

King Lear Book Notes

King Lear by William Shakespeare

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Author/Context

It would be understandable if William Shakespeare had written *King Lear* in his older years, since the play itself spotlights such topics as retirement and the disintegration of family. Yet the playwright from Stratford was just 41 and at the height of his abilities when *King Lear* was first performed and recorded as an official play.

Despite his relative youth, Shakespeare had already led a very noteworthy life by the time *King Lear* emerged. During the leadership of Elizabeth I, England was enmeshed in a period of political stability, making way for the growth of cultural expressions, not the least of which was drama. As the arts exploded and England reaped the benefits, William Shakespeare came to London all the way from Stratford and put forward the 37 plays that have since established him as the preeminent playwright in the history of the English language.

Shakespeare was born in 1564 and raised in Stratford-on-Avon, located roughly 100 miles outside of London. His father was a successful trader, and at one point held a public office of sorts. William attended the town school, where he received a decent education. When he was 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior. Together, the couple had three girls--Susanna, and twins, Judith and Hamnet.

While it is unclear how Shakespeare provided for his family--there are no records of his employment--he left them and Stratford in his mid-20s for London. Shortly after his arrival in London, his name first entered the limelight for two long poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lecece*. From there, his reputation soared.

Shakespeare shifted his focus toward the theater. Most of his early plays were the well-known comedies of today: *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors*, etc. They were all well received in London and helped cement his career. Unlike his tragedies, the comedies didn't explore hotwire political issues or major internal crises; rather, they stayed up at the surface level and explored casual relationships between friends, lovers and families.

Once the comedies were solidified as surefire attention-grabbers, Shakespeare at the end of the 16th century wrote his famous historical pieces that today are some of his most famous plays: *Richard II*; *Henry IV, Part I*; *Henry IV, Part II*; and *Henry V*.

As the playwright matured, and as the new century got underway, he began to delve into deeper topics, giving birth to his famous tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*, all of which in some way explored the greatest depths of the human element. This period is largely considered the zenith of his career.

Some consider *King Lear* Shakespeare's best tragedy. In it, Shakespeare tells a somber story that weaves together themes of vision/blindness, folly, nature, aging and nothingness. The themes plunge deeper than those in most of Shakespeare's other

pieces. The characters in *King Lear* are so intense, their speeches so impassioned, that many consider the play a must read over other classics.

After the batch of preeminent tragedies, Shakespeare lightened up, producing such works as *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, which have since become known as the romantic tragi-comedies. By this point, his writing abilities had effectively spanned the spectrum of genres.

Many specific details of Shakespeare's personal life, as aforementioned, remain either unknown or shrouded in mystery. The most blatant centerpiece of the playwright's life was his frequent participation in London's theater life, not only writing plays but also acting and starring in them. He was involved with a company called the King's Men until 1613, when the Globe Theater, where the company performed, burned down. At this point, Shakespeare returned to Stratford, enormously accomplished at the age of 50. He died April 23, 1616, at the age of 52.

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Plot Summary

The main plot deals with the head of the royal family, King Lear of Britain. Lear has three daughters: Cordelia, Goneril and Regan. The oldest, Goneril, is married to the Duke of Albany. The middle child, Regan, is married to the Duke of Cornwall. Cordelia, the youngest, has two potential suitors, the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy. The Fool is a major character in the head family, serving as the king's foremost right-hand man.

Within the plot, another story weaves its way. It is headed by the Earl of Gloucester, a member of Lear's court. Gloucester has two sons: the elder, legitimate son, Edgar, and the younger, illegitimate son, Edmund.

The plot opens at King Lear's retirement. Lear has decided to give up the throne and divide his kingdom among his daughters. Before allotting the portions of the kingdom, Lear asks each of his daughters to profess her love for him in the best way she knows how. Doing so will guarantee each girl her portion of the entitlement. While Goneril and Regan delve into expressions of adoration for their father, Cordelia remains speechless, saying that words cannot express her love.

Lear becomes enraged by what he considers his favorite daughter's lack of attachment and affection. With that, Lear cuts Cordelia off, deciding she will receive none of the entitlement. Her share is divided between the other two girls, who receive almost the entirety of the royal court. The only thing Lear keeps for himself is a retinue of 100 knights who will take him back and forth between the two girls for visits.

After Cordelia loses her portion of the kingdom, her suitors are called in to propose. Burgundy is rejected but the King of France woos her well enough to earn her hand.

Meanwhile, at Gloucester's castle. Edmund decides he will not let his illegitimate birth prevent him from earning his father's estate. He conjures a plan of his own to convince Gloucester that Edgar is covertly planning to kill Gloucester himself, in order to more quickly procure the estate while he's at a young age. Edmund tells Edgar that their father is after him, having heard falsely that Edgar committed some heinous crime. With that, Edgar flees.

At the same time, Lear decides that he can't stand living with his two daughters. They treat him cruelly and it enrages him. He screams at them and curses them, running out into a violent storm, which his two daughters do nothing to prevent. There, he is joined by Kent, the Fool, and eventually by Edgar, who disguises himself as a mad beggar to avoid his father's (Gloucester) falsely-placed anger.

Gloucester tries to help Lear escape the storm and find his senses, but Edmund betrays his father and manages to get Cornwall and Regan to punish the earl. The punishment Gloucester must endure is wretched. His eyes are gouged out and he is sent into the



storm. A still disguised Edgar discovers his blinded father and leads him to Dover, where he joins Lear, who has gone even more mad.

The news that her sisters have stripped their father of his men and chased him out of town reaches Cordelia. Her husband, the King of France, sends invading troops into France to help reinstate Lear's rights as king. In Dover, Cordelia finds her father and gives him all the loving attention he needs. She contributes wholly to the restoration of his sanity.

In the meantime, Edmund is slated to take his father's estate. Knowing that much, Goneril and Regan develop interest in him, and the interest grows increasingly competitive. Yet before they can hammer out a winner in their fight for love, the battle for the throne must be fought. The French lose, and Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoner.

Edmund secretly commissions Lear and Cordelia's deaths. Yet once Albany enters and discovers this, he accuses Edmund of treason for plotting against him with Goneril at his side. Edmund is given an opportunity to defend himself in a fair duel. Edgar, in a new, armed disguise, appears at this point to challenge his brother in the duel. Edgar fatally wounds his brother, leaving Edmund to confess to all of his crimes. Shortly, a servant enters and reveals that Goneril has poisoned her sister Regan and then proceeded to kill herself. Edmund discloses that he has ordered the deaths of Lear and Cordelia.

Lear enters with the dead Cordelia cradled in his arms. He weeps, enfeebled by the death of his most loving daughter--he refuses to believe she is gone, even as he himself dies.

Albany, winner of the battle, hands the country over to Kent and Edgar. Kent, worn out by all of the tragedy, refuses the offer. Edgar is left then as the new king, charged with the task of restoring order to Britain.

Major Characters

King Lear: All-powerful King of Britain who simultaneously tries to manage being the leader of a major country and the head of a major family. Lear slowly goes mad throughout the play, and at first gives the power to rule to his daughters, who take advantage of that power as his faculties decline and he becomes more and more angry against them. He spends the majority of the play wondering if he has sinned or been sinned against, only finding solace in the nakedness of truth. At the end of the play, he is reunited with Cordelia, his favorite daughter, and begs her forgiveness for his actions.

Cordelia: Her father's favorite daughter, Cordelia is the smartest, bravest and most honest of the three daughters. She compromises her share of the kingdom when her honor is at stake. As a princess, she has clearly had a very privileged life, but she refuses to put her lifestyle above her principles. Despite her noble character, her life is cut short by an evil plot. Still, she is clearly Shakespeare's heroine.

Goneril: The first-born daughter of King Lear, Goneril is very intelligent and uses her skills to manipulate those around her. At times, her force and rage rivals that of her father. She goes so far as to poison her own sister in an effort to get what she wants.

Regan: As the second sister, Regan often appears in the shadow of her older sister. But it becomes apparent that she is very well spoken and strong-willed, and uses her words to sway people. She seems sweet at first, but shows her true colors when she is all too willing to throw her father out into the storm.

Gloucester: Gloucester is a calmer version of Lear. He is elderly like Lear, but not nearly as weak as Lear. He is betrayed by his son, Edmund, just as Lear is betrayed by his two oldest daughters. But even when Gloucester's eyes are gouged out and he is thrown into the storm, he survives it with far more sanity than Lear is able to muster. He is blinded by his son's (Edmund) plot to become Gloucester's heir, then later physically blinded. He trusts the gods and Fortune's wheel and leaves things in their hands. Gloucester's story serves as a parallel to Lear's.

Edmund: The illegitimate son of Gloucester who proves to be as clever as he is cunning. Edmund devises a troubling plot that steers the play--all in an effort to take his brother's inheritance. His actions become increasingly like those of a villain.

Edgar: At the beginning, Edgar seems as though he will be a mindless character when he is duped into believing his brother's silly scheme. But Edgar rises to the challenge with his imagination and caring character. While running around as a madman, he manages to take his father by the arm and provide the earl with comfort at a difficult time.

Kent: Kent is the most faithful character of all, and this is apparent from the start. He is devoted to the king, and speaks on Cordelia's behalf when the king banishes her at the beginning. He says only what he believes. We know he has moments of hot-



headedness, and he hardly treats Oswald nicely, but he manages to preserve his congeniality. At the end of the play he rejects an offer to rule England, because he knows that he is nearing his own death.

The Fool: The Fool is an interesting character, bearing the freedom to say whatever he chooses. Shakespeare chooses to develop him as a commentator on social action. He manages to remind the king of all his mistakes, while occasionally offering solutions.

Oswald: Oswald is Goneril's steward. He has enough bravery to resist characters like Regan who try to pry information from him. No matter what the scenario, he is true to his cause, always making sure his messages are delivered. With all of his loyalty to Goneril, Oswald is willing to conspire against Lear alongside her, which enrages Kent at one point.

Albany: The husband of Goneril, Albany is a military man willing to fight for what he believes. Goneril calls him a coward, yet he is anything but. He is prepared to battle Edmund one-on-one and to make decisions when they need to be made. At the end of the play, he calls for Kent and Edgar, Lear's two most loyal subjects, to rule England. --the two most loyal of Lear's subjects.

Cornwall: A perfect match for the evil Regan, Cornwall is one of the darkest characters. He commissions a harsh sentence against Gloucester, to have his eyes plucked out, and enacts the punishment with ease.

Objects/Places

England and France: Territorial issues over these two countries spur the beginning of the play and its end, as well as the tone throughout. When Lear decides to give his kingdom to his daughters in the first act, the natural order is disturbed and the play chronicles the repercussions. While the King of France disappears after the first scene, the symbol of his country plays a big role in the actions of the play.

Clothing: The play sends a message that clothing makes the man. It isn't until Lear sheds his clothing and Edgar wears a whole new set of clothing that both men regain their positions in the play.

Quotes

Quote 1: "[T]here was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund?" Act 1, Scene 1, lines 21-24

Quote 2: "And here are to be answered. Tell me, my daughters-/Since now we will divest us, both of rule/Interest of territory, cares of state-/Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" Act 1, Scene 1, lines 48-51

Quote 3: "Lear: Speak.

Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.

Lear: Nothing?

Cordelia: Nothing.

Lear: Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again." Act 1, Scene 1, lines 87-91

Quote 4: "Good my lord, You have begot me, bred me, loved me; I/Return those duties back as are right fit/ Obey you, love you, and most honor you./ Why have my sisters' husbands, if they say/ They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,/ That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry/ Half my love with him, half my care and duty./ Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,/ To love my father all." Act 1, Scene 1, lines 95-104

Quote 5: "By all the operation of the orbs/ From whom we do exist and cease to be;/ Here I disclaim all my paternal care,/ Propinquity and property of blood,/ And as a stranger to my heart and me/ Hold thee, from this, for ever." Act 1, Scene 1, lines 111-116

Quote 6: "Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law/ My services are bound. Wherefore should I/ Stand in the plague of custom, and permit/ The curiosity of nations to deprive me,/ For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines/ Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?" Act 1, Scene 2, lines 1-6

Quote 7: "That lord that counseled thee/ To give away they land,/ Come place him here by me,/ Do thou for him stand:/ The sweet and bitter fool/ Will presently appear;/ The one in motley here,/ The other found out there." Act 1, Scene 4, lines 138-145

Quote 8: "I heard myself proclaimed;/ And by the happy hollow of a tree/ escaped the hunt. No port is free; no place/ That guard, and most unusual vigilance/ Does not attend my taking. Whiles I may 'scape/ I will preserve myself; and am bethought/ To take the basest and most poorest shape/ That ever penury, in contempt of man/ Brought near to beast." Act 2, Scene 3, lines 1-9

Quote 9: "The to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain./ This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,/ The lion and the belly-pinched wolf/ Keep their fur dry, un bonneted he runs,/ And bids what will take all." Act 3, Scene 1, lines 11-15

Quote 10: "Marry, here's grace and a cod-piece; that's a wise man and a fool." Act 3, Scene 2, lines 40-41

Quote 11: "'Good my lord, enter here.'

'Will it break my heart?'

'I had rather break mine own.'" Act 3, Scene 4, lines 4-5

Quote 12: "Prithee, go in thyself; seek thine own ease./ This tempest will not give me leave to ponder/ On things would hurt me more. But I'll go in./ In boy; go in first. You houseless poverty-/ Nay, get thee in. I'll pray and then I'll sleep." Act 3, Scene 4, lines 23-27

Quote 13: "How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,/ Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you/ From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en/ Too little care of this! Take physic pomp,/ Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel." Act 3, Scene 4, lines 30-34

Quote 14: "Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, that cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself, unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come unbutton here." Act 3, Scene 4, lines 98-105

Quote 15: "Poor Tom, that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt and the water, that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cow-dung for sallets, swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog, drinks the green mantle of the standing pool; who is whipped from tithing to tithing and stock-punished, and imprisoned; who hath had three suits to his back, six shirts to his body,/ horse to ride and weapon to wear;/ But mice and rats, and such small deer,/ Have been Tom's food for seven long year." Act 3, Scene 4, lines 123-133

Quote 16: "See 't shall thou never. Fellows, hold the chair./ Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot." Act 3, Scene 7, lines 66-67

Quote 17: "I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw." Act 4, Scene 1, lines 18-19.

Quote 18: "O gods! Who is't can say 'I am the worst'?/ I am worse than e'er I was...And worse I may be yet: the worst is not/ So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'" Act 4, Scene 1, lines 23-27

Quote 19: "All blest secrets,/ All you unpublished virtues of the earth,/ Spring with my tears! Be aidant and remediate/ In the good man's distress! Seek, seek for him;/ Lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life/ That wants the means to lead it." Act 4, Scene 4, lines 15-20

Quote 20: "So may it be, indeed./ Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speakest/ In better phrase and matter than thou didst." Act 4, Scene 6, lines 6-8

Quote 21: "Aye, every inch a king." Act 4, Scene 6, line 107

Quote 22: "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? Neither? Neither can be enjoyed,/ If both remain alive." Act 5, Scene 1, lines 55-59

Quote 23: "No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison,/ We two alone will sing like birds in the cage." Act 5, Scene 3, lines 8-9

Quote 24: "Howl, 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!/ I know when one is dead, and when one lives;/ She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking glass;/ If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,/ Why, then she lives." Act 5, Scene 3, lines 255-261

Quote 25: "Kent: 'Is this the promised end?'
Edgar: 'Or image of that horror?'" Act 5, Scene 3, lines 261-262

Quote 26: "You lords and noble friends, know our intent./ What comfort to this great decay may come/ Shall be applied. For us, we will resign,/ During the life of this old majesty,/ To him our absolute power; you, to your rights." Act 5, Scene 3, lines 294-298

Quote 27: "And my poor foll is hanged! No, no, no life!/ Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,/ And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,/ Never, never, never, never, never!/ Pray you, undo this button. Thank you sir./ Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,/ Look there, look there!" Act 5, Scene 3, lines 303-309



Topic Tracking: Age

Act 1, Scene 1

Age 1: Though Lear is older and supposedly wiser than his daughters, the girls dupe him into thinking they adore him relentlessly. The younger ones ends up being smarter in this case, mainly due to Lear's fading mental faculties. The only honest daughter, Cordelia, is thrown out due to her plain and honest love of her father. (lines 34-120)

Age 2: The sisters recognize here that Lear is making rash decisions because of his old age. They decide they need to be there for him to support him during this time. Again, the younger characters are the stronger ones. (lines 284-306)

Act 1, Scene 2

Age 3: Edmund wonders why his brother deserves everything good, just because he was the accident of a rightful birth. Edmund could have been rightful had timing been different, he thinks to himself. (lines 1-22)

Age 4: Edmund dupes his father into believing Edgar is a villain. As in the case with Lear, Gloucester is more easily duped in his old age. (lines 23-114)

Act 1, Scene 3

Age 5: The daughters vow to be stronger than their father and manipulate him if necessary, because they don't like the forceful ways in which he and his entourage are behaving as of late.

Act 1, Scene 4

Age 6: The king beckons Goneril and grows angry when a knight approaches him and says Goneril is unable to report at the moment; she is not feeling well. The king grows angry that his daughter disobeys him. Yet there is really little he can do, while also maintaining his sanity. (lines 41-89)

Age 7: Goneril enters to tell Lear his knights have been overly abusive. Lear mocks her and acts like the Fool. Yet Goneril has had enough and has the nerve to tell her father that he is old enough to be wiser than that. (lines 191-280)

Act 2, Scene 1

Age 8: Edmund manages to dupe Gloucester into believing Edgar is a villain. The father now, due to his gullibility, makes his illegitimate son the new heir to the kingdom. (lines 32-85)

Act 2, Scene 4



Age 9: Lear finds himself in a position of kissing up to his daughters. Regan convinces him he has been too rash in abandoning Goneril, telling him that he would sentence her (Regan) in the same exact way if in one of his moods. (lines 115-304)

Age 10: Regan and Goneril do not think their father needs such an enormous entourage. They don't think he needs any attendants at all. The king is in a position of having to defend himself to his young daughters, and says he is a poor old man as full of grief as of age.

Act 3, Scene 4

Age 11: This is the first time Lear feels his own limitations and recognizes his inappropriate behavior. He seems approachable, suddenly, in his old age. Also, this is the first time his age might be associated with his wisdom. (lines 28-36)

Age 12: Lear is becoming further detached from his throne when Gloucester arrives in the woods. Gloucester's inability to see the truth--by failing to recognize his own son Edgar dressed in beggar's garb--shows just how blind Gloucester has become to the truth about his sons. (lines 108-175)

Act 3, Scene 6

Age 13: Lear holds a mock trial to declare Goneril and Regan guilty of kicking him around in his old age. He reverts to self-pity, once again showing an approachable side. (lines 1-83)

Act 4, Scene 1

Age 14: Humble Edgar sees his father for the first time in a while, and discovers his father's compromised condition (blindness). He realizes that his own life is indeed not the "worst." There is always something lower. Hardships come with age; it is up to him to help his father. (lines 1-79)

Act 4, Scene 6

Age 15: Lear has finally reached a state of clarity. He begins to exhibit a maturity and wisdom so far absent from what we've seen of the king. (lines 80-199)

Act 4, Scene 7

Age 16: Cordelia decides to devote herself to taking care of her father. From this point on, Lear realizes what a fool he has been to the daughter he has always loved the most. He lets her now take care of him. (lines 44-97)

Act 5, Scene 3

Age 17: Lear is happily carried off to prison with Cordelia by his side. The possibility of death does not faze him, even though he is old and weak. (lines 1-25)

Age 18: The old, weak Lear dies, desperate only for his beloved daughter Cordelia to be alive. (lines 238-327)

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order

Act 1, Scene 1

Nature 1: This is the introduction of Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son. The natural order states that Edmund will not inherit his father's estate; the property and goods will go to the legitimate son, Edgar. Edmund will see how his efforts to reverse the natural order do not pay off in the end. Yet Gloucester is at fault for blindly rejecting Edmund, who is still his son. (lines 7-33)

Act 1, Scene 2

Nature 2: Edmund begins to speak out against his illegitimacy, and calls on nature to stand by his efforts to get hold of what he believes is rightfully his. (lines 1-22)

Act 1, Scene 4

Nature 3: The Fool chastises the king for giving up his coronet, saying that the king reversed the natural order in the first place when he decided to give his kingdom to his daughters. Lear is unleashing a horrible calamity when he tries to reverse the natural order and retire at an earlier age. (lines 1-90)

Nature 4: Once Lear decides to abandon Goneril, too, he calls upon nature to make her sterile forever so she might never have children. He is asking nature to defend him with quite a cruel request. (lines 191-280)

Act 1, Scene 5

Nature 5: The king begins to crack here because he has abandoned two of his daughters, Goneril and Cordelia. The Fool, who is actually a wise man, tells the king that he grew old before he gained wisdom; again, a reversal of the natural order. The king calls upon heaven to support him. He is constantly trying to use nature to support his wrongful deeds.

Act 2, Scene 1

Nature 6: Edmund dupes Gloucester into thinking that Edgar, the legitimate son, is actually a villain. Gloucester is so impressed with Edgar's loyalty to the family honor that he reverses the natural order and declares Edmund the new heir to the kingdom. (lines 32-85)

Act 2, Scene 2

Nature 7: Kent calls upon Fortune to turn its wheel once more, this time in his favor. Many of the characters in the play often call upon Fortune (aka. fate, luck), to work in their favor. Here, Kent wants Fortune to free him from the stocks. (lines 40-169)

Act 3, Scene 1

Nature 8: Kent enters the scene and speaks of an oncoming apocalyptic storm, the kind no human could battle. This is nature's way of reacting to the story, and the many attempts at reversing the natural order.

Act 3, Scene 2

Nature 9: As Lear is beginning his downward spiral toward insanity, the wise Fool notes that England will suffer because of it. He says Fortune will turn against England.

Act 3, Scene 3

Nature 10: Gloucester complains to Edmund that Cornwall and Regan have suddenly assumed authority in his home, how it is a reversal of all that is natural. Edmund lies and pretends to agree with his father, but it is clear he is lying since he, too, wants to reverse all that is natural.

Act 3, Scene 4

Nature 11: Edgar, the original heir to the kingdom of Gloucester and son of the earl, comes out dressed like a mad beggar. His role as such is a complete reversal of the role he was given by birth. (lines 37-107)

Act 4, Scene 1

Nature 12: Gloucester is alone with the mad beggar in the woods, ignorant that the beggar is his son. He is certain that he will soon die, noting that Fortune's wheel is never standing still and could easily turn against him. Yet it is now that Edgar, dressed as the beggar, begins to take control and lead his father down the right path. He is now supporting his father who has become blinded and helpless.

Act 4, Scene 6

Nature 13: Edgar convinces Gloucester he is alive, after Gloucester believes he has fallen off a cliff and died. Edgar launches into a small speech, praising the gods for preserving Gloucester. Really, though, Gloucester never fell farther than two feet. (lines 1-80)

Nature 14: Lear refers to himself here as "the natural fool of Fortune," noting that he has led himself out of Fortune's favor. He recognizes the power of fate and the natural order. (lines 80-199)

Act 4, Scene 7



Nature 15: A caring Cordelia comes in to find her father sleeping. When she kisses him to wake him, he thinks nature has sent him to heaven. Once he realizes he is alive, he berates himself for being so foolish his whole life. (lines 44-97)

Act 5, Scene 1

Nature 16: Lear and Cordelia are taken hostage and Gloucester gets upset. Edgar reminds him, though, that there is nothing he can do--nothing can reverse Fortune's natural order. It is up to the gods to determine their fate.

Act 5, Scene 2

Nature 17: Cordelia is upset that Fortune has turned against her and her father when Edmund sends them to prison, but Lear is happy to go to jail. He thinks it will be peaceful for him. The possibility of death does not cross his mind, even though at this point it is likely. (lines 1-25)

Act 5, Scene 3

Nature 18: Edgar reveals himself from behind his beggar garb and becomes a hero. The natural order is again established when Edmund realizes he has been defeated. Fortune's wheel has come full circle, and cast him in a lesser role, as was his fate. (lines 155-222)

Nature 19: Lear is once again given absolute power, though his death soon follows. The natural order is restored. (lines 238-327)



Topic Tracking: Vision

Act 1, Scene 1

Vision 1: Cordelia refused to pander to her father's petty interests. She can see right through him and refuses to succumb to his wishes. Her actions here kick off the main theme of the play. Vision is usually associated with intelligence, and blindness with misbehavior or self-delusion. (lines 59-76)

Act 1, Scene 2

Vision 2: Edgar is temporarily blinded by his brother's greed. Edmund is attempting to formulate a scheme that, far down the road, will establish him as the main heir to the kingdom, instead of Edgar. Edmund is trying to plan far into the future, but his vision is clearly blurred. (lines 130-177)

Act 2, Scene 4

Vision 3: The Fool emerges as an interesting character because he does not live up to his name. All throughout the play, and beginning here, he is clearly the wisest man with the most pragmatic and straightforward perspective. He is smart enough to both dupe the king and convince the king of what is right. (lines 60-83)

Act 3, Scene 4

Vision 4: The king becomes aware of his own frailties, and for the first time his vision is not so clouded. He is starting to see the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. It's interesting that he comes up with his clearest insights in the midst of his insanity. (lines 28-36)

Vision 5: Edgar is the hero of the play, and his time disguised as a beggar only exists so he can further see the truth. (lines 37-107)

Vision 6: Lear is realizing his past blindnesses when Gloucester arrives in the woods. Gloucester's inability to see past his own blindness--by failing to recognize his own son dressed as a beggar--highlights Lear's somewhat insane advances. (lines 108-175)

Act 3, Scene 7

Vision 7: Cornwall physically plucks out Gloucester's eyes. Literally, Gloucester is unable to see from this point onward. The metaphor extends itself into a physical manifestation and its reversal--as he is blinded, Gloucester discovers the truth about his sons and realizes he's been blind all along. (lines 27-107)

Act 4, Scene 1



Vision 8: Edgar sees his father for the first time in a while, and discovers his blindness. He realizes that his own life is indeed not the "worst." There is always something lower. He begins to see that he will always need to support his father from this point onward. (lines 1-79)

Act 4, Scene 2

Vision 9: Albany can see through Regan and Goneril's greed quite easily. They yell at him and chastise him, but he doesn't care because he knows they are evil underneath the surface. (lines 29-68)

Act 4, Scene 4

Vision 10: Cordelia enters the scene and finds her father in his state of insanity. She understands she must care for him from this point onward. She can see his good side, even though he has gone crazy and abandoned her. She knows that, despite his mental illness, her father does indeed still love her.

Act 4, Scene 6

Vision 11: Lear is quite a different person than he was in the beginning. He is covered in flowers and weeds, both humble and natural. He says that his royal garb and showy accessories were blinding him when he was king. He says he has gained a new vision from seeing what is real. (lines 80-199)

Act 5, Scene 3

Vision 12: Lear is being sent to prison with Cordelia and the possibility of death does not faze him. It's because this is the first time, and sadly the last, when he is entirely content with his free self and his clarity of the world. Perhaps this is the first time Lear can really see the world for what it is. (lines 1-25)

Act 1, Scene 1

The play begins with a simple conversation between the Kent and Gloucester. Together, they mention that the king has been treating his two sons, Cornwall and Albany, unfairly.

Strangely, little else is said about that topic as a third character comes on stage-- Edmund, the Earl of Gloucester's illegitimate son. Gloucester treats his son as a bastard and shows little regard for his unrespectable birth:

"[T]here was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund?" Act 1, Scene 1, lines 21-24

This mini-introduction ends with Edmund, the bastard, and Kent, the "noble gentleman", becoming friendly. Then, the royal party approaches.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 1

The king enters the scene majestically, changing the tone of the play. His court follows behind in rank. Lear, the king, comes equipped with an announcement: that he intends to retire and will divide his kingdom equally among his three daughters--Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Before he gives each daughter her territory, he asks them all to profess their love to him:

*"And here are to be answered. Tell me, my daughters--
Since now we will divest us, both of rule
Interest of territory, cares of state--
Which of you shall we say doth love us most?"* Act 1, Scene 1, lines 48-51

With the best show of love, he will decide who gets a largest share of the kingdom.

Goneril and Regan immediately declare their love and devotion for their father in showy speeches that sound anything but sincere.

Topic Tracking: Age 1

Then, Cordelia, Lear's favorite, begins to speak. She feels that she cannot say anything which her sisters have not already said. So her reply to her father is indeed a concise one:

*"Lear: Speak.
Cordelia: Nothing, my lord.
Lear: Nothing?
Cordelia: Nothing.
Lear: Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again."* Act 1, Scene 1, lines 87-91

Topic Tracking: Vision 1



Cordelia says she is incapable of speaking about her great love for her father, but he continues to prod her for a speech. She tells him:

*"Good my lord, You have begot me, bred me, loved me; I
Return those duties back as are right fit
Obey you, love you, and most honor you.
Why have my sisters' husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all."* Act 1, Scene 1, lines 95-104

Cordelia says she will never marry because it will divide her love for her father. Lear is almost blinded by desire for a loving speech, though, and he exercises his power, coming forward with all the rage of a tyrannical king and dad. He calls on the gods to witness the removal of Cordelia's share of the kingdom and then takes a final step and disowns her, pushing her out of his life:

*"By all the operation of the orbs
From whom we do exist and cease to be;
Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee, from this, for ever."* Act 1, Scene 1, lines 111-116

Shocked by this sudden shift, the loyal Kent then steps forward and begs the king to take back his words. Lear refuses.

Next, Lear announces that he will keep a crew of 100 knights to accompany him on visits to his two daughters, Goneril and Regan. He throws off his coronet and does away with the rest. Just minutes prior he seemed like the perfect king. Now, moments later, he has given away his kingdom.

Kent, meanwhile, goes further with his plea. He tells Lear that he has gone mad in making such hasty decisions. He wonders if the king can even see where he's gone wrong. But Lear is stubborn and banishes Kent. Before he parts, Kent asks the gods to provide a safe haven for Cordelia, whom he believes to be just and true.

Gloucester, from the introductory scene, now escorts Cordelia's suitors onto the stage. The two are the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France. But Cordelia has no dowry, so Burgundy instantly rejects her. But the King of France is not as quick to judge. He wonders why it is that Lear has suddenly changed his feelings for his daughter so quickly, so as not to offer a dowry. Cordelia manages to remind the group that her disfavor does not originate in any sort of criminal act. The King of France decides that he loves Cordelia for who she is, not for her dowry. Despite her banishment from her family and the kingdom, he takes her in. Unlike the quick-to-judge Lear, France has

analyzed the situation, thought it out clearly, and made his decision. Lear notices this, and resents it, turning away from the crowd and leaving the stage without saying a word.

Cordelia bids farewell to her sisters. Cordelia reminds them that she is aware of their faults, but asks them to take good care of their father. The girls tell Cordelia to mind her own business and tend to the silly King of France who has accepted her despite her meager worth.

After Cordelia leaves with the King of France, the two sisters speak and, although thankful, propose some concern over why their father acted so rashly. They decide he made hasty decisions because of his old age, and that they need to unite to be there for him when certain situations should arise.

Topic Tracking: Age 2

Act 1, Scene 2

Edmund enters the scene alone. He reveals that his illegitimacy is indeed a sore spot in his life. He calls on nature, the laws of might, wit and cunning, to stand by him. He promises to serve them.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 2

*"Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?"* Act 1, Scene 2, lines 1-6

He begins to wonder, publicly, why his brother is so deserving of everything, just because his brother was the accident of a proper birth. Edmund decides he needs to do something about this natural order and be clever enough to take everything. He calls on the gods to witness his resolve.

Topic Tracking: Age 3

Gloucester comes on stage and Edmund quickly returns to the sweet, unassuming son we were introduced to in the beginning. Yet Edmund now is pretending, obviously, to hide some sort of letter in his hand and intentionally stimulates his father's interest. Not surprisingly, Gloucester inquires what it is Edmund is hiding, but Edmund simply replies: "Nothing, my lord." (line 31) His "nothing" sounds strangely similar to Cordelia's "nothing" from the previous scene.

Gloucester insists, and Edmund finally concedes, willingly. The letter in hand is not a sincere letter at all; rather, a forged note from his brother, Edgar. The letter begins with a rejection of the natural order, the tradition that says a son must wait for his parent to die to come into his inheritance. The letter suggests instead that the two brothers should unite together to share in their father's property and belongings while still of a young age.

Gloucester quickly questions the validity of the letter, asking question after question. But Edmund insists that the letter is indeed written in Edgar's handwriting, and that he's even heard his brother demand that sons should replace fathers at a given age. At that point, Edmund gets what he wants. Gloucester declares that Edgar is a villain!

Topic Tracking: Age 4

But Gloucester still thinks there are other forces at work here. He has more faith than that in his son--he does not declare a final sentence on Edgar. Instead, he orders Edmund to provide more evidence.

Edmund snickers at his father's gullibility and is in a jovial mood when Edgar comes into the scene. He is mocking his father. Edmund, becoming more and more the villain, convinces Edgar that he has raised his father's ire and is about to get into some trouble. Edgar believes his brother, falling into the trap. He goes to his chambers to await more news of the case being made against him. Edmund advises him not to go anywhere unarmed.

Topic Tracking: Vision 2

Edmund, at the close of the scene, is riding high and enjoying the folly that his false story is causing.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3

The scene shifts to the Duke of Albany's castle, where his wife, Goneril, is speaking to her servant. The servant, Oswald, tells Goneril that Lear hit him because he had scolded the king's jester, the Fool. Goneril listens to Oswald and decides that she and her whole crew have been abused lately by the king's excessively rude behavior. She tells Oswald he should fight back, and that she will do the same. Goneril leaves the stage to go write her sister Regan. In the letter she will encourage Regan to act with similar strength when their father the king goes for his monthly visit.

Topic Tracking: Age 5

Act 1, Scene 4

For the second time thus far in the play, Lear enters the picture. He meets up with Kent and scolds Kent for no good reason. Kent, however, retorts with rather insulting responses, pointing out the king's look of "authority." Kent says he simply wishes to serve the king and flatter him.

Still acting like a tyrant even though he's retired, Lear demands his dinner and Fool at once. He also demands his daughter, who is in question now because she is not there to meet him exactly at the moment he arrives. A knight approaches the king with notice that Goneril is not feeling well, so she cannot greet him, and Oswald is not interested in meeting with the king. Lear gets frustrated by this report of poor treatment from the staff. A knight raises a point: perhaps the staff is acting so rudely because they resent the banishment of dear Cordelia.

Topic Tracking: Age 6

But the king has no time to deal with this, for he must address another problem first: Oswald. He goes to slap Oswald for his rudeness, and Kent pitches in by tripping Oswald, earning praise from Lear. The Fool enters.

The Fool, witty as ever, disrupts the tension in the scene and adds his own commentary. The Fool tells the king that the king himself became the fool once he gave up his coronet. Why did he do so, when he is obviously capable of handling the duties of the king? He reminds the king that he reversed the natural order of birthright when he gave his daughters the crown:

*"That lord that counseled thee
To give away thy land,
Come place him here by me,
Do thou for him stand:
The sweet and bitter fool
Will presently appear;
The one in motley here,
The other found out there."* Act 1, Scene 4, lines 138-145

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 3

The Fool, who loves Cordelia, can get away with these comments. He has a special position in the king's court.

Harping on the issue, the Fool asks Lear, "Can you make no use of nothing"? (lines 123-24), and Lear replies that: "Nothing can be made out of nothing."

Lear threatens the Fool with a beating, just as Goneril enters the scene. But the Fool isn't done yet. He has more to say about this idea of nothing: "I am a fool," he says to Lear. "Thou art nothing." (lines 184-5).

Goneril walks in to tell Lear his knights have been overly abusive. Lear mocks her and acts like the Fool. Yet Goneril has had enough. She berates him and says he should be wiser than that.

Topic Tracking: Age 7

Goneril informs him further that his knights treat the court as though it were a pub or even a brothel. But Lear doesn't listen to her--instead, he curses her much in the same way he cursed Cordelia. Then Lear gets nasty, asking the gods to take his side and make Goneril sterile forever, so she can never know what it's like to have a child. And if she were to have a child, Lear says, cursing his own daughter, the child shall turn against her.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 4

Albany cannot believe that he has just witnessed such a scene, but Goneril stays calm. Little does Lear know that she has ordered half his entourage to leave within the next two weeks. Angry as ever, Lear tells Goneril that he doesn't need her because he has one special and kind daughter, Regan, who would take his side any day.

Albany tries to interject with a rational voice of reason, but it's no use. Goneril is infuriated at this point. She summons Oswald and has him go to Regan with her side of the story so that Regan might support her. Now it's war. She ignores Albany's constant warnings that the king is not someone to reckon with.

Act 1, Scene 5

The scene is brief, and begins with Lear returning to the stage, this time only with the Fool and Kent at his side. Instantly, he sends Kent off with a letter to Regan. But unlike Goneril, who told her sender that it would be okay to embellish the story if need be, the king tells Kent to adhere strictly to the facts.

Kent leaves, and Lear is left alone with the Fool. The Fool tries to make the king laugh, but the king isn't paying attention. He says, "I did her wrong." (line 21) But it is unclear if he is referring to Goneril, Cordelia or both. The Fool notes that the king had grown old before he had gained wisdom. The king cracks a bit. He asks heaven to keep him calm. He knows that angering the gods in heaven would be a disastrous fate.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 5

The king's defenses are weakening, it seems.

Act 2, Scene 1

Gloucester is informed that Regan is en route with Cornwall and expected that evening. He hears the recent rumors that there are increasing divisions separating the Albany and Cornwall blocs. Once Edmund hears that things are about to get hectic, he decides that this would be the ideal opportunity to further his case against his brother.

Once Edgar appears, Edmund acts like things are dire. He tells Edgar that Gloucester has posted guards around and is searching for Edgar. Also, Edmund asks, could it be that Edgar has derided Cornwall, who is headed into town, or even Albany? Edmund tells his brother he can hear Gloucester's footsteps and convinces his brother to have a fake duel with them and then flee quickly.

The fake duel will give Edmund the opportunity to injure himself and then blame the injury on his brother. Gloucester enters the stage with his servants and asks Edgar's whereabouts. Edmund stalls because he wants his brother to get out of range, so the story doesn't end too quickly. Once he feels his brother has gotten far enough, he sends Gloucester after him, in what it seems is the wrong direction.

He then tries to convince Gloucester of his brother's cruelty. He claims Edgar asked him to join his "unnatural purpose" (line 50), but he opposed, and the brothers duelled. Gloucester needs no more convincing that Edgar has gone bad, and decides he will search everywhere for Edgar to both capture and punish him. Most importantly, he is so impressed with Edmund's loyalty to the family honor that he declares his son will be "legitimized" and thus become the heir.

Topic Tracking: Age 8

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 6

Good things have happened for Edmund faster than he had expected. But before things continue, Cornwall and Regan appear with an entourage of servants in tow, indicating how grand they have become.

Regan quickly says she has received news of Edgar's villainy and has come to repudiate her father's (Lear) naming of Edgar as his godson. The two stories are converging here.

*"What, did my father's godson seek your life?
He whom my father named, your Edgar?" (lines 91-92)*

Regan, not thrilled with her father in the least, suggests that Edgar has been surrounded with bad people, spending so much time with Lear's posse. Edmund, without hesitation, confirms her suspicions.

Regan, once again, uses the opportunity to lash out further against her father and his knights. She says that if Lear were to arrive at that very moment, he would find discomfort in her distant reception.

Cornwall is so impressed by Edmund that he asks him to join his own faction, praising his "Natures of such deep trust..." (line 115).

Regan then seeks to attract Gloucester to her cause against Lear. She tells him she trusts his friendship and advice so much and that she needs help deciding what to do with the separation between her father and her sister, Goneril. Yet it seems clear throughout this passage that although she has heard cases from both her father and her sister, she has been "well informed" by Goneril and wishes to make a case against her father, clearly taking the side of her sister.

Act 2, Scene 2

Kent and Oswald, the two servants, meet outside the Gloucester castle. Kent attacks Oswald here, all the while showing courage and loyalty to his faction, while Oswald cowardly runs from Kent's attack, begging for mercy.

Oswald's cries are so loud that the entourage emerges from within the castle. Edmund draws his sword to cease Kent from advancing, but Cornwall is the one who takes control of the situation. Gloucester stands close by and defers to Cornwall.

Cornwall tries to discover the root of the argument between Kent and Oswald, and Kent's rude replies indicate just how distraught he really is. He labels Oswald as something made by a tailor of sorts, meaning if you take away his clothes, there is nothing substantive beneath. Kent is angered by Oswald's poor treatment of Lear and his willingness to serve the out-of-favor Goneril.

But Cornwall doesn't care about Kent's motives. He decides to sentence Kent to the stocks. Despite Kent's insistence that he is the king's messenger, Cornwall persists.

Regan, vindictive as ever, adds to the sentence. She is concerned what Goneril will do once she gets word that her servant, Oswald, has been ill-treated.

Once everyone leaves, Gloucester is alone in the stocks with Kent, though he doesn't recognize him. Ironically enough, he takes pity on the stocked Kent, purely because he is unaware of the man's identity. Gloucester decides he will ask for the poor stranger to be given leniency. Kent plays up his impoverished look, because he recognizes the potential for his release.

Kent, alone now, reveals that he has a letter from Cordelia and says:

"Fortune, good night; smile once more; turn thy wheel!" (line 165)

"Fortune" or fate was often considered to be like a wheel, changing from good to bad then back again. Kent, obviously at the bottom of the wheel, hopes his fortune continues its upward trend after hearing of his possible release.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 7



Act 2, Scene 3

Edgar enters the stage, and for the first time he lets the audience into his head. How Edgar has been so easily duped leaves the audience questioning Edgar's intelligence and gullibility. But Edgar shows that he is not a complete loser. He decides he will transform his appearance entirely, so no one will be able to recognize him while he is wanted:

*"I heard myself proclaimed;
And by the happy hollow of a tree
escaped the hunt. No port is free; no place
That guard, and most unusual vigilance
Does not attend my taking. Whiles I may 'scape
I will preserve myself; and am bethought
To take the basest and most poorest shape
That ever penury, in contempt of man
Brought near to beast." Scene 3, lines 1-9*

Edgar will now give up his identity and become "nothing." (line 21).

Act 2, Scene 4

Lear arrives back on the scene. Seeing Kent in the stocks, he asks who had done such a thing to his messenger. When he hears it was Cornwall and Regan, he once again unveils his rage, calling the act "worse than murder." (line 22)

Little else is heard from the king. He goes to seek the source of the injustice and leaves the stage. Lear's exit gives the Fool a chance to talk to Kent, who wants to know why the king's posse has been cut. But the Fool, dodging questions, answers in riddle, giving warning of a forthcoming storm.

Topic Tracking: Vision 3

The king returns with Gloucester in tow, complaining that he cannot seem to find Regan and Cornwall. Lear begins to boil, his anger lashing out more than ever before. But suddenly, after spitting out curse after curse, he stops, pauses for a moment, and then considers an alternative. For the first time, Lear is giving someone the benefit of the doubt. He thinks maybe the two are ill, and that is why they didn't appear right away when summoned.

But before pity can be had, the king's fury triumphs once again. He screams that he will break down the door of Cornwall and Regan if they do not appear instantly. He sends Gloucester off with the message.

With that, and hardly even a moment to spare, Gloucester returns with the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall. The sides spare greetings. Lear launches immediately into his story of Goneril's mistreatment. Yet Regan is hardly pouring forth with pity. She gives polite words, but it's easy to detect her ice underneath. She tells him it is Goneril she believes, and that there are reports of riots from the king's entourage. Lear should go apologize to Goneril, Regan says.

He mocks her by kneeling down and asking feigned forgiveness from an imaginary person. Regan orders him to quit the nonsense. Yet Lear's anger is building. He complains once again that Goneril has treated him like a louse. He rips into a diatribe of curses on Goneril. Regan stops him. When rash, Lear would surely say the same of her. She reminds him of this. Lear denies the claim and kisses up to her a bit.

Topic Tracking: Age 9

Oswald enters the scene, reminding Lear that he still doesn't know who put Kent in the stocks. But suddenly Goneril enters the scene and stands alongside Regan.

Finally, the brazen Cornwall admits it was he who sentenced Kent to the stocks. On top of that, Regan tells the king that he must return to Goneril. Lear is furious at both of them.

Not surprisingly, he bids a final farewell to Goneril, who cut his entourage in half. He tells Goneril he can live without her because he still has Regan.

But Regan isn't exactly siding with her father. She agrees with Goneril that Lear does not need a full retinue. The two sisters, in fact, don't think their father needs any attendants at all. And now the king is at an all-time low point, having to defend himself to his daughters.

Lear takes a moment to pity himself, saying he is a poor old man as full of grief as age.

Topic Tracking: Age 10

He exits the stage with a final cry. But it is difficult to pity his anguish. Gloucester tells the girls a storm is cooking outside, and that they shouldn't let their father be out alone. But the girls don't care. They say all of this is his fault, and they order Gloucester to keep Lear outside. Cornwall echoes the order, this time to bar the door shut. Goneril and Regan are equally hard to pity at this point, with their true colors emerging, showing no pity for their father.

Act 3, Scene 1

Kent enters the scene with a random gentleman, who speaks of a horrific oncoming storm, the kind of apocalyptic storm that not even animals can contend with.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 8

*"The to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain.
This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,
The lion and the belly-pinched wolf
Keep their fur dry, un bonneted he runs,
And bids what will take all."* Act 3, Scene 1, lines 11-15

The two also discuss the current political issues. There is mention of underground activity going on between Cornwall and Albany, both of whom want to rule the kingdom.

There is still interest from France, though, and French forces have reportedly landed in England. Kent sends the gentleman off to inform the French of Lear's current status. He also sends a message for Cordelia, who will recognize him by a certain ring he sends along. Once again, Cordelia is mentioned as a "good" person working against the opposition.

Act 3, Scene 2

The storm begins to roar in this scene, and Lear enters the stage with the Fool. He has no royal procession behind him anymore. Gone are the benefits of a stately official. Matching the storm's angry voice with his own, Lear calls on the higher powers to bring down full revenge against his two unappreciative daughters. In a softer voice, he asks the same higher powers to take note of his pitiful state. Kent enters, and asks who is there. The Fool replies: "Marry, here's grace and a cod-piece; that's a wise man and a fool." Act 3, Scene 2, lines 40-41 The underlying joke being that the Fool is the wise man, and Lear is the fool.

Kent begs Lear to seek shelter and get out of the storm, but Lear refuses. He needs to cry out against his enemies. He says he is "more sinned against than sinning" (line 60).

Finally, Lear feels badly that he has dragged the Fool with him into the horrible storm, so he leaves and takes refuge in a haven discovered by Kent. The Fool, now clearly the wise man, says: "Then shall the realm of Albion come to great confusion" (lines 91-92). Albion is another name for England, which the Fool notes will now itself suffer the turn of Fortune's wheel.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 9

Act 3, Scene 3

Gloucester and Edmund appear on stage. Gloucester tells his bastard son that he doesn't like how Cornwall and Regan have suddenly assumed authority in his home. Edmund, lying, quickly agrees with his father that their behavior is "savage and unnatural." But we know Edmund is lying because he himself wants to overturn what is "natural."

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 10

Gloucester makes the quick mistake of telling Edmund that he's received a letter from French invaders saying they are planting their forces in England. Old Gloucester plans to disobey Cornwall's orders and go to the king with whatever comfort he can provide. He asks his son to lie for him by saying that Gloucester has gone to sleep early for the evening due to an illness. Once Gloucester leaves, Edmund reveals that he will betray this confidence to advance his cause.

Act 3, Scene 4

Back in the storm, the intensity of the scene is enormous. Kent begs Lear to enter the haven, but the king swears he isn't bothered by the fierceness of nature.

"Good my lord, enter here."

"Will it break my heart?"

"I had rather break mine own." Act 3, Scene 4, lines 4-5

He sends Kent and the Fool into a shelter and tells them he will remain outside for a moment to pray.

Lear prays. He tells Kent and the Fool to momentarily leave him alone:

"Prithee, go in thyself; seek thine own ease.

This tempest will not give me leave to ponder

On things would hurt me more. But I'll go in.

In boy; go in first. You houseless poverty--

Nay, get thee in. I'll pray and then I'll sleep." Act 3, Scene 4, lines 23-27

Lear is compassionate in this scene, showing his ability to care for others. Suddenly, he seems approachable. He reminds himself of his own errors.

Topic Tracking: Vision 4

"How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,

Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you

From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en

Too little care of this! Take physic pomp,

Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel." Act 3, Scene 4, lines 30-34

For the first time in the play, he feels his own frailties and limitations and notes them.

Topic Tracking: Age 11

Edgar comes out in this scene, dressed as a beggar. Edgar is pretending to be a madman as a disguise and a ploy to become Lear's confidante. He calls himself "Poor Tom" and "Tom O'Bedlam".

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 11

Lear relates to Edgar's madman rantings, showing how far he has fallen from his lofty status as king:

"Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, that cat no perfume. Ha! Here's

three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself, unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come unbutton here." Act 3, Scene 4, lines 98-105

Lear asks Edgar the biggest question of the play: "Is man no more than this?" (line 99) Lear is showing a new kind of awareness here, asking himself new questions and searching for new answers. Once he notices Edgar's hideous rags, he begins to tear off his own clothes to come closer to Edgar's state of the unaccommodated animal. At this point, he sees no difference between man and beast.

Lear is making progress unclothing himself when Gloucester arrives. Gloucester asks Edgar who he is, and he responds:

"Poor Tom, that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt and the water, that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eat cow-dung for sallets, swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog, drinks the green mantle of the standing pool; who is whipped from tithing to tithing and stock-punished, and imprisoned; who hath had three suits to his back, six shirts to his body, horse to ride and weapon to wear; But mice and rats, and such small deer, Have been Tom's food for seven long year." Act 3, Scene 4, lines 123-133

Gloucester and Kent take Lear inside, but Lear refuses to go without his "philosopher," Poor Tom (Edgar). They all leave together.

Topic Tracking: Age 12
Topic Tracking: Vision 6

Act 3, Scene 5

Cornwall hears the news of Gloucester's infidelity and tells Edmund a reward is available for turning in his father. With Edgar gone as well, Edmund is now essentially the Earl of Gloucester. It is ironic how Edmund and Cornwall converse about "loyalty," "trust," and "love" while betraying their families at every turn.

Act 3, Scene 6

Gloucester and Kent have managed to get Lear, Edgar and the Fool into the shelter.

Lear decides he must hold a "trial" to decide on his daughters' horrible behavior. He appoints the mad beggar Edgar as the judge, the Fool a member of the jury, and himself the prosecutor. He uses a nearby stool to represent the accused. He declares Goneril guilty of kicking "the poor King her father" (lines 47-48). Regan is accused much the same. Quickly, though, Lear turns to self-pity.

Topic Tracking: Age 13

For a second, he thinks Edgar is a member of his 100 knights, but then dismisses the idea.

Finally, the group persuades the king to lie down for the evening, as it is late. Thinking back to his own royal years, he orders the curtains to be drawn and supper, the evening meal, to be served in the morning.

The Fool replies: "And I'll go to bed at noon" (line 83). Strangely, those are the Fool's last words. He never reappears in the play, rendering his absence one of the great Shakespeare mysteries. Some interpret the Fool's line to mean that he will die, at the highest point in the day and his life.

The trusted Kent, who has witnessed this, assures Gloucester that Lear's "wits are gone." But Gloucester has worse news to report. He has overheard a plot to kill the king. They need to clear out and take Lear to Dover, where he will be safe. With that, Gloucester, Kent and the Fool carry Lear away.



Act 3, Scene 7

Cornwall orders a wide search for "the traitor Gloucester" (line 3).

Regan says to hang him. Goneril says: "Pluck out his eyes" (line 5). This latter piece of advice is what Cornwall will follow.

Gloucester is brought in. Regan and Cornwall are determined to find out everything before punishing him. They can't believe that Gloucester has sent the king off to Dover. Why Dover? In a sad and rather prescient moment, Gloucester says, "Because I would not see thy cruel nails/ Pluck out his poor old eyes" (lines 56-57). Cornwall responds:

"See 't shall thou never. Fellows, hold the chair.

Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot." Act 3, Scene 7, lines 66-67

With that, Cornwall physically plucks out one of Gloucester's eyes. A servant tries to stop Cornwall. Cornwall starts a duel with the servant, but Regan rises and stabs the servant with a sword. Cornwall then finishes the task and pokes out Gloucester's other eye.

Topic Tracking: Vision 7

Gloucester, now blinded, begs for his son Edmund and receives an even worse punishment when he finds out from Regan that it was Edmund who betrayed him in the first place.

Now, Gloucester recognizes that he has been blind for years, the fact which led him to throw Edgar out.

Regan orders a servant to throw the ravaged Gloucester out "and let him smell/His way to Dover" (lines 92-93). She then discovers that Cornwall has been hurt in his duel with the servant, and she takes him off stage.

Act 4, Scene 1

Edgar kicks off the scene still in disguise. He is quick to note that he is the lowest form of life at this juncture.

Gloucester, now blind, stumbles onto the stage. He tries to dismiss his servant, but the servant reminds him that he has no eyes and will not be able to see anything.

Gloucester's reply is a beautiful bit of irony: "I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;/ I stumbled when I saw." Act 4, Scene 1, lines 18-19

Edgar sees his father for the first time in a while, and discovers his father's compromised condition. He realizes that his own life is indeed NOT the "worst." There is always something lower.

Topic Tracking: Age 14

Topic Tracking: Vision and Blindness 8

"O gods! Who is't can say 'I am the worst'?"

I am worse than e'er I was...

And worse I may be yet: the worst is not

So long as we can say 'This is the worst.'" Act 4, Scene 1, lines 23-27

Gloucester recognizes the madman's voice. He says it reminds him of his son's voice. But Gloucester doesn't know yet that the madman really is his son. He thinks he is just making an observation. Gloucester is pessimistic about life in general now, saying: "As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods, They kill us for their sport" (lines 36-37). Gloucester bemoans his fate, noting that Fortune's wheel is never standing still.

Edgar and his father are alone now. Gloucester dismissed the servant, knowing now that he will be forced to rely on the beggar for vision. He is relying on his son. In exchange he will give the beggar clothes and cleanliness. Gloucester hands over his wallet. He then asks the beggar if he knows how to find the Dover coast. The beggar, Edgar, says yes. There, Gloucester says, is where he will no longer need a shoulder to lean on. In the meantime, though, Edgar is serving a very important role, supporting his father, even though through a disguise.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 12

Act 4, Scene 2

Goneril gets home, arriving with Edmund at her side. Oswald tells her that Albany has learned about the French invasion of England, and he is not happy. He is even less happy when told about Gloucester's betrayal and Edmund's loyalty. How could it be?

Goneril sends Edmund to rejoin Cornwall's forces. She is very taken with this earl-to-be, and seals his departure with a kiss.

Albany enters the scene and refers to Goneril and her sister Regan as "Tigers, not daughters." (line 40) He is disgusted by their horrid treatment of their father. Goneril screams at him in a fit that could match her father's rage. She calls him a coward. He doesn't care, though--to him, she is worthless.

Topic Tracking: Vision 9

A messenger interrupts the screaming match to inform the two that Cornwall has died from his recent injury. Albany is taken aback. He learns at this same moment that Cornwall was the one who blinded Gloucester. In the end, Albany takes note that the gods punished Cornwall for his horrific act against his brother-in-law.

Now that Regan is a widow, Goneril realizes that she, too, could contend for Edmund. She goes to write a letter to her sister. Meanwhile, Edgar has an impassioned moment in which he vows to seek revenge on Edmund for betraying his father.

Act 4, Scene 3

Kent arrives, disclosing that the French have officially landed. He also notes that the King of France has returned to his own country to deal with domestic issues. With that in mind, who, then, is leading the French in England? It is Cordelia leading the invasion. Kent finds her and tells her of her father's situation. She grows unhappy. Her reaction is a virtuous one. The king, though, remembers now his austere treatment of his dear daughter Cordelia. He is too embarrassed to go find her. Kent will try to persuade him.

Act 4, Scene 4

Cordelia enters the scene for the first time since the first act. She is now the Queen of France, and has all the trappings to prove it. Cordelia is redeemed as the truly faithful daughter. She goes to a doctor to ask if there is any hope for her mad father. The doctor answers briefly: the power of nature is the only thing that can decide Lear's situation from here on. Cordelia promises to find solace for her father.

Topic Tracking: Vision 10

*"All blest secrets,
All you unpublished virtues of the earth,
Spring with my tears! Be aidant and remediate
In the good man's distress! Seek, seek for him;
Lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life
That wants the means to lead it."* Act 4, Scene 4, lines 15-20

Although Cordelia prays for her father's recover, she is still the Queen of France. Yet she decides she will link her own cause to her father's. She says firmly that the only purpose of France's invasion is to give Lear back his throne.

Act 4, Scene 5

Regan and her sister begin to quibble over Edmund, the heir to the throne. Regan tries to convince Oswald that she is better suited to marry him, since she is a widow. Regan tells Oswald to share this with Edmund. Also, she tells Oswald that she would give him a reward for killing off Gloucester the traitor. Oswald accepts this offer, and goes on his way.

Act 4, Scene 6

Edgar convinces his father that they have arrived at their final destination. He uses word pictures to do so. But Gloucester notices a new tone in Edgar's voice, and begins to suspect that Edgar is not really a madman:

"So may it be, indeed.

Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speakest

In better phrase and matter than thou didst." Act 4, Scene 6, lines 6-8

The matter is quickly dismissed. Gloucester gets ready to make peace with the gods above by throwing himself off of a cliff. He gives away all of his possessions and tells the gods that his fate is theirs. He then casts a blessing on his lost son and falls forward, fainting. He has been tricked by Edgar, though, and falls just two feet.

As Gloucester recovers from his faint, Edgar convinces him that he is indeed alive. Edgar tells Gloucester a miracle has happened, and from there the blinded earl regains a sense of spirit and faith. Edgar says: "...the clearest gods...have preserved thee" (lines 73-4). From now on, Edgar refers to Gloucester as "father" and acts less and less like a madman beggar.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 13

Lear enters, quite a different person now than he was in the beginning of the play. He is covered in flowers, humble and natural. He says that his royal garb and showy accessories were blinding him when he was king. He says he has gained a new vision from seeing what is real.

Gloucester is blind but hears the voice of Lear and recognizes it: "Aye, every inch a king." Act 4, Scene 6, line 107

Topic Tracking: Age 15

Topic Tracking: Vision 11

Lear then launches into a crazed diatribe about lust and adultery and how they relate to the violence that has occurred.

It's an odd scene to picture: the madman, the king covered in flowers and weeds, and a blind, suicidal earl. But in the midst of Lear's crazy diatribe emerges the essence of truth: Lear clearly now knows the difference between ornate clothing that mask evil people, and nakedness that reveals truth and integrity. With that, he begins to take off his clothes.

Lear sees Gloucester and offers his eyes to help the blind man. Lear sees that people create their own misfortunes. Momentarily, he slips back into this thoughts of revenge and thinks of his sons-in-law, whom he would "kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" (line 184).

He refers to himself as "the natural fool of fortune" (line 188). As Cordelia's attendants arrive to capture him, he runs off, muttering words of a crazed man, and is followed by two of the attendants.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 14

One of Cordelia's remaining servants informs Edgar that the big battle will soon occur, referring to the assembling France and English armies. But Cordelia, leader of the French forces, promises to stay put until her father, the king, is brought before her.

Gloucester, after having contemplated his near-suicide, vows not to kill himself. He and Edgar reunite their loyalties, but soon Oswald approaches, almost giddy to have found the blind Gloucester. He has been hired to kill Gloucester and imagines the task an easy one. Oswald screams about fortune and shares why he must slay Gloucester. But Oswald doesn't know it is Edgar behind the beggar's garb--Edgar uses a cudgel to intercede and kill Oswald. Just before he dies, Oswald begs them to deliver a letter he is carrying to "Edmund, Earl of Gloucester." Those words resonate deeply with both Gloucester and Edgar. Edgar reads the letter. He learns from it that Goneril has given herself to Edmund and asks him to kill her current husband, Albany, so she might be with Edmund forever. Edgar decides to hold onto the letter. He'll be able to use it in some way for certain.

Act 4, Scene 7

Cordelia appears very compassionate and caring as she speaks with a doctor about her father's condition.

Soft music is playing, and Cordelia finds Lear asleep. She kisses him and he wakes. At first, he thinks he's in heaven and Cordelia is an angel. Within moments, though, he recognizes that the scene is indeed a real one and that the daughter he has wronged is standing before him. He kneels before her to apologize but she asks him to rise instead and give her the benediction. Clearly, Lear is returning to sanity. He refers to himself as "a very foolish old man" (line 60). He admits he has done her wrong.

From this point on, all Lear can do is repeat how foolish he has been, and the daughter he has always loved the most is taking care of him.

Topic Tracking: Age 16

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 15

Kent, who has witnessed everything, is moved. He decides to join the troops and fight. He is told that Edmund is leading Cornwall's troops. He decides he will face his fate and submit himself to the ensuing battle.

Act 5, Scene 1

Edmund quickly sends a messenger to see what's going on with Albany's troops. Regan, meanwhile, tries to get him to assure her that he loves her alone and has no interest in her sister, Goneril. She is quite obviously jealous. Nonetheless, Edmund gives her his vow.

Yet Goneril is lusting for Edmund and his newly acquired power, too. She decides that stealing him from her sister is the most important thing--more important, even, than winning the battle.

Albany enters the scene, informing everyone that he plans to fight as a way of pushing off the French invaders, not as a way of betraying the king. The three villainous characters--Edmund, Regan and Goneril--are on his side.

About to leave, Regan ends the conversation by convincing Goneril to come into the tent so the two can talk.

Edgar returns, still dressed as a homeless man. He is prepared now to give Albany Goneril's double-crossing note. He hands it over. Yet before Albany is allowed to take a look at it, Edgar makes him swear to a promise. Edgar wants to be allowed to find a champion to prove the letter's honesty.

Edmund is alone on the stage at this point, and it becomes clear that he has promised his love to both Goneril and Regan. He is stuck between the two sisters, and almost hopes for one of them to die:

*"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? Neither? Neither can be enjoyed,
If both remain alive."* Act 5, Scene 1, lines 55-59

He'll see what happens in the battle, meaning if Goneril becomes a widow. Then, he'll decide between the two girls. He also mentions that he would kill Lear or Cordelia if either is captured.

Act 5, Scene 2

Battle music signifies the opening of this scene, as well as the entrance of Cordelia and her father, Lear, followed by the French troops en route to battle. At the same moment, Edgar takes his own father by the arm, leading the blind man away from the war. Edgar takes his father to a safe place by a tree then Edgar himself leaves for battle.

Edgar returns quickly to inform Gloucester that the French have lost. Lear and Cordelia have been taken hostage. The only thing they can do to avoid being killed is to flee. Gloucester says he might as well die now, but Edgar goads him into escaping with him.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 16

Act 5, Scene 3

Edmund marches on stage in a vibrant and grand procession, followed by the captured Lear and Cordelia in tow.

Edmund orders the two to be taken away to confinement so he can decide their fates. But right before the departure, Cordelia makes a statement. She says she is upset that Fortune's Wheel has yet again turned--this time away from her favor. She is not as much upset for herself as she is for Lear. But Lear doesn't feel the same way. For him, prison will be a clear retreat away from the hubbub and chaos of recent days. He is happy--almost content. The possibility of death does not faze him:

*"No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds in the cage."* Act 5, Scene 3, lines 8-9

Topic Tracking: Age 17

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 17

Topic Tracking: Vision 12

As soon as Lear and Cordelia are taken away, Edmund gathers his officers and commissions the death of prisoners Lear and Cordelia.

The officers depart, and Albany enters with Goneril and Regan. He asks to see Lear and Cordelia. Once Edmund says they are in detention, Albany chastises him for making such a rash decision to do away with them. Regan steps up at this point and tells the crowd that it was she who ordered Edmund to do away with Lear and Cordelia. The two sisters begin to fight over Edmund.

But Albany, who has at this point read Goneril's letter to Edmund, accuses Edmund of treason and decides that Goneril is a top accomplice. Albany invites a fair trial and asks for a champion to challenge Edmund. Regan says she is not feeling well so she won't do it. Goneril says she is the one who administered the cause, so she can't do it. Edmund is growing more confident. Regan is led off the stage and right into Albany's tent.

The trumpet sounds three rhythmic times as Edgar enters the scene, ready to challenge his opponent. He is now armed in disguise, all the while claiming a nobility equal to Edmund's. He tells everyone that Edmund has committed crimes against the natural order of the gods, against his own father and brother, and against Albany. He calls Edmund a traitor and swears he can prove it in combat. Yet Edmund is so confident that he accepts this challenge, thinking his opponent is some anonymous fluke. They fight and Edmund loses quickly. The injury is fatal, though death is not instantaneous.

Goneril screams that she has lost her lover. Albany rapidly sees to her silence by taunting her with her love letter. She snarls at him and his accusations and runs quickly

offstage. Albany recognizes how desperate she is, so he sends an officer to keep watch over for her.

Edmund is lying on the ground, dying, and he asks to know who his opponent is. He acknowledges that the accusations made against him were true. Edgar, now a hero, reveals himself. He lashes out against the illegitimate Edmund, reminding him of his birthright status. Edmund is too weak to fight. He says: "The wheel is come full circle" (line 175), referring to fortune's wheel.

Albany welcomes Edgar back. Edgar tells him everything that has happened--his disguise, his friendship of the mad Lear, and his anonymous care for Gloucester.

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 18

A messenger runs onto the stage, screaming and holding a bloody knife. Apparently, Goneril has confessed to poisoning Regan and then killing herself. Edmund has now lost both of his fiancées and must submit to his own horrid fate.

Kent now comes to the scene, "to bid my king and master aye good night," (line 235) which reminds everyone: where did Edmund send Cordelia and Lear?

The bodies of Goneril and Regan are brought out, and Edmund is prompted to reverse his commission against Lear and Cordelia. He has changed his mind and decided not to kill them. Edmund reveals what the exact commission was: to hang Cordelia and call it a suicide. He doesn't say anything about Lear. He dies and is carried off the stage.

But it is too late. The commission had already been executed. Lear enters with his dead daughter in his arms. He is tortured over her death, and asks for a mirror to see if there is any faint breath against the glass:

*"Howl, 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!
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives."* Act 5, Scene 3, lines 255-261

Even as Lear hopes for Cordelia's life, Kent and Edgar ask each other:

*"Kent: 'Is this the promised end?'
Edgar: 'Or image of that horror?'"* Act 5, Scene 3, lines 261-262

A messenger enters the scene and declares that Edmund is dead. But no one really cares. The bigger issue, according to Albany, is restoring absolute power to Lear, the proper monarch of the time:



*"You lords and noble friends, know our intent.
What comfort to this great decay may come
Shall be applied. For us, we will resign,
During the life of this old majesty,
To him our absolute power; you, to your rights."* Act 5, Scene 3, lines 294-298

Topic Tracking: The Natural Order 19

But there isn't much time left for Lear. He is pained over the loss of Cordelia. He is weaker than ever before. Still, he is hopeful that there is life in her.

*"And my poor foll is hanged! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pray you, undo this button. Thank you sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there!"* Act 5, Scene 3, lines 303-309

After the faint words of hope, Lear dies.

Topic Tracking: Age 18

Edgar starts crying out that perhaps Lear has merely fainted. He runs to Lear's side, but Kent holds him back, telling the young Edgar that Lear deserves nothing but peace.

Now that Lear is gone, Albany passes on the ruling responsibility to Kent and Edgar, but Kent refuses it, blaming old age, and Edgar accepts his rule with a heavy heart, saying that they must bear "[t]he weight of this sad time" (line 321).

All leave the stage in a sorrowful death march.