



On some Passions of the Characters in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet": A Semiotic Prospective

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper shall be to analyze determined semantic taxonomies of the main characters in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet". The focus shall be on rendering characters' actions passionate, due to a semiotics of action, as described in Greimas and Fontanille (1993). To my opinion, universal themes such as love, hatred, death, etc. can be subject to a passionate configuration of different characters perspective in action. This shall also be due to the recent definition of semiotics as a cognitive science on meaning interpretation. In conclusion, characters' passions resulting as final semantic entities shall give this study an empirical account for at least two reasons: first to argument semiotics' importance of artistic expressivity and second, to argument semiotics' epistemological significance besides its ontological one. "The signs' way" as Deely (2009) states, gives us the possibility of treating each character's perspective separately, thus rendering the signification process for each sign taken as an example separately.

Keywords: passions, semiotics, modalities, epistemological, action

Introduction

The Semiotic Relevance of the Phenomenon

Treating whichever sort of artistic creation out of the semiotic viewpoint means not only establishing relations among its constituent components but deducting meaningful units out of such relations, as well. As obvious otherwise, relational attitudes within semiotics, as well as their relevant interpretation possibilities, are as significant as establishing the mentioned relations themselves [see: (Deely, 2009)]. I emphasize this fact because of the "action" component which is an integral part of the "actors in scene" in the case of analyzing a theatrical work of art - a term which also complies with Greimas's terminology [see: (Greimas, 1973)]. My intention here is to expose as much as possible ways of "resolving determined conflictual situations" so

as to reach the point of complex signification processes. In conclusion, therefore, one should not treat only one of the semiotic processes whose aim is to signify, but more of them. It thus makes the problem as complex as the signification process, in general, is: either taken from its ontological viewpoint [such as at least explained in (Eco, 1979)], or from its epistemological viewpoint [such as at least explained in (Greimas, 1973)].

If one has to consider both mentioned methodological approaches, then one should be certain that “relations” among characters should enhance deducing a multitude of meaning possibilities. In conclusion, therefore, the mentioned thesis shall be our main concern in the present text. What I intend by this is: focusing on the form rather than on the content, of a given art creation. In the instance of a Shakespearean tragedy, it exposes a semiotic representational method which represents at least some of the following relations: contradictoriness, conjunction, disjunction, etc., [as it is, after all, shown in (Greimas, 1973)]. My methodological approach should be seen as originating from the Russian formalists’ contribution, in the sense of exposing artistic realities to a semiotic analysis, [the historical and developmental points of view of such approaches, can be seen in (Beker, 1986)]. If all mentioned components are taken into account, it should be logical to state then, that methodologically speaking, we start our analysis out of the phenomena opposed at each other, in the sense that it has been shown within the structural approach to semiotics, so as to continue such developed inter-relations into their epistemological comprehension, aimed at a passion taxonomy of meaningful units. It should be remarked, however, that the last assertion needs a further elaboration in the frames of its methodological representation, in an attempt to justify the theoretical background of the mentioned semiotic method [such as explained in (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993)].

“Love” and “hatred” as possible passion taxonomies

If semiotics should among other related issues pertain to the “world of possibilities”, in the sense as explicated by Eco [see: (Eco, 1984); (Eco, 1994a)], then it is logical to assert that “love” and “hatred” as universal themes in Shakespeare (i.e. not only in “*Romeo and Juliet*”) [see (Shakespeare, 2002)], should be regarded as one of such possibilities. Based on the most of the plot aspects of the tragedy, a semiotician should single out such possible taxonomic results, thus enacting a “semiotics of action”, such as explicated in Greimas and Fontanille (1993). Be they semiotic topoi, or passional configurations obtained as parts of the semiotic possibilities, one should be aware of the ‘speculative’ nature of such an analysis. This is due to the following:

It is therefore not surprising that the best-explored, and perhaps the most efficient level of the generative trajectory is, in fact, situated in the middle area between its discursive and epistemological components. We are referring above all to the modelling of narrativity and to its actantial organizations. The concept of the actant, freed from its psychological frame and defined only by its doing, is the sine qua non condition for developing a semiotics of action. (Greimas and Fontanille, 1993:VII-VIII)

The above citation claims the following to be true: even though relational attitudes might be an outcome of determined narrative units (where such units, as should be obvious, represent an outcome of determined plot aspects of an analyzed artistic discourse), a taxonomy must be deduced; which should finally obtain its semantic importance. It thus definitely makes semiotics a cognitive science within its interpretative competencies. Only in such given circumstances can “love” and “hatred” be distinguished as contradictory units in the semiotic sense of the word, among other related entities under analysis. As should be understandable, all such empirically obtained results should be subordinated to a subjectivizing component, which is able to make such gained semantic units moveable, from one state to another. This last remark is finally possible through introducing the “subject” in the frames of the semiotic studies [such as explicated in (Greimas, 1973)]. The “subject” concept otherwise, can render itself “active”, and be named a “knowable subject” [such as shown in (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993)].

Prior to concretizing abstractions, at least if they are perceived within their semiotic way of comprehension, let us see some practical matters of the given object of analysis.

As obvious, in *“Romeo and Juliet”* a wanted love cannot come true: due to conflictual situations between families in question. It is for this reason that “hatred” following “despair” should be taken as one of the taxonomic solutions. The situation in question is not easy to resolve: as otherwise known, besides the conflict, there is a “secret” not known to both lovers respectively: the poisoning component (wanted by both protagonists, either true or false – but we will mention this later on in this paper); as such was their decision to resolve determined misunderstandings. I emphasize the last term because of the communication problem between two parties, which as a matter of fact, in Shakespearean terms, renders the conflict possible. Or by semiotic terms: the “absent structure” [see (Eco, 1968)], has to be resolved. I shall intend by this notion the “enigma”, the seemingly “unknown” in such sort of work of art on one hand, and on the other, in reality, the full awareness of the audience about the created situation. It thus creates two axes in the Greimasian sense of the word: one which pertains to seeming and the other one to reality. This is after all one of the main goals of an artistic creation: to enhance a certain feed-back reaction; or by other words: being able to reach reality, through determined fiction components [a term widely used in Eco, as well; see: (Eco, 1994c)].

One may ask then: who is it that offers the mentioned ‘feed-back’ information from the communicational point of view? It is only the audience that should be aware of the phenomenon of poisoning (either in terms of Romeo or Juliet): therefore it temporarily excludes the main protagonists of the scene, respectively. To my opinion, it renders at least two components visible: first, the enhancing of the audience as an active part of “participating” in the story narrated, and second, it points out, the “indetermination” component in a work of art [see: (Eco, 1989)]. It should be

remarked however that, although Eco (1989) asserts that the case of an “openness” of a work of art is more visible and noticeable in terms of modern artistic creativity, one should note that it occurs in previously created works: at our instance in conclusion, also because of its semiotic comprehension.

On the Movability of States from one to another: Which is the State of Affairs?

Not only that determined key actions of the plot aspect of the tragedy are narrated in a superb way by the author, but they are also encoded. Such sort of encoding entails a metaphoric usage, which renders the decoding process complex. It should be understood on the other hand that, the story develops gradually, to the peak of its importance, emphasized by the author himself. My aim here is to discuss only matters which are significant for the main characters, so as to obtain a semiotic process.

First, even in the exposition stage of the play, one can notice the aim of the main protagonists. Disregarding all other events happening in the tragedy, (such as, for instance, the dispute among Romeo’s friends, as well as the events of the both families respectively), one can easily notice that love between two lovers is the key point to keep the audience interested in the story being narrated. Second, the dispute among families makes itself evident almost since the beginning of the play. It is to note however that it foresees the impossibility of a wanted love to come true. It is to conclude therefore that, it points out at least two important plot components: one, that love between Romeo and Juliet has to come true, and second, that their respective parents do not want such a love to happen. It thus again pertains to both Greimasian axes: the first one in appearance, that Romeo and Juliet want their love to come true, disregarding their parents’ *wishing-to-do* (a matter that regards Greimasian “modalities”), and second, in reality, that their parents wish to marry their children with individuals equal to their respective economic statuses. Besides the mentioned distinctions above, two other related issues are evident here: the paradigmatic and syntagmatic axes of possible taxonomic deductions, which would supposedly presume determined obtainable and/or obtained passions. In conclusion, two relations can be noticed here: one which represents conjunction, and the next disjunction. If one analyzes the mentioned terms in such a context, then semiotically speaking, relations among characters themselves are a truth. However, one asks: how much of such love and hatred actually comes true, throughout the tragedy? No question, the last remark should regard the changeability and substitutional optionality among various attitudes within respective characters within the tragedy we are discussing. The instance of “substituting” determined actants among each other, (and/or determined semantic units procedurally obtained), should definitely belong to a semiotic way of comprehending the discussed tragedy.

The above-mentioned question is nonetheless clarified further in the play. Besides the exposition of the story aspects, which we shall call “a story told”, as opposed to “a story lived”, thus rendering the “story narrated”, [either seen within its psychological sense of the word, such as explained in (Griffin, 2003), or in its semiotic sense of the

word, such as explained in (Eco, 1994b)], in the sense that can be seen in Act I, one finds further explication in the next parts of the play (and/or, in the next scenes or acts of the play), at least if one follows Russian formalists theories. What I intend by this is the “agent’ s’ role, (in compliance with Greimas’s theory) [see: (Greimas, 1973); (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993)], or specifically speaking: either the nurse or the priest. In conclusion, if Romeo and Juliet mainly represent “objects” of a given story in the semiotic sense of the word, then the subjectivizing component shall consist of the ones who make matters speculative and dubious from the scientific point of view: the Nurse and Friar Laurence. What is the reason for this assertion? The action component itself: understandably, from the semiotic point of view. It is for this reason that the movability of states refers to semiotically perceived transformational processes, or by other words: it represents, moving from the state of affairs to the state of feelings. Finally then, the state of affairs is the one that is represented in the exposition of the story. In specific terms then: Romeo “has fallen in love” with a person who was the one “assigned” to him on the one hand, (represented by Rosaline), and on the other one, Juliet has also “fallen in love” with a person that was “assigned” to her (represented by Paris). Except for the main known characters of the play (which, understandably are, Romeo and Juliet), I shall name the Nurse and Friar Laurence “agents” in the Greimasian sense of the word. I intend by such notion, the action component in the dramaturgical sense of the word (or, the “modus vivendi” of the play): as according to Grimas and Fontanille (1993), a semiotics of action is based on the “doing” component. My aim, in conclusion, is to make the “intrigue” concept of the play exposable to a semiotic analysis.

Seeking for the state of feelings

The “state of feelings” should be final; therefore it should result into semantic entities. It renders at least the transformational component visible. The meaning component or the meaning itself, “is defined by the transformation of meaning itself”[the paraphrase is mine, see: (Greimas, 1973); (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993)]. As should be understandable, the meaning is being created gradually, procedurally, out of the meaning concept itself. Or by other words: a transformation of meaning, from one state to another, is what actually occurs. Finally, the “transformation” component is of a crucial importance in regard to this sort of a semiotic analysis. Let us see now, how this looks like in practical terms.

Owing to the fact that love cannot come true owing to certain circumstantial conditions, like we said, two more characters have an implicit role (and./ or act as “helpers” in the Greimasian sense of the word), as I would be encouraged to add, in the development of the story narrated itself. Such a role is seemingly unimportant – at least as far as the main line of narration goes - (specifically in terms of both concepts of “love “ and “hatred” discussed), but realistically speaking, it is essential: as it entails in itself the intrigue making phenomenon, which is very characteristic in terms of a Shakespearean sort of writing. Thus, the wish of the lovers tends to come

true. This is a part of the transformation process in semiotic terms. This is not semiotically disputable. What is it that is disputable then?

First, the Priests' choice as well as the request and consent of both lovers to use the poison offered by the Priest is a wrong choice. This entails the tragic consequences of the play. Second, the Nurse succeeds at secretly compounding both lovers, although being fully aware of other contextual conditions. Or by other words: this fact renders the "enigma" visible and/or understandable to the audience. Consequently, only in such given semiotic preconditions, can the state of feelings be deductible. In conclusion, therefore, one should see this process, after Act II, i.e., after determined conflicts in the play are already exposed and/or exposable to the audience and to the reader. Or specifically speaking: such a situation can be witnessed after the marriage between Romeo and Juliet is secretly performed by Friar Laurence. As it may be semiotically justifiable, this is the instance of the substitution component, or better expressed: the transformation process itself. Instead of applying this process with Paris (as desired and planned by the Capulets), there is another line of narration which pertains to disclosing the "enigma" to the audience. It is, as generally known, an attempt to at least dramaturgically unite the two main protagonists of the play. In such contents' preconditions therefore, the semiotic preconditions are obtained: either in the sense of the general Greimassian dichotomy between reality and appearance (previously mentioned in this text), or in other consequential meanings, which are seen as causes of the tragic events of the play.

It is for such and similar reasons that one discovers determined *meanings* throughout the process of reading the tragedy, in the semiotic sense of the word. In conclusion, therefore, as we mentioned, the consequences of the terms of "love" and "hatred" (which, like we said remain contradictory and oppositional) are to be seen gradually as the contents of the play develops in a shape of semantic entities to be transformed into passion taxonomies, because of the "becoming" component: either in the Greimasian sense of the word, or in the philosophical sense of the word. One of such situations, for instance, is witnessed by Juliet. Does she feel love for Romeo or for her cousin Tybalt, who was just killed by Romeo? Was it an animosity created in her soul, so as to be transformed into a passion, or her hesitations are based on her love towards Romeo, only? I shall quote her "confession" at this instance:

Shall I speak ill of him that is my husband?

Ah, poor my lord, what tongue shall smooth thy name,

When I, thy three-hours wife, have mangled it?

But, wherefore, villain, didst thou kill my cousin?

That villain cousin would have kill'd my husband:

Back, foolish tears, back to your native spring;

*Your tributary drops belong to woe,
Which you, mistaking, offer up to joy.
My husband lives, that Tybalt would have slain;
And Tybalt's dead, that would have slain my husband:
All this is comfort; wherefore weep I then?
Some word there was, worser than Tybalt's death,
That murder'd me: I would forget it fain;
But, O, it presses to my memory,
Like damned guilty deeds to sinners' minds:
Tybalt is dead, and Romeo—banished;
That 'banished,' that one word 'banished,'
Hath slain ten thousand Tybalts. Tybalt's death
Was woe enough, if it had ended there:
Or, if sour woe delights in fellowship
And needly will be rank'd with other griefs,
Why followed not, when she said 'Tybalt's dead,'
Thy father, or thy mother, nay, or both,
Which modern lamentations might have moved?
But with a rear-ward 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.
Where is my father, and my mother, nurse?(Shakespeare 2002:1278)*

As can be seen, both feelings seem mixed in Juliet's words at this instance: did she have to hate her husband who killed her cousin, or did she have to continue loving him? It is to note, however, that Juliet is not aware of other facts contemporarily happening in the tragedy, in the same way as Romeo is not aware, of some other events, as well. Juliet is not aware of the cause of Romeo's killing Tybalt on the one

hand, and on the other, Romeo is not aware of the reason of his being banished. He finds out this fact later, from Friar Laurence. These mentioned facts regarding the plot aspects of the story narrated in the play render the “action” component visible and faster in the play: or, in the semiotic sense of the word: the transformation process has already started to occur. In what a way, though?

Feeling love towards Tybalt (her cousin) and Romeo at the same time, Juliet starts to change her state of affairs into a state of feelings, or by other words: she hesitates at her own “transformation” of states. Deciding finally to continue loving Romeo, as can be intended also from her previous soliloquies, she is ready to stop thinking either as a Capulet or as a Montague. This definitely makes her states of feelings deductible: therefore, ready for “the meanings” that can be obtained, due to a relational semiotic process. In conclusion, therefore, she feels love instead of a presumed hatred, despair and anxiety instead of unwillingness to cope with her presumed ‘enemy’.

Romeo, on the other hand, being “banished”, cannot find out many events closely related to his beloved Juliet. Therefore he also passes through a process of transformation. Or by other words: his “state of feelings” is full of despair and hatred out of the created situation on one hand, but feeling love for his Juliet on the other. Romeo in conclusion, also, stops thinking as a Montague or as a Capulet. A state of feelings as we mentioned is possible and deductible on his part too. This is naturally, a common feature of both main protagonists of the play.

“The knowable” subjects, like we previously stated, the Nurse (in most of the cases “helping” Juliet) and Friar Laurence (in most of the cases “helping” Romeo), become “bridges” of both lovers’ own mutual understanding(s) and/or misunderstanding(s). These actions as a matter of fact (rapidly happening in the tragedy), are the cause of the tragic events occurring towards the end of the tragedy. It is for these reasons that for instance, Friar Laurence finds a way to “offer” a solution either to Juliet (by overhanding the “false” poison to her), or to Romeo by planning their secret marriage. His “active subject” at this instance is the Nurse herself. Her activities initially seem sincere, as long as she does not attempt at “tricking” the Capulets (either consciously or unconsciously), a fact which consequentially and tragically enough, also includes Juliet herself. In conclusion, therefore, it is to state that the Nurse and Friar Laurence are in a relation of conjunction, if one follows Greimassian models.

Although all such mentioned events happen one after another as it is characteristic in a theatrical work of art, the message of Friar John to Romeo does not reach the goal. It is one of the reasons for the tragic events of the play.

Conclusion

In both cases (in terms of either Romeo and Juliet), like I have attempted to show, similar passions are obtained as a consequence of determined transformational processes, throughout determined stages of narrating within the tragedy under analysis. I shall intend by a transformational process either the substituting of determined states of the actants in the Greimassian sense of the word (represented by the syntagmatic axis), or the consequential flow of the narrative units gained (represented by the paradigmatic axis). Or by other words: if initially a seemingly calm situation can be intended within initial parts of the play, towards the next parts of it, other lines of content occur, which argument the “intrigue making” phenomenon, thus rendering a tragic solution of the work of art.

“Love” and “hatred” felt by both protagonists, owing to “the agents” action in the play, are both interwoven, changeable, therefore resulting in a process of semiosis. What does this mean? By the process of semiosis of this sort, I intend uniting determined actors’ actions in a single semiotic function. This can be intended for instance, by the will, wish, and traditions of the Capulets and Montagues respectively. Notwithstanding this fact, once the author’s message is discovered, as one may presume, that the animosities have to be forgotten if true love and passion are into question, a transformational process is disclosed within the actors in scene, in an attempt to show how important is this sort of an attempt to compound and/or unite a desired semiotic function. In conclusion, therefore, the failure of a wanted love to come true or be fully expressive is due to other contextual contexts, which as it may be concluded, play a dominant part in the discussed work of art.

My intention here, as I hope that I have been able to show, was to demonstrate the existence of an epistemological component within this sort of a semiotic analysis: so that an inexactitude and/or unequivocalness of the transmitted messages could be demonstrated within artistic creativities, among other semiotically related issues. To my opinion, this last point contributes to the universality of the discussed notions of “love” and *hatred*” in the given object of analysis as well as to the omnipresence of the semiotic method in general.

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