

Passage Analysis: Tragedy's Effects on Romeo and Juliet's Discourse

In Act 2 Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet learns of Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment. The tragic news is relayed by her Nurse, who interrupts Juliet as she speaks of her love for Romeo. In shock and in grief, Juliet delivers a moving monologue that conveys her thought process to the audience as she works through the loss of both Tybalt and her husband. This passage is written in verse with the structure of iambic pentameter. Shakespeare writes these lines without a rhyme scheme and employs a number of literary devices to demonstrate Juliet's fall into desperation. First, he utilizes metaphor to present words as the medium of tragedy. He then uses diacope to demonstrate Juliet's decline into raw and powerful verse and apostrophe to demonstrate her dissociation from the tragic events that she experiences. Parataxis is then employed to mimic the natural human response to tragedy and to present the idea that without Romeo's presence, the story is unsustainable. Finally, the use of antithesis allows Shakespeare to highlight the nature of Romeo and Juliet's discourse as it develops in relation to the tragic events of the play. It is through these literary devices that Shakespeare conveys Juliet's inner emotions and train of thought in 'real time'. These choices lead Juliet to a powerful discovery: that her and Romeo's language is incapable of encompassing the tragic events that they experience.

In the first four lines of this passage, Shakespeare presents two metaphors. The first, "some word there was... that murdered me (108-109)" presents the idea that words are the medium of these tragic events, in direct contrast to the way that words had previously been the medium of Romeo and Juliet's love. The tenor of this metaphor is the pain that Romeo's

banishment causes Juliet, and the vehicle is a word being capable of murder. By using this metaphor, Shakespeare establishes the idea that their language has as significant an impact on the tragic moments of their relationship as it does on the romantic. The second metaphor, in lines 110-111, continues to establish the significance of words as Juliet comments on the extreme emotional impact of Romeo's banishment: "But O, it presses to my memory, like damned guilty deeds to sinners' minds". The vehicle of this metaphor, guilty thoughts in a sinful brain, is used to communicate the tenor—the strong effect of a word on Juliet's state of mind. At this point in the passage, Juliet has not yet spoken the word 'banishment'; instead, 'word' has been used in place of it. This choice emphasizes the impact that a word can have—Romeo's banishment brings Juliet so much pain that she cannot yet actually speak of it. Through these specific uses of language, Shakespeare gives the word 'word' a physical presence and a weight which directly influences the way the reader interprets the intensity of Juliet's grief.

In the following three lines, Shakespeare introduces the trope of diacope: "'Tybalt is dead and Romeo banished.' That 'banished', that one word 'banished', hath slain ten thousand Tybalts (112-114)." Within these three lines, Juliet speaks the word "banished" three times, which contrasts her previous aversion to the word. This demonstrates her grief as she begins to come to terms with the reality of the tragic events. She is so intensely focused on Romeo's banishment that she diverts from the poetic manner of speech present in many of her monologues. This demonstrates that their previous form of discourse, characterized by its lyrical and decorative nature, is only sustainable as an expression of their love. At the prospect of being alone, Juliet reverts to raw and powerful verse—furthering the idea that language is the vehicle of their tragedy.

The trope of apostrophe is utilized in lines 114-120: “Tybalt’s death was woe enough if it had ended there; or if sour woe delights in fellowship, and needly will be ranked with other griefs, why followed not, when she said ‘Tybalt’s dead’, ‘thy father’ or ‘thy mother’, nay, or both, which modern lamentation might have moved?” This excerpt from the passage features apostrophe in a unique way. Although Juliet is with her Nurse, she is speaking to an unhearing entity—specifically to the personification of grief. When speaking of woe, Juliet assigns it human characteristics and blames it for the tragic events that she is experiencing. In contrast, when she refers to the Nurse, Juliet says ‘she said’ and not ‘you said’. This change, although small, demonstrates Juliet’s complete dissociation from the situation and the level of distress that she is experiencing. Located in the middle of the passage, these lines convey the rise of Juliet’s emotions and set up the final lines to deliver their full impact.

Shakespeare then introduces parataxis in the following line: “‘Romeo is banished’: to speak that word, is father, mother, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet, all slain, all dead (122-124).” This trope is used twice within the passage to communicate the depth of Juliet’s pain in response to Romeo’s banishment. The parataxis employed in this line mimics the natural human reaction to tragedy. It removes the embellished and detailed elements of Juliet’s normal speech and reinforces the idea that without Romeo, Juliet cannot fulfill her role as a poet. Furthermore, Shakespeare introduces the idea that while Romeo is banished, the story cannot be sustained. For the reader, these characters have no purpose while Romeo and Juliet are not in love. As stated in the text, while Romeo is banished, the other characters—including Juliet herself—might as well not exist at all. It is in these lines that Juliet comes to a profound realization: their love is worth dying for. If it cannot be sustained in life, then it would be better sustained in death.

Shakespeare employs parataxis again in lines 124-126: “‘Romeo is banished!’ There is no end, no limit, measure, bound, in that word’s death, no words can that woe sound.” Not only do these lines continue to emphasize Juliet’s rising emotions, but they introduce the idea that for her, the pain of living without Romeo would be infinite. To stress this idea, Shakespeare uses four synonyms for the extent of her sorrow: end, limit, measure, and bound. This choice reflects Juliet’s growing focus and sense of clarity. In previous lines, she repeats singular words multiple times, while here she returns to her sharp and distinct form of speaking. Additionally, Shakespeare uses antithesis in these final lines of the passage. He presents a paradox: a word can have infinite impact, yet that impact cannot be described by words. By including antithesis in the final lines of Juliet’s monologue, Shakespeare presents a key idea: that Romeo’s banishment has an endless impact on Juliet, and yet their language is not capable of encompassing it. The discourse they developed within the first two acts of the play is only functional when Romeo and Juliet are presented as a single entity.

Throughout this passage, Shakespeare employs metaphor, parataxis, diacope, apostrophe, and antithesis to convey Juliet’s grief after Tybalt’s death and Romeo’s banishment. The specific choices that Shakespeare makes offer an answer to the question: how does tragedy affect the limits of Romeo and Juliet’s discourse? When love defines their relationship, their discourse is infinite. However, when tragedy defines their relationship, their discourse is finite. It is incapable of encompassing the depth of emotion that they experience. In the larger context of the play, this idea directly foreshadows their deaths. As the events of the play turn tragic, Romeo and Juliet run out of words. The limits of their language is what drives them towards their death.

“Some word there was, worsser than Tybalt’s death,
That murdered me; I would forget it fain,

But O, it presses to my memory,
Like damned guilty deeds to sinners minds:
'Tybalt is dead, and Romeo banished'
That 'banished', that one word 'banished',
Hath slain ten thousand Tybalts. Tybalt's death
Was woe enough if it had ended there;
Or if sour woe delights in fellowship,
And needly will be ranked with other griefs,
Why followed not, when she said 'Tybalt's dead',
'Thy father' or 'thy mother', nay, or both,
Which modern lamentation might have moved?
But with a rear-ward following Tybalt's death,
'Romeo is banished': to speak that word,
Is father, mother, Tybalt, Romeo, Juliet
All slain, all dead. 'Romeo is banished!'
There is no end, no limit, measure, bound,
In that word's death, no words can that woe sound.
(III.2.108-126)

Author's Statement

For this assignment, we were asked to write a close-reading paper on a passage from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In this analysis, we were tasked with exploring elements such as meter and rhyme, metaphor, and rhetorical tropes in order to understand our chosen passage in greater depth.