

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Romeo and Juliet

by

William Shakespeare

Book Information

William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet
Quiz Number: 53875
Washington Square Press, 1996
ISBN 0-671-72285-9; LCCN
281 Pages
Book Level: 8.6
Interest Level: UG

This a tragic play where two star-crossed teenagers take their lives for the name of love.

Topics: Arts, Theater/Plays; Classics, Classics (All); Popular Groupings, College Bound; Power Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 7 & Up; Series, Folger Library Shakespeare

Main Characters

Benvolio a cousin and close friend of Romeo
County Paris the man who Capulet wants Juliet to marry
Friar Lawrence a learned monk who helps Romeo and Juliet
Juliet Capulet the girl who falls in love with the son of her family's enemy
Lord and Lady Capulet Juliet's parents
Lord and Lady Montague Romeo's parents
Mercutio a good friend of Romeo
Nurse Juliet's nanny and confidante
Prince Escalus the ruler of Verona, who wants to end the feud
Romeo Montague the young man who falls in love with Juliet
Rosaline a girl who has spurned Romeo's love
Tybalt Juliet's cousin who pursues fights with the Montagues

Vocabulary

bedaubed covered or soaked
coz cousin
feud a hatred between two parties (often families) that is nourished and held over time
jest a joke; to make a joke

Synopsis

The chorus introduces the play, set in Verona, Italy, and tells that two lovers will die as a result of a long-existing feud between their families. The action opens with a skirmish between members of the Capulet and Montague households. The Prince of Verona, who can see the feud is disrupting the peace in his city, declares that the next combatants will pay with their lives. He hopes to discourage any further altercations.

Benvolio, part of the Montague family, goes off in search of Romeo at the request of Romeo's parents, Montague and Lady Montague, who are worried about their son's apparent depression. Upon speaking with him, Benvolio learns that Romeo is in love with Rosaline, a beautiful woman who has no interest in him. To cheer his friend, Benvolio suggests they sneak into an upcoming party hosted by the Capulets. Reluctantly, Romeo agrees to go.

In the meantime, Lord Capulet has been speaking with County Paris, a man who is interested in marrying Capulet's thirteen-year-old daughter, Juliet. Capulet is unwilling to force Juliet to marry Paris, but invites Paris to come to the party that night to meet Juliet.

At the party, Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time and instantly fall in love. Romeo is struck by Juliet's beauty and, while musing on it, is overheard by Tybalt, Juliet's fractious cousin, who is outraged that a Montague dare enter their house. Although Capulet prevents him from confronting Romeo, Tybalt's threatening words foreshadow a future altercation. Juliet, in return, is impressed by Romeo's handsome face, but is much discouraged to discover he is the son of Montague. Later that night, Romeo visits Juliet at her balcony, where the two confess their love for one another.

Before dawn the next morning, Romeo goes to Friar Lawrence and persuades him to marry the two of them. With Juliet's nurse as a go-between, the two lovers arrange to be married in Friar Lawrence's cell when Juliet comes to give her confessions.

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Shortly after they are married, however, tragedy strikes. On his way home, Romeo is detained by Tybalt, who tries to fight him. Although Romeo refuses, his friend Mercutio accepts the challenge, and when Romeo attempts to break it up, Tybalt kills Mercutio. In grief and anger, Romeo then kills Tybalt, but is immediately stricken with remorse. Upon reaching the scene and assessing the situation, the Prince banishes Romeo from the city and condemns him to death if he ever returns. When Juliet hears the news, she is overcome with grief. Not only has she lost her cousin but her husband as well.

Again using the nurse as a messenger, Romeo, who is hiding in Friar Lawrence's cell, and Juliet make plans to spend their wedding night together secretly. Romeo will go to Mantua before dawn while Friar Lawrence attempts to reconcile the families and reveal the marriage. However, in the hope of assuaging Juliet's grief, Capulet agrees to Paris's request to marry her. After her father ignores her objections, Juliet goes to Friar Lawrence for help. They devise a plan in which, after drinking a special potion, Juliet will appear to be dead, thus making the wedding impossible. After she is "buried," Romeo will come to her in the tomb and take her away to Mantua to live.

The potion works exactly as planned, but the plan goes awry when the friar finds out that the letter he sent to Romeo explaining the plot never reached him. As a result, Romeo, believing Juliet is truly dead, returns to the tomb with a vial of poison and plans to die next to her. When Romeo arrives, he discovers Paris grieving there also. The two men fight and Paris is killed. Romeo drinks the poison and dies just before Juliet regains consciousness. Upon realizing that Romeo is dead, Juliet stabs herself with a dagger and dies next to him.

In the confusion that follows, the friar comes forward to explain everything and, after hearing of the couple's love and realizing their own errors, Capulet and Montague declare the feud over and propose a tribute to their children's love.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Explain how the masked ball is important to the plot of the play.

The masked ball is a vital component of the play because it is there that Romeo and Juliet first meet. The nature of the event is such that each young person is unaware of the identity of the other, a fact that allows them to become acquainted and interested in one another before they know of the apparent folly of their action. Also, without being masked, it would have been difficult for the Montagues to gain entry to the Capulet party.

Literary Analysis

While Romeo and Juliet are largely victims of circumstances beyond their control (being born to feuding families, for instance), how do their personalities or character traits contribute to the tragic outcome of the play?

Romeo and Juliet are both extremely passionate and dramatic. Romeo's impulsive nature leads him to kill Tybalt, resulting in his banishment. From what the reader knows of Romeo's passionate temperament, it is inevitable that upon hearing Juliet is dead, Romeo will want to join her in death. As for Juliet, the reader knows that she, too, is dedicated to Romeo and would rather die than live without him. Consequently, the probability that both will commit suicide if they believe the other is dead is extremely high. After learning that Romeo never got the Friar's letter, the reader can predict what is to come. In addition, their youthfulness has not yet given them the experience and wisdom needed to solve problems constructively.

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Inferential Comprehension

Compare and contrast Capulet's attitude towards Paris's request to marry Juliet in Act I to his reaction to the same request in Act III.

On both occasions, Capulet is happy with the idea of having Paris as his son-in-law. However, in Act I, Capulet refuses to force Juliet to do anything against her will, states that she is too young to marry anyone yet, and agrees to marry her off only to a husband with whom she will be happy. Capulet completely changes his attitude in Act III, however, as he not only refuses to listen to Juliet's objections to the marriage, but also even threatens to disown her if she does not agree to marry Paris. Although Capulet tells Paris that he is in favor of the wedding because he thinks it will cheer Juliet, he insists on her marrying Paris even though his command causes her to be even more miserable.

Constructing Meaning

Romeo and Juliet fall in love as soon as they see each other. Is love at first sight possible? Explain why or why not.

This question has no real right or wrong answer. Some people have claimed that they knew they were in love the first time they saw the other person, and some happy couples hated each other when they first met. Students may argue that love at first sight exists because it is often appearances and first impressions that attract people to one another. However, they may also reason that lasting love is based on the mind and personality of a person and not just their outer appearances. Since Romeo claims he is in love with Rosaline in Scene 1, students may question the depth of his love.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization At the masked ball, Romeo and Juliet do not recognize each other as a Capulet and a Montague because of their disguises. Hold a "masked ball" in the classroom by having the students construct a variety of masks that are suitable for different characters in the play. The front of the mask can

be decorated however the student sees fit. On the back, or inside of the mask, have the students write down traits that are not especially visible to the other characters. Have the students explain their characterization masks and "hidden" traits by supporting what they have written.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors At the time in which the story is set, young girls were expected to marry men chosen by their fathers. Initiate a class discussion about arranged child marriages and ask students to consider their positive and negative aspects. Suggest that the students think about how they would feel if their spouses were chosen by their parents, as well as what it would be like to be married at their ages. Those who feel comfortable may share their ideas with the class.

Extending Meaning Set up a mock courtroom in the class and put Friar Lawrence and/or the Nurse on trial. Assign the students roles as lawyers, clients, witnesses, judge, and jury members to determine whether Friar Lawrence's and the Nurse's involvement with the two lovers help Romeo and Juliet or cause their deaths.

Making Predictions At the end of the play, the reader is left with a feeling of "If only...." If only Romeo had received the letter, the lovers would have lived. If only Friar Lawrence had reached the tomb earlier, he could have prevented Romeo from committing suicide. Have each student write an alternate ending to the play based on a particular event or action that he or she changes.