

"julius caesar" by shakespeare essay sample



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“ Julius Caesar” by Shakespeare Essay Sample

Power is a theme that has dominated mankind since history was recorded. The assassination of Julius Caesar, ruler of the greatest empire the world has ever known, was a result of such a struggle for power. The foundations of Shakespeare’s ‘ Julius Caesar’ are power relationships which dominate the liaisons between characters of opposing sex, classes, and ambitions. Even in the historical context, Rome in 44 BC, the height of the Roman Republic, predisposes the play to a complex tangle of power conflicts. As the power of prominent characters builds tension, ambitions develops, and thus manipulation arises. Struggles of authority and dominance are evident between the characters in ‘ Julius Caesar’, through Shakespeare’s adept manoeuvring of the language of power, ambition, and manipulation.

The historical circumstances of Rome predispose the play to struggles for power. In 44 BC, Rome had endured 100 years of civil war between the patrician families and generals at the head of the armed forces, a dispute which foreshadows the antagonism that would emerge between the two groups in Shakespeare’s play. Pompey, Caesar’s rival to the throne, has just been vanquished in a bloody war, and the patrician families now resent Caesar, the ‘ first man in Rome’, for his new-found supremacy. It is from these tense conditions that the characters are virtually set-up to develop contests for power in various relationships, whether it is with the masses, with their wives, or with each other.

Throughout the entire play, power is a theme of focal importance, and it is revealed as prominent from the start. In the first line of the first scene,

power becomes central to the relationship between characters, with Flavius ordering the crowd to flee to their homes, insulting them as 'idle creatures'. The use of insulting and imperative sentences by the tribunes establishes the power relationship between the tribunes and cobblers. In the third line, Flavius makes the first allusion to class, asserting that 'being mechanical', the cobblers have no right to be dressed as they are, without the mark of their caste. The carpenter addresses Flavius using polite formulas, such as 'Sir', and 'you', whereas, Flavius and Marullus address the cobblers with insults and the familiar pronoun, 'thou'. The play begins at once with imperative and interrogative sentences, insults, and a clear divergence in the language employed by the two opposed social groups, thus demonstrating the dominance of the theme of power through social standing straight away.

Shakespeare's focus on power evolves around the central figure of the play, Julius Caesar, who is the prominent example of extreme power among the characters. Even in his absence or death, the manner in which characters address Caesar, describe him, and act in his presence, reveals the authority and influence he has over people's lives. From the first scene, Caesar is presented as victorious, having vanquished his rival, Pompey, and as an extremely popular figure among the people, with the commoners even defying authorities to celebrate his victory. As the play continues into scene ii, Caesar appears before the crowds as a modern-day pop-star, surrounded by a trail of subservient entourage.

Casca and Antony display complete submission to Caesar, with the latter declaring that 'when Caesar says Do this! It is done'. In Caesar's absence,

fellow patricians, Brutus and Cassius, describe him as 'mighty Caesar', a man who 'has now become a God', and strides in the world 'as a Colossus'. It is therefore evident that his close subordinates are jealously affected by his power, an effect which will later germinate into conspiracy. Even after his assassination, Caesar's ghost continues the task of perpetuating the fear of his everlasting power on those he influenced. Caesar holds enough power over his subjects that he is capable of influencing them continually, in his life and death.

As a result of this unequal power between Caesar and his subordinates, jealousy develops and propels certain characters' ambitions towards conspiracy. Among these characters, Cassius is most prominent. Historically, Caius Cassius Longinus was Caesar's finest general, full of hope for future elevations in his political career. In his discussion with Brutus, Cassius reveals his jealousy of Caesar, as he explains that he 'was born free as Caesar', and that 'this man is now become a God'. He then contrasts his own situation to Caesar's, exclaiming that 'Cassius is a wretched creature', and that 'we petty men must walk under his huge legs'³. Cassius is visibly frustrated at Caesar's success, and, as reflected by his jealousy, he seemingly wishes that he would be so successful himself.

In this aspect, Cassius and Brutus are distinctly different in terms of character and intentions. While Cassius's motives are clear, personal and ambitious, Brutus, the almost-perfect example of stoicism and selfless patriotism, has more idealist and noble ambitions, especially for the people of Rome. This is revealed when Brutus agrees to join Cassius in conspiracy and even death, if necessary, as he explains that 'if it be aught toward the

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general good', he would be prepared to abandon life or honour for the cause of the Roman Empire and its people. His ambitions are thus largely different to Cassius's own selfish ones, but this does not prevent him from uniting with Cassius in the latter's conspiracy. Generally a consequence of unequal power relationships, ambition is thus a driving force in 'Julius Caesar', as it leads the key figure, Julius Caesar, to spark conspiratorial ambitions among his subordinates, and to eventually bring about his own death.

The relationship between Brutus, the honourable patrician, and Cassius, the main conspirator, is an exemplary illustration of the equality in social standing between patricians, which is evident in 'Julius Caesar'. Caius Cassius and Marcus Brutus are patrician Romans, both of the highest class in Rome. Their equal 'gravitas' is demonstrated by the language they employ. When addressing each other, Brutus and Cassius use the polite pronoun 'you', denoting respect and equal power, and often call each other 'dear Brutus' or 'my noble friend', illustrating the friendship and equality in social status as being 'of the best respect in Rome'. In this way, language is a vital indicator of power relations.

Power relationships are also evident between husbands and wives in 'Julius Caesar'. A first indication of the men's dominance over their wives is the language that each employs to address the other. While Portia and Calphurnia call their husbands 'my Lord', Brutus and Caesar only call the women by their first names. Portia even addresses her husband in the third person, reasoning that 'Brutus is wise, and were he not in health, he would not brave the raw cold morning'. Brutus' dominance as a male is clearly

admitted by Portia when she says ' I grant I am a woman', recognising her weak status as a woman, and inability to hold Brutus' secret.

Both Calphurnia and Portia kneel before their husbands, lowering themselves as they beg, and keeping this position until their husbands raise them again. This common act to both the women clearly illustrates their submission to their husbands. Caesar twice shows his dominance over his wife by humiliating Calphurnia before the tribunes and generals, calling her ' barren' and ' foolish' . With husbands clearly holding a higher social position than their wives, these relationships illustrates another inequality in power in ' Julius Caesar'.

As ambition propels conspiracy, manipulation is a third central theme of ' Julius Caesar'. After the death of Caesar, Antony emerges as a brilliant orator and talented manipulator, as he sees the opportunity to revenge Caesar and seize control of the Republic. This ' shrewd contriver' strategically manipulates the crowd to revolt when the conspirators allow him to give a funeral oration. To achieve this mutiny, Antony first addresses the common people as his equals, with his opening line of ' friends, Romans, countrymen' . He then uses almost indistinct sarcasm regarding Caesar's ambition and Brutus' honour, slowly swaying his audience's stance on the merit of each. He plays upon the listeners' emotions, a technique that contrasts to Brutus' rational approach, by displaying intense emotion himself, as his ' heart is in the coffin' with Caesar, and he ' must pause till it come back' to him. This moving moment has two favourable outcomes for Antony; he gains the crowd's compassion, and allows them time to reflect on the ' reason of his sayings'.

As Antony exposes Caesar's bloody corpse and wounds, he uses sensationalism to stir violent emotions in his listeners. He flatters the common people consistently, calling them ' kind souls', ' sweet friends', and emphasising that they ' are not wood', ' not stones, but men', a comment quite in contrast to the tribunes' insults to the people in the first scene. Antony appeals to his listener's self-interest by dangling before them the promise of a public inheritance in Caesar's will, which helps him gain the crowd's favour for Caesar and longing for his words. He mentions mutiny three times in his speech, every time planting the thought in the crowd's minds, as he refers to ' mutiny and rage', ' such a sudden flood of mutiny', and moving ' the stones of Rome to rise and mutiny'. Utilising many persuasive techniques in his oration, including flattery, sarcasm, emotion, sensationalism, bribery, and a strategic use of words, Antony successfully manipulates his audience to uprising and riot. This is another example of Shakespeare's focus on manipulation and the language of power.

The uses of the status between characters, their ruthless and cunning traits, and the language of power, create the play's central themes of power, ambition, and manipulation. The historical context of ' Julius Caesar' sets the scene for power conflicts. Power relationships, which are evident between characters of opposing sex, class, and ambitions, are demonstrated by the language of power and the traits of the characters. In this way, Shakespeare's ' Julius Caesar' has a clear and strong focus on the themes of power, ambition, and manipulation.