

How does Shakespeare present the Theme of Conflict in Romeo and Juliet?

Shakespeare's Tragedy, Romeo and Juliet, opens in "Verona", a city in northern Italy where the hot, narrow streets are the perfect place for tempers to flare. The play was set during the Renaissance era, a time of strict catholic beliefs, and a patriarchal family structure. Honour was seen as one of the most valuable possessions one could have; if one were to questions another's honour, be it simply by "biting" their "thumb" at them, people could expect a fight. Also, during this time, children were often seen as little more than property, who could be married off to others for their family to gain status.

In the Prologue, there are references to fate and destiny. Romeo and Juliet were described as "Star-crossed lovers" and the audience is told that their love was "Death-marked". In Shakespeare's time, people believed that the stars determined human destiny, so by describing Romeo and Juliet's love as "Star-crossed" (which means thwarted by the stars), Shakespeare illustrates the misery that their love will bring them and those around them, and how inevitable that misery is.

There are constant references to brutal conflict in the Prologue, such as "civil blood makes civil hands unclean" and "their parents' rage". However, this vile language is undercut by the form of the Prologue, as it is written in the form of a Sonnet, a type of poem that was associated with romance in the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare deciding to use this form could be him communicating that even when rampant, violent conflict is everywhere, the force of love can overpower it, and flourish, just as the undertone of love in the sonnet had overwhelmed the brutal conflict within it.

In Act 1 Scene 1, there is a fight between the Capulets and the Montagues. At the start of the fight, Sampson of the Capulets tells some Montague servants, "Draw, if you be men". The "men" in this quote is representative of both courage and masculinity, so Sampson is questioning the Montagues' honour by attacking these two characteristics. Shakespeare could be inferring the inflated importance of honour causes violent conflict, because if people didn't care about their own honour, the Montagues could've refused to fight.

Later in Act 1 Scene 1, Romeo is introduced into the play. He is presented as an over-blown Petrarchan lover. His inner conflict about his unrequited love for Rosaline is shown when he uses oxymorons, "O loving hate!", and metaphors, "a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes". He also rhymes his words, and speaks in sonnets, which presents him as very overcome with emotion. Romeo constantly using over-blown language is an intentional decision by Shakespeare, who is making fun not just of Romeo, but of the very concept of a Petrarchan lover, presenting them as too emotional and dramatic. He is making the inner conflict of unrequited love to be insignificant.

In Act 1 Scene 5, Romeo and Juliet meet for the first time. The first words they say to each-other take the form of a Sonnet, which is associated with love. The Sonnet's lines are spoken by both Romeo and Juliet, Romeo says the first quatrain, Juliet the second, they share the third and the final couplet is divided evenly between them. This is a gradual inter-mingling of speech with two people speaking in shared verse, this calls attention to how compatible the couple is, and as if they were soulmates, destined by fate to meet.

The conflict here is between sex and religion, there is the vocabulary of the body, such as "hand" or "kiss", and the vocabulary of religion, such as "pilgrim" or "holy". The Juxtaposition between the physical desire and religious concerns between the couple is strong. For example, Romeo refers to his lips as "two blushing pilgrims", this metaphor attests to the seriousness of their relationship, as their physical attraction to each-other, represented here by Romeo's lips, is spiritual and pure in nature, demonstrated by him referring to them as "pilgrims". Consequently, the Elizabethan era audience, which was very catholic and religious, is led to take their relationship seriously.