



Romeo and Juliet

by William Shakespeare
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Focus

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Take-Aways

- Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is literature's most famous romantic tragedy.
- The two main characters' relationship has become the epitome of idealistic love.
- Romeo and Juliet, offspring of two families locked in a deadly feud in Verona, Italy, fall madly in love with one another.
- They secretly marry against their families' wishes in defiance of social traditions.
- In a scuffle, Romeo kills a member of Juliet's family and so must go into exile.
- To avoid marrying another man, Juliet takes a potion to feign death until she can flee with Romeo. He believes she is really dead and poisons himself.
- Juliet wakes to find Romeo dead, and she stabs herself. The double suicide causes the feuding families to reflect upon their differences and reconcile.
- The play debuted around 1595, when Britain was experiencing a political recovery and London was enjoying a theater boom under Queen Elizabeth I.
- Theatergoers found it innovative and daring. For the first time, two historically insignificant characters were the subjects of a tragedy.
- The play inspired films and a popular stage musical, *West Side Story*.

Relevance

The world's most famous romantic tragedy

William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the world's most famous, best-loved romantic tragedies, even more than 400 years after its debut. It deals with the ill-fated love of a teenage couple in Verona, Italy. Romeo and Juliet are the children of two warring families. In a tense atmosphere, they pit their unconditional love against the constraints of their parents and society, and ultimately choose death over any compromise with traditional conventions. In less than five days, the main characters develop from gushing teens into confident young adults whose impetuous suicides end their idealistic love and bring about a purification of society – at the end of the piece, the two families reconcile in the wake of these tragic, unnecessary deaths. In Shakespearean times, the play was performed often, undergoing many edits and becoming the basis of numerous novels, musical compositions and adaptations. It features myriad plays on words (many of them crude) that can be hard to understand, but *getAbstract* says that you haven't felt the heartbeat of the Western canon until you've encountered the timeless story of these star-crossed lovers.

Abstract

“From forth the fatal loins of these two foes, / A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life; / Whose misadventured piteous overthrows, / Do with their death bury their parents' strife.”
(Prologue)

“O heavy lightness! serious vanity! / Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms! / Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health! / Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is! / This love feel I, that feel no love in this.”
(Romeo, I.1)

Two Feuding Families

The servants of two noble but warring Veronese families, the Montagues and Capulets, cross paths, leading to a wave of insults and a wild brawl. More and more citizens join the fight. Even the heads of the families want to take up arms, but their wives stop them. Finally, the Prince of Verona intervenes to end the fighting. Furious, he thunders about the way that the families' feud already has brought civil war upon the city three times. He decrees that the next person to trigger the quarrel will pay with his life.

Meanwhile, in the Montague household, Lord Montague, the patriarch of the family, worries about his son's state of mind. Young Romeo skulks around on his own, shuts himself in his room and cries often. Montague assigns his nephew, Benvolio, to find out the reasons for Romeo's puzzling behavior. In an eloquent mixture of humor and melancholy, Romeo tells Benvolio that he is suffering from unrequited love for a girl named Rosaline.

Love at First Sight

In the Capulet family home, a young count named Paris has come to ask for the hand of Juliet, the daughter of Lord Capulet. The father replies that, at 14, Juliet really is too young to marry, but if she assents, he will allow it. A servant travels into the city to invite friends of the family to celebrate at a masquerade ball. He comes across Romeo and Benvolio, and the latter encourages his lovesick cousin to look for another love at the party, so as to forget Rosaline.

Back in the Capulet home, Lady Capulet approaches her daughter with a request. She encourages the girl to start thinking about taking a husband, and to pay attention to Paris at the masked ball that night. Juliet is not enthusiastic about the idea, but being a good daughter, she promises to do as her mother asks.

*“I have lost myself;
I am not here; /
This is not Romeo,
he’s some
other where.”
(Romeo, I.1)*

*“Help me into
some house,
Benvolio, / Or
I shall faint. A
plague a both your
houses! / They
have made worms’
meat of me.”
(Mercutio, III.1)*

*“O, I am
fortune’s fool!”
(Romeo, III.1)*

*“What storm is
this that blows
so contrary? / Is
Romeo slaughter’d,
and is Tybalt
dead? / My dear-
loved cousin, and
my dearer lord?
/ Then, dreadful
trumpet, sound the
general doom! /
For who is living,
if those two
are gone?”
(Juliet, III.2)*

With torches and masks, Romeo and his friends arrive at the Capulets’ party as uninvited guests. Romeo still is melancholy over Rosaline, even alluding to death, which causes Benvolio to call for a more cheerful atmosphere. The gang sneaks in and listens to Lord Capulet joyfully urging his guests to dance and be merry. Suddenly, Romeo spies Juliet dancing; he is mesmerized. Before he can act, Lord Capulet’s hot-tempered nephew, Tybalt, recognizes Romeo’s voice and wants to murder him unceremoniously. Only the lord of the house can pacify him.

Romeo slips away and begins to woo Juliet. Amid the hustle, the two find a moment to speak alone and discover their mutual affection. Afterward, Romeo is aghast when he learns that he is pursuing the daughter of his family’s greatest rivals. Juliet also discovers at the end of the party that the young man who enchanted her is the son of the Montagues.

Juliet’s Night Sighs

After the ball, Romeo’s friends look for him, but he hides, wishing to return to Juliet, and earns their good-humored mockery. He climbs over a wall, again infiltrating the Capulets’ estate, and hears Juliet at her window, sighing his name over and over. Romeo makes himself known, and the two effusively vow their love and loyalty. Despite their warring families, Juliet suggests that they marry. She promises to send a messenger with instructions the following day.

Romeo rushes to his confessor, Friar Laurence, a Franciscan monk, to ask for advice and help. First, the priest asks in astonishment if Romeo has forgotten about Rosaline, for whom he pined so much. He replies that this time the love is mutual. After initial skepticism, the monk agrees to marry the lovers secretly the next day. He is motivated by his hope that the marriage will end their families’ conflict. However, that wish seems elusive.

Tybalt is furious with Romeo. Lord Montague’s nephew Benvolio and the Prince of Verona’s witty relative Mercutio fear that Tybalt’s anger will provoke a duel. While they are exchanging banter and ribaldry, Juliet’s nurse appears. Romeo sends her away with a message that Juliet should go to Friar Laurence’s hermitage that afternoon under the pretext of confession. The nurse hurries back to Juliet, but first she makes fun of Romeo’s impatience by deliberately delaying her departure. Juliet arrives at the friary and falls into Romeo’s arms. Friar Laurence weds them.

A Fatal Duel

Later, Mercutio and Benvolio encounter Tybalt and his men. Benvolio tries to rein in the contentious Mercutio and prevent a fight. Romeo, who appears shortly afterward, speaks to Tybalt with conciliatory words. Though Tybalt, a Capulet, has branded him a villain, Romeo knows they now are related. Mercutio finds Romeo’s refusal to become provoked dishonorable. The situation escalates, and Tybalt and Mercutio draw arms. Romeo intervenes and tries to separate them, but Tybalt stabs Mercutio, thrusting his sword under Romeo’s arm to reach him.

At first Mercutio seems only slightly injured, and a servant rushes to find a surgeon. The wounded man reproaches Romeo for interfering in the dispute. Romeo defends himself by saying he meant well. Before Mercutio is carried off, he curses the warring families, invoking a plague against “both your houses.” Shortly afterward, a horrified Benvolio reports that their friend Mercutio has died of his injuries.

*“Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day. / It was the nightingale, and not the lark.”
(Juliet, III.V)*

*“Art thou gone so, love-lord, my husband-friend? / I must hear from thee every day in the hour, / For in a minute there are many days.”
(Juliet, III.V)*

*“Romeo is banished; and all the world to nothing, / That he dares ne'er come back to challenge you; / Or if he do, it needs must be by stealth. / Then, since the case so stands as now it doth, / I think it best you married with the County, / O, he's a lovely gentleman! / Romeo's a dishclout to him.”
(Nurse, III.VI)*

Shocked, Romeo regrets that he allowed Tybalt to insult his honor. Enraged by the death of Mercutio, Romeo finds Tybalt and kills him, thus breaking the Prince's strict order of peace. Romeo flees, as the tumult prompts the Prince to act. With a clever speech, Benvolio manages to persuade the Prince not to sentence Romeo to death. The Prince decrees that Romeo must go into exile and pledges that if he ever returns to Verona, he will face execution.

Meanwhile, Juliet eagerly awaits her wedding night, when suddenly her nurse rushes in and tells of the bloody battle. Juliet is torn by her feelings. At first she fears Romeo is dead, but then she curses him for murdering Tybalt. Finally, she justifies his action as necessary self-defense. The nurse promises to deliver a ring from Juliet to Romeo and to arrange a meeting.

Farewell After a Night of Love

The nurse rushes to Friar Laurence and finds Romeo lamenting his fate. To live in exile far from Juliet seems worse than death. Friar Laurence tells Romeo not to act as if all hope is lost. According to the Prince's original decree, Romeo should have faced execution and so he should be grateful for the lesser punishment he has received by the Prince's grace. Romeo should flee to Mantua, the priest advises, and should remain there until he announces the wedding and the families have reconciled.

But first Romeo must sneak over to Juliet's home to say goodbye. The nurse promises to tell her that he is coming, and she gives him the ring. She arranges a ladder for Romeo to use to climb to Juliet's room. The couple spends a night of passion together, and when morning dawns, they almost are unable to part, talking fancifully back and forth about whether the bird they hear is the mockingbird of night or the lark that signals the break of day. Then he flees, but he assures Juliet he will see her again though he is sentenced to exile.

Suddenly, Juliet's nurse enters the room and says Lady Capulet needs to speak with Juliet. “County Paris” has inquired further about marrying her, and Lord Capulet has assured him that his daughter will agree to wed him that week. Lady Capulet believes her tearful daughter is mourning Tybalt, and promises to have Romeo poisoned in Mantua. When Juliet learns of her parents' plan to marry her to Paris, she rejects the offer and protests heatedly, “I wonder at this haste, that I must wed, ere he that should be husband comes to woo. I pray you tell my lord and father, madam, I will not marry yet, and when I do, I swear it shall be Romeo...”

Lord Capulet appears and is incensed by his daughter's opposition. He curses her terribly, saying, “God has lent us but this only child, but now I see this one is one too much and that we have a curse in having her.” He threatens to throw her out of the household. Lady Capulet asks her husband to calm down, but remains on his side. The nurse also becomes the target of the couple's gross insults, yet even she advises Juliet to act as if Romeo were dead and to grasp the opportunity to marry Count Paris, though that would be bigamy.

Juliet claims she must confess and seek absolution, and goes to ask Friar Laurence for help. At his friary, she bumps into Paris, who is eager to arrange their wedding according to her parents' assurances. She ignores his protestations of love and asks to be left alone with the priest to attend confession. Friar Laurence proposes a plan based on deception: Juliet is to drink a potion which will put her in a death-like state, but from which she

*“There she lies, /
Flower as she was,
deflowered by him.
/ Death is my
son-in-law, Death
is my heir; / My
daughter he hath
wedded: I will die,
/ And leave him
all; life, living, all
is Death’s.” (Lady
Capulet, IV.5)*

*“Come, bitter
conduct; come,
unsavory guide! /
Thou desperate
pilot, now at once
run on, / The
dashing rocks
thy seasick weary
bark! / Here’s to
my love! [Drinks.]
O true apothecary!
/ Thy drugs are
quick. Thus with
a kiss I die.”
(Romeo, V.3)*

*“O happy dagger!
This is thy sheath;
/ there rust, and
let me die.”
(Juliet, V.3)*

will awaken in two days. Romeo will receive a message to come to the family vault and escape with her to Mantua, once everyone else believes she is dead. Juliet is so desperate that she agrees.

Returning home, Juliet falls to her knees before her father, begging for forgiveness and vowing to marry the count. The wedding preparations already are underway, and he is very pleased at his daughter’s newfound obedience. Although tortured by fears and doubts, Juliet drinks the potion and falls unconscious onto her bed.

The Tragedy Takes its Course

The next day, the Capulet home is abuzz with Paris and Juliet’s wedding preparations, but to everyone’s horror, Juliet seems to be dead. Father, mother, nurse and Count Paris begin wailing, but Friar Laurence urges them to have faith in God’s plans. A Capulet servant and the musicians who were to play at the wedding are unaware of the tragedy of Juliet’s supposed death and provide a witty, complex verbal battle before they leave the family home.

Fate threatens to disrupt the friar’s ingenious plan: The messenger sent to inform Romeo of Juliet’s plan ends up quarantined and is unable to deliver the news. Instead, Romeo hears from one of his staff that Juliet has died. Without hesitation, he goes to buy poison at a pharmacy. Initially, the apothecary refuses to sell him a deadly potion, but once the chemist learns of Romeo’s bitter luck and the large sum he is willing to pay, he changes his mind, swearing, “My poverty, but not my will, consents.”

Friar Laurence hurries to the family tomb, knowing that Juliet soon will wake up and be inconsolable at the absence of her lover. He hopes to be there when she awakens to hide her in his cell until a new messenger can reach Romeo. Accompanied by a servant, Romeo reaches the vault before the friar and meets Paris, who is keeping watch over Juliet’s grave. Paris wants to arrest Romeo, “vile Montague,” on the spot for the murder of Tybalt. He ignores Romeo’s protestations and pleads to be left alone with Juliet. When Paris says that Romeo must die, Romeo agrees and begs Paris “tempt not a desp’rate man, fly hence and leave me.” Paris refuses, they duel, and Romeo kills Paris.

Romeo breaks open Juliet’s tomb, bids farewell to his beloved young wife and promises to stay with her in the tomb. He drinks the poison, saying, “Here’s to my love, O true apothecary. Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss, I die.” In that moment, Friar Laurence hurries in and finds Paris dead, with his blood staining the doorway of the vault. He sees that Romeo is also dead just as Juliet awakens to find his body beside her. The friar hurriedly proposes taking her to a convent for safety. She refuses his offer. She sees the cup in Romeo’s hand and cries, “O churl! Drunk all, and left no friendly drop to help me after?” She gives her dead husband one last kiss in hopes that the poison on his lips will kill her, too. When it does not, she stabs herself.

The Prince arrives, as do the Capulets and Romeo’s father, Lord Montague, whose wife died of grief earlier in the night. The horrible sight of the two dead young men greets them, along with the body of Juliet, “bleeding, warm and newly dead” two days after they have buried her. Friar Laurence is arrested. The Prince asks those present about the background of the tragedy, and then calls on the heads of both families to bury their bloody feud for good to honor the dead. Lords Montague and Capulet shake hands and promise to erect a magnificent tomb for their children. The Prince pronounces the young couple’s eulogy: “For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo.”

About the Text

Structure and Style

Romeo and Juliet consists of five acts divided into 24 scenes. Sonnets (14-line poems of a specific meter) introduce the first two acts. The predominant structure is the unrhymed five-stress blank verse, plus other traditional verse forms, though Shakespeare sometimes alters these with his customary skill. Stylistically sophisticated, emotive writing dominates the work.

Religious undertones also characterize Elizabethan love poetry, which the contemporary reader may sometimes find overblown. Readers also will notice the accumulation of word play, puns, malapropisms and distortions of meaning ranging from subtle to coarse. Many characters slip in lines of sexual innuendo, ambiguity and tangible obscenity – more so in *Romeo and Juliet* than in any other of Shakespeare's already rather blunt pieces.

The play is extremely concise and takes place over less than five days. The settings are important to the development of the plot, which plays out over interior and exterior spaces in the towns of Verona and Mantua, including the house and family burial vault of the Capulets. The first two acts deal with the subject of growing and enduring love, and the last three acts describe the deception-based plotting amid a sense of looming catastrophe that leaves both lovers dead. The shift takes place at the start of the third act, when Romeo kills Tybalt.

Interpretations

Like all Shakespearean plays, *Romeo and Juliet* offers the possibility of layers of interpretation. Experts point out that:

- Love is the main theme of the piece. Romeo and Juliet's devotion transcends all social conventions of their time. It trumps political adversity and family quarrels – and yet their love fails because of unrelenting, unpredictable reality.
- The fact that Romeo and Juliet's relationship violated social rules and parental authority increases its uniqueness and intensity. This is multiplied by another key theme about autonomy: the conflict between the will of the individual and the constraints of society, as embodied by the Prince.
- In the course of the piece, Romeo transforms from a melancholy, lovesick teenager into a confident, resolute man, ready to take on the tragic consequences of his actions and to follow his will until the end.
- Juliet also develops from an obedient teenager who submits to parental and social conventions into a determined young woman who sees her love for her clandestine husband as an absolute value that not even death can diminish.
- An unfortunate series of misunderstandings and coincidences determines the course of events. Thus, even a sophisticated and rational plan like Friar Laurence's is doomed to fail. Only death can free the young couple from the vagaries and twists of fate that plague them.
- Symbols play an important role in Shakespeare's language. For example, light and natural phenomena reflect and heighten the love between Romeo and Juliet.

Historical Background

Elizabethan Theater

Queen Elizabeth I ruled England for 44 years, from 1559 to 1603. During her reign, England enjoyed impressive political and economic progress. In 1534, Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, broke away from Rome, emancipating the country from the Catholic Church. This created a domestic political climate of intellectual and religious tolerance. When Sir Francis Drake's numerically superior fleet beat the Spanish Armada in 1588, the country took over Spain's position as the strongest maritime nation, ushering in its development as a European superpower. The bourgeoisie's growing material prosperity also added to England's national self-confidence.

Shakespearean London was a modern, intellectually curious city of about 200,000 people. It offered the ideal circumstances for fostering a culture of public theater. Elizabeth I not only was a shrewd politician, but also a great patron of the arts and drama. Under her reign, theaters transformed from mere venues into spheres of experience for the public, creating a boom in drama accompanied by an artistically fruitful competitive climate among playwrights and professional theater companies.

Against this backdrop, *Romeo and Juliet's* cast of two historically insignificant people, a young couple to whom audience members could easily relate, fell on fertile ground. Elizabethan dramas often struck audiences as functional literature – the play merely was a tool to aid the performance. Only a small percentage of the productions fully appeared in print, and scholars consider about two-thirds of the plays from the golden age of Elizabeth I lost works.

Formation

The tragic love story of Romeo and Juliet is not Shakespeare's invention. It existed previously, mostly in Italian novella literature. In 1476, a collection of short stories by Masuccio di Salerno dealt with the subject of apparent death and double suicide. The most famous, successful literary version of the plot in Italian literature, written by Matteo Bandello Maria, appeared in 1554.

Pierre Boaistuau added to it and translated it into French, creating a version of the story that proved very popular in Europe. It became the basis of Englishman Arthur Brooke's poem, *The History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562). This poem became Shakespeare's most important source. In none of his other plays did he stick so closely to an existing template. *Romeo and Juliet* appeared around 1595, during Queen Elizabeth I's last decade in power. The first printed edition appeared in London in 1597. The so-called first "quarto edition" is reputed to be a pirated copy.

Historical Influence

In addition to *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet* probably is Shakespeare's best known and most popular piece. Even in the 17th century it was extremely popular, and underwent many modifications – sometimes even concluding with a happy ending for the lovers. The original version was reinstated and performed again from 1846 onward, only due to the intervention of London theater director Samuel Phelps.

Numerous films and compositions draw on the timeless theme of lovers rebelling against rigid society. Even in modern times, Shakespeare's version has not lost its appeal, with each generation interpreting it to fit its own social and political circumstances. For example, immediately after the Second World War, the play represented the opportunity to overcome hatred and discord. For the 1960s-1970s Flower Power generation, it represented the revolution of youths against their parents and the state, and for people today, perhaps, it represents the ideal of pure, selfless love contrasted against a materialistic, alienating society.

Artists also can use the play to highlight political, societal and racial themes, employing backdrops such as South Africa, the Middle East and the slums of New York City. In Leonard Bernstein's 1957 Broadway musical adaptation, *West Side Story*, the two star-crossed lovers belong to rival New York gangs, the American "Jets" and the Puerto Rican "Sharks." Stephen Sondheim wrote the lyrics for Bernstein's music. Jerome Robbins's movie of the play won 10 Academy Awards.

The play has been filmed often. In 1968, Franco Zeffirelli directed a historically based version featuring Olivia Hussey and Leonard Whiting as the lovers. Zeffirelli recruited Laurence Olivier as narrator and won Oscars for best costumes and cinematography. Baz Luhrmann followed in 1996, casting Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes as the lovers in a version staged in a violent, modern setting. Director John Madden and playwrights Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard dramatized the writing of the play in 1998 in *Shakespeare in Love*, with Gwyneth Paltrow and Joseph Fiennes. The film won three Oscars, including Best Picture.

About the Author

William Shakespeare is the most famous and influential playwright in world literature. In total, he wrote 36 plays and 154 sonnets. Shakespeare probably was born on April 23, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, the son of glover and mayor John Shakespeare. His mother, Mary Arden, came from a wealthy family of the Roman Catholic gentry. In 1582, he married a landowner's daughter, Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior. They had three children, Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith.

In around 1590, Shakespeare moved to London, where he made a name for himself as an actor and playwright. From 1594, he was a member of the theater troupe, Lord Chamberlain's Men, later called The King's Men. From 1597, he was a partner in the Globe Theatre, which he affectionately called "my wooden O," because it was circular like a Greek amphitheater. In 1608, he became a partner of the Blackfriars Theatre. He acquired property in Stratford and stepped back from theater life, probably after 1613. He died on April 23, 1616.

Very few documents exist from Shakespeare's life, so historians can trace his story only in fragments. Again and again, suspicions have arisen that his works or parts of them actually come from some other source. Possible alternate authors include the philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon, the playwright Christopher Marlowe or even Queen Elizabeth I. However, no hard evidence exists that anyone but Shakespeare wrote his plays and poetry. Today's researchers generally agree that he is the authentic sole author of his works.