STUDY GUIDE AND SAMPLE ESSAYS
**Plot summary**

**Act I.**
Shakespeare's dark tragedy, King Lear begins with the fictional King of England, King Lear, handing over his kingdom to daughters Regan and Goneril whom he believes truly love him. King Lear intends to stay with each daughter consecutively, accompanied by one hundred loyal knights.

Angry that Cordelia his youngest daughter does not appear to love him as do Goneril and Regan, Lear banishes his youngest daughter Cordelia, and Kent, the servant who attempts to defend her. Cordelia leaves and is taken by the King of France as his Queen...

Edmund, the loved but illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester plots to have his elder brother Edgar's reputation ruined. Edmund tricks his father Gloucester into believing that Edgar wanted to kill him...

The disrespectful Goneril conspires to have her guest and father, King Lear, driven out of her house.

Kent, who has now disguised his identity to serve King Lear, earns King Lear's respect by defending his name. Goneril offends King Lear and dismisses fifty of his knights. Lear starts to realize Cordelia was not so disrespecting. Lear decides to leave for Regan where he is sure to be treated properly...

Lear instructs Kent to deliver several letters to Gloucester. The Fool teaches Lear several riddles.

**Act II.**
We learn of possible conflict between evil sisters Regan and Goneril. Edmund further manipulates Edgar. Gloucester learns from Edmund of Edgar's plan to kill him and believes it...

Kent and Oswald, Goneril's steward fight. Kent is placed in stocks emphasizing just how little Lear's name is now respected by daughters Regan and Goneril...

Edgar, now alone and disguised, describes his fate of living in hiding. Showing complete disregard for King Lear's authority, Kent remains in stocks. Lear tells Regan how much Goneril has hurt him. Regan in consultation with Goneril, allows Lear to stay but without a single follower. Lear decides not to stay with either daughter...

**Act III.**
The King of France may well invade England. Kent sends a messenger to Cordelia to keep her aware of King Lear's plight... Lear braves the elements against a storm, no doubt symbolic of his tortured soul...

Gloucester lets slip to his traitorous son Edmund that the army of France is poised to invade, guaranteeing Gloucester's own future suffering. We learn more of a potential conflict between Regan and Goneril, centering on their husbands...

Lear is brought out of the elements. Lear explains that nature's physical torment of him distracted him from the pain his daughters have given him.
Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate son, makes his appearance, disguised as "poor Tom." Cornwall, Regan's husband and Edmund speak. After implicating his father Gloucester as a traitor against Cornwall, Edmund is rewarded for betraying his father Gloucester by receiving his father's title as the new Earl of Gloucester.
Cornwall tells Edmund to seek out his father saying "he may be ready for our apprehension" or punishment.
Lear and company find solace and safety in a farmhouse. Lear, showing signs of madness, holds a mock trial to punish his daughters addressing two joint stools as if they were Regan and Goneril. Kent leads Lear to Dover where he will be safe...
Gloucester is captured and tortured first having his beard ripped away and later being made blind. Unable to bear Cornwall's brutality any longer, a servant wounds Cornwall...

**Act IV.**
Gloucester now blind, realizes in his suffering his mistakes, especially about his son Edgar. Gloucester meets "poor Tom" not realizing it is Edgar in disguise. Edgar leads his father to the cliffs of Dover where his father wishes to commit suicide.
The Duke of Albany renounces his wife Goneril, realizing that he has been on the wrong side... The Duke of Cornwall (Regan's husband) is now dead. The rivalry for Edmund by Regan and Goneril intensifies. Kent wonders how Cordelia can be so good and her sisters so evil. The King of France will not oversee the battle about to begin. Cordelia is saddened by what she learns of King Lear's plight...
Cordelia has her men search for her father... With the battle almost about to start, we learn Albany has switched sides again, supporting Goneril and Regan's forces against the invading French.
Regan worries more about her sister's intentions for Edmund more than the battle that lies ahead... Edgar continues to lead his father to the cliffs of Dover where he tricks him that he miraculously survived his fall. Lear learns of Gloucester's blindness.
Edgar kills Oswald when he attempts to kill Gloucester. Oswald's letter, which comes from Goneril, reveals instructions for Edmund to kill her husband, The Duke of Albany so she may marry him. Cordelia finds her father Lear who deeply regrets how he treated her...

**Act V.**
Regan and Goneril put Edmund on the spot by demanding he choose for once and for all, which one of them he loves. Albany decides to fight on Regan and Goneril's side but only to fight an invading power (France).
Cordelia's forces lose to Goneril and Regan's and Cordelia and Lear are taken prisoner. Captured, King Lear tries to comfort Cordelia. Albany congratulates his allies but now turns on them. Edgar fights his brother Edmund, mortally wounding him. Goneril kills herself and poisons sister Regan.
Edgar reveals his true identity to Gloucester who dies from a heart unable to take both grief and joy. Albany and the dying Edmund try to prevent Lear and Cordelia being hanged but are too late for Cordelia. Lear howls with pain his loss of Cordelia. Kent is finally recognized for his loyalty by Lear. Lear, unable to take further pain, dies. Albany is left to restore order following this tragedy...

### Act 3, Scene 1

**Lear’s madness**

- The knight says of Lear that he “Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea, or swell the curled waters ‘bove the main, that things might change or cease” (3.1.5-7) – not only does he appear mad in that he is shouting at forces out of his control, his call for disorder mirrors his internal chaos
  
- “unbonneted he runs, and bids what take all” (3.1.14) – Lear, contesting nature and calling for the end of the world. The audience conjure up a powerful visual image of Lear which is to be seen in the following scenes
Kent describes Lear’s “unnatural and bemadding sorrow” (3.1.34) reducing Lear to a simple, suffering man, driven mad by his abandonment

Isolation
- “Who’s there, beside the foul weather?” (3.1.1) – weather personified. Kent sounds almost surrounded by the weather as it is all that is with them
- When asked who is with Lear the Knight replies “None but the fool” (3.1.16) indicating his isolation without his ceremonial train to follow him
- “heart-struck injuries” (3.1.17) – Lear’s sorrow is brought about by his daughters’ abandonment of him

Storm representative of mental state
- The “impetuous blasts with eyeless rage” (3.1.8) mirror Lear’s hot-temperedness from 1.1 – Kent describes it as his “hideous rashness” (1.1.152)
- The Knight describes himself as “One minded like the weather, most unquietly” (3.1.2) – describes the violence and cruelty of the storm but also subtly introduces the likening of the physical storm to mental emotional turmoil – noted by Hunter

Violence of the storm
- The knight describes Lear as “contending with the fretful elements” (3.1.4) introducing associations with turbulence but also perhaps an indication of Lear’s mental state. Up until now, others have had to “contend” with Lear’s powerful unpredictability but now he is left to face the physical power of nature
- The “white hair” (3.1.7) that Lear pulls out the wind “catch in their fury and make nothing of” (3.1.9) – Lear’s anger is cruelly mocked as the wind reduces it to nothing

Power of the storm
- “Strives in his little world of man to outscorn the to and fro conflicting wind and rain” (3.1.10-1) – Lear is attempting to oppose far greater than himself. Despite his supposed power in the “little world of man”, he is unable to oppose the greater forces of nature
  - Kahn:
“The little world of man [...] is always part of a larger world of nature”
“The microcosm is inescapably a domain in which man contests nature by asserting his freedom”

Lear’s ageing
- The knight describes how Lear “tears his white hair” (3.1.7) indicating the chaos of his mind and suggesting that his age contributes to this

Lear reduced to normal man
- “unbonneted he runs” (3.1.14) – literally means bareheaded but also represents the loss of his crown and the ‘nakedness’ that brings
- “The King hath cause to plain” (3.1.35) – whereas in 1.1 and to an extent in 1.4 Lear’s anger seemed unjustified, in losing his power he reduces himself to the level of normal men and his complaints are now more legitimate

Foreboding/ominous
- “There is division, although as yet the face of it is covered with mutual cunning, ‘twixt Albany and Cornwall” (3.1.19-21) – suggests that there are more grave consequences to come and alludes to the trickery and deceit which brought it about
- “perchance, these are but furnishing” (3.1.29) – there is a sense in which these are mere signs of a more significant issue. It seems as though ‘a storm is brewing’ again mirroring the storm they are experiencing

Scheming/mistrust
- “mutual cunning” (3.1.21) – indicates the scheming of both sides in Albany and Cornwall’s division
- “spies and speculations intelligent of our state” (3.1.24-5) – an illustration of a society based on mistrust
- “Either in snuffs and packings of the dukes, or the hard rein which both of them hath borne against the old kind King” (3.1.25-8) – vagueness with which the situation is described contributes to the atmosphere of mistrust and scheming

Kent’s honesty and honour
- Kent asks the knight if “on my credit you dare build” (3.1.31) indicating the strength of his word
• Whilst deceiving Lear in his disguise, Kent is again “plain-speaking” as he offers the knight “confirmation that I am much more than my out-wall” (3.1.40-1) – he is disguised by necessity and remains true to who he actually is.
Act 3, Scene 2

Power of the storm

- “Blow winds and crack you cheeks! Rage, blow!” (3.2.1) – Lear talks directly to the elements and bids them do their worst. He is defiant in the face of nature’s great power personifying it but not begging it to stop.
- “You cararacts and hurricanoes, spout till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks” (3.2.2-3) – Lear again personifies the weather using active, aggressive verbs to describe its power. Also, for the first time he uses “our” without meaning the royal plural as he identifies himself as merely a man and describes the gods as being in opposition.
- He describes lightning as “thought-executing fires” (3.2.4); “oak-cleaving thunderbolts” (3.2.5) and “all-shaking thunder” (3.2.6) illustrating its power and its indifference.
- “Rumble thy bellyful! Spit fire, spout rain!” (3.2.14) – Lear welcomes the force of the storm compared to the deceit and trickery of his daughters. He is recklessly defiant here as he descends into madness.
- “Things that love night love not such nights as these” (3.2.42-3) – suggests that there is something almost unnatural about the
violence of the storm as even wild animals are scared which appears almost a response to Lear’s calls for disorder

- “Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder, such groans of roaring wind and rain” (3.2.46-8) – emphasises the sheer force of the storm being said by the “plain-speaking” Kent who is unlikely to hyperbolise
- “Man’s nature cannot carry th’affliction, nor the fear” (3.2.48-9) – separates the “little world of man” (3.1.10) from the power of the gods. “Man’s nature” can refer to both the physical force of the storm and Lear’s emotional turmoil which he cannot sustain
King Lear English Revision - Accelerator

Characters

Lear
- Classic tragic hero - a powerful but fatally flawed ruler who, through hubris (excessive pride or arrogance), destroys both himself and those around him.
- Initially Lear is introduced as a powerful character - it is made obvious that he has experienced absolute power for many years.
  - His disinheritance of Cordelia and banishment of Kent affirm that he is a despotic monarch.
  - He craves flattery rather than truth in the ‘love test’
- Gradually his sanity and senility comes more and more under scrutiny
  - By the end of the first scene Regan comments ‘he hath ever but slenderly known himself’
- Once he has given away his freedom the play charts his journey from pride and arrogance to self-knowledge and redemption
- The further Lear descends into madness, the sharper becomes his awareness of the world’s evils
- Briefly he emerges from his tortured madness to find some kind of peace and reconciliation with Cordelia
- Infuriatingly self-obsessed, morally blind, unjust and unfair

Cordelia
- Speaks only in four scenes yet her presence permeates most of the play
- Early exchanges with Lear show honesty in the face of falsity
  - her asides to the audience accentuate the integrity of what she says and feels
  - she abhors deception and pretence (‘Who covers faults, at last with shame derides’)
- Takes courage to stand up to her father
- Her candid assessments of her sisters’ behaviour smack of insight and perception (‘I know you what you are’)
- When she returns to England her regal qualities are often accentuated (powerful costume changes etc). Her language resonates with words of healing and therapy, leading some to interpret her in a particularly Christian way.
- In displaying unconditional love and forgiveness for her father, she is a symbol of hope and goodness
- That her life should be so pointlessly extinguished is perhaps the cruellest act of all

Gonerill
- Speaks first in the love test and instantly displays how devious and deceitful she is. Her words are ‘slick’ and ‘oily’ and play to Lear’s vanity - she exploits his weaknesses.
• Systematically schemes with Regan to erode the last vestiges of
the King’s power (reduce followers and make him homeless)
• Hates her husband and plots adultery with Edmond
• Poisons her sister
• When Edmond is mortally wounded she kills herself- an act of
courage or perverse self-destruction?

Lear’s journey of madness
• Act 1
  o Lear’s tendency to mental instability is established. He
subjects his daughters to a bizarre love trial, banishes his
loyal adviser Kent and disowns Cordelia. He reacts with
violent curses to Gonerill’s challenges to his wilful
behaviour
• Act 2
  o Lear’s sanity is undermined by his obsession with ‘filial
ingratitude’, the ‘unnatural’ behaviour of Gonerill and
Regan
  o Infuriated by Kent’s punishment in the stocks, Regan’s
refusal to speak to him and Gonerill’s alliance with her
sister, Lear rants impotently about revenge.
  o Fearing the onset of madness, he storms out of
Gloucester’s castle
• Act 3
  o Lear rages at the storm, calling for universal destruction.
  o His moods swing violently from raging in the storm to
quieter sympathy for those less fortunate than himself-
‘poor naked wretches’
  o Lear’s ‘mad’ companions, the fool and poor tom, deepen
the sense of his decline into insanity.
  o He rips off his clothes- ‘off, off you lendings’
  o Hallucinates about devilish spirits

1:3
GONERILL  ‘he wrongs me… he flashes into one gross crime or other…
His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us on every trifle.’
  • Lear deserves his future treatment?
GONERILL  ‘come slack of former services… and let his knights have
colder looks among you: what grows of it no matter.’
  • Lear will no longer command the respect of the servants- his
decline has begun at gonerill’s order

1:4
OSWALD  ‘My lady’s father’ (in response to Lear asking who he is)
  • Avoids Lear’s royal title
  • Puts his master (Gonerill) in a position higher than the king
  • Demonstrates Lear’s decline
LEAR  ‘Does anyone know me? This is not Lear… Who is it that can tell
me who I am?
FOOL  ‘Lear’s shadow’
King Lear Revision Notes

• Emphasises Lear’s decline- he exclaims he is not himself as he does not command authority any longer

LEAR ‘O most small fault, How ugly didst thou in Cordelia show!’… ‘O Lear, Lear, Lear! Beat at this get that let thy folly in and thy dear judgement out.’
  • Shows his regret already- only 3 scenes after her banishment
  • Anguish/awakening and greater self awareness already
  • ‘thy folly’- his age/vanity- the fatal flaw that led him to poor judgement

1:5
LEAR ‘I did her wrong’
  • Regret- Cordelia
  • Simple, short statement. Blunt

FOOL ‘I can tell why a snail has a house… to put’s head in, not to give it away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case.’
  • A snail has better judgement than Lear
  • References to home/shelter- the comfort of family, emphasises disfunctionality of Lear’s family

LEAR ‘O let me not be man, no mad, sweet heaven! Keep me in temper, I would not be mad.’
  • Foreshadows what is to come
  • It has already started and he acknowledges it?

2:1
GLOUCESTER ‘My old heart is cracked, it’s cracked’
  • Like Lear- parallel narrative

CORNWALL ‘you have shown your father a child-like office’
  • Edmond has risen to legitimacy?
  • Advanced already

CORNWALL ‘Natures of such deep trust we shall much need;’
  • Ironic

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS EXPLAINED-----

KING LEAR: 1. Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty According to my bond; no more nor less.

Explanation for Quotation #1: Cordelia speaks these words when she address her father, King Lear, who has demanded that his daughters tell him how much they love him before he divides his kingdom among them (I.i.90–92). In contrast to the empty flattery of Goneril and Regan, Cordelia offers her father a truthful evaluation of her love for him: she loves him “according to my bond”; that is, she understands and accepts without question her duty to love him as a father and king. Although Cordelia loves Lear better than her sisters do, she is unable to “heave” her heart into her mouth, as her integrity prevents her from making a false declaration in order to gain his wealth. Lear’s rage at what he perceives to be her lack of affection sets the tragedy in motion.
Cordelia’s refusal to flatter Lear, then, establishes her virtue and the authenticity of her love, while bringing about Lear’s dreadful error of judgment.

The blinding of the Earl of Gloucester by the Duke of Cornwall suggested by Goneril is the most horrifying incident of all. Cornwall & Regan feels very annoyed with him for he helped Lear against their wishes and had secret correspondence with the enemy. Regan shows her wickedness and disrespect by pulling his beard while Cornwall shows his barbarian and inhumane nature by gouging out Gloucester’s eyes and crushing them under his cruel boots. A servant who fights Cornwall for his wickedness gets stabbed by Regan, which adds to the horror of the incident. Cornwall punishes Gloucester in such a way to gratify his anger and revenge and also that Gloucester will not prove to be a further source of help to Lear and the French enemy.

In Act IV Scene 2, we see Goneril developing an illicit passion for Edmund. This illicit passion leads to many horrifying incidents. Regan orders Oswald to kill Gloucester, so he does not be a further threat. Oswald attempts to kill Gloucester but he gets himself killed in a duel with Edgar. But that was not all. Edgar finds a letter in Oswald’s pocket which was written by Goneril to Edmund which clearly stated Goneril was in love with Edmund and she had called upon him to kill her husband Albany, so they can consummate their love affair. Then in Act V, Scene 1, Goneril swears that she would lose in the battle rather than her sister marrying Edmund. Her jealousy toward her sister leads her to commit the most awful act; she administers poison to Regan and kills her. When her villainy and treachery is exposed, she commits suicide by stabbing herself.

Just a little time back, we see Edmund arresting Lear & Cordelia and giving his orders to hang them. He had plotted with Goneril to kill them both, so they do not prove to be a menace later. This is another horrifying incident that lead to the death of Cordelia followed by the death of Lear, who dies out of grief and despair for the loss of his beloved daughter.

In the face of destruction and gloom what rays of hope are found:
The first ray of hope is found in Cordelia’s letter sent to Kent. After Lear is rejected by Goneril and is soon to be rejected by Regan, Cordelia’s letter arrives which suggests that Cordelia has been already informed about her father’s miserable plight and the political situation of the country. Then the reference of Curan about the possible conflict between the Dukes of Albany & Cornwall and the confirmation of it is found is Act III, Scene 1 by the disguised Earl of Kent also brings in a ray of hope for their conflict will eventually result in a civil war and Lear will be able to regain his throne. The landing of French forces at Dover and Cordelia’s return also brings great relief to the audience because with the help of Cordelia and her army Lear will be able to regain back his lost power and authority. In the storm on the verge of madness Lear realizes his folly of trusting Regan & Goneril and doing injustice to Cordelia is another ray of hope which brings assurance to the audience.

The next hope is found in the loyal Earl of Gloucester who decides to help Lear in his distress irrespective of the fact he had been forbidden to do so by the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall. We next find Gloucester searching for the King on the heath. He finds that Lear and his party had no shelter over their heads and quickly takes them to his castle at Gloucester to provide them proper care, food & clothing. Soon afterwards he
learns of the plot to murder the king and he arranges a carriage & deputes Kent to drive the king to Dover where he will receive both welcome and protection. But Gloucester had to pay a heavy price for helping Lear. His evil bastard son Edmund betrays him to Cornwall, and both Cornwall and Regan punish him in the most horrific manner. As suggested by Goneril, Cornwall decides to gouge out Gloucester’s eyes. Cornwall manages to take out Gloucester’s first eye, but before he proceeds to take out the second one, one of Cornwall’s servants stands up for Gloucester and fights a duel with Cornwall for he could tolerate his master’s savagery. He succeeds in inflicting a wound upon Cornwall, but he gets stabbed by Regan from the back and dies. Cornwall gouges out Gloucester’s another eye but he soon dies due to the fatal wound he had received. The servant’s humane nature and the death of one of the villains Cornwall serve relief to the readers and bring outs the fact that though justice is delivered late, it still exists in the world.

In the Act IV, we see Edgar accompanying and guiding his blind father in his disguise. Gloucester realizes his mistakes and he wants to go to the cliff at Dover to commit suicide and Edgar takes him. When Edgar learns that his father wants to commit suicide, he tricks his father into believing that he is standing on the edge of the cliff at Dover. Gloucester jumps & lands on level ground and is thus saved from the heinous sin of committing suicide. Edgar also saves his life from another villain Oswald who had been ordered by Regan to kill Gloucester. Edgar fights a duel with Oswald and kills him & brings out a letter which is sent from Goneril to Edmund stating the conspiracy to kill Albany so both the lovers can become united. All these incidents serve as a ray of hope; Gloucester realizing his mistakes; Edgar helping his father and saving his life; the death of a villain and the unveiling of Goneril’s treachery and Edmund’s wickedness.

Meanwhile King Lear has been reconciled with Cordelia at Dover. He is still insane, but he soon recovers from his lunacy through the treatment of the doctor & the care of Cordelia. After his recovery, Lear changes completely and all his character development brings us the hope that he will be a better person in future.

In the last scene of Act V we see that Albany learns of Goneril’s and Edmund’s treachery and villainy from Edmund. Goneril poisons Regan and she stabs herself after she learns of the exposure of her treachery to her husband. Edgar fights Edmund and he receives a fatal wound which results into his death. The death of the villains as a great source of relief and hope to the audience until the moment Lear enters the scene carrying the dead Cordelia in his arms.

How normal/ abnormal are the characters in the play:
The most reasonable and the most unreasonable character of the play:
The many deaths that take place in the play and how they take place:
Cordelia’s appearances in the play and her control over situations in her presence & absence:
Similarities and differences in the characters of Lear, Goneril, Regan & Cordelia:
Lear is a rash, arrogant & haughty king who wants to have his own way. He asks his daughters to profess their love for him just to gratify his childish vanity. Indeed he knows it is his youngest daughter who loves him the most. In spite of that he proceeds to disown and disinherit her when she fails to meet his expectations in professing her love for her father. This characteristic is shown in his evil daughters Regan & Goneril. We see that Goneril is also a haughty person who goes to the extreme driving her poor
father who had gave her half his kingdom. She satisfies her pride by dismissing half his father’s knights in order to get rid of her very own father. Just like Lear she has her own way and she refuses to keep her father’s knights. Just like Lear she also has outbursts of passions. Lear had two outbursts in the first scene, one with Cordelia and the other with the Earl of Kent. Regan is another person with the character more similar to Goneril than Lear. Regan also inherits the characteristic of driving away people who fail her or disagrees with her. She is also used to have her own way. On receiving Goneril’s instigating letter, she immediately leaves for Gloucester’s castle in order to avoid her father. She also humiliates her father by supporting Cornwall’s action of putting his messenger into stocks so Lear feels disgraced and leaves them forever. She did not want her father to come over with his knights to her place and when Lear arrives at Gloucester’s place, she first avoids meeting him under the pretext of being sick. Just like Goneril she also refuses to keep Lear and his knights at her castle for she is also a vain daughter who shows her filial ingratitude by insulting her father and treating him callously and driving him into the raging storm along with Goneril. So it is in their blood to banish. Just like Lear exiles Cordelia and Kent, Regan & Goneril also drives Lear away. But Lear is a kind person who later develops his character and becomes an unselfish, humble, gentle, patient and caring old man. But throughout the play his two daughters Goneril and Regan show themselves to be unlike him and similar to each other. They show their hypocrisy by planning to consult each other when their father behaves in a rash manner so their father would not be able to affect their authority adversely. Next we see their cruelty and ungratefulness in driving their unfortunate father away into the furious storm and plotting against his life. Cruelty and inhumanity is shown in Goneril’s suggestion of blinding Gloucester and Regan’s support in Cornwall’s act of gouging out the eyes of Gloucester and stabbing her husband’s servant. During the same scene we see Regan pulling Gloucester’s beard which showed extreme disrespect for he is a senior noble and moreover their host. Goneril also shows disrespect to her kind but weak minded person by calling him a fool who was unworthy of her. Both sisters develop a love affair with Edmund, but both were different cases. We see Regan develops the love affair only after she became a widow, but Goneril develops the love affair even though she is married. This proves that Goneril is a morally depraved and lustful woman who has an illicit passion for another man. The love affair also leads to extreme jealousy between two sisters. Though the two sisters are equivalent in their wickedness we see that Goneril is one step ahead of Regan in her cruelty. She goes to the extremes of conspiring against her husband’s life and poisoning her sister so she can become united with her lover Edmund. She also schemes with Edmund to kill her father King Lear and her sister Cordelia. Thus both these sisters show themselves as devilish women & unnatural daughters who are the epitome of all the seven deadly sins and other vices that exist in the world.
The Theme of Illusion versus Reality in *King Lear*

The theme of illusion versus reality is strongly manifested throughout *King Lear* and can be seen as one of the integral themes of the drama. This theme is strongly evidenced in the disguises employed by several characters, the significance of characters’ clothing, and the schemes against Lear and Gloucester.

Perhaps some of the most conspicuous manifestations of illusion versus reality in *King Lear* occur in the many disguises characters utilize. The intrinsic nature of a disguise is to obfuscate some observable trait and to create a façade, essentially feigning a new trait. For example, Gloucester’s son Edgar can be seen as having a propensity for disguises. Edgar chooses to feign the “basest and most poorest shape” of Poor Tom to avoid capture, because of the skewed story his brother invents. The theme is manifested strongly in the disguise itself, but the very appellation of “Poor Tom” is errant from reality. Edgar was of noble blood, but all perceive Poor Tom to be of the lowest caliber, hardly different from beasts. Furthermore, Edgar assumes another roll, pretending to have witnessed his father’s fall from the cliffs, claiming divine intervention as the only means for his having survived such a fall. Additionally, another character that outwardly manifests the theme is Kent, as seen in his line, “If but as well I other accents borrow / That can my speech diffuse, my good intent / May carry through itself to that full issue / For which I razed my likeness.” In these lines, Kent justifies his cause for assuming the new identity of a beggar, the beginnings of the servant Caius. It is important to note, however, that Kent’s loyalty is unwavering; he feigns his appearance in an effort to serve the king. Rather convincingly, one may also see parallels of the theme occurring in Kent’s feigned reality, a penniless beggar, to Edgar’s creation of Poor Tom. Therefore, the heavy extent in which disguises are used throughout the course *King Lear* supports the theme of illusion versus reality.

While the disguises hide the identities of characters, the clothing they wear is a more abstract illusion. Lear understands this when he exclaims, “Through tattered clothes small vices do appear; Robes and fur’d gowns hide them all.” It is paramount to note that when Lear says this, he is nearly naked. Furthermore, Edgar assumes the position of a beggar and is also scantily dressed. Even Kent, whose loyalty is unwavering, no longer wears fancy garbs. Kent can be seen as a knight lacking a coat of arms. However, despite this lack of physical wealth and title, his inherent loyalty is resolute. On the other hand, Edmund relishes his new title as the Earl of Gloucester and certainly adorns himself with all the accoutrements he has worked so hard to attain. Goneril and Regan also savor their newfound dowries and dress themselves in fine vesttures which they have also obtained through fraudulence. One is
presented with the idea that despite the external façade of ostensible beauty and precious refinement, the character in question’s reality is often obfuscated by such adornments. The juxtaposition of undeserving characters wearing fine attire and deserving characters stripped of these adornments, is a vitriolic and strong manifestation of the theme. Despite a preponderance of other details in King Lear demonstrating the theme, perhaps the most convincing argument for it is that the crux of the plot encompasses schemes based on falsities. From the first scene of the play, one can see the sycophantic Regan and Goneril “heaving their hearts into their mouth”, a feat which the loyal Cordelia is unable to accomplish, and expressing their love for their father. From the inchoation of the daughters’ speeches, their crafted deception wins their father’s favor, albeit an egregious lie. The reality of the daughters’ speeches was that their interests were self serving, in diametric contradiction to the statements made in their speeches. On the other hand, Cordelia tells her father the acerbic truth and faces his irascible temper and loses her dowry. Almost immediately one witnesses the crafty illusion perpetuated by Lear’s daughter’s lies. Interestingly, Goneril and Regan can be seen as disloyal to each other, each scheming to capture Edmund’s love. The sisters’ disloyalty to their father applied to themselves; when allured with the possibility of personal gain, their crafter illusion disintegrated, revealing their self-serving opportunism. In a similar light lies the subplot of the play, the scheme against the Earl of Gloucester. Edmund, the illegitimate son of Gloucester, crafts a scheme to become his father’s preferred and shades his legitimate brother in ignominy. Edmund purports his brother to be the traitor, when in actuality he is the traitor, a powerful manifestation of the theme. This fuels his opportunism and greed for his father’s title and nobility. In an amazingly vituperative and epigrammatic statement Edmund even exclaims that the old suffocate the young until the young themselves have lost their youth. Then, he pledges his loyalty to his father, merely to deceive. True to form, Edmund’s interests are egocentric while his loyalty is illusory.

Therefore, by analyzing characters’ behavior, one can see illusions are prevalent throughout King Lear, which are often completely diametrical from the reality of the situation. The theme is more obviously manifested in the disguises worn by characters such as Edgar and Kent. The clothing worn by the loyal and treasonous characters, seen as incongruous with their nature, also evidences the theme. Regan and Goneril’s professed love of their father and Edmund’s treasonous plot against his brother and father are also based on the pretense of illusions used to swindle others. Ergo, King Lear with its arcane themes, disconsolate storyline, and inherent brilliance of plot, can easily be seen as one of Shakespeare’s greatest works, containing a theme still perpetuated today.
One of the most motivating intangible forces is justice. It inspires millions of stories where the hero of the story prevails and intricate court systems that are fueled by the belief in justice. In the play, *King Lear* written by William Shakespeare justice is one of the most prevalent themes, in fact it seems to be the major focus of the play itself. It is as if Shakespeare is asking himself whether justice exists or not. Scholars have debated on the subject in divine justice in *King Lear* because of what seems to be his most tragic play, most agree that Shakespeare demonstrates the belief in justice though, despite the play’s bleak ending. He does this through Gloucester’s suicide attempt, King Lear’s epiphany, the final outcome of the kingdom, and the deaths of the characters.

It is because of Gloucester’s suicide attempt that Shakespeare demonstrates the belief in justice. After Gloucester, the former Earl before his son Edmund, has his eyes gouged out, his faith in justice is demonstrated when he says, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for sport” (4.1.4). Gloucester believes that the gods can impact circumstances of their lives. Not only does he blame them for his injustice, but he believes them to be unnecessarily cruel, as little boys might swat at flies. His belief is challenged when his other son, Edgar, leads him on a false journey to the cliffs of Dover. Edgar tricks his father into believing he fell from the cliff and that a demon had saved him. He says, “Therefore, thou happy father, Think that the clearest gods, who make them honours Of men’s impossibilities, have preserved thee” (3.6.84-86). Here, clearly, Shakespeare has had a change of heart; he vies for justice now because of the wrong done to Gloucester. For Gloucester might have easily met his end at the sword of Oswald or a suicide attempt. It does not matter that later Gloucester dies because he is reunited Edgar.

Shakespeare’s demonstrates the belief in justice through King Lear’s epiphany. In the early onset of the play he describes himself as someone, “more sinned against then sinning” (3.2.58-59), even as this was true, one can say that he brought his fate upon himself. But was it justice that he ended up going insane and wandering the countryside? When Lear is in the depths of the storm he has an epiphany, that there are pitiful beggars suffering in the storm, he realizes, “O, I have ta'en too little care of this! Take physic, pomp; Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, That thou mayst shake the superflux to them, And show the heavens more just” (3.1.23-26). Here Shakespeare is showing the justice of a king brought to poverty to experience how his poor people feel. Lear has gained some humanity since being king and even repents for his thoughtlessness while ruling. He says he should feel what they are feeling and that justice is served through him staying and experiencing the storm.
Shakespeare’s belief in justice is demonstrated through the deaths of the characters. The duke of Cornwall is killed by a wound from a servant after gouging Gloucester’s eyes out, and both daughter’s of King Lear meet their timely end as well, serving a role in Shakespeare’s idea of fate. It is the death of Edmund that strikes deeply. As Edgar battles a duel with him and soon wins, he says, “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us. The dark and vicious place where thee he got cost him his eyes” (5.3.187-191). This implies that Edmund got what he deserves and what Edgar feels like divine justice, and to that note, Shakespeare. Edgar also mentions Gloucester, how his father’s misdeeds from the past were why he lost his sight, which is also another form of justice that Shakespeare is trying to convey.

The final outcome of the kingdom serves to demonstrate Shakespeare’s belief in justice. Throughout the turmoil of the play the audience wonders how things will turn out. King Lear is a tragedy yet it cannot just end in death to be very satisfying. Shakespeare decides the fate of the kingdom will turn to the living characters, Edgar, the Earl of Kent, and the Duke of Albany. Albany declares, “All friends shall taste the wages of their virtue and all foes the cup of their deservings” (5.3.92-94). This captures the audience’s attention, for when it comes to where Shakespeare stands with justice, this is a strong argument. That the good will overcome through the madness and be rewarded, while the corrupt reap what they sowed. Edgar and Kent, perhaps the most loyal, sacrificing characters in the play obtain the entire kingdom of Britain for the works, and the evil characters are dead. Gloucester and Lear both die seeing the children they rejected and the only character left is Cordelia. Although her death can be explained in so many different ways, it might serve as part of the order of the natural world, for good to overcome there has to be a sacrifice. Perhaps justice was not forgotten in the end after all.

Shakespeare demonstrates the belief in justice through the combination of Gloucester’s suicide attempt, Lear’s epiphany, the deaths of the characters, and the final outcome of the kingdom. It is these factors that highlight how justice is depicted throughout the play. At different intervals Shakespeare ranges from scorning justice, through Gloucester’s suicide attempt and Cordelia’s death, to representing it in all its glory, through the final outcome of the kingdom and everyone else’s death. Shakespeare could suggest that the one of the only ways to have justice is through the just acts of people themselves. In Shakespeare’s own life he questioned it, and maybe that is why so many people find justice fascinating enough to base countless comic superheroes off the idea. It is just that important.
King Lear I am a man more sinned against than sinning. To what extent do you agree with Lear's statement above? Discuss Lear's role in the play and explore his journey from tyrant to humility and death.

A question that is often asked in relation to King Lear, Is Lear a man more sinned against than sinning? Firstly, there can be little doubt in anyone's mind that Lear is a man with many flaws. It is also important to consider that the entire predisposition of the play is to cause the reader to discount Lear's failings and to regard him with compassion, sympathy and understanding: Royal Lear, Whom I have ever honoured as my king, Loved as my father, as my master followed As my great patron thought on in my prayers. One major factor in Shakespeare's portrayal of Lear is that all the characters we admire look on the King's situation from his perspective, and this is clearly what Shakespeare wants us to do also. We are compelled to see Lear as a man more sinned against than sinning. Lear inspires great loyalty; Cordelia, Kent, the Fool and Gloucester all risk their lives to aid Lear. They stand by him even when he rejects them. They recognise the good in him and serve to remind us of it. His faults and failings are not the things we are invited to concentrate on. But, however much Shakespeare tries to magnify Lear's accomplishments, I find it hard not to see his faults. As Lear bears the status of King he is, as one expects, a man of great power but sinfully he surrenders all of this power to his daughters as a reward for their demonstration of false love towards him. This untimely abdication of his throne results in a chain reaction of events that send him through a journey of hell.

Lear's tragic flaw is the division of his kingdom and his inability to see the true natures of people because of his pride while his scathing anger is also shown to override his judgement. He displays inadequacies as a father through lack of knowledge concerning the true characters of all his daughters, and as King through the sudden dividing of his land. The sins committed against Lear are as a result of his personal faults of rashness, blindness, and foolishness. In my opinion, up to the point where Lear states that he is a man more sinned against than sinning, he doesn't deserve much of our sympathy. He is ignorant to the true feelings and intentions of his closest family members. When Regan and Goneril shower him with false praises and declarations of their love, he egotistically believes them and bases his division of the kingdom on their deceitful words, Sir, I love you more than words Can wield the matter. His illogical decisions cause chaos in the kingdom. All of his faults provoke others to commit sins against him. Of course, two of his daughters are ungrateful and hate him, but we have to ask the question, why? Regan makes a reference to events leading up to the love test and paints us a vague picture of what life was like with Lear. He always loved our sister most, referring to Cordelia. This comment
carries a tinge of bitterness and she is probably jealous of Cordelia and full of contempt for Lear. Obviously Goneril and Regan are not characters with the most reliable information and they may be twisting the truth. Good and pure characters such as Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar will only try to see the good in people. Kent is brimming with patriotism and refuses to see Lear’s faults. His patriotic tendencies make him blind. Even after Lear banishes him he persists to honour him. Cordelia, we know, has always been loved by her father and she may be oblivious to Lear’s dark side. Whereas Goneril and Regan seem to know what he’s like, such unconstant starts are we like to have from him as this of Kents banishment implying that Lear is prone to these tantrums and bursts of bad judgement. Lear isn’t all bad. It is during madness when Lear commences to change in character, by starting to recognise his past mistakes. The storm is a metaphor of Lear’s madness, being a parallel to the mental conflict of Lear. His actions have led him to improperly govern his land, and through the storm nature reproduces the same anarchy.

Lear realises that he cannot control his surroundings, you owe me no subscription which he yells to the storm. But there is partial acknowledgement of his sins, through his proposal, Singe my white head Lear’s realisations about nature are his first steps to greater self-awareness. Lear is initially extremely vengeful, becoming obsessed with the ingratitude of his daughters and the concept of personal justice. Lear still shows egotism and a non-recognition of his sins when he proclaims, I am a man more sinned against Than sinning Although still submerged in madness, a positive change in Lear’s character is evident when he is concerned about the Fool, In, boy; go first. You houseless poverty Realising the necessity of shelter. Lear realises that he is suffering for his past mistakes, but he is still engulfed by madness, I am cut to the brain Lear’s insanity is a learning process, because he needs to suffer to understand himself and his surroundings better. Lear’s meeting with Cordelia signifies his return to sanity and clearer vision on his behalf concerning his prior transgressions. He is portrayed as being more humble, loving and perceptive, realising, I am a very foolish fond old man When British forces capture Cordelia and Lear, he is philosophical. Through his rendezvous with Cordelia, it is evident that Lear is no longer the harsh and critical person at the beginning of the play, but rather self-critical and humble. Throughout the play though, he persists to be vengeful. When Goneril confronts him for the first time, he is so angry that he curses her and wishes vengeance to be done, Into her womb convey sterility! He goes on like this to the bitter end. Cordelias death, in the closing moments of Act 5, suggest that his regeneration has not, after all been complete. A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all! I killed the slave that was a hanging thee I have seen the day, with
my good biting falchier I would have made them skip. But the main question here is, are Lear's sins greater than that of his daughters. In my opinion, they balance each other out. The two sisters may show ingratitude, cruelty and harshness, but these characteristic flaws are on par with Lear's own. Lear gained our sympathy at the end of Act 2, when his daughters turned against him, This house is little: the old man and his people Can not be well bestowed. But Lear gives as good as he gets and makes his second huge mistake by persisting to be stubborn and not decreasing his train, What! Must I come to you with five-and-twenty? Lear knows deep down that he has no power and he desperately wants to hold onto his knights as they are the last reminders of his reign. In all honesty, Lear could have faced the consequences and compromised with Goneril and Regan, but he refuses to obey them, even though it was he who gave them power. Goneril and Regan's actions may be harsh but there is an underlying bitterness towards their father and after Lear proclaims that he gave them all he had, Regan replies, And in good time you gave it. This brings us back to the question of why Regan and Goneril hate him so much. I believe that they were not born that way although Lear tries to shake all responsibility for them and claims they are like no evil on earth, Nor rain, wind, thunder or fire are my daughters Even at the end of the play when we believe Lear to be a good, compassionate man who takes responsibility for his actions, If you have poison for me, I will drink it. He point blank refuses to realise that his actions and words towards Regan and Goneril, were as cruel as their words to him, Degenerate bastard! Goneril and Regan do not deserve our sympathy, as they are on higher ground and in a position to disown Lear, but their actions are just, if overboard. As well as the references to life with Lear before the love test, we must analyse the behaviour of Lear which provoked Goneril to confront him. In Act 1 Scene 3, Goneril and her servant, Oswald, exchange words about Lear, and Goneril finds out that Lear struck Oswald, for chiding his fool. Goneril goes on to explain how Lear constantly misbehaves and takes advantage of her house, Every hour, he flashes into one gross crime or another His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids Us on every trifle. One might say that Lear is entitled to do these things as King, but Goneril reminds us, Idle old man, that still would manage those Authorities that he hath given away Even after the Fools advice which suggests that Lear be careful and have more wisdom, Have more than thou showest, Speak less than thou knowest Lear wont face the consequences of his sins. He is an old man and has no excuse for being so blind, except that he is egotistical, full of pride and foolish. The Fool even chastises him for being so immature, Thou shouldst not have been old Before thou hadst been wise. Lear's suffering was not in vain as some might think. He was
reconciled with Cordelia, and forgiven. When he regains sanity, he is a much wiser and enhanced man, father and king.

It is misleading to suggest that he is converted during the course of the play from a proud, fierce, egotist to a patient, suffering Christian martyr. To the end he can't conceive that it might have been his own fault that Goneril and Regan hate him. He tells Cordelia that she must not love him because he banished and disowned her, but her sisters have no cause for their behaviour, I know you do not love me; for your sisters have not. He won't face his failings as a father to Goneril and Regan and solely focuses on Cordelia, maybe because she did him no wrong, no disrespect. I said it before and I will say it again, Lear made this famous quote, I am a man more sinned against than sinning before his change to a humbler man. When he proclaimed that famous line he was still the egotistical, proud, rash man that we knew at the start of the play who wouldn't accept responsibility for his actions. The Lear we know at the end of the play would not say these words as he knows that it is untrue and is a false comment. I disagree with the statement and the changed Lear would too.

**Appearance and reality in King Lear**

The theme of appearance versus reality is a reoccurring one throughout the play of *King Lear* by William Shakespeare. As Shakespeare demonstrates, nothing is as it seems. There is an evident difference between reality as opposed to appearance. Reality is what is, as opposed to what seems to be. Appearance is a reflection of what is observed, it is an image or interpretation. Appearance is an imagination, while reality is an actual existence. In *King Lear* there are many characters that appear to be, what in reality, they are not. Since one cannot see into another's character, you can never identify someone for who they truly are. The following characters present themselves falsely, either to gain an advantage, or to reveal truth; Goneril and Regan, Edmund, and The Fool. These character's appear to be what, without a doubt, they are not.

Goneril and Regan first appear to Lear as loving daughters. In reality, they are selfish daughters who deceive their father for their own personal gain. They both trick Lear into believing they love him the most, when in reality it is Cordelia who loves Lear, virtuously, the most. It does not occur to Lear that Goneril and Regan may be exaggerating, or that their profession might be co.

Lastly, we have the Fool who appears to be a dumb, foolish, jester. In reality, the Fool is very wise. He serves as Lear's inner conscience throughout the play. His role is as a tutor to Lear. The Fool knows all of Lear's faults and he tries to offer Lear insight and reveal truth. Throughout the play, the Fool observes the disorder that Lear has not
only caused to himself but also to his entire kingdom, while constant references made by him sarcastically indicate Lear’s foolishness. The Fool tries to help Lear feel better about what is going on by putting a humorous spin on the words he is saying. The Fool uses poetry and song to get his point across to Lear. He helps Lear realize where he went wrong, he reveals truth to Lear. “She will taste as like this as a crab does to a crab.” (Act 1, Scene 5, Line 18, the Fool). This little verse reveals truth to Lear, telling him that if he thinks that Regan is unlike Goneril, he is wrong. The Fool indicates that Regan’s nature will be no different from Goneril’s. The Fool is partially comparable to Cordelia, in that he is a truth-teller like her and is firmly obedient to Lear. The Fool is not just a servant to Lear but he is also a friend and the son Lear never had. The name “Fool” means nothing. The Fool is the most Edmund appears to all as a fine young gentleman who is loyal and brave. In reality, Edmund is a cunning, devious, opportunist who will stop at nothing to please himself. Gloucester and many others are tricked by Edmund’s appearance. What Gloucester does not see or refuse to see, is the hatred Edmund has for him because of his cavalier treatment of him. Edmund wants all control of Gloucester’s money and power. Edmund fools both Edgar and Gloucester, destroying both their characters. Edmund turns them against each other, causing chaos and destruction in the natural universe.
King Lear – A Tragic Hero? Tragedy is defined by Aristotle as, “an enactment of a deed that is important and complete, and of [a certain] magnitude, by means of language enriched [with ornaments], each used separately in the different parts [of the play]: it is enacted, not [merely] recited, and through pity and fear it effects relief to such [and similar] emotions.” (Poetics, VI 1449b 2-3) [In other words, a man of noble stature, with outstanding quality and greatness about him.] His own destruction is caused by a character flaw, which inspires fear, but it is for a greater cause or principle. King Lear is a Tragic Hero in my opinion, for he follows the characteristics of Aristotle’s definition. We should be able to identify ourselves with the tragic hero if he is to inspire fear, because we should be able to relate that what happens to him could happen to us. If Lear were completely evil, we would not be fearful of what happens to him: he would be just vile. Lear does inspire fear because, like us, he is not completely upright for when he asks his daughters, “Which of you shall we say doth love us most? That we our largest bounty may extend/ Where nature doth merit challenge” (King Lear 1:1:52-54), nor is he completely wicked which we know when Cordelia says, “Good my Lord, You have begot me, bred me, loved me” (King Lear 1:1:98-99). The fact that a man of such stature, a King of great land, is still vulnerable to great failure also allows the audience to realize that if something so horrible can happen to him it could also happen to them. He is foolish and arrogant, but becomes humble and compassionate. He is wrathful, but becomes patient, so, because of his good qualities, we experience pity for him and feel that he does not entirely deserve the severity of his punishment. His actions are not because of corruption or depravity in him, but because of an error in judgment, which, arises from a defect in his character. Lear has hamartia (otherwise known as a tragic flaw) which we see toward Cordelia and extend to Kent, his most loyal servant. “See better, Lear, and let me still remain/ The true blank of thine eye” (King Lear 1:1:160-161). This tragic flaw is hubris or, in other words, pride. It is his pride in the first scene that causes him to make his error in judgment - the division of his kingdom and the loss of Cordelia. Throughout the rest of the play, the consequences of his actions increase, at first by the cruel treatment of his daughters, “Th’ untented woundings of a father’s curse/ Pierce every sense about thee!” (King Lear 1:4:297-298), to the point of no return, until finally Lear and the things he most cares about are destroyed, “Is this the promised end?” (King Lear 5:3:263). There must be a change in the tragic hero he must fall from happiness to misery. Lear, as seen in Act I, has everything a man should want - wealth, power, peace, and a state of well-being. Then, after reaching the pinnacle of happiness, the disasters that befall him are so unexpected that it directly contrasts his previous state, with complete despondency. The tragedies suffered throughout the play were not for naught, for good can come from bad. Every hardship and madness that
occurred was observed by Edgar who learned from the fact that the tragic hero, King Lear, gained insight through suffering, as we see him do when he asks Cordelia for forgiveness; “You must bear with me. Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish” (KingLear 4:7:83-84) and so Edgar gains insight through Lear’s suffering. Neither Lear nor Gloucester realizes he has committed an error until he has suffered. It is when he is in grave health that he fully realizes his mistake in giving the kingdom to his two savage daughters and disowning the one daughter who loves him. It is not until Gloucester has been blinded that he learns the truth about his two sons. Through the mistakes of great men, King Lear and Edgar’s father, Gloucester, that Edgar is now able to truly rule England with a wiser head on his shoulders, as we see when he says at the end, “The weight of this sad time we must obey,/ Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (KingLear 5:3:324). In my opinion, I felt that a tragic hero must not be all good or all bad, but just by misfortune he is deprived of something very valuable to him by error of judgment. King Lear is an exemplary Tragic Hero because his tragic flaw has an effect not only on his family, but as the king he disrupts the society as a whole. King Lear is great, imperfect, and is dealt by the hand of fate a severe punishment. The tragedy draws the sympathy of an audience and thus King Lear is undeniably a tragic hero.
DEATH OF CORDELIA--KING LEAR: “King Lear” is one of the greatest dramas written by Shakespeare. It is a poetic tragedy in which the good as well as bad characters play their role. King Lear has three daughters; Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Cordelia is the youngest daughter. She is an important character of the play. In the last act, she is hanged and her death seems unjustified. But it is not true. Shakespeare changed his source material to give his “King Lear” a tragic ending. Thus there is the defeat of Cordelia’s army, the imprisonment of Lear and Cordelia, and Cordelia’s murder in the prison. This tragic end did not find favour with some critics who felt Corpdelia’s death is unjustified. The other school of thought however feels that dramatic inevitability demands the death of Cordelia. Before justifying Cordelia’s death, it is necessary to understand some points of her nature. In the first Act of the Play, when it is Cordelia’s turn to tell her father how much she loves him, she surprises everybody by saying that she has “nothing” to say. In this context when asked by her father if she has really nothing to say, Cordelia repeats the word “nothing”. Lear then tells her: “Nothing will come of nothing.” Cordelia elaborates the reply she has already given. She says that he as her father, has brought her up and loved her and that in return she has always obeyed, loved and honoured him. She says that when she gets married, half of her love will go to her husband and remaining half for her father. This reply irritates Lear and he disinherits her. Then the Duke of Burgundy refuses to marry her on being told that she will bring him no dowry at all. Cordelia makes a dignified remark: “Peace be with Burgundy! Since, that respect of fortune are his love, I shall not be his wife.” We also see that she has a deep love for her father. Later in the play, when Cordelia and Lear are united, she looks after him in his illness. When Lear says that she has sufficient cause to be annoyed with him, she says: “No cause, no cause.” It is a touching moment in the play. As a consequence of a plot hatched by Edmond, Cordelia is hanged, and we then see Lear carrying her dead body. The death of Cordelia comes as a shock to all of us. To justify her death, we should look at the weakness of her nature. The whole conduct of Cordelia in the opening scene shows that she is a woman of few words. She is by nature reticent. She does not believe in showing off her affections for her father. At the same time, we cannot deny that this incapacity on her part to express her love for her father is a fault in her nature. If the old man wanted to gratify his dignity, Cordelia should have come out with some sort of assurance that she loved her father deeply because sometimes it is better for a person to express his love in words in order to satisfy the other person. There was no need for her to be as blunt as she has proved to be. Her father is aware that she loves him the best but he wants to hear her speak about her love; and her failure to speak annoys him greatly. Thus the fault is not entirely on Lear’s side; Cordelia cannot completely be exonerated. Her sere nature proves to be the, cause of Lear’s
undoing (ruin) and her undoing too. Later on, when she comes to fight against the British Forces, she makes it clear that it is not on account of any military ambition or any desire for conquest that this invasion is taking place but on account of her love for her father and for the restoration of his rights to him. Thus it cannot be another fault because she could succeed in her purpose by some other means than by fighting. Bradley rightly points out that Cordelia suffers from a tragic imperfection. It is true that she is deeply wronged by Lear in the opening scene, but we cannot assert that she was wholly rigid in her behaviour. At a moment, when a momentous issue is under discussion, Fate makes on her the one demand which she is unable to meet. It is a demand which other heroine of Shakespeare’s plays could have met. They could have made the old, unreasonable king feel that he was loved fondly by them. But Cordelia could not do so because she is Cordelia. We neither blame her, nor justify her completely; we simply experience the tragic emotions of pity. It is noteworthy that Cordelia is not always reticent; she is not always tongue-tied as several passages show in the play. But tender emotion, for her father makes her dumb as she says: “Unhappy that I am; I cannot heave My heart into my mouth.” But this particular trait in Cordelia’s nature is the only cause of Lear’s rage in the opening scene. When he asks her to mend her speech a little, she gives him a lengthy answer saying that half of her love will go her husband and that she cannot “love her father all”. Now even if she is speaking the truth here, she is not speaking the absolute truth because to give love to a husband cannot mean taking away any part of love from a father. Her responsibility for tragic events cannot be denied. Through her tragic imperfection, she contributes something to the conflict. While the tragedy is largely due to Lear’s own fault, it is in no small measure due to a deficiency in Cordelia. As the dying Lear gives us a perfect picture of her nature in a few Words: “Her voice was ever soft; gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.” She is a loving daughter as in the play it has been said: “Thou hast one daughter, Who redeems nature from the general curse Which twain have brought her to.” Mrs. Jameson compares Cordelia as the heroine of filial tenderness, with the self-devotion of Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, saying: “To Antigone, we give our admiration; to Cordelia our tears.” Dr Johnson felt that the tragic ending of “KINGLEAR”, especially the death of Cordelia, violates poetic justice (the virtuous to be rewarded and the wicked to be punished). Besides, he felt that is the play, the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry (be unsuccessful). The very conception of a Shakespearean tragedy cannot be squared with such a simple theory of poetic justice of the reward due to virtue. The wages of sin is always death though the reward of virtue is not always happiness. Cordelia’s death is a final crushing blow inflicted upon the repentant King. A tragedy in which everything can be explained and justified is not a
tragedy at all. Dr Bradley is of the opinion that the end is to be tragic, it is bound to be completed with the death of Cordelia. It was not possible for Shakespeare to have given King Lear peace and happiness at Cordelia’s fireside. We cannot dissociate Lear from Cordelia and think of one surviving the other. Lear’s fate, therefore, involves the fate of Cordelia. Her death is sacrificial, and upon such sacrifices whatever gods there may be pour their incense. Goodness and wickedness are each its reward and a true reward--- that reconciles us to the close of tragedies in which the great suffer, Lear and Cordelia are more victims than offenders. The death of Cordelia constitutes an appropriate ending for the play. Some critics are of the opinion that this death makes the play too sad. Nahum Tate went to the extent of altering the event at the end in order to give it a happy ending. But a happy ending to the play would not really be suitable. Cordelia’s death seems to be gratuitous (uncalled-for) but in tragedy, the suffering of a good character is always excessive. Therefore, if Cordelia meets her death in spite of her being innocent, we should not protest against the author’s judgment. The divine forces are not unjust. It should be remembered that it is human error that has brought about the sufferings of Lear and Cordelia; fate has little role in the matter. Cordelia’s dumbness caused all her suffering--- that indeed is a concept of justice few can quarrel with, and her death makes her character memorable.
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at left him in this scene
Write an essay which explores Shakespeare’s interest in the theme of “blindness” in the play as a whole.

King Lear is a play not just one man’s terrible decisions and how their effects return to haunt him, not just about a man in power who's position amplifies the severity of these actions, but also about a man who once he has made a mistake, never attempts to rectify it and compounds and worsens the mistake almost to the moment of his death. Shakespeare uses the many images of sight and blindness throughout the play to heighten the drama of the play and draw attention to certain character’s actions and behaviour.

The primary way Shakespeare portrays this theme is through the characters Lear and Gloucester. These are the two fatherly types in the play, both without a duchess or queen to keep them company. They have both single-handedly raised their children for a large part, and this in part has forced them both to undertake the role of both mother and father, creating a different relationship between father and children. Shakespeare even uses this fractured relationship to reflect, and are reflected, by wider events in the play for example at the end of [ACT2 SCENE4: 277 Storm and Tempest] reflect the previous quarrel between father and daughter. The children eager for their inheritance, are waiting for their fathers to die. Lear badly mis-manages this eagerness, giving away his kingdom to the daughters who have ‘sucked-up’ to him before he has died and not to his loyal daughter, leaving himself vulnerable: without his inheritance, there is no reason for Goneril and Reagan to be nice to their father. Gloucester’s inheritance, and Edmond’s impatience for it, drives his son to plot and scheme against him. The relationship between Cordelia and Lear is particularly notable. Because of the Kings age, and the difference between Cordelia’s and his own he is almost a Grandfatherly figure, and their relationship has some of the qualities of a relationship between a grandfather and a favourite granddaughter. He has a soft spot for her; he lets her have the last declaration of love [ACT1 SCENE1] so that if she were to play to his challenge, she would be in a perfect position to trump both her sisters. Cordelia however says she loves Lear [ACT1 SCENE1: “According to my bond’”] Lear does not understand the obliged love of a family, the love that should be understood between a father and his daughter, and for this reason treats this statement as an insult. Both Lear and Gloucester appear to have a fatal character flaw that blinds them to both the consequences of their actions and in many cases blinds them to the truth. They lack the quality of insight, of perception, to see through a situation to the truth within.

The play starts almost immediately with the blindness of one of these two characters. This example here is nothing on the scale of the gruesome physical blinding that he will receive later in the play, but is
an example of metaphorical blindness. In the opening moments of the first scene, the significance of which are often overlooked, Gloucester is speaking to Kent about whom the King will give the most of his kingdom to, and he makes a harsh joke about his son’s paternity. [ACT1 SCENE1: 8] Gloucester: “His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge”...
18] Gloucester: “yet his mother was fair, there was good sport at his making”, Gloucester is completely blind to the repercussions that his treatment of Edmond will have on him later in the play. By humiliating him in public on such an embarrassing matter that Gloucester takes only lightly heartedly, he sets the evil of Edmond against him. The irony is that later Edmond will hoodwink him, blind him from the truth about his other son, and manipulate him to put a price on that son’s, Edgar’s, head. The irony is taken even further in that Gloucester’s blindness there will leave him physically blinded by two evil characters later in the play. Edmond performs the hoodwinking of his father through stage magic and clever psychological trickery. He appears to want to hide the letter to spark his father’s curiosity. He then allows its forged content in Edgar’s hand to be read and its implications absorbed by his father, but then solidifies his father’s belief that it is true by appearing to defend his brother. Here we see just how flawed Gloucester’s character is and how similar it is to Lear. Having seen the letter, he does not stop for one moment to consider that this was not in Edgar’s character to do such a thing, or if there was any other evidence before this to support it. This exchange really highlights a point by Shakespeare that sight is not merely vision (the letter appears to be written by Edgar, but is a forgery) but is about perception and penetrating judgement to see truth objectively.
In the rest of the first scene, a father’s blindness to the ramifications of his actions is repeated as Lear attempts to divide his kingdom between his daughters. First, Lear is blind enough to not see though the blatant lies of his two elder daughters. Then, through this same character flaw, he does not see the wisdom, truth and purity of Cordelia’s speech. He banishes her. Lear then cannot perceive see how his maltreatment of Cordelia will backfire upon him. Nor does he see how foolish it will have been to entrust his whole kingdom to his two evil daughters. Kent, a loyal subject of Lear, warns Lear of the stupidity of his actions, both of banishing Cordelia and of dividing his kingdom. Lear is completely blind to his actions here and Shakespeare emphasises this with an exchange between Kent and Lear. [ACT1 SCENE1: 153] Lear: “Out of my sight”!
154] Kent: “See better, Lear, and let me still remain the true blank of thine eye.” Lear then makes another blind and stupid decision and banishes Kent too from the kingdom. His is completely ignorant of where his loyalties lie in this scene. He has swallowed the lies from his two eldest daughters, has banished his only loyal daughter and now banishes his most loyal servant.
Kent does however, through pure loyalty to his King, return in disguise to aid and assist King Lear from within his court. The fact, though, that Lear cannot recognise his most loyal servant in a simple costume draws attention again to Lear’s blindness. Not only can he not perceive the truth, see clearly, but he can also not recognise a close friend either from his physical appearance nor his character. Lear soon see’s however, regarding his daughters, to the extent the two eldest were lying. While staying with Gonerill, she became irritated by the number and behaviour of Lear’s followers and tells her servants, notably Oswald, to behave disrespectfully to him. Lear first mocks Oswald which turns out to be another blind decision later in the play as Oswald will be vengeful. Lear then attacks her for her ingratitude towards him for giving her half his kingdom, giving her life and defends his follower’s honour. In his speech against Cordelia he curses her with infertility. He is blind here in his ignorance that if he curses Gonerill with no children, he is also cursing himself with no grandchildren. It is another example of Lear’s lack of forethought for the consequences of his words and actions, even though this curse never happens. Despite Lear’s complete metaphorical blindness for the majority of the play, he is helped by his fool to see some truth and vision. However the Fool is never as plain speaking as Kent was in conveying his advice, and quite wisely so given Kent’s fate, but speaks in riddles and conundrums that Lear must work out for himself. There are many evil characters in the play, and it seems that those evil characters rely on a lack of understanding, knowledge and insight to propagate their evil plans. Edmond again deceives his father in Act II Scene 2 by cutting his own arm. This is also the extent evil is willing to go to blind the ‘good’ for their own ends. To convince his father of Edgar’s treachery, again exploit this fatal character flaw of Gloucester: lack of insight, he is willing deeply, to wound physically himself. This blindness that evil uses as its main weapon is not limited to being used on the ‘good’ but evil blinds evil as well. Blindness will also destroy evil towards the end of the play, as the darker characters trust other dark characters who turn on each other. Eventually, evil implodes: the sisters Gonerill and Reagan will destroy each other in their attempts to woo Edmond. Albany too experiences blindness in the play. Like Lear’s and Gloucester’s his too is that of not being able to identify evil characters. He was blinded by his devotion to Gonerill and could not recognize her evil character. He stood by while Gonerill maltreated her father, throwing him out of their home, unable to contest Gonerill’s decisions because of his blindness. He was also blind to the fact that Gonerill was having an affair with Edmond, and was plotting to kill him and marry her lover. Albany’s sight is restored however, by a note meant for Edmond which Edgar finds and shows him. It reveals Gonerill’s intentions and he
has the courage to use his new found insight and shuns Gonerill. King Lear will not be so lucky in that he will receive sight after it is too late. Albany is not the only character to have his sight restored to him. Yes, Albany has to regain moral stature too. The theme of sight and blindness is portrayed to a much greater extent using Gloucester. At the start of the play, he is blind in the metaphorical sense to Edmond’s scheming. It is in Scene 3, act 7 though, that he gains his insight, through losing his physical sight. He would not be able to ‘see’ metaphorically if he had been blind since birth. It is only through the action of him losing his physical sight that he cannot trust it and he has to rely on people’s characters for judgement and it is this requirement for him to examine characters more closely that gives him ‘sight’ and perception.

The act of his blinding is a horrible coordinated effort between two of the plays most evil characters, Reagan and Gloucester. They harmoniously dehumanise him throughout the scene with their evil rivalry. [ACT3 SCENE7: 28] Regan: “Ingrateful fox! ’tis he.”

[ACT3 SCENE7: 29] Cornwall: “Bind fast his corks arms” Even before the act of his blinding, Gloucester still does not have true sight. He says [ACT3 SCENE7: 64-5] Gloucester: “But I shall see The winged vengeance overtake such children.” He would never see vengeance taken on Cornwall at this point and he believed he was about to face his death. In this same speech he also mentions the reasons he sent the king to Dover. The terrible irony of this comment about a torture he feared Lear might endure is that he himself has planted the idea of the method for his own torture in Cornwall’s mind. [ACT3 SCENE7: 56] Gloucester: “Pluck out his poor old eyes” The action itself also gives metaphorical sight to one other man: Cornwall’s servant. Upon seeing this terrible deed he feels obligated to intervene to prevent further horror and to challenge Cornwall. His duty is not to his master, but to a higher ordeal. It is ironic that the blindness here of the evil Cornwall to the consequences of his actions results in his own demise and the clarity of vision, metaphorically, to Gloucester.

During his blinding, Gloucester, as might be expected, protests to Cornwall and Regan. [ACT3 SCENE7: 39] Gloucester: “I am your host.” It is a pitiful attempt at persuading someone not to harm you so why does he say it. Throughout the play, Shakespeare makes distinctions between the values of the older generation, and the values of the new generation. Gloucester, a father, is of the old generation. The old generation stands for old values: of loyalty, convention, tradition; good Christian values. Shakespeare seems here to have a message: do not overthrow your king, else you leave a vacuum of power into which pagan values flood. The idea is strikingly similar to that of Macbeth, where Duncan, the King that represents traditional goodness, is overthrown by a loyal friend, driven by pagan beliefs. This is almost a
parallel to Edmond’s plot to gain his father’s inheritance; those that are in power are overthrown by those they trust. The horrors than ensue in Macbeth are exactly what Shakespeare is warning against here. In Shakespeare’s time it would also have been unthinkable for a guest to treat a host wrongly. They are even superstitious; in act 1 Scene 2 Gloucester mentions “these late eclipses” as a warning. Shakespeare portrays the new generation as having no morals, the opposite values of the old generation: pagan values. Edmond makes references in his speech in Act 1 Scene 2 in his famous line when he asks “gods stand up for bastards” not God, singular, Christian. But gods with a small ‘g’. Edmond represents the pagan values of the play.

The Gloucester after the blinding is immediately a different man. He immediately see’s that Edgar is his good son and the malevolence of Edmond has forced him to treat Edgar so badly. [ACT3 SCENE7: 90] Gloucester; “O, my follies! Then Edgar was abused.”

Gloucester enters Act 4 as a liberated man. He has developed sight, perception and understanding of the situation. However, he is still unaware of Edgar’s disguise as mad Tom. This leaves Edgar in a horribly ironic situation. He cannot reveal himself without ‘twisting the knife’ into his father’s wounds and showing that he is even purer morally than his father knows and had been even more mistaken originally when he was fooled by Edmond. The second side of the irony is that even if Edgar were to reveal himself, there would be no way that Gloucester could know he was Edgar, prove he was Edgar, because of his physical blindness. Edgar watches as his father asks him to lead him to the highest cliff of Dover and leave him to kill himself. Edgar cannot watch his father die, and so he embarks on an elaborate psychological charade, playing on his father’s new blindness. The play now concerns its self with any individual’s capacity to endure pain for someone they love and who can do nothing about it. It becomes a play about Edgar’s belief and hope, against the blindness of his father.

It is after Edgar has performed the psychological game with his father that Lear enters the scene. It is notable that despite his absolute madness, he is completely self-aware of what his daughters have done to him. Lear is the least lucky of himself and Gloucester in that he does not receive true vision, insight and perception as Gloucester does through his physical blinding, before it is too late. At this point in the play is beginning to acquire a certain degree of sight. This becomes more and more apparent as the scene develops. Lear says in Act 4 Scene 5 line 168: “Thou must be patient. We came crying hither. Thou know’st the first time that we smell the air we wawl and cry.” He has accepted the cycle of life, has learned and has developed as a human. It has taken nearly the whole play for it to happen, and we know control of his fate is now out of his hands.
When evil begins to crumble under its own vicious behaviour, there is again a knowledge gradient between characters. In Act 5 Scene 3 when Edmond accepts Edgar in place of Albany as a duelling opponent, he does not know it is his own brother. It is this lack of knowledge, blindness, combined with his over-confidence that results in his death. Albany also confronts Gonerill as she tries to seize the dying Edmond before her sister. He has allowed Regan and Gonerill, his own wife, to fight in front of him over Edmond and he only put a stop to it when Regan tried to marry Edmond. In the last moments of Edmond’s life Albany says to Gonerill Act 5 Scene 3 line 144: “Shut your mouth, dame, or with this paper shall I stop it”. He has finally been given the strength to see the character of his wife, ironically through her own actions. Evil has destroyed itself.

The play, as a whole, is greatly complimented and underscored by the images of sight and blindness. They are not merely tools to enhance the dramatic effectiveness of the play, but also bring to attention some of the key themes and messages of the play. Shakespeare uses them to great effect.
One of the most motivating intangible forces is justice. It inspires millions of stories where the hero of the story prevails and intricate court systems that are fueled by the belief in justice. In the play, *King Lear* written by William Shakespeare justice is one of the most prevalent themes, in fact it seems to be the major focus of the play itself. It is as if Shakespeare is asking himself whether justice exists or not. Scholars have debated on the subject in divine justice in *King Lear* because of what seems to be his most tragic play, most agree that Shakespeare demonstrates the belief in justice though, despite the play’s bleak ending. He does this through Gloucester’s suicide attempt, King Lear’s epiphany, the final outcome of the kingdom, and the deaths of the characters.

It is because of Gloucester’s suicide attempt that Shakespeare demonstrates the belief in justice. After Gloucester, the former Earl before his son Edmund, has his eyes gouged out, his faith in justice is demonstrated when he says, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for sport” (4.1.4). Gloucester believes that the gods can impact circumstances of their lives. Not only does he blame them for his injustice, but he believes them to be unnecessarily cruel, as little boys might swat at flies. His belief is challenged when his other son, Edgar, leads him on a false journey to the cliffs of Dover. Edgar tricks his father into believing he fell from the cliff and that a demon had saved
him. He says, “Therefore, thou happy father, Think that the clearest
gods, who make them honours. Of men's impossibilities, have
preserved thee” (3.6.84-86). Here, clearly, Shakespeare has had a
change of heart; he vies for justice now because of the wrong done to
Gloucester. For Gloucester might have easily met his end at the sword
of Oswald or a suicide attempt. It does not matter that later Gloucester
dies because he is reunited Edgar.

Shakespeare’s demonstrates the belief in justice through King
Lear's epiphany. In the early onset of the play he describes himself as
someone, “more sinned against then sinning” (3.2.58-59), even as this
was true, one can say that he brought his fate upon himself. But was it
justice that he ended up going insane and wandering the
countryside? When Lear is in the depths of the storm he has an
epiphany, that there are pitiful beggars suffering in the storm, he
realizes, “O, I have ta'en too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, That thou mayst shake the
superflux to them, And show the heavens more just” (3.1.23-26). Here
Shakespeare is showing the justice of a king brought to poverty to
experience how his poor people feel. Lear has gained some humanity
since being king and even repents for his thoughtlessness while ruling.
He says he should feel what they are feeling and that justice is served
through him staying and experiencing the storm.

Shakespeare’s belief in justice is demonstrated through the
deaths of the characters. The duke of Cornwall is killed by a wound
from a servant after gouging Gloucester’s eyes out, and both daughter’s of King Lear meet their timely end as well, serving a role in Shakespeare’s idea of fate. It is the death of Edmund that strikes deeply. As Edgar battles a duel with him and soon wins, he says, “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices make instruments to plague us. The dark and vicious place where thee he got cost him his eyes” (5.3.187-191). This implies that Edmund got what he deserves and what Edgar feels like divine justice, and to that note, Shakespeare. Edgar also mentions Gloucester, how his father’s misdeeds from the past were why he lost his sight, which is also another form of justice that Shakespeare is trying to convey.

The final outcome of the kingdom serves to demonstrate Shakespeare’s belief in justice. Throughout the turmoil of the play the audience wonders how things will turn out. King Lear is a tragedy yet it cannot just end in death to be very satisfying. Shakespeare decides the fate of the kingdom will turn to the living characters, Edgar, the Earl of Kent, and the Duke of Albany. Albany declares, “All friends shall taste the wages of their virtue and all foes the cup of their deservings” (5.3.92-94). This captures the audience’s attention, for when it comes to where Shakespeare stands with justice, this is a strong argument. That the good will overcome through the madness and be rewarded, while the corrupt reap what they sow. Edgar and Kent, perhaps the most loyal, sacrificing characters in the play obtain the entire kingdom of Britain for the works, and the evil characters are dead. Gloucester and
Lear both die seeing the children they rejected and the only character left is Cordelia. Although her death can be explained in so many different ways, it might serve as part of the order of the natural world, for good to overcome there has to be a sacrifice. Perhaps justice was not forgotten in the end after all.

Shakespeare demonstrates the belief in justice through the combination of Gloucester’s suicide attempt, Lear’s epiphany, the deaths of the characters, and the final outcome of the kingdom. It is these factors that highlight how justice is depicted throughout the play. At different intervals Shakespeare ranges from scorning justice, through Gloucester’s suicide attempt and Cordelia’s death, to representing it in all its glory, through the final outcome of the kingdom and everyone else’s death. Shakespeare could suggest that the one of the only ways to have justice is through the just acts of people themselves. In Shakespeare’s own life he questioned it, and maybe that is why so many people find justice fascinating enough to base countless comic superheroes off the idea. It is just that important.
Superfast Revision

King Lear Revision Guide: Themes

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King Lear Revision Guide Act and Scene summary

1. Lear divides his kingdom
2. Gloucester believes Edmund about Edgar
3. Goneril shows her hatred of Lear
4. Lear curses Goneril
5. Lear rejects Goneril and fears madness

1. Edgar flees. Gloucester’s heart cracks
2. Kent abuses Oswald and is put in the stocks
3. Edgar becomes Tom
4. Regan rejects Lear.
Lear goes mad
1. Kent looks for Lear
2. Lear wanders in the storm
3. Gloucester confides in Edmund
4. Lear confronts the disguised Edgar
5. Edmund betrays Gloucester
6. Lear tries his daughters
7. Gloucester is blinded
1. Edgar encounters Gloucester
2. Albany rebukes Goneril
3. Cordelia learns of Lear’s madness
4. Cordelia talks to the doctor about curing Lear
5. Regan shows her jealousy of Goneril
6. Gloucester jumps off the cliff. Lear confronts Gloucester
7. Cordelia is reunited with Lear
1. The battle is engaged
2. Edgar takes leave of Gloucester
3. Cordelia loses. Virtually all the major characters die
King Lear Revision Notes

King Lear Revision Guide

Power and Responsibility

Lear calls the division of the kingdom ‘our darker purpose’ (I.i.35), a choice of image reflecting Jacobean unease at what he proposes. (James I’s accession brought relief to a nation that had been concerned for years by Elizabeth’s childlessness, and – moreover – united the English and Scottish thrones, the very opposite in effect of what Lear plans. James also put forward the notion of the Divine Right of Kings – that the monarch was God’s anointed representative on Earth; the throne is therefore not – in the eyes of the contemporary audience – something which is Lear’s to give up.) The lack of responsibility is emphasised in Lear’s desire to retain ‘all th’addition to a king’ (137), without any of the duties of rulership. (In comparison, Cordelia’s language is full of references to duty – her own duty as a daughter.) The giving to Cornwall and Albany of a single ‘coronet [to] part between you’ (140) is a visual symbol of the problems of division unrecognised by Lear – and as early as II.i Curan speaks of a rumour of ‘likely wars toward ‘twixt the two dukes of Cornwall and Albany’ (II.i.11-12).

However low Lear sinks, he is still King. Shakespeare uses Kent’s unwavering loyalty as a device to remind the audience that kingship is inalienable and indivisible – as Caius, he says Lear still has ‘that in your countenance which I would fain call master’ (I.iv.27-28), and he remains Lear’s constant follower, though at times the only train he has, to the end. When Lear dies, his own function is complete; as he says in the play’s final moments, ‘I have a journey, sir, shortly to go; My master calls me, I must not say no’ (V.iii.320-321).

Perhaps in order to emphasise the harm that Lear’s division of the kingdom has caused, Shakespeare prevents us from resolving the play into a simple battle between Good and Evil, in which the audience’s sympathies would be easily placed:

- Edgar is initially a credulous character, lacking his brother’s charisma and sexual potency. Later he inexplicably delays revealing himself to Gloucester until he has been brought to the brink of suicide, although he says ‘Why I do trifle thus with his despair/ Is done to cure it’ (IV.vi.33-34) – the old medieval belief in like driving out like. (Perhaps to distance
himself from such desperate measures, he then characterises the figure that brought Gloucester to the top of the cliff as a devil (IV.vi.72), reflecting the traditional view of suicide as sinful and drawing attention to his equivocal role in Gloucester’s life.) Only at the end of the play, in graduating from Oswald to one of his own rank when he challenges Edmund to single-handed combat, does he finally achieve full maturity.

• Cordelia and France’s actions on behalf of Lear are – whatever their intentions – those of a foreign power on English soil: as Goneril asks Albany, ‘Where’s thy drum? France spreads his banners in our noiseless land; With plumed helm thy state begins to threat, ‘Whilst thou, a moral fool, sits still...’ (IV.ii.56-59)

• Albany is presented as an effeminate character in IV.ii, and as one unwilling to take the reins of power in V.iii.

• Kent’s attack on Oswald in II.ii – whatever his loyalty to Lear – is unprovoked and bloody, especially since Oswald is simply doing his job, and indeed remains loyal to Goneril to his dying words in IV.vi.

• Edmund – at least in the first three Acts – is perhaps the play’s most likeable character, behaving as he does out of candid self-interest rather than with the vindictiveness that at times taints Goneril, Regan and Cornwall. At the end of the play, Shakespeare resists any neat sense of order restored. Lear and his three daughters lie together dead on stage, a visual echo of the family group of I.i, reminding us of the play’s overwhelming sense of waste. Edmund – like Iago – has been removed from sight but has yet to be punished. Albany, the highest ranking survivor, who should by convention close the play, first attempts (unsuccessfully) to cede joint power to Edgar and Kent – re-establishing rather than ending the division of power that precipitated the events of the play – and then gives the play’s final decisive words to Edgar while he hovers silently beside him.
In the opening scene, Lear promises to repay the greatest love with ‘our largest bounty’ (I.i.52), the first of many connections between love and money in the play. Goneril (‘dearer’, ‘beyond what can be valued’, ‘rich’, ‘makes breath poor’) and Regan (‘mettle’ (a pun on ‘metal’, i.e. coin), ‘prize’, ‘worth’, ‘deed’, ‘precious’, ‘dear’) in response similarly use the language of money to talk about love, something Cordelia sardonically puns on, in seeing her love as ‘more ponderous [i.e. weightier, and hence worth more, as well as slower to speak] than my tongue’ (78).

Cordelia's emphasis on the word ‘nothing’ in answering her father is a contrast to her sisters' language of money, and a challenge to her father’s attempt to obtain love through patronage. Cordelia’s own language is full of reference to duty, something Goneril and Regan primly scoff at in lines 278-281. (Notice how by II.ii, when Lear tries to play them off against one another, it now suits them to talk of ‘duty’ (329) and ‘obligation’ (331) and no longer of love.) Cordelia, meanwhile, finds sympathy in France who – in a key paradox – calls her ‘most rich being poor’ (I.i.252), and observes:

‘Love’s not love When it is mingled with regards that stands Aloof from th’enire point’ (240-242)

In II.ii, Lear continues to equate money and love – that, in agreeing to provide for more knights than her sister, Goneril’s ‘fifty yet doth double five and twenty,/ And thou art twice her love’ (448-449).

King Lear Revision Guide 5 Knowledge and Blindness

In the first scene, Lear dismisses the two people – Cordelia and Kent – prepared to tell him the truth. Indeed, Kent calls himself ‘the true blank of thine eye’ (I.i.160), introducing the play’s association between sight and knowledge – something chiefly explored in the Gloucester sub-plot. Regan rightly observes that ‘he hath ever but slenderly known himself’ (294-295). When faced with an unpalatable truth – that Regan and Cornwall have stocked his servant Caius (Kent) – Lear simply denies it (II.ii.205-214).

Later, however, Lear begins to search for knowledge rather than
evading it – beginning with his search for ‘the cause of thunder’ (III.iv.151), something proverbially impossible to find. He ultimately comes to accept that he has been flattered and lied to all his life, and is not ‘ague-proof’ (IV.vi.104), and what is striking about his reunion with Cordelia (IV.vii) is his emphasis on what he does not know as much as what he does (IV.vii.55-57, 64-70). His final wish is to spend his remaining years in prison sharing with Cordelia the trivial rather than the important –

‘So we’ll live And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too – Who loses and who wins, who’s in, who’s out’ (V.iii.11-15)

– the picture of a man at last unburdened and in retirement.

In view of this progression, Lear’s final moments are problematic if we see his last words as evidence of a deluded belief that Cordelia is still alive. Preferable, perhaps, is to read them symbolically – that, as the dying Lear joins Cordelia for a life in heaven she once more comes back to life for him and him alone.

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In the Gloucester sub-plot, the main plot’s concern with a father’s blindness to his children’s true natures is repeated, universalising the theme: in the main plot, the suffering that pays for this is psychological, and culminates in the psychological disturbance of madness; in the sub-plot, the suffering that pays for this is physical, and culminates in the physical cruelty of literal blinding.

The blinding of Gloucester – incidentally, a traditional punishment for adultery (and thus poetically appropriate as a punishment) – is significant for its symbolism: that only when he is blind does he gain insight (a paradox parallel to Lear’s madness leading to understanding). ‘I stumbled when I saw’ (IV.i.21), he says. Does this reflect the inverted nature of the Lear-universe – as Gloucester says, ‘tis the time’s plague when madmen lead the blind’ (IV.i.49) – in which the amoral prosper and are loved (Edmund); servants are braver than their masters (Kent, 1st Servant); happiness is deadly (Gloucester); characters survive the hostile only to die when they reach safety (Gloucester, Lear), or survive a death sentence only to die after it has been lifted (Cordelia); fools are wise (the Fool); and invasion of England is not
bad but good? Or is it part of a **cathartic** process of rebirth, for Gloucester as for Lear, in which both characters must lose what they have before they can begin to learn its meaning? (Gloucester loses his sight and, as he imagines, both his sons; Lear loses even more: his sanity, all his titles and possessions down to his very clothes, and, as he imagines, all three daughters.) As Gloucester says, it is ‘our mere defects’ that ultimately ‘prove our commodities [i.e. most valuable to us]’ (IV.i.22-23).

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**King Lear Revision Guide 6 Identity**

After he has divided the kingdom, Oswald calls Lear merely ‘my lady’s father’ (I.iv.77), for that is all he is to him. And the Fool calls him ‘Lear’s shadow’ (222), a poor version of the real Lear. But in the course of the play, Lear comes to learn that identity does not lie in titles or marks of sovereignty, or indeed in the clothes that he progressively **strips** himself of during the play, and discovers a common humanity with those around him in so doing, most notably with the Fool and Poor Tom.

In contrast, Edgar **adopts** a series of disguises in the course of the play – first Tom o’ Bedlam (II.ii), then a peasant (IV.vi), then – at the bottom of the cliff – a passer-by, then – to kill Oswald – a West Country yokel, and finally a masked avenger whose ‘name is lost’ (V.iii.119), before ultimately revealing himself as Edgar, a progression that reflects his growth in stature during the play’s action.

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The play’s interest in **clothing** and the imagery associated with it is central to its exploration of identity.

Lear describes his abdication of the throne, using the play’s first clothing image, as ‘divest[ing] us...of rule’ (I.i.49). By the start of the first storm scene (III.ii), Lear is ‘bareheaded’. On first meeting Poor Tom, he attempts to strip off his remaining clothes, which he calls mere ‘lendings’ (III.iv.106), to reveal the real man (‘the thing itself’) beneath. (There is clear **irony** here – that Edgar, who is pretending, ‘a poor, bare, forked animal’ (105-106), is seen by Lear as the most accurate picture of the human condition on stage. Is this a reflection of Lear’s muddle as he descends into madness, or a reflection of the play’s deeper truth?) Even when Poor Tom is naked, Lear continues to be obsessed by the idea of
his clothing (III.vi.76-78).

In effacing his identity as Edgar, Edgar removes all his clothes – anticipating Lear’s progressive stripping away of layers, first metaphorically (his titles), then metonymically (his knights) and finally literally (his clothing), at the end of which he arrives at a fuller sense of self. Clothes are seen as a generally bad thing at this point in the play – Lear recognises that the hypocritical Regan’s clothes do not keep her warm (II.ii.458-459) and Poor Tom twice draws attention to the extravagance of dress he used to enjoy before his fall (III.iv.84-94, 131-132).

When Lear reappears, after a break of four scenes, in IV.iv, he has begun the process of reclothing himself – beginning with the crown of wild flowers that establishes the contrast between old and new (the old, angry tyrant of the court in I.i and the new, unselfconscious king of nature) and, somewhat ironically, the inalienable nature of kingship (q.v.): however much Lear has changed, the crown remains. (Whether this is touching or grotesquely parodic is debatable, however.) Ultimately, he is reclothed only when he reaches Cordelia’s party in IV.vii – symbolising perhaps the rebirth and fresh sense of self that he is to find, secure in Cordelia’s love.

King Lear Revision Guide 7

Madness

Early references to madness in the play – ‘Be Kent unmannerly/ When Lear is mad’ (Kent; I.i.146-147)

‘O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! I would not be mad. Keep me in temper, I would not be mad.’ (Lear; I.v.43-45)

‘I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad’ (Lear; II.ii.407) – simply equate it with incontinent or helpless rage.

In the first storm scene (III.ii), Lear’s ‘wits begin to turn’ (67), as he himself acknowledges – though significantly this is followed by perhaps his first real moment of insight in the play – that others are cold as well as him. (This reflects one of the play’s central paradoxes – that in madmen and fools lies greater understanding than in those whose white hair suggests that they should be wise, and reflects the inverted nature of the Lear-universe.)
In the second storm scene (III.iv), he recognises that ‘that way madness lies’ (21) as he begins to dwell on his daughters' ingratitude. But with the entry of Poor Tom, on to whom Lear projects his own grievances, he holds himself back no longer, and for most critics this is when his madness begins.

Madness in the play, then, has several meanings. It is closely associated with anger and the storm. It is associated, paradoxically, with insight (a familiar idea for a Jacobean audience, but also particularly appropriate in view of the more generally inverted nature of the Lear-universe). And it forms part of the play’s design – as the most appropriate expression for Lear’s psychological suffering, and as the cathartic experience through which his sense of self and the world around him is renewed.

King Lear Revision Guide 8 Justice

In the first storm scene (III.ii), Lear sees injustice all around him (52-59), reflecting his sense of his own mistreatment as ‘a man/ More sinned against than sinning’ (59-60).

In the second storm scene (III.iv), however, reflecting his growing humility and identification with his fellow man, he sees the storm as a chance to ‘expose [himself] to feel what wretches feel’ – and thereby to ‘shake the superflux to them/ And show the heavens more just’ (34-36). Nonetheless, Lear’s egotism is such that he initially assumes Poor Tom must share his own situation, having ‘give[n] all to [his] two daughters’ (48).

The mock trial in III.vi shows Lear's consuming desire for justice – but the grotesque nature of the trial, presided over by a professional madman (the Fool) and a pretending madman (Edgar as Poor Tom), together with Kent (as Caius), with two joint-stools for defendants, suggests how little justice is present in the Lear-universe. In IV.vi, Lear acknowledges that even as worthless a creature as ‘a dog’s obeyed in office’ (154-155) and that against those with money ‘the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks’ (162).

Those in the play who attempt to stand up for what is right are banished (Cordelia, Kent), stocked (Kent as Caius) or killed (1st Servant). Appeals to the Gods for protection (q.v.) consistently fall on deaf ears. The death of Cornwall, sometime during IV.i, the first
real poetic justice in the play, happens unseen off-stage, making it seem incidental and preventing the audience from savouring the moment.

At the end of the play, Edgar’s formulation, in relation to Gloucester’s blinding, that ‘the gods are just and of our pleasant vices/ Make instruments to plague us’ (V.iii.168-169) seems harsh and simplistic: while it may apply to Gloucester and Lear, it does not account for – as in any tragedy – the innocent victims of evil and folly (here Cordelia, elsewhere Ophelia, Desdemona and Lady Macduff) nor, something peculiar to King Lear, the exquisite cruelty of timing: that Lear and Gloucester both die when their suffering is complete, their crimes paid for, and reunions have been effected with those whom they love. It is as if they are punished twice for the same crime, even if – as Kent suggests – death is really a blessing, preferable to continued existence in the Lear-universe.

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**King Lear Revision Guide 9 Plot and Sub-Plot**

As already noted, Lear’s situation is replicated closely in the sub-plot, which has the effect of universalising the action.

Both Lear and Gloucester are unable to recognise goodness in their children, and banish the child who loves them truly. They both suffer for their folly: Lear is forced to endure a night ‘unhous’d’ on the heath, while Gloucester is stripped of his title and branded a traitor. And their lack of knowledge in each case is given a physical form – Lear, who does not understand love in others, is driven mad; Gloucester, who does not see love in others, is blinded. Paradoxically, it is through this madness that Lear comes to a deeper understanding of himself and his fellow man, and through this blindness that Gloucester comes to a greater insight. (Symbolically, he learns the truth about his sons immediately after being blinded in IV.vii.) The two men’s suffering can be seen as a kind of purgatory, in which they atone (or pay) for their sins, readying them for a reunion with the child who has never stopped loving them – and acting unseen on their behalf – at the end of the play.

(Certainly, King Lear lends itself to a Christian interpretation – although some critics disagree – and both Cordelia and Edgar can be seen as Christ-figures, who redeem Lear and Gloucester through their love. In IV.iii Cordelia is presented as a pieta figure,
weeping ‘holy water’ (31), and in IV.iv her language – ‘O dear father,/ It is thy business that I go about’ (23-24) – echoes Christ’s in Luke 2:49. She is seen as a saviour for Lear, a daughter ‘who redeems nature from the general curse/ Which twain have brought her to’ (IV.vi.202-203) – a parallel to Christ’s redemption of man from the Original Sin of Adam and Eve. At the end of the play, the pieta image is movingly inverted as Lear enters with Cordelia dead in his arms."

Shakespeare connects the plot and sub-plot in several quite specific ways. First, verbally. Edmund’s ‘Nothing, my lord’ in response to his father (I.ii.32) echoes the key word repeated many times in the previous scene, and Gloucester’s suggestion that a child who betrays his father is ‘a monster’ (I.ii.94) similarly echoes the judgement of the previous scene (I.i.219-221). Lear’s childish and empty threat to pluck out his own eyes if they continue to cry (I.iv.293-294) foreshadows Cornwall’s more sinister and meaningful threat to pluck out Gloucester’s. And on the heath, Gloucester draws an explicit verbal comparison between his situation and that of Lear: ‘Thou sayest the King grows mad; I’ll tell thee, friend, I am almost mad myself’ (III.iv.61-62).

Second, in the ideas expressed. Both Regan in the main plot (II.ii.439) and Edmund in the sub-plot (III.iv.22-24) suggest the impatience of the younger generation to assume their inheritance. Both Lear in the main plot (III.iv.28-36) and Gloucester in the sub-plot (IV.i.70-74) come to see the world as an unfair place of haves and have-nots, and call for ‘distribution [to] undo excess’ (Gloucester; IV.i.73). Ultimately, both renounce the world – Gloucester in his attempted suicide (IV.vi.34-36) and Lear in his retreat to a prison cell with Cordelia (V.iii.8-19) – ironically both choosing what was initially forced upon them by their children.

Third, structurally, in the alternation of scenes between main plot and sub-plot, and by bringing Lear and Gloucester together on the heath in the second storm scene (III.iv) and again in IV.vi.

Fourth, in the character of Edgar, who accompanies first Lear and then Gloucester, and whose moralising soliloquy at the end of III.vi emphasises the links between the main plot and sub-plot, in how – as he says – Lear ‘childed as I fathered’ (III.vi.107). Lear and Gloucester’s reactions to him are similar: he shows Lear that ‘man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art’ (III.iv.105-106) and Gloucester ‘such a fellow saw./ Which made
me think a man a worm’ (IV.i.34-35).

The use of such parallels between plot and sub-plot is part of a wider concern with the play’s **architectonics** unusual in tragedy – it is full of correspondences and patterns. Lear has all daughters; Gloucester has all sons. Shakespeare is concerned not only with the rivalries between

**King Lear Revision Guide 10**

fathers and children, but also with the rivalries between sister and sister, and brother and brother. By making Edmund a bastard, he is able to contrast an illegitimate with a legitimate son. The king who is foolish is confronted again and again with the fool who is wise. There is a father who goes mad and a son who only pretends to go mad. They, too, are brought face to face. At times they vaguely resemble each other; Lear bedraggled by the storm or bedecked with weeds suggests Edgar disguised as Tom. Moreover, there are two men in disguise: Kent and Edgar. The hypocrites in the play, Goneril, Regan and Edmund, disguise their loyalties, but Kent and Edgar disguise themselves in order to remain loyal.

**King Lear Revision Guide 11 Animal Imagery**

The play is full of animal imagery, which has a double significance: first, it expresses the scarcely human behaviour of Goneril and Regan; second, it expresses Lear’s insight into the human condition.

In the opening scene, Lear uses the first in a series of striking **cannibal** images – symbolically appropriate in a play that is full of people who feed selfishly off one another within the family – comparing Cordelia to ‘he that makes his generation messes/ To gorge his appetite’ (I.i.118-119). The Fool then refers to ‘the hedge-sparrow [that] fed the cuckoo so long/ That it’s had it head bit off by it young’ (I.iv.206-207). Lear later calls Goneril and Regan ‘pelican daughters’ (III.iv.74), alluding to the ancient belief that the pelican feeds its young with its own blood. And finally Albany prophesies that, without divine intervention, the whole of ‘humanity must perforce prey on itself,/ Like monsters of the deep’ (IV.ii.50-51). Much of the animal imagery is violent. Lear calls Goneril a ‘detested kite’ (I.iv.254), ‘wolvish’ (300), ‘like a vulture’ (II.ii.324) and ‘serpent-like’ (II.ii.350); Albany calls her a
'gilded serpent' (V.iii.85); Gloucester calls her ‘boarish’ (III.vii.57). Albany calls her and her sister, ‘tigers, not daughters’ (IV.ii.41); Kent calls them ‘dog-hearted’ (IV.iii.46).

By the second storm scene (III.iv), Lear has come to the conclusion that man himself is no more than a ‘bare, forked animal (106), bringing into play the second use of such imagery.

Disease and Pain Imagery

Kent sees himself as Lear’s ‘physician’ (I.i.164), and his behaviour in seeking to banish Cordelia, the daughter who loves him most, as a ‘foul disease’ (165). Later, Lear comes to realise that it is Goneril who is ‘a disease that’s in my flesh’ (II.i.411) – ‘a boil,/ A plague sore, or embossed carbuncle’ (412-413). This disease imagery reflects the play’s interest in natural and unnatural states, and can be connected too with the monstrous imagery that recurs throughout the play (qq.v.). It is also a traditional motif in Elizabethan and Jacobean discussions of kingship, reflecting contemporary ideas of the body politic (in which the health of a nation and the health of the individual were interconnected).

The play is full of images of cracking, splitting and breaking, continually bringing back to the audience’s attention the act of political division with which the play opens, the ramifications of which extend throughout the text. After Gloucester is convinced of Edgar’s treachery, he cries to Regan: ‘O! Madam, my old heart is crack’d, its crack’d’ (II.i.90), and Lear – when he is at last persuaded that both his daughters have forsaken him – declares:

'I have full cause of weeping, but this heart Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws Or ere I'll weep.' (II.iv.284-286).

The same imagery is used in Edgar's description of Gloucester's death: ‘his flaw’d heart,

Alack, too weak the conflict to support! ‘Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, Burst smilingly.' (V.iii.196-199)

In the storm Lear shouts: ‘Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!’ (III.ii.1) and ‘close pent-up guilts, rive your concealing continents’ (III.ii.57-58), imagining all nature splitting like his own mind. Edgar says, as he watches mad Lear and blind Gloucester, ‘it is and my heart breaks at it' (IV.vi.142-143); Albany says to Edmund: ‘Let sorrow split my heart, if ever I/ Did hate thee or thy...
father’ (V.iii.176-177); and Edgar describes how, in telling him of Lear's condition, Kent’s 'grief grew puissant, and the strings of life/ Began to crack' (V.iii.216-217).

King Lear Revision Guide 12 Tears

Lear first cries at I.iv.290, at having been stripped of fifty knights by Goneril. These are the immature tears of a child unable to get what he wants. Later he stops himself from crying, seeing tears as womanish and a sign of weakness (II.ii.466). And again in III.iv he resolves ‘I will weep no more’ (III.iv.17).

The other character in the play associated with tears is Cordelia. But whereas Lear’s are tears of impotent rage, hers are tears of pity. In IV.ii she is presented as a pieta figure, and in IV.iv her tears symbolically water the herbs with which she seeks to ‘close the eye of anguish’ (14) for Lear.

At their reunion in IV.vi, both figures weep, but the distinction remains: whereas Cordelia’s are tears of pity, Lear’s are tears of self-reproach that ‘scald like molten lead’ (48). Finally, as Lear and Cordelia are captured by the English forces in V.iii, he strikes a defiant note, calling on Cordelia to ‘wipe thine eyes;/ The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell,/ Ere they shall make us weep' (23-25; my italics). By the end of the scene, of course, Lear once more weeps alone, over Cordelia’s dead body, in an interesting reversal of the earlier pieta image.

The significance of tears as a motif within the play is explicitly drawn attention to by Lear, who sees them as expressive of the human condition itself – as he tells Gloucester, ‘when we are born we cry that we are come/ To this great stage of fools’ (IV.vi.178-179).

Sexual Imagery

Both Gloucester and Edmund’s language in the first Act contains sexual imagery. But whereas Gloucester’s joking with Kent is indiscr...
doggerel (‘Pillicock sat on Pillicock hill’ (III.iv.75) and attributes his downfall to the influence of women (see especially III.iv.83-96 and IV.i.61-62). Lear, in his final mad scene (IV.vi), echoes this judgement in celebrating the unrestrained sexual activity he sees all around him in Nature (although he is ironically unaware that ‘Gloucester’s bastard son’ is not the demonstration of natural (q.v.) behaviour he believes) in contrast with the hypocritical behaviour of women that ‘minces virtue and does shake the head/ To hear of pleasure’s name’ (IV.vi.118-119), behaviour which he associates with the devil.

King Lear Revision Guide 13 The Gods

King Lear has often been called – though not uncontroversially – a Christian play in a pre-Christian setting.

Lear’s language suggests a primitive, pre-Christian world view. Like Gloucester in I.ii, he sees the stars as having an influence on human affairs, and sees the sun and moon as deities in their own right (I.i.110-114).

Kent is apparently contemptuous of Lear’s superstitious deference to such deities (162). His own view initially is that the Gods are a caring presence, but his wishes that ‘the gods to their dear shelter take’ Cordelia (I.i.183) and that ‘the gods reward [Gloucester’s] kindness’ (III.vi.5) are ultimately not fulfilled. The play is indeed noticeably full of answered prayers. (Ultimately, what redemption and salvation there is comes by human, not divine, agency.) Lear calls on the gods ‘if you do love old men’ to ‘send down, and take my part!’ (II.ii.379-381), but they do not. Gloucester vows to see ‘the winged vengeance overtake such children [i.e. Goneril and Regan]’ (III.vii.65) but it is by their own hand that they die, not by an unseen divine justice, while Edmund receives a mortal blow at the hands of the omnipresent Edgar, who is perhaps the nearest thing the play has – and he is a man not a god. Indeed, only the deaths of Gloucester, Lear and (as a consequence of its timing) Cordelia are in their nature beyond the work of man in some sense – which poses a crucial question about the nature of the gods: are they all but absent from the Lear-universe, or present but cruelly indifferent (as Gloucester comes to believe in comparing them to ‘wanton boys’ carelessly killing flies for ‘sport’ (IV.i.38-39))? Edmund too is contemptuous of the older generation’s
superstition and belief in astrology and the gods, which he exploits as a weakness. (For him, it is Nature who is his goddess – see below.) Only Albany – drawing comfort from news of Cornwall’s death – is able to believe in active divine agency to the end, that ‘you are above,/ You justicers, that these our nether crimes/ So speedily can venge’ (IV.ii.78-81), but such sentiments are undermined by the dramatic irony of lines such as ‘The Gods defend her’ (V.iii.254) moments before Lear enters with Cordelia’s body in his arms.

In the end, both Lear (IV.vi.174-179) and Edgar (V.ii.9-11) preach stoic endurance as the only way to live, with Edgar making sense of man’s suffering as a punishment for his ‘pleasant vices’ (V.iii.168). The play’s recurring image of fortune as a wheel is central to this idea of endurance. Kent, sitting in the stocks in II.ii, calls on ‘Fortune [to] smile once more; turn thy wheel’ (172) – an image that is later echoed in Edmund’s ‘The wheel is come full circle, I am here’ (V.iii.172) as he prepares to meet the masked Edgar, and in Lear’s sense of being ‘bound/ Upon a wheel of fre’ (IV.iii.46-47).

A note on Edmund and Nature

Nature is Edmund’s ‘goddess’, the law by which he lives. This is a key idea in the play, and has several dimensions:

• it refers to his birth (as a bastard or natural son of Gloucester, born in the ‘lusty stealth of Nature’, as opposed to Edgar’s legitimate birth);

• it refers to all that is fresh and spontaneous (as reflected in his own behaviour), as opposed to tired and conventional, hidebound by custom (which is how he sees Edgar and his father);

• it is a celebration of his own identity (or nature), as contrasted with Edgar’s forced relinquishment of his identity and adoption of a series of disguises. Ultimately, Edmund – in calling (his) Nature his goddess – is celebrating his own resourcefulness, a world-view entirely at odds with all those characters who defer to the rule of the gods in one way or another; His soliloquy in I.ii is unconsciously echoes by Lear in I.iv.267-281 – but in Lear’s hands, Nature becomes vengeful and destructive, rather than a joyous affirmation of
life, as it is for Edmund.

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Later, Gloucester – with typically unrealised irony – calls him a ‘loyal and natural boy’ (II.i.84). But Edmund’s behaviour towards his father is as unnatural as Goneril and Regan’s towards Lear (although, in the inverted order of the play, the unnatural is so common that it becomes the natural); only in the sense of behaving as amorally as befits his ‘natural’ birth is Edmund natural.

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Lear sees Nature as a **primitive vengeful force** capable of hurting those he hates – associated with sterility not fertility (I.iv.268-270), infectious ‘blasts and fogs’ (I.iv.291; an idea repeated at II.ii.355-357) and blinding lightning (II.ii.354-355). The storm that gathers at the end of Act 2 seems to **reflect** Lear’s own anger – although as early as III.i the Knight suggests to Kent that this is merely his hubris, ‘striv[ing] in his little world of man to outscorn/ The to and fro conflicting wind and rain’ (III.i.10-11). By Act 3, Lear’s view of Nature has intensified – from a **specific** vengeful force against his daughters to a more **general** bringer of chaos and apocalypse to all, ‘bid[ding] the wind blow the earth into the sea,/ Or swell the curled waters ‘bove the main,/ That things might change, or cease’ (III.i.5-7), although his concern with destroying ‘the thick rotundity o’ the world’ – an image of pregnancy aborted – cracking ‘nature’s moulds’ and spilling her ‘germens’ suggests that he still has his daughters particularly in mind.

An important shift takes place in III.ii. Lear begins to see the storm’s anger as directed against himself, rather than his daughters and the world that bore them. This reflects his changing sense of self: Lear has begun to see himself as a victim of the world rather than being at its centre (the traditional Renaissance view of the monarch). Perversely, he welcomes the storm’s anger, however, for it prevents him from looking inwards to ‘ponder/ On things would hurt me more’ (III.iv.24-25) and directs his attention outwards to those ‘poor naked wretches’ (28) who suffer it along with him.

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