

JULIUS CAESAR

- William Shakespeare

JULIUS CAESAR – General Questions

1. Compare and contrast the characters of Brutus and Mark Antony.

In Julius Caesar, Antony is a courageous but crafty schemer whose political skill brings about a civil war. He helps demonstrate the social harm done by the powerful when they pursue their political ends. On the other hand, Brutus, a strong personality, is an emotionally honest man and a much more sympathetic character than the virtuous, but cold and domineering, Caesar.

Antony's sudden dominance of the play is in Act 3. Even before he appears, the message he sends to Caesar's assassins establishes his strong personal style; a confident and powerful tone, both rhetorical and emotional. He soon arrives in person, and his initial response to the sight of Caesar's corpse is direct, uncalculated, heartfelt grief. Even in the presence of the murderers he does not hide his initial outburst. But he quickly turns to the future and takes control when he arranges to speak at Caesar's funeral.

His boldness and fervor are both powerful and charming, particularly; his magnificent funeral oration is one of Shakespeare's most renowned passages. The speech's virtues—its bold rhetoric, its manipulative presentation of evidence appeal to pathos. Certainly, the speech has this effect, as Antony knew it would to slander against Brutus, or downright dishonesty. Antony is genuinely grieved by Caesar's death, and his expression of it, while extremely inflammatory, is genuine. He actually feels the way he brings his audience to feel. And we, too, are moved to share his emotion, even as we are aware of Brutus' virtues in contrast with the mayhem Antony intends.

Marcus Brutus is the leader of the assassins of Caesar and of the forces opposing Mark Antony in the subsequent civil war. Brutus, the central character of Caesar, is representative of the moral ambiguity that is the play's central theme. He seems both good and evil: a patriotic and honorable man who nonetheless brings about Rome's downfall and his own.

Brutus is willful and arrogant, resembling the tyrant he kills and growing more like him as the play unfolds. As leader of the conspiracy he peremptorily opposes anyone else's initiative, refusing to share leadership with either Cassius or Cicero. His disdainful over-confidence is disastrous when he dismisses Antony as a man of little importance. He overrules Cassius, insisting that Antony be spared and then that Antony be permitted to speak at Caesar's funeral. Both decisions prove fateful.

Brutus possesses an integrity that impels him towards a wrong course. Attempting the impossible, he can produce only chaos, and he brings about the downfall of both his world and himself. Antony's final eulogy not only acknowledges the nobility of Brutus' conscious intentions in killing Caesar but also reminds us of his weakness, observing that he was an honorable man who did not recognize the dishonor of his actions.

Except for collapsing two battles into one, Shakespeare's account of Brutus' defeat and death at Philippi is accurately retold from Plutarch, although other sources indicate that Cassius did not oppose the decision to march to Philippi; the conspirators' forces were supported by the local population, while Antony and Octavius were short of supplies. One other mild distortion of Brutus' nature follows from Shakespeare's compression of events: in the twenty days between battles, Brutus most fully revealed his serious incompetence as a general, for he had only to wait for time and hunger to defeat his enemies and he could not do it.

2. At the end of the scene what is the fate of Brutus and Cassius?

TAKE POINTS FROM THE TEXT BOOK, ALONG WITH WHAT IS GIVEN HERE

After the assassination, Brutus was approached with a compromise: if Caesar was declared a tyrant, then all of Caesar's acts and senatorial appointments. On the other hand, if he agreed to recognize Caesar's appointments, he and the other assassins would be granted amnesty and retain their positions. Brutus accepted the offer, and Caesar was not declared a tyrant. Part of the offer was that Brutus had to leave Rome, which he did.

Marcus Cicero, angry at Octavian, wrote a letter to Brutus explaining that the forces of Octavian and Mark Antony were divided. Antony had laid siege to the province of Gaul, where he wanted a governorship. When Octavian heard that Brutus was on his way to Rome, he made peace with Antony. Their armies, which together totaled about 19 legions, marched to meet Brutus and Cassius. The following battles are known as the Battle of Philippi. The First Battle of Philippi was fought on October 3, 42 BC, in which Brutus defeated Octavian's forces, although Cassius was defeated by Antony's forces. The Second Battle of Philippi was fought on October 23, 42 BC and ended in Brutus' defeat. After the defeat, he fled into the nearby hills with only about four legions. Knowing his army had been defeated and that he would be captured, Brutus committed suicide.

Cassius fled Rome for the countryside, hoping that Marc Anthony would be overthrown. Cassius balked at being given such a small province and resigned his office, stating that he would rather live in exile than under Antonius. By this point the Senate had split with Antony and cast its lot with Cassius, confirming him as governor of the province. However, Brutus and Cassius were forced into a pair of battles by Antony, collectively known as the Battle of Philippi. Brutus was successful against Octavian, and took his camp. Cassius, however, was defeated and overrun by Marcus Antonius. Cassius, unaware of Brutus' victory, gave up all for lost, and ordered his freedman Pindarus to slay him.

3. Why is Antony's speech more effective? How was Antony successful in instigating the people of Rome against the conspirators?

Though Brutus's speech was logical, it contained facts about Caesar's ambition. He reminded the people that Caesar would have become a tyrant and would have enslaved everyone. Brutus also explained that he didn't hate Caesar, but that he loved Rome more. The people didn't

understand, however. At one point, they wanted to crown Brutus, who intended for everyone to be free.

Antony's speech on the other hand was long and it evoked pity and other strong emotions. He gave reasons that proved Brutus's points to be incorrect. Antony had the people surround Julius's body so that he could point out the wounds. As Antony identified each slice, he named the man who did it. In a sarcastic tone, Antony repeatedly referred to these "honorable men."

Brutus made a big mistake by letting Antony speak at Caesar's funeral. Antony's dramatic speech won the crowd over and ultimately resulted in the downfall of the conspiracy. The emotional style of Antony's speech was much more effective than the rational approach used by Brutus.

This is because Antony knows how to feel the pulse of the mob. He knows that the common people are swayed not by the cold logic or reasoning but by basic sentiments. He knows how to turn the tide against his enemies. Being a wonderful orator, he arouses sympathy for Caesar, his conquests, his love for the common men. He deliberately reads Caesar's will and makes the people feel them as the 'heirs' of Caesar. All these things lacked in Brutus' speech.

4. Caesar had done a lot of good things for the people of Rome. Yet he got nothing but death. Do you think his end was justified? Explain.

Julius Caesar raises many questions about the force of fate in life versus the capacity for free will. The play seems to support a philosophy in which fate and freedom maintain a delicate coexistence. Thus Caesar declares: "It seems to me most strange that men should fear, / seeing that death, a necessary end, / Will come when it will come". In other words, Caesar recognizes that certain events lie beyond human control; to crouch in fear of them is to enter a paralysis equal to, if not worse than, death. It is to surrender any capacity for freedom and agency that one might actually possess. Indeed, perhaps to face death head-on, to die bravely and honorably, is Caesar's best course. He endangers himself by believing that the strength of his public self will protect his private self. Thus, in the world of politics portrayed in Julius Caesar, the inability to read people and events leads to downfall; conversely, the ability to do so is the key to survival. With so much ambition and rivalry, the ability to gauge the public's opinion as well as the resentment or loyalty of one's fellow politicians can guide one to success.

5. Brutus's character is a conflict between his notions of honour and friendship of Caesar. Discuss how does he resolve this conflict and why he is unsuccessful?

When Caesar's apparent ambition to rule alone begins to disturb Roman aristocrats, Brutus is drawn by Cassius to lead a plot against him. 'With himself at war', Brutus debates the murder of his friend and mentor: Shall his patriotism be stronger than his love and respect? He concludes that Caesar must be killed, despite his personal virtues, to save Rome from tyranny. Brutus then approaches the assassination as a moral imperative, but Shakespeare offers much evidence that Brutus is not the wholly selfless figure he believes himself to be. Not only does his decision prove to be politically catastrophic, but it appears to be morally flawed, too, for Brutus is unconsciously in pursuit of power himself.

Brutus' self-delusion is startlingly apparent on several occasions. On one level he considers the assassination a high moral duty; yet, subconsciously guilty, he also needs to justify it, saying,

'Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers'. Further, when Caesar has been stabbed to death, Brutus improvises a cleansing ritual—the assassins bathe their hands in their victim's blood—but this act accentuates, not alleviates, the violence of the deed. Brutus does not see the gore through his own vision of rectitude. A possible source of Brutus' self-deception is his repeated denial of his emotions and thus his inability to recognize his own drives. He rejects his love for Caesar.

Thus blinded, Brutus never sees the error of his attack on Caesar. The unnecessary disaster of the civil war has resulted from his own obsession with controlling the Roman political world, but he honestly sees only his own idealistic point of view. Thus his actions are virtuous in their intent but evil in their consequences. Precisely because of this contradiction, Brutus resembles a tragic hero, attempting great things and failing through his own psychological flaws.