

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Julius Caesar

by

William Shakespeare

Book Information

William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar
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In Shakespeare's tale of political conflict and intrigue set in ancient Rome, Brutus and others conspire to assassinate Julius Caesar.

Topics: Arts, Theater/Plays; Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Politics; Mysteries, Conspiracies; People, Royalty; Popular Groupings, College Bound

Main Characters

Caius Cassius an envious conspirator against Julius Caesar; he commits suicide when he believes his friend and army are defeated

Calpurnia Julius Caesar's wife

Casca, Decius Brutus, Cinna, Metellus Cimber, Trebonius, Caius Ligarius conspirators against Caesar

Julius Caesar the ruler of the Roman Empire; he is killed by a group of conspirators

Lucius Brutus's servant

Marcus Brutus an honorable man who aligns himself with the conspirators for the good of Rome

Mark Antony Julius Caesar's close friend and triumvir after Caesar's death; he battles the conspirators

Octavius Caesar a soldier who becomes a triumvir and, with Antony, battles the conspirators

Pindarus Cassius's servant, who flees after he helps Cassius commit suicide

Portia Brutus's wife; she commits suicide by swallowing burning coals

Vocabulary

augurer a prophet or religious official who interprets omens

plebeian one of the common people of Rome
puissant powerful
tribune a protector of the people

Synopsis

As the play opens, the citizens of Rome are celebrating as Julius Caesar, a victorious general, makes a triumphal entry into the city. Two angry tribunes, loyal to the conquered general Pompey, disperse the crowds and remove trophies honoring Caesar. As Caesar passes, a soothsayer warns him "Beware the ides of March," but Caesar dismisses him as a dreamer.

Meanwhile, Brutus and Cassius discuss Caesar's increasing influence with great concern. They fear they may lose their freedom and rights under their republican government if Caesar is made a king. Because Cassius knows Caesar does not trust him, he flatters Marcus Brutus in an attempt to persuade him to join a plot to murder Caesar. He knows he needs to use Brutus's honorable reputation to gain the support of the Roman citizens. Then Brutus and Cassius hear shouting from the crowd and learn from Casca that Caesar, in order to appear humble and earn the crowd's admiration, has refused the crown Mark Antony has offered him three times. They are sure, however, that he will not refuse the crown the next time it is offered.

Cassius plans to entice Brutus to join their plot by forging anonymous letters appealing to his sense of honor and justice and placing them where he will easily find them. Later, Brutus reads one of the letters and decides to participate in the murder of Caesar for the sake of Rome. The conspirators then meet with Brutus under the cover of darkness, but Brutus refuses to kill Antony along with Caesar because he believes it would be unnecessary and dishonorable. Cassius disagrees, believing that leaving Antony alive will cause them great danger later, but Cassius relents to Brutus's wish.

The same night, Caesar's wife, Calpurnia, dreams she sees Caesar's statue streaming blood. She

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persuades Caesar to stay home that day, but Decius Brutus, one of the conspirators, arrives and reinterprets the dream in a flattering way. Decius's strategy works, and they set out for the Capitol.

On the way to the Capitol, however, Artemidorus tries to warn Caesar by handing him a letter revealing the plot, but Caesar does not read it. Caesar arrives at the Capitol and takes his place. The conspirators then use Metellus Cimber's appeal for clemency for his brother as an excuse to surround Caesar and get into position for the murder. Beginning with Casca, the conspirators stab him. Caesar dies and the citizens of Rome are horrified.

The conspirators proudly proclaim their deed as an act of honor and necessity rather than of treachery and shame. Antony then sends a messenger to request a meeting with the conspirators to ask their reasons for the murder. Brutus agrees and meets with Antony, explaining that he will detail their motives in his speech to the Romans. Antony shakes their hands but, in a private speech, reveals his intent to seek revenge. Brutus, believing that Antony poses no threat, offers to allow Antony to speak at the funeral. Cassius disagrees with Brutus, however, predicting Antony to be a great threat. Again, though, Cassius relents to Brutus's wish.

Brutus makes his speech to the citizens and explains that he killed Caesar for the good of Rome. The citizens are moved to sympathy for his cause until Antony, speaking to a crowd now hostile to him, slowly but brilliantly sways the crowd to believe that the conspirators have brutally murdered a great and generous leader for their own personal gain. The conspirators flee from Rome and the enraged mob vows to catch the culprits and burn their homes. Antony and Octavius make plans to take over rule of the empire and make a list of enemies to be executed.

Some time later, Brutus's and Cassius's armies meet near Sardis to prepare for their coming battle with Antony's and Octavius's forces. Brutus and

Cassius's friendship has cooled as a result of continuing disagreements, and they have a heated argument in Brutus's tent. They set aside their differences, however, after Brutus reveals that his wife, Portia, has committed suicide. Once again, though, Brutus and Cassius disagree as they make battle plans. Cassius advises their armies wait to be attacked by the enemy, while Brutus recommends their armies take the initiative and attack first. Cassius disagrees with Brutus's tactics, but he reluctantly consents. That night Caesar's ghost appears in Brutus's tent and tells Brutus he will see him again at Philippi.

Brutus and Cassius march to Philippi the next morning and the battle begins. At first, Brutus's troops are successful against Octavius's forces, but Cassius's are retreating from Antony's. Then Cassius sends Titinius to see if approaching troops are friend or foe. When his servant Pindarus reports that Titinius is unseated, Cassius mistakenly interprets this to mean that Titinius has been captured and Pindarus helps the despairing Cassius commit suicide. The troops are actually friendly troops reporting Brutus's defeat of Octavius. When Brutus discovers Cassius is dead and the battle begins to turn against their side, Brutus persuades Strato to help him commit suicide, too. Octavius and Antony find Brutus's body and promise to give him an honorable burial. Antony believes him to be the only conspirator to act from pure motives and declares him to be "the noblest Roman of them all."

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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Initial Understanding

The Romans seem to have great regard for the supernatural. What are some examples of this?

Romans put great faith into the prophecies of soothsayers and poets, as well as physical and earthly signs. The stormy weather is a portent of the unrest in Rome; some take the soothsayer's warning seriously; Cassius foresees his downfall with the change of the birds; and Caesar's ghost troubles Brutus.

Literary Analysis

It has been argued that this play could easily have been named Marcus Brutus. Why?

Marcus Brutus is a central character in the play, and he remains an important character long after Julius Caesar is murdered. Though the play seems to have two protagonists, Julius Caesar and Marcus Brutus, it focuses on Brutus's downfall from honor to death, and it is Brutus's struggles that are witnessed through the bulk of the play until his despair and ultimate suicide.

Inferential Comprehension

Caius Cassius shows himself to have a complex personality. What are some examples of his disparities?

He wishes to have Mark Antony killed along with Caesar, but allows himself to be swayed by Brutus's opinion. Although he claims to have Rome's best interests at heart, he is envious and greedy. While he shows no hesitation in assassinating a political enemy, he seems to have a "soft spot" for his friends, and takes his life when he thinks Titinius is dead.

Constructing Meaning

Portia is able to tell Brutus has a troubled spirit, not a physical illness. What does this tell us about their relationship? What can you tell about the people you are close to from their body language?

Portia and Brutus appear to have a close marriage. Portia talks about expectations in terms of a covenant relationship, with the two of them sharing their secrets and being of one mind. She is able to discern by Brutus's behavior that he is not physically ill, but has a sickness of mind. Body language can tell us a lot about an individual. Parents are able to discern the feelings of their babies well before the child is able to talk. People can often find disparities between what a person says and how they actually feel by their body posturing. For example, if a person says, "I'm sorry," with arms crossed tightly over the chest, it may really mean "I'm just saying this, because someone is making me say it."

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting: The historical time period surrounding *Julius Caesar* is a critical time in Roman history. This play covers the time when the first triumvirate, Julius Caesar, Crassus, and Pompey is succeeded by the second triumvirate of Octavius Caesar, Mark Antony, and Lepidus. Have the students research the actual history of this time period. How does the play compare in accuracy to the events of that time?

Understanding the Author's Craft: Many of Shakespeare's plays have been used as the basis of modern day drama. Some examples include *West Side Story* as a contemporary version of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Ten Things I Hate About You* as a modern adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Encourage the students to choose a part of *Julius Caesar* and rewrite it for modern times. They could change it to describe a current political situation or some other situation where power may be seized by others such as in the corporate boardroom. Have the students share their versions with others.

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Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning: Although Shakespeare may at first be difficult for students to read, his works have endured, and many expressions that are still in current use have come from his writings. Have the students review the play and note the location of particular words or expressions which have made their way into modern day language. Examples may include "it was Greek to me" (1.2.284); "Et tu, Brute?" (3.1.78); and "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears" (3.2.75). In what context are these expressions used today?

Responding to Literature: Ask the student to pretend they are theater critics living in 1599 and have them write a review of *Julius Caesar* as if they had just watched an original performance. They should include comments about the actors, stage, and crowd reaction in their review.