

The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, Act V, by William Shakespeare
Literary Analysis: Tragedy and Motive

A **tragedy** is a drama in which the central character, who is of noble stature, meets with disaster or great misfortune. The tragic hero's downfall is usually the result of one of the following:

- fate
- a serious character flaw
- some combination of both

Motive is an important element of a tragic hero's character. A character's motive is the reason behind an individual's thoughts or actions. In many of Shakespeare's tragedies, the hero's motives are basically good, but sometimes misguided. As a result, the hero suffers a tragic fate that may seem undeserved.

Although tragedies typically have unhappy endings, they can also be uplifting. They often show the greatness of which the human spirit is capable when faced with grave challenges.

DIRECTIONS: Use the lines provided to answer the questions about tragedy and motive in *Romeo and Juliet*.

1. In what ways does Romeo fit the characteristics of a tragic hero? How does he *not* fit these characteristics? In your answer, include a consideration of his tragic flaw.

2. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, in his treatise on tragedy entitled *Poetics*, identified another element that is common to most tragedies: the hero's recognition of the whole tragic situation. This recognition always comes too late for the hero to avoid disaster or death. However, Shakespeare departs from Aristotle's idea about the hero's recognition. In *Romeo and Juliet*, it is not Romeo who experiences recognition, but other characters in the play. Who are these characters, and when does the recognition occur?

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Vocabulary Builder

Word List

ambiguities disperse haughty penury remnants scourge

A. DIRECTIONS: In each of the following items, think about the meaning of the italicized word and then answer the question.

1. Would someone living in *penury* be likely to purchase an expensive new home? Why or why not?

2. If a statement contains *ambiguities*, can you be sure of its meaning? Explain.

3. Would the sight of a *scourge* inspire happiness or fear?

4. If an area is pounded by the *remnants* of a hurricane, does it experience winds in advance of the storm or after the storm?

5. Would you praise or criticize someone for *haughty* behavior? Explain.

6. If you see a crowd at a concert *disperse*, are they coming or going? Explain.

B. WORD STUDY: The prefix *ambi-* means “both” or “around.” Answer each of the following questions using one of these words containing *ambi-*: *ambiance*, *ambidextrous*, *ambient*, *ambiguities*, *ambivalent*.

1. Why might you have trouble understanding a speech that is full of *ambiguities*?

2. What are some things that help set the *ambiance* of a restaurant?

3. Why can someone who is *ambidextrous* write with either hand?

4. What might make you *ambivalent* about taking a course?

5. If a room has *ambient* lighting, where is the light coming from in the room?

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Open-Book Test

Short Answer Write your responses to the questions in this section on the lines provided.

1. In Act V, Scene i, of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo's Man, Balthasar, tells Romeo of seeing Juliet laid in the burial vault. He brings Romeo no letter from the Friar. What meaning do these details have for the plot of the play?

2. In Act V, Scene i, of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo hears that Juliet is dead. He says, "Is it e'en so? Then I defy you, stars!" What does he mean when he says he will defy the stars?

3. In *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, Act V, Scene i, lines 37–52, Romeo describes the apothecary's shop in great detail. Why you think Shakespeare includes this description in Romeo's speech?

4. Why was Friar John unable to deliver Friar Lawrence's letter to Romeo in Act V, Scene ii, of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*?

5. What is dramatically ironic about the arrival of Paris at the Capulets' burial vault at the beginning of Act V, Scene iii, of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*?

6. Romeo describes his own state of mind in Act V, Scene iii, lines 37–39, of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*:

The time and my intents are savage-wild,
More fierce and more inexorable far
Than empty tigers or the roaring sea.

What kind of tragic hero does he appear to be, based on his words?

7. In Act V, Scene iii, of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, Paris assumes that Romeo has come to the burial vault as an enemy of the Capulets. What is the effect of this mistaken belief?

8. In the middle of Act V, Scene iii, of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet wakes and discovers Romeo has killed himself with poison. What is her first action in an attempt to kill herself?

9. Near the end of Act V of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, whom does the Prince hold responsible for the tragedy? Explain why they are responsible.

10. According to the Prince at the end of Act V of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, what has served as a scourge in Verona, leading to the woeful deaths of Romeo and Juliet? Base your answer on the meaning of *scourge*.

Essay

Write an extended response to the question of your choice or to the question or questions that your teacher assigns you.

11. Act V of *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* consists largely of a chain of causes and effects that results in the tragic deaths of Romeo and Juliet. What would have been the result if a single key event had happened differently; for example, Friar Lawrence's letter is delivered to Romeo, or Friar Lawrence does not leave Juliet alone in Scene iii? In a brief essay, write a summary of a different ending to the play by changing just one event in the chain of cause and effect.