



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

Take a Stab at It: Exploring Character in Julius Caesar

Curriculum Unit 15.02.12, published September 2015
by Tara Ann Carter

Overview

This unit seeks to explicate strategies and activities that represent a well-rounded deep investigation of character in William Shakespeare's tragedy, *Julius Caesar*. This text, a mainstay of the public school canon, remains relevant and ripe with contemporary connections despite its over 400 years of age. This unit is designed for an advanced ninth grade classroom; however, it could be easily differentiated for learners at all levels, in middle or high school.

The focus of this unit is how to enable students to understand the creativity and economy with which the Bard approached the English language, and the frank and clear eye with which he was able to evaluate some of the most base and inherent characteristics of the human condition. To this effect, "readers (and playgoers) find more vitality both in Shakespeare's words and in the characters who speak them than in any other author, perhaps in all other authors put together".¹ It is a commonly accepted notion that we read and experience literature -- but Shakespeare before all other literature -- as an extension and enhancement to our understanding of humans and humanity.

Students will come to understand Shakespeare as a master craftsman of humanism and of the psychological development of characters. At best, a student can come away with an appreciation of the timelessness of Shakespearean plays; at worst, they will be able to read and extract meaning from a not immediately fully accessible text. The ability to read closely and find textual evidence is a primary goal; the aesthetic appreciation of the beauty and concision of the words and work is an added bonus. All the same, the universal appeal and connection to the hallmarks of the human experience is undeniable.

Rationale

There is universality in William Shakespeare's plays that makes them relevant for all people in our increasingly globalized society. In our current moment, the characters and concerns of the four primary characters of *Julius Caesar* (Brutus, Cassius, Antony and Caesar) are as relevant and applicable to the ethical,

political and psychological struggles of today as they were during the author's era. The themes of power, ambition, loyalty, friendship, trust and nationalism reverberate throughout our mass media cycles, just as they are brought to light in the tragedy of *Julius Caesar*. Selection of key scenes in which various combinations of these players interact will provide a means for students to focus on specific textual evocations of the specific characters, their reactions and the details that indicate their mental or emotional states.

In the School District of Philadelphia, one Shakespearean play must be covered each year in high school. At my school, Hill-Freedman World Academy, *Julius Caesar* is the play assigned for the ninth grade year.

School Demographics

I am a dual-certified Secondary (7-12) Social Studies and English teacher at Hill-Freedman World Academy (HFWA), an International Baccalaureate Title I public magnet high school tucked away deep within the urban backdrop of Northwest Philadelphia. HFWA is a very small, but expanding school. The genesis of the high school model began only three years ago, as an answer to the call from the already existing middle school parents for a rigorous public-school option for their children to continue their secondary education in the West Oak Lane neighborhood of Philadelphia. Student enrollment will reach 400 at the outset of the 2015-2016 school year. The school currently serves freshmen, sophomores and juniors. The rising juniors will be the inaugural graduating class from HFWA. The students of HFWA generally read at a post-high school level upon entering 9th grade and have scores of proficient or advanced on state standardized tests. Students must also have excellent behavior and attendance records to gain admittance. The school is a niche academic powerhouse that is quickly garnering a reputation on the public stage.

The school demographic consists of 98% African American as is typical of most Philadelphia public schools, and over 75% of these students are economically disadvantaged. HFWA also has the unique distinction of having over half of the student population identified as Students with Exceptional Needs. While most of these students have Individualized Educational Plans (IEP) in a self-contained learning environment, the administration requires and stresses collaboration and cooperation with the general education population, with the requirement that each general education teacher work a minimum of two times throughout the school year in a joint unit where students are meant to intermingle and learn together.

The Continued Relevancy of a Universal Shakespeare

In the wake of the proliferation of curricular responses to identity politics, the continued relevancy of teaching and studying Shakespeare has repeatedly been called into question. The continued curricular hegemony of white males writing in English is one worthy of consideration, especially in urban schools with predominately African-American student populations. However, as will be argued, there is real value in the study of the Bard, beyond the arguably valid assertions of E.D. Hirsch's opinions concerning cultural literacy. William Shakespeare demonstrated an astute sense of personality and human experience that is so cogent that it retains an important place in the establishment of a worldwide canon. Harold Bloom, preeminent Shakespearean scholar, acknowledges: "Shakespeare teaches us how and what to perceive, and he also

instructs us how and what to sense and then to experience as sensation".² Bloom explains that Shakespeare is important universally, inherently because "no one gives us so much of the world most of us take be fact"³ and that he is, in fact, an "international possession, transcending nations, languages, and professions".⁴ In other words, the plays of Shakespeare embody an element of the human experience that all peoples and cultures can embrace, because he writes not just for the audiences of Elizabethan and Jacobean England but with an awareness and keen sensibility for the common psychologies, conflicts, and ethics of people at all moments and places in our world.

It is a legitimate consideration to call into question Bloom's position as a white male reinforcing the authority of other white males' work; however, scholarship by women and non-Eurocentric critics, as well as my own experiences, work toward this same thesis. A collection of essays from South Africa on the universality of Shakespeare provides a response to the legitimacy query, stating that in fact, Shakespeare "may have been particularly good at working with inherited form and pushing it, mutating it, making something new out of the existing constitutive possibilities".⁵ Therefore, Shakespeare is in fact universality pertinent, because he demonstrates the triumph of human creativity and reworking and reimagining of form and content, which embodies the globalized and ongoing spirit of human ingenuity. In a recent response to an editorial in support of dropping Shakespeare from the curriculum, due to his lack of relevancy, an urban teacher school swiftly provided an eloquent response, worth quoting at length here, for effect:

So what Shakespeare wrote 450 years ago is not applicable to [the editorial author's] teaching today? Ethnically diverse students don't foolishly fall in love and overdramatize every facet of that experience? Or feel jealousy or rage? Or fall victim to discrimination? Or act desperately out of passion? To dismiss Shakespeare on the grounds that life 450 years ago has no relation to life today is to dismiss every religious text, every piece of ancient mythology (Greek, African, Native American, etc.), and for that matter, everything that wasn't written in whatever time defined as "NOW." And yes- Shakespeare was in fact a white male. But look at the characters of Othello and Emilia (among others), and you'll see a humane, progressive, and even diverse portrayal of the complexities of race and gender.⁶

Shakespeare is not racist, but he certainly *is* a racialist. He is interested in the interactions of the Other with their society, be it black/brown people, women, and/or Jews, to enumerate only a few. Under this consideration, the claims of Shakespeare not appealing to people outside of a white male Eurocentric tradition are invalidated. He takes up issues of race, class and gender, if you choose to look for them. These issues are complex, as Shakespeare demonstrates in his writing, and as we cannot deny in our own times.

I argue that the importance of reading and understanding the work of Shakespeare is not about dissecting and counting iambic pentameter or the work of making intelligible the sometimes (in our moment) archaic language of his plays, but rather, the cohesive and complex representation of the human through the characterization, built by the words his characters speak. The longevity and pervasiveness of the study of Shakespeare is because his stories provide universal themes and the precursors to our understanding of the modern human psyche are developed in the mind of the reader (or play attendee) with the careful crafting of his words.

Recently, I travelled to Russia to participate in a teachers' exchange, sponsored by the American Friends of Russian Folklore in conjunction with the US State Department.⁷ Upon my arrival to Moscow, I was collected from the airport and quickly whisked away to my first school visitation. In the haze of jetlag, I sat in the auditorium to observe a recital put on especially for the arrival of my group. After listening to some traditional

singing and instrumentation, typical fare for a student exposition, I was surprised to see the platform transformed into a staged production of selected scenes of *Taming of the Shrew*, performed rather well by Muscovite students in excellent English. Upon further investigation, I came to understand that this school was the recent winner of the annual nationwide Shakespearean festival. Even in Russia, a country with its own rich and proud literary tradition, and home to such famous dramatists as Chekhov, Gorky and Gogol, students engage and enjoy the works of Shakespeare. This experience helped to further cement my understanding that the Bard in fact has appeal and applicability to cultures and nations with vastly different ideologies.

Four Major Characters in *Julius Caesar*

Julius Caesar is a play written and first staged in 1599. It is a play that considers universal questions such as the ease and extent of manipulation, the nature of betrayal and the circumstantial justification of murder. The world of Shakespeare's Rome is one centered about the submission of one man to another. Coppélia Kahn, who writes extensively about gender and Shakespeare, identifies the Rome of *Julius Caesar* as one of emulation, which she defines as "pairs of evenly matched heroes act out a mixture of admiration, imitation, and domination".⁸ *Caesar* definitively works within the framework. The men of the conspiracy, Cassius in particular, act out this consideration, beginning with admiration, and escalating quickly to envious rivalry. The highly competitive nature of the male spheres of both Roman and Elizabethan societies run concurrently in this work. Kahn, also, aptly points out that "Brutus and Cassius, though bound together by shared ideals, subtly compete with each other"⁹ and that male friendships are indistinguishable from politics itself".¹⁰ In this view, *Julius Caesar* is a play in which male friendship and politics are inextricable, hence the discussion of the four primary male characters and their interactions with one another naturally presupposes the discussion of the thematic elements of the play as well.

Shakespeare creates characters with universal appeal that grapple with issues applicable to all time periods through creative and economic uses of language. The primary thrust of this unit entails close examination of how characters represent themselves with their words, how they are represented in the words of others and in what ways the language conveys characterization. *Julius Caesar* is the most useful play for this exercise, as "in this drama in particular, language is designed to make things happen, to influence, to persuade, to seduce, or manipulate others".¹¹ The analysis of the characters that follows will paint a clear portrait of each of their motivations and affectations.

Marc Antony

Marcus Antonius is the athletic party boy with an affinity for competition and the winner of race on the Feast of Lupercal. Antony is described as "of that quick spirit" (1.2.32), in direct opposition the "not gamesome" (1.2.31) nature of Brutus. At times, Antony is portrayed as having an almost sycophantic love of Caesar. How much of this is adherence to social and political code, and how much of this reflects his true feelings is not particularly easy to distinguish. The first few lines he is painted as a subservient fawner to Caesar. In response to Caesar's request for Marc Antony to propagate his good luck to Calpurnia, Antony responds, "When Caesar says 'Do this' it is performed" (1.2.13). This complicity, perhaps, spares him his life, as he is portrayed as a puppet of Caesar's and later, when the conspiracy assembles at Brutus' home, the need to assassinate Antony is dismissed because he is only a "limb of Caesar" (2.1.174). His role as acolyte saves his life in a manner of speaking. To the conspiracy, he is seen as inept, and described by Brutus as capable of doing "no more than

Caesar's arm/When Caesar's head is off" (2.1.190-192). When Antony sends his servant to check whether he is clear of danger, he directs him to state, "Mark Antony shall not love Caesar dead/ so well as Brutus living" (3.1.145-146). Whether this is a demonstration of Antony's fickleness or an act of self-preservation could engender an interesting discussion amongst students.

His funeral oration, one of the more discussed passages in all of Shakespeare, illuminates a side of him not previously revealed. He previously promises the conspiracy that he will not speak negatively of them and their actions, and he does not, but with the power of his words instead incites and rouses the plebian mob. This speech demonstrates of an element of manipulation in Antony and points toward his duplicitousness, allowing the reader to wonder about the sincerity of his words before and after. He has been described as having "at least two rather contradictory sides".¹² He loves games, competition, and by Caesar's account "revels long o' nights" (2.3.122). However, his jaunty nature shifts during Antony's funeral oration, which reveals him as a "cunning demagogue who manipulates and stirs up the citizens in a most insidious way".¹³ Later, in Act 4.1, Antony's words characterize him as ruthless, unwavering in his desire to seek vengeance through the murder of his own nephew as well as other relatives of Caesar. Antony's second side is further developed, when the generals meet on the plains of Philippi and Antony repeatedly taunts Brutus and Cassius. In his final fluctuation of ethos, Antony characterizes Brutus once again as honorable, but with marked sincerity.

Marcus Brutus

Harold Bloom, in his essay on the play, remarks that he feels the play could have been called "*The Tragedy of Marcus Brutus*"¹⁴, because much of the psychological introspection and weighing of the political gravitas of the assassination of Caesar is worked out in the words of Brutus. Bloom calls Brutus "Shakespeare's first intellectual"¹⁵ and he is repeatedly characterized as a model Stoic. Brutus, whose name seems an apt homophone, as we do find Brutus to brood through the length of the play, is portrayed as frequently ruminating over issues not always clear to the reader. His internal conflicts, as Cassius notes, are clearly portrayed on his face, which Brutus himself describes as a result of being "with himself at war" (1.2.51). In Act 1 it is unclear what is the exact reason for his melancholy; however, as the play progresses into Act 2 one quickly sees his focus shift to the issue of the assassination of Caesar for the good of Rome. This is an issue Brutus does not take lightly, stating, "Brutus had rather be a villager/Than to repute himself a son of Rome/Under these hard conditions as this time/Is like to lay upon us" (1.2.178-181). Brutus' intelligence and introspection set him up perfectly as "the one Roman to whom the conspirators look for leadership"¹⁶ and because of his balanced and stoic nature he supplants Cassius as the "architect" of the entire conspiracy.¹⁷

Later, in his funeral speech at the Forum, Brutus makes it clear that his motivations were not personal but focused on the benevolent (and in by his estimation, justifiable) purpose of the protection of the sanctity of Rome.

If there be any in

This assembly, any dear friend of Caesar's, to him I say

that Brutus' love to Caesar was no less than his. If then

that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this

is my answer: Not that I love Caesar less, but that I

love Rome more (3.2.18-23).

In the infamous funeral speeches scene, Brutus calls Caesar his “best lover” (3.2.45), yet one that was “slew...for the good of Rome” (3.2.44-45). Conversely, in his technically brilliant and persuasive oration, Antony characterizes Brutus as “Caesar’s angel” (3.2.192), as well as the repeated (to the point of excess) identification of Brutus as honorable.

These indications of Brutus’ characterization run through the entire play. His extreme awareness of public perception is set in opposition to Cassius’ volatile nature, when he instructs Cassius to not to lash out in front of the ranks, because the troops should “perceive nothing but love from us” (4.2.48). Brutus is ever aware of the public face and how other people view his associations. His stoic nature is maintained even when he learns of Portia’s suicide, and all the way through to the end of the play, when he nobly takes his own life. Antony points out in his final eulogy that Brutus, of all the conspiracy members was the most noble, motivated not by envy but by “general honest thought/And common good to all” (5.5.77-78).

Julius Caesar

Caesar, the title character of the play, has the least lines and this is partly why his titular priority is often called into question. He dies before the play is half way over; yet his ghost and the consequences of his death haunt Rome for the remainder of the play. The man has an affinity for the third person and demonstrates himself to be both oddly human (infertile and superstitious) and intolerably arrogant. The bombastic words of Caesar are among the play’s more hyperbolic instances of hubris, such as “I’d rather tell thee what is to be feared/Than what I fear; for always I am Caesar” (1.2.218-219). Similarly, when Calpurnia warns her husband of an ominous dream, he responds with: “The things that threaten me/Ne’er looked but on my back. When they shall see/The face of Caesar, they are vanished” (2.2.10-13). In other words, apparitions that scare others are in fact not frightening, and they are also frightened by the fierceness of Caesar. There are claims that this is a necessary act put on by Caesar; however, this claim is stated in private to his wife, hence would seem to reflect a true belief. Later, to his servant, he claims:

Danger knows full well

That Caesar is more dangerous than he.

We are two lions littered in one day

And I the elder and more terrible,

And Caesar shall go forth (2.2.46-50).

Caesar is more dangerous than danger, continuing the boast that he is fierce and insurmountably powerful. Despite his propensity to refer to himself in the third person, upon the request to allow Publius Cimber back from exile, he responds:

I could be well moved, if I were as you;

If I could pray to move, prayer would move me:

But I am constant as the Northern Star

Of whose true-fixed and resting quality

There is no fellow in the firmament (3.1.63-67).

These arrogant pretensions seem to provide cover for a more sensitive, superstitious and insecure Caesar: one who is possibly infertile (note his request of Antony to touch Calpurnia and spread his luck), scared of omens (note his momentary willingness to stay home at the heed of his wife after her ominous dream), and fearful of being usurped (telling Antony he wants to “have men about me that are fat/Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep o’ nights” (1.2.199-200)). As with his ally Antony, Caesar is a man whose contradictory tendencies offer students ample points of discussion.

Caius Cassius

Cassius is the originator of the conspiracy to overthrow Caesar. In Act 1.2, Cassius approaches Brutus to elicit his participation. From the outset, Cassius is very clearly a manipulator. He comments on Brutus’ countenance, telling Brutus: “And since you know you cannot see yourself/So well as by reflection, I, your glass,/ Will modestly discover yourself/That of yourself which you know not of” (1.2.71-74). He goes on to describe himself as not a “common laughter” or as one not apt to “fawn on men and hug them hard,/And after scandal them” (1.2.80-81), in other words, one who is truthful and not duplicitous. Quickly, however, one learns that Cassius’ character does not always align to these claims. He goes on to describe a swimming match, in which Caesar lost to Cassius. It appears from the outset that Cassius is jealous of Caesar’s rise to power, believing himself to be at least equal to Caesar. Sarcastically, Cassius responds to Casca’s account of Caesar’s falling down in the market, saying “No, Caesar has it not; but you and I, /And honest Casca, we have the falling sickness” (1.2.260-263). Cassius’ dislike of Caesar is based on personal resentment and for Cassius every action and every word has political connotation. Ever the manipulator, when convincing Brutus of this equality amongst themselves and Caesar, Cassius reminds Brutus, “I was born free as Caesar, so were you;/ We both have fed as well, and we can both/ Endure the winter’s cold as well as he” (1.2.103-106). Cassius is sure that he, as well as Brutus, are of made of the same cloth as Caesar and are as equally deserving of the glory bestowed upon the leader.

Later, after the assassination, Brutus rebukes Cassius for having an “itching palm/to sell and mart your offices for gold” (4.3.11-12) to which, Cassius vehemently responds in an epic argument with Brutus. Cassius argues that he is the more experienced soldier and thus is more capable than Brutus (4.3.31-33). Quickly, this argument escalates, with Cassius claiming that Brutus “love[s] him not”, because Brutus asserts that he can love Cassius as a friend but not his faults, whereas Cassius believes friends should love one another unconditionally. The argument ends when Cassius apologizes for his outburst, blaming his mother for his inherited quick temper. Shortly thereafter, Cassius decides to end his own life, perhaps out of guilt, perhaps to not give another the benefit of taking his life, because he has grossly misinterpreted information he has received about the battle. Regardless, in this moment, it is difficult to determine whether Cassius is truly remorseful, and possibly redeemed, or if he is simply out of options. In this capacity, students will have sundry opportunity to discuss their own interpretations, because the character’s demise is so ambiguous.

Approaches to Shakespeare in the Classroom

“Shakespeare knew he *had* early readers, less numerous by far than his audience, but more than just a chosen few. He wrote primarily to be acted, yes, but he wrote also to be read, by a more select group.”¹⁸ Shakespeare’s works are plays and they are intended for performance. However, to only act and not carefully consider the meaning and indications of the words chosen is to do the text and its masterful author a disservice. Hence a combination of reading and performance should be used in the classroom to create a wide breadth of experiences with the text.

Close Textual Reading and Interpretation

Reading and understanding the words of Shakespeare takes time. Slow and methodical examination of the words of characters and their responses and reactions to the words of others creates a context to understand characterization in the play. Allowing students to stop, slow down and re-read may be a skill that must be taught in an educational climate that pushes students to read once, get the answer correct and move on. Several pedagogical manuals advocate variations of this type of exercise, all suggesting the teacher provide students with a statement of inquiry or set of essential questions to use as a point of entry (examples provided in Appendix B). Once the question has been posed and students have been given the task, they need time. This is the most important takeaway an educator must extract from this strategy: time. Naturally, this type of activity cannot be used all of the time or at length. Instead, as outlined in the Suggested Classroom Activities section below, students can complete mini-versions of close reading to take stock of events and actions and demonstrate competency at a more formal level in the group and in individual tasks. One teaching authority notes, “Shakespeare’s language is . . . a modern resource for students...it offers unlimited opportunities for students’ own linguistic growth.”¹⁹ The exposure to, consideration and careful study of the way in which Shakespeare uses words to depict a rounded, well-developed character afford students a maximized opportunity to think critically about how and to what effect words can be used.

Julius Caesar considers many questions of honor, politics, relationships and loyalty. These themes will naturally be brought up as students begin to delve into the words of the characters. Urging students to answer essential questions about the nature of a character does not preclude a discussion of one or more of these thematic topics; rather it leads into them.

Suggested Scenes for Close Reading

2.1.1-34 – Brutus’ meditations on the necessity and justification of Caesar’s murder present a passage ripe with imagery and metaphor.

3.1.63-78 – The speech Caesar gives right before he is slain provides excellent points of connection and characterization.

3.2.13-47 and 3.2.80-148 – The funeral speeches of Brutus and Antony require close attention and multiple readings to fully appreciate the skill used to construct the vastly differently identities of the two men speaking.

4.3.1-139 – This argument between Cassius and Brutus is a place in which both characters construct their own definitions of friendship and loyalty, as well as identify issues they have with each other’s personalities.

Characterization and representation of personality in words is illuminated throughout this exchange.

Performance

Student performance in the classroom is a fruitful social experiment. The obvious hams will eagerly step up and steal the spotlight for a few moments; as performance becomes a routine part of the class, however, students who are meeker or have not cultivated the persona of willing participant will gleefully take part in the action as well. In my experience, there is something infectious about standing up, speaking and going for broke. I suggest that you let the class clowns break the ice because once it is broken the potential for students to surprise you is infinite.

One authority on teaching Shakespeare suggests using the play as a script.²⁰ Allowing students to insert connections to their own lives or cultures will inspire further understanding of the universality of Shakespeare. There does not appear to be a unifying consensus on memorizing soliloquies or passages from the play, but providing ample opportunities for students to speak the words out loud is a necessity. Amassing a collection of brief exchanges from various plays may be a useful strategy for getting students to participate in rapid-fire dialogue. This type of recitation activity will help students wrap their tongues around the language and rhythm of Shakespeare's words.

Additionally, encouraging students to practice vocal intonation, facial expression, and gesturing creates a space for students to carefully read the text in order to make inferences about the appropriate expressions for their scene. Students can act in small groups or in front of the class and should practice in both settings during the unit.

Suggested Scenes for Informal Performance

1.2 - Many roles and lots of talking provide a good introductory occasion for students to meet the main characters of the play. This is a long scene and may take two days to get through.

2.1.90-242 - The conspiracy meeting provides parts large and small for actors of various capabilities. This scene moves the plot along and presents opportunities to discuss the motivations and psychologies of the members of the conspiracy.

3.2 - This scene is fun to act out, as all students can join in to create the thunder and lighting that loom over it. Varied and multiple parts create maximum opportunities for student participation.

3.1.14-133 - The death of Caesar cannot be done justice to without having students stage this event. Again, many roles provide maximum participation opportunities.

Suggested Classroom Activities

Tea Party: Anticipatory Set

In order to preview the array of personalities in *Julius Caesar*, students will begin the unit with the anticipatory activity. This lesson is best taught without preparation or context, before students have too much information

about the story. In this activity, students will be given a slip of paper on which a character from the play is named, together with a personality trait and basic biographical facts or else a foreshadowing of future actions or events. There are ten total roles provided (see Appendix C), but it is perfectly admissible for the same character profile to be distributed to more than one student to accommodate larger class sizes. After students have received and reviewed their role, they will stand up and mingle around the room, introducing and acting out the role of the character they are embodying. As students mingle and meet other characters, they will be asked to complete a Cast of Characters chart, also provided in Appendix C. I recommend setting a time limit of twenty minutes for meeting the other nine characters. After characters have met one another, student will return to their desk and share out their findings. Ask students to make predictions about the actions of characters and/or events that may take place in the story. To close the lesson, students will complete an exit ticket on which they draft a five-sentence paragraph predicting the traits and behaviors of a character they met in class.

Textual Evidence Cypher: Post-Reading Group Assessment

After all five acts have been covered, students will be asked to pick one of the four main characters to craft a text-based argument about. The class will be split into four groups, one for each character, balanced by the teacher as needed. In their group students will create a slam poem or cypher rap to answer one of the central inquiry questions (see Appendix B) about the character they are writing about. The evidence for the responses should be provided in at least 25 lines, ten of which must be taken from the play in reference to or spoken by the character in question. Students will have three days to introduce, plan and execute the tasks. On the fourth day, students will share out their team's poem/rap. Points for flair, presentation and enthusiasm will be liberally awarded. A final copy of the poem/rap must also be submitted to the teacher for scoring.

Grant Me This Wish: Final Independent Assessment

Present students with the following task:

Scenario: Your school wants to put on a performance of *Julius Caesar* for the community. Luckily, you have found a wealthy patron who is willing to provide the school with a grant for the entire production. Unluckily, she hates Shakespeare because she found it very boring in school. You must create and compile a proposal, which includes each of the four items listed below:

1. An explanation of why you wish to stage the play: what are the specific qualities that make it worth staging?
2. Two typed-out speeches that you like, accompanied by comments explaining what makes the language passionate and dramatic.
3. Notes on how Brutus will be played in the final scene.
4. An eye-catching poster with an intriguing quotation from the play.

Give students ample time to read over the task and brainstorm ideas, including sharing with a partner and asking the class. This project should take no more than a week, as students should now be well acquainted with the text and characters.

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

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

Preeminent Shakespearean scholar Harold Bloom examines each of the Bard's plays under the consideration that William Shakespeare crafted the idea of the literary human and the psychoses of humanity well before modern psychology arose. The introductory and concluding essays provide fine insight into Bloom's critical positioning and each chapter, focused on an individual play, gives a thorough and well-argued discussion of character development.

Carneigie, David. *Julius Caesar*. The Shakespeare Handbooks., edited by Brown, John Russell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

This slim reference guide provides act and scene summaries as well as an interesting history of performance of the play. A quick read for foundational background knowledge.

Garber, Marjorie. *Shakespeare After all*. First ed. New York: Anchor Books, 2005.

Garber introduces Shakespeare's biography and historical context before delving into the task of up-to-date and thorough readings of each of the Bard's plays, in chronological order. This informative text is both enjoyable and easy to read.

Gibson, Rex. *Teaching Shakespeare*. Cambridge School Shakespeare. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

An excellent manual for the educator, filled with activities, ideas and short, well-organized explications of many elements and technical details of teaching Shakespeare in a literature classroom.

Goddard, Harold. *The Meaning of Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

Goddard examines Shakespeare's plays and provides insightful, compact analysis for the reader; a good reference book.

Kahn, Coppélia "'Passion of some difference': Friendship and Emulation in *Julius Caesar*," In *Julius Caesar: New Critical Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Kahn explores questions of gender and politics in her essay on emulation in Caesar. She explains and identifies the tenets of emulation in the play through careful and well-crafted analysis.

Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare's Language*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

This text is a terse and thoughtful summary of the thematic uses of language in Shakespeare's plays. As Kermode points out in his introduction, the book is accessible and created for use by the lay reader to glean basic knowledge of the way Shakespeare's language changes during his career.

Leggatt, Alexander. "Questions That Have No Answers." Chap. 4, In *Teaching Shakespeare: Passing it on*, edited by Shand, G. B., 61-72. UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

This chapter is an excellent meditation on asking generally unanswerable questions as a way to challenge students to use the text to support claims. For instance, one question could be: "Why is this play set in Italy?" Though there is no definite answer given by the text or Shakespeare, students can begin to critically engage and synthesize prior knowledge with the text in order to elicit a more meaningful and relevant reading experience. A useful strategy and a thoughtful, well written essay.

McDonald, Russ. "Planned Obsolescence Or Working at the Words." Chap. 1, In *Teaching Shakespeare: Passing it on*, edited by Shand, G. B., 11-24. UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

This chapter provides, and then explicates, a list of twelve principles for approaching Shakespeare. Advice such as don't listen to music while reading, read out loud, and look for text clues, may seem obvious to most, but all twelve principles combined point not only to the appropriate state of mind one must be in to absorb a complicated text but the specific type of attention we must give such layered and nuanced writing.

McWhorter, Patti C. *A Teacher's Guide to the Signet Classic Edition of William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar*. edited by Ellis, W. Geiger, Arthea J. S. Reed. New York: Signet Classics.

This free downloadable pdf is produced as a companion to the Signet edition of *Julius Caesar*. This study guide has activity suggestions, comprehension questions and other easily reproducible items to supplement any unit roll out.

Metzger, Mary Jane. *Shakespeare without Fear: Teaching for Understanding*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004.

Metzger's slim volume provides practical advice and kind encouragement for the educator. Metzger proposes that Shakespeare be taught as a medium through which students connect with and attempt to understand the world. This book provides the pedagogical and theoretical background for a teacher to create a space in which students will want to interact and consider the works of the Bard.

Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. Signet Classics Shakespeare., edited by Barnet, Sylvan, edited by Rosen, William, Barbra Rosen. Second ed. New York: Signet, 1998.

Signet is widely regarded for its reproductions of Shakespeare's plays. This edition has several critic essays at the end that provide excellent content and consideration for the teacher. The content may be too advanced for ninth grade students, but could be included as part of an Advanced Placement or upper-level high school curriculum.

Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. The Folger Library General Reader's Shakespeare., edited by Wright, Louis B., Virginia A. LaMar. New York: Washington Square Press, 1959.

This version of the play is used in my classroom. The footnotes, scene synopsis and occasional historical illustration provide a seamless and intelligible reading experience for ninth grade students.

Snodgrass, Mary Ellen and William Shakespeare. *Shakespeare on the Double: Julius Caesar*. Translated by Snodgrass, Mary Ellen, edited by Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. New Jersey: 2006.

A useful reference text for the teacher; several excellent, clear graphic organizers and a modern translation of the text are provided. May be of particular use for teachers who do not teach students who read below grade-level.

Strauss, Valerie. "Teacher: Why it is Ridiculous Not to Teach Shakespeare in School." *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2015, sec. Answer Sheet.

This short online entry addresses the ongoing battle regarding the canonization of literary works. Strauss addresses and provides rebuttal for criticism on prioritizing the reading of the works of Shakespeare.

Zander, Horst. "Julius Caesar and the Critical Legacy," In *Julius Caesar: New Critical Essays*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Zander's introductory essay considers the applicability of *Caesar* in today's world. He summarizes the previous body of scholarship

on this particular play and connects it to the concerns of the current collection. All in all, Zander provides excellent context and background on the critical history of *Julius Caesar*.

Appendix

Appendix A: Implementing Pennsylvania Common Core Standards

Effective 2012-2013, Pennsylvania adopted the PA Common Core Standards, which require increased focus on close textual analysis, persuasive writing and reading informational texts. This unit satisfies these stipulations, as well as the Individuals and Societies Assessment Objectives for the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme Year Four. Both of these distinct sets of requirements are met here. At first glance this amalgam may seem awkward, but the potential of this unit to fulfill both can be realized with careful planning and alignment.

Appendix B: International Baccalaureate Unit Planning Skeleton

Statement of Inquiry

Shakespeare creates characters with universal appeal that grapple with issues applicable to all time periods through creative and economic uses of language

Factual Essential Question

How do characters represent themselves with their words?

Debatable Essential Questions

Is Brutus honorable?

Is Caesar ambitious?

Is Cassius jealous?

Is Antony loyal?

Conceptual Essential Questions

In what ways does language convey characterization?

Appendix C: Tea Party Reproducible Documents

Character Roles - reproduce and cut into strips

Cast of Characters: *Julius Caesar*

Caius Cassius

Calpurnia

Casca
Cinna
Decius Brutus
Julius Caesar
Marc Antony
Marcus Brutus

Antony I like playing games and I love to win. I am the life of the party and a guy's guy. I think Caesar has the right idea and I will do whatever he commands. He's pretty much my bestie.

Decius Brutus I'm the guy that could talk an ocean into buying water. No matter what you say, I have a better interpretation. You can trust me to provide an alternative perspective.

Brutus Caesar is my friend, but this other crew is trying to recruit me. Life is a serious matter. I do not make decisions lightly. I care about Rome and I care about noble behavior. My noble family roots mean I must be very serious and professional.

Caesar More dangerous than danger am I. Some say I am ambitious, some say that I am sickly and weak. But I think they're just mad because the public loves me and wants me to be emperor.

Calpurnia My dreams are more like movies and the fortune they predict is grim indeed. I love my husband Caesar and hope he will listen and to my protestations heed.

Casca What is more important in life than fine food, wine and gossip? I cannot think of anything. I am part of a conspiracy and willingly so. After all, I've always been a big-mouthed backstabber.

Cassius I don't like it when people get credit they don't deserve. I have many endearing and enjoyable qualities, too. I think I can talk Brutus into joining my crew. Manipulation and sarcasm are just two of my many skills.

Cinna Abandon hope! All is lost! My friends are the conspiracy, and I'm not the only Cinna in town.

Portia A husband and wife are a team, what one knows the other must know as well. I am loyal and willing to sacrifice for my husband, Brutus. Try me...

Soothsayer Into the future I can see, why won't anyone believe me?! I tell them beware of the ides of March, over and over until I am parched. One day they'll see, when my prophecy comes true.

Portia
Soothsayer

Notes

1. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 10.
2. Ibid, 9.
3. Ibid, 17.
4. Ibid, 717.
5. Natasha Distiller, "On Being Human," in *South African Essays on 'Universal' Shakespeare* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2014), 55.
6. Valerie Strauss, "Teacher: Why it is ridiculous not to teach Shakespeare in school," *The Washington Post*, June 13, 2015.
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2015/06/13/teacher-why-it-is-ridiculous-not-to-teach-shakespeare-in-school/>.

7. Further information for teachers interested in details of the exchange program may visit the organizations website at <http://www.russianfolklorefriends.com/educatorexchange2015.html>.
8. Coppélia Kahn, "'Passion of some difference': Friendship and Emulation in *Julius Caesar*," in *Julius Caesar: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 271-272.
9. Ibid, 274
10. Ibid, 274-275
11. Horst Zander, "*Julius Caesar* and the Critical Legacy," *Julius Caesar: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10
12. Horst Zander, "*Julius Caesar* and the Critical Legacy," *Julius Caesar: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.
13. Horst Zander, "*Julius Caesar* and the Critical Legacy," *Julius Caesar: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.
14. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 105.
15. Ibid, 105.
16. Coppélia Kahn, "'Passion of some difference': Friendship and Emulation in *Julius Caesar*," in *Julius Caesar: New Critical Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 277.
17. Ibid, 277.
18. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 721.
19. Rex Gibson, *Teaching Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.
20. Ibid, 17.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use