

# Literary Analysis Questions for *Julius Caesar*

- 1. Appreciating Blank Verse.** *Blank Verse* is unrhymed iambic pentameter. Normally, a line of such verse will consist of ten syllables with every second syllable stressed. However, playwrights and poets like Shakespeare often depart from the normal pattern for a number of reasons: to avoid monotony, to imitate the rhythms of real speech, to vary the “music” of the verse, and so on.
  - Analyze Marullus’ speech in Act I, Scene i, lines 34-43. Mark the stressed and unstressed syllables.
  - Which characters in Act I speak in blank verse? Which speak in prose? What do you think is the reason for this difference?
- 2. Interpreting the Effect of Imagery.** Throughout the play, imagery creates mood, reveals character, suggests ideas, and otherwise affects your response. In Act I the impression the audience forms of Caesar comes mainly from the way in which other characters describe him, often with imagery rather than direct words. For example, look at Flavius’ speech in Act I, Scene i, lines 73-76. Flavius compares Caesar to a menacing bird of prey circling above the Romans to keep them in their place. The image portrays Caesar as a tyrant and threat to Roman liberty.

Analyze the imagery in the following speeches of Cassius and discuss what they contribute to the audience’s idea of Caesar.

  - Act I, Scene ii, lines 135-138
  - Act I, Scene iii, lines 103-111
- 3. Analyzing Cause-and-Effect Relationships.** A *cause* is an event or circumstance that produces a result, or *effect*. An example of a cause-and-effect relationship in Act II is when Calpurnia’s dreams cause her to cry out three times in her sleep; her dreams are the cause; her cries are the effect. Given the following causes from Act I, identify the effects of each, and explain how these relationships are important to the plot.
  - Cause: Cassius is envious of Caesar.
  - Cause: Brutus admires Caesar but is afraid that Caesar will become king.
  - Cause: Casca makes a mocking description of Caesar’s refusing the crown.
- 4. Understanding Dramatic Speeches.** A *soliloquy* is a speech in which a character, alone on stage, speaks directly to the audience and reveals or examines his or her thoughts and feelings. An *aside* is a brief remark to the audience, uttered while other characters are nearby but unable to hear. Often the character is speaking to him or herself. In Act III, however, two characters speak asides not overheard by the others, and they reveal their true feelings. A *monologue* is a lengthy, uninterrupted speech addressed to other characters, rather than to the audience. It may or may not reveal what the speaker really thinks or feels.
  - Compare what Cassius says to Antony in Act III, Scene i, lines 177 with what he says to Brutus in the aside beginning in line 232.
  - Compare what Antony says in Act III, Scene i, lines 218-222 with his soliloquy from line 254 on.
  - Examine Brutus’ speech (Act III, Scene ii, line 12 on). To what extent is Brutus speaking his true feelings?
- 5. Inferring Tone.** *Tone* in a speech is the feelings and emotions that accompany the words. When you attend a play, the tone of the speech is conveyed by the voice of the speaker. When you read a play, however, you must infer the tone. The tone of Antony’s soliloquy over Caesar’s body (Act III, Scene i, line 254 on) is that of sincere grief and rage, as you can infer from the language and sentence structure. Brutus’ speech early in Scene ii begins with a reasonable tone and shifts to one of urging the crowd’s acceptance of the assassination.
  - Examine Antony’s funeral oration.
  - Identify the tone and the shifts in tone.
  - Give an example from the text to support each of your inferences about the tone.
- 6. Recognizing Anachronisms.** An *anachronism* is an event or a detail that is inappropriate for the time period. For example, a car in a story about the Civil War would be an anachronism; cars had not yet been invented. In a play set in the 1920’s, the word *nerd* would be an anachronism because *nerd* wasn’t used as slang until much later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Remember that *Julius Caesar* is set in 44-43 B.C. in ancient Rome. Identify the anachronisms in the following passages:
  - “... he plucked me ope his doublet and offered them his throat to cut.” (Act I, Scene ii, lines 264-266)
  - “Peace! Count the clock! The clock hath stricken three.” (Act II, Scene i, line 192)
  - “Look, Lucius, here’s the book I sought for so;  
I put it in the pocket of my gown.” (Act IV, Scene iii, lines 250-251)

7. **Understanding Irony. Dramatic Irony** is a device whereby an audience's understanding of a character's words or actions is different from the character's understanding. The audience's special knowledge enables it to view the characters with superior understanding. *Verbal Irony* is when one character intentionally says something with a meaning that another character is not aware of. For example, when Trebonius speaks ironically in Act II, Scene ii, lines 124-125, Caesar is unaware of the meaning, but the audience and Trebonius know the meaning.
- Find and explain an example of **dramatic irony** in Act I or Act II.
  - Find and explain an example of **verbal irony** spoken by Decius in Act II, Scene ii.
  - Find and explain an example of **verbal irony** spoken by Portia in Act II, Scene iv.
8. **Predicting Outcomes.** An outcome is the natural result of what has gone before. To predict a story's outcome you need to be alert to **foreshadowings**—the hints and preparations for later events. You must consider both the action that has taken place and what has been said by and about the characters. For example, given what we have learned about Caesar in Act II—his pride and his unwillingness to appear weak and fearful—it is reasonable to predict that he will go to the Capitol even if he is warned. Predict outcomes to the following questions and support them with evidence from Acts I and II.
- Who will assume power after Caesar's death?
  - How will the people react to Caesar's death?
9. **Understanding Tragedy and Theme.** A **tragedy** is a drama in which the central character or characters suffer disaster or great misfortune. In many tragedies, the downfall results from fate, a serious character flaw, or a combination of the two. Other contributing causes may be present as well. The Greek philosopher Aristotle defined tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude." He explained that although the main character is noble, a tragedy must focus on action rather than on character development. The action should arouse feelings of pity and fear in the audience. The **theme** of a tragedy is the meaning of the central idea or insight about life that explains why the downfall occurred, as well as the main character's recognition of that meaning and its consequences.
- What is the central action of the play?
  - What does Brutus see as the meaning of the central action and its consequences?
  - Explain the theme of this tragedy.
10. **Interpreting Metaphorical Language.** **Metaphorical Language** involves a comparison of unlike things. For example, in Act V, Scene i, line 87, Cassius says that the shadow of the birds of prey is a canopy, suggesting how dark and dense the shadow is. Such metaphorical language deepens meaning and expresses feelings and emotions in a way that ordinary, plain language often cannot.
- To interpret metaphorical language, first clarify that the subject of the comparison is—what is the writer writing about? Then clarify what the subject is being compared to. Finally, ask yourself, "What ideas, feelings, and emotions are suggested by the comparison?" Interpret the following examples of metaphorical language from Act V:
- Act V, Scene iii, line 15
  - Act V, Scene v, line 13
  - Act V, Scene v, line 23
  - Act V, Scene v, line 41