

## **Romeo and Juliet**

Romeo and Juliet is commonly taught in American high schools at 9th grade level and often parallels a world history course that includes a study of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The following strategy can provide a high level critical thinking social studies component to enhance a humanities approach to the play or to encourage interdepartmental collaboration.

**LEVEL #1** The student will recall significant facts about the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

**LEVEL #2** The student will read excerpts from The Prince and demonstrate an understanding of the fundamental socio/political ideas of Nicolo Machiavelli.

**LEVELS #3 and #4** The student will apply Machiavelli's political advice to the character of Escalus, the Prince, in Romeo and Juliet, analyzing his behavior and predicting how Machiavelli would have judged him.

**LEVELS #5 and #6** The student will write an essay that explains and evaluates the advice given to the Prince by Lady Capulet, comparing and contrasting it to what they believe Machiavelli would have said.

The human ethical sense evolved over millions of years to establish the fitness advantages of cooperative behavior within groups and only functions naturally within that social context. In other words innate human ethics recognizes responsibility only to other human beings and only within limited cooperative groups and disregards others. The family is the strongest and most enduring ethical cooperative group and it is biologically fixed. In the play, we can see this clearly in the feud between Capulet and Montague who pursue a narrow family/clan based ethic.

This ancient human ethic has in modern times been applied to a very different world, which has forced humans into ever-larger impersonal cooperative groups for which their natural ethical equipment is not well suited. There is often a conflict between the intrinsic human ethical sense that urges unequivocal support for family and friends and the expectations of the wider community. Machiavelli understood that our wider and more impersonal societal associations have little natural ethical hold on us and require artificial efforts to ensure cooperation and stability. This normally takes the form of a persistent aggressive moralism in the form of rules, laws and sanctions. This emerging public ethic is represented by Machiavelli who believed that severe levels of punitive force, even to the extent of deliberate cruelty, would be needed to control the old, and more natural, family/clan centered life-ways.

Ethics education is very much about understanding our inner ethical imperatives and how they impact our ever-widening impersonal associations. Even though all human beings are guided by identical innate ethical instincts, these need to function within infinitely variable social contexts. The application of the immutable human

ethical sense to the real world creates the unending complexity that often makes ethical judgments perplexing. Understanding this begins with self-assessment and clarification of one’s own ethical sense. It is important to analyze the various groups that govern our own ethical lives and how the notion of right changes in relation to who is involved. This is a critical concept and is a step toward learning to act more ethically by expanding the scope of what one recognizes to be his or her ethical cooperative group. All of this plays out nicely in Romeo and Juliet and offers an opportunity to engage students in meaningful ethics discussion.

**Part I**

Ethics Workbook I: World History, Chapter 10, Renaissance, provides a useful introduction to Machiavelli and will support the unit.

After about a thousand years of feudalism, people began to question some of its basic ideas. This new period in history is called the Renaissance. It was a time of change in the way people looked at their relationship with the community they lived in. Communalism was losing ground to the idea of individualism. Individualism stresses the importance of the individual people, and places them above the group. People began to believe that there was nothing wrong with striving to get things for themselves, and they became less concerned about their obligations to others.

The Renaissance was the beginning of what we call modern times. We still live in the modern age, and our society today still stresses individualism. So, this is a very important idea for us to study. It's a new way to look at life, and it changes things a lot.

All through the Middle Ages it was assumed that, for the most part at least, people try to do the right thing. In other words, people were by nature basically good. This was one idea that was seriously questioned by Renaissance thinkers. One famous philosopher at this time was an Italian named Nicolo Machiavelli. He wrote a book called **The Prince** which gave advice to political leaders. Let's see what Machiavelli said about the natural goodness of people.

**In general, people are ungrateful, unreliable, false, cowardly and greedy. They will promise you anything, and then turn their back on you if things go wrong. And don't think that the person who is closest to you is more reliable. Friendship is based on obligations, and people break obligations most easily.**

**Nicolo Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter XVI simplified**

*What to do you think? Are people basically good or basically bad? Is Machiavelli right?*  
**A wide variety of opinion will emerge. Students should reflect honestly on themselves.**

.....

Now, if you believe that people are the way Machiavelli says they are, your ideas about right and wrong will change.

Machiavelli wrote his book as a guide for the leader of his country. He believed that the government should not have to play by the same rules as ordinary people because the government cannot afford to lose. *Do you think governments should have the same standards of right and wrong as ordinary citizens? What about when governments deal with foreign countries?*

**This question should cause students to think more deeply about groups and group ethical standards. Students like to see themselves as free entities and often don't recognize they are not free of the dominant group.**

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Here is some of what Machiavelli wrote:

**Everyone says that the leader should be honest and trustworthy and not be sneaky. But it's easy to see that in the past leaders who get things done have paid little or no attention to this idea. They have simply outsmarted the others, especially those who keep their word. We all know that there are two ways of getting what you want. The first this through the rules, and the second is to take it by force. The leader must do both. The leader should be half lion and half fox. The lion can't see the traps, and the fox can't fight off the wolves. Great leaders don't rely on either one or the other, but use both. Therefore, the wise leaders do not keep their word if it will hurt them or prevent them from getting what they want.**

**If people were good this rule would not hold. But, because they are bad, and will lie and cheat you, you are not obligated to be fair and honest with them.**

**But, it is necessary to disguise your dishonesty and to pretend to be good. People like to think that they are upright, and they are very easy to trick. You must appear to be virtuous, but only a fool actually is virtuous. Pretend to be kind, reliable, fair, honest and loyal. But be ready to do the exact opposite, as long as you don't get caught. Its always best to stay with the good if you can, but only if it works, if not, you must be ready to change**

**tactics. Remember, people must believe you are virtuous, so never give any hint that you are not. People only see what you show them, not what's really there.**

**Nicolo Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter XVIII simplified**

***What was Machiavelli's opinion of hypocrisy?***  
.....

**It seems that winning is the most important thing for Machiavelli. How important is winning in the things that you do? Does the urge to win sometimes lead to unethical actions? Can you give any examples from your own experiences?**  
.....

**Machiavelli seems different from earlier things, but there is a very basic way in which he is identical to all the others. Reread the following sentence. See if you can figure it out? Why does he tell people to lie and cheat? What basic principle of ethics is he using?**

**If people were good this rule would not hold, but because they are bad, and will lie and cheat you, you are not obligated to be fair and honest with them.**

**Nicolo Machiavelli, The Prince, Chapter XVIII simplified**

**This is the negative side of the human drive to reach equality through reciprocity.**  
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## Part II

Feudalism can be seen as a system of private contracts and personal relationships acting to provide public services and duties. At the end of the Middle Ages, a more impersonal, public, governmental idea was gradually emerging with the rise of monarchies and the subsequent development of democracy in some parts of Europe. In the play there are numerous examples of this transition from a private, and hence medieval, concept of government and the public, and hence modern, idea of governmental responsibility. As you read *ROMEO AND JULIET*, pay special attention to the words and actions of Prince Escalus and identify several examples of the struggle between these two ideas.

*What is the relationship between the "rule of law" as represented by the Prince and the "rule of men" as represented by the feuding families of Verona? List direct quotes from the play and then interpret them in short paragraphs. Find at least three examples.*

### *Act One, Scene I:*

**Violent feud between the families Capulet and Montague is interrupted by the Prince who talks tough and threatens everyone with execution.**

#### **PRINCE**

*Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace,  
 Profaners of this neighbour-stained steel,—  
 Will they not hear? What, ho! you men, you beasts,  
 That quench the fire of your pernicious rage  
 With purple fountains issuing from your veins,  
 On pain of torture, from those bloody hands  
 Throw your mistemper'd weapons to the ground,  
 And hear the sentence of your moved prince.  
 Three civil brawls, bred of an airy word,  
 By thee, old Capulet, and Montague,  
 Have thrice disturb'd the quiet of our streets,  
 And made Verona's ancient citizens  
 Cast by their grave beseeming ornaments,  
 To wield old partisans, in hands as old,  
 Canker'd with peace, to part your canker'd hate:  
 If ever you disturb our streets again,  
 Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace.  
 For this time, all the rest depart away:  
 You Capulet; shall go along with me:  
 And, Montague, come you this afternoon,  
 To know our further pleasure in this case,  
 To old Free-town, our common judgment-place.  
 Once more, on pain of death, all men depart.*

**The first concern of the government is to preserve the peace and maintain the safety and security of the citizens. This is clear in the Prince's speech.**

### *Act Three, Scene I:*

**After Romeo kills Tybalt, Lady Capulet speaks the kin-based ethic of revenge.**

**LADY CAPULET**

Tybalt, my cousin! O my brother's child!  
O prince! O cousin! husband! O, *the blood is spilt*  
*O my dear kinsman! Prince, as thou art true,*  
*For blood of ours, shed blood of Montague.*  
O cousin, cousin!

**The Prince tries to find a just way to resolve the issue and tries to be reasoned and impartial.**

**PRINCE**

*Benvolio, who began this bloody fray?*

**Lady Capulet objects to Benvolio's account because he is a Montague and cannot be trusted; again she calls for revenge. The struggle between private and public law is clear in this exchange.**

**LADY CAPULET**

*He is a kinsman to the Montague;*  
*Affection makes him false; he speaks not true:*  
Some twenty of them fought in this black strife,  
And all those twenty could but kill one life.  
I beg for justice, which thou, prince, must give;  
*Romeo slew Tybalt, Romeo must not live.*

**The Prince's kinsman, Mercutio, was also killed in the skirmish and he recognizes the vicious blood feud cycle, but he still doesn't impose the harshest penalty on Romeo, choosing rather to exile him and impose a fine on the families. The last line of his speech tells us that he knows that his leniency was a mistake.**

**PRINCE**

And for that offence  
Immediately we do exile him hence:  
*I have an interest in your hate's proceeding,*  
*My blood for your rude brawls doth lie a-bleeding;*  
But I'll amerce you with so strong a fine  
That you shall all repent the loss of mine:  
I will be deaf to pleading and excuses;  
Nor tears nor prayers shall purchase out abuses:  
Therefore use none: let Romeo hence in haste,  
Else, when he's found, that hour is his last.  
Bear hence this body and attend our will:  
*Mercy but murders, pardoning those that kill.*

***Act Five, Scene III:***

**Later the Prince addresses Montague, whose wife and son have both died and tries to be objective about the issues.**

**PRINCE**

Seal up the mouth of outrage for a while,  
Till we can clear these ambiguities,  
And know their spring, their head, their  
true descent;  
And then will I be general of your woes,  
And lead you even to death: meantime forbear,  
And let mischance be slave to patience.  
Bring forth the parties of suspicion.

**The Prince then questions everyone about how Romeo died and tries to use reason to arrive at a just result; he then admonishes everyone, including himself, for letting the lawlessness go on for too long.**

**PRINCE**

This letter doth make good the friar's words,  
Their course of love, the tidings of her death:  
And here he writes that he did buy a poison  
Of a poor 'pothecary, and therewithal  
Came to this vault to die, and lie with Juliet.  
*Where be these enemies? Capulet! Montague!*  
*See, what a scourge is laid upon your hate,*  
*That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love.*  
*And I for winking at your discords too*  
*Have lost a brace of kinsmen: all are punish'd.*

**The Prince utters the final words.**

**PRINCE**

A glooming peace this morning with it brings;  
The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head:  
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things;  
Some shall be pardon'd, and some punished:  
For never was a story of more woe  
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

Now let's see what Machiavelli says in a chapter of his book called: "Concerning Cruelty And Clemency, And Whether It Is Better To Be Loved Than Feared." Read it carefully and use it to establish standards for judging the actions of Prince Escalus of Verona. *What would Machiavelli have told the Prince to do?*

**Coming now to the other qualities mentioned above, I say that every prince ought to desire to be considered clement and not cruel. Nevertheless he ought to take care not to misuse this clemency. Cesare Borgia was considered cruel; notwithstanding, his cruelty reconciled the Romagna, unified it, and restored it to peace and loyalty. And if this be rightly considered, he will be seen to have been much more merciful than the Florentine people, who, to avoid a reputation for cruelty, permitted Pistoia to be destroyed. Therefore a prince, so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal, ought not to mind the reproach of cruelty; because with a few examples he will be more merciful than those who, through too much mercy, allow disorders to arise, from which follow murders or robberies; for these are wont to injure the whole people, whilst those executions which originate with a prince offend the individual only. ...**

Nevertheless he ought to be slow to believe and to act, nor should he himself show fear, but proceed in a temperate manner with prudence and humanity, so that too much confidence may not make him incautious and too much distrust render him intolerable.

Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with. Because this is to be asserted in general of men, that they are ungrateful, fickle, false, cowardly, covetous, and as long as you succeed they are yours entirely; they will offer you their blood, property, life and children, as is said above, when the need is far distant; but when it approaches they turn against you. And that prince who, relying entirely on their promises, has neglected other precautions, is ruined; because friendships that are obtained by payments, and not by greatness or nobility of mind, may indeed be earned, but they are not secured, and in time of need cannot be relied upon; and men have less scruple in offending one who is beloved than one who is feared, for love is preserved by the link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage; but fear preserves you by a dread of punishment which never fails. ...

Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter XVII

Escalus acts with “prudence and humanity” as Machiavelli says he should, but he fails to assert his authority and the violence gets out of hand as Machiavelli predicts it inevitably would. Machiavelli would have advised the Prince to crack down mercilessly, setting an unequivocal example by executing Romeo, to intimidate Capulet and Montague into ending the feud.

Final Assessment Essay:

*Read Lady Capulet’s words as she laments the death of Tybalt and then urges the Prince to execute Romeo. What seems to be motivating her?*

**LADY CAPULET**

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 O prince! O cousin! husband! O, the blood is spilt  
 O my dear kinsman! Prince, as thou art true,  
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**LADY CAPULET**

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Some twenty of them fought in this black strife,  
And all those twenty could but kill one life.  
I beg for justice, which thou, prince, must give;  
Romeo slew Tybalt, Romeo must not live.

*Machiavelli would probably have agreed with Lady Capulet that Romeo should be executed, but for entirely different reasons. Write an essay in which you predict how Machiavelli would have responded to Lady Capulet's plea.*

**Lady Capulet is seeking revenge for her family, which Machiavelli would judge to be a mistake, since it would only invite retribution and fuel the blood feud violence that upsets the peace and threatens the stability of the Prince's government. Machiavelli would probably have advised Escalus to execute Romeo in a way carefully calculated to cement his authority and to intimidate the two families into ending the feud. His motive would be impersonal, unemotional and purely political.**

