

MAIN POINTS IN KING LEAR:

- There's potential hints at feminism as Kent talks about the husbands not the females
 - By Edmund having been away from 9 years it means Gloucester cannot fully know him and yet he is easily taken in and is gullible to believe him. He is metaphorically blind
 - Coleridge says "Edmund hears his mother and the circumstances of his birth spoken of with the most degrading and licentious levity"
 - Lear even characterises himself as a dragon
 - In the film Lear is shaking, showing weakness
 - We see a very business-like view of marriage in which the man has all the say
 - Goneril and Regan have a discussion and it is in prose which is used for lower class, base characters
 - Cordelia was Lear's favourite which might give more reason to Goneril and Regan's actions. Is Lear then more sinned against than sinning?
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- With Edmund's illegitimacy, we must remember that the audience of the time would have reacted differently as adultery was a sin
 - Gloucester is outraged by 'Edgar'. This is ironic and links with the idea of not seeing yourself clearly as when he enters the scene he seemed shocked by Lear's rash actions yet has now just acted similarly.
 - Gloucester is very superstitious and blames the sun and moon (there was an eclipse in 1606). But Edmund says we should take responsibility because fate had made him the bastard child. He must then take responsibility for his later actions
 - Edmund is a Machiavellian character (who plots and lies)
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- Goneril has already shown that she does not commit to all she said in the love test. She even tells Oswald not to be so nice to Lear
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- Oswald refers to Lear as "your daughter's father"
 - Kent trips Oswald up, earning Lear's praise and becomes his servant
 - The Fool can be seen as more of a dramatic device than a vital character
 - The Fool says Lear has "banished 2 daughters" – 2? He is suggesting that he has driven Goneril and Regan away too by giving them all his power
 - Goneril launches an attack on Lear, accusing him of encouraging quarrelsome behaviour in his knights and doing nothing about it.
 - Lear says "who is it who can tell me who I am?" and "where are his eyes?"
 - The Fool answers with "Lear's shadow"
 - Lear leaves and returns and 50 of his followers are gone
 - Lear's mental faculties, like his verse structure, is beginning to fragment.
 - He uses "I" instead of the royal "we"
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- Lear says it is in his nature to be a kind father but he must stop now – he is blaming his daughters for changing his nature and is not taking responsibility.
 - The scene takes place outside, showing growing isolation and a fragile mental state

- ♥ Cornwall praises Edmund and says “you shall be ours” and Edmund promises to serve Cornwall. Plot and Subplot become intertwined.
- ♥ Edmund’s short, sharp sentences are suggestive of his command of circumstances

- ♥ Kent challenges Oswald to a fight, Oswald backs down and yells out – he is a coward
- ♥ Kent speaks of “holy-cords” which might hint at an inappropriate relationship between Goneril and Oswald – they do seem rather close
- ♥ Kent mocks Cornwall’s accent and this could be suggestive of him mocking the pretence that people put on to conceal who they really are
- ♥ We see Regan coming across as malevolent by enjoying and even doubling Kent’s punishment

- ♥ Edgar disguises himself as a Bedlam Beggar named Poor Tom – there were many beggars in Elizabethan times due to lots of poverty because of the loss of ‘common ground’. Bedlam hospital housed the mentally ill and when inmates were released they were allowed to go begging for survival.
- ♥ Edgar’s situation now mirrors Lear’s – Edgar is reliant on charity and assumed madness

- ♥ The Fool suggests that children are kind to their parents only due to self-interest and self-preservation
- ♥ Lear wants to know where Regan is and decides to go looking for her, instead of sending a servant – highlighting his powerlessness.
- ♥ Cornwall and Regan say they’re sick. Lear’s powerlessness is emphasised as he cannot do anything about their excuses
- ♥ He refers to Regan as “the Duke and her”
- ♥ The stress is having a physical toll on Lear as he says “oh my rising heart”
- ♥ Regan refers to him as “sir” and later progresses to call him “old man”
- ♥ Once again Lear has misread his daughters as he thought Regan would allow him to stay
- ♥ The insistence to stay with the daughter who allows him to keep the most knights reminds us of the dangers of measuring love in words and numbers
- ♥ Lear now only has 2 people with him; a Fool and a stockinged servant
- ♥ There’s pathetic fallacy here (attributing human emotions or traits to nature or inanimate objects) – the storm symbolises what is happening in terms of tension and the ‘storm’ in Lear’s mind
- ♥ The sisters are completely unmoved by Lear’s show of passion and emotion, they’re completely cold
- ♥ The pattern of entry and exits here mirrors that of act 1, scene 4 and so hints at the chaos to come
- ♥ We see the sisters cutting off Lear when he speaks and this coupled with his incomplete threats, shows his decline of status
- ♥ Lear calls Goneril a disease – he is being assaulted by his own flesh and blood

- 👤 Cordelia wants to come and help, however with this France would come also
- 👤 This is a hard situation for the audience as they don’t want France to come to England by they do want Cordelia to win

- 👤 Lear calls himself a “poor, infirm, weak and despis’d old man”
- 👤 Having the Fool and Kent stick by their master provides a glimmer of hope
- 👤 By saying “I am a man more sinned against than sinning” he takes a small amount of responsibility by acknowledging he has sinned. Although this was being performed to a post-reformation audience, some would still have been aware of the catholic sacrament of confession. The first step in confession is acknowledging your sins – this offers hope as maybe from here Lear will go up.
- 👤 Lear becomes very conscious of the plight of the poor and the outcasts. Ironically, now he is on the verge of madness he can see more clearly
- 👤 The Fool can become linked to the Fool of the Tarot cards as he speaks of Merlin (even though Merlin lived 1000 years after the era ‘Lear’ is set so the Fool seems almost timeless, like a prophet who can see into the future
- 👤 Lear speaks of concepts that are still seen in our society today such as filial ingratitude, sexual greed, manipulation, violence and lack of respect
- 👤 Lear runs around “unbonneted” – he is both mentally and physically exposed.

- 👤 Gloucester decides to defend Lear and mistakenly takes Edmund into his confidence. Gloucester is being even more metaphorically blind.

- 👤 It is ironic that Lear assumes Poor Tom is mad because of his ‘daughters’ when actually it is because of his father
- 👤 Lear wants to know what it’s like to have nothing and tries to undress himself – he has learnt the need to look beyond appearances.
- 👤 Edgar’s language as Poor Tom reflects the language used by the exorcisms in Samuel Harsnett’s book ‘a declaration from Egregious popish imposters’

- 👤 Cornwall receives information about the French invasion and intends to punish Gloucester for his treachery
- 👤 He sends Edmund to find his father

- 👤 Lear decides to ‘try’ his daughters. We see a Lear who has a desire for justice and we see him trying to move towards a society where the rule of law is important
- 👤 The trial is not in the folio edition
- 👤 The trial is a parody of the love test, however here his judgement is not faulty, his madness has helped him to see his daughters clearly
- 👤 Wooden stools represent the sisters and the wood is described as “warped”, showing that the sisters have an unnatural, twisted and perverse nature.

- 👤 Cornwall sends people to search for Gloucester; Gloucester will suffer because he has tried to help Lear
- 👤 Many directors present Regan as deriving some sort of perverse sexual satisfaction from Gloucester’s torture, highlighting her unnaturalness and depravity
- 👤 Regan calls Lear the “lunatic king”
- 👤 Gloucester says “I would not see”. He realises that he has been deceived now and taken in by appearances. Through suffering Gloucester has not, metaphorically, achieved better vision

- 👤 In Brook's 1970 film, the moment when his eyes are gauged out the frame goes black, giving a sense that we are seeing the scene from his perspective
- 👤 2 servants go to help Gloucester and want to take him to Poor Tom; this perhaps shows there is some kind of justice at work.

- ❖ For Gloucester, clarity of vision brings despair as he says "I stumbled when I saw"

- ❖ Albany has undergone a change of heart.
- ❖ Goneril says he is a coward but his reluctance to fight is not due to physical cowardice but rather to the realisation that his wife and others are behaving immorally.
- ❖ Goneril offers herself to Edmund – she is presented as being sexually aggressive.
- ❖ Albany appears and insults Goneril, clearly not the coward she just said he was

- ❖ We learn when Cordelia read the letters about her father's treatment, she cried and "shook the holy water from her heavenly eyes". She can be seen as the epitome of Christian Femininity; compassionate and loving
- ❖ As Lear has begun to regain his wits, the clarity of vision has brought with it distress and regret. Father and daughter now share the same emotion; sorrow.

- ❖ Cordelia sends out 100 soldiers to find Lear
- ❖ She has a doctor with her, showing she is aware of his madness and shows her caring and nurturing side because she has come to save him even though he rejected her
- ❖ Her words echo Christ's in Luke 2:49 "O dear father, it is thy business I go about"
- ❖ She says she is motivated by passion for her father and no political gain. This would allay the audience's fears of a foreign invasion, which was a reality to be feared at the time.

- ❖ Regan is jealous of a potential affair between Goneril and Edmund. Her overt sexuality becomes more and more apparent, especially seen in Trevor Nunn's film.
- ❖ Regan and Edmund have talked and apparently agreed on marriage as she says it is best for him to get with her and not her sister because she is a widow.
- ❖ The materialistic desired are emphasised as she says she is more 'convenient'

- ❖ The suicide scene
- ❖ The sub plot was included to show that filial ingratitude was not only isolated cases and Gloucester's suicide shows how far this ingratitude can push a person
- ❖ Again it was set in a Pagan world as suicide in Christianity is a sin
- ❖ After he 'jumps' it seems to lead to a change of heart, but this does not last very long
- ❖ We see both sons have lied; Edmund for his own self gain and Edgar to protect and save Gloucester
- ❖ Lear enters and in his madness realises his daughters were flattering him and did not mean a word they said by claiming "they told me I was everything; tis a lie"
- ❖ He launches into a tirade about female sexuality and talks about Gloucester's adultery

- ❖ Feminist critics take offense as he is stating that women are animals and fiends. They argue that these are Shakespeare's own views on women
 - ❖ The insults shock but they are relevant as we can relate them directly to Goneril and Regan rather than to all women in general (also remembering this is a prose speech, representing Lear's fragmented mind)
 - ❖ We must remember that the fathers may, in part, be responsible for their own problems and fate – it could be Gloucester's fault for committing adultery and Lear's fault for being so foolish and pompous.
 - ❖ Oswald enters and is keen to attack Gloucester for the reward – showing him to be an immoral coward
 - ❖ Edgar protects his father and challenges, wounds and kills Oswald. Like Kent, Edgar protects someone who has done him wrong
 - ❖ At the beginning Edgar was 'bookish' and confused but, like the other characters, adversity has strengthened him which is good as at the end there is only him and Albany left to rule England.
 - ❖ Perhaps if Edgar had not intercepted and killed Oswald, maybe Goneril would have succeeded at killing Albany
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- ❖ Lear is brought to the French camp near Dover, asleep.
 - ❖ Cordelia kneels by his chair and is as reluctant now to speak to him as she was in the beginning, perhaps she finds it hard to express her love.
 - ❖ In Oliver's 1980 film, when Lear is asleep his beard is shaved off, perhaps allying him with the beard plucked Gloucester.
 - ❖ Lear wakes and doesn't seem to recognise Cordelia and falls to his knees, using first pronouns. Both suggest he has accepted his diminished status
 - ❖ Cordelia says she has no reason to feel bitterly towards Lear
 - ❖ Both Lear and Cordelia feel the same emotion again; pain, humility and concern. This mutual caring is shown by the way they finish off each others sentences and leave the stage together
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- ✚ Regan asks Edmund is he loved Goneril. She is presented as being desperate and demeaning herself – being so needy, desperate and lustful
 - ✚ Edgar, still disguised, asks to speak to Albany and gives him the letter he found on Oswald.
 - ✚ Alone, Edmund reveals he has sworn his love to both Goneril and Regan and cannot decide between them; he is only loyal to himself. He even calls them "these sisters", to him they're interchangeable.
 - ✚ He thinks one will have to die for him to 'enjoy' the other and so waits to see what will happen in battle.
 - ✚ He resolves to kill both Lear and Cordelia if the British win
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- ✚ We find that the French have lost, England have won
 - ✚ Lear and Cordelia have been captured
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- ✚ Lear and Cordelia go to prison
 - ✚ Edmund gives a death warrant over them

- ✚ Regan and Goneril begin to squabble over Edmund. Goneril tells Regan that he cannot marry her and he does not need any title that Regan can offer
 - ✚ Albany is now more assertive and decides to arrest Edmund for treason and challenges him to defend his charge.
 - ✚ Goneril poisons Regan
 - ✚ Edgar accuses Edmund of betraying Albany and challenges Edmund. Edmund agrees to fight and is wounded.
 - ✚ Albany then confronts Goneril with her letter but she just runs off. This is the last we see her alive. We gather from Albany that she is going to commit suicide – she could either die defiantly or dejectedly and desperately. We later find she stabs herself
 - ✚ Edmund lies dying and confesses his crimes to Edgar who puts aside his disguise.
 - ✚ Edgar describes Gloucester's death, making it seem like his heart 'burst' at his reunion with Edgar and, stuck between joy and grief, he died.
 - ✚ Edmund, determined to do good before he dies, tells them he ordered that Cordelia be hanged. He sends a message to intervene. This is a sense of good not flourishing in time.
 - ✚ Cordelia has to die anyways because she is like Christ and because, if she lived, she would be the queen of England, however she is married to France and the husband tended to take control so in essence England would be subjected to France's wishes and this couldn't work on a political level.
 - ✚ Kent sums up the ending saying "all's cheerless, dark and deadly"
 - ✚ Lear committed one last act of heroism; he killed Cordelia's hangman. He then tumbles back into madness
 - ✚ Albany states that he intends to resign his power to Lear and that Edgar and Kent will receive back their rights. Society seems restored.
 - ✚ Lear dies, perhaps believing that Cordelia still lives. Like Gloucester he dies feeling both joy and pain
 - ✚ Edgar speaks the closing lines, Shakespeare's plays usually end with the highest ranking surviving figure saying the last lines and so if it is Edgar (and not Albany who has the highest rank theoretically) then there is a sense that there has been a shift in power and a new future beginning.
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- Critics have suggested Cordelia and Kent's behaviour at the beginning can be read as a warning to James the First not to be taken in by flattering courtiers as he was to gain a reputation for indulging in his favourites
 - Before Cordelia leaves she says the truths will come out, much like an old proverb that states "he that hideth his sins shall not prosper". The proverb is usually read out on the 26th of December.
 - The relationship between Lear and his Fool is reminiscent of the relationship BETWEEN Henry the 8th and his Fool
 - Critics argue that Goneril's savage treatment of Lear later on is motivated by her horror and shock when her father curses her
 - Lear says "unaccommodated man is no more than a poor, bare, forked animal", highlighting that humans are the same and equally vulnerable to the forces of nature and fate regardless of status. Harold Bloom believed "the descent from Monarch to unaccommodated man thus conveys most potently man's fragility, fallibility and fatality"

CRITICS:

- D. J Enright – “the principal characters are not those who act, but those who suffer”
- Knights – “the play is a microcosm of the human race”
- Kolt – “King Lear is about the disintegration of the world”
- Arnold Kettle – “Shakespeare reveals from the very start a society in turmoil”
- Arnold Kettle – “Lear is a hero. His madness is not so much a breakdown as a breakthrough [...] it is through his madness that he comes to a new outlook on life”
- Cunningham – “Lear finds wisdom through madness”
- Stuart – “Lear would rather have flattery than the truth”
- William Hazlitt – “it is Lear’s blindness to everything but the dictates of his passions that produces all his misfortunes”
- Hal Holbrook – “Lear is boisterous, demanding and arrogant”
- Harold Blood – “the descent from Monarch to unaccommodated man conveys most potently man’s fragility, fallibility and fatality”
- Thorndike sees the sisters as “inhuman sisters”
- Duthie – “surely Cordelia’s affection for her father might have led her to pardon his error and to humour him a little”
- Coppelia Kahn – “Lear goes mad because he is unable to accept his dependence on the feminine”

QUOTES:

- “which of you shall we say doth love us most”
- “who is it who can tell me who I am?” . . . “Lear’s shadow”
- “Where are his eyes?”
- “mine eyes are not of the best”
- “I stumbled when I saw”
- Lear calls himself a “poor, infirm, weak and despised old man”
- “I am a very foolish fond old man”
- “I am old and foolish”
- “unaccommodated man is no more than a poor, bare, forked animal”
- “Robes and furred gowns hide all”
- “child-changed father”
- “they told me I was everything; tis a lie”
- “reason in madness” (Edgar)
- “speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (Edgar)

NOTES:

- The fact that tragedy is brought on Lear could provoke feelings of concern in the audience as they are of lower class, so if it can happen to him it can happen to anyone
- Lear's interaction with the Fool shows a more tolerant side to his nature
- Even in his madness, Lear strives to dictate commands by instructing the storm
- In Trevor Nunn's 2009 film, Lear is shaking
- Lear's threats to the Fool are not taken seriously
- Lear's concern for Kent, The Fool and Poor Tom shows that he is learning compassion and thus the pity we feel for him increases as he learns to pity others.
- Lear tries to undress himself, he has learnt the need to look beyond appearances.
- Lear's mad speeches do tend to have an undertone of true meaning, there is a subconscious connection of words in his mind; perhaps there is some hope of him regaining his wits
- In Oliver's 1980 version Lear's beard is shaved off when he is asleep, perhaps allying him with the beard plucked Gloucester.
- Cordelia's death ultimately resulted from Lear's own misjudging of her
- Goneril and Regan are threatening and autocratic. They lust after Edmund in a predatory and unfeminine way. This would have shocked a Jacobean audience as renaissance models of femininity required women to be quiet and submissive.
- Some critics see Cordelia's refusal to speak flattering words as an act of defiance against patriarchy and so interpret her death as justice for her early disobedience.
- As Edgar moves from one role to another, he grows in stature.
- Unlike Cordelia, the Fool is never punished for his truth telling
- The fact that the Fool often calls Lear "nuncle" is significant as it is an affectionate, childlike abbreviation which emphasises the Fool's simple dependence on Lear.
- The Fool speaks in childlike-couplets to reflect Lear's infantile state of mind.
- Kent is reluctant to allow Poor Tom to accompany his master, failing to recognise the beggar's suffering, is this moral blindness?
- Kent seems not to be fooled by appearances as much as he says he does not like Oswald because of the way he looks.
- In Sam Mendes' 2014 production, Oswald is smaller than Kent, emphasising his cowardice and bad nature.
- Despite the inferior status of the servants, indicated by their appearance and clothing, they are frequently the source of hope. We see poetic justice when Cornwall is turned on and killed by his own servant
- Some Elizabethans believed blinding was an appropriate punishment for adultery.
- Lear thinks his life in prison with Cordelia will see them "sing like birds in a cage" – however, song birds are passive tame creatures and this image hints that Lear's visions of happiness are deluded.
- We know nothing of Lear's wife. His phrase "degenerate bastard" when speaking to Goneril could show that Queen Lear must have had an affair

PSYCHOANALYTICAL VIEW:

- At the end Lear seems to have regressed to a sort of childhood and pre-ego stage where a realistic awareness of the world had not been formed and so he was dominated by his id and

super-ego, demonstrated by his impulsive anger and madness. He also may see Cordelia as a mother-figure

- The Fool can be seen as a kind of lost fragment of Lear's self, a personification of his super-ego trying to rein in the violence of his wayward id.
- When Lear feels the loss of Cordelia he calls his state of mind "the mother" which can be interpreted as his repressed identification with his mother. Many people in Shakespeare's time suffered the trauma of maternal deprivation when their wet nurse departed and the effects of this, as stated by Bowlby, leads to a tendency to make excessive demands on others and be angry when they are not met.

LANGUAGE:

- Prose and Blank Verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter with 5 stressed and 5 unstressed syllables)
- The highest number of short lines of any Shakespeare plays – gives flexibility, power, music and harmony.

CONTEXT:

- James 1st was trying to unite England and Scotland
- Inheritance issues with Elizabeth 1st as she was unmarried and childless
- During same period he wrote "measure for measure" which questioned ideas about authority and justice
- Kent and Cordelia could serve as warnings to James 1st not to be taken in by flatters as he was known to indulge in his favourites.
- Performed on 26th of December, traditionally associated with hospitality to the poor and homeless.

Primary source was "the true chronicle history of king leir" (here Cordelia lives and Leir is restored to the throne) and Sir William Allen who divided his property between 3 daughte