

Shakespeare and love

With images from the Birmingham Shakespeare collection

Love is a most warming, happy, inspirational human feeling. It surrounds us throughout our lives and takes many shapes and forms. You will find it in the softness of your mother's hands, the passions of youth or mature understanding with age. Since the story of mankind began, it has inspired some of the most beautiful images in poetry or painting.

Love is something we all share no matter where we live, and it disregards social status or age. Shakespeare has captured the spirit of it, its highs and lows, and the beauty of falling in love in some of the most poetical lines ever written. He wrote 38 plays, and the word love is mentioned in each one of them. In some, it is very frequent:

The Two Gentleman of Verona – 162 times

Romeo and Juliet – 120

As You Like It – 104

A Midsummer Night's Dream – 103

Much Ado About Nothing – 89

(Richard Gill, Mastering Shakespeare, 1998)

Romeo and Juliet

One cannot talk about love without immediately recalling the story of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, a story unsurpassed in world literature as a celebration of young love – innocent and pure, love at first sight, strong and passionate. Although Shakespeare rarely invents the plots of his plays, he has created here an exceptionally powerful image of young love.

Love is a smoke rais'd with the fume of sighs;

Being purg'd, a fire sparkling in lover's eyes;

Being vex'd, a sea raging with lover's tears;

What is it else? A madness most discreet,

A choking gall and a preserving sweet.

Romeo's love is pure emotion, thoughtless and driven by the spirit of feud and revenge. Juliet is the younger one, more practical and determined that they should be joined in marriage.

*My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.*

The beauty of Shakespeare's language and understanding of the young lover's emotions is what makes the play timeless. However, the destiny of Romeo and Juliet's love is doomed due to a conflict between their families – Montague's and Capulets. The lover's sacrifice brings the reconciliation of the two families and the healing of the social wound. However, the question lingers as to whether pure love is possible in society bound by norms and rules of behaviour that suppress true feelings. It is not surprising that Shakespeare sees love as only possible in a dream (A Midsummer Night's Dream).



Romeo and Juliet. Hand coloured illustration from the Forrest collection S 790.1 F

A Midsummer Night's Dream, illustrated by Arthur Rackham, 1908 S 338.1908 Q

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Love in Shakespeare is not always tragic, unrequited, or hurtful. In three of his early romantic comedies (A Midsummer Night's Dream, Twelfth Night and Much Ado About Nothing) love is a source of pleasantry and amusement, sporting, and

playfulness. Familiar comic features are present in all three plays – mistaken identity (TN), matchmaking (MAAN) and intervening magic (AMND). Everything falls into its right place and there is no serious damage done to anybody.

There isn't a more delicate or imaginative portrait of love than in A Midsummer Night's Dream. In this play Shakespeare draws on many fairy tales and nursery legends he had heard as a young boy, as well as the established tradition of midsummer celebrations. There was a notion in his time that love is introduced and taken away by magic, hence the play of fairies at midnight and the magical setting of the play:

*I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine
With sweet musk-rose, and with eglantine;
There sleeps Titania some time of the night,
Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight;*

A Midsummer Night's Dream was probably written to celebrate a wedding. The play starts with the announcement of a wedding and ends with a marriage ceremony for three couples – Theseus and Hippolyta, Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius. What happens in between is much the making of Puck, fairy king Oberon's servant who is using the juice of a herb 'love-in-idleness' to spin everybody into action, to confuse lovers and create fun in the enchanted forest where they all find themselves. Love appears to be a dream, kind of madness, introduced by the summer heat, a feeling governed not by reason but by fairy interventions:

The course of true love never did run smooth.

However irrational love is recognised by the characters as a transformational force. Because of its blindness and lack of judgement, love helps to bring out the best in each one of them as Helena admits:

*Love can transpose to form and dignity.
Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind;*

The forest is a place of freedom and at night the lovers are free to be themselves. But Shakespeare reminds us that this is a bit of a dream and true love, however beautiful, is not always possible.

Twelfth Night

In Shakespeare's time there was a view that youth, beauty, and love are short lived so they should be enjoyed while they last. And this is what the clown's song suggests in Twelfth Night:

*What is love? 'tis not hereafter;
Present mirth hath present laughter;
What's to come is still unsure:
In delay there lies no plenty;
Them come kiss me, sweet and twenty,
Youth's a stuff will not endure.*

Just like in the other comedies, love in Twelfth Night is a game. It is never constant, is subject to suggestions, works its magic and not always results in a marriage. It makes characters love-sick and carries them through a labyrinth of confusing circumstances. Shakespeare pokes gentle fun around them and their attitude to love. Viola falls in love with Orsino at first sight, as well as Olivia with Cesario, Sebastian with Olivia. Only Sir Toby and Maria really get to know each other. Viola's love is genuine. But like most women:

*She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm I'the' bud,
Feed on her damask cheek: she pin'd in thought;*

In contrast, Duke Orsino is in love with the idea of love. It was fashionable at the time that noble men should admire women's beauty from a distance and without really getting to know the objects of their desires (*'If music be the food of love, play on....'*), making them appear sick and melancholic.

Love in Shakespeare's plays, just like in real life, makes sometimes a fool of us. Malvolio develops a *'very strange manner'* in his belief that Olivia has fallen for him. Servant Maria reports that he has been seen in yellow stockings cross gartered with

a silly smile. Life enhancing qualities of love are captured by Shakespeare in most of his plays, including Much Ado About Nothing.



Twelfth Night, illustrated by William Heath Robinson, 1908 S 352.1908 Q

Ellen Terry and Henry Irving in Much Ado About Nothing, Shakespeare Illustrated Scrapbook S 790.3 Q

Much Ado About Nothing

The playful theme is continued in Much Ado About Nothing where a clever jest tricks Benedick and Beatrice into loving each other by making them hear planted conversations. Their relationship doesn't start well, each one of them being a sober, down to earth person. Beatrice is not in a romantic mood:

For, hear me, Hero, wooing, wedding, and repenting is as a Scotch jig

A measure, and a cinque-pace; the first suit is hot and hasty, like a Scotch jig

And then comes repentance, and, with his bad legs, falls into the cinque-pace

Faster and faster, till he sinks into his grave.

Benedick is not far behind Beatrice establishing himself as a firm bachelor and 'professed tyrant' to women. Even when they are tricked to believe the other is in love with them, they stay apprehensive, and love is '*no more than reason*'. Beatrice takes him 'in friendly recompense' and 'consumption', he takes her 'in pity'. Shakespeare's take on love in the play is modern and fresh.

Beatrice and Benedick's love has been developed as part of the complex plot of the broken and then restored romance of Claudio and Hero which causes a lot of 'do about nothing' in the play. Although in Shakespeare's times it was usual to suspect women of dishonesty and deceit, Shakespeare takes it a step further and writes about men's infidelity:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more;

Men were deceivers ever;

One foot in sea and one on shore,

To one thing constant never.

Love and marriage

Love between a woman and a man in Shakespeare reaches its culmination in marriage, seen as a natural state of happiness – '*Prince, thou art sad; get thee a wife, get thee a wife*' - Benedick advises his patron Don Pedro in Twelfth Night.

Shakespeare is very realistic in his view of love in Romeo and Juliet and the three early comedies. He has sensed its grand power and transformational force, but he has not yet given its right place in the grand scheme of things in life. This is what he does in one of his later tragedies. In King Lear Shakespeare mixes love and affection with the even bigger passions for property and power and sadly, it is not the love that triumphs.

'The Tragedy of King Lear' has become a symbol of family disintegration and the pain of losing the affection of close relations at old age. The depth of expression of tragic loss of love is striking in its comparison with the natural storm:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!

You cataracts and hurricanes, spout till you have drench'd

Our steeples, drown'd the cocks!

The themes of love and power are set on the background of the medieval patriarchal society where men are the rulers and the women follow – ‘*O, let not women’s weapons, water-drops, Stain my man’s cheeks*’. However, society is captured in the process of change and Shakespeare’s women are becoming more independent and freer to express their identity. Cordelia, the youngest of king’s daughters, refuses to measure her love for her father in words:

True love cannot be put into fine words.



Ellen Terry and Henry Irving in King Lear, Lyceum Theatre London, 1892 S 601.32

It could be argued that words are important when it comes to reassuring the old father of respect and understanding. Ultimately, however, it is through each of the daughters actions that true feeling is distinguished from hypocrisy.

On another level, the theme of tragic filial love is enriched with the lines devoted to the troubled relationship of Duke of Gloucester, his son Edgar, and his illegitimate son Edmund.

The suffering, at times unbearable, of all the characters in King Lear takes on the proportions of a Greek tragedy, leaving the spectator with feeling of sorrow for the

old king, and understanding the power of material temptations and the beauty of filial love. Just as in real life, Shakespeare mixes these feelings with thoughts on hypocritical love, unfaithful nature of women and the ugliness of false marriages.