

Lesson Plan: Written in the Stars? Fate, Free Will, and Astrology in Shakespeare

Materials Needed:

- A digital or physical copy of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*
- A digital or physical copy of Shakespeare's *King Lear*
- Access to the internet for short, linked articles
- A notebook or word processing document for notes and responses

1. Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Define "astrological determinism" and explain its significance in the Elizabethan worldview.
- Identify and analyze key passages in *Romeo and Juliet* and *King Lear* that engage with the theme of fate versus free will.
- Construct a nuanced argument about Shakespeare's perspective on destiny, using specific textual evidence to support your claims.
- Creatively apply your understanding by reinterpreting a character's perspective or a director's vision for one of the plays.

2. Lesson Activities

Part I: The Hook - Modern Stars vs. Ancient Stars (10 minutes)

Let's start with something familiar. If you know your zodiac sign, quickly look up a horoscope for today from any popular source (like an online newspaper or astrology app).

- Read the horoscope. Does it feel accurate? Vague? Entertaining?
- **Discussion Question:** Why do you think people, even today, are so interested in what the stars have to say about their lives? What's the appeal of having a "cosmic forecast"?

This modern, often lighthearted view of astrology is a distant echo of a much more serious and integrated system of belief in Shakespeare's time. For Elizabethans, astrology wasn't a hobby; it was a science that suggested the stars could genuinely influence, or even dictate, human affairs.

Part II: The Context - What is Astrological Determinism? (20 minutes)

The core idea we are exploring is **astrological determinism**: the belief that the position and movement of celestial bodies at the moment of a person's birth determine their character, personality, and entire life path. This implies that free will is an illusion, and our lives are "pre-written."

To understand the mindset, read this short article on the Elizabethan World Picture from the British Library: [The Elizabethan World Picture](#)

As you read, consider:

- How did people see humanity's place in the universe?
- What was the "Great Chain of Being"?

- How does this orderly, hierarchical view of the cosmos lend itself to the idea of determinism?

In your notebook, write a one-sentence summary of why an Elizabethan might take astrology much more seriously than a modern person does.

Part III: The Evidence - Shakespeare Puts Fate on Trial (60 minutes)

Now, let's act as literary detectives. We will examine how Shakespeare uses this powerful belief system in two very different plays. Create a two-column chart in your notebook titled "Fate is in Control" vs. "We Make Our Own Choices."

Case Study #1: *Romeo and Juliet* - The Argument FOR Fate

This play is the poster child for destiny. The deck seems stacked against the lovers from the very beginning.

- **Read the Prologue.** Pay close attention to lines 5-6: "*From forth the fatal loins of these two foes / A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life.*" What does "star-cross'd" immediately tell the audience? Add this to the "Fate is in Control" column.
- **Read Romeo's line in Act 1, Scene 4**, just before he goes to the Capulet party: "*...for my mind misgives / Some consequence yet hanging in the stars / Shall bitterly begin his fearful date / With this night's revels...*" How does this create a sense of dread and inevitability? Note it in your chart.
- **Read Romeo's cry in Act 5, Scene 1**, after learning of Juliet's (supposed) death: "*Is it even so? Then I defy you, stars!*" This is a key moment. Is he successfully defying fate, or is his rebellious action the very thing that fulfills his tragic destiny? Add this to your chart, perhaps with a question mark.

Case Study #2: *King Lear* - The Argument AGAINST Fate

In this play, Shakespeare gives the most eloquent and forceful critique of astrological determinism to a villain, Edmund. This complicates things wonderfully.

- **Read Edmund's monologue in Act 1, Scene 2.** Start with "*This is the excellent foppery of the world...*" and end with "*...we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars.*"
- Analyze his argument piece by piece:
 - What does he call the act of blaming our problems on the planets? (Hint: "foppery" means foolishness).
 - He says we blame the stars for our own "goatish," "lecherous," and "villainous" behaviors. What is he really saying about the source of human evil?
 - He ends with a sarcastic jab: "*I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing.*" What is his conclusion about his own evil nature?
- Add Edmund's entire argument to the "We Make Our Own Choices" column.

Part IV: The Debate - So, What Did Shakespeare Believe? (15 minutes)

Look at your two-column chart. You have powerful evidence for both sides of the argument, straight from Shakespeare's pen.

- Does Shakespeare have a single, clear message about fate and free will?
- Why would he give the most intelligent argument for free will to a manipulative villain like Edmund? Does that weaken the argument, or does it show that even bad people can be right about some things?
- In *Romeo and Juliet*, could the tragedy have been avoided if the characters had made different choices (e.g., if Friar Laurence's letter had been delivered)? Or were their choices just leading

them down a pre-written path?

- **Final Synthesis Question:** Based on this evidence, argue for one of the following positions:
 1. Shakespeare ultimately shows that fate is an unstoppable force.
 2. Shakespeare shows that our choices are what truly shape our lives, and "fate" is just an excuse.
 3. Shakespeare deliberately leaves the question open, suggesting that life is a complex mixture of destiny, chance, and choice.

3. Summative Assessment: The Creative Response

Choose **one** of the following options to demonstrate your understanding. This project is about applying the concepts of fate and free will in a creative way, using evidence from the play you choose.

Option A: The Lost Monologue

Write a 250-300 word monologue from the perspective of a minor character in either play, reflecting on the tragic events. Your monologue must clearly show whether this character believes fate or human error was the primary cause of the tragedy. Use details from the play to support their view.

Possible Characters:

- **Benvolio** (*Romeo and Juliet*): He saw it all. Does he blame the stars, the family feud, or Mercutio's and Tybalt's hot tempers?
- **The Apothecary** (*Romeo and Juliet*): He sold Romeo the poison. Did he do it because of his poverty ("my poverty, but not my will, consents") or did he feel he was an instrument of destiny?
- **Oswald** (*King Lear*): Goneril's sycophantic servant. Does he see the chaos as a result of Lear's foolish choices, or as a cosmic punishment for a king breaking tradition?

Option B: The Director's Pitch

You are a director pitching a new film adaptation of either *Romeo and Juliet* or *King Lear*. Write a 1-page (approx. 300-400 words) pitch to a studio executive. Your pitch must focus entirely on how you will visually and thematically represent the central tension between fate and free will.

You must address:

- **Your Core Interpretation:** Will your film lean towards a deterministic world, a world of free will, or a mix? State your thesis clearly.
- **Visual Motifs:** How will you show this? (e.g., constant shots of stars and astrological charts; shaky, hand-held cameras to emphasize chaotic human choices; use of color, light, and shadow to represent destiny vs. choice).
- **Key Scene:** Describe how you would direct one of the key scenes we analyzed (Romeo defying the stars, or Edmund's monologue) to make your interpretation crystal clear to the audience.

Assessment Rubric for Creative Response

Criteria	Excellent (4 pts)	Good (3 pts)	Needs Improvement (2 pts)
Argument & Thesis	Presents a clear, insightful, and consistent argument about fate vs. free will.	Presents a clear argument, but it may have minor inconsistencies.	The argument is unclear or not well-defined.
Use of Textual Evidence	Seamlessly integrates specific, relevant details or concepts from the chosen play to strongly support the creative interpretation.	Uses relevant details from the play, but the connection to the argument could be stronger.	Includes few or generic details from the play.
Creativity & Application	The response is highly original, thoughtful, and effectively applies the lesson's concepts in the chosen format (monologue or pitch).	The response is creative and applies the concepts, but could be more original or detailed.	The response fulfills the basic task but lacks creativity or depth of application.
Understanding of Context	Demonstrates a strong grasp of astrological determinism and the Elizabethan worldview within the creative piece.	Shows a basic understanding of the historical context.	Shows little or no understanding of the historical context.