King Lear
William Shakespeare
Study Guide

Prepared by The Classic Theatre of San Antonio
March 2012
"How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child"
- King Lear, Act I sc. 4

When a child is born, existence takes on an urgency seldom felt anywhere else. From that moment, we live for them. They carry the legacy of our choices into their futures for good and for bad. We nurture them in the hopes that they will one day thrive and perhaps care for us as we age. Adults are too often left to fend for themselves in their old age, abused by our collective fear of death. Our children should be that compassionate, loving face we look to for comfort and to ease our fears. When they are not, it is catastrophic.

Our production of King Lear focuses on the personal aspects of the parallel story lines. Both Lear and Gloucester misread their children. In Gloucester’s case he is so blinded by rage at the thought of his beloved Edgar’s betrayal that he doesn’t even recognize him when disguised as the mad “Poor Tom”. It is only after his literal blinding that he is able to see the truth.

King Lear is driven out into the cold and descends into madness due to the “monster ingratitude” of his eldest daughters. The question to consider is how much of this ingratitude is Lear reaping what he has sown. He starts the play as the head of a great empire. His tyranny is on full display when he banishes both Kent and his beloved Cordelia for their perceived assault on his authority. Lear’s rightful place is to be King and cherished by his daughters. When Cordelia can’t satisfy Lear’s need for praise; the storm of madness begins. The storm reaches its apex when his eldest daughters abandon him. It is only after Lear loses everything that he is able to learn that love between parent and child is not expressed by heaping praise but by ultimate sacrifice. The story while tragic is ultimately a story of redemption and the triumph of love over greed and pride. Lear reconnects with his beloved Cordelia and dies with her cradled in his arms, as he must have held her so many times in her childhood.
Sound Design

**Rick Malone, Designer**

Regardless of the period of the play and the playwright, the sound design should support the text and the director’s concept. That said, if the director sets the play in the American 1930’s, the sound design should be consistent with that time period, both in effects and music. In general, Shakespeare’s plays give the sound designer a great latitude except when the effect is specifically referenced in the text. I recall designing the “Scottish Play” and it was set in a non-specific time and the sky was the limit with the sound.

In Lear, we want to highlight the stress and misery that Lear experiences and some of that will be done with sound. Sound will be used to highlight character and to advance the plot.

Set Design

**Mary Evans, Designer**

The theatrical set is a selective, chosen world imagined by a designer and crafted by a builder in which action and reaction take place, small and large ideas and emotions are fleshed out and viewers are transported to a different location, time and social code for the duration of the play. When designing for a demanding play like "Lear," which shifts from one place to another very quickly over and over, the set must be a chameleon; it must be able to shape-shift as the play progresses.
through light changes and set/actor interaction. It needs to be simple and nonspecific, but still offer the director a wealth of acting areas and choices for blocking movement in order to successfully illustrate relationships between characters and between characters and their environment. The relationship between Lear and his surroundings change from one of reckless domination of the natural world, to one of fear and madness and, eventually, heartbreaking grief and compassion. He begins by embodying the set in its grandeur: a cold, monolithic, indifferent, self-made kingdom of marble. But the last scene finds Lear’s tragic protagonist’s journey has delivered him to a more level, grounded, human scale: this loving, repentant father mourned, returned to the earth.

Costume Design

Jodi Karjala

We have chosen to set this production of King Lear in 1930s America, a time of not only the Great Depression, but also a time of great wealth and ostentatious display by America’s dynastic families such as the Astors and the Rockefellers, and a time filled with the greed and corruption of organized crime. The costumes for this production recall the glamor and sophistication of 1930s High Society, with characters bedecked in the opulent trapping of wealth: bias cut dresses and finely tailored suits layered with furs and chesterfields, fedoras and homburgs. As with all else Lear prizes, these trappings are shed along the way, leaving in the end a humbled Lear clad in the simplest of garments.

Interview with a KING

Laurence Olivier, On Acting
(Discussing playing the part of King Lear)
“When you have the strength for it, you’re too young; once you’ve the age, you’re too old. It’s the bugger, isn’t it?”

Allan S. Ross starring as King Lear in the Classic Theatre of San Antonio’s production of *King Lear*. 
1) Do you remember the first time you really connected with Shakespeare?

I think that the first time I really connected with Shakespeare was the first time I actually studied a play in great detail. I was amazed and fascinated by the characters and their relationships. I think like many young people I was put off by the language and the thought that Shakespeare was difficult to understand and therefore boring. Once I really took the time to study the play I realized that the people of the play and their relationships were not that different or difficult to understand. They were just more deeply and interestingly drawn.

2) Do you have a favorite Shakespeare play?

Hamlet is my favorite play. This may be the fact that it is the play with which I have been most involved. I have designed it, played Claudius twice, played Polonius and the gravedigger, designed the ghost sequences and played King Hamlet. It also was the play that got me started as a designer.

3) Is this the first time you have taken on the role of King Lear?

King Lear is a once in a lifetime project that shouldn't be attempted until one feels they are ready to handle it. It is one of the most difficult of all the Shakespeare characters. Lear is problematic for many reasons. The actor playing Lear must have the maturity to understand the complexity of the character. He must have the physical strength and endurance to perform the play. Finally, the sheer size of the role that must be memorized is a challenge for any actor of any age. Lear has more than twice as many lines as any other character in the play.

4) Did you ever imagine getting to play this role?

I think that all serious actors envision themselves being able to play Lear. For many actors, it is the last play they choose do. Many actors feel, because of its magnitude, that it should be their final performance. I hope that will not be my case. I look forward to performing for many years to come.

5) How many times have you done this play?

I played Cornwall once in Graduate School at LSU.
6) What do you think sets this play apart from other Shakespeare plays?

There are a couple of things that set Lear apart from other plays by Shakespeare. One is that it is a double plotted play. There are two story lines that could be independently played. Shakespeare has uniquely intertwined the two stories thus adding complexity and interest. This double plot also amplifies the theme of the, “ingratitude of children” by showing the relationships between fathers and sons as well as fathers and daughters. In addition to the structure, the focus on an aging monarch is unique. Usually Shakespeare’s plays deal with kings that are young men in conflict, struggling for power and not a king at the end of his life.

7) Can you describe your process in preparing to do a Shakespeare role and how that differs from contemporary roles?

I feel that Shakespeare is one of the best “contemporary” writers of our day. I mean this in the sense that his characters and plot lines are as applicable today as they were when Shakespeare was alive. The magnitude of the issues expressed may be greater in his plays but the relationships and conflicts are the same. Other than dealing with the difference in sentence structure and Shakespeare’s expanded vocabulary, the process in preparing the role is the same. I think actors sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that you must approach Shakespeare with fear and trembling and find some foreign methodology to deal with the characters. If we can get over our intimidation and see the characters as people with the feelings and fears we all share, we will be better able to bring those characters to life in a meaningful way.

8) Has your interpretation of this play changed as you have prepared to play King Lear?

My interpretation has changed and will continue to change as we go through the rehearsal process. It will bring a greater understanding as other actors and the director share their opinions and insights. In the first reading of King Lear many people see Lear as a selfish and uncaring old man who gets what he deserves. The greater our understanding of Lear’s struggle with madness and disillusionment the more easily we are able to feel compassion. We see a king of almost infinite power lose everything, but through that loss he find his humanity. The more we study the play the more we find the loyalty and love in it, which heightens the emotional impact of the tragedy.
9) What makes your approach to Lear unique? Do you see anything in this character that you feel other actors may have misinterpreted?

I don’t know that I can say that another actor has misinterpreted Lear. There are as many interpretations as there are actors to play him. We all will bring our own unique interpretations in that we are all unique individuals. I have daughters and I have experienced the effects of age related dementia on the patient and those who loved them. Both these factors will give me a background that some other actors may not possess.

10) Why do think it’s important for students to learn and understand Shakespeare?

Shakespeare is a writer that deals with characters and situations that can be related to by everyone today. His themes are universal, his imagery and expression challenge and excite the imagination and his characters are both unique and recognizable at the same time. The depth, complexity and beauty of his plays are unsurpassed.

King Lear in Rehearsal

Cast Includes:
Allan S. Ross as King Lear
Belinda Harold as Goneril
Gypsy Pantoja as Regan
Kathryn Connor as Cordelia
Dan Yount as Gloucester
Brad Adams as Edmund
Rusty Thurman as Edgar
Greg Hinojosa as the Fool
Matthew Byron Cassi as Kent
Who's Who in *King Lear*

**King Lear:** *King of Britain*, childlike, passionate, cruel, sympathetic, a very complex character and considered by many to be the most difficult of all the Shakespeare roles. Lear expresses violent impetuosity and eventually goes mad during the course of the play.

**Goneril:** *The eldest daughter of Lear*, Fierce, calculating, spoiled and selfish, cool and sarcastic, obsessed with power and wealth, she betrays her father, leaving him in the elements during a storm and then conspiring to kill him during the action of the play. She is married to the Duke of Albany, but she is in love with Edmund.

**Regan:** *The second daughter of Lear*, She is almost indistinguishable from her sister, Goneril. The major difference is that Regan is anxious and shows a particularly devastating ability to inflict violence when she kills a servant and assists her husband in gouging out one of Gloucester’s eyes. She is married to the Duke of Cornwall, but is in love with Edmund.

**Cordelia:** *The youngest daughter of Lear*, She is so honest and genuine that she is willing to lose everything in order to avoid the spectacle that Lear proposes for the division of his kingdom and refuses to play the game of flattery. She is banished and accepts her fate. She leaves her home to marry the King of France. She later returns in an attempt to save her father but is unsuccessful. Cordelia is the classic martyr character, although she never complains about the treatment she is forced to bear.

**Duke of Albany:** *Husband of Goneril*, sides with Lear and is angry at the way Goneril and Regan have treated him. Goneril complains that he is weak but he portrays a calm confidence and is not easily manipulated. He has strength in his convictions. He is one of only two characters that remain to rule the British kingdom at the conclusion of the play.

**Duke of Cornwall:** *Husband of Regan*, manipulative, ill intentioned, and malicious. He shows no pity for Lear and actively shares his wife’s desire for power and control over the kingdom. He is the mastermind behind the gouging of Gloucester’s eyes, which he considers safer than killing him without a trial. He is killed by a servant.

**King of France:** *Marries Cordelia*, he perceives Cordelia to be honest and good. He is never seen onstage after the first scene.

**King of Burgundy:** *A suitor of Cordelia*, who decides not to marry her after Lear disinherits and banishes her.

**Earl of Gloucester:** *Father of Edgar and Edmund*, He is a longtime trusted friend of King Lear. He is blinded by Regan and Cornwall but spends much of the play “blinded” by his inability to see what is true about his sons, Edgar’s loyalty and Edmund’s betrayal. He dies at the end of the play, having seen the error of his ways.

**Edgar:** *Oldest son of Gloucester*, Loyal to his father throughout, in spite of the fact that his father believes he has betrayed him. He is gullible enough to be manipulated by his half brother, Edmund. He spends most of the play disguised as Poor Tom, a peasant, or an ordinary gentleman.

**Edmund:** *Younger, bastard son of Gloucester*, Edmund is unhappy because he was born out of wedlock and is treated poorly compared to his legitimate brother.
Edgar. From the first moment Edmund addresses the audience, his desire to manipulate and control is made clear. Throughout the play, he continues to lie and behave in a selfish manner. In the last few moments before his death, he seems to have a change of heart when he admits what he done and gives information about Cordelia’s hanging.

**Earl of Kent: A loyal advisor to Lear**, Kent questions Lear’s decision to banish Cordelia which enrages Lear so much that he banishes Kent as well. Instead of leaving, he disguises himself in order to continue serving Lear. Regan and Goneril throw him in the stocks. Once he is released he stands by Lear until his death. When offered a position ruling the British kingdom, he declines because he feels his own death is coming too.

**Fool: Attendant to Lear.** The court jester to King Lear. He uses wordplay and jokes to challenge and to entertain the king. Even after Lear has begun to descend into madness, he remains loyal to him. In spite of his whimsical language, the fool is often the only one who really speaks “the truth”.

**Oswald: Goneril’s steward**, he is slapped by Lear and vows to seek vengeance. He assists Goneril and Regan in the destruction of Lear. He carries letters between Goneril, Regan and Edmund as they plot to take over the kingdom. He agrees to kill Gloucester to keep him silent but is killed by Edgar as he attempts to follow the orders.

**Old Man: Gloucester’s tenant**

*Small characters, often double cast include: A Herald, A Captain, an Officer, a Doctor, Knights, Gentleman, Attendants, Servants and Messengers.*

**Play Synopsis**

**Act 1**

Lear, the King of Britain, decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. Before dividing the estate, he asks each of his daughters to tell him how much they love him. The two older daughters, Goneril and Regan, issue statements of insincere flattery. Cordelia refuses to make such a statement. Because she is unwilling to publicly announce her love for her father, Lear disinherits her. Lear’s advisor Kent, questions his decision to disinherit Cordelia, reminding Lear of her true devotion to him. Lear reacts angrily to Kent and banishes him.

The King of France and the Duke of Burgundy are awaiting the division of the kingdom and the news of who will be given Cordelia’s hand in marriage. When Lear informs both suitors of what has transpired, Burgundy immediately withdraws his proposal. While the King of France admires Cordelia’s honesty and agrees to marry her. Goneril and Regan discuss their father’s apparent old age and strange behavior and resolve to do “something about it.”
Edmund, the bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester, plots to trick his father into believing the letter he carries is proof that his legitimate son, Edgar, plans to kill Gloucester. The trap is set, and Edmund hopes that he will become the heir to his father’s power and wealth.

No longer ruling the kingdom, Lear and his knights spend time at the kingdom of his daughter Goneril. Goneril is frustrated with their “riotous” behavior and encourages her servants to ignore Lear and his knights, in hopes that they will leave. She wants nothing to do with Lear now that she has her inheritance.

The nobleman Kent arrives disguised as a peasant, calling himself Caius. He convinces Lear to allow him to join the group as a servant. Lear and his knights begin to notice that Goneril’s servants are no longer responding to their requests. Lear speaks to Oswald about it and a fight arises. Lear strikes Oswald, with Kent protecting him. Lear’s Fool arrives and tells him that he has made a terrible mistake in giving away his power to his daughters.

Goneril demands that Lear leave or dispatch half of his knights. Lear is shocked and offended and leaves immediately for Regan’s kingdom. Goneril’s husband, Albany, is dismayed by his wife’s behavior. She tells him that she has written to her sister and that they are in agreement.

**Act 2**

Gloucester’s servant Curan discusses with Edmund the impending arrival of the Duke of Cornwall and his wife, Regan, and the rumors of a disagreement between Albany and Cornwall. Edmund is excited about the Duke of Cornwall’s arrival because he believes Cornwall will assist him with his plan to get rid of Edgar. Edmund calls Edgar from his hiding place and tells him that he must run away quickly. Edmund hears Gloucester in the distance and fakes a battle between he and Edgar. After Edgar runs away, Edmund cuts himself to make his story of Edgar’s betrayal more convincing. He tells Gloucester that Edgar attacked him when he refused to join the plot to kill their father. Devastated, Gloucester is convinced his son has turned against him.

Kent, still disguised, approaches Gloucester’s castle, at the same time that Oswald, the chief steward of Goneril’s household arrives. Oswald does not recognize Kent from their previous battle (Act 1, Scene 4). They begin to argue, and Edmund, Cornwall, Regan, Gloucester arrive to find out what the commotion is about. Kent is thrown into the stocks. Imprisoned, he reads the letter he has received from Cordelia promising to do everything possible to improve Lear’s situation in Britain.

Lear arrives to find his messenger locked up. Lear argues with Regan about the way he is being treated. She does not sympathize with him and encourages him to apologize to Goneril and beg for her forgiveness. Goneril arrives and the sisters finally declare that their father can only stay with them if his knights leave. Moving from shock and grief to fury, Lear leaves the house and goes outside into a brewing
storm, on the brink of madness. Gloucester begs Goneril and Regan to bring Lear back inside, fearing for his safety in the storm, but they refuse and bolt the castle doors.

**Act 3**
Finally free, Kent leaves to search for Lear. He sends a messenger to Cordelia asking for her help. In the meantime, Lear remains in the middle of the storm, ranting in anger and confusion. His fool attempts to convince him to ask his daughters for forgiveness in order to take shelter from the storm but Lear refuses. Kent finds them and insists they take cover in a nearby shack.

Inside the castle, Gloucester warns Edmund that a battle is going to take place between Britain and France and that Lear’s daughters must not be permitted to behave this way toward their father. He tells him about a letter he has hidden in his room that gives details about this impending attack. He leaves to find Lear.

Realizing the letter implicates his father, Edmund now has everything he needs to destroy his father and inherit his wealth.

Upon reaching the shelter, Lear refuses to enter saying he doesn’t feel the storm and sends the fool inside while he kneels to pray. Lear is overwhelmed with remorse over how little he cared for the poor and homeless when he was king. The fool runs from the shelter, declaring it to be occupied by a spirit. The “spirit” is Edgar, naked and covered in mud, pretending to be the madman Tom O’Bedlam who is being chased by a devil. Noticing his nakedness, Lear removes his own clothes as well. Gloucester arrives and attempts to bring Lear back to the castle but he refuses.

In the castle, Edmund shows Cornwall the letter revealing that Gloucester has conspired in the impending French attack. Cornwall bestows upon Edmund the title of the Earl of Gloucester and is sent into the storm to search for Gloucester and bring him back for questioning.

Kent, Lear, Edgar, and the fool enter the shack for shelter from the storm while Gloucester leaves to find provisions. Lear holds a mock trial for Regan and Goneril, convicting them both of betrayal. Gloucester returns announcing that a plan to kill the King is underway and that he must leave immediately for Dover where the French army waits. They leave and Gloucester returns to the castle.

Cornwall, Goneril and Regan conspire to punish Gloucester for his betrayal. Gloucester is captured and brought to Regan and Cornwall. They taunt him, and Regan plucks at his beard. Gloucester declares that he will not rest until he sees Lear’s mistreatment avenged. In response, Cornwall tells Gloucester that he will see nothing and proceeds to gouge out one of Gloucester’s eyes. A servant attempts to intervene and a sword fight erupts. Cornwall is wounded. Regan attacks the servant with a sword and kills him. Even wounded, Cornwall proceeds to gouge out Gloucester’s remaining eye. Gloucester yells for Edmund to help him and is shocked to learn it was Edmund who betrayed him. Gloucester understands the mistake he
has made in believing Edmund and abandoning Edgar. Cornwall and Regan leave to get medical help for Cornwall’s wounds. The servants discuss the terrible things they have just witnessed and decide to help Gloucester by bandaging his eyes and finding the mad beggar Tom to help Gloucester escape to safety.

**Act 4**

Edgar, still disguised as mad Tom, agrees to lead Gloucester to Dover.

Oswald, Goneril and Edmund arrive at Goneril’s palace to learn that Albany is angry over how they have treated Lear. Goneril declares Albany a coward and instructs Edmund to return to Cornwall’s palace to gather his troops for the impending fight. She presents him with a necklace and a kiss, promising him more when they meet again. They learn that Cornwall has been killed during the punishment of Gloucester.

Kent (who is still in disguise) arrives at the French camp in Dover. He learns that Cordelia is very devastated by what has become of her family. She sends one hundred knights to search for her father. The troops prepare for the battle with Britain.

Back at the palace, Regan begs Oswald to allow her to read the letter he carries from Goneril to Edmund. He refuses to break the seal. Regan warns Oswald that while Goneril may not love her husband, a relationship with Edmund is still adultery and a dangerous game for him to be involved in. As a widow, Regan is now free to develop a relationship with Edmund. She gives Oswald a token to give to Edmund and asks him to find and kill Gloucester in return for unspecified rewards. He agrees and leaves.

The disguised Edgar pretends to lead Gloucester to the highest cliff in Dover, which is actually a small hill. Gloucester kneels to pray for forgiveness and jumps, falling to the ground. Edgar wakes him and convinces him that he has miraculously survived his suicide attempts from the “cliffs” and that the Gods must not want him to die. They come across Lear as they continue the journey to Dover. Lear has gone completely mad, and wears a crown of flowers on his head. Lear recognizes Gloucester and declares that adultery was Gloucester’s undoing. Lear proceeds to rant against womanhood in general, drifting into indecipherable babble.

Oswald arrives with the intention of killing Gloucester and collecting on Regan’s promise. Edgar mortally wounds Oswald. Oswald begs Edgar to take the letters he carries before he dies. Edgar reads the letter intended for Edmund and learns that Goneril wants Edmund to kill Albany.

In the French camp, Cordelia promises to keep Kent’s true identity to herself. Lear has been cleaned up and is sleeping peacefully. When he awakes, he seems unsure about whether he recognizes Cordelia. Lear admits that he has gone senile and that
his daughter Cordelia must despise him and want him dead the way her sisters do. Cordelia tells him that all is forgiven and they embrace.

**Act 5**

Regan demands to know whether Edmund is in love with Goneril or has been to bed with her. He denies both accusations and promises that he will not betray her. Goneril and Albany arrive, sharing the news that Lear has reached Cordelia’s camp and joined the French army. Goneril and Regan are both unwilling to leave the other alone with Edmund; so they leave together.

Edgar (disguised as a peasant) gives Albany the letter he received from Oswald. Edgar warns him that the letter must be read before he goes into battle. Albany wants Edgar to stay while he reads the letter but he refuses, declaring the he was forbidden to do so. As the knights prepare for the battle, Edmund laments over his indecision on whether to marry Goneril or Regan. He swears that if Cordelia and Lear are captured, he will show them no mercy.

Edgar leaves Gloucester to fight in the battle. He returns quickly saying that the French have lost and that Lear and Cordelia have been captured.

Edmund is in charge of the prisoners, Lear and Cordelia. Lear begs to be placed in prison with his dear Cordelia, living like caged birds for the rest of their lives. Cordelia and Lear embrace and are then led away by soldiers. Edmund hands the captain of the army a note with instructions for what to do with the prisoners. He alludes to the contents of the note by asking the captain if he understands that being “tender-minded does not become a sword”. The captain agrees to follow Edmund’s orders.

Albany arrives with Goneril and Regan. He compliments Edmund on the well-fought battle and asks that Lear and Cordelia be brought to him. Edmund tells him that the King and Cordelia were sent away in order to avoid a mutiny should the soldiers sympathize with them. Albany rebukes Edmund and says that these actions were out of line for his position. Regan interrupts and declares that Edmund will be her husband soon and therefore he has the right to make such decisions. Goneril and Regan begin to argue but Regan must leave when she begins to feel ill. Albany produces the letter he received and arrests Edmund for treason. Albany sounds the trumpet, signaling Edgar to appear. Edgar wounds Edmund in a sword fight but does not kill him so that he can be questioned. Goneril tries to intervene on behalf of Edmund but Albany produces the letter, proving her plans to have him killed. Goneril leaves humiliated.

Edgar reveals his identity to Albany and tells the story of how he led his father to Dover. He announces that Gloucester died suddenly when he realized Edgar had been with him all along and that he had been forgiven.
A gentleman bursts in, holding a knife covered in blood and announces that Goneril has committed suicide and that Regan has died from poisoning. The bodies of Regan and Goneril are brought and laid out for everyone to see. Kent demands to know the whereabouts of Lear and Cordelia. Edmund, near death from his wounds, admits that he ordered Cordelia’s death by hanging. A messenger is sent to attempt to stop the hanging.

Lear enters carrying the dead body of Cordelia in his arms. The messenger did not arrive in time to save her. Lear weeps over her body. Overcome with grief and madness, Lear dies.

Albany returns the titles that were stripped from Edgar and Kent. He also invites them to rule the kingdom alongside him. Kent feels that he is too old for the challenge but Edgar accepts. The mood is somber as Kent, Edgar and Albany exit, leaving behind the dead bodies of Goneril, Regan, Edmund and Lear.

**Quotable King Lear**

**Act 1, Scene 1**
Cordelia: “What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.”

**Act 1, Scene 2**
Edmund: “A credulous father and a brother noble, Whose nature is so far from doing harms that he suspects none – on whose foolish honesty my practices ride easy. “

**Act 1, Scene 3**
Goneril: “I’ll not endure it. His knights grow riotous and himself upbraids us on every trifle.”

**Act 1, Scene 4**
Lear: “...How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child.”

**Act 1, Scene 5**
Fool: “Yes, indeed, thou wouldst make a grand fool.”

**Act 2, Scene 1**
Gloucester: “O madam, my old heart is cracked, it's cracked.”

**Act 2, Scene 2**
Lear: “The terrors of the earth! You think I’ll weep, No I’ll not weep Storm and tempest. I have full cause of weeping, but this heart shall break into a hundred thousand flaws or e’er I’ll weep. O fool, I shall go mad.”
Act 3, Scene 1
Kent: “If you see Cordelia, as fear not but you shall, show her this ring, and she will tell you who your fellow is that yet you do not know.”

Act 3, Scene 2
Fool: “Marry, here’s grace and a codpiece – that’s a wise man and a fool.”

Act 3, Scene 3
Edmund: “The younger rises when the old doth fall.”

Act 3, Scene 4
Fool: “This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.”

Act 3, Scene 5
Cornwall: “True or False, it hath made thee Earl of Gloucester. Seek out where thy father is, that he may be ready for our apprehension.”

Act 3, Scene 6
Edgar: “What that which makes me bend makes the King bow, he childed as I fathered.”

Act 3, Scene 7
Servant: “I’ll never care what wickedness I do if this man come to good.”

Act 4, Scene 1
Gloucester: “O dear son Edgar, the food of thy abused father’s wrath, might I but live to see thee in my touch, I’d say I had eyes again.”

Act 4, Scene 2
Albany: “Gloucester, I live to thank thee for the love thou showd’st the King and to avenge thine eyes.”

Act 4, Scene 3
Gentleman: “In brief, sorrow would be a rarity most beloved if all could so become it.”

Act 4, Scene 4
Cordelia: “Seek, seek for him, Lest his ungoverned rage dissolve the life that wants the means to lead it.”

Act 4, Scene 5
Regan: “It was great ignorance, Gloucester’s eyes being out, to let him live. Where arrives he moves all hearts against us.”

Act 4, Scene 6
Gloucester: “O you mighty gods, this world I do renounce and in your sights shake patiently my great affliction off. If I could bear it longer and not fall to quarrel with your great opposeless wills, my snuff and loathed part of nature should burn itself out. If Edgar live, O bless him! Now, fellow, fair thee well.”

Act 4, Scene 7
Lear: “You do me wrong to take me out o’the grave. Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound upon a wheel of fire that mine own tears do scald like molten lead.”

Act 5, Scene 1
Edmund: “Which of them shall I take? Both? One? Or neither? Neither can be enjoyed if they both remain alive.”

Act 5, Scene 2
Edgar: “Men must endure their going hence even as their coming hither, ripeness is all.”

Act 5, Scene 3
Lear: “My poor fool is hanged.”

Edgar: “The weights of this sad time we must obey, speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. The oldest hath borne most; we that are young shall never see so much, nor live so long.”

Scholars Opinions of King Lear

From the Introduction to the Arden Shakespeare edition of King Lear, Edited by R.A. Foakes

“King Lear stands like a colossus at the centre of Shakespeare’s achievement as the grandest effort of his imagination. In its social range it encompasses a whole society, from king to beggar, and invites us to move in our imagination between a royal palace and a hovel on a bare hearth. Its emotional range extends from the extreme violent anger to the tenderest intimacy of the loving reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia. The play powerfully registers the anguish of the suffering brought about by the inhumanity of man (and woman) to man in the exposure of Lear in the storm and the blinding on stage of Gloucester. It is the unsparing in its depiction of human cruelty and misery, but also rich in its portrayals of goodness, devotion, loyalty and self-sacrifice. Through the Fool’s commentary, Poor Tom’s ‘mad’ sayings and the insights gained by Lear and Gloucester in their suffering, the play vividly exposes human folly, greed and corruption. It incorporates aspects of pastoral and
romance, recalls morality plays, has a protagonist of ‘epic’ stature, and these features, together with the astonishing imaginative range of its action, its language and its imagery, have encouraged many to see the play in terms of universal values, as a king of objective correlative for the spiritual journey through life of suffering man. So it may not seem extravagant for the claim to be made that ‘the bent of the play is mythic: it abandons verisimilitude to find the truth, like the story of Oedipus’ (Mack 97).”

Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man*

“Shakespeare uses the three inter-related hierarchies given him by the assumptions of his age to make *King Lear* the largest and most profound of all his plays. Nowhere else does he so completely fuse the contemporary concepts of the world, the individual and the state into a single unity; correspondences and parallels between them, amalgamations of one concept with another, are everywhere; they embody the vision of life and they form the texture of the style. At the height of his career, with his dramatic craftsmanship developed to a remarkable pitch of virtuosity, daring and assurance, Shakespeare uses the old story of Lear to present his terrible picture of the microcosm and the macrocosm, the picture which shows how, under the good appearance, the evil in man’s nature can bring chaos in a kingdom and a soul, and be reflected in the chaos of the external world.”

Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare and the Invention of the Human*

“When I teach *King Lear*, I begin by reminding my students that Lear, however unlovable in the first two acts, is very much loved by Cordelia, the Fool, Albany, Kent Gloucester, and Edgar – that is to say, by every benign character in the play – just as he is hated and feared by Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and Oswald, the play’s lesser villain, the superb and uncanny Edmund, is ice cold and indifferent to Lear as he is even to his own father, Gloucester, his half brother Edgar, and his lovers Goneril and Regan. It is part of Shakespeare’s genius not to have Edmund and Lear address even a single word to each other in the entire play, because they are apocalyptic antithesis: the king is all feeling, and Edmund is bare of all affect. The crucial foregrounding of the play, if we are to understand it at all, is that Lear is lovable, loving and greatly loved, by anyone at all worthy of our own affection and approbation.”

**Themes**

**Nature:** *King Lear* has repeated references to something or someone being unnatural, against nature or an insult to nature. This brings about musings of nature and whether human beings have a nature of good or evil. Is it our nature to be generous and forgiving or is our nature greedy and power hungry? What defines our nature and can it be changed? If our nature is culturally defined or affected by the
environment in which we live, then what is our inherent nature? Another way in which the natural order of things is defied in *King Lear* occurs when parents and children betray each other in order to gain power.

**Family:** *King Lear* challenges us to decide what family means. The main storylines revolve around two men and their relationships with their children. In the series of disagreements and betrayals that occur between Lear and his daughters and Gloucester and his sons, little regard is shown for familial bonds. In both families, the patriarch is strict and has high expectations of his children. In return, his children betray him and turn their backs on him, with one exception in each family, Edgar and Cordelia. What is it about Edgar and Cordelia that set them apart from their siblings? Edmund is a bastard, meaning his parents were not married when he was born. This has caused his life to be filled with shame. His angry betrayal of his father is a direct response to this shame. But in the case of Goneril and Regan, it is unclear what has caused the lack of empathy they show. The answer may be in Lear’s insistence that they declare love for him above all other love, a declaration inappropriate for grown women with husbands.

**Gender:** There are numerous accounts of Lear speaking negatively about the nature of the female gender. Near the end of the play when Lear meets Gloucester in a field outside Dover, he begins discussing the adultery but ends with a tirade of distaste about the female gender. Gloucester and Lear both mention the children’s mothers it is not entirely clear where they are and what has become of them.

**Loyalty:** There are several characters in *King Lear* that exhibit significant amounts of loyalty toward Lear and Gloucester. Are they deserving of this level of loyalty? Kent in particular is banished from the Kingdom after having spent his life serving Lear. He is not related to Lear and has no obligation whatsoever to continue being so loyal. And yet he does. What motivates Kent’s loyalty? Cordelia is banished and forced to marry the King of France out of desperation and yet she remains loyal to Lear, even returning with French troops to do battle with her sisters. Edgar, after spending his life as a loyal son to Gloucester, is believed to have betrayed him and must disguise himself. And yet he also remains loyal to his father, staying in disguise in order to continue his loyalty. The loyalty is rewarded for Edgar and Kent but Cordelia dies in the end. What message does this play send about loyalty?

**Betrayal:** There is a lot of betrayal in *King Lear*. Lear betrays Cordelia when he reacts to her honesty by banishing her. Regan and Goneril betray their father by casting him into the storm to potentially be killed. They also betray their husbands when they battle over a relationship with Edmund. Edmund betrays his father and brother as he manipulates them both in order to gain power and prestige. Gloucester betrays Edgar when Edmund insists that Edgar desires to do him harm. He never attempts to question Edmund and or to implore Edgar for the truth. Betrayal is probably one of the most powerful themes in the play. Its important to notice that the list of characters mentioned under the heading of betrayal, Goneril, Regan, Edmund and Gloucester all die by the end of the play.
Forgiveness: Near the end of the play, both of the banished children, Edgar and Cordelia, have forgiven their fathers. Even though all is forgiven; there is no peace in it and the ending continues to be tragic. Ask yourself whether you think Lear and Gloucester should be forgiven for their behavior?

Justice: Is the universe just? Does good overcome evil? If *King Lear* is a reflection of the universe, then justice is cruel and inconsistent. While the “evil” characters all die by the end of the play, they have left behind Edgar and Albany to rule the kingdom. Both are left alone without family. Is this justice? Although justice seems to be served in the end of the play, nothing about the ending can be called happy.

Power: Lear is ready to give up his kingdom in the first scene of the play. But he is not ready to give up his power and is genuinely shocked that the two things are so intertwined. The audience doesn’t know the history of the two families involved in the story but it is assumed that Lear and Gloucester deserve the power they have earned. Edmund, Goneril and Regan are all fighting to take the power away from their fathers, by force if needed.

Madness: As Lear is trapped in the storm, he begins his descent into madness. The betrayal of Lear’s daughters and the loss of his sense of self, literally drive him crazy. At this point, the fool goes on a tirade of seemingly senseless babble, and yet, the “crazy talk” seems to make perfect sense. Madness is chaos and Lear himself is in the middle of it. As he begins to make sense of his world and himself, Lear sinks deeper into the madness of his own making. Another example of wisdom through madness is found in Edgar portrayal of Poor Tom. Lear calls poor Tom the philosopher. The theme of madness allowing for self discovery remains constant throughout the play.

Blindness: While Lear and Gloucester are blind to the reality of their situations; Gloucester is literally blinded. When Gloucester loses his eyes and Lear loses his sanity, both characters are finally able to see the truth. They meet, near Dover, at the end of the play and admit how much their blindness has cost them. According to the California Shakespeare Theatre King Lear guide for teachers, Shakespeare uses the words: “See” 46 times, “eyes” 36 times, “eye” 10 times, “sight” 9 times, “eyeless” 6 times and “blind” 5 times. Lear and Gloucester are surrounded by loyalty and yet they are both incapable of recognizing it. They are also incapable of self reflection, an ability to see themselves for who they really are. In the moment when Gloucester is blinded by Cornwall and Regan, this concept becomes literal and the consequences are horrific. The issue of blindness is probably the most prominent theme in *King Lear*. 
About Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was baptized in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564, which means he was probably born a few days earlier. He was born third in a family of eight children and was the oldest surviving son. His father was a successful glove maker and his mother was the daughter of a prominent landowner. At age 18, he married Anne Hathaway and had three children. Between 1585 and 1592, there is very little record of Shakespeare’s life and scholars have named this period “the lost years”. Around 1590, he left his family and moved to London to become a playwright and actor. He enjoyed great success and became a very popular playwright and records indicate he became quite wealthy. Shakespeare was a member of the “King’s Men” who were commissioned by the King of England, James the 1st. It was in 1599 that a group from the “Kings Men” built their own theater called the Globe. He continued to act and write until his retirement in 1613 when he returned to Stratford-upon-Avon. Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616. His wife Anne and two daughters survived him. His daughter’s children all died without having children, therefore ending the direct descendants of Shakespeare in 1670. During his lifetime, William Shakespeare wrote at least 38 plays, 154 sonnets, and significant amounts of poetry. He is considered by many scholars to be the greatest writer of the English language and the most important playwright of all time. Harold Bloom in *Shakespeare The Invention of the Human* suggests that Shakespeare’s plays were written in the following order:

- *Henry VI, Part One* 1589-90
- *Henry VI, Part Two* 1590-91
- *Henry VI, Part Three* 1590-91
- *Richard III* 1592-93
- *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 1592-93
- *Hamlet* 1589-93
- *Venus and Adonis* 1592-93
- *The Comedy of Errors* 1593
- *Sonnets* 1593-1609
- *The Rape of Lucrece* 1593-94
- *Titus Andronicus* 1593-94
- *The Taming of the Shrew* 1593-94
Renaissance England

England, during Shakespeare’s time, was in a period of transition. Until about 1603, England was in the Elizabethan Era when Queen Elizabeth ruled the monarchy. This is considered the height of the Renaissance, a time of cultural, intellectual and political change. With the invention of the printing press in the late 16th century, ideas spread more quickly and change erupted simultaneously over all geographic areas. At the time that King Lear was written, King James I had come from Scotland to take over the monarchy. King James believed in the divine right of Kings, that the king spoke for God on earth and that his opinions should never be questioned. It was during this period that people first began to question this idea and the idea of a King’s birthright to the throne. Many of Shakespeare’s plays are written with this
type of questioning in mind. *King Lear,* for example, is about the nature of power and whether it can be split up and distributed and whether it can be stolen.

**Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre**

(Drawing, the Original Globe Theatre, 1599)

The original Globe Theatre, built in 1599 (Shakespeare was part owner) was destroyed by fire during a performance of *Henry IV* in 1613. A second Globe was built in the same location in 1614 and closed in 1642. Finally, in 1997, Shakespeare’s Globe (pictured below) was opened 750 feet from the original theater. Evidence suggests that the original theatre was an open air; three story building that could hold about 3,000 people. At the base of the stage was a pit where the poorest patrons could stand to watch the performance. The playing area, known as the apron, spread out into the open area. There was a trap door in the center of the playing area where actors could enter and exit. The playing area was covered with a ceiling, known as the “heavens” because it was painted with a mural of the sky. This ceiling also included a trap door for exits and entrances from above. The back wall had several (two or three) doors and a balcony. Behind these doors, actors dressed and got ready for entrances. The balcony could be used as another playing area or for musicians. Seating was three stories high, in galleries, surrounding the playing area.
Going to the theatre during Shakespeare’s time was a significantly different experience than it is in modern times. Audiences were not expected to sit still and remain quiet. They could eat and drink and talk throughout the performance. The building was open air and used natural light. Set design was basically non-existent and the dialogue was used to establish location rather than scenery. This allowed for the production to proceed quickly, with the focus being entirely on the actors and their words. Men or boys in Shakespeare’s company played all roles. It is believed that the Fool and Cordelia were both played by the same actor because they never appear in any scenes together.

It is important to remember that Shakespeare wrote his plays for the masses, many of which could not read or write. His intention was that his work would be heard, rather than read. This distinction is essential when reading Shakespeare seems overwhelming or even impossible.

A Brief History of King Lear

King Lear was written about 1605. The story of King Lear was a popular one before Shakespeare wrote his version. The story was widely known through other plays, poems, essays and historical accounts. Scholars have traced the specific elements of Shakespeare’s tragedy to numerous sources of the story. While Shakespeare’s version is unique, the basis of the story was not his own. His ending was tragic, which was a departure from the other popular versions of the story. The play was performed at Christmas time for the court of King James. Richard Burbage, a member of the King’s Men, played the role of Lear. His performance of Lear was praised in his epitaphs. Scholars believe the role of Lear was written for Burbage who was known for his vocal technique, an essential skill with so many long speeches in the midst of intense emotion. The role of Lear is considered one of the most demanding of all of Shakespeare’s characters.

After Shakespeare’s death, Lear was not widely produced because of the ending. It was considered too tragic for mainstream audiences. In 1681, Nahum Tate revised Shakespeare’s King Lear, by adding a love story between Cordelia and Edgar, removing the fool, and changing the tragic ending to a happy one where good prevails over evil. For several hundred years, it was Tate’s version that was performed. Finally, in 1838, William Charles MacReady returned to the original (although shortened) Shakespeare version for his production. It wasn’t until the late 19th Century that the complete Shakespeare text was being used again. In the 20th Century, John Gielgud was well known for his numerous portrayals of Lear. He first played the role at the age of 27 and then finally, at age 90, in a radio production. His portrayal in 1940 at the Old Vic is considered one of the most outstanding
Shakespeare performances of all time. Harley Granville Barker, who advocated the return of the simple staging that Shakespeare had intended, directed the production. In 1946, Lawrence Olivier played Lear at the Old Vic, Directing the play himself. He later reprised the role in 1983 on film. In the last 20 years, there have countless productions of the play with varying interpretations, including two very famous female Lear’s (Marianne Hoppe, 1990 and Kathryn Hunter, 1996).

**Film Versions of King Lear**

1953 *King Lear* Directed by Andrew McCullough and Peter Brook and starred Orson Welles as Lear.

1969 *Korol Lir*, Russian Film by Grigori Kozintsev and music by Dmitri Shostakovich, considered by scholars to be the best film adaptation of the story.

1971 *King Lear*, Peter Brook’s version, shot entirely in black and white. Lear is played by Paul Scofield who is considered to be one of the greatest King Lear’s of all time. This film is controversial and is often compared to Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* for its bleakness and simplistic portrayal of evil.

1974 *King Lear*, The New York Shakespeare Festival production directed by Joseph Papp, this is a videotaped version of a live production outdoors in central park with James Earl Jones starring as Lear.

1984 *King Lear*, Sir Lawrence Olivier played Lear in his 80’s for this BBC-TV production with John Hurt as the fool and Diana Rigg as Regan.


1987 *King Lear*, Jean-Luc Godard modernized the story with Lear as a gangster named Don Learo. Molly Ringwald played Cordelia.

1997 *A Thousand Acres*, A modern interpretation of the story written by Jane Smiley. In this story Lear is a farmer and lives with his three daughters in Iowa. It became a film starring Jessica Lange and Michelle Pfeiffer.

2002 *King of Texas*, Patrick Stewart plays Lear in a modern language version set in the 1840’s. In this version, Lear is a wealthy land owner and his fool is a freed slave.

(The 1990 Godfather III contains many obvious references to King Lear with Michael Corleone’s attempt to withdraw from organized crime and the anarchy that follows and the death of his daughter in his arms near the end of the film.)
Classroom Activities

Before the show:

Preparing for the Language
From the study guide, take the section on Quotable King Lear. Give each student in class one of the quotes. Ask them to find that quote in the script and to analyze what is happening in the scene the quote was pulled from. Next, have each student paraphrase the quote in modern language. Finally, have each student line up, in order. Go down the line, with each student saying their line in order.

Reflection:
1) What did you learn about the play from this exercise?
2) Why do you think the person who prepared the list chose each quote?
3) Do you think this exercise gave a good impression of the basic story line?
4) Ask the students to switch quotes. Do they think there is another way to interpret the words?

What Does it Mean to Obey Your Parents?
This lesson intends to get students thinking about what it means to honor our parents. What is obedience and loyalty?

1) Break students up into small groups. Ask them to write down examples of situations where they may have told their parents what they wanted to hear rather than telling them their true feelings. Ask them to list any examples where they may have gotten into trouble for telling their parents the truth.
2) Discuss, as a group, how parent-child relationships were different in Shakespeare’s time.
3) Read Act 1, Scene 1 of King Lear, specifically Cordelia’s reaction to being asked to express her love for her father and Lear’s response.
4) Discuss whether Lear’s reaction seems fair.
5) Ask the students to decide what advice they would give Cordelia. Do they believe Cordelia made the right choice in being honest?
6) Reflecting back on the list they made at the beginning of the lesson, are there any times when it is justifiable to be dishonest in order to make someone feel better?

Choosing the Role for YOU!
After spending some time working with the play, ask each student to decide what role they would be most interested in playing. Next, ask them to describe the character using:
Who: Who is this character? Describe physical and personality traits.
What: What does this character want?
When: When does this character live and how does that time period affect their choices? Describe your characters daily life.
Where: Where does your character live? What is the environment like?
Why: Why does this character exist in the play? Why did Shakespeare include this character? Why is this character important to the story?

Imagine this play were set in the year 2012. Ask the students to find a photo of someone famous that they think is a good example of their character. If several students have chosen the same character, ask them to compare their choices and see if there are any similarities.

* After seeing the production, you can return to this lesson and ask the students to evaluate their impression of the character now that they have seen the live production. What would they do differently? Did seeing someone bring the character to life change their understanding of the character?

After the show:

**You Are The Critic**

After the students have attended the production, ask them to write a review for the local newspaper of Classic Theatre of San Antonio's *King Lear*. Prepare for this lesson by reading in class several published reviews from newspapers. Make sure to include information about their impression of the production values and design choices. Ask students to write about the specific performances, what they liked and didn’t like about the acting choices. Once the reviews are written, share them in class.

Reflection:
1) Did everyone agree about the production?
2) What were the biggest differences in opinions?
3) Ask the students to imagine you will send these reviews to the theatre to be read by the entire cast and crew. Does that change what they want to say? Do the students think it’s valid to worry about the feelings of the cast and crew of *King Lear*.

**Leading the Blind**

Edgar must lead his father across the British landscape after he has been blinded. Re-create this experience by building an obstacle course in a large empty space. One student is blind (using a blindfold over their eyes) and the other student is the leader. Without touching their partner, the leader must get their partner through the obstacle course using only voice signals. Have one or two pairs go at a time so
everyone can observe each other. Then allow each pair to switch roles with a new leader and a new person wearing the blindfold.

Reflection:
1) What did it feel like to be unable to see, knowing there were obstacles in the way?
2) Was it difficult to listen closely and trust the partner leading you to help you and get you safely through the obstacles?
3) As the leader, did you ever feel frustrated when you didn’t think your partner was listening to you?
4) Were you able to communicate better the second time you went, when you changed places? And if so, why?
5) How do you think Gloucester would have felt about being suddenly blinded?
6) How do you think the actor playing the role of Gloucester felt about being unable to see on stage? How important do you think it was for that actor to trust the actor playing Edgar to keep him safe?

Your King Lear

Now that the students have seen the production, ask them to make their own choices as if they were directing it themselves.

1) What time period would you place this play?
2) Describe the “World of the Play”.
3) Using well known actors and actresses, cast the lead roles. Using your fellow students, cast the lead roles a second time.
4) Describe what type of set design you would like for your production.
5) Describe the main theme of the play.
6) Decide what you would want for lighting and sound design.
7) How is your King Lear different from the production you saw at The Classic Theatre of San Antonio?

Reflection:
Allow students to present their ideas and discuss the various interpretations. Discuss what ideas are practical and what ideas might be difficult or impossible to implement.

Discussion Questions

1) Is Lear responsible for his own downfall?
2) What do you think motivates Edmund to manipulate everyone around with conniving trickery? Is Edmund evil?
3) If you were one of King Lear’s daughters (or sons), would you have flattered him as he expected or would you be honest like Cordelia?
4) Edgar and Kent both spend most of the play in disguises that allow them to continue to be loyal to Gloucester and Lear. Why do you think Shakespeare made this choice?
5) Edmund is a “bastard”, meaning he was born out of wedlock. In Shakespeare’s times this was a debilitating social stigma. Do you think that is still true today?
6) Why do you think the Earl of Kent remains loyal to Lear after he is banished? Why does he go through the trouble of disguising himself, giving up his prestige in order to continue to serve someone who has turned his back on him? What motivates his loyalty?
7) What do you think motivates Oswald to agree to kill Gloucester, who has done nothing to him?
8) Who are the heroes in the story of King Lear? Who are the villains the story of King Lear? Are there any characters that seem to part villain and part hero? Does everyone get what “they deserve” in the story?
9) Nahum Tate wrote new version of Shakespeare’s King Lear with a happy ending. What did you think about the ending of the play? Did you agree with it or disagree and why?
10) There is a lot of talk about blindness in the play. What characters would you consider “blind”?
11) What similarities and differences do you see in the relationship between Lear and Cordelia and that of Gloucester and Edgar? Do Cordelia and Edgar deserve equal amounts of sympathy?
12) What do you think the violent storm symbolizes?
13) Why do you think the fool exists as a character? Why do you think King’s have a fool in their court? Think about modern plays and films that you have seen that have a fool-like character. How do you think this modern fool’s compare to the concept in Shakespeare’s time?
14) Think about King Lear’s family and compare them to family’s you might know. Are there any differences or similarities? Can you imagine the circumstances that take place in Shakespeare’s tragedy of King Lear happening in any of the families you know?
15) Imagine that you have been asked to come with a descriptive title for this play. What title could you give the play that might describe the most important elements of the story?

Resources


