



William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Study Guide

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King Lear

Welcome to *King Lear*. We hope that this study guide will help you further your understanding and enjoyment of one of Shakespeare's most popular tragedies. The Orlando-UCF Shakespeare Festival has a strong belief in the relationship between the actor and the audience because, without either one, there is no theater. We hope that this study guide will help bring a better understanding of the plot, themes, and characters in this play so that you can more fully enjoy the theatrical experience.

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This guide was written to correspond to the following **Sunshine State Standards**

The Arts

Skills and Techniques - The student understands and applies arts techniques, media and processes.

Creation and Communication - The student creates and communicates a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas using knowledge of structures and functions of the arts.

Cultural and Historical Connections - The student understands the arts in relation to history and culture.

Aesthetic and Critical Analysis - The student analyzes, evaluates, and responds to characteristics of works of art.

Language Arts

Writing - The student uses the writing process effectively.

Listening, Viewing, & Speaking - The student uses listening strategies effectively.

Language - The student understands the nature and power of language.

Meet The Characters

King Lear: King of Britain. He is very old and ready to divide his kingdom into three parts, which he plans to give to his three daughters. He is deceived by two of his daughters and eventually driven to madness.

Goneril: Lear's oldest daughter. She is plotting against Lear to remove him from power.

Regan: Lear's middle daughter. She conspires with Goneril to remove their father from power.

Cordelia: Lear's youngest daughter. She is the only daughter that really loves her father, but is disinherited and banished when she won't tell him how much she loves him.

King of France: One of Cordelia's suitors. He marries Cordelia and takes her to France after her father becomes angry with her.

Duke of Burgandy: Cordelia's other suitor. He will not marry her after she is disinherited.

Duke of Cornwall: Married to Regan. He is every bit as ill-intentioned and malicious as his wife.

Duke of Albany: Married to Goneril. After learning about Goneril's mistreatment of her father, he becomes very angry with her and decides to have mercy on Lear.

Earl of Kent: Friend to Lear. He is banished when he tries to stick up for Cordelia, but returns to aid Lear disguised as a servant.

Earl of Gloucester: Father of Edgar and Edmund. He is tricked into fighting against Lear and abandoning Edgar by Edmund.

Edgar: Son of Gloucester. Edgar runs into hiding when Edmund tricks Gloucester into thinking Gloucester wants to kill him. Disguises himself as Poor Tom and helps his father after he is thrown out by Edmund.

Edmund: The illegitimate son of Gloucester. He is very jealous and envious of Edgar. Through trickery, he has his brother Edgar banished and his father blinded.

Lear's Fool: Court Jester to King Lear. He points out truths that Lear seems to miss. He ridicules Lear for banishing Cordelia.

Oswald: Steward to Goneril. He relays messages between Goneril, Regan, and Edmund when they are plotting to take over the country.

Plot Summary

Act I

The play opens with Kent and Gloucester discussing who they think will inherit the kingdom after King Lear steps down. King Lear comes in and announces that he is going to divide his kingdom up between his three daughters. But first his daughters must express how much they love him. Goneril and Regan quickly tell Lear how much they each love him. When Cordelia, the youngest and most liked daughter, is asked to speak, she says that she loves her father, but she cannot express the depths of her love in words. Lear is outraged and quickly disinherits her. Kent tries to tell Lear that he is being foolish, but Lear accuses him of treachery and throws him out of the kingdom as well. The Duke of Burgandy says he will not take Cordelia for a wife without a dowry. The King of France steps forward and says that he doesn't care if Cordelia has a dowry or not. He says he will marry her for her virtues. France and Cordelia then leave for Dover to prepare to depart to France. Meanwhile, Goneril and Regan have already started plotting how to take Lear's rule away.

At Gloucester's castle, Edmund complains about being the illegitimate son of Gloucester. He is jealous of his brother Edgar, and reveals a plot to win his father's love by treachery. He plans to show Gloucester a forged letter which reveals that Edgar wishes to overtake Gloucester's land. Gloucester enters, sees Edmund hiding the forged letter and demands to see it. Gloucester angrily exits just before Edgar enters. Edmund tells Edgar that their father is extremely angry with Edgar, but says he does not know why. He advises Edgar not to go out unarmed. Edgar leaves and Edmund delights in what he has done.

When Lear goes to visit Goneril at her castle, Goneril is outraged by her father's behavior. Lear has struck her steward, Oswald, for criticizing his fool. Lear has also brought with him a riotous group of men to stay with Goneril. Goneril commands Oswald to make her father and his men as uncomfortable as possible, so they will leave and go to Regan's where they will be treated with equal coldness. She goes off to write Regan a letter about their father.

Kent enters in disguise. He has a plan to present himself to Lear as a servant, so he can assist Lear. Lear and Kent both strike Oswald after he behaves rudely to Lear. Goneril enters, angry with Lear. She tells Lear that if he wishes to stay he must get rid of some of his men and treat her with more respect. Lear angrily leaves for Regan's household. Goneril sends Oswald with a letter to Regan to inform her of Lear's coming. Lear sends Kent with letters to Gloucester.

Act II

At Gloucester's castle, Edgar is warned by Edmund that their father Gloucester is coming. Edmund convinces Edgar to draw his sword and flee. After Edgar leaves, Edmund wounds himself and calls for Gloucester. Edmund then tells Gloucester that Edgar wounded him after he would not join Edgar in taking their father's power. Gloucester quickly sends servants out to find Edgar. Cornwall and Regan enter and explain that they have come to Gloucester's castle because she received a letter from Goneril about Lear's behavior.

Oswald and Kent meet outside Gloucester's castle. Kent immediately recognizes Oswald and accuses him of taking sides with Lear's evil daughter, Goneril. Kent draws his sword but Oswald simply screams and draws the attention of Cornwall, Regan, Edmund, and Gloucester, who come to find out what has occurred. Oswald claims that Kent has had no reason to strike him or to draw a sword on him at Gloucester's castle. Kent insults Regan and Cornwall and they immediately call for the stocks. They decide to keep him in the stocks for a whole day even after Gloucester protests. After they leave him, Kent ponders a letter from Cordelia. In the letter, Cordelia expresses her appreciation for Kent, since he has disguised himself to help Lear.

In the woods, Edgar explains that he has narrowly escaped being hunted by hiding in a hollow tree. He decides that he will have to disguise himself to ensure his further protection. He explains to the audience that he will go into disguise as a beggar and call himself Poor Tom. He strips his clothes and covers himself with dirt, knotting his hair and wounding himself as a disguise. After this transformation he no longer looks like himself.

Lear finds Kent in the stocks at Gloucester's castle. Kent tells Lear that it was Lear's daughter Regan and her husband who gave him this terrible punishment. Lear begins to feel ill and goes to search for Regan. Upon returning, Lear is outraged that Regan and Cornwall will not speak with him. Regan and Cornwall finally show up. They try to act casual around Lear and set Kent free. Lear explains how horrible his visit with Goneril was and Regan simply tells him that he is old and should trust any advice his daughters offer him. Regan tries to get Lear to return to Goneril but Lear pleads with her to take care of him. Goneril arrives and Lear is appalled when Regan takes her by the hand. He asks who put Kent in the stocks and Cornwall takes responsibility. Regan pleads with Lear to return to Goneril's again. Instead he leaves the castle with Kent and his fool. A storm is heard approaching.

Act III

With the storm in full force, Kent rushes onstage trying to find King Lear amidst the woods. Kent meets one of Lear's gentlemen and mentions that French spies have entered the country and are almost ready to begin their invasion. Kent sends the gentlemen to Dover to report the King's poor health. He gives the gentlemen a ring and his purse to show Cordelia, if he should meet her. They both exit to look for Lear.

Lear is seen raging against the storm with his Fool. The Fool begs Lear to put aside his pride and seek shelter at the castle. Lear refuses, saying that the storm is helping his daughters punish him. Kent enters and finds Lear. He mentions that he has never seen a worse storm and urges Lear to take shelter in a nearby cave. Lear agrees for the sake of his Fool and they all exit to the cave.

At his castle, Gloucester complains to Edmund that Cornwall and Regan have taken over his castle. Edmund pretends to agree with his father. Gloucester then tells Edmund of a letter he received about French forces coming to aid King Lear's cause. Gloucester sends Edmund to stay with Cornwall while he goes off to aid Lear. Edmund immediately goes to Cornwall and tells him of Gloucester's plans.

Back in the cave, Lear requests to be left alone. His mind is slipping from stress and sorrow. Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, has been hiding in the same cave for shelter from the storm. He speaks in language that makes no real sense and walks about acting

crazy. Lear becomes interested in Poor Tom and asks him about his life. Gloucester finds his way into the cave and urges Lear to come with him to better shelter. He does not even recognize Edgar, hidden by his disguise, as his own son. Gloucester and Kent decide it is best to invite Tom to come along with them to get Lear into better shelter.

Back at the castle, Cornwall and Edmund further discuss Gloucester's treason. Edmund pretends to feel bad about exposing his father and Cornwall comforts him. Cornwall tells Edmund that Gloucester's treason is much worse than his own and not to worry. Cornwall makes Edmund the new Earl of Gloucester and demands that he find his father. Edmund notes that he hopes to find Gloucester in Lear's company to further legitimize his story.

Gloucester leads the group to better shelter before heading off to find help. Lear holds a mock-trial for his daughters' treasons. He becomes enraged and suffers a great outburst during the trial. Kent tries to calm Lear down and urges him to be patient. Gloucester returns and urges Kent to keep Lear protected, as there have been death threats. He tells them that help is waiting to take the group safely to Dover.

Cornwall orders Goneril to bring him the letter about the French invasion and orders his servants to seek out Gloucester. Edmund is asked to go with Goneril. Oswald enters and tells everyone that Gloucester has successfully moved Lear and his company to safety. Gloucester enters accompanied by servants and Cornwall immediately has him bound to a chair. Gloucester calls for Lear's daughters to have revenge brought upon them. In a rage, Cornwall blinds one of Gloucester's eyes. A servant tries to stand up for Gloucester but is quickly stabbed by Regan with Cornwall's sword, but not before he wounds Cornwall. Cornwall then blinds Gloucester's other eye. Gloucester calls out for Edmund only to hear Regan reply that it was Edmund who turned him in to Cornwall. Regan has Gloucester thrown out of the castle.

Act IV

Gloucester is led through the woods by an old man and laments that he wants to see his beloved Edgar once again. Soon, Edgar shows up dressed as Poor Tom and Gloucester asks Tom to escort him to Dover, where he can commit suicide. Edgar tricks Gloucester by telling him that they have reached the top of the cliff, but when Gloucester tries to jump, he only falls flat on his face. Edgar then runs up pretending to be someone else and says what a miracle it is that Gloucester did not die from the fall. Gloucester becomes depressed that he is not even allowed death.

At Gloucester's castle, Oswald finds Goneril and Edmund. He warns them that Albany's attitude about everything has changed. Albany is displeased by Edmund's behavior and is happy about the French invasion. With a vow to unite as lovers and rule the kingdom, Goneril sends Edmund to find her husband Cornwall. She finds Albany very angry at her for the treatment she has given her father. Albany learns that Edmund supplied the information that got Gloucester blinded and that Cornwall died from a wound inflicted during the blinding. He promises to avenge Gloucester's blinding. Regan greets Oswald and tells him that they should have just killed Gloucester because the blinding left too much room for sympathy. She also explains that she is worried about her sister uniting with Edmund. Regan tells Oswald to remind Edmund of the promises he made to her.

Kent finds the gentlemen he had sent ahead to Dover and learns that Lear and Cordelia have not yet been reunited because Lear feels ashamed at his treatment of her. Lear comes upon Edgar and Gloucester and comforts Gloucester about his blindness saying that pretense is the biggest flaw in authority. When Cordelia's gentlemen find Lear and try to bring him to Cordelia, Lear fears he is being captured and runs away.

Oswald finally finds Gloucester and attempts to kill him, but Edgar steps in and kills Oswald instead. Edgar takes the letter Oswald was carrying to Edmund and reads it. He becomes enraged to learn about Goneril's wishes to kill Albany and marry Edmund.

Cordelia has found Lear and ordered for him to be cared for by a doctor, who has to drug him to settle him down. Cordelia expresses her thanks to Kent for sticking by her father through all the turmoil. She expresses her anger at her sister's treatment of Lear, who wakes up a bit confused at where he is.

Act V

Regan interrogates Edmund about his relationship with Goneril. He tells Regan that she is the only sister he is intimately involved with and that the partnership with Goneril is just business. Regan says that she would rather lose the war with France than lose Edmund to her sister. Goneril and Albany talk about the importance of staying united with Regan while facing off with France. However, a disguised Edgar sneaks in and gives the letter he took from Oswald to Albany. Edgar tells Albany to send word if he needs help at any time. Edmund ponders which sister he should choose, finally deciding to stick with Goneril if she can manage to kill Albany. He expresses that all he really wants is to rule a reunited Britain.

When the war begins, Lear and Cordelia lead the French. Edgar leaves Gloucester while he goes off to fight with Lear and Cordelia. He quickly returns with the news that Lear and Cordelia have been taken prisoner by Edmund. Edmund gives a death sentence to his captain to carry through. Albany praises Edmund's valor but reminds him of his position in the state. Regan declares her partnership with Edmund and calls him an equal. This makes Goneril jealous. Albany accuses Edmund of treason and challenges him to a duel. Regan mysteriously falls ill. A disguised Edgar shows up to fight Edmund. Edmund falls but is kept alive until he can be fully incriminated. Albany reveals his knowledge of Goneril's letter and she flees in anger. Edmund admits that he is guilty and Edgar reveals himself. Edgar tells Albany how he cared for Gloucester in disguise until he died shortly after Edgar revealed his true self. He tells them that Gloucester died overwhelmed with joy and sorrow. Edgar is also met by Kent, who reveals his disguise and tells of his loyalty to Lear and of Lear's impending death.

A gentleman brings in the knife that Goneril used to kill herself just after admitting that she poisoned Regan out of jealousy. Kent comes in hoping to bid Lear farewell and ask about his reunion with Cordelia, but Edmund reveals that he and Goneril ordered Cordelia to be hanged, so it would appear to be suicide. Lear enters carrying the lifeless body of his precious Cordelia. He tells them all that he killed the executioner, but was still too late. He is overcome with grief and inconsolable. They are all informed that Edmund has died. Lear then dies mourning over the body of his daughter. Albany hands shared rule of the kingdom to Kent and Edgar, but Kent says that he will soon follow the others in death. Edgar is left as the next King of Britain.

Tools for The Text: Paraphrase

William Shakespeare wrote his plays over 400 years ago. In the past 400 years there have been many changes in the English language that can alter the way we interpret some of Shakespeare's words. Over time, words change from one connotation to another. Sometimes even the definitions of words shift.

A great tool to help connect with Shakespeare's text is Paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is when you take a piece of writing and put it in your own words. It can be very helpful to take Shakespeare's words and put them into modern slang to establish a more personal connection with the writing.

Examine the following lines, where King Lear shouts at the thunder storm:

**Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters.
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children'
You owe me no subscription. Then let fall
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man;
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That will with two pernicious daughters join
Your high-engender'd battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. O, ho! 'tis foul.**

One possible paraphrase might read:

Come at me with everything you have! Throw your mighty lightning at me and dump your rain drops on my head! The rain, the wind, the thunder and the lightning are no kin of mine. I have never cursed the forces of nature. I have never given you anything or cared for you. So you don't owe me anything. Give me your worst! I am at your mercy. I am old and sick, but I will call you my master. Join my daughters and bring the heavens down upon me, despite my age and weakness. Oh, you are awful and cruel!

Tools for The Text: Imagery

Another tool to help with the words of Shakespeare is to use what comes into your mind as fuel for a scene of a character. Just as pictures come into your mind when you read a book, Shakespeare used even more profound words and phrases that create very powerful images.

Let's look at the King Lear monologue again.

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters.
I tax not you, you elements, with **unkindness**;
I never gave you **kingdom**, call'd you children?
You owe me no subscription. Then let fall
Your **horrible pleasure**. Here I stand your **slave**,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man;
But yet I call you **servile ministers**,
That will with two pernicious daughters join
Your high-engender'd **battles** 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. O, ho! 'tis **foul**.

Take a look at the words in bold. Step One is to write down the first few images that come into your mind:

Rumble thy bellyful!

Spit, fire!

Spout, rain!

unkindness

kingdom

horrible pleasure

slave

servile ministers

battles

foul

The next step is to ask yourself what those images might mean to you. What emotions do they produce? What actions do they make you want to do? You may find that certain words contain more powerful images than others.

Now that you are personally connected to the words, say the monologue out loud and allow the images to fill your mind, and your audience's mind, as you speak.

Questions for Discussion

1.) Family Structures

One of the themes in *King Lear* is family. There are many different family structures within the play. Can you identify the different families in the play? How does each family member relate with their other members? What are the relationships like? How are these relationships similar or different to your own experiences with family? How do these relationships compare with any other family structures you have seen? In your own life? In movies or on television? In your friends lives?

2.) Deception

Another major theme in *King Lear* is deception. What forms does deception take? What characters use deception and do you consider their causes good or evil?

3.) Tragedy

King Lear is one of Shakespeare's Tragedies. What is tragic about the story? What elements make it a tragedy? Which characters are most tragic? What do you think is the overall, great tragedy within the story?

Complete Learning Plans

This LEARNING PLAN is designed for Grades 5- 7

Objectives: This exercise is intended to keep students involved in the action of the play and the characters. It will add an extra level of excitement to watching the play. In addition to following the story, they are now challenged to locate individual lines, identify what is going on in the scene that causes those lines to be said, and to find greater connection with the text and the story as it comes to life.

Standards and Benchmarks: LA.C.1.3, LA.C..2.3, LA.E.2.3, TH.D.1.3

Materials Needed: A copy of the play, a notebook/piece of paper, drawing and coloring materials, and a pencil.

Suggested Lesson Plan:

- 1) Ask the students to carefully watch the play, paying close attention to all of the action that takes place.
- 2) Assign the students to pick one scene that particularly engaged them during the performance. Have them write down, as best they can, all of the action that took place in their scene, which characters were involved and where the scene fit within the play. They should also write down what, in particular, drew them to pick each scene.
- 3) Next, have them look for that scene in the play. Have each student draw a picture depicting their scene or write a short story inspired by the scene. They must also choose their favorite line from the scene and include it somewhere in their picture or short story.
- 5) Back in the classroom have each student present their picture or short story to the class. They must tell the class what action has occurred in the scene and where it fits within the play. They must also read the line they have chosen aloud and tell the class their interpretation of the line.

Assessment:

Your students will find a greater connection with the action, the text and the characters. They will be encouraged to stay engaged in the story to pick out which part of the action they liked best. This will also help them to begin to look at story structure and how each piece of a story fits within the whole.

Complete Learning Plans

This LEARNING PLAN is designed for grades 7 - 12.

Objectives: This exercise, similar to the last, is intended to challenge higher level students. In addition to locating specific pieces of action, it will challenge them to connect with the characters on a personal level. This should help them to find meaning for themselves within the monologues. It should inspire them to view the play as a living thing they can connect to personally and introduce them to the fun of exploring the text.

Standards and Benchmarks: LA.B.2.4, LA.C.1.4, LA.C.2.4, LA.C.3.4, LA.E.2.4, TH.A.1.4, TH.D.1.4

Materials Needed: A copy of the play, a notebook/piece of paper, and a pencil.

Suggested Lesson Plan:

- 1) After attending the Festival's production of *King Lear*, the students should be assigned to pick a scene and write down the action, who was involved, where it fit within the play and what drew them to choose that scene.
- 2) Next the students should find their chosen scene within the script. Have them examine the text and figure out how the text helps to convey the action that they enjoyed so much.
- 3) Have your student paraphrase the scene as explained in "Tools for the Text" (i.e. Have them put the scene in their own words- the more slang used the better).
- 4) Students should then bring in their scene, complete with paraphrase on a separate sheet. Have students remind their fellow students of the point in the play from which their piece is taken. Have them perform the paraphrased scene first, followed by performing the scene using Shakespeare's text.

Assessment:

Students should be able to identify the characters and scenes from the play. They should be able to identify the situations from which their line is taken and paraphrase the entire scene. Students should be able to use the paraphrase to connect with the text they are speaking and perform their own interpretation of the scene. If they have connected with the work, their meaning and intentions should be clear in the performance.