

Romeo & Juliet Summary - © Evelyn O' Connor 2011

Act 1, Scene 1

In the first half of this scene, the Capulet servants Gregory & Sampson boast about what tough men they are. They say they want to fight their enemies the Montagues and sexually harass their women “*thrust his maids to the wall*”. Their boasting seems to be nothing but bravado. When two Montague servants appear, Gregory and Sampson make rude hand gestures but don’t want to be the ones to actually start a fight because they don’t want to get in trouble! They draw their swords and as the fight begins Benvolio Montague enters and orders them to stop “*Part fools! Put up your swords*”. However once Tybalt Capulet (Juliet’s cousin) arrives on the scene the tension increases. He seems to be spoiling for a fight and insults Benvolio “*what! drawn and talk of peace? I hate the word, as I hate hell, all Montagues and thee*”.

The fight becomes more vicious & violent until the parents of both families arrive. Old Capulet and Old Montague want to join in but their wives won’t let them! (we quickly see who wears the trousers in these relationships). The fighting only stops because the Prince enters and proclaims that anyone caught fighting again will be sentenced to death “*if ever you disturb our streets again, your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace*”.

The scene ends with Old Montague telling Benvolio that he is worried about his son (Benvolio’s cousin) Romeo. He had been very depressed lately but won’t tell anyone why “*Could we but learn from whence his sorrows grow, we would as willingly give cure as know*”. Romeo enters and he admits to Benvolio that he is lovesick. The woman he loves (Rosaline) has sworn to remain a virgin forever and has rejected Romeo. He complains that love is heartbreaking “*love is a smoke made with a fume of sighs*”. Benvolio encourages his cousin to chase other more beautiful women but Romeo claims he will never find a woman as beautiful as Rosaline.

Questions: Do you think this is a good opening scene?

Some possible points to develop:

- It’s funny.
- It’s very dramatic and filled with tension.
- It sets up one of the main plot lines for the rest of the play.
- We’re introduced to a main character (Romeo) & to the central themes of love & hate.

Act 1, Scene 2

Paris (a cousin of the Prince) seeks Old Capulet's permission to marry his daughter Juliet. At first he refuses, telling Paris that she is too young - not yet 14. He approves of Paris but also believes that she should have some say in who she marries and recommends "*woo her, gentle Paris, get her heart, my will to her consent is but a part*". He invites Paris to a party in his house that evening so that they can be formally introduced. They also discuss the feud and both seem relieved that an end might be in sight. Old Capulet says "*'tis not hard, I think, for men so old as we to keep the peace*". Paris responds "*and pity 'tis you liv'd at odds so long*".

Meanwhile, Romeo and Benvolio find out that the Capulets are having a party and decide to gatecrash. Romeo wants to see Roseline but Benvolio wants him to realise that there are plenty of better looking women in Verona!

Questions: What kind of father does Old Capulet seem?

Act 1, Scene 3

Lady Capulet tells her daughter Juliet that Paris wants to marry her. Juliet does not want to marry "*it is an honour I dream not of*" but she agrees to speak to him at the party (she wants to please her parents) "*I'll look to like if looking liking move, but no more deep will I endart mine eye*". Meanwhile, the Nurse talks fondly about Juliet as a child. She cannot believe her little mistress is all grown up. She jokes rudely about how Juliet will soon be lying on her back enjoying her nights & before they know it she'll be pregnant. There is a warmth in the relationship between Nurse & Juliet which doesn't seem to exist between mother & daughter.

Questions: What are our first impressions of Juliet?

Act 1, Scene 4

Romeo is still lovesick but his friends are in high spirits and are looking forward to dancing the night away at the party. Even though they are wearing masks, Romeo has had a bad (an ominous) dream & fears something bad will happen if they are discovered at the Capulet party "*my mind misgives*". However, the others convince him to come to the party anyway.

Questions: Why do you think Shakespeare makes Romeo reluctant to go to the party?

Act 1, Scene 5

Capulet welcomes the guests to his party and jokes about how he is too old to dance. Romeo wanders the room and sees Juliet for the first time. He is captivated by her beauty “*did my heart love til now? Forswear it sight. For I ne’er saw true beauty til this night*”. The key idea of love at first sight is introduced here. He approaches Juliet, claiming he is a pilgrim and she a Saint. He wants to worship her beauty by kissing her hand. They flirt and then kiss. Juliet dares him to kiss her properly, teasing him “*you kiss by the book*”. At this moment the Nurse interrupts their passionate embrace and sends Juliet away. She then reveals to Romeo that Juliet is the daughter of his enemy and he is shocked but not discouraged “*my life is my foe’s debt*”. Similarly when Juliet discovers Romeo’s identity she also feels distraught but believes it is too late to change how she feels, as she is already deeply in love

“My only love sprung from my only hate

Too early seen unknown and known too late

Prodigious birth of love it is to me

That I must love a loathed enemy”

The scene introduces the idea that their love was destiny, fate, written in the stars, a force more powerful than the hatred between their two families. Juliet’s love is as extreme as Romeo’s – she asks Nurse to find out if he is married, suggesting (already!) that she would rather die than live without him “*If he be married, my grave is like to be my wedding bed*”

However, this scene also reminds us that the feud is not yet over. When Tybalt recognises Romeo at the party, he is filled with rage, feeling that the Montagues have crashed the party to laugh at the Capulets “*come in spite, to scorn at our solemnity this night*”. He immediately wants to fight “*This, by his voice, should be a Montague. Fetch me my rapier boy... To strike him dead I hold it not a sin*”. Capulet stops him, saying that Romeo has a good reputation as a decent person, and telling Tybalt he must be a better host. Tybalt is furious at being told what to do and is determined to keep the feud alive. He vows that he will get revenge.

Questions:

- What is appealing about the idea of love at first sight? What is depressing about it?
- What do we learn about Juliet’s personality in this scene?
- What do we learn about Romeo’s personality in this scene?
- Which force seems more powerful in this scene – love or hate?

Act 2, Scene 1

Romeo wants to be alone so he gives his friends the slip. He wants to stay close to Juliet and so climbs the wall into the Capulet orchard. Mercutio tries to goad Romeo out of hiding by mocking him and his love for Rosaline but it doesn't work so they go home without him. The point of this scene is to emphasise that Romeo was never really in love with Rosaline as he got over her so quickly! It also lets us know that Romeo has kept his feelings for Juliet a secret from his friends.

Act 2, Scene 2

Romeo is under Juliet's window. Once again he speaks of her beauty "*what light through yonder window breaks? It is the East and Juliet is the sun*". He compares her to an angel and eavesdrops on her thoughts as she laments the fact that she has fallen in love with a Montague

"Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?

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"

Romeo then speaks, revealing himself and Juliet shows her sensible side – she is terrified that he will get caught "*If they do see thee, they will murder thee*". She is also embarrassed that he has overheard her innermost private thoughts and feelings. She is afraid that he will think she is too easily won over by men. She worries that their love will disappear as quickly as it appeared: "*it is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden*". She asks him to prove his love by marrying her. If he does, she will be his forever "*All my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay and follow thee my lord throughout the world*". He agrees instantly and says he will visit his friend Friar Lawrence and ask his help in arranging their marriage.

Questions:

- Why do you think this is one of the most famous romantic scenes ever written?
- What do we learn about Juliet's personality in this scene?
- What do we learn about Romeo's personality in this scene?

Act 2, Scene 3

Friar Lawrence is collecting herbs and plants to make medicine when Romeo enters having been awake all night. He confesses that he is in love with Juliet and asks the Friar to marry them. The Friar scolds Romeo, saying that he falls in and out of love too easily. Romeo protests that his love for Juliet is different – it's true love. The Friar agrees to help because he hopes it might bring the two feuding families together “*For this alliance may so happy prove, to turn your households' rancour to pure love*”.

Act 2, Scene 4

Mercutio & Benvolio are still looking for Romeo & they discuss the letter that Tybalt has sent challenging Romeo to a fight. Romeo will be under pressure to accept the challenge in order to defend his honour. They think Romeo could win but fear he will be defeated by Tybalt “*the Prince of Cats*” who is a skilled fighter. Romeo appears & the boys joke around. Mercutio is glad to see that Romeo is back to his old witty self. The Nurse enters asking to speak to Romeo. The boys joke that she is sexually interested in Romeo & she pretends to be offended but jokes back. When they leave, Nurse asks Romeo if his feelings for Juliet are genuine. Then she agrees to get Juliet to go to Friar Lawrence later that day so that they can be married in secret. Romeo asks her to collect a rope ladder from his servant & hang it from Juliet's window so that he can climb in her window & they can spend their wedding night together.

Questions:

- What do we learn about Romeo's personality in this scene?
- Why do we feel a sense of danger as well as excitement about the events that are about to unfold?

Act 2, Scene 5

Juliet is waiting impatiently for news from the Nurse. When she arrives she is out of breath, exhausted from her long walk and complaining about her bad back. Juliet begs the Nurse to tell her what Romeo said but the Nurse delays, teasing Juliet about how good-looking Romeo is. Juliet begs “*Sweet, sweet, sweet Nurse, tell me, what says my love?*” then gets angry, showing how eager she is to marry Romeo. Eventually the Nurse gives Juliet the message to go to Friar Lawrence's cell where she will marry Romeo in secret.

Questions:

- What do we learn about Juliet in this scene?
- What do we learn about the relationship between Juliet & her Nurse?

Act 2, Scene 6

The Friar worries that the marriage might not be such a good idea but Romeo is living in the excitement of the moment and says he will risk everything if it means he can be with Juliet “*Love devouring death do what he dare; it is enough I may but call her mine*”. The Friar is concerned that a love this passionate cannot last “*These violent delights have violent ends, and in their triumph die, like fire and powder which as they kiss consume*” Juliet enters and she and Romeo embrace. The Friar decides the best thing to do is to marry them quickly before they commit a sin and have sex (before marriage). The scene is calm & loving but we are warned of the danger lurking on the horizon (foreshadowing). Romeo is young and in love and refuses to allow this danger to effect his joy on marrying Juliet:

“...come what sorrow can / It cannot countervail the exchange of joy / That one short minute gives me in her sight”

Questions:

- What does this scene reveal about the theme of love?
- What does this scene reveal about Juliet?
- What does this scene reveal about Romeo?
- Why do the audience feel uncomfortable watching this scene?

Act 3, Scene 1:

The danger we anticipated in the last scene is immediately present. Benvolio, again playing the peacemaker, advises Mercutio that they should go home rather than risk meeting some Capulets “*if we meet, we shall not ‘scape a brawl; for now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring*” but Mercutio refuses, accusing Benvolio of being a hypocrite, as he has often fought for silly reasons. Tybalt appears, looking for Romeo whom he then insults “*thou art a villain*” but Romeo refuses to fight. Mercutio is furious with Romeo for backing down (“*vile submission*”) and challenges Tybalt in order to defend Romeo’s honour. They fight and Romeo tries to separate them. As he does Tybalt reaches under Romeo’s arm and stabs Mercutio, then runs away. Mercutio jokes about his injury “*ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man*” but when he realises how serious the injury is he curses both Romeo and Tybalt “*a plague on both your houses*”. Mercutio is helped offstage. Romeo is filled with guilt because he realises that if he hadn’t stepped in, Mercutio might not have been fatally wounded. He also starts to wonder if his love for Juliet has made him weaker, less of a man. Benvolio returns and announces that Mercutio is dead. At this point Tybalt returns and Romeo, filled with rage, challenges him. They fight and Romeo kills Tybalt but Romeo is immediately filled with remorse “*oh I am fortune’s fool*”. He disappears, aware that if he is caught he will be sentenced to death for breaking the peace in Verona. Furthermore he has just killed Juliet’s cousin. The Prince enters and Benvolio tells him what happened but defends Romeo’s actions saying he was provoked. Lady Capulet is furious and demands revenge “*Romeo slew Tybalt, Romeo must not live*”. The Prince announces his decision not to sentence Romeo to death, but to banish him from Verona forever as punishment for killing Tybalt.

This scene is the climax of the drama for a number of reasons:

1. The feud explodes again, resulting in the deaths of Mercutio & Tybalt.
2. It is now impossible for Romeo & Juliet to declare their love publicly – her family won’t accept Romeo now that he has killed one of their relatives.
3. Romeo is now banished from Verona and thus from his true love Juliet. If he returns he will be killed. Their marriage seems doomed.
4. Up to this point it seemed that love was more powerful than hate but Romeo’s efforts to appease Tybalt fail & now the feud seems destined to destroy Romeo & Juliet’s happiness.

Questions:

- This is considered one of the most exciting, dramatic and upsetting scenes in the play. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
- How do you feel about Romeo in this scene?

Act 3, Scene 2

Juliet is waiting in her bedroom for Romeo. She is excited and nervous about losing her virginity: "*O! I have bought the mansion of a love but not possessed it, though I am sold, not yet enjoy'd*". The Nurse enters crying "*He's dead, he's dead, he's dead*" and Juliet presumes she is talking about Romeo. The Nurse says nothing to persuade her otherwise, ranting on about the scene she has just witnessed "*All bedaubed in blood, all in gore blood*". The audience are filled with frustration at the Nurse and horror and pity when faced with Juliet's distress "*O break my heart!*" When the Nurse finally explains that Tybalt is dead and Romeo banished for killing him, Juliet is filled with conflicting emotions. At first she is angry at Romeo for killing her cousin and curses him "*O serpent heart*" yet when the Nurse proclaims "*There's no trust, no faith, no honesty in men*" Juliet cannot bear to hear somebody speak ill of Romeo. The Nurse is shocked "*will you speak well of him who has killed your cousin?*" but Juliet responds "*Will I speak ill of him who is my husband?*" Forced to choose between her family and Romeo, she proclaims she would rather die than live without him. Faced with Juliet's despair, the Nurse agrees to seek out Romeo and bring him to her to say farewell.

Questions: How do we feel about Juliet in this scene?

Act 3, Scene 3

The Friar tells Romeo of the “*Prince’s doom*”. He has shown mercy and the Friar urges Romeo to see this as good news but Romeo refuses to be comforted “*there is no world without Verona’s walls but purgatory, torture, hell itself*”. The Friar scolds him for saying he would rather die but Romeo cannot see beyond the fact that he is about to be separated from everything he loves especially Juliet

“tis torture and not mercy, heaven is here where Juliet lives; and every cat and dog and little mouse, every unworthy thing, live here in heaven and may look on her; but Romeo may not”

The Nurse comes, telling them how broken-hearted Juliet is “*she says nothing, sir, but weeps and weeps; and now falls on her bed*”. Romeo is so filled with guilt that he grabs a dagger and is about to stab himself but the Nurse snatches it away. The Friar is once again furious “*Hold thy desperate hand...thy tears are womanish*” Eventually after much giving out the Friar comes up with a plan. Romeo should say one last goodbye to Juliet but he must leave her before sunrise so that they can smuggle him out of the city. From there he shall “*pass to Mantua, where thou shall live until we can find the time to blaze (announce) your marriage, reconcile your friends, beg pardon of the Prince and call thee back*”. The Nurse gives Romeo the message that Juliet still loves him and wants to see him. Juliet has sent a ring as proof of her love (and as proof that it’s not a trap!).

Questions:

- How do we feel about Romeo in this scene?
- Does it seem likely that they will find a way to be together?

Act 3, Scene 4

Paris arrives at Juliet's house and wants to know if her father has made a decision on whether or not he can marry Juliet. Capulet is distracted by Tybalt's death and embarrassed that he hasn't yet mentioned Paris' intentions/interest to Juliet so he makes a snap decision to approve of the marriage. He feels certain she will be happy with the match (remember her family know nothing of her feelings for Romeo) saying "*I think she will be ruled in all respects by me*". He announces to Paris that their marriage will take place in 3 days time on Thursday and it will be a small family wedding out of respect for Tybalt's memory. Unintentionally her father places Juliet in an extremely difficult situation – she cannot marry Paris as she is already married, but she cannot explain to her parents why she won't marry him as they will never accept Romeo now that he has killed one of their relatives.

Questions:

- ☒ How do you feel about Juliet's father in this scene?

Act 3, scene 5

Romeo & Juliet have spent the night together but it is almost daybreak and Romeo must leave "*I must be gone and live or stay and die*". Juliet is heartbroken but lets him leave reluctantly "*O think'st thou we shall ever meet again?*" Her mother knocks on her door and Juliet pretends she is sick and weeping over Tybalt's death. Lady Capulet reveals that she wants to have the "*traitor murderer*" Romeo killed by poisoning him. Juliet reveals that she is a very quick thinker and asks if she can be the one to arrange Romeo's murder (this is the only way she can protect him). Lady Capulet then tells Juliet that she is to marry Paris in three days time. Juliet refuses "*I will not marry yet*". Old Capulet, her father, then enters and asks his wife if she has delivered the news. Lady Capulet reveals her fury that Juliet wants to reject such a wonderful man "*I would the fool were married to her grave*". Old Capulet, on hearing this news, rants and raves at his daughter for daring to disobey him "*disobedient wretch*". He is so angry he is tempted to strike her "*my fingers itch*". The Nurse tries to defend Juliet "*You are to blame my lord to rate her so*" but Capulet silences her "*Peace, you mumbling fool*". He then warns Juliet that if she won't marry Paris she will be thrown out of the house and cut off from her family forever "*hang, beg, starve, die in the streets, for by my soul I'll ne'er acknowledge thee nor what is mine shall never do thee good*". He storms out and Juliet begs her mother to have some pity "*O sweet my mother cast me not away*" but she will not listen "*do as thou wilt, I have done with thee*". In desperation Juliet turns to the Nurse "*comfort me, counsel me*" but she does not like the advice the Nurse gives her, to marry Paris and forget Romeo. Juliet sarcastically pretends to accept the Nurse's advice "*well thou hast comforted me marvellous much*". She pretends to be sorry for disobeying her parents and asks the Nurse to tell her parents she has gone to Friar Lawrence's cell to confess her sins. However, once the Nurse leaves she reveals that she no longer trusts the Nurse and feels angry and betrayed. If the Friar doesn't come up with a solution she will kill herself "*if all else fail myself have power to die*".

Questions:

- Has your opinion of Juliet's relationship with her father changed after watching this scene?
- Why do you think Juliet cuts herself off from everyone, even the Nurse?

Act 4, Scene 1

Paris goes to Friar Lawrence & asks him to perform the marriage ceremony on Thursday. Juliet arrives & Paris is very worried about her "*Poor soul thy face is much abused with tears*". Friar Lawrence says that Juliet is here for confession & out of politeness Paris leaves. All in all Paris seems like a good, caring & honourable man. However, Juliet will not commit the sin of bigamy & refuses to betray Romeo, her true love. She would rather "*go into a new made grave*" & hide "*with a dead man in his tomb*". If the Friar can't find a solution she will kill herself "*I long to die*". The Friar suggests that she fake her own death using a special poison which will make her seem dead but whose effects only last for 48hrs. She will be placed on a stone slab in the Capulet vault. The Friar will send a letter to Romeo telling him the plan. When she wakes up Romeo will be there & they can sneak away to Mantua. They'll live happily ever after & no-one will come after them because they'll all think Juliet is dead.

Questions: What is revealed about Juliet's personality in this scene?

Act 4, scene 2

The Capulet household are preparing for the wedding and seem to be inviting a lot of guests despite their vow to honour Tybalt's memory. Capulet is still angry with Juliet describing her as a stubborn whiny whore "*peevish self-willed harlotry*". However, once he learns that Juliet has repented her sin of disobeying her parents, he forgives her "*my heart is wondrous light since this same wayward girl is so reclaimed*". He is so enthusiastic he decides to bring the wedding forward to the following morning.

Questions: Is Capulet's love for his daughter conditional or unconditional?

Act 4, scene 3

Juliet convinces the Nurse & her mother to leave her alone in her room. As she prepares to take the poison she begins to panic. What if it really kills her? What if it doesn't work at all? (she decides she will kill herself with a knife rather than marry Paris if this happens). What if Romeo is too late and she suffocates in the tomb? What if the spirits of her dead ancestors drive her insane and she begins to play with their corpses, finally cracking up and deciding to "*dash out my desperate brains*". Finally, filled with fear but determined to find a way of being with her true love, she takes the poison "*Romeo, Romeo, I drink to thee*". Her powerful passionate love for Romeo is obviously the greatest force in her life.

Questions: What does this scene reveal about love?

Act 4, scene 4

Capulet and Lady Capulet are in high spirits preparing for the wedding feast. Capulet says he'll stay up all night if he has to, to get everything ready, and his wife teases him that when he was younger the only thing that kept him up all night was chasing women. The atmosphere in this scene is lighthearted and full of excitement. The audience feel sick and cringe at their enthusiasm. We know that they are about to find Juliet's body and we pity them. This scene also allows enough passage of time for the poison to work.

Questions: Are our feelings towards Juliet's parents softened by this scene?

Act 4, Scene 5

The Nurse tries to wake Juliet joking that she needs all the rest she can get now, because Paris will keep her up all night on their wedding night! She then realises that Juliet is dead and roars for help. Juliet's parents enter and begin a terrible lament grieving for Juliet. The Friar tries to calm them down and comfort them by saying that Juliet is gone to a better place – heaven.

Act 5, Scene 1

Romeo's servant Balthasar brings news that Juliet is dead. Romeo, devastated, resolves to go to her tomb, say one last goodbye and then kill himself. He buys a vial of poison from an apothecary.

Act 5, Scene 2

The Friar's messenger tells the Friar that he was unable to deliver the letter to Romeo which would have explained to Romeo that Juliet wasn't really dead. The Friar decides to go to the tomb to be there when Juliet wakes up. He thinks he can write a second letter to Romeo. However, we the audience know that Romeo is already on his way to the tomb and we are now witnessing a race against time to prevent him from killing himself before he finds out the truth (Juliet is alive).

Act 5, Scene 3

Paris arrives to lay flowers in Juliet's tomb. He is quite upset and wants privacy so he asks his servant to keep watch and whistle if he sees anyone approach. The servant whistles as Romeo appears. Romeo gives his servant a letter to give to his father explaining everything that has happened. He then makes his servant promise not to enter the tomb no matter what he hears or Romeo will kill him. As Romeo begins to open the tomb, Paris recognises him and suspects he is there to vandalise the tomb and disrespect the dead. He attempts to arrest Romeo. Again, as with Tybalt, Romeo does not want to fight "*I beseech thee youth, put not another sin upon my head*" but Paris refuses to back down. They fight and Paris dies. His final dying words are "*lay me with Juliet*".

Romeo realises that the man he killed was Paris, who was supposed to marry Juliet. He shows enormous strength of character and understanding when he carries Paris' body into the tomb thus obeying his dying wishes. It would have been much easier for Romeo to blame Paris for what has happened but he doesn't. Instead he accepts that Paris was just like him – completely devoted to Juliet. Romeo looks on Juliet one last time and observes (ironically) that she looks as though she is sleeping, not dead:

"crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks.." "*Ah, dear Juliet, why art thou yet so fair?*"

The audience feel frustrated that he doesn't realise the truth. The sense of tragedy is heightened as Romeo drinks the poison "*thus with a kiss I die*" and we know that his death is completely unnecessary as Juliet will soon awaken. The inevitability of her waking up to find him lying dead upon her fills us with horror, as she has been through so much to try to keep them together. The Friar arrives and Juliet awakens. He tries to convince her to leave with him when he hears the sound of guards outside. He leaves without her, a cowardly act which leaves a distraught Juliet alone in the tomb with Romeo's corpse. She kisses his lips and cruelly they are still warm. Again the audience are reminded how easily this tragedy could have been avoided – if Juliet had woken up five minutes earlier Romeo would still be alive. She hears people coming, grabs Romeo's dagger and kills herself.

The bodies are discovered and the Prince and the two families arrive at the tomb. The Friar tells them the whole story. The Prince forces them to accept that the feud has brought about this tragedy. All have lost dear relatives – Mercutio, Tybalt, Paris, Romeo, Juliet, Lady Montague "*all are punished*". They agree to end the feud but the atmosphere of sorrow and loss remains "*the sun for sorrow will not show his head*" "*for never was a story of more woe, than this of Juliet and her Romeo*".

Questions: This is one of the most tragic scenes in all of Shakespeare – explain why!