

# KING LEAR

Key Concepts :

- Fate and inevitability
- Storge
- Death
- Religion
- Familial love
- New order vs. old order
- Nature
- Rota Fortunae
- Symbolism of the storm
- Injustice of existence
- Paganism
- Masculinity
- Primogeniture
- Justice
- Appearance vs. reality
- Power

## Tragedy Terminology

- Heroine
- Status
- Flawed / Resolution
- Hamartia
- Pride
- Antagonist
- Tragic arc
- Inevitable
- Peripeteia
- Wheel of fortune/Rota Fortuna
- Choric function
- Aristotelean pattern
- Hegelian tragedy
- Catharsis
- Ekkyklema
- Anagnorisis



<u>King Lear</u> by William Shakespeare	Key Quotations	Tragic Arc	
Derived from the myth <i>Leir of Britain</i> , <i>King Lear</i> is a Shakespearean tragedy first performed on St Stephen's Day 1606. It tells the parallel stories of Lear's betrayal by two of his daughters and subsequent descent into madness and of his kinsman's the Earl of Gloucester's betrayal by his illegitimate son and subsequent rescue by his legitimate son.	Lear (1.1): "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?"	Exposition	Lear invites his daughter's to profess their love for him in exchange for greater shares of his kingdom. Regan and Goneril flatter him while Cordelia refuses to speak. Regan and Goneril are each granted half of the Kingdom, while Cordelia is banished
	Goneril (1.1): "Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter".		
	Cordelia (1.1): "I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth".		
	Edmund (1.2): "Now, gods, stand up for bastards!"		
	Lear (1.4): "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child."		
<b>Key Characters</b>	Lear (3.2): "Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!" "I am a man / More sinned against than sinning".	Building Action	Lear is hounded out of both his daughters' households. He walks away onto the heath accompanied only by his fool and by Kent (a nobleman travelling in disguise).  Hearing of the sisters' treachery, Gloucester goes to help Lear. His son, Edgar is also on the heath disguised as a beggar (Poor Tom).
	Fool (3.2): "Here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools."		
	Edmund (3.3): "The younger rises when the old doth fall."		
	Edgar (4.3): "The younger rises when the old doth fall."		
	Lear (4.7): "I am a very foolish, fond old man."		
	Cordelia – Lear's favourite daughter. Unable to put her love for her father into words, Cordelia is disinherited then married to the King of France. She fights to save her father and they are briefly reconciled before she is hanged.		
<b>Relevant Concepts and Terminology</b>			
Regan and Goneril – Lear's other daughters. They earn his favour by exaggeratedly professing their love for him. Then they betray him.	Storge – The Greek word for love between family members. Of the many types of love identified by the Greeks, storge pays the least attention to those characteristics deemed "valuable" or worthy of love and, as a result, is able to transcend and overlook flaws or slights.		Edmund becomes romantically involved with both Regan and Goneril. He conspires with Goneril to kill her regretful husband, Albany.
Gloucester – A loyal member of Lear's court, Gloucester is tricked into disinheriting his legitimate son Edgar. He is later blinded but then saved by his forgiving son.	Primogeniture – the law which decreed that estates be passed directly from a father to his first-born (legitimate) son.	Falling Action	The French Army, led by Cordelia, arrives at Dover.
Edmund – Gloucester's illegitimate son, Edmund tricks his father into disinheriting his brother and naming him heir. Later becomes a significant member of Regan and Goneril's regime.	Tragedy – the classification of drama in which a noble protagonist, who is flawed in some way, is placed in a stressful heightened situation. The plots of Shakespearean tragedy focus on the reversal of fortune of the central character(s) which leads to their ruin and ultimately, death.	Resolution	Lear and Cordelia are briefly reunited before Cordelia is hanged for rising against her sisters. Lear dies because of his grief.  Albany and Edgar resolve to pick up the pieces, building a new world after the tragic events.
Edgar – Gloucester's legitimate son, Edgar remains faithful to and ultimately saves his father.			
The Fool – Lear's court jester/ advisor / protector.			

### AO3 Context:

**Jacobean England and King Lear:** Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* around 1605, between *Othello* and *Macbeth*. The setting of *King Lear* is as far removed from Shakespeare's time as the setting of any of his other plays, dramatizing events from 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Setting it in ancient land deflected accusations that Shakespeare might have been criticising London society and kept James I as a supporter – without whom The Globe and Shakespeare would not have survived.

**Contemporary issues with inheritance:** Shortly before the play was written, the eldest of three sisters tried to have her elderly father, Sir Brian Annesley, declared insane so that she could take control of his property. Annesley's youngest daughter, Cordell, successfully defended her father against her sister. William Allen, a mayor of London, was treated very poorly by his three daughters after dividing his wealth among them.

**The Political landscape:** By the time Shakespeare was writing *King Lear*, the English had survived years of civil war and political/religious upheaval. Considerable turmoil followed the death of Henry VIII, and under his eldest daughter's rule (Mary I), the country experienced both civil and religious chaos with the conflict between Catholicism and the Church of England, resulting in much bloodshed. After Mary's death, Elizabeth I assumed the throne leading to an extended period of peace. In spite of their contentment with Elizabeth's rule, the populace worried significantly about England's future because Elizabeth was unmarried, and she refused to select a possible heir. No citizen wanted a repeat of the events that marked the earlier transfer of power. Thus the lack of an heir created fears about a possible successor to the throne. This was finally resolved in 1603 when Elizabeth appointed James IV of Scotland to be her heir and eventually, the new King of England.

**Shakespeare's sources:** Derived from the myth Leir of Britain, *King Lear* is a Shakespearean tragedy first performed on St Stephen's Day 1606. It tells the parallel stories of Lear's betrayal by two of his daughters and subsequent descent into madness and of his kinsman's the Earl of Gloucester's betrayal by his illegitimate son and subsequent rescue by his legitimate son. In the original source, Cordelia does not die.

**Bedlam beggars:** 'Tom O Bedlam' is the name of an anonymous poem in the 'mad song' genre. The terms 'Tom O Bedlam' and 'Bedlam Begger' were used in Early Modern Britain and later to describe beggars and vagrants who had a feigned mental illness. You may wish to also consider the term 'Abraham-men'. Edgar in *King Lear* disguises himself as mad 'Tom o' Bedlam'.

### The Nature of Tragedy:

**Aristotle:** According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy should be a single serious, complete action with ornate language and the evocation of pity and fear should be central. The audience should be brought to the realisation that justice has been served: though it may be rough and there may be surprises along the way, these heightened the moral evaluations we make.

**Hegel:** Hegel presented the view that a tragic hero is one whose spirit is discordant. The tragic conflict arises due to the hero's singular devotion to an ethical principle, stubbornly refusing to engage with the opposing views. In *King Lear*, it is because of Lear's actions and attitude that order and balance are threatened.

**A.C. Bradley:** According to Bradley, a Shakespearean tragedy evokes pity, fear and mystery (mystery at how life can be wasted). A Shakespearean tragedy focuses on one person – the 'hero' who is in conflict with himself. The hero must have important social status so that the effects of his downfall can be seen to have wide-reaching consequences. Seeing the punishment in terms of justice is unhelpful as the suffering is clearly disproportionate to the initial sin/ flaw/error of the hero.



### AO2 Formal and Structural Features / Language

- \* Structure – immediately focused on Lear's hamartia and peripeteia. You could look at Aristotle's tragic arc.
- \* Subplot – Gloucester, Edmund and Edgar. The details of the sub-plot serve to draw our attention to the details of the main plot, amplifying and intensifying the emotional reaction provoked in the audience. This is the reverse of Greek tragedy – they avoided sub-plots, attempting to intensify through concentration on a single action (the Unity of Action).
- \* Variety of settings – where do certain scenes take place? Significance of the heath/storm?
- \* Staging – on-stage acts of violence. These range from low level striking, tripping and sword fights to the horrific gouging of Gloucester's eyes. The use of music/sound effects to fanfare Lear's entrance.
- \* Use of asides – reveal the character's true intentions/thoughts.
- \* Use of costume – emphasises Lear's madness.
- \* Use of imperatives.
- \* Use of prose – used for bawdy conversations between Kent and Gloucester. Goneril and Regan discuss their true purpose in prose at the end of Act One. Shakespeare alternates between prose and verse for Lear in Act Three. The Fool and Poor Tom are given only prose because of their lower social status.
- \* Repetition – to intensify emotions/distress/defiance.
- \* Animal imagery
- \* Snake/serpent imagery
- \* Religious Imagery

*King Lear* presents a bleak vision of a world without meaning. Lear **begins the play valuing justice, the social order, and the value of kingship**, but his values are undermined by his experiences. Lear ends up believing that justice, order and kingship are just flattering names for raw, brutal power.

### Sight and blindness

Evidently, the prospect of sight and blindness bears relevance towards the play due to the way in which the binary pair is a constant factor within the play. For instance, this is emphasised through the way in which Gloucester loses his sight. After his eyes were removed he consequently began to gain more insight. This brings more complexity to the play and questions the position of authority and age since Gloucester clearly presents a notion of blindness to Edmond's intention, yet ironically he gains more insight after the loss of his eyes as he is shown to recognise the king. Consequently, this brings irony, insight and complexity to the play, therefore highlighting the significance of blindness and sight.

### Words vs actions

Words and actions bring irony, complexity, and insight to the play. This is through the statements made by the characters that conflict with their actions. For instance, within the play, Lear states that he is sorry for banishing Cordelia.

However, he does not do this in person as his actions lead to her absence from the kingdom. As a result, this shows the clear distinction between the two as although his words had stated; "I loved her the most" (act 1 scene 1) and saying he loved her he allowed his vanity to sit higher than family values, consequently banishing her. Furthermore, Lear asks "Who is it who can tell me who I am?" as it was clear he thought he was king. However, his actions to divide the kingdom contradicts this as he resulted in being a king with a meaningless title as his actions got rid of the power and authority he had as king in act 1. Consequently, this brings irony, insight and complexity to the play, therefore highlighting the significance of blindness and sight.

### King Lear and the Fool in the Storm

Both characters represent irony as although they are regarded as nothing, they both stay to help the King to shelter where Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan had discarded their father to the mercy of the storm. This clearly shows who was loyal to the king. Therefore it is clear that the significance of Kent and Fool were to represent irony, rationality, loyalty and humanity within the situation.

The introduction of Poor Tom into the storm scene impacts on the play through irony, emotional response, suspense and complexity. This is distinctly due to the way Gloucester is shown to hold hands with Edgar although he was the one to put the death penalty on his head. For instance, Gloucester confesses to Kent; "I had a son. Now outlawed from my blood; he sought my life, But lately, very late. I loved him. No father his son dearer/ The grief has crazed my wits" (3.4.150-155). The way in which Edgar disguised as old Tom was in front of him without Gloucester recognising him creates irony. As a result, this reveals Gloucester deteriorating insight and wisdom despite his old age, creates an atmosphere of tension and suspense towards the audience along with disgust towards Gloucester as a father and sympathy for Edgar. This makes the play further complex as the audience anticipates whether or not Gloucester is to recognise Edgar and how he would react. Therefore the entrance of Tom brings further insight to the topic of family turmoil within the play, irony, more complexity to the plot and provokes an emotional response from the audience.