



King Lear William Shakespeare (1606 first performance)



Assessment: Paper 1 Drama

Section A Shakespeare (Tragedy)
One essay question from a choice of two (35 marks) 1 hour 15 mins



AOs

- AO1 Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression
- AO2 Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts
- AO3 Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received
- AO5 Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations

Terminology

- anagnorisis**
the startling discovery that produces a change from ignorance to knowledge
- aside**
a character speaks in such a way that some of the characters on stage do not hear what is said
- coda**
a conclusion which provides a satisfying ending
- connotations**
the associations that words have
- denouement**
the final resolution or clarification of the plot-the events following the climax of the action
- Dramatic irony**
The audience possesses more information than some of the characters have
- Machiavellian**
The Machiavel was a villainous stock character in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, named after the writer Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527)
- foil**
a character who clearly contrasts with another
- hamartia**
tragic flaw or error of judgement
- hyperbole**
exaggeration
- metaphor/simile**
comparison between two things where one thing is said to be another/ comparison using like or as
- motif**
recurring image or idea
- oxymoron**
a combination of contradictory or incongruous words
- pathos**
a deep feeling of sympathy or pity for a character
- peripeteia**
a character's tragic reversal of fortune
- protagonist/antagonist**
main character/character who is in opposition to the main character
- Soliloquy**
A direct speech to the audience as if the character is thinking aloud

Characters (vocabulary)

Lear	Gloucester	Cordelia	Goneril and Regan
irresponsible	complacent	pious	dominant
tragic	rash	defiant	sadistic
abusive	unaware	stubborn	vicious
tyrannical	vulnerable	integrity (n)	subversive
patriarchal	stoical	selfless	ambitious
egotistical	suicidal	modest	autocratic
desperate	tormented	forgiving	vindictive
outraged	credulous	saintly	masculine
beleaguered	adulterous		jealous
vengeful	loyal		treacherous
self-obsessed	trusting		immoral
diminished	courageous		remorseless
humble	heroic		inhumane
vulnerable			
compassionate			
vain			
Edgar	Albany/Cornwall	Edmund	Kent/the Fool
benevolent	passive	Machiavellian	loyal
innocent	weak	rebellious	trustworthy
gullible	agent of justice (n)	subversive	truth-teller (n)
passive	virtuous	treasonous	bitter
sympathetic		adaptable	sarcastic
	cruel	manipulative	affectionate
	corrupt	cunning	steadfast
	vengeful	anarchic	blunt
	ruthless	ambitious	accepting
	authoritarian	cruel	
		insecure	

Wider Reading/Further Study

- Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* (1991) A modern re-telling of King Lear
- Leo Tolstoy, *Critical essay on Shakespeare* (extract)
- McLuskie, K 'The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and King Lear' (2012)
- Film: *King Lear* (1971) Peter Brook's magnificent black-and-white film adaptation of his 1962 RSC staging, with Paul Scofield as the king



Context

Composed during 1605, *King Lear* is a tragedy that shows how King Lear slowly descends into madness after dividing his estate between his daughters.

Shakespeare was born just after the middle of the sixteenth century, a century which, in England, was fraught with extraordinary events. It was marked by discord, violence and change, particularly affecting the monarchy and the practice of the Christian religion in England. The tensions between worshippers who favoured a Catholic style of Christian worship, and those who followed the ideas of the Reformation, which brought in Protestant beliefs and practice, affected politics and society throughout the century.

Under Elizabeth, compulsory church services were held in English rather than Latin, and a new *Book of Common Prayer* (i.e. prayers to be used uniformly throughout the Church of England) was introduced in 1559. Throughout his life, therefore, Shakespeare heard the words of the Bible in English and listened to the scholarly and poetical language of the *Book of Common Prayer*, both of which had a considerable influence on his own written style.

Elizabeth reigned until 1603, when she was succeeded by her Protestant relative, James, King of Scotland, a member of the Stuart family.

James as King of England

- Having been brought up as a Protestant, and as a strong opponent of his mother's Catholicism, James faced opposition in England from the Catholic families who resented another Protestant ruler
- In 1605, the year in which *King Lear* appeared, a group of conspirators placed barrels of gunpowder under the House of Parliament, hoping to blow up the king and his senior ministers

However, the plot (still known today as the **Gunpowder Plot**) was discovered and the conspirators arrested and executed. One of them, Guy Fawkes, gives his name to the 'guy' still burnt on bonfires in England on Guy Fawkes' Night every year – November 5th.

In the play he wrote the next year (1606), *Macbeth*, Shakespeare pays a compliment to King James, who traced his descent from Banquo, a noble opponent of Macbeth in the play. Shakespeare also introduces allusions to the Gunpowder Plot; for example, a medal was produced to commemorate the king's escape, which had on it the image of a snake under a flower. In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth says to her husband: 'Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it.'

Politics and morality

In Shakespeare's time many people believed that the end of the world was imminent. One of the symptoms of the approaching catastrophe would be a collapse of social structures, including the political system and what were seen as 'natural' hierarchies in which people knew their place in the social pecking-order. Thus it was a relief to many when James I acceded to the throne of England, as potential civil war was avoided and there was the additional promise of unification between England and Scotland.

The threat of **civil war** is alluded to several times in *King Lear* and the play raises an important point about the behaviour of the ruling classes. If rulers behave immorally, then their conduct spreads like a disease which carries evil throughout society – even causing it to fall apart. The Britain depicted in the play is in a very fragile state. However, in the end it is rescued from evil that has spread downwards from the very highest ranks of society. Civil war is avoided and the country does not fall into French hands.

Shakespeare's play could be seen as being firmly behind traditional ideas of civil authority and supportive of what many would have regarded as the strength and harmony established by James I. It is significant that the first Court performance of the play was on the day after Christmas, December 26 1606.

Threats to social stability

Shakespeare's plays contain many references to the disasters that occur when social structures are overturned. In both *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* there are descriptions of the universe being thrown into chaos because of the actual or planned assassination of a ruler. The Elizabethan world-view saw that social happiness depended on stability.

Past Paper Questions

SAMS

Explore Shakespeare's use of power and powerlessness in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

OR

Explore how Shakespeare presents the difference between appearance and reality in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

2017

Explore the ways in which Shakespeare treats the theme of madness in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

OR

Explore Shakespeare's presentation of Edmund in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

2018

Explore the ways in which Shakespeare treats the theme of control in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

OR

Explore how Shakespeare presents the relationship between Lear and Cordelia in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

2019

Explore Shakespeare's presentation of Edgar in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

OR

Explore how Shakespeare presents the ending of *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

* 2020 (Autumn)

Explore the ways in which Shakespeare presents family relationships in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

Or

Explore how Shakespeare presents the Fool in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

*2021 (Autumn)

Explore how Shakespeare presents human weakness in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

Or

Explore Shakespeare's use of setting in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

2022

Explore Shakespeare's presentation of loyalty in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

Or

Explore how Shakespeare presents Goneril and Regan in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

2023

Explore the ways in which Shakespeare uses different varieties of language in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

Or

Explore Shakespeare's presentation of justice in *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

2024

Explore the extent to which Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a political play. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

Or

Explore the presentation of relationships between masters and servants in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

2025

Explore the presentation of the storm scene in Act III Scene ii of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

Or

Explore the presentation of social order in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.