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Literature and Daily Life: Looking for Love in All the Wrong (and Right) Places

Summary

It is sometimes claimed these days that serious literature is seldom relevant to the lives of ordinary citizens of our communities. It is the contention of this author, however, that good literature is always a joy to read and consider. The ideas conveyed by that literature can guide us, challenge us and reassure us in our daily lives. The challenge for the author is to see if he can demonstrate the truth of these claims to a general, non-academic audience. The first section of the article argues that Shakespeare in his *Romeo and Juliet* was doing something brand new in renaissance England – presenting love as a deep and sharply felt human emotion, something very different from the “game” of love presented in so many earlier works of that period and its predecessor as well, including plays, treatises of love and the many sonnet sequences of those times. The second, and somewhat longer, section analyzes James Purdy’s novel, *The Nephew*, seeing in it an underlying theme of love’s emotional power and redemptive force in the lives of ordinary individuals of all ages.

Key words: literature and daily life, academic and general audiences, James Purdy (*The Nephew*), Shakespeare (*Romeo and Juliet*), satire and celebration/redemption

Književnost in vsakdanjost: V iskanju ljubezni povsod tam, kjer je ni (ali pa je)

Povzetek

Danes pogosto slišimo, da ima resno leposlovje bolj kot ne pičlo zvezo z življenjem navadnih ljudi. Naše stališče temelji na predpostavki, da je dobro leposlovno delo vedno vir užitka in premisleka, ker nas njegove misli usmerjajo, vznemirjajo in pomirjajo, medtem ko živimo svoje življenje. V pričujočem razmišljanju bomo tako predvsem skušali ugotoviti, ali je mogoče takšne predpostavke upravičiti tudi v razmerju do t.i. širšega, neakademskega bralstva. Prvi del razprave poudarja, da je Shakespeare v *Romeu in Juliji* vzpostavil nekaj povsem novega za renesančno Anglijo – predstavil je ljubezen kot globoko in tenkočutno čustvo, kot nekaj, kakršno se je občutno razlikovalo od “igre” ljubezni, kakršno najdevamo v mnogih dramskih, esejističnih in sonetnih delih njegovih predhodnikov. V drugem in nekoliko obširnejšem odstavku se lotevamo romana *Nečak* avtorja Jamesa Purdyja, v katerem je emocionalna moč ljubezni prikazana kot odrešilna sila v življenju posameznika in vseh generacij.

Ključne besede: književnost in vsakdanjost, akademsko in splošno občinstvo, James Purdy (*Nečak*), Shakespeare (*Romeo in Julija*), satira in hvalnica/odrešitev

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to offer a test of my ability to communicate some of the essential personal rewards of reading and studying imaginative literature to a general, non-academic audience. Recent years have witnessed many similar efforts on the part of university English Department teachers and other academics. Their essays and mine are all efforts to bridge a huge gulf that developed in the later Twentieth Century between college teachers of English and the public at large. For years, reports in the media have characterized English faculty as engaged mostly in the study of abstract theory or the politics of various “isms.” In addition, it is sometimes claimed that most serious literature – even when approached or taught in more familiar ways – is irrelevant to the lives of ordinary citizens.

I believe, however, that good literature can almost always be a joy to read and consider. The ideas conveyed by that literature can guide us, challenge us and reassure us in our daily lives. My challenge here is to see if I can demonstrate the truth of these claims in practice. I look forward to receiving reader evaluations of my efforts.

The two texts I've chosen for examination have some interesting things in common, as you would naturally expect. But, they were also chosen, in part, because of their relevance to a general audience. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is, of course, widely known by people all around the world. For example, in the United States it is taught to a large percentage of all high school students. James Purdy's *The Nephew*, on the other hand, is not widely known in the United States, although Purdy was respected for his fiction during the 1960's and 70's, known especially, perhaps, for his earlier novel, *Malcolm*. In another example of a recurring literary irony, Purdy today is better known and more admired in Europe than he is in his native country. His second novel, *The Nephew*, is especially relevant to my primary general audience in the United States because it is set in Bowling Green, Ohio, which – among many other things – is my actual hometown. In fact, the setting is on the very neighborhood corner where my family now lives. Thus, it is a good choice for readers in the region where I hope to have the most direct impact.

There is a well-known American country-western song called “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places,” a tune which speaks primarily to ordinary people and uses the popular idiom of such music. With only one minor adjustment, I found it perfectly apt as a title for my article. Country-western music is loved primarily by general, non-elite audiences, and this tune's expression of the power of love to inflict pain as well as joy is directly relevant to both *Romeo and Juliet* and to *The Nephew*.

From this point on, I will present my argument just as it would be given to an audience in northwest Ohio, USA if published in the local newspaper, the Bowling Green *Daily Sentinel-Tribune* – a paper whose name is mentioned several times in *The Nephew*, by the way.

Love is a feeling that interests individuals and cultures deeply, and almost everyone values its joys and its intensity. But, in its many forms, it can also be a vexing, puzzling and contradictory emotion. In all of its manifestations, both positive and negative, I think we would all agree that it is nearly universal in human experience. I have in mind two pieces of literature that explore the topic of love, both of which should be of interest to readers of the Bowling Green *Sentinel-Tribune*. They may seem a very odd pair, but that oddity itself emphasizes the wide-ranging and puzzling qualities of love. Also, it will be intriguing to see how two otherwise unrelated literary works can illuminate each other. First is Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, which, among many other things, was the starting point for the recent film “Shakespeare in Love,” a movie as popular in northwest Ohio as it was elsewhere in the country and around the world. Second is an American novel from the early 1960’s by James Purdy, a writer whose name will ring a special bell locally because he grew up in northwest Ohio, and because *The Nephew* is set in Bowling Green.

2. *Romeo and Juliet*

All of us, I expect, know at least something about *Romeo and Juliet*. We know, certainly, that Verona was both the right place and the wrong place for love. The wrong place because a family feud separates two young lovers and creates the circumstance that ends their lives tragically. But, the right place, too, because Verona is the setting for a love of such passion and purity that it has inspired readers and viewers for over four hundred years.

Even though it is a much loved and respected play, *Romeo and Juliet* is sometimes looked down upon in comparison to some of Shakespeare’s other, supposedly greater, tragedies like *Othello* and *King Lear*. This is because the tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet* depends on external factors or accidents (such as timing miscues), rather than the internal natures of the tragic characters themselves. This may be so, but in at least one respect *Romeo and Juliet* has a securely unique place in the history of English literature. It was, I believe, the first great work in English to treat love as a “real” human emotion, to put the power and passion of love up front, at center stage, so to speak. Love had been a major topic in English literature prior to Shakespeare, as a plethora of sonnet sequences prove beyond any shadow of doubt. However, the typical treatment of this topic was very different from Shakespeare’s, very traditional and very artificial. Love was usually presented as a game, with a set of conventional rules to be followed at all cost. But, when Shakespeare composed *Romeo and Juliet*, he threw the rules away.

Shakespeare was very aware of this new road he was traveling. He makes that clear by giving Romeo some earlier, pre-Juliet, romantic feelings for a cold, unattainable lady named

Rosaline. That earlier love has all the conventions and artificialities of the old tradition. But, when Romeo first meets Juliet, all the conventions fly out the window, and the poetry tells us that this new love is deep and real. “Oh, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!” he says. “Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! / For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night.” It is the simplicity of the language that is especially telling here. It emphasizes and confirms Romeo’s sincerity. The two young people first declare their love to one another in the famous balcony scene. And, if anything, both here and in later scenes, including the final one of their self-inflicted deaths in the Capulet tomb, Juliet’s language seems even more true, even more deeply felt than Romeo’s, perhaps because she’s a bit more realistic, less totally romantic in her understandings. “Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say, ‘Ay,’ And I will take thy word.” But, she also says, with full and honest commitment, “Good night, good night! As sweet repose and rest / Come to thy heart as that within my breast!” Similar examples are numerous as the action unfolds, including the scene when they must separate because of Tybalt’s death at Romeo’s hand. But, I will let these two small samples of their language stand for all the rest.

It might seem treasonous to some Shakespeare readers and scholars to say so, but I believe that the film “Shakespeare in Love” offers one of the very best available presentations of *Romeo and Juliet*. Of course, it is not a production of the play itself, by any means, but it does offer some very effective segments, with excellent actors reading Shakespeare’s poetry beautifully. In addition, the film openly “argues” the point that Shakespeare was doing something new and wonderful in describing the very soul and meaning of love in this play. Dame Judi Dench’s Queen Elizabeth even declares him the winner of a bet on that point. And, finally, the parallel scenes of the passionate but doomed love between Will Shakespeare and Viola d’Lesseps reinforce and deepen the relevant emotions in *Romeo and Juliet*. To use a bit of language from the film itself, it is I believe, a piece “for all times.” In other words, if you know *Romeo and Juliet* mostly through “Shakespeare in Love,” you know its essence honestly.

3. *The Nephew*

Those of you who have read James Purdy’s 1960 novel, *The Nephew*, will probably not think immediately of the topic “love” in connection with that work. In particular, the early 1960’s readers from Bowling Green and northwest Ohio are much more likely to have responded with suspicion and anger at the satirical images given of one small mid-western town and its local college. While *The Nephew* has not, I think, lingered distastefully on the town’s palate the way *Winesburg, Ohio* lingered on Clyde’s, there’s still no denying that Purdy “sends up” any number of rural small town and provincial college behaviors as small-minded and hypocritical. In addition, Purdy’s novel explores other themes very typical of the decades following World War II. One of these is the inability of people to articulate their true thoughts and feelings to other people, even close friends and family members. Another is the idea that no one can ever clearly know the truth about other people, their circumstances, thoughts and feelings.

Purdy's town is named Rainbow Center, and his characters – who include cautious, conservative men, timorous but pretentious ladies, an imperious, meddlesome college trustee and one of the lesser members of the college faculty – all reside on or near the four corners at the intersection of Peninsula Drive and Crest Ridge Road. It is commonly thought that these people bear very close resemblance to members of the Bowling Green and Bowling Green State University communities who lived around the intersection of Ridge and N. Prospect streets in the 1950's.

However biting the book's satire may have seemed in the 1960's, and may still seem, *The Nephew* is at heart a study of love. Like Shakespeare's Verona, Rainbow Center is also both the wrong and the right place for love. It is the wrong place because the expression of love comes so very, very hard for the provincial and puritanical people of 1950's Middle America. However, it is the right place as well because the importance of love to all of the novel's characters is fully and deeply dramatized. It is even true, I think, that love's various forces are meant, ultimately, to redeem the town and its seemingly small-minded inhabitants.

On the surface, *The Nephew* is a quiet story, with two main characters who are quite intentionally meant to seem boring to us. Nevertheless, the surface is misleading, because underneath is a large set of human emotions and behaviors that run the gamut from pathetic to violent to noble, with all of them centered on a search for love.

Alma and Boyd Mason are elderly siblings who are living out the twilight of their years together in Rainbow Center. She is an unmarried schoolteacher, now retired, who shares the original family home with her brother, a childless widower who moved in with her after his wife died. Boyd continues to pay some attention to his long-time career as a real estate agent, and Alma has a small shop in her home, but mostly we see both of them in relationship to their memories of a nephew, Cliff, whom they had helped raise to early adulthood, and who is now abroad as a soldier in the Korean War. An official notice from the U.S. War Department that Cliff is "missing in action" sends both old people, but Alma in particular, into a deep and disturbing well of memories and apprehensions about their feelings for Cliff and his for them. That, along with a series of revelations about the hidden lives of their neighbors, is the basic "action" of the novel.

This story of Alma and Boyd, with its accompanying revelations concerning their neighbors, is about a number of things, among them the near impossibility of truly knowing other people, or even oneself. However, I think, *The Nephew* is also about the tricky and elusive power of love. Love sought. Love denied. Love feared. Love given unselfishly. Love as jealousy. Love between members of the same sex. Love uncertain. It is even, finally, about love confirmed and affirmed – but only in shadowy, shifting ways. Not the passionate purity of romantic love, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, but other kinds of love which are just as compelling and just as real in their own, very different, ways.

Alma and Boyd, childless themselves, ache with a deep longing and love for their absent nephew Cliff. Under the stress of their advanced years, retirement from their lifelong professions and the news that Cliff is missing in action in Korea, the two relatives develop an urgent need to believe that their nephew had loved them deeply as well. Subsequent news from the War Department that Cliff has been confirmed dead arrives in Rainbow Center at about the same time that revelations from some of their neighbors make it clear that Cliff's only real passion as a young adult had been to escape from Rainbow Center and from his two elderly guardians. Despite the shock of this revelation, both Alma and Boyd – with the knowing help of nearby friends – reconstruct their memories of Cliff in such a way as to reassure themselves that they had been truly loved by the boy.

The Masons' next-door neighbor, Willard Baker, the only surviving member of a prominent Rainbow Center family, has lived his life into middle age knowing that both his parents loved his younger brother far more than they did him. In addition, Willard lives a frustrating, sometimes drunken and angry life in the present because he suspects that the young man who lives with him, Vernon Miller, does not reciprocate the love he feels.

Vernon Miller, in turn, is a lonely, timid Rainbow Center native, an orphan who seeks consolation and love in marriage after Willard is killed in an automobile accident. His wife is another resident of the neighborhood, a forty-year-old whose sterile life for a decade or more has revolved solely around caring for her demented, Alzheimer's-stricken mother.

Professor Mannheim, a German scholar at the local college and a man whose professional career stalled at the assistant professor level, is forced by an imagined threat to his continued employment at the school to acknowledge to his second wife, a former student with whom he had a passionate affair some years ago, that he loved his first wife deeply, and that he agonizes still over the thought that his sexual affairs hastened her death.

Even Mrs. Barrington, a wealthy widow of ninety years who lives across the street from Alma and Boyd and who is the singularly most self-contained and most active force in the neighborhood, reveals to Alma near the end of the novel that her life's activities have been a kind of replacement for the love she never received from her husband.

The general pattern of the novel moves us, as slowly as life itself seems to have moved in small town America of the '50's, from painful images of the many ways in which human love can be twisted and denied – yet deeply desired and needed at the same time – to a final sense of reconciliation in which three of Rainbow Center's oldest residents – Alma, Boyd and their rich neighbor Mrs. Barrington – reassure themselves that love has been and is present in their lives, despite its fragile and uncertain qualities. In addition, two middle-aged residents – Faye Laird and Vernon Miller – decide to erase (or hide) their separate loneliness and pain by getting married. Positive feelings of affirmation are restrained in *The Nephew* but they are achieved nevertheless.

4. Conclusion

Of course, this is all worlds apart from the kind of love portrayed in *Romeo and Juliet*. Love in *The Nephew* is so “thin,” so tentative and so long delayed. Why, then, do I offer it in comparison to Shakespeare’s exuberant and triumphant (even if tragically doomed) emotion? The answer to that question is that the two works seem to me to form a perfect contrast, a contrast that may deepen and enrich our understanding of the puzzling, compelling emotion we call love. *Romeo and Juliet* expressed one very real and constant human wish, a desire for passionate, reciprocal, totally consuming love. We can’t help holding this ideal in our minds. But, *The Nephew* shows us other faces of love – the ones which we experience much more often in real life – no less powerful or important, but muted, complicated and rewarding mostly in subtle, or even unexpected ways. Examples of this truth don’t seem necessary, somehow, because most of us live with these other faces of love on a daily basis throughout our lives. In other words, they are so familiar that they can go without saying.

The main point seems to be that there can be no wrong way and no wrong place for love. It is everywhere and in every guise. Sometimes it can be simple, passionate and perfectly reciprocal. Most often, it is far more quiet, more fragile and more complicated, but no less deep and important in our lives. Thinking of the contrast with *Romeo and Juliet*, we are led to realize that this kind of love is also “for all times.”

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