Contributions of Celtic Literature

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Many common themes can be found in English literature as well as in Celtic myths and tales. For this study we compare themes of chivalry, courtly love, forbidden love, and tragedy in the Celtic romance Tristan and Isolde and Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet.

Tristan and Isolde is an archetypal tale of courtly love. Tristan and Isolde fall in love when they meet as she tends his wounds after a battle in which he killed a warrior he does not know is her uncle. This is when the familial forbiddance enters the story. When it is discovered that the knight Tristan was responsible for the death, he is sent home. But he has been ordered to bring her home to marry his uncle and liege, King Mark. On the way to Mark, they mistakenly drink a love potion and fall in love. After Isolde has married the king, she and Tristan carry on a furtive affair: here, as in tales of modern liaisons that reenact this archetype, forbidden love subverts marriage, family, and fealty. After many years, Tristan leaves the country and weds another woman named Isolde. He is again taken ill, and Isolde is sent to heal him. Out of hurt and jealousy, Tristan’s wife prevents the two lovers from meeting. Both Tristan and Isolde die from grief and sorrow.

This archetype informs William Shakespeare’s tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. It begins with the attraction of Romeo and Juliet to each other, followed by the chivalrous way Romeo behaves toward Juliet. Again there is an obstacle: the two come from warring families, who forbid them to be with each other. But they persist, so their love too goes against family loyalty. With the obstacles generated by a forbidden passion that is only to find completion in death, Romeo and Juliet’s developing romance exemplifies courtly love. Mistakenly, tragically, both characters end their lives when, willing only good for one another, each comes to believe that the other has dies. Based on the outcomes of each, it seems clear that both Celtic and English tales extol the joys of love far less than they warn of passion’s danger.

Work Consulted