Feminist Criticism Applied to Romeo & Juliet

Group Members:
1. ____________________________________
2. ____________________________________
3. ____________________________________
4. ____________________________________
5. ____________________________________
6. ____________________________________
7. ____________________________________
8. ____________________________________

Process
1. Read through the objectives, Notes, Essential Questions, and Points of Study
2. Your main group will be divided into two smaller groups: Group A and Group B. Each group will complete a portion of Activity 1.
3. The groups will be rearranged to share responses from Activity 1.
4. In your new groups, you will respond to a new set of questions.
5. You will return to your Groups A and B and complete a portion of Activity 2.
6. The groups will be rearranged to share responses from Activity 2.
7. The group will meet as a whole to work together on a group presentation of the Feminist Critical Literacy Approach Applied to Romeo and Juliet for the class.
8. Each member of the group will complete a written essay.
Objectives: Students will be able to

- Examine the relationship between Romeo and Juliet
- Examine the status of women in a patriarchal society
- Study the relationship between Juliet and her parents
- Evaluate Juliet’s attitude toward death
- Understand the implications of Juliet’s suicide

Notes on the Feminist Approach

Feminism is an evolving philosophy. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.

Three main areas of study/points of criticism:

1. Differences between men and women
   a. The basic assumption is that gender determines everything, including values and language.
   b. The canon must be expanded to include the study of those genres in which women “traditionally” write: journals, diaries, and personal letters.
   c. Note the differences in both the topics or issues about which men and women write and the perspectives from which they write about them.
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2. Women in power or power relationships between men and women
   a. Note and attack the social, economic, and political exploitation of women. Note whether women have any power and what type it is.
   b. Society has not treated all of it constituencies with equality, and literature is a means by which inequities can be identified, protested, and possibly rectified.
   c. Note the division of labor and economies between men and women.
   d. Note how men and women interact with one another in a variety of relationships (romantic, professional, etc.) Does the woman act in any way subservient to the man? Does the man treat the woman like an adult? Does the man treat the woman like a political and economical equal?

3. The female experience
   a. On the most basic level, women experience different things in life than men do. Examine what aspects of feminine life are included in the work. Note the point of view through which the events are told. Is it male or female? Pay attention to how the narrator, male or female, treats the events. For example, are they depicted with sensitivity, harshness, etc.?
   b. Reject any view of female personality in contrast to male personality. Feminists believe that the female personality is a separate entity from the male personality, and if judged by the same measures, is judged incorrectly. The female personality can stand independent of the male personality, just as the male can stand independent of the female.
   c. Examine (and possibly celebrate) the creative, life-giving role of femininity. Though traditionally women have been portrayed as dependent on men for everything, the fact is that men are dependent on women for the most basic necessity in the world—birthing children. A male’s relationship to his mother has always been portrayed as a very strong bond (whether in the Freudian theory of the Oedipal complex or modern phrases such as “Mama’s boy”).
   d. Explore the concept that men and women are both incomplete without each other (women cannot conceive without men, etc.) not of feminine “incompleteness” alone (Adam’s rib, Freudian theories on sexuality, etc.).

### Essential Questions for a Feminist Reading

2. Do the female characters play major or minor roles in the action of the work? Are they supportive or independent? Powerless or strong? Subservient or in control?
3. If the female characters have any power, what kind is it? Political? Economic? Social? Psychological?
4. How do the male characters talk about the female characters?
5. How do the male characters treat the female characters?
6. How do the female characters act toward the male characters?
7. How do the female characters act toward each other?
8. Is the work in general sympathetic to female characters? Too sympathetic?
9. Are the female characters and situations in which they are placed oversimplified or presented fully and in detail?
10. What are the predominant images? Are they images usually associated with women? Why or why not?
11. Do any of the work’s themes touch upon any idea that could be seen as a feminist issue? Is the theme supportive or disparaging of women?
12. Overall, do you think that the female characters are believable (based on women you know)? For that matter, do you think that the male characters are believable?
Activity One: Group A

Examining Juliet’s Role as Wife and Daughter in a Patriarchal Society

Reread the following scenes:
- Act 1, Scene III
- Act 3, Scene V
- Act 4, Scene II

Discuss the following ideas:
- Juliet’s attitude and behavior toward her parents before and after meeting Romeo
- Juliet’s attitude toward filial obedience, marriage, honor, and virtue
- The Capulets’ expectations with regard to their daughter

Record your group’s responses to the following questions:

1. Before meeting Romeo, how does Juliet view the prospect of marriage? ____________________________________________

2. Before meeting Romeo, how does Juliet evaluate the right of her parents to choose her husband? ____________________________________________

3. How does Capulet expect Juliet will respond upon hearing that her wedding day has been set? Why does he expect this particular response? ____________________________________________

4. What language does Capulet use to address Juliet when she expresses her refusal to marry Paris? What does this language indicate about Capulet’s attitude toward Juliet? Toward women in general? ____________________________________________

5. What is the relationship between disobedience and death as expressed by Capulet and Lady Capulet? What does the connection between disobedience and death as expressed by Juliet’s parents reveal about the importance or power of the patriarchal state? ____________________________________________

6. Why does Juliet say she would choose death—suicide—over marriage to Paris? What does Juliet’s decision to die in case no other solution becomes available reveal about a woman’s status in her society? About a woman’s power or lack of power? ____________________________________________
7. Why does Juliet profess to regret her “disobedient opposition” (Act 4 Scene 2) after visiting Friar Laurence?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

8. Why does Juliet turn to Friar Lawrence for help?

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________
**Activity One: Group B**

Reread the following selections from the play in context:

- Act 1, Scene 5: Juliet to Nurse: “Go ask his name.—If he be married, my grave is like to be my wedding bed.”
- Act 3, Scene 2: Juliet (alone)“Poor ropes, you are beguil’d, both you an I, for Romeo is exil’d. He made you for a highway to my bed, but I, a maid, die maiden-widowed. Come, cords; come, Nurse, I’ll to my wedding bed, and death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead!”
- Act 3, Scene 5: Juliet to Nurse: “Go, counselor! Thou and my bosom henceforth shall be twain. I’ll to the friar to know his remedy. If all else fail, myself have power to die.”
- Act 4, Scene 1: Juliet to Friar Laurence “God join’d my heart and Romeo’s, thou our hands; and ere this hand, by thee to Romeo seal’d, shall be the label to another deed, or my true heart with treacherous revolt turn to antoher, this shall slay them both. Therefore, out of thy long-experience’d time, give me some present counsel; or, behold, ‘twixt my extremes and me this bloody knife shall play the umpire, arbitrating that which the commission of thy years and art could to no issue of true honour bring. Be not so long to speak. I long to die if what thou speak’st speak not of remedy.”
- Act 5, Scene III: Juliet (alone) “O happy dagger! This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die.”

Record your group’s responses to the following questions:

1. What does Juliet’s comment in Act I, Scene 5 reveal about her passion for Romeo? How does she evaluate her new infatuation for Romeo?
   _________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________

2. What is the connection between Juliet’s virginity, her relationship with Romeo, and death?
   _________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________

3. Why does Juliet prefer death over marriage to Paris, even though Romeo has been exiled?
   _________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________

4. To Juliet, what is the connection between being faithful to Romeo and retaining her virginity after Romeo has been exiled? What, then, is the value and meaning of virginity for Juliet? For the society in which she lives?
   _________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________

5. Why does Juliet threaten suicide in her conversation with Friar Laurence? Does Juliet’s suicide threat help her to achieve her purpose? Does it enable her to “force” Friar Laurence to propose a solution?
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<tbody>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Why does Juliet kill herself when she finds Romeo dead?</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Does suicide give Juliet power? If so, what kind of power?</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Are there alternative courses of action available to Juliet? Why or why not?</td>
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Reread Act 2, Scene II and study the language Shakespeare employs in his depiction of the love, passion, and loyalty that Romeo and Juliet feel toward one another. Generate a list noting images, metaphors, similes, etc. used to describe or express the love Romeo and Juliet express to one another. For example, in line 62 of Act 2, Scene II, Romeo uses a metaphor to express how he has been able to enter the Capulet garden in secrecy: “With love’s light wings did I o’erperch these walls; for stony limits cannot hold love out.”

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<tr>
<th>Similes</th>
<th>Metaphors</th>
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**Activity 2: Group A**

Once the lists have been completed, use the following questions to generate a discussion about the language of love Romeo and Juliet use. Focus students’ attention on the ways in which the images, metaphors, similes, etc., the two lovers use confirm traditional, patriarchal views of love and male-female relationships:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What stereotypes or traditional/conservative attitudes about love are expressed in this scene?</td>
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<td>2. What images are associated with love? Are they negative images? Positive images?</td>
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<td>3. How does Juliet differentiate between “true-love passion” and “light love”? What does she hope to achieve by explaining this differentiation to Romeo?</td>
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<td>4. Why is Juliet willing to forfeit her name?</td>
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<td>5. What does Juliet offer to Romeo in exchange for his willingness to forfeit his name? What does her offer reveal about her attitude toward women's role in marriage? Does Romeo indeed forget his name?</td>
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<td>6. What is the significance of likening Juliet to “merchandise”? What attitude toward women does Romeo express in his word choice?</td>
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Activity 2: Group B

Once the lists have been completed, use the following questions to generate a discussion about the language of love Romeo and Juliet use. Focus students’ attention on the ways in which the images, metaphors, similes, etc., the two lovers use confirm traditional, patriarchal views of love and male-female relationships:

1. Why does Juliet describe their secret encounter as a flash of “lightening” and a “bud of love”? What fears and hopes are associated with these images? What do these fears and hopes reveal about Juliet’s attitude toward women’s honor, virtue, and marriage?

2. What stereotypes, if any, about women in general are exemplified in this scene? What images and word choices are associated with Juliet? What do these word choices reveal about Romeo’s attitude toward Juliet? Toward women in general?

3. Does Juliet’s character successfully function as a heroine in her own right, equal to the hero Romeo in significance within the context of the play?

4. Why does Juliet wait for Romeo to return with wedding plans the next day? Why does she not leave her parents’ house right away?

5. Who dominates the conversation between Romeo and Juliet? Who drives the relationship forward? Who is active in achieving a union? Who is dependent on the other to achieve a union?

6. How does the language of the scene inscribe a traditional, patriarchal view of courtship? How does it support a break with traditional courtship roles?
Group Presentation
Directions: answer the following questions in your group. After you have discussed them in length, collaborate on a presentation in which you introduce the mythological/archetypal approach to analyzing Romeo and Juliet, and present your findings to the questions below to the rest of the class. Each member of your group is required to present some portion of the discussion. Consider in what ways you can make the information visually attractive on a poster.

1. Summarize the Feminist Critical Literacy approach to analyzing Romeo and Juliet.
2. To what extent do the female characters—Juliet, Lady Capulet, Lady Montague, Juliet’s Nurse—carry responsibility for the actions and events in the play? Be sure to support all of your assertions with direct references and examples from the text.
4. How might the fact that only men were allowed to perform on stage in Shakespeare’s day have affected his portrayal of female characters?
5. How would the play be different if the Montagues and Capulets both had a son and a daughter? Would the potential relationship between Romeo and Juliet have been possible or different? Would the significance of the relationship between Romeo and Juliet have changed for the lovers themselves, for their families, for the society at large?
6. What roles do mothers play in the context of Romeo and Juliet? Are Lady Capulet and Lady Montague described as effective mothers? Absent mothers? Caring mothers? How do these mothers affect their children?

Essays or Writing Assignments
Directions: Choose one of the following essay prompts to respond to with a well-written, fully developed five paragraph essay that introduces your topic in the introduction, presents and thesis, and develops the thesis using relevant evidence cited from the text.

1. Consider how the play presents women’s roles throughout different social classes. To what extent do Juliet, Lady Capulet, and the Nurse share the same female experience? To what extent are their experiences different and why?
2. Compare and contrast the relationship between Romeo and his parents to the relationship between Juliet and her parents. What differentiates these two child-parent bonds and why? Be sure to indicate the extent to which the differences and similarities between each child and its parents are significant and why. Support all your assertions with evidence from the text.
3. Trace the prevalence or lack of power for the character of Juliet throughout the play. Pay particular attention to ways in which Juliet’s actions depend on the decisions or actions of various male characters (Romeo, Paris, Capulet, Friar Laurence, etc.).
4. Explain whether or not you believe that Juliet can be considered a tragic hero in her own right. Be sure to support all your assertions with evidence from the text (and from potential research about the model of the classical or Renaissance tragic hero).