

The power of circumstance in the tragedy of romeo and juliet



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Throughout the world, “[t]here are... great challenges that ordinary [people] are forced by circumstance to meet” (Halsey). William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, effectively conveys how Romeo and Juliet meet their tragic fates. The actions of Friar Lawrence, members of the Capulet and Montague households, society’s demands, and fate create circumstances which ensnare Romeo and Juliet, who encounter a lamentable end. Romeo and Juliet are not responsible for the tragedy that befalls them, but rather victims of circumstances that force them into situations they are least capable of handling.

Firstly, Romeo and Juliet are the victims of events that Friar Lawrence and members of the Capulet and Montague households create. Rosaline rejects Romeo which disheartens him because he is “out of her favour where I am in love” (1. 1. 162). Romeo’s dispiritedness causes Benvolio and Mercutio to escort Romeo to Capulet’s feast, where he can “[c]ompare her face with some that I [Benvolio] shall show/ And I [Benvolio] will make thee think thy swan a crow” (1. 2. 88-89). At the feast, Romeo and Juliet meet, fall in love, and vow to marry the following day.

Friar Lawrence is capable of refusing to marry Romeo and Juliet, but agrees because of his groundless optimism for peace between the quarrelling households. He reasons: “... this alliance may so happy prove/ To turn your households’ rancour to pure love” (2. 3. 91-92) as justification. However, Romeo and Juliet’s marriage must remain undisclosed because of the antagonism between their families. The actions of characters such as Friar Lawrence and members of the Capulet and Montague households generate

circumstances in which Romeo and Juliet are incapable of handling and have limited actions to choose from, resulting in their tragic end.

In addition, the law and society they inhabit create circumstances that victimize Romeo and Juliet. The generations old conflict between the Capulets and the Montagues creates a lasting enmity between the two families. Therefore, the love between Romeo and Juliet must remain hidden in fear of a violent rejection of their union. Following the initial conflict in the streets of Verona, the Prince expressly bans all fighting, declaring: “ If ever you disturb our streets again/ Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace” (1. 1. 90-91).

Romeo’s exile follows the deaths of both Mercutio and Tybalt, resulting in Romeo’s ignorance of the plan that Friar Lawrence and Juliet concoct, thus ending the lives of both Romeo and Juliet. The Prince’s word is the law in Verona and law is a fundamental part of society. In a society like Verona’s, the lord of the household gives orders that cannot be disputed. When Capulet declares, “ I tell thee what: get thee to church a’Thursday/ Or never after look me in the face/ Speak not, reply not, do not answer me! ” (3. 5. 161-163), he demonstrates that he expects Juliet to comply with his wish since he is the lord of the household.

Therefore, Capulet expects Juliet to wed Paris regardless of her desires. Consequently, Juliet’s desperate endeavour to escape her fate causes the deaths of Romeo, Count Paris, and herself. The expectations of society and its law create circumstances that worsen the situation for Romeo and Juliet by thrusting them into increasingly troublesome situations that they are

incapable of managing. Lastly, Romeo and Juliet are victims of fate itself. When seeking vengeance for his late friend Mercutio, Romeo accidentally slaughters Tybalt, resulting in Romeo`s imminent exile preceding the tragedy.

As Friar John travels to Mantua to deliver important letters regarding Juliet and Friar Lawrence`s plan to Romeo, he encounters a town where “ the infectious pestilence did reign” (5. 2. 10), and cannot deliver the letters to Romeo. Simultaneously, Balthasar, convinced that Juliet truly perishes, reports to Romeo, “ Her body sleeps in Capels` monument” (5. 1. 18). Subsequently, Romeo rushes to Verona where the tragedy ensues. These unpredictable events fabricate situations that neither Romeo nor Juliet are prepared for and correspondingly, they become the victims of a tragic end.

Being in situations they cannot manage, Romeo and Juliet are forced to choose ineffective decisions out of the limited options that are available to them in the occurrences they lie in, resulting in their demise. The actions of other characters and the expectations of society, as well as fate, create occurrences causing Romeo and Juliet to make rash, difficult choices.

Therefore, Romeo and Juliet are not responsible for the tragedy that befalls them, but are merely pawns of circumstance. Ergo, the tragedy of this famous love story is the result of circumstance interfering with the lives of two adolescents.