

2011 Study Guide for *King Lear* by William Shakespeare

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the elements of Shakespearean tragedy. What characteristics are necessary for a play to be a tragedy? What are your expectations of a play that is called a tragedy? These and other websites provide information:
http://shakespeare.about.com/od/thetragedies/a/Shakespeare_Tragedies.htm
<http://alliemacb.hubpages.com/hub/Shakespeares-Plays-Comedy-Tragedy-History>
2. Research the source material for *King Lear*. These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leir_of_Britain
<http://king-lear.org/sources>
http://www.britaininprint.net/shakespeare/study_tools/lear_sources.html
3. Research “legitimacy” and what it was to be a “bastard” in Elizabethan England. Research the laws of inheritance. What were the social and financial consequences of being illegitimate? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/bastard>
<http://voices.yahoo.com/deformity-illegitimacy-shakespeares-plays-46697.html>
<http://www.elizabethan.org/compendium/41.html>
4. Research the Great Chain of Being, paying particular attention to the place of a king and the ramifications of disrupting the Great Chain. These and other websites provide information:
<http://faculty.up.edu/asarnow/GreatChainofBeing.htm>
<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/ren.html>

5. Research modern theories on birth order within families. What are the characteristics of the oldest child, middle child and youngest child? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.parentingideas.com.au/Blog/September-2011/Birth-order-theory---understand-your-birth-order-p>
<http://allpsych.com/personalitysynopsis/adler.html>
6. Research the Fool in Shakespeare's plays. What are the Fool's characteristics? What power does a Fool have? What dangers threaten him? What particular functions does Shakespeare assign to his Fools? These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespearean_fool
<http://suite101.com/article/shakespearean-fools-the-role-of-shakespeares-clowns-a398223>
7. What are the qualities of a good leader? What are the responsibilities that accompany leadership? What problems can result from ineffective leadership?
8. Read the first scene of *King Lear*. What themes are introduced? If this scene provides a keyhole through which you can view the entire play, what do you expect the play to be about?
9. As the play begins, King Lear announces that he will retire and divide his kingdom among his three daughters. In what way is Lear's plan an unusual one for a monarch? What are the potential problems that could arise from such a plan?
10. Due to the hostile nature of the society of *King Lear*, people have only their ties with each other to depend on. Find at least a dozen statements of kinship, connection or allegiance in the first scene. What do the statements tell us about the speakers? As you continue to read *King Lear* or as you watch it, listen for other examples. How do these defining relationships evolve over the course of the play?
11. *King Lear* is filled with words of measurement, often concerning things that cannot be measured, such as love. Find at least a dozen instances of this in the first scene. What might this foreshadow about the entire story?

Resources

Films:

King Lear, with Ian McKellen, 2009

King of Texas, with Patrick Stewart, 2002

A Thousand Acres, with Jessica Lange, Michelle Pfeiffer, Jason Robards, 1997

The Tale of Lear, adapted by Tadashi Suzuki, 1987

Ran, directed by Akira Kurasawa, 1985

King Lear, BBC film version with Lawrence Olivier, 1984

King Lear, with James Earl Jones, 1974

King Lear, directed by Grigori Kozintsev, 1970

King Lear, directed by Peter Brook, 1969

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>

<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>

<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>

<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>

<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>

After seeing/reading the play

1. In the first line of the play, Act I, scene i, lines 1-2, the Earl of Kent says to the Duke of Gloucester, "I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall." What does this statement mean? What might it say about the rest of the play? What does it tell us about King Lear and his rule? What other instances of preferring one person over another occur in the play? What are the consequences of these preferences?
2. In Act I, King Lear acts as though love can be measured and otherwise quantified. Find other instances of this in the play. How do characters seem to define love? How do characters express their love? How do they mask it? How do they express their hatred? How do they mask it?

3. Refer to your research on the Great Chain of Being. How does the Great Chain of Being relate to the theme of order and disorder in *King Lear*? How might King Lear's actions at the opening of the play contribute to the order or disorder of the kingdom?
4. Refer to your research on the source material for *King Lear*. What are some of the differences between the stories? Why might Shakespeare have changed the ending of the story? In what ways is the message of the play different than that of the source material?
5. In what ways is Cordelia a dutiful daughter? In what ways is she a rebel? What would have happened if Cordelia had stated her love as her sisters did? In what way is Cordelia similar to her father?
6. How does King Lear feel about his children? Find references in the play which identify his sentiments. What kind of a father is King Lear? How do his feelings change over the course of the play? How does he change as a father during the course of the play? How does his behavior towards his daughters effect how they treat him? Is he responsible for their actions, or deserving of the things that befall him at their hands?
7. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare tells two stories about fathers and their children. How do the stories reinforce each other? How do they mirror each other? What elements make them different?
8. How does Gloucester feel about his sons? Find words in the play which identify his sentiments. What kind of father is Gloucester? How do his feelings change about his sons over the course of the play? Cite examples of the ways in which Edmund and Edgar are similar to and dislike their father.
9. Refer to your research on the theory of birth order determining the role of each sibling. In what ways do King Lear's daughters fit the birth order theory? In what ways do they not? How do the traditional roles of oldest, middle and younger sibling change throughout the play? Consider Edmund and Edgar in the same way. How do their roles as older and younger brother change throughout the play?

10. How are Goneril and Regan similar? How are they different? In what ways are they similar to their father? Tell the story from the point of view of Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Justify the choices each character makes.
11. Describe Albany and Cornwall. Describe Goneril's and Regan's relationships with their husbands. How are the men different from and similar to one another? How are the two marriages similar and different? How does Cordelia's marriage to the King of France compare to the marriages of her two sisters?
12. Who has power at the beginning of the play? How is it gained? How is it lost? What does it mean to Lear to lose power? What does it mean to Edmund to gain power? To Goneril and Regan? To Edgar? What is the cost of power for each?
13. Consider that Gloucester is blinded twice in the play. Who blinds him metaphorically and for what purpose? Who blinds him physically and for what purpose? What is the significance of the blinding of Gloucester? What does Gloucester learn after he is blinded? Who else in the play is "blind," and to what? What is the relationship between physical and metaphoric blindness?
14. What are the instances of goodness in the play? What are the instances of cruelty? What are the connections between the acts of goodness and cruelty? What would the story be like without instances of goodness? Which triumphs in the end, goodness or cruelty? Make a case for each. What are the consequences of goodness in the world of the play? What are the consequences of cruelty?
15. The word "nothing" is used 34 times in the play. What different meanings does the word have in the course of the play? In what ways does "nothing" mean "something" as the play progresses?
16. Refer to your research on legitimacy and inheritance. In what ways is legitimacy a driving force for Edmund? How does this stigma shape Edmund? How does it shape his relationship with Edgar? Gloucester?

17. Three minor characters in the play are nameless: Lear's gentleman, Cornwall's servant and Gloucester's tenant. Describe each character's background. How does his title define the essence of his character? What specific function does he serve? How instrumental is he to the plot? What abstract purpose does he have?
18. What does loyalty mean to the Fool? To Gloucester? To Kent? To Edgar? To Edmund? To Cordelia? To Regan? To Goneril? To Oswald? Note the betrayals—who betrays whom and why?
19. Find the letters in the play. Who wrote each letter? What does it say? Why was it written? Who reads each letter? What is the result of it? What role do the letters play in developing the plot?
20. What qualities define Lear's Fool? What qualities define Edgar? How are the Fool and Edgar similar?
21. Compare the madness of King Lear and that of poor mad Tom. What does madness allow King Lear to "see"? What does his feigned madness allow Edgar to "see"? How does madness illuminate the truth in *King Lear*?
22. Who are the outcasts in the play? Why are they cast out? Where do they end up?
23. Name the different characters that Edgar becomes. Why does he choose each character? How does each role he plays fit into the particular circumstance in which he finds himself?
24. Find instances in the play when the word nature is used and take note of who uses it. What does nature mean to each of these characters? Why is "Nature" Edmund's goddess? What is the role of nature in *King Lear*? Who is cast out into nature in the play? What effect does nature have on each of the characters? What does King Lear learn, if anything, from contending with nature, most specifically the storm?
25. In the text, find images that relate to animals or beasts. Find images and verbs that relate to violence. In what way do these images affect the telling of the story? What do they tell us about the world of *King Lear*?

26. In what ways is order restored at the end of the play?
27. If you are seeing both *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*, compare Cymbeline and King Lear. Describe how each is effective and ineffective as a ruler. How does each inspire loyalty? Disloyalty? How do their families and the people they rule pay for their decisions? How are their families reconciled, if they are?
28. If you are seeing *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *My Fair Lady*, compare the daughters in the plays. How is each daughter valued and by whom? How much power does each daughter have? Which daughters find power by defying the societal expectations of their role as women? Which by conforming? How much choice does each have about whom she will marry?
29. If you are seeing *King Lear*, *Cymbeline*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *My Fair Lady*, compare the role of the fathers in the plays. How does each father try to control his daughter(s)? How successful is each?

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