

## Romeo and Juliet

**'Fate is the main reason for the tragic outcome of *Romeo and Juliet*'.**

**To what extent do you agree with this statement?**

*Romeo and Juliet* is a play that frequently uses fate as a technique to drive the plot and the action. From the start of the prologue to the end of the play, fate is wondered at and cursed by many characters.

The Prologue at the opening of the play sets the scene and the plot for the play by referring to Romeo and Juliet as 'a pair of star-cross'd lovers'. This gives a clear indication that their love was formed and created by fate as the stars crossed at a certain time to create it and ensure that they met. As this reference comes at the very start of the play and is one of the first few lines that the audience hears, Shakespeare could be said to be explaining the role fate will play in the plots. Equally, there is a similar reference to 'death mark'd love' in the Prologue which is further evidence to the idea that their love (and their deaths) are already planned out. As we are told that both Romeo and Juliet will 'take their life' at the very start of the play, it can easily be construed that Shakespeare wants us to agree that their 'fate' or end is completely out of their control.

As well as the audience being made aware of the importance of fate, Shakespeare ensures that his main characters also value its importance. Romeo himself often makes reference to the Fates just before an important event in the plot occurs. In Act 1, scene 4, just before he meets Juliet for the first time at the ball, he states that he 'misgives some consequence yet hanging in the stars', showing Romeo's strong belief in the Fates and how they control his life, rather than him. This is not the only time that Romeo implies that he has no control or responsibility for his actions. At a similar point in the play, he also announces that 'he who hath the steerage of my course directs my sail'. By comparing himself to a ship on the ocean which is governed by someone who can move the sail to set his fate, he is referring to the fate that God and fate are interlinked and that man has no control over his own destiny. This view would also have been held by the Elizabethan audiences who believed very strongly that there was an all powerful God who determined your fate in this world.

Like Romeo, Juliet is also believes in the power of fate as we see when she calls out to fate when Romeo is banished. Pleading to fortune (another name for fate), she acknowledges the unpredictability of life for mortals saying 'Fortune, fortune, all men call thee fickle'. As well as pleading in a sort of prayer to Fortune, the deliberate personification through the capitalisation of Fortune shows that it is something very important to Juliet. It also shows that, like Romeo, she is aware of its power and treats it as though it is mighty, like a God. In another, similar, reference to fate, Juliet asks the rhetorical question 'is Heaven so envious?' when Romeo is placed into exile and their love for one another is tested over such a long distance. This quotation clearly shows Juliet's belief that it is fate, rather than Romeo's actions, that have caused him to be taken away from her.

Another aspect of fate that must be considered is Mercutio's curse as he lies dying after the fight with Tybalt. Calling out repeatedly, 'a plague a'both your houses', Mercutio's curse could be seen to be calling on the Fates to avenge his death. If the curse which he utters is considered to be the cause of the deaths of Romeo and Juliet, then predestination and fate must play a large role in ensuring that the result comes about. Again, Mercutio believes that his curse will seek the vengeance for his death which shows the widespread beliefs held by people during the 16<sup>th</sup> century about the presence and purpose of fate.

While their strong belief in fate overshadows the play, there are more subtle instances of foreshadowing which could indicate the ever-present nature of fate throughout the play. For example, on first catching sight of Romeo, Juliet asks the Nurse to find out his eligibility, as 'if he be married, my grave is like to be my wedding bed'. Juliet thus tells the audience the nature of her death, albeit unknowingly, as her marriage is the eventual cause of her death. The more subtle foreshadowing such as this give more credibility to the idea that fate must be a crucial factor in the way people live their lives.

However, there are other arguments for what the main cause of Romeo and Juliet's death was. One of the main arguments is the rashness of all of the characters involved, which Juliet acknowledges when she says 'I have no joy of this contract tonight – it is too rash, too sudden, too unadvised'. The repetition of 'too' show how this is something she is worried about and how it is all too much for her to cope with. Had the lovers taken more time to think, much of the tragedy could have been avoided, and their love could potentially have lasted. Equally, it could be argued that fate was controlling all their actions, thus preventing them from acting any slower, as it is impossible to escape or run from fate.

Ultimately, whilst there are many indications that fate plays an important role in *Romeo and Juliet*, its power mostly comes from the characters' beliefs that they cannot escape from it and therefore don't need to take responsibility for their actions. This is exemplified by Romeo declaring 'I am Fortune's fool' after killing Tybalt, thus devolving responsibility for his actions to a higher power rather than accepting that he was in control of his own decisions. The actions of many characters imply that they are controlled by fate, but most compelling is Juliet's foreshadowing of her own death. Regardless of personal belief, Shakespeare clearly wants his audiences to believe that fate is the deciding factor in Romeo and Juliet's deaths perhaps due to his own beliefs about Fate which were common at the time that the play was written. Fate is therefore the main reason for the tragic deaths of the two main characters in the play as all their actions, and the actions of others, are caused by fate to engineer the final, tragic, outcome. **[1119 words]**