

## An Existentialist Approach to William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*\*

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### Abstract

Existentialism is the approach to define the human being not only as the thinking being but also as the acting and feeling human individual. In terms of Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of freedom, one must let go of the past, make a choice, act on it, and then take its responsibility. This study aims to analyse William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of existentialist approach, namely human's existence of freedom which depends on the on-going relationships between the aspects of 'being as a subject' and 'being as an object'. The play depicts the love between Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet who are the children of hostile families. At the beginning of the play, Romeo and Juliet are considered 'being as an object' because they accept an age-old blood feud between their families into which they are born. As an uninvited guest at a Capulet party, Romeo falls instantly in love with Juliet. After they learn to be the children of hostile families, they let go of the past and make free-choices by continuing to love each other, decide to marry and keep it in secret, so they become 'being as a subject'. Then Romeo acts on his decision and attempts to halt a fight leading to the death of Juliet's cousin for which Romeo is banished. In order not to marry her father's choice of bridegroom, Juliet acts on her decision and fakes her own death to be reunited with Romeo. The message of her plot about the fake death fails to reach Romeo. Believing Juliet dead, Romeo takes the responsibility of his decision and drinks poison in her tomb. Juliet who wakes to find Romeo's corpse beside her takes the responsibility of her decision and kills herself.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Being-for-itself, Being-for-others, William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*.

### Introduction

As a European philosophical movement, existentialism<sup>1</sup> which is the philosophy of existence itself flourished around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jonathan Webber argues that "existentialism is the ethical theory that we ought to treat the freedom at the core of human existence as intrinsically valuable and the foundation of all other values" (2018: 2). Kevin Aho remarks that "the legacy of existentialism is alive and well" (2014: 140). If existentialism's notoriety as a cultural movement may have impeded its serious philosophical reception, it may be that what we have most to learn from existentialism still lies before us. This philosophy declares that existence precedes essence. Human beings exist (are born) before they can construct values, meanings and identities on the basis of their consciousness. Human beings are responsible for making themselves into an essence. In this sense,

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\*This article is an extended study of the abstract paper titled "An Existential Analysis of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*" verbally presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> *International Management and Social Sciences Conference* on 16-18 January 2021 in Istanbul, Turkey.

<sup>1</sup>The theory of existentialism is retrieved from the book chapter by Halit Alkan, "An Existentialist Approach to Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*", *Kavramlar ve Kuramlar: Düşünce Bilimleri* (CONCEPTS AND THEORIES: The Study of Thought) (2020): 863-870.

of necessity, one must make choices, take actions and assume the consequences. Therefore, human beings are condemned to a life of freedom in which they must choose.

According to Mark Tanzer, existentialism occupies a liminal position between the boundaries of philosophy and literature (Tanzer, 2008: 1). Being a French philosopher famous for his existentialist aspect, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) expresses that conscious beings are structured in such a way that their existence precedes their essence because “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards” (Sartre, 2007: 23). In other words, human beings exist first and then they make choices. Sartre’s slogan—“existence precedes essence”—may serve to introduce what is most distinctive of existentialism, namely, the idea that no general, non-formal account of what it means to be human can be given, since that meaning is decided in and through existing itself. Existence is “self-making-in-a-situation” (Fackenheim, 1961: 37). Human beings make themselves in situation: what I am cannot be separated from what I take myself to be. In Charles Taylor’s phrase, human beings are “self-interpreting animals” where the interpretation is constitutive of the interpreter (Taylor, 1985: 45). In their ontology, human beings are defined according to the things they choose to say and do. Therefore, as consciousness (of) being, human beings are totally responsible for their choices and actions as the natural result of a human’s being free to choose. According to Sartre, human beings have a free choice in how to respond and how to act. Human beings are free to create what they will become. This sort of freedom is not easy for man to cope with because it creates forlornness for human beings: “I am abandoned in the world... in the sense that, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant” (Sartre, 1957: 57). Freedom means responsibility and that freedom may be a burden because it also is a tremendous responsibility. Sartre believes that choice means hope which provides an opportunity to solve the problems and change the difficulties that human beings undergo.

Human beings accept that they have limitations, but they still try to act in the best way possible to control what is in their hands. “Anxiety puts you in the position to do that by overwhelming you in a mood that breaks you out of your immediacy and creates a space for you to once again ask those important questions” (Panza & Gale, 2008: 65). This sort of anxiety senses the nothingness at the core of the world and human beings. Furthermore, the meanings which make up one’s world are accidental. Anxiety takes away the illusion that human beings made their life neat, clean, comfortable and in order. So, human beings are surrounded by nothingness. In this sense, anxiety shows human beings that they have the power to create themselves differently from the roles or meanings that their world assigns to them. Soren Kierkegaard stresses anxiety’s positive role in the flourishing of the human: “If a human being were a beast or an angel, he could not be in anxiety. Because he is a synthesis, he can be in anxiety; and the more profoundly he is in anxiety, the greater is the man” (Kierkegaard, 1980: 155). The prioritization of anxiety is a typical existentialist move, eager to assert the positive role of emotions for human life. Like Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger also believes that anxiety is born out of the terror of nothingness. “The obstinacy of the ‘nothing and nowhere within-the-world’ means as a phenomenon that the world as such is that in the face of which one has anxiety” (Heidegger, 1962: 231). Equally for Heidegger, anxiety manifests an authentic existence since it realizes that the crowd of ‘others’ cannot offer any consolation to the drama of existence. Human beings can take hold of their own existence. In short, for the existentialists, nothingness means freedom to human beings (Kaya, 2019: 581). Therefore, there is no meaning to be found in the world beyond what meaning human beings give to it. However, life becomes absurd when human beings try to impose clarity to an irrational world. “The existentialists think that the world has no necessary structure, no intrinsic meaning, no innate meaning, no innate significance, and no internal purpose whatsoever on its own” (Panza & Gale, 2008: 79). Absurdity is a confrontation, an opposition or a conflict between two ideals. “The world in itself is not unreasonable, that is all can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the

wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart” (Camus, 1991: 19). While human beings wish for meaning and certainty, the world is indifferent or silent. A realization with the absurd provides a person with such choices like acceptance of the absurd or suicide. According to Camus, the realization of the absurd in the universe requires revolt because “the struggle itself... is enough to fill a man’s heart” (Kaufman, 1956: 345-369). However, the problem of suicide manifests the exigency of a meaning-giving response.

### **Methodology**

Jean-Paul Sartre focused originally on the individual in the society, on her/his innermost thoughts about freedom and anguish, on the concept of responsibility and consciousness. Sartre’s concept of freedom is based on responsibility toward society and, naturally, toward one’s own growing essence. He identifies the theory of freedom with that of human consciousness, showing that human beings must make their own choices, take actions, assume the consequences and establish their own standards of living. Sartre judged the concept of freedom and choice and even more significant was his idea of creating an order out of the chaos because his ideas were affected by the Spanish Civil War, the worldwide economic crisis, World War II and Germany’s occupation of France. Sartre focused on the conflict between human’s needs and hopes, and the meaningless universe into which humans are thrown (Yüksel, 2011: 111). In “Being and Nothingness”, Sartre’s aspect of existentialism is that human being is condemned to be free and that there is no limit to human freedom except for the freedom itself (Sartre, 1992: 439). Human consciousness is not bound by natural laws: it can interpret them and decide how to act on them. The anguish which we feel when we are confronted with the vast and meaningless universe is something which Sartre calls “nausea”. To combat this “nausea”, man can use his freedom – the freedom of thought, choice, action. But once man has made a choice, acted upon his choice and taken its responsibility, there is no turning back. This choice stands as an imprint on his essence, on his human makeup, and it follows him for the rest of his days.

In terms of freedom, there are two kinds of beings: ‘being as a subject’ and ‘being as an object’. Human’s existence of freedom depends on the on-going relationships between these two aspects. In terms of ‘being as a subject’, human beings that are conscious beings are free by creating their own value system through choice, action and responsibility. In other words, those who are free ignore how others judge them. ‘Being as an object’ means that human beings give up the ability to judge themselves and create their own morals, and simply rely on others’ evaluations of them for guidance by letting others impose their morals on them. “Every person exists for others as well as for himself. A person is his being-for-others... The ‘other’ only has to look at him to take possession of at least a part of what he is” (Cox, 2009: 137). In this sense, like a stone, these human beings need the existence of others to have a meaning. In other words, one cannot act freely if s/he takes the judgment of others into consideration.

This study aims to analyse William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of existentialist approach, namely human’s existence of freedom which depends on the on-going relationships between the aspects of ‘being as a subject’ and ‘being as an object’. In terms of Jean-Paul Sartre’s conception of freedom, one must let go of the past, make a choice, act on it, and then take its responsibility. The play *Romeo and Juliet* which includes these forms of existentialism depicts the love between Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet who are the children of hostile families.

### **An Existentialist Approach to *Romeo and Juliet***

There are two aristocratic families, the Montague and the Capulet, who are enemies. As the families are in conflict, their servants are also in conflict; however, the ignorant servants do not know even

why the two families are in conflict. The servants do not have their identity by their own, so they stick to a family. When the servants of Capulet come across to a servant of Montague, they fight with each other. The fight is at the market place on Sunday at a very early o'clock. The citizens of Verona hate the Montague and the Capulet because the members of these two hostile families fight with each other on all occasions. There is a kind of civil problem in Verona where there is feudalism. The manager of the city is Prince. After the last fight, Prince wants to put an end to this nonsense quarrel and he says that the one who makes a next quarrel will be executed death.

As there is a male-dominant world, the girls are accompanied by other people and they are kept in houses. Simone de Beauvoir explains: "No biological, physical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine" (Beauvoir, 2009: 293). In aristocratic houses, the ladies do not look after their children, but they have a nurse for the children. Therefore, the nurse is nearer to Juliet Capulet than Juliet's mother, Lady Capulet. Paris, a kinsman to Prince, wants to marry Juliet. In marriage of convenience, there is no love. As Lady Capulet does not have a close relationship with her daughter, she calls for nurse to tell Juliet that Paris wants to marry her. Since her father Mr Capulet wants that marriage, he holds a masked ball so that Paris and Juliet can speak with each other. Juliet who is very young is an obedient feudal girl and knows nothing about love. "Women live dispersed among men, tied by homes, work, economic interests and social conditions to certain men – fathers or husbands" (Beauvoir 2009: 9). The female identity is "very much bound up with the identity of the men around them" (Reynolds, 2006: 145). Tradition has always thought of woman as the 'other' of man. Woman defines herself only through man who constitutes himself as a subject: "A woman determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential" (Beauvoir, 2009: 6). Romeo Montague who is in love with Rosaline, a relative of the Capulet, goes to the party to see Rosaline. However, when Paris and Juliet are dancing, Romeo who is a romantic lover notices Juliet, praises her beauty and falls in love with her. Romeo has forgotten Rosaline because it was not a true love. Tybalt of Capulet who is a trouble-maker notices Romeo, his foe Montague. In order not to make disturbance, he has to leave Romeo to stay as a guest. When Romeo finds the chance to touch Juliet's hand, he makes a romantic compliment by comparing her hands with a holy shrine and says "if I profane with my unworhiest hand, this holy shrine, the gentler sin is this" (Shakespeare, 2000: 54). When Juliet begins to flirt with him, Romeo uses the aspect of religion to kiss her, and they fall in love with each other. This love remains a secret love because nobody knows of it. Romeo and Juliet are the children of the families who have feud with each other. Romeo and Juliet are considered 'being as an object' at the beginning of the play because they accept an age-old blood feud between their families into which they are born. In other words, they give up the ability to judge themselves, and they simply rely on others' evaluations of them for guidance by letting others impose their morals on them. When Lady Capulet calls for Juliet, Romeo understands that Juliet is a Capulet, and he thinks his fate is fixed now by saying "my life is my foe's debt" (Shakespeare, 2000: 55). Juliet who learns that Romeo is a Montague says "my only love sprung from my only hate" (Shakespeare, 2000: 55).

In the first balcony at night, Romeo leaps over the wall and is in the garden of the Capulet. Romeo compares the brightness of Juliet's eyes with the stars and says that the stars appear just as a lamp. Juliet wants Romeo to reject his identity or she will give up her identity by saying "deny thy father and refuse thy name; or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I'll no longer be a Capulet" (Shakespeare, 2000: 59). Romeo takes her at her word, and says "call me but love, and I'll be new baptized" (Shakespeare, 2000: 59). They decide to get married secretly. De Beauvoir acknowledges that the possibility of human flourishing is based firstly upon the recognition of the existence of the other and secondly on the recognition that my own flourishing passes through the possibility of a common flourishing: "Man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of the

other men... To will oneself free is also to will others free" (Beauvoir, 1976: 72-73). On the next day, Romeo wants the nurse to tell Juliet that she should come to Friar Lawrence's cell in order to arrange marriage. Friar who is a clergyman and a friend of Romeo thinks that if the only child of each family marries with each other, there will be peace between these two hostile families. After Romeo and Juliet learn to be the children of hostile families, they let go of the past and make free-choices by continuing to love each other, decide to marry and keep it in secret, so they become 'being as a subject'. In other words, they are free and ignore how others judge them by creating their own value system through choice, action and responsibility.

In the public in the daytime, Tybalt asks for Romeo. At that moment, Romeo arrives there by his free-choice. Tybalt calls Romeo a villain. In a male-dominant world, this word is a bad one and you have to kill him because of this word for the sake of society and honour. However, by getting married with Juliet, Romeo who becomes now a relative of Tybalt does not want trouble and says that he is not a villain. Romeo's visiting the party has injured Tybalt because he takes it personally. As Romeo is at his high happiness, he is not the general Romeo anymore, and he says "Tybalt, the reason that I have to love thee doth much excuse the appertaining rage to such a greeting. Villain am I none" (Shakespeare, 2000: 77). Upon these words, Tybalt becomes very angry and draws his sword. Mercutio who is a kinsman to Prince and friend to Romeo is a trouble-maker. Tybalt under Romeo's arm wounds Mercutio. Before dying, Mercutio blames Romeo by saying "why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm" (Shakespeare, 2000: 78). For this reason, Romeo feels guilty about Mercutio's death and says "Tybalt, take the 'villain' back again that late thou gav'st me, for Mercutio's soul is but a little way above our heads, staying for thine to keep him company" (Shakespeare, 2000: 79). In order to pay Tybalt back, Romeo kills him. Romeo acts on his decision and attempts to stop a fight leading to the death of Juliet's cousin for which Romeo is banished from Verona by Prince. As a young girl in a male-dominant world, Juliet cannot go out, and so, she gets from her nurse the news that Romeo is the murderer of her cousin Tybalt. Juliet is unhappy, but she does not speak ill of Romeo who is her husband because she loves Romeo much more than Tybalt. Therefore, she reasons in an optimistic and says "that villain cousin would have killed my husband" (Shakespeare, 2000: 84).

In the second balcony scene at night, Romeo comes to see Juliet. Romeo tells her that he is banished from Verona and has to leave or he will die. Romeo kisses Juliet and leaves her. When Juliet's father, Mr Capulet, wants her to marry Paris, Juliet consults Friar because she will kill herself rather marrying Paris. Friar gives Juliet a bottle of potion that will kill her for a short time. Her pulse will stop, and she will look like a dead person. Juliet who does not want to marry her father's choice of bridegroom acts on her decision and fakes her own death to be reunited with Romeo and she says "give me, give me! O tell not me of fear!" (Shakespeare, 2000: 103). Friar will send Romeo a letter to inform him about the fake death so that Romeo will come at night to take Juliet to Mantua. On the next day, the marriage is arranged, but the Capulet see that Juliet is dead in her bed. Unfortunately, the message of Juliet's plot about the fake death fails to reach Romeo. Believing Juliet dead, Romeo returns to Verona and buys poison from a poor apothecary. In the meantime, Romeo writes about his secret love and marriage and wants his servant to give this letter to his father, Mr Montague. When Romeo arrives at the monument of the Capulet, he sees Paris at Juliet's tomb. Paris charges Romeo with murder of Tybalt and thinks that Romeo comes to harm the dead body of Juliet. When Paris attacks Romeo to stop him, Romeo kills Paris. Romeo remembers clearly the death of Mercutio and that he has killed Tybalt and Paris. Romeo does not want to live without Juliet and says "here will I set up my everlasting rest.... Eyes, look your last. Arms, take your last embrace! And, lips, O you the doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss" (Shakespeare, 2000: 119). Romeo considers it a dateless bargain to engrossing death. So, Romeo takes the responsibility of his decision and drinks the poison just before Juliet wakes up. When Juliet finds Romeo's corpse beside her and a cup of poison in his hand, she takes the responsibility of her decision and kisses his lips in order to take some poison. Furthermore,

Juliet stabs herself with Romeo's dagger: "Then I'll be brief. O happy dagger. This is thy sheath. There rest, and let me die (Shakespeare, 2000: 121). Friar tells Prince, the Montague, and the Capulet about what has happened. Romeo's letter is a proof for Friar's speech. Because of their children's love and marriage, the two hostile families reconcile and erect their children's statue.

## Conclusion

In terms of existentialism, the human being is considered both as the thinking being and as the acting and feeling human individual. According to Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of freedom, one must let go of the past, make a choice, act on it, and then take its responsibility. Thus, human's existence of freedom depends on the on-going relationships between the aspects of 'being as a subject' and 'being as an object'. William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* which includes these forms of existentialism depicts the love between Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet who are the children of hostile families. Romeo and Juliet are considered 'being as an object' at the beginning of the play because they accept an age-old blood feud between their families into which they are born. In other words, they give up the ability to judge themselves, and they simply rely on others' evaluations of them for guidance by letting others impose their morals on them. When Romeo goes to the Capulet party as an uninvited guest, he falls instantly in love with Juliet. After Romeo and Juliet learn to be the children of hostile families, they let go of the past and make free-choices by continuing to love each other, decide to marry and keep it in secret, so they become 'being as a subject'. In other words, they are free and ignore how others judge them by creating their own value system through choice, action and responsibility. Then Romeo acts on his decision and attempts to stop a fight leading to the death of Juliet's cousin for which Romeo is banished. Juliet who does not want to marry her father's choice of bridegroom acts on her decision and fakes her own death to be reunited with Romeo. Unfortunately, the message of her plot about the fake death fails to reach Romeo. Believing Juliet dead, Romeo takes the responsibility of his decision and drinks poison in her tomb. Juliet who wakes to find Romeo's corpse beside her takes the responsibility of her decision and kills herself. As conscious beings, Romeo and Juliet become 'beings as a subject' because they let go of an age-old blood feud, make choices by getting married, act on their decisions, and then take their responsibilities.

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