

# Shakespeare's julius caesar vs. plutarch's julius caesar essay sample

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



These words were spoken by Cassius, a character in Shakespeare's play Julius Caesar.

He is speaking about Julius Caesar and Caesar's arrogance and overconfidence. This quote also shows how Shakespeare perceived Julius Caesar as a prominent and influential man of his time. However, this view is not shared by all of the biographers that chose to write about Julius Caesar. In fact a famous ancient writer named Plutarch depicted Julius Caesar as a power-hungry and arrogant man in his biography The Life of Caesar. Plutarch was one of the world's first modern biographers and his work is still used today. Even Shakespeare used him as a historical reference in his play on Caesar.

Although this is the case, Plutarch and Shakespeare's portrayals of Caesar and the events that encompass his life are quite different. But who's to say which one is correct? That is where the work of Suetonius comes in.

Suetonius was another ancient writer that lived over one hundred years after the assassination of Caesar yet Suetonius had access to important archival records and literary sources that are now lost. Therefore, it can be assumed that his account of the life of Caesar in The Lives of the Twelve Caesars is fairly accurate. So when Shakespeare and Plutarch's biographies are compared with Suetonius' work, Plutarch comes out the winner in validity.

Although Shakespeare and Plutarch's descriptions of the events surrounding the life and death of Caesar are somewhat similar, the differences outweigh the parallelism by far. Some of the most obvious differences include: the way Caesar was viewed by the people, the fact that the conspiracy was known

about, and the detail and lack of detail regarding Caesar's assassination. Equally important are the differences in the character and personality of Julius Caesar himself.

Plutarch describes Caesar as ambitious and self-centered, whereas Shakespeare makes Caesar out to be a national hero, all about the people, and not zealous at all.

In Plutarch's version of Caesar's life it is made clear that Caesar had an uncovered longing to become king and that the people resented that. "What made Caesar most openly and mortally hated was his passion to be made king. It was this which made the common people hate him for the first time, and it served as a most useful pretext for those others who had long hated him but had up to now disguised their feelings" (The Life of Caesar 231). The Romans of this time period had a new way of governing themselves: actually governing themselves instead of being governed by one man.

Plutarch states that the last of the kings was driven out by Brutus' ancestors and that the people never wanted another monarchy (The Life of Caesar 232-33). This is the reason they hated Caesar. Although this animosity is very evident in Plutarch's work it is not even mentioned in Shakespeare's play. However, Shakespeare does lead the reader to believe that Caesar is revered and liked by most if not all of the common people. ""~ ""|we / make holiday to see Caesar and to rejoice in his / triumph"" (Julius Caesar 1. 1. 33-35). Upon Caesar's return from defeating Pompey he is greeted by celebration and festivities.

The common folk even take the day off to honor Caesar. This clearly shows that the common people in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar looked up to Caesar.

Another difference between Plutarch and Shakespeare's writings is the fact that Caesar knew about the conspiracy against him in one account and did not in the other. In Shakespeare's play Caesar is about to learn about the conspiracy through a letter Artemidorus writes him, but Caesar does not get the chance to open it. Although Caesar did not learn about the actual conspiracy, he did have several chances to act on warnings that he received from other sources. His wife Calphurnia had a dream involving his murder and his statue spouting blood, a soothsayer told him to "beware the ides of March" and there were many omens prophesizing a horrible event, but Caesar just shrugs off these warnings and goes about his business.

On the other hand, in Plutarch's *The Life of Caesar* Caesar receives word that his friend, Brutus, is leading a group that is plotting to kill him. "And once, when the conspiracy was already formed and some people were actually accusing Brutus to Caesar of being involved in it, Caesar laid his hand on his body and said to the accusers: "Brutus will wait for this skin of mine" (*The Life of Caesar* 233). What Caesar meant was that he knew Brutus would never do such a thing because he was not "base and ungrateful." So once again Caesar shrugs off the warning and this is his fatal mistake.

The major difference between these two biographies is the different versions of Caesar's assassination. In Shakespeare's play Caesar's assassination is described in a total of 2 lines. "Speak, hands, for me!" [As Casca strikes,

the others rise up and stab Caesar.]/ “~Et tu, Brute?” Then fall, Caesar.’/ [He dies]” (Julius Caesar 3. 1. 84-85).

Shakespeare makes Caesar seem to die nobly with time to utter a few famous last words.

Whereas Plutarch's version of Caesar's death goes into more detail. In this version, Caesar grabbed Casca's dagger when Casca stabbed him in the neck and said, “~ Casca, you villain, what are you doing?” (The Life of Caesar 236). Caesar was then surrounded by the conspirators and “ was driven this way and that, and like a wild beast in the toils, had to suffer from the hands of each one of them (The Life of Caesar 236).

Caesar supposedly fought back and cried out for help, “ but when he saw that Brutus had drawn his dagger, he covered his head with his toga and sank down to the ground” (The Life of Caesar 236). In this case Plutarch seems to want the reader to pity Caesar because he compares him to a wild beast. Also Caesar seems to lose his will to live, he stops fighting, when he sees his friend with a dagger.

Since Shakespeare's play is based on Plutarch's biography on Caesar, it would be fitting that the two accounts of this same person be almost exactly the same. But that is not the case. Shakespeare's Julius Caesar is more of a literary character than an actual historical figure. Shakespeare omits and changes facts about Caesar to make Caesar a tragic hero. For example, Shakespeare uses Antony's speech at Caesar's funeral to discredit the early claim by Brutus that Caesar was ambitious. “~ I thrice presented

him a kingly crown, / Which he did thrice refuse. Was this ambition?" (Julius Caesar 3. 2. 105- 06). Shakespeare is trying to say that because of Caesar's refusal to accept the title of king, he had no intention of becoming king. But what Shakespeare failed to explain was the fact that when the crowd cheered his refusal of the crown Caesar was visibly upset.

" "Although, when Caesar again rejected it, there was applause from everyone. Caesar, finding that the experiment had proved a failure, rose from his seat and ordered the wreath to be carried to the Capitol" (The Life of Caesar 232). Basically Caesar wanted to see what the people thought of him gaining supreme power and when he found that they were against him it made him angry.

As Shakespeare's work can be compared to Plutarch's, so can Plutarch's work be compared to Suetonius. In this comparison, the two biographies are similar. Although Plutarch doesn't come out and say he thought Caesar's death was justified he does seem to lean in that direction. Suetonius, on the other hand, actually says, " "He abused his powers and was justly slain" (The Lives of the Twelve Caesars 110). In both, The Life of Caesar and The Lives of the Twelve Caesars Caesar is expressed as being ambitious and as having a desire to gain supreme authority. He is also shown to be arrogant and disrespectful. In both accounts Caesar offends the people and senate by refusing to stand when the consuls approached him. Also in both accounts Caesar grows angry when two tribunes, Marullus and Flavius, remove decorations from Caesar's statues and arrests the man who declared Caesar king. " This made Caesar angry. He deprived Marullus and Flavius of their

tribuneship and in speaking against them he insulted the people at the same time" (The Life of Caesar 233). The most important similarity is that in both accounts, the people hate Caesar and this hate is eventually acted on.

Julius Caesar lived in a time when education and literature were just beginning to boom. It is one of the most documented times in history and Julius Caesar is one of the most documented historical figures of all time. However, no two accounts on Caesar's life are the same. A good example of this diversity is Shakespeare's play Julius Caesar compared to Plutarch's The Life of Caesar. Although Shakespeare used Plutarch's work as his basis for the play, the two accounts ended up totally different. They showed two different sides to one man, kind of like the classic Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde story. One showed a dressed up, perfected, tragic hero while the other showed the true "warts and all" version of an important man who got too greedy with power and was punished for it.