The Stable And Unstable Romantic Relationships In Much Ado About Nothing

In each and every one of his plays, playwright William Shakespeare exhibits the thousands of different relationships we experience as humans through the various characters he creates. In Much Ado About Nothing, Shakespeare highlights two contrasting romantic relationships through Claudio and Hero (C & H) and Benedick and Beatrice (B & B). Although C & H may seem like they have the ideal romantic relationship because they fall in love at first sight and become engaged very quickly, the obstacles they run into in the latter half of the play display the hidden insecurities that lie between them. These revealed insecurities creates a contrast from B & B's relationship, which has a rocky start but soon becomes a love that is built on a firm foundation of trust. The different levels of stability the two relationships have originate from the lack of faith C & H have in each other, which can be seen in Claudio's infatuation with Hero and his tendency to approach love with his senses, while B & B possess stability through the genuine love they share and their trusting relationship.

One indication that shows the instability in C & H's relationship is Claudio's tendency to idealize Hero as a perfect woman, which leads him to also have an infatuation with her. Though infatuation can technically be categorized as love, it actually "involves little or no knowledge of the other," causing the infatuated to "project his or her own desires and longings on the beloved". Claudio displays this infatuation throughout the beginning of Much Ado after he and the other soldiers arrive in Messina from war and he describes Hero as "a jewel" and as "the sweetest lady that [he] ever looked on" . An interesting note, however, is that Claudio describes Hero in this way after he sees her from a distance, not even after he exchanges words with her. Their lack of conversation in this scene—and the remainder of the play—reveals their relationship is founded solely on the image they have created of each other and not on any actual known information about the other. Because relationships like C & H's are so unstable and only based on the intense infatuation one has for the other, a weakness that makes the relationship "not destined for cooperation but for collision" is formed, which proves to be true in the latter half of the play when Don Jon uses this vulnerability to enact his evil plan, breaking C & H apart temporarily.

Unlike C & H, who fall in love almost as soon as they see each other, B & B start out on the complete opposite side of the spectrum, openly expressing their contempt for one another through their "skirmish[es] of wit". In the same scene that C & H fall in love, B & B are battling each other in a verbal war, attacking each other with insulting remarks. While this interaction, along with others, make it seem as though they would never fall in love with each other, their aggressive interactions are actually an "indirect affirmation of rational self-control as opposed to [the] emotional self-indulgence" that Claudio exhibits. Through their harsh words, B & B are masking their true emotions and expressing them in a very indirect way with "sarcasm and other forms of hostile innuendo". Rather than having a clear romantic interest in each other like C & H, B & B have an attraction towards one another that is authentic but "ambivalent". Although B & B's interactions depict their relationship as an unstable one, the remainder of Much Ado and the juxtaposition between them and C & H show that they have a much more secure and real connection than their alternatives do.

On top of the fact that B & B share an authentic love dissimilar to C & H, they also share a neoplatonic one, which is described as “the progression from the love of particular beauty to the apprehension of the universal concept of beauty and finally to union with absolute Beauty itself”. However, in Much Ado, Shakespeare focuses on the “dramatic microcosm” of B & B’s relationship which moves from consisting of an extreme disgust towards each other to a deep and passionate affection. In the scene after Claudio condemns Hero for being unfaithful, Benedick confesses he doesn’t love “nothing in the world so well as [Beatrice]” and she responds by saying she also feels the same. These impassioned emotions they express towards love and each other at this point are radically different from the emotions each character had in the beginning of the play: Beatrice calls Benedick a “valiant trencherman” (someone who is heavily dependent on another like a parasite) and says she prays every night and day that God will never send her a husband. Likewise, Benedick conveys his negative opinions on women who he believes will always be unfaithful to men, attributing this as the reason for why he “will live as a bachelor”. Although this complete transformation seems too good to be true, it aligns with the “dramatic microcosm” Shakespeare concentrates on within neoplatonic love, proving that the affection they have for one another at the end of the play is real.

C & H on the other hand eventually reach the final stage of sharing a genuine love like B & B but do so through their senses and not reason, primarily on Claudio’s end. Claudio’s tendency to move “by desire and passion rather than the higher love” is a big factor that plays a part in his aforementioned infatuation as well. After meeting Hero for the first time, Claudio describes his own intense emotions towards her as a “passion” and says, “That I love her, I feel”. He attributes these new emotions he has to the fact that he no longer has “war thoughts,” allowing “soft and delicate desires” to take their place. In describing his sight in this way, Claudio turns his vision into something that is “involuntary and unquestionable,” disconnecting it from himself and demonstrating the little control he has over his emotions. He also continuously praises Hero’s appearance, but rarely her character which shows how little he knows about her and is instead driven by his feelings and his impression of her. C & H’s lack of conversation and interaction does not help the development of their relationship but instead further serves as evidence that the two are connected solely by their senses and not reason. Claudio’s dependence on his sight and Hero’s impression not only explains why their relationship is based on infatuation but also supports the claim that they are more unstable compared to B & B.

Ultimately these smaller differences between C & H’s relationship and B & B’s relationship bring us to the conclusion that because B & B are based on love, they also have trust while C & H are based on infatuation and sense, causing them to lack faith. B & B’s trust is developed throughout the play and grows even through their “warfare” which is “an open expression of the hostility that is a part of all intimate relationships”. This open expression helps them develop their relationship into a completely romantic one and also develop a trust that is not shown in any other relationship. However, this unseen faith B & B have in each other also comes from a past relationship they had that is indirectly mentioned: after their first skirmish, Benedick leaves with the last comment, with which Beatrice responds by saying, “I know you of old,” indicating that B & B have a history outside of the play itself. Their history is alluded to again later on in the play when Beatrice says Benedick had “lent [his heart] me awhile” when she gave him “a double heart for his single one”. While C & H have little to no interaction in the entirety of the play, B & B are described to have had a past relationship on top of frequently conversing with each other, which prove they have much more knowledge about each other to build their trust

on. This trust, however, is put to the test when Hero is condemned for being unfaithful and Beatrice tells Benedick to “Kill Claudio”. Although Benedick refuses at first, he eventually agrees to do as she asks because “his love for her enables him to trust in the rightness of her commands” but also because he wants to prove his sincere feelings for her. Benedick’s acceptance of Beatrice’s request is the final indication that the two have reached a point of complete trust and dependence with one another, thoroughly solidifying their relationship.

While B & B exhibit the complete trust that exists in a couple that truly loves each other, C & H are established on a very shaky foundation, which is not only attributed to Claudio’s infatuation (influenced by his senses) but also attributed to who he is as a character. When Claudio is first introduced in Much Ado, he is portrayed as someone who literally falls in love at first sight with Hero’s beauty, showing that he doesn’t completely understand “the value of love”. In addition, he is “more practiced as a soldier than as a courtier” which is also the reason why he needs Don Pedro to court Hero on his behalf. However, when he mistakenly understands Don Pedro to be courting Hero for himself, this willingness to discredit the intentions of his brother from war illustrates the lack of trust he has as a character, not just in love. However, it is still true that Claudio “judge[s] his mistress [...] through the eyes of others,” (namely Don John) which can allow some to go as far as describing him as “radically mean and selfish”. When combining Claudio’s immature character with fact that he is heavily reliant on his sight and the appearance of Hero to feed his infatuation of her, it leads their relationship to be very unstable and at the same time insincere, especially when comparing it to B & B’s relationship.

Although C & H’s relationship may seem ideal because of how deeply in love they appear at the beginning of Much Ado, B & B prove to be the much more stable couple as the plot thickens and C & H are unable to work through the several tests of faith and different struggles they face. This instability between C & H is largely due to the fact that Claudio falls into infatuation with Hero solely through his feelings and desires as well as his childish personality. On the other hand, B & B prove to be stable because of the trust they have built through their previous relationship, their indirect expressions of affection, and the neoplatonic love they share. The juxtaposition Shakespeare makes between C & H and B & B displays the qualifications of secure and unsecure romantic relationships which is applicable to us all as we form and break our own relationships with others.