

Courtly Love in *Romeo and Juliet*

Benvolio's description of Romeo and Romeo's responses to him and Mercutio in Act One are superb examples of the physical symptoms as well as the ornate language that characterizes the traditional courtly lover. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare carefully delineates between courtly love and true love.

Courtly Love — a philosophy of love and a code of lovemaking which flourished in chivalric times, first in France and later in other countries, especially in England. According to the system, falling in love is accompanied by great emotional disturbances: the lover is bewildered, helpless, tortured by mental and physical pain, and exhibits certain "symptoms," such as pallor, trembling, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, sighing, weeping, etc. He agonizes over his condition and indulges in endless self-questioning and reflections on the nature of love and his own wretched state. His condition improves when he is accepted, and he is inspired to great deeds. The language of courtly love reflects these qualities or conditions and can use a variety of literary devices. Two such devices are oxymoron and the Petrarchan Conceit.

Oxymoron (oxymora) — a self-contradictory combination of words. Some examples of oxymora are the following:

bittersweet	passive resistance	worthless treasure
black light	selfish love	zero growth
exact estimate	sweet sorrow	
genuine imitation	unbiased opinion	
jumbo shrimp	working vacation	

Petrarchan Conceit — the kind of conceit (an unusual comparison) used by Italian poet Petrarch in his love sonnets and widely imitated by Renaissance English sonneteers. It rests upon elaborate and exaggerated comparisons expressing in extravagant terms the beauty, cruelty, and charm of the beloved and the suffering, sorrow, and despair of the forlorn lover.

1. Read the following selection from Romeo's and Benvolio's conversation about love. Highlight examples of Oxymora.

"Alas that love, whose view is muffled still,
Should without eyes see pathways to his will!
Where shall we dine?—O me! What fray was here?
Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all.
Here's much to do with hate, but more with love.
Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate,
O anything of nothing first create!
O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms,
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,
Still-waking sleep that is not what it is!
This love feel I, that feel no love in this."
(I. i. 176-190)

2. Each quote is either said by Romeo or about Romeo. Highlight the words that demonstrate signs that Romeo is experiencing courtly love in Act 1 when he is infatuated with Rosaline.

“Many a morning hath he been seen,
With tears augmenting the fresh morning’s dew,
Adding to the clouds more clouds with his deep sighs.”
(I. i. 135)

“Away from light steals home my heavy son
And private in his chamber pens himself,
Shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out,
And makes himself an artificial night.” (I. i. 140)

“Tut, I have lost myself. I am not here.
This is not Romeo. He’s some other where.”
(I. i. 205-206)

“She hath, in that sparing made huge waste;
For beauty, starved with her severity,
Cuts beauty off from all posterity.
She is too fair, too wise, wisely too fair,
To merit bliss by making me despair.
She hath forsworn to love, and in that vow
Do I live dead, that live to tell it now.”
(I. i. 226-232)

“Not mad, but bound more than a madman is;
Shut up in prison, kept without food,
Whipped and tormented. . . “
(I.ii.53-55)

“Not I, believe me. You have dancing shoes
With nimble soles. I have a soul of lead
So stakes me to the ground I cannot move.”
(I. iv. 15-17)

“I am too sore enpierced with his shaft
To soar with his light feathers, and so bound
I cannot bound a pitch above dull woe
Under love’s heavy burden do I sink.”
(I.iv. 19-22)

Love and Marriage Do or Don't
Go Together Like a Horse and Carriage?

People	Definition of Love	Qualities Necessary	What's love like?
You			
Parents			
Romeo (I.i.)			
Paris (I.ii.)			
Lord Capulet (I.ii.)			

Lady Capulet (I.iii.)			
Nurse (I.iii.)			
Mercutio (I.iv.)			
Romeo (I.v.)			