Julius Caesar, one of Shakespeare's best-known tragedies, is based on the assassination of Julius Caesar, the historical event occurring on the ides of March (March 15) in 44 BCE. While the plot of the play centers on the assassination and its aftermath, the story focuses on Brutus, a Roman senator and Caesar’s friend who joins the conspiracy to kill Caesar only after much deliberation. Brutus’s feelings about murdering Caesar serve as the central conflict in the play; a man of honor, Brutus weighs his love of freedom and of Rome itself against his personal loyalty to a friend. In Shakespeare’s drama, Brutus ultimately is manipulated into joining the conspiracy and participates in stabbing Caesar to death on the floor of the Roman Senate. Julius Caesar, however, does not end with the assassination. In the wake of Caesar's shocking and brutal murder, events unfold quickly in Rome, and later on the plains of Greece, as leaders and armies fight for political power and Brutus faces the tragic consequences of his actions.

Likely written in 1599 to open the new Globe Theatre, Julius Caesar reflects a political concern of the time: Queen Elizabeth I was an aging monarch with no heir to the throne. Shakespeare’s play about a leader who died without an heir and whose death prompted a civil war reflects the concern in England that civil war would break out when Queen Elizabeth died without a direct successor. Moreover, since Shakespeare staged his productions at the pleasure of the Queen, his plays' political themes are far from controversial in the context of his era, and this, too is reflected in Julius Caesar. As Caesar’s assassination results directly in political turmoil, suffering, and bloodshed, the play can be interpreted as a cautionary tale about the perils of usurping political power, a theme sure to have been embraced by an English sovereign.

Julius Caesar is drama, not history, but specific events in Roman history serve as antecedent action in the play, and Shakespeare alludes to some of them in establishing his characters’ motivations for assassinating Caesar. Under Julius Caesar, Roman armies conquered much of France and Belgium and crossed the English Channel to lay claim to Britain, as well. Called home, Caesar famously crossed the Rubicon River in Italy with his army, despite the fact that to come this close to Rome with an army was illegal. Caesar knew his action would lead to civil war, with the Roman Senate, and more importantly, with the great Roman general Pompey allied against him. Caesar defeated Pompey’s forces, assumed control of Roman affairs, and was named dictator, an appointment made in times of emergency. The title and the political power conferred with it were meant to be temporary, but Caesar’s ambitions to retain both became increasingly clear. In 44 BCE, Caesar was appointed dictator for life. This alienated many senators, some of whom, led by Cassius and Brutus—both in life and in the play—killed Caesar soon after, on the ides of March that same year. In Julius Caesar, various references to Pompey’s fall and to Caesar’s having “grown so great” are allusions to actual events.

Because Brutus is both Caesar’s friend and colleague, the play develops themes of friendship vs. civic duty, public vs. private identity, and loyalty vs. betrayal. The meaning of honor is explored as Brutus struggles to define it in his own character and to determine its role in making the critical decision that will profoundly affect the future freedom of Rome and his countrymen. Political intrigue, scheming, and rhetorical speech (the art of persuasion) dominate the drama, too, and are as relevant to politics today as they were in both Caesar’s and Shakespeare’s time. In its characters, deeply human and often flawed, and in its conflicts and themes, Julius Caesar continues to appeal to a universal audience.
Julius Caesar

Objectives

By the end of the unit the student will be able to:

1. Explain the definitions of antagonist and protagonist and discuss Shakespeare’s development of these roles in *Julius Caesar*.

2. Identify the primary conflicts and themes in *Julius Caesar*.

3. Identify symbols found in *Julius Caesar* and discuss their interpretations.

4. Explain notions of democracy vs. tyranny and allegiance vs. rivalry and duplicity and describe how these are developed thematically in the play.

5. Identify and understand the various allusions to death and violence throughout *Julius Caesar*.

6. Identify and discuss examples of fate, fortune, and the supernatural in the play.

7. Identify examples of motifs found in *Julius Caesar* and discuss their significance.

8. Identify and discuss the literary devices and language techniques employed by Shakespeare.

9. Determine what makes *Julius Caesar* a timeless and popular work and relate events in the play to contemporary world events.
Act One, Scenes One and Two

Vocabulary
accout’red (accoutered): outfitted and equipped
Aeneas: Roman mythology a Trojan hero
aught: archaic anything
awl: a small tool used for making holes, especially in leather; in context, a pun, meaning “all”
bade: archaic told, ordered
barren: sterile, fruitless
chafing: rubbing against and causing irritation
chanced: to do something by accident, without design
cogitations: considerations, meditations
countenance: noun the face
dost: archaic does
doublet: archaic a shirt
durst: archaic past tense of dare
fawn: to display servile flattery or affection
gamesome: playful, frolicsome
hence: archaic from this place, away from here
ides of March: March 15 in the Roman calendar
knave: archaic a tricky and deceitful fellow
lief: as readily, as willingly
loath: reluctant
Lupercal (the feast of): a feast to promote fertility and to ward off evil spirits
mettle: spirit, boldness
Pompey: a well-known military leader in ancient Rome whom Caesar had defeated
rabblement: archaic a crowd of common people, rabble
rogues: dishonest, unprincipled persons; scoundrels
rout: the disorderly retreat of defeated troops
Julius Caesar

Study Guide - Student Edition

saucy: impudent, flippant
soothsayer: a person who foretells the future
swounded: archaic swooned
throng: a crowd
Tiber: a river in Italy
vexed: aggravated, tormented
vulgar: crass, crude
wenches: archaic young women or girls
wherefore: archaic why
wherein: archaic in which
yoke: archaic to tie up, to hold
yond: archaic yonder

1. Why do Flavius and Marullus drive the commoners from the streets of Rome?

2. What do you believe is the purpose of Act One, Scene One? Which details suggest why the play begins with this scene?

3. Why does Caesar ask Antony to touch his wife Calpurnia as he runs the race during the feast of Lupercal? Why would Shakespeare include this bit of dialogue?

4. What does the soothsayer tell Caesar? How does Caesar respond? What literary device is employed in their exchange?

5. How does Cassius manipulate Brutus to join the conspirators and kill Caesar?

6. Caesar says this about Cassius:
   
   Let me have men about me that are fat;
   Sleek-headed men and such as sleep o’ nights:
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;
He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.

Why does Caesar dislike Cassius? How is Caesar’s observation about Cassius insightful?
**Act One, Scene Three**

**Vocabulary**

alchemy: a medieval forerunner of chemistry focused on the transmutation of base metals into gold and discovering a path to immortality

bestow: to confer or present (such as an honor)

conjointly: in the manner of being combined or united

factious: relating or inclined to a state of internal dissention

gait: a manner of walking

ghostly: hideous, horrible

infused: instilled

menace: a threat, a danger

offal: waste parts; refuse, rubbish

perilous: dangerous

portentous: ominous, foreboding

prodigies: persons endowed with extraordinary qualities

prodigious: abnormal (in context)

redress: remedy or compensation for a grievance

rived: broken into pieces, torn apart

strife: a bitter sometimes violent conflict

surly: bad tempered, unfriendly

tempest: a violent storm; furious agitation, commotion, or tumult; an uproar

woe: sorrow, distress

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1. Which theme is found in Casca’s remarks to Cassius and Cicero? What specifically does he say he has seen this night? How do Cicero and Cassius respond to Casca?

2. What is meant by and what is the context for, “It was Greek to me”?
3. In speaking of Caesar’s growing power, Cassius states to Casca, “Cassius from bondage will deliver Cassius.” What prompts him to say it, and what does he mean?

4. Why, and how, does Cassius deliver the forged letter to Brutus?
Act Two, Scene One

Vocabulary
affability: friendliness
appertain: to relate to, to concern
augerers: fortunetellers, soothsayers
augmented: made greater
betimes: **archaic** soon, early
carrions: **archaic** decaying flesh; decaying corpses
cautelous: cunning, sly
dank: moist, wet, and clammy
disjoins: separates
entreated: asked for something earnestly
exhalations: the sound of the crowds speaking in awe (in context)
faction: a small group part of a larger whole
hark: to listen
hew: to shape
ingrafted: pulled together from different plants, breeds
instigations: incendiary actions that arouse rebellion
palter: sense; to be deliberately unclear in order to mislead
phantasma: a ghostly apparition
purgers: those that cleanse; the conspirators against Caesar (in context)
rheumy: characterized by a watery discharge from mucous membranes
ruddy: having a reddish color
semblance: look, appearance
spurn: to reject
taper: a slender candle
Tarquin: the last king of Rome, driven out of Rome in favor of a republic
toil: to work
unto: **archaic** see to
visage: countenance, face, expression
vouchsafe: to grant, often with courtesy, a privilege or special favor
wafture: the act of waving one's hand
wary: cautious, careful
wrath: intense anger

1. At the beginning of the act we are immediately alerted to Brutus's quandary regarding Caesar. What is it?

2. In what form does a message arrive for Brutus? What purpose does it serve, and what literary device does it represent?

3. Why do the conspirators, led by Cassius, visit Brutus before dawn?

4. How do the citizenry of Rome unwittingly affect the actions in this scene?

5. What rhetorical strategies does Cassius employ in the forged letter?

6. How does the forged letter encourage Brutus?

7. After it is decided that Caesar will be killed the next day, Cassius wants to swear their resolution. Why does Brutus refuse?

8. What does this scene tell us about Brutus's character?

9. Why does Brutus defend Antony and persuade the other conspirators not to kill him?

10. Cassius worries that being superstitious “of late” will cause Caesar not to go to the Senate on the ides of March. How does Decius Brutus propose to get him there on that day?
11. Brutus claims that illness is the reason he has been out of good spirits recently. What is Portia’s response?

12. Is Portia able to exert any influence on Brutus?

13. What does Portia say in defense of being a woman?

14. How does Portia staunchly defend her role as a wife to Brutus?
Act Two, Scenes Two and Three

Vocabulary

amiss: not quite right; inappropriate or out of place
conquest: victory; subjugation of one’s enemies
emulation: imitation, simulation
expounded: explained, commented on
lest: *archaic* in case
liable: likely, susceptible, prone
relics: items that remain from a past era; remnants
revel: to celebrate, to take part in festivities
statua: *archaic* statue, image
take heed: to pay attention to
tinctures: paints, colors
whelped: given birth (used in reference to animals)

1. A motif in *Julius Caesar* is the supernatural. What signs, omens, and premonitions are evident in Scene Two? What function do they serve in the play?

2. How does Caesar respond at first to Calpurnia’s fear of evil omens? How does he respond later?

3. Why does Caesar reverse his earlier decision and decide to go to the Capitol?

4. What is the dramatic irony in Scene Two?

5. How is the theme of friendship vs. civic duty evident in Scene Two?

6. Scene Three is very brief. What is likely the purpose?
Act Two, Scene Four and Act Three, Scene One

Vocabulary
beseech: to ask, to beg
besmear: archaic to rub onto, to smear with
confounded: confused, surprised
cur: a mongrel dog
discourse: discussion
enfranchisement: the state of possessing certain rights and liberties
enterprise: an endeavor, an undertaking
fare you well: archaic take care, best wishes
fell deeds: archaic negative actions
firmament: the heavens, the skies
fray: a quarrel, a skirmish, a fight
leagues: units of distance approximately three miles in length
lofty: heady, high
praetors: judges in ancient Rome
pre-ordinance: a decree, a determination
prithee: archaic please
prostate: still
puissant: strong, mighty
repealing: revoking, cancelling
reverence: respect, awe
slay/slain: to kill in a violent manner/to have been killed in a violent manner
thine: archaic yours
unassailable: unable to be rebuked or argued against
void: empty
1. Portia declares, “I have a man’s mind but a woman’s might.” What does she mean?

2. What passes between Portia and the soothsayer?

3. What does Caesar say to the soothsayer?

4. What does Metellus Cimber’s appeal on behalf of his brother’s banishment reveal about Caesar, and in what way is Caesar’s response ironic?

5. What is Caesar’s response to Cassius begging on behalf of Metellus Cimber’s brother?

6. Cassius says, “Why, he that cuts off twenty years of life / Cuts off so many years of fearing death.” Caesar, however, says earlier that “cowards die many times before their deaths; / The valiant never taste of death but once.” Considering both views of death, what do Cassius’s words reveal about him?

7. Why does Caesar say “Et tu, Brute? Then fall, Caesar!”? What theme does it develop?

8. How are the symbols of blood and swords, and the motifs of the citizenry and the supernatural, reflected in these scenes?

9. After Caesar’s death, what personal motives for killing him does Cassius reveal?

10. How does Antony react to the news that Caesar is dead? What does his initial reaction imply about him?

11. When Antony meets Brutus and the other conspirators, how does he behave toward them? Why?

12. How does Antony respond to the sight of Caesar’s body when he is alone with it? What does this reaction reveal?
13. Against Cassius’s better judgment, Brutus grants Antony the right to speak at Caesar’s funeral. In a soliloquy, what does Antony prophesy? What does Antony’s message to Octavius suggest about his future plans?
Act Three, Scenes Two and Three

Vocabulary
bondman: a slave
censure: to condemn, to rebuke
clamours: shouts noisily in demand
commonwealth: part of a territory; surrounding lands
dracmas: archaic silver coins
dwell: to stay, to live
grievous: injurious, most serious
heir: one who inherits the property or position of another
interred: buried
mantle: a sleeveless cape or cloak
marr’d (marred): damaged, spoiled
parchment: paper made of goatskin
rendered: represented, depicted
testament: proof, evidence
treason: an act of rebellion against a government or a ruler

1. What themes are immediately presented in these scenes?

2. How does Brutus approach the crowd? How does he attempt to persuade them that Caesar’s murder was just?

3. What is Antony’s motivation to speak to the citizens of Rome?

4. What does Antony say to the citizens of Rome in his speech? How does he employ the rhetorical tools of confirmatio (logical proofs), refutatio (counterarguments), and pathos, or an emotional appeal, in his speech?
5. How does Shakespeare portray the citizenry in regard to Brutus’s and Antony’s speeches?

6. Scene Three is a very short scene. What is the likely reason for its inclusion in the play?
Act Four, Scenes One, Two, and Three

Vocabulary

abject: hopeless
by and by: as things go
corporal: physical, tangible
covert: hidden
covetous: greedy, envious
crests: part of a coat of arms
fashion: a trend
gallant: courteous, brave
hither: archaic here
itching palm: archaic someone who takes bribes
legions: troops
levying: imposing a tax, fee or fine; gathering troops and waging war
niggard: stingy, miser
omitted: kept out
orts: archaic scraps, leftovers
provender: a store of hay or grain for animals
rash choler: hot temper
selfsame tenor: same voice and tone
slanderous: false and harmful
slighted: disregarded
spur: noun a sharp device used to goad a horse along; verb to inspire, to motivate
testy: peevish, irritable
unmeritable: without value or worthiness
vaunting: boasting or praising excessively
waspish: sharp tongued
wrangle: to argue
wring: to take from
1. What does Antony’s conversation with Octavius indicate about Antony’s character?

2. In Scene Two, the conspirators and their armies are readying for Antony and Octavius’s armies, when Lucilius tells Brutus that Cassius seems to be “cooling” towards their cause—he is cordial, but not familiar; what is Brutus’s response? What themes are present?

3. In Scene Three, why do Brutus and Cassius argue on the eve of battle? What does their argument reveal about each of them?

4. How does Cassius behave during his argument with Brutus? What do you infer about their relationship?

5. What is the purpose of the letters in these scenes?

6. According to Brutus, why did Portia commit suicide? How did she kill herself?

7. What is Cassius’s advice to Brutus regarding the battle with Octavius and Antony?

8. What is Brutus’s argument against waiting? Which argument prevails? Why is this significant?

9. Why do you think Brutus does not listen to Cassius? Should he have?

10. A supernatural being visits Brutus in his tent; what is it and what does it say?

11. Why do you think Caesar’s ghost visits Brutus?
Act Five, Scenes One and Two

Vocabulary
consorted (with): associated with, spent time with
ensign: a lower military rank
Epicurus: an ancient Greek philosopher
exigent: urgent, pressing
parley: to speak together
steads: places or positions occupied by a person or thing

1. How does Antony explain the conspirators’ meeting him and Octavius at Philippi before the battle begins?

2. Antony says to Brutus, “In your bad strokes, Brutus, you give good words: / Witness the hole you made in Caesar’s heart, / Crying ‘Long live! hail, Caesar!’” What does this mean?

3. What does Cassius forewarn?

4. Brutus declares to Cassius that he would like to start the battle. Why?

5. What happens in Scene Two?
Act Five, Scenes Three, Four, and Five

Vocabulary
apt: appropriate
behold: to observe
bondage: slavery
disconsolate: dejected, without hope
entrails: intestines
envenomed: filled with hate, poison
misconstrued: misunderstood
office: a place (in context)
rites: ceremonial acts or procedures
smatch: a taste, a tincture
tarrying: delaying, lingering
vessel: a container, a receptacle

1. Why does Pindarus kill Cassius with Cassius's own sword?

2. On whom does Brutus blame the deaths of Portia and Cassius?

3. Why does Brutus kill himself?

4. Compare and contrast the circumstances of various characters' deaths in these scenes.

5. Is suicide an honorable way out?

6. Why does Antony call Brutus "the noblest Roman of them all"?