



NAME:

CLASS:

BRIEF HISTORY AND SYNOPSIS OF ROMEO & JULIET

Romeo & Juliet is believed to have been written by Shakespeare in the 1590s, but was itself adapted from an Italian novelle written in 1554. This novelle deems the story to be historic fact – that is, that the lovers really existed, living, loving and dying in Italy in the 1300s.

In Shakespeare's version set in ancient Verona, two influential families, the Montagues and the Capulets are sworn enemies, so that any meeting of their respective members/supporters in public almost inevitably leads to brawling, despite the exhortations of Verona's peaceful Prince Escalus. However, Romeo, teenage son of Lord Montague, is infatuated with Rosaline, the pretty niece of Lord Capulet. Egged on by his friends Benvolio and Mercutio, the latter who is a relative to the Prince, Romeo risks his life to sneak into a masked ball thrown by the Capulets, where he is recognised by the violent Tybalt, and is only stopped from doing so by Lord Capulet who does not want bloodshed in his house. An oblivious Romeo then meets the lovely Juliet. The two fall in a deep and instantaneous love, but realise almost immediately after that they are the respective offspring of the warring families. Nonetheless, Romeo sneaks into the Capulet orchard and overhears Juliet vowing to love him in spite of all. He reveals himself, and they are married secretly the very next day by Friar Lawrence, who hopes to reconcile the two families through their union.

Unfortunately, none of their kin know of their new relationship. Tybalt, still seething from Romeo's invasion of the Capulet ball, challenges him to a duel. Thinking of his bride, Romeo refuses, but the proud Mercutio accepts on his behalf. Romeo's attempt to break up their fight inadvertently allows Tybalt to inflict the fatal blow on Mercutio. Driven to distraction by the death of his friend, Romeo kills Tybalt. The Prince discovers the Montague/Capulet wars have claimed his kinsman Mercutio, and exiles Romeo from Verona, on pain of death if he returns. Juliet is thrown into a state of grief, and Lord Capulet, seeking to rescue her from what he thinks is obsessive mourning for her cousin, decides to marry her to Count Paris, threatening to disown her when she disagrees.

When begged for help by Juliet, Friar Lawrence gives her a drug to put her in a deathlike sleep for 42 hours, promising also to send Romeo word to join her when she awakes. She drinks this on the night before her wedding, and on being found apparently lifeless in the morning, is placed in the family crypt. Unfortunately, the messenger never reaches Romeo, and, hearing news instead of her apparent death, he buys poison and goes to the Capulet crypt to die beside Juliet. He meets the mourning Paris

there, who tries to stop this apparent vandal from approaching the crypt, but is killed in the ensuing battle. Entering the crypt, Romeo discovers the motionless body of Juliet, and drinks the poison. Juliet awakens just moments too late, to find her lover dead. Having lost everything, she stabs herself fatally with his dagger.

The bodies are discovered, and Friar Lawrence explains to all the secret tale of the star-crossed lovers. Sorrow-stricken, the families finally agree to end their violent feud.

Whether this tale, partly or wholly, actually happened, a tradition of love stories surprisingly alike to *Romeo and Juliet* can be found dotted across history as early as AD8, in the tale of the similarly star-crossed Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. After Shakespeare's adaptation, the Romeo and Juliet story has flourished further – in numerous movies, theatrical adaptations, operas, songs, musicals and so on. It seems proof that throughout time, from ancient human history till today, people continue to identify with the consuming, death-defying passion of doomed lovers.

EXCERPTS FROM THE PLAY

1. Read Act 1 Sc 8, lines 89-107, where our lovers meet, flirt, and kiss for the first time. In olden times, people used to use metaphors a lot in flirting, so that if one wanted to reject the other, they could simply pretend not to understand. Romeo and Juliet likewise use metaphors, ie, figures of speech where you refer to something as something completely different, although they have similar qualities. Eg: She is a beanpole (She is not literally a beanpole, she is human, just one who is very skinny). In the case of Romeo and Juliet, they talk in an extended metaphor: Juliet's hand is a 'holy shrine', and Romeo's lips are 'pilgrims hands' that want to visit and honour that shrine, and he wants their two sets of 'pilgrim's hands' to meet in holy 'prayer'. Can you find at least three other metaphors in the rest of the play? What are they?
2. Create your own extended metaphor, using at least three related metaphors, to describe something that you do often/ something that happened to you. For example: This cafeteria is hell. The coffee burning my tongue is divine punishment on me for deciding to come here, and the waiters' attitudes are demonic. Remember, if you're writing about your teachers, school or classmates, be nice!
3. Shakespeare has been celebrated for using different forms of verse/speech to differentiate different characters in this play, or the moods of the characters. For example, compare how the nurse speaks with how a character like Friar Lawrence, or Lady Capulet, speaks. Do this by choosing different parts of their text and reading them out loud. Can you hear the difference? Why do you think their lines are written so differently? Also, read aloud Juliet's lines to Romeo after the marriage, and then read aloud the way she speaks to County Paris. Who do you think she is being more formal with?
4. While performances of Shakespeare's works today are often thought of as lofty, sophisticated art; they were in fact written for the masses like seamen, tanners, butchers etc, who often couldn't read or write, and who made up most of his audience, and Shakespeare's genius lies in how his stories and wit can captivate people of all levels of society. Romeo and Juliet is no different – you may notice characters like Mercutio and the nurse make very bawdy jokes! Rather than thinking of Romeo and Juliet as a highbrow play, imagine you are describing the story to some relatives or friends who perhaps do not speak English as well as you and are not interested in Shakespeare. How would you make the plot sound interesting to them, so that you can get them to watch it? Ask your teacher if you may use Singlish, or your mother tongue. Read this out to your classmates.

ROMEO + JULIET FILM (1996)

DIRECTOR: BAZ LUHRMANN

STARRING: LEONARDO DICAPRIO, CLAIRE DANES

RUNNING TIME: 120MINS

1. This blockbuster adaptation modernises the 16th century text of Romeo and Juliet, making the Montagues and Capulets owners of rival business empires, and setting the entire tale in 1990s Verona Beach (an imaginary place in America), where the young fighters battle with guns instead of swords. Because of Shakespeare's aptitude in portraying the universal nature of human emotions, performances have often 'transplanted' his stories to take place in just about any location and in any era. Sometimes, Shakespeare's language is changed to fit the location/time, sometimes it is not. Can you find at least two adaptations of Romeo and Juliet, either in the form of a movie, stage play, ballet, TV program, or other performance art form, which were 'transplanted' to modern locations and times? Share with us what adaptations these were, and how the locations and times were 'transplanted.' Pick one scene in the play to illustrate how things were presented differently because of the different setting (for example, in Baz Luhrmann's movie, the fight scene between Mercutio, Tybalt and Romeo takes place with logs and glass shards on the beach instead of swords on the streets, and the characters are dressed in open Hawaiian shirts.)
2. Then re-enact a three to five-minute snippet of this transplanted scene you have found as best as you can, with whatever props, costumes and set pieces you can source, perhaps with someone narrating what the scene is like in case you cannot find everything that is needed! Alternatively, choose one scene in the play and transplant it into a place in modern day Singapore (an office, a school, a restaurant...anything!), and perform that instead, again with any props and costumes you can find. Refrain from re-enacting the fight scenes – stay safe!
3. In both Baz Luhrmann's movie, as well as the stage production of Romeo & Juliet you have just watched, music plays an important role. How do you feel music affects the performance of a story? How is music used differently in the movie as opposed to the play?
4. Choose a scene from Romeo and Juliet, and think of a song you like that can be used to underscore it. Why do you think this song would be appropriate? Demonstrate by playing the song, and then getting your friends to read/perform the lines with you, to the accompaniment of the music.

CREATIVE PROJECT

1. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Introduce this project by allowing the students to brainstorm on what they already know or would like to know about Romeo & Juliet, while getting clues and answers from the play.

- How old are Romeo and Juliet? (Hint: The Nurse and Lady Capulet reveal Juliet's age.)
- During their time, around what age did girls get married?
- After their first meeting, how long did it take for Romeo and Juliet to:
 - Declare their love?
 - Get married?
 - Consummate their marriage?
 - Commit suicide?
- How long before Romeo declares love for Juliet, was he talking about how much he adored her cousin Rosaline?
- How many people die in the course of the play? How many of them are Montagues? How many are Capulets? How many are from neither house?
- In the play, which character do you think is the most impulsive, and why?
- Is it ever explained why the Montagues and Capulets are enemies?

After you've explored the project with your class, do return to this list. Compare their initial impressions of the play and characters with their impressions after answering the above questions.

2. CONSIDERING THE STORY IN A MODERN, LOCAL CONTEXT

Look at the questions above again. Now consider:

- Do you know anybody of Romeo's or Juliet's age who felt very passionately in love?
- What is the minimum age for marriage, and sexual relations, in Singapore? What about in other countries around the world? Why do you think these restrictions are in place? Do you agree with them, and why?
- Even if Romeo and Juliet had been older, do you think they were impulsive to marry so quickly? Why or why not?
- In the play, the younger generation suffer because of the older generation's enmity, and some of them are neither Montagues or Capulets. Think of a fight/argument that you have been involved in, or know about, where people who were not involved in the initial disagreement ended up getting physically/emotionally hurt.

- Even in modern Singapore, people often find reasons to dislike other people so much that they would not be happy to let their children marry the children of those other people. Can you think of a few of these reasons? Do you agree with these reasons, and why?
- If you were the friend of a modern day Romeo and Juliet, what suggestions would you give them, so that the story would not have to end in tragedy?

3. IMAGING OF A PERSON

Each student is to recall a *memory* or *personality trait* of a major character from the play. Draw a human outline of this character on a large piece of paper and write these traits onto the outline. Add memorable quotes of the character to go with each one and then explain why you think the quote reflects the character's traits.

REFLECTIONS

1. How do you feel about this play? Did it aid you in your understanding of Shakespeare's work?
2. Music played an important role in this production. Why do you feel the director made the choice to include music and song in this way? Whose song did you like/ find most memorable or appropriate, and why?

REFERENCES

- www.shakespeare-online.com/playanalysis/romeoplayhistory.html
- Halio (1998)
- Gibbons (1980: 33)
- www.shakespeare-online.com/essays/shakespeareaudience.html
- www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?t=2101234 (How does Baz Luhrmann update Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet for a Modern Audience)