



[Romeo and Juliet](#), by William Shakespeare

In A Nutshell

William Shakespeare wrote the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* around 1595. Arguably the most famous love story of all time, this play tells the tale of a boy and a girl from warring families who meet and fall in love. Fate is not on their side, however, and they eventually choose to kill themselves rather than live without each other.

Because the play has always been popular with audiences, some scholars have refused to take *Romeo and Juliet* too seriously. They sometimes dismiss it as Shakespeare's trashy blockbuster, not complicated enough to be "high art." It's easy to think the play is nothing more than a tearjerker plot and a collection of pick up lines so cheesy they've become clichés. ("O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo," etc.) But *Romeo and Juliet* is more than a love story. The supporting characters – Mercutio, above all, but also the Nurse and Friar Laurence – are complicated and morally ambiguous. Through them, the play shows how romance comes in conflict with other relationships. And love itself can't be taken for granted, either. The play actively poses the question of whether the title characters' legendary romance is nothing more than infatuation.

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Romeo and Juliet are the most famous pair of lovers in Western literature, but is their love real, or is it just infatuation? Some people claim that Romeo and Juliet are just melodramatic teenagers. Others argue that the Romeo and Juliet 's love is the kind of love everyone should aspire to find. What proof does the play provide that their love is "real love," not just infatuation?
- 2 What would have happened to Romeo and Juliet if they hadn 't died? Is their relationship sustainable over time? Do they have anything to offer each other once the initial burst of passion calmed down? Would Romeo move on from Juliet as quickly as he moved on from Rosaline?
- 3 "Youth in this play is a separate nation," scholar Frank Kermode writes of *Romeo and Juliet*. How is the world of the young people in the play – Romeo and Juliet, Mercutio, Benvolio, and Tybalt – different from the world of their parents and mentors? In what ways do the young adopt the beliefs of the old, and in what ways do they ignore them or fight against them? Should Romeo and Juliet 's relationship be viewed as a rebellion of the young against the old? Should the world of the young, and its values, or the world of the old, and its values, bear more of the blame for their tragedy?

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