



GUIDELINES FOR A COMPARATIVE STUDY

CORRECTION

[Ford Madox Brown](#) (1821–1893) oil on canvas at [Delaware Art Museum](#) between 1869 and 1870

The story of Romeo and Juliet originates in folklore. It was first translated into English in 1562 by Arthur Brooke- a translation on which Shakespeare based his play.

WHERE? WHEN?

1. Compare the two scenes (similitude and difference)

1. This scene is known as “the balcony scene”. Shakespeare’s play *Romeo and Juliet*, is set in Verona, Italy, in the 16th century, whereas the film *West Side Story* is set in New-York, U.S.A, in the 1960’s. The similitude between play and film stems from their themes: love, conflict, fate and death and in the way these themes raise basic human emotions such as joy and laughter, fear, anger, sorrow and tears. The difference in time and place chosen to set the action only emphasizes the fact that these themes are universal and timeless in the course of human history.

2. In the play, the scene takes place in the Capulets' orchard which is surrounded by high walls. What makes this setting particularly appropriate? What does Shakespeare suggest by speaking of an orchard rather than a garden?

2. Romeo had to trespass in order to come close to Juliet. From then on, he is an outlaw. He has broken the rules of the Montagues. Shakespeare speaks of an orchard, suggesting that the two lovers are innocent, still in the Garden of Eden. They stand for the original couple Adam and Eve before the original sin was committed and God drove man from paradise.

3. In the film, what stands for the balcony and the orchard? Why do you think the authors of the lyrics of *West Side Story* chose to change the name of Juliet for Maria? What in each text suggests that there is a sacred quality in this love?

3. In the film, the balcony is replaced by a staircase which suggests a possible meeting between the two characters. In Shakespeare’s play the orchard is linked to the notion of the divine. The authors of the lyrics of *West Side Story* transposed William Shakespeare's tragedy in a subtle way. The name Maria is suitable for a Puerto-Rican who is a Catholic. It suggests the purity of the Virgin Mary. It also points to the sacred quality of the love that unites Tony and Maria. Romeo calls Juliet 'Dear Saint' (1. 25). Their meeting is a miracle according to Tony, which suggests that it might have been due to God's intervention.

4. At what time of day does the scene take place, in both play and film? Why is this?

4. The scene takes place at night, after the meeting at the ball. Given that the Montagues and the Capulets are rival families, the two heroes of the play are not supposed ever to meet each other, let alone talk to each other. Besides Juliet is very young. She is just fourteen and she will surely not disobey her father. In the same way, the film shows two characters belonging to two rival ethnic groups, the Sharks and the Jets who are not supposed to mingle either. So Tony and Maria should hide to meet, at night and in a back street.

5. In *West Side Story* Tony and Maria can see each other. Is that the case in *Romeo and Juliet*? Why did Shakespeare set Romeo and Juliet's meeting at night? What part of the stage is in darkness? What part is lit up?

5. In the first part of the scene, the orchard where Romeo is standing is in darkness. Only the balcony is lit up, which is fitting, since Romeo considers that Juliet is the Sun.

THE DRAMATIS PERSONAE

6. What in Tony's words echoes the following lines in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*?

a) *"It is the east, and Juliet is the sun."* (Act II, sc.2, l.3)

b) *"It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden. Too like the lightning."* (Act II, sc. 2, l.117-118)

6. a) This sentence suggests that Romeo was dazzled by the sight of Juliet. l. 13: *"I saw you and the world went away."* Later they both sing: *"the world is full of light."*

b). l. 17: *"I had the feeling a miracle would happen."*

7. What in the song suggests that Tony and Maria's meeting is a case of love at first sight?

7. Tony says: *"I saw you and the world went away."* He explains that the meeting is *a miracle*.

8. How is the notion of miracle rendered in the Song?

8. The moment he saw Maria the world was *"full of light with suns and moons all over the place,"* which suggests that day and night became mixed, that the planets changed their course and became *"wild"*. The meeting created a universal upheaval.

9. What in Shakespeare's play indicates that the world is *"wild, bright, and going mad"*?

9. Romeo feels he is *"new baptised"* (= newly baptised) (l. 19). He talks about love's light wings that enabled him to fly over the walls. He also explains that walls have never been an obstacle to love.

10. Pick out the words that are common to Tony's and Maria's parts. What conclusion do you draw?

10. *Nothing else but you, you and me, only you, tonight.* The focus is on the fact that the two persons merge instantly into one. 'You' becomes 'me' and vice versa.

11. Who sings which lines? How is the idea of an immediate fusion between two beings conveyed?

11. The song is built on a pattern of echoes between the lines sung by Tony and those sung by Maria. Eventually their voices merge, which expresses how perfect the union between the two lovers is.

12. On the contrary, show that Juliet and Romeo stand for two worlds that are apart and cannot meet. How did Shakespeare dramatise the fact that Romeo's love for Juliet is impossible? Consider the position of the characters on stage.

12. In this scene Romeo and Juliet are apart in space. The audience cannot perceive them as a couple. Juliet's house is walled in. Juliet herself is high up behind a balustrade and any time she is likely to disappear back into her bedroom. Romeo looks up to Juliet. He is not on the same level as she is. Besides they cannot actually meet, or even touch hands.

13. What words in the song rhyme with "tonight"? What conclusion do you come to when comparing film and play?

13. *Light, wild, bright, right.*

In Shakespeare's play, the two lovers only meet at night. But whenever they meet the night is illuminated by the love they feel for each other. The fact that theirs is an impossible and supernatural love is dramatised by the following associations: Romeo is the Moon and Juliet is the Sun. Sun and Moon can never meet. The universe becomes wild. The earth becomes a star. It is light at night. Even the elements participate in their miraculous love.

THE SCENE IN CONTEXT

14. What fundamental question does Juliet ask in the first part? What values does she challenge?

14. Juliet questions her lover's name. What draws them apart is their names, for which they are hardly responsible. She argues that a name means nothing, that each individual should be free to cast off his name, and break his bonds with his family.

15. How do you react as a reader? Do you feel that she is right or that she is too daring? Analyse what leads you to judge her as you do.

15. The spectators are bound to side with Juliet. She has done nothing wrong so far. Her arguments are based on common sense. Everyone is likely to agree that a person is more than a name. Her arguments are expressed in a naive way (1. 8-10) that are in keeping with her youth.

16. How many times are the words ,*"love"*, and *"death"* used? Which of the two characters uses them? Show that they are central to the myth of *Romeo and Juliet*.

16. *love*: 1. 3; 1. 19; 1. 36; 1. 38 - *death*: 1. 34

This scene focuses on love. However death is already looming in the background. We are in a tragedy. In the beginning the chorus presented the story as one of star-crossed lovers.

17. Romeo and Juliet's love upsets the world order. How is this idea expressed?

17. The world order here is based on people's ranks and names. The two lovers question these values. They do not care who the parents are, how rich they are. They respond spontaneously to each other, violating the social laws of Verona. This violation is echoed in the song by the "*madness*" of the planets.

18. Go through the whole scene once more and note down all the single-line sentences. Why do they have such an impact on the audience?

18. Single-line sentences are very numerous. Note that most lines end with a punctuation mark. This creates the illusion that both Romeo and Juliet constantly speak the truth, that what they say is final, and cannot be questioned. Quite a number of their sentences are questions (1. 1, 5, 30, 32) that challenge the family and social laws. Single-line sentences are easy to memorise, especially when they follow a pattern. Note for instance:

If they do see thee, they will murder thee.

19. In which text is the notion of impending danger better rendered?

19. Only in Shakespeare's play is death clearly mentioned.

20. What ideals and beliefs are conveyed by the story of *Romeo and Juliet* and of *West side Story*? What makes these ideals universal and timeless?

20. Romeo and Juliet is first and foremost a celebration of love that is supposed to be stronger than war and rivalry. When the play opens, the chorus says that the two lovers "*do with their deaths bury their parents' strife.*"

In Act V, the Capulets and the Montagues are reconciled in mourning, and peace is restored in Verona as it is in the streets of Manhattan, at the end of the film. Love and death, peace and war are timeless subjects. They are essential to a tragedy.

21. Although the balcony scene in the film does not appear as tragic as in the play, show how, in both film and play, Death, though tragic, acquires a cathartic dimension.

21. In both film and play, love can only be fulfilled in Death. There is nevertheless a redeeming note to the tragedy, which is that love and understanding, reconciliation, symbolised in the play by the fathers' shaking hand, and in the film by the Sharks and Jets holding Tony's dead body all together, result from their deaths. However tragic, Death is shown as not wholly useless.