



William Shakespeare's
Julius Caesar:

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



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QUICK CARD



Reference	<i>Julius Caesar</i> . William Shakespeare. ISBN: 978-0393932638												
Plot	A group of zealous republicans become concerned when a rumor spreads through Rome that Julius Caesar is going to declare himself king. They plot to murder him and convince the righteous Brutus to join their effort. When Brutus follows through on the plot, intending to save Rome, he takes up the same tyrannous position as Caesar. His army of rebels is defeated by Marc Antony's army, and Brutus takes his own life.												
Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rome • Around 44 B.C. • Prior to the fall of the Republic, and preceding the rise of the Empire 												
Characters	<table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%;">Brutus</td> <td style="width: 33%;">Marc Antony</td> <td style="width: 33%;">The Roman people</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Julius Caesar</td> <td>Octavius</td> <td>Ghost of Caesar</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Calpurnia</td> <td>Lepidus</td> <td>Senators (Cicero, Cinna)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Cassius</td> <td>Conspirators</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Brutus	Marc Antony	The Roman people	Julius Caesar	Octavius	Ghost of Caesar	Calpurnia	Lepidus	Senators (Cicero, Cinna)	Cassius	Conspirators	
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Conflict	<p>Man vs. Man</p> <p>Man vs. Himself</p>												
Theme	<p>Tyranny</p> <p>Self-knowledge</p> <p>Sinful nature</p>												
Literary Devices	<p>Blank verse</p> <p>Hyperbole</p> <p>Simile</p> <p>Metaphor</p> <p>Irony</p> <p>Allusion</p> <p>Foreshadowing</p>												

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT: AUTHOR



Who is the author? (18 a, c, e)

The author is the famous English playwright William Shakespeare, who was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564 and died in 1616. Most scholars date *Julius Caesar* from 1599, when Shakespeare was 35 years old. He was married to Anne Hathaway, by whom he had three children, the twins Hamnet and Judith, and daughter Susanna.

The authorship of Shakespeare's plays has always been the subject of controversy, partly because so little information survives about the life of William Shakespeare of Stratford. A fair number of scholars through the years have concluded that someone else must have written the plays, and have argued for the authorship of various notable personalities from the period, including philosopher Francis Bacon, playwright Ben Johnson, and Edward De Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. Students with an interest in literary archaeology may pursue this fascinating topic further, but for purposes of a high school literature course it is perhaps best to take him as he presented himself: William Shakespeare of Stratford.

Where did the author live? (19)

Though born in Stratford, Shakespeare lived and acted for most of his life in London, where he became a prosperous gentleman before retiring to the town of his birth.

When did the author live? (20)

Shakespeare lived from 1564 to 1616, during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I of England. During the height of his career, Shakespeare's theatre company was patronized by the crown. Evidence of this relationship is present in *Julius Caesar*, both in Shakespeare's choice of subject matter (the downfall of a usurper) and his treatment of themes such as revolution and the divine right of kingship.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



Who is the protagonist of this story? (5)

Note: the protagonist of a story is the main character, whose struggles form the basis of the story's action. Though Caesar has the title role in this play, the protagonist is clearly Brutus, whose decision to slay his friend forms the central event of the plot and whose struggle with the consequences of his deed brings the story to its conclusion.

What does the protagonist want? (5a)

This story is about Brutus trying to save the Roman Republic from tyranny, the "Spirit of the Age."

Does he attempt to overcome something – a physical impediment or an emotional handicap? (5b)

From Brutus' perspective, the obstacle that must be overcome is Caesar, or Caesar's tyrannical ambition. He must rid Rome of Caesar in order to preserve the freedom of the Republic, and so he participates in a conspiracy to murder Caesar. He must also win the mob over to his perspective so that they too will strive to remain free men. Finally (and Brutus only realizes this near the end of his life), he must overcome his own nature which, swollen with pride, would become the very Caesar he has dismembered.

Is the conflict an external one, having to do with circumstances in the protagonist's physical world, or is it an internal conflict, taking place in his mind and emotions? (5c)

The conflict is both internal and external. Externally, threats to the security of the Republic abound in the persons of Caesar, Cassius, Antony, Octavius and even Brutus himself. Internally, Brutus' struggle with his own tyrannical impulses are no less violent, and eventually result in his own downfall.

Do the protagonist's objectives or goals change throughout the story? How? Why? (5d)

Brutus' aim remains constant throughout the play: to preserve the freedom of the Republic and protect it from encroaching tyranny. His single-minded pursuit of this goal is the motive force behind all of the plot's twists and turns.

In an important sense, however, Brutus' goals undergo a radical shift at the moment when he realizes that the spirit of tyranny, the "spirit of the age," resides in his own breast – and that to be true to his aim he must deal with himself as a traitor to the Republic.

Why can't the protagonist have what he wants? What categories of conflict stand in his way? (6)

▪ **Is the conflict a man v. man struggle? (6g)**

At the most visible level, this is a story about competition for supremacy among a group of ambitious men. Once the Rubicon of Caesar's murder has been crossed, Brutus finds himself locked in life-or-death combat with Antony for control of the future of Rome. Also, he struggles against Cassius for control of the conspiracy.

▪ **Is the conflict a man v. himself struggle? (6k)**

Ultimately, Brutus' struggle is with himself – with his fallen human nature, his worldly philosophy (see answer 7 in *Questions about Structure: Characters*), his sin.

Does God himself (or Providence, or Fate) oppose the protagonist? How do you know? (6l)

The Fates are mentioned throughout the play as having a hand in the eventual success or failure of the various characters. In particular, they seem to have a strong opinion of Brutus's decision to participate in Caesar's murder. Omens in the skies portend disaster from the first act, and the night of the conspiracy is troubled by unnatural weather, which Brutus takes as a sign of approaching calamity. Such unrest in the natural world foreshadows the civil unrest that will follow Caesar's murder, and may also echo Shakespeare's own view that God, or "the gods," is incensed by treason.

What happens in the story? (8a)

Brutus is convinced by a group of conspirators (led by Cassius) to participate in the assassination of Julius Caesar, who has just been given king-like control of the Roman Republic. Brutus addresses the mob immediately after the murder and proclaims his intention to preserve the Republic from tyranny.

Caesar's friend Mark Antony is also given leave to speak in Caesar's funeral, and his flawless oration against the conspiracy stirs the mindless mob into a passionate fury. They turn on Brutus and his friends and drive them from the city.

With the help of Lepidus and Octavius (with whom he forms the *Triumvirate*), Antony consolidates his power in Rome by drawing up a proscription list and executing people who pose a threat to the budding empire. After rallying their armies, Antony and the triumvirs pursue the armies of Cassius and Brutus in order to rid Rome of traitors and usurpers.

Meanwhile, an agitated Brutus quarrels with Cassius as the resolve of the conspirators begins to crumble. Brutus' anger and imperious nature recall the posturing of Caesar in the senate just before the assassination. The restless ghost of Caesar visits Brutus in the night and accuses him of tyranny. The ghost promises to meet Brutus in battle on the plains of Philippi the following day.

Brutus and Cassius part company to ride into battle as Cassius's sickened mind dwells on the seeming hopelessness of the conspirators' situation. Cassius becomes obsessed with the idea that he will be defeated and die in this battle. Though the conspirators are actually victorious, Cassius' already defeated spirit mistakes his friends and allies for his foes, and he despairs. With the aid of Pindarus, he kills himself.

Brutus, fleeing the quickened onslaught of the Triumvirate, also despairs. Coming upon Cassius and seeing his dear friend dead, he falls on his own sword, ending the conspiracy. Antony, approaching the scene, proclaims Brutus the noblest Roman of them all, whose motives alone were pure and consistent to his life's end.

What external influences heighten the conflict – weather, war, summer break, separation, sickness, etc? (8d)

The developing conflict in Brutus' mind and heart is intensified by the foreshadowing accomplished through omens and portents – storms, lightning, monstrous births, etc.

Brutus' separation from his wife Portia leaves his heart vulnerable, even as she is vulnerable. This works to develop the growing conflict between Brutus' stoic ideology, which admits no vulnerability, and the reality that is overtaking him.

The response of the mob to Antony's oration also serves to heighten this tension, as they forsake Brutus' stoic advice to fling themselves headlong into a frenzy.

How is the main conflict resolved? Does the protagonist get what he wants? (9a)

On the face of things, Brutus gets what he thinks he wants, at least initially. He and the conspirators successfully eliminate Caesar. However, this fails to rid Rome of the tyrannical spirit that guided Caesar. While Brutus continues to fight this spirit, even turning his sword upon himself when it becomes evident that the same spirit dwells in his own heart, he finally fails to eliminate it altogether. His actions as co-conspirator have loosed the spirit on the world. The Republic he longs to preserve from tyranny dies by his own hand at the moment when he plunges his dagger into Caesar's body.

What events form the highest point or climax of the story's tension? (9d)

While traditional interpretations of *Julius Caesar* often place the climax of the play in Act III (the murder itself), the most telling climax seems to occur in Act IV, when Brutus is confronted by Caesar's ghost and accused of the very tyranny he has opposed. You might say this is the "Aha!" moment when Brutus realizes where tyranny really lies, and what must be done to defeat it.

How does the story end? Do you believe the characters' responses to the cataclysmic events surrounding the climax? (10c)

The action in Acts IV and V are the natural outworking of the bitter course the conspirators have chosen. Cassius' bitterness and envy devour him, sickening his mind and making him prey to despair. Brutus' stoic philosophy is fully exposed as fallacious, and his entire mental world collapses. Grief-stricken, alone, and ruined, he struggles to secure the crumbling philosophy that has girded him with strength all his life. Grappling for control over events that spiral out of his reach, he strives to preserve his dignity and honor by self-murder. This act, however, contradicts every tenet of the philosophy he would retain. He dies the victim of faulty thinking, and could easily have been the object of Titinius' lament, "Alas, thou has misconstrued every thing" (IV.iii.84).

What aspect of the human condition is brought to light in this story? (13e)

Noble Brutus, full of good will and good intentions, is beset by the very sin he seeks to purge from Rome. Likewise, he fails to recognize it in himself until the ghostly Caesar provides him a mirror. The depth of human depravity and its elusive nature are laid bare in this play, which certainly illustrates the Biblical idea that "the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked above all things. Who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



In what country or region does the story happen? (1a)

The story takes place in Rome, Italy in 44 B.C., just prior to the fall of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire.

Does the story happen in the country or the city? Does it happen in one spot, or does the action unfold across a wide area? (1b,c)

The majority of the story takes place within the city of Rome itself, though it also takes place in the countryside surrounding Rome where the conspirators battle Mark Antony and the Triumvirate for supremacy.

What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny, or dark and bleak? What words or phrases or description does the author use to create this atmosphere? (1d)

The story is dark and ominous, with much of the action happening on windy nights full of lightning and thunder (see I.iii for example).

Is the setting a real or imaginary place? Is the setting important because of historical events which may have happened there? How does this link help you understand the themes of the story? (1g,j)

The story's setting is the actual city of Rome in the year 44 B.C., a real time and place. The story is set among the historical personalities of that era – Caesar and Antony were real people, as were Brutus and Cassius. Furthermore, the story is based on actual events: Caesar really was murdered by a conspiracy and Brutus really was defeated at Philippi. However, Shakespeare has taken liberties with the events and especially with the personalities in order to address his themes. In particular, he has given each character certain motives and personality traits that drive the plot forward (Brutus' love of Republican freedom, Cassius' jealousy, Antony's loyalty to Caesar). These, of course, are pure speculation on his part, as they must be on ours.

Among what kinds of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)

The story's main conflicts occur among Rome's patrician class, the aristocracy of the time, who live in the kind of luxury that allows them to give their attention to matters of state, and to concern themselves with the larger questions of life. The plebeian mob plays an important part in the action, of course, but it is the struggles of the great men – Brutus, Antony, Caesar – that concern us most.

How long a period of time does the story cover? A few minutes? A single day? A whole lifetime? (2b)

Shakespeare compresses the events of the story, which in reality took place over approximately three years, into a mere three days.

Does the story happen in a particular year, era, or age of the world? What historical events may have just preceded the period of the story? Do these events help explain the actions of the characters, the action of the story, or its mood? (2d)

An understanding of the legends surrounding the founding of the Roman republic is necessary for an informed reading of this text.

Rome, founded by a murderous brother and peopled with men of equally bad character, was initially ruled by kings. Some of these grew in nobility and honor, while others were tyrannical and wicked. Of this latter stripe, the worst of all were the Tarquins, who ruled Rome in the 6th century before Christ. When King Tarquin Superbus turned a blind eye to the rapacious exploits of his son Sextus, his nephew Junius Brutus took matters into his own hands. Rallying the honorable men of Rome to his aid, Brutus threw the despised Tarquin out of the city, vowing that Rome would never again be ruled by kings. This event (which took place, the legend goes, in 509 BC), marks the beginning of the Roman Republic, a period during which the nation was ruled by elected officials.

Brutus the conspirator in *Julius Caesar* is a descendant of this Junius Brutus, and shares his passionate commitment to republicanism.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3)

The following questions are answered for Brutus, although the same set of questions could be asked about Cassius, Caesar or indeed any of the characters in the story.

Is the character sane or crazy? (3e)

Brutus is a self-consciously reasonable man. Guided by his Stoic philosophy (see page 10), he strives to avoid excesses of all kinds, whether emotional or physical.

Is the character kind, gentle, stern, emotional, harsh, etc? (3f)

Brutus' most important characteristic is his nobility. He is noble in both position and character. Descended from the patriarchs of Rome, he is one of the city's most powerful aristocrats; at the same time, he is firmly committed to his patriotic worldview and maintains his ideals to the bitter end. Not even sparing his own life, he guards the great Republic from every foe as a sacred trust.

Other adjectives with which Brutus may be described include brave, resolute and earnest. On the other hand, he is also trusting to a fault, somewhat gullible and easily misled. He is stoic (both in temperament and in philosophy), self-sacrificing and idealistic, but also proud and foolhardy.

Of what nationality is the character? Does he live in his native land, or somewhere else? (3g)

As discussed above, Brutus is a Roman of proud lineage. This is significant in that his illustrious family heritage feeds his vision for Rome's future, and weighs him down with undue feelings of personal responsibility for the preservation of the Republic.

What does the character say about himself to other people? (3j)

Calls himself honorable (III.ii.15)

Calls himself loving (II.ii.19)

Calls himself a lover of Rome (patriot) (III.ii.22, 46)

Implies his bravery (III.ii.47)

Calls himself a “sacrificer, not a butcher” (II.i.166)

Calls himself honest (II.i.114)

Implies that he is responsible as a judge and keeper of Rome (II.i.56-58)

Calls himself fearless (I.ii.85ff)

What do other characters say about him? (3k)

Cassius calls him noble (I.ii.308)

Cassius implies that he’s easily manipulated (I.ii.309ff)

Cinna calls him noble (I.iii.141)

Caius calls him a leader (II.i.334)

Antony’s servant implies that he’s trustworthy (III.i.135ff)

Antony calls him a gentleman (III.i.190)

Antony calls him cruel and bloody (III.i.294)

The plebeians believe him to be noble (III.ii.11)

Antony questions his honor (using irony) in the funeral oration (III..ii.74ff)

Antony calls him unkind (III.ii.182-185)

Antony calls him treasonous (III.ii.191,194)

Antony calls him an orator (III.ii.219)

Pindarus calls him noble (IV.ii.11)

Caesar’s ghost calls him an evil spirit (IV.iii.281)

Clitus calls him a noble vessel (V.v.13)

Antony calls him the noblest Roman of them all (V.v.68ff)

Antony calls him a [true] man (V.v.68ff)

Is the character a member of any particular religious or social group? If so, what do you know about this group? What motivates this group? What do its members feel to be important? (3j)

This is a very important question for understanding Brutus. His self-revealing comments suggest that he is an adherent of Stoicism, a brand of philosophy which was popular in the late 1st century BC. Stoicism was originated by the Greek philosopher Xeno, whose students used to meet with him in porches (“stoa” in Greek) to discuss his views.

Xeon taught that all men are naturally good and are guided by the gods. If left to themselves, therefore, they can be counted on to behave reasonably as long as they guard

against extremes of passion. Consequently, qualities such as reserve, patience, self-control and reason were the cardinal virtues of Stoicism, and stoics prided themselves on their ability to “keep their cool” in times of crisis.

What does the character think is the most important thing in life? (3m)

Brutus seems to value two things above all else: his stoic worldview and its teachings, and the health and safety of the Roman Republic. Virtually all of his thoughts, words and actions can be seen as emanating from these two basic commitments. Indeed, his outbursts of passion later in the play are all the more striking given what we know about his convictions on these matters.

Do the character’s priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? Is it a change for the better or for the worse? (3n)

Brutus’ priorities never change. While he falls to various deceptions, including the treachery of his own heart, he strives to protect the Republic by any means, even his own death.

How does the personality of the character reflect the values of the society (or individual) that produced the story? (3o)

Brutus’ fierce patriotism reflects both the fabled patriotism of the Roman people and that of the English at the end of the 16th century, who had witnessed, among other things, the decisive defeat of the Spanish Armada by England’s navy. The surge in English patriotism that followed made loyal subjects of just about every one of Queen Elizabeth’s countrymen.

Is the character a type or archetype? Is he an “Everyman” with whom the reader is meant to identify? Are his struggles symbolic of human life generally in some way? (3p)

In a sense, Brutus is an Everyman character in that, contrary to the fundamentals of his Stoic philosophy, he falls prey to original sin, stumbling over the hubris of his own heart. Led astray not only by the conspirators, he also trusts too readily in the impulses of his own heart.

Is the character a “sympathetic character”? Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Do you pity him? Do you scorn or despise his weakness in some way? Why? (3q)

Of all the characters in *Julius Caesar*, Brutus is perhaps most sympathetic. Unsuspecting, he is led to death by the motives and ambitions of crafty men, and by his own pride. His intentions, however misdirected, remain honest. His character, despite his ignoble participation in conspiracy, remains noble as he strives to remain true to his guiding philosophy and worldview. “There is a way that seems right unto a man, but the

end thereof is death” (Proverbs 14:12). That the philosophy he trusted was fallacious at the root makes him most pitiable.

Who else is the story about? Is there a single character that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? (4a)

Since his plans and devices work against Brutus’ success and happiness, Cassius must be considered a major antagonist in the story.

Cassius earns our suspicion early in the play, when Caesar describes him as “too lean,” and does not like the look of him at all. (I.ii.192-210) Caesar calls him hungry-looking, and says he “thinks too much.” Caesar’s suspicion of Cassius also stems from the fact that the latter is a “reader,” a great observer who sees through men’s deeds. Cassius is serious-minded, and decidedly discontent in the presence of men greater than himself.

Cassius suggests to the reader that he knows he’s not to be trusted, admitting that his words “influence by flattery” (I.ii.314).

Antony impugns Cassius’ character in the funeral oration, ironically comparing the latter’s deeds to his honor. (III.ii.75ff)

Cassius seems motivated on the surface by a desire to retain the rights of a freeman in a republic. However, further scenes betray his envy and hatred of Caesar. (I.ii.135-161; I.ii.90-130) In the end, Cassius is conflicted, torn between noble aspirations and base ambition. For this reason, he is a sympathetic character, even though his manipulation of Brutus rightly earns our condemnation. Anyone who has struggled with envy, jealousy and bitterness will easily understand Cassius’ words and actions.

Who else is the story about? Is there a single character that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? (4a)

You can have profitable discussions of the play’s other antagonists, such as Antony, by asking similar questions of them: what are their goals and motivations? What obstacles stands in their way, and how do they strive to overcome them?

Especially important in the discussion of the antagonist in this story is to consider the actions of the mob as the story progresses. Wildly supportive of Caesar in Act One, the crowd is easily persuaded to side with Brutus during his funeral oration in Act Two. However, the people are just as easily whipped up into a frenzy against the conspirators by Mark Antony’s brilliant speech. Above all, it seems that the mob is easily ruled – perhaps the people are even looking for someone to rule them absolutely. In this attitude of the crowd we find the real antagonist of the play. Brutus calls it the “spirit of the age,” and its primary characteristic is a predisposition to tyranny.

When we think of tyranny as the real enemy in *Julius Caesar*, Brutus' actions as protagonist make perfect sense throughout the play. All of his decisions, from his murder of Caesar to his suicide, spring from a desire to defeat tyranny and preserve the old Republic from this threat. Unfortunately, he is finally unsuccessful – the spirit of the age triumphs in the end, making this play one of Shakespeare's grandest tragedies.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



What is the main idea of the story? (13)

With most classic stories, a discussion of theme is unavoidable as the reader plumbs the depths of character, setting, conflict and plot. *Julius Caesar* is certainly no exception to this rule; virtually every question so far has directed us to contemplate the nature of ambition, patriotism, tyranny and sin. Any one of these universal concepts would make a perfect theme or main idea for this story.

Given the drama of Brutus' self-realization on the plains of Philippi, however, it is perhaps appropriate to call attention once again to the universal truth found in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked – who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

Brutus' life is certainly an illustration of this theme, as he struggles along a painful path to self-knowledge that finally proves his undoing. His problem from the beginning is that he does not know himself in the wickedness of his own heart; his heart deceives him, and leads him to tyranny where he looks for patriotism.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



What sort of language does the author employ?

An important stylistic device common to most Shakespeare plays is worth mentioning here, since it characterizes all of *Julius Caesar*. This device has to do with the rhythmic and metrical style of poetry in which the play is written. Though the lines don't rhyme, you'll notice that each line has five beats, and that each beat consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. This is called *iambic* (unstressed syllable followed by stressed syllable) *pentameter* (five beats per line). Unrhymed iambic pentameter, which was Shakespeare's favorite style and can be found in all of his plays, is called **blank verse**.

Does the author use hyperbole – that is, do characters within the story make gross overstatements to drive home an issue or idea? (15c)

The best example of this device is Cassius' melodramatic retelling of Caesar's swim in the Tiber river. (I.ii.90-130) Cassius makes the point that Caesar is just a man, and a frail one at that. In this way he hopes to ridicule the mob for ascribing divine power and authority to Caesar, and to convince Brutus of the need to exterminate him.

Does the author use simile – that is, does he use “like” or “as” in making comparisons between two or more dissimilar things? (16d)

What sort of images do the following similes call to mind?

Caesar “doth bstride the narrow world like a colossus” (I.ii.135-136)

Caesar “as a serpent's egg...” (II.1.32-34)

Caesar's wounds “like dumb mouths” (III.1.260 and III.ii.255)

Brutus compares fickle friends to “horses hot at hand” and “deceitful jades” (IV.ii.23)

Does the author use metaphor – that is, does he make comparisons of dissimilar objects without the use of “like” or “as”? (16h)

Antony calls Caesar a “bleeding piece of earth” (III.1.254)

Antony compares Lepidus (the third *triumvir*) to his horse (IV.i.29-40)

Brutus calls himself a lamb and a flint (IV.iii.110-113)

Brutus compares slumber to a “leaden mace” (IV.iii.268)

Titinius likens Rome to the setting sun (V.iii.63)

Does the author use irony – that is, do his characters say the opposite of what they mean in order to make a point (verbal irony)? Does the author put his characters in situations where you, the reader, know more about them than they do themselves (dramatic irony)? (17d,e)

Dramatic irony plays a very important role in *Julius Caesar*, as Shakespeare develops the idea that Brutus is as tyrannical as Caesar, though he does not realize it until late in the story. Alert readers will see it long before Brutus does, however, thanks to Shakespeare’s use of this literary device.

See, for example, Brutus’ evaluation of Caesar in Act II: “Th’abuse of greatness is when it disjoins remorse from power” (II.1.18-19) – spoken when Brutus is contemplating murder, the most remorseless kind of power! He will indeed abuse his own greatness, and it will eventually bring about his destruction.

Verbal irony is given its all-time greatest expression in Antony’s funeral oration over the dead Caesar’s body. (III.ii.73-253) Over and over Antony repeats the line, “Brutus is an honorable man,” subtly altering the word “honorable” until he has stirred the mob into an angry passion against the conspirators. Though he promises not to use rhetoric to arouse their emotions, he does this very thing. And, though he claims to be a poor orator and to speak plainly, he delivers one of the greatest persuasive speeches in English literature.

Does the author use allusion – that is, do his characters refer to events, works of literature or people outside the story in order to deepen our understanding of things within the story? (17g)

Cassius delivers two excellent allusions in his first long conversation with Brutus. (I.ii.90-131)

- First, he compares himself to Aeneas, who carried Anchises out of Troy in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. (lines 112-14)
- Second, he alludes to the career of Junius Brutus, who, five hundred years before, had overthrown the wicked king Tarquin and established the Roman Republic. (lines 158-161)

Our understanding of Brutus’ plight is deepened when we understand that his ancient namesake Junius Brutus had risked life and limb to rid Rome of the tyranny of kings. Cassius plays skillfully on this connection, and on Brutus’s natural sympathy with Republican freedom, to influence Brutus to join the conspiracy.

Does the author use foreshadowing – that is, does he provide hints of coming doom or disaster? (17g)

The best example of foreshadowing in *Julius Caesar* is the thunderstorm which takes place on the night Cassius initiates his conspiracy. (I.iii.1-164) It seems that all nature is horrified by the monstrous plan Cassius is putting into action, and his companions are unnerved, believing that something on earth has incensed the gods. (lines 3-4, 12-13, 31-32, etc) Cassius alone seems unmoved by the signs and portents of the heavens. (lines 46-52) The tumult in the skies certainly foreshadows the chaos – both personal and political – that will follow the completion of Cassius’ plan.

Another chilling example of foreshadowing occurs in Brutus’ funeral oration (III.ii.47), when he promises to turn his dagger upon himself should his country ever need his death. Before the play’s end, of course, he does this very thing.

NOTES:

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. What was Caesar’s fatal flaw – the character weakness that brought about his downfall? What was Brutus’ fatal flaw?
2. Compare Brutus’ motives for participating in the conspiracy with those of Cassius. Were there significant similarities and differences?
3. Who is the main antagonist in the story, and what makes this antagonist the most important?
4. Discuss the use of irony in Antony’s funeral oration. To what purpose does Antony put this rhetorical technique? What words does he manipulate to achieve his desired effect?
5. Discuss the presence of “the spirit of the age” in each of the main characters in the play: Caesar, Brutus, Cassius and Antony. Is anyone free from the impulse to tyranny?
6. What is the main theme of *Julius Caesar*? How do the other elements of the story (plot and conflict, characters, setting) serve to reinforce this theme?

NOTES:

STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central *conflict*. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

To give the teacher an idea of the various interpretations which are borne out by the text, several examples are presented here.

Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare: Story Chart

SETTING

Rome, 44 BC – the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Empire.

Climax:

The conspirators murder Caesar in the Senate and proclaim victory over tyranny, but Antony turns the mob against them.

Rising Action:

Cassius tries to persuade Brutus to join a conspiracy to murder Caesar for the good of the Republic.

THEME:

Tyranny, the “spirit of the age.”

Exposition:

In 44 BC, Julius Caesar returns to Rome from battlefield victories. He receives wild popular acclaim.

Denouement:

Driven from the city, the conspirators begin to quarrel. Caesar’s ghost predicts disaster. The armies of Antony and Brutus meet in battle.

Conclusion:

Brutus and Cassius take their own lives. Antony declares Brutus to be a noble man, a true Roman.

CHARACTERS

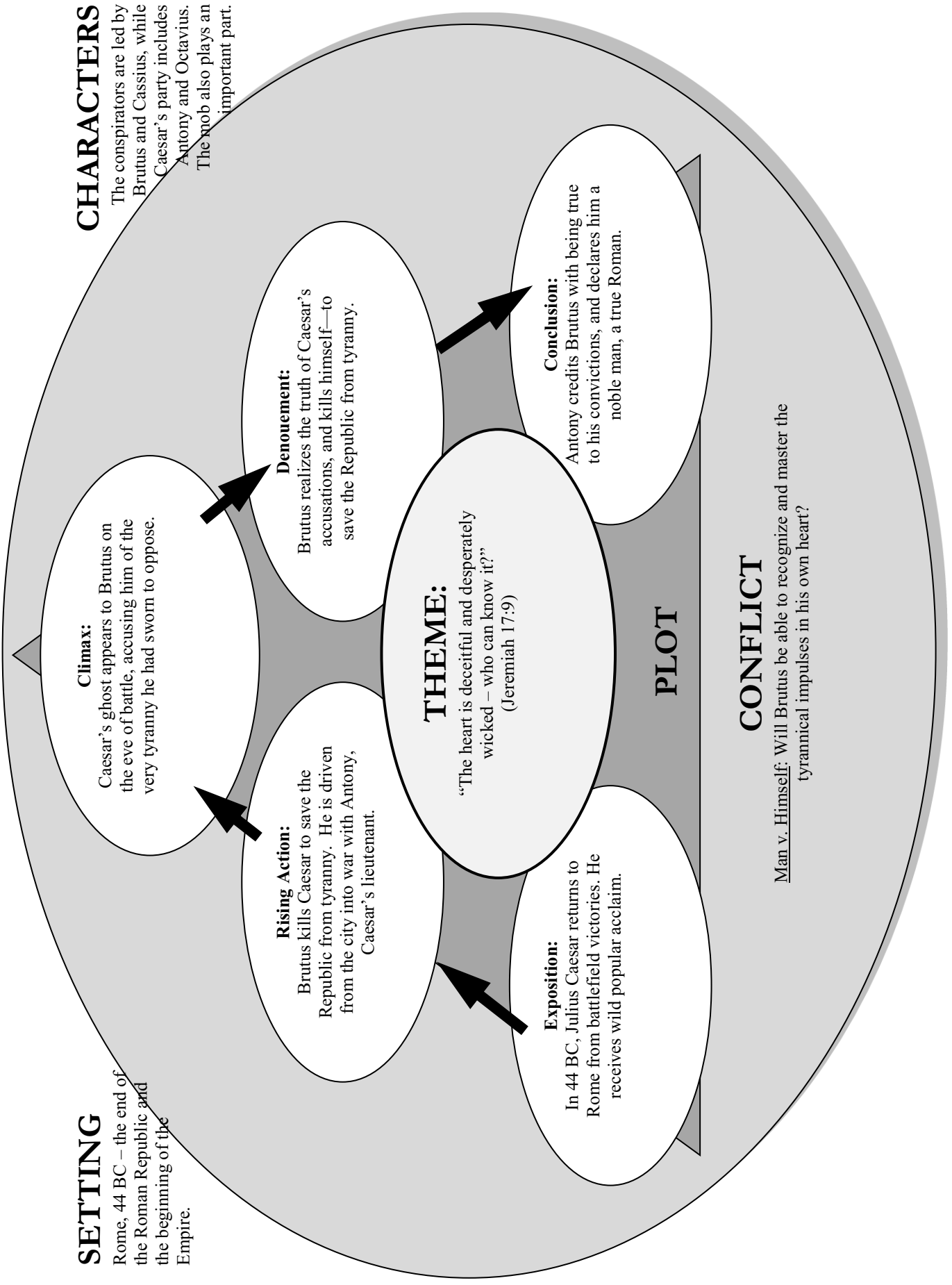
The conspirators are led by Brutus and Cassius, while Caesar’s party includes Antony and Octavius. The mob also plays an important part.

PLOT

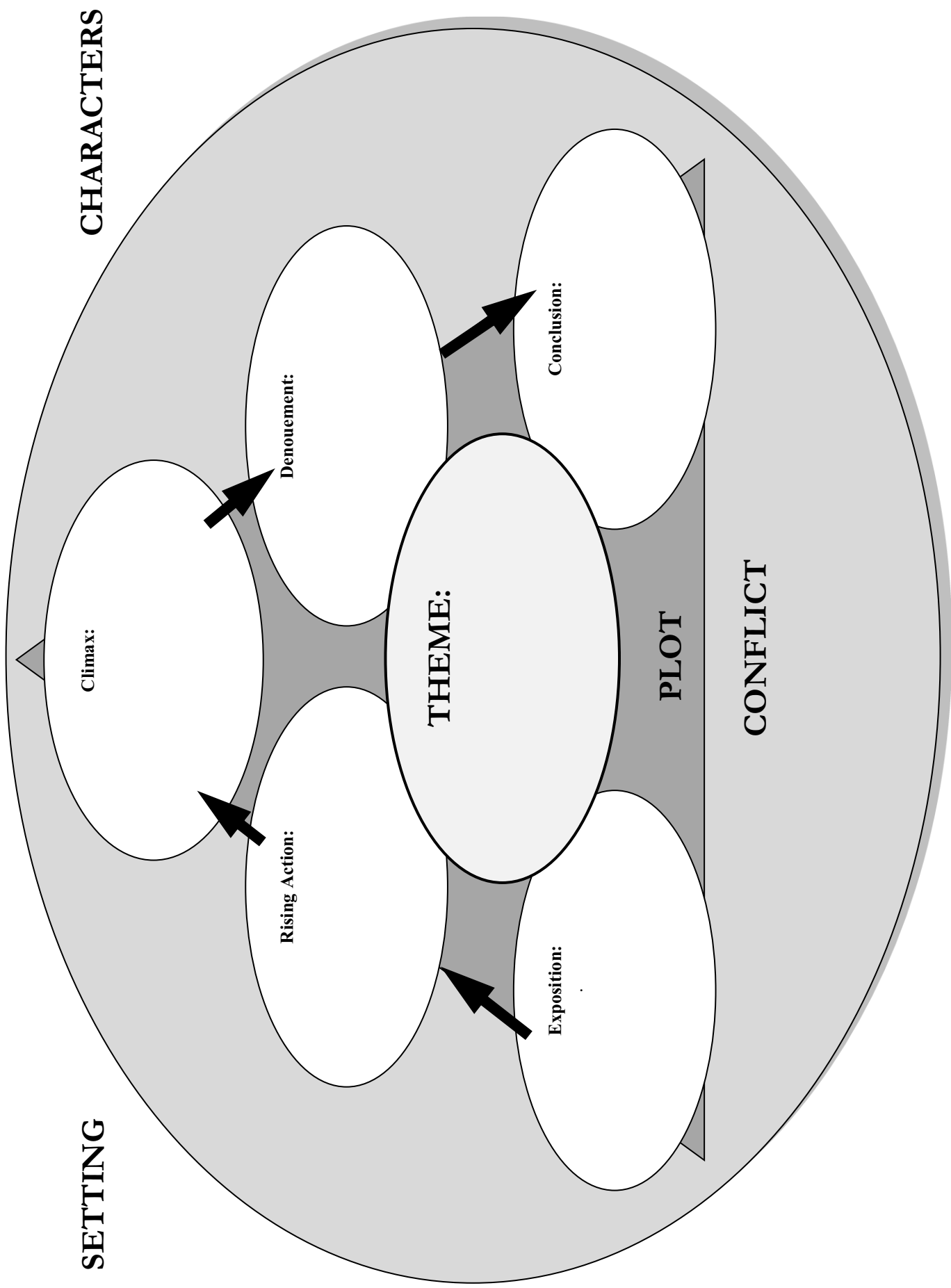
CONFLICT

Man v. Man: Will Brutus prevail over Caesar and Antony and preserve the Republic from tyranny?

Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare: Story Chart



Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare: Story Chart



SETTING

CHARACTERS

PLOT

CONFLICT

Climax:

Rising Action:

Denouement:

Exposition:

Conclusion:

THEME:

