

# Critical lens: julius caesar: the effects of power essay sample



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It is generally accepted that hardship would ensue harsher test of one's character than power would. Abraham Lincoln attempted to denounce this belief when he claimed that " Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." Lincoln illustrates that adversity is something that many men can succeed in spite of while maintaining their character by comparing its effects with those of power. He sustains the idea that a man's character is only truly tested if they are given power because of its corrupting influence. Lincoln's ideas are substantiated in the play Julius Caesar, in which William Shakespeare explores topics of adversity and power. Through his characterization of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Brutus, Shakespeare clearly indicates that the true test of a man's character is, in fact, power rather than adversity.

Julius Caesar is able to easily overcome misfortune; however his character is challenged by the corrupting influence of power. Though Calpurnia is unable to conceive a child, denying Caesar an heir, Caesar can withstand this hardship and continues in his quest for power. Later, when the soothsayer cautions him concerning the 15th of March, Caesar dismisses the caveat as frivolous. In reply to his warning to " beware the ides of March," Caesar calls the soothsayer a " dreamer," and decides that they should all " leave him; pass" (I. ii. 28-29). Julius Caesar replies in this way because he feels he would be able to overcome any adversity that could impede his success. Through this situation, Shakespeare proves that Caesar, like most men, is able to easily endure adversity. When Caesar gains power, however, he is disillusioned by it. As Cassius attempts to persuade Brutus to join the

conspirators, he demonstrates how Caesar is actually a cowardly man who has a large ego.

He describes how he used to help Caesar and care for him when they were friends in the past, and how now that Caesar gained power, he treats Cassius like a “wretched creature [who] must bend his body/If Caesar carelessly but nod at him” (I. ii. 124-125). Caesar has forgotten and abandoned his true friends in exchange for power, exhibiting the test of character imposed by power. It is not only Cassius that realizes the change in Caesar’s character, as Flavius and Marullus agree that “these growing feathers [being] plucked from Caesar’s wings/Will make him fly an ordinary pitch,/Who else would soar above the view of men/ And keep us all in servile fearfulness” (I. i. 79-80). The tribunes compare Caesar’s growing arrogance to the feathers of a bird. Marullus and Flavius believe that Caesar’s pride must be contested in order to ensure that his power is controllable and does not leave the Roman people as servants. Through direct and indirect characterization of Caesar, Shakespeare is able to illustrate how though he is able to prevail over adversity, Caesar character is tried by his power.

Shakespeare is also able to use his characterization of Mark Antony to show that hardships may be effortlessly surmounted and that power is the true test of character. Through the misfortune of Caesar’s murder, Antony is able to use the people’s insecurity to his advantage. By using reverse psychology and the rhetoric, Antony gains the support of the Roman public, who eventually considered him to be “most notable Antony” (III. ii. 248). Antony is able to achieve power through the cooperation of the people. Later,

however, when Antony has power along with Octavius and Lepidus, he  
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questions whether or not Lepidus should be allowed to share power with them, not realizing that he himself had been in the same position as Lepidus when Caesar was in power.

Mark Antony cruelly mocks Lepidus, comparing him to a horse, implying that “ he must be taught and trained,” and calling him a “ barren-spirited fellow” (IV. i. 39-40). Antony also demeans Lepidus’ importance by instructing Octavius to “ not talk of him/But as property” (IV. i. 44-45). In this situation, William Shakespeare reveals Antony’s true character as cruel and malicious. Once again it is apparent through Shakespeare’s characterization that adversity is something that is surmountable, while power truly tests character.

The development of characters in Julius Caesar illustrates that Brutus, similarly to Caesar and Antony, is able to overcome hardships but is characteristically affected by power. Brutus triumphs over adversity in several instances during the play. One such instance is when he is forced to assist in the murder of a good friend in order to preserve the Roman Republic and the welfare of the people. Later in the play, Brutus must also cope with the death of his wife, Portia: “ No man bears sorrow better. Portia is dead” (IV. iii. 168). He is able to handle the death through practicality: “ We [all] must die.../With meditating that she must die once,/I have the patience to endure it now” (IV. iii. 217-220). Brutus rationalizes that he has realized that everyone must die at one point, and that if Portia’s time was to be now, then he would not disrupt fate. Brutus is easily able to manage adversity, leaving power to be the true test of his character. Though Brutus

attempted to escape the corruption that power usually inflicted, his character was altered as a result of power.

Instead of using his usual methods of compromise, when deliberating with Cassius concerning whether to advance to Philippi or remain at the camp, Brutus contended his plans without listening to those of Cassius. Cassius agreed readily with Brutus' plans only because of his friend's higher authority: " Then, with your will, go on;/We'll along ourselves and meet them at Philippi" (IV. iii. 226-227). Cassius does not make an attempt to argue for his ideas because he does not believe that he has any say, as Brutus is in power. Brutus' power is also recognized by Antony and Octavius, illustrated at Brutus' death: " This was the noblest Roman of them all./According to his virtue, let us use him/With all respect and rites of burial./Most like a soldier, ordered honorably" (V. v. 74, 82-83, 85). Both Antony and Octavius respect Brutus' loyalty to Rome and decide to honor him with a proper burial. Brutus effortlessly triumphed over adversity and, though not to the extent of Caesar and Antony, power had a slight corrupting influence on Brutus' character as exemplified through Shakespeare's use of characterization.

By establishing that " Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power," Lincoln ascertains the accurate idea of adversity being overcome by most men while power being a true examination of character. This initiative can be applied to several world leaders today. In order to survive politics, one must be able to withstand adversity, but it is once power is acquired that the character of a person is truly tested, revealing their personal qualities. Throughout the play Julius

Caesar, William Shakespeare explores these same topics of adversity and <https://assignbuster.com/critical-lens-julius-caesar-the-effects-of-power-essay-sample/>

power and their effects. It is evidently implied by Shakespeare through his characterization of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Brutus that the true test of a man's character is, in fact, power rather than adversity.