

ROMEO AND JULIET

From Shakespeare's time to today, *Romeo and Juliet* is the play that youth has taken for its own. Its tone of intensity and urgency reflects the very essence of youth. In the passionate idealistic lovers, in the encounters between young and old, students can see some reflections of themselves.

The play is one of intense urgency, and time is a decisive factor in this story of doomed young love. Romeo and Juliet try to ignore time and live in a world without clocks. They want to turn day into night, speed up or slow down the minutes and hours, but time inevitably catches up with them.

I: 1

Love and hate bloom quickly in Verona's hot sultry streets and spill over the social barriers meant to contain them. From the opening lines of the play we feel the tension that lies heavy in the air. "Gregory, on my word, we'll not carry coals [suffer insults]."

Is Sampson expecting insults? Is he looking for the chance to insult somebody? A few lines later we learn that it is against the law in Verona to provoke a fight this way. Does Sampson obey the law? Explain the line: "I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir." How effective are the laws in controlling feuds? Benvolio tries to break up the fight. How does he get drawn into it?

Even in the first scene we see that laws cannot control simmering emotions. They spill over legal limits and carry the day. And cool heads, such as Benvolio's, get swept along with the tide. Hot blood stirs in Verona's streets. And here Romeo and Juliet catch fire. Their love also knows no limits. It sails over difficulties, as Romeo scales the Capulet garden walls.

I: 11

Paris has come to ask Capulet for Juliet's hand. Note that he approaches the father, not the daughter, with his suit. Paris seems rather proper, formal, and reasonable. Contrast him with Romeo. Capulet replies that, at fourteen, Juliet is too young to marry, and that, in any case, he will never force her to marry against her will.

At this point, what is Capulet's attitude toward his daughter? Does he seem like an indulgent father?

Capulet is planning a ball and he sends a servant out with a list of guests. The servant cannot read and asks for Romeo's help. Thus, it is by chance that Romeo hears of Capulet's ball and decides to go.

Have students look for other accidents that affect the lovers during the course of the play.

I: 111

This scene introduces Juliet and shows her relationship to her mother and the Nurse. Notice Juliet's first words to Lady Capulet: "Madame, I am here. What is your will?"

What do these words say about her? Does she behave like a docile child throughout this scene?

When Lady Capulet mentions that her daughter is approaching womanhood, the Nurse breaks in and runs away with the conversation.

What sort of details does the Nurse remember from Juliet's childhood? What do these earthy recollections tell you about the Nurse? How do you imagine Juliet feels listening to them? Lady Capulet broaches the subject of marriage. How does Juliet respond? Have her thoughts turned yet to young men? Contrast Juliet's quiet, modest remarks on marriage with the Nurse's enthusiastic ones.

I: v

The ball opens with a festive atmosphere as servants rush about and the hall fills with guests. But tension quickly develops as Tybalt spots Romeo among the maskers.

Contrast Tybalt's and Capulet's responses to Romeo's presence. What does their angry exchange suggest about the importance of the feud to the two generations in Verona? About Capulet when his will is crossed?

The most important development in Scene v is the meeting of Romeo and Juliet. Romeo sees Juliet and falls in love at first sight.

Is this in keeping with what we know about his character?

Romeo speaks of Juliet as a torch in the night, as a bright jewel on an Ethiopian's ear, thus introducing the metaphor of light in darkness that runs through the play. Romeo and Juliet consistently express their love by means of poetry. Their first exchange is a sonnet. Note the elaborate symbolism of pilgrims, prayers, and saints.

What do these religious terms suggest about Romeo and Juliet's newborn feelings? In what sense is the meeting for both a sacrament?

The Nurse interrupts this tender exchange with a message from Juliet's mother. Only at this point do the lovers learn one another's identity. Juliet's lament again suggests the workings of fate: "My only love, sprung from my only hate! Too early seen unknown, and known too late!" Note that Juliet feigns interest in some of the other guests in order to learn Romeo's name.

In view of her childlike openness in Scene iii, why is it significant that she hides her feelings now?

II: 11

Romeo's opening line dismisses Mercutio's jests and clears the air for the lyric mood of the balcony scene. Once again, Romeo addresses Juliet in terms of light. She is the sun rising in the east. Her eyes are bright stars streaming through the heavens.

Contrast Romeo's language here with his complaint about Rosaline in Act I. Do his words now seem less bookish, more sincere? Have students describe Romeo's mood in this scene - his feelings of exaltation and soaring freedom. What "stony" limits, besides Capulet's orchard walls, separate these lovers? How do they quickly dismiss the hatred of their kinsmen? The danger of discovery?

Even in her happiness, Juliet remains more earthbound than Romeo, and she has her moments of hesitation. She is frightened by the swift pace of their love: "It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden; Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be 'Ere one can say: 'It lightens.'"

What does the image of lightning suggest about the love affair? Its brilliance? Its swiftness? Its danger?

II: vi

Romeo awaits his bride in Friar Laurence's cell. In this brief scene, there is a dramatic argument between Romeo and the Friar about the nature of love. In lines 3-5, Romeo insists that the intensity of love is far more important than its duration. One moment with Juliet outweighs all the sorrow that may come to him, though death "devour" their love. Friar Laurence responds with a warning against that very intensity: "The sweetest honey is loathsome in his own deliciousness ... Therefore love moderately: long love doth so."

What two attitudes toward love are presented in this scene?

Ask students if they sympathize more with Romeo or with Friar Laurence?

III: 1

As the scene opens, Benvolio comments on the hot weather. Why does it worry him? Why is he so anxious to get Mercutio off the streets? Compare Benvolio here with his role in Act I, Scene 1. What is the fate of his efforts to keep the peace throughout the play?

As if in answer to Benvolio's fears, Tybalt arrives and Mercutio does his best to provoke him. But the "Prince of Cats" is saving his sword for Romeo.

Contrast Tybalt and Romeo in lines 69-74. Do they seem like beings from two different worlds? Why does Romeo refuse to fight Tybalt?

Appalled at Romeo's seeming cowardice, Mercutio draws on Tybalt. Romeo comes between them, and Tybalt stabs Mercutio under Romeo's arm.

What do you think of Romeo in this scene? Why do his good intentions misfire? Is he living in a fool's paradise to think that his love for Juliet will put an end to the general enmity?

Mercutio dies in character, with a curse and a jest. Romeo, shaken, recalls the street code of honor and slays Tybalt to avenge his friend. "Away to heaven respective lenity," he cries, "and fire-eyed fury be my conduct now." Does Romeo sound like Tybalt here? Aroused, he proves a better duellist than the "Prince of Cats."

Stunned by two deaths he has unwittingly caused, Romeo stands half-paralyzed as Benvolio tries to hurry him away. Finally, he cries out, "O, I am fortune's fool."

To what extent is Romeo the victim of these swift-moving events? To what extent is he the cause?

III: 111

Juliet's lament on the word "banished" is echoed by Romeo as he tells the Friar that death would be far more welcome than exile from Verona and Juliet. Laurence vainly tries to reason Romeo out of his extravagant grief. He offers "adversity's sweet milk philosophy" to ward off thoughts of banishment. What is Romeo's answer? See lines 64-68.

"Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel
Wert thou as young as I, Juliet thy love,
An hour but married, Tybalt murdered,
Doting like me, and like me banished,
Then mightst thou speak..."

When the Nurse arrives and Romeo hears of Juliet's grief, he tries to stab himself.

In what way is this rash gesture characteristic of him? Compare Romeo's tears with his sighs for Rosaline in Act I. Are there times when Romeo seems very young and rather cowardly? Have students look for a change in Romeo in Act III. Scene v when he comforts his grieving wife, and in Act V when he hears of her death.

IV: v

The Nurse goes to waken Juliet on her wedding day and finds her apparently dead. The household begins its lamentation. Students may find these expressions of grief extravagant. In fact, they are stylized—rhetorical devices that Shakespeare borrowed from Senecan tragedy.

Ask students to compare the wedding preparations in this scene with the secret ceremony in Laurence's cell, Act II, Scene vi. In Shakespeare's view, what makes a marriage—the approving parents, the wedding feast, the musicians, or two young people in love?

V: 111

Paris has come to Capulet's tomb to perform a ritual of mourning for Juliet. He is interrupted by Romeo and assumes that this Montague has come to desecrate the grave. He challenges Romeo, who fights him in desperation, not anger, for he pities Paris as a companion in misfortune and death. Line 59, Romeo addresses Paris as "good, gentle youth."

Is Romeo older than Paris? How does despair and world-weariness make him seem so? Note the simplicity of Romeo's final soliloquy: "O my love, my wife." How has Romeo changed from his lovelorn attitude in Act I? His raving in Act III? At the point of death, has Romeo reached a kind of emotional maturity?

Friar Laurence arrives moments too late to prevent Romeo's death. He urges Juliet to come away with him, but she refuses and a noise by the watch frightens the Friar from the tomb. Left alone with Romeo's corpse, Juliet looks for remaining drops of poison, and finding none, stabs herself with Romeo's dagger. With the lovers' deaths, the feud burns itself out, and Montague and Capulet join hands over bodies of their children.

As the play closes, the Prince blames the feud for the tragedy. "Capulet, Montague," he says, "see what a scourge is laid upon your hate."

Ask students what other factors led to this bitter end. What role is played by chance? By timing? By the lovers' own rashness? By the heady emotionalism of Verona that breeds intense hate and intense love?

Writing Projects and Activities

1. The prologue refers to Romeo and Juliet as "star-crossed lovers," suggesting that their deaths have been decreed by fate. How does Shakespeare develop the theme of fate as a controlling force in the play? Cite all the instances you can think of where fate rules against them right from the start.
2. Romeo and Juliet are both young and in love. How are their temperaments different? In your opinion, which of the two seems more mature and reasonable? Which is more practical, less romantic? How do the two youngsters mature during the course of the play? Cite examples from the play.
3. The character of Romeo is developed partly through contrast with Mercutio, Tybalt, and Paris. How does he resemble these three young men? How is he different from each of them?
4. Discuss the generation gap in Verona. What misunderstandings take place between Capulet and Tybalt? Between Capulet and Juliet? Between Friar Laurence and Romeo? Between the Nurse and Juliet? In general, what is the difference between the old and young in this play?
5. Romeo and Juliet often try to turn day into night. In Act III, Scene ii, Juliet imagines that "all the world will be in love with night. And pay no worship to the garish sun." What events in the play cause the lovers to seek the night and shun the daylight?
6. If Romeo and Juliet had been older by even five years, do you think they would have acted differently? If so, how?
7. "Here's much to do with hate, but more with love," Romeo says in Act I, Scene i. Show how this remark can apply to the play as a whole.
8. Write a headline and front page news story relating the facts of Romeo's and Juliet's deaths. Then, adopting a different tone, write a human interest story about these two young lovers for the feature section of the same newspaper.

