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Teaching William Shakespeare's

Romeo and Juliet

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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

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Prestwick House

General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Romeo and Juliet*

*R*OMEO AND JULIET is a play, or, more specifically, a tragedy, yet, in some ways, it complicates the definition of Shakespearean tragedy. A Shakespearean tragedy generally involves a **tragic hero** (*Romeo and Juliet* contains a hero, Romeo, as well as a heroine, Juliet. However, Romeo figures as the central heroic character and most successfully fits the definition of the tragic hero). The tragic hero occupies an **elevated position in his society** (Romeo is the only son of the socially prominent Montague family of Verona. He is a also close friend of the Prince's kinsman Mercutio). The hero is marked by a **key character trait**, often a **tragic flaw** (Romeo displays several characteristics that can be considered tragic flaws: his youthful rashness and uncontrolled passion, as well as his immaturity, play a core role in determining the outcome of the play).

This tragic flaw motivates the hero to perform a particular **action** or set in motion a **series of actions** (Romeo encounters Juliet's kinsman Tybalt in the streets of Verona. Fueled by the long-standing feud between the Capulets and the Montagues, a fight ensues between Tybalt, on the one side, and Romeo and Mercutio on the other. When Tybalt kills Mercutio, Romeo avenges Mercutio's death and kills Tybalt. The tragic encounter and Tybalt's death lead to Romeo's banishment). Often, the hero's **inability or failure to make the right decision** functions as a catalyst to the action or series of actions (Romeo makes a mistake when he hastily kills Tybalt and provokes his own banishment; he makes yet another mistake when he slays Paris and poisons himself in a moment of desperation. Romeo and Juliet's decision to marry secretly without the consent of their parents can likewise be viewed as an irresponsible act of disobedience). Sometimes, **outside forces** (a villain or intruder, supernatural intervention, fate) likewise contribute to the hero's deeds and subsequent downfall (Friar Lawrence offers some very bad advice about Romeo and Juliet's secret marriage. Romeo never receives the letter from Friar Lawrence informing him of Juliet's faked death.)

The series of actions set in motion by the tragic hero and/or outside forces creates **intense suffering and desolation both for the hero and for the society at large** (Romeo is banished from Verona; therefore, he cannot see Juliet, his new wife. When Juliet's parents attempt to force their daughter to marry Paris, she decides to seek the help of Friar Lawrence to escape her family in Verona and find Romeo. Friar Lawrence's plan to fake Juliet's death and subsequently enable Romeo to take her out of the city fails when Romeo learns about the plan too late and believes his beloved to be deceased. Heartbroken, Romeo seeks out Juliet's tomb, slays Paris, and subsequently poisons himself. When Juliet awakens from her drug-induced sleep, she sees the dead Romeo at her side and takes her own life with a dagger. The entire city of Verona laments the unnecessary loss of so many noble citizens). Eventually, **the hero dies** (Romeo, believing his beloved Juliet to be dead, kills himself by ingesting poison). The few survivors lament the tragic events and promise to restore order and peace (The Prince of Verona views the tragic deaths that have occurred as a punishment for the long-standing violent feud between the Capulets and the Montagues. The two families vow to erect statues in honor of Romeo and Juliet as a reminder that unnecessary fighting and rivalry only result in tragedy).

Feminist Criticism Applied to *Romeo and Juliet*

Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the "modern woman."

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.

Activity One

Examining Juliet's Role as Wife and Daughter in A Patriarchal Society

1. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) examine the following scenes:

    • Act I, Scene III
    • Act III, Scene V
    • Act IV, Scene II

2. Ask students to take detailed notes on the following ideas:

    • Juliet's attitude and behavior toward her parents before and after meeting Romeo
    • Juliet's attitude toward filial obedience, marriage, honor, and virtue
    • The Capulets' expectations with regard to their daughter

3. Use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion:

    • Before meeting Romeo, how does Juliet view the prospect of marriage?

    • Before meeting Romeo, how does Juliet evaluate the right of her parents to choose her husband?

    • How does Capulet expect Juliet will respond upon hearing that her wedding day has been set? Why does he expect this particular response?

    • What language does Capulet use to address Juliet when she expresses her refusal to marry Paris? What does this language indicate about Capulet's attitude toward Juliet? Toward women in general?

    • What is the relationship between disobedience and death as expressed by Capulet and Lady Capulet? What does the connection between disobedience and death as expressed by Juliet's parents reveal about the importance or power of the patriarchal state?

    • Why does Juliet say she would choose death—suicide—over marriage to Paris? What does Juliet's decision to die in case no other solution becomes available reveal about a woman's status in her society? About a woman's power or lack of power?

    • Why does Juliet profess to regret her "disobedient opposition" (IV, II) after visiting Friar Lawrence?

    • Why does Juliet turn to Friar Lawrence for help?

Psychoanalytical/Freudian Criticism
Applied to *Romeo and Juliet*

Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS "PSYCHOLOGICAL," OR "PSYCHOANALYTICAL," OR "Freudian Theory" seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.

- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

17. Are there any inner conflicts within the character? How are these conflicts revealed? How are they dealt with? Are they ever resolved? How?

18. Do any characters perform uncharacteristic actions? If so, what? What could these actions mean?

Focus of Study

• Compare and contrast the language used to describe Romeo's love for Rosaline with the language used to describe his love for Juliet

• Examine the connection between love and hate and the psychological implications for Romeo and Juliet

• Study the significance of Rosaline's silence

• Examine the connection between adolescence and the Freudian concepts of the id, ego, and superego

Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *Romeo and Juliet*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all very closely interrelated. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who read texts with the mythological/archetypal approach are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested" ("The Problem of Types in Poetry" 1923). He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology (long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe). Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Examining Romeo and Juliet as Archetypal Heroes

1. Copy and distribute the handout *Romeo and Juliet* Archetypal Activity One Worksheet

2. Divide class into pairs or small groups. Assign the character of Romeo or Juliet to each and have students discuss the extent to which their character fulfills the role of archetypal hero and fill in the necessary information on the handout

3. During the small groups' review of the play and completion of the worksheet, have them consider the following for their character:

Romeo

• Does Romeo stand apart from his social equals (Mercutio, Benvolio) in the text? If yes, how?

• Given Romeo's passion for Rosaline when we first meet him followed by his sudden and deep love for Juliet, what can be inferred about Romeo's need *not* to be isolated or alienated?

• How does Romeo's quest for love mirror his quest for self-identity or self-fulfillment?

• What can be inferred from Romeo's apparent willingness to help heal the feud between the Capulet and Montague families?

• How significant is Romeo's exile from Verona?

• What progress does Romeo's death bring to the society in which he lives?

• How does society reflect on Romeo's life and death?

Juliet

• What differentiates Juliet's character from other female characters in the play? Specifically, what sets Juliet apart from her social equal, Rosaline?

• Is Juliet focused on finding an idealized, reciprocated love relationship? Why or why not?