

BBC Bitesize Romeo and Juliet

Episode 2 - Conflict

HOLLIE MCNISH: Hi, and welcome to our Bitesize English literature podcast. My name is Hollie McNish. I'm a writer and performer and I use GCSE Bitesize to help me with a lot of my exams. So I'm very excited to be here.

Across seven episodes, with the help of the brilliant beatboxer, rapper and writer Testament,

TESTAMENT: Ahhh.

HOLLIE MCNISH: We'll (laughs). We'll take you through the key themes of one of William Shakespeare's best-known tragedies, Romeo and Juliet.

It's a play about what happens when two teenagers from families that hate each other meet and fall in love. Today we're focusing on one of the text's key themes. Conflict. All of the themes cross over each other, so please go and listen to the other episodes to get more hints, which I'm sure will also be useful for this theme.

Before me and Testament get into it properly, here are a couple of clips, starting with the prologue at the very beginning of the play.

CLIP: In fair Verona, where we lay our scene, from ancient grudge break to new mutiny, where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.

Come forth the fatal loins of these two foes, a pair of star-crossed lovers take their life.

TYBALT: Turn thee Benvolio. Look upon thy death.

BENVOLIO: I do but keep the peace. Put up thy blade or manage it to part these men with me.

TYBALT: What drawn and talk of peace? I hate the word. As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee! Have at thee, coward! [fighting]

UNKNOWN: Down with the Capulets.

UNKNOWN: Down with the Montagues

HOLLIE MCNISH: So that last speech was from Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, and that is one of my favourite lines in the whole play. So I'm very excited to have heard that.

TESTAMENT: Have at thee, coward?

HOLLIE MCNISH: Oh no, the peace, peace "I hate the word as I hate hell, all Montagues and thee." It's like oh, and even in the prologue, even before any action in this play begins, Shakespeare has made it so clear that conflict is one of the biggest themes. The narrator says "civil blood making civil hands unclean".

TESTAMENT: So like civil b - civil hands, so like

HOLLIE MCNISH: Civil blood making like civil hands unclean.

TESTAMENT: Right, so you've got like normal people, not army, not

HOLLIE MCNISH: No.

TESTAMENT: Civil - civilians, like regular people, they've got blood on their hands.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Yeah.

TESTAMENT: Oh my gosh.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Yeah.

TESTAMENT: They've been involved in violence, not cool

HOLLIE MCNISH: From the very beginning this is

TESTAMENT: Not cool.

HOLLIE MCNISH: No, it's not cool. This is the background.

TESTAMENT: And as soon as the prologue's done, like scene one, boom, you've got some servants for the Montagues and Capulets, just going about their business, and a fight breaks out from nothing, just because they're on basically different sides, and they start having this stupid argument about like, oh what you saying then, what you saying?

Do you bite your thumb at me? No, I do bite my thumb though. And it's like why are you actually killing each other over work? We don't even really know what this ancient grudge, as it's called, an ancient grudge which goes back, you know, decades or whatever, and it's between these two families. You don't even know what started it.

HOLLIE MCNISH: But I think that's the point, isn't it, that Shakespeare's making. There's so many conflicts, like it's been going on for so long.

TESTAMENT: Yeah.

HOLLIE MCNISH: We don't learn why.

TESTAMENT: No, but we just see this escalation, like constantly, like it starts off small and these massive fights break out where, you know, people's lives are taken, these two houses, two families that are in conflict with one another.

HOLLIE MCNISH: The Montagues and the Capulets.

TESTAMENT: The Montagues and the Capulets, and you get these people that are sort of the minions, the people that are smaller, lower down the ranks, about to start to fight because their superiors are involved in this grudge, and they've got this thing about biting your thumb, and yet - and as - when you - you know, here I am in the 21st century and I'm like well what's this biting thumb business?

HOLLIE MCNISH: Yeah.

TESTAMENT: But it's kind of like doing something rude with your hands, it's like that equivalent, but back in the day in Renaissance Italy, you know. Do you bite your thumb at me? Well I might be biting my thumb at you. I - I do bite my thumb. And there's a sort of tension that builds and it builds, and then the fight breaks out and then Romeo's friend, Benvolio, has to come in and try and break it up.

And then Tybalt from the other side comes over and you think oh maybe he's gonna help. No. He wants to like get - he wants to start the ruckus. Tybalt is a Capulet, and he is Juliet's cousin. Every time he pops up he's like - he's all about this bravado and he's like I'll take you on, I'll take you - he's constantly there, amazing character.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Well that's like the quote, isn't it, that we've just heard. Where it's Tybalt that's speaking,

TESTAMENT: Yeah.

HOLLIE MCNISH: And he literally says "peace, I hate the word." Like, it's amazing.

HOLLIE MCNISH: So so far we've talked about conflict, but actually all the characters that we've been talking about are male.

TESTAMENT: Yeah.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Mostly young.

TESTAMENT: Yeah.

HOLLIE MCNISH: There's not only

TESTAMENT: Even old Montague pulls out his sword in act scene 1, cheeky chap, wants to get involved in the fight.

HOLLIE MCNISH: So what about the female characters?

TESTAMENT: Well this is the thing, so the thing that stops old Montague is his wife. She sort of restrains, so there's much more common sense going on with the mothers in the play. But they're affected by the conflict too. When Romeo is exiled because he's murdered someone, that conflict affects his mum, and she's so heartbroken, at the end of the play, old Montague says alas my Liege, my wife is dead tonight. Grief of my son's exile has stopped her breath. So she dies, I guess w - you could say of heartbreak, we don't quite know why. And then you've got the prince, the law and order in this city.

Everybody is a victim. As the prince says, all are punished.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Yeah, all are punished. It's really important to get into your head, and to get down on paper, in your GCSE exams, that just like with the theme of love, which we've got an episode on too, just like the fact that there are different types of love, there are different types of conflict. So there's these two big themes of external conflicts and internal conflicts.

So maybe stop this, write those two down. Internal conflict, external conflict. So we've got the internal conflicts in the characters minds, in their head, what should they do, what can they do. And then we've got the external conflicts of the political situation, social situations, families.

TESTAMENT: And it - it's beautiful, but you were about to say, there's other types of conflict as well, I think.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Yes, and so if you were talking about conflict in an exam, it's a great way, and quite a sort of simple way, to structure any answer, that there are these forms of external conflict that we've just spoken about. There's also internal conflict in so many of the characters. So internal conflict like the sort of conflict in your head, not knowing what to do, not knowing who you are, just that sort of confusion, that - we all - we all have internal conflict.

TESTAMENT: I really also like the conflict that Romeo's got, and it's - there's lots - so much about secrets, so Romeo can't say why he wants peace once he's fallen in love with Juliet. He can't say I don't wanna fight the Capulets anymore, um, because he's got a secret relationship. And there's that moment just before Mercutio dies where Tybalt's trying to get a rise out of him and get a fight on with - between Tybalt and Romeo, and Romeo's like no, I can't fight you and I can't tell you why but I love you now. So Mercutio stands up and gets involved in the conflict. He's standing up for his mate, for Romeo, so a switch clicks inside of Romeo when he sees his best, you know, one of his best friends, Mercutio, killed by Tybalt, and he's enraged and he, gosh, he fights and he murders Tybalt, you know, takes revenge right there and then. And we see the internal conflict afterwards and how he's conflicted and think - he's got that internal conflict and guilt that he's dealing with.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Yeah.

TESTAMENT: And - and he knows that he's hurt the family of the woman he's in love with.

HOLLIE MCNISH: So quotes, quotes and quotes. Quotes are a great way of helping you to explain themes and illustrate the points you're making. They're also a great way for you to remember themes that you want to talk about. So find quotes that work for you. Right now we're gonna give you some of our favourite quotes on the theme of conflict. So I'll go first this time, maybe.

TESTAMENT: Go on.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Alright. So, I've said it all through this episode really, but the - the Tybalt, in act one, scene one, when he sort of says to the group of Montagues 'peace'. He's questioning it. 'Peace, I hate the word, as I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee'. And I know that's not that long a quote but I do not have that great a memory, and if I'm in an exam, sometimes I used to panic and think oh, and you have to get these quotes accurate. So if I couldn't remember the whole quote, 'Peace, I hate the word, as I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee.' I would remember 'Peace, I hate the word'. It's oh, it just sums up everything for me, in terms of not being able to get out of the conflict and what the conflict is about. Also in terms of language, cos it's excellent and very important to talk about language. Examiners...love language. That fact that it starts with a question, like he's questioning the whole idea of peace, and then it's just such a set response.

TESTAMENT: So Peace question mark. I-

HOLLIE MCNISH: Peace question mark. Yeah.

TESTAMENT: I hate the word.

HOLLIE MCNISH: 'Peace question mark. I hate the word'. I hate the word is all monosyllables. It's like dum dum dum dum. This is what I think. As I hate hell. And then the next part of the sentence, 'As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee.'

TESTAMENT: It's almost like he's pointing his finger and says 'and thee'.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Ooh, imagine someone saying that to you.

TESTAMENT: I've got this one from the Friar, from act two, scene six, where he says 'These violent delights have violent ends'. 'These violent delights have violent ends'.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Oh, that's a good quote to remember.

TESTAMENT: Which is - which is another good one. So these people that are living a life of violence and conflict, you know, as we know at the end of the play it is a tragedy, so it has a sad ending. Violent delights have violent ends.

HOLLIE MCNISH: I think that's one of Shakespeare's intentions, no? To show that. Like we have so many films and so many songs that really romanticise violence, and I think Romeo and Juliet absolutely does the opposite. It does not end well. All are punished.

TESTAMENT: It's the idea that these families are delighting themselves in violence, in - in conflict, but yet it's gonna end in violence again. It's just quite nice, there's good repetition of violent in it, so it really drives the point home.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Nice. If you wanna stop us now, maybe write down these quotes that we've given you, go back, rewind, write them down, record them, listen to them over and over again, work out which themes you could use them for, work out three points to say about the language that you can get down really quickly in your exam, then I think that would be really helpful.

I've got one, because it scared me. Juliet, it's said by Juliet's father to Juliet when she says she doesn't want to marry Paris, but he says to her 'Hang, beg, starve, die in the streets. For by my soul I'll never acknowledge thee'.

But I would just remember, (laughs), again because my memory's not great, 'Hang, beg, starve, die in the streets'. And the reason that I like this is cos I feel like it sums up this idea of like, of conflict in family, that the language it uses also, I think it's so clever. It's full of verbs - hang, beg, starve, die, it's like the crescendo of using lists, it like builds up the tension, or it builds up the symbolism, so hang, beg, starve, die. And 'in the streets' at the end, just reminds me that this is also an external conflict. This is like a family conflict.

HOLLIE MCNISH: Hopefully you're feeling a bit more at peace with the theme of conflict in Romeo and Juliet. Listen again however many times you need. You'll also find loads more on Romeo and Juliet at the BBC Bitesize website. And you can check out the other episodes of the Bitesize English Literature podcast on BBC Sounds about this text, where me and Testament will be looking at five more key themes:

fate, youth, individual versus society, conflict and love. Thanks for now, and good luck.

TESTAMENT: Do you Bitesize your thumb at me, sir?

HOLLIE MCNISH: Ohh!