

# **King Lear Study Guide**

## **King Lear by William Shakespeare**

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# Plot Summary

King Lear is one of Shakespeare's most popular tragedies, exploring the role of power and deceit among families through the flawed relationship between King Lear and his three daughters.

At the opening of the play, the ageing King Lear decides that he would like to retire, so he divides the country between his three daughters, Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia. But first, he asks his daughters to profess how much they love him, saying that he will reward the most loving daughter with the most land. His eldest two daughters, Regan and Goneril, blindly flatter their father, but Cordelia, the only daughter to truly love Lear, remains silent. Lear flies into a rage and banishes Cordelia from England. She moves to France and marries the king without her father's blessing and without inheriting any power of land from him. Almost as soon as they inherit their power, Regan and Goneril begin to undermine what little power Lear has left, refusing to let him travel with his knights, for example. Lear, who cannot believe that his daughters would betray him, slowly goes mad. When he is turned away from both his daughters' homes unless he release his traveling party, Lear decides to spend the night on the heath during a bitter, brutal storm.

Meanwhile, one of Lear's most trusted allies, a nobleman named Gloucester, is experiencing similar family troubles. He has two sons, Edgar, his legitimate heir, and Edmund, his bastard son born out of wedlock. Edmund, who because of his bastard status stands to inherit nothing from his father, plots to overthrow his father and betray his legitimate brother in his quest for power. Edmund convinces Gloucester that Edgar is plotting to kill him, and Gloucester foolishly believes him. Thinking that his father is after him, Edgar disguises himself as a beggar named Poor Tom and also travels to the heath to hide. Shortly after Edgar's departure, Regan and her husband Cornwall discover Gloucester's plan to aid Lear during the storm and punish him with torture. They pluck out his eyes and banish him to the heath where he is reunited with his son Edgar, who does not reveal his true identity.

Cordelia, who is now the queen of France, soon hears about her sister's brutal treatment of their father and vows to send a French fleet to Dover to aid Lear's cause and hopefully return him to power. In the heath, both Lear and Gloucester descend into madness, with Gloucester trying to kill himself and Lear lamenting his foolish decision to hand power over to his wicked daughters. By the time the French arrive, Lear has gone completely mad and is living in the fields covered in weeds and flowers. Meanwhile, in his quest for even more power, Edmund becomes romantically involved with both Regan and Goneril, turning the two jealous sisters against each other. At the time of the final battle between France and England, neither sister actually cares about the outcome. They only care about securing Edmund's affections. When Lear and Cordelia are reunited at the French camp, Lear experiences a few moments of blissful sanity. His happiness is interrupted when the British quickly overpower the French and Lear and Cordelia are taken as Edmund's prisoners. At the end of the play, nearly all the characters are dead. Goneril has poisoned Regan and then committed suicide over the



botched relationship with Edmund, Edgar kills Edmund in a duel, Cordelia is hanged, and Lear dies of a broken heart. Only Albany, Goneril's sympathetic husband, and Edgar are left to rule the devastated Britain.



# Act One

## Summary

### Scene One

Two faithful friends of King Lear, Kent and Gloucester, meet in Lear's palace. Gloucester introduces Kent to his son, Edmund, who was born to an unwed mother and is therefore considered to be a bastard. Gloucester explains that he has another son, a "legitimate" one named Edmund, but that he also loves his bastard son dearly. Their conversation is interrupted when Lear makes his appearance, followed by his three daughters – Regan, Goneril, and Cordelia. Lear has called this meeting because he plans to divide up his kingdom between the three daughters so he can retire in peace and enjoy his old age without the responsibility of ruling a kingdom.

Before he divides up the land, Lear requests that each of his children profess how much they love him, and he promises to give the most land to the daughter who loves him most. His eldest two daughters, Regan and Goneril, are scheming, conniving women who loudly and obnoxiously profess how much they adore their father: "A love that makes breath poor and speech unable; / Beyond all manner of so much I love you" (Act One, Scene One, Lines 55-56). Lear's youngest daughter, Cordelia, the only daughter who actually loves him, refuses to cheapen her love with overblown flattery, so she simply states that she loves her father as any daughter should: "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / my heart into my mouth: I love your majesty / According to my bond; no more no less" (1.1.87-89). Despite Cordelia's honesty, Lear flies into a rage and disowns her, dividing his entire kingdom between Regan and Goneril.

Kent, who has known Lear for many years, quickly steps in to say that Lear is being a fool and points out that Lear knows Cordelia loves him more than Regan or Goneril, but Lear's rage won't abate. He banishes Kent from his kingdom, telling him he has six days to leave. He then turns his attention to the two men, Burgundy and France, who have come to the meeting seeking Cordelia's hand in marriage. Once Burgundy learns that Cordelia has inherited no land, he retracts his offer, but the King of France, who is impressed by Cordelia's honesty, agrees to marry her. A sulking Lear sends France and Cordelia away without his blessing. Meanwhile, Regan and Goneril begin scheming about how they can steal away the last of their father's authority in the kingdom.

### Scenes Two and Three

In the Earl of Gloucester's palace, Edmund, the bastard son, holds a letter in his hand and delivers a soliloquy about society's view of bastards. He has spent his entire life feeling like an outsider, and he deeply resents the fact that his brother Edgar stands to inherit everything from their father simply because he is legitimately born. He has forged the letter in Edgar's hand, claiming to be plotting to kill their father. Edmund prays a furious prayer, "Now, gods, stand up for bastards" (1.2.22). Just then, Gloucester enters



and Edmund makes a big show about hiding the letter. When Gloucester demands to read it, the manipulative Edmund convinces him with careful lies that Edgar is planning to kill him. In the forged letter, “Edgar” complains that he has waited too long to inherit his father’s wealth and that he would like Edmund’s help in speeding the death along. Gloucester is completely blindsided by the news that his beloved son wants to kill him, and feels deeply indebted to Edmund for telling him the “truth.” He begs Edmund to find Edgar and bring him to him so they can talk, and Edmund promises to do so.

After Gloucester leaves, however, Edgar arrives. Edmund tells him that their father is furious with him and that he should go into hiding. Edmund claims to have no idea what has angered their father, and encourages Edgar to give their father a few days to cool off before trying to speak with him. He says Gloucester is angry enough that Edmund should go into hiding armed, which Edmund finds absurd. Still, he takes his brother’s warning with deep gratitude and promises to stay hidden and safe.

True to his word, Lear spends the first part of his retirement staying with Goneril in her palace, much to her annoyance. Goneril finds her father’s presence to be deeply tiresome, especially because she is eager to begin exercising her new power, but cannot with her father hovering around. She complains to her steward, Oswald, about Lear’s presence and orders all of her servants to begin treating him rudely in the hopes that he will leave early. She sends a letter to Regan telling her the plan in the hopes that Lear’s visit with Regan will be equally short-lived and they can quickly get him out of their hair.

#### Scenes Four and Five

Kent arrives at Goneril’s palace disguised as a simple peasant named Caius. Even though Lear has banished him, Kent remains faithful to the king and knows that his daughters are plotting against him. Therefore, he has come in disguise with the hopes of earning a new job on the king’s court so he can keep an eye on things. Under the name of “Caius,” Kent professes his loyalty to Lear, and the king hires “Caius” on the spot. Shortly after, Lear begins to notice that Goneril’s servants are no longer obeying his commands. When he demands to know where Goneril is, Oswald refuses to tell him, or even acknowledge that Lear has spoken. Enraged, Lear begins beating Oswald, and Caius jumps in to help him. From this, Lear knows he can trust Caius, and he pats himself on the back for making such a good judgment call.

The king calls for his fool, who arrives with a well-prepared and entertaining speech about the king’s recent power shift. Although he speaks through puns and double entendre, the fool makes it clear that the king was foolish to hand his power over to Goneril and Regan, and that he never should have trusted his daughters: “The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long, / That it had it head bit off by it young” (1.4.190-191). Goneril interrupts the entertainment to tell Lear that since he has behaved so poorly with her servant Oswald, she is sending him away from her palace. Lear realizes that he has been set up to take a fall, and laments ever handing power over to Goneril. He curses her, praying that she will be made barren, and prepares to leave with tears in his eyes. Albany, Goneril’s husband, arrives and seems genuinely confused as to why



Goneril is kicking her father out. Lear vows to stay with Regan, whom he believes still loves him, but when he is gone, a smirking Goneril tells Albany that her sister, too, will not house their father.

Lear travels to Regan's castle with Caius (Kent) and his fool. He sends Kent ahead with a message for Gloucester. As they prepare the horses to leave, the fool warns Lear through song that Regan will not treat him any better than Goneril did, and again reminds him that it was foolish to give such power to untrustworthy children. Lear prays for sanity, fearing that his new reality will drive him mad.

## Analysis

King Lear is one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies, and as such, from the onset, readers can expect that there will be no happy endings for the characters. The play, therefore, should be read as a study of familial love and loyalty. From the onset, it is clear that King Lear is a somewhat insecure, possibly senile, old man. His first act in the play is to demand to know how much his daughters love him so that he can reward their flattery with land. Lear's daughters are all adults, so it would be safe to assume that he has had at least twenty years to gauge how his daughters felt about him, so it seems particularly rash to make such a large decision about power distribution based on flattery. His request not only invites, but demands opulent flattery above heartfelt truth, and the conniving Regan and Goneril are only too happy to oblige. To the reader and to the audience in the court, it's obvious that Regan and Goneril's speeches are obnoxiously over the top, but Lear is still impressed. Perhaps this is because Lear has spent his entire life feeling insecure about his relationships with his daughters and now that he is in his old age, simply wants to hear – whether it's true or not – that they love him. Still, the only daughter who loves Lear, Cordelia, is unable or unwilling to cheapen her love by competing with her sisters, so she remains silent, infuriating her father. It's interesting to note that everyone in the court knows how much Cordelia loves her father, and it is suggested that Cordelia has always been Lear's favorite, which is why it is so unexpected for Lear to disown his beloved daughter. Lear has foolishly chosen to trust his evil daughters while turning his back on his trustworthy child.

This storyline is paralleled in Gloucester's relationship with his two sons, Edgar (good) and Edmund (evil). When the play opens, Gloucester is mocking Edmund for being a bastard, a mentality that the rest of society mimics, and one that Edmund has painfully had to grow up with. As a result of his outcast upbringing, Edmund is darkly jealous of his brother and plans to ruin his life. Unlike Goneril and Regan, who turn against their father simply for financial gain, Edmund also seems to want societal change – recognition of bastard children – or at least emotional restitution for the pain he has suffered throughout his childhood. This distinction makes him a far more complicated villain than Lear's daughters. Like Goneril and Regan, Edmund uses knowledge of his father's greatest fears and desires to manipulate his plans. Gloucester, it appears, has always feared that his son would turn against him, so the seed of doubt was planted before Edmund even began work. Because he was insecure to begin with, Gloucester is quick to latch on to Edmund's lies, and is devastated by them. Edmund is able to play



the “innocent son” by promising his father that he will seek out Edgar, and by trying to convince Gloucester that perhaps he can change Edgar’s mind. When he is alone with Edgar, however, Edmund convinces him that he should carry his sword at all times, ensuring that when Gloucester and Edgar do cross paths, Gloucester will see the sword and think that Edgar has come to kill him.

When Lear is at Goneril’s castle, the reader begins to see how the daughters will manipulate their father. Goneril first insists that Lear must cut down on his number of knights, from 100 to 50, claiming that they are too rowdy and obnoxious to be housed. All members of the royal court are accustomed to having large parties of servants, and the number of servants one has is a show of rank. Lear immediately recognizes that the loss of knights also reflects his daughter’s diminishing respect for him, and he is devastated. Although the reader knows that Goneril is manipulating her father out of a lust for power, she hides her true motivations behind the insistence that her father is senile and unable to tend his own affairs: “Come, sir, / I would you would make use of that good wisdom / Whereof I know you are fraught, and put away / These dispositions that of late transform you / From what you rightly are” (1.4.194-198). The already insecure Lear seems to pick up on Goneril’s lies and even begins to question his own sanity saying, “Doth any here know me? This is not Lear. Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes? / ... / Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (1.4.203-207). At the end of the Act, Lear prays for sanity, fearing that he is losing his mind. This is clear foreshadowing to Lear’s impending insanity, and the loss of his “sight” in the world.

Finally, Act One introduces Lear’s fool, a common character in Shakespeare plays. Traditionally, the king hired a fool for entertainment purposes. A fool would wear funny costumes, sing, dance, recite riddles, and play instruments. Shakespeare’s fools are almost always ironic characters – often the most intelligent and wise characters despite their title. Lear’s fool is no exception. Even though he speaks in silly riddles, poems, and songs, it’s clear that the fool knows Lear has made a terrible choice in trusting Regan and Goneril, and that they plan to ruin him. Because he is viewed as simpleminded and childish, the fool is able to get away with chastising Lear in a way no other member of the court would be allowed. Because he speaks in riddle rather than plain speak, the fool is also able to plant seeds of warning and doubt in Lear’s mind without Lear ever being aware of it. It’s clear that over the years, Lear and his fool have become very close – the fool calls Lear “nuncle” (an affectionate family name), and Lear calls the fool “boy” – so it’s understandable that Lear would want the fool with him as he travels from palace to palace.

## Discussion Question 1

Is Lear's test of his daughter's affection a good way to divide up land? Why or why not?





## Discussion Question 2

How do Regan and Goneril immediately begin to undermine their father's power? What does this tell you about their characters?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the role of the fool? How would you describe his relationship with Lear?

## Vocabulary

Moiety, Liege, Dower, Amorous, Sojourn, Felicitate, Opulent, Propinquity, Miscreant, Beseech, Glib, Benison, Choleric, Fain, Auricular, Scourge, Foppery, Lecherous, Firmament, Allay, Mongrel, Cur, Coxcomb, Pestilent, Motley, Frontlet, Forsooth, Retinue, Rabble, Dotage, Perforce, Visage



# Act Two

## Summary

### Scene One

Gloucester's servant informs Edmund that the Duke of Cornwall and his wife, Regan, are coming to Gloucester's palace that night. Edmund is excited because he sees yet another way to manipulate his father and brother. He calls Edgar out of his hiding place and tells him that Cornwall has heard about Edgar's allegiance with Albany (Goneril's husband) and that he is angered by Edgar's friendship. Edmund claims that Cornwall and Albany are in a fight, and that Albany plans to take his frustrations out on Edgar. Of course Edgar has no idea what Edmund is talking about, but it sounds serious enough to heed Edmund's warning to hide further afield. When Edmund hears Gloucester approaching, he draws his sword and pretends to fight his brother, urging Edgar to run and hide. As Gloucester walks through the door, he sees Edgar running away and misses Edmund slashing his own sword against his arm. Bleeding, Edmund tells his father that Edgar once again tried to entreat him to join the plot to kill their father, and that he did his best to fight him off. As before, Gloucester sees Edmund as an honorable victim and praises him for his dedication and loyalty. He vows to send men in search of Edgar so that Edmund will no longer have to put himself in danger. He swears that when Edgar is caught, he will be killed immediately for his treason against their family. Cornwall and Regan arrive, and Gloucester and Edmund tell them what has just happened with Edgar. Regan wonders whether Edgar is one of the "unruly" knights that was loyal to Lear, and suggests that the rest of Lear's knights probably put Edgar up to the idea of killing Gloucester.

### Scene Two

Meanwhile, outside Gloucester's palace, Kent (still disguised as Caius) runs into Oswald, Goneril's servant. Still outraged by Goneril's treatment of her father, Kent lashes out at Oswald, calling him a series of terrible names and challenging him to a duel. For his part, Oswald claims not to know Caius and says he has no reason to fight him. Kent's insults are unrelenting and he refuses to back down until Oswald draws his sword. No matter what Kent says Oswald refuses to fight him, screaming and shouting for help, "Help, ho! Murder! Help" (2.2.34). Gloucester, Cornwall, Edmund, and Regan all come running to Oswald's aid, and are equally confused as to why this messenger would want to fight him. They break up the tussle and demand to know why Oswald is being threatened, but Kent simply continues his barrage of insults, saying that Oswald is unfit to wear a sword when he wears no honesty. Regan interrupts Kent to say that this is exactly what she and Goneril were talking about: Lear's servants are out of control. Cornwall calls for the stocks and orders Kent into them, despite knowing that shackling the king's messenger will be perceived as a great insult to Lear. Cornwall only wants to hold Kent in the stocks until noon, but Regan sneeringly says that he shall be held through the night, regardless of how it might affect her father. When everyone leaves,



Kent pulls a letter from Cordelia from his pocket and reads it aloud. In the letter, Cordelia promises to do what she can to help her father and the country.

### Scenes Three and Four

Scene Three is a monologue from Edgar in which he details the disguise he will undertake in order to escape his father. He will dress as a common beggar, called “Poor Tom” and will wander the country in search of food and shelter. He strips his clothes, covers himself in dirt, cuts his hair, and plans to pretend to be recently released from the insane asylum.

In Scene Four, Lear and his fool arrives at Gloucester’s castle hoping to find shelter for the night. Immediately, Lear sees Caius (Kent) in the stocks and is outraged. He demands to know who would treat his servant so cruelly, especially since even horses and dogs are not bound. From the stocks, Kent tells Lear that it was Regan and Cornwall. Lear refuses to believe that his daughter would so disrespect him, saying such an offense would be akin to murder, and demands to speak with them immediately. Kent tells Lear that Oswald, Goneril’s servant, arrived with letters for Regan, and that he assumes they will be cruel in nature, ready to poison Regan against her father. A gentleman returns from the castle a short time later and says that Cornwall and Regan do not wish to speak with Lear, another grave offence. Gloucester arrives and tries to calm Lear who is enraged that his daughter will not come out to speak with him. Finally, and perhaps due to all the shouting, Cornwall and Regan coolly emerge from the castle. Lear immediately begins begging Regan to take him in, saying that Goneril has treated him cruelly and that he has nowhere else to turn. Regan suggests that she agrees with Goneril’s decision to cut down Lear’s party and states that he should do as Goneril asks and return to her. Lear can barely contain his emotion as he describes Goneril’s “sharp toothed unkindness,” saying that it would be impossible for him to return. Lear is further blindsided with Regan flatly refuses to let Lear in, and shocked to see Goneril herself walking up the drive. Goneril and Regan join hands and stand against their father, telling him that he is old and senile, and that if he wants to stay with either of them, he’ll have to meet their demands. In Lear’s shocked confusion, the daughters up the ante by saying that if Lear wants to stay with them, he can do so alone, without a single servant. Lear is heartbroken as he realizes what his daughters are doing, and vows never to visit them again. A terrible storm is brewing outside, but Lear turns away and walks into the wind. Gloucester begs Goneril and Regan to save their father from the storm, but they refuse.

## Analysis

In Scene One, a gentleman makes an offhand remark about a conflict brewing between Albany and Cornwall, the husbands of Lear’s eldest two daughters. Edmund immediately picks up on this comment and knows that he can use it to further manipulate his family. The comment is interesting because it highlights the political structure at the time of the play’s first staging. Petty conflict between minor nobles, particularly over land and power, was commonplace in Shakespeare’s time, and often



led to upheaval and disarray for the commoners. The fact that Albany and Cornwall are fighting so soon after their wives inherited Lear's kingdom highlights the mistake Lear made. He had been hoping for a peaceful retirement, but he has practically ensured that the rest of his life will be filled with personal and national conflict. Edmund's use of this offhand comment shows how shrewd and manipulative he is. He is careful not to invent facts altogether, but instead twists truths that already exist, thus making his stories more believable. There is particular irony in Edmund's lies about what Edgar has said to him, particularly that no one will believe Edmund's "truth" about Edgar wanting to kill their father because he is a bastard. Not only are lies like this believable, they also reveal Edmund's true motivation: to be liberated of the social stigma of his birth.

Gloucester believes Edmund's cunning lies without question, despite the fact that he has spent a lifetime with Edgar and never before questioned his "legitimate" son's character. A strong parallel is drawn between Gloucester and Lear as two fathers who are completely out of touch with their children's nature. Both have turned their backs on their loyal children in favor of their cunning, trickster children.

Kent's unprovoked attack of Oswald outside Gloucester's castle may be somewhat confusing for readers and is never fully explained. At a guess, it appears that Shakespeare is using Kent's vitriolic hatred of Oswald to highlight his fierce dedication to Lear. Kent is so loyal to Lear that any offense against him should be punishable with death by sword. Even though Oswald was simply acting on Goneril's orders, Kent still believes that Oswald's act of ignoring the king was treasonous and punishable by death. Kent's attack also highlights Shakespeare's cutting sense of humor, even in tragedy, and showcases a few examples of the infamous insults for which Shakespeare is known. Regan's deteriorating relationship with her father is further highlighted by her insistence that Kent spent the entire day and night in the stocks – an insulting punishment typically used on common criminals – knowing full well that shackling the king's messenger would be perceived as deeply offensive. Regan seems to welcome, even relish in, the thought of her father's unhappiness, which shows just how coldhearted she is.

When Lear sees Caius (Kent) in the stocks, he realizes straight away that Regan and Cornwall mean to offend him. This is further highlighted by their refusal to come out and speak to him. Because he has already been slighted by Goneril, Lear is a bit more prepared for Regan's betrayal, although he takes it just as hard crying, "O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! / Hysterica passio, down, thou climbing sorrow" (2.4.60-61). In Shakespeare's time, the "mother" referred to a quick illness that quickened one's heartbeat and suffocated one's breath. In short, a panic attack. Lear can't cope with the physical and emotional trauma of his daughters' betrayal, and it pushes him ever closer to insanity. Regan picks up on this insecurity and needles Lear even further by suggesting that she must treat him this way because he is losing his sanity: "I pray you, father, being weak, seem so" (2.4.215). With these words, Regan proverbially kicks her father while he is down, cementing her role as a heartless villain. Lear's obvious impending descent into madness is mirrored by Edgar's decision to go undercover as "Poor Tom" to escape his father's murderous rage. Edgar poses as a



homeless man just released from an insane asylum, although his descent into madness, unlike Lear's, is voluntary.

Finally, readers may wonder why Lear holds steadfastly on to his army of attendants. Some may ask why Lear doesn't simply let his servants go, as his daughters suggest he should. For Lear, the servants are a symbol of his power and position. Although he doesn't necessarily need his servants to survive, he simply cannot imagine living respectfully without them. Turning away his servants would be akin to living without clothing or shelter – entirely possible to do, but in a way, doing so would make him less human. Lear's daughters know how he feels about his servants, so they are effectually asking him to give up his humanity, a heartbreakingly cruel request. Lear would rather spend the night battling a dangerously brewing storm than in the company of his cruel daughters. The storm, of course, symbolizing the disarray and destruction in Lear's own life.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why are Lear's servants so important to him? What does his relationship with his staff tell you about society at the time?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What parallels can be found between Lear and Gloucester's family conflicts?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How is Edmund using social and familial issues to manipulate his cause? Does this make him a more or less complex villain than Goneril or Regan?

## **Vocabulary**

Caitiff, Pight, Dullard, Bawd, Varlet, Ruffian, Verity, Conjunct, Braggart, Beseech, Penury, Meiny, Arrant, Infirmity, Sepulchering, Raiment, Abjure, Carbuncle, Avouch, Superfluous, Alack



# Act Three

## Summary

### Scenes One – Three

Caius (Kent) roams an open heath frantically searching for Lear during the storm. He runs into one of Lear's knights and learns that Lear and his fool are somewhere in the field, and that they are traveling alone. Kent tells the knight of the conflict brewing between Cornwall and Albany (even if they are pretending to get along), and that the King of France, Cordelia's husband, has heard of discord and is preparing to invade. Kent urges the knight to travel to Dover in search of help, telling everyone there of Lear's present position. He also gives the knight a ring to give to Cordelia should he see her. Meanwhile, Lear rages against the storm, shouting into the wind and cursing his two ungrateful daughters. His fool, recognizing the weather's danger, begs Lear to apologize to his daughters and return indoors. Lear refuses. Kent eventually finds the pair and convinces them to seek shelter in a nearby hovel. Kent leaves Lear and the fool to return to Gloucester's castle to ask if they can sleep there for the night.

At the castle, a worried Gloucester speaks with Edmund about his concerns. He expresses how uncomfortable he felt when Lear's children refused to house him, but that when he confronted Regan and Cornwall about their attitudes, they seized his house. Despite the punishment, Gloucester still wants search the heath for Lear. Gloucester divulges that Albany and Cornwall are fighting, and that the King of France plans to invade. Fearing that Cornwall will kill him for treachery if he knows he has gone in search of Lear, Gloucester asks Edmund to distract Cornwall while he searches. Edmund agrees to the plan. As soon as his father leaves, however, Edmund rejoices at how easy it will be to betray Gloucester. He rushes to tell Cornwall the truth – that Gloucester has gone to save Lear – hoping that Cornwall will order Gloucester's immediate execution, leaving Edmund as his father's sole heir now that Edgar has gone into hiding.

### Scenes Four and Five

Lear's fool tries to convince him to seek shelter in the hovel, but Lear refuses. He sends the fool inside and then kneels outside to pray, again lamenting how his daughters have betrayed him after he gave them everything, and also prostrating himself for not doing enough for the homeless and poor, who have few resources to protect themselves against storms, when he was king. The fool comes running out of the hovel shouting that there is a spirit inside. The spirit is actually Poor Tom (Edgar in disguise) who has also been seeking shelter. Knowing that he must play the part of a madman to stay safe, Edgar bemoans the devils that chase and possess him. He says that before he went mad, he was a wealthy courtier who spent his days gambling, drinking, and sleeping with beautiful women. Lear, who is struggling with his own inner demons, simply nods and asks if wicked daughters have ruined Poor Tom as well.



Feeling a sense of companionship with Poor Tom, Lear also tears off his clothes to stand naked in the storm as an act of camaraderie. Gloucester arrives and is disturbed by the scene at the hovel, thinking that Lear deserves much better companions than a fool and a madman. He once again tries to convince Lear to return to his castle for shelter, despite knowing that it will infuriate Lear's children, but Lear refuses. When Edgar complains that he is cold, Lear finally agrees to seek shelter inside the hovel.

Meanwhile, at Gloucester's castle, Edmund delivers his father's letter to Cornwall, proving that Gloucester secretly supports Lear and the impending French invasion. As expected, Cornwall feels deeply betrayed and immediately promotes Edmund to the title of Earl of Gloucester, earning his father's title and land. Edmund continues to play the role of an innocent, pretending to have been shocked to discover his father's treasonous ways, but in reality, he is delighted to see his plans coming into fruition. He vows to find Gloucester and return him to Cornwall, secretly hoping that he will find his father aiding Lear, which will confirm all of Cornwall's suspicions and certainly lead to Gloucester's execution.

### Scenes Six and Seven

Lear, the fool, Poor Tom (Edgar), Caius (Kent), and Gloucester leave the hovel and travel to a farmhouse on Gloucester's property to seek shelter and to hide from Cornwall and Regan. Gloucester, who thinks no one knows that he has gone in search of Lear, goes to collect supplies from the castle. While he's gone, Lear holds a mock trial for his wicked daughters, with Edgar, Kent, and the fool acting as the jury. Gloucester interrupts the trial to say that he's overheard a plot to kill Lear, and that the group must hurry Lear away, warning that in half an hour he will be dead. As the fool and Kent rush to take Lear to Dover, where he has friends who may aid him, Edgar takes a moment to deliver a soliloquy to the audience about how miniscule his troubles seem in comparison to Lear's.

Meanwhile, inside the castle, Cornwall shows Goneril Gloucester's treasonous letter, telling her to show it to Albany. He orders the servants to seek out Gloucester and bring him back for punishment, warning Edmund that he should not watch the violence that will be bestowed upon his father. Oswald arrives to say that he has heard that Lear now escapes to Dover. Edmund and Goneril leave immediately to find Albany and search for Lear.

Moments later, a group of guards brings Gloucester into the room. Cornwall orders for him to be tied to a chair, and he and Regan mock and humiliate him, pulling his beard and calling him a traitor. Gloucester demands that they unhand him and treat him with more respect – they are guests in his house, after all – but the pair is unrelenting. When they ask why Gloucester sent Lear to Dover, he says it is because he cannot bear to see the way his children treat him. Enraged, Cornwall says, "See 't shalt thou never," and viciously plucks out one of Gloucester's eyes (3.7.71). One of the guards who brought Gloucester in draws his sword and exclaims that Gloucester should not be treated this way. He and Cornwall duel and Cornwall is injured. Regan snatches a sword and stabs the guard in the back, killing him. A bleeding and infuriated Cornwall



angrily plucks out Gloucester's other eye. Weeping, Gloucester calls out for his beloved Edmund to save him, and Regan announces with great pleasure that it was Edmund who betrayed him as a traitor. Immediately, Gloucester realizes that he, like Lear, has misjudged his children. He prays for Edgar's safety and success, wherever he may be. Throwing Gloucester out of the castle, Regan and the wounded Cornwall make their way to Dover in search of Lear. Gloucester's remaining servants lament the old man's terrible treatment and vow to hand him over to the new beggar, Poor Tom (Edgar in disguise), with the hopes that Poor Tom can sneak him out of town.

## Analysis

In this act, the audience sees the chaos of Lear's madness symbolized in two ways: the weather and the impending war. Throughout the play, there have been hints of political unrest, but all is made clear in this section. While the timeline is a bit hazy (it's practically impossible that word of the king's treatment would have reached France in only a few days), Lear suggests that French spies have been monitoring his treatment, which is why they have sent aid to him (through Cordelia) from France. Many of the characters begin making their way to Dover, where Lear has traveled in the hopes of uniting with allies to his cause. By giving up his power, Lear seems to have sealed Britain's chaotic fate, and a French invasion – with ships landing in Dover – is inevitable. The audience knows from the play's opening scenes that Lear had enjoyed a stable rule and that he hoped to relax in an equally peaceful retirement. Now that he has handed power over to his daughters and their feuding husbands, Cornwall and Albany, Britain has been plunged into immediate unrest and it appears Lear's power, and the power he has handed to his greedy daughters, will be completely undermined. Tension of the impending war with France heightens through the act as various characters make their way to Dover in search of conflict.

This chaos is mirrored in the storm on the heath, from which Lear refuses to seek shelter. In the violent wind and rain, Lear is literally (and symbolically) stripped bare, standing naked in the raging weather. Lear's gesture shows that, in his mind, there is no difference between a king and beggar: both are equally vulnerable to the world's unyielding cruelty. Lear, who had once thought his power to be unshakable, now realizes that he is as vulnerable to pain, both physical and emotional, as any other man, a thought that causes him to reconsider his rule. As Lear descends into a depressed madness, ironically he begins to realize his own humanity. He regrets not doing more for the homeless and poor, even going so far as to pray for their safety (rather than his own) during the storm. When he meets Poor Tom, he immediately latches on to the "Bedlam beggar," seeking to protect and shelter him, as if to rectify his sins. He also compassionately questions whether his fool is cold and sends him into the hovel to find warmth. It is ironic to note that with his current knowledge, Lear would make a compassionate, effective king, yet he has handed away all his power to the play's villains.

As Lear begins to realize his own humanity, he seems also to realize that he is going mad, which frightens him: "My wits begin to turn" (3.2.68). The world has shifted





beneath Lear's feet and now that he has been stripped of all he once held dear, he no longer understands where he fits. The fact that Lear tears off his royal clothes, questions the gods, and laments nature shows that he has begun to question his own humanity. All of this takes place during a storm that is described as apocalyptic, sending the message that while it may not be the end of the physical world, it is certainly the end of the world as Lear knew it. Throughout the storm, Lear's thoughts never stray from his daughters, whom he blames for everything: "Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters. / I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness" (3.2.14-15). In this, Lear means to say that he does not blame the weather for doing what comes naturally to it, despite how it punishes his body. All the blame, Lear thinks, lies with the two daughters who betrayed him.

The violent storm also underscores the crazed chaos in Lear's mind. Rather than seeking shelter in the hovel as his companions suggest, Lear strips off his clothes and shouts into the wind, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! / You cataracts and hurricanes spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!" (3.2.1-3). In his madness, Lear is challenging the storm to do its worst. Some critics believe that this speech highlights Lear's loosening grip on reality or his lack of understanding of the physical world. Others argue that Lear is not speaking to nature, but to the gods. Either way, Lear's diatribe calls into question whether the world is fundamentally friendly or hostile. If there is an all-powerful god who rewards good and evil, why, Lear seems to question, is he being punished?

At the close of Scene Six, Lear states that "We'll go to supper i' the morning," to which the fool replies, "And I'll go to bed at noon" (3.2.77-78). This final exchange between the king and his fool highlights the lost order of the world. In Lear's mind, everything is topsy-turvey. It is the fool's last line in the play, as it becomes increasingly clear that in Lear's madness, the role of a fool is no longer needed, especially since Lear seems to have already internalized the fool's chastising messages and warnings, and even if he hasn't, Lear would be unable to understand the fool's cryptic messages now anyway.

The violence of Gloucester's eye-gouging is one of the bloodiest in all of Shakespeare's works, in which murder and violence typically take place off-stage. Gloucester's punishment seems symbolically significant as it is a physical blindness to match his symbolic blindness. Gloucester's eyes are gouged out, rendering him unable to see, which mirrors how he (and Lear) are unable to see the truth about their children. They mistook the loyal for the deceitful, and the selfish for the trustworthy. Lear is likewise "blinded" from reality through his increased madness, although it appears that Gloucester's violent punishment is more severe. Regan and Cornwall's sadistic treatment of Gloucester, in whose home they are guests, again calls into question the innate cruelty of a world in which there is no social order or respect. When all seems lost, however, Shakespeare offers a glimmer of humanity in Cornwall's servants, one of whom gives his life to defend Gloucester's honor. At the end of the act, Cornwall's gobsmacked servants secretly care for Gloucester's wounds and ensure that he finds a guide in Poor Tom (who is, of course, actually Gloucester's disguised son Edgar). In these actions, Shakespeare offers the audience some hope: even in the midst of horrific cruelty and violence, a glimmer of humanity always remains.



## Discussion Question 1

Why is Regan and Cornwall's treatment of Gloucester particularly shocking? What does this tell you about their characters?

## Discussion Question 2

What realizations does Lear make about himself and his situation while on the heath?

## Discussion Question 3

Does Shakespeare seem to be suggesting that all humanity is lost in the world of the play? How can you tell?

## Vocabulary

Impetuous, Fie, Pernicious, Pother, Perjure, Hovel, Malady, Filial, Quagmire, Sallow, Importune, Sapient, Cur, Anatomize, Dally, Festinate, Pinion



# Act Four

## Summary

### Scene One

Back on the heath, Edgar delivers a soliloquy that once again states that his circumstances are not as bad as they could be. His thoughts are interrupted by the horrifying sight of his blinded father being led into the fields by one of his longtime tenants. As he walks, Gloucester laments the way he treated his beloved son Edgar, and claims that he would rather touch his son one last time than restore his eyesight: "Ah, dear son Edgar, / The food of thy abused father's wrath! / Might I but live to see thee in my touch, / I'd say I had eyes again" (4.1.22-25). Even though Edgar is moved by his father's words, he remains disguised as Poor Tom when he approaches him. Gloucester, who remembers Poor Tom from the previous night on the heath, asks his tenant to return home and gather some clothes for the beggar to wear. Gloucester dismisses the tenant, and fearing that aiding him any further will only bring the tenant hardship, Gloucester asks Poor Tom (Edgar) to take over as his guide. He asks to be brought to the highest cliff in Dover, and Edgar agrees to take him.

### Scene Two

Goneril and Edmund arrive back at Goneril's castle. The two discuss the fact that Albany, Goneril's husband, seems to be wavering in his loyalty, and Goneril harshly criticizes him for being a coward. Oswald arrives with a letter confirming that Albany is angered by Goneril and Regan's treatment of their father, and that he plans to support the French troops when they land in Dover. Realizing that she can no longer rely on her husband for support, Goneril immediately turns her attention to Edmund, flirting mercilessly with him, and strongly suggesting that she would like to become both his lover and his political partner. Goneril sends Edmund off to speak with Cornwall, wishing him a safe journey with a kiss and a token of her affection.

As soon as Edmund leaves, Albany arrives, and immediately begins berating his wife for the terrible person she has become: "You are not worth the dust which the rude wind / Blows in your face. I fear your disposition: / That nature which contemns it origin / Cannot be border'd certain in itself" (4.2.34-37). Albany is outraged to have learned that Lear was driven mad by Goneril's treatment, and he calls her "vile," "monstrous," and "barbarous." Goneril shrugs off her husband's insults saying that he is simply a coward hiding behind the pretense of morality. A messenger interrupts the argument to deliver the news that Cornwall has died from the injuries he sustained while gouging out Gloucester's eyes. Albany is horrified to hear of Gloucester's treatment, and outraged to learn that it was Edmund who betrayed Gloucester in the first place. Fed up with the wickedness he has seen, Albany vows to seek revenge upon Edmund and do what he can to aid Gloucester.



### Scenes Three – Five

Caius (Kent) discusses the arrival of the French troops in Dover with the messenger who delivered Kent's letters to Cordelia, who is now the queen of France. The messenger tells Kent that Cordelia was deeply moved by his account of Lear's treatment, and that she is outraged by her sisters' misbehavior. Kent divulges that Lear has made it safely to Dover, but that he refuses to see Cordelia out of guilt for the way he treated her. The men discuss that Cornwall and Albany's troops, which Goneril has taken command of, are marching toward Dover. Meanwhile, Cordelia has summoned a doctor to investigate whether Lear may ever regain his sanity. The doctor claims that it may be possible if Lear can find time to sleep. He is prepared to give Lear sleeping medicine. Cordelia sends 100 soldiers in search of her father, who is hiding in the fields, singing to himself, draped in flowers and weeds. Cordelia also prepares her troops for battle, knowing that Albany and Cornwall's troops are not far off.

Oswald arrives at Cornwall's castle to tell Regan that Albany's troops have begun marching toward Dover. Regan is not at all interested in the military's progress, and only questions Goneril's burgeoning romance with Edmund. Regan claims that Edmund should be hers since she is now a widow, and she demands that Oswald hand over Goneril's love letter to him. Regan dismisses Oswald with the order that if he runs into Gloucester, he should kill him.

### Scene Six

Poor Tom (Edgar) leads Gloucester through the countryside, but tells the old man that he is leading him up a very steep cliff at Dover. He describes the terrible height, which he claims gives him vertigo, and acts surprised when Gloucester claims that he cannot hear the wild waves crashing against the sharp rocks below. When they have reached the "top of the cliff," Edgar pretends to leave his father, but in reality just steps back silently. Gloucester, who can no longer cope with the events that have unfolded, delivers a final prayer before falling forward off the "cliff" to commit suicide. Somehow, he loses consciousness during the short fall. Edgar rushes to his father's side and awakens him. No longer pretending to be Poor Tom but instead adopting the character of a gentleman (although still not revealing his true identity), Edgar tells Gloucester that it is a miracle he survived the fall off such a high cliff. He claims to have seen Gloucester tumble from a great height, and that it must certainly be by the grace of the gods that he survived. Gloucester accepts the theory that it was not his time to die, and vows to be more accepting of whatever life throws his way.

Lear, covered in flowers and weeds, stumbles across Gloucester and Edgar in the field. He babbles incoherently about sexuality and women. Gloucester recognizes Lear's voice and feels deeply sorry for his old friend, who has clearly gone mad. Cordelia's men arrive and are relieved to have finally found Lear. When he sees the soldiers, however, Lear flees, sending the men chasing after him. Oswald appears moments later, and having been charged with killing Gloucester, draws his sword. Gloucester welcomes the sword at his neck and only asks that Oswald kill him quickly. Edgar intervenes, this time adopting the voice and accent of a French soldier, and kills



Oswald. With his dying breath, Oswald asks Edgar to deliver his parcel of letters to Edmund, as was requested by his mistress. Edgar quickly reads the letter from Goneril which asks Edmund to kill Albany as soon as he has the chance so that they can be together. Edgar is disgusted by the letter and vows to show it to Albany.

### Scene Seven

Lear, who has finally been captured by Cordelia's men, is brought to her camp. While Lear sleeps, Cordelia speaks with Caius (Kent), whom she recognizes immediately but vows to keep his true identity a secret. She is deeply grateful for all Kent has done to help protect her father. When Lear wakes, he is brought to Cordelia. It's clear that he recognizes his beloved daughter, despite his madness. He assumes that Cordelia has brought him to her so that she can betray and kill him, just as her sisters would have done. Cordelia tells her father that she loves him and tearfully forgives him for banishing her. Meanwhile, the soldiers outside discuss the news that Edmund has been put in charge of Albany's troops.

## Analysis

In this Act, the play reaches its pinnacle of hopelessness. At the opening of the Act, Edgar believes that the worst has passed: "The lamentable change is from the best; / The worst returns to laughter" (4.1.5-6) only to be confronted with the horrific sight of his bloodied and bandaged father. He descends into despair at the cruelty of the world. Likewise, Gloucester has descended so far into depression that he considers killing himself. He bemoans the gods for the cruel way in which they "kill us for their sport" (4.1.38) suggesting his desperate belief that there is no logical order to the world and that the gods have invented man simply for their own amusement. Gloucester's belief that there can be no redemption or relief from life's cruelty is what leads him to his suicide attempt on the "cliffs." The irony of Gloucester's situation, of course, is that when he had his sight, he was blind to his son's betrayal. Now that he is blinded, he "sees" the truth of his reality and fears that there is no way he can make amends, which intensifies his despair.

Many readers may question why Edgar refuses to reveal his true identity to his father, even after Gloucester claims that his dying wish is to touch his beloved son one last time. Edgar tells the audience before Gloucester's "fall" that his father wouldn't heal if he knew Poor Tom's true identity, which is why he chooses to keep silent. It's clear that Edgar has forgiven his father and that he wants him to live, but he also wants Gloucester to feel emotionally whole again. Much of the plot surrounds characters reaching moments of despair and realizing their true self. While it may seem heartless for Edgar to refuse Gloucester his dying wish, he does so to ensure that his father continue on the path of self-discovery. If Gloucester were given the opportunity to make amends with his son now, surely the evolution of his character would halt.

Unlike Lear and Gloucester, Albany's belief that Cornwall's death was divine redemption for his horrific behavior suggest that there are some characters who still believe the



world functions under some religious order: “This shows you are above, / You justicers,” (4.2.88-89). In his attack on Goneril, Albany further suggests his belief in the natural order of the world when he says, “That nature, which contemns its origin, / Cannot be border’d / certain in itself; / She that herself will sliver and disbranch / From her material sap, perforce must wither / And come to deadly use. (5.2.32-36). It is interesting to note that the further Lear descends into madness, the closer he aligns himself with the natural world, even going so far as to drape himself in weeds and flowers rather than the man-made construction of clothing. He wears a crown of flowers on his head, suggesting that he has aligned with the natural gods rather than with the wicked power of man. Lear’s change of attire seems to suggest that he has accepted his place in the natural order of the world rather than trying to fight against it, as the other characters do. At the same time, Lear’s appearance covered in weeds also symbolizes the neglect he showed in tending to his kingdom. Both Lear’s appearance and England are overrun and in desperate need of some TLC.

Albany’s turn against his wife Goneril also suggests, for the first time, the possibility of redemption for wickedness. Albany’s decision to turn against his wife also continues the theme of betrayal. Now that all the wicked characters have turned against the good, the time has finally come for them to begin turning on each other. Albany has turned against his family in the hopes of securing some moral redemption, but the rest of the wicked characters, driven by their own greed, are beginning to turn against each other in their ravenous pursuit of power. Goneril, even before her fight with Albany, begins plotting an adulterous romp with Edmund simply because he seems more aligned to power than her “weakling” husband. When she hears of Cornwall’s death, Goneril’s first thought is not of her sister’s broken heart, but the jealous realization that now Regan may try to steal Edmund for herself.

Cordelia returns in this Act, first in word and then in presence. The gentleman with whom Kent speaks describes Cordelia in a romantic, even god-like way, describing her “delicate cheek” and “ripe lip” before saying that her tears took on the form of “holy water from her heavenly eyes” (4.3.32). The gentleman’s words remind the audience that Cordelia is the feminine ideal: beautiful and morally flawless. This idea is furthered when it is revealed that the French invasion, which came strictly on Cordelia’s request, is as a result of the banished daughter’s desire to return the father who abandoned her to the throne. Despite her father’s betrayal, Cordelia remains motivated by “love, dear love, and our aged father’s right” (4.4.29).

Meanwhile, the other two sisters, Regan and Goneril, are losing sight of their initial goal – controlling England – as they pettily squabble over Edmund. The two most powerful women in England have been reduced to bickering schoolgirls, giving Edmund all the ammunition he needs to escalate his quest for power. Although it is never discussed outright, it appears through Regan and Goneril’s words that Edmund is romantically linked to both sisters, again suggesting that he will stop at nothing to gain power. When Regan is demanding to see the letter from Oswald, she states that she and Edmund have already reached an agreement, which suggests that their relationship is already romantic, yet Edmund is clearly comfortable kissing Goneril and leading her to believe that their relationship, too, will blossom. At the end of Scene Five, it is revealed that



Goneril has placed Edmund in charge of her armies, a move that give Edmund great power in the country. By the end of Act Four, Regan doesn't care whatsoever about the progression of her army; she only cares about Edmund's whereabouts and the status of his relationship with Goneril. This love triangle not only complicates the plots, it provides a perfect foil for the play's savior, Cordelia, who comes in alone – without her husband present to cloud her judgment – with the hopes of saving her father.

Again, despite Lear's increasing madness, he displays signs of clarity and a keen understanding of his situation, which returns to the play's themes of self-discovery. Now that he has been forced to live in the wild, communing with nature and questioning the gods, Lear has learned much about himself and his position as king. He realizes the dangers of flattery, and that it was his own vanity that led him to his current predicament: "They flattered / me like a dog, and told me I had the white hairs in my / beard ere the black ones were there" (4.6.96-98). He also seems to realize that greed is behind his daughter's betrayal, and he begins to fear that there is no justice in the world amidst such evil treachery: "Plan sin with gold, / And the strong lance of justice hurtles breaks" (4.6.61-61). When Lear is reunited with his beloved Cordelia at the end of the Act, it seems, for just a moment, that his sanity has been restored, perhaps by copious amounts of sleep. He recognizes Cordelia immediately ("I think this lady / To be my child Cordelia) (4.7.69-70)), and the return of music signals a sense of harmony in the world. It's clear in this section that all the characters are hurtling toward their final realizations, and that the play's psychological and physical plotlines are drawing to a close.

## Discussion Question 1

How has Edmund managed to jockey himself up the ranks of power in such a short period of time?

## Discussion Question 2

What does this Act suggest about the natural order of the world?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Edgar chooses to keep his true identity a secret from his ailing father? Do you agree with this decision? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

Wanton, Daub, Usurp, Fumiter, Remediate, Descry, Preferment, Chough, Gossamer, Beguile, Gauntlet, Fitchew, Civet, Apothecary, Usurer, Cozener, Wawl, Stratagem, Benison, Ballow, Boon, Fain, Arbitrement



# Act Five

## Summary

### Scenes One

Act Five opens with Regan quizzing Edmund about his relationship with Goneril. Regan feels certain that Albany has turned against them, and that he will soon be killed as a result, which would leave Goneril free to remarry as she chooses. She demands to know whether Edmund loves Goneril, and he claims to love Regan alone. She makes him promise that he will “be not familiar with her,” meaning that he will not sleep with her, which Edmund swears to. Their conversation is interrupted when Goneril and Albany arrive. Despite earlier swearing to aid Lear, Albany has had a change of heart. The French invasion challenges all of Britain, and as the highest nobleman in the land, he recognizes his responsibility to protect the nation. Therefore, he has agreed to fight alongside Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, despite his issues with their behavior. As soon as Regan and Goneril are in the same room with Edmund, they begin jealously squabbling over him, and when he leaves the room, both hurry after him, too nervous to leave their untrustworthy sister alone with him.

Edgar, no longer disguised as Poor Tom but as a lowly peasant, bursts into the room to deliver Goneril’s letter to Albany. In the damning letter, Goneril asks Edmund to kill Albany as soon as he has the chance so that Goneril will be free to remarry. Edgar promises that after the battle, when Albany blows the trumpet of defeat, he will return and prove that all the facts in the letter are true. Then he hurries away. Moments later, Edmund returns and tells Albany that the battle is about to begin. When Albany rushes off to rally the troops, Edmund addresses the audience in an aside, admitting that he has promised himself to both Goneril and Regan. He does not know which to choose, and hopes that the battle makes the decision for him (he hopes that one of them will be killed or have a change of heart). Finally, Edmund hopes that the battle brings forth Lear and Cordelia so that he can be rid of them himself. He swears to show them no mercy, saying they “Shall never see his pardon; for my state / Stands on me to defend, not to debate” (5.1.77-78).

### Scenes Two and Three

In the very short Scene Two, all the action of the battle takes place offstage. Edgar finds his father and prepares to hide him in safety while the battle commences. He returns moments later shouting that Lear and Cordelia have been captured and that the fight is over: Albany, Regan, Goneril, and Edmund have won.

At the British camp, Edmund marches in with his prisoners, Lear and Cordelia, heavily bound and guarded. Cordelia hopes to confront Goneril and Regan, but Lear refuses to see or speak to them. He hopes he and Cordelia will spend the rest of their days in prison, living like birds in cages singing to one another. Edmund sends Lear and





Cordelia away to the prisoners' tower with an ominous note to the guard about what should happen to them. Albany, Goneril, and Regan arrive/ Albany, who had hoped to show Lear and Cordelia mercy, orders Edmund to hand over the prisoners to him. When Edmund refuses, Albany, who is higher ranking than Edmund, orders the guards to arrest Edmund for treason. Regan steps in and says that she plans to make Edmund her husband, so he has not acted out of line with his power. Suddenly, Regan clutches her stomach and claims to feel ill. She is taken to Albany's tent to lie down. Albany sounds the defeat trumpet and Edgar appears. Although he does not reveal his true identity, he swears that he is as noble as Edmund and that his claims against Edmund should therefore be believed. Outraged, Edmund draws his sword and challenges Edgar to a duel. In the fight, Edmund is wounded. When Albany confronts Goneril with the damning letter, she flees offstage.

It is obvious that Edmund is near death. Edgar reveals his true identity and tells his brother that their father has died. It was his dying wish to see Edgar one final time, and in the moments of Gloucester's final breaths, Edgar revealed himself. A gentleman rushes into the scene holding a bloody knife, claiming that Goneril has killed herself. She has poisoned Regan, who is also dead. The sisters' bodies are hauled onto the stage and laid out. Edmund, in a moment of clarity before death, feels a sudden remorse for his terrible actions. He tells Albany that he ordered the prison guard to hang Lear and Cordelia as soon as they reach the towers. Hurriedly, Albany sends his fastest messenger to intervene at the executions before it is too late. Moments later, a weeping Lear appears, carrying Cordelia's dead body in his arms. He lays out his daughter's body and, slipping in and out of madness, swears he can see her still breathing. As Edgar reaches out to loosen the button on Cordelia's dress, Lear falls forward onto her chest and dies. News arrives that Edmund, too, has died from his injuries. Albany, who has now inherited the title of King of England, asks Kent and Edgar to rule alongside him. Kent, who says he is not long for this world, refuses, but Edgar solemnly accepts. The few remaining characters exit the stage in a somber death march.

## Analysis

In the play's final act, much of the plot is made clear. For example, the audience learns explicitly the nature of the tangled romantic relationship between Edmund and the two sisters. He has promised himself to both, but appears to love neither. He has succeeded in distracting the sisters from their political duties long enough to hoist himself into a position of power. At the opening of Act Five, it appears that Edmund, the bastard son of a nobleman who previously stood to inherit nothing, is poised to become the king of England. It is interesting and entertaining to see the two most powerful women in England squabbling over a man, and the bickering highlights the pettiness of the sisters' characters. At the opening of the play, the women were concerned with nothing but their own power. Now Goneril claims that she would rather lose the battle against the French than lose Edmund to her sister. The fact that neither sister trusts the other to even be alone in the same room as Edmund shows how far their relationship has deteriorated.



It is interesting to note that in such a violent tragedy as King Lear, all of the bloody fighting takes place offstage, in a very short scene. This informs the reader that the physical plot of the play – the rise and fall of power – is not nearly as important as the emotional plot – character development and personal epiphanies – which is why so little attention is actually given to the battle that the entire play has been marching toward.

In the final scenes, Lear appears to have reached true happiness, even though he is on the precipice of death. All he wanted was to be reunited with his beloved Cordelia, and now that he has, he seems oblivious to the danger of his situation and would be quite content to spend the rest of his days in prison, hearing about the outside world but no longer taking part in it: “Come, let’s away to prison: / We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage” (5.3.9-10). Lear doesn’t want to confront the evils of the world, embodied by Goneril and Regan, for even a moment. When Cordelia desires to confront her two wicked sisters, Lear responds with a resounding, “No, no, no, no” (5.3.8).

Albany, who has meandered through the play as a somewhat weak character comes into his own as a leader in the play’s final scene. He recognizes his role as the country’s leader and is even willing to put aside his personal feelings for the protection and betterment of the country. When England succeeds in defeating the French, Albany stands up to Edmund when he thinks the bastard son is overstepping his place, calling him a “Half-blooded fellow” (5.3.81). Despite Regan’s pleas to save Edmund, Albany calls forth for a duel, and Edmund, who arrives dressed as knight, draws his sword. The battle between Edmund and Edgar is clearly a symbolic battle between good and evil. With Edgar’s victory, a sense of moral order is restored. However, with the tragic deaths of Lear and Cordelia, the sense of divine justice is somewhat undermined. This ending was particularly shocking to 18th century audiences who, after reveling in the “just” deaths of Cornwall, Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, were shocked when the corpses of the play’s heroic protagonists, Lear and Cordelia, were also heaped onto the stage in the final scene. Audiences were so outraged, that initial performances actually included a rewrite in which Cordelia’s character lives. Nevertheless, it is clear that Shakespeare hoped to create controversy and discussion about the ideas of divine justice and moral order.

## Discussion Question 1

What does the novel's final scene tell the reader about moral order and the battle between good and evil?

## Discussion Question 2

What message is sent to the audience in Cordelia's death? Why do you think 18th century audiences were so outraged?



## Discussion Question 3

Do you think Albany will make a good king? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

Forefend, Avouch, Machination, Adder, Rogue, Patrimony, Attaint, Bespoke, Mauge, Puissant, Falchion, Usurp



# Characters

## King Lear

King Lear is the tragedy's main protagonist. At the opening of the play, Lear is the somewhat vain, misguided King of England who hopes to hand power over to his three daughters and enjoy his retirement in peace. In his vanity, Lear offers to give the most land to the daughter who loves him most, inviting shallow flattery rather than heartfelt affection. As a result, Lear ends up giving power to his two wicked daughters, Goneril and Regan, and banishing his beloved daughter Cordelia, the only daughter who actually loves him. Lear's main character progression over the course of the play is his descent in to madness and, ironically, his gradual understanding of his own humanity. At the opening of the play, Lear feels powerful, entitled, and is out of touch with his kingdom. Out on the heath, Lear experiences the pain and struggles of the thunderstorm and he realizes not only that he is just as vulnerable as any other man, but also that he was an ineffective king. He didn't do enough to protect the poor and homeless, who would have ever fewer tools than him to deal with the horrific weather. As the play progresses and Lear descends further into madness, he removes his royal clothes and drapes himself with weeds and flowers. This act symbolizes his release of political / royal power and his embrace of the power of the natural world. Despite the fact that he is mad, Lear comes to understand his own humanity in a new way, and by the end of the play, he seems truly happy after reuniting with his beloved Cordelia. Lear even wishes to spend the rest of his days in prison rather than return to rule as king. Lear's newfound happiness is short-lived, however, when he dies of a broken heart after Cordelia's untimely execution.

## Edmund Gloucester

Edmund Gloucester is the bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester. Born to a mother out of wedlock, Edmund stands to inherit nothing from his noble father. Instead, all of Gloucester's wealth and power will be handed down to his "legitimate" son, Edgar. Edmund has grown up under the stigma of being a bastard for his entire life, and it has made him power hungry, greedy, and manipulative. At the opening of the play, Edmund puts a plan into action that will turn his father against his brother in the hopes that Edmund will rise in ranks and stand to gain some inheritance. First, Edmund convinces his father that Edgar is trying to kill him, turning father against son and sending the legitimate heir into hiding. Then, Edmund hands his father over to Cornwall as a traitor and is rewarded with his father's title and power. Still unsatisfied, Edmund takes both Goneril and Regan as his lovers, turning sister against sister, and putting himself in prime position to one day become king. Edmund is an opportunist who will stop at nothing to further his own goals, no matter who he takes down in the process. Nearly all of the tragedy and horror that befalls the characters is as a result of Edmund's manipulations. Edmund's rise to power suggests that there is no natural order or moral code in the world – the evil find power and success while the moral suffer – yet Edmund



meets death at his brother's sword at the end of the play. The fight between Edmund and Edgar is truly symbolic of the battle between good and evil, and Edgar's victory suggests the return of moral order in the world.

## **The Earl of Gloucester**

The Earl of Gloucester is one of Lear's closest friends and most loyal allies. Like Lear, Gloucester is terribly misguided about his children's loyalty, and doesn't recognize his mistake until it is too late. Gloucester is easily conned by his manipulative son Edmund, and turns his back on his trustworthy son Edgar as a result. Edmund continues to betray his father, resulting in Gloucester being brought to Cornwall as a traitor and having his eyes brutally plucked out. With a physical blindness to match his symbolic blindness, Gloucester wanders the English countryside with a homeless beggar, who is actually his son Edgar in disguise, as his guide. Eventually, the cruelty of the world becomes too much for Gloucester and he attempts suicide. Gloucester dies at the end of the play having finally touched his beloved Edgar one last time.

## **The Earl of Kent (Caius)**

The Earl of Kent (Caius) is one of Lear's closest friends and most loyal allies. At the opening of the play, Kent chides Lear for banishing Cordelia, suggesting that Lear is vain is trivial. Outraged, Lear banishes Kent, telling him that he has only a few days to leave the kingdom forever. Knowing that Goneril and Regan could not be trusted, Kent disguised himself as a peasant named Caius and convinced Lear to give him a job. For the rest of the play, Kent's true identity remained hidden from Lear, but the loyal friend was able to protect and serve the king until his death.

## **Edgar Gloucester (Poor Tom)**

Edgar Gloucester (Poor Tom) is the legitimate, honorable son of the Earl of Gloucester. Edgar is a victim of his greedy brother's manipulations and is forced into hiding at the opening of the novel. To stay safe, Edgar dresses as a bedlam beggar named Poor Tom and wanders the heath in search of shelter. Eventually, he runs into King Lear and joins his traveling party. Throughout the play, Edgar adopts many false identities including a countryside peasant and French soldier, first to protect himself from his father and then to aid in his father's emotional journey. At the end of the play, Edgar has forgiven his father, defeated his evil brother, and agreed to rule alongside Albany.

## **Goneril and Regan**

Goneril and Regan are King Lear's eldest two daughters. They are manipulative and cunning, concerned only with their own power and greed. At the opening of the play, the daughters obnoxiously flatter their father with the hopes of inheriting more land, and when they does, they immediately begin undermining what little power their father still



has left. First, they refuse to house Lear along with his servants, then they torture his allies and friends. At the end of the play, their insatiable evil and hunger has turned the sisters against each other as they squabble over a man's affection. The play ends with Goneril killing herself after poisoning Regan.

## **Cordelia**

Cordelia is King Lear's youngest daughter, and the only of his children that actually loves him. Cordelia refuses to heap cheap flattery on her father at the play's opening, and is banished to France as a result. Despite this, Cordelia remains faithful and loyal to her father and sends French troops to aid him when she hears of her sisters' mistreatment. Cordelia is portrayed as the feminine ideal throughout the play, but ultimately ends up dead after the untimely execution that breaks Lear's heart.

## **The Duke of Cornwall**

The Duke of Cornwall is Regan's husband. Cornwall shows himself to be just as evil and manipulative as his wife when he brutally plucks out Gloucester's eyes for being a traitor. He dies from wounds sustained in a battle during that tussle.

## **The Duke of Albany**

The Duke of Albany is Goneril's husband. Unlike his wife and her allies, Albany feels guilty about the way that Lear and his friends were treated, and actually turns against his wife with the plans of supporting Lear's return to the throne. When the French troops land in Dover, however, Albany realizes that it is his responsibility to protect England from invasion, so he is forced to join forces with his wife once again, although he promises to show Lear and his friends mercy if they are captured. At the end of the play, the moral Albany is the last nobleman living, which means that he will inherit the title of the King of England.

## **The Fool**

The Fool is a classic character in Shakespeare plays. Shakespeare's fools are almost always ironic characters – often the most intelligent and wise characters despite their title, and Lear's fool is no exception. Even though he speaks in silly riddles, poems, and songs, it's clear that the fool knows Lear has made a terrible choice in trusting Regan and Goneril, and that they plan to ruin him. Because he is viewed as simpleminded and childish, the fool is able to get away with chastising Lear in a way no other member of the court would be allowed. Because he speaks in riddle rather than plain speak, the fool is also able to plant seeds of warning and doubt in Lear's mind without Lear ever being aware of it. The fool disappears without explanation from the play during the storm on the heath.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Storm

The Storm on the heath is a symbol of the emotional chaos in Lear's mind as well as of the political unrest that brews in England now that Lear has handed power over to his two manipulative daughters.

## Gloucester's Eyes

Gloucester's Eyes are a symbol of blindness in the play. Both Lear and Gloucester are blind to their children's true intentions, and both fathers accidentally favor the untrustworthy children over the moral ones. When Gloucester's eyes are plucked out, the physical act symbolizes Gloucester's emotional blindness.

## Flowers and Weeds

Flowers and Weeds are a two-pronged symbol in the play. When Lear covers himself in flowers and weeds, it not only symbolizes his "oneness" with nature, but it also symbolizes how unkempt Lear has allowed his kingdom to become. Both Lear's appearance and England have been neglected and are now overrun.

## Clothing

Clothing is a symbol of royalty, particularly for Lear. When he realizes that he is as vulnerable to pain as any other man, even a bedlam beggar, Lear strips off his clothing and stands naked in the storm next to Poor Tom. This act symbolizes that all men are equal under the eyes of the gods.

## Edmund's Letter

Edmund's Letter is a forged admission from his brother Edgar claiming to be plotting to kill their father, Gloucester. This lying letter is how Edmund first starts his plan to overthrow his father and steal his brother's inheritance.

## Goneril's Letter

Goneril's Letter is a damning love note to Edmund asking him to kill Albany when he has the chance so that they can be together. Edgar intercepts the letter and gives it to Albany, ensuring that Goneril's wicked rule will soon be over.



## The Feather

The Feather is what Lear clutches at the end of the play, after Cordelia's death. Lear holds the feather close to Cordelia's mouth and swears that she is still breathing. It is with this momentary hope that Lear collapses on Cordelia's chest and dies.

## The Stocks

The stocks are where Regan and Goneril order Caius to be held after he threatens Oswald outside the castle. The wicked daughters know that it would be a great offense to imprison the king's messenger, but they don't care. The stocks are a punishment traditionally used with common criminals and petty thieves.

## Servants

Servants are a symbol of power. When Lear steps down as king, he still travels the land with hundreds of servants. For Lear, the servants are a symbol of his power and position. Although he doesn't necessarily need his servants to survive, he simply cannot imagine living respectfully without them. Turning away his servants would be akin to living without clothing or shelter – entirely possible to do, but in a way, doing so would make him less human. Lear's daughters know how he feels about his servants, so they are effectually asking him to give up his humanity, a heartbreakingly cruel request.





# Settings

## Lear's Palace

Lear's Palace is where the play opens. This is where Lear divides up his kingdom and banishes Cordelia.

## Gloucester's Castle

Gloucester's Castle is where the Earl of Gloucester lives with his two sons, Edgar and Edmund. After gaining power over England from her father, Regan and her husband Cornwall come here to stay. Regan turns Lear away when he requests to stay with her, claiming that she cannot house all of his servants. Regan also treats Gloucester terribly here, including plucking out his eyes, despite the fact that she is a guest in his home.

## The Duke of Albany's Palace

The Duke of Albany's Palace is where Goneril and her husband Albany live. This is Lear's first stop after handing political power over to his daughters, and where he first begins to realize that his daughters are undermining him. At Albany's palace, Goneril orders the servants to ignore Lear's commands, deeply offending him.

## The Heath

The Heath is where Lear decides to stay after his daughters refuse to house him and all of his servants. Lear decides to live in the wild, despite a blustering thunderstorm, so that he can keep some semblance of control in his life.

## Dover

Dover is the port city in England where the French dock their ships before the way. Many of the characters head to Dover in search of support or conflict, and this is the site, famed for its white cliffs, where Gloucester believes he attempted suicide.

## The British Camp

The British Camp is where the play ends. The British forces have set up camp in Dover, and this is where the play's final scenes take place. Edgar and Edmund battle in a duel, Regan and Goneril die, and Lear carries out Cordelia's dead body before dying of a broken heart.



# Themes and Motifs

## Loyalty and Betrayal

Throughout *King Lear*, loyalty is symbolized in peace and betrayal in chaos, and the audience sees these two forces at work from the play's opening scenes. When Lear asks his daughters to profess how much they love him, he invites the ensuing chaos by testing their loyalty. Goneril and Regan, who have no loyalty to their father, and only seek to further their own greed, heap cheap flattery onto their father and are rewarded with power over England. Cordelia, who is the only daughter to love her father, refuses, as is banished. Immediately, the court erupts in chaos as Kent, Lear's faithful friend, tries to intervene on Cordelia's behalf and is also banished. The chaos continues as Lear schleps from home to home searching for respite and is eventually forced onto the heath in the middle of a terrible thunderstorm. Meanwhile, French forces have threatened to invade England, ending the peace that had existed during Lear's rule and threatening war.

Paralleling Lear's story is Gloucester's. Gloucester has two sons – one loyal and one manipulative – with the younger betraying his father for power. Gloucester faces his own fair share of chaos when his elder son must don a disguise and go into hiding, and his younger son lies and manipulates his way into power at any cost. Gloucester's eyes are plucked out in one of the play's goriest scenes, and Gloucester's emotional turmoil reaches fever pitch when he attempts suicide on the cliffs of Dover.

Once the evil characters have turned against the heroic characters, there is nothing left for them to do but turn against each other as they jockey against each other to grasp what little power is left in Britain. Goneril and Regan go down in a ball of flames as they betray each other's loyalty over the affections of a man. Goneril ends up stabbing herself after poisoning Regan, and both die. Albany turns against his wife in a change of heart that eventually becomes King of England. At the end of the play, nearly all of the heroic characters are dead as a result of the betrayals that have befallen them. It is interesting to note, though, that despite the betrayals he has faced, Lear still experiences true happiness in the moments before his death. After being reunited with his beloved Cordelia, Lear realizes true happiness and even claims that he would rather spend the rest of his life in prison with Cordelia than have to face his wicked daughters again to be restored as king. The plot events send a clear message to the reader that only chaos comes from betrayal, and that loyalty should be valued above all else.

## Moral Order and Divine Retribution

Given the amount of betrayal that goes on in *King Lear*, it seems fitting that one of the main themes of the play is the exploration of the world's moral order, and the questioning of divine retribution. It is important to note that *King Lear* is set in a pagan era, pre-Christ, and the world itself is therefore devoid of Christian symbolism.



Shakespeare wrote the play, however, post-Christ and the influences of Christian religion can clearly be seen in the text. This provides an interesting and intriguing religious juxtaposition.

Lear first begins to question the will of the gods during the storm on the heath when he says, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! / You cataracts and hurricanes spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks" (3.2.1-3). In his madness, Lear is challenging the storm to do its worst. Some critics believe that this speech highlights Lear's loosening grip on reality or his lack of understanding of the physical world. Others argue that Lear is not speaking to nature, but to the gods. Either way, Lear's diatribe calls into question whether the world is fundamentally friendly or hostile. If there is an all-powerful god who rewards good and evil, why, Lear seems to question, is he being punished? Like Lear, Gloucester also questions the moral order of the universe when he says, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport" (4.1.37-38). He utters these words before he attempts suicide on the cliffs of Dover. His lamentation calls into question the moral order of the universe as he wonders aloud whether there are all-knowing gods in charge of the universe. If there are, why is Gloucester, an upstanding and good man, being so punished? Gloucester feels that the gods have only invented man for their own amusements, and that it is a game to watch them suffer.

While it may seem that all the characters have resigned themselves to the random chaos of their violent world, there are glimmers of moral order, such as when Albany thanks the gods for claiming Cornwall's life, calling his death divine retribution for their treatment of Gloucester. At the end of the play, the swordfight between Edmund and Edgar clearly symbolizes the battle between good and evil. With Edgar's victory, a sense of moral order is restored. However, with the tragic deaths of Lear and Cordelia, the sense of divine justice is somewhat undermined. Although the questions are never answered, it is clear that Shakespeare hoped to create controversy and discussion about the ideas of divine justice and moral order.



# Styles

## Point of View

King Lear was written in 1605 and is one of Shakespeare's most popular and well known tragedies. It is also one of his most bleak. The play was written in Elizabethan England, an era that held strictly to a hierarchical power structure. At the time, all of society, from the wealthy to the poor, would have adhered to social rules and constraints based on power, meaning that there were certain codes of conduct to show respect to those who were wealthier or more powerful than you. This system not only maintained social order, it also kept people "in their place." Great respect would have been paid to elderly, particularly one's parents, which is one of the many reasons why Lear was so shocking to audiences at the time. The daughters' treatment of Lear – as their father and as the King of England – was considered treasonous. Their treatment of Gloucester, an elderly nobleman, was unforgivable. By playing into the social constraints of the time, Shakespeare was sure to arouse great outcry from his audiences, which perhaps helped cement King Lear as one of Shakespeare's most talked about plays.

Many critics have discussed two shocking court cases that took place shortly before King Lear was written, that might have served as Shakespeare's inspiration. In the first, the mayor of London, William Allen, was notoriously treated very poorly by his three daughters after handing political power over to them. In the second, the eldest daughter of the wealthy Sir Brian Annesly tried to have her father deemed insane so that she could inherit power of his property before his death. Annesly's youngest daughter, interestingly named Cordell, fought against her sister in court to protect their father's assets.

## Language and Meaning

Like all of Shakespeare's plays, King Lear is written in Early Modern English, although his complex sentence structure and use of (now) obsolete words, often leads students to think they are reading Old or Middle English. Shakespeare's works have often stood the test of time simply because of his profound mastery of the English language. This is particularly striking given the fact that Shakespeare himself had very little formal education and that linguistic tools like the dictionary and thesaurus hadn't been invented yet. Shakespeare used his immense creativity and imagination to play with language, molding it into an immediately recognizable style. Through his works, Shakespeare is credited in the Oxford English Dictionary, the first comprehensive dictionary created, with the invention of over 3,000 words! Furthermore, the vocabulary of Shakespeare's collected works numbers well over 17,000 words (nearly quadruple the layman's vocabulary) including 7,000 words he used once and then never again.



It is important to note that in Shakespeare's time, people did not actually speak the same way that Shakespeare wrote. Shakespeare constructed his sentences and dialogue for specific poetic and dramatic effects, including poetic rhythm, literary emphasis, and speech patterns. As a result, Shakespeare's language is often characterized by unusual word order, word and syllable omission, and the inclusion of unusual (or made up) words. All of these elements have added to the intrigue (and frustration) of Shakespeare's works, and hundreds of glossaries, study guides, and literary aids, have been created to help students and audiences alike to unlock the magic of Shakespeare's finest works.

## Structure

King Lear is divided into five acts. Act One opens with Lear's flawed plan to divide his kingdom amongst his daughters and ends with Goneril's initial offenses to undermine her father's remaining power. Act Two adds to the dramatic tension as Regan joins in her sister's cruel plot to offend their father and ends with Lear clinging to what little control he has left in his life by choosing to sleep on the heath during a thunderstorm than with either of his ungrateful daughters. Act Three is clearly the climax of the play, with Lear battling the horrific thunderstorm (and his personal demons) and Gloucester having his eyes plucked out in a violent assault. Act Four follows Lear and Gloucester as they begin to come to terms with their mistakes, while the tension of impending war begins to build. Act Five brings the story to a close with nearly all of the characters meeting tragic deaths.

At first glance, it appears that the play's plot is straightforward: a father comes to terms with his daughters' betrayal. Upon closer inspection, however, the reader sees that the play is actually quite complicated, with many layers of meaning, symbolism, and messages. Although Lear is the play's namesake and main protagonist, equal attention is given to his friend Gloucester, who also struggles to come to grips with the mistake of trusting the wrong child. Both Lear and Gloucester must reconcile their "blindness" – which takes on both physical and emotional forms – while hoping to one day be forgiven for their mistakes. Their characters grow both in humanity and understanding, yet both characters continue to question the moral order of the universe and the possibility of divine retribution.



## Quotes

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

-- Cordelia

**Importance:** Cordelia says these famous lines when her father is demanding that his daughters express how much they love him in order to receive land. Cordelia, who actually loves her father most, does not wish to cheapen her affections with petty flattery, so she honors her love for him by speaking about it plainly.

Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed, / And my invention thrive, Edmund the base / Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper. / Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

-- Edmund

**Importance:** This is the end of Edmund's soliloquy to the audience in the moments before he puts his treacherous plan of betrayal into action. In this speech, Edmund expresses his desire not only to gain power from his father, but also to seek recognition in society as something other than a bastard. This dual goal makes Edmund a far more complicated villain than Goneril or Regan, who are simply power hungry and greedy.

Doth any here know me? This is not Lear. Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes? / ... / Who is it that can tell me who I am?

-- King Lear

**Importance:** At the end of Act One, Lear prays for sanity, fearing that he is losing his mind. This is clear foreshadowing to Lear's impending insanity, and the loss of his "sight" in the world.

I pray you, father, being weak, seem so.

-- Regan

**Importance:** In this quote, Regan picks up on her father's insecurity and needles Lear even further by suggesting that she must treat him strictly because he is losing his sanity. With these words, Regan proverbially kicks her father while he is down, cementing her role as a heartless villain.

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars / Are in the poorest thing superfluous. / Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man's life's as cheap as beast's.

-- King Lear

**Importance:** In this quote, Lear laments the fact that his daughters will no longer let him travel with servants, an act that he fears reduces him to an animalistic existence. This quote showcases Lear's need for power and recognition, as well as his petty understanding of the meaning of life. All these things change once Lear decides to live on the heath, and is forced to come to grips with life's true realities.



You think I'll weep; / No, I'll not weep: / I have full cause of weeping, but this heart / Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws / Or ere I'll weep. O fool! I shall go mad!

-- King Lear

**Importance:** In this speech, Lear laments the fact that his daughters have begun to turn against him. He realizes that Goneril and Regan are manipulating him and undermining what little power he has left. He doesn't want to admit it, but he knows that he made the wrong choice in banishing Cordelia. He fears that he will lose his mind from the guilt, which is an ominous foreshadowing.

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! / You cataracts and hurricanes spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!

-- King Lear

**Importance:** In his madness, Lear is challenging the storm to do its worst. Some critics believe that this speech highlights Lear's loosening grip on reality or his lack of understanding of the physical world. Others argue that Lear is not speaking to nature, but to the gods. Either way, Lear's diatribe calls into question whether the world is fundamentally friendly or hostile. If there is an all-powerful god who rewards good and evil, why, Lear seems to question, is he being punished?

Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters. / I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness.

-- King Lear

**Importance:** Here, Lear means to say that he does not blame the weather for doing what comes naturally to it, despite how it punishes his body. All the blame for the terror that has befallen him, Lear thinks, lies with the two daughters who betrayed him.

And I'll go to bed at noon.

-- The Fool

**Importance:** This is the fool's final line in the play. With this exchange, it becomes clear that in Lear's madness, the role of a fool is no longer needed, especially since Lear seems to have already internalized the fool's chastising messages and warnings, and even if he hasn't, Lear would be unable to understand the fool's cryptic messages now anyway.

See 't shalt thou never.

-- Cornwall

**Importance:** This is what Cornwall cruelly mutters before plucking out Gloucester's eyes. He means to say that Gloucester shall never see the cruel way that Lear's daughters treat him, but symbolically, the line also means that Gloucester shall never see the errors of his own decisions. Here, Gloucester is physically and symbolically blinded to the truth.



As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport.  
-- Gloucester

**Importance:** Gloucester utters these words before he attempts suicide on the cliffs of Dover. His lamentation calls into question the moral order of the universe as he wonders aloud whether there are all-knowing gods in charge of the universe. If there are, why is Gloucester, an upstanding and good man, being so punished? Gloucester feels that the gods have only invented man for their own amusements, and that it is a game to watch them suffer.

You are not worth the dust which the rude wind / Blows in your face. I fear your disposition: / That nature which contemns it origin / Cannot be border'd certain in itself.  
-- Albany

**Importance:** Here, Albany speaks his heart to Goneril, calling her out for the villain that she truly is. He is outraged to have learned that Lear was driven mad by Goneril's treatment, and he calls her "vile," "monstrous," and "barbarous." Albany has begun to separate himself from the rest of the play's villains by showing a bit of conscience and moral guidance.

Come, let's away to prison: / We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage.  
-- King Lear

**Importance:** In the final scenes, Lear appears to have reached true happiness, even though he is on the precipice of death. All he wanted was to be reunited with his beloved Cordelia, and now that he has, he seems oblivious to the danger of his situation and would be quite content to spend the rest of his days in prison, hearing about the outside world but no longer taking part in it. Lear doesn't want to confront the evils of the world, embodied by Goneril and Regan, for even a moment before his death.

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones: / Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so / That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone forever! / I know when one is dead, and when one lives; / She's dead as earth.  
-- King Lear

**Importance:** Lear shouts these words after carrying Cordelia's corpse onto the stage after her untimely execution. Lear believes that "heaven's vault should crack" at the injustice of Cordelia's death, but there is no heavenly repercussion for this crime. Once again, this calls into question the moral order of the universe and the idea of divine justice.