

An exploration of the
ways shakespeare
dramatises the
teenage experience
in romeo...



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Shakespeare's portrayal of teenage experience in *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most well known and often imitated in existence, and this is because of how well he captures some of its aspects - the idea of first love, isolation and rebellion - but with enough melodrama and exaggeration to make it the basis for entertainment on stage.

Despite being written nearly half a millennia ago, Shakespeare's play is still studied in schools today because so much of the subject matter is still relevant - the star crossed lovers are as much at home in modern Miami in Baz Luhrman's film adaptation as they are in feudal Verona - and while the details may have changed, *Romeo and Juliet* would lead us to conclude that teenage experience in particular has many of the same elements now as it did in Shakespearean times. *Romeo and Juliet* are a pair of love-struck teenagers trapped between their desire to be together and the long and bloody feud between their families.

However the play begins as *Romeo* is pining for another girl he professes to be in love with, *Rosaline*. She represents the petrarchan ideal; an unattainable woman *Romeo* idolises and rarefies, who his love for is unrequited - a direct contrast with the immediate mutual amorousness he and *Juliet* share. Here, Shakespeare chooses to depict teenage love as melodramatic, superficial and fickle. *Romeo* seems to almost obsess over *Rosaline*, though only upon her good looks and the fact that she has decided to 'remain chaste' despite his advances upon her.

In scene one of Act one, *Romeo* bombards *Benvolio* with a torrent of oxymorons - "O brawling love, O loving hate!" - to describe the depression

and emotional turmoil his love for Rosaline is causing inside him, a girl whom he barely knows but says is "... rich in beauty". Romeo describes being in love as being a weight upon him, in act one scene one love is a " heavy lightness" and a " feather of lead", and then in scene four before entering the Capulet's masked ball he says he has " a soul of lead".

In spite of this, later when he sneaks into the Capulet's garden to see Juliet, he describes himself as having " love's light wings" further contrasting his love for Juliet against his previous feelings for Rosaline, showing this is a different, higher form of love. In a moment of male camaraderie, Mercutio jokes with Romeo, implying the heavy weight he feels is that which lovers feel on each other during intercourse, and suggests he " borrow cupid's wings".

After he meets Juliet the language he uses changes, and becomes far less coarse and less fraught with innuendo - later, they talk in sonnet and rhyme each other's lines in order to show there is a deeper connection between them. As they share their first kiss, both Romeo and Juliet's speech becomes rich with religious imagery " For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch, and palm to palm is holy palmers kiss" presenting their love here as something spiritual and sacred, and after the kiss Romeo even says " my sin is purged", likening it to a divine and religious experience.

The idea of love is shown from a completely different perspective in act one scene two, as Capulet and Count Paris discuss arranging a marriage between him and Juliet. Capulet shows a level of kindness and understanding which he seems to lose later in the play, as he says it is Juliet's decision whether

she marries and that it would be a mistake for her to marry so young, “ too soon marred are those early made” although this could mean spoiled by childbirth, increasing the degree to which Juliet is treated like an object in the conversation.

Paris comes off as being rather shamelessly lecherous, as he protests Capulet stating that Juliet is a child and too young to be married by saying “ Younger than she are happy mothers made”. Even without the war between their families, it is clear that there are heavy societal constraints burdening both Romeo and Juliet, especially regarding their relationships with their parents. Juliet doesn't get along with her mother, and when in the play she is told she must marry Paris she pleads with her mother to try and stop it she is met with a withering verbal blow, “ Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word...

I have done with thee. ” Clearly her relationship with her mother isn't very strong, unlike her relationship with her nurse. In Act three scene one Lady Capulet asks the nurse to fetch Juliet so she may broach the subject of marriage with her, and it is obvious from the nurse's fawning over Juliet and the way she talks about her that they are much closer than Juliet and her mother, and the nurse says “ I might live to see thee married once, I have my wish. - vocalising an ambition usually held by a mother to see her own daughter married, making the disparity between Lady Capulet's cold and clinical appraisal of the situation and the nurses bawdy, vulgar one even more noticeable.

The nurse is genial and kind and has a penchant for making coarse remarks and often makes them without realising it, when Lady Capulet says marrying

Paris will make Juliet “ no less” the nurse agrees saying “ No less? Nay, bigger! Women grow by men. She is a role model for Juliet and gives her advice and counsel, but her irresponsibility is shown when after goading Juliet on with her relationship with Romeo and facilitating their marriage, following Romeo’s exile she completely changes her mind and advises Juliet to marry Paris: “ Since the case stands as now it doth, I think it best you married with the County” She realises she has made a mistake encouraging Juliet and had not fully thought about the consequences.

Romeo shares a similar relationship with Friar Lawrence, except more of one of two close friends than a father and son. Romeo is never on stage with either of his parents at any time during the play; his absence demonstrates both an inability to communicate and show of teenage rebellion. He rejects them and the society and responsibilities they represent in favour of the Friar’s advice - which while often more sensible than the Nurse’s and driven by his naivety?? in hoping to unite the families by encouraging Romeo and Juliet to marry, is still irresponsible.