

Lois Kerschen

Kerschen is a freelance writer and adjunct college English instructor. In this essay, Kerschen considers whether fate, the personal characteristics of Romeo and Juliet, or the demands of justice determine the outcome of the story.

Whenever a tragedy occurs, people want to know what went wrong. They look for the causes, the reasons for the end result. With *Romeo and Juliet*, the opinions have varied as literary criticism has taken different viewpoints through the years. Since William Shakespeare named the play for the two central characters, the immediate reaction is to look at them for fault. However, Shakespeare is never that simple, so a deeper analysis is warranted.

The great German Shakespearean critic, August von Schlegel, blamed fate for the tragedy, but in the sense that the cruel world is too terrible a place for a love as tender as that of Romeo and Juliet. Instruction books such as Kelley Griffith's *Writing Essays about Literature* very matter-of-factly blame fate as well by telling students that "if the plot is only part of a larger or ongoing story, then the characters are more likely to seem at the mercy of forces beyond their control." Therefore, since the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* is actually only one episode of a long feud, the young couple, according to Griffith, "cannot escape the undertow of their families' history." Even the powerful prince cannot prevent the tragedy, although he tries, because Romeo and Juliet are identified by fate as "star-crossed" and "death-marked."

It must be noted that the family feud is the reason that Romeo and Juliet's relationship is a "forbidden love." It should also be noted that the play begins with a fight scene between servants of the two families and ends with a peace agreement between Lords Montague and Capulet. The family feud could then be seen as a bookend structure around the lovers' story. Shakespeare did not create the story—he inherited it. The feud is part of the previous versions that he draws upon, in which the feud serves as a complicating device that keeps the lovers apart. However, placing the feud first and last in the play, that is, in the most attention-getting spots for the audience, indicates that the feud is the most important facet of the story. Although this play is considered one of the greatest love stories of all time, viewed from another angle, it may be that it is a story about hate; a story that is the final episode of a long-running saga. The love affair of Romeo and Juliet may be only a device to bring about an end to the feud and show how terrible the consequences can be of such violent and vindictive behavior. As a result, the blame according to this theory can be placed with the demands of justice.

Further support for this interpretation is the realization that violence runs throughout the story, linking each event. Romeo meets Juliet at the Capulet party but his presence there fuels Tybalt's challenge to him the next day. That challenge leads to the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt. That violence is the reason that Romeo is banished. His banishment leads to the risky ruse of Juliet's death, which leads to Romeo coming to Juliet's family tomb. There, the family feud causes Paris to assume that Romeo has evil intent and the resultant fight costs Paris his life. The entrapment and despair that the feud has precipitated next results in the death of both Romeo and Juliet. With these events in mind, it would be easy to see this play as being about the feud, not the lovers. After all, Juliet says, "My only love sprung from my only hate!"

Many studies of the play remark on the relationship of love and hate. Could Juliet's love spring from hate because they are both intense passions? A nineteenth-century German scholar, Hermann Ulrici, said that the love of Romeo and Juliet had an ideal beauty but was condemned from the beginning because of its "overpowering and reckless" passion that disturbs "the internal harmony of the moral powers." Ulrici concluded that Shakespeare brings balance back to the situation through the deaths of the couple and the end of the feud. Following this interpretation, Denton Snider, an American scholar, later agreed that Romeo and Juliet are destroyed by their own love. He said that, just as with the passion of hate, the intensity of love's passion blots out reason and self-control and leads to destructive behavior. Snider also thought that there was a moral justice involved in that the fire of love that consumes Romeo and Juliet is the fire of sacrifice that is rewarded with peace between their families. Snider writes, "The lovers, Romeo and Juliet, die, but their death has in it for the living a redemption."

So, the argument comes back to the idea of justice. In 1905, American scholar Stopford Brooke wrote that the feud is the central event and cause of the tragedy and that the accord reached at the end was the goal of justice. Brooke

counsels that discussions of fate as a determinant in the story would be more correct if the name "Justice" were given to fate.

While Brooke and others reject the mere happenstance of fate for the more intentioned aim of justice, the conclusion is still that outside forces bring Romeo and Juliet to their doom. Another slight turn of the viewpoint sees justice as a moral lesson. In this light, there is the unsympathetic view that Romeo and Juliet are foolish children who are inevitably headed toward ruin because they do not consult or gain the approval of their parents for their marriage. Once again, the sentiment is that passion leads to head-strong, reckless behavior such as a refusal to obey constituted authority (one's parents, one's ruler). This results in a disruption of hierarchical order, and the tragedy works to reestablish that order through loss and grief. One's attention is drawn to the two central figures, and a quite natural reaction is that Romeo and Juliet are impetuous kids. In that case, this story can be interpreted as having a more universal message about young love and not just about the two young lovers in the play. Undoubtedly, it is the universality of Shakespeare's dramas that has made them classics, so perhaps Shakespeare's intent was not just to tell a story, but to give an example. If the theme were not timeless, then Leonard Bernstein might not have taken the story and transformed it into *West Side Story*. There are foolish teenagers in every generation, and there is senseless feuding in every culture.

Although it has been suggested that the love of Romeo and Juliet was too ideal to survive in this imperfect world, it would seem a shame to think of true, passionate love inevitably leading to a bad result. Perhaps the problem is not with the intensity of the emotion, but the inability to control and direct that emotion in a positive way. If that is the case, then Romeo and Juliet are doomed, not by the fates, not by the judgment of justice, but by their own character flaws. Shakespeare may have altered the classic form of the Greek tragedy, but that does not mean that he totally ignored the Greek formula for the tragically flawed hero.

It can be said that part of Romeo's character flaw is that he believes in the fates and therefore feels powerless to help himself. He has a bad feeling that going to the party may lead to eventual doom, but he goes anyway. He surrenders himself to the guidance of the gods not just out of piety but perhaps because he shirks responsibility. Killing Tybalt is a rash act that needed not have happened if Romeo had been better able to control himself. Instead, Romeo succumbs to an irrational and violent reaction and then feels sorry for himself as "fortune's fool" who has been pushed by fate into committing the terrible deed.

Juliet's nature is more practical and cautious, but her innocence and the intensity of her love are her downfall. Moreover, she lives in a family where her father does not know how to express his love except to make decisions for Juliet that he thinks are in her best interest. Her mother is too cold and distant to give her good advice, and her nurse, though she loves Juliet, is too crude to understand the delicacies and dangers of first love. Consequently, Juliet is not chastised by the critics as much as Romeo for being rash. As a young girl practically restricted to her house by the social customs of her time, she has very little control over anything anyway. Romeo, however, is older and has slightly more autonomy.

Is it fate, a need for justice, or the characters themselves who bring a tragic end to *Romeo and Juliet*? Can it be a combination of all these factors? They seem to be inextricably mixed, despite the efforts of the critics to separate them. Ben Jonson and many others have admitted to Shakespeare's genius, even though they found other faults in his work. Scholars have commented on the depth of Shakespeare's understanding of human nature and the psychological aspects of his plays. Is it not possible, then, the Shakespeare was smart enough and sensitive enough to have picked up on all the nuances of a human situation and been able to incorporate highly complex emotions and interactions in *Romeo and Juliet*? Shakespeare was aware of the conventions of his time and the expectations of his audience for certain elements of tragedy. But he was also innovative enough to blend some of the traditional aspects of tragedy with a much more intricate and multi-faceted dramatic structure that included an amazing depth of characterization. There is a reason that Shakespeare is considered the greatest dramatist of all time, and that reason may be that he was able, better than anyone else, to fill his plays with a richness that, four hundred years later, had scholars still mining its depths.

Source:

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