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Romeo and Juliet

by

William Shakespeare

1590's



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The play is set in the thirteenth or fourteenth century in Italy in Verona and Mantua. Much of the action takes place in Juliet's house. Two cities of Venice are also mentioned in the play. The Capulets and the Montagues, the main families of the play, are from noble.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Romeo - the hero and one of the protagonists of Romeo and Juliet. The son of Old Montague, he is at first in love with Lord Capulet's niece, Rosaline. When he goes to a feast given by Capulet, he attends the feast in a mask, meets Capulet's daughter Juliet, falls in love with her, and becomes passionate and impulsive.

Juliet - the heroine and one of the protagonists of the play. She is the thirteen-year-old daughter of Capulet. She is a happy, romantic, and an innocent girl who falls in love with Romeo.

Friar Lawrence - the person who is responsible for helping Romeo and Juliet. He is a good man with good intentions.

Nurse - a friend, guide, confidante, and educator of Juliet. She has raised Juliet and is truly fond of her. She is a realist, who is fond of talking and joking. She often provides comic relief to the play.

Minor Characters

The Montagues - one of the two major families of Verona. They are bitter enemies of the Capulets.

The Capulets - one of the two major families of Verona. They are bitter enemies of the Montagues.

Escalus - the Prince of Verona. He is tired of the fighting in his city and.....
Many additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Romeo and Juliet is based on external conflict and portrays the long-standing quarrel between the two established families in Verona, the Capulets and the Montagues.

Protagonists - Romeo and Juliet are the protagonists of the play.

Antagonists - The long-standing quarrel between the Capulets and the Montagues, which.....

Climax - The climax occurs when Romeo kills himself by drinking poison, preventing the young couple from experiencing happiness on earth. Some critics point to.....

Outcome - *Romeo and Juliet* ends in tragedy. Because they cannot profess their love openly, fate intervenes and causes Romeo to kill himself, believing Juliet is dead. When Juliet discovers the.....

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

ACT I

Years ago there lived in the city of Verona in Italy two noble families, the Montagues and Capulets. Unfortunately, there existed much bad blood between them. Their animosity was so pronounced that they could

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not stand the sight of one another. Even the servants of the house carried on the animosity of their masters. The bloody feuds of the two families led the Prince to order all brawls to cease on pain of death.

Romeo, son of old Montague, is a handsome young man. He fancies he is in love with Rosaline, who disdains his love. As a result, Romeo is depressed. To cure him of his love, his friend Benvolio induces him to attend a masked ball at the Capulets, where he could encounter other beauties and forget Rosaline. At the ball, Romeo is attracted by a girl who he learns is Juliet, daughter of the Capulets. They seal their love with a kiss. Juliet, on learning Romeo's identity from a servant, confesses to herself that her only love has sprung from her only hate. Meanwhile, the fiery Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, recognizes Romeo and challenges him. Old Capulet forbids him to insult or harm any guest. Tybalt vows to settle the score with Romeo later.

ACT II

That night Romeo lingers in Capulet's garden, standing in the.....

THEMES

Major Theme - True love can conquer all, as shown through Romeo and Juliet who defy unbelievable problems to be married, to consummate their.....

Minor Theme - Foolish quarrels should be ended, for they are.....

MOOD

There is a contrast of moods throughout the play. The mood created by the love between Romeo and Juliet is bright, happy, and romantic. The prevailing mood of Verona is

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

William Shakespeare is usually considered the greatest dramatist and finest poet the world has ever known. No other writer's plays and poetry have been produced so many times or in so many countries or translated into so many languages. One of the major reasons for Shakespeare's popularity is the variety of rich characters that he successfully creates, from drunkards and paid murderers to princes and kings; and from inane fools and court jesters to wise and noble generals. Each character springs vividly to life upon the stage, and as they speak their beautiful verse or prose, the characters remind the viewers of their own personalities, traits, and flaws. Shakespeare also made his characters very realistic. The dramatist had an amazing knowledge of.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Date and Source of the Play - Romeo and Juliet is one of the early plays of Shakespeare. It was probably written in 1594 or 1595, for it is similar in language to A Midsummer's Night Dream and Richard II. Some scholars, however, date the drama to 1591, for there is a reference made by the nurse in.....

Time Of Action - There is no clear indication within the play of the time setting, but it seems to be around 1200 or 1300. In history, rival noble houses existed within that time frame, and their actions disturbed the local peace. People were divided, and a lot of jealousy and.....

The Elizabethan Stage - Drama was the prime means of public entertainment during Shakespeare's time. Traveling actors went around the country and were hired by those who wanted their services. In larger cities, such as London, permanent acting groups were.....

SCENE SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

PROLOGUE

In old English drama, the prologue made the audience aware of the nature of the play before it began. The prologue to this play discloses the differences between the Capulets and Montagues, the two important families of Verona, and the role of fate in bringing them together in the end. The Prologue then tells that the children of these two warring families innocently become victims of the conflict; they fall in love, marry secretly, and kill themselves in order to be together in eternity since they feel they cannot be together in Verona. The Prologue states, in sonnet form, that the story of their ill-fated, death-marked love is the theme of the play.

ACT I, SCENE 1

Summary

Act I begins with the servants of the two households carrying on the enmity of their masters. Samson and Gregory, the Capulet servants, and Abraham and Balthazar, the Montague servants, start a sword fight in a public square in Verona for no real purpose. Benvolio, a nephew of the Montagues and also a good friend and cousin to Romeo, intervenes and stops the fight. Then Tybalt, the nephew of Lady Capulet, arrives on the scene. When he notices a sword in Benvolio's hand, Tybalt challenges him to a duel. When the former refuses, Tybalt declares that he hates all the Montagues. A crowd, which has gathered, now starts fighting with each other.

Hearing the noise, the heads of both the families, accompanied by their wives, arrive on the scene. So does Prince Escalus, who angrily orders the crowd to throw down their weapons and stop the fighting. The Prince accuses the lords of the two families for being the cause of such outbreaks and warns, "If ever you disturb our streets again, your lives shall pay forfeit of the peace," words that foreshadow the climax of the play. Lord Capulet and Lord Montague do not pay with their own lives, but their children die as an indirect result of the age-old conflict.

Lady Montague, happy that Romeo has not been a part of the brawl, asks Benvolio about her son's whereabouts. Benvolio answers that he has seen Romeo sighing and weeping earlier in the morning and feels that he definitely has some serious problems. As Benvolio speaks, Romeo approaches them. When questioned about his behavior, Romeo discloses that he is in love with a woman who does not love him. The young romantic then goes on to describe his love for the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. Unfortunately, she seems to have the mind of the goddess Diana, scorning love and swearing to remain single. Benvolio suggests that Romeo forget the girl, but Romeo states he cannot.

Notes

The first scene begins with unimportant characters, but it is lively and immediately captures the attention of the audience. Servants in brightly colored Renaissance dress begin fighting, and the stage is suddenly filled with action and the sounds of striking swords. The purpose of the street brawl is to visibly show the animosity that exists between the house of the Capulets and the house of the Montagues, not just at the highest levels, but all the way down to the servants who are fighting. More important characters soon begin to arrive on stage. Benvolio, a Montague, comes in as a peacemaker and tries to stop the fighting. Tybalt, a Capulet, enters with temper flaring and challenges Benvolio, a Montague, to a fight. Lord Capulet and Lord Montague arrive and are ready to enter the brawl if necessary in spite of their advanced age and nobility. This is no ordinary quarrel, but a long-standing feud based on familial history and bitter hatred. The Prince of Verona, Escalus, knows the conflict has greatly affected his fine city and wants it stopped. When he hears the noise of the fighting, he comes on the scene and threatens punishment if peace is not reached.

Romeo has not taken part in the brawl, but wanders on the stage after the fighting has ceased. He is a

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handsome, idealistic, and romantic youth who is in love. He tells Benvolio of his deep feelings for a beautiful young lady (later identified as Rosaline). He seems to worship her, but it is from afar, for she is aloof and does not return his love. As a result, Romeo moons about, feeling very melancholy. Shakespeare places this scene at the beginning of the play in order to show the romantic character of his hero; the scene will also be contrasted later in the play when Romeo reacts to Juliet in a very different manner. He thinks he loves Rosaline; he truly loves Juliet.

ACT I, SCENE 2

Summary

Paris, a young nobleman and kinsman of the Prince, asks Lord Capulet for Juliet's hand in marriage. At first the father tells Paris that his daughter, at age fourteen, is too young, but later agrees to the marriage if the idea pleases Juliet. He advises Paris to woo her and win her love. Capulet then invites Paris to a feast that he is hosting the same night (the same Sunday that the brawl took place earlier). Juliet, as well as all the Capulet beauties of Verona, will be present.

Capulet then sends his servant off with a list of the guests to invite to the party. The servant goes out to accomplish his task, but he is illiterate and cannot read the list of names. When he sees Romeo and Benvolio, the servant asks them to read the list to him. It includes Rosaline's name; Romeo's supposed lady love. Romeo and Benvolio then find out where the party is to be held and decide to attend since it is a masked affair. Romeo, of course, hopes to see Rosaline there. Benvolio hopes that Romeo will see another beauty, who will take his friend's mind off Rosaline.

Notes

In this brief scene, the audience learns more about Juliet, the heroine of the play who has not yet been introduced on the stage. She is young girl of fourteen and obviously Capulet's pride and joy. The father says of Juliet that "the earth has swallowed all hopes but she." When Paris asks Capulet for her hand in marriage, he hesitates at first; then he says that he will agree if the idea pleases Juliet. In the thirteenth century, when noble marriages were usually arranged by the family, it is a loving father who.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Romeo - Of the many tragic heroes of Shakespeare, Romeo continues to exercise a peculiar fascination over the minds of young men and women. He stands out as the emblem of youthful love, its disappointment, and its possibility for tragedy.

Romeo is the only son of Lord Montague, the head of a reputed and rich family of Verona that is plagued by its long-standing feud with the Capulet family. In the first scenes, Romeo appears indifferent to his family's feud. His only concern is his love for Rosaline, a love, which is overwhelming, but artificial. Romeo is really in.....

Juliet - Shakespeare is said to have created a masterpiece in the development of the character of Juliet. Her exquisite beauty and personal charms are amongst the finest in literature. In describing Juliet, Romeo captures the depth of her loveliness. "Juliet is the sun and the brightness of her cheek would shame the stars."

Juliet, who is almost fourteen years old, is the only child of the Capulets. She is blissfully ignorant of the ways of the world, and at the beginning of the play turns to her Nurse for guidance and advice. As the play develops and Juliet becomes the wife of Romeo, she quickly matures into a.....

Mercutio - Mercutio, whose name suggests his mercurial character, is a relative of the Prince and a man of

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rank. He mixes with people from both enemy houses and is an adult friend of Romeo. He serves as a foil to Romeo as well. His sarcasm, scorn of love, and interest in dueling are exactly the opposite of the sincerity, passion, and pacifism of Romeo. Mercutio also possesses a.....

Many additional characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

The Central themes of the play are developed by contrast and center on love. In the first and second scenes, three different kinds of love are depicted. Sensual love is first presented in the ribald jokes of Sampson and Gregory, in the bawdy comments of the Nurse, and in Mercutio's sexual jokes about Rosaline at the expense of Romeo. Next, petty love is presented in the "love sick" Romeo. Romeo is in love with the idea of love and fancies that Rosaline is the girl of his dreams. He praises her beauty, moans about her not returning his love, and sheds affected tears for his plight. Mercutio and the Friar both are aware of the shallowness of Romeo's 'love' for Rosaline. The third type of love presented in the play is "Conventional Love", which is developed in the social situation of arranged marriage. Paris offers his rank in exchange for.....

Many additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

THE PLAY AS A LYRICAL TRAGEDY

Literary critics have hailed *Romeo and Juliet* as a lyrical tragedy; rich in imagination and poetry and universal in appeal. Every utterance of the young lovers is bubbling with emotion; as it excites, it exalts as well. Romeo and Juliet become more than mere characters on stage; they are exemplary lovers who sacrifice unto death for their love and for one another. What appeals to the reader is.....

A TRAGEDY OF CHANCE

Fate (also called chance, accident, or destiny) plays a vitally significant part in the play. From the beginning of the drama, Shakespeare calls Romeo and Juliet star-crossed lovers, for fate brings them together and fate is responsible for their tragic end. The family feud of the Capulets and Montagues is the means by which fate acts. Romeo, who belongs to the Montague family, "crashes" the Capulet party in order to gain a glimpse of Rosaline, his supposed beloved. At the dance, fate intervenes and he falls in love with Juliet, who is.....

PUN, WIT, AND HUMOR IN THE PLAY

Although tragic in nature and conclusion, *Romeo and Juliet* is filled with humor. Shakespeare has enlivened the story with delightful characters and wonderful wit in order to lighten the bitterness of the tragedy. The opening scene of the play is filled with puns as the servants Sampson and Gregory indulge in a verbal duel as well as a fight with swords. Abraham observes that they will not

STUDY QUESTIONS – BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Explain the importance of the opening scene of the play.

Describe the significant events that happen at Lord Capulet's party.....

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