A Closer Look at

"It must be by his death..."

This speech is spoken by Brutus in Act 2, Scene 1 of *Julius Caesar.*

Who's Brutus?

Shakespeare's character is based on a real person. Marcus Junius Brutus was a Roman politician who lived from 85-42 BCE. Brutus had a famous ancestor, Lucius Junius Brutus, whom many credited with banishing Rome's last tyrant/king and establishing the Roman Republic. Shakespeare has the characters in the play embrace this tradition, amplifying the impact of Brutus's participation in the assassination plot.

What's happening when this speech is spoken?

Brutus is one of several Roman senators concerned about Julius Caesar's growing power. They fear that the Republic, in which power was shared by many people elected to public office, will become an autocracy, in which one person holds absolute power.

Cassius and other senators have hatched a plot to assassinate Caesar and hope to persuade Brutus to join them. Brutus is admired by the people of Rome for being noble, so the senators believe that if Brutus participates, the people will approve of the assassination.

Brutus cares deeply about doing what is right, and wrestles with the dilemma through the following speech. It is delivered to the audience, since Brutus is alone on stage.

The speech

It must be by his death: and for my part,
I know no personal cause to spurn at him,
But for the general. He would be crown'd:
How that might change his nature, there's the question.
It is the bright day that brings forth the adder;
And that craves wary walking. Crown him?--that;--
And then, I grant, we put a sting in him,
That at his will he may do danger with.
The abuse of greatness is, when it disjoins
Remorse from power: and, to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affections sway'd
More than his reason. But 'tis a common proof,
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber-upward turns his face;
But when he once attains the upmost round.
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend. So Caesar may.
Then, lest he may, prevent. And, since the quarrel
Will bear no colour for the thing he is,
Fashion it thus; that what he is, augmented,
Would run to these and these extremities:
And therefore think him as a serpent's egg
Which, hatch'd, would, as his kind, grow mischievous,
And kill him in the shell.

The speech: thought by thought

Shakespeare's language can be overwhelming, so it helps to break it down, thought by thought. Look at the speech again below, taking your time to make sense of each thought. This is a subjective process, so this example is just one way to break the speech down into thoughts. Would you do it differently?

It must be by his death:

and for my part,
I know no personal cause to spurn at him,
But for the general.

He would be crown'd:

How that might change his nature, there's the question.

It is the bright day that brings forth the adder,
And that craves wary walking.

Crown him!-

-that;--

And then, I grant, we put a sting in him,
That at his will he may do danger with.

The abuse of greatness is, when it disjoins
Remorse from power:

and, to speak truth of Caesar,
I have not known when his affections sway'd
More than his reason.

But 'tis a common proof,
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber-upward turns his face;

But when he once attains the upmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend.

So Caesar may.

Then, lest he may, prevent.

And, since the quarrel
Will bear no colour for the thing he is,
Fashion it thus; that what he is, augmented,
Would run to these and these extremities:

And therefore think him as a serpent's egg
Which hatch'd, would, as his kind, grow mischievous,
And kill him in the shell.

Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

Note: the definitions below apply to how the words are used in the speech.

cause – here it means reason to do something
spurn – kick out at, or treat with contempt
general – short for general public; ordinary people
adder – a small poisonous snake in the viper family that emerges from hibernation in the spring to bask in the sunshine
craves – here it means needs or requires
wary – careful or cautious
grant – allow or admit
danger – here it means damage or harm
disjoins – separates
remorse – pity or compassion
affections – emotions or feelings
sway'd – controlled or governed
reason – good judgment or common sense
'tis a common proof – it's common knowledge, or something everyone knows
lowliness – appearance of being humble or meek
the upmost round – the highest rung (of a ladder)
scorning the base degrees – feeling contempt for the lower levels (of the metaphorical ladder)
lest he may – to avoid the risk that he may (do what was just described)
prevent – take steps to thwart or avoid by prompt action
quarrel – reason to complain
bear no colour – hold no explanation or excuse
fashion it thus – arrange, manage, or think about it this way
augmented – made greater
extremities – intensity, severity, or hardship
mischievous – here it means harmful or damaging



Explore the language

Explore the words

Step 1:

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- If you're a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?

Step 2:

- What's the effect of this language?

Explore the thoughts

Step 1:

- Are the thoughts short and direct, or long and complex? Do they ever change?

Step 2:

- What might the length of the thoughts tell you about what's happening for this character? Why do you think Brutus speaks this way?

Explore the imagery

Shakespeare's language is often rich in imagery, which is language that conjures either a visual picture or another sensory experience. In this speech, Brutus uses images such as an adder, a ladder, and a serpent's egg to stand in for the threat of Caesar's growing power.

- What do you think Brutus means by, "It is the bright day that brings forth the adder, and that craves wary walking"? Do you agree that a crown for Caesar would be as dangerous as an adder's sting?
- What does the description of ambition's ladder conjure for you? Do you agree with Brutus that the 'climber upward' will disrespect what's below?
- Brutus decides to think of Caesar as serpent's egg and to kill the leader 'in the shell' before any danger can grow. What do you think of this reasoning?

Explore the character

Although the play is called *Julius Caesar*, Brutus is the main character or protagonist. Brutus faces the play's central dilemma, whether to join the conspiracy to assassinate Caesar or resist the persuasion of the other conspirators. They want Brutus involved because the people consider Brutus wise, noble, and just, giving legitimacy to the assassination. Brutus is also given the only soliloquy in the play. This is a speech delivered to the audience while a character is alone on stage (like this speech). Many consider this an opportunity for a character to reveal their inmost thoughts and feelings.

- What do you think of Brutus? Is this someone you admire? Is it someone you would choose for a friend? Is this someone you would choose as a leader?
- Can you think of anyone, either a famous person or someone in your social circle, who is admired the way Brutus is? Can you think of someone whose participation or endorsement changes the way people think about things?
- What qualities do you most value and admire in your friends? In the adults around you? In political leaders?

Explore the ideas

Brutus is traditionally referred to as a stoic, but this can lead to some misunderstanding. Today, the word is most often used to describe someone who doesn't show emotion, however, that's not the definition of someone who followed the ancient philosophy of Stoicism. Followers of this philosophy believed that the path to virtue was reason. They tried to avoid being at the mercy of forces beyond their control. In this speech, we might consider that Brutus is trying to reason through the decision of whether to kill Caesar.

- Look at the first line of the speech. What does this suggest to you about what Brutus thinks at the beginning? How does Brutus's reasoning develop from this point?
- How does Brutus support the argument of the speech? Is it through evidence? Is it through common sense? Is it through imagination? What else can you find?
- Can you spot moments when Brutus is unsure what is right? Can you spot moments when Brutus's mind is made up?
- What do you think about the way Brutus has made the decision? What do you think about the decision itself?