The language of *Romeo and Juliet*

Imagery

Shakespeare seems to have thought in images, and *Romeo and Juliet* abounds in imagery (sometimes called 'figures' or 'figurative language'). Imagery is created by vivid words and phrases that conjure up emotionally charged mental pictures or associations in the imagination. Imagery provides insight into character, and gives pleasure as it stirs the audience's imagination. It deepens the dramatic impact of particular moments or moods.

For example, when Juliet learns that Romeo has killed Tybalt she struggles to express her contradictory feelings. How could such a beloved, beautiful person like Romeo commit so vile a deed? How could such beautiful reality cover such malicious reality? Her outburst (Act 3 Scene 2, lines 73–85) contains at least a dozen images beginning with:

> O serpent heart, hid with a flow'ring face!
> Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?

Some images recur throughout *Romeo and Juliet*, helping to create a sense of the themes of the play. One example is that of light and dark:

> O she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
> It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
> As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear   *Act 1 Scene 5, lines 43–5*

> The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars,
> As daylight doth a lamp   *Act 2 Scene 2, lines 19–20*

>   her beauty makes
> This vault a feasting presence full of light   *Act 5 Scene 3, lines 85–6*

Some of the play's images are very showy and extravagant, and are often called 'conceits'. One such conceit is in Act 1 Scene 3, lines 82–95, where Lady Capulet gives advice to Juliet to marry Paris. Her conceit is like a sonnet, spun out over fourteen lines (see p. 217). She compares Paris to a book, and begins:

> Read o'er the volume of young Paris' face,
> And find delight writ there with beauty's pen

All Shakespeare's imagery uses metaphor, simile or personification. All are comparisons which substitute one thing (the image) for another (the thing described).

- A **simile** compares one thing to another using 'like' or 'as', for example: 'shrieks like mandrakes' torn out of the earth'; 'And in their triumph die like fire and powder'; 'My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep'.
- A **metaphor** is also a comparison, suggesting that two dissimilar things are actually the same. When Romeo says, 'O speak again, bright angel' he implies that Juliet is an angel, some glorious thing to be praised. To put it another way, a metaphor borrows one word or phrase to express another. For example, Benvolio uses all the following as metaphors for swords and sword-fighting: 'piercing steel', 'deadly point to point', 'Cold death', 'fatal points' (Act 3 Scene 1, lines 143–66). And Chorus in the Prologue describes the lovers as 'star-crossed' and their love as 'death-marked'.
- **Personification** turns all kinds of things into persons, giving them human feelings or attributes. Probably the most powerful personification in the play is the image of Death as Juliet's husband-bridegroom. It recurs in different forms:

> And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!
>
> *Act 3 Scene 2, line 137*

> Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir,
> My daughter he hath wedded.   *Act 4 Scene 5, lines 38–9*

> Shall I believe
> That unsubstantial Death is amorous,
> And that the lean abhorrèd monster keeps
> Thee here in dark to be his paramour?   *Act 5 Scene 3, lines 102–5*

Check your understanding of metaphors, similes and personification: which is which here?

> 'Scaring the ladies like a crow-keeper'
> 'When well-apparelled April on the heel / Of limping winter treads'
> 'bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth'
> 'Love goes toward love as schoolboys from their books'

- ◆ Find several examples of metaphors, similes and personification in the play. Write them out, and say why they appeal to you. Suggest the atmosphere they create, or how they help to build up a sense of what a character is like.
- ◆ Also, listen carefully to other people's language. You'll hear hundreds of metaphors and similes!

Antithesis and oxymoron

Antithesis is the opposition of words or phrases against each other, as in 'More light and light, more dark and dark our woes!' (Act 3 Scene 5, line 36). This setting of word against word (e.g. 'light' versus 'dark') is one of Shakespeare's favourite language devices. He uses it in all his plays. Why? Because antithesis powerfully expresses conflict through its use of opposites, and conflict is the essence of all drama.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, conflict occurs in many forms: Montague versus Capulet, love versus hate, the bridal bed versus the grave, and all the other oppositions listed on pages 209–11. Antithesis intensifies that sense of conflict. For example, Friar Lawrence's first speech (Act 2 Scene 3, lines 1–30) contains at least fifteen antitheses as he gathers plants and ponders on the potential for good and evil in every living thing ('baleful weeds' versus 'precious-juicèd flowers', 'tomb' against 'womb', 'Virtue' against 'vice', and so on).

In another speech full of sharply contrasting antitheses, Capulet grieves for Juliet (Act 4 Scene 5, lines 84–90). He contrasts the happy preparations for the intended wedding with the mourning rites that now must mark her death. The first two lines set 'festival' versus 'funeral':

> All things that we ordainèd festival,
> Turn from their office to black funeral

A special kind of antithesis is **oxymoron**. Here, two incongruous or contradictory words are placed next to each other, as in 'cold fire' or 'bright smoke'. Oxymoron comes from two Greek words: *oxys* meaning 'sharp' and *moros* meaning 'dull'.

At the end of the 'balcony' scene Juliet uses a memorable oxymoron to describe her feelings: 'Parting is such sweet sorrow' ('sweet' versus 'sorrow'). Romeo, on his first appearance, seeing the signs of the brawl, speaks a dozen oxymorons as he reflects on love and hate (Act 1 Scene 1, lines 167–72). His reflection begins with two oxymorons, setting 'brawling' versus 'love', and 'loving' versus 'hate':

> Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate

♦ Work through the play collecting as many examples of antitheses and oxymorons as you can. Write an extended essay showing how these two language devices help create the sense of conflict in *Romeo and Juliet*. There are shorter activities on antitheses on pages 2 and 164, and on oxymorons on page 14.

Sonnets

At about the same time as Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet*, he was probably writing his *Sonnets*. There are several sonnets in the play:

- Chorus at the start and end of Act 1
- Lady Capulet's praise of Paris (Act 1 Scene 3, lines 82–95)
- Romeo and Juliet's first meeting (Act 1 Scene 5, lines 92–105)
- their next four lines are the start of another sonnet.

A Shakespearian sonnet is a fourteen-line poem. Each line usually contains ten syllables. The sonnet has three quatrains (each of four lines) and a couplet:

- the first four lines (rhyming ABAB)
- the next four lines (rhyming CDCD)
- the next four lines (rhyming EFEF)
- a couplet (two lines) to finish (rhyming GG).

- ◆ Turn to the Prologue. Identify the rhymes ('dignity'/'mutiny', 'scene'/'unclean', and so on) and match them with the rhyme scheme above.

Write your own sonnet

The quickest way to learn to write a sonnet is to have one in front of you and to write a parody of it. Turn to the Prologue and complete the following sonnet by carefully fitting the last twelve lines to the rhythm and rhyme scheme of Shakespeare's language:

Two classrooms, quite unlike in atmosphere,
Inside this building, (where I write this rhyme),

The sonnet tradition

The language of *Romeo and Juliet* shows the strong influence of the Italian poet Petrarch (1304–74). He became very popular with English poets in the time of Queen Elizabeth I. They drew on Petrarch's themes and style to write about courtly love.

Romeo's love for Rosaline echoes the major theme of Petrarch's poetry: a young man's unrequited love of an unattainable and disdainful woman. Romeo was infatuated with Rosaline, but she rejected all his advances. In Act 1 Scene 1, lines 199–207, and lines 219–29, you can see other influences of the sonnet tradition: neat rhyming; elaborate conceits (for example, metaphors of war); and the wordplay of wit, puns and repetition.

You can find more help with sonnets in the Cambridge School Shakespeare edition of *The Sonnets*.

Verse and prose

Although it has a good deal of rhyme, most of *Romeo and Juliet* is written in blank verse: unrhymed verse with a 'five-beat' rhythm (iambic pentameter). Each line has five iambs (feet), each with one stressed (/) and one unstressed (×) syllable:

$$\times \quad / \quad \times \quad / \quad \times \quad / \quad \times \quad / \quad \times \quad /$$

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

The 'five-beat' rhythm (or metre) is often obvious, but at other times, notably in the 'balcony' scene, it is less prominent.

Prose was traditionally used by comic and low-status characters. High-status characters spoke verse. But the Nurse (low-status) speaks a good deal of verse when she is with high-status Lady Capulet and Juliet. Also, Romeo, Mercutio and Benvolio (all high-status) use prose in Act 2 Scene 4 (probably because their talk is 'comic'). And although the conventional rule is that tragic death scenes should be in verse, Mercutio, at the point of death, speaks in prose.

◆ Choose a verse speech and speak it to emphasise the metre (five beats). Then speak it as you feel it should be delivered on stage. Finally, write four to eight lines of your own in the same style.

Listen! It's all around you!

Shakespeare created some very familiar expressions in *Romeo and Juliet*:

star-crossed lovers	if love be blind
parting is such sweet sorrow	as true as steel
above compare	cock-a-hoop
light of heart	as gentle as a lamb
in a fool's paradise	past help
what's in a name?	on a wild goose chase
what must be shall be	we were born to die
I will not budge	stiff and stark
where have you been gadding?	on pain of death
let me alone	the weakest go to the wall
fortune's fool	go like lightning
a rose by any other word (often misquoted as 'name') would smell as sweet	a plague on both your houses where the devil?

◆ Use these familiar expressions to make up a short story. Include other familiar sayings you find in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Repetition

Repeating words or phrases was a favourite device of Shakespeare's. Repetition can heighten tension and add depth to both drama and character. For example, when Juliet opposes her mother in Act 3 Scene 5, lines 114–17:

LADY CAPULET The County Paris, at Saint Peter's Church,
       Shall happily make thee there a joyful bride.
JULIET Now by Saint Peter's Church and Peter too,
       He shall not make me there a joyful bride.

◆ Collect more examples of repetition in the play. Dramatise a few to show their effect.

Puns – something to find out

A pun is a play on words which sound similar but have different meanings. Shakespeare was fascinated by puns – especially in *Romeo and Juliet*. Mercutio revels in punning, often of a sexual nature. Even at the point of death he can't resist punning: 'Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man' (Act 3 Scene 1, lines 89–90).

◆ Does every character in the play use puns? Discover the first pun each character uses. For example, Gregory and Sampson pun on 'colliers'/'choler'/'collar' at the very start of Act 1 Scene 1.

Shakespeare – and other writers' stories and language

Shakespeare almost always took the ideas for his plays from someone else's writing. He brilliantly transformed whatever he worked on. He found the idea for *Romeo and Juliet* in Arthur Brooke's poem *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*, written in 1562. But Brooke's long poem was pretty dull! Here are Brooke's lines about Juliet just before she drinks the potion:

The force of her imagining, anon did wax so strong,
That she surmised she saw out of the hollow vault,
(A grisly thing to look upon) the carcase of Tybalt,
Right in the self same sort, that she few days before
Had seen him in his blood embroiled, to death eke wounded sore.

Shakespeare vividly rewrote Brooke's image of the dead Tybalt:

Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
Lies fest'ring in his shroud   *Act 4 Scene 3, lines 42–3*