

Fate and freewill in "julius caesar" by shakespeare essay sample

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



One of the major concerns presented by Shakespeare in Julius Caesar is the struggle between fate and free will. This struggle is evident throughout the play through Shakespeares continual presentation of the supernatural. The supernatural is present in many different forms in the text, for example through omens, nightmares and sacrifices. Shakespeare believed that life was a combination of fate and freewill, he presents this idea to the audience through different events that occur throughout the play, events such as the Feast at the Lupercal, the Soothsayers prophecy, the animal sacrifice, Calpurnias dream and the presence of animals and Caesars ghost. These events build dramatic tension throughout the play, illustrating the struggle of fate versus freewill.

The Romans believed in superstition and that people lived the life that was chosen for them by the Gods. For example, one of the earliest encounters with supernatural elements in Julius Caesar is the Feast at Lupercal. This was a holiday celebration whereby priests would sacrifice goats and a dog and run through the city dressed in loincloths made of goatskin carrying a februa. Women would place themselves in a position where they would be struck by the februa. In Roman superstition this was suppose to ensure fertility. This ceremony is a significant moment in the play as a whole as it demonstrates Caesars desire for a male heir.

This shows Caesars ambition and how he was a man who was willing to attempt to create his own fate. Caesar tells Calpurnia to stand in front of the priest and shake off their sterile curse. Caesars words here are ironic as it is more likely to be his rapid aging that is the curse as apposed to anything

Calpurnia could be blamed for. This event is a contrast to Calpurnias next appearance in the play, whereby she warns Caesar not to go to the Senate and Caesar ignores her and the signs and goes anyway. These events demonstrate how life is a combination of fate and freewill.

Another important event in the opening scenes of Julius Caesar is Caesars encounter with the Soothsayer. He warns Caesar to beware the ides of March. This builds dramatic tension, as while Caesar can ignore the prophecy claiming, he is a dreaming, the audience can not. The warning seems too direct to be ignored. In the approaching scenes dramatic irony is created as the audience learns of the conspirators plans. At this early stage of the play however ignoring the prophecy demonstrates how he is tempting fate and how his freewill allows his to ignore this important warning. The importance of the Soothsayers words are emphasised when Caesar is killed, this upsets the natural order of Rome and sends Rome into a state of anarchy. Shakespeare introduces an increasing number of storms and unnatural phenomena to testify to the breakdown of the natural order.

Sacrifice was pivotal to the lives of Romans, and it was considered to be a bad omen if the sacrifice did not go to plan. For example, in Julius Caesar, an animal is sacrificed to establish whether or not Caesar should go to the Senate but they could not find a heart within the beast. An Elizabethan audience would have recognised this as an ominous sign. The sacrifice helps to build to the climax of the play as the bad omens suggest that Caesar is going to die soon. The dramatic irony here is apparent as the audience is aware of the conspirators plans to kill Caesar, but Caesar is completely

oblivious to this, instead choosing to believe in his own morality. Caesar claims that Danger knows full well that Caesar is more dangerous than he. Caesars use of the third person to address himself illustrates his arrogance and hubris; by putting himself on par with the Gods he makes himself vulnerable and open to danger.

It is evident through Shakespeares use of dramatic irony that Caesar is to be killed, but Caesars words here help the audience to understand Brutus motives for killing Caesar. In Caesars previous speech he says that cowards die many times before their deaths; but the valiant never taste of death but once. This shows how Caesar acknowledges that we have the choice to be a coward, therefore saving ourselves from possible death, but not wanting to appear a coward he chooses not to listen to his own advice; by choosing to ignore the signs which point to his death he thinks he is doing a valiant act. This flawed justification illustrates his confusion and how he does not seem to connect death with himself.

Pathetic Fallacy is used by Shakespeare to create a mood of malevolence and darkness. Thunder and lightning is used frequently in the early stages of the play to highlight the lack of balance in the natural world. For example, when the conspirators are trying to convince Brutus to join the conspiracy there is a storm with thunder and lightning, this creates an ominous tone as an Elizabethan audience would have recognised the storm as an omen of unrest. The Elizabethans believed that storms released forces of evil and unrest, this indicates the unnatural dominance of corruption.

The turmoil of the heavens directly represents the state of Rome and the minds of men, in particular, Brutus. The rampant storm and the peculiar signs of disharmony are misinterpreted by Caesar and this becomes an increasingly important concern in the play. The ambiguities present in the omens are summed up by Cicero, men may construe things after their fashion clean from the purpose of the things themselves. This is one message that Shakespeare presents to the audience, men at some stage are masters of their fates. This illustrates how Shakespeare ultimately believes that we must choose whether or not to live the path of our fate. Caesar chooses to ignore the signs and therefore is a master of his own fate.

An Elizabethan audience would recognise Calpurnias sleep talking as a sign of madness and unrest. Caesar claims she cries out in her sleep, Help ho! They murder Caesar! This is significant as it shows that only the women in Julius Caesar are capable of correctly interpreting omens; she foreshadows Caesars death. Once again the dramatic irony is apparent as the audience is aware that the conspirators plan to kill Caesar. The scene opens with thunder and lightning, once again pathetic fallacy is used to create an ominous and dark atmosphere. The pathetic fallacy builds tension and creates suspense in the moments leading up to Caesars death. The content of Calpurnias dream is also significant as she dreams of unnatural and unpleasant things, this creates an sinister and threatening atmosphere in itself. She dreams that a lioness hath whelped in the streets, and graves have yawned and yielded up their dead.

These images are signs of unrest and to an Elizabethan audience would be recognised as a sign that the natural order is upset. To a twenty-first century audience the dreams of such images are still recognised as dark and ominous. The dream highlights the power of the supernatural and how Caesar has been warned about what will happen and that it is he who chooses his own fate. It is Decius responsibility to get Caesar to the senate and therefore interprets Calpurnias dream completely differently. He claims that her dream was a vision fair and fortunate, and that from you great Rome shall suck reviving blood. This interpretation of Calpurnias dream illustrates how easily omens can be misinterpreted by different people and how we create our own fate from the way we choose to view these omens.

Women are clearly presented as the most intuitive characters in Julius Caesar and the only ones with the ability to correctly interpret omens.

Calpurnia acknowledges that the omens presenting themselves are bad and is sceptical of Caesar leaving the house because of this reason. She reminds Caesar that when beggars die there are no comets seen, to the Elizabethan audience this would symbolise the death of a member of the monarch, this creates dramatic tension building to Caesars death. Decius also belittles Calpurnia by saying that Caesar should not attend senate until Caesars wife shall meet with better dreams. Decius forces Caesar to misinterpret the omen by challenging his pride, this is significant as it illustrates how Caesar chooses his dignity over his wifes fear, thus creating his own fate. By Caesar choosing this fate dramatic tension builds as Caesars death approaches.

The appearance of the ghost continues to highlight the presence of the supernatural. Caesars ghost is used as two things, firstly it highlights Brutus troubled mind and his guilty conscience, it also emphasises how he knows his deeds are immoral. Secondly, the entrance of the ghost is an apparition, foreshadowing Brutus death at Philippi. Ghosts are seen as supernatural and highlight the increasing role of the power of the supernatural. It is significant at this point that Brutus too ignore the omens which present themselves. Earlier in the play these exhalations, whizzing in the air, gives so much light that I may read by them. This unnatural phenomena is a warning to Brutus that he should not join the conspiracy, but he chooses to ignore this as he chooses to ignore the apparition.

Finally, animals are used throughout to illustrate how the natural order is out of balance. For example, the bird of night did sit even at noonday, this is an omen of unrest ignored by all the characters except Casca. Later in the play two eagles fell and were replaced by ravens, crows and kites, this creates an ominous atmosphere as the men are under the shadow of a canopy most fatal. Cassius, one of the more sharp characters in the play, in his moment of clarity realises that the fall of the two birds might foreshadow the death of two great men. Cassius believed in an Epicurean philosophy at the outset of the play, in which he tended to believe that the Gods did not meddle in human events, making signs and omens invalid. However, before his death he has a belief in fate and predetermination.

Julius Caesar ponders the idea of whether we really have control of our lives or whether we are solely a result of fate. Shakespeare uses an extensive

range of omens to suggest that we have some control of our own destiny. However, as the play progresses this view becomes more and more bleak. Cassius, who is one of the most perceptive characters in the play, chooses to believe in fate and this tends to influence the audiences view on the matter. The continual presence of the supernatural suggests that fate is certainly an influencing factor in mens lives but how we choose to interpret these omens and warnings can influence peoples destinies.