Of Pentameter & Bear Baiting - Romeo & Juliet Part I: Crash Course English Literature #2

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=I4kz-C7GryY
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/I4kz-C7GryY

John Green: Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course English Literature, and *this* is *Romeo and Juliet*, written in 1595 or 1596 and often called the greatest love story of all time, which when you think about it is a very strange thing to say about a play that features, like, one off-stage sex scene, and, like, seven on-stage fatalities.

=====The Plot=====

I mean, let's quickly review the plot.

Boy, Romeo, goes to a party trying to get over a girl with whom he is completely obsessed, but then he meets another girl, Juliet, and becomes obsessed with her. Their families hate each other, but despite that (or possibly because of it) they fall madly in love and get married the next day, whereupon immediately a family feud breaks out. ([animation] No, Thought Bubble, not *that* kind of family feud. [different animation] Yes, *that* kind.) Several people get killed, including Juliet's cousin, who is offed by Romeo, and that means Romeo has to flee. Juliet takes a sleeping potion to avoid another marriage, and then Romeo comes back, finds her sleeping, thinks she's dead, kills himself, and then she wakes up and kills herself, and then the families end the feud. Yay...

That we consider this "romance" says quite a lot about humans.

Student!John: Mr Green, Mr Green! But they love each other so much, you know. It's like his life literally isn't worth living without her.

John: Yes, me from the past. Her being a woman that he's known for, like, a few hundred hours. And yet, every year, thousands of people write to Juliet, care of her hometown of Verona, Italy, and the citizens of Verona write back. You, in fact, when you're in college, will go to Verona and visit all the touristy *Romeo and Juliet* sites, and that very night you will be in a Veronese nightclub and you will meet a girl named Antonia and you will believe that you really love her and that it is the kind of love that can last a lifetime.

Student!John: I'm gonna hook up with herâ€½

John: No. At the end of the night, you lean in to kiss her like... and no.

=====Shakespeare's Influences=====

(Intro)

So, Shakespeare didn't invent the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, but he made really important changes to it. His immediate source material was a 3,000-line narrative poem called *The Tragic History of Romeus and Juliet*, written by Arthur Brooke in 1562, which itself borrowed from a tradition of tragic romances dating back at least to Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

So Shakespeare obviously changed some of the names, but more importantly he introduced a lot of narrative complexity. I mean, for Brooke the story of Romeus and Juliet was a cautionary tale. He calls them,

> A couple of unfortunate lovers, thralling themselves to unhonest desire; neglecting the authority and advice of parents and friends... Attempting all adventures of peril for th' attaining of their wished lust... Abusing the honourable name of lawful marriage."

So Brooke's poem is just an ordinary story about naughty teenagers who receive the standard punishment for their naughtiness, which is of course death. (And of course, as you know from watching contemporary horror movies, if you're a woman and you wanna live to the end, you better be a virgin.) But Shakespeare offers a much more compassionate portrait of Romeo and Juliet, and encourages us to empathize with them.

I mean, Romeo and Juliet are obviously hot for each other, but they're also kind of polite about it. I mean, witness the physical distance between them in their most amorous scene. (I mean their most amorous on-stage scene, I mean, obviously they do do it.) And they use the kind of sacred metaphors that etiquette experts in Shakespeare's day recommended for courtship. I mean, Romeo calls Juliet "a holy shrine", and then Juliet welcomes the flirtation by calling him "a good pilgrim". Also, Shakespeare's Juliet is much younger; she's 16 or 18 in other versions of the story, but in Shakespeare's she's only 13, and so it's hard to see her as, like, a dishonest floozy. I mean, even in a profoundly misogynistic age, it's hard to see a 13-year-old stab herself and be like, "Yeah! She got what was coming to her!"

So, Shakespeare was also likely influenced by the love poems of Petrarch, who the character Mercutio mentions, and Petrarch's work is much more approving of intense adoration than Brooke's is. For instance, he believed in love at first sight -- and he had to because all of his poems were written to a woman he never met and only saw once.

But then, the play also isn't, like, a YOLO endorsement of following your heart, because following your heart does get Romeo and Juliet dead.

=====The Thought Bubble=====

So, Shakespeare sets the play in Verona, Italy, which isn't a surprise since the source material sets it there as well, and also because Shakespeare set most of his plays away from England. If you're gonna talk about morality and values, like individual's responsibilities to their own interests versus their responsibilities to their families or the larger social order, for instance, it's much safer to set it in far-away Italy. *Romeo and Juliet* is a love story, but it's also a political story. The Montagues and Capulets consistently ignore the proclamations of the prince of Verona, and arguably Romeo's biggest hurdle to marrying Juliet is that the prince exiles him and promises to execute him should he return to the city.

Should you be loyal first to your own feelings, or to your family, or to your faith, or to your prince? These are not just questions of "will that hot girl go out with me"; they are in fact questions that were central to Elizabethan England, and, as the critic Northrop Frye pointed out, whenever Shakespeare wanted to write about the problems of feuding nobles, he either set his plays in the distant past or in a land far far away.

But when it comes to the actual romance, it's all very hot-blooded and Mediterranean and Catholic. It's no coincidence that in Protestant England, much of Romeo and Juliet's tragedy is facilitated by a slippery Catholic friar.

The stereotype of Italians as passionate and impulsive goes back a long way, to well before Shakespeare, and that helps explain Romeo and Juliet's actions. I mean, would English lovers act like this? Probably not; they'd be too busy being pale and avoiding the rain and eating shepherd's pie and whatnot. But this is just what those Italians would do.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

=====Structure=====

Okay, let's turn briefly to the play's structure. *Romeo and Juliet*, you'll be surprised to learn, is a tragedy, and Shakespeare's tragedies follow the same structure first described by Aristotle in 5th century BCE. Tragedy occurs when a mostly good character or characters of noble extraction -- here, Romeo and Juliet -- make an error -- getting married so quickly, ignoring the family feud -- and are brought low -- double suicide. Shakespeare wouldn't have read Aristotle, but he probably would've been familiar with Latin criticism of the poetics.

Now, I don't wanna generalize about Aristotle, and I know that he has a vocal group of supporters among Crash Course commenters, but it is widely known that Aristotle was 100% wrong 100% of the time. If you watched our series on world history, for instance, you'll recall that Aristotle believed that some people were just naturally slave-y.

But while this narrative of tragedy, that noble people suffer when they act badly, isn't actually reflected very often in the real world, it remains a really powerful idea, both in our fiction and in the way we imagine the world around us. And it's a big part of why we're so fascinated when we see the once-great suffer downfalls, whether it's Lance Armstrong or Warren G. Harding or Marilyn Monroe or Lindsey Lohan or the entirety of the Jackson family, but what makes Shakespearean tragedy so interesting is the complexity he introduces to that Aristotelian structure -- complexity, by the way, not seen in the downfall of Lindsey Lohan. I mean, at least by Elizabethan standards Romeo and Juliet both make mistakes, but they're mistakes born of love, and it is because of their deaths as a result of these mistakes that peace and harmony return to the streets of Verona.

So, you can read it as a mere Aristotelian tragedy, but you can also read it as a narrative of tragic sacrifice, or as a story about love being worth the price of death.

=====Open Letter=====

Oh, it's time for the open letter?

An open letter to star-crossed lovers.

But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Ah, it's Hazel and Augustus, noted star-crossed lovers from my book *The Fault in Our Stars*. Hi, guys! Uh, I'm gonna leave you in there, but keep it PG.

Dear star-crossed lovers,

You go pretty much all the way back in literature. You're very helpful for thinking about, like, fate and free will, but you're also kinda sexy, so if you wanna think about free will but also give people high-quality entertainment, you are the natural choice, star-crossed lovers.

But I wonder if this constant exploration of star-crossed lovers-ness also leads to a kind of celebration of it, and whether actual lovers who needn't be star-crossed try to invent star-crossed-ness. Yeah, don't do that! It's unhealthy. For Emily Dickinson's sake, just let yourselves be happy!

Best wishes,
John Green.

=====The Writing=====

Okay, so let's turn to the actual writing.

Romeo and Juliet has both poetry and prose. It's pretty easy to tell which is which by looking at, y'know, the line length. The lines of poetry are shorter and usually conform to the same metric structure, called iambic pentameter. An iamb is a poetic foot consisting of a stressed syllable and an unstressed syllable, and not like in the anxiety sense but in the sense of putting an emPHAsis on a sylLABle. And "pentameter" means that there are five feet in a line. This sounds very complicated, but it's actually very easy. Let's try it on the prologue.

> Two HOUSEholds BOTH aLIKE in DIGniTY,
> In FAIR VerONa, WHERE we LAY our SCENE,
> From ANcient GRUDGE break TO new MUtinY,
> Where CIvil BLOOD makes CIvil HANDS unCLEAN.

Now, my performance just then would not have got me hired at Shakespeare's theater company -- ideally, you don't read iambs in that sing-songy way -- but iambic pentameter pops up all over the place. John Keats's last will and testament is a single line of iambic pentameter, "my chest of books divide among my friends", and much of our conversation takes place within iambs -- like that last sentence, for instance.

I mean, this isn't genius stuff. My two-year-old son regularly uses iambic pentameter, like every time he says "Daddy, I want to go to Steak'n'Shake!" Iambic pentameter is a way of reflecting the natural rhythms of human speech in English, while also heightening it. And it's worth paying attention to, especially when Shakespeare messes around with the meter, as in the famous line, "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou, Romeo?" That line would be iambic pentameter, but something keeps messing it up -- specifically, Romeo's name, and it's his name of course that is the problem. Were he not named Romeo Montague, there'd be no issue in the line or in the play.

And I know that when we first encounter Shakespeare, the language can seem difficult. That's because, unlike French or Italian, English has evolved a lot since the 16th century. Also, Shakespeare was constantly using words in new ways, as in this play, for instance, when he became the first person ever to describe a hot girl as an angel. But the difficulty in the slowness of the reading allows you to pay attention to the genius of Shakespeare's language. So, I know sometimes it feels more like translation than reading, but if you stick with it, you will find yourself in Shakespeare's world.

=====The Theater=====

Actually, it might help a little to imagine the plays as they were originally staged, because the Elizabethan playhouse was very different from theaters of today.

There were a few indoor private theaters, and a couple more in palaces and at the inns of court, but Shakespeare's company typically performed in large theaters like the Globe, partly open to the air and partly covered by a thatched roof. Now, I don't know if these thatched roofs inspired Rock Master Scott and the Dynamic Three to record their song "The Roof is On Fire"; however, the roof was often on fire, particularly when plays necessitated cannons, and as there was limited water and firefighting resources, it was

sometimes necessary to let the William Faulkner burn.

So, if you had the cash for it, you sat in tiered benches in the galleries with a good view of the stage, but if you had less money, you stood in the pit, and you usually stood there for more than three hours -- these weren't short plays. Well, except for *Macbeth*. [bag drops] Ah! I should have said the Scottish Play.

Romeo and Juliet wasn't performed at the Globe, but probably at a theater called the Curtains, slightly older but otherwise very similar, although on the good side of the River Thames. Shakespeare referred to it as the Wooden O. It was rediscovered earlier this year by archaeologists working in London.

Theaters like the Globe and the Curtain were dirty, they probably didn't smell very good, and, while cell phones didn't go off in the middle of plays, they were not quiet places. Today, you go to the theater and everyone gets quiet when the lights go down, but there were no lights. There also weren't any microphones. There was nothing to focus attention on the stage except the play itself, so people drank and ate and jeered at the actors if they thought the performances were bad.

So *Romeo and Juliet* may be an amazing work of poetry, but it also pandered to the popular tastes of the time. I mean, Renaissance theater wasn't like high art, so yes, nobles went to the theater, but it wasn't considered classy. I mean, a lot of times, people were literally choosing between seeing this play and watching a chained bear try to fight off a bunch of dogs. So this wasn't highbrow entertainment, and I hope it doesn't feel highbrow to you just because of the fancy language.

Shakespeare knew how to navigate between high and low culture. He knew how to amuse and entertain us, while also grappling with big questions about honor and fate and duty and human frailty, and the idea that something can be both fun and smart still resonates today. I mean, isn't that why you watch Crash Course? And yes, I went there -- we are of Shakespearean quality!

=====Conclusion=====

Aw. Next week, we'll delve further into the themes of *Romeo and Juliet* and discuss whether it's really love or lust at the heart of their relationship. Thanks for watching! I'll see you then.

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 Soloski and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Every week, instead of cursing I use the names of writers I like. If you'd like to suggest writers, you can do so in the comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of highly trained English people.

Thanks for watching Crash Course, and, as we say in my hometown, don't for forget to be awesome.