

Study Guide on William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

At the end of the play (V.5.67¹), Mark Antony says of Brutus, "This was the noblest Roman of them all." Does the action of the play support Antony's judgment?

In this play, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, is Caesar the tragic hero? If not, then who is, and why does the play bear this title?

What view of kingship does Brutus give voice to? Does he see kingship in Rome as being evil in itself, or only evil if a man like Caesar ascends to it? Does it follow that if Caesar is crowned, then the disenfranchisement of the citizens would automatically ensue? Consider:

- The conversation between Brutus and Cassius beginning at I.2.38 ff.
- "Brutus had rather be a villager / Than to repute himself a son of Rome / Under these hard conditions as this time / Is like to lay upon us" (I.2.171–176). What harsh conditions does Brutus have in mind: a king simply speaking, or Caesar as king?
- "But 'tis a common proof / That lowliness is young ambition's ladder . . . So Caesar may" (II.1.21–27). Is this analysis more personal or general?

"All the conspirators save only he / Did that they did in envy of great Caesar. / He only in a general honest thought / And common good to all made one of them" (V.5.68–71). Does Antony see truly into Brutus' motives? With what spirit did Brutus join the conspiracy? Was it with selfish or with selfless intentions?

- "What is it that you would impart to me? / If it be aught toward the general good, / Set honor in one eye and death i' th' other, / And I will look on both indifferently . . ." (I.2.86–89).
- "And for my part / I know no personal cause to spurn at him, / But for the general" (II.1.10–12).
- "O Rome, I make thee promise, / If the redress will follow, thou receivest / Thy full petition at the hand of Brutus" (II.1.56–58).

Consider the justification with which Brutus commits to the conspiracy: "Fashion it thus: that what he is, augmented, / Would run to these and these extremities; / And therefore think him as a serpent's egg, / Which, hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous, / And kill him in the shell" (II.1.28–34). From what Shakespeare portrays, was this act warranted? Does Caesar in this play appear so ambitious that he would be a threat to the peace and order of Rome?

¹ Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Edited by William Montgomery. New York: Penguin Group, 2000. (All act, scene and line numbers refer to this edition.)



Compare and contrast Brutus with Caesar. Consider their nobleness, influence, self-perception, treatment of their wives, etc.

What is the fate of Cinna the poet meant to convey (III.3, pp. 75–76)? What does it illustrate about the aftermath of Caesar’s murder and Antony’s speech?

What is Brutus’ greatest flaw? Is it an inability to read those around him? Imprudence about the effects of Caesar’s death, and how Rome would be ruled without Caesar?

Consider the plea that Portia makes to Brutus in II.1. Is she right to demand that he open his mind to her? Do you think that Brutus follows through on his vow to unburden his mind to her? How do you interpret Portia’s lament about the weakness of woman’s heart in II.4?

Upon catching sight of Cassius, Caesar remarks, “Such men as he be never at heart’s ease / Whiles they behold a greater than themselves, / And therefore are they very dangerous” (I.2.209–211). Is Caesar correct—does Cassius despise Caesar’s greatness? Is that the only reason that he conspires to kill Caesar?

- “Our fathers’ minds are dead, / And we are governed with our mothers’ spirits. / Our yoke and sufferance show us womanish” (I.3.81–83).
- “What trash is Rome, / What rubbish, and what offal, when it serves / For the base matter to illuminate / So vile a thing as Caesar!” (I.3.107–110).
- See also: I.2.92–133, 136–162.

Why does Brutus prevent the conspirators from swearing an oath? What feeling does this scene bring to the conspiracy? Do you perceive tension or doubt in the conspirators, which would lead them to seek security in an oath?

“*Et tu, Brute?* Then fall Caesar” (III.1.76) What do Caesar’s final words reveal? Is Antony right to say about this final moment, “Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him! / This was the most unkindest cut of all. / For when the noble Caesar saw him stab, / Ingratitude, more strong than traitors’ arms, / Quite vanquished him. Then burst his mighty heart . . .” (III.2.179–183)?

Why does Brutus prevent the conspirators from planning to kill Antony (II.1)? Is this a testament to high-mindedness, mercy, imprudence, or something else?

Brutus’ funeral speech is in prose, while Antony’s is in verse. What is this meant to convey? What does this difference convey about the intentions and effectiveness of each speaker?

How does Brutus compare with Cassius? What seems to be the foundation of their friendship? Do they seem to be of one mind? Of one heart?



Is Brutus a prudent man? Judging from the effects of Caesar's murder, did he actually achieve the good of Rome? Was he wise in joining the conspiracy? Did he succeed in his attempt to "make sick men whole" (II.2.326)?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

