They agree to meet at Doc’s

candy store at midnight for a ?war council?. Act Two, Scene Two, of Romeo

and Juliet, better known as the balcony scene, is reflected in West Side Story

in Act One, Scene Five, or the fire escape scene. Romeo refers to Juliet as

"the sun" (II.ii.3), calling for her to "rise . . . and kill the

envious moon" (II.ii.4). During the fire escape scene, Tony and Maria sing

the song "Tonight": Tonight, tonight, The world is full of light, With

suns and moons all over the place. Tonight, tonight, The world is wild and

bright, Going mad, shooting sparks into space. (Laurents 42) This moment

exemplifies the Shakespearean impact perhaps better than any other in West Side

Story, since even the Bard’s imagery is swiped for use in song. Not to mention,

before parting, both parties agree to meet the following day: Romeo and Juliet

"at the hour of nine" (II.ii.169) and Tony and Maria "at

sundown" (Laurents 44). In scene seven of Act One, Tony meets Maria at the

bridal shop. Anita catches them together. "You will not tell?" Maria

inquires. "Tell what?" Anita replies. "How can I hear what goes

on twelve feet over my head?" (Laurents 76); Anita is supportive of their

love, as is Juliet’s nurse, who acts as an intermediary between the young

lovers. Following Anita’s departure, Tony and Maria go through a mock wedding

ceremony, mirroring the real one Romeo and Juliet prepare to undertake, aided by

Friar Laurence. Both these instances occur before true tragedy strikes. The

beginning of act three in Romeo and Juliet features the death of Mercutio by the

hand of Tybalt, who, in turn, is slain by Romeo. Likewise, the rumble under the

highway in West Side Story culminates with the deaths of Riff and Bernardo (Laurents

94). In both instances, the young romantic lead tries to talk the others out of

harming one another. Tony, at the entreaty of Maria, tries to stop the violent

proceedings, only to be taunted by Bernardo. "It doesn’t take guts if you

have a battle. But we haven’t got one, ‘Nardo," Tony smiles (Laurents 91).

The taunting escalates, despite Tony’s valiant efforts, and Riff soon hauls off

against Bernardo, just as Mercutio had drawn against Tybalt. Both episodes

result in deaths: Mercutio and Tybalt; Riff and Bernardo. Following the rumble,

the similarities between West Side Story and Romeo and Juliet dwindle. One

similarity would be the Nurse’s grief for Tybalt (III.ii.61-63) paralleling that

of Anita’s for Bernardo (Laurents 127), but most interesting of all would be the

manner in which Romeo and Tony learn of the deaths of Juliet and Maria,

respectively. In Romeo and Juliet, Balthasar delivers the news to Romeo

regarding the death of Juliet: "Her body sleeps in Capel’s monument, and

her immortal part with angels lives" (V.i.18-19). Romeo then approaches the

Apothecary: ". . . let me have a dram of poison, such soon-speeding gear as

will disperse itself through all the veins that the life-weary taker may fall

dead . . ." (V.i.59-62). Doc, likewise, is the provider of poison to Tony,

for it is he who delivers the news (falsified by Anita) of Maria’s death, along

with the money Tony and Maria were going to use to flee the city (Laurents 138).

"That was no customer upstairs, just now," Doc tells him. "That

was Anita. (Pause) Maria is dead. Chino found out about you and her and shot

her". "Come, cordial and not poison, go with me to Juliet’s grave; for

there must I use thee," speaks Romeo (V.i.85-6). Tony pursues the same

means to an end, only he expresses it in layman’s terms: "Chino? Chino?

Come and get me, too, Chino" (Laurents 139). While roaming the streets,

searching for Chino, Tony spots Maria, alive and well. Just as they are about to

embrace, a shot rings out, and Tony falls via Chino’s violent hand, Maria

catching him as he stumbles (Laurents 141). However, whereas Juliet, upon

discovering Romeo’s death, ends her life by falling upon Romeo’s dagger

(V.iii.169). An anguished Maria doesn’t end hers, although she speaks of it with

Chino’s gun in hand, she asks, "How many can I kill, Chino? How many and

still have one bullet left for me?" (Laurents 143). Whereas Romeo and

Juliet’s love was one intended to last an eternity, attaining a spiritual realm

with their deaths, that of Tony and Maria was restricted to the material world,

ending "with Tony’s death and . . . forever lost" (Poelstra). Even so,

the relationships in both plays reflect the "intolerance, misunderstanding,

and mistrust that seem to be ever-present in human society". Perhaps this

makes the themes of love and fear, that abound in both plays, all the more

relevant to our modern, commercialized, technological and, to some extent, still

segregated society, and, therefore, a more accessible vehicle for today’s

audience (Poelstra). West Side Story allows the basic elements of a story four

centuries old to be retold in a fairly modern-day setting (after all, street

gangs are more prominent now than ever before). A retelling that has garnered

its own wide audience appeal over the past four decades, showing that certain

tales can stand the test of time more than once, provided the content and

context effectively reflects the world within which it occurs.

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