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Differences and similarities in *Romeo and Juliet*

*Romeo and Juliet*, the classic play by William Shakespeare, is a work of literature that has stood the test of time. Through the years, the play has been performed many times, and each presentation of the play has presented it in a slightly different light. Whether it was because of the way the actors delivered the lines or the way the director staged the action, each performance of Shakespeare’s play was an individual interpretation. When motion pictures were invented, this popular story was of course made into a feature film, and this re-imagining of the tale continued. Though both the 1968 version of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli, and the 1996 version, directed by Baz Luhrmann, are based on the same play, there are a number of differences in presentation that make important changes to the film.

The first difference in presentation is obvious at the very beginning of Luhrmann’s 1996 film. While Zeffirelli’s 1968 version was set in the same 15th century setting as Shakespeare’s original play, the 1996 version updates the story, placing it in the 20th century, complete with cars, modern technology, and guns, while still preserving Shakespeare’s original dialogue. This has an odd effect on the movie, as apparently modern-day characters speak in Shakespearian language. It is not difficult, however, to understand why the filmmakers decided to make this very fundamental change. It seems that they may have believed the traditional presentation of the story to be too familiar, and wanted to introduce modern elements in order to attract a younger audience.

Another important difference occurs soon after, in the first act. In Shakespeare’s original play and the 1968 film version, the fight that breaks out between the warring Capulet and Montague families is started by the Capulets, who end up looking rather foolish as they go back and forth, deciding whether they have the courage to insult Romeo’s family, the Montagues. In the 1996 film, the lines are reversed, with the Montagues speaking the cowardly ones. This was almost certainly done so as to make the Capulets, and Tybalt in particular, into more credible foes. Cowardly villains, such as those in the earlier versions, are simply not as frightening or imposing as the confident Capulets in Luhrmann’s film.

One difference that cannot go without discussion is the famous balcony scene. This was a centerpiece of Shakespeare’s play, and considered to be one of the most romantic scenes in the history of drama. It was made all the more romantic, in its original presentation, by the fact that during the entire scene, Romeo and Juliet are separated physically. Because he is standing on the ground and she is above in the balcony, they cannot touch. Only their words show how much they are in love with one another.

In Zeffirelli’s 1968 film, an important change is made to the scene; a tree is conveniently placed next to the balcony, allowing Romeo to climb up to the balcony so that he and Juliet can kiss and embrace. The director, it seems likely, must have believed that words alone would not convey the feeling and romanticism that he wanted present in the scene, and so he staged the action so that the lovers could physically come together. Luhrmann’s 1996 film takes this difference even further, teasing the audience with the possibility of Juliet appearing at the balcony, only to have her actually exit below. The dialogue that, in the play, takes place with Romeo and the ground and Juliet in the balcony takes place here with both floating in a swimming pool, their arms around each other for maximum romance.

The final scene, in which Romeo and Juliet commit suicide out of despair for the other, is one of the most important and affecting scenes in the play. The 1968 version presents it without any major alterations, only cutting some unimportant dialogue. The major change, that Friar Laurence attempts, in the movie, to lead Juliet out of the crypt without letting her know that Romeo is dead, as he does in the play, still makes little difference in the effect of the scene. The 1996 version, however, drastically changes the staging, having Juliet wake up just as Romeo is drinking the poison. This is unlike the play and the 1968 film, in which she wakes up after he is already dead. This is obviously a major change, letting the lovers have a final, tragic moment together before Romeo succumbs to the poison, and it has the effect of deepening the sense of tragedy for most viewers. There is the sense that, if things had only gone slightly differently, these two could have lived long, happy lives together. The other versions, in which Romeo is dead before Juliet even wakes up, present the death as much more preordained.

Although there are many differences between the various versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, the strength of the story is so great that it shines through whatever changes the director or actors see fit to make. Whatever small changes are made to update the narrative for new audiences, the central thread of doomed lovers bringing peace to their feuding families through their death still survives. It is this theme, and the way in which it can be applied and understood by people regardless of their time and place, that makes the play a classic and ensures that it will be read and enjoyed by many more generations.