



GABLESTAGE

Shakespeare's

Timon of Athens

Student Study Guide

Plot Summary

Timon of Athens likes nothing better than to please his friends. He lavishes gifts on them, holds entertainments for them, grants dowries to them. The word around Athens is that if you ask Timon for something, you shall receive it in abundance. Give Timon a gift, and he shall give you one with triple the value. So it is that the citizens of Athens flock to him to flatter, praise, and esteem him. Painters paint him. Writers write him. Everyone does everything for Timon, the jolliest (and richest) of good fellows. Their attentions will surely bring them a handsome reward.

One citizen, the cynical philosopher Apemantus, warns Timon that his friends are parasites who care only for his gold. If Timon continues to squander money on them, Apemantus says, he will bankrupt himself: "Thou givest so long, Timon, I fear me thou wilt give away thyself in paper shortly: what need these feasts, pomps, and vain-glories?" (1. 2. 214).

Timon's honest and loyal steward, Flavius, also cautions Timon that his extravagance will one day lead to his ruin. Ruin eventually arrives in the form of unpaid bills, one of them six weeks overdue. When Timon tells Flavius to sell his lands, Flavius says,

'Tis all engag'd, some forfeited and gone;
And what remains will hardly stop the mouth
Of present dues; the future comes apace. (2. 2. 137-139)

When Timon turns for help to the very people upon whom he showered his favors, they give him only cold shoulders and excuses. Their friendship, it seems, is as empty as Timon's purse. He then announces a great banquet and invites these same people to partake. Believing he must have come into new wealth, they gladly accept his invitation. However, after they arrive, Timon serves them lukewarm water, throws some in their faces, and says, "Live loath'd and long, / Most smiling, smooth, detested parasites" (3. 6. 53-54). Throwing dishes at them, he drives them out of his house and then quits Athens (Act IV), vowing never to return. Turning to look at the wall of the city one last time, he heaps a soliloquy of curses upon Athens and its citizens. Part of the soliloquy, which constitutes all of Scene I, follows:

Plagues incident to men,
Your potent and infectious fevers heap
On Athens, ripe for stroke! Thou cold sciatica,
Cripple our senators, that their limbs may halt
As lamely as their manners! Lust and liberty
Creep in the minds and marrows of our youth,
That 'gainst the stream of virtue they may strive,
And drown themselves in riot! Itches, blains,
Sow all the Athenian bosoms, and their crop
Be general leprosy! Breath infect breath,

That their society, as their friendship, may
Be merely poison! Nothing I'll bear from thee
But nakedness, thou detestable town! (4. 1. 23-35)

Taking up residence in a cave near the sea, he lives off the land and spends most of his waking hours bitterly denouncing fickle humankind. One day, while digging for roots to eat, he finds gold, a great cache of it. He is rich once again. It so happens that General Alcibiades, who has also been wronged by the Athenians and has been banished from Athens, comes upon Timon in the woods near the cave. Timon greets him rudely: "The canker gnaw thy heart, / For showing me again the eyes of man!" (4. 3. 52-53). But Alcibiades treats Timon with respect, telling him he has heard of the wrongdoing done to him. When Alcibiades mentions that he is gathering an army to make war on Athens, Timon sees an opportunity for revenge and gives him gold to finance the venture.

After Alcibiades departs, the pesky philosopher Apemantus arrives at Timon's cave to offer his annoying advice and wisdom. He urges Timon to "Be thou a flatterer now, and seek to thrive / By that which has undone thee . . ." (4. 3. 222-223). Timon returns only insults, and soon the conversation becomes a duel of mocks and scorns. "Would thou wert clean enough to spit upon!" (4. 3. 341) says Timon. Apemantus retorts: "A plague on thee, thou art too bad to curse" (4. 3. 342).

Word of Timon's new-found gold spreads, and two bandits descend upon the cave to steal their fair share. Timon does not shrink from the robbers; nor does he try to protect his cache of gold. Instead, he willingly gives them gold—and a harangue urging them to "take wealth and lives together" (4. 3. 418) and "cut throats" (4. 3. 430). His hatred for humankind is so strong that it nearly shocks the bandits into becoming honest men.

After the bandits leave, the good and worthy Flavius arrives at the cave seeking the company and love of his master. At first Timon rebukes him, too. Later, when he realizes that Flavius has come in search of companionship, not gold, Timon praises him as the only honest man on earth, then gives him a large portion of gold and bids him adieu. Next to arrive at the cave are a poet and a painter, whom Timon sends away, and two representatives of the Athenian senate, who praise Timon and then ask for gold to purchase the means to shore up their defenses against the invading army of Alcibiades.

Timon tells the senators that he has been busy writing his epitaph, which "will be seen to-morrow. My long sickness / Of health and living now begins to mend" (5. 1. 183-184). When he tells them he will do a kindness for his countrymen in Athens, the senators think Timon has come to his senses and will aid them. But Timon dashes their hopes when he explains that the kindness he has in mind is an invitation to Athenians to come out and hang themselves on a useless tree that Timon plans to cut down. Timon then dismisses the senators. Thus, their only recourse is to prostrate themselves before Alcibiades and beg mercy. Back at the walls of Athens, Alcibiades agrees to spare the

innocent and destroy only those who wronged him and Timon. A soldier then arrives with news that Timon has died. He shows the general a wax copy of the inscription on Timon's gravestone:

Here lies a wretched corse [corpse], of wretched soul bereft:
Seek not my name: a plague consume you wicked caitiffs left!
Here lie I, Timon; who, alive, all living men did hate:
Pass by and curse thy fill, but pass and stay not here thy gait. (5. 4. 84-87)
Alcibiades praises Timon as noble and says he will pursue a course of peace in Athens.

SAMPLE

Characters

Protagonist: Timon

Antagonists: Timon's Faithless Beneficiaries

Timon: Athenian who becomes a misanthrope and a cave-dwelling hermit after citizens take advantage of his generosity, then refuse to help him when he runs out of money.

Lucius, Sempronius, Lucullus: Lords who are false friends of Timon. (Note: *Lucius* is also the name of a servant in the play.)

Ventidius: Another of Timon's false friends.

Apemantus: Cynical philosopher who warns Timon that his friends are using him..

Flavius: Loyal steward of Timon. He is the only character in the play who remains a friend of Timon to the end.

Alcibiades: An Athenian general wronged by Athens.

Timandra, Phrynia: Mistresses of Alcibiades.

Old Athenians

Flaminius, Lucilius, Servilius: Servants of Timon.

Caphis, Philotus, Titus, Lucius, Hortensius: Servants of Timon's creditors.

Poet, Painter, Jeweller, Merchant

Page, Fool, Three Strangers

Cupid and Amazons: Entertainers performing in a masque.

Minor Characters: Other lords, senators, officers, soldiers, banditti (bandits), attendants.

The action in the play takes place in Athens, the walls outside the city, and the city's neighboring woods. Individual scenes are set in rooms of Timon's house, a senator's house, Lucullus's house, Sempronius's house, a public place, the Senate house, the environs outside the city, and Timon's cave and the surrounding woods, near the seashore.

Key Dates and Sources

Date Written: Between 1605 and 1608 (probably 1607).

First Performance of Play: There are no records of a performance during Shakespeare's lifetime. An adaptation of the play by Thomas Shadwell (1642-1692) was staged in 1678.

Probable Main Sources: The story of Timon of Athens is an ancient one. The playwright Phrynicus, an important innovator in the development of Greek drama in the Fifth Century, B.C., centered one of his dramas on Timon, a legendary misanthrope. (Only fragments of his plays survive. In addition, the playwright Aristophanes (450-388 B.C.) refers to the Timon story in his popular comedy *Lysistrata*, when a chorus of old women sing the following lines:

Once there was a certain man called Timon, a tough customer, and a whimsical, a true son of the Furies, with a face that seemed to glare out of a thorn-bush. He withdrew from the world because he couldn't abide bad men, after vomiting a thousand curses at them. He had a holy horror of ill-conditioned fellows, but he was mighty tender towards women. (Anonymous Translator)

These stories were handed down to the Greek biographer Plutarch (46?-120?), who refers to Timon in his *Life of Marcus Antonius* (Mark Antony), and to the Greek satirist Lucian (125-200), who wrote a work entitled *Timon, or The Misanthrope*. One of Lucian's favorite topics was the inability of people to realize how empty and temporary are wealth and luxury. Shakespeare is believed to have consulted these works by Plutarch and Lucian. In addition, he is said to have read a story about Timon in a collection of tales entitled *Palace of Pleasure*, by William Painter (1525-1595).

Type of Play

Timon of Athens is a tragedy with characteristics of an [allegory](#). In regard to the latter, Timon appears to serve as a symbol or an abstraction, first for philanthropy and then for misanthropy.

Satirical Undertone

Timon of Athens has been interpreted as a mockery of the spendthrift ways of England's James I, the first king of the House of Stuart. His personal extravagance ate deeply into state coffers, and Parliament was reluctant to approve special appropriations to meet his expenses. However, the skill of his chief advisor, Robert Cecil (who was made Earl of Salisbury in 1605), helped keep the financial ship of state from foundering.

Structure and Characterization

Scholars generally do not include *Timon of Athens* among Shakespeare's greatest plays. They maintain that the plot and characterization are both underdeveloped, leaving the audience and readers in doubt about causes and motives. Moreover, they argue, the dialogue at times jerks back and forth haphazardly between verse and prose. The play ends abruptly. Among theories presented to explain deficiencies in the play are the following: (1) It is a copy of an unfinished or unrevised draft; (2) it was unskillfully edited or revised by a theatre company; (3) it was written by another author and rewritten by Shakespeare; (5) it was co-written by Shakespeare and another author—Thomas Middleton has been mentioned as the second author—resulting in stylistic and structural problems; (6) Shakespeare was bored at having to write another tragedy—*Timon* is the last ascribed to him—and therefore he rushed through his task. However, the play may be better than many critics believe. If regarded as a fable or an allegory—with Timon serving as a symbol or an abstraction, first for philanthropy and then for misanthropy—Shakespeare's handling of the story seems appropriate.

Climax

The climax of a play or another narrative work, such as a short story or a novel, can be defined as (1) the turning point at which the conflict begins to resolve itself for better or worse, or as (2) the final and most exciting event in a series of events. The climax in *Timon of Athens* occurs, according to both definitions, in the final scene of Act III in the banquet room of Timon's house. There, Timon exposes his so-called friends as frauds, drives them away, and denounces the world, saying, "Burn, house! Sink, Athens! Henceforth hated be / Of Timon, man, and all humanity!" (3. 6. 64-65).

Imagery

Shakespeare devotes hundreds of lines in the play to imagery centering on Timon's hatred of humankind. In Act IV, for example, Timon marshals a grab bag of curses in a fulmination against the Athenians.

Thou cold sciatica,
Cripple our senators, that their limbs may halt
As lamely as their manners. Lust and liberty
Creep in the minds and marrows of our youth,
That 'gainst the stream of virtue they may strive,
And drown themselves in riot! Itches, blains,
Sow all the Athenian bosoms; and their crop
Be general leprosy! Breath infect breath,
That at their society, as their friendship, may
Be merely poison! Nothing I'll bear from thee,
But nakedness, thou detestable town!
Take thou that too, with multiplying bans!
Timon will to the woods; where he shall find
The unkindest beast more kinder than mankind.
The gods confound—hear me, you good gods all—
The Athenians both within and out that wall!
And grant, as Timon grows, his hate may grow
To the whole race of mankind, high and low! Amen. (4. 1. 25-42)
Later, in the same act, Timon epitomizes his attitude when he tells Alcibiades:
I am Misanthropos, and hate mankind.
For thy part, I do wish thou wert a dog,
That I might love thee something. (4. 3. 56-58)
Shakespeare also frequently uses contradictory locutions, as in the following oxymorons Timon utters after digging up gold: "Thus much of this will make black white, foul fair, / Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant" (4. 3. 30-31).

Themes

One cannot buy friendship. Timon spends lavishly on the citizens of Athens, presumably to earn and preserve their friendship. But when his money is gone, his so-called friends desert him.

"The love of money," as the Bible says, "is the root of all evil." Timon's friends pretend to love him, but it is his money that they love. Their greed brings out the worst in Timon and themselves. Shakespeare also developed this theme in other plays, notably *The Merchant of Venice*, in which a note in the golden casket says, "All that glitters is not gold." In *King Lear*, the lust for property and wealth is a key motivation. This lust embitters Lear, just as it does Timon.

Hatred is a fatal disease. We do not know the pathology of Timon's death, perhaps because the cause of it lodged in his soul—a burning, unremitting hatred that consumed him—rather than his body.

Timon's Road to Ruin

From the outset of the play, Timon walks the road to ruin, mainly because he is unduly generous. For example, in the first scene, the Poet speaks of Timon's unbridled generosity in a conversation with the Painter:

You see how all conditions, how all minds—
As well of glib and slippery creatures as
Of grave and austere quality—tender down
Their services to Lord Timon: his large fortune,
Upon his good and gracious nature hanging,
Subdues and properties to his love and tendance
All sorts of hearts. (1. 1. 65-71)

But liberality of coin is not the only fault that dooms Timon. Another is poor management of his finances, for he keeps no careful account of his assets and debts. When insolvency overtakes him, he tells his loyal steward, Flavius, to sell his lands to pay what he owes. However, Flavius informs him that he has already sold available lands. Timon is down to the change in his pocket. And it lacks jingle.

Still another fault of Timon is his inability to judge people. He gives freely of his money to anyone who wears the mask of friend. But when bankruptcy arrives and Timon asks his friends for help, circumstances unmask them as opportunists. At this point, Timon could fight back. But instead he resigns himself to his fate, alienates himself, and chews the bitterroot of hatred.

Study Questions and Essay Topics

1. In an essay, analyze Timon's personality and character. One question you should address is this: Does Timon's generosity early in the play result from an abnormal desire to be loved and praised?
2. Why does Flavius remain loyal to Timon while his other acquaintances rebuff him?
3. If Timon had a wife and children, would he be a different man?
4. Write a comparison-contrast essay addressing this question: In what ways is Timon similar to, and different from, Charles Dickens's character Ebenezer Scrooge (*A Christmas Carol*). As a starting point, consider using the following observation: Timon, at first kind and generous, becomes cruel and bitter. Scrooge, at first cruel and bitter, becomes kind and generous.