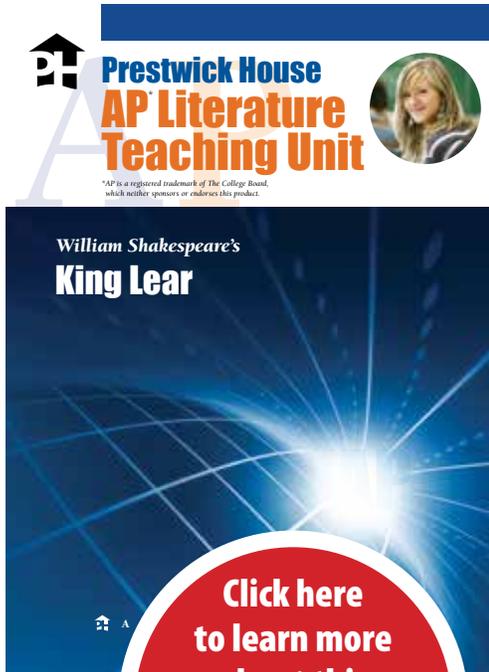




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Teaching Unit

King Lear

by William Shakespeare

Written by Eva Richardson



Prestwick House

Item No. 301413

King Lear

Objectives

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

1. trace the development of the main plot in the play and indicate how and where the subplot parallels the main plot.
2. trace and analyze the development of the following characters: Lear, Cordelia, Regan, Goneril, Kent, Gloucester, Edgar, Edmund, Cornwall, Albany, Oswald.
3. trace the causes, symptoms, and consequences of the developing madness that plagues King Lear throughout the play.
4. trace and analyze relationships between characters, especially between Lear and Cordelia, Regan and Goneril, Edmund and Edgar, and Gloucester and Edgar.
5. analyze Shakespeare's use of language:
 - rhyme and meter
 - figurative devices such as metaphor, simile, personification, etc.
 - dramatic conventions such as pun, aside, allusion, subplot, etc.
6. analyze the function of the Fool.
7. define the concept of the tragic hero by looking at the example of King Lear.
8. trace the following themes in the play:
 - old age and the ingratitude of the young
 - the concept of Natural Order in terms of family relations and the influence of fate, the stars, and the gods
 - the meaning of "nothing"
 - the conflict between sight and insight, vision and blindness, ignorance and self-knowledge
 - reality versus appearance
9. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition exam.

Lecture Notes

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS TIMES

William Shakespeare was born in the town of Stratford-Upon-Avon in England in 1564. Queen Elizabeth I was the ruling monarch when Shakespeare came to live in London to develop his skills as a poet, playwright, actor, and theater director. In London, Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, a theater company that allowed him to concentrate on his career as a writer and actor. Once King James I succeeded Queen Elizabeth in 1603, the company was renamed The King's Men. Shakespeare's company frequently performed at Court as well as in other theaters around the city. In 1616, Shakespeare died in Stratford-Upon-Avon, having become one of the most popular and renowned playwrights in English history.

The Elizabethan Age was a time of great prosperity and wealth in England. Furthermore, it was an era that was marked by significant scientific discoveries, explorations, and inventions. Scientists like Copernicus (1473 – 1543), for example, revolutionized Western thought by demonstrating, for the first time, that the planets revolve around the sun rather than the earth. Although many people at first hesitated to accept such startling new ideas, Shakespeare's time, a period also known as the English Renaissance (1500 – 1650), saw a decreased interest in the outdated ideas inherited from the Middle Ages and a growing fascination with new ideas that emphasized the importance and potential of each individual human being.

People like Martin Luther, Leonardo Da Vinci, and John Milton initiated significant changes in religious beliefs, politics, and the arts and stood as examples of the "Renaissance Man" who accumulates skills in a vast variety of subject matters and areas of study while actively participating in public life.

Several of the groundbreaking ideas that characterized the English Renaissance find their way into Shakespeare's *King Lear*, including:

- This was a new age, a time that required a shift in power from old to new, from old to young. This idea is evidently vital to the story of *King Lear* and centers on Lear's abdication of power and his struggle to find a place as an aging man in a changing world.
- This age saw a turn away from the idea of the "Great Chain of Being," a belief that every being occupies a predetermined place in the hierarchy of the universe. This notion of the "Great Chain of Being" that could not be influenced or changed, because it was divinely preordained, invited human passivity, despondence, and a lack of initiative. A strong belief in the power and influence of the stars, fate, and the gods was closely related with the "Great Chain of Being" theory. The English Renaissance saw a shift away from the ideas associated with human passivity and the unquestionable influence of the gods and fate toward an emphasis on human self-determination, independence, and responsibility. This idea finds its way into a number of Shakespeare's characters. Gloucester, for example, adheres to an antiquated world view focused on a passive belief in the stars and gods, whereas Edmund displays a growing belief in human responsibility.

Practice Free Response Questions

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION #1

In the following passage from Act I, Scene II, Edmund openly expresses his feelings toward his father, his brother, and his situation. Read the passage carefully and write a well-organized essay in which you analyze Edmund's character and evaluate his sentiments with regard to notions of natural family relations and the problem of legitimacy versus illegitimacy.

EDMUND: Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land:
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to the legitimate: fine word, "legitimate"!
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper:
Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

PRACTICE FREE RESPONSE QUESTION #2

In the following soliloquy from Act II, Scene III, Edgar seeks refuge in a forest near Gloucester's castle. The banished son, who has fallen victim to Edmund's evil schemes, now realizes that he will never be able to return to his father to regain his love and respect because everybody believes him to be a traitor who planned to kill his father. Read the passage carefully and write a well-organized essay in which you analyze Edgar's decision to assume the character of a poor madman. Explain Edgar's reasoning for becoming "nothing" and analyze how his disguise influences later actions and events in the play.

EDGAR: I heard myself proclaim'd;
And by the happy hollow of a tree
Escaped the hunt. No port is free; no place,
That guard and most unusual vigilance
Does not attend my taking. Whiles I may 'scape
I will preserve myself: and am bethought
To take the basest and most poorest shape

King Lear

Act I, Scene I

1. What is the question Lear asks his daughters before he makes the division of his kingdom final? What does he expect of his daughters?

2. What is Cordelia's answer to Lear's question, and why is Lear outraged by Cordelia's answer?

3. How does Kent's reaction to Lear's banishment of Cordelia introduce the theme of sight and insight?

4. In this first scene of the play, how does Shakespeare establish the parallels between the stories of Lear and his daughters on the one hand and the story of Gloucester and his sons on the other hand?

Act II, Scene I

1. What rumor of political upheaval reaches the castle of Gloucester?

2. Why does Edmund injure himself to draw blood?

3. How does Gloucester react when he learns about Edgar's alleged intentions to attack and murder him?

4. How does the conversation between Gloucester and Edmund, following Edgar's escape, signal a reversal of the relationships that Edgar and Edmund have with their father?

5. How does Gloucester's expression "my old heart is crack'd, is crack'd" illustrate the parallel between Gloucester and Lear when it comes to old age and their relationships with their children?

Act III, Scene I

1. What news about Albany, Cornwall, and the King of France does Kent reveal to the Gentleman?

2. What mission does Kent ask the Gentleman to complete?

Act IV, Scene I

1. What does Edgar mean when he says “the worst is not so long as we can say ‘this is the worst’”?

2. How does the following statement by Gloucester contribute to the theme of sight and insight: “I have no way and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw”?

3. To what degree does Gloucester attribute influence and power to fate and the gods? Where in this scene does his belief become obvious?

4. What can be inferred from Gloucester’s last comments about his attitude toward fate?

5. What climactic moment might Gloucester’s lament about the capriciousness of the gods signify?

Act V, Scene I

1. What great fear does Regan express to Edmund at the opening of the scene? What does she demand of Edmund?

2. What shocking information does Goneril reveal to the audience in an aside and what does this information disclose about her character?

3. Edmund asks an officer to determine whether the Duke of Albany is still on their side since “he’s full of alteration and self-reproving.” Why does Albany stay on the side of Edmund, Regan, and Goneril even though he despises their actions?

4. Why does Edgar, still in disguise, wish to speak to Albany?

5. What is Edmund’s attitude toward the sisters Regan and Goneril, and what does his speech at the end of the scene reveal about his character?
