

JULIUS CAESAR AS A TRAGIC HERO: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Julius Caesar is one of the greatest tragedies of William Shakespeare. It depicts a significant catastrophic event in Roman history - the assassination of Julius Caesar and its terrible consequences. Shakespeare names his tragedies after the name of the tragic hero and such is in Julius Caesar. Though Caesar makes only three appearances in the play and is assassinated in the middle of the play, yet he dominates the entire drama. Caesar living is active in the first part of the plot and Caesar dead rules over the second half. The first part impressed us by Caesar's power and influence. Against Caesar's greatness, the conspiracy is hatched. As a result of which Caesar is assassinated. After the assassination, Antony, as a representative of Caesar, takes charge and avenges Caesar's murder. As a political tragedy, the play depicts the conflict between the monarchic and republican principles. It shows that the murder of Caesar was a political blunder because the people of Rome were not yet ready for democracy. It emphasises that a strong ruler like Caesar was needed to save the Roman Empire from disintegration. Julius Caesar was one of the greatest figures in Roman history and his name was familiar to Elizabethans. So the proposed research paper would attempt to explore the reasons and repercussions of how Caesar dead is more powerful than Caesar living and how he turned an immortal tragic hero. Before assassination, Caesar ruled Rome and after him, it is his spirit which is all powerful and which drives the conspirators to their doom.

Keywords: Assassination, political tragedy, monarchic, republican and Elizabethans

William Shakespeare is deemed one of the great playwrights in the sphere of English literature. He does not need the introduction because there is no existence of English literature without him. His birth is shrouded in mystery. However, his date of birth is supposed on 23rd April 1564, Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire. He had schooling at the free Stratford Grammar

School at the age of seven. He had no sufficient schooling, yet he proved his mettle in the field of literature. Julius Caesar is his tragic play.

Julius Caesar is returning after having defeated the sons of Pompey in the battle of Munda. Hearing this great news, the people of Rome come out in the streets to celebrate the victory. But Flavius and Marullus, hostile to Caesar, rebuke the people for coming out in the street. Flavius scolds them:

Hence! home, you idle creatures, get you home.
Is this a holiday? What, know you not,
Being mechanical, you ought not walk
Upon a labouring day without the sign
Of your profession? Speak, what trade art thou? [21]

They do not want that the people of Rome should be happy over the victory. They are jealous to Caesar. They think Caesar himself, now, would consider a great man. Flavius orders the people who are in the streets:

Go, go, good countrymen, and for this fault
Assemble all the poor men of your sort;
Draw them to Tiber banks, and weep your tears
Into the channel, till the lowest stream
Do kiss the most exalted shores of all. [23]

One day in the feast of Lupercalia, Caesar is on his way; in the meanwhile, a soothsayer calls out him and warns:

Beware of ides of March
Caesar asks:
What man is that?
Brutus replies:
A soothsayer bids you beware the ides of March.
Caesar says:
Set him before me; let me see his face.
Cassius calls him:
Fellow, come from the throng; look upon Caesar.
Caesar asks:
What say'st thou to me now? Speak once again.
Soothsayer repeats:
Beware of ides of March.
Caesar reacts:
He is a dreamer; let us leave him. Pass. [25-26]

Caesar dismisses his foretelling. As the procession passes along, Brutus and Cassius are left behind. Cassius wishes to poison the mind of Brutus telling him that the concentration of too much power in the hands of one man may prove treacherous. He says that Caesar really wants to become the king of Rome, which may lead to trample over the liberties of the people. Brutus is moved and assures Cassius to think over it. Caesar and his followers move on and the procession pass away leaving Brutus and Cassius alone. They are thinking over Caesar's victory. In the crowd, Brutus moves with Casca who describes how Caesar had been offered the crown by Antony thrice and how he had refused it. Casca says:

Antony offer him a crown; yet 't was not a crown

... ..
... ..

ed Caesar; for he swooned and fell down at it: [33]

Now Caesar is at home. He is feeling a little puzzled. He also has some doubt what the soothsayer has told. He experiences:

Nor heaven nor earth have been at peace tonight:
Thrice hath Calphurnia in her sleep cried out,
'Help, ho! They murder Caesar!' Who's within? [56]

Next day Caesar has to go to the Senate because he was to be crowned. But his wife has a bad dream. She has seen the visions of murder three times. Calpurnia strongly suggests:

What mean you, Caesar? Think you to walk forth?
You shall not stir out of your house today. [56]

He introspects and orders his servant to tell priests to sacrifice to get the opinion of success. The message communicated by priests was not good. It was also fearful. Despite bad omen, he refuses the suggestion of his wife not going to the Senate and Caesar roars:

Caesar shall forth: the things that threaten'd me
Ne'er look'd but on my back; when they shall see
The face of Caesar, they are vanished. [56]

This shows Caesar's boastfulness and bravery simultaneously. But still Calpurnia begs:

Caesar, I never stood on ceremonies,
Yet now they fright me. There is one within,

... ..
... ..

And I do fear them. [57]

Caesar reacts:

What can be avoided
Whose end is purpos'd by the mighty gods?
Yet Caesar shall go forth; for these predictions
Are to the world in general as to Caesar. [57]

Calpurnia implores for Caesar's life. But he is not ready to listen to her. He consoles her chanting:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once. [57]

He thinks that if he stays home today, the people of Rome would think that he is a coward. The people may have a great misconception. He says:

The gods do this in same of cowardice:
Caesar should be a beast without a heart
If he should stay at home today for fear.
No, Caesar shall not. Danger knows full well
That Caesar is more dangerous than he:
We are two lions litter'd in one day,
And I the elder and more terrible:
And Caesar shall go forth. [58]

Calpurnia wails:

Alas! my lord,

Your wisdom is consumed in confidence. [58]

While they were talking, Brutus comes. Caesar says to him that he is not well today to attend the Senate meeting, so go and spread this news in the Senate.

After sometime Caesar feels humiliation on his decision not to attend the Senate meeting. A strong feeling of patriotism and honesty towards the people of Rome comes in his heart. He utters:

Shall Caesar send a lie?

Have I in conquest stretch'd mine arm so far [58]

But before spreading the news, Brutus wants to know the real cause. He thinks if Caesar does not go to the Senate, their plan must fail to assassinate the king. But Caesar wishes not to disclose it, yet he reveals the truth to Brutus due to being most trusted friend. Caesar says:

The cause is in my will: I will not come;

This enough to satisfy the Senate:

... ..

Because I love you, I will let you know:
She dreamt tonight she saw my statue,
Which, like a fountain with an hundred spouts,
Did run pure blood; and many lusty Romans

... ..

Hath begg'd that I will stay at home today. [59]

Brutus appears to be shrewd at that moment. Calpurnia's interpretation was correct, but Brutus misinterprets the dream in such a way that Caesar believes it and discards his wife's interpretation. Brutus expounds:

This dream is all amiss interpreted;

It was a vision rair and fortunate:

... ..

For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognizance. [59]

Now Caesar strongly wishes to go to the Senate. He says to his wife:

How foolish do your fears seem now, Calpurnia!

I am ashamed I did yield to them.

Give me my robe, for I will go: [60]

He leaves for the Senate. As he reaches near the Senate, the soothsayer makes him recall that the ides of March are come. Caesar calls him a mad fellow. Now he is ready to start the proceedings of the Senate. Metellus Cimber begs for his brother's life who has been captivated. Caesar refuses to free him. Caesar says:

Might fire the blood of ordinary men,
And turn pre-ordinance and first decree

... ..

I spurn thee like a cur out of my way. [67]

Brutus too requests Caesar for Publius Cimber's release from prison: He requests:

I kiss thy hand, but not in flattery, Caesar;

Desiring thee, that Publius Cimber may

Have an immediate freedom of repeal. [67]

Caesar is amazed seeing Brutus to do so. Caesar asks:

What, Brutus!

Cassius too earnestly requests him to free him.

Now Caesar turns angry and reacts:

I could be well mov'd, if I were as you;
If I could pray to move, prayers would move me;

... ..

That I was constant Cimber should be banish'd,
And constant do remain to keep him so. [68]

The decline of giving freedom to Publius Cimber leads to Caesar's assassination. All the conspirators stabbed Caesar, even his most trusted friend Brutus does so, and then Caesar wails:

Et tu, Brute? Then fall, Caesar! [68]

So Caesar is undoubtedly the tragic hero but not hero. He is deemed the noblest character of the play who dominates the play directly till he is alive. Though he does not appear from start to finish, yet he makes his appearances from the commencement to the end. He is proud and he believes his own irresolute behaviour. He says that he is not afraid of any danger, and in fact, danger is afraid of him. He has been depicted as an inconsistent and inflexible leader. He puts up a courageous front, but is afraid of the senators; he hesitates to accept the crown. His greatness is assumed throughout the play. It fills the mind of the dramatist and is communicated to his audience in phases that fall from his pen whenever Caesar is mentioned, even by his enemies. Thus, Caesar has got the start of the majestic world. His fall is heralded by a strange impatience of the heavens and by crucial things which shake the minds of the stoutest of the Romans. For dramatic reasons, Caesar's faults have been emphasized and his virtues have been depicted only causally; yet we have been made to feel his greatness, power, and influence. The conspiracy against him occupies the first part of the play, his assassination comes in the middle of the play, and the latter half of the play shows the influence which Caesar's spirit exercises over the Roman Empire. The entire action of the play centres round him. The play ends with the message that Caesar dead is more powerful than Caesar living. Before the murder, Caesar ruled Rome and after his murder, it is his spirit which is all powerful and which drives the conspirators to their doom.

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