

# *Julius Caesar* Teaching Guide

Teaching Shakespeare's Play with Confidence

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History of the Text

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## Approaches and Discussion Questions

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- **For discussion:** How is Caesar's murder described in act III, scene I? In what ways is it especially violent and bloody? When Antony is left alone with Caesar's body, how does he describe the civil war that he intends to wage against the conspirators? How will it affect Rome and the Roman people?
- **For discussion:** Which details in Antony's funeral oration in act III, scene II, suggest that the Roman people benefited from having Caesar as a ruler?
- **For discussion:** What occurs immediately after Antony speaks at Caesar's funeral? Does it indicate that Caesar's assassination created social chaos and destruction? How?

**Motifs Underscoring Themes in the Play:** Several motifs appear throughout the play emphasizing major themes in the text. Frequently the motifs are images or ideas that are repeated at key points in the plot. Examine how these motifs relate to the development of themes in the play: deceit, darkness and shadows, and omens.

- **For discussion:** Which characters deceive others? Describe how and why each of them chooses to engage in deception. Are there justifiable reasons for each character's deceitful behavior?
- **For discussion:** Which scenes in the play are set in darkness and shadows? What is happening or about to happen in the plot when the scenes are thus staged? What are the connotations of darkness and shadows? What ideas do they suggest regarding the characters in the scenes and their activities?
- **For discussion:** What omens occur before and after Caesar's assassination? Which of them seems to warn of Caesar's impending death? Which of them seems to occur in response to Caesar's murder? How might these omens be described? What atmosphere do they create in the scenes where they occur or are discussed?
- **For discussion:** How do these motifs relate to the themes of honor, ambition, or regicide?

### **Additional Discussion Questions:**

- Contrast Brutus's speech at Caesar's funeral with Antony's. How does Brutus rely on logic to explain Caesar's assassination? How does Antony appeal to emotion to turn the crowd against the conspirators? What other persuasive techniques does Antony employ in his oration? Why is Antony's speech more persuasive than Brutus's?
- Which scenes in the play depict the behavior of the commoners? How are they depicted as a social class? What are some details in the text that suggest commoners are not to be admired?
- Examine instances of psychological manipulation that advance the plot. Which characters use psychology to manipulate someone else to achieve a hidden objective? Whom do they manipulate, and how do they do it?
- How does Shakespeare infuse the play with irony? What are some examples of situational irony, dramatic irony, and verbal irony in various scenes? How do dramatic irony and verbal irony contribute to the creation of suspense in several scenes?
- Examine the role of women in the play. How are Calpurnia and Portia alike? How could each woman's relationship with her husband be described? What do Calpurnia and Portia contribute to the play?
- The soothsayer and Artemidorus are both minor characters. In which scenes do they appear? How does each of them play a role in creating suspense as the plot unfolds?
- Consider Brutus as the play's tragic hero. What is the fatal flaw in his character that leads to his own destruction?
- Define *blank verse* for students. Which parts of the text are written in blank verse? Which parts are not written in blank verse? Why does Shakespeare write passages of exposition as blank verse?

## Alternative Approaches to Teaching *Julius Caesar*

To have students consider this frequently taught play from an alternative perspective, consider focusing on the following approaches:

- **Focus on the characters' personal relationships.** Since friendship is a motif in the play, examine the friendships between Brutus and Caesar, between Caesar and Antony, and between Brutus and Cassius.
  - *For discussion:* How does Brutus's friendship with Caesar contribute to Brutus's intense internal conflict prior to joining the conspiracy? How does it contextualize Caesar's dying words in act III, scene I?
  - *For discussion:* How is Antony's relationship to Caesar depicted early in the play? How does Antony's friendship with Caesar determine his immediate response to Caesar's brutal murder?
  - *For discussion:* How does Cassius betray his friendship with Brutus prior to Caesar's assassination? When does Cassius defer to Brutus's judgment on matters they disagree on, and why does he continue to defer, even though Brutus's decisions consistently prove to be wrong? How is Brutus and Cassius's friendship affected by waging war together against Antony after Caesar's murder?
  - *For discussion:* In what ways is friendship a major motivation and source of conflict for the characters?
- **Focus on other motifs in the play.**
  - *For discussion:* Identify images and references to blood, and interpret what they suggest. Contrast Brutus's description of Caesar's bloody corpse with Antony's description.
  - *For discussion:* Identify references to fate, courage, and suicide. Interpret what they suggest about the characters and their culture.
  - *For discussion:* Identify examples of letters playing a role in the plot. Interpret how they create suspense.
- **Focus on static vs. dynamic characters.** Explain the difference between a *static* character and a *dynamic* character. Examine the major characters in the play to determine whether they change in substantial ways as the plot unfolds. Interpret the significance of each character's being either static or dynamic.
  - *For discussion:* How is Caesar portrayed from the beginning of the play until his death at the beginning of act III? What seem to be Caesar's primary character traits? How do his speeches earlier in the play compare to his final speech to the Senate before his assassination? What traits do his speeches reveal? Which of Caesar's character traits remain constant? Is Caesar more static or dynamic?
  - *For discussion:* How is Brutus portrayed from the beginning of the play until his death in act V? What seem to be his primary character traits early in the play? By the play's conclusion, in what ways has he remained the same? In what ways has Brutus changed? Is Brutus more static or dynamic?
  - *For discussion:* How is Cassius portrayed from the beginning of the play until his death in act V? What seem to be his primary character traits early in the play? By the play's conclusion, how has he changed? Is Cassius more static or dynamic?
  - *For discussion:* How is Antony portrayed from the beginning of the play until his final speech in act V? What seem to be his primary character traits prior to Caesar's assassination? What traits in Antony's character are revealed after Caesar's murder? How has Antony's character changed by the conclusion of the play? Is Antony more static or dynamic?

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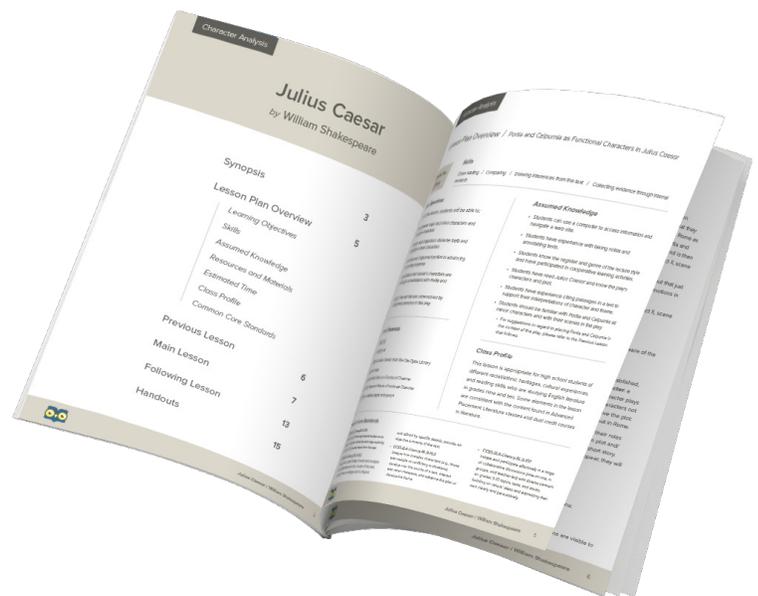
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