

MODULE IV: RESPONSIBILITY/BLAME/GUILT

"And here I stand, both to impeach and purge
Myself condemned and myself excused."

(V.iii.226-227)

The final moments of the play depict the responses of the survivors to the deaths of Romeo, Juliet, Paris, Tybalt and Lady Montague. They grieve, they feel responsible, they blame others and themselves and they are filled with guilt.

These are common responses for any survivor of tragedy. Thus, the purpose of this module is to acknowledge that such behavior is not unusual and to describe ways that survivors can deal with loss constructively. Tragedy helps us understand the mistakes of fictional characters with whom we suffer and for whom we grieve. It also suggests that, with understanding, comes the ability to forgive rather than blame. In Romeo and Juliet, responsibility for the tragedy is shared among all.

In this module, we will examine ways in which blame, responsibility and guilt contributed to the final tragedies in the play; explore the implications of handling these feelings differently; and see what "other endings" might have evolved.

ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY

Exercise 1: Responsibility

The story of Romeo and Juliet's love and the story of the feud between the Montagues and Capulets intersect fatally in III.i., the pivotal scene of the play. Romeo's decision to avenge Mercutio's death marks the turning point in the action: All else follows from it--Romeo's banishment, Capulet's hasty decision to marry Juliet to Paris to lift her from her grief. Thus we can see that the workings of "fortune" depend on the choices Romeo makes here. A determining factor in his decision to fight Tybalt is Romeo's sense of responsibility for Mercutio's death.

It is important to understand the sequence of events leading to Romeo's decision and to his sense of responsibility and guilt. As the scene opens, it is clear that Mercutio is spoiling for a fight. When Tybalt enters, seeking Romeo to answer his challenge to a duel, Mercutio tries to bait him, but Tybalt is intent on fighting Romeo. Tybalt resists quarrelling with Mercutio, who is related to the Prince, not

the Montagues. Tybalt challenges Romeo, who refuses to fight, calmly rebuffing Tybalt's insults. Shocked at this departure from the personal code of honor of the feud, Mercutio calls Romeo's action "calm, dishonorable, vile submission," and challenges Tybalt to a duel. As Romeo frantically tries to part them, Tybalt wounds Mercutio fatally. Tybalt flees; the dying Mercutio blames Romeo for coming between them and curses both houses. Romeo reproaches himself for lacking courage and resolves to fight Tybalt to the death.

The following discussion questions are designed to help students analyze the sequence of events in this scene and to assess how Romeo's reactions to Mercutio's death lead him to assume responsibility and to decide to kill Tybalt.

NOTES

INSTRUCTIONS

Suggestions (a)

Evidence includes Romeo's belief that Mercutio was killed fighting for Romeo's honor; "My very friend, hath got this mortal hurt/in my behalf..." (III. 112-113).

Suggestions (b)

Evidence includes Mercutio's blame of Romeo: "why the devil came you between us? I was/hurt under your arm" (III.i.104-105) Mercutio's rejection of Romeo's help (II.i.107), and Mercutio's curse on the feuding families for causing his death, "A plague o' both your houses... They have made worms' meat of me" (III.i. 108-109).

Suggestions (c)

Romeo was ashamed that he had not behaved according to the code of his day; "O sweet Juliet,/thy beauty hath made me effeminate/And my temper soften, valour's steel" (III.i.115-117).

Suggestions (d)

- o He tried to stop the fight and act like a responsible citizen (cf.1.86).
- o He thought he was helping Mercutio by stepping in to block Tybalt's

1. Read or enact III.i.1-38, paying special attention to lines 59-134. Ask the following questions:

- a. Is there evidence from the play to show that Romeo feels responsibility for Mercutio's death?
- b. What did Mercutio say and do that made Romeo feel responsibility for Mercutio's death?
- c. What evidence do we have that Romeo reacted to Mercutio's criticism of his refusal to fight Tybalt? How did this contribute to Romeo's decision to fight.
- d. Is there evidence that Romeo, in fact was not responsible for Mercutio's death?

sword.

- o Mercutio had wanted to fight Tybalt earlier; Mercutio decided to fight despite everything Romeo and Benvolio could do to stop him.
- o He felt that he had to avenge his friend's death, so he challenged and killed Tybalt.
- o Events happened so swiftly that Romeo did not have time to think. He just reacted.

Suggestions (f)

- o Although we cannot tell a friend how to feel, we can share our views of the facts and our own feelings about an event.
- o As we try to understand a friend's feelings, we can explore ways to deal with those feelings.

- e. What was the effect of Romeo's taking of responsibility for Mercutio's death?

- f. Other Endings: If you were Romeo's friend, how could you help him gain perspective on his role in Mercutio's death?

2. These questions are designed to help students understand how Romeo felt about what happened to Mercutio.

Suggestions (a)

It is important to try to understand and gain perspective on feelings of responsibility, guilt and shame.

- a. What is the probable time frame between Mercutio's death and Romeo's decision to fight Tybalt?
- b. Discuss the effect this had on Romeo's perception of his responsibility for Tybalt's death.

3. Since Mercutio was Romeo's close friend, Romeo felt both grief and guilt at Mercutio's death.

- a. What else could Romeo have done to express his sorrow at Mercutio's death?

Suggestions (a)

When we grieve for someone, we often do something--anything--to express our remorse. If we feel guilty, we may want to make amends. there are other options than the one taken by Romeo (avenge the death).

- b. Other Endings: Consider what might have happened had Romeo sought advice from the Prince before deciding to assume responsibility for Mercutio's death and to seek revenge.

BLAME

Mercutio blamed Romeo in part for his own death. Prince Escalus and Lady Capulet blamed Romeo for Tybalt's death. Romeo blames himself for Mercutio's death and, later, for the grief that Tybalt's death has brought to Juliet (III.iii.93-95; 101-106). Capulet blamed Juliet for being disobedient (III.v.139-145) and both he and Lady Capulet blamed her for being "ungrateful" to her parents (III.v.149-168). Finally, the Prince blames Capulet and Montague, as well as himself, for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet:

"...Capulet, Montague,
See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,
That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love;
And I, for winking at your discords too,
Have lost a brace of kinsmen; all are punishid."
(V.iii.291-295)

As we can see, the tendency to assign blame was as much a part of the human condition in Renaissance times as it is today. It is as futile now as it was then. In this module, we will explore the human need to blame.

NOTES

Use the critical events list above to help guide the discussion.

The major point to be made in this exercise is that although everyone including Romeo and Juliet themselves, could be blamed, for some part in the events leading to the deaths, such "proscriptive thinking" is futile and actually leads away from understanding. Some examples:

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Ask the students to recall the various places in the play when blame is assigned for some action.
2. a. Ask whom they feel really is responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet and why? List the names provided on the blackboard.
- b. Look at the list of people on the board and ask students to

- o Fr. Laurence because he ran away;
- o Romeo because he killed himself;
- o Romeo and Juliet because they acted rashly;
- o The parents because of their feud;
- o Balthazar because he failed to alert someone;
- o The Apothecary for selling Romeo poison.

debate, why each should not be blamed for the suicides.

Shakespeare never creates a simple, schematic world in which "blame" can be assigned easily for tragic consequences. The major lesson of this exercise is that both everyone and no one is to blame.

3. ALTERNATIVE EXERCISE

List all the characters who might be blamed for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet. Have students form debating teams. For each character listed, have a team debate why that character should and should not be blamed.

GUILT

The final scene of the play (line 199-the end) shows the survivors gathering together to understand what has happened and why. Romeo, Juliet and Paris are lying dead in the tomb. As Friar Laurence and Balthazar unfold the story, the survivors begin to comprehend the far-reaching effects of their feud. In their guilt about their roles in their children's deaths, Montague and Capulet agree to resolve their discord and to raise a golden statue in their children's honor.

Montague: "For I will raise her statue in pure gold,
That while Verona by that name is known,
There shall no figure at such rate be set
As that of true and faithful Juliet.
Capulet: As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie,
Poor sacrifices of our enmity."
(V.iii.299-304)

NOTE

When we lose someone, especially when we feel some responsibility for their deaths, it can seem as though we cannot live with the guilt and the knowledge of what we have done. We wish for a way to make amends, for absolution or even punishment. By erecting a costly memorial seen by all of Verona, Capulet and Montague publicly expressed their sorrow, guilt and shame.

Suggestions (b)

- o They felt so badly (grief-stricken, guilty, responsible, shamed) that they needed to do something.
- o They wanted to show (albeit too late) how much Romeo and Juliet were loved and valued by their parents.
- o They wanted to remind themselves and others of what happened.

Note: It is important not to present the resolution of the feud as an accomplishment brought about by the suicides of Romeo and Juliet but rather as a lesson learned too late, at a cost far too high. Although Romeo and Juliet longed for the feud to end, they did not martyr themselves to bring about its end. They were victims, whose living presences would have been the best of all monuments for families and friends.

Suggestions (2)

That pride and habit can have tragically destructive price tags.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Have students read or enact V.iii.199-310.
 - a. Have students discuss their own reaction to Montague's and Capulet's intention to build a monument.
 - b. Why do you think they decided to build a statue?
2. More important than building a statue, Montague and Capulet shake hands and end the feud. What have the parents learned?

Suggestions

- o Become active in bringing about change in situations that may have contributed to Romeo and Juliet's deaths, i.e., establish family counseling programs, crisis centers; organize peer support groups; support research into the causes of suicide; join a ban-the-sword movement.
 - o Create a fund in Romeo and Juliet's memories that would be used to help others.
 - o Write a book telling the story, so others would not make the same mistakes.
3. If you were Montague and Capulet, what would you do today?