Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Julius Caesar

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Plot

- Julius Caesar returns to Rome in triumph. A soothsayer warns him to beware the **Ides of March**, and Cassius persuades the honourable Brutus that Caesar is becoming too powerful.
- Caesar ignores warnings, including his wife Calpurnia's dream, and is stabbed to death by the **conspirators** on the **Ides of March** (15 March).
- Brutus explains the killing to the crowd, but Mark Antony's funeral speech turns the people against the **conspirators**.
- Civil war follows. At Philippi, Antony and Octavius win; Cassius and Brutus kill themselves, and Antony praises Brutus as the noblest Roman of all.

Themes and context

- Ambition and power, honour, loyalty and betrayal, persuasion and **rhetoric**, fate and free will.
- Written in 1599, when the ageing Elizabeth I had no heir and people feared civil war. Shakespeare used Plutarch's Lives as a source.

Form

- A tragedy whose hero is arguably Brutus: a good man whose honour leads him to a terrible act.

How to get top marks

- Write about **rhetoric**. Comparing Brutus's reasoned speech with Antony's 'Friends, Romans, countrymen' shows how words move crowds.
- Have an idea about Brutus: is he noble or naive? Shakespeare makes both arguable.
- Link it to Elizabethan fears about who would rule next, and only when it explains a point.

Key terms

Ides of March	15 March, the day Caesar was killed.
Conspirators	People who plot together, here to kill Caesar.
Rhetoric	Persuasive speaking, as in Antony's funeral speech.
Tragic hero	A main character whose flaw leads to their downfall.

Quick questions

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

1. What does the soothsayer warn Caesar about?
2. Who persuades Brutus to join the conspiracy?
3. Why does Brutus join the conspiracy?
4. Who warns Caesar after a frightening dream?
5. What turns the crowd against the conspirators?
6. Where are Brutus and Cassius defeated?
7. Which theme does Antony's funeral speech show?
8. What fear in 1599 links to the play?

Answers

1. The Ides of March
2. Cassius
3. He fears Caesar will become a tyrant and believes it is for Rome's good
4. Calpurnia
5. Mark Antony's funeral speech
6. Philippi
7. The power of persuasion
8. Civil war, because Elizabeth I had no heir

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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