

The representation of the feud in romeo and juliet



**ASSIGN
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The essence of Romeo and Juliet involves the lovers' struggle against the social structures which prohibit their union. This essay will examine these structures, which range from the concrete to the abstract, their families' enmity and the social importance placed on masculine honour. These obstacles spring from the families' 'ancient grudge' and I will analyse the vehicles used by Shakespeare to represent the feud to the audience. The theme of violent tragedy runs through the work almost from the opening lines. Chorus tells the story of the play and appears to judge the parents of the lovers as their murderers due to their inability to resolve their differences.

'A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life.....

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...Which but their children's end naught could remove-' (1.

1. 6 -10). It is notable that no reason is explained for the conflict and this serves to make it appear particularly futile. To Shakespeare's audience, public feuding and fighting were a matter of daily occurrence despite laws which sought ineffectively to control them. Here Shakespeare draws a parallel with the ineffectual laws of Verona.

The feud justifies many aspects of life in Verona and draws many parallels to life in Elizabethan England where duels and public affrays were considered the norm. Family honour, particularly masculine honour, was considered to be of paramount importance engaging not only the nobility but also their

servants. It is the importance of this honour which is the cause of the outbreaks of violence which disturb the public peace throughout the play. Shakespeare uses the feud to create a profound conflict for the lovers. The enmity between their families, coupled with the emphasis placed on loyalty and honour to kin, combine to force them to rebel against their heritages, marrying in secret and, inevitably, their double suicide. Even the good intentions of the Nurse and Friar Lawrence are doomed as all must be conducted clandestinely.

A pivotal point in the play is Act 3. 1 when Tybalt is slain by Romeo. Shakespeare uses the hot blood of youth as a vehicle to reinforce the feud and further distance Romeo from his goal both physically and mentally as he is banished to Mantua, guilt-ridden having caused the death of his new wife's cousin. He has been forced by social expectations into fighting against his judgement. Their love is in opposition to the decrees of their society and their determination to be together results in their deaths.

He protests that he loves Tybalt: 'But love thee better than thou canst devise Till thou shalt know the reason of my love And so good Capulet, which name I tender As dearly as mine own, be satisfied.' (3. 1. 67 - 71) All reason is forgotten when hot headed Tybalt, defending his family's honour, fights with Mercutio and slays him whilst Romeo attempts to part them. Mercutio in his dying speech curses both families: 'A plague a both your houses!' (3.

1. 106) Is this Shakespeare's way of directing blame away from fate and towards the real culprit which is man made? The viciousness and dangers of the play's social environment are a dramatic tool employed by Shakespeare

to make the lovers' romance appear even more precious and fragile. Many critics attribute the cause of the tragedy to fate and indeed this could be considered a contributory factor as the series of accidents that ruin Friar Lawrence's well intentioned plans and Juliet waking only moments after Romeo's death would seem to indicate this. On the surface these events would seem to be coincidences but none of these devices would have occurred if the Montagues and Capulets did not hate each other. It is possible to see Romeo and Juliet as a battle between the responsibilities and actions demanded by social institutions and those demanded by the private desires of the individual. Romeo's and Juliet's appreciation of night, symbolic of privacy and secrecy, and the renunciation of their names, symbolic of loss of social obligation, show that they wish to escape from their public world.

But they cannot stop daylight returning nor can they stop being Montague and Capulet because the world will not allow it. In this way Shakespeare justifies their suicide as the ultimate night, the ultimate privacy and the ultimate escape from the conflict. In Mercutio's Queen Mab speech, are we possibly seeing an alternative opinion of society? The words 'quean' and 'mab' were references to whores in Elizabethan England. In Queen Mab Shakespeare creates a conceptual pun by alluding to a mythological fairy tradition and attaches to it a reference to prostitutes.

The child pleasing image of a fairy in a nutshell coach bringing dreams to sleepers is endearing but, on examination, the dreams are not comforting but show a depraved side to society: 'O'er lawyers finger's, who straight dream of fees;...(1.

4. 71)Sometime she driveth o'er a soldier's neck, And then he dreams of cutting foreign throats, Of breaches, ambuscades, Spanish blades,' (1. 4. 80 - 83)These lines show a darker vision of society. Romeo dismisses Mercutio'Thou talk'st of nothing.

' (1. 4. 94)Mercutio agrees, saying that dreams are the children of an idle brain (1. 4. 98). But Romeo's visions of love are dreams, Tybalt's ideals of social standing and honour are dreams and Friar Lawrence dreams of bringing peace to the houses of Montague and Capulet.

It would seem that all these desires are delusions. Mercutio's comment may be seen as debunking the grand idealistic passions of love and family loyalty that animate the play. Surely this speech offers an alternative view of the play's reality. In the final scene of the play, Shakespeare appears to reconcile the two houses as each promises to honour their children's sacrifice by erecting lavish statues in remembrance of them. But it seems that the fathers are already vying with each other to produce a bigger and better statue than the other, Montague: ' But I can give you more; For I will ray her statue in pure gold, That while Verona by that name is known, There shall no figure as such rate be setAs that of true and faithful Juliet.

' Capulet: ' As rich shall Romeo's by his lady liePoor sacrifices to our enmity.' (5. 3. 299 -304)Maybe this will be a future reason for rivalry. In summary, Shakespeare has incorporated many of the conventions which were acceptable to his audience.

The ideals of masculine honour, pride and status are likely, particularly in young men, to erupt into conflict and would have been commonplace in

Elizabethan society. In fact the play is littered with dead bodies. Paris dies for Juliet, Romeo dies for Juliet, Mercutio dies for the Montague family, Tybalt dies for the Capulet family. The reasons for the hatred and feud are never revealed. All of these deaths are as a result of honour not nature. Romeo and Juliet's dilemma is a direct result of their parents' conflict and Shakespeare by his use of Petrarchan poetry makes his audience understand their pain.

Thus the feud almost represents an extra character within the play, influencing the behaviour of every character. It is not fate alone which causes the inevitable tragedy but the feud which causes their sad fate.