# Love or Lust? Romeo and Juliet Part II: Crash Course English Literature #3

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=9J4hoAatGRQ
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course English Literature, and today we return to *Romeo and Juliet*, a tale of love and woe. Or else a tale of lust and woe. Anyway, it's definitely a tale of woe.

As the play begins, Romeo is telling us that he is completely in love with a girl, and will never love anybody else, and her name is Rosaline. And a day later - A SINGLE DAY - he has married an entirely different girl!

And the whole thing is forbidden in a desperate and exciting way - "My only love sprung from my only hate", etc. And that makes me wonder, does romantic love benefit from - or maybe even require - these kinds of obstacles to feel intense and real?

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Yes.

Truly spoken like a teenager, Me from the Past, because from where I'm sitting, true love is when you're standing in line at a Chipotle, and you say, "I shouldn't get guacamole", and the great love of your life says, "You know what? Just get the guac!" And then you go home, and you watch TV together while eating burritos.

THAT's true love, Me from the Past, of a depth and quality that you can only imagine and poor Romeo and Juliet will never know, and not least because there were no Chipotles in medieval Verona.

[intro music]

So it's telling to look at the way that Juliet describes her own feelings and the reasons for them. She calls their romance:
"too rash, too unadvised, too sudden;
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be
Ere one can say 'It lightens.'"

But then in the same scene, she says:
"My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite."

The lightning is over in a flash, but the sea is infinite. Juliet also famously speaks of her "true love's passion", which conflates two very different ideas. As previously noted, true love is eating burritos together on the couch in your sweatpants, whereas passion never involves burritos. - what's that? What's Rule 34? Oh? Rea- Wow. Really? Okay, yes, apparently passion occasionally involves burritos.

By the way, this play is full of bawdy jokes, usually told in prose, courtesy of the Nurse or Mercutio, so it's not like Shakespeare wasn't aware of sex without love. Are Romeo and Juliet making themselves believe there's in love to excuse their sexual desire? Would Juliet have gotten tired of Romeo? Stan, I thought that we had established that these [digital flowers] are real. How is this... why is this happening... ah, it's a metaphor, isn't it, Stan? Get rid of the metaphor.

Possibly, Romeo can be a little bit intense, like sword-fight-murder intense. And although Juliet violently rejects Paris, the man her father wants her to marry, he seems like a pretty stand-up guy, and in many ways, is a better match for her than Romeo.

So Romeo and Juliet's flirtation follows the traditions of courtly love, a medieval concept still popular in the Renaissance, that advocates love at first sight, and forswearing all for love.

But vitally, you aren't supposed to sully courtly love with sex or marriage, and Romeo and Juliet clearly do. You're supposed to sit around and pine and be miserable for the rest of your Edith Wharton-ing life, like Petrarch and Dante did, all these supposedly amorous Italians, but all they ever did was write poems.

Right, so you could really read the first couple of acts of Romeo and Juliet as a potential comedy - girl falls for the wrong boy, they've got to figure out what to do. So far, that's the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But with those characters, there was no skoodilypooping. Romeo and Juliet do skoodilypoop, and sullying their love with sex, even post-marital sex, proves kind of deadly. Oh, it's time for the Open Letter?

An open letter to literary sex. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, it's Shakespeare socks! Perfect, because Stan won't let me wear shoes, because they just painted the set.

Dear literary sex, why you gotta be so fatal?

Here's an interest fact - until about 40 years ago, every single human who was ever born, was born as a result of sex. But to read the great novels and plays of human history, you would think that the mere act of having sex is fatal, like 65% of the time. How did we acquire all these Montagues and Capulets if just having sex is so dangerous?

And I've noticed that having sex is particularly fatal to young ladies. And that doesn't seem very fair! After all, it does take two, to fandango.

Best Wishes, John Green.

Okay, but as always in Shakespeare, it's not quite that simple, and there are indications that Romeo and Juliet may be, at least in Shakespeare's conception, really in love.

I mean, in their first conversation, they speak a total of fourteen lines to each other, and those fourteen lines, when combined, form a perfect Shakespearean sonnet. So this isn't some random hook-up at a party; this is literally instant poetry. And Shakespeare bestows some of his most gorgeous lines of them - Northrop Frye called this play "word magic".

Not only that, but remember, through their deaths, this intractable conflict between two families is ended. And in that story of transcendental suffering and sacrifice, one can't help but recall the more famous story of transcendental suffering and sacrifice - that of Jesus.

So Romeo and Juliet don't really do much together - if you think about it, they don't even actually die together. Only a few days separate their meeting and their deaths.

We can see the play, then, as a tragedy about time - how little there is of it - and also about about youth - how we assign passionate importance to things and people when we're young, because we don't have the breadth of experience to behave more moderately. Which is maybe the tragedy of adulthood. Old folks, Juliet maintains, are "unwieldy, slow, heavy and pale as lead".

But for me, the play is ultimately about having to make difficult choices with limited information. This love, which feels real, and therefore, I would argue, is real, has to be balanced against responsibilities to your family, and to the state, in the form of the Prince of Verona, and to the Church.

In your life, are you going to seek what you want, or are you going to listen to your parents when they tell you what to want, or to the state, when it tells you what to want? Until the end of the play, both Romeo and Juliet are trying to find ways to please all these masters - the self, the state, the church, the family - and that is what kills them. Had they just run away together, or hooked up without getting

married, in an un-churchly fashion, they probably would have survived.

Their love is an ardent and over-the-top response to the violent and unjust world in which they live, and the patriarchal authority that controls that world. But they can never fully abandon or reject that authority. And this is still a challenge for teenagers, who are often dismissed as idealistic or melodramatic, and who must balance the intensity of their feeling against the expectations of the world around them.

Don't drop out of high school to follow your dream of being a trapeze artist, honor thy father and mother, register for the draft, don't pass up a full ride to Harvard to follow your girlfriend into the Marines, etc. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

As Harley Granville- Barker puts it, "Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy of youth as youth sees it." If you're young or have ever been young, you know what it's like to be pulled in many directions while trying to discern whether feelings that are brand-new to you are more like "flashes of lightning" or an "eternal ocean". And you know what it's like to want to live fully and fearlessly, and maybe even a little foolishly. And the occasionally tragic thing is that you are just grown-up enough, for that kind of thinking to get you killed.

Romeo and Juliet, to live the lives they want, must also alter the world, or maybe even the cosmos. They're always looking for night to come quickly, or to stay late - Juliet tells the horses that draw the sun to "Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds", a speech that was considered so racy that many nineteenth-century actresses wouldn't perform it.

And in the next scene, after their single night of wedded bliss, she tries to keep the dawn from arriving, telling Romeo:
"...it is not yet near day:
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear..."

Characters are constantly evoking light and dark imagery, and calling out to the sun and the moon, to day and night, as if they were seeking some control over the universe. Because it's they only way they can have all of what they want - their families at peace, their faith, and their life together in their hometown.

But the universe will not bend to them, or to anyone - no matter how real your love, you can't avoid fate, and you can't alter time. Well, except for daylight savings. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So, that's one way to read the story - Romeo and Juliet's hubris in believing they could change the universe leads to their demise. But actually, how responsible are they? I mean, there's a lot of bad luck involved. There's the messenger's delay, the hastening of the wedding between Juliet and Paris...

Now, in the source material, Brooke's "The Tragic History of Romeus and Juliet", Brooke makes it explicit that it's their own fault, and they get what they deserve. But Shakespeare is a lot more ambivalent - the friar who marries them worries that "violent delights have violent ends", which seems to imply that Romeo and Juliet are to blame for their own undoing. But the play calls them "star-crossed", which implies that their sad end was written out by fate, before they ever even met.

As with so much Shakespeare, and with great literature in general, how you feel about this question says a lot about you. And these meditations on faith, combined with the question of whether immediate attraction can lead to lasting love, have made Romeo and Juliet a story with legs.

These days, it might be race that separates the two loves, as in West Side Story, or religion, as in a 90's production in Bosnia that saw a Christian Romeo and a Muslim Juliet. The obstacles may change, but the underlying problem of love in an unjust world isn't going anywhere.

It's tempting to dismiss the plot of Romeo and Juliet as sappy, emo romance, but in truth, each of us will live out our lives having answered, consciously or not, the questions at the heart of the play. Do you believe that fate is inescapable, or that people forage their own lives? Is the fault in the stars, or in ourselves? And will you prioritize your personal wishes, or the wishes of your family, or your religion, or your country?

If you think about it, Romeo and Juliet aren't offered an easy choice. They could hurt family members they love, or they can hurt each other. Either way, there will be tragedy, and these messy, ambiguous, ethically fraught high-stakes questions are still a part of all of our lives.

Shakespeare's gift to us is giving a voice to them, in all their maddening complexity.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Meredith Danko, the associate producer is Danica Johnson, the show is written by Alexis Siloski and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Instead of cursing, I use the names of writers I like. If you want to suggest future writers, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of highly-trained English-y people!

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as I often say, while sitting upon my golden throne, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.