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KING LEAR

Who is King Lear?

- Lear is a king of ancient Britain who plans to retire in old age.
- In a moment of anger he exiles his loving daughter Cordelia and his loyal adviser Kent and puts the kingdom into the hands of his two evil daughters.
- Humiliated by Goneril and Regan, he suffers a mental breakdown, but through his 'madness' he begins to see life more clearly.

An irresponsible character

Lear is a complex **tragic** hero, who excites a variety of responses. Watching his disastrous actions of Act I Scene 1, it is hard not to feel that Lear deserves punishment for his folly. Quick to abusive anger and too arrogant to take advice, Lear is blind and irresponsible as father and ruler. His 'darker purpose' (I.1.35), to divide the kingdom into three, would have alarmed the Jacobean audience, who would remember how the question of the succession had loomed large during the reign of Elizabeth I.

Lear attempts to separate power from responsibility. He is preoccupied with appearances. If he can retain the trappings of majesty without the 'cares and business' of ruling (I.1.38), he is content. It is also possible to see his desire to rely on Cordelia's 'kind nursery' (I.1.123) as selfish. He intends marrying her off in Act I Scene 1 but expects to be nursed while he crawls 'unburdened' (I.1.40) towards death. At the start of the play, Lear is both tyrannical patriarch and demanding child.

A character who inspires some sympathy

Yet we do sympathise with this egotistical autocrat. In Act II, Lear's better qualities are revealed. His hiring of Kent is a sign that Lear inspires loyalty, and his interaction with the Fool shows a more tolerant side to his nature. It also becomes clear that Lear is trying to remain calm even when he feels he is being wronged (I.4.65–9). In the next scene Lear recognises that he has behaved foolishly and treated Cordelia unkindly (I.5.24). As his insight and troubles grow, so does our concern. We begin to share his outrage as Goneril and Regan become more repugnant. There is desperation as well as egotism in his confrontation with his 'dog-hearted' (IV.3.45) daughters in Act II Scene 4. Gradually Lear's rages become signs of impotence, not authority. By the time he rushes out into the storm our sympathies are likely to lie – and remain – with the beleaguered king.



Study focus: A learning process?

A02

Many critics see Lear's breakdown as a learning process. Lear needs to suffer to improve his understanding of himself and the society in which he lives. Certainly he considers a number of topics he had previously paid little attention to: the wretched condition of the poor, the corrupt justice system, true necessity. He learns to distinguish between appearances and reality and considers the sufferings of those close to him. Lear also becomes much more self-critical. He emerges from his torment a more humble, loving and appealing character.

However, other commentators suggest that Lear remains self-obsessed and vengeful. His reflections on the heath are punctuated by thoughts of punishing Goneril and Regan. He struggles to accept responsibility for his elder daughters' cruel natures and never fully acknowledges the folly of his earlier actions. What is your opinion?

Reconciliation

Shakespeare does not allow us to remain too critical of Lear. We see the king in his best light in his reconciliation with Cordelia. Ashamed of his former unkindness, he humbles himself before his youngest daughter. By the end of the play he seems almost to move beyond himself. He has certainly accepted his powerless, diminished status and now sees himself primarily as Cordelia's father. His language reflects his progress. Gone is the royal 'we'. Now Lear uses the first person when he speaks of himself and his feelings. Cordelia is reclaimed lovingly as 'my Cordelia' (V.3.20). In Act V Lear clings to his 'best object' (I.1.213) protectively. He revenges her death by killing the 'slave' responsible for hanging her.

In all of his speeches in Act V Scene 3, the dying king focuses on Cordelia and the overwhelming grief he feels at her passing. Lear's love for and defence of Cordelia go a long way to redeeming him from charges of egotism. He has clearly learned the value of true emotion. His recognition of the injustice of Cordelia's death suggests that his judgement has been restored (V.3.306–7). But wisdom comes too late. Watching the final bleak moments of the play, it is easy to feel that Lear's sufferings have been in vain.

Key quotation: King Lear

A01

Exposed to the storm in Act III, Lear's feelings of abandonment and vulnerability lead him to sympathise with the poor and outcast, and to feel anger at powerful people who exploit others. At first he tries to exempt himself, claiming 'I am a man / More sinned against than sinning' (III.2.59–60). But as his mind struggles to come to terms with his loss of privilege and the insights that his new situation gives him, he is forced to admit that as a ruler he has failed in his responsibility to the most vulnerable (III.4.32–3). While Lear's suffering may be terrible, we see here that it also has some benefit in breaking down his self-centred view of life so that he is able to start to feel humility and compassion.

Further key quotations

- Goneril assesses Lear's banishment of Cordelia and Kent: 'You see how full of changes his age is.' (I.1.287).
- Lear questions his reduced status: 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' (I.4.228).
- Lear's self-assessment to Cordelia: 'I am a very foolish fond old man, / Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less; / And, to deal plainly, I fear I am not in my perfect mind.' (IV.7.60–3).

A03 KEY CONTEXT

Today, more people are living into old age than ever before. Because of this, it seems likely that a modern audience will be particularly fascinated by Lear's struggle to make sense of his life in his declining years and by the apparent symptoms of dementia with which he seems to struggle in the process.

KEY INTERPRETATION

A05

The writer Charles Lamb believed the part of King Lear could not be brought fully to life in the theatre, complaining in 1811 that 'an old man tottering about the stage with a walking stick' was inadequate to the great and complex vision that Shakespeare's words created. A similar view has been expressed by some later critics. How well in your experience have actors succeeded in portraying Lear?

HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

Five key areas

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. The structure of your answer/essay

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follow up with evidence or detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't **always** be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references which help the essay flow. Aim to present an overall argument or conceptual response to the task, not a series of unconnected points.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to add.

EXAMINER'S TIP

AO1 and AO2 are equally important in AS and A Level responses.

Aiming high: Effective opening paragraphs

Let's imagine you have been asked the following question:

'King Lear is a play about the corrupting effects of power?' To what extent do you agree?

Here's an example of a successful opening paragraph:

Gets straight to the point

The play starts with Lear abusing his power in the love test, a misdeed which damages him as well as others, leaving rivals to emerge and struggle for control of his kingdom. As their evil grows, Lear comes to see the dangers of any unrestrained authority, but it is far too late for him to set matters right.

Sets up some interesting ideas that will be tackled in subsequent paragraphs

2. Use of titles, names, etc.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, authors and so on. Present them correctly too, with inverted commas and capitals as appropriate. For example, *In Act I of 'King Lear' ...*
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the term 'text' or 'play', rather than 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

3. Effective quotations

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant and not too long (you are going to have to memorise them, so that will help you select shorter ones!)
- Integrated into your argument/sentence
- Linked to effect and implications

Aiming high: Effective use of quotations

Here is an example of an effective use of a quotation about suffering in the play:

short, relevant quotation, embedded in sentence

Lear says he is 'bound / upon a wheel of fire.' He is only half awake and believes that he is being punished in Hell.

explicit meaning

His words describe some kind of torture device but they remind us that his past mistakes have also 'bound' him to the cyclical wheel of fortune, and a tragic outcome is now virtually inescapable.

inferred meaning

Remember – quotations can be one or two single words or phrases embedded in a sentence to build a picture or explanation, or they can be longer ones that are explored and picked apart.

4. Techniques and terminology

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions, critical theories or people (for example, 'paradox', 'archetype', 'feminism' or 'Aristotle') **but** make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly

5. General writing skills

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'ok', and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view (such as 'Edmund is a typical villain because he is evil'), but analyse closely with clear evidence and textual detail.

Note the professional approach here in the choice of vocabulary and awareness of the effect on the reader:

Edmund has the typical qualities of a Machiavellian villain. He is discontented, cynical and self-serving, and able to disguise his villainous intentions behind a facade of honesty. However, his asides to the audience ensure that we are not deceived.

EXAMINER'S TIP

It's important to remember that *King Lear* is a text created by Shakespeare – thinking about the choices Shakespeare makes with language and plotting will not only alert you to his methods as a playwright but also his intentions, i.e. the effect he seeks to create.

EXAMINER'S TIP

Answer the question set, not the question you'd like to have been asked. Examiners say that often students will be set a question on one character (for example, the Fool) but end up writing almost as much about another (such as Lear). Or they write about one aspect of the question (for example, 'comic elements') but ignore another (such as 'tragedy'). **Stick to the question**, and answer **all parts of it**.