

2016 Study Guide for *Timon of Athens* by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the historic figure on whom *Timon of Athens* is based. These and other websites provide information:
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timon_of_Athens_\(person\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timon_of_Athens_(person))
2. Research the life of Alcibiades. These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.livius.org/articles/person/alcibiades/>
3. What is a misanthrope? What are the roots of the word? What causes a person to become misanthropic? What are the benefits for such a person? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Misanthropy>
<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/cliffsnotes/subjects/literature/what-is-misanthropy>
4. What is a philanthropist? What are the roots of the word? What might cause a person to become a philanthropist? What acts do philanthropists perform? How has the meaning of the word changed over the centuries? What are the rewards and pitfalls of philanthropy? This and other websites provide information:
<http://sofii.org/article/philanthropy-in-ancient-times-some-early-examples-from-the-mediterranean>
5. What are the principles of the philosophy of Cynicism? How is the word related to the Greek word for “dog”? What might attract an individual to the philosophy? How would an adherent of Cynicism regard his fellow humans? What behaviors did a classical Cynic adopt along with his philosophy? What has cynicism come to mean in modern times? These and other websites provide information:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynicism_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynicism_(philosophy))
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cynic>

6. Compare misanthropy, philanthropy and Cynicism. What potential for good and potential for harm does each philosophy have?

7. Webster dictionary defines status as “the position or rank of an individual in relation to others.” What are some factors that determine an individual’s status in Elizabethan England? When and how could one’s status change? What is the relationship between reputation and status? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.britannica.com/topic/social-status>
<https://sites.google.com/a/pvlearners.net/elizabethan-era-social-classes/social-classes>
<http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/education/elizabethan-age>

8. Research the ancient Greek custom of the symposium (plural, symposia). Who attended a symposium? What was the responsibility of the host? What activities occurred at a symposium? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.fjkluth.com/symposium.html>
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/symp/hd_symp.htm

9. Research asceticism and its principles. What is the purpose of asceticism? What activities do ascetics engage in? This and other websites provide information:
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/asceticism>

10. Research fortune as it was portrayed and understood in Shakespeare's time. This and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rota_Fortunae

11. Research satire. Find examples of satire in television, film, literature and theatre. These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/satire>
<http://literarydevices.net/satire/>

12. Some scholars suggest that *Timon of Athens* comments unfavorably on the extravagance of King James I of England and his nobles. Research him and his time. What were his strengths and weaknesses as a king? His major achievements? Describe his excesses and those of his nobles and explain why such display was

fashionable. These and other websites provide information:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/history/change.html>

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/james_1.htm

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://ise.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/homepage>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Describe Timon at the height of his fortunes. What are his activities? His pleasures? What are some of Timon's strengths? What are some of his weaknesses? Who are his friends? What is it about Timon that his friends love? What is it about him that his friends dislike?
2. Describe Timon's generosity. What does he give? To whom? In what circumstances? How is he rewarded for his giving? How do the recipients treat him in public? How do they privately think of him?
3. What role does money play in *Timon of Athens*? Take into account acquiring, lending, borrowing and charging interest. In what ways is Timon's financial situation exploited by those around him?
4. Refer to your research on status. How does Timon gain status? How does Timon lose it? What are the sources of status in the play? Compare Timon and Alcibiades' rise and fall in status. Describe Apemantus's status—in his own estimation and in the opinion of others. How does he acquire and maintain his status?
5. Describe in detail the generosity Timon shows to Ventidius, Lucilius, Lucius and Lucullus. Who is most indebted to Timon? What excuses does each (including the previously unseen Sempronius) offer when Timon requests generosity in return? How does each justify himself? What is the dramatic effect of showing three examples of ingratitude and then casually describing the fourth?

6. Which characters claim to love Timon? What is the basis of each character's love? How does each demonstrate his friendship? Which claim to hate Timon? Why? How is the hatred demonstrated?
7. Who are the flatterers in the play? What does each flatterer hope to gain? In what ways are they successful? In what ways are they not successful?
8. Which characters refuse to be bought or bribed—that is, which turn down money and other commodities offered to them? What motivates each of them?
9. Describe the mini-society comprised of Timon's servants. Who is their leader? What are his responsibilities? When and how does he go beyond his obligations? Why are these servants loyal to Timon? How do they express their loyalty? Compare them to the men who claim to be Timon's friends.
10. Why can't Timon and Flavius be friends? What reason does Timon give for not being able to be friends with Flavius? Why does Flavius remain loyal to Timon?
11. Refer to your research on misanthropes. Who in the play is a misanthrope? Where does their hatred of mankind originate? What are the results?
12. Refer to your research on symposium. What do Timon's guests expect of him as the host of a banquet symposium? How does he express gratitude and friendship? In what ways does Timon break the rules of hosting a symposium? What is the symbolism of the stones in the water?
13. What services has Alcibiades rendered to the city of Athens? What does he ask of the Senators? Why do they refuse him? How do they punish him? What is Alcibiades' response to their punishment?
14. Contrast Timon's reaction to the ingratitude of his friends to Alcibiades' reaction to the ingratitude of the Senators. How do these two responses mirror and illuminate each other? Why can Alcibiades show mercy while Timon cannot?

15. Why does Alcibiades attempt to befriend Timon in the woods? At what point does Timon decide to help Alcibiades in his cause? Why? In what ways is Alcibiades similar to Timon's false friends? In what ways is he different?
16. Refer to your research on Cynicism. What characteristics of the Cynic philosophers does Apemantus embody? What does he value? How does his use of language reflect those values?
17. Why do the Senators ask Timon for help against Alcibiades' attack against Athens? How can Timon aid the Athenians against Alcibiades' attack? Why should he help the city that betrayed him?
18. In what ways are Timon's actions of revenge justified? In what ways are they not?
19. Describe the dynamics between Timon and Apemantus in their last encounter (Act IV, scene iii). How do they feel about each other? What binds them together? What does each want the other to do? Why does Apemantus urge Timon, "Do not assume my likeness?" To what extent is their relationship resolved?
20. Why does Timon write his epitaph in Latin? Who is Timon's intended audience for his epitaph?
21. Refer to your research on satire and King James I. *Timon of Athens* is generally considered to be one of Shakespeare's tragedies, yet there are elements of satire in it. Who or what might Shakespeare be satirizing in this play?
22. Dramatic Irony: is a relationship of contrast between a character's limited understanding of his or her situation in some particular moment of the unfolding action and what the audience understands the character's situation actually to be. What are some examples of dramatic irony in the play? What is the effect of dramatic irony for the audience?
23. Two of the play's themes, "reality vs appearance" and "illusion vs disillusionment" are closely linked. Define these two sets of contrasting qualities and explain the differences between them. Describe Timon's situation as it *appears* at the beginning

of the play, taking into account his wealth and his friends. What illusions does he harbor? What is the reality behind these appearances? Which characters are aware of the reality? What keeps Timon from believing them when they tell him the truth? What events unmask the false appearances? How does Timon respond to the reality of his situation?

24. Describe Timon after his fortunes fall. In what ways does Timon change from the beginning of the play to the end of the play? In what ways does he stay the same? What is the effect of dramatic irony for the audience?

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