

Romeo and Juliet

Context, Critical Ideas and Grade 9 Essay Guide

Edexcel International GCSE English Literature

What Are Examiners Looking For?

Your essay is marked out of **30 marks**:

Assessment Objective	Marks
AO1: Knowledge, understanding and personal response	10
AO2: Language, form and structure	10
AO4: Context	10

The highest level of the mark scheme says:

"Understanding of the relationship between text and context is integrated convincingly into the response."

This means context should not be something you simply add at the end of a paragraph. Instead, it should help explain Shakespeare's choices, ideas and messages.

The Grade 9 Rule for Context

Most students write:

Women had fewer rights in Elizabethan England.

Grade 9 students write:

Juliet's refusal to obey Capulet challenges patriarchal expectations because daughters were expected to submit to paternal authority. Shakespeare therefore presents her rebellion as both courageous and dangerous.

Notice the difference.

The second response links:

- text
- context
- Shakespeare's purpose

in a single argument.

That is what top-level AO4 looks like.

The Origins of the Story

Shakespeare did **not** invent Romeo and Juliet.

The story developed through several earlier texts:

Luigi da Porto (1530)

One of the earliest versions of the story.

Matteo Bandello (1554)

Expanded the narrative and popularised it.

Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562)

Shakespeare's main source.

Why Does This Matter?

A Grade 9 insight is not simply knowing Shakespeare borrowed the story.

The important question is:

What did Shakespeare change?

He:

- made Juliet younger
- increased the pace dramatically

- intensified emotional conflict
- made the lovers more sympathetic
- increased the role of fate

As a result, Shakespeare transforms a cautionary tale into a profound tragedy exploring youth, love, violence and social division.

Ovid and Classical Influences

Like many Renaissance writers, Shakespeare was heavily influenced by the Roman poet **Ovid**.

His work *Metamorphoses* contained stories involving:

- forbidden love
- family conflict
- revenge
- transformation
- tragedy

Pyramus and Thisbe

This story is particularly important.

Similarities include:

- feuding families
- forbidden love
- secret meetings
- misunderstandings
- double suicide

Grade 9 Idea

Shakespeare uses an ancient myth as the basis for a more sophisticated tragedy.

Rather than simply telling a love story, he explores how hatred, violence and social expectations destroy innocent lives.

Renaissance Humanism

Shakespeare wrote during the Renaissance, a period heavily influenced by **Humanism**.

Humanists believed:

- individual thought mattered
- people should question accepted ideas
- human experience deserved exploration
- identity was not entirely fixed by birth

Why Is This Relevant?

Throughout the play, Romeo and Juliet place individual desire above social expectation.

Juliet asks:

"What's in a name?"

This question challenges the ideas upon which Verona itself is built.

Family identity, status and inherited loyalty suddenly appear meaningless when compared with love.

Grade 9 Interpretation

The play can be viewed as a conflict between:

the individual and **society**

Romeo and Juliet represent personal freedom.

Verona represents tradition, hierarchy and social control.

Patriarchy and Female Obedience

Elizabethan society was strongly patriarchal.

Men controlled:

- political power
- legal authority
- family decisions
- marriage arrangements

Women were expected to be:

- obedient
- modest
- silent
- submissive

Religious and social teachings encouraged daughters to obey their fathers.

Juliet's Rebellion

Many students describe Juliet simply as "independent".

A more sophisticated argument is that Shakespeare gradually allows Juliet to reject every expectation of the ideal Elizabethan daughter.

At the start she appears compliant:

"I'll look to like, if looking liking move."

However, she later:

- chooses her own husband
- rejects Paris
- deceives her parents
- challenges her father's authority
- takes control of her own fate

A Grade 9 Reading of Juliet

Juliet becomes increasingly powerful throughout the play.

In many ways she grows more quickly and more effectively than Romeo.

By Act 4, she is making complex decisions independently.

Ironically, the adults around her often seem less rational than she does.

Sophisticated Argument

Shakespeare presents Juliet as an unusually intelligent and self-determined young woman whose tragedy arises partly because society has no place for female independence.

Juliet as a Challenge to Traditional Female Roles

The ideal Renaissance woman was expected to be:

- chaste
- obedient
- passive

Juliet is none of these things by the end of the play.

Her famous question:

"What's in a name?"

shows intellectual independence.

She refuses to let inherited identities define her reality.

Grade 9 Concept

Juliet is not merely rebelling against her father.

She is questioning the entire social structure upon which Verona is built.

Romeo as a Petrarchan Lover

Before Juliet appears, Romeo behaves like a stereotypical **Petrarchan lover**.

The Italian poet **Petrarch** created a style of love poetry in which:

- women were idealised

- lovers exaggerated their suffering
- emotions became theatrical
- unrequited love was celebrated

Romeo and Rosaline

Romeo constantly speaks in exaggerated clichés:

"O brawling love! O loving hate!"

The oxymorons create a sense of performance.

Some critics argue Romeo is enjoying the experience of being in love rather than genuinely loving Rosaline.

Why Is This Important?

Shakespeare may be parodying fashionable love poetry.

Romeo initially appears:

- immature
- self-absorbed
- melodramatic

Juliet changes this.

His language gradually becomes more genuine and direct.

Grade 9 Interpretation

Romeo begins the play as a literary stereotype.

Shakespeare develops him beyond that stereotype through his relationship with Juliet.

Courtly Love Versus Real Love

Elizabethan audiences were familiar with ideas of **courtly love**.

Typical courtly love involved:

- instant attraction
- idealised beauty
- emotional suffering
- dramatic declarations

Romeo and Rosaline fit this model perfectly.

Romeo and Juliet increasingly do not.

Shared Sonnet

When Romeo and Juliet first meet, they form a shared sonnet together.

This is important because sonnets were associated with love poetry.

The shared structure suggests:

- harmony
- balance
- equality

Unlike many relationships in Verona, their conversation is a genuine exchange.

Grade 9 Interpretation

Shakespeare contrasts artificial courtly love with a more authentic emotional connection.

Fate, Fortune and Free Will

Elizabethans believed in:

- fate
- providence
- astrology
- divine influence

The audience learns in the Prologue that Romeo and Juliet are:

"star-cross'd lovers"

From the beginning, tragedy appears unavoidable.

However...

A Grade 9 essay should recognise that the play is not simply about fate.

Many disastrous events result from human choices.

Examples include:

- Tybalt's aggression
- Romeo's impulsiveness
- Capulet's demands
- Friar Laurence's schemes

Sophisticated Interpretation

Shakespeare deliberately refuses to provide a simple answer.

The tragedy may result from:

Fate

Events seem predetermined.

Free Will

Characters repeatedly make poor decisions.

Society

The feud creates the conditions for disaster.

Grade 9 Conclusion

The play remains powerful because Shakespeare leaves responsibility unresolved.

Honour, Masculinity and Violence

Male honour was immensely important in Renaissance society.

Men were expected to:

- defend their reputation
- respond to insults
- demonstrate courage

Verona operates according to this code.

The Toxic Culture of Honour

Tybalt, Mercutio and Romeo all become trapped by expectations of masculine behaviour.

Tybalt cannot tolerate insult.

Mercutio cannot refuse a challenge.

Romeo feels compelled to avenge Mercutio.

Grade 9 Interpretation

Shakespeare critiques a culture in which masculine pride becomes more valuable than human life.

The feud survives not because anyone remembers its cause, but because nobody can abandon it.

Religion

Religion shaped every aspect of Elizabethan life.

Romeo and Juliet frequently use religious language:

"saint"

"holy shrine"

"pilgrim"

Why Does Shakespeare Do This?

Their love appears elevated and sacred.

However, there is a contradiction.

They also:

- deceive their families
- disobey authority
- marry secretly
- ultimately commit suicide

Grade 9 Interpretation

Shakespeare uses religious imagery to elevate the lovers while simultaneously exposing the moral complexity of their actions.

Mercutio and Renaissance Skepticism

Mercutio is often overlooked by weaker candidates.

Top students recognise that he offers an alternative voice.

Unlike Romeo, Mercutio:

- rejects romantic idealism
- mocks dreams
- questions fantasy

His Queen Mab speech undermines many beliefs that Romeo takes seriously.

Why Is Mercutio Important?

Mercutio exposes the tension between:

romantic fantasy and **reality**

His death marks the moment when comedy becomes tragedy.

Grade 9 Interpretation

Mercutio represents a sceptical Renaissance perspective that challenges both romantic and fatalistic ways of thinking.

Shakespearean Tragedy

Romeo and Juliet is often remembered as a love story.

It is actually a tragedy.

Like many Shakespearean tragedies, it explores:

- flawed decisions
- suffering
- responsibility
- human weakness

Romeo's Tragic Flaw

A convincing argument is that Romeo's tragic flaw is impulsiveness.

Examples include:

- falling in love quickly
- marrying quickly
- killing Tybalt
- buying poison immediately

Friar Laurence warns:

"Wisely and slow."

Grade 9 Interpretation

Romeo does not merely suffer because fate targets him.

His downfall also stems from his inability to moderate his emotions.

The Big Ideas Examiners Love

The strongest essays often explore one or more of these conceptual arguments:

Individual vs Society

Romeo and Juliet's desires conflict with Verona's social structures.

Love vs Hate

Private love exists within a public culture of violence.

Youth vs Age

Younger characters often appear more emotionally honest than adults.

Freedom vs Control

Juliet fights against attempts to control her future.

Fate vs Responsibility

The play invites debate rather than offering certainty.

Grade 9 Essay Checklist

Before submitting your essay, ask yourself:

- ☒ Have I answered the question throughout?
- ☒ Have I analysed Shakespeare's methods closely?
- ☒ Have I zoomed in on important words?

- ✓ Have I explored multiple interpretations?
- ✓ Have I linked context directly to analysis?
- ✓ Have I referred to Shakespeare's purpose?
- ✓ Have I explored a conceptual argument?
- ✓ Have I written about ideas, not just events?
- ✓ Have I shown how context shapes meaning?

Final Grade 9 Thought

The very best essays do not use context as a list of historical facts.

Instead, they show how Shakespeare uses the world around him to explore universal questions about love, violence, identity, authority and freedom.

A top-level response might conclude:

Shakespeare presents the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet as more than the story of two unfortunate lovers. By drawing upon Renaissance ideas, classical influences, patriarchal expectations and the culture of honour, he exposes the destructive consequences of a society that values loyalty, reputation and tradition above individual humanity. The play's enduring power lies in the fact that Shakespeare never presents a single cause for the tragedy, instead encouraging audiences to debate whether Romeo and Juliet are victims of fate, their own choices, or the society in which they live.