Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Romeo and Juliet

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Plot

- In Verona, the Montague and Capulet families are feuding. The **Prologue** tells the audience that 'a pair of star-cross'd lovers' will die.
- Romeo, a Montague, meets Juliet, a Capulet, at the Capulets' party. They declare their love in the balcony scene and are secretly married by Friar Laurence.
- Tybalt kills Romeo's friend Mercutio, and Romeo kills Tybalt in revenge. Romeo is banished to Mantua.
- Juliet's parents arrange for her to marry Paris. The Friar gives Juliet a potion to make her seem dead, but his message explaining the plan never reaches Romeo.
- Romeo hears Juliet is dead, buys poison, kills Paris at the tomb and drinks the poison. Juliet wakes, finds Romeo dead and stabs herself. The families are finally reconciled.

Themes

- Love (romantic, courtly and sexual), conflict and violence, fate, family and duty, youth and age, and time and haste.

Context

- It was written around 1595, during Elizabeth I's reign. Society was patriarchal: daughters were expected to obey their fathers, and marriages were often arranged for wealth and status.
- Honour mattered greatly to men, which made insults lead to violence. Many people believed in fate and the stars. Italy was seen by English audiences as a place of passion and violence.

Key quotations

- 'A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life' (**Prologue**).

- 'O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!' and 'It is the east, and Juliet is the sun' (Romeo).
- 'My only love sprung from my only hate!' (Juliet). 'These violent delights have violent ends' (Friar Laurence).
- 'A plague o' both your houses!' (Mercutio). 'O, I am fortune's fool!' (Romeo).

Your notes

How to get top marks

- Use the structure: the Chorus tells us the ending in the first lines, so we watch everything knowing it's doomed.
- Use form: Romeo and Juliet's first words to each other make up a **sonnet**, so Shakespeare shows love through verse itself.
- Have an idea about what really destroys them: fate, hatred or their own haste? Then argue it.

Key terms

Prologue	An introduction spoken before a play begins.
Star-crossed	Doomed by fate, as if controlled by the stars.
Feud	A long and bitter conflict between two families.
Patriarchy	A society in which men hold power.
Foreshadowing	Hints about what will happen later.
Dramatic irony	When the audience knows something a character doesn't.
Sonnet	A fourteen-line poem, often about love.
Oxymoron	Two contradictory words placed together, such as 'loving hate'.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where is Romeo and Juliet set?
2. Which families are feuding?
3. What does the Prologue call Romeo and Juliet?
4. Where do Romeo and Juliet first meet?
5. Who secretly marries Romeo and Juliet?
6. Who kills Mercutio?
7. What is Romeo's punishment for killing Tybalt?
8. Whom do Juliet's parents want her to marry?

Answers

1. Verona
2. The Montagues and the Capulets

3. Star-crossed lovers
4. At the Capulets' party
5. Friar Laurence
6. Tybalt
7. Banishment to Mantua
8. Paris

What to do next

Practise 13 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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