



SHAKESPEARE'S PURPOSE in ROMEO AND JULIET
2017

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WHY YOU SHOULD ALWAYS PREPARE TO WRITE ABOUT AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Preparing to write about the author's purpose helps you to cover any type of question on theme, character and settings.

NOBODY KNOWS FOR SURE, AND THAT'S OK

Nobody knows exactly why Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet. Paradoxically, while we have a long train of legal documents, such as deeds, bills of sale, and a will, all belonging to or associated with Shakespeare, we have not one scrap of personal writing by him. Therefore, we have to rely on commonsense and probability to understand his thinking.

We know that Shakespeare and his partners were seeking profitable material for their theater company. Like such modern, if larger, counterparts as Netflix or HBO, Shakespeare and his friends were ever on the lookout for creative material that had already proven popular.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Shakespeare's thoughts would roam to Arthur Brooke's popular poem The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet, written in 1562. It seems, too, that Shakespeare must have been familiar with Luigi da Porto's 1531 version of the story called Giulietta e Romeo, with which Shakespeare's play shares elements of setting, character, and plot points, such as the Verona location, the friar, the nurse, and Mercutio, and the feud between two families with names close to Montague and Capulet.

Shakespeare almost certainly saw the dramatic potential in this story, realized it could hold the interest of audiences, and adapted it to fit the needs of the 1590s.

LINKING AUTHOR'S PURPOSE TO SETTING - VERONA

For example, if a purpose of Romeo and Juliet is to warn parents and teenagers of upper class families of the danger of marrying for love, rather than proper arrangement:

- If Shakespeare is trying to say that arranged marriages are best and that parents know best, then **setting it in Verona helps to emphasise that marrying for love is a dangerous foreign concept**, tinged with associations to the Catholic setting, in contrast to Protestant England
- Remember that England had been Catholic until the time of King Henry VIII, who was Elizabeth I's father, just a generation before Shakespeare's audience
- **There was great suspicion of Catholics in England**; they were really despised figures and therefore there is a merit in setting it in Verona because this dangerous idea of these 2 lovers deciding to marry for love, in





stead of arrangement by their parents, is therefore a foreign and dangerous idea and that is in contrast to Protestant England

LINKING AUTHOR'S PURPOSE TO THEME - LOVE

The ideas above can also easily be linked to the theme of tragedy

- Love, here can be seen as being linked to impulse because we can say that Romeo and Juliet don't act with thought, planning and awareness of consequence
- So the lovers take no time and rush headlong into their tragedy
- The Friar preaches caution – “they stumble that run too fast” – but then marries them immediately anyway so we can see that this is his impulse
- Shakespeare is warning against love which he is saying is just like an impulse, which you may not give into if you step back and think about it sensibly
- Shakespeare is arguing that you would be much better of listening to your parents who know exactly what is best for you and society will run better that way
- This is how the rich hold onto their power and indeed increase it because they create alliances with other rich families and so this can also be Shakespeare's purpose

LINKING AUTHOR'S PURPOSE TO CHARACTER - ROMEO


Looking into Shakespeare's purpose will immediately give you an insight into character

- Romeo's character is ridiculed through his original love for Rosaline, who sees through his immaturity, and won't be his partner.
- In terms of the structure of the play this is why Shakespeare introduces this love story with Rosaline, only to show how ridiculous it is that Romeo falls in love with Juliet
- It also shows his immaturity because he is trying to pay Rosaline with gifts in order to get her to like him
- Juliet's speech, “what's in a name?” is the root of the tragedy because Shakespeare is saying the family name is everything – Romeo is a Montague and that should be a warning of impending tragedy to Juliet but she ignores it because she completely ignores her parents wishes, just as Romeo is – chooses to fall in love with the enemy
- So the family name is everything and had they both decided that that was the most important thing in life, then this tragedy would never have happened
- Shakespeare could be suggesting that the best matches are made by parents by families who are looking after each other's interests

ARGUING THE REVERSE OF THE ABOVE

The great thing about literature is that you can argue the exact reverse, that Shakespeare is actually promoting marriage through love, rather than arrangement.



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- The key is not about getting the right author's purpose
 - The key is to get a purpose that makes sense to you so that you can articulate your view in a coherent and interesting manner
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REVERSE ARGUMENT LINKING AUTHOR'S PURPOSE TO SETTING - VERONA

Shakespeare is forced to set it in Verona because

- His audience already know the story
 - **It is already popular in England** which is why his prologue tells the story of the whole play – we find out right at the beginning that his play is going to be a tragedy in which the lovers kill themselves. Shakespeare does this because the audience already knows this before they buy their tickets; the story is already popular; they are coming to see a story they are already familiar with
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REVERSE ARGUMENT LINKING AUTHOR'S PURPOSE TO THEME - LOVE

Now we can argue that the tragedy is caused by the system that allows families to control the lives of their children

- **Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline is not to ridicule his immaturity, it is a product of the over emphasis on family in the class system, as is his love of Juliet**
 - **There would be no need for him to seek relationships outside of marriage if the society were not so patriarchal, and if he did not have to wait for a suitable match to be found by his feuding family**
 - **The tragedy is caused by the fact that he cannot chose his own partner and he has to do things surreptitiously behind his family's back** – this is produced by this system which disallows him to chose
 - **Shakespeare's theme of love is also an attack on the feud**, this closed mentality that reduced everything to the clan, including the extended families as you can see in the battle in Verona between the Capulets and the Montagues; this is the very thing that Shakespeare has escaped by leaving Stratford for London – the contextual evidence here is that Shakespeare has rejected a similar way of life where he would not have been free to choose a marriage partner for himself and he has rebelled against that sort of upbringing and chosen his own way of living
 - **It could also be argued that his marriage is also a rejection of the arranged marriage system**; at 18, he married a woman of 28, not necessarily with his parents wishes; he chose his own route, therefore he has his characters do the same thing
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REVERSE ARGUMENT LINKING AUTHOR'S PURPOSE TO CHARACTER - ROMEO

Juliet asks “**what's in a name, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet**”





- This quote becomes the motto of the play
- Shakespeare is trying to show that the world is better as a meritocracy where people rise in love, marriage and power according to their abilities, not their inherited worth; everyone earns their own place through merit
- Again this reflects Shakespeare himself as a self-made man, theatrical entrepreneur (he ran theatres and partly owned them), and dramatist who created new dramatic forms through his plays; he was doing new things that were right at the forefront of popular entertainment
- Juliet's question is pointing out how her destiny should not be decided by her upbringing or the family she comes from; she is pointing out that people can make of themselves what they want
- The lovers try to create a marriage of their choice and it is society that stops them; if society were different, they could succeed
- Shakespeare's point is about transforming society; he moved to London to do it; he was attempting to build a new society that did not exist before; before Shakespeare's time, going to the theatre was about going to see religious plays that enforced stories from the Bible or moral stories; Shakespeare and his contemporaries went against this convention and treated it purely as spectacle and entertainment; this was a completely new idea which may be difficult for a modern audience to imagine, similar to going back 20 years and imagining a world without the internet; Shakespeare's theatrical ingenuity would have been of similar magnitude to someone the inventor of the internet

LINKING AUTHOR'S PURPOSE TO CONTEXT - HONOUR

Shakespeare might have wanted us to see the play as a criticism and warning about going to extremes in beliefs such as the Early Modern beliefs about honour.

- In essence, he seems to suggest that obsessions with honour were meaningless, but ultimately result in violence and if powerful individuals fight each other, the whole state and the ordinary citizens will suffer.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR ACTIONS

Shakespeare may have been trying to demonstrate the consequences of our actions.

- Lord Capulet and Lord Montague would have never imagined that their children would marry each other and as a result of their family feud, kill themselves.
- The consequence of the family feud is the death of their children.
- The consequence of Lord Capulet forcing Juliet to marry Paris was that she had to take the vial given by Friar Laurence and go through with the terrifying plan.
- The consequence of Romeo killing Tybalt was his banishment, which meant he wasn't in Verona when Juliet devised her plan. And although fate and time play a part in his death (the message of Juliet's plan not arriving on time) Romeo being in Verona, with Juliet, would have saved his life because he would have known about her plan. I think this point is really emphasised when the Friar says 'violent delights have violent ends.'





THE KEY TO SUCCESS IN YOUR LITERATURE EXAMS

Decide on what you think the author's purpose is

- This will allow you to revise everything very quickly
- Remember that you do not have to get the correct author's purpose; its one that you can backup and articulate; it should feel true to you
- As long as you have textual evidence and contextual evidence, you will get the question right every time
- You don't have to separately learn about character and context; they all fit together from your understanding of the author's point of view
- Apply these techniques to all your texts.

