

Focus on the text: *Romeo and Juliet*

The plot

The **Montagues** and **Capulets**, the two most important families of Verona, are bitter enemies. Romeo, a Montague, goes to a masked ball given by the Capulet family and falls in love with their daughter Juliet. After the ball, Romeo goes into the Capulet's garden and overhears Juliet confessing that she, too, has fallen in love with him; they decide to marry secretly. With the help of Friar Lawrence, they are married the next day. But the same day some of the Montagues and Capulets meet and a fight follows in which Romeo's friend Mercutio is killed. Romeo is involved in the fight, and he kills Tybalt, Juliet's cousin; he is then banished to Mantua. Meanwhile, Lord Capulet wants Juliet to marry Count Paris. Juliet asks Friar Lawrence for advice and he suggests she should drink a potion which will give her the appearance of being dead for 42 hours. The friar will tell Romeo about it and Romeo will take her to Mantua with him. But the Friar's message fails to reach Romeo in time, and Romeo, believing Juliet is dead, decides to kill himself. He buys some poison and goes to see Juliet's body for the last time. At the tomb Romeo gives Juliet a final kiss, drinks the poison and dies. Juliet awakes and, finding Romeo dead, takes his knife and kills herself.

Features of the play

Shakespeare places the pure and absolute love of **Romeo** and **Juliet** in contrast with other notions of love that are embodied by other characters. For **Juliet's father**, love is a profitable contract between two families. For **Juliet's nurse**, love is something physical that belongs to the realm of the senses. For **Paris**, the man Juliet's family want her to marry, love is linked to the idea of correct behaviour.

Though the tragedy of the play is linked to destiny, Shakespeare also gives his characters free will to decide their own fate. This is one of the things that makes *Romeo and Juliet* a '**modern**' **tragedy**. At the end of the play Romeo looks at the sleeping Juliet, who has taken a potion to fake death, and believes the illusion rather than the reality. Juliet, in fact, wakes up a moment later, but it is too late because Romeo has already killed himself. In this way Shakespeare questions the power of appearance and illusion.

Romeo and Juliet **plays with the audience's expectations**. Unlike Romeo, the audience knows of Juliet's plan but can only watch as he mistakenly believes she is dead. Part of the play's emotional effect therefore derives from this gap in knowledge — the fact that we know everything but are at the same time powerless to change the course of events.



The language used by Romeo is extremely **poetic**. Standing under Juliet's balcony, he describes her using some of the conventions of courtly love and Neoplatonism found in sonnets of the time. Later in the play his language becomes less conventional, and more genuinely poetic.

Romeo and Juliet in a performance by the Russian Bolshoi Ballet (1987).

Romeo and Juliet (c.1595)

This passage is taken from one of the most famous scenes of the play, the so-called 'balcony scene'. It is night. After seeing Juliet at the Capulets' house, Romeo secretly returns to the Capulets' garden to see her again. Here Juliet and Romeo reflect, at first independently and then in dialogue, both on the things which have brought them together and which separate them.

Before you read

- 1 In this extract Romeo describes Juliet in a way which is typical of the courtly love tradition: through comparisons. What images do you think Romeo will use? Choose from the following or add your own ideas.

spring the sun the moon the stars night summer light
lovers angels darkness water the Virgin



ROMEO. But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,

Who is already sick and pale with grief

5 That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she.

Be not her maid, since she is envious.

Her vestal livery is but sick and green,

And none but fools do wear it; cast it off.

(Enter Juliet aloft.)

It is my lady, O, it is my love.

10 O that she knew she were!

She speaks, yet she says nothing. What of that?

Her eye discourses; I will answer it.

I am too bold. 'Tis not to me she speaks.

Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,

15 Having some business, do entreat her eyes

To twinkle in their spheres till they return.

What if her eyes were there, they in her head? —

The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars

As daylight doth a lamp; her eye in heaven

20 Would through the airy region stream so bright

That birds would sing and think it were not night.

See how she leans her cheek upon her hand.

O, that I were a glove upon that hand,

That I might touch that cheek!

25 JULIET. Ay me.

ROMEO. (Aside.) She speaks.

O, speak again, bright angel; for thou art

As glorious to this night, being o'er my head,

As is a wingèd messenger of heaven

30 Unto the white upturned wond'ring eyes

Of mortals that fall back to gaze on him

When he bestrides the lazy-passing clouds

And sails upon the bosom of the air.

JULIET. (Not knowing Romeo hears her.)

O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?

ROMEO. Piano! che luce rompe da quella finestra lassù? Lì è l'Oriente. È Giulietta il sole.

Levati, o sole bello, a cancellare la gelosa luna sbiancata e livida di rancore perché tu, vestale sua, sei bella, molto più bella di lei. Non farle più da ancella, se è così invidiosa di te: ché tanto il suo manto di vestale s'è fatto ormai livido e consunto, e non lo portano più che le pazze. Buttalo via. È la mia donna, oh! Il mio amore. Ah potesse saperlo, lei, che è così!

Ecco: parla... ma senza parole. E com'è?

Parlano i suoi occhi. Risponderò. Eh, come corro! Non parla con me. Due delle stelle più vive di tutto il firmamento, essendo occupate altrove, hanno pregato i suoi occhi di brillare nelle loro orbite fino al loro ritorno. E se fossero i suoi occhi, lassù, e loro, le stelle, in fronte a lei? Allora la luce del suo viso farebbe impallidire di mortificazione le due stelle come lampade in pieno sole; e di lassù i suoi occhi versano per i campi dell'etere un tal fiume di luce che gli uccelli, credendo finita la notte, tutti insieme si mettono a cantare. Vedi come appoggia la guancia sulla mano? Oh, foss'io il guanto su quella mano e sentire la sua guancia!

GIULIETTA. Ahimè!

ROMEO. Ecco, parla. Oh parla ancora angelo di splendore, gloria di luce a questa notte, che di lassù sopra al mio capo sfolgori come di più non potrebbe un alato messaggero del cielo agli occhi dei mortali, che arretrano nel contemplarlo mentre varca le pigre nuvole e veleggia nell'immenso grembo dell'aria.

GIULIETTA. O Romeo, Romeo, perché sei Romeo?

- 35 Deny thy father and refuse thy name,
Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.
ROMEO. (*Aside.*)
Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?
JULIET. 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
40 Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
45 By any other word would smell as sweet.
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for thy name—which is no part of thee —
50 Take all myself.
ROMEO. (*To Juliet.*) I take thee at thy word.
Call me but love and I'll be new baptized.
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.
JULIET. What man art thou that, thus bescreened in night,
55 So stumblest on my counsel?
ROMEO. By a name
I know not how to tell thee who I am.
My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself
Because it is an enemy to thee.
60 Had I it written, I would tear the word.
JULIET. My ears have yet not drunk a hundred words
Of thy tongue's uttering, yet I know the sound.
Art thou not Romeo, and a Montague?
ROMEO. Neither, fair maid, if either thee dislike.
65 JULIET. How cam'st thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?
The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,
And the place death, considering who thou art,
If any of my kinsmen find thee here.
ROMEO. With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls,
70 For stony limits cannot hold love out,
And what love can do, that dares love attempt.
Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me.
JULIET. If they do see thee, they will murder thee.
ROMEO. Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye
75 Than twenty of their swords. Look thou but sweet,
And I am proof against their enmity.
JULIET. I would not for the world they saw thee here.
ROMEO. I have night's cloak to hide me from their eyes,
And but thou love me, let them find me here.
80 My life were better ended by their hate
Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love.

Rinnega tuo padre, rifiuta il suo nome, o, se vuoi, legati a me anche solo d'un giuramento, e io non sarò più una Capuleti.

ROMEO. Devo ascoltare ancora, o risponderle?
GIULIETTA. Solo il tuo nome è mio nemico; ma tu sei tu, non un Montecchi. Che è un Montecchi? Non è né una mano né un piede, né una faccia né un braccio: nessuna parte di un uomo. O sii tu qualche altro nome! E che è un nome? Quella che noi chiamiamo rosa, anche con un altro nome avrebbe il suo soave profumo. Così Romeo, che se non si chiamasse Romeo, conserverebbe un fascino di perfezione, che possiede anche senza quel nome. Romeo, poiché non ti è nulla il tuo nome, buttalo via, e prenditi, in cambio, tutta me stessa.

ROMEO. Ti prendo in parola. Chiamami soltanto amore; e così ribattezzato, d'ora innanzi non sarò più Romeo.

GIULIETTA. Ma tu chi sei che protetto dalla notte inciampi nel mio segreto pensiero?

ROMEO. Non posso dirtelo con un nome: il mio nome, cara santa, mi è odioso perché tuo nemico. Se lo avessi qui, scritto, lo, straccerei.

GIULIETTA. Il mio orecchio non ha ancora bevuto cento parole di quella voce, che già ne riconosce il suono. Non sei Romeo? Un Montecchi, tu?

ROMEO. No, bella bambina, né l'uno né l'altro, se l'uno e l'altro ti è sgradito.

GIULIETTA. Come, dimmi, e perché sei entrato qui dentro? Sono erti e aspri da scalare i muri dell'orto: e qui, per te quale sei, se qualcuno di casa mia ti scopre, è luogo di morte.

ROMEO. Sulle ali leggere dell'Amore ho scavalcato questi muri. Amore non teme ostacoli di pietra. Amore, quando a una cosa intende, è ardimentoso e pronto. - Perciò non temo i tuoi parenti.

GIULIETTA. Ti uccideranno, se ti scoprono qui.

ROMEO. Ahimè, c'è nei tuoi occhi più pericolo che in cento loro spade.

Se mi guardi tu con dolcezza io sarò a tutta prova contro l'odio dei tuoi.

GIULIETTA. Ma io non voglio per nulla al mondo che ti trovino qui.

ROMEO. Mi nasconde alla vista il mantello della notte. Se tu non mi ami, mi trovino pure qui.

Meglio finir la vita per il loro odio che ritardare la mia morte nel vano desiderio del tuo amore.

Translated by Cesare Vico Lodovici

Orientation

- Focus on Romeo's initial speech (lines 1-33) and underline the exact words which correspond to the following points:
 - Seeing the light from Juliet's window, Romeo imagines that it is Juliet herself who produces it, as though she were the rising sun.
 - Romeo says that the moon is jealous of this 'sun' because she is more beautiful.
 - Romeo says he would like to be a glove on Juliet's hand, to be able to touch her cheek.
 - Romeo imagines that Juliet's eyes are in conversation with two stars.
 - Romeo says that if there were stars in place of Juliet's eyes their light would be shamed by the brightness of her skin.
 - Romeo says that if Juliet's eyes replaced the stars in the sky, the light they shone would make the birds think it was day.
 - Romeo compares Juliet's voice to that of an angel who makes mortal men turn their eyes to the sky.
- Now read the second part of the text (lines 34-44). What does Juliet want Romeo to do? Why? What is she prepared to do if he doesn't?
- Now look at the last part and decide whether the following statements are true or false. Correct the false ones.
 - Juliet says that if a rose were not called a rose it would not be as sweet. T F
 - Romeo insists on keeping his name. T F
 - Romeo says his name reveals nothing about who he really is. T F
 - Romeo says that he hates his name. T F
 - Juliet says that Romeo is safe with her. T F
 - Romeo says that he used a ladder to get into Juliet's garden. T F
 - Romeo says he's not afraid of Juliet's family. T F
 - Romeo says that he would prefer to die than to live without Juliet's love. T F

Exploration

- Read and listen to the passage again and reflect on the techniques used. Find the following:
 - Romeo's monologue.
 - Romeo's asides.
 - Juliet's monologue.
 - Dialogue.
 - Stage directions.
- Find evidence in the text of blank verse.
- Consider Juliet's reflections on the value of names. Fill in the following text with the appropriate words:

smell	meaningless	comparing
correspond	object	

In this passage Juliet begins by
 a Romeo's family name, Montague, to that of the names of objects. She concludes that 'Montague', unlike 'hand' or 'foot', does not refer to any specific
 b but is arbitrary and ultimately c She then goes on to reflect on the value of names in general. For a rose to retain its essential, characteristic sweet d it does not need to be called 'rose' but could be called anything at all. Juliet therefore shows up the arbitrary nature of all names, which do not e to the things they name.
- Find the exact line of transition from monologue to dialogue. What effect does this have? Choose from the following:
 - It introduces a comic element to the scene.
 - It creates suspense.
 - It releases tension.
 - It creates a shock effect.
- Find all the expressions that Romeo uses to address Juliet. What do they tell us about his attitude towards her?
- Now analyse the type of language used in this scene. Find examples of
 - Metaphor.
 - Rhetorical exaggerations.
 - Pragmatic comments.
 - Philosophical reflections.

- 7 Read the entire scene again and reflect on the two characters. Describe them using some of the following adjectives or adding your own, if you like. Justify your choice of adjectives by quoting from the text.

pragmatic playful idealising
rational speculative naïve prosaic
serious intelligent poetic analytical

Context

- 1 Look back at Romeo's description of Juliet. In what way do Romeo's words reflect the codes and themes of the Renaissance?

LINKS

THEMATIC: Love

Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 130'

Multimedia Lab: Courtly Love

Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*

James, *The Portrait of a Lady*

Joyce, 'The Dead'

Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*

FILMOGRAPHY

West Side Story (1961, US).

Directed by Robert Wise.

Romeo and Juliet (1968, GB).

Directed by Franco Zeffirelli.

William Shakespeare's

Romeo + Juliet (1996, US).

Directed by Baz Luhrmann.

Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio in
William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet.



Discussion

- 1 You are staging your own version of this scene. What kind of house or set will you use? How do you want the characters to look, dress, speak, etc.? Will you use music? If so, what kind? Discuss in groups and then compare your ideas with the rest of the class.

Creative writing

- In pairs, rewrite the balcony scene in a comic style. One person can work on Romeo's monologue, the other on Juliet's reflections.
- Consider the metaphors Romeo uses to describe Juliet and substitute more absurd terms of comparison. Then rewrite Juliet's reflections on the relationship between names and bodies replacing words like 'rose'.



William Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996)

Director: Baz Luhrmann

Cast: Leonardo DiCaprio, Claire Danes, Pete Postlethwaite, Brian Dennehy, John Leguizamo

About the film

Baz Luhrmann's adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is innovative as it gives the play a contemporary and popular context. The director said that his version of *Romeo and Juliet* reflected how he imagined Shakespeare would have worked if he had lived at the end of the 20th century instead of in the 16th. Luhrmann sets his film in modern-day Los Angeles. This allows him to suggest interesting parallels between the rival Veronese families, the Montagues and Capulets, and contemporary Latino street gang rivalries. In both cases codes of honour and loyalty are invoked to justify hatred and bloodshed.

In line with the passions of its protagonists, Luhrmann's film is deliberately excessive. We are presented with a mass of images, sounds and bizarre camera angles. But thanks to the performances of the film's leading actors, Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes, we never lose sight of the approaching tragedy, or of Shakespeare's text itself.

Screening 1

- 1 **Setting:** Find all the elements that create the dramatic atmosphere.
- 2 **Characters:** Describe the two characters.

Screening 2

- 1 While watching, read the following extract. What parts of Shakespeare's text are not included in Romeo/DiCaprio's speech?

ROMEO. O my love, my wife!

Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath,
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty.
Thou art not conquered. Beauty's ensign yet
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,
And death's pale flag is not advanced there.
Tybalt, liest thou there in thy bloody sheet?
O, what more favour can I do to thee
Than with that hand that cut thy youth in twain
To sunder his that was thine enemy?
Forgive me, cousin. Ah, dear Juliet,
Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe
That unsubstantial death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?
For fear of that I still will stay with thee,
And never from this pallet of dim night
Depart again. Here, here will I remain

With worms that are thy chambermaids. O, here
Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last.
Arms, take your last embrace, and, lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain to engrossing death.
(He kisses Juliet, then pours the poison into the cup)
Come, bitter conduct, come, unsavoury guide,
Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on
The dashing rocks thy seasick weary barque!
Here's to my love!
(He drinks the poison)
O true apothecary,
Thy drugs are quick! Thus with a kiss I die.
(He kisses Juliet, falls, and dies).

Screening 3

- 1 Are there any elements – related to images and sound – which seem to you surprising in an adaptation of Shakespeare?
- 2 How is music used in the sequence? What emotional effect does it have?
- 3 What are the predominant colours? What do you think they might represent?
- 4 In this final sequence Baz Luhrmann uses a lot of close-up shots. What effect does this have?

Focus on the text: *Hamlet*

The plot

When Hamlet's father, the king of Denmark dies suddenly, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, marries the dead king's brother, Claudius, who takes the throne. Hamlet meets his **father's ghost**, who tells him that he was murdered by Claudius, and Hamlet resolves to take revenge for his death.

Hamlet pretends he is mad and rejects the love of Ophelia, the daughter of the king's counsellor Polonius. In order to prove that his father was murdered, he asks a group of actors to perform a play about a similar fratricide, called *The Murder of Gonzago*, in front of Claudius to see his reaction. (This has been defined as a 'play within the play'.) During the murder scene, Claudius angrily goes out of the room in apparent guilt. Hamlet then accuses his mother of having betrayed his father's memory by marrying Claudius. During this scene he hears a noise behind a curtain and kills the intruder, thinking it is Claudius; it is, in fact, Polonius. Hamlet is then sent to England by Claudius, who wants to have him killed there. But Hamlet manages to escape and to return to Denmark. During Hamlet's absence Ophelia, who has become mad because of Hamlet's rejection of her and by her father's death, drowns herself. Returning from abroad, her brother Laertes decides to avenge his father's and sister's deaths. Claudius arranges a duel between the two and gives Laertes a poisoned sword, but his plan fails and both Hamlet and Laertes are fatally wounded by the same sword. In the end Gertrude drinks from a poisoned cup intended for her son and Hamlet kills his uncle, Claudius, before he dies too.

Features of the play

Critics have argued for centuries over *Hamlet's* complexities, and the number of different interpretations the play has produced is astonishing. In its origins, *Hamlet* is a **revenge story** which dates back to the early Middle Ages. Its main nondramatic source is *Historiae Danicae* by Danish historian Saxo Grammaticus and the free translation of Saxo into French by François de Belleforest, *Histoires Tragiques* (1559). But Shakespeare also had another source: a revenge play of the same name already existed, though it is now lost to us, it was probably written by Renaissance dramatist Thomas Kyd.

However, *Hamlet* is much more than a tragedy of revenge. Among the other themes explored in the play are the **meaning of action, power, honour, justice, doubt, death, the restoration of order**, the nature of human beings and the nature of the good ruler.

A recurrent motif in *Hamlet* is the idea that interior evil and disease are concealed under the false appearance of a healthy exterior. 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark', the soldier Marcellus says in Act i, Scene v. The **rapport between appearance and reality**, typical of much Renaissance literary production, is probably best exemplified in the 'play within the play'. What does the play within the play tell us about appearance and reality? Paradoxically it is through a performance that the truth becomes evident, it is through fiction that reality is revealed.

One of the most relevant ideas to a modern reading of the play is the complex figure of Hamlet



Hamlet Sees his Father's Ghost (1825)
by Eugène Delacroix.
Muzeum Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Cracow.

himself, who is **one of the first truly modern characters in literature**. Hamlet is a figure who is radically isolated, cut off both from society and from religious or moral certainty. The question of how he should act therefore becomes a question he can only ask himself. It can be argued that Hamlet is the first character in literature who possesses full self-consciousness. With Hamlet, Shakespeare invents a character who is free to decide for himself, but his actions provoke a chain of tragic consequences which are beyond his control, leading to the deaths of nearly everyone in the play. But finally both Hamlet and the audience are forced to ask themselves if what he did was right, destroying a human community in the name of filial loyalty and a higher idea of justice.

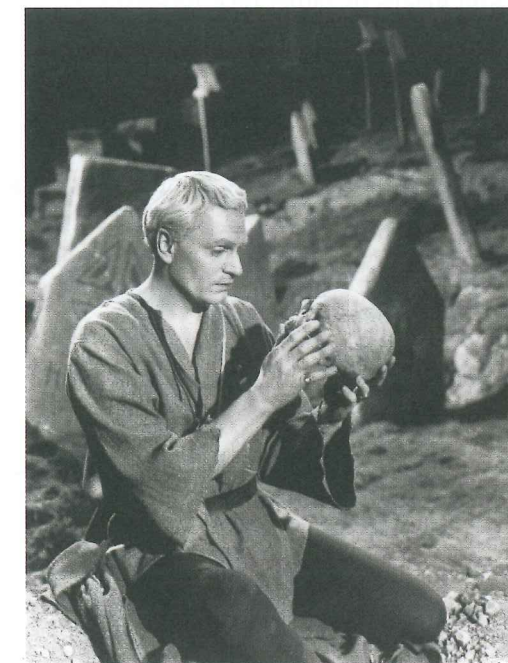
Hamlet (c.1600)

Before you read

- 1 This is the most famous soliloquy in *Hamlet*. What do you think the meaning of the phrase 'to be or not to be' might be? Compare your ideas with other students.



- 4 **HAMLET.** To be, or not to be; that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
5 And, by opposing, end them? To die, to sleep —
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep.
10 To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life,
15 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
20 When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would these fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,



Laurence Olivier as Hamlet in his own 1948 film version of *Hamlet*.

AMLETO. Essere... o non essere. È il problema. Se sia meglio per l'anima soffrire oltraggi di fortuna, sassi e dardi, o prender l'armi contro questi guai e opporvisi e distruggerli. Morire, dormire... nulla più. E dirsi così con un sonno che noi mettiamo fine al crepacuore ed alle mille ingiurie naturali, retaggio della carne! Questa è la consunzione da invocare devotamente. Morire, dormire; dormire, sognar forse... Forse; e qui è l'incaglio: che sogni sopravvengano dopo che ci si strappa dal tumulto della vita mortale, ecco il riguardo che ci arresta e che induce la sciagura a durar tanto anch'essa. E chi vorrebbe sopportare i malanni e le frustate dei tempi, l'oppressione dei tiranni, le contumelie dell'orgoglio, e pungoli d'amor sprezzato e rèmore di leggi, arroganza dall'alto e derisione degl'indegni sul merito paziente, chi lo potrebbe mai se uno può darsi quietanza col filo d'un pugnale? Chi vorrebbe sudare e bestemmiare spassato, sotto il peso della vita,

- 25 But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
30 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.

se non fosse l'angoscia del paese
dopo la morte, da cui mai nessuno
è tornato, a confonderci il volere
ed a farci indurre ai mali d'oggi
piuttosto che volare a mali ignoti?
La coscienza, così, fa tutti vili,
così il colore della decisione
al riflesso del dubbio si corrompe
e le imprese più alte e che più contano
si disviano, perdono anche il nome
dell'azione.

Translated by Eugenio Montale

Orientation

- 1 Hamlet's soliloquy can be interpreted in many different ways. However, it is possible to outline the main points he reflects on. Here is a list of his thoughts. Write the number of the line/s they refer to.

Thought	Line/s
a Main existential alternatives.	1
b Is it better to accept the life we have, however unjust, or to take action against the things that oppress us?	
c Is suicide a possible solution?	
d Death might not be the end of our troubles.	
e People continue to tolerate a life of suffering because they don't know what will come after death.	
f Therefore it is better to suffer things that we know than to face the unknown.	
g Consciousness makes us afraid to take action.	
h People are not capable of taking action because they think too much.	

Exploration

- 1 In lines 1-5 Hamlet uses several 'military' images to refer to how difficult life is. What expressions does he use?
- 2 In line 6 does Hamlet refer only to himself or to humanity in general? What pronoun does he use to imply this?

- 3 What is Hamlet referring to when he says in lines 8-9 'Tis a consummation / Devoutly to be wished'? Why does he say this?

- 4 Look again at lines 10-13. Why might death not be an end to Hamlet's troubles?

- 5 What metaphor does he use to refer to life in line 12?

- 6 Now focus on lines 15-18. Here are some of the troubles that, according to Hamlet, afflict men. Put them in the order as they appear in the text.

- a ☐ The postponement of the law's judgement.
b ☐ The insolence of proud men.
c ☐ The cruel passing of time.
d ☐ Unrequited love.
e ☐ The wrongs of the oppressors.

- 7 In line 20 Hamlet uses the legal expression 'quietus' – i.e. a statement freeing one from an obligation or debt – to talk about death. In this sense, what could death theoretically bring? Choose from the following:

- a A chance to begin again.
b Release from pain and suffering.
c Torture.

- 8 However, in Hamlet's opinion, people continue to tolerate a life of suffering. Why?

- 9 In lines 24-5 Hamlet uses a metaphor to refer to death. Do you find it effective?

- 10 How would you define Shakespeare's language? Choose from the following:

flat	varied	dramatic	metaphoric
unimaginative	banal	rich	
imaginative	repetitive	enigmatic	

- 11 Consider the structure of the soliloquy. It mainly consists of long questions and makes use of several infinitive forms. The questions convey Hamlet's dilemma and emphasise his uncertainty, while the use of infinitives, since the verb form is not related to any particular person, gives his speech a universal dimension. Reread the text and underline examples of both.

Discussion

- 1 Have you seen any of the film versions of Hamlet? Did you like them? Do you think theatre can be filmed effectively? Discuss with other students.

LINKS

THEMATIC: Death

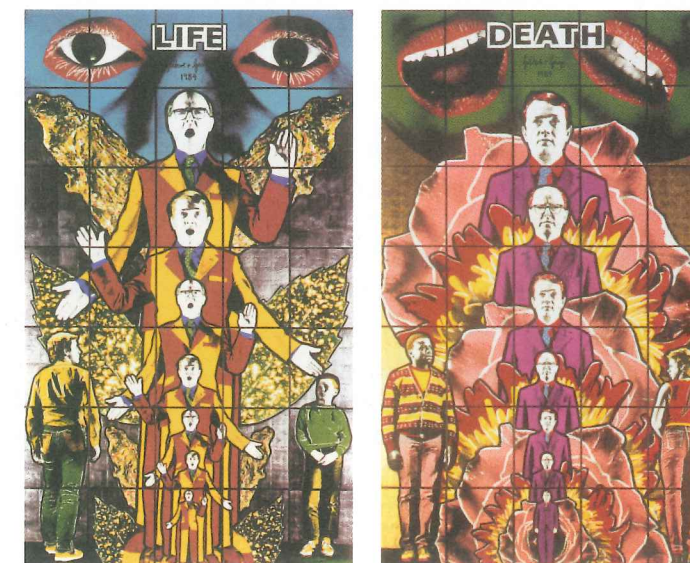
Joyce, 'The Dead'

MOVIE LINK: *Dead Man*

Stevens, 'The Snowman'

Larkin, 'Wants'

- 2 Read the soliloquy again. If you were staging the play set in modern times what piece of music would you use as a background? What kind of clothes would Hamlet wear? Once you decide, discuss with the rest of the class.



Death Hope Life Fear (1984),
two of four panels by Gilbert and George.
Anthony D'Offay Gallery, London.

FILMOGRAPHY

Hamlet (1948, GB). Directed by Laurence Olivier.

Hamlet (1964, USSR). Directed by Grigori Kozintsev.

Hamlet (1969, GB). Directed by Tony Richardson.

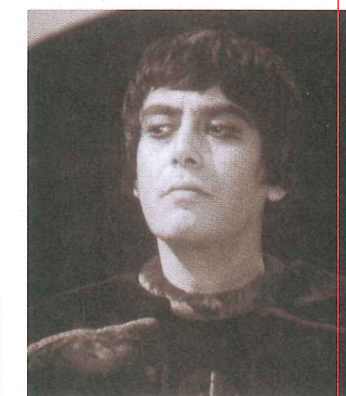
Un Amleto di Meno (1973, Italy). Directed by Carmelo Bene.

Hamlet Goes Business (1987, Finland).

A modern-day version. Directed by Aki Kaurismäki.

Hamlet (1991, US). Directed by Franco Zeffirelli.

Hamlet (1996, US). Directed by Kenneth Branagh.



Carmelo Bene as Hamlet.

Kenneth Branagh in his own
1996 film version of *Hamlet*.

Shakespeare's Sonnets

The sonnets

Shakespeare probably wrote his 154 sonnets in the 1590s, although they were published some years later, in 1609. They all use the **Elizabethan form**: three quatrains and a final couplet rhyming *abab cdcd efef gg*.

Most of Shakespeare's sonnets speak about the themes of **love** and **time**, suggesting that love outlasts time and, of course, poetry outlasts both. Other themes include beauty, death, friendship, the power of the beloved and the suffering of the lover. These are typical themes of the sonnets of the time, but Shakespeare's images have a unique complexity and energy.

It appears that the first 126 sonnets are supposedly addressed to a **young man**, probably a young aristocrat who was also Shakespeare's patron, while the others are addressed to a mysterious 'dark lady'.

Sonnets to the young man

The sonnets to the young man, which compose the larger group, form one of the most impressive and complex explorations of the themes of **platonic love** in English poetry. From one sonnet to another, we see how the relationship changes as Shakespeare explores from all angles the sentiments the young man inspires in him. These range from fascination with the man's beauty to his sufferings at the man's indifference to him, to his sadness at growing old and the fact that the young man's youth will also fade. Throughout these poems, Shakespeare frequently returns to the conflict between the beauty of what his eyes see and the truth of what his heart knows, concluding that appearances are often deceptive.

In his sonnets, Shakespeare wishes to preserve the **eternal part** of the young man's beauty against the effects of time. Love is judged to be stronger than time, but poetry is considered immortal. It is through Shakespeare's poems that this young man's beauty will be preserved forever.



Unknown Young Man with a Garden View
(c.1595) by Isaac Olivier.
The Royal Collection, London.

Focus on the text: 'Sonnet 60'

In this poem the poet is in a melancholy mood but his melancholy inspires him to reflect on how the progress of human life resembles the **futile movement of the waves**. Just as each wave dies as soon as it reaches the shore, only to be replaced by the next, the minutes of our lives pass quickly away. Minutes, like the waves, are small units and they help to convey the inexorable forward movement of time. But, again like the waves breaking on the shore, they also suggest how much time is simply wasted.

In the second stanza the poet evokes the '**ages of man**', a familiar subject in art of the period,

tracing the short path from birth to adulthood and then old age. In the beginning time is seen as benevolent, the giver of life, but as we grow older, it becomes a trap. The positive value of the gift of life is cancelled by the fact that it is also the gift of death.

After a middle period, in which the appearance of youth appears to be fixed or paralysed – 'time doth transfix the flourish set on youth' – comes old age and physical decay. **Time** is portrayed as the **conqueror** and everyone must die.

Finally comes the turning point of the sonnet, in which Shakespeare speaks again of the **immortality of poetry** and the fact that it is the only thing which can survive the effects of time. But it appears only at the very end, in the final couplet, and seems weaker and less confident in its expression than in other of Shakespeare's sonnets. Poetry may survive the effects of time but here it seems to offer limited consolation.

'Sonnet 60' (1609)

Before you read

- 1 The opening of Shakespeare's sonnet evokes the image of the sea, in particular its movement. What does the movement of the sea evoke in you?
- 2 Now read and listen to the poem.



Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end,
Each changing place with that which goes before;
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.

- 5 Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crowned
Crookèd eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And time that gave doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth,
10 And delves the parallels in beauty's brow;
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.
And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,
Praising thy worth despite his cruel hand.

Come incalzano le onde verso la pioggia ciotolosa,
così i nostri minuti s'affrettano alla loro fine,
ciascun cambiando posto con quello che lo precede,
e in affannosa sequela tutti s'accalcano in avanti.
La nascita, appena nel mare della luce,
striscia verso la maturità, e quando ne è coronata
contorte eclissi combattono contro la sua gloria,
e il Tempo che diede distrugge ora il suo dono.
Il Tempo trafigge la fiorita tinta che alla giovinezza è apposta
e scava parallele sulla fronte della bellezza,
si nutre delle perfette rarità della natura,
e nulla sta in piedi se non per la sua falce che lo miete.
E tuttavia contro i tempi futuri starà la mia poesia,
lodando il tuo valore, a dispetto della sua mano crudele.

Translated by Alessandro Serpierti



The Time (1999) by Andy Goldsworthy.