



ENGLISH LITERATURE

Bridging Work

Romeo and Juliet



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Introduction

A Bridge to A Level Literature

You have already studied *Romeo and Juliet*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. Those skills remain important at A Level, but they are developed in new and more sophisticated ways.

At GCSE, you were often asked to explain what Shakespeare presents and how he presents it. At A Level, the conversation broadens. Ideas become more complex and debatable. Analysis of language, form and structure moves beyond methods you might have explored at GCSE and invites you to explore craftsmanship and constructs. Context is no longer a collection of facts used to support an argument, but a lens through which interpretation can be generated and challenged.

You will also begin to think about texts in relation to one another. Shakespeare's tragedies do not exist in isolation: they belong to wider literary traditions, genres and theatrical practices. Comparing texts allows us to explore how writers revisit similar concerns and produce different effects.

Perhaps the most significant change is that interpretation becomes central. You will encounter the views of critics and scholars, consider how directors and actors make interpretative choices in performance, and explore how audiences have responded to texts and productions across different periods. Rather than searching for a single "correct" reading, you will learn to evaluate multiple perspectives and develop arguments of your own.

This booklet uses *Romeo and Juliet* as a starting point for that journey. Through contextual reading, critical debate and close textual analysis, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into an A Level one.

How the Booklet Works

As you move through the booklet, you will work with the same essay question, the same line of argument and the same analytical paragraph. You will revisit these repeatedly, refining and extending them as each new assessment objective is introduced.

1. Chapter 1 introduces the shift from GCSE to A Level and explores how literary study becomes increasingly interpretative.
2. Chapter 2 introduces the assessment objectives and shows how GCSE skills evolve at A Level.
3. Chapter 3 focuses on AO1 and AO2, helping you construct a line of argument and develop an analytical paragraph through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.
4. Chapter 4 introduces AO3, showing how contextual reading can deepen interpretation.
5. Chapter 5 explores AO4 through comparison with Antony and Cleopatra, demonstrating how texts illuminate one another.
6. Chapter 6 introduces AO5 through literary criticism, revealing that interpretation is an ongoing conversation rather than a search for certainty.

Your final essay should include:

1. an introduction containing your line of argument;
2. multiple analytical paragraphs;
3. close analysis of Shakespeare's methods;

4. relevant contextual understanding;
5. comparative insight;
6. engagement with critical interpretations;
7. and a conclusion that draws together your argument.

You are not expected to have all the answers before September. Instead, you are invited to approach literature with curiosity, confidence and a willingness to explore.

Welcome to A Level Literature.

Booklet Key

Key Information

Task instruction

Model/exemplar

Chapter 1

The Question

You have already studied *Romeo and Juliet*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. You have analysed Shakespeare's methods, learnt quotations and developed interpretations supported by evidence from the text.

Those skills do not disappear at A Level.

However, A Level Literature invites you to engage with texts differently. Rather than simply identifying what Shakespeare presents, you begin to explore the ways in which literature generates debate, encourages multiple interpretations and resists straightforward answers.

To experience this shift, begin with two questions.

The GCSE Question

Read the following extract from Act 3 Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*.

In this scene, Romeo has refused to fight Tybalt. Mercutio draws his sword and is mortally wounded.

ROMEO:

Draw, Benvolio, beat down their weapons.
Gentlemen, for shame forbear this outrage!
Tybalt, Mercutio, the Prince expressly hath
Forbid this bandying in Verona streets.
Hold, Tybalt! Good Mercutio!

MERCUTIO:

I am hurt.
A plague a' both your houses! I am sped.

...

Why the dev'l came you between us?
I was hurt under your arm.

ROMEO:

I thought all for the best.

MERCUTIO:

Help me into some house, Benvolio,
Or I shall faint. A plague a' both your houses!
They have made worms' meat of me.

ROMEO:

This gentleman, the Prince's near ally,
My very friend, hath got this mortal hurt
In my behalf; my reputation stained
With Tybalt's slander—Tybalt, that an hour
Hath been my cousin. O sweet Juliet,
Thy beauty hath made me effeminate,
And in my temper softened valour's steel!

GCSE Task

Starting with this moment in the play, explore how Shakespeare presents the effects of conflict in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents the effects of conflict in this moment;
- how Shakespeare presents the effects of conflict in the play as a whole.

The A Level Question

Consider the A Level standard question below. Read the information that follows and respond to the task.

"The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* suggests that individuals are powerless against the conflicts they inherit."

In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of the effects of conflict in *Romeo and Juliet*.

This question does not simply ask you to identify examples of conflict in the play.

Instead, it offers an interpretation and invites you to engage with it.

You may agree.

You may disagree.

You may find yourself doing both.

Before deciding what you think, spend some time with the question itself.

Task:

Explore the question:

1. Read the statement several times.
2. Annotate it as you would annotate a passage from the play.
3. Circle, underline or make notes around the statement itself (above).
4. Use the prompts below to help inform your annotation.

Consider:

- Which words seem most significant?
- Which words are difficult to define?
- Which words seem open to debate?
- What assumptions does the statement make about *Romeo and Juliet*?
- Which moments from the play immediately come to mind?

Gathering Evidence

Rather than deciding immediately whether you agree or disagree, begin by collecting evidence. Imagine that you are preparing for a debate. Read the information below and complete the table that follows.

1. Evidence that supports the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Romeo and Juliet are powerless against inherited conflict?

You might consider:

- the Prologue and "star-cross'd lovers";
- the feud between the Montagues and Capulets;
- Mercutio's death;
- Tybalt's determination to fight Romeo;
- Capulet's insistence that Juliet marry Paris;
- the failure of Friar Laurence's plan.

Use quotations wherever possible.

2. Evidence that challenges the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Romeo and Juliet contribute to their own downfall?

You might consider:

- Romeo attending the Capulet feast;
- the secret marriage;
- Romeo's revenge against Tybalt;
- Juliet's decision to take the potion;
- Romeo's impulsiveness in the tomb;
- the lovers' willingness to reject social expectations.

Again, support your ideas with evidence from the text.

3. Looking for Tension

Strong literary arguments rarely emerge from certainty.

As you gather evidence, look for moments that complicate your thinking.

For example:

- Are Romeo and Juliet victims or agents?
- Can inherited conflict excuse individual choices?
- Is fate more powerful than free will?
- Does Shakespeare criticise Verona's society more than the lovers themselves?
- Is love a force of resistance or another form of recklessness?

Make a note of any moments that resist easy judgement. These moments of tension are often where the most interesting arguments begin.

Task:

Using the prompts and guidance above, complete the evidence table below.

Evidence to support the statement	Evidence to challenge the statement

From Ideas to Argument

You have now gathered evidence, explored different perspectives and identified points of tension.

The next step is not to choose one side and ignore the other.

Instead, begin to shape your own viewpoint.

Read the examples below.

1. A straightforward response:

Romeo and Juliet cannot escape the conflict around them.

2. A more developed response:

Inherited conflict limits Romeo and Juliet's choices and contributes significantly to their tragedy.

3. A more nuanced response:

Although Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of a society shaped by hatred and division, he also suggests that their impulsive decisions intensify the conflict that ultimately destroys them.

Notice that the final example acknowledges complexity.

It does not abandon judgement.

Instead, it refines it.

Task:

Drawing on the notes you have made, write a line of argument responding to the question. You do not need to completely agree or disagree.

You might begin with phrases such as:

- Although...
- While...
- To some extent...
- However...
- Ultimately...

Remember:

- Your aim is not to produce the perfect answer.
- Your aim is to begin thinking like a literary critic: gathering evidence, weighing interpretations and arriving at a viewpoint that is thoughtful, tentative and supported by the text.

Your line of argument:

Looking Ahead...

You have just begun doing something that A Level Literature students do every day.

You have moved beyond identifying examples of a theme and started to engage with an interpretation.

You have gathered evidence, recognised complexity and begun constructing an argument of your own.

In the next chapter, you will revisit your thesis and begin to develop it further, exploring how literary arguments become increasingly sophisticated through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.

Chapter 2

The Assessment Objectives

In Chapter 1, you explored an A Level question, gathered evidence from across the play and developed a provisional argument of your own.

Without realising it, you had already begun engaging with some of the skills expected of A Level Literature students.

The Assessment Objectives (AOs) explain how literary thinking develops from GCSE to A Level. They are not simply a checklist for examiners; they describe the different ways in which we engage with texts as readers and critics.

Importantly, A Level does not replace the skills you developed at GCSE. Instead, it elevates them.

GCSE to A Level

GCSE Literature	A Level Literature
AO1: Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response. Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.	AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.
AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.	AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.
AO3: Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.	AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.
AO4: Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.
—	AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

As you read through the table, what do you notice?

Perhaps the most striking changes are:

- GCSE skills are still present, but they become broader and more conceptual;
- AO4 changes entirely;
- A new AO5 is introduced, recognising that literary interpretation is often contested.

You have already begun engaging with AO1. Now, revisit your argument and consider how each of the AOs can deepen and develop it.

AO1: Argument

At GCSE, you developed a personal response supported by evidence from the text.

At A Level, that response becomes more conceptual and sustained.

Task:

Read the line of argument you wrote at the end of Chapter 1.

Does it:

1. move beyond retelling events?;
2. establish a clear viewpoint?;
3. acknowledge complexity?;
4. suggest that alternative interpretations may exist?

You may wish to revise it.

Revised line of argument:

A02: Writer's Craft

At GCSE, you explored how writers use language, form and structure to create meanings and effects. Strong GCSE responses already move beyond simply identifying techniques; they explain what those methods contribute to the audience's/reader's understanding of the text.

At A Level, that analysis becomes broader and more ambitious.

You begin to consider how the distinctive features of a text's form shape meaning.

For drama, this means thinking not only as a close reader, but also as a theatre critic:

- Why has Shakespeare chosen to place this moment here?
- How would this scene work in performance?
- What do these dramatic choices encourage audiences to think and feel?
- How do the conventions of tragedy shape our interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*?
- How do private emotions become public moments of drama?

The question shifts from: "What effect does this method have?" and towards: "How has Shakespeare constructed meaning through the possibilities of dramatic form?"

Consider the responses below.

GCSE

Mercutio's curse "A plague a' both your houses" shows that conflict has terrible consequences.

This is a valid observation. It identifies a method and explores its meaning.

A Level

Positioned at the turning point of the play, Mercutio's repeated curse transforms a personal injury into a wider condemnation of Verona's culture of violence. Shakespeare uses Mercutio's death to expose the destructive reach of inherited conflict, whilst also foreshadowing the tragedy that will consume both families. Through this highly theatrical moment, private rivalry becomes public catastrophe, encouraging audiences to see conflict as a force that extends beyond individual characters.

Both responses explore meaning.

The difference is that the A Level response also considers:

- dramatic placement;
- audience experience;
- tragic structure;
- Shakespeare's construction of conflict as a social problem.

Task:

Return to the extract from Act 3 Scene 1.

Choose one or two quotations from the table you devised and write a response exploring how Shakespeare constructs meaning through dramatic form.

You might consider:

- where this moment appears in the play;
- how an audience might respond to it in performance;
- what Shakespeare reveals or withholds;
- how speech, staging or dramatic conventions contribute to meaning;
- how this moment contributes to the tragic movement of the play.

Remember: you are not looking for techniques to identify.

You are exploring how Shakespeare, as a dramatist, has crafted this moment and shaped the audience's understanding of conflict.

Your Response:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines, typical of notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

AO3: Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often supports an argument.

At A Level, context can deepen, challenge or reshape interpretation.

Consider the examples below.

GCSE

In Elizabethan society, family honour was extremely important. Tybalt therefore feels justified in defending the reputation of the Capulet family, which helps explain why conflict escalates so quickly.

A Level

While ideas of family honour and social reputation help explain Tybalt's aggression, Shakespeare also encourages audiences to question the value of these beliefs. The deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt suggest that the pursuit of honour may be inseparable from cycles of violence. Rather than simply reflecting Elizabethan attitudes, *Romeo and Juliet* invites audiences to consider the human cost of a culture built upon inherited loyalties and division.

The difference is subtle but significant.

Context becomes a way of thinking rather than a fact to insert.

Task

Look back at the paragraph you have just written.

How might an understanding of family honour, patriarchy and social expectation deepen your interpretation of conflict in *Romeo and Juliet*?

Develop your response below.

AO4: Connections Across Texts

One of the biggest surprises for many students is that AO4 changes completely.

At GCSE, AO4 rewarded accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

At A Level, AO4 asks you to:

- **explore connections across literary texts.**

Literature does not exist in isolation.

Tragic lovers often confront similar questions:

- Can love survive social pressure?
- How much control do individuals have over their own lives?
- What happens when personal desire clashes with public duty?
- Is love worth sacrifice?
- Can conflict ever truly be escaped?

Later in this booklet, you will compare *Romeo and Juliet* with another Shakespearean tragedy.

For now, simply consider:

- why might reading texts alongside one another deepen our understanding of both?

Task: write down your thoughts

A05: Critical Interpretations

A Level introduces a completely new Assessment Objective.

A05: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

This means recognising that readers do not always agree.

You will encounter:

- academic critics;
- alternative readings;
- directors' interpretations;
- actors' performances;
- audience responses from different periods.

One production might present Romeo and Juliet as innocent victims trapped by a violent society.

Another might portray them as reckless young people whose impulsive choices contribute to their downfall.

Neither interpretation is automatically "correct".

Your role is to evaluate them.

Task:

Read the critical interpretation below.

"Romeo and Juliet are destroyed by the violence of the society they inherit."

How might someone respond to this interpretation?

Write two or three sentences that either:

- support the statement;
- challenge it;
- or qualify it by recognising both perspectives.

You might begin:

- One interpretation of Romeo and Juliet is that...
- However, another reading might suggest...
- Shakespeare may encourage audiences to see...

Your Response:

Looking Ahead...

You may have noticed that the Assessment Objectives do not operate independently.

As you developed your argument, analysed Shakespeare's methods, considered the influence of context, anticipated wider connections and explored alternative interpretations, you were engaging with all of them.

The rest of this booklet will continue to revisit and refine the same question.

By returning to your original argument again and again, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into something recognisably A Level: more exploratory, more nuanced and more attentive to the many conversations that literature invites.

Chapter 3

Developing Your Argument

By this point, you have already begun answering an A Level question.

In Chapter 1, you encountered an A Level-style task for the first time. You gathered evidence, explored tensions within the statement and developed a provisional line of argument.

In Chapter 2, you considered how the Assessment Objectives evolve from GCSE to A Level, recognising that the skills you have already developed are not replaced, but elevated.

The next step is to begin constructing an essay.

Importantly, A Level essays are not written by addressing one Assessment Objective at a time. Nor are they simply a series of analytical paragraphs linked together.

Instead, they are driven by a line of argument: an overall interpretation that develops, deepens and evolves across the essay. Each paragraph contributes to that wider argument.

In this chapter, you will return to the line of argument you developed earlier and begin transforming it into the foundations of an A Level essay.

Returning to Your Line of Argument

At the end of Chapter 1, you developed a provisional response to the question below.

"The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* suggests that individuals are powerless against the conflicts they inherit."

In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of the effects of conflict in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Task:

Read your original line of argument again.

Having explored the Assessment Objectives in Chapter 2:

- Does it still reflect your thinking?
- Does it establish a clear judgement?
- Does it acknowledge complexity?
- Can you now see more clearly how the essay might develop?

Literary study is often a process of revisiting and refining ideas.

You will have the opportunity to revise your original response later.

A Line of Argument: The Roadmap

A line of argument does more than establish your opinion.

It provides the roadmap for your essay.

A strong line of argument should:

- respond directly to the question;
- establish an overall judgement;
- acknowledge complexity;
- anticipate the development of the essay by alluding to the ideas explored in later paragraphs.

Think of it as answering two questions at once: What do I think? and: How am I going to prove it?

Less Effective

Romeo and Juliet are affected by conflict throughout the play and this causes the tragedy.

This establishes a viewpoint, but gives little indication of how the essay will unfold.

More Effective

Although Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of a society divided by hatred and inherited conflict, the tragedy also suggests that individual choices intensify the violence that surrounds them. By exposing the destructive consequences of family loyalty, masculine honour and impulsive action, Shakespeare ultimately presents conflict as both a social force that shapes individuals and a responsibility they must confront.

Notice that this line of argument:

- establishes an overall judgement;
- acknowledges complexity;
- hints at the main ideas the essay will explore;
- alludes to wider concerns about society, honour and responsibility.

A reader can already anticipate the likely direction of the essay.

Planning from the Line of Argument

The line of argument above might develop in the following way:

Line of Argument	Paragraph Focus
Conflict shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they even meet.	Paragraph 1: Inherited conflict and social division.
Individual choices intensify the violence around them.	Paragraph 2: Mercutio, Tybalt and Romeo's responsibility.
Shakespeare ultimately presents conflict as both inherited and self-perpetuating.	Paragraph 3: Tragic responsibility and final judgement.

At this stage, you are focusing primarily on AO1 and AO2.

You will return to these ideas later in the booklet:

- contextual insight (AO3) will deepen them;
- critical interpretations and productions (AO5) may challenge them;
- comparison with other texts (AO4) will broaden them.

For now, your task is to establish the foundations of your essay.

Line of Argument to Analytical Paragraph

At GCSE, many students use structures such as PEE, PEA or PEAL. These can provide a useful starting point.

At A Level, essays are often less formulaic. Rather than moving mechanically from point to evidence to explanation, paragraphs sustain an argument whilst moving flexibly between textual detail and interpretation, interleaving the Assessment Objectives along the way.

The structure below is not a formula to memorise.

Instead, it reflects how literary arguments often develop.

1. Establish an aspect of your argument.

How does this paragraph contribute to your wider line of argument?

2. Support it with evidence.

Which moments from the text best illuminate this interpretation?

3. Explore Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

How does Shakespeare shape meaning through:

- a. language;
- b. dramatic form;
- c. structure;
- d. placement within the play;
- e. audience response;
- f. the conventions of tragedy?

4. Return to the wider judgement.

How does this analysis support, refine or complicate your overall argument?

Task:

Before reading, return to the first strand of the line of argument: **Conflict shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they even meet.**

Now consider how this idea develops in the model below.

Although Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of a society divided by hatred and inherited conflict, the tragedy also suggests that individual choices intensify the violence that surrounds them. By exposing the destructive consequences of family loyalty, masculine honour and impulsive action, Shakespeare ultimately presents conflict as both a social force that shapes individuals and a responsibility they must confront.

Shakespeare initially presents conflict as an inherited force that shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they have any opportunity to determine their own futures. From the opening Prologue, the lovers are described as "star-cross'd", suggesting that their relationship exists within a world already marked by

division and suffering. By revealing the tragic outcome before the action begins, Shakespeare transforms the feud between the Montagues and Capulets into something larger than a private disagreement. The audience watches events unfold with the knowledge that the lovers' deaths are already anticipated, creating a sense that conflict has become embedded within the social fabric of Verona itself. Through this dramatic structure, Shakespeare encourages audiences to see Romeo and Juliet not simply as individuals, but as young people attempting to navigate a society whose divisions existed long before they were born. Conflict therefore emerges as a powerful force that shapes their choices and limits their freedom.

Notice how the paragraph contributes to the wider essay.

1. It develops one strand of the line of argument.

"Conflict shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they even meet..."

2. It selects evidence purposefully.

"...the lovers are described as 'star-cross'd'..."

3. It explores Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

"...By revealing the tragic outcome before the action begins..."

Rather than simply identifying repetition, the analysis considers:

- dramatic placement;
- audience experience;
- Shakespeare's construction of tragedy.

4. It returns to the wider judgement.

"...Conflict therefore emerges as a powerful force that shapes their choices and limits their freedom."

The paragraph contributes to the essay's overall argument.

Your Turn: Part A

Task:

Return to the revised line of argument from Chapter 2.

Do you need to make any final changes before beginning your essay?

Remember:

- establish a judgement;
- acknowledge complexity;
- allude to the ideas your essay will explore.

Revised line of argument:

[illegible]

Your Turn: Part B

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

Task:

Read your line of argument and paragraph together and reflect on what you're written.

Ask yourself:

- Does my paragraph genuinely develop the argument I established?
- Could a reader anticipate the direction of my essay from my line of argument?
- Have I moved beyond identifying methods to exploring how Shakespeare constructs tragedy through conflict, character and dramatic form?
- Have I maintained a focus on the question throughout?

Make any revisions you feel are necessary.

Looking Ahead...

You now have the beginnings of an A Level essay:

- a refined line of argument;
- a developed analytical paragraph;
- a clear relationship between the two.

In the next chapter, you will revisit this same paragraph through contextual readings. Rather than adding historical information for its own sake, you will explore how contextual insight can deepen, challenge and reshape the argument you have already begun to construct.

Your essay has started.

Now it is time to elevate it.

Chapter 4

Integrating Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often helps to explain a text.

You may have learned about Elizabethan beliefs in fate, family honour, patriarchal authority or the expectations placed upon daughters. These details can help us understand why writers make particular choices.

At A Level, however, context becomes something more dynamic.

Context is not simply information to be added into an essay. Instead, contextual reading should deepen, challenge and complicate interpretation.

The question is no longer: What do I know about the period? Instead, ask: How does this reading change the way I understand the text?

In this chapter, you will revisit the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3 and explore how literary, historical and theatrical contexts reshape interpretation.

Returning to the Model

Task:

Remind yourself of the model (below) from Chapter 3 which developed the line of argument and first main analytical paragraph.

Although Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of a society divided by hatred and inherited conflict, the tragedy also suggests that individual choices intensify the violence that surrounds them. By exposing the destructive consequences of family loyalty, masculine honour and impulsive action, Shakespeare ultimately presents conflict as both a social force that shapes individuals and a responsibility they must confront.

Shakespeare initially presents conflict as an inherited force that shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they have any opportunity to determine their own futures. From the opening Prologue, the lovers are described as "star-cross'd", suggesting that their relationship exists within a world already marked by division and suffering. By revealing the tragic outcome before the action begins, Shakespeare transforms the feud between the Montagues and Capulets into something larger than a private disagreement. The audience watches events unfold with the knowledge that the lovers' deaths are already anticipated, creating a sense that conflict has become embedded within the social fabric of Verona itself. Through this dramatic structure, Shakespeare encourages audiences to see Romeo and Juliet not simply as individuals, but as young people attempting to navigate a society whose divisions existed long before they were born. Conflict therefore emerges as a powerful force that shapes their choices and limits their freedom.

Task:

Now reread the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3.

Before reading any further, ask yourself:

- What assumptions am I making?
- What do I currently believe Shakespeare is doing?
- Which aspects of my interpretation feel secure?
- Which ideas might become more nuanced?

Keep this paragraph in front of you throughout the chapter.

Reading 1: Violence in Romeo and Juliet

Historical context enhances interpretation; at A Level, historical knowledge matters because it changes the questions we ask of the text.

Task:

Read and annotate the extract below.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extract: from 'The Violence of Romeo and Juliet' (see appendices for full article – page 87)

All Shakespeare's plays contain themes that feel universal – the father who breaks disastrously from his children, the marriage that collapses under the pressure of a husband's jealousy. But the ingredients that make up Romeo and Juliet are perhaps more universal than most: young love, bitter hate, feuding communities, tragic and undeserved death. Shakespeare drew his story of a pair of star-crossed Veronese lovers from the lumbering narrative poem *Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet* by the Elizabethan writer Arthur Brooke, but in reality the idea could have come from almost anywhere. The story is surely as old as love itself.

'With great applause'

The play's first audiences, perhaps at the Curtain Theatre in Shoreditch, seem to have responded powerfully to this story of volatile emotions and passions lived to the extreme: the first quarto of 1597 refers to it being 'often (with great applause) plaid publicquely', a claim echoed by the second quarto two years later, which refers to the play being 'sundry times publicquely acted'.

It is not hard to see why. Following Brooke, the play is set in Verona, but – as so often with Shakespeare – the streets we hear described on stage are also those of the bustling, overcrowded, pestilent, noisy and noisome city in which he lived and worked. London was a young city in the 1590s, and the crowds who took their chances with prostitutes and pickpockets in the entertainment districts were even younger; contemporary reports suggest audiences at the open-air theatres were predominantly male, and (unlike 'private' indoor playhouses, where admission cost at least six times as much) were drawn from all ranks of society. For this youthful, restless crowd – some of whom were bunking off work to attend – the violent skirmishes between the Capulets and Montagues that dominate the action must have been a major part of the attraction, and the swordfighting skills displayed by Shakespeare's colleagues will have been watched with a keen eye. It is an amusing thought that for at least some of these artisans and apprentices, the lovers and their all-consuming passion might have seemed almost incidental.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How does Dickson's discussion of Shakespeare's first audiences change your understanding of the opening conflict in *Romeo and Juliet*?
- Why might violence have been as appealing to Elizabethan audiences as the love story itself?
- How does the article encourage you to view the feud as a social problem rather than a private family dispute?
- In what ways does the context of Renaissance London deepen your interpretation of Verona?
- Does this reading make you more likely to agree that Romeo and Juliet are powerless against the conflicts they inherit?

Model Revisited

Task:

Read the model. Notice how it has evolved (see sections in bold) – the contextual insight has been integrated at several points.

Although Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of a society divided by hatred and inherited conflict, the tragedy also suggests that individual choices intensify the violence that surrounds them. By exposing the destructive consequences of family loyalty, masculine honour and impulsive action, Shakespeare ultimately presents conflict as both a social force that shapes individuals and a responsibility they must confront.

Shakespeare initially presents conflict as an inherited force that shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they have any opportunity to determine their own futures. From the opening Prologue, the lovers are described as "star-cross'd", suggesting that their relationship exists within a world already marked by division and suffering. **Understanding the play's theatrical and historical context deepens this interpretation. Elizabethan audiences lived in a society familiar with public disorder, civic unrest and violent displays of masculine honour, meaning the feud would have resonated as more than a private family disagreement. Shakespeare therefore constructs Verona as a community in which conflict has become embedded within everyday social life rather than an isolated dispute between two households.** By revealing the tragic outcome before the action begins, Shakespeare transforms the feud between the Montagues and Capulets into something larger than a private disagreement. The audience watches events unfold with the knowledge that the lovers' deaths are already anticipated, **creating the impression that inherited violence has become a defining feature of the society itself, shaping not only individual destinies but the collective identity of Verona.** Through this dramatic structure, Shakespeare encourages audiences to see Romeo and Juliet not simply as individuals, but as young people attempting to navigate a society whose divisions existed long before they were born. Conflict therefore emerges as a powerful force that shapes their choices and limits their freedom.

Your Turn

Task:

Revisit your own paragraph from Chapter 3.

Integrate some contextual insight informed by this historical lens.

Aim to weave the context into your paragraph, and not simply put it at the end.

Your Response:

Reading 2: Renaissance Theatre

Context also involves understanding how theatre functioned within society and how audiences responded to performance.

Task:

Read the extract below carefully - annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'The Renaissance Theatre' (see appendices for full article – page 89)

In the late summer of 1597, a monster emerged from the humid stench of London's Bankside. News of the monster quickly reached Robert Cecil, Secretary of State to Queen Elizabeth. Cecil determined that the monster was a threat to national security and arranged for its swift destruction. The nest where it had bred was raided and neutralised; the people who had nurtured it were called to account and imprisoned.

The monster in question was a satirical play called *The Isle of Dogs*. Its co-author, Thomas Nash acknowledged that in writing the play he'd created a monster: 'it was no sooner borne but I was glad to run from it'. No copy of the play exists today, so we can only guess at its contents. But the Privy Council clearly viewed it as 'seditious' and ordered not only that the dramatists and actors be imprisoned but that all theatres in the city be closed for months as a punishment. This governmental response may seem like overkill, but the Queen and her enforcers were keenly aware of the potential danger posed by theatre's ability to subvert cultural norms. In Renaissance England, the development of theatre paralleled, and may have helped to spark, dramatic, culture-wide shifts in religious, economic, social, sexual and even political perspectives.

Theatre historian Andrew Gurr has estimated that as many as 50 million people paid to see live theatre in London during the golden age of English Renaissance drama. London loved theatre. And with theatre's popularity came a reorganising of social strata in which class divisions were no longer safe. After all, William Shakespeare, the son of a Stratford glover, earned enough in a decade of playmaking and acting to buy a share in a theatrical company as well as an opulent house in Stratford-upon-Avon. He even applied to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms. When the request was granted, Shakespeare effectively entered the nobility. This social step epitomises the potentially subversive nature of theatre: it allowed the playmaker son of an artisan father to style himself a gentleman.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How does understanding the role of theatre in Renaissance England change your interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of conflict?
- Why might plays exploring authority, rebellion and social order have been viewed as potentially dangerous?
- How does the public nature of Renaissance theatre affect the way we understand the opening brawl and the feud between the Montagues and Capulets?
- In what ways does the article suggest that Shakespeare's theatre invited audiences to question the societies in which they lived?
- How does this theatrical context broaden your interpretation beyond Romeo and Juliet as individual tragic characters?

Model Reconsidered

Task:

Read the model again. Notice how it has evolved (see section in bold) – in this case, it is integrated at the beginning.

Although Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of a society divided by hatred and inherited conflict, the tragedy also suggests that individual choices intensify the violence that surrounds them. By exposing the destructive consequences of family loyalty, masculine honour and impulsive action, Shakespeare ultimately presents conflict as both a social force that shapes individuals and a responsibility they must confront.

Shakespeare initially presents conflict as an inherited force that shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they have any opportunity to determine their own futures. From the opening Prologue, the lovers are described as "star-cross'd", suggesting that their relationship exists within a world already marked by division and suffering. **Understanding the play's historical and theatrical context deepens this interpretation. Elizabethan audiences lived in a society familiar with public disorder, civic unrest and violent displays of masculine honour, meaning the feud would have resonated as more than a private family disagreement. At the same time, Renaissance theatre itself was recognised as a space capable of questioning social hierarchies and exposing political and cultural tensions before diverse public audiences.** Shakespeare therefore constructs Verona as a community in which conflict has become embedded within everyday social life rather than an isolated dispute between two households. By revealing the tragic outcome before the action begins, Shakespeare transforms the feud between the Montagues and Capulets into something larger than a private disagreement. **Performed on a public stage where authority, identity and social order could be explored and contested, the tragedy invites audiences to reflect upon the systems that sustain violence rather than viewing the lovers' deaths as the consequence of private misfortune alone.** The audience watches events unfold with the knowledge that the lovers' deaths are already anticipated, creating the impression that inherited violence has become a defining feature of the society itself, shaping not only individual destinies but the collective identity of Verona. Through this dramatic structure, Shakespeare encourages audiences to see Romeo and Juliet not simply as individuals, but as young people attempting to navigate a society whose divisions existed long before they were born. Conflict therefore emerges as a powerful force that shapes their choices and limits their freedom.

Your Turn

Task:

Reconsider your revised paragraph.

How might theatrical context broaden your interpretation beyond Romeo and Juliet as individual characters?

Aim to deepen your interpretation rather than simply adding information.

Revised paragraph:

Reflection: Watching it Evolve

Task:

Compare the three versions of the model.

Version	Development
Original Model	Line of argument and close analysis established an interpretation of inherited conflict and Shakespeare's dramatic methods.
Model Revisited	Historical context deepened the interpretation by exploring violence, public disorder and the social divisions that shape Verona.
Model Reconsidered	Theatrical context broadened the interpretation by showing how Renaissance theatre encouraged audiences to question authority, social order and the systems that sustain conflict.

What has changed?

At A Level, AO3 is not about accumulating facts. It is about recognising that texts exist within wider historical, literary and theatrical conversations.

The strongest essays do not simply mention context. They allow contextual understanding to reshape interpretation.

Looking Ahead...

You have now revisited and refined your paragraph through contextual reading.

In the next chapter, you will encounter another important aspect of A Level Literature:

What happens when critics, directors and audiences disagree about what a text means?

You will discover that literary interpretation is not fixed.

It is debated.

Chapter 5

Exploring Texts and Traditions

At GCSE, you studied *Romeo and Juliet* as a text in its own right.

At A Level, you begin to recognise that literary texts do not exist in isolation. Writers revisit similar concerns, ask recurring questions and experiment with familiar forms. Reading texts alongside one another allows us to deepen our understanding of both.

AO4 asks you to:

- **Explore connections across literary texts.**

However, comparison is not simply about identifying similarities and differences.

Instead, comparison allows texts to illuminate one another. It encourages us to ask broader questions:

- How does Shakespeare present the relationship between love and conflict?
- To what extent are tragic protagonists shaped by forces beyond their control?
- Are individuals responsible for their own downfall, or victims of the societies in which they live?
- How does Shakespeare repeatedly explore the tension between personal desire and social expectation?

In this chapter, you will encounter another of Shakespeare's great tragedies: *Othello*.

As you do so, keep the following question in mind:

- To what extent are tragic characters responsible for the conflicts that destroy them?

Romeo and Juliet inherit a feud that existed long before they were born.

Othello inherits a society shaped by prejudice, suspicion and social division.

Both tragedies invite audiences to consider the uneasy relationship between circumstance, choice and responsibility.

Before You Begin

Task:

Based on your study of *Romeo and Juliet* what do you think Shakespeare is interested in exploring through tragedy?

You might consider: love; conflict; fate; family; honour; responsibility; violence; identity; social expectation; loyalty; freedom; choice.

Record your ideas:

Introducing *Othello*

Written around 1603–4, *Othello* is one of Shakespeare's most celebrated tragedies.

The play follows Othello, a respected military commander serving the Venetian state. At the beginning of the play, Othello has secretly married Desdemona, the daughter of a powerful Venetian senator.

Although their relationship appears loving and secure, it exists within a society shaped by racial prejudice, political tension and anxieties about social order.

When Othello's ensign, Iago, begins to manipulate those around him, suspicion gradually replaces trust. Othello becomes convinced that Desdemona has betrayed him.

Like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* explores the destruction of a relationship through conflict.

However, whereas Romeo and Juliet struggle against divisions that exist outside their relationship, Othello increasingly allows conflict to enter and transform the relationship itself.

Both tragedies ask difficult questions about responsibility, trust and human judgement.

As you read, ask yourself: Is tragedy caused by the society that surrounds the protagonists?

Or by the choices they make within it?

Shakespeare offers no easy answers.

Act One

Othello opens in a society already marked by tension, suspicion and division.

The play begins at night in Venice, where Roderigo and Iago wake Brabantio, a wealthy senator, with alarming news. They reveal that Brabantio's daughter, Desdemona, has secretly married Othello, a respected military commander in the service of Venice. Rather than presenting the marriage as a loving relationship, they describe it in provocative and inflammatory terms, encouraging Brabantio to see it as unnatural and threatening.

As the scene develops, audiences learn that Iago has his own reasons for creating conflict. Othello has recently promoted Cassio to the position of lieutenant instead of him, and Iago openly expresses his resentment. Although he continues to present himself as loyal and trustworthy in public, he privately admits that he intends to deceive those around him. In one of the play's most famous declarations, he states: "I am not what I am."

Unlike the other characters, the audience immediately becomes aware of Iago's hostility and ambition. This creates dramatic irony throughout the play, as audiences often understand his intentions long before those around him recognise the danger he poses.

Brabantio is outraged by the news of his daughter's marriage and gathers supporters to confront Othello. However, when they find him, Shakespeare presents a striking contrast between Othello and the men who have been discussing him. Despite the accusations directed towards him, Othello remains calm and self-controlled. Confident in the legitimacy of his marriage, he refuses to respond with anger and agrees to explain himself before the Venetian Senate.

Meanwhile, Venice faces a new threat. Reports suggest that a Turkish fleet is preparing to attack Cyprus, an important Venetian territory. As a result, Othello is summoned before the Senate not only to answer Brabantio's accusations but also because his military leadership is urgently required.

In the Senate chamber, Brabantio accuses Othello of using witchcraft to win Desdemona's affection. He insists that his daughter could never have chosen such a marriage freely. Othello responds by recounting the story of their courtship, explaining how Desdemona became fascinated by the stories of his travels, hardships and adventures. Rather than denying his unusual background, Othello embraces it, arguing that honesty and experience won Desdemona's love.

When Desdemona is called to speak for herself, she publicly defends her marriage. Acknowledging the duty she owes her father, she nevertheless insists that her loyalty now belongs to her husband. Her decision disappoints Brabantio but persuades the Senate that the marriage is genuine.

For a moment, it appears that the conflict has been resolved. Othello retains both his position and his marriage, and preparations begin for the journey to Cyprus.

However, Shakespeare ensures that the act ends with uncertainty rather than reassurance. Brabantio warns Othello that if Desdemona has deceived her father, she may one day deceive her husband. At the same time, Iago reveals that he intends to exploit Othello's trust and destroy the happiness he has achieved.

Act One therefore establishes the central conflict of the tragedy.

Othello believes that honesty, loyalty and love provide firm foundations for his future.

The audience already knows that deception, mistrust and manipulation threaten to destroy them.

AO4 Reflection

Both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* begin with relationships that exist within societies marked by division and conflict.

Romeo and Juliet must navigate the hostility between their families.

Othello and Desdemona must navigate prejudice, suspicion and social opposition.

Task

How does Shakespeare establish different forms of conflict from the very beginning of each tragedy?

Consider:

- family and social division;
- parental authority;
- the role of love;
- the extent to which the protagonists are already constrained by circumstances beyond their control.

To what extent do the tragedies seem inevitable from the very beginning?

Record your ideas:

Act Two

Act Two begins with Othello, Desdemona and their companions arriving safely in Cyprus. Reports soon confirm that the Turkish fleet has been destroyed in a storm, removing the military threat that had brought them there. The atmosphere is one of relief and celebration, and for a brief period it appears that Othello and Desdemona may enjoy a happy future together.

The audience's attention quickly shifts from external conflict to the tensions developing within the group itself.

As the characters arrive in Cyprus, Cassio warmly greets Desdemona. Their conversation is courteous and respectful, but Iago immediately begins to interpret their behaviour in a different way. Observing their friendship, he sees an opportunity to further his plans against both Cassio and Othello. Although there is no evidence of any improper relationship, Iago begins considering how appearances might be manipulated to create suspicion.

Later that evening, celebrations are held to mark the Venetian victory. Knowing that Cassio has little tolerance for alcohol, Iago encourages him to drink. Cassio is initially reluctant, but eventually joins the festivities. As the evening progresses, he becomes intoxicated and loses control of his behaviour.

Iago then sets the next stage of his plan in motion. He persuades Roderigo to provoke Cassio, leading to a violent disturbance. During the conflict, Cassio wounds Montano, a respected Cypriot official. The disorder becomes so serious that Othello is forced to intervene and restore order.

When Othello demands an explanation, Cassio is unable to defend himself effectively. Disappointed by the behaviour of a trusted officer, Othello removes him from his position as lieutenant. The decision is made quickly, but Othello believes he is acting fairly and responsibly.

The audience, however, understands something Othello does not.

The entire conflict has been carefully orchestrated by Iago.

Following his dismissal, Cassio is devastated. Reflecting on what he has lost, he laments the damage done to his reputation, believing his future prospects have been ruined. Seeing an opportunity to advance his scheme, Iago advises Cassio to seek Desdemona's help. He suggests that her influence over Othello may persuade him to restore Cassio to favour.

Cassio gratefully accepts the advice, unaware that he is helping to create the circumstances Iago intends to exploit. Desdemona, equally unaware of Iago's intentions, readily agrees to assist Cassio when he approaches her.

By the end of the act, several characters believe they are acting wisely and honourably. Othello believes he has restored discipline. Cassio believes he has found a path towards redemption. Desdemona believes she is helping a friend.

Only Iago understands how these separate actions are beginning to form part of a larger design.

Act Two therefore marks an important turning point in the tragedy. Although Othello remains confident in both his marriage and his judgement, the foundations of that confidence are already being undermined.

The conflict that will eventually destroy him has begun to take shape, even though he remains completely unaware of the danger.

The tragedy increasingly asks whether individuals can protect themselves from deception when they trust those who seek to harm them.

AO4 Reflection

In *Romeo and Juliet*, conflict develops from a feud that has existed for generations. The characters inherit divisions that they neither created nor fully understand.

In *Othello*, conflict is deliberately engineered by Iago. While other characters believe they are acting sensibly, they unknowingly become part of his scheme.

Task:

How do the origins of conflict differ in the two tragedies?

Consider:

- inherited conflict and family division;
- manipulation and deception;
- the role of trust;
- the extent to which characters understand the situations they face.

To what extent are Romeo, Juliet and Othello responsible for the tragedies that begin to unfold around them?

Record your ideas:

Act Three

Act Three marks the dramatic and psychological turning point of *Othello*. The tensions that have been developing since the beginning of the play become increasingly difficult to contain, and the conflict that once existed outside Othello's marriage begins to enter it directly.

The act opens with Cassio seeking Desdemona's help in regaining Othello's favour. Grateful for her friendship and convinced of her influence over her husband, he asks her to speak on his behalf. Desdemona readily agrees and promises to do everything she can to repair the damage caused by his dismissal.

As Othello approaches, Cassio leaves. Although there is nothing suspicious about his departure, Iago immediately begins to exploit the situation. Rather than making direct accusations, he relies upon hints, suggestions and carefully chosen questions. His apparent reluctance to speak openly encourages Othello to become curious and suspicious.

At first, Othello resists these suggestions. Confident in Desdemona's honesty and loyalty, he refuses to believe that she could deceive him. However, as Desdemona repeatedly asks him to forgive Cassio and restore him to his former position, Iago gradually encourages Othello to interpret her behaviour differently. What appears to the audience as kindness and loyalty begins to appear to Othello as evidence of a hidden relationship.

The conflict within Othello grows steadily throughout the act. He begins to question both Desdemona and Cassio, searching for certainty while becoming increasingly vulnerable to Iago's manipulation. At the same time, Iago continues to present himself as a reluctant friend who is only speaking out of concern for Othello's wellbeing.

One of the most important developments in the act involves Desdemona's handkerchief. Othello had previously given it to her as a symbol of his love. When Desdemona accidentally drops it, Emilia finds it and gives it to Iago, who has repeatedly asked her to obtain it for him. Emilia does not know why he wants it and remains unaware of the role it will play in his plans.

Iago then uses the handkerchief as supposed evidence of Desdemona's infidelity. Although he cannot provide proof of an affair, he understands that the handkerchief's significance will make Othello more willing to believe his accusations. The audience watches as an object that once symbolised love and trust becomes associated with suspicion and betrayal.

As the act progresses, Othello's language and behaviour begin to change. The calm and self-controlled leader introduced in Act One becomes increasingly emotional and unstable. His confidence in his marriage gives way to jealousy, anger and uncertainty. Although he repeatedly demands evidence, he gradually becomes willing to accept assumption in place of certainty.

The act reaches its climax when Othello kneels with Iago and vows revenge against those he believes have betrayed him. He appoints Iago as his new lieutenant and commits himself to a course of action that will shape the remainder of the tragedy.

By the end of Act Three, Othello believes he finally understands the truth about Desdemona and Cassio. The audience knows that he understands almost nothing.

Act Three therefore marks the moment at which deception begins to replace reality. The conflict that initially seemed external becomes deeply personal, and Othello increasingly places his trust in the very person seeking to destroy him.

The tragedy begins to ask whether certainty is always possible and whether people can make wise decisions when fear and suspicion shape their understanding of the world.

AO4 Reflection

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio's death transforms a long-standing feud into a tragedy that rapidly spirals beyond the control of the characters involved. Romeo's decision to kill Tybalt changes the course of the play and creates consequences that cannot easily be undone.

In *Othello*, Act Three marks a similar turning point. Othello begins to trust Iago's interpretation of events rather than his own experience of Desdemona, setting in motion a chain of events that will prove increasingly difficult to reverse.

Task:

How do Shakespeare's tragic protagonists respond when faced with emotional pressure and uncertainty?

Consider:

- trust and judgement;
- emotional vulnerability;
- external influences;
- personal responsibility;
- the consequences of key decisions.

To what extent do Romeo and Othello contribute to their own downfall?

Record your ideas:

Act Four

The consequences of Othello's growing jealousy become increasingly apparent in Act Four. The doubts and suspicions that emerged in the previous act now dominate his thinking, and the conflict within his marriage moves steadily towards tragedy.

The act opens with Othello continuing to question Desdemona's loyalty. As Iago's influence over him grows, he becomes increasingly convinced that his wife has betrayed him. During a conversation with Iago, Othello is so overwhelmed by emotion that he collapses in an epileptic fit. While he recovers, Iago continues to develop his plans.

Knowing that Othello is desperate for evidence, Iago arranges for him to observe a conversation between himself and Cassio. Othello believes the discussion concerns Desdemona, but Cassio is actually speaking about Bianca, a woman with whom he has a casual relationship. Because Othello already believes Desdemona has been unfaithful, he interprets Cassio's laughter and comments as confirmation of his suspicions.

The misunderstanding is strengthened when Bianca appears carrying the handkerchief that once belonged to Desdemona. Having planted the handkerchief earlier, Iago succeeds in making it appear that Cassio has received it from Desdemona. To Othello, this seems to provide the proof he has been seeking. Convinced of his wife's guilt, Othello resolves to kill her. Iago encourages him in this decision and promises to deal with Cassio himself. The audience watches as Othello places increasing trust in the very man responsible for deceiving him.

Meanwhile, Desdemona remains confused by her husband's behaviour. Unable to understand why he has become distant and hostile, she continues to defend Cassio and to express her loyalty towards Othello. Her innocence stands in sharp contrast to the accusations being made against her.

Later in the act, Othello publicly humiliates Desdemona by striking her in front of visitors from Venice. The incident shocks those who witness it, particularly because Othello had previously been respected for his self-control and dignity. Lodovico, who has only recently arrived from Venice, struggles to reconcile Othello's behaviour with the man he has heard praised.

The act also gives greater prominence to Emilia. As she observes the growing conflict between Othello and Desdemona, she becomes increasingly critical of the assumptions men make about women and marriage. Although she remains unaware of her husband's role in the tragedy, she begins to recognise the injustice of the situation unfolding around her.

Towards the end of the act, Othello confronts Desdemona in private. Accusing her of infidelity, he rejects her attempts to defend herself and becomes more determined than ever to carry out his plans. Desdemona is left distressed and bewildered, unable to understand why the relationship she values so deeply appears to be collapsing around her.

The act concludes with Desdemona and Emilia preparing for bed. As they talk together, Desdemona sings the "Willow Song", a melancholy ballad associated with love, loss and abandonment. The scene creates a sense of foreboding, as both characters reflect upon the difficulties faced by women within relationships and marriage.

By the end of Act Four, Othello is convinced that he understands the truth.

The audience knows that he is completely mistaken.

The conflict that began with suspicion has now developed into a determination to commit irreversible violence, and the tragedy moves steadily towards its conclusion.

AO4 Reflection

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt create a chain of events that becomes increasingly difficult to stop. Characters find themselves trapped by decisions that have already been made and by conflicts they can no longer control.

In *Othello*, jealousy and suspicion gradually replace trust and understanding. As Othello becomes more certain of Desdemona's guilt, he moves closer to actions that cannot be undone.

Task:

How do Shakespeare's tragic protagonists respond when they believe they have discovered the truth?

Consider:

- certainty and misunderstanding;
- emotional pressure;
- the influence of others;
- personal responsibility;
- the consequences of irreversible decisions.

At what point do characters become responsible for the tragedies that follow?

Record your ideas:

Act Five

By the final act of the play, the tragedy has become unavoidable. The misunderstandings, suspicions and deceptions that have developed throughout *Othello* now move towards their devastating conclusion.

The act opens with Iago attempting to eliminate Cassio. Hoping to prevent the truth from emerging, he persuades Roderigo to attack Cassio under cover of darkness. The plan does not proceed as expected. Cassio is wounded but survives, while Roderigo is seriously injured. Fearing that Roderigo might reveal his involvement, Iago kills him before he can expose the truth.

These events further demonstrate the lengths to which Iago is willing to go in order to protect himself and maintain his deception.

Meanwhile, Othello prepares to carry out the decision he reached in the previous act. Believing that Desdemona has betrayed him, he enters their bedchamber determined to kill her. Yet Shakespeare complicates the scene by reminding audiences of Othello's lingering love for his wife. Before waking her, he reflects upon her beauty and struggles with the consequences of what he intends to do.

When Desdemona awakens, she is bewildered by Othello's accusations. Despite repeatedly protesting her innocence, she is unable to convince him that he has been deceived. Convinced that he is acting justly, Othello refuses to listen to her pleas and eventually smothers her.

The scene is particularly tragic because the audience knows that Desdemona is innocent. Throughout the play, audiences have watched misunderstandings accumulate and have repeatedly witnessed opportunities for the truth to emerge. By the time Othello kills Desdemona, it is clear that his actions are based upon a false understanding of reality.

Shortly afterwards, Emilia enters the room and discovers what has happened. As the truth begins to emerge, she gradually realises that her husband has manipulated events from the beginning. Refusing to remain silent, Emilia publicly exposes Iago's deception and reveals the true story of the handkerchief. For the first time in the play, Othello understands the extent of his mistake.

The certainty he believed he possessed is replaced by horror, guilt and self-reproach.

Iago attempts to silence Emilia by killing her, but the truth can no longer be concealed. His schemes are finally exposed and he is arrested. However, Shakespeare refuses to provide audiences with a full explanation of his motives. When questioned, Iago simply declares: "From this time forth I never will speak word."

Faced with the consequences of his actions, Othello reflects upon the destruction he has caused. Recognising that he has killed the woman who loved him most, he condemns himself and takes his own life. Dying beside Desdemona, he attempts to reclaim some measure of dignity whilst acknowledging the tragic error that has led him to this point.

The play concludes with Lodovico assuming responsibility for restoring order and ensuring that justice is carried out. Yet the ending offers little comfort. Desdemona, Emilia and Othello are dead, Cassio has been wounded, and the damage caused by Iago's deception cannot be undone.

Act Five therefore brings the tragedy to its devastating conclusion. Othello finally gains the understanding he has sought throughout the play, but this knowledge arrives too late to prevent catastrophe.

The tragedy leaves audiences with difficult questions about trust, responsibility and human judgement. Othello is undoubtedly deceived by Iago, yet he is also responsible for the choices he makes. Shakespeare offers no simple answer as to where blame ultimately lies.

Instead, audiences are left to consider how easily certainty can become dangerous when it is built upon false assumptions.

AO4 Reflection

Both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* conclude with moments of painful recognition.

Romeo realises too late that Juliet is not dead.

Othello realises too late that Desdemona was innocent.

In both tragedies, understanding arrives only after irreversible actions have been taken.

Task:

How do Shakespeare's protagonists respond when they finally recognise the consequences of their actions?

Consider:

- responsibility and blame;
- guilt and self-awareness;
- the role of fate, circumstance and choice;
- whether tragic insight arrives too late to be meaningful.

To what extent are Romeo and Othello victims of forces beyond their control?

To what extent are they responsible for their own downfall?

Record your ideas:

Tragedies Compared

Throughout this chapter, you have explored how *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* present characters facing conflict, uncertainty and difficult choices.

Although the plays are very different, they repeatedly raise similar questions about responsibility, judgement and the forces that shape human behaviour.

The table below highlights some important connections.

<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	<i>Othello</i>
The protagonists inherit a violent social conflict that shapes their lives before they can act.	Othello enters a society already structured by racial prejudice, suspicion, and exclusion.
Love challenged established social expectations and inherited divisions.	Love challenged established social expectations and racial prejudice.
Romeo and Juliet attempt to escape conflict but remain trapped by the feud between their families.	Othello initially transcends prejudice but gradually internalises the values of the society around him.
Impulsive decisions intensify an inherited conflict rather than create it.	Jealousy and manipulation transform social prejudice into personal violence.
The tragedy exposes the destructive consequences of family, loyalty, masculine honour and revenge.	The tragedy exposes the destructive consequences of patriarchal authority, racial insecurity, and possessive love.
Recognition comes too late to save the lovers or repair the divided community.	Recognition comes too late to save Desdemona or restore Othello's moral judgement.
Shakespeare presents conflict as a force inherited from previous generations that limits individual freedom.	Shakespeare presents conflict as a force sustained by prejudice and internalised through individual choice.

Reflection

Despite these similarities, Shakespeare's protagonists respond differently to the pressures they face.

Romeo and Juliet often appear trapped by conflicts they did not create.

Othello appears increasingly responsible for the tragedy that unfolds around him.

Comparison therefore encourages us to think more carefully about the relationship between circumstance and choice.

Task

Which comparison do you find most interesting?

How has reading *Othello* changed your understanding of *Romeo and Juliet*?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Throughout this booklet, you have been developing a response to the following question: "The tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* suggests that individuals are powerless against the conflicts they inherit."

In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of the effects of conflict in *Romeo and Juliet*.

In Chapter 3, you developed an analytical paragraph.

In Chapter 4, contextual reading deepened and complicated that interpretation.

Now comparison can help us refine it further.

Task:

Read the model below from where it was modified with AO3 insight.

Although Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of a society divided by hatred and inherited conflict, the tragedy also suggests that individual choices intensify the violence that surrounds them. By exposing the destructive consequences of family loyalty, masculine honour and impulsive action, Shakespeare ultimately presents conflict as both a social force that shapes individuals and a responsibility they must confront.

Shakespeare initially presents conflict as an inherited force that shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they have any opportunity to determine their own futures. From the opening Prologue, the lovers are described as "star-cross'd", suggesting that their relationship exists within a world already marked by division and suffering. Understanding the play's historical and theatrical context deepens this interpretation. Elizabethan audiences lived in a society familiar with public disorder, civic unrest and violent displays of masculine honour, meaning the feud would have resonated as more than a private family disagreement. At the same time, Renaissance theatre itself was recognised as a space capable of questioning social hierarchies and exposing political and cultural tensions before diverse public audiences. Shakespeare therefore constructs Verona as a community in which conflict has become embedded within everyday social life rather than an isolated dispute between two households. By revealing the tragic outcome before the action begins, Shakespeare transforms the feud between the Montagues and Capulets into something larger than a private disagreement. Performed on a public stage where authority, identity and social order could be explored and contested, the tragedy invites audiences to reflect upon the systems that sustain violence rather than viewing the lovers' deaths as the consequence of private misfortune alone. The audience watches events unfold with the knowledge that the lovers' deaths are already anticipated, creating the impression that inherited violence has become a defining feature of the society itself, shaping not only individual destinies but the collective identity of Verona. Through this dramatic structure, Shakespeare encourages audiences to see Romeo and Juliet not simply as individuals, but as young people attempting to navigate a society whose divisions existed long before they were born. Conflict therefore emerges as a powerful force that shapes their choices and limits their freedom.

Task:

Now read the reconsidered model, with AO4 insight incorporated.

Although Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of a society divided by hatred and inherited conflict, the tragedy also suggests that individual choices intensify the violence that surrounds them. By exposing the destructive consequences of family loyalty, masculine honour and impulsive action, Shakespeare ultimately presents conflict as both a social force that shapes individuals and a responsibility they must confront.

Shakespeare initially presents conflict as an inherited force that shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they have any opportunity to determine their own futures. From the opening Prologue, the lovers are described as "star-cross'd", suggesting that their relationship exists within a world already marked by division and suffering. Understanding the play's historical and theatrical context deepens this interpretation. Elizabethan audiences lived in a society familiar with public disorder, civic unrest and violent displays of masculine honour, meaning the feud would have resonated as more than a private family disagreement. At the same time, Renaissance theatre itself was recognised as a space capable of questioning social hierarchies and exposing political and cultural tensions before diverse public audiences. Shakespeare therefore constructs Verona as a community in which conflict has become embedded within everyday social life rather than an isolated dispute between two households. By revealing the tragic outcome before the action begins, Shakespeare transforms the feud between the Montagues and Capulets into something larger than a private disagreement. Performed on a public stage where authority, identity and social order could be explored and contested, the tragedy invites audiences to reflect upon the systems that sustain violence rather than viewing the lovers' deaths as the consequence of private misfortune alone. **Comparison with *Othello* further develops this interpretation by revealing Shakespeare's recurring interest in societies fractured by inherited divisions and codes of honour. Like Romeo and Juliet, Othello attempts to pursue a relationship that challenges established social expectations, yet both plays demonstrate how prejudice, masculine identity and public reputation shape private decisions. However, the tragedies also differ in significant ways. Romeo and Juliet inherit a feud created by previous generations, whereas Othello increasingly becomes an active participant in the conflict that destroys him, allowing jealousy and suspicion to dictate his actions. Reading the plays together therefore complicates the view that Shakespeare presents individuals as entirely powerless, instead suggesting that tragedy emerges through the uneasy interaction between inherited social pressures and personal responsibility.** The audience watches events unfold with the knowledge that the lovers' deaths are already anticipated, creating the impression that inherited violence has become a defining feature of the society itself, shaping not only individual destinies but the collective identity of Verona. Through this dramatic structure, Shakespeare encourages audiences to see Romeo and Juliet not simply as individuals, but as young people attempting to navigate a society whose divisions existed long before they were born. Conflict therefore emerges as a powerful force that shapes their choices and limits their freedom, while comparison with *Othello* reveals that Shakespeare repeatedly explores the tension between social circumstance and individual agency as a defining feature of tragic experience.

Notice what has changed.

The comparison has not distracted from your interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Instead, it has sharpened it. AO4 does not ask: What is similar? It asks: How does another text help me understand this one more deeply?

Your Turn

Task:

Return to the paragraph you have been developing throughout this booklet.

Using one carefully integrated comparative sentence, broaden your interpretation through *Othello*.

Remember:

- Keep *Romeo and Juliet* as the focus.
- Use *Othello* to illuminate your argument.
- Avoid bolt-on comparison.
- Ask yourself what *Othello* reveals about *Romeo and Juliet*.

Revise your paragraph:

Looking ahead...

Before moving on, take a moment to recognise how your thinking has evolved:

- Chapter 3 helped you construct an argument and analyse Shakespeare's methods;
- Chapter 4 deepened that argument through literary and historical context;
- Chapter 5 broadened that argument through comparison.

You have not replaced earlier interpretations.

You have refined them.

In the final chapter of this booklet, you will discover that interpretation itself is contested. Critics disagree.

Directors make choices. Audiences respond differently across time.

Literary study is not about arriving at a single, definitive answer.

It is an ongoing conversation.

Chapter 6

Joining the Critical Conversation

Throughout this booklet, you have gradually developed your interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of guilt in *Romeo and Juliet*.

1. You began by constructing an argument.
2. You analysed Shakespeare's dramatic methods.
3. You deepened your ideas through context.
4. You broadened them through comparison.
5. At each stage, the same paragraph evolved.

However, A Level English Literature asks something more.

It asks you to recognise that intelligent readers do not always agree.

Two critics may examine the same scene, the same quotation and the same character and arrive at different conclusions.

This is AO5.

AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

Importantly, AO5 is not about finding the "correct" critic.

Nor is it about collecting quotations from critics and attaching them mechanically to the end of an essay.

Instead, criticism should help you:

1. refine your ideas;
2. challenge your assumptions;
3. qualify your interpretations;
4. recognise the complexity of literary debate.

Literature becomes a conversation.

And now, you are invited to join it.

Before You Begin

Task:

Without looking back at your paragraph, complete the statements below.

Romeo and Juliet are victims because...

Romeo and Juliet contribute to their own tragedy because...

If you found yourself agreeing with both statements, you have already begun thinking critically.

Reading 1: Kiernan Ryan

Task:

Read the extract carefully and annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that support your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge your interpretation;
- ideas that could deepen your understanding of Rome and Juliet.

Extract: from 'The Violence of Romeo and Juliet' (see appendices for full article – page 91)

So what is it that stamps a play as the kind of tragedy that merits the term 'Shakespearean'? The detailed answer that question demands is beyond the scope of this brief introduction. But the basic points of the argument it would entail can be outlined here, and my articles on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth should go some way towards fleshing them out.

The key point should become clear if we turn to one of Shakespeare's earliest tragedies, Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare's immortal couple have become a global byword for lovers driven unjustly to their doom because they belong to warring factions that refuse to tolerate their love. During the last four centuries the play has inspired countless adaptations and offshoots on stage and screen, as well as operas, symphonies, fiction, poetry and paintings. But Romeo and Juliet couldn't have acquired its enduring resonance, if the significance and value of the tragedy were trapped in the time when Shakespeare wrote it. If the play made sense and mattered only in terms of that time, it wouldn't be able to reach across the centuries and speak with such urgency to so many different cultures now. That Romeo and Juliet is rooted in the age of Shakespeare, and can't be fully understood without some knowledge of the world it sprang from, hardly needs demonstrating. But no critical account or production can do justice to Romeo and Juliet, if it's not alert to the ways in which it was far ahead of Shakespeare's time and is still far ahead of ours too.

Coleridge was the first critic to grasp, over 200 years ago, this crucial characteristic of Shakespeare's greatest plays. Shakespeare 'writes not for past ages,' observes Coleridge, 'but for that in which he lives, and that which is to follow. It is natural that he should conform to the circumstances of his day, but a true genius will stand independent of those circumstances.' 'It is a poor compliment to a poet', Coleridge remarks with Shakespeare in mind, 'to tell him that he has only the qualifications of an historian.' And what enables Shakespeare's drama to stand independent of the historical circumstances to which it otherwise conforms is what Coleridge calls its 'prophetic' quality, its dream of 'that which is to follow'. While he 'registers what is past' in his plays, Shakespeare also 'projects the future in a wonderful degree', and thus 'shakes off the iron bondage of space and time', as Coleridge superbly puts it.

'My bounty is as boundless as the sea'

It's hard to think of a Shakespearean tragedy that illustrates Coleridge's insight more clearly than Romeo and Juliet. The love that Romeo and Juliet discover may be fleeting, but it's a new kind of love that propels them beyond the horizon of Shakespeare's world and remains an inspiring ideal in our own. Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline had been rightly mocked by Mercutio as the same old Petrarchan

scenario of submissive male tormented by unrequited love for an unattainable mistress. But Mercutio's remedy for Romeo's clichéd quandary is merely its inverted mirror-image, the subjugation of female to male in an aggressive act of self-gratification: 'If love be rough with you, be rough with love; / Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down' (1.4.27–28). Both scenarios lock both parties into an unequal relationship that subordinates one of them to the will of the other. But the relationship of Romeo and Juliet is based on reciprocity rather than subservience. As the Chorus tells us: 'Now Romeo is beloved and loves again' ('loves again' means 'loves back in return'); they are equally attracted to each other: 'Alike bewitched by the charm of looks'; and, unlike Rosaline, Juliet is 'as much in love' with Romeo as he is with her (2 Chorus 5-6, 11).

Romeo's symmetrical phrasing reflects the perfect balance of attraction and power that distinguishes their relationship: 'One hath wounded me / That's by me wounded' (2.3.50–51); 'As mine [i.e. 'my heart'] on hers, so hers is set on mine' (2.3.59); 'Her I love now / Doth grace for grace and love for love allow; / The other did not so' (2.3.85–87). Above all, their love is mutually enhancing and limitless. In Juliet's wonderful words: 'My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite' (2.2.133-35). Thus the tragic fate of Romeo and Juliet's 'true-love passion' (2.2.104) does more than dramatize the pernicious effects of the feud that divides their families. It's long been recognised that the play vindicates the individual's right to love whoever they choose to love, unconstrained by irrational prohibitions or mindless prejudice. But Romeo and Juliet goes further than that. It envisions, and finds the words to describe, a bond of love uncontaminated by the urge to use and dominate. 400 years on, the play is as committed as ever to showing that mutual love between equals is not just desirable but possible by bringing it alive in the theatre or the mind's eye of the reader.

Citizens of centuries to come

What makes the fate of Romeo and Juliet tragic, and what makes the play a Shakespearean tragedy, is the fact that they live at a time when a boundless love like theirs cannot be sustained and cannot survive, because it belongs to a future men and women are still struggling to create. Romeo and Juliet turn out to have been citizens of truly civilized centuries to come, who reveal the potential to lead more fulfilling lives than those they have been forced to lose by the barbaric age in which they are marooned.

The same strikes me as true, in one way or another, of all Shakespeare's great tragic protagonists. They are all 'fools of Time' (to borrow a phrase from Sonnet 124) in the sense that they are hoodwinked by history. In spite of their capacity to embrace an entirely different destiny, they are overpowered by the constraints of the era they have the misfortune to inhabit rather than by some malign metaphysical force or some unfortunate flaw in their character. Romeo may believe himself to be the victim of 'some consequence... hanging in the stars' (2.4.107); Hamlet may wonder whether it's 'some vicious mole of nature' (1.4.24) or 'a divinity that shapes our ends' (5.2.10); and Macbeth may blame his downfall on the 'supernatural soliciting' (1.3.130) of the 'secret, black, and midnight hags' (4.1.48) he encounters on the heath. But their real tragedy is to find themselves stranded and fated to die in a hostile, alien reality, far from the transfigured future their tragic plight foreshadows.

Think of Othello. A black man from Africa and an upper-class white woman from Venice fall in love and elope, undaunted by the hostility their interracial marriage inevitably incurs. Othello and Desdemona act, with a sublime utopian naivety the play invites us to admire, as if they already dwelt in a world of which we in the 21st century can still only dream: a world in which such marriages have the unquestioned right to be left in peace to flourish. Instead they attract, in the shape of Iago, the lethal hatred of a racially prejudiced, patriarchal society, whose foundations their love threatens to undermine.

Kiernan Ryan offers a strikingly different way of understanding *Romeo and Juliet*.

Many readers see the play as a tragedy in which two young people are destroyed by fate, family hatred or their own impulsive decisions. Ryan does not dismiss these ideas, but he argues that Shakespeare's tragedy is ultimately about something much more hopeful.

Ryan suggests that Romeo and Juliet represent a new way of living and loving. Their relationship is based upon equality, mutual choice and complete emotional openness rather than duty, status or social expectation. In Juliet's declaration that her love is "as boundless as the sea", Ryan sees a vision of a society built upon generosity rather than power or possession.

This changes the way we might interpret the tragedy.

Instead of viewing the lovers simply as powerless victims, Ryan encourages us to see them as characters who reject the inherited values of Verona. They refuse to allow family loyalty, prejudice and social division to determine their future, imagining instead a world in which love can exist free from hatred and hierarchy.

From this perspective, the tragedy lies not in the lovers themselves but in the society that surrounds them. Romeo and Juliet die because Verona cannot tolerate the values they represent. Ryan therefore argues that Shakespeare's play is not only a warning about conflict but also a vision of the more compassionate and equal society that might replace it.

This interpretation does not invalidate the arguments you have developed throughout this booklet. Instead, it asks you to reconsider whether Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of conflict or as figures whose love exposes the failures of the society that destroys them.

Reflection

Task:

Ryan argues that Romeo and Juliet belong to a better future and are destroyed because their society cannot sustain the kind of love they represent.

To what extent do you agree?

You may wish to consider:

- Does Shakespeare present Romeo and Juliet as victims of Verona's society rather than their own choices?
- Can the lovers be viewed as symbols of hope as well as tragic figures?
- Does the play ultimately criticise inherited hatred and social division more than individual impulsiveness?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Task:

Read the model paragraph below.

This is the version developed at the end of Chapter 5 having integrated a comparison with *Othello*.

Although Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of a society divided by hatred and inherited conflict, the tragedy also suggests that individual choices intensify the violence that surrounds them. By exposing the destructive consequences of family loyalty, masculine honour and impulsive action, Shakespeare ultimately presents conflict as both a social force that shapes individuals and a responsibility they must confront.

Shakespeare initially presents conflict as an inherited force that shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they have any opportunity to determine their own futures. From the opening Prologue, the lovers are described as "star-cross'd", suggesting that their relationship exists within a world already marked by division and suffering. Understanding the play's historical and theatrical context deepens this interpretation. Elizabethan audiences lived in a society familiar with public disorder, civic unrest and violent displays of masculine honour, meaning the feud would have resonated as more than a private family disagreement. At the same time, Renaissance theatre itself was recognised as a space capable of questioning social hierarchies and exposing political and cultural tensions before diverse public audiences. Shakespeare therefore constructs Verona as a community in which conflict has become embedded within everyday social life rather than an isolated dispute between two households. By revealing the tragic outcome before the action begins, Shakespeare transforms the feud between the Montagues and Capulets into something larger than a private disagreement. Performed on a public stage where authority, identity and social order could be explored and contested, the tragedy invites audiences to reflect upon the systems that sustain violence rather than viewing the lovers' deaths as the consequence of private misfortune alone. Comparison with *Othello* further develops this interpretation by revealing Shakespeare's recurring interest in societies fractured by inherited divisions and codes of honour. Like Romeo and Juliet, *Othello* attempts to pursue a relationship that challenges established social expectations, yet both plays demonstrate how prejudice, masculine identity and public reputation shape private decisions. However, the tragedies also differ in significant ways. Romeo and Juliet inherit a feud created by previous generations, whereas *Othello* increasingly becomes an active participant in the conflict that destroys him, allowing jealousy and suspicion to dictate his actions. Reading the plays together therefore complicates the view that Shakespeare presents individuals as entirely powerless, instead suggesting that tragedy emerges through the uneasy interaction between inherited social pressures and personal responsibility. The audience watches events unfold with the knowledge that the lovers' deaths are already anticipated, creating the impression that inherited violence has become a defining feature of the society itself, shaping not only individual destinies but the collective identity of Verona. Through this dramatic structure, Shakespeare encourages audiences to see Romeo and Juliet not simply as individuals, but as young people attempting to navigate a society whose divisions existed long before they were born. Conflict therefore emerges as a powerful force that shapes their choices and limits their freedom, while comparison with *Othello* reveals that Shakespeare repeatedly explores the tension between social circumstance and individual agency as a defining feature of tragic experience.

Task:

Now read the model paragraph below which has been adapted.

Notice how criticism can be woven into an argument rather than attached awkwardly to the end.

It becomes part of the wider discussion.

The additions below have been bolded.

Although Shakespeare presents Romeo and Juliet as victims of a society divided by hatred and inherited conflict, the tragedy also suggests that individual choices intensify the violence that surrounds them. By exposing the destructive consequences of family loyalty, masculine honour and impulsive action, Shakespeare ultimately presents conflict as both a social force that shapes individuals and a responsibility they must confront.

Shakespeare initially presents conflict as an inherited force that shapes the lives of Romeo and Juliet before they have any opportunity to determine their own futures. From the opening Prologue, the lovers are described as "star-cross'd", suggesting that their relationship exists within a world already marked by division and suffering. Understanding the play's historical and theatrical context deepens this interpretation. Elizabethan audiences lived in a society familiar with public disorder, civic unrest and violent displays of masculine honour, meaning the feud would have resonated as more than a private family disagreement. At the same time, Renaissance theatre itself was recognised as a space capable of questioning social hierarchies and exposing political and cultural tensions before diverse public audiences. Shakespeare therefore constructs Verona as a community in which conflict has become embedded within everyday social life rather than an isolated dispute between two households. By revealing the tragic outcome before the action begins, Shakespeare transforms the feud into something larger than a private disagreement, inviting audiences to reflect upon the social systems that sustain violence rather than viewing the lovers' deaths as the consequence of private misfortune alone. Comparison with *Othello* further develops this interpretation by revealing Shakespeare's recurring interest in societies fractured by inherited divisions and codes of honour. Like Romeo and Juliet, Othello attempts to pursue a relationship that challenges established social expectations, yet both plays demonstrate how prejudice, masculine identity and public reputation shape private decisions. However, the tragedies differ in significant ways. Romeo and Juliet inherit a feud created by previous generations, whereas Othello increasingly becomes an active participant in the conflict that destroys him, allowing jealousy and suspicion to dictate his actions. Reading the plays together therefore complicates the view that Shakespeare presents individuals as entirely powerless, instead suggesting that tragedy emerges through the uneasy interaction between inherited social pressures and personal responsibility. **Kiernan Ryan's interpretation challenges this argument still further by suggesting that Romeo and Juliet are not simply tragic victims but figures who imagine a different way of living. Rather than reproducing the hatred and hierarchy that define Verona, their relationship is founded upon mutual choice, equality and generosity. Ryan argues that the lovers belong to a future society rather than the violent world they inhabit, meaning their deaths expose the moral failures of Verona rather than any fundamental flaw in their own characters. From this perspective, the Prologue's presentation of the lovers as "star-cross'd" becomes less an expression of inevitable fate than a criticism of a society incapable of sustaining the values they represent. Shakespeare therefore encourages audiences to see Romeo and Juliet not simply as powerless victims, but as young people whose love challenges the divisions surrounding them and offers a vision of a more compassionate society beyond the tragedy.**

The audience watches events unfold with the knowledge that the lovers' deaths are anticipated from the outset, creating the impression that inherited violence has become a defining feature of Verona itself. Conflict ultimately emerges as a force that shapes individual choices, exposes the destructive consequences of inherited hatred and invites audiences to consider both the society that produces tragedy and the possibility of a different future.

Your Turn

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

Looking Back

At the beginning of this booklet, you were invited to think differently about literary study.

Since then, you have learned how to:

- construct arguments (AO1);
- analyse Shakespeare's methods (AO2);
- deepen interpretations through context (AO3);
- broaden ideas through comparison (AO4);
- engage with literary criticism (AO5).

You have also discovered something important.

Great literature rarely produces certainty.

Instead, it invites debate.

It encourages disagreement.

It rewards curiosity.

As you move into A Level English Literature, remember:

- You do not need the "right" answer.
- You need an argument that is thoughtful, supported and open to complexity.

That is what literary study demands.

And that is the conversation you are now ready to join.

What's Next?

You are now to complete your essay – as aforementioned in the introduction, you can hand write or type this.

Important: Whilst this booklet required you to integrate contextual insight (AO3), comparative insight (AO4), and critical insight (AO5) in one main paragraph, **you are not expected** to include these in all your main paragraphs. You have to be selective and purposeful, avoiding repetition and embedding any of the above just for the sake of it.

Your deadline will be given to you in September, however expect it to be within the first two weeks of the term.

This essay will be marked and feedback will be provided.

Your baseline assessment will be linked to this work where you'll be given a similar essay-style question to respond to – the contextual and critical reading from this bridging unit will be directly relevant for this assessment.

Appendices

The Violence of Romeo and Juliet – Andrew Dickson

All Shakespeare's plays contain themes that feel universal – the father who breaks disastrously from his children, the marriage that collapses under the pressure of a husband's jealousy. But the ingredients that make up [Romeo and Juliet](#) are perhaps more universal than most: young love, bitter hate, feuding communities, tragic and undeserved death. Shakespeare drew his story of a pair of star-crossed Veronese lovers from the lumbering narrative poem *Tragicall Historie of Romeus and Juliet* by the Elizabethan writer Arthur Brooke, but in reality the idea could have come from almost anywhere. The story is surely as old as love itself.

'With great applause'

The play's first audiences, perhaps at the Curtain Theatre in Shoreditch, seem to have responded powerfully to this story of volatile emotions and passions lived to the extreme: the first quarto of 1597 refers to it being 'often (with great applause) plaid publicquely', a claim echoed by the second quarto two years later, which refers to the play being 'sundry times publicquely acted'.

It is not hard to see why. Following Brooke, the play is set in Verona, but – as so often with Shakespeare – the streets we hear described on stage are also those of the bustling, overcrowded, pestilent, noisy and noisome city in which he lived and worked. London was a young city in the 1590s, and the crowds who took their chances with prostitutes and pickpockets in the entertainment districts were even younger; contemporary reports suggest audiences at the open-air theatres were predominantly male, and (unlike 'private' indoor playhouses, where admission cost at least six times as much) were drawn from all ranks of society. For this youthful, restless crowd – some of whom were bunking off work to attend – the violent skirmishes between the Capulets and Montagues that dominate the action must have been a major part of the attraction, and the swordfighting skills displayed by Shakespeare's colleagues will have been watched with a keen eye. It is an amusing thought that for at least some of these artisans and apprentices, the lovers and their all-consuming passion might have seemed almost incidental.

'Mad blood stirring'

For greyer heads in the audience, the image of young men on the prowl and a city slipping into mayhem would have been only too familiar. In summer 1595, two years before that first quarto was printed and perhaps in the same year Shakespeare was writing the play, a series of riots in London over rocketing inflation caused the authorities to panic. On 29 June, a 1,000-strong army of apprentices and disaffected soldiers marched on Tower Hill; on 4 July, martial law was imposed. In the legal action that followed, the rioters were accused of intending to 'robbe, steale, pill and spoile the wealthy ... and to take the sworde of auchthorityte from the magistrats and governours lawfully authorised'. Five were hanged, drawn and quartered. Ever-attentive to the world around him, Shakespeare responded to this atmosphere of what Benvolio calls 'the mad blood stirring' (3.1.4) by putting a version of it on stage:

ABRAHAM Do you bite your thumb at us, sir? (1.1.31–42)

wondered whether the couple in the play's title would be the only ones caught up in the tragedy.

Prague to Palestine

And while *Romeo and Juliet* has barely been off stage or screen since – it may well be Shakespeare’s most performed and adapted play – it takes on a particular intensity in places and periods where violence is more than a mere literary device. In communist Czechoslovakia in 1963, Czech director Otomar Krejča directed it at the Prague National Theatre in a famous version that, drawing heavily upon its Cold War context, made it into a parable of disaffected youth versus negligent age (seeing it in Paris the following year, Peter Brook declared this ‘the best production of the tragedy he had ever seen’). Indeed, according to some theatre historians *Romeo and Juliet* was one of the most popular plays behind the Iron Curtain; at Moscow’s Vakhtangov Theatre in 1956, Josef Rapoport offered an image of the lovers crushed by violent social forces, an approach echoed by Tamás Major’s Hungarian production of 1971, which played the feud as an outright civil war, put down by an overbearing military regime.

Other conflicts have provided divisions even starker and more dramatically potent. In 1994, the Romany company Pralipe (Brotherhood), forced to perform in exile from their native Macedonia, set the play in Bosnia with a Muslim Juliet and a Christian Romeo, and closed the play not with reconciliation but spatters of gunfire. That same year, Palestinian and Israeli theatremakers came together to create a joint production in Jerusalem, with the Montagues as Arabs and the Capulets as Jews; the balcony scene was conducted in a mixture of Arabic and Hebrew, and the brawling families threw rocks in a deliberate echo of the intifada.

In India, where tensions of creed and caste are impossible to ignore, the Romeo and Juliet story has inspired multiple versions, notably in cinema: in 1947, the year of partition, a version starring the great Indian heroine Nargis was released (the film is now unfortunately lost), while in 1992 an adaptation called *Henna* was a hit at the box office, featuring Zeba Bakhtiar as a Pakistani Muslim Juliet and Rishi Kapoor as her Indian Hindu lover.

More familiar to most Western audiences is the much-loved *West Side Story* (1957), which united the considerable talents of Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins and Stephen Sondheim. Set on the mean streets of New York's Upper West Side, it portrayed the violent gang warfare between the Puerto Rican Sharks and the white Jets. That Robbins's original concept suggested a conflict between Irish Catholic and Jewish families located in the entirely different community of the Lower East Side suggests how adaptable the story can really be.

Yet if *Romeo and Juliet* can point up the multiple divisions in society, it can also – sometimes at least – attempt to heal them. In 2014, the Syrian playwright and director Nawar Bulbul, working with two groups

of young people in Syria and Jordan, performed a version of the play unlike any other.^[8] A 12-year-old Syrian boy played Romeo from the hospital in Amman where he'd been forced to flee; Juliet, her head covered with a veil and her identity kept secret, was in Homs. The two sets of performers – and the two sets of audience in each location – were rehearsed separately, then connected by Skype for the performance. Friar Lawrence was played by a young Muslim actor in tribute to Father Frans van der Lugt, a Jesuit priest murdered by the Assad regime. This time the play ended not with death, but in the frantic hope for something else. 'Enough killing! Enough blood!' Juliet's companion cries, 'Why are you killing us? We want to live like the rest of the world.'

The Renaissance Theatre – Eric Rasmussen

In the late summer of 1597, a monster emerged from the humid stench of London's Bankside. News of the monster quickly reached Robert Cecil, Secretary of State to Queen Elizabeth. Cecil determined that the monster was a threat to national security and arranged for its swift destruction. The nest where it had bred was raided and neutralised; the people who had nurtured it were called to account and imprisoned. The monster in question was a satirical play called *The Isle of Dogs*. Its co-author, Thomas Nash acknowledged that in writing the play he'd created a monster: 'it was no sooner borne but I was glad to run from it'. No copy of the play exists today, so we can only guess at its contents. But the Privy Council clearly viewed it as 'seditious' and ordered not only that the dramatists and actors be imprisoned but that all theatres in the city be closed for months as a punishment. This governmental response may seem like overkill, but the Queen and her enforcers were keenly aware of the potential danger posed by theatre's ability to subvert cultural norms. In Renaissance England, the development of theatre paralleled, and may have helped to spark, dramatic, culture-wide shifts in religious, economic, social, sexual and even political perspectives.

Theatre historian Andrew Gurr has estimated that as many as 50 million people paid to see live theatre in London during the golden age of English Renaissance drama. London loved theatre. And with theatre's popularity came a reorganising of social strata in which class divisions were no longer safe. After all, William Shakespeare, the son of a Stratford glover, earned enough in a decade of playmaking and acting to buy a share in a theatrical company as well as an opulent house in Stratford-upon-Avon. He even applied to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms. When the request was granted, Shakespeare effectively entered the nobility. This social step epitomises the potentially subversive nature of theatre: it allowed the playmaker son of an artisan father to style himself a gentleman.

Restrictions

Governmental authorities understood the potential disruptions public theatre could cause in a well-ordered cultural hierarchy, so took steps to control the performances of plays from the very beginning. As early as 1574, even before the first theatre was built, the Lord Mayor of London and the Common Council laid heavy restrictions on the times, places, contents and purposes of theatrical entertainments. Although the municipal government was decidedly anti-theatre, its animosity had little effect. Beginning with the construction of the first purpose-built playhouse in 1576 until the closing of the theatres in 1642, theatre's popularity and commercial success steadily increased.

Subversive playwrights

The successful playwrights who emerged during this period were a decidedly subversive group. There was Christopher Marlowe, accused of being an atheist, suspected of homosexual tendencies, an ex-spy who was murdered at age 29 in the suspicious company of other spies. There was Ben Jonson, who had been apprenticed to his bricklayer stepfather as a youth, soldiered in the Low Countries, killed a fellow actor in a

duel and became a Catholic while in prison for the killing. And there was George Wilkins, a thug who had a long arrest record for brutal assaults (including kicking a pregnant woman in the belly). Wilkins was Shakespeare's landlord in London, and collaborated with him on *Pericles*.

When Sir Francis Walsingham formed an acting company under the patronage of Queen Elizabeth, he dictated that plays written for and performed by the Company of Players, the Queen's Men, should feature patriotic representations of English history with wholesome Protestant morals, and ought to be written in stately verse. Although some early playwrights adhered to this party line, Marlowe broke frame to take serious risks: writing about a Mongol warlord, Tamburlaine – in blank verse, no less. More seriously, whereas the government had called for morality plays with English heroes, Marlowe's foreign infidel repeatedly commits heinously amoral acts and is never struck down by the hand of divine justice. And Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* was a runaway success.

Even when Marlowe wrote apparently orthodox plays, he still found ways to push against the government's expectations, as well as societal conventions. *Doctor Faustus*, his best-known work, presents itself as a familiar moral tale of the perils of pride and excessive learning, and yet somehow manages to question the very legitimacy of that moral dramatic framework. *The Massacre at Paris*, perhaps Marlowe's most obscure play, disrupts expectations in similar ways. The play promises to be a fairly straightforward, nationalistic condemnation of Frenchness and Catholicism. Unsurprisingly, in the course of the play this expected straightforwardness collapses into recognisably Marlovian political angling and moral shades of grey.

Shakespeare was influenced by Marlowe's subversion of form and subject matter. The two may have collaborated on *King Henry VI* Parts 1–3, choosing as their subject a weak and ineffectual monarch in a decidedly unpatriotic series of plays. Much like Marlowe's earlier *Edward II*, Shakespeare's own *Richard II* deals with the deposition of another inept king. The scene in which Richard is forced to yield his crown was omitted from printed versions of the play throughout Elizabeth's reign, and was perhaps left out in performance as well – no doubt the official government censor, known as the Master of the Revels, did not wish to encourage audiences to contemplate removing a sitting monarch, given the Queen's advanced age and debatable fitness for rule. Indeed, when the Earl of Essex planned a coup to overthrow Elizabeth, his henchmen commissioned Shakespeare's acting company to perform *Richard II*, presumably to get Londoners in the mood for a forced deposition. Although the rebellion failed, theatre's potential for political subversion was clearly understood.

Many of Shakespeare's plays actually deal with unstable political situations, especially those commonly referred to as the 'great tragedies'. *Hamlet*'s famous indecision originates in the death of Denmark's monarch; *Macbeth*'s plot involves two separate regicides, though both occur offstage. *King Lear* provides some of Shakespeare's most complex reflections on the nature of kingship. The image of the 'poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old' Lear (3.2.20) wandering mad on the heath may not have unsettled James I, devoted fan of theatre as he was. But it certainly does raise questions about the actual differences between monarch and subject, questions that resonate with performers, critics and students to this day. The extant manuscript of *Sir Thomas More* – a play to which Shakespeare contributed a few speeches – gives us a peek of insight into the type of subversive material that the censor was on the lookout for. The Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, has written on the first page of the manuscript 'leave out the insurrection wholly'. The government was obviously concerned that a stage representation of a riot by unemployed Londoners against foreign workers who had taken their jobs might breed real riots in the theatres and the streets of the city.

All plays performed in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre had to be approved by the Master of the Revels, with the curious exception of those staged by the Children of the Queen's Revels, a company of boy actors under the patronage of Queen Anne, for whom the poet Samuel Daniel was appointed as the official

licenser of plays. Dramatists flocked to this company where they (rightly) assumed that a sympathetic fellow writer would be more likely to allow subversive plays to be staged than a rigorous government censor. In 1605, Ben Jonson, George Chapman and John Marston went so far as to make fun of King James's Scottish accent in *Eastward Ho!* (Jonson and Chapman were subsequently imprisoned and 'in danger of having their ears and noses slit' as punishment, all the while blaming the offensive passages on Marston.) In the following year, John Day's *Isles of Gulls*, a thinly veiled attack on the government, occasioned such a scandalous uproar that the playwright and entire cast of boys were imprisoned. Whereas casting conventions called for boys to perform women's roles, the trope of the cross-dressing character called for a female character to don a male disguise. Thus, a boy actor taking the role of Portia in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* would, in the course of the action, cross-dress as a woman for the part of Portia, then cross-dress again (or back?) when Portia adopts the persona of Balthazar. This fluidity leads, in several of Shakespeare's plays, to highly fascinating reflections on the relationship between gender, performance and identity; more importantly to Renaissance London, it would have further ruffled Puritan feathers. But the Puritans would ultimately get their revenge, and certainly the last laugh, when they came to power and succeeded in closing the theatres in 1642.

Religion

Religion was another favoured target of theatrical satire, and one that was seemingly tolerated by the Master of the Revels. Characters such as Zeal-of-the-Land Busy in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* and Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* exaggerated extremist Puritanism for comedic effect. Roman Catholicism was usually represented with more seriousness, but hardly more concern for psychological realism. In Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*, the outwardly Catholic Duke of Guise reveals in his first soliloquy that he is in fact one of Marlowe's trademark atheist villains. In Shakespeare's *King John*, Cardinal Pandolf acts as the Pope's proxy, repeatedly acting against England's interests. Sometimes, of course, Puritans were represented seriously, and Catholics were represented comedically; for instance, one scene in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* has Faustus use his new magical powers to beat and abuse the Pope, a scene clearly written for laughs. The theatre used humour to skewer Puritans and slander to skewer Catholics: the common denominator was irreverence.

Cross-Dressing

The Puritans deeply disapproved of the theatrical practice of cross-dressing female roles. Women were not part of the theatrical guilds, so acting companies cast boys in most women's parts. This practice represented the ultimate in theatrical deception to religious eyes: boys were not women, and presenting boys in the guise of women misled audiences, both about boys' natures and women's natures. When playwrights and companies realised that this casting habit bothered the Puritans, they predictably leaned into it. With increasing frequency from the 1590s onward, English Renaissance plays deployed not only cross-dressing actors but cross-dressing characters as well.

An Introduction to Shakespearean Tragedy - Kiernan Ryan

When we think about Shakespearean tragedy, the plays we usually have in mind are *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. That core list of nine can be expanded to twelve, however, if we include the history plays *Richard III* and *Richard II*, both of which were also billed as tragedies in Shakespeare's day, and *Timon of Athens*, whose claim to inclusion is more questionable, but which is listed as one of the tragedies on the contents page (the 'Catalogue') of the 1623 First Folio. So, for that matter, is *Cymbeline*,

though no one could make a credible case for its belonging there, when it plainly belongs with the late romances – *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* – with which it's long been grouped. *Troilus and Cressida*, on the other hand, despite being advertised in an earlier edition as a first-rate comedy, is also entitled a tragedy in the First Folio, but not listed at all in the Catalogue and placed ambiguously – as befits its unclassifiable nature – between the histories and the tragedies.

The more one ponders the question of what qualifies as a Shakespearean tragedy, the more complicated it can become. So modern studies of Shakespeare's tragedies tend to focus on the plays whose right to the title is undisputed, and treat each one separately as a self-contained tragedy, leaving the question of what unites them unaddressed or unresolved. There's a lot to be said for approaching each tragedy first and foremost as a unique work of dramatic art in its own right. And the temptation to boil them all down to the same generic formula should obviously be resisted. But it would be equally misguided to rule out the possibility of identifying what the tragedies have in common without dissolving the differences between them. For that would mean denying the strong sense most people have, when watching or reading these plays, that there's something distinctively Shakespearean about their tragic vision that sets them apart from other kinds of tragedy.

Romeo and Juliet

So what is it that stamps a play as the kind of tragedy that merits the term 'Shakespearean'? The detailed answer that question demands is beyond the scope of this brief introduction. But the basic points of the argument it would entail can be outlined here, and my articles on *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* should go some way towards fleshing them out.

The key point should become clear if we turn to one of Shakespeare's earliest tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare's immortal couple have become a global byword for lovers driven unjustly to their doom because they belong to warring factions that refuse to tolerate their love. During the last four centuries the play has inspired countless adaptations and offshoots on stage and screen, as well as operas, symphonies, fiction, poetry and paintings. But *Romeo and Juliet* couldn't have acquired its enduring resonance, if the significance and value of the tragedy were trapped in the time when Shakespeare wrote it. If the play made sense and mattered only in terms of that time, it wouldn't be able to reach across the centuries and speak with such urgency to so many different cultures now. That *Romeo and Juliet* is rooted in the age of Shakespeare, and can't be fully understood without some knowledge of the world it sprang from, hardly needs demonstrating. But no critical account or production can do justice to *Romeo and Juliet*, if it's not alert to the ways in which it was far ahead of Shakespeare's time and is still far ahead of ours too.

Coleridge was the first critic to grasp, over 200 years ago, this crucial characteristic of Shakespeare's greatest plays. Shakespeare 'writes not for past ages,' observes Coleridge, 'but for that in which he lives, and that which is to follow. It is natural that he should conform to the circumstances of his day, but a true genius will stand independent of those circumstances.' 'It is a poor compliment to a poet', Coleridge remarks with Shakespeare in mind, 'to tell him that he has only the qualifications of an historian.' And what enables Shakespeare's drama to stand independent of the historical circumstances to which it otherwise conforms is what Coleridge calls its 'prophetic' quality, its dream of 'that which is to follow'. While he 'registers what is past' in his plays, Shakespeare also 'projects the future in a wonderful degree', and thus 'shakes off the iron bondage of space and time', as Coleridge superbly puts it.

'My bounty is as boundless as the sea'

It's hard to think of a Shakespearean tragedy that illustrates Coleridge's insight more clearly than *Romeo and Juliet*. The love that *Romeo and Juliet* discover may be fleeting, but it's a new kind of love that propels them beyond the horizon of Shakespeare's world and remains an inspiring ideal in our own. *Romeo's*

infatuation with Rosaline had been rightly mocked by Mercutio as the same old Petrarchan scenario of submissive male tormented by unrequited love for an unattainable mistress. But Mercutio's remedy for Romeo's clichéd quandary is merely its inverted mirror-image, the subjugation of female to male in an aggressive act of self-gratification: 'If love be rough with you, be rough with love; / Prick love for pricking, and you beat love down' (1.4.27–28). Both scenarios lock both parties into an unequal relationship that subordinates one of them to the will of the other. But the relationship of Romeo and Juliet is based on reciprocity rather than subservience. As the Chorus tells us: 'Now Romeo is beloved and loves again' ('loves again' means 'loves back in return'); they are equally attracted to each other: 'Alike bewitched by the charm of looks'; and, unlike Rosaline, Juliet is 'as much in love' with Romeo as he is with her (2 Chorus 5-6, 11).

Romeo's symmetrical phrasing reflects the perfect balance of attraction and power that distinguishes their relationship: 'One hath wounded me / That's by me wounded' (2.3.50–51); 'As mine [i.e. 'my heart'] on hers, so hers is set on mine' (2.3.59); 'Her I love now / Doth grace for grace and love for love allow; / The other did not so' (2.3.85–87). Above all, their love is mutually enhancing and limitless. In Juliet's wonderful words: 'My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite' (2.2.133–35). Thus the tragic fate of Romeo and Juliet's 'true-love passion' (2.2.104) does more than dramatize the pernicious effects of the feud that divides their families. It's long been recognised that the play vindicates the individual's right to love whoever they choose to love, unconstrained by irrational prohibitions or mindless prejudice. But *Romeo and Juliet* goes further than that. It envisions, and finds the words to describe, a bond of love uncontaminated by the urge to use and dominate. 400 years on, the play is as committed as ever to showing that mutual love between equals is not just desirable but possible by bringing it alive in the theatre or the mind's eye of the reader.

Citizens of centuries to come

What makes the fate of Romeo and Juliet tragic, and what makes the play a Shakespearean tragedy, is the fact that they live at a time when a boundless love like theirs cannot be sustained and cannot survive, because it belongs to a future men and women are still struggling to create. Romeo and Juliet turn out to have been citizens of truly civilized centuries to come, who reveal the potential to lead more fulfilling lives than those they have been forced to lose by the barbaric age in which they are marooned.

The same strikes me as true, in one way or another, of all Shakespeare's great tragic protagonists. They are all 'fools of Time' (to borrow a phrase from Sonnet 124) in the sense that they are hoodwinked by history. In spite of their capacity to embrace an entirely different destiny, they are overpowered by the constraints of the era they have the misfortune to inhabit rather than by some malign metaphysical force or some unfortunate flaw in their character. Romeo may believe himself to be the victim of 'some consequence... hanging in the stars' (2.4.107); Hamlet may wonder whether it's 'some vicious mole of nature' (1.4.24) or 'a divinity that shapes our ends' (5.2.10); and Macbeth may blame his downfall on the 'supernatural soliciting' (1.3.130) of the 'secret, black, and midnight hags' (4.1.48) he encounters on the heath. But their real tragedy is to find themselves stranded and fated to die in a hostile, alien reality, far from the transfigured future their tragic plight foreshadows.

Think of Othello. A black man from Africa and an upper-class white woman from Venice fall in love and elope, undaunted by the hostility their interracial marriage inevitably incurs. Othello and Desdemona act, with a sublime utopian naivety the play invites us to admire, as if they already dwelt in a world of which we in the 21st century can still only dream: a world in which such marriages have the unquestioned right to be left in peace to flourish. Instead they attract, in the shape of Iago, the lethal hatred of a racially prejudiced, patriarchal society, whose foundations their love threatens to undermine. Or think of Antony and Cleopatra, that peerless 'mutual pair', whose passion for each other moves Antony to exclaim, as he embraces Cleopatra, 'Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my

space, / Kingdoms are clay' (1.1.33–35, 37, 40). To find 'the nobleness of life' (1.1.36) not in rank, power, politics or conquest, but in the intensity of their feelings for each other, is to be fatally at odds with everything Rome stands for, and with the part of themselves that can't, in the end, resist the demands or the glamour of empire. So, like Romeo and Juliet, they are left with no option but to take their own lives in order to find forever in death the transcendent union denied them in life.

Shakespearean tragedy

It's not difficult to see how Shakespeare's tragedies of love – Romeo and Juliet, Othello and Antony and Cleopatra – were written from an imaginative standpoint ahead of their time. The heart-breaking conflict between what human beings need to be, deserve to be and could be, and what the time and place they live in condemn them to become, could scarcely be clearer than it is in these plays. Shakespeare makes it equally plain that there's nothing to stop human beings putting an end to such tragedies by changing the world that produced them and changing themselves in the process. His creation of characters who can't come to terms with their world reveals the capacity of human beings to be radically different from the way their world expects them to be. So, although these particular characters end up defeated by the intolerable predicament in which they are trapped, the predicament itself is shown by them to be the product of a society whose authority can be resisted and contested. The way things had to be for them, as they prove at the cost of their lives, is not the way they should be, and not the way they have to go on being.

Once one understands that, it's much easier to see what the other tragedies have in common with the tragedies of love, and what's characteristically Shakespearean about them too. Shakespeare's tragic protagonists, the fictional universes they inhabit, and the tragic fates that await them are amazingly diverse. But every one of his tragic protagonists is doomed by having been cast in the wrong role in the wrong place in the wrong time. Every one of them becomes a stranger in a world where they had once felt at home, and a stranger to the person that they used to be or thought they were. And in the process, every one of them reveals the potential they possess to be another kind of person in another kind of world, which they will tragically never live to see.

'The prophetic soul / Of the wide world'

Take, for example, Hamlet: cruelly miscast as a 16th-century prince, bewildered by his inability to sweep to the revenge he has sworn to take, and so alienated from a time he perceives to be 'out of joint' (1.5.188) that 'all the uses of this world', including sovereignty itself and everything it entails, have become 'weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable' (1.2.133–34) to him. Or King Lear: forced to feel what the 'Poor naked wretches' (3.4.28) of his kingdom feel; to see the vulnerable human being – 'unaccommodated man' (3.4.106–7) – beneath a mad beggar's rags and his royal robes; and to recognise the systemic injustice and inherent inhumanity of the regime over which he had presided so thoughtlessly for so long. Or Macbeth: the noble warlord who murders a fellow human being for his crown, is tortured by guilt as a consequence, and winds up butchering his way to oblivion, in spite of being, as his own wife attests, 'too full o' th' milk of human kindness' (1.5.17).

Take Titus Andronicus and Coriolanus: both driven to turn in savage rage against the Rome whose martial virtues they once epitomized – Titus having realised that 'Rome is but a wilderness of tigers' (3.1.54) behind its civilised façade; and the killing-machine Coriolanus that 'There is a world elsewhere' (3.3.135), though not one in which he can escape from himself. Or Richard II: the dethroned monarch, who learns too late, like Lear, that the king was just the role he chanced to play, and who realises that without the trappings of majesty he is 'nothing', and might as well have been the 'beggar' he sometimes wishes that he was (5.5. 33, 37). Or Timon of Athens: transformed by the ingratitude of his friends into an implacable misanthrope, so disenchanted with humanity that, like Richard II, he finds fulfilment only in the

annihilation death will bring: 'My long sickness / Of health and living now begins to mend, / And nothing brings me all things' (5.1.186–88).

When the visionary German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, 'We children of the future, how could we be at home in this today?', he might have been speaking for all Shakespeare's tragic heroes, who are heroic precisely because they could never have been at home in their today. Nor is it that surprising, since they are the creations of a dramatist who was himself a child of the future, and who remains to this day, four centuries after his death, 'the prophetic soul / Of the wide world dreaming on things to come' (Sonnet 107).