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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



King Lear

by William Shakespeare

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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King Lear

Objectives

Note: All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classics edition of *King Lear*, copyright 2006.

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. trace the development of the main plot in the story and indicate how and where the subplot parallels the main plot.
2. identify and write a brief character sketch for each of the following characters:
 - Albany
 - Cornwall
 - Cordelia
 - Edgar
 - Edmund
 - Gloucester
 - Goneril
 - Kent
 - Lear
 - Oswald
 - Regan
3. write a short essay on the function of the fool in this play.
4. trace the development of the following themes in this play:
 - the foolishness of the aged and the ingratitude of the young
 - the roles of parent and child
 - the importance of nature and the natural order, and the consequences that occur when the natural order is subverted
 - man's fate viewed as a wheel of fortune
 - the consequences of unregulated passion
 - the corruption of power and redemption through suffering

King Lear

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Point out how and to what extent Lear is an example of a “tragic hero.”
2. In three short paragraphs, identify and discuss three ways in which the Gloucester subplot mirrors the main plot.
3. Identify at least three comments made by the fool that reveal his opinion of Lear. In what way does the fool function as the Chorus does in a Greek play?
4. Write a short character analysis for each of the more important characters in the play. Identify their behavior and comment on their motivation.
5. Demonstrate how the following themes pertain to this play:
 - The foolishness of the aged and the ingratitude of the young.
 - The importance of nature and the natural order, and the consequences that occur when the natural order is subverted.
 - Fate, like a wheel, can spin spin out of control.
 - Punishment by the gods for evil acts.
 - Corruption of the individual by power.
 - Redemption through suffering.
 - The consequences of unregulated passion.
6. Describe the relationship between Lear and the Fool. How is it similar and dissimilar to the relationship of Lear and his daughters?
7. Identify the procedures of chivalry that are followed during the confrontational scene between Edgar and Edmund.

1. In this scene, what do we find out about Edmund's birth? How do you suppose Edmund feels about his father's comment on his birth?

2. Find a pun in this scene.

3. What announcement does Lear make?

4. How and why is Lear dividing his kingdom? On what will he base this division?

5. What is the meaning of Cordelia's asides regarding her sisters' comments?

6. How does Lear respond to Cordelia's comment?

Act II, Scene II

Vocabulary

antipathy – a strong dislike
beguiled – tricked
check – reprimand
daub – defile
entreat – plea
epileptic – distorted
exploit – act
ill – badly
mire – an area with wet, soggy ground; bog
pilferings – thefts
reverence – respect
sooth – truth
sop – a piece of bread or cake soaked in liquid before being eaten
stocks – an enclosure for prisoners
visage – countenance
wagtail – an English bird that derives its name from its flicking tail

1. What makes this scene humorous? What literary term would apply?

2. Describe Kent's character, and explain how it contrasts with Oswald's.?

3. Why does Gloucester say that Kent should not be put in stocks?

Act IV, Scene I

Vocabulary

bending – overhanging
brim – edge
contemned – despised
entreat – ask
lamentable – sorrowful
superfluous – over prosperous
wanton – reckless

1. Explain what Edgar means when he says, “The worst is not/So long as we can say ‘This is the worst.’ ”

2. How does Gloucester return to the theme of blindness and lack of vision?

3. What sentiment about fate and the gods does Gloucester express?

4. At this point, why does Edgar not reveal himself to his father?

5. What can you infer from Gloucester’s last comments? How do his comments amplify the theme of fate and mankind?
