Romeo and Juliet – Context

The Setting

It is generally believed that the play is based on a real Italian love story from the 3rd Century. The 'real families' are the Capeletti and the Montecci families.

Shakespeare wrote his version in 1594 which was based on Arthur Brooke's poem of 1562.

This period was 'The Elizabethan Era' which was also known as 'The Renaissance': a time of significant change in the fields of religion, politics, science, language and the arts.

Religion

Romeo and Juliet was set during a time of religious and political turmoil.

Europe was a traditionally Catholic society with a strong belief in damnation for mortal sin. Suicide and bigamy were both considered to be mortal sins.

Shakespeare was writing following 'The Reformation' and this was when England became a Protestant nation, having broken away from the control of the Catholic Church.

In this Protestant society, life became more open and less oppressed.

Family

The father was the head of the household in this patriarchal society.

Women had no rights or authority in law: they could not own property or money but could influence their husbands.

Children were regarded as property and could be given in marriage to a suitable partner. This was often a political or financial transaction to secure and retain wealth.

It was not unusual to be married very young.

In high society, children were often raised by a 'wet nurse' and did not have a strong bond with their parents.

Love and Relationships

Courtly love (like royalty) should be polite, ceremonious, restrained, intellectual, courteous and those involved should be in love with the idea of being in love.

There was no contact, just an exchange of gifts, letters and poems.

Divorce was impossible.

Honour

Family honour was important to the Elizabethans.

There was a strong belief that the slightest wrong or insults must be avenged as a matter of personal pride or to protect reputation.

Fate and Destiny

Most Elizabethans believed in the ideas of fate and astrology; rich people often paid for horoscopes for their children, and before major decisions such as marriage or travel, one would often consult an astrologer to see if the stars favoured it.

Many people believed that they had no free will: that they had no choice to change their destiny because everything was already 'predestined'.

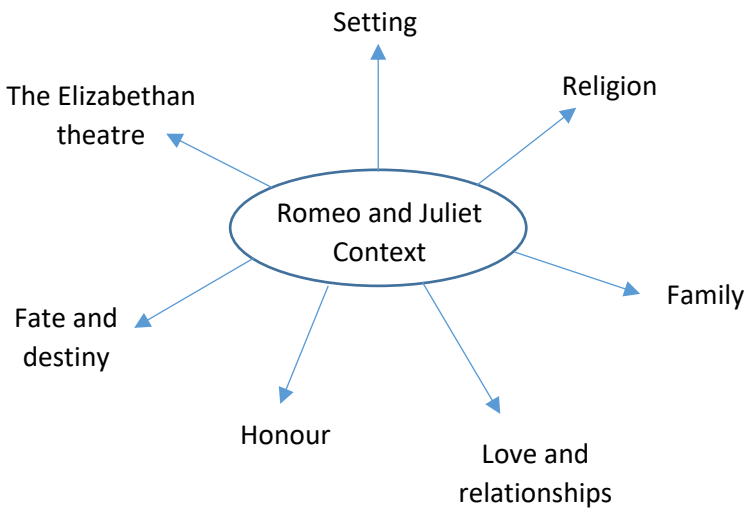
The Elizabethan Theatre

The theatre was a popular source of entertainment in Elizabethan England.

Audiences included servants, labourers, the wealthy and they could become quite rowdy during performances.

The poorer people in the audience stood on front of the stage and the more wealthy people sat in the covered galleries above.

It was illegal for women to act, so female roles were played by young boys.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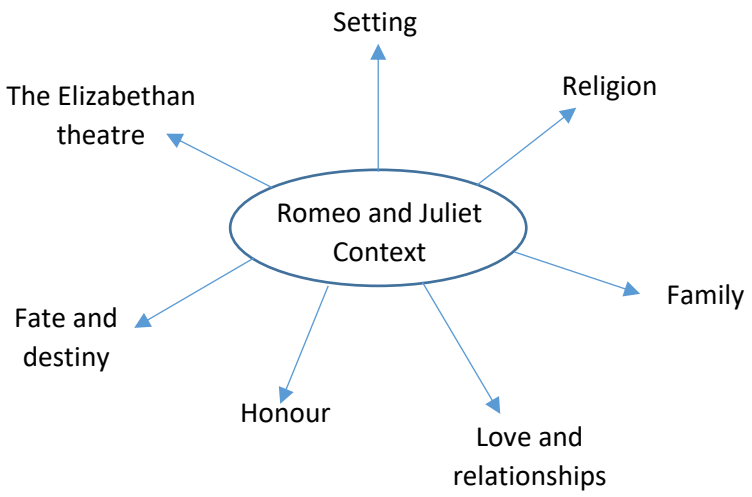
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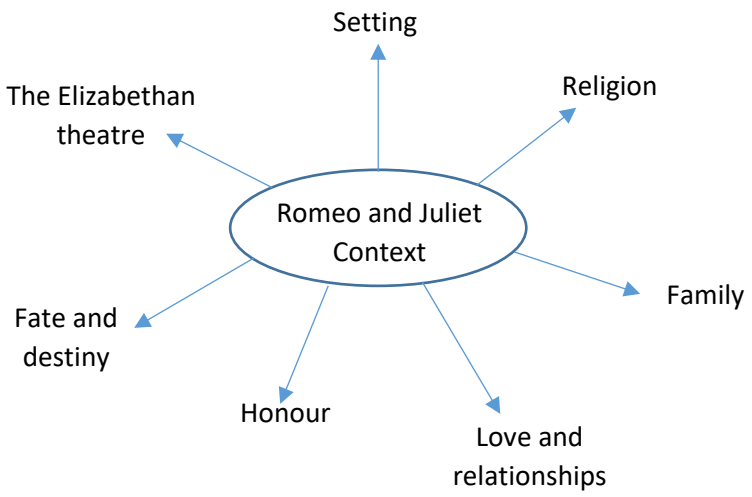
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