

WJEC GCSE English Literature

Activities and Exam Practice

Romeo and Juliet

(Sample pages)

Shelagh Moore



Themes

Themes are the main topics or discussions that are introduced and developed throughout the play. The origin of the word comes from the Greek *thema*, which means 'something placed'. Themes are placed in the text to encourage the audience to relate to the play and to think about and form an opinion about what is happening on the stage. The themes presented in *Romeo and Juliet* concern hate, fate, life and death and love. The play is full of contrasting themes that ensure that the lovers are doomed.



Hate

The play begins dramatically, with a fight. Such fights were deadly, fuelled by bravado and by hate between rival groups. The use of swords meant that such encounters often ended in death.

The young men's code of honour is one that those watching the play could understand, whatever their background or time: '*If I am slighted, then I will fight and try to kill you*'. This

code could apply to today's gang rivalries or to the Mafia (as portrayed in films).

Shakespeare shows the audience the futility and horror of such attitudes, as it is ultimately the innocent that suffer. The feuding families with their violent young people and stubborn older leaders make life difficult for the people of Verona and the Prince is forced to threaten them with punishment by death if another incident occurs. The scene is set for fate to take a hand in ensuring that there is another incident – and death.

Activity 1

- 1 Identify the moments in the play when the feud between the families is shown by the behaviour of the characters.
- 2 List your findings and provide the evidence from the text to prove that you are right.
- 3 Discuss the attitudes of the young male characters. Do their modern counterparts in rival gangs behave in similar ways?

Hate has developed as a result of the feud. The two families have no regard for each other. We see Benvolio trying to stop a fight and Tybalt doing his best to fight. Characters are not willing to let go of their hate, despite the loss of life that the feud causes. Only Romeo and Juliet are willing to ignore the hatred and love each other without caring who their families are. The feud and the behaviour of those involved in it conspires to destroy the young lovers. Through no fault of theirs, but because of the actions of others they are destroyed.

Characters involved:	Loyal to:	Evidence from the text:

★ Fate

Fate is mentioned at the outset, in the prologue. We are to see the story of two *'star-crossed lovers'*. The audience is left in no doubt that the story is to be tragic. In Act 1, scene 5, Romeo talks of *'some consequence yet hanging in the stars'*.

At the Capulets' party, Tybalt is enraged at Romeo's presence and wants to kill him. He promises: *'this intrusion shall, for seeming sweet, convert to bitt'rest gall.'* He intends to challenge Romeo, but he is tempting fate. The future holds *'bitt'rest gall'* for both families, because he decides to fight Romeo.

Juliet fears fate when she tells Romeo that she sees him *'as one dead in the bottom of a tomb'*.

The fate of the young lovers is caused by the actions of others; they cannot change what happens, but they have to bear the consequences. The deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt lead to Romeo's exile and the proposed marriage of Juliet to Paris. She tries to avoid this and, as a result, Romeo kills himself just before she wakes. Juliet's fate is then in no doubt. Unable to live without Romeo, she ends her life.

There is a sense that nothing can stop the lovers' deaths. The audience will find this painful, as they see the actions of others causing the couple's difficulties and fate apparently controlling their future.

Activity 2

What part do you think fate plays in Romeo and Juliet's lives, or are their deaths just a result of the actions of others? Do you think they could have changed their fate?



Life and death

Throughout the play, we see opposite themes. The play contrasts **love and hate** and **life and death**. Death is talked about frequently and the characters are aware that death is a regular part of their lives. The deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt lead to more deaths and in Act 3, scene 2 we see Juliet's reaction to the fact that her husband has killed her cousin. She voices her despair: *'All slain, all dead.'* Juliet feels there

is also a form of death in that Romeo is banished and she tells her nurse to find him, so that they can have a *'last farewell'*.

Life is not celebrated in the way that death is in the play. The balcony scene shows us the lovers happy and pleased with their love. However, the joy of their marriage is short-lived, as Tybalt declares his intention to kill Romeo.

Activity 3

- 1 Check the text for references to death: find four or five different images of death and explain them.
- 2 Why has Shakespeare used them?
- 3 What is the audience's response to them likely to be?



Love

Love is the most important theme in the play. We see different types of love. We are shown the **unrequited love** of Romeo for Rosaline; the **love of the parents** of Romeo and Juliet for their children and finally the **passionate** and immediate love that Romeo and Juliet feel for each other from the moment they meet.

Romeo and Juliet are not just physically in love, but respect and value each other as well. They are honourable and marry before they celebrate their love physically. However, the intensity of their love makes them impulsive. With the help of the Nurse and the Friar they marry in secret, but give no thought to the consequences that they will have to deal with.

Romeo and Juliet mature quickly, but their passion stops them from thinking clearly. They do not tell of their marriage and are caught up in a tide of events that are the results of the response of the Friar to Juliet's parents insisting that she marries Paris. Their passion for each other causes them to die rather than be apart. Their tragedy is caused by their inability to tell their parents about their love and marriage.

Activity 4

In Act 5, scene 3 the Prince berates the families: ‘*See what a scourge is laid upon your hate.*’ Imagine you are visiting the Prince, and relate how he explained this tragic love story to you. Consider:

- The theme of love in the play
- How the characters behaved and their relationships with the families
- What the Prince tried to do
- What he thought about the whole episode.

Extension activity

In a group, map out the different themes in the play. Provide evidence from the text, which explains the themes to the audience.

Show which characters are involved in the particular themes.

Make the map on A3 paper and display it for others to see. Do they agree with your theme map?