

AQA English Literature GCSE

Romeo and Juliet: Themes

Oppositions

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Opposition

Shakespeare **uses** oppositions in Romeo and Juliet to make the audience question conflict and opposition in their own lives and society. Shakespeare is able to bring **polarising concepts** together which allow the audience to analyse how they interact. By doing this, Shakespeare is able to highlight obvious differences as well as the more implicit similarities.

Shakespeare often uses **juxtapositions** and **oxymoronic** language to present these contrasting and contradicting ideas in the play. He also creates characters which have **contrasting or similar personalities**.



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Capulets and Montagues

The play is **based on a conflict** between these two opposing families. This instantly grounds the play as a story based on **opposing forces** and their **destructive powers**.

Didactic means when something is intended to teach a moral lesson.

It is important to note that the Montagues and Capulets have an **“ancient grudge”** against each other, which suggests that they are very different people. However, the **reality** is that the families are **more similar than they are different**. They’re both **noble families** with characters who have similar attributes such as Mercutio, a Montague, and Tybalt, a Capulet.

While Romeo and Juliet is a love story and a tragedy it also is a **moral story** as it fulfils a **didactic purpose**. At the end of the play the two families realise the error of their ways and **make peace with each other**. Lord Capulet says **“O brother Montague, give me thy hand”**. Through the tragic ending in the play, Shakespeare illustrates the **dangers of opposition and conflict in life**.

Mercutio and Tybalt

Tybalt and Mercutio are similar characters as their **inclination towards violence** make them **catalysts** for the plot. In **Act 3 Scene 1** we can see both men starting fights which ultimately lead to their deaths:

- In this scene Tybalt is looking to fight Romeo. He calls him a **“villain”** to try and **entice him to fight**. Despite this Romeo refuses to fight Tybalt. Mercutio does not understand why Romeo is refusing to fight. In the Elizabethan era it would have been typical to challenge someone to a duel if they disrespect you. Mercutio decides to step in and puts forward the challenge by saying to Tybalt: **“O calm dishonourable, vile submission!... Tybalt, you ratcatcher, will you walk?”**. This decision ultimately results in his death.
 - ◆ *Both of these characters contrast with Romeo who does not want to join in the violence. Their masculinity is contrasted with Romeo’s feminine traits.*



Whilst Tybalt and Mercutio are very similar, they also **juxtapose** each other; Tybalt is a very serious character who introduces the **reality** of the situation to the audience whereas Mercutio adds **comedic relief**.

- An example of Mercutio's comedy is found in **Act 1 Scene 4** when Romeo is still depressed over Rosaline. Mercutio says his Queen Mab speech which includes moments of comedy as he talks about Queen Mab (a fairy who visits people in their dreams) **"Tickling a parson's nose as he lies asleep"**.
- This **juxtaposes** Tybalt who never has a moment of humour. Even at the party in **Act 1 Scene 5** Tybalt is angry that Romeo has gatecrashed the feast saying that Romeo is a **"villain"**. Lord Capulet has to make him calm down.



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Love and Hate

Shakespeare **juxtaposes love and hate** throughout the play. He even **subverts** incredibly romantic scenes with moments filled with hate and conflict. The opposition of love and hate within the play **creates tension**.

Act 1 Scene 5

This is the iconic scene where the two lovers meet for the first time. Here the lovers speak in a **sonnet form** and their language is filled with **religious imagery**. This exchange is completely **fuelled by romance** which leads to a **climax**: their kiss. Juliet tells Romeo: **"You kiss by th' book."**

However, just before this exchange, there is a conflict between Tybalt and Lord Capulet. Tybalt is **enraged** by Romeo and his friends gate-crashing the **"feast"**. Tybalt believes that Romeo is **"villain"** and should be thrown out of the party. However, Lord Capulet doesn't want to spoil the celebrations and demands that Romeo **"shall be endured"**.

- This is one of the few times that the audience is able to see **in house conflict**. In this instance it occurs between the **patriarch** of the family and one of his relatives. While Tybalt tries to **persist** in the end he says **"I will withdraw"** which emphasises Lord Capulet's authority.

What is Shakespeare trying to achieve by placing these contrasting exchanges, one filled with anger and one filled with love, next to each other?

Act 2 Scene 6 and Act 3 Scene 1

Another instance in which love and hate are put together is after the two lovers get married.

- The Friar conducts the ceremony saying **"Come, come with me, and we will make short work."** Friar Lawrence basically says here that they have to go quickly and make the ceremony fast.

In the Elizabethan times it was forbidden to show religious ceremonies (such as weddings) on stage.



→ This scene is immediately **juxtaposed** by the **climax** of the play **Act 3 scene 1** where Mercutio and Tybalt die. Shakespeare manages to put together the **epitome of love which is marriage** and the epitome of hate which is murder to illustrate to the audience the **simplicity** as well as the **complexity** of life in presenting the two most powerful emotions alongside each other.

Life and Death

Shakespeare shows the **duality between life and death** within the play. A key theme within any tragedy is death, it is used by Shakespeare to **release tension** and **purge emotions**.

It was the usual practise in Shakespearean tragedies to have a series of deaths in the final scene. Romeo and Juliet is no different as the final scene encompasses the deaths of Paris, Romeo and Juliet.

Death

In Romeo's final speech before he commits suicide he **contrasts the sadness of death with a feeling of elation** saying **“How oft when men are at the point of death/ Have they been merry, which their keepers call A lightning before death!”**.

→ Here Romeo is saying here that some men describe happiness before they die, he shows the audience that he is experiencing a similar kind of high which he compares to **“lightning”**. (This **metaphor** is also used by Juliet to describe their love which is **“too like lightning”**).

Life

The theme of life is shown in a **subtle way** within the play. There aren't any births, instead there are **new beginnings** which can be seen as **symbolic of new life**.

- The love between Romeo and Juliet is symbolic of this new life. They cannot remember a life before they had met each other, and they cannot imagine a life without each other.
- Equally, they **forge a new life together** as a married couple.

Shakespeare's Tragedies

Everybody Dies.

Original Concept
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Romeo and Juliet						
	Mercutio is Stabbed	Tybalt is Stabbed	Paris is Stabbed	Romeo Poisons Himself	Juliet Stabs Herself	and Lady Montague dies of a Broken Heart
Hamlet						
	Hamlet is Stabbed and Poisoned	Claudius is Stabbed and Poisoned	Laertes is Stabbed and Poisoned	Polonius is Stabbed through a curtain	Gertrude is Poisoned	Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern are Beheaded and Ophelia Drowns
Othello						
	Emilia is Stabbed	Roderigo is Stabbed	Othello Stabs Himself	and Desdemona is Smothered by a Pillow		
Macbeth						
	Duncan is Stabbed	Duncan's Guards are Stabbed	Banquo is Stabbed	the MacDuff Family is Stabbed	Young Siward is Stabbed	Macbeth is Beheaded and Lady Macbeth dies from Lack of Sleep
Antony and Cleopatra						
	Enobarbus dies of Shame	Antony Stabs Himself	Charmian Poisons Herself	Iras Drops Dead	and Cleopatra dies from a Snakebite	
Julius Caesar						
	Julius Caesar is Stabbed	Brutus Stabs Himself	Cassius Stabs Himself	Cinna the Poet is Torn Apart by the Mob	and Portia Eats Hot Coals	
King Lear						
	The Fool Disappears	Gloucester is Blinded then Dies of Shock	Cornwall is Stabbed	Oswald is Stabbed and Poisons her sister, Regan	Edmund is Stabbed	Cordelia is Hanged and Lear dies of Grief
Titus Andronicus						
	Alarbus's Arms and Legs are Cut Off, then he is Thrown into a Fire	Chiron and Demetrius are Stabbed then Baked into a Pie which Titus feeds to Tamora	Tamora dies of Indigestion	Lavinia's Hands and Tongue are Cut Off then she is Stabbed	The Nurse is Stabbed	
						
	Mutius is Stabbed	Bassanius is Stabbed	Martius and Quintus are Beheaded	The Clown is Hanged	Saturninus is Stabbed	Titus is Stabbed and Aaron is Buried to his Neck and Starves
Coriolanus and Timon of Athens			Bonus: The Winter's Tale			
	Coriolanus is Cut to Pieces	Just throws Himself Away.			Antigonus Exits, Pursued by a Bear	

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<https://www.nosweatshakespeare.com/blog/death-in-shakespeares-tragedies/>

