

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT I, *ROMEO AND JULIET*

Prologue The play begins with a Prologue - and in fact the whole story of the play is given in this opening. What is important is that the Prologue makes a point of telling us that the lovers are 'Star-cross'd', an important piece of information that is meant to help us understand why things go so horribly wrong for Romeo and Juliet. There is more than a suggestion that things go awry not because of choices freely made. It is some 'destiny' written in the stars that determines how events will turn out.

You'll have noticed that the Prologue is in fact a **sonnet**, so the 'argument' of the tragedy is already in place. The sonnet form also reminds us that this is a love story, a tale of two young people whose misadventure is to fall in love in a world dominated by hate and strife. Of course the Prologue also tells us how the play will end: with the reconciliation of the two families - but at what a price!

This section of the play introduces the following:

- The setting: Verona.
- The age-old feud between the Capulets and Montagues - and the whole of the city.
- The two lovers who live under the decree of 'Fate'.
- The reconciliation of the two families as a result of the love and death of their children - the only way the feud could possibly end.
- The play will be made clear through the performance of the actors.

Scene 1

Summary

This is set in the streets of Verona where two Capulet servants, Sampson and Gregory engage in rowdy banter concerning the house of Montague. This involves the beating of Montague men and conquering of Montague women. They come across two Montague servants and a brawl soon ensues.

Benvolio, a kinsman to Montague endeavours to stop the confrontation, and then Tybalt enters the scene, which is a kinsman to Capulet, and seeing Benvolio's drawn sword, causes the brawl to escalate. Eventually, Prince Escalus enters and is able to restore order.

The protagonists throw down their weapons and the Prince declares that the feuding must stop on penalty of torture, and he issues a death sentence on anyone who disturbs the peace again.

The brawlers disperse, leaving Benvolio with Montague and Lady



ACT I, ROMEO AND JULIET

Montague. Lady Montague is concerned about her son, Romeo, who has been seen outside the city in a lovesick state over Rosaline. Benvolio seeks out his cousin and friend, Romeo who is melancholy, as his love for Rosaline has not been returned. Benvolio advises his friend that he should seek out other beauties.

Analysis

Throughout the play, Shakespeare provides two perspectives of life in Verona, one from the servants' position, and the other from the nobility.

Initially we see the feud between the two houses from the eyes of the servants of these noble households. The opening scene is full of action devised by Shakespeare to absorb his audience. The brawl portrays the different layers of Veronese society from those without any power, i.e. the servants, through the nobility, up to the Prince. It is the Prince who is able to calm the situation and end the brawl. The Prince is at the top of the political and social scale.



We obtain details of some of the main characters. Benvolio is portrayed as intelligent and respectful of the law, whilst Tybalt is shown to be hot-headed with a short temper. It is clear that there is a deep, long-standing hostility between the two houses.

Romeo is also introduced to the audience as a lovesick youth, consumed with his unrequited love for Rosaline.

The audience is made aware that this is a very passionate society, where swords are drawn with little or no provocation and that a man's honour must be defended at all costs. The concept of masculine honour is evident throughout all the layers of society, including the servants. The brawl initiated with the servants and spilled over into the nobility.

Shakespeare cleverly uses the servants as a way of commenting on the behaviour of the hierarchy of Veronese society. The intention is that the audience will conclude that although the two households are dramatically tragic, they are also dull-witted and over-privileged, since only stupid people would bring death upon themselves when there is no clear need for it.

In direct contrast to the masculine honour of the noble households, there is the passionate love that Romeo has, not for Juliet at this stage of the play, but for Rosaline, who the audience will never see.

Shakespeare is clear to show that although love is extremely passionate, it is fickle; so fickle in fact that many of Romeo's friends are unaware that he has fallen in love with Juliet, until almost the end of the play. It is clear that Shakespeare's intention was to demonstrate that Romeo has a passionate nature by referring to Rosaline in the first place, although there is an alternative view that Romeo was willing to love anyone who was beautiful and willing to share his feelings.

Act I, Scene 2

Summary

We are still in the streets of Verona where Capulet is in conversation with Paris, a kinsman of the Prince. Paris is anxious to marry Capulet's daughter Juliet, and Capulet favours this union, as it will give his family more power in the city. However, Juliet is not yet fourteen and Capulet thinks she is too young to get married, and asks Paris to wait two years. He assures Paris that he will be the first suitor and invites him to the masquerade feast he is holding that night, where he can start his wooing of Juliet.

Capulet entrusts a servant, Peter, to deal with the invitations to the feast, but he unfortunately cannot read, and taking advantage of this situation, Romeo and Benvolio (Montague's) obtain invitations to the ball. Benvolio advises Romeo that this will be a good opportunity for him to compare Rosaline to the other beautiful women of Verona. Romeo only agrees to go because Rosaline herself will be at the ball.

Analysis

Capulet's chosen suitor for his young daughter, Juliet, is introduced to the audience. Paris is a kinsman to the Prince and, therefore, has influence in the city.

The low position of the women of Verona is revealed here. They can be forced to marry whomever the head of the family chooses. Juliet's status is almost non-existent and she is a tool to be used by her family in order to further their position in Verona.

However, Capulet is not entirely heartless. This will be a good match for his daughter and he gives Paris permission to woo her at the forthcoming feast in a hope that he will not have to force his daughter to wed.

In the Prologue, we have learned that Romeo and Juliet battle against the fates - one of the tools of fate is revealed, being parental influence. This, together with Juliet's arranged marriage will contribute to our heroes' deaths. These forces are already in place, even before the two lovers have met.

Although this is a tragedy, Shakespeare provides light relief concerning the servant Peter who has been given a list of those to be invited to the feast, but he cannot read. The farce continues when he invites two Montague's to the party. Just as Juliet has no power because she is a woman, the servant Peter has no power, because he has no education. However, is it not fate that it is Romeo this illiterate servant turns to to read the invitation?

Our hero, Romeo, only agrees to go to the feast because he hopes to meet Rosaline, but the audience know that it will be Juliet that he will see and fall in love with, and the audience now senses that the wheels of fate are in motion.

Act I, Scene 3

Summary

This scene takes place in the Capulets' house between Juliet, her nurse, and Lady Capulet.

The nurse tells a long story concerning Juliet as a child and how she became an innocent accomplice to a sexual joke. Despite Lady Capulet trying to stop the nurse, she continues, causing embarrassment to Juliet.

Lady Capulet wishes to obtain Juliet's views on marriage, which replies that she has not given the subject any thought. This questioning is prompted by the fact that Lady Capulet was the same age that Juliet is now when she first gave birth. She advises Juliet that the valiant Paris has expressed an interest in her. Juliet responds by saying that she will look out Paris at the feast to see if she might love him.

Analysis

We establish from this conversation that it was the nurse who effectively brought Juliet up, suckling her as a baby. Lady Capulet is not confident enough to speak to Juliet about marriage without the nurse being present.

Lady Capulet is herself a woman who married at a young age, and is supporting her husband's plans for their future and that of Juliet. She too, wishes to obtain power for the family through a good marriage for her daughter.

Juliet, by agreeing to look favourably on Paris when she meets him at the feast, is going along with her parents' plans.

The nurse's tale concerning Juliet as a child being involved innocently in a sexual joke, is an indication that Juliet's fate was set many years previously, in that her marriage would have to fall in with the plans for the Capulet family.

This scene also provides a good insight into the three main female characters in the play. Lady Capulet is seen as an ineffectual mother; the nurse is portrayed as being slightly vulgar; and Juliet at this stage in the play, is shown to be a rather naïve young girl who is obedient to her mother and nurse. However, there are glimpses of an inner strength that Juliet possesses which is wholly absent in her mother. Juliet is able to control her nurse, where Lady Capulet is unable to do so. Juliet's hidden strength is indicated in the following: 'But no more deep will I endart mine eye than your consent gives strength to make it fly'. On the surface, this implies a complete surrender to her mother's control, but there is an alternative interpretation to this phrase in that Juliet uses vague language indicating that she is asserting some control over her position. While agreeing that she might be able to love Paris, she is not fully committing herself to her parents' wishes. There is an element of passive resistance.

Act I, Scene 4

Summary

The three Montague's, Romeo, Benvolio and Mercutio, wearing masks attend the Capulet feast. Romeo is still in a melancholy mood and the others mock him. Romeo still has reservations about going to the feast saying that he learned in a dream that it was a bad idea. Mercutio responds by giving a long speech about Queen Mab of the fairies who visits people's dreams.

Romeo eventually stops the speech and Benvolio reminds them that they are employed on serious business by attending the Capulets' house.

Romeo's spirits start to rise as they enter the Capulet home.

Analysis

At first this scene seems unnecessary, as the audience already know that Romeo and his friends are going to the feast and that Romeo is sad.

Shakespeare's main aim is to provide details concerning Mercutio's character. He is shown to be a witty and clever person introducing puns throughout his dialogue. As a good friend of Romeo, he is able to gently mock Romeo as no other character can. In fact he stands in contrast to all the other characters in the play because he is able to see through the shallowness of the society in Verona. He ridicules Romeo's passionate love, which he considers to be frivolous, and he also mocks Tybalt's adherence to the fashions of the day.

Shakespeare through Mercutio shows his ability as a master punner, and in this way he is able to twist the meanings to words.

It is worth reading the Queen Mab speech again, as it is one of the most famous in the play. She brings dreams to sleeping people, and these dreams are normally based on pagan, Celtic mythology before the time when Christianity was brought to England. The dreams that Queen Mab brings to people are more than child's fairy tales, but possess a darker side, and this has a direct relationship to the story of Romeo and Juliet. This too starts almost like a fairy tale, but there will be no happy ending.

ACT I Scene 5

Summary

This is set in the great hall of the Capulet house where the feast is in full flow with servants working hard providing food and drink for the guests.

Romeo sees Juliet, and immediately falls in love with her beauty, and any thoughts for Rosaline disappear. Romeo declares that he has never been in love until this moment.

Tybalt hears Romeo's voice and realizes that there are Montague's present and he tells a servant to bring his sword.

Capulet overhears Tybalt, telling him that Romeo is well regarded in Verona and that he is not to be harmed at his feast. Tybalt agrees to keep the peace, but vows that he will not let this insult pass.

Romeo has made it across the room to Juliet's side and they engage in a dialogue that is full of religious metaphors indicating that Juliet is a saint, and Romeo is the pilgrim who needs to have his sins absolved. He tries to convince her to kiss him so that his sins can be forgiven. Thus, in terms of their conversation she takes his sins from him, but as she now has Romeo's sin on her lips they must kiss again for it to be removed.

The nurse breaks up the conversation saying that Juliet's mother wants to see her. When Romeo finds out that Juliet's mother is Lady Capulet, he is devastated.

Benvolio leads Romeo from the feast and Juliet wonders who the mystery man is that kissed her. She needs to find out Romeo's identity and so she cleverly asks the nurse to identify a serious of young men, and eventually realizes that Romeo is a Montague and she is distraught.

Analysis

We are nearly at the end of the first Act, and at last our two heroes meet and immediately fall deeply in love with each other.

The language used by Shakespeare here eloquently describes the deep passion that they feel for one another, and the audience are well rewarded for their patience in waiting for the two lovers to meet.

Romeo is shown to be an ingenious lover, convincing Juliet to kiss him after only a few sentences. He uses religion in order to persuade Juliet to kiss him. He says that their love can only be described in religious terms, as it is associated with the purity and passion of god-like beings. In doing so, they are flirting with a blasphemous idea in that Romeo sees Juliet as a saint that should be worshipped, which in Elizabethan times was idolatry and, therefore, blasphemy.

Juliet freely engages in this type of conversation by describing Romeo as the 'god of her idolatry', thereby replacing God with Romeo.

However, Shakespeare ensures that the audience is not totally lost in the couple's lovemaking, by inserting the knowledge that Tybalt has discovered Romeo's identity. Capulet stops Tybalt taking immediate action, but he has vowed to take the matter further.

The scene between Romeo and Juliet provides an indication of the roles that each will play in the relationship. It is clear that Romeo is the more dominant partner, using great skill to seduce Juliet. She is a young girl and during the first kiss remains motionless. Although she is greatly attracted to Romeo, she allows him to make the first move, but during the second kiss, she is much more aggressive, using her logic to ensure that Romeo kisses her again in order to take back the sin that he has placed on her lips. Juliet during this conversation starts to mature from a timid young girl to a mature woman. She makes an interesting comment, 'You kiss by th' book,' which can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it emphasizes Juliet's naivety, and in many productions the line is said with a degree of wonder so that the audience thinks she is saying what a great kisser Romeo is. Secondly, the line can be said in a matter of fact manner indicating that Romeo kisses by the book, meaning that he is proficient, but unoriginal. What did Shakespeare intend? However, it is clear that Juliet is impressed with Romeo and ends up encouraging him to pursue their love.

Questions on Act One

(answer them mentally, and compare your answers with the prepared responses)

1. What have we received from Act I?

We have received a knowledge of the setting and of the main characters (except Friar Laurence); three important actions: the giving of the Capulet feast, the meeting - and kisses - of Romeo and Juliet, and the angry resolve of Tybalt to get even with the Montagues. We have had a good deal of dramatic interest, and the fun among the servants.

2. How did Shakespeare quickly get the interest of his audience?

Shakespeare quickly got the interest of his audience by rapid actions and intriguing situations: he contentious servants picking a quarrel, then the fierce intrusion of Tybalt, and mob threats, the Prince's authoritative action and decree, a very sad Romeo, etc.

3. Which of the characters we have met so far is most likely to determine the action of the play? Why?

Tybalt is likely to affect the action of the play as he is filled with hate, is vindictive and implacable. And he has a slight case - Romeo's intrusion.

4. Select a few words to characterize Mercutio as we know him so far.

Mercutio is light-hearted, fun-loving, imaginative, clever in suggestion and repartee, brave, loyal.

5. *We shall not meet Rosaline again. What has she contributed to the play?*

Rosaline has set off Romeo as a sentimental lover - at a distance - so that when Romeo is really in love with Juliet we recognize genuine love. The contrast in his way of speaking proclaims the difference. Moreover, talk about Rosaline has shown us Romeo's cleverness and wit.

6. *Has the nurse helped the action of the play so far? If not, what has she contributed?*

The nurse has done little beyond telling Juliet Romeo's name. However, she has contributed a good deal of atmosphere, has set off the nobility as different from the common folk, has given vitality, humour, and the childhood of Juliet.



*"My only love sprung from my only hate.
Too early seen unknown, and known too late.
Prodigious birth of love it is to me
That I must love a loathed enemy."*