**Themes in *Romeo and Juliet***

The story of Romeo and Juliet continues to interest and engage viewers and readers to the present day. One of the reasons for this may be that it explores universal themes which are still of interest and concern to everyday people. The play makes us think about issues, such as love, loyalty to one’s family and friends, authority and fate. Each of these themes is discussed below in relation to the play.

# Loyalty

*Romeo and Juliet* contains many examples of loyalty of one person or group to another person or group. Loyal actions in the play do not always have positive results and cannot always be seen to have been the best course of action. At times, as we see in the opening of the play, loyalty can lead to violence and people behaving dishonestly or wrongly.

**Student tasks**

1. On your own or in a group, discuss and decide on a definition of loyalty. In your answer consider the following: What is loyalty and how does a loyal person behave? Where does loyalty start and stop?
2. Think of at least three examples of when a person or group shows loyalty in *Romeo and Juliet*. Write down:

* Who was loyal to whom?
* How they were loyal – what did they do that showed loyalty?
* What the result of their actions – did their loyalty have positive or negative outcomes in the end?

1. Using the scenes of *Romeo and Juliet* that we have studied in class, find three quotations that show that a character is feeling torn or pulled in two directions by their loyalties. Write down the quotation and explain what it shows about the character and to whom they are loyal.

# Authority

Authority is illustrated and explored in *Romeo and Juliet.* In Shakespeare’s time, authority was very closely linked in people’s minds to the natural order of the world and to the will of God. For example, the authority of the king or queen was believed to be given to them by God. Therefore, anyone who went against the authority of the king or queen would be considered to be committing a crime or sin against the wishes of God. People who went against authority were seen as going against the natural order and many people believed that this could only end in disaster.

**Student tasks**

1. There are many other words related to the word ‘authority’. For example: *authoritarian, authorise, authoritative*. Look up each of these words and find out what form of word that they are, e.g., noun, adjective, adverb. Write a brief definition for each of the words including the word ‘authority’.
2. Find and write down three examples from the play where one person or group has authority over another group.
3. Describe three situations in the play when a person or group disobeys authority. What is the end result of each situation? Which of these examples of disobedience are the more serious ones in your opinion?
4. Are there any situations in *Romeo and Juliet* where people in authority do not do their jobs properly? For example, do the people in authority always carry out their jobs as carefully and as well as they should?
5. What message or idea do you think Shakespeare might have wanted to say in *Romeo and Juliet* about the nature of authority and about obeying authority?

**Love**

Love in *Romeo and Juliet* is presented almost as a disease that makes you physically ill and behave in a foolish way.

**Student tasks**

1. Read the two statements about the theme of love in *Romeo and Juliet*. As an individual/ group, choose the statement that you agree with more and find quotations and examples from the play to support your opinion. Be prepared to contribute your ideas to a class discussion.

“*Romeo and Juliet* is one of the greatest love stories of all times.”

“*Romeo and Juliet* is more about passion, hate and the importance of obedience than it is about love.”

# Fate versus free will

In Shakespeare’s time, fate was seen as your personal fortune or destiny that was predetermined by God. You could escape or avoid it. Your fate was said to be aligned with the stars (that is why astrologers have such importance for some people). On the other hand, there is free will. This is where a person takes control and makes his or her own destiny thereby changing the will of God. This was seen as a sin.

**Student task**

1. Write down three examples of fate or free will from *Romeo and Juliet*.
2. What message was Shakespeare trying to convey about fate and free will?

**Handout 13b**

**Evidence in the play**

Look carefully at the following quotations from *Romeo and Juliet*. You may need to go back to the scene and reread the lines before and after the quotation to remind yourself of what was happening in the scene. Decide which theme the quotation relates to and explain what you think Shakespeare might have been trying to say about the themes of love, authority and loyalty.

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| **Extract from *Romeo and Juliet*** | **Which theme does it relate to?** | **What does the scene show or suggest to the viewer about the themes of the play?** |
| Act I, scene I, line 80 Prince: Three civil brawls, bred of an airy word,  By thee old Capulet and Montague  Have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets.  …  If ever you disturb our streets again,  Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace. |  |  |
| Act I, scene i, line 122 Montague: Many a morning hath he there been seen,  With tears augmenting the fresh morning’s dew,  Adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs. |  |  |
| Act I, scene v, line 51 Romeo: Did my heart love till now? Forswear it sight  For I ne’er saw true beauty till this night. |  |  |
| Act I, scene v, line 74 Tybalt: I’ll nor endure him.  Capulet: He shall be endured.  What Goodman boy, I say he shall, go to! Am I the master her, or you? |  |  |
| **Act II, scene v, line 65**  Nurse: Have you got leave to go to shrift today?  Juliet: I have.  Nurse: Then hie thee thence to Friar Lawrence’s cell. There he stays a husband to make you a wife. |  |  |
| Act III, scene I, line 100 Romeo: This gentleman, the prince’s near ally,  My very friend, hath got this mortal hurt In my behalf. |  |  |
| Act III, scene ii, line 96 Nurse: Will you speak well of him that killed your cousin?  Juliet: Shall I speak ill of him that is my husband?  … My husband that lives that Tybalt would have slain. |  |  |
| Act III, scene v, line 137 Capulet: How now wife,  Have you delivered to her our decree?  Lady Capulet: Ay, sire, but she will none, she gives you thanks.  I would the fool were married to her grave.  Capulet: How, will she none?  Doth she not give us thanks?  Is she not proud? Doth she not count her blest,  Unworthy as she is, that we have wrought So worthy a gentleman to be her bride? |  |  |
| Act V, scene iii, line 119 Romeo: Here’s to my love! (Drinks) O true apothecary! Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die. |  |  |
| Act V, scene iii, line 291 Prince: Where be these enemies? Capulet, Montague?  See what a scourge is laid upon your hate.  That heaven finds means to kills your joys with love!  And I for winking at your discords too  Have lost a brace of kinsmen.  All are punished. |  |  |