

ROMEO AND JULIET



Romeo and Juliet is a story of universal appeal – it is one of the world’s great stories: that of love transcending social barriers. The Verona of Shakespeare’s play is a highly commercial, competitive society. The two lovers offend against the society they live in by rejecting its value system. The action of the play takes place over a few days. It is as if from the moment the lovers meet they plunge headlong towards disaster.

Paradoxically, in death, the victims are also the victors. Their love for each other is transmitted to their families. The feud is ended. The dream has altered the reality.

FATE

Fate plays a decisive role in the play. The “starcrossed” lovers are seen as victims of Fortune. “O, I am fortune’s fool!” cries Romeo after killing Tybalt. His fate is dictated by the stars. On his way to the Capulets’ feast, where he will meet and fall in love with Juliet, Romeo has a premonition of doom, and when he hears of Juliet’s supposed death, he cries out, “Is it e’en so? Then I defy you, stars!”



LANGUAGE

The language of the play is the language of poetry. When the two lovers meet for the first time the words they exchange actually take the form of a Shakespearean sonnet, the meeting of rhyme in the final couplet being a reflection of the lovers’ first kiss.

DREAM / REALITY

The dream, that of a perfect love between Romeo and Juliet, is set against the reality of a competitive, feuding and violent society. And the elements that make up that reality – the Family, the State, the Church – combine to ensure that the dream remains for the lovers “nothing but vain fantasy”.

CONTRASTS

It is a play of sharp contrasts. Public, social scenes are followed by very private ones. Romeo’s inflated romantic language when talking of Rosaline is punctuated, and punctured, by Mercutio’s “bawdy” talk, his sexual jokes.

QUEEN MAB SPEECH

Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech calls up an imaginary world of fairies and links it with the worldly desires of a group of contemporary characters, ridiculing Romeo for paying heed to the ominous dream he has had about going to the Capulets’ feast. He pours scorn on the images that he has himself conjured up from nowhere, as being merely dreams, “Which are the children of an idle brain / Begot of nothing but vain fantasy.” The speech thus illustrates the underlying conflict in the play: a dream set against reality.

LOVE / DEATH

Repeatedly, love is linked with death, and, like Romeo, Juliet too has a premonition of death. As Romeo descends from the balcony after their wedding night, she exclaims, “Methinks I see thee, now thou art so low, / As one dead in the bottom of a tomb!” When she refuses to marry Paris, her mother says, “I would the fool were married to her grave.” Friar Lawrence’s role provides a tragic irony. He says of the lovers’ secret marriage: “...this alliance may so happy prove / To turn your households’ rancour to pure love” - and the marriage does indirectly bring about this reconciliation, but in a very tragic manner.