
Religious Theme in Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* Film Interpretation

Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, the 1996 cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's play, is imbued with religious imagery. The feuding families display such images on everything from their cars, to their clothes, to their guns. In addition, a statue of Jesus Christ looms over the city, bearing witness to the events unfolding. When taken at face value, religion should bring a person peace and give additional meaning to their life. However, throughout the film, the presence of religious imagery often indicates conflict and violence. Luhrmann uses the omnipresent religiosity to contrast against this violence and to heighten the sense of tragedy.

The religious imagery is indicative of conflict. Luhrmann opens the film with the recitation of the prologue in a modern interpretation in which it is read by a newscaster. In Luhrmann's hyper-visual style, the sequence quickly becomes chaotic as the camera quickly zooms into the television then pushes through to an image of a street in Verona Beach. The camera rapidly zooms through the streets and lands on the face of a large statue of Christ, reminiscent of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro. This statue is revealed to be framed by two large buildings which are owned by the Capulets and Montagues. The frenzied opening is backed by a religious chant, which further heightens the tension and indicates the large presence of religion that will be reoccurring throughout the film. When Romeo and Juliet first meet at the party, Juliet is dressed as an angel. While angels are usually regarded as symbols of peace, Juliet's angel brings conflict as she falls in love with Romeo- a rival of her family. When the two marry, the church that they are in is filled with with religious symbols. While these symbols fit the context, the church is more extravagant than any regular church. The purpose of this is to further remind the audience of the lavish nature of this setting. Because this scene features the secret union of a Capulet and Montague, it is laden with conflict. The children have gone behind their parents' backs to marry, and the undue amount of religious imagery present here reflects and contrasts with this conflict.

Moreover, the presence of religious imagery often marks violence. In the comical first scene, the Capulet and Montague boys clash at a gas station. Before they come to blows, members of both houses are shown harassing a group of young nuns. This scene shows both physical violence and sexual violence. Nuns are chaste, so the boys and their lustful comments pose a verbal attack on them. Later in the film, the Montagues and Capulets fight once again on the beach. Religious symbols in this scene are subtle, but distinctly present. Mercutio wears a necklace with a cross on it and Tybalt's gun has an image of the Virgin Mary on it. The cross is often used as a symbol of protection, yet in this scene, Mercutio is killed. The Virgin Mary is also

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contradictory as she is a symbol of purity, yet Tybalt uses this gun for murder. As Mercutio dies, a hymn plays in the background. It adds a heightened sense of ominousness to the scene as he calls for “a plague on both your houses.” In the next scene, Romeo kills Tybalt in revenge, using Tybalt’s own gun. It is revealed that this is done directly in front of the ever-seeing statue of Christ. Romeo looks up at him as he cries “I am forgetful,” and Christ looks down on him in a manner that can be viewed as damning.

The deaths of Romeo and Juliet occur in a tomb. As opposed to the typical idea of a tomb-dark, somber, frightening- the tomb is well lit because of the countless candles lit around Juliet’s body and the fluorescent crosses that light the path to where she lays. The pain and suffering that has been brought upon the families because of the strife between them climaxes with the deaths of their children and heirs. The bright and beautiful tomb, full of symbols and figures of crosses and saints, signifies the peak of the feud and how it ends in death. As Romeo and Juliet die in the tomb, the light coming from the candles and crosses contradict the darkness that will befall their families, whose bloodlines end with the two lovers, upon their demise.

Luhrmann's prominent religious imagery contrasts with the significant violence and conflict that occurs throughout. While religion often represents peace and virtue, Luhrmann uses it to represent the opposite in the film. The presence of religious figures and images contradicts the turmoil that occurs over the course of the film and serve to heighten the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet.

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