



IGCSE Edexcel (9-1) English Literature

Romeo and Juliet: Character Profile Mercutio

Mercutio

INTRODUCTION

Mercutio's character not only encapsulates the **comedic relief** in Romeo and Juliet, but Shakespeare also employs him to **contrast** the views of many of the other characters.

The **critic** Stephen Greenblatt describes Mercutio as a ***“force within the play that functions to deflate the possibility of romantic love and the power of tragic fate”***. From this perspective, Shakespeare

has perhaps implemented the character of Mercutio to provide a **realistic** yet harsh view of love to his audience as his opinions harshly **juxtapose** the potent, tender love that Romeo and Juliet share.



However, although Mercutio provides Shakespeare's audience with a rough view of love that is not controlled by fate but rather sexual impulsion, it is clear that Mercutio's views do not completely dampen the potent theme of love within the play. Romeo and Juliet continue to pursue their romance, and it can be argued that they die together due to fate despite Mercutio's suggestion that fate is of no importance.

CHARACTER IN CONTEXT

- **Family Honour** - During the Elizabethan era **family honour** was extremely important to many individuals. Shakespeare portrays this through the Montague versus Capulet feud, whereby each family stays loyal to each other by fighting against members of the other family and protecting their own. Yet, Mercutio disregards the idea of 'family honour' as he blames the feud between both families for his tragic death; thus, Mercutio's death and final words (***“A plague o' both your houses. They have made worms' meat of me.”***) perhaps reveal to Shakespeare's audience the possible **dangers** of allowing family honour to consume an individual. Through Mercutio's death, he shows that an obsession with family honour can tragically lead to impulsive murder.
- **Courtly love** - Mercutio is well known for his explicit speeches about **sexual desire** and his emotionless views of love. Therefore, he completely contradicts the Elizabethan idea of courtly love, which was meant to be **true, pure and full of restraint**. Instead, he clearly suggests that love is based off of sex and nothing more.

- **Religion** - Religion was **central** to Elizabethan life, yet it seems as if Mercutio's crude and sexual views on love contradict Catholic and Protestant religious teachings. This means his explicit views almost come across as **blasphemous**.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS & CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

- **VIOLENT** – From the outset, Shakespeare presents Mercutio as violent as he exerts an **aggressive tone** throughout many of his speeches. This can be witnessed through examining the way in which Mercutio speaks about love in a rough way (look at his quote bank on the last page) and mocks Romeo for being “**effeminate**” for not wanting to battle with Tybalt in **Act 3 Scene 1**. It is through Mercutio's aggressive view of love and act of physical violence against Tybalt that the audience are reminded that despite the large emphasis on love and romance, Romeo and Juliet is set in an era that was **dominated by males**, and thus the plot was destined to be plagued by male aggressive behaviour due to their fixation with **pride, respect and status**.
- **CYNICAL** – Mercutio's views become **increasingly cynical** as the play progresses. He views love as something that is purely based on sexual desire and mocks Romeo for the way that he fantasises about true love.
- **UNCONVENTIONAL** - Throughout the play, Mercutio consistently goes against the conventions formed by not only the Elizabethan era, but also by the other characters in the play. For example, despite the fact that most of the other characters believe in **fate** and **true love**, Mercutio goes against these ideas by broadcasting his own views on love and suggesting before death that it was the family feud that had led to his death and not fate.

STUDENT TIP

If you are looking to get a grade 7 or above examiners are looking for you to show a **development in your ideas** as you write each paragraph. You can **show this development through your argument**. For example, if the question you are given is about a Mercutio, you could state at the beginning of your second paragraph that Mercutio's character becomes **increasingly violent** at a later stage in the text, and then in your final paragraph you could state that this particular section of the text is where Mercutio's character is the most violent. This clearly shows that you are writing about how the particular character develops within the play by simply changing a few words at the beginning of each of your paragraphs!

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OTHER CHARACTERS

The Nurse | Although Mercutio and the Nurse do not share a **direct relationship**, it is interesting to note the **similarities** in their views on love (refer to the Nurse's character profile and jot down any similarities between her and Mercutio's views in regard to love and relationships).

Romeo | Romeo and Mercutio share a **strong bond**, and thus it is the breaking of this bond that acts as a **catalyst** for Romeo's violent behaviour. It is after Mercutio's death that Romeo kills Tybalt which leads to Romeo's banishment.

Tybalt | Mercutio and Tybalt share a brief but chaotic relationship that is extremely significant to Shakespeare's plot. Their main encounter is in Act 3 Scene 1 where Mercutio and Tybalt sword fight, leading to Mercutio's death. Their relationship is significant as their dislike for each other stems from the fact that Mercutio is associated with Romeo, a Montague, whilst Tybalt is a Capulet and thus, they cannot be civil with each other. Through this, Shakespeare reveals how tragically futile this family feud is as it leads to the death of not only Mercutio, but the feud causes a plethora of deaths throughout the whole play which is why Mercutio curses both families before he falls to his demise.

STUDENT TIP

For the top grades, examiners are looking for students to AVOID making sweeping generalisations such as "*All Elizabethan men were violent*". Instead, examiners are seeking for students to make sophisticated links between relevant contextual factors and the question. For example, if you were speaking about Act 3 Scene 1 you could say instead that "*it perhaps wouldn't be surprising for Shakespeare's audience to see that Mercutio and Tybalt engaged in a violent physical fight because most men were influenced by pride, honour and status during the Elizabethan era as they were expected to be the dominating gender within society. Therefore, it is likely that such an influence would lead to an eruption of male aggressive behaviour and violence.*"

MERCUTIO QUOTE BANK

QUOTE	EXTENDED ANALYSIS
<p><i>“A plague o’ both your houses. They have made worms’ meat of me.”</i> Act 3 Scene 1</p>	<p>The first sentence is repeated twice within Act 3 Scene 1. Thus, the repetition of this phrase enforces the impression that Mercutio, unlike the majority of characters within the play, completely disregards fate. Rather, he instils his opinion that it was the pointless feud between the two families that had caused his death.</p> <p>Mercutio describes his death in euphemistic terms (<i>a euphemism being a mild or indirect word or expression substituted for one considered to be too harsh or blunt when referring to something unpleasant</i>) as he does not actually say that Tybalt had murdered him but rather suggests that he had made a “worms’ meat” of him.</p>
<p><i>“If love be rough with you, be rough with love. Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down”</i> Act 1 Scene 3</p>	<p>The plosive lexis (<i>lexis being a fancy word for ‘group of words’ in this case the words “be”, “prick”, “pricking” and “beat” agglomerate to create a succession of harsh sounds</i>) reinforces the impression of Mercutio’s harsh, and raw perception of love because this almost suggests that he views love making as a violent action.</p> <p>The violent verbs “prick” and “pricking” create phallic imagery, which shows Shakespeare’s audience how he views love as purely sexual, whilst this also depicts the dominance that men were supposed to have over women within an Elizabethan relationship.</p> <p>The symmetry of the sentence structure here, as both sentences are split in half by the implementation of a comma, contrasts Mercutio’s opinion of love. This is because the symmetry makes it seem as if love is very complete and perfect, which is not what Mercutio believes. Yet, his harsh opinions completely contrast Romeo and Juliet’s pure and tender expression of love.</p>
<p><i>“I conjure thee by Rosaline’s bright eyes, By her high forehead and her scarlet lip, By her fine foot,</i></p>	<p>Mercutio’s listing of Rosaline’s body parts alludes to the popular poetic ‘blazon’ technique. This listing of body parts reinforces the impression of Mercutio’s sexual and primitive view of love as he again creates sexual imagery through his speech.</p>



<p><i>straight leg, and quivering thigh”</i> Act 2 Scene 1</p>	
<p><i>“O Romeo, that she were, O, that she were An open-arse, thou a poperin pear!”</i> Act 2 Scene 1</p>	<p>Again, the plosive lexis created through the mentioning of <i>“poperin pear!”</i> reinforces the impression that Mercutio views love in a harsh and rough way.</p> <p>To build upon this, the mention of <i>“poperin pear!”</i> creates more sexual imagery (not surprising from Mercutio) as this was a fruit that was often at the time compared to a woman's genitalia. Thus, Mercutio believes that love is based on sexual desire and not true affection.</p>
<p><i>“O calm, dishonourable, vile submission!”</i> Act 3 Scene 1</p>	<p>The tricolon here creates a lexicon of fragility (lexicon being another fancy word for saying ‘group of words’) which emphasises Romeo’s effeminate inability to fight, whilst exaggerating Mercutio’s male aggressive behaviour.</p>

STUDENT TIP

For the top grades, examiners are looking for students to AVOID simply identifying Shakespeare’s nouns or verbs as this may limit the effectiveness of your analysis. For example, the 2017 examiner’s report urges students to compare “Shakespeare **uses the verb** “bite” in “bite my thumb” to...” with “Shakespeare creates an **aggressive tone** through the insult “bite my thumb” to...” The report states that it is the quality of your explanation which determines your level rather than the inclusion of a ‘term’.