

## *The Tragedy Of Julius Caesar* **William Shakespeare**

In 1598, Francis Meres described Shakespeare as "the most excellent in both sides - comedy and tragedy". His comedies are unsurpassed for the marvellous harmony they establish among so many apparently discordant elements. His tragedies, rightly interpreted, do not reveal a spirit of gloom and disillusionment. Yet, if we ponder carefully, while the themes of Shakespeare's tragedies are indeed dark and dismal, the message that they impart is that, no matter how deep the misfortune or how dreary the circumstances, man is capable of rising from his own ashes, like Phoenix; think of Richard II, Henry V, King Lear, or Prospero. Good will triumph over evil, in the end; think of Hamlet, Macbeth, Julius Caesar.

As the theme and message in Shakespeare's comedies, they can be summed up in two lines from "*As You Like It*":

"All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players"

In his comedies, just as in real life, the protagonists play different parts in the little playlets they have themselves improvised in order to get what they desire. No one is hurt, no one is denied the opportunity to join in the game, no one is left out. Life is a merry-go-round and each individual may get off the platform as soon as he no longer enjoys the game. As long as all ends well...

All Samuel Taylor Coleridge maintained, Shakespeare was more interested in character-development than in his plots. Besides, in most cases, he did not invent the plots, he merely borrowed them from Holinshed and Hall Chronicles. Yet, his plots follow the classical Aristotelian outlines.

Of Shakespeare's tragic characters, Mark Antony is quite outstanding in point of versatility. He does not exactly fit the Aristotelian description of the tragic hero. He is reliable and trustworthy friend, a highly intelligent and tactful man, a good psychologist, a skilful orator. Analysing Antony's famous speech of act 3, scene 2, we admire its uncanny rhetorical effects and the most persuasive use of the emotional appeal that assist him in disentangling the truth from the pack of lies concerning Julius Caesar that Brutus had just told the Roman citizens. By using the apophatic approach (the device by which one mentions something by saying it will not be mentioned: "*I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him*", and "*I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke*"), Antony manages to do just what he was not expected or allowed to do: praise Caesar and disprove what Brutus spoke.

In a society like Shakespeare's, which felt secure about what constituted proper behaviour, social, political and familial roles were basic sources of order and untroubled adherence to them symbolised the continued existence of order. What Shakespeare presents in "*Julius Caesar*" and in other tragedies as "*Romeo and Juliet*", "*Hamlet*", "*Othello*", "*King Lear*", "*Macbeth*" is not untroubled adherence to the roles of his type but, rather, their constant violation or loss as well as the subsequent restoration of order, as the masters of deceit who had thrived on disorder are exposed and destroyed.

Antony speech moves coherently from one idea to another, from one image to another, as he places the Roman citizens in relation to reality and forces them to identify the real traitor. Thus, order is being restored and, as Edmund remarks in *"King Lear"*: *"The wheel is come full circle"*.

***Style and imagery:***

In Renaissance literature the idea that the poet, insofar as he creates a world of his own, can be compared with God, Who created the world, was already a commonplace by Shakespeare's time. The fact that St. Augustine compared the world with a poem and a discourse was crucial for the way in which the Renaissance writers conceived of style and imagery.

The development of poetic language, of style and imagery, was the main concern of 16<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance writers who probed the nature of language and its ingredients as well as potential relationships between words and reality (*"brutish beasts"* is intentionally used by Antony in his speech in order to imply that, by murdering Caesar, Brutus acted like a brute), between words and signs as containers of meanings.

Shakespeare's preoccupation with language was not confined to words as rhetorical ornaments of thought but, rather, reflects the belief in the magic of language that thrives on an inter-referentiality among words, concepts, and things (the word "Brutus", the concept of brutishness, and the brutish thing that Brutus did, i.e. Caesar assassination).