

The Tragedy of King Lear
by
William Shakespeare

a
Shakespeare In The Ruins
Study Guide

INTRODUCTION:

King Lear is thought by many to be the greatest of Shakespeare's plays. It has everything: sibling rivalry, parent-child conflict, love, hate, greed, ambition, good versus evil, illegitimacy, adultery, suicide, compassion, Fortune, questions of fate and faith, politics, poverty, deprivation, madness, vanity, senility, cruelty, loyalty, devotion, ageism, dignity and the loss of dignity, examples of the best and worst of humankind... But perhaps this is why so many teachers find it daunting.

This year my students, accompanied by my very able student-teacher, Aaron Russell, and me, are moving slowly through the play – not because they're having a hard time "getting" it, but because there are so many issues they want to discuss. One of the most compelling topics has been the human capacity for love: do we have limits or is it unlimited? Can Regan and Goneril give their father "all" their love and also give their husbands "all" their love? Or is Cordelia most realistic when she suggests there is only a certain amount of love available and so it must be divided between father and husband? One student refuted this idea with the argument that that would be like saying "our brains can only hold so much" – and this all within the first scenes of Act I!

King Lear has been called a "sublime tragedy" and "[Shakespeare's] greatest meditation on extreme old age; on the painful necessity of renouncing power; on the loss of house, land, authority, love, eyesight, and sanity itself" (Greenblatt, 40 & 356).

Well-known literary scholar and critic, Harold Bloom, says, "*King Lear* ... ultimately baffles commentary" (476), "may well be the height of literary experience..." (477), and that "Lear himself is Shakespeare's most sublime and most demanding character" (493). "[Lear] is the most awesome of all [Shakespeare's] originals" (509).

In an older text (1951), G. B. Harrison explains why *King Lear* might be unpopular and gives us a warning: "It is too moving and there is no escape from its terrors. Indeed, inevitability is another quality necessary to deep tragedy, which can only perform its cleansing function when the author is utterly merciless with his audience. Weaklings should avoid the ruthless purgation of deep tragedy" (183).

University English major Jonathan Clark adroitly observes: "...it is quite rare to encounter a work of literature that is as emotionally straining as the final tragic scene in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Of course, the final outcome is so heart wrenching because the undeserving execution of Cordelia was entirely preventable by other characters who were present in the scene. Shakespeare is able to manipulate the audience's emotions drastically...Even the welcomed deaths of Goneril, Regan and Edmund cannot alleviate the tragedy of the

scene... The audience desires to know what Edmund has done with Lear and Cordelia; but not a single character is able to find the answer to this question until Kent enters the scene much too late. As a result, the audience feels helpless to intervene in a preventable and unjust outcome.”

Shakespeare aficionado, Ed Friedlander, on his outstanding website, suggests: “Shakespeare has retold [this] old story as a vehicle for a strikingly modern message. Many people consider *King Lear* to be his finest work. Whether or not you agree with his vision of a godless universe in which our only hope is to be kind to one another, you will recognize the real beliefs of many (if not most) of your neighbors... Shakespeare took a story which had a happy ending, and gave it a sad ending. He transformed a fairy-tale about virtuous and wicked people into something morally ambiguous. He took a story of wrongs being righted, and turned it into the story of painful discovery. He included passages which deal with ideas instead of advancing the plot. “

As per usual, Shakespeare in the Ruins takes an imaginative and unusual approach, setting this production in the “dirty thirties”. According to co-director, Michelle Boulet, this time period is “a great backdrop for this play...lonely, stark, desperate, and mean-spirited. This is a theatre troupe staging *Lear*. The benefits of this are that it puts the play within a theatrical framework which is quite freeing. For example, we don't have any structures at our disposal so the troupe will solve that by using what they have (which isn't much) to create the world of the play.”

This play will require our students to do some deep, and sometimes uncomfortable, thinking. Without a doubt, they and their teachers can handle it. Enjoy the sharing and the growth which come with a challenge like this.

- Pamela Lockman
for *Shakespeare In The Ruins*,
April, 2005.

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Time Line of Shakespeare's Life

- 1564** William Shakespeare is born to Mary and John Shakespeare.
- 1582** William Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway; he is 18 and she is 26.
- 1583** Daughter, Susanna Shakespeare, is born.
- 1585** Twins, Judith and Hamnet, are born.
- 1589-94 (circa)** Shakespeare's first plays, *Titus Andronicus*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Henry VI* are written.
- 1592** Shakespeare makes a name for himself as an actor and arouses resentment from rival dramatists.
- 1593 (circa)** Shakespeare begins writing the Sonnets (he writes a total of 154).
- 1594** Shakespeare acts in several plays before Queen Elizabeth. His acting company, The Lord Chamberlain's Men, is formed.
- 1596** Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, dies.
- 1597** Shakespeare's name first appears on printed plays. He purchases New Place, a large house that enables him to acquire a coat of arms and use the term *gentleman* after his name.
- 1598** A critic announces Shakespeare as the best author of both tragedy and comedy for the stage.
- 1599** Shakespeare becomes a stockholder in the new Globe Theatre.
- 1599-1608** The peak of Shakespeare's career. He writes many famous plays, including *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*.
- 1603** Queen Elizabeth I dies, and James VI ascends the throne. Shakespeare's acting troupe establishes royal patronage and becomes The King's Men.
- 1610 (circa)** After writing at least 37 plays, Shakespeare retires to his home in Stratford.
- 1613** The Globe Theatre burns to the ground during a production of *Henry VIII*. It is eventually rebuilt on the same grounds.
- 1616** Shakespeare dies from mysterious causes and is buried at the Church of Holy Trinity.
- 1664** The clergy finally have their way; the Globe Theatre is torn down.

BEFORE THE PLAY

1. Have students do a web search to find out about the history of this play and where some of Shakespeare's ideas for it might have come from. A number of websites devoted to Shakespeare and/or this play are listed in the back.
2. Create an Anticipation Guide. Some discussion statements (true/false) might include:
 - It is natural for parents to expect their children to care for them in old age.
 - Our lives are ruled by Fortune and by Fate.
 - Good will always triumph over evil.
 - Good people will prosper.
 - A Fool can also be wise, and vice versa.
 - True love lasts forever.
3. Read and discuss the following of Shakespeare's sonnets (29 & 116):

29

When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes
I all alone bewep my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love rememb'ed such wealth brings
that then I scorn to change my state with kings.

116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
Oh, no, it is an ever-fixed mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of Doom.
 If this be error, and upon me proved,
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

4. Read and discuss a variety of modern poems on some related themes and motifs. The following poems are suggested and all appear in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, edited by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair [Canada: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973].
- Much Madness Is Divinest Sense (Emily Dickinson)
 - An Old Man's Winter Night (Robert Frost)
 - Fire and Ice (Frost)
 - What are Years? (Marianne Moore)
 - Dirge Without Music (Edna St. Vincent Millay)
 - Love Is Not All (Millay)
 - The End of the World (Archibald MacLeish)
 - you shall above all things be glad and young (e.e. cummings)
 - My Papa's Waltz (Theodore Roethke)
 - The Unbeliever (Elizabeth Bishop)
 - Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night (Dylan Thomas)

READING THE PLAY

Nothing takes the place of actually reading the play, and the best way for students to do this is to get up on their feet! In some classes (my own included), students are assigned to one of five groups, and each group is assigned one complete act of the play. Students read the act and scene summaries to put their assigned section in context of the whole play, and then have several days in class to prepare their specific act. We start with Act I and read all the way through, stopping at the end of each scene for questions (often in the form of "hot seat", explained below) and discussion. Some teachers also like to give a variety of quizzes during the reading to check comprehension.

Another reading technique, which Aaron Russell and I are experimenting with this year, is to have students read the play in five small groups, with each group responsible for dramatically reading specific scenes (teacher assigned) aloud to the class. Students are given time to read in their groups, along with one or two discussion questions, different for each group. After each scene, questions are presented to the class. At this point the entire class gets involved in the discussion.

Some of Aaron's questions for Act I include:

Scene 1

Explain in detail Cordelia's following lines:

"Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty
According to my bond, no more no less" (100 – 102)

How does this make Cordelia different from her sisters?

Scene 2

What can we assume about Edmund from his soliloquy at the beginning of Act 1

Scene 2? (1-23) How do you feel towards him?

Scene 3

Are Goneril's orders to Oswald, to treat Lear coldly, just? What does this tell us about her character?

Scene 4

What is the Fool actually saying to Lear in lines 144 – 151? Does Lear understand this?

Scene 5

Why does the Fool say, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise"?

Hot Seat: At the end of a scene, several students are assigned the role of a character within that scene. Teacher and other students ask questions to the selected students about what's going on in the scene just read. These students must answer the questions in the persona of whichever character they have been assigned. In other words, the students must speak "in the shoes" of the selected character.

For example, at the end of I.i.: Regan, what are you really worried about related to your father's banishment of Kent? And Goneril, what do you think you should do and why does it have to be right away?

Hotseat is an excellent technique for delving into the characters and plot, and it is also a way to deal with specific lines and to explore varying interpretations. For example, I.v.43-44: Fool, what do you mean when you say to Lear, *Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise*? Do you think he's wise or not? And Lear, on line 45 in the same scene, are you really afraid of being mad? And when you say *sweet heaven*, what do you really mean? Do you think the gods exist and might even hear you?

Tone & Emotion:

Have several students read the same speech, but with a different emotion. For example, II.iv.305-328: *O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars*

Are in the poorest thing superfluous.

..... – O Fool, I shall go mad!

Try it with anger. Then sadness. Then make the tone ominous. It's interesting to note how the character and implications change with the voice and tone.

Try these speeches as well:

Cordelia: *Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me.
..... (To love my father all.) (I.i.105 – 115)*

(Sad, scornful)

Goneril: *It is the cowish terror of his spirit,
That dares not undertake. He'll not feel wrongs
....Conceive, and fare thee well. (IV.ii.15 – 29)*

(Scheming, angry, dismissive, controlling)

Albany: *O Goneril,
You are not worth the dust which the rude wind
... And come to deadly use. (IV.ii.38 – 45)*

(Fearful, disgusted, angry)

Edmund: *To both these sisters have I sworn my love,
Each jealous of the other as the stung
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
....Stands on me to defend, not to debate. (V.i.63 – 77)*

(Confused, devious)

Lear: *Howl, howl, howl! O you are men of stones!
... Why, then she lives. (V.iii.308 – 315)*

(Angry, mad [insane], sorrowful)

SYNOPSIS: Act, Scene and Line numbers are from *The New Folger Library Shakespeare: KING LEAR* (1993).

I.i. We are introduced to the two families: Lear's and Gloucester's. From Kent's opening line, the concern of favoring one child over another is raised. Lear, who wants to divide his kingdom and power among his three daughters, demands public expressions of their love. While Goneril and Regan try to outdo each other in their statements, Cordelia refuses to participate, saying simply

I love your majesty

According to my bond, no more nor less (101 – 102).

Lear can hardly believe his youngest daughter's response, and when she repeats that she has nothing more to say, his reply is *Nothing will come of nothing* (99).

Again, Lear practically begs Cordelia to change her response:

But goes thy heart with this? (116)

So young and so untender? (118)

And then becomes enraged:

Let it be so. Thy truth, then, be thy dower (120).

Kent tries to reason with him, but to no avail and Lear turns his rage on him, calling him a traitor (191) and banishing him. However, Lear's harshest words in this scene are for Cordelia, when he says to her:

Better thou

Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better (269 – 270).

The scene ends with Regan and Goneril agreeing to take turns housing him, but expressing some concern for his rash actions.

I.ii. The scene opens with Edmund the Bastard, Gloucester's illegitimate son, contemplating the words "bastard" and "legitimate" and their implications for him and his brother, Edgar. He plots to make himself heir by convincing Gloucester that Edgar has turned against him. A dismayed Gloucester wonders about heavenly influences in the recent downward turn of things:

*These late eclipses in the sun and moon
portend no good to us...* (109 – 110).

*Love cools,
friendship falls off, brothers divide...* (112 – 113).

*This villain
of mine comes under the prediction: there's son
against father. The king falls from bias of nature:
there's father against child* (115 – 118).

*– And the noble
and true-hearted Kent banished! His offense,
honesty! 'Tis strange* (122 – 124).

Edmund clearly lets the audience know his opinion of this outside influence when he says:

*This is the excellent foppery of the world, that
when we are sick in fortune (often the surfeits of*

*our own behaviour) we make guilty of our own disasters
the sun, the moon, and stars... (125 – 128).*

And after he easily convinces Edgar that he has offended and enraged their father, Edmund again allows us to see the rising tyranny within and to compare the evil with the good:

*A credulous father and a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty
My practices ride easy (187 – 190).*

I.iii. It isn't long before Goneril starts to complain about her father:

*By day and night he wrongs me. Every hour
He flashes into one gross crime or other,
That sets us all at odds. I'll not endure it (4 – 6).*

She refuses to see him and tells Oswald to treat Lear and his knights coldly.

I.iv. Kent may be banished, but he's not gone! Here he returns in disguise to help Lear, who, not recognizing Kent, accepts his services. In this scene, Shakespeare has some fun with the relationship between Lear and his Fool. Goneril is upset with Lear and demands that he give up half his knights. Goneril hints that he has changed somewhat (*This admiration, sir, is much o' th' savor/Of other your new pranks [244 – 245]*), and he is furious with her:

*Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend,
More hideous when thou show'st thee in a child
Than the sea monster! (270 – 272).*

He is also furious with himself for getting into this position, and he chastises himself:

*O Lear, Lear, Lear! [strikes his head]
Beat at this gate that let thy folly in
And thy dear judgment out... (283 – 285).*

I.v. Lear sends the disguised Kent on ahead to deliver a letter to Regan, while he and the Fool walk together. Lear admits (about Cordelia): *I did her wrong (24)*. And as is often the case, the Fool is a source of great honesty and insight:

Thou wouldst make a good Fool (38).

*If thou wert my Fool, nuncle, I'd have thee
beaten for being old before thy time (40 – 41).*

*Thou shouldst not have been old till thou
hadst been wise (44).*

Also in this scene, Lear begins to fear for his sanity:

O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!

Keep me in temper. I would not be mad! (46).

II.i. Act II begins with Edmund, who continues his deceitful ways against his brother and tricks him into fleeing from Gloucester's castle:

My father watches. O sir, fly this place!

Intelligence is given where you are hid.

You have now the good advantage of the night (20 – 22)

Edmund wounds himself and blames it on Edgar, thus turning Gloucester against his one honest son:

Let him fly far!

Not in this land shall he remain uncaught,

And found – dispatch... (66 – 68)

...I will proclaim it

That he which finds him shall deserve our thanks,

...He that conceals him, death (71 – 73)

Cornwall and Regan arrive and hear the lies against Edgar. They welcome Edmund into their service as Gloucester welcomes them into his castle.

II.ii. At Gloucester's castle, Kent insults Oswald and challenges him to fight. Oswald, a steward of Goneril, cries out *Help, ho! Murder, murder!* (43), which summons Edmund, Cornwall, Regan and Gloucester to his rescue. The hotheaded – and still disguised – Kent continues to insult Oswald in response to Cornwall's questions. His payment?

Fetch forth the stocks. – As I have life and honor

There shall he sit till noon (Cornwall 146).

But that's not enough for Regan, who's even meaner than Cornwall:

Till noon? Till night, my lord, and all night, too (147).

The scene ends with Gloucester apologizing to Kent, and blaming the Duke for what has happened.

II.iii. Edgar disguises himself as Poor Tom, a beggar of Bedlam.

II.iv. Lear and his Fool arrive at Gloucester's castle to find his messenger, the disguised Kent, in the stocks. Lear can't believe his own daughter and son-in-law would do such a thing:

They durst not do't.

They could not, would not do't. 'Tis worse than murder (26 – 27).

And he becomes more baffled, even incensed, when Gloucester attempts to placate him at the same time he tells him that Regan and Cornwall will not speak with him:

Lear: Deny to speak with me? They are sick? They are weary? (95 – 96)

Glou:

My dear lord,

You know the fiery quality of the Duke... (100 – 101)
Lear: "Fiery"? What "quality"? (105)
...The King would speak with Cornwall. The dear father
Would with his daughter speak... (113 – 114)

When Cornwall, Regan and Gloucester return, Kent is set free and they do speak with Lear, who is in a rather awkward position. That is, he has left Goneril because he is fed up with her, and now he begins to realize that neither will it be easy to stay with Regan, who suggests he apologize and return to Goneril. Lear tries to convince Regan to let him stay, suggesting that she is the much better, kinder daughter (*Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give/Thee o'er to harshness* [194]) and reminding her of his gift:

Thy half o' th' kingdom hast thou not forgot,
Wherein I thee endowed (204 – 205).

When Goneril arrives, the two sisters immediately team up against their frustrated father, offering him shelter only if he gives up his knights. One of Lear's finest speeches follows (*O, reason not the need!* [305]) wherein he beseeches the heavens for help (*You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!* [313]), turns his emotions to anger (*-- No, you unnatural hags,/I will have such revenges on you both/That all the world shall – I will do such things –* [322]). And then, sadness and fear:

No, I'll not weep,
I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
[Storm and tempest.]
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep. – O Fool, I shall go mad! (325 – 328)

And as the storm rages, Lear, Kent and Fool exit while Cornwall, Regan and Goneril retreat to the shelter of the castle, Gloucester's entreaties that they call Lear back falling on deaf ears.

III.i. Act III begins with Kent searching for Lear. This scene is omitted in this production.

III.ii. Lear and Fool are in the middle of the storm. (If you haven't done so already, this is an excellent time to discuss Pathetic Fallacy: the representation of nature as being in sympathy with or affected by the deeds or feelings of man [Houghton, 290].) With great lines like these, who needs special effects?!

Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks.
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head. And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world (1 – 7)

His anger with his daughters is obvious in the metaphors of 16 – 17:

*Rumble thy bellyful! Spit fire! Spout rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire are my daughters.*

And he, again, speaks to the heavens and makes it clear that he believes in the power of fate:

*I never gave you kingdom, called you children;
You owe me no subscription. Then let fall
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave... (19 – 21)*

How can anyone not be moved to sympathy for Lear when he says

*I am a man
More sinned against than sinning... (62 – 63)
My wits begin to turn. –
Come on, my boy. How dost, my boy? Art cold?
I am cold myself. – (73 – 75)*

III.iii. Gloucester tells Edmund that he's going to help Lear, which has brutal consequences later on. Edmund lets us in on his betrayal in the scene's last line:
The younger rises when the old doth fall (25).

III.iv. The disguised Kent leads Lear and Fool to a hovel (small, run-down shelter) and although the storm still rages outside, that is not what most upsets Lear:

*This tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else
Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude! (15 – 17)*

We might wonder here about the real cause of his growing madness:

*O Regan, Goneril,
Your old kind father whose frank heart gave all!
O, that way madness lies. Let me shun that;
No more of that (22 – 25)*

Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, a madman-beggar, is also in the shelter, and it isn't long before Gloucester arrives carrying a torch, which Edgar sees as *the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet* (122).

III.v. Edmund, true to his name, tells Cornwall that Gloucester is helping Lear; Cornwall makes him an Earl.

III.vi. Lear appears to be sinking deeper into madness. Gloucester tells Kent of the plot to kill Lear and suggests they take him to Cordelia, in Dover, for *welcome and protection* (98).

III.vii. Cornwall sends men to find Gloucester, now considered a traitor. Regan and Goneril suggest punishments:

Regan: Hang him instantly.

Goneril: *Pluck out his eyes (5 – 6)*

Cornwall's plan is so evil that he sends Edmund away:

*The revenges we are
bound to take upon your traitorous father are not
fit for your beholding... (8 – 10)*

Gloucester is bound and taunted mercilessly before Cornwall puts out his eye. A servant, unable to watch the torture longer, draws his sword on Cornwall. Regan draws as well and kills the servant, who just before dying wails

*O, I am slain! My lord, you have one eye left
To see some mischief on him. O! (99 – 100)*

whereupon Cornwall, in the full throes of evil's power responds

Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly! (101)

as he puts out Gloucester's other eye. Not knowing the truth, Gloucester pleads for Edmund to end the torture, to which Regan coldly responds:

*Out, treacherous villain!
Thou call'st on him that hates thee. It was he
That made the overture of thy treasons to us,
Who is too good to pity thee (107 – 110)*

And Gloucester at once understands, *O my follies! Then Edgar was abused (111)*. He is thrown out, helpless, by Regan and Cornwall, and the servants are left trying to ease his pain and calling on heaven to help him.

IV.i. Act IV begins as Gloucester, led by an Old Man, comes upon Edgar, still disguised as Poor Tom but who, seeing his father in such a state, has trouble maintaining his persona. Deciding he must, he names all the demons who inhabit him. Gloucester feels sorry for him, gives him money, and requests that he take him *to the very brim of Dover's high cliffs (85)*.

IV.ii. Arriving at her castle, Goneril and Edmund are warned by Oswald of Albany's displeasure. Goneril, with a favor and a kiss, quickly sends Edmund back to Cornwall. Albany enters, full of contempt for his malicious and unfaithful wife:

*O Goneril,
You are not worth the dust which the rude wind
Blows in your face... (38 – 40)*

In this scene, Albany's anguish and humanity could not be more clear in contrast to Goneril's viscious and evil nature:

*...What have you done? (49)
...What have you performed? (50)
Most barbarous, most degenerate, have you madded (54)
Humanity must perforce prey on itself (60)*

Goneril's response might remind us of Lady Macbeth:

*Milk-livered man,
That bear'st a cheek for blows, a head for wrongs;
Who hast not in thy brows an eye discerning*

Thine honor from thy suffering... (62 – 65)

Though we may have seen them as a cohesive unit early on, there's no mistaking their differences here:

*Albany: See thyself, devil!
Proper deformity shows not in the fiend
So horrid as in woman.*

Goneril: O vain fool! (73 – 76).

Albany leaves with the messenger, who gives him the news of Gloucester's blinding and the duke of Cornwall's death.

IV.iii. & iv. Kent and Gentleman discuss Cordelia's love for Lear and that he's too ashamed to see her. Cordelia sends out a search party for Lear. Both scenes are cut in this production.

IV.v. The "love" story becomes more complicated: Regan confides in Oswald that, with her husband dead, she has more claim to Edmund than her sister. She sends him off with something for Edmund, and requests that he try to return Goneril to her senses so that *she* can marry Edmund.

IV.vi. Gloucester is determined to commit suicide and enlists Edgar's help. Edgar tricks him into believing that he is jumping off the cliff. Before his "leap" Gloucester prays:

*O you mighty gods!
This world I do renounce, and in your sights
Shake patiently my great affliction off (44 – 46).
If Edgar live, O bless him! – (50)*

Edgar, disguised now as a peasant, convinces him that he fell a long way and that his *life's a miracle* (69). Lear, quite mad, comes upon them. Gloucester recognizes his voice and mostly listens as he rambles on about their terrible states, their nasty children, and the rotten world. When one of Cordelia's search party shows up, Lear runs off. Gloucester addresses the heavens, asking for inner-strength and a death other than suicide:

*You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me;
Let not my worser spirit tempt me again
To die before you please (241 – 243).*

Oswald now comes upon them and is practically giddy at the chance to kill Gloucester:

*A proclaimed prize! Most happy!
That eyeless head of thine was first framed flesh
To raise my fortunes. Thou old unhappy traitor,
Briefly thyself remember; the sword is out
That must destroy thee (253 – 257).*

Of course, Edgar, still disguised and now putting on a foreign dialect, steps between them, fighting and killing Oswald. Edgar finds the letters that make clear Goneril's plan to have her legal husband, Albany, murdered.

IV.vii. Lear, obviously confused, awakens in the presence of his daughter, Cordelia, who he thinks is a spirit. His despair is palpable:

*You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave.
Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead (51 – 54).*

We cannot help but hurt with Lear when, on his knees, he says to Cordelia:

Pray do not mock:

*I am a very foolish fond old man (69)
...I fear I am not in my perfect mind (72).*

He finally recognizes that it is Cordelia with him, and he acknowledges his earlier wrongdoing:

*If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me, for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause; they have not (82 – 85)*

The gentle and loving Cordelia responds with *No cause, no cause (87)*, and with Lear's asking for forgiveness (*Pray you now, forget, and forgive. I am old and foolish [99]*), we are given some small, but false, hope that things will change for the better.

V.i. Act V begins as Regan lets Edmund know that she suspects he's been intimate with her sister, and she tries to convince him that he'd be better off with her. Albany and Goneril appear, ready to join their army with Regan's to go against France. Some sisterly rivalry is evident:

*Regan: Sister, you'll go with us?
Goneril: No.
Regan: 'Tis most convenient. Pray, go with us.
Goneril (aside): Oho, I know the riddle.—I will go (39 – 42).*

Edgar appears in his peasant disguise and, alone with Albany, gives him the letter that tells of the murderous plot against him. Edmund has his own problems:

*To both these sisters have I sworn my love,
Each jealous of the other as the stung
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
Both? One? Or neither? Neither can be enjoyed
If both remain alive... (73 – 77).*

However, his thinking is clear when it comes to Albany's murder, and the killings of Cordelia and Lear should the British army win.

V.ii. This scene, in which Cordelia's French army is defeated, is cut in this production.

V.iii. Lear and Cordelia are prisoners, and Edmund secretly orders their executions. Albany credits Fortune for Edmund's successes (47) and requests that he turn over Lear and Cordelia. Edmund will not, and Albany accuses him of treason, making clear his knowledge of both the adultery and the plan to kill him. Albany challenges Edmund, but before they can fight, Regan becomes ill and has to be helped to her tent. Edgar arrives and proclaims Edmund a traitor:

*False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father,
Conspirant 'gainst this high illustrious prince,
And from th' extremest upward of thy head
To the descent and dust below thy foot,
A most toad-spotted traitor... (162 – 166).*

He and Edmund fight, and Edmund is mortally wounded. Edgar reveals his true identity and Edmund acknowledges that Fortune's *...wheel is come full circle; I am here* (209). We, along with Edgar, Albany and Edmund, discover that Goneril and Regan are both dead – Goneril by her own hand, and Regan by Goneril as well (poison). Kent finally shows up, asking for Lear:

*I am come
To bid my king and master aye goodnight.
Is he not here? (279 – 281)*

To which Albany replies: *Great thing of us forgot!
Speak, Edmund, where's the King? And where's
Cordelia? (282 – 284)*

Edmund, seemingly yearns to repent and show some goodness:
*I pant for life. Some good I mean to do
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send –
Be brief in it – to th' castle, for my writ
Is on the life of Lear, and on Cordelia.
Nay, send in time (291 – 295)*

But it's too late. And when Lear enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms, we are ready to sob with him –

*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 (308 – 311).*

There is no consoling him –

*A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all!
I might have saved her. Now she's gone forever. –
Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little... (325 – 327)*

Kent ponders the possible interference of Fortune:

*If Fortune brag of two she loved and hated,
One of them we behold (338 – 339).*

A messenger brings news of Edmund's death, and Lear's death follows as he looks upon his beloved Cordelia. The play ends with Kent and Edgar contemplating their own mortality.

AFTER THE PLAY

1. **Reflect on the experience** of the theatre production. Was it what you expected? Were the characters as you imagined they would be? What did you think of Lear being played by a woman? What are some of the changes you noticed between the performance and the text you read? Why do you think the directors might have made these changes? (For example, in the SIR production, cut scenes include III.i., IV.iii, and IV.iv., and Cordelia and Fool are played by the same person). If you had a chance to act in this production, which character(s) would you have liked to play? Why? If you were directing, would you have anything differently?

2. **Revisit the text** to find lines which include the following images and motifs:

- Human nature and Natural forces
- Clothing/nakedness
- Fortune
- Justice
- Eyesight/blindness/hallucination
- Nothing

3. **General topics for discussion:**

1. (a) Explain fully the initial situation with which Shakespeare confronts his audience.
(b) What elements in this situation seem bound to lead to trouble? Why?
2. What are the main themes in the play?
3. Indicate the successive stages in Lear's change in attitude from spiritual pride to true humility.
4. By what means does Shakespeare gradually deepen the contrast between Cordelia and her sisters?
5. Show that the secondary plot echoes and reinforces the main action.

Houghton, Ralph E. C., ed. *King Lear*. Toronto: Oxford University Press (The New Clarendon Shakespeare for Canadian Students), 1964.

4. **Oral Histories:**

So much of this play has to do with old age and ageism that it should be interesting for students to consider these topics in more depth as they relate to us as individuals who exist in the real world. Students can choose someone from their own families to interview about his or her life, and then share the information in a form suitable for your class. This might mean formal essay, oral presentation, visual representation, audio presentation...

5. **Related Poetry and/or Music:**

If you didn't do this as a pre-reading exercise, consider it now. Have students find poems and/or songs related to some of the themes and images of the play. You can read and study the poems or lyrics as well as listen to the songs. For songs, discuss how the music complements the lyrics. What kind of music would you use as background for various scenes of the play?

6. **King Lear Lesson Plans on the Web**

These are *excellent* resources!

www.bbc.co.uk/education/bookcase/lear/index.shtml

www.english.byu.edu/Novelinks/reading%20strategies/King%20Lear.htm

www.folger.edu (K – 12 Teachers → Teaching Shakespeare Lesson Plans → Lesson Plans Archive → King Lear)

www.lessonplanspage.com.LA5DayLiteraryAnalysisOfKingLear912MO.htm (for more, scroll down to “Search this Site” box on left side)

www.onlinepoetryclassroom.org (→ Search box, top left)

www.penguinputnam.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/kinglear.pdf