

Folder O

IGCSE English Literature (Edexcel Pearson)

Literary Heritage Texts - Romeo and Juliet

Question: Explore Juliet's decisions in Romeo and Juliet and discuss in relation to the life of women at the time.

A04 Like a ship doomed to sink before it even sets sail, we know, from the prologue, that the 'star-cross'd' lovers' story will only end in disaster. Shakespeare utilises the Elizabethan interest in cosmic order to explore and challenge the idea of fate. The idea of fate determining human lives and preordained decisions occurs often in the course of the play; in Act 5, Scene 1, Romeo says, 'I defy you stars' and in Act 5, Scene 3, Friar Lawrence talks of a 'greater power than we can contradict' thwarting their plan. Was Juliet's fate written in the stars or was her life truly in her hands? Did her decisions take her down the path to her own demise?

A04 Quiet, reserved and submissive, in her first appearance Juliet paints the perfect picture of a young Elizabethan woman and appropriates the filial obedience so fundamental to life in that era. In Act 1, Scene 3 Juliet behaves very respectfully towards her mother, 'Madam ... what is your will?' and also mentions 'consent'; yet later on in the play she decides to completely defy her parents and ignore the social norm of having parental consent for marriage. Even from the start, Juliet is isolated and imprisoned by her status and sex. She only has her nurse to talk to so, later on in the play, her nurse becomes her trusted confidant.

A02 When Romeo and Juliet first meet, the first 14 lines they exchange are in the form of a collaborative sonnet, a poem commonly used to express love. Juliet alludes to the feud in relation to their love: 'My only love sprung from my only hate', conveying how deeply her decisions are affected by an 'ancient grudge'. However, Juliet shows contempt for the importance society places on names; 'That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet'. She also shows this later on when she decides not to marry to acquire wealth and status but for love; and in her decision to commit suicide, thus bringing shame on the family name. Elizabethan audiences would have been shocked by Juliet's lack of restraint; Juliet echoes these societal conventions in Act 2, Scene 2, when she says 'I should have been more strange'.

perceptive A02/A04 In the orchard scene, Juliet pours out her feelings for Romeo in a passionate soliloquy. Society at the time restrained women from being so candid about their emotions, therefore Shakespeare had to structure her speech as an overheard soliloquy. Because Romeo knew her innermost thoughts about him this quickened the pace of their relationship, definitely influencing Juliet's decision to bring up the topic of marriage so early on. This forthright behaviour would be associated with men and could insinuate that Juliet is dominant, and makes the decisions, in their relationship; contrary to social expectations at the time. Romeo calls Juliet a 'bright angel', implying that she is above him in the Great Chain of Being. Juliet

compares Romeo to a 'wanton's bird', insinuating that she controls Romeo; but as the play unfolds it could also imply that she is in control of her life, making her own decisions. No matter how out of control everything seems, she is the one pulling the strings.

AO 4
AO 2
perspective
The lives of women in Elizabethan times were tightly controlled by the male patriarchy; also influenced by religion and filial obedience, women had little freedom to make their own decisions. Juliet is defying all the societal conventions of the time by marrying Romeo without her parents', and especially her father's, consent. Act 2, Scene 6 is extremely short, perhaps echoing the extreme haste with which the marriage was carried out. Friar Lawrence warns against a speedy marriage, 'these violent delights have violent ends' and 'too swift arrives as tardy as too slow'; however this imagery does nothing to sway the lovers' decision.

AO 2
Determined, defiant and devious; increasingly throughout the play, Shakespeare presents Juliet incongruously to expectations of women at the time. This image of Juliet is entrenched with a blatant act of filial disobedience when Juliet refuses to face her Father's impossible ultimatum: marry Paris or be disowned. Capulet insults her: 'hilding' and 'tallow-face'; his rage further driving her away from her parents and home; and when the nurse later suggests that she should marry Paris, Juliet feels betrayed and isolated. Throughout the play, isolation is a key catalyst for many of her independent decisions. Juliet says at the very end of Act 3: 'If all else fail, myself have power to die'. This was the moment the idea of suicide was first established in her head.

Even when Juliet seemed powerless, she still managed to manipulate other characters into assisting her. Juliet used the only control she had left in the situation, her existence, to coerce Friar Lawrence into helping her. In Act 4, Scene 1 Juliet says 'This shall slay them both' and 'me this bloody knife shall play the umpire', showing that she understands the extent to which she is controlling the situation and has effectively stepped into what Elizabethans would consider God's place in her life. Juliet will decide whether she lives or dies, not fate nor any immortal in the sky.

AO 2
In Act 4, Scene 3 Juliet is afraid and once again isolated. She feels a 'faint cold fear' which 'almost freezes up the heat of life' and she begins to lose trust in the Friar, also alluding to a loss of faith in God and religion: 'What if it be a poison?'. Shakespeare uses violent imagery, such as 'festering', to show Juliet's terror and her fear of dying 'stifled' or 'strangled', despite entertaining thoughts of suicide. However she must still believe in an afterlife where she and Romeo can be together. This belief in everlasting love is affirmed in Act 2, Scene 2, when Juliet declares her love for Romeo as 'infinite'; this love also gives her the courage to decide to drink the potion, 'Romeo! ... I drink to thee'.

In Act 5, Scene 3 both Romeo and Juliet commit suicide. Romeo's death undoubtedly influences Juliet's decision to commit suicide; she feels she cannot live without Romeo and that death will restore her to him. Despite Juliet's lack of a long soliloquy leading up to her suicide, her actions speak louder than words: she stabs herself with a 'happy dagger'. Juliet was in control of her life to the very end, she knew what she wanted: to live or die with Romeo, and did everything in her power to make it happen.

In the Elizabethan era, suicide was illegal and was considered a mortal sin. If you committed suicide you had forfeited God's mercy and if you failed in your attempt you could be condemned to death anyway. However Shakespeare has chosen to present a peaceable union as the ending to his play; perhaps he wanted society to be more forgiving to those who had committed suicide. Despite the seemingly happy end to the sorrowful affair, Shakespeare left the ending of the feud shrouded in some ambiguity; Capulet and Montague seem to be trying to outbid each other in their final lines. Possibly each still blamed the other for the decisions made by their offspring; it also makes us wonder how the play could have ended differently had women been the heads of their families. Potentially women might have held even longer grudges, however it highlights the gender inequalities at play in that era and that women were subservient to the men in their families.

Through his play, Shakespeare was perhaps trying to portray the difficult decisions we face at crossroads in our lives; never clearly right or wrong, all options have consequences. Shakespeare made Juliet into a determined young woman with a large degree of conviction in her decisions; this would have appealed to the monarch of the time, Queen Elizabeth, who was herself a strong woman. Shakespeare could also have been trying to engage with patriarchal society; his message could have been to show the extent to which things go wrong if a woman is in charge of her own life. ✓

The ending of Shakespeare's play was determined from the beginning; but what was he trying to show us through his construct, Juliet? I think Shakespeare was trying to portray, through Juliet's dynamic decisions, that women should be able to make their own choices. I believe Juliet was an embodiment of what women at the time didn't have - freedom, and therefore Shakespeare ended his play in disaster because society was not ready for an independent woman. Juliet chose a companionate marriage over a dynastic one. She chose death over a life without her love. She was playing the game, she was never a pawn; but the odds were stacked against them and it was a wager they could not win. Their love was passionate and true, but it was a raging inferno that consumed them and others who got too close; after all a fire burning that bright could never last.

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