

BBC Bitesize Romeo and Juliet

Episode 1 - Love

HOLLIE McNISH: Hi, and welcome to our Bitesize English Literature podcast. My name's Hollie McNish. I'm a writer and a poet. Across seven episodes, with the help of the brilliant writer, rapper and beatboxer Testament...

TESTAMENT: Yo! Whassup!

HOLLIE McNISH: ..and holder of the Guinness World Record for leading the world's largest human beatbox ensemble – is that true? I've never met anyone that–

TESTAMENT: It's fact. It's all fact.

HOLLIE McNISH: OK, fact! Just to clear that up before we talk about Love! Right now we're looking at 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. Feel free to pause us any time you want, scribble down notes, re-listen, repeat ideas in your head – whatever works for you, really; whatever makes it less stressful. Today we're gonna be focusing on one of the text's key themes, Love. Here's a clip from Juliet just after she's met Romeo for the first time.

CLIP

JULIET

Go, ask his name.

[footsteps as Nurse walks off; sounds of a gathering of people]

JULIET

If he be married, my grave is like to be my wedding bed.

[footsteps of Nurse returning]

NURSE

His name is Romeo, and a Montague. The only son of your great enemy.

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.

END OF CLIP

HOLLIE McNISH: So it is Juliet saying it, and it's from Act 1, Scene 5. "My only love sprung from my only hate." She's so disappointed when she finds out that Romeo's a Montague. It's like, "Ah! Come on!" Like, that's so bad. If I was listening to that and I was doing my GCSEs, I would probably find that bit, I'd walk around the room and read it out loud myself. 'Cause it's so-, it's so important, that part, isn't it?

Right, so, Testament, in this play, for you, what are the main forms of love that we see?

TESTAMENT: Well, the biggest one is obviously romantic love. Romeo and Juliet, they fall in love. Devastatingly. They fall hard in love. It's love at first sight as well. Also, they're both really smart. They're both amazing with words and language. And you can see, they match up and they fall in love. In fact, their love is so powerful it brings peace to a whole city, the city of Verona, between two families that were at each other's throats. That's how powerful their love is.

HOLLIE McNISH: So I think that's such a good point about the language there. Because actually, one of the things that I love about this story is that the language is intelligent. It's ridiculous at times. It's so dramatic.

TESTAMENT: Yeah, Romeo and his language, and Juliet as well, are constantly trying to use words to capture this emotion and also how amazing this other person that they're in love with is. So Romeo's calling her a saint. You know, she's like a holy figure. She's like a... he compares...

HOLLIE McNISH: The sun!

TESTAMENT: Yeah, he compares her to the-, to the sun! Er, she's "light through a window," you know. She's above the ordinary. She's magical.

HOLLIE McNISH: And her as well, doesn't she? She describes him as a god. There's so many metaphors and so many similes when these two young people are trying to describe their feelings that it's almost like it's just too much for their hearts; they, like, can't. "It's like-, it's like the sun!" "Yeah, he's a god!" "Yeah, she's a saint!" It's like, "What words can I use?" They're, like, desperately grappling to describe something! I think their language it's quite sort of chaotically full of metaphors and similes!

TESTAMENT: Er, we should actually point out that, like, this is the world's most famous love story between Juliet who's thirteen years old! We're not exactly sure how old Romeo is. He's a little bit older, but we're not sure by how much. But he's got the advantage, of course, he's a boy, and he'd probably have much more say in who he marries than poor Juliet who's, you know, got parents trying to marry her off to this—

HOLLIE McNISH: Much older guy!

TESTAMENT: Yeah. So you've got all the-, the hormones of a teenager, and then having to-, to navigate love. And then even being willing to sacrifice things for the other person. Juliet asks him from the balcony, she says, "Are you-, you Romeo? Are you a Montague?" And he says, "Well, I'll be neither if that's what you want." You know, he's willing to change his identity so he can be with the person that he loves.

HOLLIE McNISH: So love is important in terms of a theme, but how important is it for the actual storytelling? Like, the plot?

TESTAMENT: Love powers the whole play. Like, from the very beginning. Romeo's already in love before the play even starts. So when we meet Romeo first of all he's already in love with this girl called Rosaline, and unfortunately she doesn't return his feelings. And, in fact, the only reason he ends up going to the party where he meets Juliet is because he hears that Rosaline's gonna be at the party. So he's like, "Right, I betta go to that party."

And of course he goes there and boom, love at first sight. He sees wonderful, intelligent, strong-hearted Juliet. And the rest, as they say, is tragedy.

HOLLIE McNISH: And, also, importantly, that, like, their love obviously drives them. It's sort of... it's like a wind-up toy, innit? You pull it and it's love that makes you, du du du du, go different places. But he probably wouldn't have met Juliet any other way.

[music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Right, if you go into your exam, I think this is really important, to talk about the fact that there are different types of love. You have to get in to the exam that there's not just one type of love in this play. Alright, so, Testament, if I said, "Oh, surprise, I've booked you in for a GCSE exam of "Romeo and Juliet" – yes! Great! Love it! – what would be the "these are the three types of love that Shakespeare shows" and why?

TESTAMENT: Romantic love, obviously, between Romeo and Juliet – and that's the thing that drives the play and keeps the whole story together, and makes them wanna overcome the obstacles that their families have put in place.

You've got family love and wanting to honour your family, and the pressure that Juliet in particular gets from her dad. He says, "I'll disown-", you know, basically says he's just gonna disown her...

HOLLIE McNISH: That was awful, that scene.

TESTAMENT: ..if-, if she doesn't marry Paris, and he's calling her ungrateful and stuff like that.

HOLLIE McNISH: OK, so Paris is the man who Juliet's father, mother and father, father in particular, want her to marry because he is a very upstanding, wealthy member of the community.

TESTAMENT: You could also talk about brotherly love or camaraderie. So you've got people like Mercutio who stands up for Romeo, erm, when Romeo doesn't wanna fight. He doesn't understand why Romeo doesn't wanna fight. He doesn't understand that. And the reason Romeo doesn't wanna fight is because he's gonna marry into this new family and he–

HOLLIE McNISH: –And he doesn't tell them. I wish he'd just tell them.

TESTAMENT: I know!

HOLLIE McNISH: So many missed opportunities.

TESTAMENT: A hundred-, one hundred percent. And Mercutio, he stands up for his friend. He says, "I'll fight for you." You know, that friendship love, which Benvolio has got as well.

HOLLIE McNISH: Right, I wanna add one more. Er, I would love it if you had a question on love and you put in the two relationships that Romeo and Juliet have with these older sort of mentor types. You know, it's definitely platonic, but there's Romeo with the friar, and Juliet with the nurse.

TESTAMENT: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: I think those are really nice relationships as well to look at when we talk about love. Because this is seen as such a romantic play, but Shakespeare showed us that love is this incredibly complicated idea with so many different varieties and so many different outcomes.

TESTAMENT: Oh, a hundred percent.

HOLLIE McNISH: There's so much love. There's so much love.

TESTAMENT: Lovely.

The word "love" is used 163 times in this text.

HOLLIE McNISH: Ah! That's interesting.

[music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Right, so for your exams it is not enough to just talk about the themes. Your opinions, everything, has to be backed up. And quotes are the best way to do this. In every episode we're gonna give you some quotes that we think will make your essays really, really good. If you talk about the language, even better. So, Testament?

TESTAMENT: My one's from Act 2, Scene 3. And the friar says to Romeo, "For this alliance may so happy prove to turn your household's rancour to pure love." And I love that. And the idea... he's happy. He basically-, he's saying he wants Romeo and Juliet to get married. Why? This is the bit you really need to file safe in your brain: "to turn your household's rancour to pure love." "So this alliance may so happy prove" – and "alliance" is there, the marriage between Romeo and Juliet – "to turn your household's rancour to pure love." So your family's anger, basically, to pure love. And you could say pure love could be the romantic love, or you could say the pure love between, er, the love of humanity. And it's good for the other themes as well.

HOLLIE McNISH: So it's got family in it, doesn't it?

TESTAMENT: Yeah. It's got conflict, it's got family.

HOLLIE McNISH: That is a great quote that you can put in loads. So my memory is not great. How would you remember that quote?

TESTAMENT: I'd remember it, personally, because there's a monster in "Star Wars" who Luke Skywalker fights called a rancor. And it's big and it's evil and it's scary. And we know that the Montagues and Capulets are doing big, scary things, aren't they? So they've got a rancor! And, er, if you wanna turn your household's rancour to pure love, get Romeo and Juliet married. So.

HOLLIE McNISH: Maybe stop the podcast and say it out loud. Do you find that? I find it really helps me with quotes. I used to, like, walk around my room just saying them.

TESTAMENT: Er, I turn them into songs. So I'd be like: [sings] "To turn your household's rancour [clicks his fingers to the beat] to pure love. Why? To turn your household's rancour to pure love." "Why, Friar?" [sings and clicks his fingers to the beat] "To turn your household's rancour to pure love."

HOLLIE McNISH: That was the best! I am never gonna forget that quote! That was beautiful! So, my quote is Juliet saying it, and it's from Act 1, Scene 5. And I'm gonna read, like, the four lines, but I would definitely only be able to remember one. So it's: "My only love sprung from my only hate. Too early seen unknown and known too late. Prodigious birth of love is it to me that I must love a loathed enemy."

And it's like, "Oh! Why has that happened? Why is fate—" Maybe Fate; listen to the episode on Fate; this is very good for Fate as well. But, "My only love sprung from my only hate," that's the line that I would remember.

TESTAMENT: It's beautiful.

HOLLIE McNISH: It is beautiful, isn't it? And I think it also covers family, conflict, youth. And in the exams it's really important to talk about the language of a quote.

TESTAMENT: Can I give you a big ol' word?

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

TESTAMENT: Juxtaposition.

HOLLIE McNISH: Nice. Go on. Explain.

TESTAMENT: Juxtaposition. So juxtaposition is when you contrast two things. So, like hot/cold; heavy/light. And so it's putting two things that seem like opposites together. And what Shakespeare's done there is "only love...only hate". Rappers use it all the time. You know, "I'm a Ferrari, you're a Nissan Micra." They use juxtaposition to get their points across. And it makes you remember it. And it makes... the difference between the two things make you remember it. And it feels really powerful, you know? So, "My only love sprung from my only hate."

HOLLIE McNISH: And there's a symmetry to it, huh? The way that the sentence is done, it uses juxtaposition but it's also so symmetrical. So it's really balanced, huh? Juliet is stuck in the middle like a see-saw. On one side she's got "My only love", the other side "My only hate", although they're the same thing. So there's this juxtaposition and there's a symmetry to it. There's obviously repetition in it, which... just get "repetition" in the exam because she keeps saying "My only, my only." There's loads to say about that. And it's quite an easy one to remember in general, I think, "My only love sprung from my only hate." But you can, like, just make-, just get in, like, the bullet points about the language.

TESTAMENT: I think that's wicked. I'm... I'll file-save them in my brain.

HOLLIE McNISH: Alright, so, one last time, my quote is, "My only love sprung from my only hate!" And, Testament, what's yours?

TESTAMENT: It's the friar, Act 2, Scene 3, and he says, [sings] "To turn your household's rancour to pure love."

HOLLIE McNISH: Ah! So, hopefully you've now got the key theme of Love in "Romeo and Juliet" a little bit closer to your heart. We hope you enjoyed listening. There is plenty more on the theme of Love in "Romeo and Juliet" on the BBC Bitesize website.

TESTAMENT: [in a deep voice] Oh yeah!

HOLLIE McNISH: [chuckles]

TESTAMENT: [in a deep voice] Love!

HOLLIE McNISH: [giggles]

And you can check out the other episodes of the Bitesize English Literature podcast about this play on BBC SOUNDS, where me and the lovely Testament will be looking at five more key themes: Youth, The Individual versus Society, Conflict, Fate, and Family. Good luck.

TESTAMENT: [in a deep voice] Love! Oh yeah!