



Romeo and Juliet

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Context – The play was written by William Shakespeare, and was first performed around 1594.

Shakespeare's Time – Shakespeare wrote his plays at the time of two monarchs: **Queen Elizabeth I** and **James I**. *Romeo and Juliet* was written relatively early in Shakespeare's career (the bulk of his tragedies were written in the 17th century) yet was extremely popular in his lifetime, as it is now. Shakespeare borrowed heavily from two texts: *The Tragical History of Romeo and Juliet* (1562) and *Palace of Pleasure* (1567)



Elizabethan England and Italy – Shakespeare frequently engaged with Italy in his plays, leading many to believe that he travelled there between the late 1580s and early 1590s. Italy was a place that Shakespeare's contemporaries would have had a keen interest in; it was already an **advanced** and **beautiful** place for travel. Shakespeare's depictions of many areas of Italian life at the time are deemed largely accurate.



Religion – The heavy religious presence is evident across several parts of *Romeo and Juliet*. This is reflective of a society across Europe that was **deeply religious** (predominantly catholic or protestant). Several characters demonstrate their **commitment to the church**, such as Romeo and Juliet who choose to marry rather than fornicate, and the Capulets, who are quick to contemplate that Juliet is in a better place (heaven) after she is found 'dead.'



Patriarchal Society – Society throughout the Middle Age and at Shakespeare's time was **patriarchal** – women were considered inferior to men. This was also the case in much of Europe, including Italy. Women belonged to their fathers (or brothers if their fathers had died) and then their husbands, so Juliet would be expected to obey her father. Women were not permitted to own land or enter most professions. They were instead expected to bear children, be gentle and womanly.



Astrology the Supernatural – At the time of Shakespeare, the belief in both astronomy and the supernatural was far more preminent than in society today. The reference to 'star-cross'd lovers' demonstrates the large role of horoscopes and planet positions in being used to **predict fate**. Also, Romeo and Juliet make reference to the fact that they feel they are being **guided by a supernatural force** (e.g. 'fortune's fool').



Healthcare and Medicine – Healthcare and medicine were not as advanced in Shakespeare's age as they are today – there were numerous ailments and diseases that were not yet understood. This makes it much more believable for both the Capulets and Romeo that Juliet could have died so suddenly and so young. The high death count in the play would seem slightly more common in those days!



Main Characters – Consider what Shakespeare intended through his characterisation of each of the below...

Romeo – The son and heir of Lord and Lady Montague. Romeo is **handsome** and **intelligent**, yet he is also **impulsive** and extremely **sensitive**. Romeo is a **peaceful** character, and is not interested in the violence that goes on around him, choosing instead to focus his energies on love. Although Romeo's love seems fickle (he loves Rosaline at the outset) his commitment can't be debated in the end!

Juliet – The daughter of Capulet and Lady Capulet. Juliet is a **beautiful** young girl (13 years old at the start of the play). Juliet is **caring**, **compassionate**, and at times demonstrates **courage** (she defies her parents in order to marry Romeo, and drinks the contents of the vial without fully trusting its effects). At times, she shows great **intelligence and wit**, particularly in conversations with her mother.

Prince Escalus – The most **powerful** character in the play, with the authority to govern the other characters and administer sentences. He is also a kinsman to Mercutio and Paris. As the **seat of Verona**, his main concern throughout most of his appearances are in relation to ensuring that the peace is kept. He is **merciful** in banishing Romeo for the death of Tybalt, as opposed to sentencing him to death.

Mercutio – A kinsman to the prince and one of Romeo's closest friends. Mercutio is an extraordinary character in that he has sparkling wit and a vivid imagination. Much of Mercutio's speeches deal in puns and word-play. He appears to see himself as being above the vices of love, choosing instead to view it as misplaced sexual appetite. His hot-headedness is eventually his downfall.

Montague and Capulet – The **patriarchs** of the Montague and Capulet families, who have held a long and violent **feud** with one another from some time before the play begins. Both seem to deeply love their respective child, yet do not always seem appropriately aware of their emotional wellbeing. For example, Romeo chooses to walk the streets in melancholy rather than share his feelings with his father, and Capulet feels the best thing for Juliet would be a marriage with Paris.

Friar Laurence and the Nurse – Both Friar Laurence and the Nurse act as **guidance counsel** for Romeo and Juliet. They appear to be the two people that Romeo and Juliet **trust** more than any others in the world, as they are the two that they **confide** in. Friar Laurence is **kind and civic-minded** (believing the marriage may heal the feud), whilst the Nurse is **kind and sentimental** (yet at times vulgar). She seems as though she is more of a mother to Juliet than Lady Capulet has ever been.

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Love – In *Romeo and Juliet*, love is an extremely **overpowering** force that supersedes all other values, emotions, and loyalties. Through their love, Romeo and Juliet conspire to go against the forces of their entire social world. Romeo returns to visit Juliet at points, even though he is well aware of the threat of death. At times, love is presented as fickle (Mercutio's speeches, Romeo + Rosaline).



Individual vs Society – Romeo and Juliet are forced to undermine the **oppressive rules of society** at the time. For example, rules of the patriarchal family force Juliet to be subservient to her parents, rules of religion mean that they must marry in haste, and rules of masculinity force Romeo into conflict with Tybalt.

Violence – Extreme violence takes place sporadically throughout the play. The **feud** between the two families is so bitter that the mere sight of each other can be the cause of a **fight to the death**. Unchecked violence is personified through the character of Tybalt. The violence culminates in Act 3 Scene 1, in which both Mercutio and Tybalt are murdered.





Fate – In the first address to the audience, the Chorus states that Romeo and Juliet are 'star-cross'd' lovers, meaning that fate had intended for their paths to cross, and that fate **controls their actions**. A series of **unfortunate accidents** towards the end of the play thwart Friar Laurence's plan and eventually manifest in both Romeo and Juliet committing suicide, thus adding to the sense of fate.

Scene-by-Scene Summary – Take note of the key quotations from each scene.

Scene	Summary	Key Quotations
Prologue	The Chorus speaks of an ancient grudge between two households, from which two 'star-crossed lovers' appear.	<i>From forth the fatal loins of these two foes A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life...</i>
Act 1 Scene 1	A street brawl breaks out between the Montagues and Capulets. The Prince intervenes. He threatens the death sentence for anyone who breaks the peace again.	<i>To old Free-town, our common judgment-place. Once more, on pain of death, all men depart.</i>
Act 1 Scene 2	Paris speaks of his desire to marry Juliet to Capulet. They arrange a masquerade ball so that he can begin to woo her. Peter accidentally invites Romeo and Benvolio.	<i>One fairer than my love? The all-seeing sun Ne'er saw her match since first the world begun.</i>
Act 1 Scene 3	Lady Capulet discusses the prospect of Juliet getting married to Paris. She dutifully says that she will look upon him.	<i>I'll look to like if looking liking move! But no more deep will I endart mine eye! Than your consent gives strength to make it fly.</i>
Act 1 Scene 4	Before the ball, Mercutio mocks Romeo. He gives his 'Queen Mab' speech. Romeo fears the night will set fate in motion.	<i>O, then I see Queen Mab has been with you... She is the fairies' midwife...</i>
Act 1 Scene 5	Romeo and Juliet meet at the ball. They immediately fall for each other – Romeo uses metaphors to compare her to a pilgrim. Tybalt spots Romeo and wants to kill him, but Capulet stops him. Romeo and Juliet learn that they are from warring families.	<i>If I profane with my unworship hand This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this: My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.</i>
Act 2 Prologue	The chorus returns and delivers a sonnet about the new love.	<i>But passion lends them power, time means, to meet, Go then, for 'tis in vain To seek him here that means not to be found.</i>
Act 2 Scene 1	Benvolio and Mercutio search for Romeo, who has escaped them in the hope of re-finding Juliet.	<i>If that thy bent of love be honorable, Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow, By one that I'll procure to come to thee,</i>
Act 2 Scene 2	The famous 'balcony scene.' Romeo decides that he cannot go home without seeing Juliet again. He trespasses into her garden, where she appears at a window. They decide that they will wed.	<i>Thy love did read by rote that could not spell. But come, young waverer, come go with me, The sovereignty will fall upon Macbeth. Bid her devise! Some means to come to shrift this afternoon. And there she shall at Friar Laurence's cell Be shrived and married.</i>
Act 2 Scene 3	Romeo visits Friar Laurence to ask if he will wed him to Juliet. Whilst shocked at how fickle Romeo's love is, he agrees.	<i>But come what sorrow can, / It cannot countervail the exchange of joy! That one short minute gives me in her sight.</i>
Act 2 Scene 4	Romeo arrives to meet Mercutio and Benvolio. The Nurse and Peter then arrive, and Mercutio makes fun of the Nurse. When Mercutio leaves, Romeo arranges with the Nurse for Juliet to meet him at Friar Laurence's chamber.	<i>"A plague o' both your houses!" "Ask for me tomorrow, and / you shall find me a grave man"</i>
Act 2 Scenes 5-6	The Nurse sends Juliet to Friar Laurence's cell, where they are married. The Friar warns them to love moderately.	<i>O nature, what hadst thou to do in hell! When thou didst bower the spirit of a fiend! In moral paradise of such sweet flesh? There is no world without Verona walls But purgatory, torture, hell itself. Hence "banished" is banished from the world, Hang thee, young baggage! Disobedient wretch! I tell thee what: get thee to church o' Thursday,</i>
Act 3 Scene 1	Tybalt duels Mercutio. Romeo tries to make peace, but Tybalt stabs Mercutio dead under Romeo's arm. In rage, Romeo kills Tybalt. The Prince arrives and exiles Romeo.	<i>Take thou this vial, being then in bed, And this distilled liquor drink thou off,</i>
Act 3 Scene 2	The Nurse tells Juliet of the fight. Juliet is traumatised by the idea of an exiled Romeo. The Nurse says she knows where he is hiding.	<i>Romeo, Romeo, Romeo! Here's drink. I drink to thee.</i>
Act 3 Scenes 3-4	Romeo despairs at hearing of being banished. The Friar makes a plan for him to visit Juliet before leaving. Elsewhere, Capulet contacts Paris and arranges for Juliet to marry him.	<i>O me, O me! My child, my only life, Revive, look up, or I will die with thee!</i>
Act 3 Scene 5	Romeo reluctantly leaves Juliet. Her mother then tells of the marriage to Paris. She rejects it. Capulet threatens to disown her.	<i>Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight. Let's see for means. O mischief, thou art swift</i>
Act 4 Scenes 1-2	Juliet meets Friar Laurence, saying that she would rather kill herself than marry Paris. Friar Laurence proposes the sleeping potion plan. She agrees, returns to her parents, and repents.	<i>Unhappy fortune! By my brotherhood, The letter was not nice but full of charge,</i>
Act 4 Scene 3	Juliet is scared, but drinks the contents of the vial.	<i>For never was a story of more woe Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.</i>
Act 4 Scenes 4-5	The Nurse finds Juliet dead on her wedding morning. The family are distraught, but agree to make the funeral arrangements.	
Act 5 Scene 1	Romeo is told of the death by Balthasar. Romeo decides that he will return to Verona to kill himself. Before doing so, he purchases poison from an apothecary.	
Act 5 Scene 2	Friar Laurence learns that Romeo has not received his letter informing him of the plan, and is worried. He doesn't know that Romeo now thinks that Juliet is dead.	
Act 5 Scene 3	Romeo finds Juliet's body and kills himself. She awakens and kills herself. Montague and Capulet commit to resolve.	

Dramatic Devices in Romeo and Juliet

Features of a Tragedy in Romeo and Juliet

Dramatic Irony	Mercutio and Benvolio think Romeo is still pining over Rosaline, but the audience knows he has moved on to Juliet. A2 S1	Tragic Hero – A main character cursed by fate and possessed of a tragic flaw (Romeo, and to an extent Juliet). 
Soliloquy	Juliet's opening speech in A3 S2 in which she pours her heart out over her love for Romeo.	Hamartia – The fatal character flaw of the tragic hero (his passion and impulsiveness).
Aside	Juliet secretly hopes for the 'villain' Romeo: <i>Villain and he be many miles asunder God pardon him!</i> A3 S5.	Catharsis – The release of the audience's emotions through empathy with the characters. 
Foreshadowing	Friar Laurence: <i>These violent delights have violent ends, And in their triumph die, like fire and powder.</i> A2 S6	Internal Conflict – The struggle the hero engages in with his/her fatal flaw.