“Aristotelian Tragedy: Actions Speak Louder Than Words”

In the simplest terms, a tragedy is an event that brings an emotional sensation of melancholy or infinite sadness upon those involved or witnessing the tragedy. This grievance is brought out in its purest forms through death because the woeful transition of humans descending into nothingness, out of existence, brings out raw emotion in others, especially those who formed close bonds with the deceased. Death is usually the cause of ultimate mourning, and William Shakespeare takes advantage of this understanding of tragedy in his play, Romeo and Juliet, in a way that mimics the definition the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, created that outlines a perfect tragedy. Romeo and Juliet draws upon Aristotle’s concept of a tragedy through the result of many solemn actions across the play that, more often than not, result in death. Those fatal concoctions not only cover the audience with a veil of catharsis, but the actual characters achieve the same state of a “ritual cleansing,” as well.

Isaac Newton describes in depth, the outcomes of actions. Newton created three basic laws that describe the outcomes of actions. Whereas these laws are in context of a literal sense of motion, they still apply in a metaphorical sense in literary texts. In his first law of motion, or inertia, for motions to occur in a still object or a change in motion occur to an object not at rest, an outside force must act upon it.

In the case of Romeo and Juliet, this law still applies perfectly in the winding path of tragedy explored throughout the play. For every tragic event that occurs, there is always an action, which results from a character’s hamartia, which is the causation for the end result of the tragedy. For example, during the fray between Mercutio, Romeo, and Tybalt, after Mercutio is slain and Tybalt arrives at the scene of the bloodshed to bring an end to this violent feud, Romeo announces to Tybalt, “Alive in triumph, and Mercutio slain?/Away to heaven respective lenity,/ And fiery-eyed fury be my conduct now!” Throughout the entire play, the one hamartia Romeo displays is purely love. From the “artificial night” he creates, to his ultimate demise through a poison drop that “delivers” his soul to his dearest Juliet, love is the driving force that controls his actions. Although some may consider this “fiery-eyed fury” to be the product of sheer hatred towards Tybalt, the bleak reality of the matter is the surge of anger Romeo experiences during this destruction of his innocence, is the result of the polar opposite of hate: his love for Mercutio. This love for his dearest companion made Romeo’s character morph into this warrior of love instead of the pacifistic empathizer towards love, yet this is not the only tragedy to be born through this fatal flaw.

The final, solemn, tragic, action of Romeo and Juliet’s suicide radiates such magnitude that it brings every spectator at the point past tears into a state known as catharsis. This final “purging of emotions” is a key section of Aristotelian Tragedy that almost matches a portion of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy itself. The definition being, “Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and possessing magnitude…” A suicide of anyone, be they noble or not, is serious, yet it also possesses magnitude because all death possesses magnitude; this duo of deaths encases such magnitude that it shattered a feud centuries old. Moments after discovering the scene of monumental grief, Lord Capulet calls out to Lord Montague, “O brother Montague, give me thy hand:” Not only does this tragic death of two young souls causes the audience of the play to go through a cleansing sensation, but two heads of the households, full of hatred for each other, set aside differences older than their existence and comfort each other in a time of mourning. The significance of ending the grudge that resulted in every tragedy acted out in the play is unrivaled, but it is terrible that the tragedy had to be complete for the families’ differences to be set aside.

Encompassed within the many tragedies that occur in Romeo and Juliet, one cannot help but wonder if the deaths, violence, hatred, and misguided romance were the faults of the free will the characters had, or others even link the events to a fate that always was meant to be. Despite these various claims, the crystal clear fault lies shrouded in fog, for there are too many variables to paint a perfect picture of whose fault the blame should be placed upon and the reasons backing their treason. Nevertheless, the importance of this tragedy stems from the actions creating it and the hamartia assisting the decision making process. The actions are the core of the poisonous apple, Aristotelian Tragedy. Without these misjudged actions, sorrow could not flourish; when the refuses to rise marking an end to an unfortunate series of events, Prince Escalus solemnly announces, "For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo."