

The ways in which shakespeare creates dramatic tension

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



William Shakespeare wrote more than 30 plays in his life time and 'Romeo and Juliet' is one of his best known works. It is the famous tragedy of a young couple, Romeo and Juliet, who meet and experience love at first sight.

However a number of unfortunate events lead to a tragic ending. In Act 1 Scene 1 and Act 1 Scene 5 of this play, Shakespeare's use of dramatic interest, tension and unusual language and phrases, captivate the audience's attention from the very beginning.

The play begins with a prologue which instantly sets the scene of the play, 'In fair Verona, where we lay our scene'.

The prologue, spoken by the Chorus, introduces the audience to the story and summarises the entire play in 14 short lines. It mentions the two families which the lovers come from; the enmity between them is made very clear- 'from ancient grudge break to new mutiny'.

The prologue claims that the 'star-crossed lovers take their life' which immediately sparks interest in the audience and will keep them wanting to watch more, as they will be interested to see how and why the lovers die.

The prologue ends with a rhyming couplet which invites the audience to listen with 'patient ears' which brings across the idea that the play is definitely worth watching.

Act 1 Scene 1 of 'Romeo and Juliet' begins with the Capulet servants Sampson and Gregory talking about violence: fighting, rape and death, in the streets of Verona. It is an opening full of action, which is used to capture the audience's attention and create dramatic interest as well as tension. The

lines spoken are short and sharp, and it seems like the characters are finishing each others sentences. This creates tension in the scene as the audience will begin to expect a conflict later in the play. When the Montague servants appear, it causes a 'war of words' which is then followed by a fight which also foreshadows the violence and death which occur later in the play.

It is in this scene, where many of the important characters are introduced, long before they play a major role in the story. This form of introducing characters creates interest later in the play, when they play a more significant role in the story.

Benvolio is one of these characters. He is a Montague and enters the story trying to keep the peace and stop the fighting between the servants. However before the fighting has a chance to stop, another important character, Tybalt, enters the scene. Tybalt, a Capulet, immediately creates dramatic interest and tension from his very first line- 'what are thou drawn among these heartless hinds? Turn thee Benvolio, look upon thy death.'

The contrast between Benvolio's peace loving character and Tybalt's is clearly shown at this part in the play as the audience is able to see that whilst Benvolio is trying to calm the situation, Tybalt is only there to cause more trouble and increase the tension.

Tybalt's hot temper and fiery nature foreshadows his later involvement in Act 3 Scene 1 where he kills Mercutio, a Montague and is then killed by Romeo, causing his banishment and creating the trouble leading to the deaths of Romeo and Juliet.

The language and tension introduced in this scene are used to establish the feud between the two families. The hatred between the Montagues and Capulets is a very important part of the play and so is brought to the attention of the audience from the very first scene. It becomes more significant when old Capulet and Montague enter the scene and begin to fight with each other.

The fight and the language used at the beginning of this scene were mainly used to attract the attention of the lower class citizens who are watching the play.

As Shakespeare wrote his plays to appeal to the widest range of people, he knew that this meant that not all the members of his audience would enjoy the same things, and so he made sure that there was something which interested everybody.

'Tis true, and therefore women being the weaker vessels are ever thrust to the wall. Therefore I will push the Montague's men from the wall and thrust his maids to the wall.' (Act. 1, Scene 1, L. 13-15)

This line is spoken by the Capulet servant Sampson who is talking of killing the Montague men and raping the Montague women. This foreshadows the larger fight that occurs between the Capulets and Montagues and also shows that the enmity between the two families is very strong as even the servants are involved.

Lines such as this one would be used to draw the attention of lower class members of the audience as they would be able to relate more to these characters and the language they use.

As the fight on the streets of Verona becomes more violent and as more characters begin to join, Shakespeare introduces us to another character, Prince Escalus, who is a figure of power and authority.

The language used by this character and, his position in society, would appeal more to the higher class citizens in the audience.

As Peter Thomas states in his forward in the Nelson Thorne edition of Romeo and Juliet, 'Shakespeare was a comprehensive writer for a comprehensive audience, writing to please the educated and the un-educated.'

Prince Escalus stops the fighting and also creates a lot of dramatic tension in his short appearance on stage. He declares that any further fighting between the families would result in death of those involved. As the scene progresses the tension builds more and more. This seems to be linked to the hierarchy of the characters in the play, because as the class of the characters increase on stage, the tension brought by their actions, also increases.

After the Prince and Capulets exit the stage the dialog turns to the subject of Romeo. Lady Montague first mentions Romeo and this immediately creates dramatic interest as the audience would finally be introduced to one of the main characters of the play. Lady Montague is initially worried about Romeo,

but is also relieved that he was kept out of the fighting and she asks Benvolio if he has seen his cousin:

'O where is Romeo? Saw you him today? Right glad I am he was not at this fray.'

This concern is rather ironic as, although Romeo was not involved in this fight, he is later involved in a much larger fight which results in death and banishment.

Romeo enters the play after Lord and Lady Montague exit the stage. He enters the scene miserable, pitiful and lovesick instantly interesting the audience. However, whilst the audience would expect Romeo to be lovesick over Juliet, it is Rosaline with whom he is in love. Romeo expresses his love for Rosaline in this scene using a tone which suggests that this unreturned love is making him mad with grief.

'What is it else? A madness most discreet,

A choking gall, and preserving sweet.' (L. 181-182)

It seems that Romeo is passionate and loving, but also headstrong and unsure of the best course of action.

As it is Rosaline, not Juliet with whom Romeo is so in love, it causes dramatic interest and tension in the story as the audience will come to wonder at this point why the story is called 'Romeo and Juliet' when it is apparent that in the beginning of the play Romeo is in love with another girl. It also sparks

interest as the audience will be interested to know how it will come to be that Romeo and Juliet fall in love.

Romeo and Juliet meet in Act 1 Scene 5 in which Capulet is holding a grand feast, which Romeo and his friends plan to enter under masks, so that Romeo can meet his love, Rosaline.

However it is not Rosaline that Romeo meets but Juliet. As his eyes fall on her, he exclaims 'did my heart love till now? Forswear it a sight, for I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.' (L. 49-50)

This then creates tension in the play as the audience will instantly see the contradiction in Romeo's words; he says 'did my heart love till now' when in Act 1. Scene 5 he pitifully exclaims that he is in love with Rosaline.

In this scene Shakespeare shows Romeo to be rather 'fickle', switching affections from Rosaline to Juliet in a moment.

Friar Lawrence, who appears later in the play in Act 2 Scene 3, also expresses shock that Romeo's affections could shift so quickly from Rosaline to Juliet.

Romeo's love for Rosaline seems to be immature, more a statement that he is ready to be in love than that he actually is in love.

In Act 1 Scene 5 Shakespeare uses many literary devices to describe the characters.

For example, when Romeo first sees Juliet, he uses a metaphor to describe her: " She doth teach the torches to burn bright". (, L. 41)

This tells us that Juliet must be very beautiful as her beauty is much brighter than torches. Romeo delivers a short speech at this point which is spoken in rhyming couplets. This causes the words to sound more like a poem than a speech, which causes interest as poetry can be associated with love.

After Romeo's speech, he is identified by Tybalt, who is furious at the idea that a Montague had sneaked into the Capulet's feast. His eagerness to fight Romeo in a public place further highlights his 'fiery' nature and foreshadows later events. 'This by his voice should be a Montague'. 'To strike him dead I hold it not a sin.'

This creates dramatic tension in the scene as it looks like a brawl is about to occur in the middle of the feast.

However Tybalt is stopped by Capulet who is determined not to allow anything to ruin his night. He also says;

'Content thee gentle coz, let him alone. A bears him like a portly gentleman; and to say truth, Verona brags of him.' (L. 62-64)

These words create dramatic interest as it appears that although Capulet hates the Montagues, he does not mind young Romeo, who is thought of as a 'portly gentleman'.

This further infuriates Tybalt who snaps back at Capulet, only to anger his uncle. This creates further tension and irony as he threatens to kill Tybalt if he does not 'endure' Romeo for the night.

It is in this scene that the love affair between Romeo and Juliet begins. As they meet they are instantly attracted and after only after a few words are exchanged they share a kiss. These words exchanged are spoken with a rhyme scheme of, abab, which again will sound like poetry to the audience, causing the moment to become more harmonious and loving.

The religious significance of the words exchanged between the lovers at this point is rather ironic and creates dramatic interest. 'Ay pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.'

This is because in the time the play was set, it would be against religion for two young strangers to meet and share a kiss, which is what Romeo and Juliet. This also foreshadows the wedding ceremony, officiated by Friar Lawrence in Act 2 Scene 6.

Is it not until the end of Act 1 Scene 5, when Juliet is alone with her nurse, that she realises Romeo is a Montague.

'My only love sprung from my only hate!' (L. 135)

The fact that Juliet claims that she has fallen in love with Romeo so soon after meeting him, adds dramatic tension to the scene, and she cries out- 'If he be married, my grave is like to be my wedding-bed.' (Act 1 Scene 5 L. 131) which foreshadows the later tragedy in Act 5 Scene 3.

Act 1 Scene 1 and Act 1 Scene 5 both include dramatic interest and tension, and Shakespeare has used this to keep the audience entertained. These two scenes introduce the audience to a number of different characters and contain some of the key points of the story. Shakespeare's effective way of using language and devices to create tension and interest keeps the audience captivated through out the entire play.