

Genre and Conventions

Shakespearean Tragedy

-The protagonists are in conflict with an overpowering force (their love against the feud of their families)
 -Both protagonists can be considered to be tragic heroes: high status, sympathetic characters whose fatal flaws contribute to their inevitable downfall (their deaths)
 -Uses a five-part structure: exposition (an initial incident), rising action (a growth in the tension), climax (the high point of the action), falling action (where the plot begins to unravel), denouement (the ending or resolution to the drama)

Key Terms

Hamartia: A fatal flaw leading to the downfall of a tragic hero
Hubris: Exalted pride of the protagonist which leads to their defiance of authority
Peripeteia: A sudden negative reversal of fortune or change in circumstances leading to downfall

Language

Imagery: Language which creates vivid sensory ideas in the reader's mind, such as a representation of a specific picture or sound
Simile: An explicit comparison between two things using 'like' or 'as'
Metaphor: An implicit comparison between two things not using 'like' or 'as'
Personification: Attributing human-like qualities to objects, ideas or animals
Prose: Lines which use a natural, unstructured rhythm, similar to speech
Blank verse: Lines which follow the fixed, more poetic structure of iambic pentameter (10 beats, 5 stressed, 5 unstressed)
Rhyming couplet: Two successive rhyming lines, which usually signal that a character has left the stage or is falling in love
Sonnet: A poem of 14 lines with a strict rhyme scheme, usually associated with love and romance in conflict
Oxymoron: The combination of words or ideas which have opposite or very different meanings
Pun: A joke based on the different possible meanings of a word or the fact that there are words which sound alike but have different meanings
Soliloquy: When a character, thinking they are alone, speaks their thoughts aloud

Structure

Contrast: Scenes often contrast strongly with the one that follows them, highlighting the theme of conflict
Timeframe: The play begins on Sunday morning and ends just before daybreak the following Thursday, creating a rapid, whirlwind pace of action
Foreshadowing: R&J's downfall is hinted at throughout the play, increasing suspense for the audience
Dramatic irony: Some things are revealed to the audience before the characters, increasing tension
Juxtaposition: The placement of two ideas, statements or events near each other to invite comparison or contrast

Symbolism

Light: Juliet's beauty, the overwhelming power of R&J's love, hope and optimism
Darkness: The secrecy of R&J's love, loss of hope, R&J's impending death
Poison: It is in the power of human hands and human will to extract potential evil or fatal harm from an object or thing

Influences

Arthur Brooke's 1562 poem 'The Tragical Historie of Romeus and Juliet': A similar plot with key differences: events take place over nine months, the tale doesn't open with conflict, Juliet is 16, and characters like Mercutio and the Nurse are not as well-developed as in Shakespeare's play.

Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe (Metamorphoses): Two lovers in the city of Babylon live in connected houses. They are forbidden by their parents to be wed because of their parents' rivalry, but whisper their love for each other through a crack in the wall. Pyramus mistakenly believes Thisbe to have been eaten by a lion and kills himself, as Thisbe does when she later finds his body. Pyramus' blood has turned the mulberry fruits from white to dark red, and the gods decide to forever change their colour to this in honour of the dead lovers.

Key Themes

Religion: The impact of religion on the characters' attitudes and choices. How characters conform to expectations, and how they defy them.
Fate and free will: The concept of an inevitable destiny and its relation to the characters' choices.
Honour and loyalty: The importance of kinship, one's responsibility to their family, views of masculinity and violence.
Love: Romantic, sexual, superficial and platonic forms of love are present in the play. This love can be volatile, brutal, and oppressive- or the opposite.
The Individual versus society: R&J struggle against their parents, authority, and society's expectations.
Death: How the certainty, fear, acceptance and welcoming of death is portrayed in the play.
Youth: The thrills and perils of adolescence.
Time: Characters' awareness of time and how it affects their decisions, the limitations of time, the importance of timing and its effect on the plot.

Social and Historical Context

Staging: The play was first performed around 1595. 16th- and 17th-century audiences watched Shakespeare's plays being performed at open-air London theatres during the day. The stage had no scenery, few props, and women were played by boys with unbroken voices. The poorer 'groundlings' stood nearest to the stage, and wealthier spectators paid higher prices to watch from the seated galleries.

Queen Elizabeth: Reigned from 1533-1603. Her reign saw England prosper and become a major player in Europe, although not all citizens supported her. She chose not to marry, maybe due to her own infertility or to prevent political instability and loss of power through her choice of husband. She defied the expectations of a patriarchal society.

Setting of the play: 14th-century Verona, Italy. A successful and cultured city which suffered widespread violence involving deadly battles over trivial issues (e.g. the rivalry between supporters of the emperor and supporters of the Pope). The Montecchi and Capuleti were real families fighting for power in Verona at this time.

The bubonic plague: Killed a third of the Italian population in the 14th century and then 17,000 people in an outbreak in London in 1592.

Astrology: In both 14th-century Italy and Elizabethan England stars linked to fate and fortune, were believed to predict and influence the course of human events. The ideas of Boethius, a 6th-century philosopher, were popular throughout this time: he asserted that Fortune (both good and bad) is part of life and, along with God, controls human destiny. He argued that Fortune is random and that bad fortune is a greater teacher than good fortune.

Gender: Both 14th-century Verona and Elizabethan England were patriarchal societies. Women were denied all political rights and considered legally subject to their husbands. Disobedience was seen as a crime against their religion. Women who did not marry for whatever reason were forced to live in under the control of a male relative in his home or in a convent, where a woman could become a nun. Aristocratic families often required their young daughters to marry successful older men. Girls were considered eligible at the age of 14 and had to give their consent to a marriage.

The Catholic Church: During the Protestant Queen Elizabeth's reign, there were secret Catholic plots to overthrow her. Those involved were executed, and she took a harsher stance towards Catholics later in her reign as threats to her power increased.

Characters

Romeo Montague: Initially a typical Petrarchan lover, his love for Juliet is incredibly romantic, impulsive and passionate.

Juliet Capulet: Young and innocent, not yet 14. Her love for Romeo matures her and makes her bolder in her defiance

Lord Capulet: Juliet's father. Shows concern for Juliet's welfare, but can be aggressive and tyrannical when he is disobeyed

Lady Capulet: Juliet's mother. Cold and distant for most of the play, she expects Juliet to follow in her own footsteps.

Lord Montague: Romeo's father. Can be drawn into conflict, but also has genuine concern for his son and is quietly dignified

Lady Montague: Peace-loving and dislikes the violence of the feud. She dies of grief when Romeo is banished

Nurse: Juliet's nursemaid, they have a close relationship. She acts as confidante and messenger for Romeo and Juliet

Tybalt: Juliet's ruthless, hot-tempered and vengeful cousin. Has a deep, violent hatred of the Montagues

Mercutio: A relative of the Prince and a high-ranking man. Mixes well with both families and is Romeo's loyal best friend

Benvolio: Cares about his cousin Romeo and tries to keep peace between the families

Prince Escalus: The symbol of law and order in Verona, yet his threats of punishment are unable to bring an end to the conflict

Count Paris: A rich and highly-regarded young man, kinsman to the Prince, who is determined to marry Juliet

Friar Lawrence: A caring, trusted, kind man of the Church who is optimistic, perhaps naively, about the possibility of peace

Plot

Key Quotes

ACT I

Prologue: A sonnet which introduces the audience to the key events, characters, and themes of the play.

Sc i: The servants of both households start a fight, which Benvolio tries to stop until Tybalt draws him in. Montague and Capulet enter and intend to join the conflict until the furious Prince puts an end to it. Everyone leaves except the Montagues and Benvolio. They are worried about Romeo, who has seemed very depressed recently. Benvolio talks to Romeo alone, and finds out that Romeo has unrequited love for a woman, Rosaline. Benvolio advises Romeo to forget about her, but Romeo replies that he can't.

Sc ii: Paris asks Capulet for Juliet's hand in marriage, but Capulet tells him she is probably too young and she would be better to wait two more summers. However if Paris can win her heart, then Capulet will consent. Romeo finds out from Capulet's servant that he is throwing a party, and Benvolio convinces Romeo to sneak in to the party to meet other women and get over Rosaline. Romeo agrees to go, however, because Rosaline is invited and he hopes to see her.

Sc iii: Lady Capulet tells Juliet that she should be thinking of marriage, and that Paris would be suitable. Juliet reluctantly agrees to consider the idea.

Sc iv: Mercutio tries to cheer Romeo up before the party, but Romeo has an ominous feeling about the night's events.

Sc v: Romeo sees Juliet, not Rosaline, at the party and is awe-struck by her beauty. Tybalt recognizes Romeo's voice and shouts for his sword but Capulet stops him, not wanting to ruin the festivities. Tybalt leaves in a rage, promising revenge. Before he leaves, Romeo and Juliet speak in a shared sonnet and then kiss. Once separated they each learn that they are from enemy houses, and are devastated.

A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life

BENVOLIO: Put up your swords; you know not what you do.

TYBALT: I hate the word,/As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee

ROMEO: Ay me! sad hours seem long.

ROMEO: O brawling love! O loving hate!/O any thing, of nothing first create!

ROMEO: Farewell: thou canst not teach me to forget.

CAPULET: My child is yet a stranger in the world.

CAPULET: She is the hopeful lady of my earth: But woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart

ROMEO: One fairer than my love! the all-seeing sun/Ne'er saw her match since first the world begun/I'll go along, no such sight to be shown

JULIET: It is an honour that I dream not of.

LADY CAPULET: I was your mother much upon these years/That you are now a maid. Thus then in brief:/The valiant Paris seeks you for his love.

ROMEO: Some consequence yet hanging in the stars/Shall bitterly begin his fearful date/With this night's revels

ROMEO: O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

ROMEO: Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!/For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.

TYBALT: I will withdraw: but this intrusion shall/Now seeming sweet convert to bitter gall.

ROMEO: O dear account! my life is my foe's debt.

JULIET: My only love sprung from my only hate!

ACT II

Sc i: Romeo realises he can't leave Juliet and jumps over a wall into the Capulet grounds. His friends leave.

Sc ii: Romeo, hidden, sees Juliet come out on to her balcony. Juliet thinks she is alone, and speaks about her love for Romeo and her dismay at his Montague name. Romeo reveals himself and they declare their passionate commitment to each other, although Juliet is worried about Romeo's safety and about how quickly things are moving. As Juliet is called inside, Romeo promises to find a way for them to be married.

Sc iii: Romeo visits Friar Lawrence to tell him of his plans for marriage to his true love. Friar Lawrence is surprised that Romeo has forgotten about Rosaline so quickly, but hopes that the union will bring an end to the families' feud.

Sc iv: Mercutio and Benvolio discuss the fact that Tybalt has sent Romeo a challenge to a duel. Romeo arrives, followed shortly by the Nurse, and when they are alone Romeo tells her of the wedding plans: the ceremony will be performed that afternoon, and so Juliet will need to leave home secretly and meet him at the Friar's cell.

Sc v: After teasing the anxious Juliet by avoiding the subject, the Nurse tells her of the plans and Juliet is overjoyed.

Sc vi: The Friar warns Romeo of loving too quickly and passionately. Juliet joins Romeo and the Friar's cell, and the two are married.

ROMEO: Can I go forward when my heart is here?

ROMEO: But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?/It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

JULIET: What's in a name? that which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet.

JULIET: If they do see thee, they will murder thee.

ROMEO: My life were better ended by their hate,/Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love.

JULIET: It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden;/Too like the lightning

JULIET: What satisfaction canst thou have to-night?

ROMEO: The exchange of thy love's faithful vow for mine.

ROMEO: this I pray,/That thou consent to marry us to-day

FRIAR LAWRENCE: what a change is here!/Is Rosaline, whom thou didst love so dear,/So soon forsaken? young men's love then lies/Not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes.

ROMEO: O, let us hence; I stand on sudden haste.

FRIAR LAWRENCE: Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast.

NURSE: if ye should lead her into/a fool's paradise, as they say, it were a very gross/kind of behaviour, as they say: for the gentlewoman is young

ROMEO: Bid her devise/Some means to come to shrift this afternoon

JULIET: Nay, come, I pray thee, speak; good, good nurse, speak.

ROMEO: Close our hands with holy words,/Then love-devouring death do what he dare;

FRIAR LAWRENCE: These violent delights have violent ends

ACT III

Sc i: Benvolio senses that a conflict is about to erupt. Tybalt arrives and demands to see Romeo. Mercutio tries to confront him, but Romeo arrives and Tybalt ignores Mercutio. Romeo refuses to fight Tybalt, but can't explain why. Mercutio is angered by Romeo's cowardice and attacks Tybalt, who fatally stabs him under Romeo's arm as Romeo tries to stop the battle. Romeo is devastated and attacks Tybalt in revenge, killing him. Romeo immediately realises what he has done and Benvolio tells him to go. Prince enters with the Montagues and the Capulets. Benvolio explains what happened and the Prince exiles Romeo, stating that he will be killed if he returns.

Sc ii: Juliet is at home, unaware of what has happened and waiting for Romeo. The Nurse arrived speaking of death and at first Juliet thinks she means Romeo, but then learns the truth. She is devastated, but she also knows Tybalt would have killed Romeo. She does not want to live if Romeo is banished, so the Nurse goes to bring him to her.

Sc iii: Friar Lawrence tells Romeo that he has been banished rather than killed, so should be grateful to find a life somewhere else. Romeo replies that he would rather die than be exiled. The Nurse arrives, telling Romeo that Juliet is crying for both him and Tybalt. Romeo is inconsolable until the Friar chastises him for being so weak, telling him he should be grateful for his blessings and to go to see Juliet. He will then flee to Mantua until the Friar can work out a way for him to return. Romeo agrees with the plan, although he risks death if he is seen on his way to Juliet.

Sc iv: Capulet, Lady Capulet and Paris discuss Juliet's grief, believing it to be over Tybalt. Capulet decides that a wedding to Paris on Thursday will be a remedy for her devastation.

Sc v: Romeo and Juliet have their final moments alone together. Juliet doesn't want him to leave and almost convinces him to stay, but then realises there is no choice. The Nurse comes to warn them that Lady Capulet is coming and Romeo escapes out of the window. Juliet has a vivid premonition of his death as he leaves. Lady Capulet excitedly tells Juliet about the wedding, but Juliet refuses. When Capulet enters and learns of her disobedience he is incandescent with rage; his wife tries unsuccessfully to calm him. He storms away and Juliet turns to her mother, but Lady Capulet refuses to have anything to do with her. Juliet is alone with the Nurse but not even she will give Juliet comfort, telling her to forget Romeo and marry Paris. Juliet realises she can't rely on her Nurse. She pretends to feel remorseful and asks the Nurse to tell her mother that she has gone to Friar Lawrence to confess her sin of disobedience to her Father. The Nurse happily agrees and leaves, as Juliet pins her last hopes on the Friar.

BENVOLIO: We shall not scape a brawl;/For now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.
TYBALT: Romeo, the hate I bear thee can afford/No better term than this,--thou art a villain.
ROMEO: I do protest, I never injured thee,/But love thee better than thou canst devise,/Till thou shalt know the reason of my love:/good Capulet,--which name I tender/As dearly as my own
MERCUTIO: O calm, dishonourable, vile submission!
ROMEO: Gentlemen, for shame, forbear this outrage!
MERCUTIO: I am hurt./A plague o' both your houses!/They have made worms' meat of me
MERCUTIO: Why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm.
ROMEO: Alive, in triumph! and Mercutio slain!/Away to heaven, respective lenity,/And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now! Either thou, or I, or both, must go with him.
ROMEO: O, I am fortune's fool!

JULIET: O serpent heart, hid with a flowering face!/Beautiful tyrant! fiend angelical!
JULIET: 'Romeo is banished,' to speak that word,/Is father, mother, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet,/All slain, all dead. 'Romeo is banished!'

FRIAR LAWRENCE: Thou art wedded to calamity./Be patient, for the world is broad and wide.
ROMEO: There is no world without Verona walls,/But purgatory, torture, hell itself.
ROMEO: 'Tis torture, and not mercy: heaven is here,/Where Juliet lives
NURSE: Stand up, stand up; stand, and you be a man./For Juliet's sake, for her sake
FRIAR LAWRENCE: Art thou a man? thy form cries out thou art:/Thy tears are womanish

CAPULET: I think she will be ruled/In all respects by me/Wednesday is too soon,/O' Thursday let it be: o' Thursday, tell her,/She shall be married to this noble earl.

JULIET: Methinks I see thee, now thou art below,/As one dead in the bottom of a tomb
JULIET: He shall not make me there a joyful bride./I wonder at this haste; that I must wed
LADY CAPULET: I would the fool were married to her grave!
JULIET: Good father, I beseech you on my knees,/Hear me with patience but to speak a word.
LORD CAPULET: Hang thee, young baggage! disobedient wretch!/get thee to church o' Thursday,/Or never after look me in the face:/My fingers itch/we have a curse in having her
NURSE: God in heaven bless her!/You are to blame, my lord, to rate her so.
CAPULET: having now provided/A gentleman of noble parentage,/Of fair demesnes, youthful, and nobly train'd,/beg, starve, die in/the streets,/For, by my soul, I'll ne'er acknowledge thee
JULIET: O, sweet my mother, cast me not away!/Delay this marriage for a month, a week;
LADY CAPULET: Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee.
JULIET: What say'st thou? hast thou not a word of joy?/Some comfort, nurse.
JULIET: I'll to the friar, to know his remedy:/If all else fail, myself have power to die.

ACT IV

Sc i: Friar Lawrence tells Paris he disapproves of the idea of the wedding, knowing Juliet can't have two husbands. Juliet arrives and Paris leaves. Juliet is close to suicide. The Friar devises a plan: he will give her a potion that will make her appear dead for 42 hours. He will send a message to Romeo, who will take Juliet from Verona to Mantua.

Sc ii: Juliet's parents are preparing for an enormous wedding as she returns. She tells her father that she is sorry and that she will obey him completely until she marries Paris. Capulet is pleased and moves the wedding to Wednesday.

Sc iii: Juliet sends her mother and nurse from her room. She is troubled by all the possible dangers and expresses her dark fears to herself. She has a vision of Tybalt's ghost seeking to kill Romeo, calls to Romeo and drinks the potion.

Sc iv: The next morning, the wedding plans are under way. Capulet sends the Nurse to wake Juliet.

Sc v: Juliet is found 'dead' by the Nurse. Lord and Lady Capulet are distraught, and Paris mourns the wife he never had. The musicians who were going to play at the wedding play sorrowful music instead.

JULIET: Be not so long to speak; I long to die,/If what thou speak'st speak not of remedy.
JULIET: O, bid me leap, rather than marry Paris,/From off the battlements of yonder tower;/Or bid me lurk/Where serpents are; chain me with roaring bears;
FRIAR LAWRENCE: Hold; get you gone, be strong and prosperous/In this resolve: I'll send a friar with speed/To Mantua, with my letters to thy lord.

JULIET: And beg your pardon: pardon, I beseech you!/Henceforward I am ever ruled by you.
LORD CAPULET: my heart is wondrous light,/Since this same wayward girl is so reclaim'd.

JULIET: I see my cousin's ghost/Seeking out Romeo, that did spit his body/Upon a rapier's point: stay, Tybalt, stay!/Romeo, I come! this do I drink to thee.

NURSE: O hateful day!/Never was seen so black a day as this:/O woful day, O woful day!
LADY CAPULET: O me, O me! My child, my only life,/Revive, look up, or I will die with thee!
CAPULET: Alack! my child is dead;/And with my child my joys are buried.

ACT V

Sc i: Romeo anxiously awaits news of Juliet in Mantua. He has had a dream in which he was dead and Juliet breathed life back into him with kisses that made him awaken as an emperor. His servant Balthasar arrives, having heard the news of Juliet's death, and tells Romeo. He is overcome with grief and decides to go back to Verona to die with Juliet. He goes to an apothecary who reluctantly sells Romeo the poison.

Sc ii: Friar John tells Friar Lawrence that he was unable to deliver his letter to Romeo as a plague broke out and Friar John was quarantined. Friar Lawrence demands that he gets an iron bar to open the tomb, as Juliet will wake up in three hours alone with the corpses. Friar Lawrence plans to keep her in his cell until Romeo arrives.

Sc iii: Paris has come to the Capulet tomb to mourn for Juliet and lay flowers. Paris hides as Romeo approaches with Balthasar to open the tomb with a mattock and a wrenching iron. He tells Balthasar that he must leave and not interfere. Balthasar agrees but secretly hides nearby. As Romeo opens the tomb, Paris recognizes him and suspects he wants to do harm to Juliet. Romeo tries to avoid conflict, but Paris provokes him and is soon killed. As he dies, Paris asks to lie with Juliet, and Romeo agrees. Taking the body into the tomb, Romeo sees Juliet and notices how beautiful she looks. He apologises to Tybalt's corpse, says farewell to Juliet, and takes the poison. Friar Lawrence arrives and Balthasar tells him that Romeo is there. Friar Lawrence realises what has happened to Romeo and Paris as Juliet awakens. Friar Lawrence tells her what has happened and tries to get Juliet to leave with him but she won't, and he exits as he hears noises of people coming. Realising all the poison is gone, Juliet stabs herself with Romeo's dagger as the watchmen enter, falling on Romeo's body. The watchmen alert the families and the Prince, who soon arrive. Balthasar and Friar Lawrence have been caught. The families come in shock and disbelief, and we learn that Lady Montague has died from the grief of Romeo's exile. The Prince demands an explanation, which Friar Lawrence gives. Balthasar shows the Prince a letter from Romeo which supports the story. Montague and Capulet recognize the part their hatred has played in the tragedy, and vow to reconcile and erect a golden statue of Romeo and Juliet in their memory. The play closes with the sorrowful words of the Prince.

BALTHASAR: Her body sleeps in Capel's monument,/And her immortal part with angels lives.

ROMEO: Is it even so? then I defy you, stars!/Hire post-horses; I will hence to-night.

BALTHASAR: Have patience:/Your looks are pale and wild, and do import/Some misadventure.

ROMEO: There is thy gold, worse poison to men's souls,/Doing more murders in this loathsome world/Come, cordial and not poison, go with me/To Juliet's grave; for there must I use thee.

FRIAR LAWRENCE: Unhappy fortune!

FRIAR LAWRENCE: I will write again to Mantua,/And keep her at my cell till Romeo come;
Poor living corpse, closed in a dead man's tomb!

ROMEO: Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death,/Gorged with the dearest morsel of the earth,/Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open,/And, in despite, I'll cram thee with more food!

ROMEO: Good gentle youth, tempt not a desperate man/Put not another sin upon my head,
By urging me to fury: O, be gone!/By heaven, I love thee better than myself;

ROMEO: For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes/This vault a feasting presence full of light./Thou art not conquer'd; beauty's ensign yet/Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks

ROMEO: Thy drugs are quick/Thus with a kiss I die.

JULIET: O happy dagger!/This is thy sheath;/there rust, and let me die.

FRIAR LAWRENCE: if aught in this/Miscarried by my fault, let my old life/Be sacrificed, some hour before his time,/Unto the rigour of severest law.

PRINCE: Where be these enemies? Capulet! Montague!/See, what a scourge is laid upon your hate,/That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love./all are punish'd

CAPULET: O brother Montague, give me thy hand/Poor sacrifices of our enmity!

PRINCE: A glooming peace this morning with it brings;/The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head;/For never was a story of more woe/Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.