

## Character List

**Romeo** - The son and heir of Montague and Lady Montague. A young man of about sixteen, Romeo is handsome, intelligent, and sensitive. Though impulsive and immature, his idealism and passion make him an extremely likable character. He lives in the middle of a violent feud between his family and the Capulets, but he is not at all interested in violence. His only interest is love. At the beginning of the play he is madly in love with a woman named Rosaline, but the instant he lays eyes on Juliet, he falls in love with her and forgets Rosaline. Thus, Shakespeare gives us every reason to question how real Romeo's new love is, but Romeo goes to extremes to prove the seriousness of his feelings. He secretly marries Juliet, the daughter of his father's worst enemy; he happily takes abuse from Tybalt; and he would rather die than live without his beloved. Romeo is also an affectionate and devoted friend to his relative Benvolio, Mercutio, and Friar Lawrence.

The name **Romeo**, in popular culture, has become nearly synonymous with "lover." Romeo, in *Romeo and Juliet*, does indeed experience a love of such purity and passion that he kills himself when he believes that the object of his love, **Juliet**, has died. The power of Romeo's love, however, often obscures a clear vision of Romeo's character, which is far more complex.

Even Romeo's relation to love is not so simple. At the beginning of the play, Romeo pines for **Rosaline**, proclaiming her the paragon of women and despairing at her indifference toward him. Taken together, Romeo's Rosaline-induced histrionics seem rather juvenile. Romeo is a great reader of love poetry, and the portrayal of his love for Rosaline suggests he is trying to re-create the feelings that he has read about. After first kissing Juliet, she tells him "you kiss by th' book," meaning that he kisses according to the rules, and implying that while proficient, his kissing lacks originality (I.v.107). In reference to Rosaline, it seems, Romeo loves by the book. Rosaline, of course, slips from Romeo's mind at first sight of Juliet. But Juliet is no mere replacement. The love she shares with Romeo is far deeper, more authentic and unique than the clichéd puppy love Romeo felt for Rosaline. Romeo's love matures over the course of the play from the shallow desire to be in love to a profound and intense passion. One must ascribe Romeo's development at least in part to Juliet. Her level-headed observations, such as the one about Romeo's kissing, seem just the thing to snap Romeo from his superficial idea of love and to inspire him to begin to speak some of the most beautiful and intense love poetry ever written.

Yet Romeo's deep capacity for love is merely a part of his larger capacity for intense feeling of all kinds. Put another way, it is possible to describe Romeo as lacking the capacity for moderation. Love compels him to sneak into the garden of his enemy's daughter, risking death simply to catch a glimpse of her. Anger compels him to kill his wife's cousin in a reckless duel to avenge the death of his friend. Despair compels him to suicide upon hearing of Juliet's death. Such extreme behavior dominates Romeo's

character throughout the play and contributes to the ultimate tragedy that befalls the lovers. Had Romeo restrained himself from killing [Tybalt](#), or waited even one day before killing himself after hearing the news of Juliet's death, matters might have ended happily. Of course, though, had Romeo not had such depths of feeling, the love he shared with Juliet would never have existed in the first place.

Among his friends, especially while bantering with [Mercutio](#), Romeo shows glimpses of his social persona. He is intelligent, quick-witted, fond of verbal jousting (particularly about sex), loyal, and unafraid of danger.

**Juliet** - The daughter of Capulet and Lady Capulet. A beautiful thirteen-year-old girl, Juliet begins the play as a naïve child who has thought little about love and marriage, but she grows up quickly upon falling in love with Romeo, the son of her family's great enemy. Because she is a girl in an aristocratic family, she has none of the freedom Romeo has to roam around the city, climb over walls in the middle of the night, or get into swordfights. Nevertheless, she shows amazing courage in trusting her entire life and future to Romeo, even refusing to believe the worst reports about him after he gets involved in a fight with her cousin. Juliet's closest friend and confidant is her Nurse, though she's willing to shut the Nurse out of her life the moment the Nurse turns against Romeo.

Having not quite reached her fourteenth birthday, [Juliet](#) is of an age that stands on the border between immaturity and maturity. At the play's beginning however she seems merely an obedient, sheltered, naïve child. Though many girls her age—including her mother—get married, Juliet has not given the subject any thought. When [Lady Capulet](#) mentions [Paris](#)'s interest in marrying Juliet, Juliet dutifully responds that she will try to see if she can love him, a response that seems childish in its obedience and in its immature conception of love. Juliet seems to have no friends her own age, and she is not comfortable talking about sex (as seen in her discomfort when the Nurse goes on and on about a sexual joke at Juliet's expense in Act I, scene iii).

Juliet gives glimpses of her determination, strength, and sober-mindedness, in her earliest scenes, and offers a preview of the woman she will become during the five-day span of *Romeo and Juliet*. While Lady Capulet proves unable to quiet the Nurse, Juliet succeeds with one word (also in Act I, scene iii). In addition, even in Juliet's dutiful acquiescence to try to love Paris, there is some seed of steely determination. Juliet promises to consider Paris as a possible husband to the precise degree her mother desires. While an outward show of obedience, such a statement can also be read as a refusal through passivity. Juliet will accede to her mother's wishes, but she will not go out of her way to fall in love with Paris.

Juliet's first meeting with [Romeo](#) propels her full-force toward adulthood. Though profoundly in love with him, Juliet is able to see and criticize Romeo's rash decisions and his tendency to romanticize things. After Romeo kills [Tybalt](#) and is banished, Juliet does not follow him blindly. She makes a logical and heartfelt decision that her loyalty

and love for Romeo must be her guiding priorities. Essentially, Juliet cuts herself loose from her prior social moorings—her Nurse, her parents, and her social position in Verona—in order to try to reunite with Romeo. When she wakes in the tomb to find Romeo dead, she does not kill herself out of feminine weakness, but rather out of an intensity of love, just as Romeo did. Juliet’s suicide actually requires more nerve than Romeo’s: while he swallows poison, she stabs herself through the heart with a dagger. Juliet’s development from a wide-eyed girl into a self-assured, loyal, and capable woman is one of Shakespeare’s early triumphs of characterization. It also marks one of his most confident and rounded treatments of a female character.

### **Friar Lawrence**

**Friar Lawrence** occupies a strange position territory in *Romeo and Juliet*. He is a kindhearted cleric who helps Romeo and Juliet throughout the play. He performs their marriage and gives generally good advice, especially in regard to the need for moderation. He is the sole figure of religion in the play. But Friar Lawrence is also the most scheming and political of characters in the play: he marries Romeo and Juliet as part of a plan to end the civil strife in Verona; he spirits Romeo into Juliet’s room and then out of Verona; he devises the plan to reunite Romeo and Juliet through the deceptive ruse of a sleeping potion that seems to arise from almost mystic knowledge. This mystical knowledge seems out of place for a Catholic friar; why does he have such knowledge, and what could such knowledge mean? The answers are not clear. In addition, though Friar Lawrence’s plans all seem well conceived and well intentioned, they serve as the main mechanisms through which the fated tragedy of the play occurs. Readers should recognize that the Friar is not only subject to the fate that dominates the play—in many ways he brings that fate about.

### **Mercutio**

With a lightning-quick wit and a clever mind, Mercutio is a scene stealer and one of the most memorable characters in all of Shakespeare’s works. Though he constantly puns, jokes, and teases—sometimes in fun, sometimes with bitterness—Mercutio is not a mere jester or prankster. With his wild words, Mercutio punctures the romantic sentiments and blind self-love that exist within the play. He mocks Romeo’s self-indulgence just as he ridicules Tybalt’s hauteur and adherence to fashion. The critic Stephen Greenblatt describes Mercutio as a force within the play that functions to deflate the possibility of romantic love and the power of tragic fate. Unlike the other characters who blame their deaths on fate, Mercutio dies cursing all Montagues and Capulets. Mercutio believes that specific people are responsible for his death rather than some external impersonal force.

## Themes

### The Forcefulness of Love

*Romeo and Juliet* is the most famous love story in the English literary tradition. Love is naturally the play's dominant and most important theme. The play focuses on romantic love, specifically the intense passion that springs up at first sight between Romeo and Juliet. In *Romeo and Juliet*, love is a violent, ecstatic, overpowering force that supersedes all other values, loyalties, and emotions. In the course of the play, the young lovers are driven to defy their entire social world: families ("Deny thy father and refuse thy name," Juliet asks, "Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, / And I'll no longer be a Capulet"); friends (Romeo abandons Mercutio and Benvolio after the feast in order to go to Juliet's garden); and ruler (Romeo returns to Verona for Juliet's sake after being exiled by the Prince on pain of death in II.i.76–78). Love is the overriding theme of the play, but a reader should always remember that Shakespeare is uninterested in portraying a prettied-up, dainty version of the emotion, the kind that bad poets write about, and whose bad poetry Romeo reads while pining for Rosaline. Love in *Romeo and Juliet* is a brutal, powerful emotion that captures individuals and catapults them against their world, and, at times, against themselves.

The powerful nature of love can be seen in the way it is described, or, more accurately, the way descriptions of it so consistently fail to capture its entirety. At times love is described in the terms of religion, as in the fourteen lines when Romeo and Juliet first meet. At others it is described as a sort of magic: "Alike bewitchèd by the charm of looks" (II.Prologue.6). Juliet, perhaps, most perfectly describes her love for Romeo by refusing to describe it: "But my true love is grown to such excess / I cannot sum up some of half my wealth" (III.i.33–34). Love, in other words, resists any single metaphor because it is too powerful to be so easily contained or understood.

*Romeo and Juliet* does not make a specific moral statement about the relationships between love and society, religion, and family; rather, it portrays the chaos and passion of being in love, combining images of love, violence, death, religion, and family in an impressionistic rush leading to the play's tragic conclusion.

### Love as a Cause of Violence

The themes of death and violence permeate *Romeo and Juliet*, and they are always connected to passion, whether that passion is love or hate. The connection between hate, violence, and death seems obvious. But the connection between love and violence requires further investigation.

Love, in *Romeo and Juliet*, is a grand passion, and as such it is blinding; it can overwhelm a person as powerfully and completely as hate can. The passionate love between Romeo and Juliet is linked from the moment of its inception with death: Tybalt notices that Romeo has crashed the feast and determines to kill him just as Romeo catches sight of Juliet and falls instantly in love with her. From that point on, love seems

to push the lovers closer to love and violence, not farther from it. Romeo and Juliet are plagued with thoughts of suicide, and a willingness to experience it: in Act III, scene iii, Romeo brandishes a knife in Friar Lawrence's cell and threatens to kill himself after he has been banished from Verona and his love. Juliet also pulls a knife in order to take her own life in Friar Lawrence's presence just three scenes later. After Capulet decides that Juliet will marry Paris, Juliet says, "If all else fail, myself have power to die" (III.v.242). Finally, each imagines that the other looks dead the morning after their first, and only, sexual experience ("Methinks I see thee," Juliet says, ". . . as one dead in the bottom of a tomb" (III.v.242; III.v.55–56). This theme continues until its inevitable conclusion: double suicide. This tragic choice is the highest, most potent expression of love that Romeo and Juliet can make. It is only through death that they can preserve their love, and their love is so profound that they are willing to end their lives in its defense. In the play, love emerges as an amoral thing, leading as much to destruction as to happiness. But in its extreme passion, the love that Romeo and Juliet experience also appears so exquisitely beautiful that few would want, or be able, to resist its power.

### **The Individual Versus Society**

Much of *Romeo and Juliet* involves the lovers' struggles against public and social institutions that either explicitly or implicitly oppose the existence of their love. Such structures range from the concrete to the abstract: families and the placement of familial power in the father; law and the desire for public order; religion; and the social importance placed on masculine honor. These institutions often come into conflict with each other. The importance of honor, for example, time and again results in brawls that disturb the public peace.

Though they do not always work in concert, each of these societal institutions in some way present obstacles for Romeo and Juliet. The enmity between their families, coupled with the emphasis placed on loyalty and honor to kin, combine to create a profound conflict for Romeo and Juliet, who must rebel against their heritages. Further, the patriarchal power structure inherent in Renaissance families, wherein the father controls the action of all other family members, particularly women, places Juliet in an extremely vulnerable position. Her heart, in her family's mind, is not hers to give. The law and the emphasis on social civility demands terms of conduct with which the blind passion of love cannot comply. Religion similarly demands priorities that Romeo and Juliet cannot abide by because of the intensity of their love. Though in most situations the lovers uphold the traditions of Christianity (they wait to marry before consummating their love), their love is so powerful that they begin to think of each other in blasphemous terms. For example, Juliet calls Romeo "the god of my idolatry," elevating Romeo to level of God (II.i.156). The couple's final act of suicide is likewise un-Christian. The maintenance of masculine honor forces Romeo to commit actions he would prefer to avoid. But the social emphasis placed on masculine honor is so profound that Romeo cannot simply ignore them.

It is possible to see *Romeo and Juliet* as a battle between the responsibilities and actions demanded by social institutions and those demanded by the private desires of the individual. Romeo and Juliet's appreciation of night, with its darkness and privacy, and their renunciation of their names, with its attendant loss of obligation, make sense in the context of individuals who wish to escape the public world. But the lovers cannot stop the night from becoming day. And Romeo cannot cease being a Montague simply because he wants to; the rest of the world will not let him. The lovers' suicides can be understood as the ultimate night, the ultimate privacy.

### **The Inevitability of Fate**

In its first address to the audience, the Chorus states that Romeo and Juliet are "star-crossed"—that is to say that fate (a power often vested in the movements of the stars) controls them (Prologue.6). This sense of fate permeates the play, and not just for the audience. The characters also are quite aware of it: Romeo and Juliet constantly see omens. When Romeo believes that Juliet is dead, he cries out, "Then I defy you, stars," completing the idea that the love between Romeo and Juliet is in opposition to the decrees of destiny (V.i.24). Of course, Romeo's defiance itself plays into the hands of fate, and his determination to spend eternity with Juliet results in their deaths. The mechanism of fate works in all of the events surrounding the lovers: the feud between their families (it is worth noting that this hatred is never explained; rather, the reader must accept it as an undeniable aspect of the world of the play); the horrible series of accidents that ruin Friar Lawrence's seemingly well-intentioned plans at the end of the play; and the tragic timing of Romeo's suicide and Juliet's awakening. These events are not mere coincidences, but rather manifestations of fate that help bring about the unavoidable outcome of the young lovers' deaths.

The concept of fate described above is the most commonly accepted interpretation. There are other possible readings of fate in the play: as a force determined by the powerful social institutions that influence Romeo and Juliet's choices, as well as fate as a force that emerges from Romeo and Juliet's very personalities.