

Themes

- What is a theme?
- What are the main themes in *Romeo and Juliet*?
- How do these themes relate to each other?
- How do these themes relate to the characters?

A **theme** is an idea that the playwright explores. There is no absolutely correct way to define the themes in any text, and in any interpretation of literary themes there is bound to be some overlap.

These are some of the themes of *Romeo and Juliet*:

- love and marriage
- families and conflict
- fate, fortune, responsibility
- friendship and enemies

Love and marriage

Arguably the most important theme of the play is that of love and marriage and the complexities of love. The play is full of images of love:

Key quotation

Is love a tender thing?
it is too rough,

Too rude, too
boist'rous, and it
pricks like thorn.

(1.4 25–26)

Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs,
Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes (1.1 181–82)

Love causes many of the problems in the play. Romeo is depressed at the start because his love is not returned by Rosaline. Love can be physical and Romeo is unhappy that Rosaline wants to remain chaste (virginal). He feels she is wasting her beauty by not wanting to sleep with him. It is debatable whether Romeo is really in love or simply driven by his sexual desires.

In Act 1 scene 4, Romeo debates whether love is tender or rough. In his view it presents a **dichotomy** (opposing values). He sums up love's opposing qualities: it can be something gentle and 'tender', but it can also be dangerous and can hurt. The image of a thorn pricking sums this up clearly as a rose can be beautiful, but it has a dangerous side with its sharp thorns. The consequences of Romeo's love for Juliet can also be linked to the more violent pricking of Tybalt's sword as he kills Mercutio.

Love is described by Benvolio as 'gentle', but also 'tyrannous and rough in proof!' (1.1 160–61). Romeo feels that love and hate go closely together. They are both strong emotions and can cause just as many problems as each other:

O brawling love, O loving hate! (1.1 167)

Mercutio's attitude towards love is entirely negative. He sees it as unmanning

Romeo and turning him into an ‘ape’ or a fool (see *Characterisation* for a full discussion of this).

Although there is evidence in the play that Paris loves Juliet, particularly in his reaction to her death in Act 5 scene 3, Juliet clearly does not love Paris and, as a result, does not wish to marry him. She states, ‘He shall not make me there a joyful bride’ (3.5 117). Her attitude to marriage, however, is out of line with what is expected from her and this is best exemplified by her father’s threats to throw her out of the family home if she refuses to marry Paris. Such extreme behaviour could be Shakespeare’s comment on how wrong this form of arranged marriage is.

The love between Romeo and Juliet is a romantic form of love. Their feelings are deep and there is almost a spirituality about it. They give themselves so completely to each other that nothing else matters. Their love is passionate, but the Friar urges moderation from Romeo, whose over-passionate nature has urged him to marry Juliet speedily and regardless of the consequences. The Friar warns Romeo of the dangers of marrying too quickly in Act 2 scene 6.

The constant advice against passionate and intense love which both Romeo and Juliet are given throughout the play from family, friends and advisors, might be argued to be the key to why the play ends in tragedy. However, it is not just the young, but also the old that encourage this union, as both the Nurse and the Friar help the marriage on.

Fate, fortune, responsibility

Many of the play’s events are seen by the majority of the characters as the result of fate or destiny.

- Romeo blames fortune and the stars.
- The Friar blames destiny and time.
- Montague and Capulet blame each other.
- Mercutio blames the Capulets and the Montagues.
- Tybalt blames Romeo.
- Paris blames Romeo.

Shakespeare creates and explores his characters’ attitudes to the seemingly higher powers of fate and destiny, and to one another, inviting the audience to consider whether they might be rather too quick to shrug off personal responsibility.

It could be argued that it is destiny that Romeo and Juliet fall deeply in love on their first meeting. However, the nature of Romeo’s love for Juliet is clearly questionable given his previous assertions to Benvolio about his undying devotion to Rosaline. Shakespeare has ensured that the audience

Grade **booster**

More effective answers will explore the varied images of love presented in the play. Capulet, for example, sees marriage as being a commodity, and does not seem to mind if a couple are not deeply in love. These views are perhaps reflected in his own marriage with Lady Capulet, which is dutiful, rather than a close and loving marriage. This equally reflects a business-like attitude to love and marriage which was common in English society in 1595.



Key quotation

These violent delights have violent ends

And in their triumph die like fire and powder,

Which as they kiss consume.

(2.6 9–11)



is aware of Juliet's extreme youth and her inexperience in matters of the heart. Furthermore, she has just told her mother that she has not thought about marrying but will do as her mother wishes in 'looking to like' Paris. It is notable here, though, that she makes no promises to her mother and is quite clever in her answer, adding that all important '*if*' looking liking move'. This doubt, if it is one, seems completely cleared up the minute she sees Romeo. In her balcony soliloquy, Juliet speaks of Romeo's 'dear perfection', and declares that she will follow him through the world if only he would tell her he loves her. She has nothing other than 'looks' to go on, but that seems enough. She also seems to have forgotten her implied promise to her mother not to engage her affections further than her mother authorises: 'But no more deep will I endart mine eye/Than your consent gives strength to make it fly', although she is referring to Paris here.

Juliet is perfectly aware at this stage that her parents wish her to marry another man and she also knows who Romeo is — she states that she 'must' love a loathed enemy. Both make clear that they feel they have no choice but to love one another. But this does not mean that Shakespeare is agreeing with this. He seems to be inviting us to question precisely the degree to which people, including Romeo and Juliet, do have choices in life. The eternal question of whether or not we can choose who we love is definitely raised here. However, there is another issue Shakespeare may be inviting us to consider, and that is that even if we cannot choose who we love, surely we can choose what we do about it. Juliet tells Romeo in no uncertain terms that if his intentions are not 'honourable' and his 'purpose marriage', she would rather he left her 'to her grief'. This shows she is quite capable of choosing whether to take the love she feels further or not.

It might also be considered an unfortunate coincidence that the two young lovers happen to be members of the two feuding families, which will cause them great difficulty. But here again, the question is begged as to whose fault it is that the two families are feuding. Not Romeo's or Juliet's, for sure, but not fate, destiny or the stars either. The feud is caused by human and not superhuman forces. The older generation aren't exactly good role models in terms of accepting responsibility for their own actions: old Montague and Capulet with their petty feud, the Friar with his meddling and the Nurse with her childishly enthusiastic involvement in orchestrating Juliet's 'love' life.

It could be argued that 'fate' ensures that the Friar's letter is not delivered, but had it not been for the Friar's plan in the first place, there would have been no need of the letter. Again, it is human decisions and actions that set events in train, not superhuman intervention.

The Friar appears at the tomb moments after Romeo has killed himself

and just as Juliet wakes up. He blames this ‘mischance’ on ‘an unkind hour’, but does not consider that had he not given Juliet the potion in the first place, this would not have happened. There is great **irony** in the Friar telling Romeo that if men cannot be constant in their loves, it is not surprising that ‘women fall’, meaning are unfaithful to their men. The irony lies in the fact that the Friar advises Romeo to act ‘wisely and slow’ and yet hastens their marriage through and makes decisions that most in the audience would see as anything but wise. He has also accused Romeo of being unmanly in his tears when he learns of his banishment, yet runs away the moment he fears being discovered and leaves Juliet alone in the tomb with the corpse of the man he knows she loves so much. Finally, the Friar as a member of the church is in a position of double trust: he is not only Romeo’s adviser, but one who is meant to set the moral standards for his society. Yet he marries two young people without their parents’ permission in the full knowledge that this would not be accepted by either family. With the adults in the play behaving in this way, the audience may well feel, what hope is there for the youngsters?

The Prologue pronounces Romeo and Juliet as ‘a pair of star-cross’d lovers’, but it is significant that the sonnet begins with man (the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets) not star-made strife. When taking an overview of the play, everything that happens to the young lovers can be attributed to human causes.

Arguably, fate’s biggest role is when Romeo kills himself just before Juliet wakes up, paving the way for the complete tragedy at the end. Even here, though, one can’t help but wonder whether Shakespeare did not intend us to see that had the impetuous Romeo sought out the Friar first to hear what had happened, the ending would have been different.

This is a tragedy and so Shakespeare will have intended us to see the outcome as anything but the result of a single cause, be it an outside force such as destiny, or an internal one such as a personal characteristic. What happens, as in any tragedy, is through a complex intertwining of many different factors — the end comes about inevitably. This inevitability need have nothing to do with destiny or any force outside of human nature.

It is interesting that at the end of the play, the Prince and old Montague and Capulet do finally take on board their own responsibility in having set the tragedy in motion, with the Prince for ‘winking at’ (turning a blind eye to) their ‘discords’ and Capulet and Montague for the feud that has caused them to lose their children. The fact that social harmony is restored only when personal responsibility is accepted and this is the note that the play ends upon is a powerful argument for its being one of Shakespeare’s central themes in this play.

Grade **booster**

Higher grade answers may consider the structural role of the theme of fate. The audience always knows that Romeo and Juliet will die at the end of the play. Every time a character feels threatened by fate, the audience gets to feel more knowledgeable than them. In many ways, the audience is in the position of the higher power that so many of the characters fear in the play.



Pause for thought

How might the play’s message of personal responsibility be relevant today?

Are adults always the best role models for young people?

Are priests or clergymen always going to give the best advice?





Key quotation

**Put up your swords,
you know not what
you do.**

(1.1 56)

Friendship and enemies

Romeo, Mercutio and Benvolio are close friends, something which is evident from the start of the play. Shakespeare has created three characters who complement each other: Mercutio is aggressive and loves to argue, Benvolio is always looking for peace and Romeo has a rash desire to be in love. It seems that these differences do not matter when they are

together, but their friendship group is under threat as Romeo has already deserted them for Rosaline and he does so again when he meets Juliet.

There is a hint that Mercutio is in love with Romeo (see *Characterisation* — Mercutio — for a detailed discussion of this). It has been suggested by several critics that Mercutio uses his Queen Mab fairy story to seduce Romeo, but Romeo does not understand and Mercutio has to give up, frustrated, admitting that he talks ‘of dreams’ (1.4 96).

Mercutio and Benvolio seem to need Romeo with them to have a good time and when just the two of them are together they discuss Romeo and do not seem to function properly as a group, both deciding to go to bed rather than to continue to search for Romeo in Act 2 scene 1.

While Romeo’s friendship with his ‘boys’ is strong, the enemy rivalry with the Capulets has damaging strength. Throughout the play there is the threat of violence from Tybalt’s continual attempts to cause chaos, whether it is at Capulet’s party in Act 1 scene 5 or on the streets in Act 1 scene 1 and Act 3 scene 1. Benvolio tries to diffuse the tensions in both Act 1 scene 1 and Act 3 scene 1.

Romeo does not want any part in the feud and walks away from the violence in Act 3 scene 1. We know this is because of his marriage to Juliet, but he cannot tell anyone else this, which causes Mercutio to step in for Romeo’s ‘honour’. It is ironic that by trying to stop the fight, Romeo unwittingly causes the death of his close friend.

Families and conflict

Shakespeare opens both the Prologue and the first scene of the play with a focus on the feud. Against this backdrop of hate, a strong love forms, a juxtaposition of opposite emotions.

The power of a name, and what it represents, obsesses Tybalt who seems convinced that the Montagues are out to destroy the Capulets:



Alamy

Pause for thought

To what extent could the relationships between the Friar and Romeo, and Juliet and the Nurse be considered friendships?



Key quotation

**O brother Montague,
give me thy hand...**

(5.3 296)

Uncle, this is a Montague, our foe:
 A villain that is hither come in spite,
 To scorn at our solemnity this night. (1.5 60–62)

In Act 1 scene 5 Juliet asks herself, 'wherefore [why] art thou Romeo' because she knows that his name will cause problems. The strength of the feud means that only the deaths of the lovers, Montague's wife and Paris in the climactic final scene, convince Capulet and Montague that it must come to an end.

Shakespeare leaves his audience with some hope at the end of the play that Verona can now be a peaceful place. The feud, arguably, has caused the lovers to marry in secret, Tybalt and Mercutio's death, the brawl in Act 1 scene 1 and, we are told by the Prince, at least two other fights before the action of the play commences (1.1 80). The feud seems ever-present, either in the background or as the centre of the action, causing Romeo's banishment and the Friar's plans, which result in the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. The feud also gives Romeo and Juliet a valid reason for marrying secretly.

Family values are different in the world of the play from those we see today. This is most evident in Shakespeare's portrayal of the Capulet family, which is controlled by Capulet who often tells his wife and daughter what he expects of them. In asking his wife if she has delivered his 'decree' to Juliet regarding whom she will marry, Shakespeare's choice of word clearly underlines the degree to which he sees his wishes as law in his household. This repressive existence results in Juliet lying to them and disobeying her parents because she is in love with Romeo.



Photostage

Grade **booster**

Higher grade answers might explore how Romeo is presented as part of a friendship group, rather than with his immediate family. This distances him from the feud and family issues in the play as he seems independent of his parents. By contrast, Juliet is in her family home for most of the play. How do these values differ today?

Review your learning

(Answers are given on p. 94.)

- 1 What are the main themes of the play?
- 2 What other themes might you suggest are dealt with in this play?
- 3 Which characters are used to explore the themes of love and marriage?
- 4 Which characters are used to explore the themes of fate, fortune and responsibility?
- 5 Which of these themes are still relevant today?



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