

IGCSE Edexcel (9-1) English Literature

Romeo and Juliet: Themes

Fate and Freewill

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Fate is the concept that there are forces outside of human control which **predetermine** what happens in our lives, there's nothing we can do to change what is happening to us now or what will happen to us in the future.

Freewill is the exact **antithesis (opposite)** of this as it claims that there are no outside forces and all the actions we take are just a result of us exercising our own **choices**. We therefore have the ability to change what happens to us in the future based on the choices we decide to make in the present.



Prologue

The **prologue** identifies a theme of fate as it tells the audience what is going to happen before it happens, this is a **dramatic tool** used to **create tension**. Through telling the audience exactly what is going to happen at the beginning of the play, it is evident that the characters are unable to escape their **impending doom**. Thus, it is evident that **fate is in control**.

It is important to remember that the prologue would have been performed by a chorus (a group of people). This would have added to the gravitas of the message and contributed to the overwhelming idea that the protagonists' lives are not in their own hands.

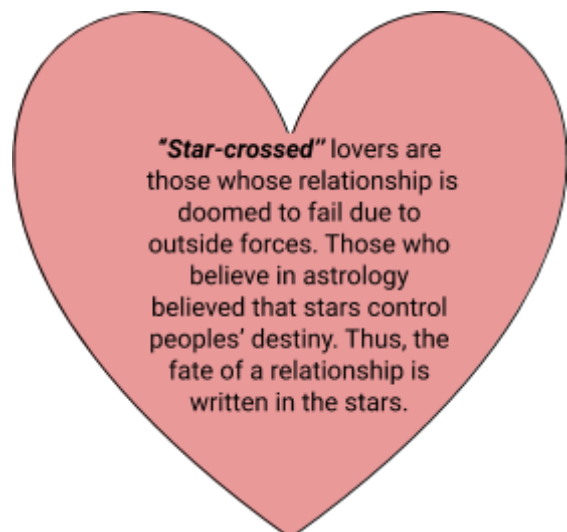
Shakespeare even tells the audience how long the story will be, referencing the **"two hours' traffic of our stage"**. This reference to the length of the play further increases the tension as the audience are in constant anticipation of the two protagonists.

The tension and anticipation is resolved when the prophecy is finally fulfilled. Here the emotions of the audience climax which result in **catharsis** (relieving of emotion).

Superstition

The **Elizabethan era** was a very **superstitious** time, many believed in concepts such as destiny and many believed that their lives were written in the stars.

Through referring to the lovers as **"star-crossed"** Shakespeare shows how even the planets have an opposition to this relationship. It could also show the audience that their love is different from others and how it has a spiritual connection.



Act 1 Scene 4

Shakespeare uses **Act 1 Scene 4** to expand on the idea of **fate** being a large factor in the events that take place within the play.

Between lines 106 and 113, Romeo uses a multitude of **worrying abstract noun phrases** such as **“mind misgives”** to build up anticipation to the dreadful events that take place later in the play. His talk of a consequence **“hanging in the stars”** echoes the ideas of two **‘star-crossed’ lovers** and reminds the audience of how the loves are in a way, doomed.

In this scene the Friar discusses the **duality** within flowers and other elements of nature, perhaps suggesting a coexistence between good and evil. By bringing in the **natural imagery** of the **“baleful weeds”** and the **“precious-juiced flowers”**, Shakespeare creates almost a sense of certainty in this coexistence.

This **natural imagery** further ties in with the themes of fate as the Friar discusses the **natural and definite cycle of birth and death**. He describes the **“burying grave that is [a mother’s] womb”**, which **foreshadows** the death that comes up later in the play.

When Juliet thinks that Romeo is dead, instead of regarding the possible things on Earth that could have killed him she asks if **“heaven [could] be so envious”**. This shows that she could only think of the spiritual world as having the ability to intervene in their relationship. Once more Shakespeare is reminding the audience of fate, and how much of a role the spiritual world plays in this play.

Romeo’s belief that he can **“defy the stars”** shows his self-assured **hubris** (excessive pride) and belief that he is **bigger than fate, destiny and the stars**. This allows his character to be defiant and arrogant.

In Greek Mythology **hubris** is followed by **nemesis, fate and destruction**. This echoes what we see in this play as Romeo’s belief that he can change his fate causes the ultimate destruction; his death.

Romeo’s death is further foreshadowed when Juliet compares Romeo’s love to **“lightning”**. Lightning has connotations of destruction and intensity which almost foreshadows the **destruction** that the love between Romeo and Juliet creates. Alternatively, it suggests the power and overwhelming and quick nature of their love.

There is also allusion to the Hebrew idea in the Bible that **‘pride goes before destruction’**.

Shakespeare then says that love **“doth cease to be”**, indicating that love has to have an end. Here, Shakespeare fills this scene with the foreshadowing that the love between Romeo and Juliet will **“cease to be”**.

Freewill

Ideas of fate and destiny can be perceived as contradictory to the **religious beliefs** of the time. While many people were superstitious and believed in fate, many people were religious and believed that God gave humans free will to do as they please.

- Shakespeare uses this tension between the two beliefs to introduce a **philosophical** argument on **freewill vs. predestination**: does anyone really have a choice in their

life or is everything predetermined? Arguments for each side are explored through the play.

Although there is a great level of destiny involved in Romeo and Juliet love story, the two lovers also make conscious decisions which contribute to their tragic ending.

- In **Act 2 scene 6** the Friar says **“these violent delights have violent ends”** which foreshadows the tragic ending of the lovers' story.

It could be argued that this warning by the Friar **foreshadows** the end of the play and proves that fate is very much at work. However, Romeo and Juliet were giving multiple warnings like this one but still decided to follow their desires. It could therefore be argued as not being fate but as a result of teenagers following their own **desires**.



Perhaps the power of Romeo and Juliet's love is so powerful that forces like free will cannot even affect it.

The Elizabethan audience was incredibly superstitious and would have been receptive to this belief, the concept of fate would have increased the **tension** and intrigue of the tragedy.

Shakespeare's use of the sonnet form

The **sonnet form** is used throughout the play. Sonnets are poetry of love and Shakespeare's use of the form adds to the romance of the two lovers' growing romance. The form could also be used by Shakespeare because it has a very **regular rhyme scheme and rhythm**. The regularity of the form adds to the theme of fate as through it the audience is able to anticipate the inevitable rhythmic timing.

By using this sonnet form in the prologue, which already introduces the element of **foreshadowing**, Shakespeare could be reinforcing the idea that everything in the world is **planned and predestined** and that nothing we do is ever spontaneous because it is already written in the stars somewhere. This revelation can have one of two effects on the audience:

- The revelation could be **comforting** to the reader, filling them with a sense of hope that if things are meant to happen they will.
 - For example, in the love story of Romeo and Juliet despite so many things being in the way of their love (Romeo was **infatuated** with Rosaline, they come from feuding families, Juliet was about to be betrothed to Paris etc), they still wanted to be together. Here, love conquers all.

- The revelation could be unsettling to the audience as **predestination** would also mean that no one really has control of what they do and so free will as a concept doesn't really exist. The very concept of fate and destiny means that you could not change the course you are already on.
 - Romeo exclaims "***I defy you stars***", this phrase in itself is **paradoxical** as the stars by definition are **inevitable**. However, it reveals a lot about Romeo's character, as even though it is impossible to defy the stars Romeo is persistent.