Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Antony and Cleopatra

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Plot

- After the death of Julius Caesar, the Roman world is ruled by three men: Mark Antony, Octavius Caesar and Lepidus. Antony, a great soldier, is living in Alexandria with Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, and neglecting his duties to Rome.
- When his wife Fulvia dies and Pompey threatens Rome, Antony returns. To mend his quarrel with Octavius, he marries Octavius's sister, Octavia. His friend Enobarbus predicts he will never leave Cleopatra.
- Antony goes back to Egypt. Octavius, angry that he has crowned Cleopatra and given kingdoms to her children, goes to war. At the sea battle of Actium, Cleopatra's ships flee and Antony follows her, and he is defeated. Enobarbus deserts to Octavius, then dies of shame when Antony sends his treasure after him.
- After a last defeat, Antony thinks Cleopatra has betrayed him. She hides in her monument and sends word that she is dead. Antony stabs himself, and dies in her arms. Rather than be paraded through Rome by Octavius, Cleopatra kills herself with the bite of a poisonous snake, an asp.

Characters

- Antony: a hero torn between Rome and Egypt, duty and passion. His love for Cleopatra is his glory and his downfall.
- Cleopatra: witty, changeable and theatrical. Enobarbus praises her "infinite variety". Her death is calm and queenly.
- Octavius Caesar: cold, controlled and efficient; he stands for Rome and the future.
- Enobarbus: Antony's blunt, loyal soldier, who comments on events; his desertion and death show the cost of disloyalty.

Themes and context

- Love against duty; Egypt (pleasure, excess, emotion) against Rome (discipline, order, politics); honour and reputation; power; loyalty and betrayal.

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- Shakespeare wrote it around 1606, using Plutarch's Lives as his source. The real Antony and Cleopatra died in 30 BC, and Octavius became the first Roman emperor, Augustus.

Form and language

- A tragedy with many short scenes that jump between Egypt and Rome, so the audience keeps seeing two opposite worlds.
- Rich, exaggerated language for Egypt and the lovers, and plainer, practical speech for Rome. Enobarbus's famous description of Cleopatra on her barge, which "burned on the water", shows her magic.
- The play opens with Romans calling Antony a fool for love, so we judge him through Roman eyes before we see him for ourselves.

Key terms

Triumvirate	Rule by three people, here Antony, Octavius and Lepidus.
Tragic hero	A great character whose flaw leads to their downfall.
Juxtaposition	Placing two contrasting things side by side, like Rome and Egypt.
Hyperbole	Deliberate exaggeration for effect.
Asp	A poisonous snake, which Cleopatra uses to kill herself.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Who are the three rulers of the Roman world at the start?
2. Where does Antony live with Cleopatra?
3. Whom does Antony marry to make peace with Octavius?
4. What happens at the Battle of Actium?
5. Which character deserts Antony and then dies of shame?
6. What false message does Cleopatra send Antony?
7. How does Cleopatra die?
8. What does Rome stand for in the play?

Answers

1. Antony, Octavius Caesar and Lepidus
2. Alexandria, in Egypt
3. Octavia
4. Cleopatra's ships flee, Antony follows and is defeated
5. Enobarbus
6. That she is dead
7. From the bite of an asp
8. Duty, discipline and politics

Your notes

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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