

Exam Topics

1. *'Despite his serious flaws, the audience remains sympathetic towards Lear.'*

If the play is to work as a tragedy, we must retain a degree of sympathy for the protagonist (central character), King Lear through to the end of the play. While Lear is a deeply flawed character who is the architect of his own downfall, we ultimately see him as **'a man more sinned against than sinning'**. While Lear clearly does wrong, the greater wrongs are done to him. He earns our sympathy because he is pained to the point of insanity by the unnatural behaviour of his 'pelican daughters' and elicits our admiration because he demonstrates a capacity to grow through his intense personal suffering. It is also significant that Shakespeare encourages us to see Lear in the same positive light as those characters in the play that we admire.

The dramatic opening scene brings Lear's serious and related flaws into sharp focus. We see the very harmful effects of his arrogance, his moral blindness, his gullibility and, particularly, his rashness. The love test dramatically underscores (underlines) Lear's foolishness: 'Which of you shall we say doth love us most?' His ego demands that his daughters flatter him and Goneril and Regan immediately try to out-do each other in their professions of love for their credulous father. Lear's treatment of both Cordelia and Kent is extremely harsh and unjust. Cordelia is disowned and disinherited simply for refusing to pander to Lear's ego ('Here I disclaim all my paternal care, propinquity and property of love'), while Kent is banished for bluntly telling Lear to reverse his 'hideous rashness' and for describing his treatment of Cordelia as 'evil'. **The Lear that we see in the opening scene is an utterly unappealing, unsympathetic character.**

While Lear is undeniably the architect of his own downfall, our initial disapproval of him ultimately develops into a profound sympathy when we see the intensity of his suffering. While

Lear's cruelty is impulsive and unthinking, Goneril and Regan's mistreatment of Lear is coldly pre-meditated. They conspire to strip Lear of his remaining power and dignity: 'Pray you sister, let us sit together'. Lear is profoundly shocked by the disrespect shown to him first by Goneril's servants, and then by Goneril herself ('Are you our daughter?'). He is pained by his sense of powerlessness: 'I am ashamed that thou hast power to shake my manhood thus'. We pity Lear as he senses his growing lack of control over himself ('O let me not be mad, not mad sweet heaven!'), others, and events in general. The stocking of Kent constitutes a deliberate, public show of disrespect towards Lear that shakes him to the very core of his being: 'They could not, would not do it: 'tis worse than murder to do upon respect such violent outrage'. Lear's pitiful running between sisters only sees him stripped of his remaining power and dignity when Goneril and Regan refuse to allow him to keep even a single knight: 'What need one?' We cannot but sympathise with Lear as he pleads with the gods not to let him break down completely in the face of Goneril and Regan's heartless behaviour: '. . . this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws, or ere I'll weep'. **The storm scene highlights the intensity of Lear's physical and mental suffering.** Callously locked out by Regan, the frail old man is exposed to the ferocity of the elements. The pain that drives Lear to insanity is caused by the ingratitude of his 'pelican daughters'. The old king is a particularly pathetic figure in the mock trial scene as he struggles to comprehend his daughters' unnatural behaviour: 'Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?' Like Edgar, the audience is deeply moved by Lear's anguish: 'My tears begin to take his part so much, they'll mar my counterfeiting'. Finally, it is impossible not to feel profoundly sympathetic towards Lear when he carries Cordelia's lifeless

body onto the stage: 'Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little'. The images of the wheel of fire and the rack effectively suggest the intensity of Lear's suffering. **By the closing scene, we feel that Lear has paid an inordinately high price for his personal failings.**

We also admire Lear for growing through suffering. His pain has a humanising, ennobling effect, and he consequently ends the play a better, wiser, more humble man.

Lear gradually learns to see himself more clearly ('I am a very foolish, fond old man'), recognises his wrongdoing ('I did her wrong'), and is filled with guilt and shame at his mistreatment of Cordelia ('If you have poison for me I will drink it'). He ultimately acquires humility, asking for Cordelia's forgiveness ('Pray you now, forgive and forget') and comes to see others in a clear light, recognising that Goneril and Regan flattered him 'like a dog'. He acquires a social conscience, regretting his failure to look after the poor: 'O, I have ta'en too little care of this!' Remarkably, Lear even comes to preach the idea of social justice, arguing that wealth should be distributed more equitably: 'Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel that thou may shake the superflux to them and show the heavens more just'. We admire the manner in which Lear grows in wisdom. He becomes aware of corruption in high places, and of the absence of fairness in the administration of justice in the kingdom: 'Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold

and the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks; arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw doth break it'.

The remarkable loyalty of such characters as Kent, the Fool and Gloucester reminds us of an earlier, greater Lear. Kent returns in disguise to serve the king who banished him. His loyalty to Lear is total: 'My life I never held but as a pawn to wage against thine enemies'. Kent's loyalty to Lear is such that he is even prepared to follow him into the next world: 'I have a journey, sir, shortly to go. My master calls me, I must not say no'. The Fool remains with Lear throughout his descent into insanity and endures the worst storm in living memory alongside him. We also see Gloucester risking his life to help Lear. We realise that Lear must essentially be a good and noble character to inspire such unwavering loyalty and respect. We gradually come to see Lear in the same light as those characters who admire him.

In conclusion, Lear displays no redeeming features in the dramatic opening scene. In fact, his foolish and harsh behaviour inevitably alienates the audience. However, Shakespeare ensures that we ultimately sympathise with Lear by powerfully evoking his intense personal suffering. **We realise that Lear is the author of his own demise, but ultimately we see him more as victim than villain. We also come to admire Lear for his acquisition of wisdom, self-awareness and humility.**

2. 'Lear grows through a process of intense personal suffering, ending the play a better and wiser man.'

The personal growth of the central character is the dominant theme of the play, King Lear. When we meet Lear in the opening scene of the play, he is a deeply flawed and utterly unappealing character. He is arrogant, egocentric (self-centred), spiritually blind, and rash. However, Lear grows through suffering, gradually acquiring humility, self-knowledge and wisdom. **By the close of the play we feel both pity and admiration for the man who appeared to be**

nothing more than a cruel, foolish tyrant in the dramatic opening scene.

The opening scene dramatically highlights Lear's weaknesses. Lear is a foolish character – he divides his kingdom on the basis of a ridiculous love-test, believing that he can measure love in terms of words: 'Which of you shall we say doth love us most?' Goneril and Regan do not hesitate to exploit their ageing father's **gullible** nature. Lear is also extremely **rash**, disowning and

disinheriting Cordelia because she refuses to flatter him: 'Here I disclaim all my paternal care, propinquity and property of blood . . .' He also banishes Kent for bluntly telling him that he is doing 'evil'. Through Goneril we learn that Lear has always been a **fiery** character ('The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash'). Accustomed to unquestioning obedience, Lear has grown **arrogant**. He is outraged by Kent's intervention: 'Come not between the dragon and his wrath'. The dragon image indicates that **Lear lacks self-knowledge**, suggesting that he sees himself as an all-powerful being, a 'dragon' whose anger must be feared. Regan remarks that Lear 'hath ever but slenderly known himself'. **Lear must acquire self-knowledge, before coming to understand others and life in general. He is spiritually blind at the start of the play, but through suffering gains true vision, ultimately coming to see himself and the wider world more clearly.**

Lear's personal growth is gradual and uneven. In contrast to Gloucester who gains insight (understanding) in a very sudden manner, Lear's path to self-knowledge and insight is a long, painful one. It must also be pointed out that even as Lear grows in wisdom, he occasionally shows signs of his earlier failings. At different times in the play, Lear displays the foolishness, arrogance, rashness and egocentricity (self-centredness) so dramatically in evidence in the opening scene. **However, Lear's transformation is all the more credible (believable) because it is not a simple process.**

Lear takes his first painful steps on the road to self-knowledge when he is stung by Goneril's 'marble-hearted' ingratitude. Once Goneril has her share of the kingdom, she has no need to flatter or humour Lear any longer. Encouraged by their mistress, Goneril's servants treat Lear with thinly-disguised contempt, while she herself expresses her impatience with his 'insolent retinue' (bad-mannered followers). **Lear is stunned to find himself treated, not as an all-powerful king, but as an irritating old man:** 'Are you our daughter?' Not only does he have difficulty recognising his daughter, he has difficulty recognising himself: 'Does any here

know me? This is not Lear. . . . Who is it can tell me who I am?' **Lear's self-image is shaken by Goneril's display of filial ingratitude (which he describes as being 'sharper than a serpent's tooth') and he painfully acknowledges his own foolishness and lack of judgement:** 'O Lear, Lear, Lear! Beat at this gate that let thy folly in and thy dear judgement out!' Lear's anguish (mental/emotional suffering) is heightened by his awareness of his own powerlessness: 'I am ashamed that thou hast power to shake my manhood thus'. However, even though Lear has gained a degree of self-knowledge, he still displays the rashness that caused so much harm in the opening scene. Goneril is cursed in the strongest terms imaginable: 'Into her womb convey sterility . . .'

The next step on the road to self-knowledge is taken when, speaking of Cordelia, Lear remarks to the Fool, 'I did her wrong'. It is ironic that as Lear begins to gain insight he simultaneously edges closer to insanity. Shocked by Goneril's ingratitude and pained by the knowledge that he gave her the power to humiliate him, Lear struggles to keep his sanity: 'O, let me not be mad, not mad sweet heaven!' While the disintegration of his self-image lies at the root of Lear's loss of sanity, the onset (beginning) of madness is accelerated by his towering rages.

Lear is foolish to believe that Regan will treat him better than Goneril, but again learns through painful experience. When he arrives at Regan's castle, he is horrified to find his servant Kent in the stocks: 'They could not, would not do it; 'tis worse than murder to do upon respect such violent outrage'. Stung by this public insult, he senses the madness rising up within him: 'O how this mother (disease) swells up toward my heart!' Lear initially refuses to believe that Regan could be as ungrateful as Goneril: 'Thou shall never have my curse . . . thou better know'st the offices of nature, bond of childhood, effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude'. However, when Goneril arrives and takes Regan by the hand, it is clear that the two sisters are acting as one against Lear to strip him of his remaining power and dignity. Regan coldly reminds Lear of his powerlessness

in a strikingly callous remark: 'I pray you father, being weak, seem so'. We see how much Lear still has to learn when he tries to measure love in terms of the number of knights each sister will allow him to have. He tells Goneril: 'Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty, and thou art twice her love'. When his daughters refuse to allow him to keep even a single knight, Lear rants powerlessly, threatening them with 'the terrors of the earth'. **However, he continues to grow through suffering, showing signs of self-knowledge when he describes himself as 'a poor old man as full of grief as age'.** Sadly, he moves ever closer to insanity: 'O fool, I shall go mad!'

In the storm scene Lear's suffering is so intense that he finally loses his sanity. Kent tells us that 'all the power of his wits have given way to his impatience'. **The positive aspect to Lear's torment is that he paradoxically acquires 'reason in madness'.** He sees himself for what he is: 'A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man'. He shows an admirable concern for others, ushering the Fool into the hovel ahead of him ('I have one part in my heart that's sorry yet for thee'). He also acquires a social conscience, realising that he neglected the poor who do not even have adequate shelter from the storm: 'O, I have taken too little care of this'. Lear even preaches the idea of social justice, suggesting that wealth should be distributed more fairly: 'Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel that thou mayest shake the superflux to them and show the heavens more just'. We see further evidence of Lear's new-found wisdom when he sees Poor Tom as an example of the reality of humankind: 'A poor bare forked animal'.

It must be pointed out that even as Lear gradually grows and learns, he continues to display some of his old failings. This fact makes his personal transformation more realistic – he doesn't change suddenly or completely. On the heath Lear cries out for universal destruction because of his own intense suffering: 'And thou all-shaking thunder, strike flat the thick rotundity of the world'. This is a reminder of **Lear's egocentric (self-centred) nature.** He views everything in terms of his own

experience, concluding that Poor Tom could only have been reduced to his miserable state by his ungrateful daughters. When Kent points out that Poor Tom has no daughters, we again see **Lear's rash and fiery nature:** 'Death traitor! Nothing could have subdued nature to such a lowness but his unkind daughters'.

The pain of his daughters' filial ingratitude is so intense that Lear almost welcomes the storm as a distraction, reflecting that it 'will not give me leave to ponder on things would hurt me more'. On the heath, Lear occasionally becomes tranquil, but, when he calms down, he remembers how his daughters have mistreated him and another towering rage follows. **The mock trial highlights Lear's inner torment as he struggles to understand his daughters' 'hard hearts'.** Lear continues to grow through his suffering, now acknowledging that Goneril and Regan flattered him 'like a dog'. However, the gradual, uneven nature of his personal development is again apparent when he arrogantly declares, 'I am the king himself . . . When I do stare, see how the subject quakes'. Here we are reminded of the dragon image from the opening scene.

There are many examples of what Edgar describes as Lear's 'reason in madness'. Lear wisely tells the blind Gloucester that 'a man may see how this world goes with no eyes'. He comes to realise that the world is unjust and corrupt, observing that the rich can avoid justice, while the poor are always punished for any wrongdoing: 'Through tattered clothes small vices do appear: robes and furred gowns hide all'.

We get further evidence of Lear's personal development when his sense of 'burning shame' prevents him from rushing to Cordelia. We are reminded of the intensity of Lear's suffering when he finally meets his beloved daughter: 'I am bound upon a wheel of fire that mine own tears do scald like molten lead'. The dramatic nature of Lear's transformation is apparent when he describes himself as 'a very foolish, fond old man' and begs Cordelia's forgiveness ('. . . pray you now, forgive and forget'). He is so contrite (guilty) that he is even prepared to drink poison.

The closing scene brings unbearable anguish for Lear when he carries Cordelia's lifeless body onto the stage: 'Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones'. This dramatic scene reminds us that in some ways Lear remains unchanged. We again see his rashness in the immediate aftermath of Cordelia's murder: 'A plague upon you, murderers,

traitors all'. However, while Lear's personal transformation may not be total, it is certainly dramatic. We cannot but feel admiration for a man who acquires wisdom and humility through intense personal suffering. In the course of the play Lear is truly stretched 'upon the rack of this tough world', but ends the play a better and wiser man.

3. *'King Lear – A Tragic Hero?'*

King Lear is a true tragic hero. As the play opens he is a king with all the power and prestige that accompany this position. A tragic hero possesses a major flaw which brings about a catastrophe (disaster). Lear's tragic flaw is his rashness. Underlying this rashness are his arrogance, spiritual blindness and lack of judgement. The catastrophe brought about by Lear's flawed character causes immense suffering for Lear and for others. Lear descends from a position of absolute power to one where he owns nothing except the clothes on his back, while his kingdom is plunged into a state of chaos because of his tragic mistakes. As a tragic hero, Lear should retain our sympathy (to some degree, at least) and, as the play unfolds, we feel both pity and admiration for him. He grows through suffering, ultimately becoming a better and wiser man. What really casts Lear in the role of a tragic hero is the fact that wisdom and humility come too late for him to alter the disastrous sequence of events caused by his destructive rashness. The mood at the close of the play is particularly bleak as the audience is overwhelmed by a terrible sense of tragedy.

The play opens with Lear as a figure of immense power and authority. He is 'every inch a king'. He is almost a god-like figure as he leans over the map and proclaims how he will divide up the kingdom. His subjects are loyal and respectful. Kent addresses Lear in reverential tones ('Royal Lear whom I have ever honoured as my king, loved as my father . . .'), before going on to deliver a blunt warning to his master after he has disowned and disinherited

Cordelia: 'Reserve thy state, and in thy best consideration, check this hideous rashness'. The autocratic (tyrannical) Lear sees himself as an all-powerful being as he warns Kent, 'Come not between the dragon and his wrath . . .'

However, for all his power, Lear is a flawed character. It is his human weaknesses that bring about his downfall and cause so much suffering for both himself and others. In this sense, he is the typical tragic hero. Lear is dangerously rash in his decision-making. He is arrogant and lacking in judgement and self-knowledge. Lear's rashness is the main cause of the catastrophe which affects both himself and his entire kingdom. He disowns Cordelia, his one true daughter: 'Here I disclaim all my paternal care, propinquity and property of blood . . .' In this one moment of terrible impetuosity, Lear sets in motion a train of disastrous events which lead to his own downfall and to the deaths of many of the participants in the opening scene. He unleashes evil forces which ultimately assume complete control of his kingdom. In cutting himself off from his one true daughter, Lear puts himself at the mercy of Goneril and Regan – a decision he lives to regret. By the close of the opening scene, the evil sisters are already conspiring (secretly plotting) against Lear: 'Pray you, let us hit together . . .' Lear's destructive rashness is also to be seen in his impulsive decision to banish Kent. Not only does Lear banish his most loyal servant for attempting to make him aware of his foolishness, he also threatens him with capital punishment (i.e. death).

Lear pays a high price for his human

weaknesses as he is driven to the point of insanity by Goneril and Regan's ingratitude and callousness (lack of feeling). While we realise that Lear is the architect of his own downfall, we still sympathise with him as he is rejected and belittled by his ungrateful daughters. Stung by Goneril's 'marble-hearted' ingratitude, Lear naively expects Regan to treat him better, only to realise that his two daughters are acting as one against him. Regan coldly reminds Lear of his powerlessness: 'I pray you father, being weak, seem so'. The two sisters strip Lear of his remaining power and dignity when they refuse to allow him to have even a single knight, coldly asking, 'What need one?' Locked out in the worst storm in living memory, Lear struggles in vain to retain his sanity. The pain of his daughters' filial ingratitude is such that he calls out for universal destruction: 'And thou all-shaking thunder, smite flat the thick rotundity of the world! Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once that make ingrateful man!' In the mock trial scene, Lear pathetically tries to understand his daughters' 'hard hearts'. **The images of the wheel of fire ('I am bound upon a wheel of fire that mine own tears do scald like molten lead') and the rack (used by Kent in the closing scene) underline the intensity of Lear's suffering.**

As Lear loses his sanity the forces of darkness, unleashed by his initial foolishness, take complete control of his world. Evil is depressingly dominant for much of the play because Lear gives it the opportunity to thrive. Edgar is reduced to the level of a mad beggar by Edmund's scheming, Gloucester is savagely tortured for going to assist Lear, while Goneril and Regan plumb new depths of evil in their rivalry over Edmund.

Like all great tragic heroes, Lear comes to acknowledge his own mistakes. He grows through suffering. He realises that he did Cordelia wrong and, towards the close of the play, begs her forgiveness ('Pray you now, forgive and forget'). He realises that Goneril and Regan flattered him 'like a dog'. He comes to see himself as 'a poor, infirm, weak, despised old man'. He also acquires a social conscience,

recognising that he neglected the poor when he was king ('O, I have taken too little care of this'). We see his compassion for others as he ushers the Fool into the hovel ahead of him ('In boy, go first'). He achieves a degree of wisdom, declaring that man is 'a poor bare forked animal'. He also comes to see that the system of justice is corrupt because 'robes and furred gowns hide all' (i.e. the rich avoid justice while the poor are always punished for any wrongdoing).

Lear is a classic tragic hero in that while he becomes a better and wiser man, his acquisition of self-knowledge comes too late for him to undo the harm that he has done.

The hope offered by the counter-movement against evil is all-too-brief. The counter-action against the forces of evil begins almost as soon as Cordelia and Kent are unjustly banished by Lear. The two are in regular contact and Kent looks forward to co-operating with Cordelia in setting right the wrongs done to Lear ('seeking to give losses their remedies'). Gloucester also goes to Lear's assistance: '... the king, my old master, must be relieved.' Hope is heightened when Lear and Cordelia are reconciled. However, the defeat of Cordelia's forces extinguishes this hope and from this point Lear's suffering reaches new and heartbreaking levels of intensity. Cordelia is hanged after Edmund ordered her execution, and Lear's grief knows no bounds: 'Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones'. **The happiness that Lear had anticipated following his reconciliation with Cordelia is cruelly snatched from him:** 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life and thou no life at all?' This poignant scene brings the full extent of the tragedy into sharp focus. Lear dies, having truly been stretched 'upon the rack of this tough world'.

The ending of the play is particularly bleak. Lear and Cordelia are both dead. The death of Cordelia is particularly depressing because she is the epitome of virtue and the play's most innocent victim. Lear's kingdom has been profoundly disrupted by the forces of evil, and, in Kent's words, 'all's cheerless, dark and deadly'.

Albany knows that intervention by a foreign force must be opposed. However, we learn from Edmund that Albany intends showing mercy to both Lear and Cordelia ('As for the mercy which he intends to Lear and Cordelia . . .'). Albany acknowledges the justice of the revolt of many of his own people, who have, he says, been 'forced to cry out' by the harshness of the regime ('the rigour of our state') ruling in place of Lear.

The last scene of the play helps us to appreciate more fully the full strength of Albany's character. Pragmatism demanded that he ally himself with Goneril, Regan and Edmund against the French invasion. However, when the external threat has been dealt with, Albany takes charge, impressing us with his dignity and authority. His strength of character is obvious in his refusal to tolerate Edmund's arrogance: 'I hold you as a subject of this war, not as a brother'. He arrests Edmund and Goneril ('this gilded serpent') for 'capital treason'. Albany emerges as a man of action willing, if necessary, to fight Edmund himself in trial by combat (he is the first to throw down his glove to Edmund). When Goneril states that, according to the rules of knighthood, Edmund is not obliged to accept a challenge from a person of lesser rank (the unknown warrior who challenges Edmund is the disguised Edgar), Albany puts her firmly in her place: 'Shut your mouth, dame . . .' Albany is also sufficiently perceptive to realise that Goneril may attempt to commit suicide ('Go

after her: she's desperate; govern her'.) He also recognises the nobility of the disguised Edgar: '... thy very gait did prophesy a royal nobleness.'

Albany displays many of the qualities required of a good and strong leader. He is compassionate and sensitive. He is deeply moved by Edgar's account of Gloucester's suffering and death ('I am almost ready to dissolve hearing of this') and by the intensity of Lear's grief at Cordelia's death ('Fall and cease'). **However, he only shows sympathy towards those deserving of it. He barely reacts to news of his wife's death, seeing Goneril's demise as divine justice:** 'This judgement of the heavens, that makes us tremble, touches us not with pity'. Tragically, while preoccupied with all that is happening around him, Albany seems to forget Cordelia and Lear and the fact that they must now be in a position of great danger. When Edmund confesses to having ordered their executions, Albany makes a belated and ultimately vain attempt to save them, telling Edgar to 'Run, run, O, run!' He subsequently dismisses news of Edmund's death as 'but a trifle here'. **At the close of the play, Albany promises that justice will be done in the kingdom:** 'All friends shall taste the wages of their virtue, and all foes the cup of their deservings'. **Along with Edgar, Albany will play an important role in restoring the health of 'the gored state' and in reinstating the natural order.**

9. *'The theme of madness is central to the play.'*

Madness is one of the central themes of the play. Madness, in its various forms, is a theme that relates to Lear, Edgar and the Fool. While we sympathise with Lear when he is pained to the point of insanity by the ingratitude and callousness of his 'pelican daughters', there is a positive aspect to Lear's madness, as there is to Gloucester's blindness. In his madness Lear acquires a peculiar type of wisdom – a wisdom that is encapsulated in Edgar's paradoxical expression: 'reason in madness.' When Lear acquires 'reason in madness', he is able to see

himself, others and society in general more clearly than ever before. The Fool was also regarded as mad, but his idiotic antics conceal a sharp wit. While the Fool may or may not be entirely sane, he is certainly wise and commonsensical. The final character to whom this theme relates is of course Edgar, who is forced by his brother's treachery to adopt the disguise of a mad Bedlam beggar in order to avoid arrest. Act 3, Scene 6 brings all three of these 'madmen' together as Lear imagines himself putting his ungrateful daughters on trial. In this memorable scene, we

observe Lear's genuine insanity, Edgar's feigned madness and the Fool's half-foolish jests.

Lear's madness has its origins in Goneril and Regan's unnatural ingratitude. When Lear is first rebuked and attacked by Goneril, the shock to his system is immense. His self-image is dramatically undermined: 'This is not Lear . . . Who is it that can tell me who I am?' The realisation of the injustice he did to Cordelia ('I did her wrong') combined with the pain of Goneril's 'monster ingratitude' cause Lear to fear for his sanity: 'O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!' The sight of Kent in the stocks (''tis worse than murder to do upon respect such violent outrage'), and Cornwall's refusal to meet him are further insults to Lear's royal dignity. Lear now struggles to resist the insanity rising within him: 'O how this mother swells up toward my heart! *Hysterica passio* down, thou climbing sorrow, thy element's below!' Regan's contemptuous ejection of him ('. . . being weak, seem so') is the next great shock to his system. **While Lear is very much the architect of his own downfall, we cannot but feel pity for a powerless old man who can only rave helplessly against his daughters' filial ingratitude.** When he declares 'O Fool, I shall go mad', it is clear that he is losing the battle to retain the balance of his mind. **Lear's towering rages accelerate the onset of madness.**

The storm on the heath reflects the storm in Lear's mind. Yet even as his 'wits begin to turn', Lear shows signs of growing through suffering. He begins to acquire insight and humility, seeing himself now as 'a poor, infirm, weak and despised old man'. The mentally unstable king displays a new concern for others when he ushers the Fool into the hovel in front of him: 'In boy, go first'. Even though he is now on the verge of insanity, he becomes aware of his failings as a king. He realises that he neglected the poor and now preaches the doctrine of social justice: 'O I have taken too little care of this! . . . Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, that thou may shake the superflux to them and show the heavens more just'. Lear's belief that Poor Tom's misery is attributable to 'his unkind daughters' prompts the concerned Fool to

suggest that 'This cold night will turn us all to fools or madmen'. As Lear tears off his clothes in an attempt to identify with 'unaccommodated man', it is clear that he has lost the balance of his mind. Kent simply says: 'All the power of his wits have given way to his impatience'. The 'trial scene' sees Lear's insanity reach a peak. In this bizarre scene he struggles to understand his daughters' callousness as he wonders, 'is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?'

Like Edgar ('My tears begin to take his part so much, they'll mar my counterfeiting'), the audience is deeply moved by Lear's intense suffering. Yet Lear continues to grow through his mental torment. Further evidence of Lear's personal growth comes when Kent informs us that 'burning shame' prevents Lear from going to Cordelia. Lear gradually acquires moral vision. He now realises that Goneril and Regan flattered him 'like a dog'. He wisely tells the blind Gloucester that 'A man may see how this world goes with no eyes'. He becomes aware of corruption in high places and of social inequalities: 'through tattered clothes small vices do appear. Robes and furred gowns hide all'. Little wonder that Edgar should speak of Lear's 'reason in madness'.

The ennobling, humanising effects of Lear's mental suffering are most strikingly apparent when he meets Cordelia. Now lucid (clear-minded), Lear displays self-knowledge and humility, describing himself as 'a very foolish, fond old man'. His sense of guilt in relation to Cordelia is so overwhelming that he would willingly drink poison if that would somehow prove the depth of his shame and regret. Lear's personal redemption is complete when he is reconciled with Cordelia. When he is arrested, the increasingly philosophical king only wishes for himself and Cordelia to be together so that they can ponder the meaning of life ('the mystery of things'). **While we cannot but sympathise with Lear in his intense suffering, his madness has a positive dimension. Lear's acquisition of 'reason in madness' enables him to see himself, others and the world in general more clearly.**

While the Fool was generally regarded as a madman, he clearly possesses a sharp wit. His primary dramatic function is to make Lear more aware of his foolishness. **The Fool is able to speak his mind to Lear precisely because he is regarded as a madman.** Lear describes him as 'a bitter fool' because he speaks the bitter truth, while Goneril refers to him as Lear's 'all-licensed Fool' because his apparent madness allows him to say whatever he likes. As Kent shrewdly observes, the Fool is no ordinary comic buffoon: 'This is not altogether Fool, my Lord'.

The Fool continually reminds Lear of his foolishness: 'Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest thy golden one away', '... thou madest thy daughters thy mother', 'thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise'. The Fool disguises many of his philosophical utterances with nonsense songs: 'Fathers that wear rags/Do make their children blind'. He is the voice of Lear's conscience, the nagging inner voice that relentlessly reminds him of his wrongdoing. He is also sufficiently perceptive to realise the consequences of his master's intense suffering on the heath: 'This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen'. Once the Fool has prompted Lear to reflect on his folly, his dramatic function is fulfilled, and he takes no further part in the action.

Edgar adopts the disguise of a mad Bedlam beggar for purposes of survival. His brother's falseness and his father's rashness have reduced him to the level of a hunted fugitive and, with all of the ports closely guarded, Edgar is forced adopt the persona of a madman: 'I will preserve myself; and am bethought to take the basest and most poorest shape'. Edgar's assumed madness has a definite purpose: self-preservation. While Edgar is able to keep up the pretence of being mad for a long time, he is so deeply moved by his father's suffering that he nearly dispenses with his act: 'My tears begin to take his part so much, they'll mar my counterfeiting'. **Edgar's 'madness' also has a very positive aspect in that it enables him to stay alive, go on to redeem his father and play his part in restoring the natural order. He assumes the role of a madman in**

order to protect his own life, but dispenses with his disguise as soon as his country needs him.

Of the trio of 'madmen' who find themselves together on the heath (Lear, the Fool and Poor Tom), only Edgar is entirely sane. His feigned madness is a contrast to Lear's real madness and helps to relieve the dramatic tension. When Lear declares that Poor Tom's misery is attributable to his 'unkind daughters', it is clear that he has finally lost the balance of his mind. Obsessed with the ingratitude of his own daughters, Lear cannot see that Edgar does not have any daughters. **The exchanges between the real madman (Lear), the official madman (the Fool), and the pretended madman (Edgar) make for one of the most memorable scenes in the play.** Now at the height of his madness, Lear finds in Edgar a true image of the basic humanity he wants to share: 'unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art'.

At one level the mock trial scene is bizarrely comic as the mad Lear, the blanketed Edgar and the Fool preside over the mock trial of Goneril and Regan. **However, the mock trial serves a significant thematic purpose:** the fact that Lear appoints a fool and an apparent madman to pass judgement on his daughters suggests that he has now grown in wisdom to the point where he perceives that sanity and reason have nothing to do with justice as it is administered in his kingdom.

In conclusion, the play presents us with three very different kinds of 'madness'. While Lear's madness is a human response to the pain of his daughters' filial ingratitude, Edgar's 'madness' is a matter of choice. **However, in both cases madness, real or feigned, is the result of the natural bonds that should bind families together being broken.** It is the ingratitude and treachery of those closest to them that reduces both Lear and Edgar to the level of madmen. **As an 'official' madman, the Fool fulfils a traditional role in the royal court, entertaining the king with his witty observations and clever rhymes. However, the Fool's unofficial role as**

Lear's conscience is more important as, under the guise of madness, he points out Lear's

mistakes to him, helping him to grow in wisdom and become more self-aware.

10. *'The play explores the meaning of love.'*

King Lear is notable as much for its exploration of love as it is for its portrayal of evil. From the impressive sincerity of France's love for Cordelia in the opening scene through to the healing, redemptive love of Cordelia and Edgar for Lear and Gloucester respectively in the latter stages of the drama, love is a central theme of the play.

Having witnessed and been repelled by the false love of Goneril and Regan, the audience is greatly impressed with the genuine nature of France's love for Cordelia. After being disowned and disinherited by Lear, Cordelia understandably fears for her reputation, requesting Lear to make it known that she has not lost his favour because of any dishonourable action on her part. However, it is immediately apparent that France is aware of the strangeness of Lear's behaviour towards Cordelia when he asks the king how the daughter 'who even now was your best object, the argument of your praise, balm of your age' could in a moment commit an act 'so monstrous' to completely fall from favour. He is incredulous when he learns that Cordelia has lost everything simply because of her unwillingness to flatter Lear. In contrast to the romantic Paris who believes that Cordelia 'is herself a dowry', the mercenary-minded Burgundy is unwilling to marry Cordelia without the portion of the kingdom promised him. Paris openly expresses his love for her at this point: 'Fairest Cordelia, thou art most rich, being poor; most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised!' **Paris' love for Cordelia highlights the fact that true love is never influenced by material considerations: 'Love is not love when it is mingled with regards that stand aloof from the entire point'.**

Kent's love for Lear is one of the most positive and uplifting aspects of the play. It is no overstatement to say that Kent lives for Lear: 'Royal Lear, whom I have ever honoured

as my king, loved as my father, as my master followed, as my great patron thought on in my prayers . . .' Kent's love for Lear means that he sees it as his inescapable duty to make the king aware of any mistakes he is making that may ultimately cause him suffering. He describes Lear's decision to disown and disinherit Cordelia as 'hideous rashness'. After Kent is banished and threatened with death, he still returns in disguise to serve Lear as a humble servant: 'Now banished Kent, if thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemned, so may it come, thy master, whom thou lov'st, shall find thee full of labours'. Kent remains with Lear throughout his painful journey to self-awareness and wisdom. He never fails to defend Lear's honour, ending up in the stocks after beating the despicable Oswald for disrespecting Lear. It is Kent who leads Lear to the shelter of a hovel in the dramatic storm scene and who ensures that Cordelia remains informed about Lear's plight. In the closing scene, Kent is deeply pained by Lear's heartbreak at the death of his beloved Cordelia, insisting that no attempt be made to revive him if he loses consciousness: 'O let him pass! He hates him that would upon the rack of this tough world stretch him out longer'. Kent's love for and loyalty to Lear does not end with the latter's death. He refuses the offer to join Albany and Edgar in ruling the kingdom because of his enduring devotion to Lear: 'I have a journey, sir, shortly to go; my master calls me, I must not say no'. **Kent's love for Lear reminds us that unwavering loyalty is a key feature of real love.**

Cordelia's love for Lear is another of the play's most inspiring features. In total contrast to her sisters' hollow declarations of love for Lear, Cordelia's love for her father is genuine and deep. Once she becomes aware of Lear's plight, she leads an expedition to England to rescue him. Cordelia's motivation

for this military intervention has nothing to do with political ambition, and everything to do with her loving concern for her father: 'No blown ambition doth our arms incite, but love, dear love and our aged father's right'. The scene where she meets Lear is deeply moving. She struggles to come to terms with the appalling cruelty inflicted on her father, telling Kent that she would have kept her enemy's dog close to her fire on the night that Lear was forced to endure a particularly violent storm on the moor. Cordelia is seen as the very embodiment of love and forgiveness as she tenderly addresses Lear: 'O my dear father! Restoration, hang thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss repair those violent harms that my sisters have in thy reverence made!' Remarkably, Cordelia even asks Lear's blessing: 'O! Look upon me sir, and hold your hands in benediction o'er me'. **Cordelia's love for Lear indicates that a capacity for forgiveness is an integral aspect of love, while also highlighting the redemptive power of love.**

Edgar's enduring love for Gloucester is another of the play's most heartening (uplifting) features. Notwithstanding the fact that he has been reduced to the level of a hunted criminal by Gloucester's rashness and has been forced to adopt the disguise of a mad Bedlam beggar in order to survive, Edmund, like Cordelia, bears no feelings of resentment

towards his father. Seeing his father's dark despair and desire to end his life, Edgar engages in a kindly deception, tricking the credulous (gullible) and disorientated Gloucester into believing that he has fallen from the steep cliffs of Dover and that the gods have saved his life: 'Thy life's a miracle.' Edgar's loving action rids Gloucester of his suicidal tendencies, with the latter now proclaiming: '... henceforth I'll bear affliction till it do cry out itself "Enough, enough", and die'. **Edgar's love for Gloucester reinforces the idea that love is always kind and forgiving and can be redemptive.**

Unsurprisingly, the relationships involving Goneril and Regan tell us a great deal about what love should not involve. Their transparent flattery of Lear immediately suggests the insincerity of their declarations of 'love' for their father. Their attempts to ingratiate themselves with him are far removed from genuine expressions of love since they are motivated solely by the desire for self-advancement.

All of these relationships help us to better understand the nature and meaning of love. We see that love is not influenced by material considerations and that love based on loyalty and a willingness to forgive has the power to redeem characters who, like Lear and Gloucester, have lost their way in life through their spiritual blindness.

11. 'Describe a dramatic scene in the play.'

Act 3, Scene 7 is one of the most dramatic scenes in the play, indeed in any Shakespearian drama. This is the scene in which Gloucester's eyes are gouged out in an act of monstrous cruelty.

Gloucester bravely goes to Lear's assistance when he learns of the plot upon his life. Gloucester does not realise that he has been betrayed by his son Edmund in whom he confided this dramatic news. We know that Cornwall has sworn to Edmund that he will have his revenge on Gloucester for this act of 'treachery' and fear for Gloucester. **The irony whereby the**

audience knows more than the character adds to the dramatic nature of this scene.

This scene opens dramatically with Cornwall ordering Gloucester's arrest and Goneril ('Hang him instantly!') and Regan ('Pluck out his eyes!') trying to outdo each other in their vengeful bloodlust. When Cornwall tells Edmund to leave because 'the revenges we are bound to take upon your treacherous father are not fit for your beholding', our fears for Gloucester intensify. When Gloucester arrives, he is immediately bound. We sympathise with Gloucester who, sensing that these evil characters

mean to harm him, pathetically reminds them that he is their host. However, since the evil sisters show scant regard for the natural bond that should link parent and child, they are unlikely to display any respect for the natural bond that should link a host and his guests. Goneril, Regan and Cornwall are intent on revenge and will abuse Gloucester's hospitality in the most dramatic and horrifying way imaginable. Regan starts the cruel process of revenge when she shows her disrespect for Gloucester by plucking his beard.

The tension mounts as Gloucester is bound and interrogated about his involvement in the French landing and his knowledge of Lear's situation. Gloucester shows admirable courage and loyalty to Lear in philosophically accepting his predicament: 'I am tied to the stake, and I must stand the course'. When Regan asks Gloucester why he sent Lear to Dover, his response is charged with irony: 'Because I would not see thy cruel nails pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy cruel sister in his anointed flesh stick bearish fangs'. Like all of the other noble characters in the play, Gloucester believes in the idea of divine justice, defiantly telling his captors: '. . . but I shall see the winged vengeance overtake such children'. However, the evil characters will first have their revenge on him.

There follows one of the most horrifying moments in any Shakespearian drama as Cornwall, in an act of unimaginable savagery, gouges out one of Gloucester's eyes. However, even this act of barbarity does not satisfy Regan who, clearly feeling that no punishment is adequate for a man who has helped her father, demands that Gloucester's second eye be cut from his head: 'One side will mock another; the other too'.

More drama and physical action follows when, in an instinctive act of humanity, one of Cornwall's servants intervenes on behalf of Gloucester. In the sword fight that

ensues, Cornwall is mortally wounded and the noble servant stabbed from behind by Regan. **Cornwall's wound does not prevent him from completing his vicious blinding of Gloucester:** 'Out vile jelly! Where is thy lustre now?'

Gloucester endures further suffering when, in his agony and blindness, he calls out for his son Edmund. Regan, not satisfied with Gloucester's physical torture, delights in tormenting him mentally by revealing that it was Edmund who betrayed him: 'Thou call'st on him that hates thee, it was he who made the overtures of thy treasons to us . . .'

Gloucester now experiences a sudden, dramatic moment of self-awareness: 'O my follies! Then Edgar was abused. Kind gods, forgive me that and prosper him'. While Lear acquires insight in a slow, gradual manner, Gloucester gains understanding in an instant. **The irony in Gloucester gaining spiritual vision at the very moment that he is made physically blind adds to the dramatic qualities of this scene.**

Almost unbelievably, Gloucester has to endure even more misery when Regan orders that he be thrown out of his own castle: 'Go thrust him out at the gates, and let him smell his way to Dover'. This is yet another dramatic example of the evil sisters' seemingly insatiable appetite for cruelty.

This scene dramatically highlights the depths of inhumanity and savagery of which people are capable. The fact that two female characters are involved and delight in physical torture adds to the barbarity of Gloucester's blinding. This scene is also important because it sees the death of the first of the evil characters. Like Gloucester, Albany subscribes to the notion of divine justice. When he learns of Cornwall's death, he sees it as an example of the gods punishing evil-doers: 'This shows you are above you justicers that these our nether crimes so speedily can venge'.