

Discussion Questions for Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Set 1: 1.1-2.3

Set 2: 2.3-4.1

Set 3: 4.1-end

1. What is King Lear's "darker purpose" (1.1.35—that's Act 1, Scene 1, line 35)? What does he want from his daughters, and what does he get? How would you characterize the daughter's behavior and Lear's behavior? What is said about Lear's age (1.1.290-95)? What are the main things that have happened by the end of the scene?
2. What is Gloucester's relation to Edmund and how does Gloucester treat him? See especially 1.1.7-23. What are Edmund's thoughts in his soliloquy (1.2.1-22) and what does his plot regarding the letter appear to be? What do Gloucester's ideas at 1.2.103-116 lead us to think about his powers of reasoning?
3. What is Goneril's plan regarding the treatment of her father (1.3.1-27)? What is the argument between Goneril and Lear (1.3.183-306)? Who seems at fault?
4. How does Edmund gain his father's favor, and what does his father suggest this will lead to (2.1.1-86)?
5. Who is Kent? How is he treated in 2.2? Why is he treated that way, and what are its implications? What does Kent mean at the end of 2.2 when he says, "Fortune, good night; smile once more; turn thy wheel!" (2.2.169)?

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1. When Lear talks with Regan about Goneril, whose side does Regan take and why (2.4.126-187)? What argument ensues when Goneril arrives (2.4.187-262)?
 2. What ideas, fears, and/or desires are expressed in Lear's "O reason not the need!" speech (2.4.262-84) in which he curses his two daughters as "unnatural hags"? The speech seems complex, not straightforward. Untangle and interpret it as best as you can.
 3. Like the ravings of a madman, Lear's scenes in the storm are notorious for their complex yet insightful glimpse into the human psyche. "Reason in madness" is how Edgar describes Lear's ramblings at one later point. What lines in 3.2 and 3.4 stand out to you as being especially revealing with regard to Lear's feelings about his daughters and his feelings about his own guilt, humiliation, power, and/or powerlessness?
 4. What do we learn about the letter, Edmund, and Gloucester in 3.3 and 3.5?
 5. What is Gloucester's crime and punishment (3.7)? How does his punishment appear symbolic in relation to key points of the play?
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1. What is the plot between Goneril and Edmund? Note what occurs in 4.2.1-24, 4.6.245-272, and 5.1.40.
2. What does Gloucester attempt to do at Dover (4.6.1-41)? Why is the scene both tragic and comic (4.6.41-80)? How does Edgar convince Gloucester to change his outlook?
3. Describe the reunion between Lear and Cordelia (4.7.). When they are taken prisoner together (5.3.), what does Lear's reaction suggest?
4. What charge is brought upon Edmund and by whom (5.3)? What then occurs between the brothers, and what happens when Edgar reveals himself to Edmund? What do we learn about their father?
5. What do we learn about Regan and Goneril (5.3)? Describe Lear's reaction to Cordelia's death (5.3.). What do his last words suggest?