

AQA English Literature GCSE

Romeo and Juliet: Themes *Violence and Conflict*

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Violence and Conflict

Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy and so includes a substantial amount of **conflict**. Shakespeare uses the possibility of conflict as a way of **building tension** within the play, then the violence which ensues releases the tension.

Shakespeare shows **two** different types of conflict:

- **External** which is shown through the dispute and fighting between the Montagues and the Capulets.
- **Internal conflict** which is the mental struggle characters may feel towards their feelings and what is happening to them.

Household Conflict

While the main conflict in the play is between the two opposing households, the Capulets and Montagues, there is still conflict inside each of the households as they come to terms with their own conflicts. Shakespeare may have done this to explore the **complexities** and **intricacies** that are apart of the **human existence**.



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Capulets

Act 1 Scene 5

The first time the reader sees conflict in the Capulet household is in **Act 1 Scene 5** during the **“old accustom'd feast”** between Tybalt and Lord Capulet.

- When Tybalt sees Romeo Montague at the **“feast”** he states that the **“villain is a guest”** and that he shall not **“endure him”**.
- Tybalt is a **hot-headed** and **loyal** Capulet who believes it is his duty to protect his family from the Montagues.
- However, Lord Capulet becomes angry at this remark claiming he **“shall be endured”**. He then asks, **“Am I the master here, or you?”**. The **rhetorical question** reaffirms Lord Capulets' authority while at the same time discrediting any authority that Tybalt believed he had.

Lord Capulet's language in this section (lines 74- 91) is extremely **patronising** to Tybalt. For example, he calls Tybalt a **“saucy boy”** which is **belittling** to Tybalt as he is a grown man. The term **“saucy”** means someone who is silly and likes to cause trouble. Tybalt inevitably says **“I will withdraw”** as he succumbed to what Capulet wants, realising that Lord Capulet has the true power in the household.

Act 3 Scene 5

There is further conflict in the Capulet household when Juliet **disobeys her father** and **refuses to marry Paris**. Due to this disobedience Lord Capulet becomes aggressive and violent.

Marriage

Paternal involvement in who women were to marry was common in Shakespeare's time. Marriage was often used to forge new alliances with families. For Juliet to disobey her father, the **patriarch** of the family, was extremely disrespectful.



- Lord Capulet explodes in her face saying **“Hang thee, young baggage! Disobedient wretch!”**
- He goes on to say that his **“fingers itch”** meaning that he feels a need to slap her. Here we see how **violence** is apart of their way of life. The **verb “itch”** shows the audience that his body is telling her to punish her but he is using self control to stop himself.
- The **violent imagery** used in the **list “hang, beg, starve, die in the streets”** creates a **vivid image** in the reader's mind. The words used also illustrate the level of **disregard** that Lord Capulet has for Juliet if she does not do as he says his own daughter becomes nothing better than trash.

Juliet is **disowned** by her father which would have been the **expected reaction** from her father.

Through these examples, it is clear that conflict arises in the Capulet household when someone threatens Lord Capulet's authority.

External Conflict

The play is all about the conflict between the **“Two households”**, the Montagues and the Capulets, who are **“both alike in dignity”**. The **prologue** sets the scene of the conflict, it tells us that their **“ancient grudge”** makes **“civil hands unclean”**.

Shakespeare makes it very obvious to the reader that the **tragic fate** which awaits the lovers would not be there if not for the **“mutiny”** between their parents.

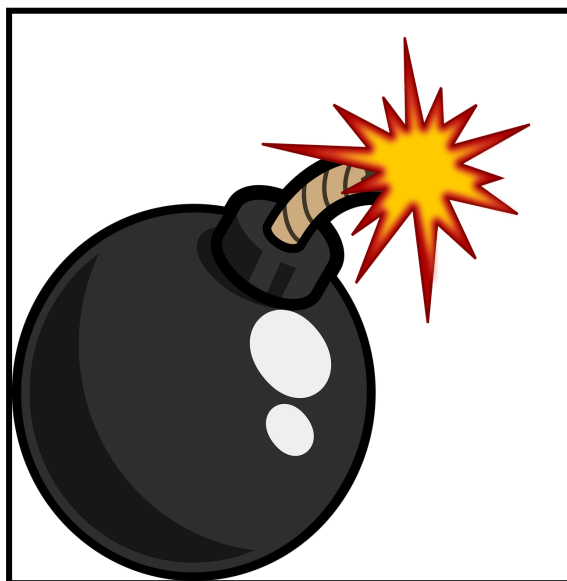
The importance of conflict is affirmed in **Act 1 Scene 1** which starts with violence between the Montague and Capulet servants. Shakespeare starts the play **in media res** to immerse the audience in the action and the fast-moving **pace earlier on in the storyline**.

It starts from a small insult **“Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?”** and the resulting arguing builds **dramatic tension**. This tension is laced with humour as the servants try to catch each other in **technicalities in language**.

- For example, the men act as though they want to start a fight but also keep the pretence of civility by using **“sir”**.
- However, the **quick transition** between **comedy** in **lines 1-38 of the first scene** to **violence** and danger demonstrates the rapid pace that later dictates the play and its sequence of events.

The Prince's speech

The Prince is used as a way to explain the effects of the Montague and Capulet conflict on the people of Verona. He explains that the families have **“Have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets”** which shows that conflict and violence have become a **regular occurrence** in the city. He explains that the violence they bring has **“made Verona's ancient citizens, Cast by their grave-beseeming ornaments, To wield old partisans in hands as old”**.



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The Prince then presents the extent of the **conflict** when he declares that if they start another fight on the streets of Verona again their **“lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace”**. This means that if there is conflict again then they will die. The speech is therefore **foreshadowing** later events in the play as the audience know that members of the family will die which of course means that there will be more conflict to come.

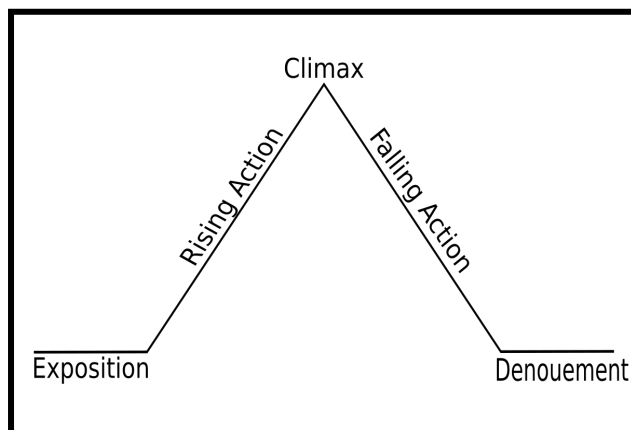
Violence - Act 3 Scene 1

Violence can be seen as a manifestation of conflict. One of the biggest accumulations of conflict in Romeo and Juliet occurs halfway through the play in **Act 3 Scene 1** where fighting between Mercutio, Romeo and Tybalt results in the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt.

- Just before this scene in **Act 2 Scene 6** Romeo and Juliet have just had their marriage ceremony in which Friar **foreshadows** that their **“violent delights have violent ends”**. **Act 3 Scene 1 juxtaposes** the previous scene which perfectly encapsulates the story of Romeo and Juliet, while there is a lot of love and desire, there is also a lot of violence and bloodshed.

Shakespeare opens **Act 3** with Benvolio’s discussion of **“mad blood stirring”** which creates **tension** and **pace**. The **personification** of blood as **“mad”** could imply the fact that the families are about to **clash**, and so **‘familial blood’** will take over.

Romeo and Juliet follows a clear structure in which the **climax** occurs right in the middle of the storyline which is the **traditional structure** for stories following **Freytag’s Pyramid** (the structure of a play or tragedy developed in **Gustav Freytag** in 1863). By putting this scene right in the **middle**, Shakespeare provides **catharsis** for the audience as the tension which has been building throughout the first half is quelled through fighting.



Mercutio’s **last words before his death** are **“A plague o’ both your houses!”**. This is not only **foreshadows** events which come later in the play but the scene also acts like a **catalyst** for the events that come.

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After Mercutio’s death, Romeo becomes filled with a **murderous rage** and kills Tybalt. Due to his actions Romeo is banished from Verona: the Prince says **“Immediately we do exile him hence”**. This banishment sets in motion the tragic ending of Romeo and Juliet as they try to be together.

Internal Conflict

Aside from the obvious external conflict which manifests itself through violence within the play, characters also suffer from **internal conflict**.



Juliet

Juliet suffers a lot of **internal conflict** as she struggles between her love for Romeo and her loyalty to her family. Due to the conflict between the houses she is forced to choose her family or to follow her heart and pursue a relationship with the son of her enemy.

Balcony scene - Juliet's soliloquy

After the party, Juliet goes to her balcony trying to **rationalise** her feelings and even find ways to overcome the problem. In Juliet's balcony **soliloquy** the audience is able to see how desperate she is to have a way in which Romeo could not be a Montague. This desperation is what leads Juliet to go to the Friar after Romeo's banishment for the potion which leads to the **tragic ending**.

| Line Number | Quote | Analysis |
|-------------|--|--|
| (I.v.34-36) | <i>"Deny thy father and refuse thy name Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, And I'll no longer be a Capulet."</i> | Juliet is saying that Romeo should no longer be a Montague or if he truly loves her, she will stop being a Capulet. However, this is, of course, impossible and just wishful thinking . |
| (I.v.40-41) | <i>"What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part"</i> | Juliet then becomes more desperate , trying to figure out what is so special about a name. By listing parts of the body, Juliet tries to show the audience how meaningless the name is. Maybe she is trying to get the audience to sympathise with her position. |
| (I.v.38-46) | <i>"That which we call a rose By any other word would smell as sweet. So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called, Retain that dear perfection which he owes"</i> | Finally, Juliet uses the metaphor of a rose to illustrate to the audience again that a name truly means nothing. A rose is a symbol of romance which is known for its smell and beauty, however, a rose has thorns. It is possible that Shakespeare uses this image to exhibit the duality of love , that while it can be soft and beautiful, it can also be harsh. |

Act 3 Scene 2

After Juliet finds out that Romeo has killed her cousin Tybalt she is conflicted and doesn't know what to think. The man she fell in love with and married is a murderer. The **sequential use of oxymorons** "**serpent heart**" and "**beautiful tyrant**" between lines 73 and 77 help to portray this conflict between seeing Romeo as the gentle man she loves, and him as a murderer.

Ending



As the Prince says in the end “**Never was there a story of more woe than Juliet and her Romeo**”. Shakespeare illustrates to the audience that conflict will lead to pain and “**woe**”.

