

The story of **Romeo and Juliet** had existed in folk tale form for many years before Shakespeare wrote it into a play. The story of young lovers from opposing families who chose death rather than being separated is common in literature and other Shakespeare plays.

The play shows how extreme passion leads to disaster '*violent delights have violent ends.*'

The story contains a number of 'stock characters' or stereotypes which were common in literature: meddling friars; an argumentative old nurse; an angry and over-protective set of parents; young lovers; feuding young men; aggressive aristocrats.

Many of Shakespeare's plays deal with difficult family relationships, particularly fathers' oppositions to their daughters' desires to marry. Feuding families are also a common theme in Shakespeare's plays.

Several sonnets are spoken in the play. Traditionally sonnets had love as their main theme and focus. Shakespeare's audience would have been very familiar with the sound, language and rhythm of sonnets and would have appreciated his sonnet-writing skills. Shakespeare was a celebrated master of writing sonnets.

Romeo and Juliet is part of an Elizabethan appetite for revenge tragedies which was a very popular form of entertainment at the time. Shakespeare included many conventional aspects of tragedy but expanded it further in this play. The young lovers are tragically separated and destroyed by powers outside of their control.

Many aspects of Shakespeare's plays would have been very familiar to Elizabethan audiences: street fights and brawls; violence and death; masked balls and dances; potions and medicines in apothecaries' shops; strong male friendships. Patriarchal attitudes and authority; the roles and responsibilities of children and attitudes towards family; the plague, religion and attitudes towards death are all significant throughout the play.

Shakespeare re-defined the genre of tragedy. Instead of kings, princes and powerful nobles, but *Romeo and Juliet* are very different: they are young, innocent and in love. They have no power and this is the very nature of their tragedy. Theirs is a domestic tragedy and it takes place in a play which also contains comedy which many previous tragedies did not.

Although he was redefining the tragedy genre, he made sure the conventions were still there. The characters may not be nobles, but they experience a loss of fortune (not financial!) and go from a state of happiness to suffering and then to death. Like classical tragedy, R & J is a story of loss and waste. Young lovers are destroyed by powers beyond their control.

Sons and daughters were expected to be obedient to their parents, particularly their fathers. There is some evidence that children had some say over their choice of husband or wife. Capulet certainly urges Paris to woo Juliet, but suggests that her consent is important too. Women usually married in their 20s. Juliet was particularly young in the play perhaps to emphasise the tragedy

Religion was an important part of many people's lives and religious language and imagery can be seen throughout the play. Modern audiences have much less knowledge than Shakespearean ones about the influence of religion. Setting the play in Catholic Italy made audiences particularly intrigued and the suicide at the end would have been very shocking. More than a 'love story' R&J would have been seen as scandalous!

Juliet's behavior in kissing Romeo on their first meeting would have been shocking and beyond the bounds of respectable behaviour! Don't forget also that Juliet would have been played by a young man as it was illegal for women to be on stage.

Mercutio's curse of 'A plague a'both your houses' would have had particular meaning for an Elizabethan audience. An outbreak of the plague had closed all theatres in London in 1593-4 and the plague was a constant threat. Children dying before their parents on and off stage was always a tragic event that audiences would have well-understood as England and Europe's populations were decimated by the plagues.