

BBC Bitesize Romeo and Juliet

Episode 5 – Fate

HOLLIE: Hello and welcome to our Bitesize English Literature podcast. I am Hollie McNish, I'm a writer, and across seven episodes we'll take you through the key themes of the text you're studying so you're as well prepared as possible to study GCSE English Literature. Right now we're looking at one of William Shakespeare's best known plays, Romeo and Juliet, a tragedy about what happens when two teenagers from families that hate each other meet and fall in love. Today we're gonna be focusing on one of the text's key themes: fate.

People who believe in fate believe that events in your life or the world are governed by some sort of supernatural power outside your control, predetermined. So in this play when we talk about fate we're asking whether what happens in the play - especially to young Romeo and Juliet - was already determined. Was Shakespeare's suggestion that they were in control of their lives, or that their lives and what happened to them was already decided by some greater power?

I'm so delighted to be joined again by the superb writer, rapper, and beatboxer, Testament.

TESTAMENT: It was fate!

HOLLIE: It was fate brought us together to talk about the theme of fate in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Here's a clip from the prologue.

TESTAMENT: What the prologue does, it is before the play, but it's actually it's almost like they stop the play and they just, the actors are talking to the audience going, we're going to tell you this story, it goes like this, now we're gonna fill in, you know, here are the big things that happen and now we're gonna actually tell it you properly.

NARRATOR: From forth the fatal loins of these two foes, a pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life, whose misadventured piteous overthrows do with their death bury their parents' strife.

HOLLIE: And what would they have believed about fate within the culture, the society?

TESTAMENT: Well it's a heavily religious society, and part of that is this idea - well, in their version of God, God has planned out what's gonna happen to us. In the prologue we talk about "star-cross'd lovers" [H: Yeah.] so that's almost like astrology, the idea that the - the universe, the stars, you know, we have it today people believing in horoscopes, astrology has destined these two children to meet, and they're gonna fall in love and it's gonna end in tragedy.

HOLLIE: And they're star-cross'd –

TESTAMENT: Star-cross'd right.

HOLLIE: - it's not, it's not them, it's the stars that destined them to be together so he does, he does imply with that line that this is a fated romance, and like you said star-cross'd lovers is in the prologue, the fact that the prologue it tells you what is gonna happen. So in the play itself there's this idea of fate because you already know the ending by the time you've started reading that and - [TESTAMENT: Yeah.] and the fated death I get, this - [TESTAMENT: That's right.]

This idea of the stars - let's just talk about the language, like the idea of the stars is so prevalent in this play, and if you're talking in your exam then I would use the word symbolism - there's constant symbolism of stars, there are so many examples. I think Romeo for me is the character that most believes in this idea of fate, the characters within the play are very conscious of the idea of fate, and Romeo says in Act 1, Scene 4, "Some consequence yet hanging in the stars shall bitterly begin", and he also says, "I defy you stars" -

TESTAMENT: That's foreshadowing there isn't it?

HOLLIE: - Yeah it's foreshadowing bad things are gonna come and he also says, "I defy you stars", and so he's like blaming the stars which I think makes it, for me it makes it more interesting because this character, I'm not sure if Romeo believes in fate, or if he blames fate.

TESTAMENT: I think he's in a tussle with fate, it's like I want to have my choice, I want to be able to do what I want to do, um, so when he says, "Is it even so? Then I defy you stars!" he's saying, well if this is what fate wants for me I'm going against that.

HOLLIE: But he's also saying that that's hard because there is this supernatural power –

TESTAMENT: Exactly.

HOLLIE: - so he does believe in it –

TESTAMENT: Yes.

HOLLIE: - he does believe in it or, I feel like in some way, he calls himself "fortune's fool".

TESTAMENT: Well yeah I mean that's after he kills his wife's cousin. [H: Yes.] Um, he kills Tybalt which is exactly who he doesn't want to kill, and rather than saying, I made a big mistake, at that point he goes, "I'm fortune's fool". [H: Yes.] so it's fortune's fault it's not his fault.

[music]

TESTAMENT: I think there's, there's that and I think there's a pleading with fate to try and fix things. Juliet, when she's feeling down, you know, she gives this calling out to, "O fortune, fortune", she – she sort of prays to fortune, you know, not to keep Romeo long, so she doesn't feel like, oh Romeo's gonna sort it out, she doesn't feel like the Friar's gonna sort it out, she has to appeal to some higher power, or to chance, or to fate to - to fix things.

HOLLIE: So there are so many moments in this play where Shakespeare intentionally gives us events where you have to ask, is this fate? Is this a coincidence? Is this just a mistake somebody's made? So, maybe let's have a look if you've got examples to give in an exam.

TESTAMENT: So the first one like, but it's a good one - well it ends badly but it starts well, Romeo goes to a party that he's not meant to go to.

HOLLIE: Yes.

TESTAMENT: He runs into the messenger who's got the, ah, the guest list who's got the invite list for the Capulet party, he's not meant to be going to the Capulet party but he manages to get his hand on the list of the people invited to attend - Rosaline's invited, he decides to go, and -

HOLLIE: Da da!

TESTAMENT: - as fate would have it -

HOLLIE: Ha! Or, as coincidence would have it [laughs].

TESTAMENT: Exactly, Juliet is there and they fall in love at first sight.

HOLLIE: That's a positive example isn't it? [TESTAMENT: Yeah.] in the play of like things being fated in a, in a positive way.

TESTAMENT: Another example of 'is this fate or is this not fate?' - 'is this just coincidence or just the mistakes of life?' so to speak, ah, the Friar had got a message for Romeo, [H: Yeah.] and Romeo's in Mantua and he needs to know, he needs the secret knowledge that Juliet hasn't died, it's just a sleeping potion and she's gonna wake up in a few days and it's gonna be alright. But unfortunately Friar John who's got the message has ended up quarantined, and, ah, it means that Friar John can't get to - get the message to Romeo in time, so Romeo is absolutely devastated and now wants to take his own life and visit the tomb of Juliet, so -

HOLLIE: And is it fate - is it fate [TESTAMENT: Yeah.] or is it just a coincidence or is it just a mess up? This is the whole point that Shakespeare is not giving us an answer I don't think he's just asking us to question it, as part of the drama.

TESTAMENT: I don't know like - the prologue is, like these are star-cross'd lovers - it's not, ARE these star-cross'd lovers question mark.

HOLLIE: Ah, true.

TESTAMENT: Discuss in 300 words, he doesn't say that, it's like, these are star-cross'd lovers.

[music]

HOLLIE: For each episode we've chosen what we think are great quotes for you to use to make your essays really stand out, examiners love quotes, any idea you put down you have to back up with quotes and examples from the text. So Testament, could you tell me what quote you've chosen for the theme of fate?

TESTAMENT: I'm gonna choose a quote from Romeo in Act 3, Scene 1, after he kills Tybalt, his wife's cousin, which is exactly who he doesn't want to kill. He says, "O, I am fortune's fool!" so you've got the alliteration in fortune's fool, and it's an apostrophe which is like a calling out, a statement that calls out to someone or to something, "O, I am fortune's fool!"

HOLLIE: So I - also had that quote, [laughs] that was MY quote, and I chose it as well because I find the language, it can say a few quick things about the language, the fact that it starts with the exclamation "O", is very - very dramatic it's like "O - I am fortune's fool!" and I think it's quite an easy one to remember cos it starts with the "O", so just remember "O", "O", "O", [TESTAMENT: Yeah.] and I can remember that.

It's got two exclamation marks, so the use of exclamation means that the actors, these are- he's exclaiming it, and I think the alliteration really - it combines the word "fortune" and "fool" as if they're really intertwined; there's also a possessive so he's fortune's fool, he belongs to fortune, he's

literally saying, [TESTAMENT: Wow.] which the alliteration really adds to, that it's possessive; he's possessed by fortune and the fool is owned by fortune. I think all of that adds to the drama.

TESTAMENT: And rather than saying, I made a big mistake, at that point he goes, I'm fortune's fool. [H: Yes.] So it's fortune's fault, it's not his fault.

HOLLIE: So this is why I think it's interesting, um, and the idea of what the - remember you've always got to talk about what the, what the authors say and what Shakespeare's saying about fate, and - I feel like there are two sides to this, I feel like this kind of supernatural, the universe, stars, this is like the but, I'm not sure if Shakespeare is saying that there is this, or that Romeo is using fate, this idea of oh it was the stars, and it was fortune, so I couldn't have done anything about this, as a kind of excuse. I don't think there's a definite message from Shakespeare in this play about things being fated or not. I think he's questioning, it's through the entire plot of this play, whether things really are fated and whether we really can blame fate for our own actions.

I'd chosen a similar quote, but I'm actually letting myself off a little bit learning a quote here, so I had, I had the previous one as well, "O, I am fortune's fool!" - but I also think sometimes, um, you have so many quotes to learn, and sometimes I just talk about words when I'm answering an exam question, so the symbolism that runs through, or the imagery that runs through a play.

So I would take the word star, or stars, which is repeated in many different exclamations, proclamations, to just repeat this idea –

TESTAMENT: Yes.

HOLLIE: - constantly throughout this play there's this idea of the star, star-cross'd, I defy you stars, mainly spoken by Romeo. Er, it's also really good to learn a few specific words to use in your exam, so for example if we're talking about fate you could try and learn the word predetermined, predestined, foreshadowed, just something to really make your essay stand out as you're explaining your thoughts - Shakespeare's intent, talking about the language - to just have those kind of up your sleeve so I would stop this, write down some of the quotes, write down some of the symbolism, and write down a few words that you might just get into that essay.

[music]

HOLLIE: I really hope you now see how fate works in Romeo and Juliet, what Shakespeare maybe intended to do, and how you could talk about language within this theme. I also hope that you're now inevitably going to do better in your GCSE because of it. Check out the other Bitesize English Literature episodes about Romeo and Juliet on BBC Sounds, where me and Testament will be looking at five more key themes, Conflict, Family, Individual versus Society, Youth, and Love. Thanks for now, and really, really good luck in your exams.

TESTAMENT: You can do it, [with reverb effect] it is your destiny...