



Romeo Was Both a Lover and a Fighter

Any character analysis of Romeo Montague has to begin with the fact that Shakespeare wrote him as a sixteen-year-old, hormone-driven, lovesick—and sometimes annoying—young man. When we first meet Romeo, he is hopelessly infatuated with Rosaline, who wants nothing to do with him. He crashes the enemy Capulets’ party partly because he hopes to see her. Then fickle Romeo lays eyes on Juliet, and Rosaline is promptly forgotten. In Act I, Scene 5, he sees Juliet across the room and exclaims:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

Rosaline who?

Romeo the Romantic

At first, Romeo is far more interested in romance than in the family feud between the Montagues and Capulets that forms the backdrop of the play. Unfortunately for him, his newest love happens to be Juliet, the only daughter of the hated Capulets. Worse still, Juliet’s father expects her to marry the nobleman Paris.

Juliet has other ideas. She has fallen just as completely for Romeo, and in the famous balcony scene of Act II, Scene 2, she wishes aloud that their family names could simply cease to matter:

O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?^[SEP]Deny thy father and refuse thy name.

Romeo shares her belief that love can somehow overcome the barriers surrounding them. Having climbed into the Capulet orchard, he declares:

With love’s light wings did I o’erperch these walls,^[SEP]For stony limits cannot hold love out.

Romeo may believe that love conquers all—even a blood feud. For a while, he would apparently prefer to remain a lover rather than a fighter. Unfortunately, Shakespeare does not allow him that luxury.

The Lover Becomes a Fighter

The turning point comes with Tybalt. After secretly marrying Juliet, Romeo has a reason he cannot reveal for refusing to fight her cousin. Tybalt insults him, but Romeo tries to make peace.

Mercutio, Romeo's close friend, is a witty and hot-tempered young nobleman who is also related to Prince Escalus of Verona. He interprets Romeo's restraint as cowardice and takes up Tybalt's challenge himself. Tybalt kills Mercutio, and the dying Mercutio famously curses both feuding families: "A plague o' both your houses!"

Romeo immediately blames himself. His love for Juliet, he fears, has made him "effeminate" and softened his courage. That reaction tells us something important about Romeo and about the masculine world he inhabits. He cannot simply grieve for Mercutio. He feels compelled to prove himself through violence.

In a rage, Romeo kills Tybalt.

That single act destroys nearly everything the young lovers have hoped for. The Prince of Verona, who has expressly forbidden further street fighting, banishes Romeo from the city. Romeo and Juliet are separated almost as soon as they are married.

Impulse, Violence, and Tragedy

Romeo's impulsiveness is as important to his character as his romanticism. He falls in love almost instantly, marries almost instantly, kills Tybalt in a burst of rage and, when he mistakenly hears that Juliet is dead, immediately resolves to die beside her.

Even on his way to suicide, violence follows him. At Juliet's tomb, Romeo encounters Paris, who has come to mourn her. Paris attempts to arrest him, and Romeo warns him to leave. Paris refuses, they fight, and Romeo kills him.

Then Romeo enters the tomb and sees Juliet, apparently dead but still beautiful:

Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe^[1]_{SEP} That unsubstantial death is amorous?

It is vintage Romeo. Even while preparing to die, he remains the extravagant romantic poet we met at the beginning of the play.

Romeo's Fatal Contradiction

Romeo's tragedy lies partly in the contradiction between the lover he wants to be and the violent world in which he lives. Love temporarily pulls him away from the Montague-Capulet feud, but the death of Mercutio drags him straight back into it. His romantic passion and his capacity for

violence ultimately spring from much the same source: Romeo feels everything intensely and acts before reflection has much chance to catch up.

That is why it is too simple to dismiss him as merely a foolish teenager—or to remember him only as the ideal romantic lover. He is both. His love for Juliet is genuine, but so are his impulsiveness, anger, recklessness and youthful certainty that whatever he feels at this particular moment must be acted upon immediately.

At the tomb, that combination finally destroys him. Believing Juliet dead, Romeo raises the poison:

Here's to my love! O true apothecary!^[1]_{SEP} Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die.

Romeo dies as he has lived throughout the play: passionately, impulsively and absolutely convinced of what he feels. The terrible irony, of course, is that Juliet is not dead. She awakens moments later to find Romeo dead beside her. Refusing to live without him, she takes his dagger and kills herself. Thus the final consequence of Romeo's fatal impulsiveness is not merely his own death, but Juliet's as well—the last cruel stroke in a tragedy that might have been avoided had Shakespeare's most impatient young lover waited just a little longer.