

Teen Disorder and Suicide in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

When it comes to Shakespeare's beloved play, *Romeo and Juliet*, we are often reminded of the unfulfilled young love and suicidal tragedy of both heirs in the feudal families. But is it that simple for these young lovers to dispose their lives because of the disapproval of their parents? The hatred between the two family can put damage to them but the fearful facts are underlying. The factors are both personal and social. The behavior of both Romeo and Juliet reveals that they are problematic teens. I'm going to uncover the disorders under the seemingly beautiful veil of *Romeo and Juliet*.

It is not hard to find out that “death” is following the development of the play and accompanies the characters – Romeo and Juliet in many ways. Especially through utterance, they are somehow unconscious of what they are saying. For example, after knowing the banishment of Romeo, Juliet laments:

But with a rearward following Tybalt's death,
'Romeo is banished'—to speak that word
Is father, mother, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet,
All slain, all dead. 'Romeo is banished'—
There is no end, no limit, measure, bound,
In that word's death. No words can that woe sound. (3.2. 121-26)

How can a thirteen-year-old girl say something so deadly in despair without considering that this is probably not the worst situation she might face? According to Erikson's eight life-stage virtues, there are eight psychological developments of human beings. Erikson explains in his fifth stage that the adolescents are facing the identity crisis. They will question who they are and where they are going. Contrary to our usual stereotype, teens' thinking capabilities are mature enough for them to think about life and death.

Unexperienced teens always view death as a relief of reality. It is interesting to examine what death will bring us when our lives end one day. In philosophy of death, it points out that

“destruction is not change” (Soll 1998). Soll further elaborates that what we undergo or suffer before the event of death will cease after it happens. Soll says:

Although the event of death happens at a particular time and involves a living being, it might be argued that it is still not a calamity *suffered, undergone or endured* by a living creature, because by the time it has happened, the living creature no longer exists. How can someone undergo an event, when at its close there is no one who has undergone it? How can someone endure a calamity that no one endures? (Soll 1998)

Because death is a form of destruction, according to the above statement, it is not change. This can explain why death in a way is a relief no matter what the cause is.

Juliet is the only daughter of Capulet so she is over-protected and vulnerable. In her growing process, she is deeply distorted by the environment and the parenting model. As a hostess of the family, we can see why Capulet's wife has to get the Nurse to take care of Juliet because she doesn't put much attention on her daughter unless she thinks she need to. According to Erikson, in the first stage of infancy, the caregiver has to give basic need, comfort and affection to help the infant to learn trust. Otherwise, it will learn mistrust. Basically, Nurse is the caregiver to Juliet and she seems to love Juliet more than Capulet's Wife. Under this care, Juliet can learn trust but her real mother is coercive and neglectful. This gives Juliet the feeling of uncertainty about the world. Studies show that supportive parenting (SP) can buffer children from the negative impact of family adversity (Pettit, Bates & Dodge 1997). The adversity can be viewed as Capulet's hatred toward Montague. Juliet's childhood is the mixture of love, hatred, coercion and neglect. When Capulet's wife has the opportunity to talk to Juliet, she only forces her ideas into Juliet's mind instead of listening to her daughter. This can be shown in the following:

CAPULET'S WIFE. Marry, that 'marry' is the very theme
I came to talk of. Tell me, daughter Juliet,
How stands your dispositions to be married?
JULIET. It is an honour that I dream not of. (1.3. 65-68)

The talk is purposely for marriage itself. Capulet's wife never asks how Juliet really feels. Capulet's wife insists that Juliet think about Paris' love regardless of Juliet's reluctance. In this stage, parents should encourage children to have their own thoughts about the future (Erikson). It is evident that Capulet's Wife has a negative impact on Juliet's growing process.

Inability to develop the right value for her life, Juliet develops a covert antisocial behavior. It is a natural self-defense when the outer world cannot give as much as the child thinks. Here's the description for this kind of situation:

Covert forms of antisocial behavior have similar social-functional properties. They provide access to material or activity reinforcers that are denied by others or are otherwise unavailable, or serve as a means of undetected retribution. The emergence of covert forms of antisocial behavior arises, in part, from discrimination learning about setting conditions associated with detection and punishment. Persistent and serious antisocial behavior is typically accompanied by children's failure to acquire an increasingly sophisticated array of skills that bridge the gap between short- and long-term contingencies. (Conger & Simons 1999)

As soon as Juliet acknowledges Romeo's identity, she mourns, "My only love sprung from my only hate" (1.5. 135). We can see how deep the impact on Juliet by her family is. It is the reason why she falls in love with Romeo despite of her passiveness in marriage at first when her mother asks her. She asks Romeo for marriage at the first night after the party on her balcony (2.1. 184-90). Through Romeo, it is the only way for her to see the world she imagines, not the world Capulet's wife wants her to see.

As for Romeo, he is mentally unstable. At the beginning, he grieves for not earning the love of Rosaline and shows depression. But he can instantly transform his melancholy to love toward Juliet at the first sight in the party. His changeable behavior is called Conduct Disorder. We can also see some traits from the family of Montague. After the first duel, Montague's wife asks Benvolio whether he saw Romeo today (1.1. 109-10). It seems that Romeo is always wandering around. Contrary to Juliet, Romeo has his best friends, Benvolio and Mercutio. A study shows that either overt or covert antisocial behavior will occur especially in the absence of effective adult monitoring. And peers may increase the risk of this behavior (Snyder, Reid & Patterson 2003). Apparently, Montague's Wife does not have an effective monitoring. The playful Benvolio and Mercutio can easily persuade Romeo to dress up and sneak into Capulet's party. The relation is dangerous for someone who cannot control himself rationally. The emotion disturbance can also be regarded as a trait of antisocial behavior (Dishion, French & Patterson 1995). Romeo nearly breaks down on many occasions and Friar turns out to be a psychologist instead of the clergy.

Teens who suffer from Conduct Disorder always like to violate rules and act impulsively to hurt others. The perfect example is that Romeo kills Tybalt during the duel and keeps breaking the promise to Friar Laurence. According to one hypothesis, Romeo is a relationally aggressive child with more externalizing behaviors than his peers (Crick 1997). For example, Romeo has several confrontations with Tybalt but Romeo tries to eliminate the situation while Mercutio likes to stand out for him. That means Romeo takes actions according to his instincts and surging emotions.

As for teen suicide, according to America's Mental Health Channel, the basic triggers of teen suicide are depression, feeling of lost and pressure. And antisocial behavior will also co-produce depression (Rutter, Giller & Hagell 1998) As I mentioned in the second paragraph, the two lovers repeatedly use “death” as the object of their conversation. At first, they may not have the trace for suicidal behavior. There are three terms for suicide: suicide, suicide attempt and suicide ideation (Goldston 2002). With “thoughts of death or wanting to die without specific thought of killing oneself are not considered to be suicidal ideation” (O'Carroll 1996). So in this case, Romeo and Juliet's suicidal behaviors cannot be considered as suicidal ideation. It is the antisocial thinking which makes them choose death when the cherished one dies. They cannot bear the consequence of choosing to live. So it is easy for them to give up life after knowing that death is ever-lasting love.

We can see the thoughts in Romeo's monologue in the tomb:

Forgive me, cousin. Ah, dear Juliet,
Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe
That unsubstantial death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?
For fear of that I still will stay with thee,
And never from this pallet of dim night
Depart again. Here, here will I remain
With worms that are thy chambermaids. O, here
Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last. (5.3. 101-12)

Even though Romeo knows death is not far away, he still describes death with beautiful language. Juliet even uses “happy dagger” to end her life. It is clear that they both don't see their behavior as suicide. Although Juliet lies dead in front of Romeo, he still sees her as a lively person with a fair

look. For them, death is only a form of life. So it is a simple idea of staying with each other after the destruction of death.

Through the factors, we understand that the main trigger for Romeo and Juliet's suicide is their antisocial behavior and conduct disorder. And it is deeply affected by the parenting model and the social environment. Whom can we blame? The Prince at the end laments, "Some shall be pardoned, and some shall punished/ For never was a story of more woe/ Than Juliet and her Romeo." (5.3. 307-9) Indeed, it is a loss to both Montague and Capulet. But ironically, no one shall be pardoned unless they unfold the truth hidden under these deeds of love.

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