

# Romeo and Juliet essay: How does Shakespeare present Romeo in Act 1 Scene 1?

In Act 1 Scene 1 of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo is presented as a young man who is just beginning to explore love, as he discusses his emotions with his cousin and good friend, Benvolio. Although Romeo has many conflicting thoughts<sup>1</sup>, he stubbornly claims he loves Rosaline, all to the audience's knowledge that very soon he will meet Juliet instead. In the first scene of the play, Shakespeare establishes the core themes,<sup>2</sup> such as the passing of time and the disparity between love and hate. Romeo's very first line, "Is the day so young?" exposes how his love-sickness for Rosaline causes him to wake up before sunrise and wait for the hours to drag by. Shakespeare's use of a combination of monosyllables<sup>3</sup> and open vowels stretches out Romeo's short sentence "sad hours seem long", while the sibilance matches his dour tone, suggesting sadness and a feeling of pain and endlessness. Immediately after this, Shakespeare introduces, arguably, the most important theme of the play: love. Benvolio indicates that Love as a character can seem so "gentle", but be so brutal, powerful and unpredictable ("tyrannous"), further emphasised by the connotations of violence and pain in the word "rough". Romeo's use of ecphosis as he exclaims "O" several times shows his highly emotional state. Shakespeare uses a paradoxical phrase "O brawling love, O loving hate" similar to the line "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" in *Macbeth*, to draw the audience's attention to the theme of love and hate<sup>4</sup>. The next few lines add to the audience's impression of Romeo's confusion and uncertainty, as he talks about the two-faceted nature of love. The use of oxymorons such as "heavy lightness" shows his conflicted mindset and reinforces the idea that love can cause both positive and negative emotions. "Feather of lead" portrays love as something that can be as fragile as a feather but at the same time something heavy-hearted. Love is simultaneously something so full of emotion like a "fire" but also something with connotations of heat and anger. The listing of these chaotic ideas goes to show the extent of Romeo's love-sickness. As Romeo's verse concludes, his comparisons of love become more and more vibrant and violent. He ends it by calling love "a choking gall, and a preserving sweet", something both mortally destructive and healing, something that paradoxically fulfils the two, reinforcing the overall presentation of Romeo as someone immature for whom love is a new and rather unexplored idea.<sup>5</sup>

Romeo's tone subtly shifts to present how his love for Rosaline perhaps isn't<sup>6</sup> true love. He calls love a "smoke", suggesting that it is a mirage, resembling something so ambiguous, unsubstantial and fleeting. He appears to be more in love with his emotions than the woman he supposedly loves. Overall, we find out very little about Rosaline, as he makes no mention of her character, only calling her "fair". However, in Tudor times women were not treated in the same way as in the modern world and marriages were often done solely because of the individuals' status. Romeo's brief descriptions of her are underpinned by the later revelation that the woman he loves has sworn to celibacy, as "she'll not be hit With Cupid's arrow". The adjective in Romeo's phrase "strong proof" implies that Cupid's arrows are weak and childish, therefore Rosaline will never fall in love, letting her beauty and her fertility perish with her. He particularly makes note of the fact that she will not have any offspring, enhanced by the sexually explicit phrase "ope her lap", which hints at

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<sup>1</sup>vague—explain this more clearly

<sup>2</sup>link to the title of the essay

<sup>3</sup>how do the monosyllables achieve this?

<sup>4</sup>in what particular way?

<sup>5</sup>not quite clear how you got to this point

<sup>6</sup>contractions are not permissible in essays: write "is not"

Romeo's lust and sexual frustration. Although he deifies Rosaline, comparing her to Diana, a Greek goddess of hunting and chastity, "assailing" suggests Romeo feels as if he is in a military battle where he is losing. He talks with an excessive language of love, talking about "a fire sparkling", suggesting something celestial and so full of energy. Despite these declarations of love, Romeo's speech is undermined by Shakespeare's presentation of Romeo's love as somewhat foolish and simply a passing infatuation. Romeo talks frequently of death, such as when he states "I live dead" and "a sick man ... make his will", inferring premature mortality and associating love with dying, signifying what will happen later in the play. The word "grief", for example, is usually associated with loss and mourning, and more generally, he uses a lexical field of destruction and misery. Shakespeare uses "making me despair" to reveal Romeo's hopelessness and feelings of being upset and emotionally wronged. Benvolio simplistically suggests that Romeo "forget to think of her", but Romeo stubbornly says that this is impossible, as Rosaline is so omnipresent in his mind. When told to "examine other beauties", Romeo's response seems rather hyperbolic and irrational, as he once again describes love as "blind". By the end of the first scene, Benvolio begins forming a plan about which we find out more in the next scene. He does so to help Romeo see that there is a better love elsewhere. Benvolio understands Romeo well and sympathises with him, shown in many of his lines, but especially in his short sentence "No, coz, I rather weep." Despite Romeo's apparent stubbornness, Benvolio is strongly dedicated, and within a few scenes, Romeo's love for Rosaline is proven to be untrue.

To conclude, in Romeo's first scene in the play, Shakespeare presents him as someone inexperienced who is still confused and troubled by love. He resembles a Petrarchan lover, one whose love is immensely powerful yet painful. Even though he describes Rosaline as the ideal woman and despairs at her indifference towards him, his feelings seem shallow and juvenile. Romeo repeatedly explains his love as blind and impaired and firmly denies and rejects the idea of ever loving anyone other than Rosaline. These two factors not only highlight his immaturity but also heighten the comic effect when, just four scenes later, he falls in love with Juliet at first sight.

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### **Teacher's comments**

Mark: 16/25 *Some good points, but you need to write more in a point-evidence-explanation way. At the moment, this is a bit scrappy.*

See footnotes for specific remarks.