

# ***King Lear* by William Shakespeare**

Study Guide by Janet Somerville

## **Background**

### A) ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY

- protagonist has fortune determined by HAMARTIA (in Lear's case his decision to hold a love contest between his daughters)
- stock characters such as villain (Edmund), faithful servant (Kent)
- sensational themes: lust, blood, avarice
- STICHOMYTHIA: rapid dialogue exchange between two characters

### B) TRAGIC HERO QUALITIES

- born into nobility
- responsible for own fate
- endowed with a tragic flaw
- doomed to make a serious error in judgment
- falls from great heights
- realizes the irreversible mistake
- accepts
- instills PITY AND FEAR in the audience (Aristotle)

## **Thematic Warmup**

Most people identify themselves by what they do--athlete, scholar, entrepreneur, accountant, doctor, waiter, etc. Does your vocation--a regular occupation, especially one for which a person is particularly suited or qualified--define you? Is that who you are? How do you decide who you are?

During your life you have either heard (or have said), "My parents/teachers just don't understand." What does this really mean? Explain how this type of "generation gap" affects or has affected you.

One of the more recent concerns of our nation is how to accommodate a growing senior citizen population, yet as individuals we tend to ignore the concerns of the elderly until we are counted among them. We seem to be overwhelmingly interested in being and staying young. When the time comes, how will you take care of the senior citizens in your family? What are your concerns about growing older?

In a nation that demands that promises be in writing before they are honoured, the spoken word and its meaning is devalued. How are spoken words deceptive? Describe a time when you have been deceived--or you have deceived someone--by spoken words.

In the check-out line at your local grocery you are assaulted by tabloid headlines blaring alien dogs, four-foot tall walking frogs, and a host of other oddities. You give these little credence, but most of us are influenced by advertising claims. How deceptive is the written word? How do you protect yourself from such deceptions?

"Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long upon the land" (Exodus 20:12). Most have heard this Old Testament commandment, but what does it mean? How do you honor your parents? How important is it?

## Act One

### Scene 1

#### DAUGHTERS, DUTY AND DISOBEDIENCE

Consider:

1) the order in which the daughters speak

2) how they profess their love

3) their birth order

#### CHARACTER TRAITS

Lear	Goneril	Regan	Cordelia

#### Scenes 2-5

##### Divine Right of Kings

- belief that the king/queen is chosen by God
- natural hierarchical order
- rule of primogeniture: inheritance via first born son

Edmund's Scheme

- to frame Edgar with a forged letter to get his own inheritance
- appeal to Nature as a goddess is subversive

Parent/Child Relationships

*How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.*

Examine Gloucester's rapport with Edmund and Edgar as well as Lear's rapport with Goneril and Regan.

	Goneril	Regan
Lear		
	Edmund (the bastard)	Edgar (the legitimate)
Gloucester		

Examples of DRAMATIC IRONY

- 1) Scene 2 "*O villain, villain....Abominable villain! Where is he?*"
- 2) Scene 2 "*Some villain hath done me wrong.*"

## Lear's INSULTS

### Scene 4

- clotpoll
- mongrel
- the slave
- my lord's knave
- you whoreson dog
- you slave
- you cur
- you rascal
- detested kite

THEMES/ MOTIFS sustained throughout the play:

- a) nothing
- b) blindness
- c) seeing
- d) truth
- e) identity

## Act Two

### Scene 1

- Curan tells Edmund of the RUMOUR that Albany and Cornwall are going to war with each other (Lear's inheritance?)
- EDMUND continues villainy by setting Edgar up and then faking an injury (cutting his own arm and blaming Edgar)—as a result Gloucester is upset and orders Cornwall to kill Edgar if found
- note Gloucester's on-going GULLIBILITY and the ease with which Edmund continues to lie

cf: “Now Edmund, where’s the villain?”

- *Machiavelli*: “the end justifies the means”—ruthless, diabolical villainy

## Scenes 2-4

Edgar’s disguise as Tom O’Bedlam

*My face I’ll grime with filth, Blanket my loins, elf all my hairs in knots...  
Edgar I nothing am.*

BEDLAM= Bethlehem Royal Hospital

- took patients in the 1400s
- first asylum for the mentally ill
- madmen were called “Tom O’Bedlams”—common among London streets
- belief: madness=demonic possession
- cf: Edgar’s mention of RATSANE—poison that caused insanity/possession by the devil

Parallel illness:

LEAR’s reality (mentally ill) vs. EDGAR’S assumed insanity (the mask to protect him)

Edmund’s VILLAINY

- cuts himself
- blames Edgar
- continues to lie to his father

Kent in the stocks

- says he will either sleep or whistle to pass the time
- has a LETTER from Cordelia
- humiliates Lear to see his servant thus imprisoned: “*tis worse than murder to do upon respect such violent outrage*”
- note the STICOMYTHIC exchange between Lear and Kent

LEAR’S INTERNAL STORM

- “*Oh how this mother swells up toward my heart!! Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow*”
- The Fool predicts that Lear will be abandoned: “*leave thee in the storm./But I will tarry, the fool will stay.*”
- Regan and Cornwall refuse to speak with Lear: “*Deny to speak with me?*”

- “*Oh me, my heart! My rising heart! But down!*”
- “*O, Regan, she hath tied/sharp-toothed unkindness like a vulture here.*”
- “*I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad.*”
- “*You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,/as full of grief as age, wretched in both.*”
- “*I have full cause of weeping, but this heart/shall break into a hundred thousand flaws/Or ere I’ll weep.—O fool, I shall go mad!*”

## Act Three

### Dame Fortuna

- the wheel of fortune is turning for Lear
- he is approaching the NADIR—he will be stripped of all—his title; his children; his clothing—and exposed to the elements of the storm

### Scene 1

- Kent wants to send word to Cordelia that CORNWALL and ALBANY are rising up against the king (uses a RING)

### Scene 2

Lear’s breakdown mirrors the storm—PATHETIC FALLACY

### GROUP WORK

Have groups prepare each of Lear’s speeches to present dramatically—either act it out or perform as a rap or as a choral reading.

- Blow wind...that makes ingrateful man* (1-9)
- Rumble thy bellyful! ....tis foul!* (14-24)
- Let the great gods...more sinned against than sinning* (49-60)

Exterior storm	Inner Storm

### Scene 3

Gloucester confesses he has a LETTER with information that the “*injuries the king now bears will be revenged home.*”

Edmund betrays his father to Cornwall—his evil plot continues

### Scene 4      On the Heath

THEME: filial ingratitude

Lear and Poor Tom meet at the hovel.

Lear is obsessed with the betrayal he has suffered from his daughters and wonders if the same happened to Edgar.

*Didst thou give all to thy daughters?*

Foreshadowing: *This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.*

Edgar PLAYS the role of madman—note references to the “foul fiend”

Lear strips—he no longer wears the trappings of the king: *Off off, you lendings!*

Gloucester arrives to warn Lear of the army being raised against him.: *His daughters seek his death* Does not recognize either Kent or Edgar who are in DISGUISE.

All go into the hovel to wait out the storm: Gloucester, Edgar as Poor Tom, Lear, Kent and Fool.

### Scene 5      At Gloucester’s

Cornwall and Edmund plot.

LETTER Gloucester has received that Edmund betrays him with shows he has knowledge—is spying on behalf of France.

\*Edmund says he will choose LOYALTY to Cornwall over loyalty to his father.



## Scene 6 In the hovel

-Edgar begins to dissemble because it hurts him to see the King—his godfather and the man who named him—fall so far. He cries and his tears “*mar my counterfeiting*” Will true feelings expose him?

- the king’s gone made: *his wits are gone*

-Gloucester’s news: plot to kill Lear/ he’s arranged for transportation to Dover where he will meet welcome and protection (from France)

## Scene 7 At Gloucester’s

### ACT IT OUT

\*Gloucester is branded a traitor since there is news that France has landed

\* Regan’s response: *hang him instantly*

\* Goneril’s response: *pluck out his eyes*

\* Cornwall’s response: *Leave him to my displeasure*

--Gloucester arrives home, having delivered Lear to safety

He is wrongfully accused of being a traitor.

Regan plucks his beard—an EXTREME INSULT

LETTER from CORDELIA

- from one that’s of a neutral heart/ And not from one opposed

Gloucester is BLINDED by Cornwall—takes his boots to him

**1st DEATH: Cornwall’s servant** begs him to stop hurting Gloucester—they fight.

Regan kills a different servant

THEME: Blindness/Sight

#### TURNING POINT FOR GLOUCESTER

Now blind, Gloucester sees the truth when Regan tells him “*Thou call’st on him that hates thee*” and Gloucester realizes *Then Edgar was abused.*

- at the end of the act Gloucester is tossed out of his own home and is smelling his way to Dover to join Lear

## Act Four

### BODY COUNT

- 1) servant who stabs Cornwall trying to defend Gloucester in Act III, Sc 7 (killed by Regan)
- 2) Cornwall—from his wounds (told in IV, 2)
- 3) Oswald (IV, 5)

LOVE TRIANGLE: widowed Regan + Edmund + Goneril

### Scene 1

EDGAR

- distressed to see his father blinded
- feels he cannot stay disguised

THEME: blindness/sight

\*Gloucester “stumbled when I saw”

\* “I therefore want no eyes”

PHILOSOPHY: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods”

Gloucester therefore chooses his own death—SUICIDE at the cliffs of Dover (he will meet Lear there?)

### Scene 2

**GONERIL** is in love/lust with **EDMUND**: offers him a love token for good luck

**ALBANY** switches allegiance—feels badly that Gloucester was so poorly treated—pledges *to revenge thine eyes*

### Scene 3

**CORDELIA** has landed in England and has asked the messenger to find her father and bring him to safety. She already knows the news of the messenger: that the **BRITISH POWERS** are marching towards Dover

## Scene 5

Gloucester is led to DOVER where he thinks he will commit suicide by hurling himself from the cliff.

Edgar assumes a DIFFERENT DISGUISE and a DIFFERENT ACCENT and proclaims a miracle that Gloucester survived his fall—note the imagery used to describe the great heights.

LEAR loses the plot completely—“Reason in madness”

A Gentleman from the French camp offers to take Lear to safety at Cordelia’s bidding.

Edgar KILLS Oswald: note the LETTERS Oswald carries (p 246)

1) Goneril’s letter to Edmund that orders Albany’s death

## Scene 6

### THE FRENCH CAMP

- Cordelia recognizes “good Kent” immediately—so much for his disguise
- “To be acknowledged, madam, is o’erpaid”
- Lear is sleeping
- Lear’s acknowledgement of his FATE: “I am bound upon a wheel of fire that mine own tears do scald like molten lead.”
- Lear recognizes Cordelia and asks her for poison... his final lines are “I am old an foolish”—a mantra for this act

## Act Five

Body Count

4) Gloucester “flawed heart...burst smilingly”

5) Goneril stabs herself

6) Regan is poisoned by Goneril

7) Edmund is slain by Edgar “all three marry in an instant”

8) Cordelia is hanged by Edmund’s order (too late revoked)

9) Lear kills the hangman

10) Lear dies of joy (like Gloucester) believing Cordelia is breathing

*Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass. He hates him  
That would upon the rack of this tough world  
Stretch him out longer*

11) Kent will kill himself to follow his “master”

*I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;  
My master calls me I must not say no.*

**Note the LESSON in Edgar’s final speech:**

*The weight of this sad time we must obey,  
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.*

## Assignments/Tests

### ACT ONE

In the spirit of a formalist literary approach, you are going to do a close reading of the opening act of *King Lear*.

Trace one of the following motifs throughout Act One:

- disguise
- nothing
- blindness

1) Begin by rereading the act and highlighting every occurrence of your motif.

2) Next, brainstorm how the motif contributes to the following:

- a) plot development
- b) character development
- c) theme

3) Organize your thoughts in a logical way in a detailed outline.

4) In a short paper (1-2 pages, typed and double-spaced, a 5-paragraph essay), argue for the effective inclusion of the motif in the play.

SUBMIT ALL STAGES OF YOUR WORK FOR EVALUATION ON \_\_\_\_\_

#### Rubric

<b>Brainstorm</b>	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Outline</b>	1	2	3	4	5	
<b>Short Paper (Content)</b>	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Style</b>	1	2	3			<b>TOTAL:</b>
<b>Spelling/Grammar</b>	0	1	2			<b>/25 marks</b>

## Quiz 1

### REVIEWING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED SO FAR Act I, Scenes 1 & 2

/10 marks

1. Who is Gloucester's bastard son?
2. Name Lear's youngest daughter.
3. What kind of contest does Lear set up to determine how to divide his property?
4. Circle the characteristic that best describes Goneril.  
a) loving                      b) mean-spirited                      c) honest
5. Name one of the ideas with which Edmund is obsessed.
6. What does Regan mean when she says, "*I am alone felicitate in your dear highness's love?*"
7. Who marries Cordelia because he believes "*she is herself a dowry?*"
8. Who says, "*I love your majesty according to my bond. No more. Nor less?*"
9. How does Lear punish Cordelia for her response to his question?
10. What happens to Kent at the end of the opening scene?

## Quiz 2

/10 marks

### REVIEWING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED SO FAR

- 1) What is the approximate age difference between Edgar and his brother?  
a) 3 months    b) 1 year    c) 5 years
- 2) Which character disguises himself and speaks in an accent in order to continue to serve Lear?
- 3) With which daughter does Lear stay first?
- 4) When Goneril's servant Oswald refers to Lear as "my lady's father," why is Lear outraged?
- 5) What forged prop does Edmund use to trick both his brother and his father?
- 6) How does Edmund prove to Gloucester that his legitimate brother Edgar is out of control?
- 7) How is Kent punished when he insults Oswald at Gloucester's castle?
- 8) How does Edgar disguise himself?
- 9) At the end of Act Two, Regan and Goneril strip Lear of his retinue as he stumbles out into the fierce storm.
  - a) How many men is he left with?
  - b) Name one of them.

**Quiz 3**  
**REVIEWING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED SO FAR**  
**Act Three**

**Each correct answer is worth ½ mark.**

**/5 Marks**

- 1) There is a rumour of “*division...twixt Albany and \_\_\_\_\_*”
- 2) Name the item Kent gives the gentleman to take to Cordelia: \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3) Lear is raging on the heath. What is the literary term that mirrors a character’s emotional state in the natural elements? \_\_\_\_\_ (2 words)
- 4) Lear claims he is “*a man more \_\_\_\_\_ against than sinning.*”
- 5) Where do Lear, Kent and the Fool find shelter during the storm? \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) Who is already hiding in the hovel? \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) Why does Gloucester want to find Lear?  
\_\_\_\_\_

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- 8) What form of ingratitude does Lear obsess about? f \_\_\_\_\_ (1 word)
- 9) From whom has Gloucester received a letter that Edmund, Regan and Cornwall claim is treasonous? \_\_\_\_\_
- 10) How is Gloucester injured by the end of Act III?  
\_\_\_\_\_



## Quiz 4

### REVIEWING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED SO FAR Act Four

Each correct answer is worth ½ mark.

/5 marks

After Gloucester is blinded, who leads him to the cliffs of Dover?

\_\_\_\_\_

Why is Gloucester going to Dover?

After Regan is widowed, to whom does she pledge her love?

\_\_\_\_\_

Name the third person in the love triangle that includes:

1. Edmund
2. Regan
3. \_\_\_\_\_

What gift does Gloucester offer his guide?

What phrase best describes Lear's mental state when he is reunited with Gloucester?

- a) angry      b) compliant      c) mad      d) grateful

How does Cordelia treat Lear when they re-meet?

- a) with respect      b) with disdain      c) with scorn

Does Cordelia recognize Kent in disguise?

YES

NO

Name two of the characters who have died by the end of ACT IV.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

**Dear Regan**

King Lear 1.1-5

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By the time you have finished reading the first act of *King Lear*, you have been exposed to many of the interesting dynamics in the Lear family. The discussion and writing activities contained here will encourage you to understand that each character in the play has a distinct point of view. The lesson will also stress that it is necessary to look carefully at the interaction between two characters before labeling one as the "bad guy" and one as the "good guy" in the relationship.

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**DISCUSSION/ BACKGROUND WORK**

a) How does Goneril feel about what has been happening with her father? What has Lear done to make her upset? How does she make her feelings known to the servant Oswald? Then explore Lear's feelings. Why has he acted this way? What have the characters in the play done to make Lear feel welcome or unwelcome?

b) Complete this chart in which you examine Lear's attitude toward Goneril and her servants and Goneril's attitude toward Lear and his knights. Make sure that you *find quotations from the play to support your ideas. Cite at least three quotations per character.*

Lear's attitude toward Goneril and her servants	Cited proof	Goneril's attitude toward Lear and his knights	Cited proof

## WRITING ASSIGNMENT

3. *Select ONE of the following:*

\*Write a letter from Goneril to Regan telling Regan what has happened with Lear, and what she has done about it.

\*\* Write a letter from Lear to Regan complaining about his treatment at Goneril's castle.

\*\*\*Write a letter from Regan to Goneril responding to what she's heard about the situation.

Your letter must be at least five paragraphs in length, and must use lines from the text to justify your interpretation of the characters' actions.

## EVALUATION

Item	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Mark
Supporting Evidence	25	limited support, character development and plot revealed (15)	some support, character development and plot revealed (17)	considerable support, character development and plot revealed (20)	thorough support, character development and plot revealed (25)	
Grammar	5	more than ten errors (2)	six to ten errors (3)	one to five errors (4)	no errors (5)	
Spelling	5	more than ten errors (2)	six to ten errors (3)	one to five errors (4)	no errors (5)	
Style	10	Communicates with limited clarity and sentence structure variety  (4)	Communicates with some clarity, appropriate diction, sentence structure variety and letter format  (6)	Communicates with considerable clarity, uses appropriate diction and letter format  (8)	Communicates with a high degree of clarity, uses appropriate diction, sentence structure variety and impeccable letter format (10)	
Punctuation	5	More than ten errors (2)	Six to ten errors (3)	One to five errors (4)	No errors (5)	

**/50 marks**

## Viewing Nature

<p><b>Edmund</b></p> <p>Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law My services are bound. Wherefore should I Stand in the plague of custom, and permit The curiosity of nations to deprive me, For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base? When my dimensions are as well compact, My mind as generous, and my shape as true As honest madman's issue? Why band they us With base? With baseness? Bastardy? Base, base? Who in lusty stealth of nature take More composition and fierce quality Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed, Go to th'creating a whole tribe of fops, Got 'tween asleep and wake?</p> <p>1.2. 1-15</p>	<p><b>Lear</b></p> <p>Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow! You cataracts and hurricanes, spout Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks! You sulphurous and thought-executing fires, Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts, Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder, Strike flat the thick rotundity of the world! Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once That makes ingrateful man!</p> <p>3.2. 1-9</p>
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In a short paper (maximum 500 words), **compare Edmund's and Lear's views of nature**. Comment on diction, rhetorical strategy, figurative language, imagery and anything else you see fit.

***In-class Essay***

**/50 marks**

Select ONE of the following topics. Please double space your essay. Consult your copy of the play as you write.

a) The notion of filial love is central to both the plot and subplot in *King Lear*. With reference to specific events in the play show how the complicated relationships between parents and children are the true tragedy.

b) The theme of madness is woven throughout the play. Compare Lear’s real madness with Edgar’s feigned madness.

c) There are several letters used to develop plot and reveal character. Comment on the effectiveness of three of them.

d) Disguise is a recurring motif throughout the play. Discuss why both Kent and Edgar disguise themselves and comment on how effective each of their strategies is.

Item	Value	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Mark
Supporting Evidence	25	limited support, only one quotation used  (15)	some support, two-three quotations used  (17)	considerable support, four-five quotations used  (20)	thorough support, more than five relevant quotations used (23-25)	
Grammar	5	more than ten errors (2)	six to ten errors (3)	one to five errors (4)	no errors (5)	
Spelling	5	more than ten errors (2)	six to ten errors (3)	one to five errors (4)	no errors (5)	
Style	10	Communicates with limited clarity and sentence structure variety  (4)	Communicates with some clarity, appropriate diction, sentence structure variety  (6)	Communicates with considerable clarity, uses appropriate diction, sentence structure variety  (8)	Communicates with a high degree of clarity, uses appropriate diction, sentence structure variety  (9-10)	
Punctuation	5	More than ten errors (2)	Six to ten errors (3)	One to five errors (4)	No errors (5)	