

Themes in *King Lear*

This resource is designed as a reference guide for teachers. We have listed the major themes and motifs within *King Lear* and provided examples of scenes where you can study them.

Themes

- Appearance versus reality
- Justice
- Compassion and reconciliation
- The natural order

Motifs

(Recurring elements and patterns of imagery in *King Lear* which support the play's themes)

- Nature
- Blindness
- Parent / child relationships
- Clothing and nakedness
- Betrayal
- Madness

Themes

Appearance versus reality and the need for wisdom to tell the difference.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 1: Lear believes the saccharine professions of his older daughters and divides his kingdom between them, rejecting the truthful and devoted Cordelia; Kent is banished for his honesty.
- Act 1 Scene 2: Illegitimate Edmund expresses his bitterness about his social status and resolves to eliminate his legitimate half-brother, Edgar. He begins his campaign to discredit his brother in the eyes of his father, Gloucester.
- Act 2 Scene 1: Edmund furthers his plot against his brother: on the basis of Edmund's forged letter Gloucester rejects Edgar.
- Act 3 Scene 7: Gloucester is blinded and then told it was his son Edmund who betrayed him.

Justice and whether providence is concerned for our well-being.

Some related scenes:

- Act 2 Scene 4: At Gloucester's house Regan and Goneril join forces in insisting that their father gives up all his servants. Lear leaves in stormy weather as the daughters bar the door against their father.
- Act 3 Scene 2: In concert with a violent storm on the heath, Lear rages against his daughters. He calls himself 'more sinned against than sinning.'
- Act 3 Scene 6: Increasingly incoherent, Lear insists on a mock trial to bring his evil daughters to account.
- Act 4 Scene 1: Edgar meets his blinded father and agrees to lead him to Dover. 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,' says Gloucester.
- Act 5 Scene 3: Goneril poisons her sister and commits suicide, Edgar kills Edmund who has had Cordelia killed and Lear dies of a broken heart. Only a few survive.

Compassion and reconciliation and their triumph in the face of tragedy.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 4: Disguised as a peasant, Kent returns to Lear's service in order to protect him.
- Act 3 Scene 3: Despite his awareness that he is going mad, Lear feels pity for his Fool.
- Act 3 Scene 4: In the continuing storm Lear reflects on the poor and homeless who have no protection against such weather. Coming upon the naked Edgar as Poor Tom, Lear tears off his own clothes.
- Act 4 Scene 7: Lear and Cordelia are reconciled. 'No cause, no cause,' says Cordelia in response to her father's admission that she has some cause to hate him.

The natural order and the terrible consequences when the laws of nature are broken.
Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 2: Illegitimate Edmund expresses his bitterness about his social status and resolves to eliminate his legitimate half-brother, Edgar.
- Act 2 Scene 1: Edmund furthers his plot against his brother: Gloucester rejects his son Edgar.
- Act 2 Scene 4: At Gloucester's house Regan and Goneril join forces in insisting that their father gives up all his servants.
- Act 3 Scene 2: In concert with a violent storm on the heath, Lear rages against his daughters.
- Act 4 Scene 7: War between the forces of good and evil is now fully engaged as Cordelia leads her troops against Goneril's army led by Edmund.
- Act 5 Scene 3: Goneril poisons her sister and commits suicide, Edgar kills Edmund who has had Cordelia killed and Lear dies of a broken heart. Only a few survive

Motifs

Nature as it mirrors the human condition; also as a force much greater and more authentic than human authority and as such a lesson in humility.

For example:

- 'Thou, Nature, art my goddess'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'Crack Nature's moulds, all germains spill at once, / That makes ingrateful man'
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'The tempest in my mind / Doth from my senses take all feeling else / Save what beats there'
Act 3 Scene 4

Blindness as highlighting the inner vision needed to tell substance from the superficial.

For example:

- 'All that follow their noses are led by their eyes but blind men'
Act 2 Scene 4
- 'I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'What, art mad? A man may see how the world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears'
Act 4 Scene 6
- 'Get thee glass eyes / And, like a scurvy politician, seem / To see things thou dost not'
Act 4 Scene 6

Parent / child relationships as reflecting the natural order of things and the consequences when this order is disrupted.

For example:

- 'Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend, / More hideous when thou show'st thee in a child / Than the sea-monster'
Act 1 Scene 4
- 'Create her child of spleen, that it may live / And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her'
Act 1 Scene 4
- 'I pray thee, daughter, do not make me mad'
Act 2 Scene 4
- 'But I shall see / The winged vengeance overtake such children'
Act 3 Scene 7

Clothing and nakedness as they support the idea of appearance versus reality, shallowness versus substance.

For example:

- 'Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'Let not the creaking of shoes nor the rustling of silks betray thy poor heart to woman'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'You, sir - I entertain you for one of my hundred; only I do not like the fashion of your garments'
Act 3 Scene 6
- 'And bring some covering for this naked soul'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'Robes and furr'd gowns hide all'
Act 4 Scene 6

Betrayal as both cause and consequence of the breaking of natural laws.

For example:

- 'In palaces, treason; and the bond crack'd 'twixt son and father'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves'
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts / Against their father, fool me not so much / To bear it tamely'
Act 2 Scene 4
- 'Of Gloucester's treachery / And of the loyal service of his son'
Act 4 Scene 2
- 'Edmund, I arrest thee / On capital treason; and, in thine attaint / This gilded serpent'
Act 5 Scene 3
- 'If none appear to prove upon thy person / Thy heinous, manifest and many treasons'
Act 5 Scene 3

Madness as the consequence of upsetting the natural order; also as a form of wisdom in a topsy-turvy world.

For example:

- 'O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven'
Act 1 Scene 5
- 'I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad'
Act 2 Scene 4
- 'O fool, I shall go mad'
Act 2 Scene 4
- 'O, that way madness lies'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'Enter Edgar disguised as a madman'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'Thou say'st the King grows mad: I'll tell thee, friend, / I am almost mad myself'
Act 3 Scene 4
- 'Tis the time's plague when madmen lead the blind'
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'O, matter and inpertinency mix'd! / Reason, in madness'
Act 4 Scene 6