

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Julius Caesar

by William Shakespeare

Written by Elizabeth Scott

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ISBN 978-1-60389-338-1

Item No. 301624

Julius Caesar

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the techniques Shakespeare uses to convey character and character relationships to his audience.
2. discuss the dramatic development of the play in terms of exposition, conflict, climax, resolution.
3. analyze the importance of literary elements like dramatic irony and foreshadowing on the development of the play.
4. analyze Shakespeare's use of language (verse, prose, rhythm, rhyme) and its importance in setting mood and establishing character.
5. define by example the terms *tragedy* and *tragic hero*.
6. describe how the play parallels the political situation of Shakespeare's time and the repercussions of this parallel.
7. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. offer a close reading of *Julius Caesar* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the play.

Julius Caesar

Lecture Notes

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS TIMES

When William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) was born in Stratford-on-Avon, England was in the midst of its Renaissance. Queen Elizabeth I was the ruling monarch. It was a time of national strength and wealth, and the prevailing attitude was that life was exciting. It was an age of exploration, not only of the world but also of human nature and the English language.

Some ideas that characterized the English Renaissance that are important to this play are:

- Humans had potential for development.
- The Protestant Reformation that began in Germany, and Elizabeth's father's (Henry VIII) break with the Roman Catholic Church paved the way for rapid advances in art, science, and philosophy. The medieval premise that this world is a preparation for eternal life was questioned. Instead, people began to see everyday life as meaningful and an opportunity for noble activity.
- This was a time for heroes. The ideal Elizabethan man was a talented courtier, adventurer, fencer, poet, and conversationalist. He was a witty and eloquent gentleman who examined his own nature and the causes of his actions.
- Despite the fact that the nation was ruled by a queen, women had a lower social status than men.
- While some medieval notions were being reevaluated and discarded, others remained. Elizabethans still maintained a firm belief in the "Natural Order," the hierarchy that set God above humans, humans above animals, animals above inanimate living things like plants, and plants above non-living things like rocks. This concept originated with Plato and expressed the idea that there is a proper order within all things, and among all things, based on complexity, from the tiniest grains of sand to heaven and God. When everything was in its proper position, there was harmony.
- This "great chain of being" was likewise reflected in the human social structure, in which royalty, nobility, gentry, and peasantry were not mere social classes but considered almost different species. If the chain were broken, *everything* was upset and *everyone* suffered.
- Any upset in this great chain was portended by signs and divinations in nature—signs in the stars, the weather, unusual animal behavior, etc. Shakespeare makes much of these signs in his plays.

Julius Caesar

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What is Shakespeare's purpose in creating different speech patterns for different (types of) characters? Why do some characters speak in prose and others in poetry? Pay special attention to the eulogies given in Act III.
2. Why would Elizabethans have considered the slaying of Caesar an unnatural act? Point out how this idea is reinforced by comments and incidents from the play. Include discussion on how the play concludes.
3. Discuss the different reasons for the conspirators' desires to see Caesar dead. Be sure to determine motives for each character.
4. The wives of Caesar and Brutus appear only briefly in the play. How does Shakespeare use them?
5. Why is Lucius almost always seen sleeping? What does this say about his master, Brutus?
6. Why is there no significant comic relief in this play?
7. Is Brutus a good example of an Aristotelian tragic hero? Try to see both sides of the question.

Julius Caesar

Act I, Scene I

1. What dramatic technique does Shakespeare use to start his play?

2. What is the significance of Marullus' rebuke of the commoners?

3. Why does the Second Commoner pun?

4. Identify and explain the cobbler's puns.

Act II, Scene I

1. Why does Brutus believe that Caesar must be stopped from becoming king? Do you think Brutus' fear of what Caesar may become is justified?

2. What are the "exhalations" by which Brutus reads the letter Lucius delivers?

3. What strategical error do Brutus and Cassius make when they are discussing Caesar's death? Why do they commit such a blunder?

4. What does the fact that Caesar is so easily swayed by flattery say about his character?

5. Why does Portia stab herself?

Act III, Scene I

1. What motivates Caesar to say he will not read Artemidorus' letter first?

2. What is significant about the way Caesar opens the senatorial session?

3. Why does Metellus bring a petition to Caesar?

4. Who is the first to stab Caesar?

Act III, Scene III

1. What is the dramatic significance of this short scene?

Act IV, Scene I

1. What are Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus doing at the opening of this scene? What is suggested about their collective and individual characters?

2. How does Antony show himself to be ruthless in this scene?

3. Historically, what is Shakespeare dramatizing in this scene?

Act IV, Scene II

1. What is suggested about Cassius' character even before he appears in this scene?

2. Why does Brutus request that the conference be held inside?

Act V, Scene I

1. What does Antony mean when he accuses Octavius of “crossing” him? What is he implying?

2. What is Octavius clearly implying by his response?

3. What is significant about the way Antony addresses Octavius in this scene?

4. What effect does Shakespeare achieve by the debate the warring parties have prior to their battle? How does he achieve this affect?

5. What is significant about Messala’s reference to Pompey?

6. What is the significance of the omen Cassius reports he saw?

7. What is being foreshadowed when Brutus tells Cassius, “Think not, thou noble Roman, / That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome”?
