



**Shakespeare's  
King Lear**

**Revision Notes  
By**

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Summary: Act 1 .....	3
SCENE 1 .....	3
SCENE 2 .....	4
SCENE 3 .....	5
SCENE 4 .....	5
SCENE 5 .....	6
Summary: Act 2 .....	7
SCENE 1 .....	7
SCENE 2 .....	8
SCENE 3 .....	8
SCENE 4 .....	8
Summary: Act 3 .....	10
SCENE 1 .....	10
SCENE 2 .....	10
SCENE 3 .....	10
SCENE 4 .....	11
SCENE 5 .....	12
SCENE 6 .....	12
SCENE 7 .....	12
Summary: Act 4 .....	14
SCENE 1 .....	14
SCENE 2 .....	14
SCENE 3 .....	15
SCENE 4 .....	15
SCENE 5 .....	15
SCENE 6 .....	15
SCENE 7 .....	16
Summary: Act 5 .....	18
SCENE 1 .....	18
SCENE 2 .....	18
SCENE 3 .....	19
Analysis of Major Characters .....	21
Themes.....	25
Aspects of the Story.....	27
Literary Genre.....	28
Cultural Context.....	29
General Vision & View Point.....	30
Sample Answer: Leaving Cert Higher Level (2006) English Paper 2 .....	31

## Summary: Act 1

### Scene 1

At King Lear's palace in Britain, the earls of Kent and Gloucester, along with Edmund enter. Gloucester and Kent, are discussing King Lear's plans to divide his kingdom. They speculate as to why the king was decided to give the same amount of territory to both of his sons-in-laws, even though he prefers one to the other. Their conversation quickly changes, however, when Kent asks Gloucester to introduce his son. Gloucester introduces Edmund, explaining that Edmund is his illegitimate son (he cracks jokes about his affair with Edmund's mother, who was apparently quite fun, but too fertile for everyone's good), being raised away from home for the past nine years and will be returning to his home-away-from-home soon, but that he nevertheless loves him dearly.

King Lear, the ruler of Britain, enters his throne room and makes a formal announcement about his plan to divide the kingdom among his three daughters and their husbands. Lear says he will still officially be king; meaning he will retain all of his power and revenues, but he intends to give up the responsibilities of government and spend his old age visiting his children. He feels that dividing up the kingdom now will avoid any disputes after his death. There is also the matter of his youngest and unmarried daughter, Cordelia; the king of France and the Duke of Burgundy are at his court at that time, competing for her hand. But first he commands his three daughters to say which of them loves him the most, promising to give the greatest share to that daughter.

- Goneril (Lear's eldest daughter): makes a ridiculous and flattering speech about how she loves her father as much as life itself.
- Regan (Lear's middle daughter): declares Goneril is a good daughter, but actually she is the one who loves her father more than life. She declares his love is the only thing that gives her happiness in life.
- Cordelia (Lear's youngest daughter): listens to her sisters' empty words and ponders the stupidity of a 'love' contest. Words of love are no substitute for actually feeling love, and her love is richer than her ability to flatter. So when her turn comes, she refuses to play Lear's game. He asks her, "What can you say to draw a third [of the kingdom] more opulent than your sisters? Speak." She replies, "Nothing."

Lear presses her, responding to her; "Nothing will come of nothing: speak again" (A1.A1.L82). When pressed, Cordelia says that she cannot "heave / [her] heart into [her] mouth," that she loves him exactly as much as a daughter should love her father, and that her sisters wouldn't have husbands if they loved their father as much as they say (A1.A1.L84–85). Cordelia promises that when she marries, half her love will be reserved for her husband; she won't claim that all her love belongs to her father. In response, Lear flies into a furious rage; he says if she loves truth so much, truth can be her dowry and he disowns Cordelia, and divides her share of the kingdom between her two sisters. Lear then swears by Heaven and Hell that he is casting Cordelia out. She is no longer part of his family, and he thinks of her as fondly as he thinks of the kind of people who eat their children.

The Earl of Kent, a nobleman who has served Lear faithfully for many years and is a trusted advisor, is the only courtier who disagrees with the king's actions. He tries to intervene on Cordelia's behalf, telling Lear he is insane to reward the flattery of his older daughters and disown Cordelia, who loves him more than her sisters do. Lear turns his anger on Kent, ordering him "Out of [his] sight!" (A1.S1.L154), banishing him from the kingdom and telling him that he must be gone within six days on pain of death. Kent responds by saying "See better, Lear" (A1.S1.L155). Declaring Lear is up to evil, Kent valiantly takes his leave, announcing he is headed to freedom instead of banishment. He bids Cordelia good luck, and praises her for her honest words. He also says he hopes Goneril and Regan's big speeches amount to more than lies. Kent exits.

Lear makes sure his rejection of Cordelia is complete by calling in her two suitors: the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy, who are still at Lear's court, awaiting his decision as to which of them will marry Cordelia. He tells them that Cordelia is no longer his daughter, and that she no longer has any title or land. Burgundy withdraws his offer of marriage, but France is impressed by Cordelia's honesty and decides to make her his queen. Lear sends her away without his blessing, and then exits.

Cordelia offers a tense goodbye to her sisters. She claims her sisters don't really love their father as they stated. They sweetly reply that they hope Cordelia's new husband will dislike her as much as their father now dislikes her. Cordelia wishes her sisters well, and declares time will reveal them to be schemers. Goneril and Regan scheme together in secrecy. Although they recognize that they now have complete power over the kingdom they still worry about what their father will do next. Lear, they say, is going senile, as there is no other explanation for why he would banish both Cordelia and Kent on a whim. They both agree that they must act to reduce their father's remaining authority.

## Scene 2

Edmund enters and delivers a soliloquy expressing his dissatisfaction with society's attitude toward bastards. He bitterly resents his legitimate half-brother, Edgar, who stands to inherit their father's estate. Edmund argues that he's just as smart, attractive, and talented as Edgar. But because of a technicality of birth, Edgar will get property and an important position and he, Edmund, will get nothing. He resolves to do away with Edgar and seize the privileges that society has denied him.

Edmund begins his campaign to discredit Edgar by forging a letter in which Edgar appears to plot the death of their father, Gloucester. When Gloucester enters, Edmund makes a show of hiding this letter from him, acting flustered when questioned and naturally, Gloucester demands to read it. Edmund answers his father with careful lies, so that Gloucester ends up thinking that his legitimate son, Edgar, has been scheming to kill him in order to hasten his inheritance of Gloucester's wealth and lands. Edmund then promises he can provide his father with some kind of resolution: that very evening, he'll have a conversation with Edgar on which Gloucester can spy. Edmund will talk to Edgar of the business, and Gloucester can form his own conclusion. Gloucester ponders over the thought of Edgar betraying him and reminds Edmund that it's now up to him to sort out Edgar. He also muses over the banishment of Kent before he exits.

After Gloucester exits, Edmund takes time to muse about the fact that people are often ready to blame their own failings and circumstances on the stars and their fates, as if

they couldn't help being as villainous as they are. Edgar enters and Edmund begins the second part of his plan. Edmund makes a little speech about the horoscope promising death and division that will impact both states and families. After Edgar teases about how silly horoscopes are, Edmund tells him that Gloucester is very angry with him and that Edgar should avoid him as much as possible and carry a sword with him at all times. Edgar suggests that his father could only think badly of him because some villain has done him wrong, and Edmund agrees that's probably the case. Edmund also provides a plan, saying if Edgar goes back to his place, he'll drop by and fetch him to speak to their father when the time is right. Thus, Edmund carefully arranges circumstances so that Gloucester will be certain that Edgar is trying to murder him. Edgar exits and Edmund, alone, crows over how lucky he is to have a brother and father so good and gullible that they won't suspect his treachery, simply because they couldn't fathom it. This will make his evil deeds easy. He declares he's sure to get Gloucester's land, if not by rightful inheritance, then by his own wits.

### Scene 3

Lear is spending the first portion of his retirement at Goneril's castle. Though he is a guest and has given his daughter's equal rule, he still acts as though he was in charge. Goneril's steward, Oswald, confirms to Goneril that Lear smacked one of her servants upside the head because the servant was rude to Lear's Fool (A1.S3.L1-2). Goneril complains to Oswald, that Lear's knights are becoming "riotous" and that Lear himself is an obnoxious guest (A1.S3.L6). Seeking to provoke a confrontation, she orders her servants to behave rudely toward Lear and his attendants to spark up confrontation. This way, they can air everything out. Goneril also announces that Regan and she share the same distaste for their father, so she's safe if Lear goes to Regan for help.

### Scene 4

Kent enters Goneril's castle, disguised as a simple peasant and calling himself Caius. He speaks in a strange accent so no one recognizes his voice. Lear enters with his entourage and he puts himself in Lear's way. After an exchange of words in which Caius emphasizes his plain-spokenness and honesty, Lear accepts him into service and he becomes one of his entourage.

Lear's servants and knights notice that Goneril's servants no longer obey their commands. When Lear asks Oswald where Goneril is, Oswald rudely leaves the room without replying. A knight then enters and reports that Goneril says she isn't well. Lear is angry that Goneril and Oswald have disrespected them and the knight confirms that everyone in Goneril's castle seems to be being rude and cold as of late. Lear asks for his Fool, whom he says he hasn't seen him in two days. The knight reports the Fool hasn't been the same since Cordelia left for France. Though Lear has noticed this also, he doesn't want to talk about it.

Oswald soon returns. Lear demands that Oswald tell him who he thinks he's talking to. "My lady's father," Oswald replies. This is not an acceptable answer, as Lear is still the King, which, to Lear, is a more important label than "parent" (A1.S3.L63-64). But his disrespectful replies to Lear's questions induce Lear to strike him. Kent steps in to aid Lear and trips Oswald.

The Fool arrives and, in a series of puns and double entendres, tells Lear, in a mocking comedic way, that he has made a great mistake in handing over his power to Goneril and Regan. He suggests that Lear's pitiful position now is his own fault – after all, he made his daughters into his mother. The Fool has a lot more fun at Lear's expense, calling Lear a fool and making clear that he values Cordelia above Goneril and Regan, who are bad seeds. The Fool laments that there's no need for fools when wise men are foolish. Nobody else could get away with speaking like this to Lear except the Fool. After a long delay, Goneril herself arrives to speak with Lear. She claims his 100 knights are always loud and riotous, and that with the way he's been behaving lately, she worries he's actually encouraging this bad behavior and tells him that his servants and knights have been so disorderly that he will have to send some of them away whether he likes it or not.

Lear is shocked at Goneril's treasonous betrayal. Nonetheless, Goneril remains adamant in her demand that Lear send away half of his one hundred knights. An enraged Lear repents ever handing his power over to Goneril. He curses his daughter, calling on Nature to make her childless. Surprised by his own tears, he calls for his horses. He declares that he will stay with Regan, whom he believes will be a true daughter and give him the respect that he deserves. He announces to all that Goneril is a "degenerate bastard" (A1.S4.L199) and that he has one daughter left.

When Lear has gone, Goneril argues with her husband, Albany (who had come in during the middle of the fight out of curiosity). He is upset with the harsh way she has treated Lear. She says that she has written a letter to her sister Regan, who is likewise determined not to house Lear's hundred knights. Goneril instructs Oswald to deliver the letter to Regan and to explain her reasoning while delivering the letter, and to feel free to embellish any bits he thinks will keep Regan on their side. Goneril then gives a tongue lashing to her husband. She's wary of Albany's gentleness towards Lear. Albany counters that things will turn out badly if Goneril keeps up her bad behavior.

## Scene 5

Lear sends the disguised Kent to deliver a message to Gloucester informing him of his arrival at his second daughter's house. The Fool cracks some bizarre jokes, needling Lear further about his bad decisions, foreseeing that Regan will treat Lear no better than Goneril did. Lear half-listens to him, but he can't get his mind off his one good daughter, Cordelia, who he seems to remember all of a sudden; "I did her wrong," Lear admits quietly (A1.S5.L17). The Fool makes jokes that Lear is old before his time, he points out that men should be wise before they get old. The Fool is calling Lear a foolish old man, not a wise old man. Lear calls on heaven to keep him from going mad; "O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! / Keep me in temper: I would not be mad!" (A1.S5.L34-35). Lear and his attendants leave for Regan's castle.