**ROMEO AND JULIET - Context**

**Duelling and the concept of honour:** Maintaining the honour of your family name was hugely important at the time. If you were challenged to a duel and you refused, you would be deemed a coward, thus damaging your honour and the status of your family. Most Elizabethan gentlemen carried swords in public and many died in the streets.

**Courtly Love and cures for lovesickness:** common in medieval literature where a knight was consumed with passion for an unattainable noblewoman; Romeo fits this perfectly. Elizabethan doctors saw unrequited love or desire as a disease, a type of melancholy sometimes called lovesickness. They tried various cures and sometimes sent patients to church to confess to a priest. They believed that if lovesickness was left untreated, it could lead to madness.

**Role of women in a patriarchal society:** Elizabethan England was a society controlled by men. Women were seen as the weaker sex and were expected to be meek and mild, and most importantly, obedient to their fathers and their husbands.

**Arranged marriages:** Marriages amongst the wealthy were arranged by parents in order to match or improve social standing. However, in practice, parents did try to choose someone their child liked and was happy to marry. Secret marriages such as that between the young Romeo and Juliet would have been both illegal and shocking.

**The Italian setting of the play:** The play is set in Italy, which was known for its warring states. It is also a Catholic country; religion was extremely important and marriage vows were seen as sacred – once made, they could not be broken.

**Plot**

**ACT 1**

In Italy, two noble families (the Montagues & Capulets) are feuding yet again. Romeo is in love with Rosaline, who rejects his love. As a result, he is depressed. To cure Romeo of his lovesickness, Benvolio persuades him to attend a masked ball at the Capulets, where he might see prettier girls and therefore forget about Rosaline. Romeo meets Juliet and they instantly fall in love with one another. Tybalt hears Romeo’s voice at the ball and is furious that a Montague has dared to attend.

**ACT 2**

Romeo stands beneath Juliet’s balcony. He sees Juliet leaning over the railing, hears her calling out his name and wishes that he wasn’t a Montague. He reveals his presence and they resolve, after a passionate exchange, to be married secretly.

**ACT 3**

Romeo returns from his recent marriage to Juliet and encounters Tybalt, who challenges Romeo to a duel. Unbeknownst to all present, Tybalt is now Romeo’s kinsman by marriage so Romeo refuses. Mercutio is livid with Romeo’s refusal and fights with Tybalt who underhandedly kills Mercutio. Furious by the death of his friend, Romeo kills Tybalt and takes shelter in the Friar’s cell. The Prince exiles Romeo for his part in the fray.

**ACT 4**

In despair, Juliet seeks Friar Lawrence’s advice. He gives her a sleeping potion, which for a time will cause her to appear dead. Thus, on the day of her supposed marriage to Paris, she will be carried to the family vault. By the time she awakens, Romeo will be summoned to the vault and take her away to Mantua.

**ACT 5**

The Friar’s letter fails to reach Romeo. When he hears of Juliet’s death, Romeo procures a deadly poison from Friar Lawrence’s hermit. He uses it to commit suicide. Juliet, seeing that Romeo is dead, sues for his body and dies a widower.

**Significant characters**

**Romeo**
A young Montague. Not interested in violence, only love. He’s passionate and sensitive yet also impulsive.

**Juliet**
A young Capulet. Naive and sheltered at the beginning, develops into a strong character. Grounded.

**Friar**
Friar Lawrence is a friend to both Romeo and Juliet. Civic-minded. Also expert with potions and herb remedies.

**Capulet**
Juliet’s father. Proud and caring but can fly into rage if respect is lacking.

**Mercutio**
Romeo’s close friend. Witty, bawdy, cynical and a hot-headed character.

**Benvolio**
Romeo’s cousin. Tries to keep the peace and keep Romeo’s mind off of Rosaline.

**Prince**
Leader of Verona, concerned with keeping order between the warring families.

**Tybalt**
Juliet’s cousin. Obsessed by family honour; quick to draw his sword. Hates Montagues.

---

**Assessment objectives**

**AO1 (40%)**
Make an informed personal response using a critical style.

- Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.
- Make an informed personal response using a critical style.

**AO2 (40%)**
Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.

**AO3 (20%)**
Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.

**AO4 (4 marks)**
Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

---

**The exam**

- Firstly, highlight the key words in the question and plan, consider **WHAT? HOW? WHY?**
- **Now read the extract and highlight good evidence** to answer the first bullet point of your question (5 min)
- **Write response** to both bullet points:
  - Intro: discuss the extract’s place in the play then go straight into **analysing the extract** (20 mins)
  - **Write 2 or 3 detailed paragraphs** for the second part of your question. (20 mins)
  - **Sum up** how the writer presents… whatever the question asks. (5 mins)
- **Check spellings, punctuation and vocabulary** (5 mins)

**REMEMBER – WHAT? HOW? WHY?**

**Sample answer**

**Starting with this moment in the play (Act 3, Scene 1), write about how Shakespeare presents conflict.**

Through the use of dramatic irony, Shakespeare allows his audience to understand why Romeo “love[s]” Tybalt, whom Rome now regards as family following his clandestine marriage to Juliet. However, an Elizabethan audience would be aware of the dishonour of refusing a challenge and would not be surprised at the hot-headed Mercutio’s desire to join the “ fray” due to what he sees as Romeo’s “wile submission”. The sudden death of Mercutio’s lively character would come as a shock and his final pun when he refers to himself as a “grave man” would actually reinforce that shock rather than add humour; it illustrates the brutal reality of Romeo’s world, which is in stark contrast to the romantic world of the preceding marriage scene. The audience would now expect “grave” consequences and indeed there are: Mercutio’s death becomes the pivotal point in the play as a series of tragic events ensues, leading to the tragic climax. Mercutio’s repeated curse on “both [their] houses” would also remind the audience that it is the families’ “ancient grudge” that has ultimately led to his death. Such a dramatic scene could be staged in such a way as to convey its importance with perhaps the actors frozen in horror as Mercutio looks to the audience while delivering his final lines.

---

**Stretch yourself**

- Whilst analysing the extract, quickly refer out to other parts of the play.
- Watch different performances of key scenes to provide you with ideas and alternative interpretations.