

KING LEAR – LANGUAGE

VERSE AND PROSE

- It is written in blank verse and prose.
- There are 2238 lines of Blank verse in the play (approximately 3 quarters). There are 191 short lines within this Blank verse; the highest number of short lines in any of Shakespeare's plays – such variation give flexibility, power, music and harmony. 'Light endings' (defined by Ingram as ending in words like 'thou' 'am' 'can') are only used once within the play, lending significance to the tragedy as other of his play's such as *The Tempest* has 42 'light endings'.
- Blank verse consists of unrhymed iambic pentameters with 5 stressed syllables and 5 unstressed syllables to each line.
- At school Shakespeare would have learnt the technical definition of iambic pentameter and his early plays, such as 'Richard III', tend to be very regular in rhythm. But by the time he came to write 'King Lear', he had become very flexible and experimental in his use of iambic pentameter. His later plays also make greater use of enjambment and he uses this to express the fractured emotions of a particular moment.
- Prose was traditionally used by comic and low-status characters and letters or 'mad' scenes. High-status characters spoke in verse.
- It may be significant that Shakespeare chose Lear to speak in prose later on in the play as that is when he begins to realise his common humanity with those who are most wretched.
- However Shakespeare does not stick to the rules of blank verse rigidly. He uses shorter lines for emphasis and longer lines are used to avoid the comic sing-song or monotonous effect of repeated iambic pentameters.
- At the end of scenes Shakespeare sometimes used rhyming couplets to provide a sense of closure. Rhyme also draws attention to particular thoughts or ideas.
- Sometimes scenes contain both verse and prose.
- The language in the play, especially the final scene, is direct and simple, with the exception of Edgar's mad talk and the Fools riddles. The simplicity plays a part in the play's dramatic power.
- Characters also use asides and soliloquies and have their own personal 'styles' which reflects their roles, emotions and natures.
- It is always important to remember that Shakespeare wrote for the stage and therefore actors will employ a wide range of methods, using their voices and expressions to exploit the dramatic possibilities of the language.

HIGH AND LOW CLASS LANGUAGE

- ❖ 'Low' or comic characters generally speak in prose in Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas. Traditionally, scenes of madness were also written in prose. These traditions are seen in 'King Lear' – however there are some occasions where prose is used other than the tradition.
- ❖ We would expect Lear to speak in verse but as his wits desert him he shifts from verse to prose and back again, signifying the disruption in his mind.
- ❖ It is also seen that at the beginning of the play Lear uses the third person (the royal 'we') but adopts the first person ('I', 'methinks') when he recognises he is powerless. This change reflects his change in status.
- ❖ We also see Gloucester muttering in prose at the beginning of Act one Scene two – perhaps this is to show how troubled he is as he recalls the events of the previous scene.

- ✿ Lear begins the play with an imperative style suited to a monarch – his first words are an abrupt order to Gloucester and even in his madness he strives to dictate to the elements by instructing the storm. At the end of the play he is still giving orders, but the tone has changed into one of polite request and his final words are an impassioned plea for confirmation that Cordelia still lives.

LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

- 🐾 The setting is pagan, but the play is permeated with Christian terminology.
- 🐾 The language also displays many of the characteristics of religions ritual; prayers, oaths, sermons, invocations (when characters appeal to the gods), requests and parables.
- 🐾 Cordelia's language also affirms Christian qualities and her words echo those of Jesus – "O dear father, it is thy business that I go about".

IMAGERY

- 🌸 Figurative language conjures up emotionally charged pictures in the imagination.
- 🌸 Shakespeare uses it to give pleasure, deepen the dramatic impact intensify meaning and provide insight into character.
- 🌸 Lear's words as he wakes from his torturing madness employ a metaphor to create an image that links heaven, hell and earth.

ANTITHESIS (the opposition of words against each other)

- Shakespeare uses the setting of a word against a word extensively in his plays because it powerfully expresses conflict through its use of opposites and conflict is the essence of all dramas.
- For example we have father against daughter, son against father, brother against brother, sister against sister, kingdom against kingdom, sight against blindness, nature against unnatural, evil against good.
- Gloucester notices this himself when he says "there's son against father...there's father against child".

REPETITION

- 🔥 Gloucester's plot mirrors or repeats in a different form Lear's own painful story.
- 🔥 Repetition contributes to the creation of character and dramatic impact.
- 🔥 In the final scene Lear's repetitions of single words convey the depth of his agony and grief for his dead daughter.
- 🔥 Similarly, the recurrence of a few key words provides a clue to some of the play's deepest preoccupations; 'nature', 'unnatural', 'love' and 'nothing'.
- 🔥 The play's poetry and prose both contain rhythmical and phrase repetition

LISTS

- 📌 Shakespeare learned the technique as a schoolboy in Stratford-upon-Avon.
- 📌 He identifies a description and he 'piles up' item on item.
- 📌 For example Kent says "a knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud..."

Charlie cooper

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- The lists provide valuable opportunities for actors to vary their delivery. They usually seek to give each 'item' a distinctiveness and sometimes an accompanying action.