

# Julius caesar – conflicting perspectives



In literary texts, conflicting perspectives are explored through the representation of events, personalities and situations. In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Judith Brett's article *Mirror Mirror* (published in *The Monthly* in October 2013), conflicting representations affect both the reader's perspective and the lives of key characters. The major personalities explored in these texts, Julius Caesar and Kevin Rudd, are similar in occupation and their divisiveness, and are the subject of many conflicting perspectives which affect the events which are integral in determining key parts of their lives.

In Acts 1 and 2 of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, differing perspectives of the protagonist Julius Caesar are seen from Mark Antony and Cassius, and each perspective is used by the composer to manipulate the responder's reaction. Similarly, the conflicting perspectives offered by J. Brett of Kevin Rudd from the public, the Liberal party and the Labour party shape the reader's opinion of his personality and effectiveness as a leader. The use of different, textual forms, features and choice of language to represent these characters, successfully affect the reader's perspective.

The representation of conflicting perspectives is, therefore an integral part of these two texts. Contrasting power dynamics are represented throughout the texts, involving the tribunes, plebeians, Caesar and Mark Antony. In the opening scene, a power struggle occurs which causes a group of plebeians to question their allegiances. Originally the plebeians are making " a holiday to see Caesar" however when Murellus, a tribune, asks the rhetorical question " knew you not Pompey? " and reminds them that Caesar " comes in triumph over Pompey's blood" the plebeians run away.

This not only demonstrates a struggle of power between the plebeians and the tribunes, but also introduces the conflicting allegiances of the Romans to their past leader and Caesar, their new leader. However Caesar's power and influence over the people is demonstrated to a great extent by Mark Antony, who is described by Brutus as "but a limb of Caesar". The respect and love which Antony shows for Caesar is publicized when he claims that "when Caesar says, 'Do this', it is performed." This also shows the extent of the power and control that Caesar has over Antony.

Caesar's immense power is further demonstrated when Casca reveals that he saw "Mark Antony offer him a crown". This shows the high regard that Antony holds Caesar in, and the sincere belief that Caesar has the strength and power to rule. The perspective of Caesar from Antony conflicts with that of the tribunes, and increases the adoration in which the responder feels for Caesar. The use of scripting and language devices to reveal physical weaknesses of characters in the two texts, and thus the interpretation of them from third parties, affects the understanding of the responder.

In Julius Caesar, Caesar initially reveals his fallibility and flaws to Antony, by directing him to touch Calpurnia during his race, claiming that the elders say that this will "shake off their sterile curse". Such open admission of superstition predisposes the audience to be sympathetic towards him. Caesar's weaknesses are further revealed by Cassius in his anecdotal persuasive speech, claiming that Caesar "is superstitious grown of late", when discussing with the conspirators whether Caesar will attend the Capitol.

Cassius' illustration of Caesar's flaws undermines Caesar's claims of power and ambition. Cassius's true opinion of Caesar is exposed in his soliloquy in Act 1 when he declares that " we will shake him, or worse days endure". The use of soliloquy allows Cassius's full perspective to be seen by the responder, and the promise of worse days links Caesar to danger, adding to Cassius' claim of ' ambition'. Shakespeare creates negative images in the responder's mind, adding to the predetermined prejudices that Shakespeare and Cassius create in the character of Julius Caesar.

The negative perspective of weaknesses in powerful personalities is seen in the opinion piece ' Mirror Mirror' where the epithet ' narcissistic megalomaniac' is used as an example of the way that Rudd's associates described him, a sobriquet that is backed up by a " psychiatric report [that] claimed Rudd suffered from a destructive personality disorder known as ' grandiose narcissism'". The negative adjectives used to describe this condition, such as ' destructive', create a negative connotation in the responder's mind which was used by the opposition party to create campaigns against him.

According to the text Rudd is also given the nickname " Mr Personality", which reinforces the diagnosis that " a big personality is often associated with narcissism". By creating negative perspectives of Rudd at the beginning of the article, and of Caesar in Act One, the responders are conditioned to accept them. Caesar's strengths are explored through the way Caesar perceives himself and the way that Mark Antony perceives him and the positive language used to convey this.

Caesar appears to make many decisions based his perception of public need, thus often making decisions that show courage even when they potentially put his life at risk. His undoubted courage is revealed when he compares himself to a personified ‘ danger’, claiming that “ danger knows full well/ That Caesar is more dangerous than he”. The use of third person in this statement inflates the perception of Caesar’s power. This perspective of courage and power in Caesar allows the responder to see Caesar as a positive leader.

Contradictory perspectives are often revealed throughout the text and despite the weaknesses and poor leadership discussed in respect to Rudd; Brett later describes him as a good leader for his positive effect on the Australian society. The article claims that “ in the narcissistic character [there is] an unequalled potential for leadership”. This positive perspective begins to change the reader’s perceptions of Rudd, through his “ capacity to inspire cultural change”. This is another positive statement that further shapes the reader’s opinion, stating that “ narcissism can be creative and serve greater ends”.

These final statements leave the reader with a positive attitude of Kevin Rudd. Both texts explore conflicting perspectives to discuss the weaknesses and strengths of major political leaders. Conflicting perspectives may adversely affect a politician’s life. Cassius reveals his perspective of Caesar to Brutus and Casca, and attempts to convince others to feel the same way. In the dialogue between Cassius and Brutus in Act 1, Cassius reveals his disregard for Caesar, mentioning occasions such as when “ Caesar cried, ‘

Help me, Cassius, or I sink!” when swimming in the Tiber, and when “ he had a fever when he was in Spain”.

These recounts give Brutus and the responder examples of Caesar’s weaknesses, causing his argument to be more persuasive. Cassius uses metaphor to exaggerate the weakness that Caesar showed, claiming that he cried out “ as a sick girl” when he was suffering. This metaphor creates a stronger image of the weak Caesar in the responder’s mind. Cassius’ persuasive monologues create a negative opinion of Caesar in the responder’s mind.

Also being a politician, conflicting perspectives affect Kevin Rudd in a similar fashion, particularly from the opposition party (Liberal) and his own party (Labour). In the psychological report that the opposition party used attention was drawn “ to his sensitivity to criticism and absolute conviction of his intellectual superiority” and these characteristics of Rudd’s personality are essentially what lost the support of the public and allowed the opposition party to cause his demise.

However, Brett then poses the rhetorical question – “ if the ... character flaws [were] so marked, how was it that the Labour party chose Rudd not once, but twice, to lead the country? ” This rhetorical question makes both the public and the members of his party question their negativity towards Rudd. However, the Labour party saw that “ Rudd [was] not a monster” and that “ he had the personality to connect people ... and make them feel like it mattered which side won the election”. The Labour party saw the positive

side to his narcissism, and this caused him to be chosen as the leader of the Labour party twice.

This is much like the plebeians support of Caesar during Act 1, demonstrated through them making “ holiday to see Caesar and rejoice in his triumph. ”

This is further established through the biblical allusion of them “[strewing] flowers in his way”, which symbolises them treating Caesar like a ‘ god’. In either case, the differing viewpoints shown from the people around Rudd caused his rise and demise in politics. Ultimately, conflicting perspectives of major public figures affect their own lives, and other people’s view of them.

With both character’s being similar in occupation and power, these two cases are prime examples of the ways in which conflicting perspectives can cause the rise and fall of major personalities, and are thus important parts of texts. Through the representation of conflicting perspective, the author can manipulate the opinions that reader’s hold of characters and situations. As shown above, the order and placement of language techniques and forms affects the lives of characters like Caesar and Rudd and the point of view that the reader holds of them.