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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2015 Volume II: Explaining Character in Shakespeare

How Our Moral Views Shape Our Judgment of Characters in Julius Caesar

Curriculum Unit 15.02.10, published September 2015
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Introduction

Dazed by a rebuke from someone he considers a dear friend, Cassius has this exchange with Brutus on the battlefield in Act IV of *Julius Caesar*:

> Cassius: … Brutus hath rived my heart.
>
> A friend should bear his friend's infirmities,
>
> But Brutus makes mine greater than they are.
>
> Brutus: I do not, till you practice them on me.
>
> Cassius: You love me not.
>
> Brutus: I do not like your faults.
>
> Cassius: A friendly eye could never see such faults.
>
> Brutus: A flatterer's would not, though they do appear
>
> As huge as high Olympus.[1]

Brutus and Cassius struggle here, in a way that all of us do daily as we decide who to count among our friends, who to trust and when we may have to disengage from a relationship because we can no longer do that.

The two men seem to have different definitions of friendship. Cassius thinks a friend should "bear his friend's infirmities" -- given that he later insists that a friend "could never see such faults," it probably makes sense to assume that he means, rather than "put up with," something more like paper over or even ignore rather than highlight and "make greater" as Cassius insists Brutus does. Because he makes his faults seem worse than

they are, Brutus must not love Cassius. It is an all or nothing game to him.

Brutus, however, seems better able to separate what he loves about Cassius and what he does not. He acknowledges that as long as he doesn't bear the negative outcome of one of these faults, there is no harm done if he doesn't ignore them. They are there, but they aren't a problem. In fact, he says, someone who ignores faults is a flatterer, not a true friend.

Cassius and Brutus deal with the problem of taking sides. Can you still be someone's friend if they highlight your faults? Do you have to love every part of someone? At what point do you dismiss someone for their faults -- when they "practice them on me," as Brutus says?

When we enter into this decision with other people, both parties inevitably bring different sets of values to the table. As readers and interpreters of literature, we do the same when we attempt to make judgments about characters and "take sides." Do we want to root for the good guy or the bad guy? What makes one character good and another bad -- or, as Brutus seems to think in the quotation above -- can a character be both and still be okay?

This unit will use William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to explore the idea that readers use a set of values to make judgments about character and that the text, rather than having a surefire "answer" contained within about each character actually might allow for and suggest multiple interpretations. Depending on which evidence is used and how each individual piece (as well as larger groups of those pieces) is judged against a reader's moral "rules," a different judgment about a character might be made.

In the exchange between Brutus and Cassius above (and during the rest of their "quarrel," which goes on for several pages), the values I the reader hold may influence which character I "side" with. If I think that people who are truly friends accept each others' faults and don't attempt to point them out, I might feel some amount of sympathy for Cassius and join him at being upset at Brutus for "riving" his heart. If I think that ignoring someone's faults is flattering them, and that flattering makes one a phony, I might sympathize with Brutus. I might also fall somewhere in the middle -- yes, he'd be flattering, but that's not a bad thing.

Content Objectives

What We Bring to the Table

Through participation in society -- the upbringing in our home and community, engagement in civic institutions like church and public education -- we form values based on our experiences as well as the traditions and customs of our culture. If a value judgment is defined as our own personal opinion about how good or bad something is, a moral principle may be understood to be a bit wider in scope. Typically, a culture shares a moral code that, for the most part, one must subscribe to in order to be deemed "right" or "good" by that culture's standards.

Moral relativism is a perspective on ethical theory positing that there are deep and widespread moral disagreements across different societies or cultures, rather than the view that that there is one authoritative and universal moral outlook that is better than others. According to this second view, for any moment of choice there is one "right" thing to do, one course of action that is "good," because there is a set of objective

criteria for evaluating the rightness of an action. Even if "moral facts" are not universally accepted, the argument goes, they do exist.[2]

Interpreting literature as a moral objectivist would mean that, when evaluating the choices of characters, we should be able to determine clearly which choice is right and which is wrong. In the mind of a moral relativist, we may be able to recognize right and wrong within the moral standards of a particular culture, but not in a universal sense.

Moral relativism also recognizes multiple sets of moral standards existing within a larger culture or society -- essentially that there are moral sub-groups.[3] I may participate in American culture and therefore have a set of morals that align with American ideals, but I may also participate in a subculture in which some of the moral standards might differ from those of other subcultures within American society.

I think the idea of subgroups within a culture carries an immense amount of relevance to the way we conduct discussion about literature within a classroom. If I stand in front of the room and lecture about the ethics of *Julius Caesar* to my students and ask them to accept my ideas as correct, in a way I'm imposing my own set of moral standards on them. In a more open-ended discussion, I may not be imposing my own moral standards, but there could potentially be a "clash" of moral standards between students to the extent that they subscribe to their own subgroup's unique sets of moral standards.

When we read, we also participate in a process of moral justification -- that is, seeking affirmation of the moral standards that we believe are right. This justifying process can be conducted against the grain of our own beliefs (we seek to find support for choices we are morally wary of) or more neutrally (we try to justify multiple and mutually contradictory principles).

Though I think the idea of what a "moral position" is, arising from the relativist assumption that there is more than one worthy position, is the correct outlook, it still isn't feasible to attempt to define the morals of a particular culture and then use those as defined to analyze this play. I think that would be an impossible task. I want to invite students to consider what they believe their own personal values to be and how much those values align with the moral code of a larger group -- and whether the groups they encounter within the classroom may differ in moral standards from the group they associate with. The idea would be to compare their own values with the values they find in the play, albeit with the understanding that they may not fully grasp those values.

It is possible that, when reading a text, students might seek specific evidence to support the moral choice they have made while ignoring (purposefully) or overlooking (subconsciously) evidence that may support an opposite moral standard. In her book *The Moral of the Story: Literature, Values and American Education*, Susan Reneck Parr notices a recent shift in her students' values, specifically that they now seem to maintain "morally apathetic, now-oriented" and generally individualistic sets of moral views. Though I don't particularly agree with her stance (and she was writing about K-12 and college students in the late 1970s, so her assertions may now be inaccurate), her argument that "preconceptions shape not only my students' interpretive response to the course material but, on an even more basic level, what material they consciously attend to" does seem right.[4]

Considering our moral beliefs allows us to make decisions between things that are selfish and things that benefit the culture or world at large. This question is ultimately at the center of *Julius Caesar* -- Brutus needs to decide whether to preserve Caesar's life and therefore his leadership of Rome (self-interested, preserving

friendship and protecting Caesar's life for that reason) against the benefit to a larger community (the people of the Roman Empire). Though Brutus may deem his choice right based on his moral code (or Roman ideals), we should entertain the possibility that the other option may seem just as right to someone with a different set of moral standards. Most importantly, as readers we should not ignore evidence that might support either side because of our own moral bias.

Analysis of Julius Caesar

To give students a purposeful, directed encounter with their own moral standards and the way that evidence in the text either supports or subverts those standards, I think it is useful to focus on guiding questions that ask us, as simply as possible, to consider what our values incline us to think about a particular situation in the play. As we consider what we might do in response to a situation, we can analyze the character's decision, characteristics and motivations against our own values.

In *Julius Caesar*, some of the general ideas relevant to the story include friendship, love, power, fairness, judgment and justice, theories of governance, the uses of persuasion, and honor, to name a few. Unfortunately, this doesn't exactly narrow it down. I will frame my analysis of the play around a few of the major characters (Caesar, Brutus, Cassius) against the larger "moral dilemma" question: at what point does loyalty expire? Investigating beliefs around loyalty can open us up to more specific questions about how we are loyal to friends and ideas.

This analysis should serve to indicate possible alternative interpretations but not provide an exhaustive or "definitive" outlook on the play. Hopefully, however, these questions will be of interest to students and could be used in inquiry-based discussions and other classroom activities. My "answers" to these questions will allow us to see the way that we judge character against our own moral standards. Drawing on the example from the introduction, my moral dilemma may have been "is it okay to point out my friend's faults?" - my answer will most likely color my judgment of Brutus and Cassius.

At what point does loyalty expire?

Curiously enough, the word "loyalty" does not occur in the play; it is hard to dispute that the idea doesn't underlie most of the decisions made by the characters. Brutus considers whether he should be loyal to his friend Caesar or to Rome; Caesar considers whether he should be loyal to the people of Rome (or, I suppose, the idea of a republican system) or himself and accept the crown. Cassius and Brutus both deliberate between loyalty to their cause and ending their own lives as the play draws to a close. We question to whom Antony is loyal as he manipulates Brutus and the conspirators: Is this really loyalty to Caesar? Identifying our own beliefs about loyalty will allow us to discuss various aspects of the play.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines the word "loyal" as "having or showing complete and constant support for someone or something." Synonyms specify types of loyalty as allegiance to one's lawful or sovereign government; remaining faithful to a private person to whom fidelity is due; or fidelity to a cause, ideal or custom.[5]

Act I scene one is our first encounter with loyalty - among the mechanicals, Carpenter and Cobbler, and the tribunes, Flavius and Murellus. The mechanicals are on their way to "make holiday to see Caesar and rejoice in his triumph," (I,i,31-32) incurring the anger of Flavius and Murellus, who are appalled by the commoners' lack of loyalty to the former ruler of Rome, Pompey. Immediately as readers we are forced to consider our ideas of loyalty -- should these men celebrate Caesar, or does that constitute a betrayal of Pompey?

This celebration in the street, and the tribunes' anger over the commoners quick flip to allegiance with Caesar, forces us to begin to judge Caesar's character. Though he used to be allied with Pompey, he later defeated him in battle. The celebration itself "comes in triumph over Pompey's blood" (I,i,52). A few lines later, Flavius describes Caesar as one who "would fly above the view of men/ And keep us all in servile fearfulness" (I,i,75) if he is not brought down to an "ordinary pitch." Before scene one ends, we are already asked to contend with our beliefs and begin to make a judgment of Caesar.

To judge Caesar around the idea of loyalty, we will have to consider our beliefs about being loyal to those who have power over us. At what point do we shed our loyalty to a leader? When he puts us in danger? When he abuses his power in general? When he loses a battle? When he betrays our trust in some way? Students' answers before reading the play will influence the way they manipulate evidence in making a judgment about Caesar and, consequently, their decision about whether his murder was justified.

Almost all of the evidence we get about Caesar's character comes from the mouths of other characters. Though some of Cassius' description of Caesar relates to him as an "official," or, how he behaves in his office, some of it deals with his personality in general. As he begins to convince Brutus of "the problem with Caesar," he relates two stories -- one of a swimming adventure in the Tiber river and another of Caesar fainting when he was in Spain. In the former situation, he relates his story using the lofty language of heroes -- Caesar dared him to leap into the "angry flood;" they "did buffet it/with lusty sinews, throwing [the current] aside/ And stemming it with hearts of controversy." The only negative word he uses to describe Caesar in this account is "tired." His second story describes Caesar as a god who "did shake," with "coward lips" losing their color and that he lost his "luster," and he whined like a "sick girl." In both accounts, Cassius focuses on his physical deficiencies. He uses this evidence to judge that Caesar has no claim to the god-like status he seems to have achieved in Rome. If we believe that we should remain loyal to leaders who are strong and do not request the help of others, this might be evidence we would use to argue that Caesar was not fit for his office and had somehow unfairly claimed something he didn't deserve. That being said, Caesar demonstrates in these stories an almost dangerous courage (he was the one who wanted to jump in the river in the first place) and a willingness to ask for help when he needed it. It isn't actually so straightforward that these stories demonstrate something negative about Caesar (I,ii,90-130).

When Cassius refers to Caesar aside from these stories, he tends to use words that refer to Caesar in the abstract - he is a god, immortal, "as free as" Brutus and Cassius, a Colossus, great, and has ambition. Caesar's ambition is presented to the reader, by Cassius and Brutus, as potentially the main justification for the assassination. This prompts us as readers to decide whether we will remain loyal to someone whose ambition may become troublesome (and, honestly, to decide at what point that happens).

Most of Brutus' judgments of Caesar center around his ambition – not necessarily to suggest that he himself is more ambitious than anyone else, but that any man treated like a demigod has the potential to abuse his office. In fact, he asks himself in the first scene of Act II: "He would be crowned:/ How that might change his nature, there's the question" (12-13). Though we may judge that Caesar is ambitious, Brutus seems to say that he doesn't think he is at that moment. He is more wary of the hypothetical ambition Caesar might embody when he is handed power and the system of government in Rome changes to an absolute monarchy (II,I,10-34).

We, as readers, are asked (through Brutus) to judge Caesar on his potential. If we side morally with Brutus -- that the crown inherently makes men more ambitious and power hungry than they were previously--we begin to assume that Caesar will become that way despite evidence earlier in the play that might contradict it.

Brutus uses metaphors -- it is “the bright day that brings forth the adder” (II,i,14) and “think him as a serpent’s egg,/ Which, hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous,/ And kill him in the shell” (II,i,32-34)--that seem to contradict his former assertion that his nature would change. One could read Brutus’ choice of metaphors to indicate that there is something already in Caesar’s nature that makes him dangerous. The adder didn’t become bad by going out in the sun; the serpent was a nascent danger in the egg.

The reasoning Brutus presents can be taken in two ways -- that he thinks there is something inherent to the throne that would cause a man to abuse power or that he thinks that tendency is already innate in Caesar and the throne would bring it out in him. Does that matter? Are we reading in too much detail, or is there a chance that our preconceived ideas about loyalty to our friends might color the way we look at those lines? We might be more comfortable with Brutus’ decision to betray Caesar if we believe that monarchy in itself brings out some kind of dangerous ambition that is inherent in all men. We may be less comfortable if we see Brutus trying to rationalize his wariness of Caesar when he actually might just believe he is a bad guy.

Of course, there are other points that will complicate our interpretation of Brutus. He ostensibly provides the level-headedness and dignity of sentiment that elevates the conspirators’ moral position; he insists that the faction “be sacrificers, not butchers” (II,i,166) and spare Antony; he insists that they kill Caesar “boldly, but not wrathfully” (II,i,172) and urges that they eschew an oath because it would make it seem like they weren’t really dedicated to their cause. “What need we any spur but our own cause/ To prick us to redress” (II,i,123-4) These lines can show that Brutus provides a voice of integrity, reinforcing his earlier contention that he was not conspiring against Caesar for personal reasons but for the general good. Excessive zeal for blood or wavering commitment might show that they might not actually trust him (or, might prove to Brutus that he doesn’t really trust himself).

One could also read a sort of aggressiveness in Brutus toward the group, specifically against Cassius. When Cassius suggests killing Antony, Brutus immediately opposes this idea. Even though his response is admirably reasoned (though wholly mistaken, as Antony ends up being a very real threat to the conspirators), we can see from it that Brutus has come into the group of conspirators and immediately taken over. He does the same when Cassius suggests the oath. Brutus has already begun to assume the leadership role in the group and asserts his power, power that will be echoed later (though he doesn’t respond to or claim that power) when the plebeians cry, “Let him be Caesar” and “Caesar’s better parts/ Shall be crowned in Brutus” (III,ii,45-50). (His countrymen seem to demand, and we may have seen glimpses of, the same ambition in Brutus that he feared so much in Caesar.)

Brutus takes great pains to convince us that he is acting in the general interest of his country and not because of a personal vendetta against Caesar himself, or even because Caesar is a bad person. But does that make him “honorable”? Can we excuse or even laud his choice to rid Rome of Caesar because he is doing it for the good of the people? If we agree that his choice is morally okay but only because of its purity of motive, are we then forced to view Cassius in a different light?

Cassius immediately bears his heart on his sleeve. He begins his persuasion of Brutus to join the cause by asking him why he is so upset:

> Brutus, I do observe you now of late.
>
> I have not from your eyes that gentleness

And show of love as I was wont to have.

You bear too stubborn and too strange a hand

Over your friend that loves you… (I,I,32-36)

Cassius establishes that (as I mentioned in the introduction) he expects constant devoted attention from his friend in order to feel that their friendship is genuine. If Brutus is acting cold and "ceremonious" as he says later in Act IV, then he must no longer love him. He later laments that Caesar never loved him as much as he loved Brutus. Cassius launches into his argument against Caesar first by flattering Brutus, a move that seems to be the type of flattery that Brutus bemoans in Act IV as well. Cassius believes that friends should show each other how wonderful they are and demonstrate "shows of love" that confirm the friendship.

The "fight scene" between Brutus and Cassius in Act IV on the face of it seems to be two leaders arguing over the particulars of their newfound leadership: is it permissible to take bribes? Should there be some "nobility" in their fundraising efforts, and how should money be exchanged between them? But the quarrel is really about friendship. Cassius has, in a way, what he wants -- he and Brutus are alone together and, now that Caesar is gone, Brutus can love him the most. But he doesn't, and Cassius goes as far as to request that Brutus kill him:

If thou beest a Roman take it forth.

I that denied thee gold will give my heart.

Strike as thou didst at Caesar. For I know

When thou didst hate him worst thou loved'st him better

Than ever thou loved'st Cassius…(IV,iii,103-7)

Cassius seems to want Brutus to do the same thing to him that he did to Caesar as a way of "emulating" that love. If Brutus would kill him for his faults, maybe he would get that much closer to being as deeply loved as Caesar was. Simultaneously he admits that he knows that wouldn't even make it true.

We can then infer that while Cassius wanted a similar outcome - ridding Rome of a potentially tyrannical monarch -- his motive is slightly different. Brutus seems to rationalize his choice with the selflessness of his motive, so does Cassius' less selfless motive force us to judge him differently?

When it comes to judging motive, Antony doesn't seem to differentiate between Cassius and Brutus. He considers them "butchers" and admonishes himself for being so kind to them, even if it is to serve his purpose of revenge for Caesar (III,i,254-5). He goes on to lament the loss of Caesar, the "noblest man/ To ever live the tide of times" (III,I,256-7). It is clear that emotion has overtaken him, though he keeps a level head long enough to cleverly flee before he is killed as well and convinces Brutus and the conspirators that he will be on their side if they can demonstrate to him why Caesar was dangerous.

Fast forward to the end of the play. Antony stands – victorious – over Brutus' dead body and declares him "the noblest Roman of them all." Is he being genuine here, even though he sarcastically called Brutus "honorable"

in his funeral speech? Has something changed in Antony to allow him to see Brutus differently? He goes on to differentiate – just as Brutus had earlier, when he convinced himself to join the conspiracy – between the motivations of the other conspirators and those of Brutus. Brutus is different because he did what he did "in a general honest thought/ And common good to all" (V.v.71-2).

The baffling thing about Antony's comment is that we don't see him given occasion to change his mind about Brutus. We see very little of Antony after his funeral speech; his main later appearance features his discussion with Octavius and Lepidus about whom to kill (and, coldly, he dismisses Lepidus' worth as soon as he exits the stage) (IV.i.1-47). We see him again in Act V, fighting Brutus and Cassius, when he calls them "villains" (V.i.38).

Depending on the way you define loyalty, this sudden change in sentiment could lead to different judgments about Antony. Is this change in his opinion of Brutus a betrayal of Antony's loyalty to Caesar or a reasonable growth in Antony's character? Depending on our interpretation of Brutus' motives (do we really think he is noble or did he betray his friend?) we might think that Antony is the hero for killing him and getting some kind of justice for Caesar or the villain for slaying such a noble Roman.

Though he is off stage for most of the play aside from the third act, he is the major engine of the resolution of the conflict: he rouses Rome to war and then slays the conspirators. We are asked to judge Antony primarily through his public speech after Caesar's death and his behavior toward Brutus and Cassius immediately before his speech. This makes him especially difficult to judge. Is he portraying his true self through this behavior and his oration, or is he manipulating us as well as Brutus, Cassius and the Roman people?

After Caesar's death, Antony sends his servant to proclaim to Brutus that he is "noble, wise, valiant and honest" (III.i.126). He returns and sets out to convince the conspirators that he will be loyal to them and absolutely not try to avenge Caesar's death. But as soon as Brutus and Cassius leave, Antony reveals his true feelings:

> Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood.
>
> Over thy wounds do I now prophesy –
>
> Which like dumb mouths do ope their ruby lips
>
> To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue –
>
> A curse shall light upon the limbs of men.

Antony makes it clear here that he wants revenge. But he does not clarify his attitude toward Brutus. If you come to read this and Antony's speech on the supposition that by avenging Caesar's death he must also have some level of animosity for Brutus, you might presume Antony's motives to arise from passion and personal feeling rather than from a lofty political principle. We can ask the same questions about Antony's motives that we already have about those of Brutus and Cassius.

Though Antony declares his love for Caesar, he also declares his love for Brutus twice – through his servant (III,i,129) and directly to the conspirators when he asks why they killed Caesar (III,i,220). Antony also declares his respect for Brutus' devotion to the general good (in his closing lines), but acts, at times, much like the too-

powerful tyrant that would threaten the general good he cares so much about, as when he leads an army against Brutus and Cassius and argues with Octavius about who will be killed and who will share in the spoils of victory.

If Cassius is the lover whose motives are personal and Brutus the citizen whose motives are public, then Antony lies somewhere in between. In Act 4, Octavius Caesar closes scene one by saying:

> Let us do so, for we are at the stake
>
> And bayed about with many enemies,
>
> And some that smile have in their hearts, I fear,
>
> Millions of mischiefs (IV,I,48-52).

Octavius speaks here about the duplicity of people – the tendency to seem something on the outside that one is actually not on the inside. While Cassius and Brutus do struggle with their decisions and exhibit the complexities of realistic, human characters, they are typically pretty consistent (as far as we can tell). Cassius cares only about personal loyalty; Brutus is consistent in placing his love for country above his love for Caesar. Antony is much more difficult to pin down. As a result, he may be the most human of them all.

Almost every story we read has a clear "hero": although this person may not be perfect in any sense of the word, or arguably not even "good," we know that we are supposed to root for them. They are the one who should win and, frankly, the more imperfect they are the more we want them to win because then we know that we ourselves could win yet be imperfect, too. But in *Julius Caesar*, it is next to impossible to clearly identify the hero. The beliefs that students bring to the table will color their interpretations and, ultimately, make it challenging to arrive at a clear choice.

Rationale

The analysis I've provided above clearly doesn't exhaust the possible pieces of evidence that can be interpreted to make judgments about the characters in Julius Caesar. There are probably solid disagreements with my interpretations that could be supported. The focus, however, should not be on what answer I provide, but that students will have been guided through a "meta-interpretation" of the play. Not only are they making judgments about the characters, but thinking about why they make those judgments given their own beliefs. They will consider how their beliefs might act as biases governing their interpretations and learn how to actively seek out evidence that they might be missing owing to preconception.

Seeking out more complex ways of interpreting character -- and interpreting the people around them -- is an invaluable skill to give high school students. The students I teach - 9th and 10th graders at Allderdice High School in Pittsburgh -- ask themselves the same question every day. Which of their peers are the good guys -- who should they trust, who do they count as friends? And as they prepare to enter life beyond high school, they will increasingly have to ask this question about the people they meet; as they decide who to vote for,

who to marry; as they consider which friends to keep in their lives and which to grow apart from.

In my five years of teaching, I've had mixed experiences teaching Shakespeare. This year in particular, I had both extremes. In my honors classes, after finishing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, my classes practically begged to read *Macbeth* next. They couldn't get enough; though they still struggled with the language, they seemed so engaged in the story that they were willing to take on the challenge. We laughed together at Puck's antics and argued about whether Lady Macbeth was strong or crazy; they wouldn't let me take a day off from reading.

The other extreme happened during a reading of *Romeo and Juliet* with my mainstream class. Though there were some high points, we hit rock bottom during 6th period somewhere in Act IV. "Are we reading again today?" -- and not with the same tone as the other class begging for *Macbeth*. Reading *Romeo and Juliet* was slow, agonizing, difficult and boring for them. Though there were a few students who loved it, most slogged through just to get the work done and earn a grade.

My mainstream classes are an interesting mix of students. Previously, Allderdice had three "tracks" -- Center for Advanced Studies (CAS) classes that were limited to students who qualified as gifted by the state's standard, an IQ of 130; Pittsburgh Scholars Program (PSP) for students who were advanced, but not gifted; and mainstream, for students who were not advanced. Three years ago, the "mainstream" track was eliminated and all students not in the CAS program were enrolled in PSP. As a result of this change, the range of ability levels in PSP goes from very advanced students, some of whom may be gifted but not tested or have chosen not to take the advanced English class, all the way to students with IEPs who are included in general education classes.

Engaging students at a range of ability levels creates problems, but part of the struggle lies in the anxiety about finding the "right" answer in what they often see as a jumble of language that barely makes sense to them. After they have endeavored to sort out what the words mean, they are then tasked with making judgments about these characters and hoping that they are "right." They sift through pages and pages of evidence, often skipping over what they didn't understand very well or what might have seemed less significant. I believe that, at times, they have an answer in mind and find the most prominent evidence that supports that answer while avoiding a close reading of a wider range of evidence that might complicate their beliefs.

My mainstream classes read *Julius Caesar* at the end of 10th grade. At that point, I will have taught the same group of students for two years; they will leave me and go to a new teacher for 11th grade. The way that I teach *Julius Caesar* will be what sends them off -- my last chance to make sure they have the skills they need to move forward and that they enter into 11th grade excited about English class.

After completing this unit, with 11th grade in their sights, I hope that students will have a sense of the complexity of character in the literature that they study, specifically Shakespeare. I hope that approaching the text by ascertaining our own beliefs and then purposefully finding ways to challenge them will not only expand their consideration of what is "good" and "bad," but will also give them the skills to more carefully analyze the evidence presented to them in a text.

Teaching Strategies

Establishing a Moral Framework

It is important to choose some guiding “moral dilemma” questions to guide the choice of evidence and discussions used in the unit. For the purposes of this narrative I focused on the idea of loyalty and then wrote about the questions that might arise when we think about whether we should stop being loyal to someone, and if so when. You might use this question and develop some other questions that follow from it but do not necessarily match the ones above. In order for students to think consciously about what beliefs and potential biases they bring to the table, it’s imperative to start the unit with discussion of at least one of these questions. There is a specific activity below to open the unit, but students should return to these questions throughout the unit and at some point ask the questions themselves.

Evidence Collection

Students should keep a record of text evidence that could go toward judging characters against the questions above. Assign each student a character and create a place for them to collect evidence as they read that might help them make a judgment about that character. Be sure to ask students to note the act, scene and line numbers in which their evidence appears, so that they can refer to it later and cite it properly.

Students should focus on the character that they will eventually use for the culminating project (below). Character assignments can be used to group students for this project as well.

Shared-inquiry discussion

Shared-inquiry discussion is student-centered; as much as possible, the teacher should not enter the discussion and should avoid communicating “answers” that might be interpreted by students as the *only* right answer. This discussion structure allows students to build a community of learners who listen to and acknowledge each other’s answers rather than waiting for the approval of an “authority.”

Students should be sure to build on each other’s responses, listening and agreeing with added evidence for another viewpoint or disagreeing with conflicting evidence. Students new to this style of discussion will be tempted to “share” rather than converse. If your students need support, give them a pre-prepared list of sentence starters to help them learn to build on the previous response rather than merely read their own.

To give students more control, assign roles to students to help manage the discussion. These could include a facilitator who keeps the discussion on task and elicits contributors if there are no volunteers, a tracker who maintains a list of participants, a timer and a note taker. As an observer, you can take notes and interject if the discussion becomes unruly or needs to be redirected.

Activities

Introduction – Human Barometer

The purpose of this first lesson in the unit is to begin the conversation about what moral beliefs students bring to the classroom. In order to advance students to the point where they can consider how their own beliefs might bias their interpretations of the characters in the play, they first need to establish what some of their beliefs are.

Begin the lesson by asking students to write for a few minutes about the question: what things influence a person's beliefs? Students should share their responses and you or a student should create a chart with the responses that can be referred to later in the unit.

Before the lesson, consider what "moral dilemmas" you may use to ask students to examine their beliefs and interpretations as they read. For example, my questions above focused on loyalty. Based on these questions, create a set of statements that take a clear stance on the question. Below is a sample question based on Brutus and Cassius' argument about friendship in my introduction to this unit.

Question: Should a good friend ignore a friend's faults or point them out?

Stance Statement: A good friend should never point out a friend's faults.

Then, allow time for students to write "agree," "disagree" or "not sure," and explain their reasoning. Students should use examples (at this point, from their own lives or media since they have not yet read the text) to support their response. You can adjust the number of statements based on the ability level of your class and time available.

Give students a few minutes to respond, then explain the human barometer. On the floor, put a green piece of paper on one end of the room and a red piece of paper on the other. Go through the statements one by one and instruct students to stand at the end of the room* that represents their answer (green for agree, red for disagree). Students can stand in the middle if they are unsure. After students align themselves in support of each statement, spend a few minutes allowing them to share their response and explain their reasoning. Have one student take notes on the board or chart paper about the class's responses (including how many agreed and disagreed).

Close the discussion by asking students to sum up what they noticed about the class's responses using the chart with discussion notes. Then, as an exit slip, ask students to choose one of their responses and, returning to their warm up, consider how the belief in that question was formed. Using my example above, I might say that my beliefs about friendship were formed from my feelings about the friends I had as a child. Collect these slips and use them to begin the next lesson by discussing the responses.

*If you prefer not to have students standing and moving around, you can give each student a piece of green and red paper to indicate their responses, and perhaps also yellow paper for "unsure."

Act III – Antony's Funeral Speech

This lesson will allow students to examine Antony's use of rhetoric and consider whether this makes him

someone trustworthy. Depending on how you use the film clip, this lesson may be best spread over two class periods (80 minutes). This lesson is best used after students have read Act III, scene i.

Begin the lesson by asking students to answer the question, “Can someone who uses persuasive strategies to convince an audience be trusted?” After a few minutes, ask students to share their responses. As the discussion winds down, ask students whether they feel they can trust Antony at this point in the play. Ask them to think generally about why or why not and try to use text evidence in support. If you have time, show a clip of the speech.

Do a close-reading of Antony’s speech, focusing on the language strategies Antony uses to help convince his audience. Give students a few minutes to do this individually, underlining or highlighting the strategies they notice. It may help to give them examples first or make a list of devices, such as repetition, rhetorical questions, emotional appeal. This list can be adjusted based on the ability level or previous information your class has encountered about persuasive strategies. Have students share with a partner, then with the class. Have students share, returning to the earlier question about whether Antony is trustworthy. As an exit slip, ask students to consider how their own beliefs and biases might have influenced their interpretation of Antony’s speech.

Culminating Project – Un-taking sides

This project can be completed individually or in groups. Students should focus on the character they have been tracking throughout the reading and they should have plenty of evidence ready.

Have students choose a moral dilemma question from the opening activity (human barometer). Students should create two opposite “answers” to this question – they can use their own and hopefully an “opposite” or alternate response. If you group students for this project, you can use their responses to put students who answered differently from each other in the first activity in the same group.

For the project, have students consider how they reacted to their character. They can frame this as “good or bad,” or whether or not the character did the right thing in a certain situation. For example:

Character: Cassius

Situation: Cassius started the conspiracy to kill Caesar

Moral Question: If I do something out of jealousy, does that make the thing I’m doing wrong?

How I’d answer: The motive behind something doesn’t really matter – if what I did is bad, it doesn’t matter why I did it. It’s still bad. So killing Caesar is bad whether Cassius did it out of jealousy or for the good of Rome.

Alternative Response: Motive is everything. If I did it for a good reason, then the thing I did might be okay. If I did it for a selfish reason, then it isn’t. Cassius is wrong because his motivation was selfish.

Have students create a poster on which they display both “sides” to their moral dilemma and evidence to support each side. They should also include a separate written component in which they explain how their own beliefs influenced their answer and how someone might see a different side of the character with other evidence or by interpreting the same evidence differently.

Resources

Bibliography for Teachers

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human.* New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.

The chapter on *Julius Caesar* in this book explores the extent to which Caesar and Brutus' relationship impacted Brutus' choice to murder Caesar.

"Loyal," Merriam Webster, 2015, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/loyal.

MacDonald, Chris. "Moral Decision Making – An Analysis," *Ethicsweb.ca*, June 6 2002, http://www.ethicsweb.ca/guide/moral-decision.html.

A webpage with a introductory explanation of how morals impact our decisions.

Parr, Susan Resneck. *The Moral of the Story: Literature, Values and American Education*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1982.

A book that considers how the change in students' morals over time has led to a change in their interpretations of literary works. Parr includes observations from her own teaching about the effects of these changes in her students, then provides an analysis of several canonical pieces of literature through a moral/value framework. Though *Julius Caesar* is not considered specifically, reading about other texts through this lens may help you create questions for discussion of the play.

Schanzer, Ernest. The Problem Plays of Shakespeare. New York: Schocken Books, 1963.

The essay on *Julius Caesar* is mainly an analysis of Caesar – considering whether he was truly a tyrant or the victim of a horrible act of treason. This text will supplement the teacher's understanding of how different interpretations of Caesar and the other main characters can be supported with evidence.

Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*, ed. By S.P. Cerasano. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012.

This critical edition includes several essays of criticism about the play, including Shakespeare's source material, Plutarch's *Life of Julius Caesar*.

Westacott, Emyrs. "Moral Relativism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://www.iep.utm.edu/moral-re/.

A lengthy explanation of moral relativism.

Reading List for Students

Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*, ed. By S.P. Cerasano. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012.

Materials

- Copies of *Julius Caesar*, including photocopies of key scenes for close-reading and annotating (specifically Antony's funeral speech)
- Evidence collection sheet or notebook for character tracking
- Chart paper for tracking beliefs from opening discussion as well as evidence/discussion of those beliefs as they arise in the

play

- Poster or chart paper for culminating projects
- Shared-inquiry discussion materials, including sentence starters, timer, and a tracking sheet for participation

Appendix

Standards

The primary goal of this unit is not only for students to make judgments about characters, but to consider the process by which they make those judgments given their own biases and the evidence available to them in the text. The Common Core standard for literature that will be met most thoroughly as students read and analyze the play is standard 1 for grades 9-10, "cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text." Using writing and discussion, students should consider what pieces of evidence lead them to their conclusions about characters and how that evidence might be interpreted differently depending on the bias they bring to the reading.

Students will demonstrate mastery of this standard with various activities in the unit, but primarily the culminating project that asks them to consider a wide variety of evidence about a character, select the best evidence to support the judgment they make about that character and explain how the evidence led them to their conclusion.

By tracking one character throughout their reading of the play, students will also meet literature standard 3 in grades 9-10, "analyze how complex characters (e.g. those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme." As students gather evidence about their character, they will complicate their own judgments about that character and consider how that character interacts with and is developed by his relationship with other characters.

Dealing with the complex language of the play will also help students meet literature standard 4 in grades 9-10, "determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone." Specifically, the analysis of rhetorical and persuasive strategy in Antony's funeral speech will allow students to consider various aspects of language, primarily his diction.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, ed. By S.P. Cerasano (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.), IV,iii, 83-92.
2. Chris MacDonald, "Moral Decision Making – An Analysis,"*ca*, June 6 2002, http://www.ethicsweb.ca/guide/moral-decision.html.
3. Emyrs Westacott, "Moral Relativism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosphy*, http://www.iep.utm.edu/moral-re/.
4. Susan Resneck Parr, *The Moral of the Story: Literature, Values and American Education* (New York, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1982), 4.
5. "Loyal," Merriam Webster, 2015, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/loyal.