

BBC Bitesize Romeo and Juliet

Episode 6 – Youth

HOLLIE: Hi there, and welcome to our Bitesize English Literature podcast where across seven episodes we'll take you through the key themes of the texts you're studying, so you're as well prepared and hopefully as comfortable as possible to tackle your GCSE English Literature exam. And please remember to pause us any time, scribble down notes, rewind, listen again, listen while you walk, get some fresh air, have a lie down and listen, whatever works for you.

Right now we're chatting about one of William Shakespeare's best known plays, 'Romeo and Juliet', about what happens when two teenagers from families that are feuding, fighting, hate each other meet and fall in love. We have six podcast episodes covering key themes: family, individuals and society, conflict, love, fate, and youth which we'll be focusing on today.

In episode seven, we'll be giving you some top tips on how to remember, how we remember, key themes and quotes from the play to back up your writing. First of all, here are some clips related to the theme of youth, starting with the scene where Juliet's father is discussing how she is not old enough to be married yet.

[Clip from Romeo and Juliet]

CAPULET: "My child is yet a stranger in the world; she hath not seen the change of fourteen years. Let two more summers wither in their pride, ere we may think her ripe to be a bride."

PARIS: "Younger than she are happy mothers made."

CAPULET: "And too soon marr'd are those so early made."

HOLLIE: It's so nice to be joined by Testament, who is a brilliant writer, rapper, and beatboxer, and a big fan of Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet'. All right, Testament, you know this play very well and you love it, do you love it?

TESTAMENT: Well, no doubt, it's amazing.

HOLLIE: So, the play is based on a poem, and Shakespeare actually made Romeo and Juliet younger than they are in the poem, so he made them very young for a reason. So, what do you think that reason is and what would you say about the theme of youth in the play?

TESTAMENT: I think you've got a couple of things going on. One is that this is a play in many ways that is about young versus old. So, you've got an "ancient grudge".

HOLLIE: Good quote, you can use that [chuckling] for many things.

TESTAMENT: "Ancient grudge" from the prologue, fam. [Hollie: "Ancient grudge".] From the prologue. And you've got the parents' grievances versus what happens to children. The prologue calls them children.

So, you've kind of got the innocent love of Romeo and Juliet versus all the baggage that the world and age has given to these older people, who have got contorted by hatred over years and years of-, of anger and revenge.

So that is the backdrop for-, for youth, this, this sort of, new young flower that's trying to break through of love against this-, the horrib-, almost like bricks and concrete and stone of-, of what the old people have set up.

HOLLIE: That fits so well doesn't it, like, the idea of youth adds so well to the themes of [sniggering] conflict and the themes of individual versus society. The fact that they are young, [Testament: Yeah.] makes them powerless in the world that they live in, in terms of the family feud, in terms of family duties.

Yeah, I agree; the idea that they're so young, it makes them powerless, it adds to the conflict.

TESTAMENT: It adds to tragedy coz when-, when lives are taken early, and you know, they're not old, and they haven't, like, lived a great life and earnt their GCSEs yet, you know. So for their lives to be taken away so young is very, very tragic. And it-, and it's so tragic that it brings the two families to a place where they think, you know what, we need to rethink how we're living our lives.

HOLLIE: Which may not have happened were it two of the older characters. So in terms of the play, this-, this theme of youth it adds to the tragedy and it adds to the drama, it adds to the conflict. You can see the difference between these generations. In terms of how the story actually plays out, in terms of the plot and what happens, how do you think youth is important there?

Would the narrative have been different if these characters were a bit older, a bit more mature?

TESTAMENT: Well if-, if these young men all had jobs and-, and families, they wouldn't be on the street larking about. Like Mercutio seems very full of very youthful, sort of, teenage energy and it would be very different. And you get that, sort of, young man energy of a, sort of, competition between the young men of the Montagues and the young men of the Capulets.

HOLLIE: They're also more vulnerable, no? I feel-, I feel like exactly in that example, the youth of-, of these characters, all these characters, Romeo's friends, it adds to the drama, it adds to the excitement. Maybe because they're so vulnerable, they're so prone to these ideas of you should be out fighting.

TESTAMENT: Yeah, there's almost a naivety to it, so, like, I don't think they quite realise the consequences of what it means to fight and die. So, Mercutio when he fights Tybalt, he's full of this braggadocio, this pride. But when he dies, he's not saying, oh I'm dying for a really good reason, he's no, like, "plague o' both your houses!"

Now, it's-, yeah, you know, he's really realising that actually violence has consequences. You could even argue for Romeo and Juliet, they fall in love and they're-, like, they're following their hearts. I mean, with Romeo, he's terrible, he's in love with Rosaline, and then he's in love with [chuckling] Juliet two minutes later.

HOLLIE: That's a really important point.

TESTAMENT: There's a real big youth thing going on.

HOLLIE: That is-, that's a really important point, because Shakespeare puts that in, he puts the backstory of Rosaline in. It's quite funny at first, it makes us question Romeo a lot more. We see him as this young boy who has just fallen so madly deeply in love with this person, now he's like, no, no, no, this person.

So it's-, it's so exaggerated, but it makes more excite-. I think Shakespeare d-, does it on purpose, it's like the excitement of-, of youth is really present in this play. And in their language, the way that Romeo and Juliet both talk about each other: Juliet calls him a god; he calls her a saint, he calls her the s-. We've talked about this [Testament: Yeah.] in the-, in the Love episode. But it's youthful, the language is so exaggerated and dramatic, and it just adds to the love story.

TESTAMENT: What I-, and you've got the c-, all this grand language coming from Romeo and Juliet, and then you've got these adult figures in their life, like the nurse who's like, oh I remember when you were a baby. You've got Juliet's dad saying, well, she doesn't know much about the world yet, give her two more summers.

And you've got the friar talking to Romeo when Romeo rocks up at the friar's place and he's like, oh I'm in love with Juliet, I want you to marry us right now. The friars like, what, "Holy Saint Francis, what a change is here! Is-, is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear, so soon forsaken?" Like, have you just switched off Rosaline, you've just forgot about her have you?

[Clip from Romeo and Juliet]

FRIAR LAURENCE: "Holy Saint Francis, what a change is here! Is Rosaline, that thou didst love so dear, so soon forsaken? Young men's love then lies not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes. Jesu Maria."

TESTAMENT: And when he says, "Young men's love lies-, young men's love lies-" like it's telling you a lie, but also, young-, young men's love then lies "not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes." So, it's like, oh you're so young, it's just-, you're just following your eyes, you're not following your heart really.

And then he goes on to contrast it with older love, you know, and-, and being a bit more steady. And so this whole thing is a-, a dichotomy, which is like a split between two sort of ideas; a dichotomy between youth and age and the-, the wisdom that should hopefully come with age.

However, by the end of the play, it's actually the wisdom of Romeo and Juliet and putting their love first actually teaches all the people that are older a lesson.

HOLLIE: For me it would be a really good way to kind of start or end an essay on this, that Shakespeare, he uses youth in many ways to-, to make the play more dramatic, to make the play more tragic. But he doesn't finally say that with age comes wisdom. That's a-, such a good final point.

This idea of youth plays so many parts, in everything about this, it makes the language more dramatic in many ways, it makes it more comical.

TESTAMENT: More emotional.

HOLLIE: There's-, um it sets up these ideas of conflict between the generations. But at the end, I totally agree, Shakespeare is not saying that the grown-up characters, as a whole, are necessarily wiser.

[music]

HOLLIE: Quotes are an excellent way of helping you to explain themes and illustrate the points you're making. And I'm not gonna stop going on about quotes in this-, in this podcast series. So, now, Testament, you go first, can you give us a quote that you think would help, [chuckles] remind you of this theme, give you ideas about the theme, or back up ideas about this theme.

TESTAMENT: So, this idea of this dichotomy, this split of two ideas of youth and age and how the young people feel different. When Romeo was talking to the friar, he basically says look, you don't understand because you're old, basically. He says if you were young like me, you'd understand. So he says it like this, "Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel. Wert thou as young as I."

[music]

TESTAMENT: So, you can't speak of what you don't feel, you know, you need to be as young as me, basically. "Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel. Wert thou as young as I".

HOLLIE: That quote is such a tongue twister; that is so hard to say, so if-, if you were just picking out a shorter bit, if you couldn't remember the whole lot, what would you pick out?

TESTAMENT: Um I would pick out, "Wert thou as young as I". Wert-, so it's like Romeo is using that to differentiate, to show the difference. Basically, were you as young as me, is what he's saying. "Wert thou as young as I". So, the fact that Romeo uses that phrase is highlighting, look me and you, friar, we're different ages.

HOLLIE: So weirdly, my uh quote that I use for this theme is actually from the same act, [chuckling] same scene, so it's from Act 3, Scene 3. But instead of it being, I guess, Romeo telling the friar, like, you can't understand it if you're not as young as I am, it's the opposite. And I think I like it because it's one of the positive examples for me of an-, an-, an older character actually helping a younger character and actually being able to teach them something.

So it's the repetition of, "there art thou happy". Romeo's coming in, he's-, he's basically complaining and he's crying, so he's like, you know, you've been charged with murder and you're not being executed, you've been banished and you're not happy. Um Juliet is alive, are you not happy? Um so he's like, "there art thou happy" and he lists all of the things that Romeo should be grateful for. And I think this is one of the good examples of slightly more wiser, older character just having more of an outlook. You know, not the whole world is against you, like, look at these things that haven't gone wrong or that are still that you can pick the positive out of them. So, I really like this, "there art thou happy", "there art thou happy", "there art thou happy" - at the end of every sentence. Just the repetition, like, just stop and think and here is a kind of wider world view.

[music]

HOLLIE: Thank you so much for listening to this episode. Hopefully you can now see how the theme of youth works in Romeo and Juliet to add to the action, to add to the language, to add to the excitement and the tragedy.

Do go to BBC Sounds and look out for the other Bitesize English Literature episodes about 'Romeo and Juliet' where me and Testament will be looking at five more key themes: fate, love, family, individual versus society, and conflict.

You can also find plenty more information and ideas about 'Romeo and Juliet' on the BBC Bitesize website. And really, really good luck.

TESTAMENT: "There art thou happy".

HOLLIE: [laughing] "There art thou happy".

TESTAMENT: Huh? What you saying?!