

# Romeo and Juliet vs. West Side Story essay



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Romeo & Juliet vs. West Side Story What would Romeo and Juliet be like if Juliet hadn't died? What if Paris killed Romeo, instead of vice versa? What if instead of occurring several centuries ago, it took place on the streets of New York City during the 1950s, with a bunch of fresh-faced youths posing as street toughs and dancing and singing their hearts out? Well, just take a look at West Side Story, and you will have your answers. It is impossible for anyone familiar with both texts to not note the obvious major similarities between the two plays. From the opening scenes in both, up through the rumble in West Side Story/death of Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet, the plays mirror each other (Poelstra). It isn't until the last part of West Side Story, where Tony, our modern-day Romeo, dies and Maria, Tony's Juliet, doesn't (unlike the two star-crossed lovers of Shakespeare's work), that the major difference between the two works becomes apparent.

Granted, instead of tension between feuding families, West Side Story offers prejudice between races, as illustrated between street gangs, the Jets and Sharks. Some of the characters in West Side Story are carbon copies of those in Romeo and Juliet: Maria (Juliet), Tony (Romeo), Bernardo (Tybalt), Lt. Schrank (Prince), and Anita (Nurse). Others appear to be a composite of characters, namely Riff, a combination of Benvolio and Mercutio, and Doc, who appears to fulfill the role of Friar Laurence (possessed somewhat of a peacekeeping nature: "You couldn't play basketball?", he asks, when informed of their upcoming "war council" Laurents 57) yet, at the same time, it is implied in the film version, not the play that he is a pharmacist, and there was, after all, an apothecary in Romeo and Juliet. The tomboyish Anybodys, a Jet wannabe, would best fit into the role of Balthasar (although

Doc's character fits into this role marginally as well), since it was she who aided Tony in escaping after the rumble, which resulted in the deaths of Riff and Bernardo, as well as later informing the other Jets that Chino, the Paris of the Sharks, had a gun and was hunting down Tony. In the opening act of *Romeo and Juliet*, Sampson and Gregory, servants of Capulet, harass Balthasar and Abraham, servants to the Montagues. "I will bite my thumb at them; which is a disgrace to them, if they bear it," boasts Sampson (I. i. 48-50). In the opening scene of *West Side Story*, several Sharks, the Puerto Rican gang led by Bernardo, harass A-rab (notice the similarity in name to Abraham), a white dude, a Jet, and therefore, an enemy of the immigrants. In no time at all, other Jets, led by Riff, rush to A-rab's side. No words are exchanged between the gangs, since it is, after all, a musical, and they basically just jump around in exaggerated fashion. Nevertheless, the scene, like the opening of *Romeo and Juliet*, sets the stage for the remainder of the production.

It is here where Lt. Schrank and his faithful compatriot, Officer Krupke, happen on the scene to break apart a potential rumble just like Escalus, Prince of Verona, did in *Romeo and Juliet*: "If ever you disturb our streets again, your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace" (I. i. 103-4). Or, as Schrank would phrase it, "I got a hot surprise for you: you hoodlums don't own the streets" (Laurents 6).

Following the altercation between the gangs, it is decided by Riff that the time has come to take care of the Puerto Ricans once and for all, "clean em up in one all-out fight!" (Laurents 10). Riff will challenge them at the dance at the gym later that night. But, he wants his old pal Tony, who founded the

Jets with him, in as his Lieutenant (Laurents 12). So, he goes to fill in Tony, who has made a sincere effort to forsake the gang life by becoming gainfully employed at Doc's candy store. This is where another parallel occurs: just as Benvolio talks Romeo into attending the ball at the Capulets, Riff talks Tony into attending the dance at the gym.

Prior to the dance, a sweet-faced seventeen-year-old gal, fresh up from Puerto Rico, prepares for her first big social event in America. Here, even the exact act and scene (I/iii) are the same as in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Lady Capulet and the Nurse speak to Juliet of her possible impending marriage to Paris.

The dance, where Tony and Maria first meet, is comparable to the Capulets' ball, where Romeo and Juliet first encounter one another. At the Capulets ball, it seems to be Romeo who falls in love at first sight, since he spots her before she eyes him: "What lady is that, which doth enrich the hand of yonder knight?" (I. v. 44-5). After exchanging a few words, Juliet becomes smitten with the loquacious youth, yet she doesn't reveal this until the balcony scene. Tony and Maria, on the other hand, notice each other at the very same moment, falling head over heels in love. Shortly thereafter, Bernardo "is upon them in an icy rage" (Laurents 31), telling Tony to "Go home, American". Bernardo then reveals that Maria is his sister. "Couldn't you see he's one of them?" Bernardo asks Maria (Laurents 32). "No; I saw only him," she replies. Juliet's exclamation at such a revelation was much more poetic: My only love sprung from my only hate! Too early seen unknown, and known too late! Prodigious birth of love it is to me, That I must love a loathed enemy. (I. v. 140-3) Bernardo orders Maria to go home, after <https://assignbuster.com/romeo-juliet-vs-west-side-story-essay/>

which he approaches Tony, who is still intoxicated by the lingering image of his new-found love (Laurents 35). Riff sidelines Bernardo, mentioning the possibility of a rumble. They agree to meet at Doc's candy store at midnight for a war council.

Act Two, Scene Two, of *Romeo and Juliet*, better known as the balcony scene, is reflected in *West Side Story* in Act One, Scene Five, or the fire escape scene. Romeo refers to Juliet as "the sun" (II. ii. 3), calling for her to "rise . . . and kill the envious moon" (II. ii. 4). During the fire escape scene, Tony and Maria sing the song "Tonight": Tonight, tonight, The world is full of light, With suns and moons all over the place.

Tonight, tonight, The world is wild and bright, Going mad, shooting sparks into space. (Laurents 42) This moment exemplifies the Shakespearean impact perhaps better than any other in *West Side Story*, since even the Bard's imagery is swiped for use in song. Not to mention, before parting, both parties agree to meet the following day: Romeo and Juliet "at the hour of nine" (II. ii. 169) and Tony and Maria "at sundown" (Laurents 44). In scene seven of Act One, Tony meets Maria at the bridal shop. Anita catches them together. "You will not tell?" Maria inquires. "Tell what?" Anita replies. "How can I hear what goes on twelve feet over my head?" (Laurents 76); Anita is supportive of their love, as is Juliet's nurse, who acts as an intermediary between the young lovers. Following Anita's departure, Tony and Maria go through a mock wedding ceremony, mirroring the real one Romeo and Juliet prepare to undertake, aided by Friar Laurence. Both these instances occur before true tragedy strikes. The beginning of act three in *Romeo and Juliet* features the death of Mercutio by the hand of Tybalt, who,

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in turn, is slain by Romeo. Likewise, the rumble under the highway in West Side Story culminates with the deaths of Riff and Bernardo (Laurents 94). In both instances, the young romantic lead tries to talk the others out of harming one another. Tony, at the entreaty of Maria, tries to stop the violent proceedings, only to be taunted by Bernardo. "It doesn't take guts if you have a battle. But we haven't got one, 'Nardo," Tony smiles (Laurents 91). The taunting escalates, despite Tony's valiant efforts, and Riff soon hauls off against Bernardo, just as Mercutio had drawn against Tybalt. Both episodes result in deaths: Mercutio and Tybalt; Riff and Bernardo.

Following the rumble, the similarities between West Side Story and Romeo and Juliet dwindle. One similarity would be the Nurse's grief for Tybalt (III. ii. 61-63) paralleling that of Anita's for Bernardo (Laurents 127), but most interesting of all would be the manner in which Romeo and Tony learn of the deaths of Juliet and Maria, respectively.

In Romeo and Juliet, Balthasar delivers the news to Romeo regarding the death of Juliet: "Her body sleeps in Capel's monument, and her immortal part with angels lives" (V. i. 18-19). Romeo then approaches the Apothecary: ". . . let me have a dram of poison, such soon-speeding gear as will disperse itself through all the veins that the life-weary taker may fall dead . . ." (V. i. 59-62). Doc, likewise, is the provider of poison to Tony, for it is he who delivers the news (falsified by Anita) of Maria's death, along with the money Tony and Maria were going to use to flee the city (Laurents 138). "That was no customer upstairs, just now," Doc tells him. "That was Anita. (Pause) Maria is dead. Chino found out about you and her and shot her". "Come, cordial and not poison, go with me to Juliet's grave; for there must I use

thee," speaks Romeo (V. i. 85-6). Tony pursues the same means to an end, only he expresses it in layman's terms: "Chino? Chino? Come and get me, too, Chino" (Laurents 139).

While roaming the streets, searching for Chino, Tony spots Maria, alive and well. Just as they are about to embrace, a shot rings out, and Tony falls via Chino's violent hand, Maria catching him as he stumbles (Laurents 141). However, whereas Juliet, upon discovering Romeo's death, ends her life by falling upon Romeo's dagger (V. iii. 169). An anguished Maria doesn't end hers, although she speaks of it with Chino's gun in hand, she asks, "How many can I kill, Chino? How many and still have one bullet left for me?" (Laurents 143).

Whereas Romeo and Juliet's love was one intended to last an eternity, attaining a spiritual realm with their deaths, that of Tony and Maria was restricted to the material world, ending "with Tony's death and . . . forever lost" (Poelstra). Even so, the relationships in both plays reflect the "intolerance, misunderstanding, and mistrust that seem to be ever-present in human society". Perhaps this makes the themes of love and fear, that abound in both plays, all the more relevant to our modern, commercialized, technological and, to some extent, still segregated society, and, therefore, a more accessible vehicle for today's audience (Poelstra). West Side Story allows the basic elements of a story four centuries old to be retold in a fairly modern-day setting (after all, street gangs are more prominent now than ever before). A retelling that has garnered its own wide audience appeal over the past four decades, showing that certain tales can stand the test of time

more than once, provided the content and context effectively reflects the world within which it occurs.