By Christine Marlowe

Laurence. His actions are pivotal in catapulting the young couple towards the tragic finale of the play. As a character, Laurence offers poor guidance and is unable to protect the tragic lovers from catastrophe. Analysis of literary devices used in the character’s opening soliloquy also provide early indication of Laurence’s capacity for inflicting great harm. In fact, throughout the play, the Friar becomes a malicious force that leads the young lovers astray and into the path of disaster.

Throughout the plot, it is very clear that it is the actions of Friar Laurence, and he alone, that are most significant in ensuring the final tragedy of the play. Laurence eagerly agrees to join Romeo and Juliet in marriage, despite the fact that the couple belong to hostile families. He lacks the foresight to see any negative consequences resulting from the ‘holy act’ (2.6.1), which he describes as ‘… the sweetest honey’ (2.6.11). It is somewhat ironic that this supposedly sweet act culminates in the final bitter tragedy of the play. Out of all Laurence’s blunders, however, his calculated plan for Juliet to take on the appearance of, ‘A thing like death …’ (4.1.74) is surely his greatest error. Compounding this, it is obvious that Laurence did not emphasise the importance of the letter he had instructed Friar John to deliver to Romeo. Only after hearing Friar John has not delivered the letter does Friar Laurence reveal, ‘The letter was not nice but full of charge/

Of dear import, and the neglecting it/May do much danger’ (5.2.18–20). For this reason, the letter is not delivered with urgency or any amount of perseverance by Friar John. This leaves Romeo uninformed about Juliet and the Friar’s scheme. The woefully executed plan leads to Romeo hearing about Juliet’s apparent death from other sources and causes him to rush to Verona to die by her side. The bumbling approach of the Friar ‘… how oft to-night/ Have my old feet stumbled at graves!’ (5.3.121–122) means that he is unable to reach the Capulet tomb and prevent the tragic death of the lovers. His sluggishness is certainly the reason Romeo dies. Upon discovering Romeo’s lifeless body, Juliet also ends her life.

The Friar’s constant meddling sets off a chain of events beginning with the secret marriage of Romeo and Juliet and ending in both of their deaths. This is no wonder when his character is considered in depth.

In the eyes of Romeo and Juliet, Friar Laurence is a source of wise guidance and a figure of unwavering support — a misperception that guides them towards disaster. In actuality, Laurence consistently fails in his role as spiritual adviser and is not dependable when the young lovers really need his support. Constantly, he instructs the young lovers to act in ways that are immoral or dangerous. After the Prince proclaims Romeo’s banishment, the Friar instructs Romeo (3.3.146–147) to gain entrance into Juliet’s room to ‘comfort’ her, even though should he be found, he will be killed. The Friar also counsels Juliet to be dishonest to her parents and advocates the reckless plan for her to feign her own death. In the final scene of the play, Laurence has an opportunity to lessen the tragedy of the drama by preventing the death of Juliet. Instead of supporting her, he flees the scene fearing retribution from the Prince’s watchmen. In his absence, Juliet tragically takes her own life. When the Prince’s watchmen actually take him into custody, their description reveals the true nature of the Friar. He is not a supportive, strong figure, but ‘… a friar that trembles, sighs and weeps’ (5.3.184). It is this weak, unreliable character who misleads Romeo and Juliet and seals their doom. Interestingly, Shakespeare provides early warning about the internal flaws of Laurence in his use of language earlier in the play.

Shakespeare’s subtle use of language and literary devices provides early indication of a fatal flaw in Friar Laurence, which guides Romeo and Juliet toward tragedy. In his introductory soliloquy, Laurence provides a series of paradoxical statements about life. One of these he applies to a medicinal flower he is working with, ‘Within the infant rind of this weak flower/Poison hath residence and medicine power’ (2.3.23–24). Laurence extends this paradox to draw comparisons between the flower and humanity. He suggests that each individual has equal capacity for
‘... grace and rude will’ (2.3.28) or good and evil, help and harm. He suggests that good and evil compete for primacy within people and that people have equal capacity to bring about help and harm. Shakespeare uses soliloquy to deliver these ideas, the function of which is to communicate the intimate secrets of a character. With this understanding, Friar Laurence is not reflecting on mankind but articulating his perception of self. The fact that Laurence is subject to this flaw has a significant influence on the events of the play. Romeo and Juliet both look to him as a holy man, as a paragon of virtue. Unfortunately for them, Laurence’s capacity for evil and for harm overpowers his capacity for good and he becomes an instrument of tragedy in the young lovers’ lives.

Throughout Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Laurence is revealed as the chief instigator of tragedy. Throughout the plot his meddling in affairs causes a sequence of events that ends in the lovers’ deaths. As a character he is essentially weak and foolish. He is unable to provide the wisdom and support the young protagonists need. Finally, Shakespeare’s subtle use of literary devices early in the play put forward the notion that perhaps even holy men like the Friar have the capacity to do harm. This notion is confirmed by the end of the play.