

# *King Lear*

## Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition Teaching Unit

### Study Guide Student Copy

#### Act I, scene i

1. What is the question Lear asks his daughters before he makes the division of his kingdom final? What does he expect of his daughters?
2. What is Cordelia's answer to Lear's question, and why is Lear outraged by Cordelia's answer?
3. How does Kent's reaction to Lear's banishment of Cordelia introduce the theme of sight and insight?
4. In this first scene of the play, how does Shakespeare establish the parallels between the stories of Lear and his daughters on the one hand and the story of Gloucester and his sons on the other hand?

5. Explain the ambiguous nature of Cordelia's farewell to her sisters: "The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes / Cordelia leaves you," particularly as she reveals the theme of sight and insight?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. How does Lear's "love test" foreshadow the way the plot is going to play out and suggest the primary character motivation for the action of the play?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What emotional reasons are suggested for Goneril and Reagan's later treatment of their father and Cordelia?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. What emotions are at the root of the Edmund/Edgar plot line?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. How has Lear himself upset the "natural order"?

### Act I, scene ii

1. What information is contained in the letter that Edmund pretends to conceal from his father?
2. What does Edmund suggest his father should do to confirm the contents of the letter?
3. What do Gloucester's and Edmund's comments about the constellations of the stars reveal about their individual beliefs in the power of the stars or fate?
4. Where does Edmund send his brother Edgar as the scene draws to a close?

### Act I, scene iii

1. What concerns about Lear's intentions does Goneril express during her conversation with Oswald?
2. Whom does Goneril decide to contact by letter at the end of the scene, and why?

## Act I, scene iv

1. How does Kent's disguise support the theme of sight and insight?
2. Why does Kent trip Oswald?
3. What wisdom does the Fool express about possessions on the one hand and about "nothing" on the other hand?
4. Why is Lear angry at Goneril?
5. What do Lear's hundred knights come to represent in this scene? Why is Goneril's threat to send fifty away such an important issue?



## Act I, scene v

1. Where does Lear send Kent?
2. What does the Fool criticize in his statement to Lear, “thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise”?
3. What is significant about Lear’s “prayer” not to go mad?

## Act II, scene i

1. What rumor of political upheaval reaches the castle of Gloucester?
2. Why does Edmund injure himself to draw blood?
3. How does Gloucester react when he learns about Edgar's alleged intentions to attack and murder him?
4. How does the conversation between Gloucester and Edmund, following Edgar's escape, signal a reversal of the relationships that Edgar and Edmund have with their father?
5. How does Gloucester's expression "my old heart is crack'd, is crack'd" illustrate the parallel between Gloucester and Lear when it comes to old age and their relationships with their children?

## Act II, scene ii

1. What does Kent say about Oswald's character when he metaphorically claims "a tailor made thee"?
2. Why does Kent attempt to dissuade Cornwall and Regan from putting him in the stocks?
3. How does Gloucester's response to Kent's being put in the stocks reflect the parallel between Gloucester's and Lear's relationships with their children?
4. On what does Kent base his hopes for the future at the end of the scene, once he has been put in the stocks?
5. How does the Gloucester plot continue to parallel the main plot? What does Shakespeare achieve by keeping the two plots so carefully parallel?

## Act II, scene iii

1. What decision does Edgar make that will help him hide from the authorities that are chasing him?
2. How does Edgar's statement "Edgar I nothing am" demonstrate the connection between the recurring "nothing" motif and the natural order of family relations?



## Act II, scene iv

1. What answer does Lear receive upon his request for admittance into the presence of Regan and Cornwall?
2. How does Lear respond to Regan's welcome?
3. How does Regan respond to Lear's complaints about Goneril?
4. Why does Lear believe that Regan will treat him with more respect than Goneril? What idea does Lear still cling to?
5. What question does Lear continue to ask that Regan will not answer?

6. What is Regan's response when Lear says that he and his knights will have nothing to do with Goneril and that he plans to move to her house instead?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What revenge does Lear swear on both of his daughters?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. What makes the sisters' actions at the end of this act seem particularly cruel?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. What two events signal the end of Lear's status as king and father?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. What does the storm represent in this scene and the scenes that follow?

### Act III, scene i

1. What news about Albany, Cornwall, and the King of France does Kent reveal to the Gentleman?
2. What mission does Kent ask the Gentleman to complete?

### Act III, scene ii

1. In Lear's first speech in this scene, how does Shakespeare portray the great emotional upheaval going on within Lear's mind?
2. What comment about women does Lear make in his speech?
3. What is Kent's opinion of the storm's ferocity?
4. How does Lear's remark "I am a man more sinn'd against than sinning" reflect his development as a human being within the play?
5. How does the Fool evaluate the state of Britain in his closing "prophecy"?



### Act III, scene iv

1. How does Lear explain his approaching insanity?
2. In which lines in this scene is Edgar's speech filled with alliterations?
3. Upon seeing Edgar emerge from the hovel disguised as poor Tom, what does Lear immediately assume has happened to Edgar?
4. How does Edgar respond to Lear's assumptions?
5. Why does Lear tear off his clothes?
6. How does Gloucester's appearance at the hovel illustrate the parallel structure between the Lear-daughters plot and the Gloucester-sons subplot?
7. What trait is Lear developing as a result of his daughter's treatment? How does this trait affect Lear's status as a tragic hero?

### Act III, scene v

1. What is Edmund's reward upon reporting Gloucester's alleged sympathies for the King of France to the Duke?
2. How does Edmund misrepresent his family obligations to the Duke?
3. What is Edmund's attitude toward the concept of loyalty and what does it reveal about his character?
4. What does the Duke promise Edmund?

### Act III, scene vi

1. What imaginary event does Lear stage once he has entered the farmhouse chamber?
2. What does Lear accuse Goneril of during his imaginary trial?
3. Why does Edgar fear his true identity might be exposed and how does the audience learn about his concerns?
4. What news does Gloucester deliver upon his arrival?
5. How does Lear's suffering impact Edgar's disposition?

### Act III, scene vii

1. Why does Cornwall order his servants to pursue Gloucester?
2. How does Cornwall vow to treat Gloucester once he has been found?
3. Why does Gloucester consider Regan's and Cornwall's behavior toward him inappropriate?
4. What information do Regan and Cornwall demand from Gloucester?
5. What image does Gloucester evoke in the following lines he speaks to Regan: "Because I would not see thy cruel nails pluck out his poor old eyes, nor thy fierce sister in his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs"?





## Act IV, scene i

1. What does Edgar mean when he says “the worst is not so long as we can say ‘this is the worst’”?
2. How does the following statement by Gloucester contribute to the theme of sight and insight: “I have no way and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw”?
3. To what degree does Gloucester attribute influence and power to fate and the gods? Where in this scene does his belief become obvious?
4. What can be inferred from Gloucester’s last comments about his attitude toward fate?
5. What climactic moment might Gloucester’s lament about the capriciousness of the gods signify?

## Act IV, scene ii

1. What does Albany's reaction to his wife's treatment of her father reveal about his character?
2. What climax has occurred between the end of the previous scene and Albany's condemnation of his wife's actions?
3. How are Goneril's feelings toward Edmund portrayed in this scene?
4. What attitude toward her husband does Goneril display when she calls him a "milk-liver'd man"?
5. What is Albany's reason for not attacking Goneril?
6. What news about the Duke of Cornwall does the messenger reveal?
7. What does Albany learn about Edmund and what is his resolution?
8. How does the relationship between Goneril and Regan change as the scene draws to a close?

### Act IV, scene iii

1. What effect does Shakespeare create by having the French king return to France and leaving Cordelia in Dover to command the French troops?
2. What information does Kent seek from the messenger?
3. What is Shakespeare suggesting when he has the Gentleman describe Cordelia's crying as: "she shook / the holy water from her heavenly eyes"?
4. How does Kent reconcile the differences between Lear's daughters? How does he explain their different behaviors?
5. Why does Lear refuse to see Cordelia?

#### Act IV, scene iv

1. What does Cordelia promise for any help anyone can offer her father?
2. According to Cordelia, what is the ultimate reason for the French army's attack?
3. Why does Shakespeare decide to have the King of France return home and leave Cordelia as the major force opposing her sisters?

#### Act IV, scene v

1. Why does Regan consider it necessary to find Gloucester and kill him?
2. Why does Regan want to open the letter her sister has written to Edmund?
3. How does the dialogue between Regan and Oswald in this scene reveal Oswald's character?

## Act IV, scene vi

1. What is Gloucester's intention upon reaching Dover?
2. Gloucester, thinking he is throwing himself from the cliff, falls forward on the ground and faints. Edgar, now assuming the character of a man who happened to pass by the cliff as Gloucester was jumping, revives him and tells his father it is a miracle that he was not killed by falling off the cliff. What does Gloucester resolve?
3. How does Edgar influence Gloucester's decision to live, especially considering the theme of natural order of the stars?
4. Explain the irony that dominates the following lines uttered by Lear upon seeing Gloucester: "GLOUCESTER: Dost thou know me? LEAR: I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squiny at me?"



## Act IV, scene vii

1. What does the following statement by Cordelia reveal about her attitude toward her father: “Cure this great breach in his abused nature! The untuned and jarring senses, O, wind up of this child-changed father!”?
2. Where in this scene does Cordelia’s respect for Lear as a father and as a King become apparent?
3. What does the following comment uttered by Lear reveal about his attitude toward the natural order of the stars: “I am bound upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears do scald like molten lead”?
4. What literary device can be found in the above lines spoken (in Question 3) by Lear?
5. What does Lear ask of Cordelia before he exits the stage and what realization about his error in judgment do his words contain?
6. Why don’t this reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia, Lear’s restoration to sanity, and his newfound awareness of his human condition mark the end of the play?



## Act V, scene i

1. What great fear does Regan express to Edmund at the opening of the scene? What does she demand of Edmund?
2. What shocking information does Goneril reveal to the audience in an aside and what does this information disclose about her character?
3. Edmund asks an officer to determine whether the Duke of Albany is still on their side since “he’s full of alteration and self-reproving.” Why does Albany stay on the side of Edmund, Regan, and Goneril even though he despises their actions?
4. Why does Edgar, still in disguise, wish to speak to Albany?
5. What is Edmund’s attitude toward the sisters Regan and Goneril, and what does his speech at the end of the scene reveal about his character?

## Act V, scene ii

1. After leaving his father in a safe place, Edgar leaves for the battlefield, but returns shortly. What information does he reveal upon his return?

### Act V, scene iii

1. What orders does Edmund give to the Captain?
2. As Albany enters, what does he demand of Edmund?
3. After a brief exchange, Albany puts Edmund in his proper place. How does he do this and why?
4. How does Regan stand up for Edmund?
5. How does Goneril react to Regan's defense of Edmund?
6. Following the argument between Regan and Goneril, what does Albany accuse Edmund of?
7. Why does Regan feel increasingly sick as the scene progresses?
8. In fighting Edmund, Edgar wants to avenge his brother's "hell-hated lie." What is Edgar referring to?

9. How does the following comment by Edmund reinforce the idea of human responsibility versus fate: “The wheel has come full circle; I am here.”?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
10. What does Edgar mean when he says about his father, Gloucester, that “twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, [his heart] burst smilingly”?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
11. What good deed does Edmund intend to do before he dies?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
12. Who, beside Edmund, has commissioned the murder of Lear and Cordelia?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
13. How does Albany try to appease Lear, who is distraught over the death of Cordelia?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
14. How does Albany’s final speech allude to some of the play’s major recurring themes?