

THE PROTAGONIST IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *JULIUS CAESAR*

FATIN ADNAN ABED AMEER

Tragedy is a term broadly applied to literary, especially dramatic, representations of important and serious events, which end in a disastrous conclusion for the protagonist or chief character. More precise and detailed discussion of tragic form properly began with Aristotle's classic analysis. He defined tragedy as:^١

The imitation of an action that is and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself, in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work, in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

Tragedy has tended to be a form of drama concerned with the fortunes, misfortunes and disasters that befall a human being of power, position and title. To be a tragic play, there must exist what is called a tragic hero. What makes him a tragic figure is that he has qualities of excellence, of nobleness, of passion; he has virtues that lift him above the ordinary run of mortal men and women. Although he has all these features, they are seen to be insufficient to save him either from self-destruction (hamartia) or from destruction brought upon him. So it leads to his death at the end. The greater the person, the more acute the tragedy.^٢

Usually, there is one tragic hero in the tragic play but not all the time. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is one of his tragedies which deals with the fall down of three men. The first is Caesar who is killed in a "conspiracy"; the second is Brutus, a noble man, who loves his friend Caesar but loves his country more, which leads him to be the head of the "conspirators"; the last is Cassius, who plots the "conspiracy" and convinces Brutus to take part in it to free his country from the "tyrant" ruler. Both Cassius and Brutus commit suicide after their defeat in the battle against Antony.

The play poses a question: who is the tragic hero? We have three men, noble indeed, having tragic flaws that lead to their disastrous deaths. This paper attempts to unravel this complication and find a compromising solution as to who the tragic hero is.

In the opening scene of *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare presents Julius Caesar for the first time under two contradictory lights: Caesar the would be tyrant, and Caesar the patriot. Romans differ in evaluating Caesar: some love him and take him for a hero, while others expect him to become a tyrant because of the great power he has as a result of his growing authority and strength.

^١ - J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London: Penguin Books, ١٩٩٨), pp. ٧٠٣-٤.

^٢ -Ibid.

^٣ -M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (London: Harcourt-Brace Ivanovich, ١٩٩٨), p. ٢١٢.

Caesar is too confident, which is clear in his conversation with his wife who begs him not to go to the Capitol because of her ominous dream, and his neglect of the Soothsayer's warning. His self-confidence is an element of his downfall, which is transformed from dignity into pride then vanity is clear in this speech: "I am constant as the northern star". (III, i, ٦٠) He believes that he is not "Liable to fear". (I, ii, ٢١٢)

Ambition is another of Caesar's features. He longs to be king, so his enemies think that, little by little, he will grow to be a tyrant. The "conspirators" want Caesar to be curbed, as in Flavius' words:

These growing feathers, pluck'd from Caesar's wings,
Will make him fly on ordinary pitch,
Who else would soar above the view of men,
And keep us all in servile fearfulness.

In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Caesar is not presented as a faultless figure, but at the same time, he is not presented as a villain. He has virtues which are revealed during the play. He believes in the will of God and destiny: "What can be avoided/ Whose end is purposed by mighty gods". (II, ii, ٢٦-٧) He also loves the people of Rome, he respects them and wants to finish their issues before his own issues. He refuses to read the schedule given to him by Antemidorus which would have saved his life if he had read it: "What touches us ourself shall be last serv'd". (III, I, ٨) He even leaves his riches to the Romans as Antony tells the Roman reading Caesar's will at his funeral.

Shakespeare depicts Caesar at the end of a glorious life declining physically, infatuated with himself. However, Cassius tries to indicate that Caesar is an imperfect man to be a god and that he has many defects such as his deafness. Cassius also talks about Caesar's sickness in Spain: (I, ii, ١٢٩-٣٢). Cassius emphasizes these incidents to the background of Caesar's supposed tyranny only to emphasize his humanity. Caesar's treatment of his "friends" is tragically ironic:

Caesar: Good friends go in, and taste some wine with me.
And we are (like friends) will straightway go together.
Brutus: That every like is not the same, O Caesar,
The heart of Brutus earns to think upon! (II, ii, ١٢٦-٩)

This emphasizes Caesar's potential good-nature which makes his murder on the basis of future would-be tyranny questionable.

Later on, he is killed by those same "friends" in the Ides of March. Caesar disappears, however his role does not end since he leaves a spirit that seems more powerful than the living Caesar. Shakespeare shows that through the appearance of the ghost at Philippi. Cassius' and Brutus' words testify to that and to Caesar's victory as well: "Caesar, thou art reveng'd/ Even with the sword that kill'd thee" (V, iii, ٤٥-٦); "O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet!/ Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords,/In our own proper entrails." (V, iii, ٩٤-٦)

At once, the word honourable comes to the mind whenever one thinks of Brutus. He has a great place among the people of Rome, and even among his enemies. After his death, Antony praises him saying:

His life was gentle, and the elements

So mix'd in him that nature might stand up,
And say to all the world, "This was a man!" (V, v, ٧٣-٥)

In Act One, Scene Two, when Caesar is celebrating the feast of the Lupercal, Cassius and Brutus are left alone, and Cassius begins talking about the celebration. When Brutus says "I do fear the people/ Choose Caesar for their king" (I, ii, ٨٠-١), Cassius carefully replies: "Then must I think you would not have it so". (I, ii, ٨٥) It is important for his purpose to make Brutus, not himself, the one who first suggests the danger of Caesar's ambition. So, cautiously, Cassius begins to hint at the part which Brutus is expected to have in the "conspiracy". In the beginning, Brutus shrinks from the idea of the "conspiracy":^١

In to what dangers would you lead me, Cassius,
That you would have me seek into myself,
For what which is not in me?

In this scene, Brutus is "sounded" by Cassius, as to his willingness to kill Caesar. Cassius supports his task by profound knowledge of Brutus' nature and personality. He starts with the basis of that personality. In a good maneuver, he changes the subject into what he wants to say: "Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?" (I, ii, ٥١) Brutus answers saying not without a reflection, and Cassius swiftly offers to be the reflector:^٢

I your glass
Will modestly discover to yourself
That of yourself which you know not of. (I, ii, ٦٩-٧١)

Cassius contrives to use an image which both tells Brutus of the opinion of others and evokes his private virtue. His slyness and double-dealing when he chooses his words and the meaning he intends may raise Brutus' narcissism. Cassius uses the language subtly in the letters which he decides to forge messages to the effect that Brutus is expected by many eminent citizens to take a stand against Caesar's so called tyranny. Then Cinna throws these messages in Brutus' windows and leaves them where Brutus will find them.^٣

Cassius works on Brutus and makes use of every word said by Brutus. The cause behind Brutus' struggle is not what Caesar is, but what he may become. He accepts to take part in the "conspiracy" for the "great good".

If it be toward the general good,
Set Honour in one eye, and Death i'th' other,
And I will look on both indifferently!
For et the Gods o speed me as I love
The name of Honour, more than I fear death. (I, ii, ٨٦-٩٠)

Instead, Cassius takes up a phrase used by Brutus "the name of honour" and moves his subject from another direction. Brutus has said that the notion of honour is close to his

^١ - John Palmer, *Political and Comic Characters of Shakespeare* (New York: Martin's Press, ١٩٦٥), p. ٢.

^٢ -A. D. Nuttall, "Brutus' Nature and Shakespeare's Art", in Harold Bloom (ed.), *William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar* (New York: Chelsea House, ١٩٨٨), p. ١١٢, <www.questia.com> (١٢ Dec, ٢٠٠٤).

^٣ -Ibid.

heart, and Cassius associates honour with the idea of freedom and specially with freedom from the “tyrant” Caesar.

I know that virtue to bring you, Brutus,
As well as I do know your outward favour.
Well honour is the subject of my story.
I cannot tell what you and other men
Think of this life; but' for my single self,
I had as life not be as live to be
In awe of such a thing as I myself. (I, ii, ٩١-٧)

Brutus is deceived by Cassius' speech. After Cassius' speech against Caesar and after presenting all of Caesar' defect, from Cassius' point of view, he succeeds in raising Brutus patriotism which leads to Brutus' resolution to defend Rome from the “tyrant”.

Brutus: Till then, my friend, chew upon this:
Brutus had rather be a villager,
Then to repute himself a son of Rome
Under there hard conditions, as this time
Is like to lay upon us.
Cassius: I am glad that my weak words
Have struck but this much show of fire from Brutus. (I, ii, ٧٢-٨)

Brutus is fooled by Cassius' carefully chosen words.

Brutus is puzzled as to what will he do. Hid thoughts are of two opposite directions. On the one hand, he believes himself to be on a high political rectitude which will not tolerate the possibility of a dictatorship or tyranny; on the other hand, he is a fastidious man towhom murder is unacceptable especially the murder of Caesar who is his close friend. In deed, he is in a struggle. He can either refrain from joining the “conspiracy” or betray his friendship with Caesar. There is no opportunity to remain neutral. He tries to find the means to destroy Caesar the institution without having to destroy Caesar the man.^١

O that we then could come by Caesar's spirit,
And not dismember Caesar! But, also,
Caesar must bleed for it.

In fact, Brutus is better than what Cassius thinks of him. In the orchard scene he uses his mind wisely to know what ought to be done.^٢ He leads the “conspiracy” not only to protect the Republic, but also above all to defend his name. he does not bungle his attempt to preserve the Republic because of his idealism or simplicity but because he will not want to lose this aspect of self in any effort, not for citizenship, not for friendship, not even for the Republic.^٣

Brutus' idealism, love of Rome, and self-denial are his weaknesses. Brutus' idealism is shown by his belief that the “plotters” motive alone should be strong enough

^١ -John Wilders, *New Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, ١٩٨٨), pp. ١٣٧-٨.

^٢ -Nuttall, op. cit., p. ١١٢.

^٣ -Ibid.

to oblige them to go through with their plan without backsliding so that an oath should not be necessary. He takes the others to be as good as himself:

No, not an oath: if not the face of a man,
The sufferance of our souls, the time's abuse;
If these be motives weak, break off betimes'
And every man to his idle bed. (II, I, ١١٤-٧)

There is a political error in Brutus which is rooted in a certain nobility of mind.^١ When everybody agrees that it is necessary to kill Antony, Brutus does not accept this idea:

Our course will seem too bloody, Caius Cassius,

To cut the head off, and then hack the limbs,
Like wrath in death, and envy afterwards;
For Antony is but a limb of Caesar
Let's be Sacrificers, but not Butchers, Caius,
We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar. (II, I, ١١٢-٧)

Brutus' decision to murder Caesar and to leave Antony results from clear judgment but not from misjudgment because he follows his principle, honour and his conscious, not the demands of the politician's role. The aim of the "conspiracy" is to repress the "tyrant" Caesar only in order to end "the sufferance of our souls, the times abuse" (II, I, ١١٥). In other words, Brutus insists on his decision that Antony be spared because honour demands the death only for Caesar who has offended the Republic by his attempts to fly above the reach of ordinary man.

There is a sharp contrast between Brutus' idealism and Cassius' skill:

Brutus: I know that we shall have him well to friend.
Cassius: I know we may: But yet have I a mind
That fears him much: and my misgiving still
Falls shrewdly to the purpose. (III, ii, ١٤٤-٧)

While Brutus speaks out of his idealism assuring Antony of their good intentions towards him, Cassius tempts him with material rewards "disposing of new dignities". There is again contrast between the idealist and contriver.

Brutus' oration in Caesar's funeral reflects his real character. He speaks in prose. His speech is sober and the balanced sentence structures are logical.^٢ Brutus wants to state the case clearly and honestly to the people in order to convince them of what he has done.^٣ He wants to persuade the Romans that Caesar's murder was a heroic act to protect Rome from a purge of tyranny. He regards himself and his followers and liberators, Rome's saviors', not butchers.^٤

Brutus is not an orator as Antony described him. On the contrary, Antony who describes himself as being "no orator as Brutus is", as an orator. Brutus speech makes no

^١ -Palmer, op. cit., p. ٦.

^٢ -Wilders, op. cit., p. ١٤١.

^٣ -Palmer, op. cit., p. ٢٢.

^٤ -James C. Bulman, "Ironie Heroisms in Julius Caesar: A Repudiation", in Bloom (ed.), p. ١٢١.

deep impression upon the Romans. The Romans' call them to be their Caesar, but they change their minds after Antony's speech.

Brutus' speech may be described as dry wisdom whose effect might be strong on intellectuals and not commoners who answer best to their emotions which will be manipulated by Antony who knows the nature of men and what manner of speech is suitable when addressing them. He will play on the common people's emotions until he makes them revolt against the "conspirators".

Cassius is the originator and motivating force behind the "conspiracy", whose envy of Caesar appears in his speech when he tries to enlist the support of Brutus.^١

Brutus and Caesar. What should be in that 'Caesar'?
Why should that name be sounded more than yours?
Write them together: yours is as fair a name:
Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well:
Weigh them, it is as heavy: Conjure with 'em,
Brutus will start as soon as Caesar.
Now in the names of all the Gods at once,
Upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed,
That he is grown so great? (I, ii, ١٤٣-٥١)

Cassius has a personal cause to spurn at Caesar in contrast to Brutus. He hates Caesar because he envies him for his greatness, so he has a keen eye for his defects, none for his merits. Regarding himself as an equal to Caesar, if not superior, he cannot bear to be in an inferior position:^٢

This man
Is now become a god; and Cassius is
A wretched creature, and must bend his body,
If Caesar carelessly but nod on him. (I, I, ١١٦-٩)

Cassius reveals his own jealousy of Caesar and his contempt for Caesar's physical weaknesses. He does everything that may support his aim, so he does not only manipulate Brutus but tries to enlist others. In a fearful night, Cassius meets Casca. In the beginning of their conversation Casca asks Cassius, "Who ever knew the Heaven menace so?" (I, ii, ٤٤) Cassius answers, "those that have known the Earth so full of faults." (I, iii, ٤٥) He turns a simple question to his own advantage attempting to manipulate Casca. He paves the way to his subject saying that it is the anger of the gods over the state of affairs in Rome that is shown in this disturbance in the heavens, and that he can name the man responsible. Casca blurts out: "'Tis Caesar that you mean", (I, iii, ٧٩) Cassius replies "Let it be who it is" (I, iii, ٨٠). He is cautious he does not want to reveal his intentions before being sure of Casca's agreement. Cassius throws away caution and makes a genuinely passionate speech, declaring that he will kill himself rather than live in Rome under tyranny:

I know where I will wear this dagger then;

^١ -Wilders, op. cit., pp. ١٣٧-٨.

^٢ -Raghukul Tilak, "Introduction", in Raghukul Tilak (ed.), *Julius Caesar* (Meerut: R. D. Goel Printing Press, ١٩٩٦), p. ٧١.

Cassius from bondage will deliver Cassius:
Therein, ye Gods, you make the weak most strong,
Therein, ye Gods, you tyrants do defeat. (I, iii, ٨٩-٩٢)

Casca agrees and enthusiastically pledges his support to the “conspiracy”:

Hold my hand:
Be factious for redress of all the griefs,
And I will set this foot of mine as far,
As who goes farthest. (I, iii, ١١٧-٩)

and Cassius is very quick to take the chance and win another man to his side. “There’s a bargain made. (I, iii, ١٢٠) Cassius manipulates others as he declares:

Now know you, Casca, I have mov’d already
Some certain of the noblest-minded Romans,
To undergo with me an enterprise
Of honourable – dangerous consequences; (I, iii, ١٢١-٤)

Another character that is very important for Cassius to win is Brutus. He works skillfully on Brutus as he sets about recruiting him for the “conspiracy”. The first speech in which Cassius’ manipulation of Brutus begins:

Brutus, I do observe you now of late:
I have not from your eyes, that gentleness
And show of love, as I was wont to have:
You bear too stubborn, and too strange a hand,
Over your friend, that loves you. (I, ii, ٣٣-٧)

Cassius blames Brutus because of Brutus’ cold behavior with his friends. He pretends to be a close friend to Brutus. Then he uses flattery, “good Brutus”, “noble Brutus” in order to deceive him and draw him to another subject, which is the goal behind the “conspiracy”.^١ “Tell me good Brutus, can you see your face.” (I, ii, ٥٢)

As an attempt to make Brutus agree with his ideas against Caesar, skillfully and carefully speaking with him. Cassius knows well that Brutus is an honest man and loves honour more than he fears death so that he, first, makes use of this and in the name of honour he starts his speech. He refuses bondage saying that all men were born as free as Caesar; Brutus, Cassius, and all the Romans are as good as Caesar:^٢

The fault, dear Brutus, is not our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
‘Brutus’ and ‘Caesar’ what should be in that ‘Caesar’? (I, ii, ١٤١-٣)

Also, he reminds Brutus of his family position in Rome and how his grandfather defeated the tyrannous king.^٣

O! you and I have heard our fathers say
There was a Brutus once that would have brook’d

^١ -John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Style* (London: Heinemann, ١٩٨٠), p. ١١٣.

^٢ -Palmer, op. cit., p. ٢.

^٣ -Ibid, p. ٣.

The eternal devil to keep his state in Rome
As easily as a king. (I, ii, ١٥٩-٦٢)

In addition, he realizes that the relation between Caesar and Brutus is stronger than the relation between Caesar and himself. Finally, Caesar trusts Brutus and loves him. In order to succeed in his “conspiracy” he needs Brutus’ support. Cassius admits that if he had the position of Brutus he would not have allowed himself to be “seduced” into the rebellion.^١

Well, Brutus, thou art noble; yet, I see,
Thy honourable metal may be wrought
From that it is disposed: therefore 'tis meet
That noble minds keep ever with their likes;
For who so firm that cannot be seduc'd?
Caesar doth bear me hard; but he loves Brutus,
If I were Brutus now and he were Cassius,
He should not humour me. (I, ii, ٣٠٩-١٦)

Cassius is obviously more skilled than Brutus. He can predict that Brutus will respond to the call of duty; therefore, he tries to win Brutus’ support by appealing to that motive.^٢ Cassius, as T. S. Dorsch describes him, is a man of action, a man who has skill in war but is cruel and a wonderful choleric. He describes himself as an old soldier who is better than Brutus:^٣ “I am a soldier. I, \ Older in practice, abler than yourself \ To make conditions”. (IV, iii, ٣٠-٢) From the following speech, the tactics of an experienced soldier, the man of war appears clearly.

This it is:
'Tis better that enemy seek us;
So shall he waste his means, weary his soldiers,
Doing himself offence, whilst we lying still,
And full of rest, defense, and nimbleness. (V, ii, ٢٠٠-٤)

Although he has bad features, he has good ones. He has the ability to judge people correctly and understand their nature. He knows the real nature of Antony and Brutus. This is why he wants to kill Antony in order to avoid any trouble which may be caused by the latter. He also does not agree with Brutus in his decision to allow Antony to speak in the funeral. Yet, he does not care much about the morality of his deeds.^٤

Cassius dies at the end of the play. He thinks that the enemy defeated them and Titinius is taken prisoner. He asks his servant Pindarus to kill him with the same sword by which he killed Caesar.

And with this good sword
That ran through Caesar's bowels, search his bosom.
Stand not to answer: here, take thou the hilts,
And when my face is cover'd, as 'tis now,

^١ -Ibid, p. ٥.

^٢ -Wilders, op. cit., p. ١٤٠.

^٣ -T. S. Dorsch, “Appendix A” in T. S. Dorsch (ed.), Julius Caesar (London: Methuen, ١٩٠٢), p. ١٣٦.

^٤ -Tilak, op. cit., p. ٧٢.

Guide thou the sword – Caesar, thou art reveng'd,
Even with the sword that killed thee. (V, iii, ٤١-٦)

The tragic flaw is not a bad quality; on the contrary, one would be hard put to find dishonest or reprehensible quality in a tragic figure, like Hamlet for instance; however, this quality leads to that man's fall.

To know the protagonist of this play, I will present the features of Julius Caesar, Cassius and Brutus. For Caesar, pride and ambition lead to his downfall. Although there is no tangible proof to his ambition, which will change him into a tyrant; yet, the "conspirators" feared his greatness. His pride is a bad quality while the tragic flaw must be a good quality leading to his fall.

Cassius cannot be taken for a tragic hero because he has more bad qualities than good. He deceives almost everyone around him in order to kill Caesar. His motives were his envy and jealousy of Caesar. This contradicts the main features of a tragic hero, namely, nobility, honesty, etc.

Brutus' idealism is the tragic flaw. It lies in that there is a slight and subtle but pervasive undercutting of himself in almost every one of his sterling qualities. Brutus is not only an idealist, but also an unrealistic idealist. Therefore, his idealism is no match for ruthlessness and deceit. His devotion to the abstract virtues which indeed are what he lives by remove him from the common arena in which most men live. He is so poor a judge of men's characters as to prepare the ground for his disaster. In other words, the nature of Brutus is such that it contains in every virtue a subtle consequence of harm to him and this is a tragic flaw which through his actions, interactions, emotions, and intellectual reasoning brings him to his end; yet, his death is not the tragedy. The tragic flaw has brought about the waste of all the virtues, love and life-values of the man, Brutus.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. London: Harcourt-Brace Ivanovich, ١٩٩٨.
- Brown, John Russell. *Shakespeare's Dramatic Style*. London: Heinemann, ١٩٨٠.
- Bulman, James C., "Ironical Heroisms in Julius Caesar: A Repudiation", in Harold Bloom (ed.) *William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar*. New York: Chelsea House, ١٩٨٨, pp. ١٢١-٣٢. <www.questia.com> (١٢ Dec, ٢٠٠٤)
- Cuddon, J. A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. London: Penguin Books, ١٩٩٨.
- Dorsch, T. S. (ed.) *Julius Caesar*. London: Methuen, ١٩٠٢.
- Nuttall, A. D., "Brutus' Nature and Shakespeare's Art", in Harold Bloom (ed.) *William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar*. New York: Chelsea House, ١٩٨٨. <www.questia.com> (١٢ Dec, ٢٠٠٤).
- Palmer, John. *Political and Comic Characters of Shakespeare*. New York: Martin's Press, ١٩٦٥.
- Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. H. L. Kennedy (ed.) London: Collins Publishers, ١٩٧٢.
- Tilak, Raghukul (ed.) *Julius Caesar*. Meerut: R. D. Goel Printing Press, ١٩٩٦.
- Wilders, John. *New Prefaces to Shakespeare*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, ١٩٨٨.