

I am Juliet

Jackie French

Book Summary

Who am I?

Only a daughter? A Capulet, wed to my father's choice?

No! I am the girl who chose her destiny, whose love outlasts the sun.

I am Juliet.

The girl who loved Romeo. In this story, she takes centre stage

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes

- English - Language Literature and Literacy
- SOSE

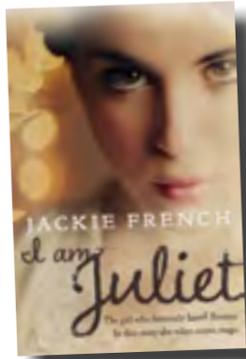
Appropriate Ages:

10+

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Notes By Robyn Sheahan-Bright



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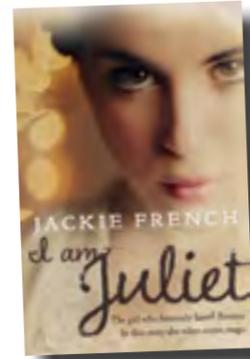
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Introduction

'I was more than my family now, more even than Romeo's love.
I was Juliet.' (p 77)

We all know the story of Juliet and Romeo, the star-crossed lovers from the warring Capulet and Montague families whose love is doomed. In this new retelling of the tale, though, Juliet's story is framed by the voice of Rob Goughe the young apprentice English actor in sixteenth century Elizabethan England, cast as Juliet, with whom the novel opens. He is excited by the fact that, unusually, since he is used to playing weak and rather subservient female characters, Juliet is instead a strong and pivotal character in the plot. The novel then turns to the first person voice of Juliet Catherine Therese Capulet in the 1300s in Verona. It ends with Rob on opening night 'inhabiting' Juliet's part.

This retelling concentrates on thirteen-year-old Juliet being the catalyst in the story. She is not happy about the options open to her as her parents' daughter, betrothed to her cousin Tybalt. She is less than enthused when the Earl of Paris expresses a desire to claim her hand. And then she meets her true love, Romeo, and despite his being from the family in opposition to her own, she invites him to marry her, challenging the society in which she lives. Hence, this telling foregrounds the pivotal role played by Juliet, rather than by the men in this patriarchal society.

In essence, though, the message behind this timeless tale is the sad reflection that:

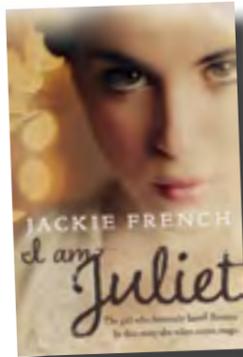
'Enmity can vanish like the darkness once you look at what you share.' (p 166)

Neither family wins in this tragic tale of love and loss. Both lose their heirs, and both discover too late that a child is more important than a meaningless vendetta. And two young lovers lose each other, but will be remembered for all eternity in this tragic story:

'That my heart is twisted into his, and will be for all time, and his with mine.' (p 72)

This is the first in a planned series by Jackie French which will continue with *Ophelia, Queen of Denmark* (2015) and *Third Witch* (2016). With her storytelling skills, she will bring new life to several well-known classical tales by concentrating on a theme which she believes deserves better exploration.

And hopefully she will turn young readers back to the originals with renewed interest.



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About the Author

Jackie French is a multiple award-winning author who deals with a very wide-range of topics. Of her books she says on her website that:

'There were over 140 at last count, slightly more than we have varieties of apples. If something is worth doing you may as well go heart and soul and boot leather ... I write for kids and adults, fiction, history, gardening, pests control, chooks and some that must be a nightmare for book shops to work out what genre they are. Have a look at 'which book?' for a probably not quite up to date list of what is where and for whom.'

Jackie is the current Australian Children's Laureate (2014-15). **Share A Story** is the philosophy behind her tenure. For more information, please visit:

<http://www.childrenslaureate.org.au/>

Her website offers further detailed and fascinating insights into her life and work:

www.jackiefrench.com.au

Author Inspiration

Jackie writes:

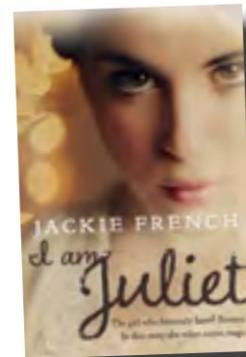
'Where does a book begin?

It may be when I first read *Romeo and Juliet* when I was eight years old, in a collection of Shakespeare's plays my grandfather gave to my grandmother before they were married, and the book that I used as a reference to write the story. The pages are thin, the type small, and the language bothersome, but as soon as Juliet entered the play I was hooked. A girl who seems to be just a dutiful daughter, but is her own person. Years later I watched the Zefirelli movie three times. Every time I hoped that maybe, this time, she would live.

But the book truly began in 2012 when a group of teenagers told me how they'd hated the play – 'all those words' – until they had seen the film. Shakespeare wrote his play to be seen, not read, with love scenes and dances in silk costumes and sword fights. And as a theatre manager, he also wrote his plays to be changed to suit the actors and the audience.

So I did. This is a story for the page, not the stage.

Romeo and Juliet has become so much a cliché now we lose sight of how extraordinary Juliet is.



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At a time when most people weren't married till their early twenties, unless they were important royalty, she was betrothed at 13; she proposed to the man she loved; plotted her escape; defied her parents, and her entire world.

And because of this, her story continues, hundreds of years after a girl named Juliet (perhaps) lived.'

Notes on Themes and Curriculum Topics

Characters

The Significance of Character

Characters are the heart of any narrative, the catalysts for action, and the central core around which all other narrative aspects must revolve and work. In this work there are several major characters (some of whom figure briefly in the action) and a cast of minor ones.

Discussion Point: Discuss the character of Tybalt who is not sympathetically portrayed. What may have made him the person he is?

Major Characters: Rob Goughe, the youngest apprentice actor of Lord Hunsden's men; Juliet

Capulet; her parents; her cousin Tybalt; the Earl of Paris, the Prince's cousin; Nurse; Romeo Montague.

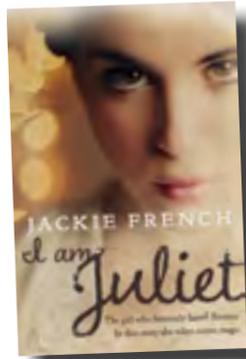
Discussion Point: Which of the main characters did you find most appealing, and why?

Minor Characters: Juliet's servants Joan, Janette and Joanette; the Friar; the thieves; the woman at the hotel who steals Juliet's clothes.

Activity: Is there a minor character who might have played a larger part? Why would you have liked to have seen more of this character?

Character Arcs are the curve on which key events show how a character grows or develops in response to events and to interactions with other characters in the novel.

Activity: Choose a character and trace an arc on which key events indicate some aspect of their personality or change in their behaviour (e.g. Nurse).



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Themes

Women's History and Rights

Discussion Point:

'What could a girl say in the world of men? Except Queen Bess, of course. But queens were different.' (p 2)

The fact that Elizabeth was such a strong figure seems to challenge notions of women being oppressed or subservient in this time. Discuss.

Discussion Point: Juliet is mostly depicted as an innocent.

'But you can read her role differently. Juliet does the unthinkable for the time: she asks Romeo to marry her. She plots, she schemes; she has the courage to face almost death and a dark crypt, then real death, killing herself with a dagger.' (pp 173-4)

Discuss for instance, the following quote:

'Marry, the girl was the hinge on which the whole play turned. "Then have my lips the sin that they have took.'" (p 3)

Discussion Point:

'Girls are little use, except to marry and breed sons.' (p 7)

Discuss this quote in relation to Elizabethan society and to the machinations within the royal family from the time of Henry VIII.

Discussion Point:

'Once we were married, and all that was mine became his, Tybalt would probably no longer give me gifts. A husband may treat his wife how he likes. But as long as Tybalt got what he wanted, he would stay sunny. And I would do my duty, to my husband and our house.' (p 12)

This is a fairly gloomy summary of marriage. Discuss.

Activity: On p 41, the maids dress Juliet in fine clothes to impress the Earl of Paris. She is literally sewn into them. Discuss the role that fashion played in suppressing women and holding them captive to men's expectations. Research the types of garments and undergarments they wore and the hairstyles, jewellery and makeup they were allowed.

Discussion Point: What does the Earl's song (p 51) say about his intentions towards Juliet?



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Discussion Point:

'I liked it not. Womanhood seemed like the dance, with steps that no dancer was allowed to change. I would be my father's daughter and my husband's wife. But Juliet, who was she? A person as insubstantial as our shadows on the wall.' (p 54)

How difficult would it have been to forge an identity as a woman in these times, when independent thought was viewed as unseemly and disobedient to the patriarchal hierarchy?

Discussion Point: Juliet's description of her attraction to Romeo is vivid and heartfelt.

'Now I felt every part of my skin. My body was a star. No, half a star. The other half was him.' (p 55)

She goes on to describe meeting him:

'He did not walk towards me. He let me come to him. No one had given me that gift of choice before.' (p 57)

These passages suggest that in choosing love she is defying her role as a woman in her society; that she is taking control of her own destiny. Discuss the novel and the play on which it is based in these terms.

Discussion Point: Compare these two quotes from the play

'If I profane with my unworsted hand this holy shrine, the gentle fine is this: my lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand to smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.' (p 57)

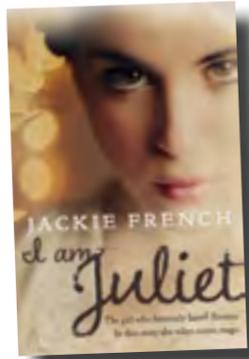
and:

'It was a question. To kiss, or not to kiss? Once more, he left me to decide. I felt my smile grow. The poetry I had not been able to find for Paris came easily now. I glanced at our hands, already kissing. 'Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much. For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch, and palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.' (p 58)

Discussion Point:

'My parents had created their daughter as my father would have shipwrights build a ship: for its use and the wealth it would bring him. But I was not a ship. I was Juliet. And I owed my parents nothing now.' (p 117)

Is Juliet right about this? Does she owe her parents nothing?



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Shakespearean Drama and Theatre

Discussion Point:

'Words! Page after page, scribbled so fast Master Shakespeare hadn't bothered to blot the ink. Southwark crowds didn't want speeches. They wanted dancing bears. Sword fights! They'd throw rotten apples if the company tried to serve them a play like this. Or oyster shells, which were worse.' (p 1)

Jackie French writes in her notes that Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed for audiences. This is true, but discuss the beauty of the language as you read it as well.

Activity: The history of the play is described by Jackie French (pp 181-3); she also discusses the role and life of actors (pp 183-5). Research Shakespearean drama and theatre further.

Activity: Many contemporary texts reference Shakespeare and often update the stories and plots. Baz Luhrmann's film (1996), for example, was set in a 'hip' contemporary setting. Discuss the references you have perceived in contemporary art, literature or film to Shakespeare and to *Romeo and Juliet* in particular. [See Bibliography for texts related to this activity.]

Activity: Read other versions of *Romeo and Juliet* in novels, eg Rachel Caine's *Prince of Shadows* (2014) or Jacqueline Ritten's *Juliet's Story* (2009) and then compare to this one. Read and discuss other retellings of other Shakespearean plays. (For references see Jo Goodman's 'Happy 450th Birthday Mr William Shakespeare' *Magpies* Vol 29 Issue 1 March 2014 pp 10-13.)

Elizabethan England

Activity: Jackie French describes the way of life in Elizabethan Times (pp 178-81). Research work, leisure and lifestyle in these times.

Activity: The lavish and intricately crafted food at the banquet to welcome the Earl of Paris is described (pp 47-9). Research this further too.

Activity: The plague was a huge problem in this era, and in the novel nurse describes her husband's death and her being quarantined with him leading to the death of her baby. Research the history of the plague and how it was eradicated.

Activity: How did the poor and infirm survive in this era, with the lack of social services? Read the brief description of the scene outside the church (p 84) as an example of some of the people's problems.

Activity: 'Most of the rooms had been empty



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since long before I was born, when the King had ordered the monasteries disbanded, but a few of the friars had stayed, bound to the new church now, giving lessons and guidance to the young.' (p 84) Research the role which religion played in the battle between various members of the royal family to assume power.

Activity: The use of poisons in this era was alarming, and often led to death or permanent damage. For example, women commonly used lead on their skin to whiten it as Juliet's mother does. She also used hemlock in her eyes to make them sparkle (p 123). Jackie French writes about this in her notes (p 197).

Discussion Point: Jackie French makes an interesting observation: 'talking about sex is far more taboo today than it was back then.' (p 195) She refers to the fact that sex is used to sell everything today, but that we don't tend to mention sex in 'polite' conversation.

Family Feuds

Discussion Point:

'For some reason, our two families played the game of hatred. But hatred killed. Suddenly, all the years of hatred slid away and I could think again. I would play my parents' game no longer.' (p 66)

Discuss the issue of family feuds and how they can

destroy a family. Contemporary examples include the mafia stories told in Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* and the film franchise it spawned. Find examples of such feuds in classical and contemporary literature.

Traditional Stories and Fairytales

Activity: The story of Romeo and Juliet itself has been told many times in many ways. Jackie French traces some of that history of the play in the notes at the end of the book (pp 181-3). Students might like to read the simpler rendition of the tale in Charles and Mary Lamb's famous *Tales of Shakespeare*. Or to watch some of the films based on the story [See Bibliography].

Discussion Point: Juliet tells her servants and nurse a story by Marie de France, entitled *The Lady of Guigemar* (p 17+), which offers a romantic comparison to her own dreams of finding love. Shakespeare often drew on traditional stories in his plays. Research this and discuss some of the origins of his dramas and comedies.

See also **Author Notes** (pp 172-205).

Key Quotes

<p>'I lay in my soft bed. Sometimes, despite the silk curtains, it seemed a prison. If only I could go to battle like a knight, or even like Tybalt. I had never seen the streets in the dark; had never walked in the street at all. I was carried in a chair to church and back, to keep my silk slippers from the mud.' (p 26)</p>	<p>'I shook my head. What was love, except the duty one owed one's parents and one's husband? Dreams were just that: shadows of the night.' (p 42)</p>
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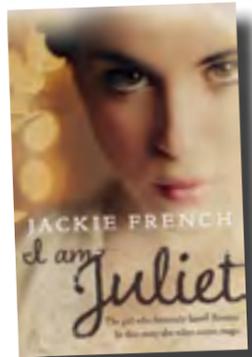
<p>'I knew him. I had known him all my life. He was my dream shadow, come to life.' (p 54)</p>	<p>'What is a girl? Born of her family, fed by her nurse, dressed by her maids, kept from the world by her garden walls. But I had seen another life: the world where a woman crossed the sea to find her love; where a woman's tales were read hundreds of years after her name and home were lost.' (p 77)</p>
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<p>'This was the door. This was what I had to do, had always had to do.' (p 84)</p>	<p>'He was right. Of course he was right. He was a man, and I a girl. When I rode it was balanced side saddle, not as a man rides. I had never galloped, never even ridden for long. When we travelled to our estates I was carried in my chair.' (p 105)</p>
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<p>'I kneeled in my shift on the floor. It was as though I pleaded for a million daughters. Pleaded to be myself, not just a daughter, a possession like his ships.' (p 115)</p>	<p>'He stared down at me, as if I were a beggar in the street. 'Thursday is near, and you are mine,' he added coldly. 'I'll give you to my friend. If you refuse, you can beg in the streets, hang, starve, die, for all I care. I won't acknowledge you. For what is mine shall never do you good. Trust to that, my girl. You have my word.' (p 116)</p>
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<p>'Nurse cared for me. But she cared more for herself, her comfortable life. I had been alone for all my life and never known it. My mother, my father, had not known me. Even Nurse had abandoned me.' (p 118)</p>	<p>'They would not mourn the inside me; only the loss of the daughter who would have joined their house with the nobility.' (p 136)</p>
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<p>'It was I who had challenged Romeo to marry me. Now I must have the courage to join him here forever.' (p 165)</p>	<p>'Every day till you are dust, you will remember how you watched a young girl die in front of you, for love. There will be no actor in your memory, no theatre and no stage. Just the girl, the aching of her tears, the tears you shed for her, and for me.' (p 170)</p>
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Curriculum Topics

Language and Literacy

Colloquialisms

Activity: Elizabethan language uses words which are not common or not used today. Research this further and write a passage using such colloquialisms and then ask another student to attempt to translate it.

Historical Fiction

This novel is a work of **Historical Fiction** — it tells a story set in the past. It is also a re-telling of a classical work of literature.

Activity: Have you ever tried to re-tell a story in a new or contemporary way? Watch films which do this eg *Great Expectations* (1998) directed by Alfonso Cuarón was set in the US and starred Ethan Hawke, Gwyneth Paltrow, Anne Bancroft and Robert de Niro. Then write your own version of a traditional tale.

Suspense

Suspense in a story hinges on the intended ending and also on what the reader or audience expects to happen.

Discussion Point:

'A girl would bring two broken families together. A girl hand in hand with her true love, just like in the stories.' (p 74)

Imagine if, as Juliet hoped, their marriage had healed the rift between their families? Jackie French imagines a possible scenario in her notes at the end of the book (pp 190-2). Write a different ending to the novel.

Narrative Structure

The novel follows a **chronological structure** during just a few days in the 1300s in Verona, but uses a framing narrative set in Elizabethan England in the late sixteenth century as well.

Activity: What effect does the framing narrative have on your reading of the main story?

Narrative Perspective

This novel is told from the **personal point of view** of Juliet in **first person** and the **third person** subjective point of view of Rob Goughe, the apprentice actor who plays her.

Discussion Point: This is, unusually, told in first person from Juliet's perspective. How does this colour the story?



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Use of Ornate and Poetic Language

Jackie French writes that

'well-educated people in Shakespeare's time were expected to speak wittily and poetically.' (p 175)

Activity:

'I'll look to like, if looking liking move. But no more deep will I endart mine eye than your consent gives strength to make it fly.'(p 37)

Discuss the construction of this sentence and what Juliet's mother meant by it.

Activity:

'He smelled of a garden in summer, the moment the earth gives its blessing for the plants to grow.' (p 58)

Discuss this romantic description of Romeo in Juliet's eyes.

Activity:

'My only love sprung from my only hate!' I whispered. 'Too early seen unknown, and known too late! Prodigious birth of love it is to me, that I must love a loathed enemy.' (p 62)

This is another example of the language used in the play. Decipher its meaning.

Discussion Point: One of the most well-known quotes from *Romeo and Juliet* is:

'What's in a name? That which we call a rose would smell as sweet with any other name. Throw away your name, and for that name, take all myself.' (p 67)

Discuss its meaning and construction.

Activity: Locate other examples of the use of literary devices and discuss their meaning and effect, eg:

'Time dragged like a crust through a bowl of honey.' (p 79)

Literary References

Jackie French extrapolates on the original playscript in this version, and explains her reasons (p 176).

Discussion Point: What function do the literary quotations play?

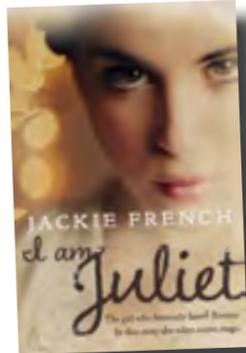
The Literary Trope of Doomed Love and Star-Crossed Lovers

This is used in this novel symbolically to explore wider issues.

Discussion Point: Jackie French writes:

'The story of a girl and boy in love despite their families' enmity is a story as old as humankind. It will happen time and time again as long as we humans feel love and hatred.' (p 172)

Research this theme in classical literature.



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The Cover

The Cover of a book is an ideogram for the contents and a marketing tool as well.

Activity: Create a new cover for the work drawing on either theme or incident to create the image. Use techniques such as collage. Write a blurb for the back cover of the book as well.

SOSE

History

Although this is a fictional story, it does give you insights into the historical background as well.

Activity: What aspects of European history were revealed to you in this text? Have each student write at least one aspect down and then discuss their findings.

Social Class

Juliet and Romeo are members of the upper class which has protected them from some of the privations of the poor, but also restricted their freedom in several respects.

Discussion Point: Discuss the differences in lifestyle between Juliet's family and her servants; between them and the people in the streets.

Discussion Point:

'The footmen trudged on either side as we bobbed down the street. I kept the curtains shut. I smelled the sawdust and vomit stink of the tavern, the stench of chamber-pots, the blood smell of the butchers' row.' (p 83)

This description gives a very visceral feeling to the streets of Verona. Discuss.

Values

The values expressed in this play differ from contemporary values but also have some similarities.

Activity: What values are particularly evident in this text?

Discussion Point: Juliet has grown up aware that her parents see her as a chattel to be sold to a potential suitor. What sort of values has this equipped her with?

Discussion Point: Loyalty is expected of both Juliet and Romeo. Do they owe loyalty to their parents, or have their parents lost their rights to such loyalty?

Further Points for Discussion

1. 'A breeze blew up from the river, through the rotting shutters of his window. It was almost as if he smelled roses and the taste of love amid the stench of chamber-pots, the river mud and mouldy cabbage stalks. Suddenly, he could see her. Short, like him; quiet, with eyes downcast. But inside she was a girl of fire and steel.' (p 4)

Discussion Point: This is the moment of magic when an actor 'feels' his character for the first time, and forgets the world around him. What is Rob Goughe feeling as he reads Juliet's lines?

2. 'I heard the bustle of the maids, my Joans. Joan herself was as fat as Nurse but ten years younger. Janette was a cousin of our steward, and Joanette, the youngest, was only ten years old, her face dusted with scars from the smallpox, but not too deep. My mother would only have fair maids serving in our house; no hunchbacks or birthmarks.' (p 9)

Discussion Point: This simple description of Juliet's servants tells us a lot about the attitudes and conditions of the times.

3. 'I stood there as I had stood for thirteen years and let them tend me, as a nice girl should. Sometimes I thought I existed only from what they made.' (p 11)

Discussion Point: How easy would it have been to present any sort of individual face to the world or to rebel against society's demands when surrounded by such constant attention?

4. 'It was a lesson only a mother could give her daughter, for sugar is too expensive to trust to servants, even in a house as rich as ours. Perhaps today we'd preserve cherries.' (p 33)

Discussion Point: The novel is full of insights like this one, which give an inkling into the disparity between rich and poor lives and the strict rituals observed in a wealthy household. Find other quotes which offer insights about society and discuss them further.

5. 'I cried for him and for my Susan. But then I had you, my poppet.' Nurse suddenly looked fierce. 'And I would give my life and heart for you.' (p 73)

Discussion Point: Juliet is assisted in her secret marriage by the Nurse who later has a change of heart regarding Juliet's disobedience (p 118). So Juliet rejects her for it, despite her previous devotion to her. Was Juliet too hard on her nurse? Did she have any other course of action given that she was a servant in this household with no husband or child to turn to for protection or comfort?

6. 'I wished I could be stone, like the statues in the hall. A statue had no father or mother, that her heart should freeze like this. What was a daughter? Nothing, when she refused to be what her parents wanted her to be.' (p 114)

Discussion Point: Discuss the role that parental expectations have in a teenager's life and how Juliet's situation relates to any teenage girl's feelings.

7. 'He grasped me by the hair. I screamed. His hand slapped my face, once and then again.' (p 115)

Discussion Point: Until this point the suppression of Juliet seemed only emotional. But here she is physically abused. Clearly her father feels he has the right to treat her so. Did this shock you?

8. 'Poor Tybalt. Poor angry boy. I had not liked him, but I had loved him, just a little.' (p 133)

Discussion Point: Juliet is never very warm towards her cousin and is not immediately sorry he has died. Has her fearful upbringing made her a little lacking in feeling too?

9. 'Escape was not easy.' (p 148)

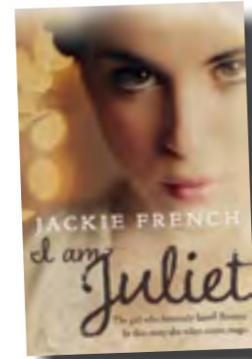
Discussion Point: This could almost be the theme of this novel.

10. 'Every day till you are dust, you will remember how you watched a young girl die in front of you, for love.' (p 170)

Discussion Point: Invite students to discuss how the tragic ending of this novel affected them. Then arrange an excursion to see a play or film version and discuss the similarities/ differences.

11. Juliet uses Marie de France's stories to see beyond the walls of her life. Perhaps Shakespeare hoped that his play might, somewhere, sometime, make young people look at the feuds, hatred and prejudices they have inherited, and reject them.

Discussion Point: Can a story change your life?



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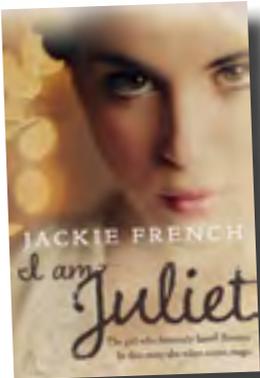
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Websites

Shakespearean Language

http://www.skwirk.com/p-c_s-54_u-253_t-649_c-2526/shakespearean-language/nsw/shakespearean-language/skills-by-text-type-shakespearean-drama/shakespeare-overview
William Shakespeare Plays <http://www.william-shakespeare.info/william-shakespeare-plays.htm>

Films

Romeo and Juliet (1968) Directed by Franco Zeffirelli Writers: Shakespeare and Franco Brusati, Masolino D'Amico and Franco Zeffirelli

Romeo and Juliet (1996) Film Directed by Baz Luhrmann. Writers: Shakespeare and Screenplay Craig Pearce

Romeo and Juliet (2013) Film Directed by Carlo Calei .Writers: Shakespeare and Screenplay Julian Fellowes

West Side Story (1961) Directed by Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins Writers: Shakespeare and Screenplay Ernest Lehman