

Paul Jolly
Discovery Core – Honors English
Jolly
Sep. 28, 2012

The Fire in the Stars

As I gazed up at the mounting flame, I knew I had made a fatal mistake. Playing with fireworks was risky enough; lighting them on a hillside of tinder-dry grass was utter recklessness. The grass caught the flame quickly. In no time, a warrior of fire stood over me, ten feet tall and ready to make ruin of our neighborhood. While our local firefighters quickly doused the small inferno, that image stands out in my mind as a symbol of my childish ignorance. In William Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*, several images likewise stand out for their symbolic value, but none are more powerful than the image of stars.

Throughout the story, the love of Romeo and Juliet is veiled by the secrecy of night, under the watchful eyes of the stars. The romance of the two young lovers shows first at night, when Romeo and his friends sneak into the Capulet's masquerade party. There he spies Juliet and realizes that he "ne'er saw true beauty 'till this night" (I.5.51). Later that evening, Romeo sneaks into the Capulets' garden where, "bescreened by night", he and Juliet profess their love for each other (II.2.52). Finally, their tragic love is extinguished in the Capulets' tomb that "dire night" when both take their lives (V.3.262). Throughout *Romeo & Juliet*'s courtship, the stars serve as a symbol to remind us that the major developments in their relationship happen at night.

Additionally, both Romeo and Juliet use the image of the stars to explain how beautiful each thinks the other is. When Romeo gazes at Juliet that first night in her garden, he notes that "two of the fairest stars in all the heaven, / Having some business, do entreat her eyes / To twinkle in their spheres 'till they return" (II.2.15-17). Her beauty, he goes on to note, would "shame those stars / As daylight doth a lamp" (II.2.19-21). Juliet, meanwhile, dreamily imagines that if Romeo were cut into "little stars / ...he will make the face of heaven so fine / That all the world will be in love with night" (III.2.24-26). The symbolic image of the beauty of the stars shows us just how lovely each of the two characters is.

Lastly, but most significantly, is the fact that stars are referred to as a symbol of fate playing its cruel hand against the two. In the prologue, the chorus sings of the "star-crossed lovers", referring to the way in which fate dooms their love seemingly from the start (prologue.6). Indeed, as Romeo prepares to enter the Capulets' party that first night, he anticipates that "Some consequence yet hanging in the stars / Shall bitterly begin this fearful date" (I.1.108-109). His sense that things will go awry from the beginning proves tragically accurate as the story ends. When he is misinformed of Juliet's apparent death, he cries out, "I defy you, stars!" (V.1.24). His effort to overcome fate with his own free will (combined with an

unhealthy dose of hastiness) leads to his suicide just moments before Juliet wakes, and concludes with her suicide as well...and bitterness for the Montague and Capulet families alike.

As we can see, the image of the stars is a powerful one in the story of *Romeo & Juliet*, for it captures much more meaning than simply the image of the nighttime sky. Likewise, the enduring vision from my own youth of a menacing figure in the flames of a grassfire serves not only to transport me back to that terrible day, but to remind me that acting without thinking beforehand can have dire consequences. In this, we learn that the power of symbols is not simply to provide us with lots to write about; rather, the symbols help us to understand the world and our place in it. If we learn from their lessons, we can better direct our actions in the future to create the lives we wish for ourselves.