Romeo and Juliet (1996): Movie Analysis

Pranjal Suthar (C039)

JDSOLA, NMIMS, Department of Psychology

T.Y., B. Sc. Applied Psychology

Sexuality and Relationships

Prof. Chakshu Sang

March 23, 2026

Introduction

"Love is heavy and light, bright and dark, hot and cold, sick and healthy, asleep and awake - it's everything except what it is!" (Shakespeare, 1597, Act I, Sc. i)

Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is the most analysed romantic story in Western literature. Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film brings it into contemporary life and keeps the original Shakespearean dialogue.

The story is set in the fictional Verona Beach. Two powerful families live there: the Montagues and the Capulets. They are locked in a bitter feud, and their servants brawl in the streets. Romeo Montague is a dreamy, impulsive seventeen-year-old. Juliet Capulet is a bright, determined thirteen-year-old. They meet at a party, fall in love, and secretly marry within twenty-four hours. Within five days, both are dead.

Romeo is emotionally intense, poetic, and deeply sensitive. He feels everything at full volume. He moves from pining over Rosaline to an all-consuming love for Juliet with no pause. Juliet is younger, but she is the more rational and resourceful of the two. She cautions against moving too fast. She crafts the plan to escape with Romeo. In her final act, she shows considerably more resolve than Romeo does.

Their relationship is the emotional and psychological centre of the play. The story moves fast: a secret marriage, Romeo's banishment after killing Tybalt, Juliet's feigned death, and a double suicide in the tomb.

This report analyses their relationship through six concepts from Module 3: attraction, social cognition and impression formation, verbal and nonverbal communication, dysfunctional communication, the dark side of relationships, interdependency and social

exchange, and theories of love. Each part draws on scene-level evidence, direct dialogue, empirical research, and personal reflection

Relationships Analysis using Module 3 Concepts

Attraction

Proximity and the Mere Exposure Effect

Zajonc (1968) proposed the mere exposure effect: repeated exposure to a stimulus reliably increases liking for it. Romeo and Juliet first meet at the Capulet party, a closed and physically intimate space. In Luhrmann's film, this is staged as a fish-tank encounter. Their faces are pressed close on either side of the glass. Proximity creates a magnetic pull before a word is spoken.

Festinger, Schachter, and Back (1950) found that physical nearness predicts the formation of friendships and romantic bonds. The party scene is a small version of this: forced proximity produces instant attraction. I can recognise this in my own life. Some of the people I have grown closest to are those I happened to sit next to in a classroom, or share a commute with repeatedly. We do not always choose who we fall for. Sometimes proximity decides it for us.

Driscoll, Davis, and Lipetz (1972) identified what they termed the **Romeo and Juliet Effect**: parental interference increases romantic attraction by a measurable amount ($r = .50$). When the Montague–Capulet feud acts as a social barrier, it paradoxically intensifies the lovers' desire. Romeo expresses this when he defies every rational obstacle to reach Juliet: *"With love's light wings did I o'er-perch these walls; for stony limits cannot hold love out"*. The wall does not cool his desire. It amplifies it.

Physical Attractiveness and the Halo Effect

Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) demonstrated the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype: we attribute positive qualities to physically attractive people based on appearance alone. Romeo's first sight of Juliet produces exactly this response:

"Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight! / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night."



Before Romeo and Juliet even speak, Romeo already sees Juliet as special. This is an example of the halo effect. People assume that someone who looks attractive must also have other good qualities. Research by Feingold (1988) shows that while attractiveness strongly influences the desire to start a relationship, it does not predict how good or lasting that relationship will be. This difference is important. Romeo and Juliet's connection begins only with appearance. They have no real understanding of each other, and their relationship ends tragically.

This kind of thinking happens in real life too. People often say they "just knew" when they first saw someone. In reality, they felt strong attraction and then convinced themselves it

meant something deeper. That feeling of instant certainty is usually just attraction, not true understanding.

Reciprocity of Liking

Sprecher (1998) found that when you learn someone likes you, you start liking them more too. This is called the reciprocity of liking. The balcony scene shows this clearly. Juliet thinks she is alone and openly shares her feelings for Romeo. When Romeo hears this, he realizes she feels the same way he does.

That moment changes everything. What was just attraction quickly turns into strong commitment. Once they begin talking, they open up to each other very quickly (Reis and Shaver, 1988). In real life, this happens all the time. A crush can grow much stronger the moment you find out the other person feels the same. The doubt disappears, and the feeling becomes much more intense.

Similarity

Byrne (1971) said that people are more attracted to others who are like them in how they think and see the world. Romeo and Juliet fit this idea. They both speak in a poetic way, believe strongly in love, and feel out of place in the violent world around them.

Their connection is not about simple likes or dislikes. It is about their personalities. Both of them feel emotions very deeply, and both feel that their world is stopping them from being true to themselves.

Social Cognition

First Impressions and the Primacy Effect

Asch (1946) showed that the first thing we notice about someone strongly shapes how we see them later. This is called the primacy effect. Romeo's first impression of Juliet happens in a silent moment when he sees her across the room. She stands out to him and seems different from everyone else.

That first image stays with him. It affects how he sees her in every moment after that. For Romeo, Juliet is always viewed through that first impression.

When Juliet discovers Romeo's identity, she experiences sharp cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957):

"My only love sprung from my only hate! / Too early seen unknown, and known too late!"

The person encoded as "ideal romantic partner" through feeling is also categorised as "enemy" through reason. Her love persists not in spite of this conflict, but partly because of it. The dissonance creates urgency.

This happens in ordinary life too. Once I form a strong first impression of someone, positive or negative, it takes considerable evidence to shift it. We tend to look for information that confirms our initial read of a person rather than challenges it (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Impression Management and the Balcony Scene

Goffman (1959) proposed that social life is a performance. We present a managed front-stage self in public and keep our authentic back-stage self for private. The balcony scene is a breach of this management. Juliet believes she is alone and speaks freely:

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet."

She is not performing for an audience. Romeo overhears the back-stage Juliet, the one who has dropped all impression management. This is what deepens his love. Reis and Shaver (1988) found that intimacy grows from self-disclosure met with perceived partner responsiveness. Juliet discloses without knowing it. Romeo responds with full acceptance and emotional presence. Intimacy escalates almost instantly.

Murray and Holmes (1997) showed that people in early romantic relationships idealise their partners. They see strengths more clearly than flaws. Romeo never meets Juliet in conflict, under stress, or making petty decisions. His love is for a person he has built from a few intense encounters, not for a fully known human being.

Communication

Verbal Communication and Poetic Hyperbole

Romeo and Juliet's verbal communication is saturated with poetic hyperbole. Exaggerated language reflects the cognitive distortions of early passionate love, in which the partner feels cosmically important (Fisher, 2004).

"It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. / Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon."

"My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite."

Gottman and Levenson (1992) found that stable relationships carry a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions. Romeo and Juliet's verbal exchanges are almost entirely positive. This is a warning sign, not a mark of health. Relationships in which only positive content appears are often avoiding the harder work of navigating disagreement and real knowledge of the other person.

I notice this in my own friendships and relationships. The healthiest ones are those where I can say the uncomfortable thing, disagree, push back, or express disappointment. Romeo and Juliet never have a difficult conversation about anything real.

Nonverbal Communication

Argyle (1975) identified gaze, touch, proximity, and posture as nonverbal channels that carry more relational meaning than words in intimate contexts. This could be seen in the Capulet party scene. Romeo and Juliet build a sonnet together and hold hands:

"If I profane with my unworthiest hand / This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this: / My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand / To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss."

The sonnet is the verbal layer. The sustained touch is the nonverbal one. Research shows that physical touch, even brief and incidental, produces measurable increases in reported liking and trust (Burgoon, 1994). Their clasped hands at this first meeting communicate more than anything else does.

Dysfunctional Communication

Gottman (1994) identified four dysfunctional communication patterns: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Romeo and Juliet do not show the first three toward each other. But the structure of their relationship forces total stonewalling with everyone else. They cannot speak openly with their parents, their families, or any adult who holds power over their lives.

This forced secrecy creates a communication pattern in which their only honest talks is with each other. The relationship becomes the most intimate and most isolated space in

their social world. When this channel breaks, and Friar Lawrence's letter fails to reach Romeo, the entire system collapses:

"Then I defy you, stars!"

Romeo's response to the news of Juliet's death is immediate, catastrophic, unilateral action. He purchases poison within minutes. Sprecher and Fehr (2005) found that unilateral decision-making under emotional stress is a primary predictor of relational deterioration. Romeo makes the most consequential decision of his life entirely alone, without consulting anyone.

Friar Lawrence sees the problem too late: *"These violent delights have violent ends / And in their triumph die, like fire and powder, / Which, as they kiss, consume."*

The Dark Side of Relationships

Jealousy, Possessiveness, and Manic Love

Buss (2000) defines jealousy as an evolved protective response to perceived threats to a valued relationship. Romeo's jealousy is directed outward, at Paris, at the Capulet family, at any force that would separate him from Juliet. But it grows beyond jealousy into what Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) classify as **Mania**: an obsessive love style marked by emotional extremes, possessiveness, and intolerance of separation.

Romeo's Manic profile is visible from his first appearance. He is pining obsessively for Rosaline, who has not returned his love. He spends his days in artificial darkness, weeping, refusing food:

"Griefs of mine own lie heavy in my breast, / Which thou wilt propagate to have it prest / With more of thine."

He has not been with Rosaline. He is performing the idea of being in love. This is not attachment to a person. It is an addiction to the feeling. Fisher (2004) found through fMRI studies that early romantic love activates the same dopaminergic reward circuits as cocaine dependency, specifically the ventral tegmental area and nucleus accumbens. Romeo and Juliet are neurochemically addicted to each other. Like addiction, they will do anything to avoid withdrawal.



Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) found that Manic love style links with anxious attachment, low self-esteem, and poor relationship outcomes. Romeo's behaviour before Juliet, the uninvited presence at the Capulet party and the trespass into the orchard, fits the profile of obsessive relational intrusion (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1998). The story ends up framing this as romance.

Accelerated Commitment and Reactance

Research by Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, and Cate (1981) found that relationships which escalate quickly to formal commitment are linked with higher rates of later dissatisfaction and instability. Romeo and Juliet meet, fall in love, and marry within twenty-four hours. Juliet voices the danger herself:

"It is too rash, too sudden, too like the lightning, / Which doth cease to be ere one can say 'It lightens.'"

This is the most psychologically clear moment in the play. While watching this scene, I wanted to scream to Juliet to listen to that gut feeling. It is a moment of genuine attachment security in an otherwise anxiously-driven relationship. She abandons this caution within minutes.

Brehm's (1966) psychological reactance theory explains part of this. When a freedom is threatened, the restricted object becomes more desirable. The feud does not suppress Romeo and Juliet's love. It inflates it. Every parental objection, every social barrier, registers neurologically as an increase in the relationship's value. I find this recognisable in everyday life. We are often most attracted to people we are told we cannot have, or should not want.

Interdependency

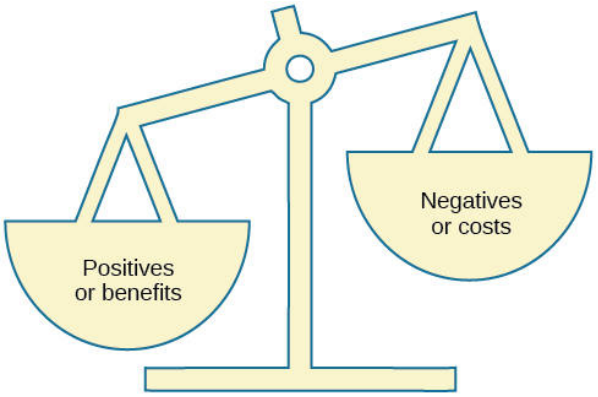
Social Exchange Theory

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) proposed that relationships are evaluated through two internal standards:

- **Comparison Level (CL):** what we expect from a relationship, based on past experience
- **Comparison Level for Alternatives (CLalt):** the perceived quality of available alternatives

For Romeo, his CL has been shaped by his idealisation of Rosaline. Juliet dramatically exceeds this standard. His CLalt is effectively zero. The feud means there is no other acceptable partner in his social world. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) predict that when

rewards are high and alternatives are absent, dependency becomes extreme. This is not a recipe for stable love. It is a recipe for desperate love (Rusbult, 1983).



Rusbult's (1980) **Investment Model** adds that commitment grows from investments: the time, emotional exposure, and sacrifices already made. By second half of the film, Romeo and Juliet have invested a marriage, a murder, and an exile in their relationship. These sunk costs make withdrawal psychologically impossible.

In my own experience, I have stayed in friendships long past the point where they were rewarding, partly because of how much I had already invested in them. It is hard to walk away from something you have put yourself into, even when it is no longer working. Romeo and Juliet show this at a tragic extreme.

Nature of Commitment: Tripartite Model

Johnson (1991) distinguished three forms of commitment:

- **Personal commitment:** wanting to stay
- **Moral commitment:** feeling one ought to stay
- **Structural commitment:** feeling one has to stay

Romeo and Juliet show all three at once. They want each other. Their secret marriage creates a moral bond:

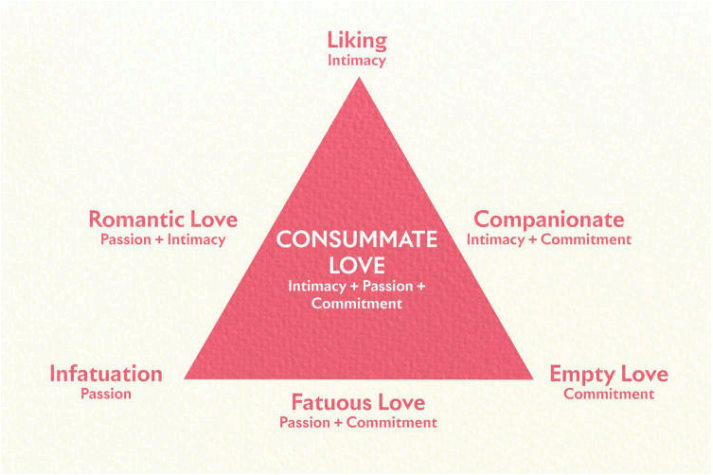
"What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?... Th' exchange of thy love's faithful vow for mine."



The other constraints, family enemies, banishment, and an arranged marriage to Paris, mean that leaving would destroy their entire identity and social world. This tripartite model of commitment makes exit impossible and tragedy inevitable.

Love

Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love



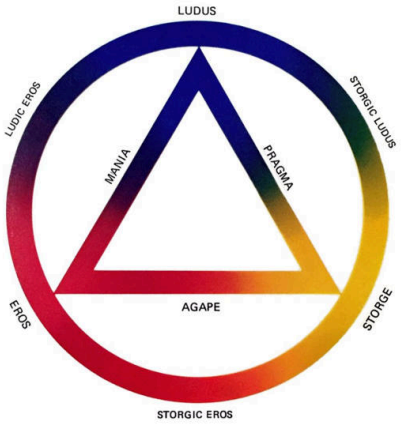
Sternberg (1986) proposed that love has three components: **Intimacy** (emotional closeness), **Passion** (physical and romantic drive), and **Commitment** (the decision to maintain the relationship). Their presence and absence define seven love types.

Romeo and Juliet's love is almost pure Passion, with rapidly growing Commitment, but minimal Intimacy in the sense Sternberg intends: mutual knowledge, shared vulnerability, and understanding of the other as a whole person. In Sternberg's (1988) taxonomy, Passion plus Commitment without Intimacy is **Fatuous Love**, the least stable type, sustained by intensity rather than depth.

Sternberg (1988) found that passion-dominant relationships have the shortest lifespans and the highest emotional volatility. Thefilm confirms this within five acts. I think about relationships I have seen that started at a fever pitch, intense, all-consuming, moving very fast. Many burned out just as quickly. The ones that lasted were built on knowing someone over time, not on feeling intensely about them.

Dr. Anna Machin from Oxford University explains that early love is driven by primitive reward circuits below conscious awareness. These include dopamine from the ventral tegmental area, oxytocin, and a suppression of serotonin that creates obsessive thinking about the partner (as cited in Taylor, 2021). Dr. Donatella Marazziti found that serotonin levels in people newly in love resemble those of people with obsessive-compulsive disorder. This explains why we cannot stop thinking about a new romantic interest. Romeo's inability to think of anything but Juliet from the moment they meet is not some poetry. I see it as neurochemistry.

Lee's Colour Wheel: Love Styles



Lee (1977) identified six love styles. Romeo fits **Mania**, which is obsessive, possessive, and emotionally extreme, and **Eros**, which is aesthetic and idealising. Juliet shows traces of **Pragma**, which is rational and consequence-aware. But she is drawn into Romeo's Manic register almost immediately.

Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) found that Manic love style links with poor relationship outcomes, anxious attachment, and low self-esteem. This maps onto Romeo with precision. His decision to kill himself the moment he believes Juliet dead, *"Thus with a kiss I die"*, is not romantic heroism. It is the final expression of a love built entirely on the partner's presence, and unable to survive her perceived absence.

Cultural Differences: Collectivism vs. Individualism

Levine et al. (1995) surveyed eleven countries and found that individualist cultures treat romantic love as necessary for marriage. Collectivist cultures weight family approval and practical compatibility more heavily. Shakespeare's Verona runs on a collectivist logic. Juliet is treated as property to be exchanged. Lord Capulet arranges her marriage to Paris without consulting her. Family honour is paramount:

"Thursday is near; lay hand on heart, advise: / An you be mine, I'll give you to my friend; / And you be not, hang, beg, starve, die in the streets."

Romeo and Juliet's tragedy is the collision between an individualist love ideology, their romantic absolutism, and a collectivist social structure built on arranged marriage, family honour, and feudal loyalty. Netting (2010) documents exactly this tension in contemporary South Asian contexts, where young people hold individualist romantic expectations inside family systems that still run on collectivist logic.

Personal Analysis

Romeo and Juliet is the story I was taught to call the greatest love story ever written. Having analysed it through Module 3, I find it more accurately described as a comprehensive list of relational risk factors, and a psychologically instructive case study in what happens when intense feeling is mistaken for mature love.



I found the film's phenomenological accuracy genuinely compelling. The portrayal of early passionate love, the cognitive distortion, the inability to think about anything else, the sense that this person is uniquely and cosmically irreplaceable, is psychologically real. Fisher (2004) confirmed through neuroimaging that early romantic love activates the same reward circuits as cocaine dependency. When I experienced my first serious crush, I could not

concentrate in class. I rehearsed every conversation in my head. I found reasons to walk past certain classrooms. Romeo's inability to sleep, eat, or think straight in the film is not dramatic exaggeration. Its true, this is what happens when you are in love.

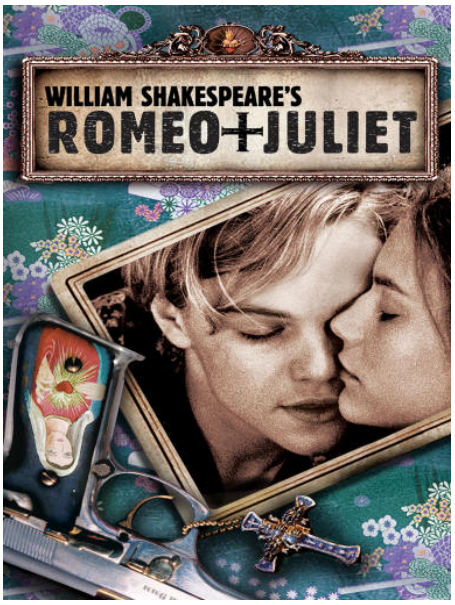
I find Juliet most interesting. She is the more psychologically mature of the two. She is the one who sees the danger of moving too fast: *"It is too rash, too sudden"*. She asks practical questions: *"If thy bent of love be honourable, / Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow"*. She is planning. He is rhapsodising. And yet the film gives her no structural power to act on her own better judgment. She is thirteen. Her parents control her future. Her only ally, the Nurse, fails her. Her rationality is acknowledged and then discarded by the narrative, which requires her to be swept away.

This film romanticises the abandonment of good judgment as devotion. Juliet's "It is too rash" is shown as a charming hesitation to be overcome, not a wise caution to be heeded. In real relationships, the person who says "slow down" is often the healthier partner. Overriding them is not romance. It is pressure.

From a personal standpoint, the neuroscience of love (Fisher, 2004; Machin, as cited in Taylor, 2021; Marazziti, as cited in Taylor, 2021) is the most useful Module 3 lens on this film. It treats the intensity of what Romeo and Juliet feel as real without romanticising its consequences. They are not foolish. They are young humans doing exactly what human neurochemistry was designed to make them do. The dopamine surge, the serotonin suppression, and the reduced activity of the prefrontal cortex are not metaphors. They are measurable. What the film does not show is the next chapter: the serotonin stabilising, the prefrontal cortex coming back online, and two people who barely know each other having to actually live together.

What I liked most about studying this story through Module 3 is that it reframes tragedy as preventable. The Romeo and Juliet Effect (Driscoll et al., 1972) tells us the feud made the love more intense. Brehm's (1966) reactance theory tells us every parental restriction inflated the relationship's value. If either family had responded with openness instead of control, the intensity that drove Romeo and Juliet toward marriage within 24 hours might have had a chance to settle into something that could sustain itself.

Conclusion



I don’t see Romeo & Juliet as a simple love story. It shows what happens when two people, driven by proximity, physical attraction, and the thrill of being chosen, move too fast with too little to stand on. They never build anything. They just burn.

Sternber's (1986) would call their love fatuous. Thibaut and Kelley (1959) would note they had no choice or alternative left, only each other. Buss (2000) and Spitzberg and Cupach (1998) would recognise the obsessive acceleration. Gottman (1994) would point to the structural silence that made the final miscommunication almost certain.

And yet. The psychology is damning. The play does not end with a diagnosis. It ends with grief: *"For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo."* We do not mourn them because they were foolish. We mourn them because what they felt was so real to them, completely and fatally real. Fisher (2004) is right: love is an addiction. And like all addictions, it is most dangerous when it is most beautiful. Romeo and Juliet could not see from the inside. Neither can most people in the middle of something intense like love do.

The challenge at the end, is to hold the feeling and knowledge at the same time. To understand that intensity is not the same as depth. That speed is not the same as certainty. Juliet herself came closest to naming it: *"It is too rash, too sudden."* She felt the danger, said it out loud, then the moment swallowed her anyway. They did not fail love, it was a tragedy that struck them.

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