

Death of Hero in Othello (1603) and Romeo and Juliet (1595): Death and Dying Studies in English Literature

Ramis Rauf¹, Fardan Rezkiawan Faida², Afriani Ulya³, Mutmainnah⁴, Eko Harianto⁵

¹ Universitas Khairun, Indonesia

^{2,3,4} Halu Oleo University, Indonesia

⁵ Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia

*Correspondence: ramis.rauf@unkhair.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the hero's death in two Shakespearean plays, Othello and Romeo and Juliet. It attempts to answer how the author depicts death and dying in Shakespeare's plays. Benstock and Dickinson, two specialists on death and dying, will provide an answer to the challenge. Benstock divides the death stages into three categories: deceased, moribund, and living-dead. Simultaneously, Dickinson mentions three periods of life: children strove (early life), gazing grain (physical maturity), and setting sun (ageing). This qualitative research uses textual analysis by deeply reading to describe the heroes' deaths in the plays. The conclusion was that the hero's death is simply a Shakespearean device for revealing the truth about anything. The message of peace is Romeo and Juliet's death as a vehicle for unifying two opposing families, as in Romeo and Juliet's tragedies between Capulet and Montague. It explains why there should be death when peace can be easily achieved. Furthermore, the revelation of truth through death confirms Desdemona's loyalty to Othello.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Published September 18th 2023



KEYWORDS

Death and Dying; Othello; Romeo and Juliet; Shakespeare; Tragedy.

ARTICLE LICENCE

© 2023 Universitas Hasanuddin
Under the license CC BY-SA
4.0



1. Introduction

Previously, an author would write a literary piece to express a message. However, today's literature can deliver and generate messages through its aspects. Death and dying are symbols the author offers in a literary work that serves as a channel for delivering and constructing messages for readers (Bennett, 1974). William Shakespeare is a phenomenal author whose work is connected with tragedy and leads to death (Bradley, 2018).

There have been some researchers who have studied Othello and Romeo and Juliet. The first comes from Vita Kristina, who researches one of the characters in Shakespeare's Othello, Desdemona. The researcher wishes to learn how Desdemona's role in Othello is seen psychologically by employing a psychoanalytic technique. The study discovered that the character of "Desdemona" varies occasionally. Desdemona is vital, especially when she chooses to marry Othello without her father's approval. Desdemona can also be a faithful wife, especially when she becomes Othello's wife, albeit she experiences turmoil regarding her fidelity to her husband amid the story. She is also a caring individual, especially when it comes to Cassio. However, she is unaware that it will cause significant difficulty in her life. She cannot persuade Othello, who eventually kills her, to trust her. She has had the feeling that she will die before it happens. She believes that by dying, she will be able to address this dilemma and demonstrate her fidelity to her spouse in perpetuity. Her death only symbolizes her honesty and fidelity to her husband, Othello (Kristiana, 2022).

The death of the many works of Shakespeare correlates with it, like a Shakespearean tragedy. A Shakespearean tragedy is a story of unparalleled misfortune that results in the death of a man of a great estate (Gamboa, 2018; Ćirović, 2022). No tragedy alone befell men. Tragic events do not happen by chance. They are primarily the result of activities, particularly those of males. These actions beget others, and these others beget others again until this chain of interconnected acts leads to a disaster in what appears to be an unavoidable sequence. A disaster is defined not only as something that happens to the individual in question but also as something they cause. It is the hero's principle: he always contributes in some way to the calamity in which he dies (Bradley, 1937).

This article will analyze the topic of death and dying as seen by William Shakespeare in his two plays, *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) and *Othello* (1603). These pieces feature a heroine who is as much the centre of attention as the hero. These stories feature the hero's demise. On the one hand, no play in which the hero survives the end is a tragedy in the classic Shakespearean meaning. On the other side, these stories illustrate the troubled period of heroes' lives that preceded and led up to their deaths, and an accidental death in the middle of affluence would not satisfy them. In truth, it is mainly a story of pain and tragedy (Bradley, 1937). Based on the description, the authors attempt to construct a research question about how the author illuminates the concept of death and dying in his two plays, *Othello* (1603) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1595), about the hero's death.

In order to answer the problem, the theory of death and dying is used to give more explanation. They are Dickinson and Benstock. According to Dickinson (Krueger, 2004), in the eyes of Christians, death is the gateway to a happy, eternal existence. Children strove (early life), gazing grain (physical maturity), and setting sun (ageing) are the stages of life shown. Meanwhile, death is represented by carriage (train money or coffins) and rising earth (grave).

In contrast, Benstock (1969) categorized the death stages into three stages in his critical essay "The Dead". The first is called deceased, a stage of death that occurs when the spirit separates from the body, which can happen to anybody and everyone. The second is moribund. Moribund is a medical term that defines a person who is physically alive but on the verge of death. The condition primarily affects older adults. The third state is living-dead, also known as spiritual death by Benstock (1969). In this situation, someone is still healthy and fit but has a frozen heart (dead) and is paralyzed. The cold and hepatic paralysis is the result of his declining religious values.

2. Methodology

This study uses two steps of research methodologies: data collection and data analysis. Faruk (2012) defines a data collection approach as "a method or technique that is an extension of the human senses because the goal is to collect empirical facts related to the research problem." The data in this study is qualitative in the form of written words from Shakespearean plays. This study used the plays of Shakespeare, *Othello* (1603) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) as data sources. Primary and secondary data are used in this investigation. The primary data is all the texts collected by intensively reading the plays that contain the death of heroes. Secondary data is information such as cultural phenomena collected from other sources connected to the deaths of heroes in *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*.

The data analysis approach, on the other hand, is a method or technique that is an extension of the human intellect to hunt for links between data that will never be stated by itself (Faruk, 2012, p. 25). This study employs two analysis methods. The first is to do a textual analysis to investigate concerns about the deaths of heroes in *Othello* (1603) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1595). The researchers employ the "simak" method in this study, which involves deep reading, finding out, and grouping data units in texts. The second step is analysis, done by determining the correlation and comparison between the plays and secondary data, which are external texts. The comparison method is employed in this analysis to compare existing data with data relating to social, political, and cultural phenomena.

3. Result and Discussion

"..... And sayst thou yet that exile is not death? Hadst thou no poison mixed, no sharp-ground knife, no sudden mean of death, though ne'er so mean, but "banishèd" to kill me?— "Banishèd"!....." (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, Scene 3).

The quotation above addressed the death issue in Shakespearean plays *Romeo and Juliet*. Hence, Bradley (1937) defined Shakespearean plays as tragic stories. This article will explore death and dying notions in William Shakespeare's two works, *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) and *Othello* (1603), about the death issue, which is frequently presented, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual deaths. As in the quotation from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo would sooner die than be exiled to a foreign land. He claims exile from Verona, where his wife dwells, is worse than death. Therefore, he asks to die rather than live beyond Verona, far from his wife, Juliet. That is why Romeo prefers to suffer than suffer to live apart from his love, Juliet. The following quotation likewise depicts death as the door to happiness.

".... For fear of that, I still will stay with thee, and never from this palace of dim night Depart again. Here, here will I remain with worms that are thy chamber maids. Oh, here Will I set up my everlasting rest, And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars from this world-wearied flesh. Eyes look your last. Arms, take your last embrace. And, lips, O you the doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss A dateless bargain to engrossing death. (kisses JULIET, takes out the poison)...." (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, Scene 5).

Juliet, Act II, Scene 3).

According to Dickinson (Krueger, 2004), death is the gateway to victory. In the eyes of Christians, death is synonymous with eternal life. The quotation above reveals Romeo's willingness to spend eternity in the tomb where his wife sleeps, accompanied by earthworms. It reflects Romeo's desire for death in exchange for the bliss he will experience because he will live eternally with his wife, Juliet. Juliet, like Romeo, prefers death as a method to avoid misery. The following quotation exemplifies this point.

"..... What's here? A cup, closed in my true love's hand? Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end.— O churl, drunk all, and left no friendly drop to help me after? I will kiss thy lips. Haply some poison yet doth hang on them, to make me die with a restorative. (kisses ROMEO). Thy lips are warm..."(Romeo and Juliet, Act V, Scene 3).

Juliet, like Romeo, would sooner die than live without her husband. According to the statement above, Juliet notices Romeo holding a bottle. Later, he discovered that Romeo died as a result of poison. Because the bottle Romeo was holding no longer contained poison, Juliet kissed Romeo's lips, which still contained poison. Juliet is also dead as a result of this. Juliet had a strong desire to end her life. It is because dying with her beloved husband will bring her happiness. That way, the agony he will experience in his own life without his love in the world will never occur.

In addition to the delight Romeo and Juliet felt due to death, there was another happiness felt in this Romeo and Juliet drama. Juliet and Romeo's family brought them happiness. Previously, the Capulet and Montague families were adversaries. Because of these feuds, there were regular conflicts between both families, which could result in the death of some members of both. Furthermore, this hatred resulted in the union of pure love that Romeo and Juliet belonged to both families' hostilities. However, the sanctity and loneliness of Romeo and Juliet's love resulted in the conclusion of the enmity between the two families. However, it is via the death of these two lovers, not through the merging of love in a great marriage. The terrible deaths of these two lovers galvanize the two families to reach an agreement. The following quotation evidences it.

Capulet to Montague: "O brother Montague, give me thy hand. This is my daughter's jointure, for no more can I demand" (Romeo and Juliet, Act V, Scene 3).

Montague to Capulet: "But I can give thee more, for I will raise her statue in pure gold, That whiles Verona by that name is known, there shall no figure at such rate be set as that of true and faithful Juliet" (Romeo and Juliet, Act V, Scene 3).

The quotation above demonstrates the reconciliation between two previously antagonistic families. Capulet seized Montague's hand and proposed to Juliet. Montague offered to create an unparalleled statue in Verona made entirely of pure gold in exchange for Juliet's fidelity. According to the passages above, death is not simply sadness and pain; it can also erase misery and provide enormous delight.

Romeo and Juliet, or Othello's plays, also depict death as the gateway to happiness. It is clearly demonstrated by the character Othello. Instead, He would commit rather than follow in the footsteps of his wife, who perished due to his actions. The following quote illustrates this:

Narrator: "Stabs himself."

"...(to DESDEMONA) I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this, Killing myself, to die upon a kiss."

*Narrator: "Kisses **DESDEMONA**, dies (Othello, Act V, Scene 2).*

According to the quotation above, Othello murdered himself by stabbing himself. Othello does it to atone for his wrongdoings towards his wife, representing his regret. Then, just before he died, he kissed his wife, just as he had done before she died after being strangled by him. In addition to Othello, one of the characters, Emilia, regards her death as amusing. As evidenced by the following quotation:

"What did thy song bode, lady? Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan. And die in music. (singing) Willow, willow, willow—....."

***EMILIA** dies. (Othello, Act V, Scene 2).*

Emilia is stabbed to death by her husband, Iago, for exposing his crime to Othello and everyone else. On the other hand, Emilia meets her death with delight in her heart. According to the remark above, she felt like she was flying while singing a song just before she died. The deaths of Othello, Emilia, and Desdemona imply that death can bring a sense of calm. It is demonstrated by the circumstances surrounding the figures who gladly face his death, resulting in the disclosure of the truth.

In addition to Dickinson, Benstock (1969) separated death into three types; the first is the separation of the body's spirits, which all humans on the planet will experience. The second is "moribund", a state that characterizes a person physically alive but in the abyss of death, frequently occurring in the elderly. The third type of "living-dead" condition is spiritual death, in which a person is alive and well, but his heart is frozen (dead) and paralyzed due to his declining religious ideals.

Some of the characters in the Shakespeare play Romeo and Juliet died. In addition to the deaths of the Romeo and Juliet figures previously addressed, fatalities also happened in two other characters, Mercutio of the Montague family and Tybalt of the Capulet family. The following quotation depicts Mercutio's demise.

"It is too late. (he smothers her)" (Othello, Act V, Scene 2).

Othello murders his wife out of jealousy after learning she is having an affair. Desdemona (Othello's wife) tries to explain and defend herself, but Othello is enraged and strangles her immediately. Othello's humanity was lost due to his jealousy, even though the lady he killed was the woman he loved the most.

Dehumanization occurs when Tybalt's human side dies due to his loss of Mercutio's life. It was written (in Erich Maria Remarque's novel All Quiet on the Western Front) that "man is essentially an animal, like a loaf of bread with a bit of jam that is decency." The ability to regress like animals is essential for life on the battlefield, but it is also combined with modesty, which is essential for surviving in society. Indeed, animalism is used when someone is fighting on the battlefield; without these warriors, it would be difficult for them to survive. The concept of animal behaviour is an excuse because humans are the only creatures who form armies and go to war. It is demonstrated in the following quotation.

".....Romeo, he cries aloud, "Hold, friends! Friends, part!" and, swifter than his tongue, His agile arm beats down their fatal points, And 'twixt them rushes—underneath whose arm An envious thrust from Tybalt hit the life Of stout Mercutio,....."(Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene 1).

Benvolio explains that Romeo arrived to stop Mercutio and Tybalt from fighting. Then Romeo dashes into a brawl and dumps a Mercutio and Tybalt weapon. However, Tybalt burst through Romeo's arm and struck Mercutio with a sword, killing him. Romeo avenges Mercutio's death by murdering Tybalt. Then Romeo and Tybalt fought, and Tybalt eventually perished. The following quotation makes it plain.

Narrator: *"....They fight. TYBALT falls and dies...."*(Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene 1).

In addition to physical death, spiritual death, or "Living-Dead," is shown in this drama. A couple in love, Romeo and Juliet, died in this manner. Because they must split, their life souls are lost. The following quotation demonstrates it.

"...Both you and I, for Romeo is exiled. He made you for a highway to my bed, But I, a maid, die maiden-widowèd. Come, cords.—Come, Nurse. I'll to my wedding bed. And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!" (Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene 2).

The quotation expresses Juliet's intense anguish at learning that Romeo would be exiled to a distant land and never see her again. As a result, she loses her life spirit. All she could do was lie in her bed and wait for her "virginity" to be taken away by her death. Romeo, described in the following line, likewise experiences a lack of passion for life.

"Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel. Wert thou as young as I, Juliet thy love, An hour but married, Tybalt murderèd, Doting like me, and like me banishèd, Then mightst thou speak, then mightst thou tear thy hair And fall upon the ground, as I do now, Taking the measure of an unmade grave" (Romeo and Juliet, Act III, Scene 3).

The sentence above demonstrates Romeo's sadness due to what he has done. He murdered Tybalt and was subsequently exiled to a distant land, along with his existence, which would be confined to his love after the exile. It causes Romeo to lose his zest for life and act like a man who has lost his strength (indicated by his lying on the floor). Romeo and Juliet spent time grieving and wailing in the face of this tragedy, demonstrating their acceptance of death's approach.

Romeo and Juliet is one of William Shakespeare's masterpieces from the XVI century, under the reign of Elizabeth I. In that century, England was torn apart by religious warfare. King Henry VIII had previously severed connections with the Pope in Rome and declared himself supreme head of the Church of England. Following the death of King Henry VIII in 1547, the spiritual counsellors of his infant son, Edward VI, tried to convert England to Protestantism. Also, England nearly became bankrupt after losing its remaining territories in France and Spain, which posed a threat. Queen Elizabeth I attempted to avoid religious conflict by restoring reform by establishing a Church of England that was neither Catholic nor extreme Protestant.

Protestants and Catholics have long been at odds due to religious differences. This difference in belief can be evident in how they regard saints and priests. Protestants regard a pastor as someone admired or revered for his generosity to the needy. Aside from that, they believe priests have a pure heart since they come closer to God without using mystical abilities. In contrast, Catholics perceive the priest as someone who cannot be worshipped since he is endowed with magical powers to influence the world around him (Callaghan, 2003, p. 384). It is depicted from Romeo and Juliet's belief. Juliet believes that if she wants to pray, go to the church and pray to God with the priest's guidance. At the same time, Romeo believes he can pray by worshipping mystical objects like curved monuments.

Apart from their differences, Catholics and Protestants share spiritual commonalities in that they both want to draw closer to God rather than focusing on worldly or temporal things. Catholics believe that spiritual things can be achieved by resisting the desire for wealth or other goods and that the material obtained must not interfere with religious ceremonies. Protestants believe that spiritual things can be achieved by drawing closer to God and avoiding any sacred items, statues, images, or religious paraphernalia, even if they obtain a small amount of material wealth, not primarily to pursue world prosperity (Callaghan, 2003, p. 387). The impact of these two ideologies is demonstrated by the characters in the play Romeo and Juliet, notably Juliet, who is portrayed as a Protestant. The following quotations demonstrate this.

"I have no joy of this contract tonight: it is too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden." (Romeo and Juliet, ACT II, Scene 2).

The phrase above depicts Juliet's idea of marriage as something official, witnessed by the public, performed in a church, and requiring the blessing of both the bride and groom's parents. Because for them (Protestants), marriage must include guidance, not haste, and careful and mature planning. In contrast to Romeo, who believed that marriage should be secret and not be viewed by the public and that it should be carried out without due forethought. It is about the portrayal of Catholics. In other words, Romeo was a devout Catholic. Furthermore, the following quotation explains the impact of these two beliefs:

"an ancient receptacle; where, for these many hundred years, the bones of all my buried ancestor are packed"(Romeo and Juliet, ACT IV, Scene 3).

According to Capulet, an ancient place has been used for years as a place to bury all its descendants; this exemplifies the Catholic belief that the soul of a person who died before reaching the realm of death is deemed to need to be purified by building a special place where priests or other people can pray. The saint can read a prayer or chant for the deceased person's soul, so the particular location is known as a family burial site or monument. This Catholic concept is further illustrated in the burial monuments described at the end of the play Romeo and Juliet when their death monuments are built in the shape of their statues and made of gold. It contrasts with the Protestant idea that the golden monument merely represents the world's wealth. The remarks of Juliet as she was going to appear dead by drinking poison offered by Friar Laurence strengthen the two theories above concerning the contrasts in Protestant and Catholic beliefs.

*"what if it be a poison which the Friar
Subtly hath ministered to have me dead,
Lets in this marriage he should be dishonoured,
Because he married me before to Romeo?"*
(Romeo and Juliet, ACT IV, Scene 3).

When Juliet is going to swallow the poison provided to her by Friar Laurence, she questions whether the poison will kill her and wreck her marriage because she had married Romeo. Friar, who believes in Protestantism, is not trusted by Juliet, who also believes in Protestantism. Because Romeo held different Catholic beliefs than them, Juliet believed

Friar Laurence would murder her so that their marriage would be shattered and ended, and Friar Laurence's pride as a Protestant believer would not be tainted.

Romeo and Juliet are just made-up characters in a play to demonstrate essential differences in Protestant and Catholic views, one of which is the definition of marriage. This disparity also implies a disagreement between the Capulet family (Juliet) and the Montague family (Romeo), which is thought to be related to the two families' opposing ideologies. It is founded on the previous explanation; it can be linked to modern issues, specifically the prevalence of a mindset that political leadership or authority must be founded on the ideology of the governing majority. Disputes over beliefs became a feature of sixteenth-century Puritanism (ecclesiastical rule) and still occur today. In Indonesia, for example, Islam is the dominant ideology; thus, the elected leader must also be Muslim. This mentality has persisted in society.

4. Conclusion

Based on the preceding description, it can be concluded that William Shakespeare's view of death and dying in his two works, *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) and *Othello* (1603), about the death of the hero, is a type of peace message that Shakespeare wishes to convey through the death of the hero. Besides, the hero's death is only a Shakespearean device for revealing the truth about something. The message of peace is Romeo and Juliet's death as a vehicle for unifying two opposing families, as in Romeo and Juliet's tragedies between Capulet and Montague. It explains why there should be death when peace can be easily achieved. Furthermore, the revelation of truth through death confirms Desdemona's loyalty to Othello. Even though she will be slain by his husband (Othello), who believes she has been unfaithful, Desdemona maintains her love and devotion to Othello. These feelings of love and loyalty prove that the truth is in Desdemona's hands, which becomes a significant regret for Othello, who has killed a lady he deeply loves and cares about.

References

- Bennett, R. V. (1974). *Death and the Curriculum*. Chicago: American Education Research Association.
- Benstock, B. (1969). "The Dead" in *James Joyce Dubliners: Critical Essay* (C. Hart, ed.). New York: Faber and Faber Copyright.
- Bradley, A. C. (1937). *Shakespearean Tragedy, Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (Second Ed.). London: Macmillan and Co. Limited.
- Bradley, A. C. (2018). *Shakespearean tragedy*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Callaghan, D.M. (2003). Health-promoting self-care behaviors, self-care self-efficacy, and self-care agency. *Nursing Science Quarterly*, 16(3), 247-254.
- Ćirović, M. (2021). Conceptual metaphor in Shakespeare's tragedies, comedies, and tragicomedies as a means towards better understanding of the plays, characters, the author, and the Renaissance period. *Универзитет у Београду*.
- Faruk. (2012). *Metode Penelitian Sastra*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Gamboa, B. (2018). *Shakespeare's Double Plays: Dramatic Economy on the Early Modern Stage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kristiana, V. (2022). Psychoanalysis of "Desdemona" Character on Othello. *PHILOLOGY: Journal of English Language and Literature*, 2(1).
- Krueger, G. (2004). "Death Be Not Proud: Children, Families and Cancer in Postwar America, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 78. Baltimore. Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1595). *Romeo and Juliet*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Shakespeare, W. (1603). *Othello*. London: Oxford University Press.