

Vitality of His Illusion:
Idolatry and Obsession
in
William Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*
and
F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Student Name

Miss Ellery

ENG 3U

Monday, January 14, 2013

“You become what you think about all day long.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

The idea of idolization being connected in dangerous ways to love has been explored in numerous literary works for centuries. William Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* both suggest through the actions of their characters that idolatry of an average person can be disastrous for an individual. Romeo Montague and Jay Gatsby both demonstrate this idea through their relationships with the women in their lives. The two characters are willing to do anything for the women they love even when such actions would harm themselves, both have incredibly high expectations and are ultimately led to their demises because of their obsessions. The women Romeo and Gatsby idolize are average and it is because of this that the results for both are devastating. Both authors are bringing forth this same view of idolatry through their male protagonists.

The willingness to sacrifice anything for love is evident in both men; they each believe their partners are worth the trouble they go through for loving them. Romeo's love for and idolization of Juliet Capulet compels him to leave his family, risk death in order to be with her and sacrifice himself so he will be forced to not live without her. When he goes to Juliet's balcony Romeo says to her, "call me but love, and I'll be new baptized; henceforth I never will be Romeo," (II. ii. 50-51) an action that proves his willingness to leave his life and family for his love. To Friar Lawrence after being banished he claims that "exile hath more terror in his look, much more than death," (III. iii. 12-14) for banishment means being without Juliet. Due to this desperation to see his idolized lover, he risks death by returning to Verona where Juliet has remained. Upon discovering Juliet has died, because of his overly-idolized view of her Romeo feels that life is meaningless without her and the only thing he can do is sacrifice himself to be with her once more. As he drinks the poison that brings his death, Romeo proclaims: "Here's to my love!" (V. iii. 119) which shows that he feels even this last action is for her. By relinquishing his old life and upbringing, risking his life and finally sacrificing himself, Romeo has proven that his actions reflect an unwavering compulsion to do whatever he can for Juliet because he believes her to be worth the effort. Like Romeo, Gatsby has a deep desire to put everything into his relationship with the woman he loves, Daisy Buchanan. This idea is shown with Gatsby in different ways than it is with Romeo; he spent years shaping his life to fit her, created an elaborate façade for her sake and took the blame for Myrtle's death which had been Daisy's fault which ultimately was the sacrifice of himself much like Romeo's. When Daisy goes to Gatsby's house for the first time, Gatsby "revalued everything in his house according to the measure of

response it drew from her well-loved eyes” and he “stared at his possessions in a dazed way, as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real” (92). For five years Gatsby created a life completely designed to have Daisy in it; his desperation for her to be pleased by his work shows the dangerous idolization he had of her. His entire home is a façade with the intent of enticing the materialistic Daisy, for this reason. A party guest comments on this idea by calling Gatsby “a regular Belasco,” (46) referring to the famous set designer. Gatsby’s whole life is an attractive front he has devised for the sole purpose of winning over Daisy. He proves this need to sacrifice anything for her when he tells Nick after Myrtle was accidentally hit by the car Daisy was driving that “of course [he’ll] say [he] was” (144) driving the car and take the blame. In the end Gatsby, like Romeo, sacrifices himself for his love; Myrtle’s husband Wilson murdered Gatsby because he took the blame for Daisy’s mistake. Gatsby’s endless work to shape his life around Daisy, the falsely attractive outward appearance of his life he creates for her and his final sacrifice are the proof of his need to do anything for the woman he foolishly idolizes. Both Romeo and Gatsby give up everything for their idols, which proves disastrous for their characters.

Juliet and Daisy are both held on extremely high pedestals by the men they love, and the elevated expectations in the end leave them disappointed with the result. Romeo’s comparisons of Juliet and expectations are such that the only possible outcome is a letdown on Juliet’s part and disappointment on his. When he sees her on the balcony, Romeo says that “Juliet is the sun” and that the “envious moon” is “sick and pale with grief that” Juliet “art far more fair than she” (II. i. 3-6). He also refers to her as a “holy shrine,” claiming that his is the “unworthiest hand” (I. v. 93-94). Romeo’s blasphemous and overly-idolizing comments show the ridiculously inflated view he has of her. Along with undeserving comparisons, Romeo also has unrealistic expectations of both Juliet as a person and the love they have. When meeting with her, he tells her that “with love’s light wings did [he] o’erperch these walls; for stony limits cannot hold love out” (II. ii. 66-67). This attitude remains with Romeo his entire time of knowing Juliet; he fully believes that their love is enough to overcome the circumstances. His worship of her and what she stands for causes him to feel this way and when their love is unable to change fate, he is left dissatisfied. Romeo’s idolatrous love for Juliet leads him to have enormous expectations that can never be reached, which becomes catastrophic for both himself and his love. Gatsby is similar to Romeo in that regard. For five years, the memory of Daisy has been alive in him and it has

caused him to have inflated expectations that cannot and aren't matched by the actual person of Daisy. Despite the time that has passed, he still expects Daisy to love him as she did years ago and leave her family for him and she has come to mean much more than her actual worth to him. Gatsby is still living in the past and because of that, he does not understand why it is difficult for Daisy to desert the man she married. Gatsby "wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: 'I never loved you.' After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken" (111). In Gatsby's mind, leaving Tom and the life she spent years making should be easy since the obvious choice is the man she loved half a decade ago. When he asks this of her, Daisy exclaims that he "want[s] too much" and that she "can't help what's past" but she loves him now (133). Gatsby is wrapped up in the idea of Daisy he has created over the years and because of that he expects her to feel the same way she did when they were together last and leave everything she has made of herself and her life. When Nick spends the day with Daisy and Gatsby he thinks that "there must have been moments that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of [Gatsby's] dreams—not through her own fault but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion" (97). Over the past five years, Daisy has come to mean much more than just a past love to Gatsby. She is a flesh representation of the unattainable American Dream; she can never live up to his idea of her because it is not a realistic view of Daisy as a person. Gatsby idolized Daisy to the point where his idea of her worth has greatly exceeded her actual worth. To him she is no longer just a woman; she represents the dream to which he has dedicated every part of himself. These expectations both Romeo and Gatsby have for their love interests stem from the undeserved idolization they have of the women they love. The only possible outcome can be disappointment for Romeo and Gatsby because they expect more than what Juliet and Daisy can give them.

Romeo and Gatsby both experience disaster because of their obsessive ways. The end results for both protagonists are a feeling of heartbreak and surrender. For Romeo his obsession is shown in his rushed actions and his inability to live without Juliet. From the moment he sees her, Romeo proclaims that his "life is [his] foe's debt" (I. v. 118) because he knows that he can never live without Juliet, who is a Capulet and therefore unattainable due to their families' feud. He asks for "the exchange of [his] love's faithful vow for [his]" (V. i. 34) the first night they are together, his obsession making him act rashly. This desire to rush things shows that from the start Romeo felt that his life would be nothing without Juliet. Due to this thinking, Romeo, after

hearing of Juliet's death decides that with her in the Capulet tomb is where he will "set up [his] everlasting rest" (V. iii. 109-111) because he does not know what else to do without his love. Romeo's obsession, which comes from his idolization, is what causes him to act as he does and it is these actions that lead him to his death. Gatsby also has the belief that without his love his life has nothing. He built up his whole life for Daisy, waited for and wasted five years on the memory of her and in the end gave up when the only option was to be without her, all because of his obsession. Nick comments that "it ha[s] gone beyond her" and that on that on the memory of Daisy Gatsby "ha[s] thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time" (97). Daisy has become the center of Gatsby's whole world and the reason behind his every action. This is a very dangerous thing for him to do because every part of him exists because of her and when she is taken away the very essence of himself is taken away as well. Due to this thinking Gatsby spent years waiting for Daisy, ensuring he never forgot her and what they had together. Fitzgerald states through the character of Nick that "no amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" (97) and for Gatsby this is very true; no matter what Gatsby went through, the memory of Daisy never faded because he let his love turn to obsession and claim his life. After Daisy makes her final decision to leave Gatsby, "he must have felt he had lost the old warm world" (162) because Daisy has become everything to him and now that she is gone, Gatsby has nothing. Gatsby realizes that he has "paid a high price for living too long with a single dream" (162). His idolization of Daisy creates an obsession which causes him to make everything in his life revolve around her. Without her his life is empty and he becomes completely lost which is what causes his surrender. Romeo and Gatsby both obsess over their loves which leads them to being lost and broken-hearted. Both their demises are ultimately brought on by this.

Juliet Capulet and Daisy Buchanan are both average women, but they are seen as much more by the men they love, Romeo Montague and Jay Gatsby. This undeserved idolization shown by the male protagonists of William Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* proves to be extremely dangerous and can be determined as the thing that brought upon their disastrous ends. Both authors are suggesting through their characters that the idolatry of an average person, in the end, can be detrimental.

Endnotes

1. Shakespeare, William, *Romeo & Juliet*. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Canada Inc., 1988), (II. ii. 50-51). Some subsequent quotations are from this edition and are noted in the body of the essay.
2. Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Great Gatsby*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1980), (page 92). Some subsequent quotations are from this edition and are noted in the body of the essay.