

## Study Questions for King Lear

### 1. What does the storm in Act III symbolise?

- The Knight describes Lear as being out of his mind, comparing the storm inside Lear's mind with the storm outside, "One minded like the weather, most unquietly" (3.1.2).
- This highlights Lear's powerlessness against the storm—an underlying theme is the helplessness of "unaccommodated man" (3.4.105) against the forces of nature—for he is driven 'to and fro' by the storm and hence his madness.
- Lear, in 3.4, actually states that "this tempest in my mind / Doth from my sense take all feeling else" (3.4.12-13), representing a change in Lear's conception of himself as flawless, because he comes to a realisation of his own fragility. In 3.6, Lear's trial of his two elder daughters can be described as 'reason in madness', that is, Lear's lofty ego has been brought down to being that of a normal person.
- It is interesting to note that the characters make references to the weather and landscape because this was the only way Shakespeare could present them to his audience.

### 2. What roles do women play in *King Lear*?

- Cordelia:
  - ❖ Plot: Cordelia refuses to flatter Lear in public, thus sparking the entire tragedy as Lear divides his kingdom between his other two daughters; she also instigates an attack on England by the French forces and upon loss, she is killed by an order of Edmund, which acts as the catharsis of the play.
  - ❖ Cordelia's role in the tragedy of *King Lear* is quite important, for her death has been considered the real tragedy of the play. Cordelia, seen as innocent and pure because of her unwillingness to "want that glib and oily art" (1.1.226) in order to flatter her father to her needs, and because of the concern she shows for her aged father, dies for no apparent reason.
  - ❖ Her execution is the final straw that kills King Lear, "Never, never, never, never, never" (5.3.307), and has left the end of the play with no sense of justice being done, the kingdom a "gored state" (5.3.319).
  - ❖ Cordelia is set up as a paragon of female values—dutiful, respectful, unchallenging to male power, loyal—in comparison to the masculine features of her sisters, Goneril and Regan, who aspire for power, betray their husbands, and try to usurp the patriarchal society for their own devices (Feminism).
  - ❖ By attempting to restore Lear to his throne and halt the new order that attacks the monarchy created by Goneril and Regan and their husbands, Cordelia can be seen to be a capitalist supporting power in the minority (Marxist).
  - ❖ Cordelia serves as Lear's incestuous desire, because having no wife, Lear sees his daughters, especially his unmarried, virginal (Psychoanalysis)
- Goneril and Regan:
  - ❖ Plot: Goneril and Regan show filial ingratitude towards Lear by not permitting him to stay at their castles with his retinue. Goneril is the instigator of the crimes, but Regan becomes just as vicious when she comes up with the idea of plucking out Gloucester's eyes.
  - ❖ On the Jacobean stage, women were generally presented as quiet, submissive, and morally divine in thought and in action, but Goneril and Regan act violently and aggressively throughout the play, hence instilling their female roles with male characteristics. This defeminises their characters and highlights their atrocities towards Lear. Albany calls them, "Tigers, not daughters" (4.2.41), and thus Shakespeare uses these two women to emphasise the unnaturalness associated with filial ingratitude that places them on the level of wild animals.
  - ❖ They are both in love with Edmund, thus serving as links between the main plot and the subplot and being outputs of Edmund's evil.

3. Analyse the relationship between madness and blindness in the play.
  - Lear is blind to Cordelia's true love, while believing the "professed bosoms" (1.1.274) of his other daughters. Psychoanalytically, Freud and his supporters believed that Lear was already showing symptoms of mental degradation at the beginning of the play, as demonstrated firstly by his calling of his daughters to give him praise in public, and secondly his overreaction to Cordelia's "nothing". France realises this, "This is most strange, / That she who even but now was your best object" (1.1.228).
  - Lear later says, "I did her wrong" (1.5.24), which suggests that he realises that Cordelia was not a bad daughter after all; he can now 'see' what he has done, although his most significant change occurs after he meets Edgar, the "learned Theban" (3.4.143).
  - Lear's madness comes about because he was metaphorically blind at the beginning.
  - Gloucester, although he never exhibited the same symptoms as Lear, disregards his legitimate son Edgar based on the evidence of his other son Edmund alone. This is a form of madness, and it is only when he is physically blind can he see that he has been betrayed by the son he trusted, "O dear son Edgar, ... Might I live to see thee again in my touch" (4.1.23-25).
  
4. Is Lear a sympathetic character? What about Gloucester? How do our impressions of them change during the course of the play?
  - Lear
    - ❖ Initially, Lear shows no sympathy towards anyone, believing that as king and representative of God on Earth that he does not need to bow down to anyone.
    - ❖ During the storm, Lear begins to understand that humanity, after being stripped of all its outer glamorous clothing, is simply a bare animal, and thus, he begins to understand his subjects. He shows sympathy to the plight of the Fool, a loyal follower, "Come on, my boy. How dost my boy? Art cold?" (3.2.68)
    - ❖ (Nihilistic) In the Peter Brooks production, Lear does not even get the chance to ask the Fool as above – all traces of sympathy have been reduced.
    - ❖ Beginning – disgust; Eviction from Goneril's palace – undeserving of the harsh treatment (in Peter Brook's version of *King Lear*, Goneril is seen as being justified in her decision); Storm – completely insane, but gradually changing; Capture by English forces and death of Cordelia – audience feels sympathy, because just as he understands life, he dies.
  - Gloucester
    - ❖ Gloucester's initial conversation with Kent shows that he does not mind flirting with the boundaries of decency; when introducing Edmund to Kent, he says, "There was good sport at his making" (1.1.20).
    - ❖ The audience may feel concern towards how Gloucester is being treated by Edgar, for there is dramatic irony in that the audience can almost predict Gloucester's downfall through Edmund's revealing soliloquies, "An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star" (1.2.126).
    - ❖ However, Gloucester may in fact be deserving of cruel treatment, for he is a fool for placing his entire trust on Edmund.
    - ❖ Later in the play, Gloucester's suicide scene is distinctively grotesquely humorous, with the audience kept in suspense to invite a sympathetic response to his plight, and together with him, finally come to terms with the cruelty of the world. In addition, Edgar's recount of the final moments he spent with his father after he revealed his true identity is truly moving, and caps off a series of changes in Gloucester, who transforms from being obscenely obedient to identifying with the other geriatric in the play, Lear, and taking a brave and independent stance against the daughters.

5. Analyse the function that the Fool serves. Why does he disappear from the action?
  - Classical Greek theatre used the device of a chorus to comment upon the plot for the audience, even if they were not integral to the plot itself.
  - The Fool accompanies Lear on his journey from ignorance to understanding. Sometimes, Lear acts more foolishly than the Fool does.
  - The Fool's words offer good advice and sound judgement throughout the play.
  - The Fool, who was "whipped for speaking true ... whipped for lying ... whipped for holding my peace" (1.4.174-6), must disguise his message to Lear, who was higher in status than he was, in riddles and nonsense sounding messages.
  - The Fool provides comic relief for the audience in an otherwise dark and cruel story.
  - In Shakespeare's time, the Fool and Cordelia may have been played by the same actor, and hence they cannot be on stage simultaneously.
  - After Lear's experience out on the heath, the Fool is no longer necessary to provide support to the ailing king. His role is taken over by Edgar; in fact, it has been suggested that the action may overwhelm the audience if both 'Poor Tom' and the Fool were on stage, for both provide comic relief and wise comments.
  
6. Discuss the relationship between Cordelia and Lear, and compare it to the relationship between Edgar and Gloucester.
  - Lear and Cordelia have always been close, and before the division of the kingdom, she was his favourite daughter, "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery" (1.1.118).
  - (Psychoanalysis) Lear sees Cordelia as being the object of incest, acting as his mother.
  - Cordelia may have thought that their relationship was strong such that she did not have to flatter him in public.
  - Cordelia returns to England with the French army, not to claim the throne for herself or her husband, but for her father; she is the only daughter out of the three who shows true filial duty.
  - Edgar and Gloucester may have had a poorer relationship to begin with, because as even Edmund pointed out, he is a "credulous father" who falls for Edmund's "practices" easily, disregarding Edgar without much thought. (1.2.177)
  - Both Cordelia and Edgar continually look for ways to serve their father.
  - Lear realises early on that he wronged Cordelia, and so she does not need to appear to him in disguise. However, Gloucester does not understand his situation until his eyes are removed, which is a result of Edmund's treachery, and thus, Edgar must remain in disguise until the last half hour of his father's life.
  
7. Of the three villains – Edmund, Goneril and Regan – who is the most interesting? Why?
  - Probably Regan
    - ❖ Less contemptuous than Goneril towards Lear, and seems to be a reasonable person (she asks of Gloucester, "Bestow / Your needful counsel to our business" due to "differences" he has with Goneril (2.2.128-9)), infected by the evils of Goneril.
    - ❖ She always seems to be looking for ways to outsmart her sister, and this might explain her violent bursts of imagination that worsen every possible deed—placing Kent in the stocks for double the period of time, and taking Gloucester's words literally, "Because I would not see thy cruel nails / Pluck out his [Lear's] poor old eyes" (3.7.55-6).
  
8. Discuss the significance of old age and death in King Lear.
  - (Marxism) *King Lear* can be seen as a power struggle between the new and the old (the younger generation and the older generation).

- The young, who have life, think that they can do away with the old, and successfully obtain power. "This policy and reverence of age, makes the world bitter to the best of our times, keeps our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish them" (1.2.46).
  - This attempted usurping of the norm results in the death of innocent people.
  - Lear, particularly at the beginning of the play, acts as if he were equal or even above the gods in the Chain of Being, because he is not permitted to divide up his kingdom.
  - It is through the realisation of mortality, especially through old age and Cordelia's death, that the protagonist reaches the catharsis.
9. How does order break down in Britain during the course of the play? Who is to blame?
- The storm in Act III is representative of the break down in natural order in Britain.
  - When Britain is divided, it symbolically a divided kingdom, and foreshadows conflicts later on between the two halves.
  - When he divides his kingdom in order to "shake all cares and business from our age" (1.1.38), Lear will not only divest himself of authority, but he will destroy authority in all of Britain, as demonstrated by the ensuing civil crisis.
  - Edmund – calls on gods to support his unnaturalness
  - Cordelia – refuses to cooperate in what would otherwise have been a simple proclamation of love
  - Goneril and Regan – for being dishonest and making Cordelia's purity and innocence stand out
10. Discuss Edmund. Are we meant to find him sympathetic?
- Edmund has always been treated worse by Gloucester comparing him with Edgar, simply because was born illegitimately; "He hath been out [to war] nine years, and away he shall again" (1.1.31).
  - He probably takes on the Machiavellian attitude because of his continual inferiority complex, and wishes to attain the social standing that he has never been able to achieve just because of his different birth. "Now gods, stand up for bastards!" (1.2.22)
  - In the end, (as a Marxist interpretation would have it) Edmund is killed; he is too ambitious, because not only does he want to be Earl of Gloucester, but he also desires the entire kingdom now by seducing both Goneril and Regan. However, Shakespeare is seen to be supporting the monarchy by showing that usurpers will be defeated.
  - He shows some remorse at the end when he orders that Lear and Cordelia be freed, probably because he realises that his plans have failed, and thus his hard attitude to life must cease to exist.
  - (Psychoanalysis) Edmund's superego is overwhelmed by his id – this results in conflict. If we assume that Edmund sees his father as some sort of competition for his whorish mother, Freudian theory suggests that after he goes through this phase of incestuous love, his superego will develop fully, and bring about a conscience, as evidenced by his reversal of heart about Lear and Cordelia. "Some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine on nature" (5.3.241-2).
  - (Nihilism) In Peter Brook's production, Edmund never orders that Lear and Cordelia be freed and spared from death. Thus, we cannot feel sympathetic to Edmund in this production (or indeed any of the characters).