

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Romeo and Juliet: Themes

Love

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Love

Romeo and Juliet is widely regarded as one of the **greatest love stories ever told**. Shakespeare tells the story of two young people who are so in love that they would rather die than live without each other.

The **theme of love** is interwoven into every scene in the play, the different forms of love are also explored by Shakespeare. He contrasts the purity of first love with the passionate and uncontrollable force of the emotion. He uses existing conventions, as well as his own elaborate language and imagery, to present love as:

- Unrequited
- Elevated and holy
- Physical
- Linked with violence and death

Unrequited Love

Unrequited love is portrayed through Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline; instead of bringing him joy he becomes depressed as his love is one sided and she doesn't feel the same way.

In Act 1 Scene 1, Romeo uses a range of **oxymorons** to express his emotions about love. "**O brawling love, O loving hate**". The **verb "brawl"** is used as an **adjective** here and has **connotations** of fighting (which emphasises the conflict within the play). The **oxymoron** between "**brawling**" and "**love**" represents the **contrast** between Romeo and Juliet's love with the quarrelling and violence of the family feud. It also **foreshadows** the amount of violence that will occur throughout the course of the play between the families, and links with the important theme of the coexistence of love and hate.

The unending **list** of Romeo's **oxymorons** from "**feather of lead,**" "**bright smoke,**" "**cold fire,**" to "**sick health,**" suggests Romeo's inability to comprehend what is in front of him and his overall confusion on love. In addition to this, it strongly alludes to Romeo's immature and inexperienced character, and his tendency to make rushed decisions.

This is reinforced when Juliet says in Act 2 Scene 2 "**too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden, too like the lightning**", the **asyndetic** listing builds to the **simile** which encapsulates Romeo's character as someone who is reckless and impulsive.

Religion and love

The **pure and chaste religious imagery** when Romeo and Juliet meet is contrasted to **Act 5 Scene 3** where the imagery becomes sexualised. In many cultures sex is a way of **consuming** a marriage and thus completes the unification of a couple. Here the couple are **unified in death** and the sexual imagery is **symbolic of the consummation of their unity in the afterlife**.

- Romeo drinks to his death from a round vial which in Elizabethan times was an **allusion to female sexuality**.
- This combines with the action of Juliet killing herself with a dagger, a **phallic symbol** which could also be seen as representing a **re-consummation of the marriage**.



This highlights how they had a love that was transcendental and able to connect them across three levels; **physically, mentally and spiritually**. The fact that the two lovers die together also cements their eternal devotion for each other.

Physical Love

This concept of love being both **emotional and physical** is exemplified in various places throughout the play.

In **Act 1 Scene 4**, Mercutio says that if **“love be rough with you, be rough with love”**. This alludes to the **sexual nature** of love which is physical and not pure. This also suggests that love can also be **“rough”** emotionally which is evident in the way that Romeo is suffering from **unrequited love**.

In **Act 2 Scene 1** Mercutio **subverts the convention of romantic poetry** when describing Rosaline’s body. He **lists** her body parts saying; **“I conjure thee by Rosaline’s bright eyes, / By her high forehead and her scarlet lip, / By her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh”**. Here, Mercutio is reducing what was previously a love-filled romance for Rosaline to nothing but a **sexual description** of her body.

The Friar shows his lack of emotional understanding in this scene as he says that **“Young men’s love lies not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes”**, essentially disregarding the idea that love can be something from the heart. This could be seen as Shakespeare shining light on the **superficial nature of love**, perhaps cloaking the whole play in **irony** and showing a fresh view of love, which contradicts the more romantically idealised conventions of the time. This idea is further explored as the Friar says that Romeo was only **“dotting”** for Rosaline.

This sexual form of love is not just focused on by the men. The Nurse checks out Romeo’s body and comments that his **“leg excels all men’s”**. The Nurse’s sexualised view of Romeo contrasts with the emotional attachment Juliet feels towards him. Perhaps Shakespeare is stressing how Romeo and Juliet’s love **transcends the conventional ideas** of love that we see from Lady Capulet, the Nurse and Mercutio.

Oxymorons

Shakespeare’s use of **oxymorons** are interesting as Juliet describes the good parts of Romeo in relation to physical attributes and external beauty. This could be seen as Shakespeare commenting on the **superficial** nature of all love or perhaps Juliet is still in the same sex-orientated state of mind that she had adopted earlier.

Alternatively, the oxymorons express the **dichotomy** of love, while it is pure and **“beautiful”** it can also be the exact opposite.

Furthermore, by saying that she has **“bought the mansion of a love / But not possess’d it”** we see Juliet liken the consummation of her marriage to the possession of a mansion. This could be a reference to the **objectification** of women, and how instead of it being based on mutual affection it is instead more of a **business transaction**, the emotional for the physical.



Love linked with violence and death

Within *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare manages to fuse together many **powerful emotions**. The passionate love of Romeo and Juliet is **unsettled by the violence** and conflict that takes place in the play. However, while some might think that the **conflict corrupts** their love it actually **fuels** it and makes it more **powerful**. The **amalgamation** of love and the violence is what characterises the **drama as a tragedy**.

Love is also linked with violence and death in many other ways within the play.

- In Act 1 Scene 1, Sampson and Gregory describe acts of violence and rape with the use of a **“naked weapon”**. The word **“naked”** fills the description with both sexual ideas of intimacy but also highlights an idea of truth. The **juxtaposition** of this with **“weapon”** which has **connotations of violence** again highlights how there is an **overlap** between love and hate.
 - ◆ It is said along with desires to **“thrust [Montague’s] maids to the wall”** and to rape the women. Rape can be seen as violence infiltrating what is supposed to be an act of love and intimacy.
- The use of the **sonnet form** which was conventionally used to depict love is used by Shakespeare to describe death and feud. He uses **blood-filled imagery** of **“civil blood makes civil hands unclean”** which **highlights** how this play is contained within ideas of love but is just as much to do with hate and fighting.
- The marriage of Romeo and Juliet is described as **“violent delights”** by Friar Lawrence. This use of **oxymoron** emphasises the difference between the two ideas but also highlights a connection between them. The use of the **adjective “violent”** echoes the fighting that has gone on within the novel. However, the use of the **verb “delights”**, rather than love also puts emphasis on how the violence occurs within the indulgence rather than the relationship
- The almost **prophetic words** of Juliet that her **“grave is like to be [her] wedding bed”** again highlights an intersection between violence and death with love. The image of a wedding bed is interesting as it suggests consummation of a marriage and finality which has links to death which is also final.

