



The Plays of William Shakespeare



JULIUS CAESAR STUDY GUIDE

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Special Note on Shakespeare's Plays

A first encounter with Shakespeare can be a challenging experience for high school students. The spelling is often nonstandard, the vocabulary is difficult and archaic, and the cadence and structure are unfamiliar. These barriers to understanding the story could cause a student to become frustrated with the literature and give up. To enhance the students' appreciation and understanding of *Julius Caesar*, we urge instructors to carefully consider the edition your students will read. We suggest selecting an annotated edition that uses standard spelling but retains the original sentence structure. We recommend *The New Folger Library Shakespeare* editions, and our line references will be to the Folger edition. Other editions may have slightly different line numbering due to differences in formatting and typesetting, particularly in prose text, so the reader may have to search around somewhat for the exact text referred to in the study guide. In most instances we have included the words at the beginning of the referred to lines to make the passage easier to find [e.g., Act 3, scene 1, lines 280–301 (“O pardon me”)].

In addition, since Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed and not merely read, we recommend the use of video or audio recordings of *Julius Caesar* as part of the learning process. These may be available through your local library. We advise letting students watch or listen to the play before actually reading it. This helps familiarize the students with the story and the language and makes in-depth study of the text easier. Note that every performance is an interpretation, however, and so may not match perfectly with the text. Some versions of the play are recommended at the end of this study guide, but our recommendations are not meant to be an exhaustive list.

Synopsis

*My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them. If they say,
“Come along with us; let’s lie in wait for someone’s blood, let’s waylay some harmless soul;
let’s swallow them alive, like the grave, and whole, like those who go down to the pit;
we will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder;
throw in your lot with us, and we will share a common purse”
—my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths;
for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood.
How useless to spread a net in full view of all the birds!
These men lie in wait for their own blood; they waylay only themselves!
Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain; it takes away
the lives of those who get it.—Proverbs 1:10–19*

The machinations of a few powerful men have begun to threaten the republican ideal of Roman governance, and some among the nobility believe Julius Caesar is the embodiment of this threat.

Caius Cassius and a band of patricians have decided that Caesar must die, but they believe they need the support of Caesar’s friend, the popular Marcus Brutus, to lend legitimacy to their plans. Brutus already seems to fear Caesar and soon succumbs to their influence and joins their plot. Once persuaded, however, Brutus brings an almost religious fervor to the conspiracy, cloaking their actions in robes of glory and virtually taking control of the decisionmaking.

Caesar is not without warnings of his danger, however: a soothsayer warns Caesar to “Beware the ides of March,” strange visions appear in Rome, and his wife Calphurnia has a terrible dream of death. But as Cicero says of the portents, “men may construe things after their fashion, clean from the purpose of the things themselves,” and Caesar does not recognize, or explains away, the importance of the warnings, declaring himself above fear and danger.

March 15 arrives and Caesar, ignoring the pleas of his wife and sure of his own power, goes to the Roman Senate. As they plead mercy for one of their associates, and

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as Caesar declares himself immovable and superior, the conspirators draw their daggers and slaughter Caesar, who dies at the feet of the statue of Pompey, his predecessor.

As the citizens of Rome flee in confusion, the conspirators bathe their arms in Caesar's blood and proclaim themselves liberators of the state of Rome. Mark Antony, friend of Caesar, begs an audience with Brutus. Cassius and Brutus explain their justifications for killing Caesar and Antony declares himself satisfied, begging only that they allow him to give Caesar's funeral oration. Brutus gives him permission over Cassius' objections. Antony uses his oration to remind the people of Rome of the greatness of Caesar and turn them against the conspirators, who are then forced flee Rome. Mark Antony joins forces with Caesar's nephew, Octavius Caesar, against the conspirators to seize control of Rome and finally wreak vengeance on the murderers of Julius Caesar.

Act One

*Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look. . . .
Such men as he be never at heart's ease
Whiles they behold a greater than themselves.*

Vocabulary:

Some words have changed meaning since the time of Shakespeare. Below are five vocabulary words that may be familiar to you, but may have unfamiliar meanings in the play. For each vocabulary word below, pick one word that comes closest to its meaning from the Contemporary Word Box, and one word that comes closest from the Shakespearean Word Box and write them in the appropriate blanks next to the vocabulary word.

Contemporary Word Box

shiny	improper	irritating
envious	shoemaker	machinelike

Shakespearean Word Box

suspicious	laborer	harming
bungler	impertinent	stared

	Contemporary	Shakespearean
1. mechanical	_____	_____
2. cobbler	_____	_____
3. jealous	_____	_____
4. glazed	_____	_____

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understandable or immediate to the reader or listener, but they often have little factual validity in an argument. A good, strong argument should have opinions that are based upon strong facts that may be then *communicated* through generalizations and metaphors.

For each of the sentences below, determine whether it is a fact, opinion, generalization, and/or metaphor, and write **F** for fact, **O** for opinion, **G** for generalization, or **M** for metaphor in the blank next to the sentence. Some sentences may be both **G** and **M**.

- ___ 1. And for my part I know no personal cause to spurn at him, but for the general.
- ___ 2. He would be crowned: how that might change his nature, there's the question.
- ___ 3. It is the bright day that brings forth the adder, and that craves wary walking.
- ___ 4. Crown him that, and then I grant we put a sting in him that at his will he may do danger with.
- ___ 5. Th' abuse of greatness is when it disjoins remorse from power.
- ___ 6. And, to speak truth of Caesar, I have not known when his affection swayed more than his reason.
- ___ 7. But 'tis a common proof that lowliness is young ambition's ladder, whereto the climber-upward turns his face; but, when he once attains the upmost round, he then unto the ladder turns his back, looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees by which he did ascend.
- ___ 8. So Caesar may.

- 9. Does Brutus' soliloquy contain more facts or opinions and generalizations? Do you think his conclusion is based more on facts or on opinions and generalizations?

Questions:

- 1. Which two men speak with their wives during this act?

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2. What does Lucius find upon the window sill?
3. Who do the conspirators decide to *not* kill? Why?
4. What three occurrences or events does Calphurnia interpret to mean that Caesar should not go to the Senate?

Analysis:

5. A *soliloquy* is a speech a character makes when he or she is alone on stage. A soliloquy often is used to provide background information or express what the character is thinking. Review Brutus' soliloquy at the beginning of Act 2, scene 1. What does this soliloquy reveal about Brutus?
6. In Act 1, scene 3, Casca says of Brutus to Cassius:

O, [Brutus] sits high in all the people's hearts,
And that which would appear offense in us
His countenance, like richest alchemy,
Will change to virtue and to worthiness.

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Dig Deeper:

15. When a person is intent on doing right, it means the person has applied a moral and/or ethical measure to his actions and is trying to match his actions to the moral code. When a person is justified in his actions, it means that he had good reasons for committing them. Review Brutus' statements and musings throughout this act. Do you think Brutus' words and arguments demonstrate that he wants his actions to be *right*, or to be *justifiable*? Which is more important? See Proverbs 6:30, 31; Philippians 1:9–11; 1 Peter 1:15, 16.

16. At every opportunity, Cassius has flattered Brutus and reminded him that he is viewed as an honorable man. In Act 1, scene 2, Cassius tells Brutus that the best of Rome wish that he could see himself with their eyes, and then offers to be Brutus' mirror so Brutus can "discover" himself. In Act 2, scene 1, when Cassius and his friends meet Brutus in his garden, Cassius says of the men,

. . .and no man here
But honors you, and every one doth wish
You had but that opinion of yourself
Which every noble Roman bears of you.

Review Act 2, scene 1. Do you think Brutus believes he is honorable? How do his actions, particularly in the latter half of the scene, reflect his self-perception?

17. When Cassius suggests killing Mark Antony along with Caesar, Brutus objects because it will make their actions "seem too bloody." Review Brutus' argument for not killing Antony in Act 2, scene 1, lines 175–193 ("Our course will

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Optional Activities:

1. Review Brutus' soliloquy about Caesar in Act 2, scene 1, lines 10–36, and his discussion of Caesar at Act 2, scene 1, lines 175–193. Note the way in which Brutus describes Caesar in generalizations and metaphors. Discuss why Brutus does this—why he describes Caesar as a snake or a sacrifice rather than describing Caesar's specific wrongs as a man and leader? Do you see instances of that in current politics or disagreements between people?
2. We often hear that what a man does in private should not be dragged out into politics, and we should judge political leaders by their policies, not their character. Discuss this issue as a class, or form two teams to debate each side of the issue. Can a man be a good leader without having good moral character? Is it possible to find leaders who are above reproach? Should Christians demand that their political leaders be moral men and women?
3. Think about the characters you have met thus far in the play and choose actors or characters from current television shows or movies to represent these characters. For example, you might cast Jerry Seinfeld as Cassius and George Costanza as Casca, or you might cast John Wayne as Julius Caesar and Mel Gibson as Mark Antony. Explain why you cast the characters as you did.
4. An *anachronism* is someone or something that is presented outside of its proper, chronological, or historical place or time. In Act 2, Shakespeare places a sound or object that is a glaring anachronism. Research the thing that is out of its appropriate time and write a one-page paper describing the object's development through history and mentioning what the Romans actually would have used during their period in history. You may instead make a poster or bulletin board with pictures and short descriptions of its development.

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people will overlook the faults of conspirators if Brutus joins them because of the respect the people have for Brutus. In both passages the conspirators want to enlist the cooperation of a man they believe will lend the appearance of honor and credence to their enterprise.

19. First, Cassius proposes that the group takes an oath to bind their resolution, then Cassius proposes that they approach Cicero about joining their group, then Cassius proposes that Mark Antony be killed along with Caesar. Each time Brutus opposes the idea and Cassius quickly backs down, though he does so more reluctantly over the issue of Mark Antony. Answers may vary about the meaning of these confrontations, but it appears as if Brutus has taken charge of the conspiracy. Brutus opposes the inclusion of Cicero because “he will never follow anything that other men begin,” but this suddenly appears to be true of Brutus, also.

20. Interpretations of Artemidorus’ statement should be similar to the following: “I am sad that goodness/greatness/virtue will always be in danger from envious people.” His statement is a more general version of what Caesar says of Cassius in Act 1, scene 2: “Such men as he be never at heart’s ease whiles they behold a greater than themselves, and therefore are they very dangerous” (lines 218–220). Students’ judgment about the general truth of Artemidorus’ statement will vary, but, sadly, virtue and success often bring out envy and animosity. For some scriptural examples of envy of those in power, see Genesis 39; Esther 2:21–3:15, 5:9–7:10; Ezra 4:1–5:18; 1 Samuel 18:1–11; Daniel 6.

21. Answers will vary; accept reasonable responses. Possibilities for the differences between Act 2, scene 4 and scene 1 may be simply that actions speak louder than words—Portia was brave and forthright with Brutus when in their garden, but when time for action comes she loses her bravery. Shakespeare may have included this scene as foreshadowing or as contrast with the certainty of Brutus and the conspirators. Since making his decision to kill Caesar, Brutus has become more and more certain of himself. By contrast, Portia seems to be becoming more and more unnerved, unable to hide her agitation from those around her, unlike the conspirators, who cheerfully greet Caesar and breakfast with him. Note that by the end of the act, both Portia’s and Calphurnia’s fears contrast with the bold confidence of both the conspirators and Caesar.

22. The first requirement that Paul lists for spiritual leadership is being above reproach (1 Timothy 3:2, 3) or being blameless (Titus 1:6, 7). Paul probably lists this first because it is the overriding qualification. The areas that follow are simply specific areas or specific behaviors in which leaders must be above reproach, but if one attempts to be blameless in everything, one should do well. Answers will vary. The requirement to be above reproach is one that should be followed everyone, not just leaders; and it is a requirement that leaders, especially, should follow. Brutus and the conspirators do not seem to be attempting to be above reproach, they seem to be trying to appear above reproach. They never speak of finding good men from whom they can gain counsel, they only speak of finding good, honorable men who will lend credence and the appearance of honor to their actions. See Act 1, scene 3, lines 145–169 and Act 2, scene 1, lines 152–161, 175–179, 190–193.

23. Answers will vary. Caesar seems genuinely brave and unconcerned about the signs around him. He seems concerned for his wife and eventually capitulates to her wishes. However, his bravery may have overstepped itself in the light of those warnings—Caesar seems to think himself above common dangers. When Decius and the others arrive, he allows himself to be flattered and manipulated. Cassius’ description of Caesar in Act 1 was deliberately mocking, and the man we see in Act 2, scene 2, seems much more genuine than Cassius’ portrayal. However, we do see a hint of the man who