



Rewarding Learning

eGUIDE//English Literature

Shakespearean Genres

Unit A2 1

King Lear

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Starting Point

In this unit there are 5 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03, A04 and A05.

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of the selected play.

This Assessment Objective (AO) involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the play, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently, using appropriate terminology and concepts. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.

A02: Dramatic methods

In this examination, the candidate should analyse Shakespeare's use of such dramatic methods as characterisation, structure, language and staging.

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in plays. This means identifying dramatic features and showing how these features relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing dramatic methods – advice to teachers and students:

In this component, equal marks are available for the candidate's treatment of the extract and other relevant parts of the text. As the unit is closed book, examiners will be realistic about the amount of detail from the wider text which can be provided in the time available. Every play has its memorable phrases which come to mind when writing, but it is anticipated that the larger-scale features of form, structure, language and staging will be helpful in constructing a relevant response. The student will, however, be expected to respond in a more detailed fashion to the use of language and dramatic methods within the given extract. A reminder of the process of identification (of methods), illustration, analysis, and relation to the question may be timely.

A03: Contexts

In this examination, the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which a play is written and received by drawing on appropriate information from outside the play.

Each question will specify a particular type of context in the stimulus statement/directive. In this unit the stipulated context will be literary and will focus on the nature of a particular Shakespearean genre. Contextual information offered should be of this stipulated type. It should be relevant to the question. And it should be external to the play itself.



Contextual information which is made relevant to the key terms of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

A04: Connections

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections within a Shakespeare play, and between the extract accompanying the question and the wider text.

The student should explore similarities and differences between characters, plot lines, themes, staging, and other dramatic techniques within the play and its wider context. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key terms of the question will be rewarded.

A05: Argument and interpretation

In this examination, the candidate should offer opinion or judgment in response to the given reading of the play, taking account of the key terms as the basis of the argument.

This AO is the driver of Unit A2 1 and is of primary importance.

A05 can be satisfied in full by the candidate developing his/her own reading in response to the given reading. If, however, critics are used, they must be:

- used with understanding;
- incorporated into the argument to reinforce or be seen as an alternative to the student's opinion;
- not used as a substitute for the development of the student's own opinion; and
- properly acknowledged.

Coherence and relevance of argument will be rewarded. Students should be aware of the importance of planning in the sequencing and illustration of the reading they wish to put forward. They should also beware of the danger of replacing the key terms of the question with others of their own choosing which they assume mean much the same thing.

The following information is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a starting point for teachers and students. It reflects some of the stylistic and contextual issues which may be explored and developed further both in the classroom and through teachers' and students' own independent research.



A01 Plot, Characters, Themes

Plot Summary

Act One

In Act One Lear may appear rash and despotic but the seventeenth-century belief in the Divine Right of Kings to govern meant he had absolute power and was not required to listen to opposing views. The tragic hero in his time of prosperity and good fortune.

The elderly monarch of Britain has decided to relinquish his responsibilities as king (but not his royal title) to his three daughters.

The play opens with the Earl of Kent and the Earl of Gloucester – and Gloucester’s illegitimate son, Edmund – discussing King Lear’s decision to divide his kingdom, thus engaging the audience’s interest in Lear before he even takes to the stage. Kent and Gloucester’s initial interaction is bawdy and this is reflected in the use of prose.

Lear’s tragic flaw (or hamartia) is his pride. This is first demonstrated through the ‘Love Test’ that he has designed. Lear has divided the kingdom and has reserved the best portion of land for the daughter who flatters him the most, anticipating that this will be his favourite and youngest daughter. The older daughters, Goneril and Regan, comply and flatter Lear in a hyperbolic manner. Cordelia, who genuinely adores her father and knows her sisters are being disingenuous, struggles with the very concept of the ‘Love Test’. When it is her turn to speak she simply states that she loves Lear as any daughter should love her father. Her brief response, expressed in simple and direct language, contrasts sharply with her sisters’ elaborate praise for Lear. Lear’s pride is hurt and he angrily rebuffs Cordelia’s words as a slight against him. He disowns Cordelia. Kent tries to calm his king but Lear announces that the kingdom will be divided equally between Goneril and Regan (and their husbands, the Duke of Albany and the Duke of Cornwall), and turns his wrath on Kent whom he banishes.

Two suitors – the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy – had been visiting Lear’s palace, hoping to win the hand of Cordelia in marriage. Now that Cordelia has been disowned and is without a dowry, Burgundy withdraws his interest, but the King of France remains steadfast and accepts Cordelia as his queen, regardless of Lear’s harsh words and refusal to bestow a dowry. In this way, France acts as a foil to Lear’s rash and intemperate treatment of Cordelia, demonstrating true nobility. Before leaving with the King of France, Cordelia entreats her sisters to treat Lear with kindness even though she knows the two are incapable of doing so.

Alone on the stage Goneril and Regan discuss briefly how they will push Lear aside - their disrespect and lack of affection for their father is clear.

In Gloucester’s castle, Edmund plots to seize his father’s land and inheritance from Edgar (Gloucester’s legitimate son and rightful heir). Sound reason for Edmund’s plan is not



offered; selfish ambition and resentment at the more favoured treatment of his legitimate brother seem to be his only motives. When Gloucester returns, upset by the events at the 'Love Test', Edmund pretends to hide a letter but only so that Gloucester will notice him doing it. Obeying Gloucester's demand to see the letter, Edmund claims it is from Edgar and that he hasn't read it fully yet. The letter (which in fact was written by Edmund to frame his brother) suggests that if the brothers conspire to kill Gloucester, Edgar will share the inheritance with Edmund¹. Gloucester asks Edmund to confirm that the handwriting is Edgar's. Edmund pretends to defend his half-brother, but tells Gloucester that Edgar has previously mused about taking over Gloucester's estate. Gloucester is convinced of Edgar's guilt and demands to speak with Edgar. Edmund, perhaps afraid that Gloucester will recognise Edgar's innocence if they should discuss the matter, suggests that Gloucester eavesdrop on a conversation between himself and Edgar instead. Confused by the apparent disintegration of his relationship with Edgar, Gloucester agrees and leaves.

When Edgar arrives, Edmund questions him as to how he may have offended his father, telling him that Gloucester is angry with him. Edgar, knowing that he is innocent of any offence, correctly guesses that someone has misrepresented him to his father. Edmund advises Edgar to stay away until Gloucester calms down.

In Albany's castle where Lear is staying (note how the action moves from place to place and from one group of characters to another, and see later remarks on the Unities of Action and Place), Goneril's steward Oswald recounts how Lear struck him because Oswald offended the king's Fool. Goneril orders her servants not to obey or look after Lear or his retinue. She instructs Oswald to tell Lear that she is ill and cannot speak with him. She resolves to write to Regan. The two sisters' resolve to act against their old father is being put into action almost immediately.

A disguised Kent has made his way to Albany's castle - his loyalty to his king means he cannot desert Lear. He asks to serve Lear². Lear accepts Kent on a trial basis. Oswald, the steward, is insolent to Lear and refuses to obey his (or his knights') instructions. Lear has already noticed the growing impudence of Goneril's servants. When Oswald returns, he again shows disrespect to Lear, resulting in Lear striking Oswald and Kent tripping him. Kent's defence of the king pleases Lear.

The Fool, who has been upset since Cordelia's departure, voices his annoyance at Lear's recent behaviour. Lear warns the Fool not to be disrespectful, but the Fool continues to point out Lear's foolishness - a strain of criticism which he will maintain throughout.

Goneril comes to Lear to complain about the behaviour of his retinue in her palace. The Fool's comments reinforce how Lear is being belittled by his daughter. Goneril demands that the number in Lear's retinue should be reduced by half (from 100 to 50 knights). Rather than agree, Lear decides to go to Regan's palace instead. He insults and curses Goneril at length, invoking Nature to wreak revenge on his behalf:

'Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her!'

and begins to recognise how little Cordelia's offence was in comparison to his eldest

¹ As an illegitimate offspring, Edmund was not legally entitled to any inheritance.

² Kent takes on the name Caius with his disguise.



daughter's maltreatment. Knowing she needs Regan's support in diminishing Lear's power and prestige, Goneril sends Oswald with a letter to Regan before Lear can reach Regan's castle. Meanwhile Lear sends Kent with a letter to Regan indicating his intention to reside with her. The Fool tries to warn Lear that Regan will be as inhospitable as Goneril. Lear is beginning to show physical symptoms of stress or mental instability.

Act Two

In Gloucester's castle Edmund is told by a courtier that Regan and Cornwall are expected. The courtier (Curan) also shares with Edmund the rumours he has heard regarding conflict between Cornwall and Albany. Dissension in the kingdom is growing, provoked by Lear's initial rash error.

Edmund tells Edgar to flee the castle because Cornwall is coming and Cornwall has heard that Edgar has spoken against him. Once again Edgar is innocent but fails to see Edmund's manipulative strategies. Edmund engages Edgar in a mock sword fight, aware that Gloucester is approaching. Once Edgar has left, Edmund wounds his own arm and tells Gloucester that Edgar attacked him for refusing to be part of Edgar's patricidal plan. Furious, Gloucester deploys men to capture Edgar. Edmund further manipulates Gloucester by telling him that Edgar plans to blame Edmund if he is caught, knowing that the legitimate son will be believed over the illegitimate son. Gloucester vows to make arrangements so that Edmund can inherit all of his land and wealth.

Cornwall and Regan have heard of Gloucester's family woes and Regan quickly lays the blame for Edgar's malicious plan on the influence of Lear and Lear's knights, whom she says Edgar has been consorting with. Impressed by the loyalty Edmund has shown to his father, Cornwall enlists Edmund in his own service. Regan admits that she and her husband have come to Gloucester's castle to avoid Lear, who is on his way to their palace. She says she wants Gloucester's advice as to how to proceed as both Goneril and Lear have written to her – each complaining about the other.

Outside Gloucester's castle Oswald, Goneril's steward, mistakes Kent for a servant of the castle. Kent however recognises Oswald, insults him and physically attacks him. The assault is stopped by the entrance of Edmund, Gloucester, Cornwall and Regan who try to ascertain the cause of the quarrel. Kent's account displeases Cornwall, who orders that Kent is placed in the stocks. Kent reminds Cornwall that he is a messenger of the king, but Cornwall and Regan insist that Kent should be punished because Kent (the king's messenger) has assaulted Oswald (Goneril's messenger). Alone on stage, Kent reveals that Cordelia is aware of Lear's situation: he has faith that Cordelia will restore order to the kingdom.

Edgar has fled to a wood. He knows a decree has been issued for his arrest and that securing help or escaping Britain is impossible. He decides to disguise as a mad beggar.

As they approach Gloucester's castle, Lear and the Fool discuss the strangeness of Regan and Cornwall being absent from their castle and the non-return of the messenger Lear had sent (Kent). They soon discover Kent in the stocks and Lear is outraged that his envoy has been treated in such a manner. Lear finds it difficult to believe that Cornwall and Regan are the cause of Kent's imprisonment. Kent recounts the incident to Lear who then goes in search of Regan. Kent questions the Fool as to why Lear has so few men in his retinue and the Fool explains that many have deserted Lear due to his lack of money and power.

Lear returns with Gloucester, angry that Regan and Cornwall have refused to see him. He



insists that Gloucester go to get Regan and Cornwall, not least so they can rescind the order that placed Kent in the stocks.

The fall of the tragic hero: in Lear's pleading with Goneril and Regan, he is humiliated and realises his total lack of power.

Gloucester returns with Cornwall and Regan, and Kent is released. Lear complains to Regan about Goneril but Regan defends her sister's actions. When Regan tells Lear that he is being unreasonable and that he should return to Goneril and apologise to her, Lear refuses and curses Goneril. Regan tells Lear that she knows Lear will similarly turn on her but Lear insists that Regan is a better daughter than Goneril and he knows that Regan will show him kindness. At this point, Goneril arrives. Suddenly Lear realises that Goneril and Regan are allied against him. Regan insists that Lear returns to Goneril's palace and then he can come to her after one month as they had previously arranged. Lear angrily rejects the suggestion and demands to stay with Regan – along with his 100 knights. Regan refuses, saying she can only accommodate 25 knights³. Lear, humiliated says he will go back to Goneril as she will allow him 50 knights, but Goneril and Regan conspire to reduce Lear's retinue to zero. They tell Lear that the servants at their palaces will tend to his needs instead. Lear is furious but his emotional state prevents him from making any coherent argument. He curses his two daughters and threatens revenge on them for their malice and unnatural disrespect, using metaphors of disease:

'But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,
Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,
A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle,
In my corrupted blood.'

He leaves with Gloucester, the Fool and one knight. A storm is brewing but Goneril is unrepentant that her elderly father has gone out into the turmoil. Gloucester returns to beseech Goneril and Regan to make amends so that Lear will not be forced to suffer the storm. Their response is that Regan orders the doors to be bolted to deny Lear re-entry.

Act Three

On a heath, Kent meets one of Lear's gentlemen who tells him that Lear has no shelter and is wandering aimlessly in the violent storm with the Fool. Kent tells the gentleman that French forces have come to Britain to assist King Lear and entrusts him with the errand to go to Dover to tell Cordelia what has happened to Lear.

Lear's madness is evident yet he begins to recognise his errors. The beginning of tragic enlightenment.

On another part of the heath, in apocalyptic terms Lear seems to entreat the storm to end the world:

'Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,

³ Goneril and Regan feel that they need to reduce Lear's retinue in order to demonstrate their power and to remove the capability of Lear to rise against them.



Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Strike flat the thick rotundity o'th'world!
Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once,
That make ingrateful man!

He sees the storm as a punishment because of his errors; or sees the storm as a heavenly sign that the gods are united with his daughters in wanting to destroy him. Even his indulgence in self-pity reveals his recognition that he has lost his power:

'here I stand, your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man.'

Kent locates Lear and the Fool and insists they take shelter from the storm. Lear has no concern for himself but agrees to find shelter in order to protect the Fool. The use of pathetic fallacy, whereby the storm mirrors the 'tempest in [Lear's] mind' that the king feels as his remorse (for his actions towards Cordelia) and anger (towards Goneril and Regan) effectively heightens the dramatic presentation of his emotional turmoil and descent into madness.

In Gloucester's castle, Gloucester tells Edmund that he thinks Lear has been treated badly by his two eldest daughters. He confides in Edmund that he has received word that a force has arrived in Britain to help the king. Edmund at once resolves to betray Gloucester and tell Cornwall everything he has learned in order to gain favour with what he sees as the rising powers.

Note how the alteration of scenes and groups of characters (A02) show break-down on a personal, family and national scale, while the storm suggests a near-cosmic disturbance.

Lear, Kent and the Fool have found a hovel to take shelter in but Lear refuses to enter it. He says that the hardship of the storm is as nothing to the pain his daughters have caused him because of their ingratitude. His compassion for the Fool is clear though, and he tells the Fool to take refuge. The Fool enters only to run back out, claiming to have seen a spirit in the hovel. The 'spirit' is Edgar, disguised as a beggar. Edgar plays the role of a mad beggar (raving gibberish for the most part) but tells Lear, Kent and the Fool that he is being tortured by the devil. In Lear's own mentally distressed state, he thinks the beggar suffers the same torment as he – namely the beggar's daughters have brought him to ruin. Lear's madness is worsening and he begins to tear at his clothes.

Gloucester arrives on a mission to help the king. Fearing he will be recognised by his father, Edgar's ravings become louder and even more incoherent. The ploy works and Gloucester fails to recognise his son. Gloucester is more concerned than ever for Lear, given the strange company he is keeping. Gloucester tells Lear that he should return with him, in spite of Goneril and Regan's orders. Lear insists on speaking further with Edgar/Poor Tom⁴ first. Kent confesses to Gloucester that Lear is very unstable. Gloucester says he can sympathise because his son Edgar's betrayal has caused him similar pain. It is decided that Poor Tom will return with Lear, the Fool, Kent and Gloucester.

In Gloucester's castle, Edmund has carried out his intention to betray Gloucester to Cornwall in order to secure his own position. Cornwall declares Gloucester a traitor and promises Edmund the title of Earl of Gloucester.

⁴ Poor Tom is the name Edgar has adopted.



Lear, the Fool, Edgar/Poor Tom, Kent and Gloucester have battled through the storm and have reached a farmhouse on Gloucester's estate. Gloucester leaves to find provisions. Edgar continues to 'play' the mad beggar but Lear's descent into insanity is sincere as he believes he is present at the trial of Goneril and Regan (with Edgar and the Fool as the judges). Kent recognises Lear's fragile mental state and encourages him to rest. When Gloucester returns, he beseeches Kent to take Lear to Dover as he has learned of a plot to kill Lear. Alone on stage Edgar remarks on the similarity between his and Lear's situation:

'He childed as I fathered!'⁵

Back in Gloucester's castle Cornwall tells Goneril to alert Albany to the fact that the French have invaded and that Gloucester is a traitor. Regan declares that Gloucester should be hanged and Goneril demands that Gloucester's eyes should be plucked out. Cornwall tells Edmund to accompany Goneril back to Albany so that he will be spared having to watch his father's punishment. Oswald brings news of Lear's journey to Dover and confirms that Lear has been assisted by Gloucester and others.

The captured Gloucester is brought before Cornwall and Regan. Gloucester is humiliated, not only because his guests have become his jailors, but also because Regan 'plucks his beard'⁶. Gloucester admits that he assisted Lear to escape to Dover so that Lear may avoid the cruelties that Goneril and Regan had intended to inflict upon him. Cornwall reacts by plucking out one of Gloucester's eyes and Regan encourages Cornwall to remove the other as well. A servant tries to prevent the barbarity, wounding Cornwall, only to be attacked and killed by Regan.

Now blind, Gloucester calls for Edmund but Regan gloatingly reveals that Edmund hates Gloucester and was the source of their knowledge that Gloucester was a traitor. Gloucester immediately realises that Edmund's treachery means that Edgar had always been loyal to him. Regan orders that Gloucester is ejected from the castle, then tends to Cornwall who has been injured in the sword fight with the servant. Other servants decide to tend to Gloucester's wounds and bring him to Poor Tom so that the beggar can lead Gloucester away to safety.

The tragic arc: the positioning of Lear's peripeteia (the reversal in his fortunes) may be debated; his anagnorisis (recognition of the truth) is usually looked for in the storm scenes.

Act Four

Edgar immediately recognises his father as an elderly servant escorts Gloucester across the heath. Selflessly, Gloucester insists that the servant leave him before the servant's kindness is detected and punished by Cornwall's men. Gloucester laments his metaphorical blindness to Edmund's treacherous plotting and expresses remorse for his poor treatment of Edgar. Edgar speaks with Gloucester and the servant as Poor Tom. Gloucester asks the servant to get clothes for 'Tom' so that 'Tom' can guide Gloucester to Dover. Gloucester promises 'Tom' that once at Dover he will reward him. Moved by his father's plight, Edgar agrees to the proposition.

As Goneril and Edmund approach Albany's palace, Oswald meets them with the news that Albany has not reacted to the French invasion and Gloucester's treachery as expected.

⁵ *Lear's daughters have treated the king unjustly, just as Edgar's father has treated him unjustly.*

⁶ *A highly insulting gesture in Renaissance society.*



Goneril calls her husband a coward and indicates that she will leave Albany and take Edmund as her lover. She sends Edmund back to Cornwall and Regan.

Albany comes to meet Goneril but chastises her for her contemptible treatment of Lear. He accuses Goneril and Regan of unnatural behaviour towards their father – and their king. Goneril is unrepentant and insulting. She questions why he is not preparing a force to fight the French. Their argument is interrupted by a messenger who reveals that Cornwall has died from the injury he sustained in the sword-fight on the occasion of Gloucester's blinding. Albany is disgusted when he hears how Cornwall plucked out Gloucester's eyes and says that Cornwall's death was a just punishment from the gods for this cruelty. Goneril's only concern is that her now widowed sister may destroy her plans to take Edmund as a lover. In Goneril's absence, the Messenger tells Albany that Edmund had accompanied Goneril to the palace and that Edmund had been instrumental in Gloucester's arrest. Albany vows to avenge the pain caused to Gloucester and reveals he is loyal to King Lear.

Now the forces of healing and re-integration begin to assert themselves.

At the French camp near Dover, a Gentleman tells Kent that Cordelia cried when she read of Lear's plight and that she was angered by Goneril and Regan's cruel treatment of their father. Kent says that Lear, although also in Dover, has been too ashamed to go to Cordelia.

Cordelia has heard reports of Lear's descent into madness and sends officers to search for her father. She promises great wealth to the man who can restore Lear to his proper senses. When she learns of the British forces making their way to Dover she makes it clear that the French aim is not to conquer Britain; her husband merely gave her the resources to be reunited with her father.

In Gloucester's castle, Regan reveals to Oswald her belief that Edmund is absent because he has gone to find Gloucester to kill him. Oswald has a letter for Edmund from Goneril – Regan wants to open it as she suspects it is a love-letter. Knowing that Oswald is loyal to Goneril, Regan tells Oswald that she herself would be a better match for Edmund now that Cornwall is dead.

As they approach Dover, Edgar (still pretending to be Poor Tom) fears that Gloucester wishes to commit suicide by falling from a cliff's edge. Although on even ground, Edgar deceives Gloucester by describing the supposed seascape below and tells Gloucester he is a few inches from the cliff edge. Believing he is alone on a precipice, Gloucester prays, then 'throws himself forwards and falls'. Gloucester's belief that he is committing suicide fills this scene with pathos; his remorse for his folly is clear and his attempt to punish himself for his errors in judgement secures the audience's sympathy. Edgar pretends that he has found Gloucester at the bottom of the cliff and that, miraculously, Gloucester has survived the great fall.

Lear comes upon Gloucester and Edgar. Lear is talking to himself and is 'fantastically dressed with wild flowers'. Edgar is distressed to see how unstable Lear has become. Gloucester recognises Lear's voice but Lear does not recognise Gloucester or Edgar – his mind is focused on his cruel daughters. Gloucester quickly realises that Lear is mad and is saddened.

Although mad, Lear has gained insight and wisdom.



Lear asks Gloucester to read a challenge he has written but Gloucester explains that he no longer has eyes to read. Lear muses that no one should be blind to justice and lists the injustices that the powerful commit against the lowly. Lear's mind flits to thoughts of killing his sons-in-law. Cordelia's officers find Lear but Lear misinterprets their intentions and runs off.

Oswald finds Gloucester and tries to kill him, but Edgar defends Gloucester and it is Oswald who dies. With his last breath, Oswald asks Edgar to deliver the letters he is carrying to Edmund, whom he refers to as 'Earl of Gloucester'. Edgar reads a letter from Goneril to Edmund in which she tells her lover to murder her husband so they can marry. Edgar resolves to show the letter to Albany after he has found refuge for Gloucester.

At the French camp, Lear has been rescued and put to bed to rest. Cordelia thanks Kent for his unwavering loyalty to her father. Kent is humble but asks that she allow him to continue with his disguise for the time being. The Doctor suggests it is time to wake Lear. Cordelia is kind and loving towards Lear, hoping it will alleviate the pain caused by Goneril and Regan. She cannot comprehend how Goneril and Regan could have treated Lear so badly.

Lear remains fragile but is no longer 'mad'; his reunion with Cordelia has a regenerative effect and he has become more self-aware.

When Lear speaks at first he still seems to be delirious, addressing Cordelia as though she were an angelic spirit. He is remorseful for his weaknesses and errors when he recognises Cordelia and invites her to kill him because of the wrongs he has done her. Cordelia tells Lear she has no cause to hate him and he begs her forgiveness.

Rumours circulate the French camp that battle is imminent.

Act Five

In the British camp near Dover, Edmund is frustrated at Albany's apparent lack of decisiveness. Regan tries to secure Edmund's love and fidelity for herself. When Goneril arrives, she admits (in an aside) that she doesn't care about the battle; her only concern is that Regan doesn't come between her and Edmund. As Goneril, Regan, Edmund and Albany prepare to leave to discuss strategies, Edgar (who is in disguise) arrives and asks to speak with Albany. Edgar gives Albany the letter he had taken from Oswald and then leaves. Before Albany can read the letter Edmund returns to say the enemy is within sight. Alone on the stage Edmund confesses that he has purposely made Goneril and Regan rivals for his love. He intends to give Goneril enough hope for their union so that, following the battle with the French, she will have Albany killed. Edmund is determined that the mercy Albany had decided to show Lear and Cordelia shall not be put into effect.

Edgar has taken Gloucester to a field so that he will be safe. From his vantage point Edgar sees that the French army has been defeated and that Lear and Cordelia have been taken prisoner.

At the British camp Edmund triumphantly tells the guards to take Lear and Cordelia away to await their judgement. Cordelia wishes to confront her sisters but Lear simply wants to be with Cordelia – believing that, with her, he will be happy, even if they are prisoners. Edmund gives an officer a written instruction and promises him a promotion if he follows the orders therein without question. The officer agrees.



Albany, Goneril and Regan come to meet with Edmund. Albany congratulates Edmund on the victory and asks for Lear and Cordelia. Edmund explains that Albany can see the prisoners later. Regan defends Edmund's right to decide such matters as he has fought as proxy for her late husband. Jealous, Goneril tells Regan she has over-estimated her right to speak for Edmund and the sisters argue over him. Albany at last reveals his position, telling Edmund and Goneril they are under arrest for treason; and telling Regan that Goneril and Edmund have already arranged to marry (knowledge from the letter Edgar passed to Albany earlier). Albany challenges Edmund to a duel. Regan repeatedly claims to be sick and she is led out. An aside from Goneril indicates she has poisoned her sister.

As Albany and Edmund are about to fight, Edgar arrives dressed in knightly armour. His lowered visor means he cannot be recognised and he refuses to give his name. He states that he has come to fight Edmund because of Edmund's treachery against his brother, father and Albany.

When Edmund is struck down in the duel, Goneril tries to intervene but Albany silences her with the evidence of the love-letter. Goneril exits. Edmund admits his guilt for the crimes Edgar has accused him of (perhaps aware that his wound is fatal). Edgar reveals his true identity and explains how he pretended to be a mad beggar to protect his father. Edgar tells Albany that he had told Gloucester about his ruse before he came to challenge Edmund and that Gloucester had given him his blessing. However, the joy and grief felt by Gloucester had been too much for his heart and the old earl had died.

In a frenetic final episode, a Gentleman interrupts Edgar's revelations by coming in 'with a bloody knife' and explains that Goneril poisoned Regan and then stabbed herself. Edmund speaks only to say that he will not live much longer either. Albany gives the order for the bodies of Goneril and Regan to be brought to him. Kent arrives and asks to speak to Lear. Kent's request reminds Albany of Edmund's final act of treachery and he demands that Edmund tell them where Lear and Cordelia have been taken. Knowing he will die soon Edmund shows a little mercy and warns that they must rush to prevent his order to kill Cordelia from being carried out. Edmund is then taken away.

Lear returns to the stage, piteously carrying a deceased Cordelia in his arms. Lear – broken, exhausted and grief-stricken – carrying his lifeless, innocent daughter is reminiscent of the pieta tableau:





Cordelia, like Christ, is an innocent victim, a suffering servant. Through this tableau the Virgin Mary's grief at her Son's death is symbolically transferred (from the audience's perspective) to Lear. His silent raw distress is shared by the audience and the catastrophic ending is almost complete. Lear is in denial, desperately hoping that Cordelia still breathes. He tells the others that he killed the man who had hanged Cordelia. Kent reveals his true identity to his master. Kent also tells Lear that Goneril and Regan are dead but Lear grieves only for the loss of Cordelia.

An officer arrives to say that Edmund is dead. Albany explains that he will return all the royal power to Lear and reinstate Kent and Edgar's previous titles.

Lear dies. It is ambiguous whether Lear dies believing deludedly that Cordelia is alive; or whether his acceptance of her death had made him lose the will to live.

Albany asks Edgar and Kent for their help in restoring the kingdom. Kent refuses because he feels he is near death himself. Edgar suggests they need time to process their personal grief before turning their attention to the matters of state.

Characters

The antagonists of the play are relatively two-dimensional in that their evil traits are not balanced with redeemable qualities. The 'good' characters are generally more complex with a mixture of admirable qualities and weaknesses.

Lear

It is obvious to the audience that the Lear we meet at the beginning of the play is a flawed character. He is an egotistical, dictatorial and impetuous elderly man with an unshakeable belief that his royal status affords him privilege and an unquestioning obedience from those around him.

His foolish decision to divide his kingdom may be partially attributed to his old age but his rash and callous treatment of Cordelia and Kent are harder to understand – or forgive. The extent of his hubris and wrath as presented in Act One is made all the more shocking when judged against the humble and composed reactions of his innocent victims. Despite the totally negative impression the audience is given of Lear in the opening Act, the loyalty and love which Cordelia, Kent, the Fool and Gloucester clearly have for the king cannot be ignored and serves to establish Lear as a character worthy of our respect (an essential element of a tragic hero).

The suffering which Lear endures is extreme. While at first he counters Goneril and Regan and their maltreatment with extraordinary insults and curses, his descent into madness evokes pity from the audience. His redeeming qualities such as his tenderness with the Fool, his sensitivity and generosity of spirit with Poor Tom, his gratitude to Caius (Kent in disguise) and his growing self-knowledge all contribute to Lear securing the audience's sympathy when he finally recognises his errors. He shows remorse for his mistakes and judges himself harshly – the toll of which manifests in his physical and mental decline. By the time he is reunited with Cordelia, he is a broken man but he has learned grave lessons from his downfall. This recognition of his flaws and his subsequent realisation of what truly matters in life confirms Lear as a tragic hero.

By the final Act Lear is presented as devoid of hubris, intent only on enjoying his time with Cordelia even if this time is to be spent in prison. Compassion for Lear is demonstrated



by Cordelia, Kent and Albany and makes him worthy of the audience's sympathy too. It is through witnessing the suffering of Lear and his transformation that the audience are able to experience catharsis, that mixture of pity and terror which Aristotle noted as the intended reaction to the experience of a tragedy.

Lear's heartache as he holds the lifeless Cordelia in his arms is sincere and evokes great pity. His final moments of agony on stage and the denial of a happy conclusion have a great impact on the audience. While Lear has become much more self-aware and has acquired true wisdom, his grief for Cordelia and misplaced hope that she lives, followed by his own death intensifies the moral message of the play for the audience.

Gloucester

Gloucester, like Lear, makes serious errors in judgement and suffers – disproportionately – as a result. He is presented as a loving father at first to both Edgar and Edmund, if rather tactless regarding Edmund's illegitimate status. The speed with which he is convinced that Edgar is disloyal however, indicates the flaw in his character. Ironically he can recognise Lear's folly but not his own – until he undergoes immense suffering himself.

Gloucester has many admirable traits: he defends Lear, challenges Goneril and Regan, stoically accepts the brutality inflicted upon him by Cornwall and is repentant for his treatment of Edgar. He demonstrates the responsibilities the rich have towards the poor through the respect and gratitude he shows to Poor Tom.

Cordelia

From the outset Cordelia is a morally aware and insightful character. Her refusal to indulge Lear in the 'Love Test' shows her desire to keep her father – whom she loves dearly – away from the pitfalls of hubris. She shows an incredible capacity to forgive and reserves indictments exclusively for her two malicious sisters.

Cordelia's remarkable ability to recognise the moral fibre of other characters makes her a useful guide for the audience and we assess the virtues (or lack thereof) of the characters around her in accordance with her opinion of them.

Her defence of what is morally correct, her denunciation of evil actions and her undeserved death has echoes of Christ's life and Crucifixion, and this association is occasionally strengthened through imagery and staging.

The Fool

A humorous character such as the Fool was a familiar dramatic device that provided the Shakespearean audience with moments of light relief in a tragic plot. The Fool in *King Lear* occupies a privileged place as he and Lear have a close bond, and because of this, the Fool is able to question, scold and mock Lear without fear of punishment. His words – though presented through riddles and song – reveal great wisdom and he helps guide Lear towards his anagnorisis.

Edgar

Like Cordelia, Edgar is an innocent victim who suffers because of the unreasonable and unprovoked actions of others; and like Cordelia, he demonstrates an admirable ability to forgive those who transgress against him. As Poor Tom he cares for and protects Gloucester – in spite of Gloucester's previous actions. His compassion is complemented with a strong moral code. For example, his decision to fight in the duel with Edmund is not motivated by personal revenge, rather he is presented as a noble hero who fights against a character who represents a threat to loyalty, justice and truth.



Goneril and Regan

The eldest daughters of Lear are vicious and manipulative characters. They are ignoble, self-serving and cannot even remain loyal to each other.

Edmund

Edmund's desire to acquire wealth and status at any cost is particularly despicable because there is no evidence that Gloucester or Edgar have treated him unfairly. Illegitimate children in seventeenth-century society had few rights but Gloucester shows affection for Edmund and makes provision for him. In contrast, and in return Edmund shows no affection towards either Gloucester or Edgar and is unrepentant when his plotting to destroy his father and brother is revealed. He is conniving, bloodthirsty and merciless. His dying revelation about where Lear and Cordelia are being held does little to redeem his character because his order to have them killed was baseless in the first place. His words in defeat reveal the inevitable futility of such a life: 'The wheel is come full circle; I am here.'

Themes

Below is a list of some of the major thematic treatments – but others can be identified.

Parents and Children

With this theme, positive and negative relationships should be explored and how relationships develop or are redeemed. The associated themes of love (conditional and unconditional) and the responsibilities of parents and children would also apply, especially in light of Lear and Gloucester's advanced age.

Good and Evil (Order and Disorder)

This theme is certainly worthy of study but should not be confined to characters who are 'good' and 'bad'. The natural order/equilibrium is quickly disrupted in this play and disorder is presented in a variety of ways. Consider whether order is restored in the final scene. Is 'good' victorious over 'evil'? What is the cost?

Appearance Vs Reality

Not only do a number of characters assume disguises but many profess the opposite of what they mean.

Influence of the gods/fate

The tragic figures in the play are brought low not only because of their own flaws and the actions of other characters but their fall from grace is also influenced by what is perceived as the failure of the gods to intercede. In spite of this, various characters call upon the gods to help alleviate their suffering. We can perhaps perceive a moral order, which Lear realizes he has broken, in his words, 'Oh, I have taken too little care of this.'



A02 Dramatic Methods

Structure

We immediately focus on Lear's **hamartia** in the opening scene of the play, quickly followed by his **peripeteia**. (We can interpret the first as his tragic flaw, or as a tragic error.) This then allows for Lear's movement towards **anagnorisis** (tragic enlightenment) and redemption. Lear's development as a tragic hero is a slow one, and his enlightenment is prolonged and needs to be tracked in the latter stages of the play. Audience reaction to the death of the tragic hero was described by Aristotle under the name of **catharsis**. Pity and terror were the main emotions he identified: the first revealing our identification with the humanity of the hero; the second representing our desire to distance ourselves from such dreadful events and a realization that they could happen to us.

The use of the Gloucester sub-plot is a key structural feature of the play. Gloucester's family relationships, his suffering and failure to recognise true loyalty and love mirror the main plot which focuses on Lear. The details of the sub-plot serve to draw our attention to the details of the main plot, amplifying and intensifying the emotional reaction provoked in the audience. Shakespearean practice here is the reverse of that of the tragedians of ancient Greece, who avoided sub-plots, instead seeking to intensify through concentration on a single action – the so-called Unity of Action.

The variety of settings and movement of characters suggest that the play covers an extended period of time. The use of short scenes and different locations in Act Four, by adding to the pace (cf. Act Five *Macbeth*) contributes to the sense of inevitability. Here too we can contrast Shakespeare's practice with the ancient tragedians' preference for Unity of Time and Place.

The majority of the deaths occur in the final Act thereby increasing the traumatic impact of the tragedy on the audience. Greek tragedy is a fierce and bloody business, but its playwrights were reluctant to show death on stage. Some critics believe that this reluctance stems from tragedy's roots in religious ritual and argue that the representation of death on stage would thus have been regarded as a pollution. Shakespearean tragedy shows no such inhibitions.

Staging

This play is marked by a series of on-stage acts of violence. These range from low-level striking, tripping and mock sword fights to Kent being placed in the stocks, the horrific gouging out of Gloucester's eyes, and the duel between Edgar and Edmund.

The use of music/sound effects is also notable. Prior to Lear's humiliation and being stripped of his regal power, his entrances are marked by fanfare. But once his status has been diminished, he is not afforded this sign of respect; indeed, throughout Act Three the storm (pathetic fallacy) is the aural device most associated with Lear. The storm also reflects Lear's inner turmoil as he struggles to understand his dramatic change in



circumstances and falls into despair as he comes to understand his actions and their consequences.

Lighting is judiciously used to reinforce key ideas. For example, darkness is denoted through the characters carrying torches, particularly in the storm/heath scenes – metaphorically suggesting that Britain is in ‘darkness’ as Lear is shunned and Goneril and Regan exercise their power.

The use of asides is critical in *King Lear*. They reveal characters’ true intentions/thoughts as the level of subterfuge becomes more and more intricate. The asides assist the audience in navigating between truth and deception and provide insight into characters’ motivations.

Costume is used to reflect the disguises adopted by Edgar and Kent (as they take on a different identity), providing a plausible explanation as to how Gloucester and Lear fail to recognise such familiar members of their households. But costume is also used symbolically – for example:

‘Lear, fantastically dressed with wild flowers’

This use of costume emphasises Lear’s madness. It also links Lear to nature and it is this reconnection with nature that helps Lear gain true insight.

Props also perform an important function in the play. For example, Edmund needs to produce a fraudulent letter to convince Gloucester of Edgar’s treachery; and the love-letter from Goneril to Edmund is the catalyst for their deaths.

Perhaps the most poignant example of staging comes in the final Act when the pieta tableau is used:

‘Re-enter Lear, with Cordelia dead in his arms’

In this final scene, the bodies of Goneril, Regan and Edmund have already been unceremoniously taken on and off-stage but the pieta tableau of Lear carrying Cordelia is given focus so that the audience can share in Lear’s grief.

Language

Lear’s language is adapted to his position on the tragic arc. Initially, he speaks formally, using imperatives and, as expected of a king, Shakespeare has Lear employ the ‘royal we’ during Act One. Following the recognition of his hubris, Lear speaks using the singular pronoun. As he struggles to understand his downfall, questions and exclamations mark his speech.

Prose is used for a variety of reasons in *King Lear*. It is used for bawdy conversations such as that of Kent and Gloucester when they discuss Edmund’s conception in Act One. Goneril and Regan discuss their true purpose (to usurp Lear’s power) in prose at the end of Act One. And Shakespeare alternates between verse and prose for Lear in Act Three to suggest the king’s mental instability. The Fool and Poor Tom are given prose not only because of their lower social status but perhaps also to reflect their perceived weak-wittedness and incoherence.



Repetition is used frequently and can serve to intensify the emotion being expressed. For example, Lear's anger towards his sons-in-law is beyond doubt when he states:

'I'll put 't in proof;
And when I have stol'n upon these sons-in-law,
Then, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!'

Or his defiance against Goneril and Regan's attempts to demean him:

'You think I'll weep;
No, I'll not weep:
I have full cause of weeping; but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
Or ere I'll weep.'

Or his distress at the injustice of Cordelia's fate:

'And my poor fool is hang'd! ...
... Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!'

Numerous examples of patterns of imagery can be found in *King Lear*. Below are a few examples:

Animal imagery

The unnatural or inhumane traits of Goneril and Regan are frequently highlighted through their comparisons to animals. For example, Kent refers to Goneril and Regan as Lear's 'dog-hearted daughters' while Albany condemns them as 'Tigers, not daughters'. Lear refers to them as 'pelican daughters', describes Goneril as a 'Detested kite!' and compares her to a wolf and a vulture.

Snake/serpent imagery

The symbolism of snakes and their association with evil and duplicity explains why the two eldest daughters are also connected to serpents. For example, Albany calls his wife a 'gilded serpent', echoing Lear's earlier accusation that Goneril is 'Most serpentlike'. Even Edmund recognises that the two older sisters are 'of the adder'.

Religious imagery

References to pagan deities such as Jupiter, Apollo, Fortune, and Phoebus reinforce the fickleness of the gods. Gloucester's appraisal of man's weakness in comparison to the power of the gods reveals his level of despair as he asserts that suffering is indiscriminate:

'As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods.
They kill us for their sport.'

Yet Cordelia remains trusting that those who are virtuous will have the support of heavenly powers:

'O you kind gods,
Cure this great breach in his abused nature!'



A03 Contexts

The nature of tragedy

Aristotle

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy should be a single serious, complete action with artistically ornate language, and the evocation of pity and fear should be central. Causes and consequences need to be expounded in detail so that the audience can learn from the play's message. A tragedy must show the range of emotions which rule the main characters. Emotions are fundamental in a tragedy - emotions so strong that the audience identify imaginatively with each stage of the passion unfolding. The audience should be brought to the realisation that justice has been served though this justice may be 'rough', and although there may be surprise elements along the way, these heighten the moral evaluations we make. *Peripeteia* - sudden reversal of fortune - is essential, followed by recognition of fault (ignorance is transformed into insight or knowledge - *anagnorisis*).

Read more at: <http://www2.cnr.edu/home/bmcmamus/poetics.html>

Hegel

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel presented the view that a tragic hero is one whose spirit is discordant. The tragic conflict arises due to the hero's singular devotion to an ethical principle, stubbornly refusing to engage with opposing views. In *King Lear*, the conflict begins within the established unit of the royal family (though it permeates throughout the kingdom). It is because of Lear's actions and attitude that order and balance are threatened. Following the conflict, a sense of natural justice is restored. How well does Hegel's scheme fit Lear? Stubbornness, yes; but can we say that the selfish and tetchy Lear of Act One is devoted to an ethical principle?

The tragedy illustrates how balance has been disrupted and harmony will only be restored in the denouement. Lear's recognition of his error draws pity from the audience. His acceptance of his wrong-doing, attempts to correct his flaws in order to regain a moral balance and his self-judgement and readiness to be punished are features of a Hegelian tragic hero. By the denouement, Lear has reached a point of reconciliation. In *King Lear*, despite Cordelia's death and Lear's heartfelt grief, the harmony of the parent-child relationship has been restored.

Read more at: <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4598&context=ocj>

A.C. Bradley

According to Bradley, a Shakespearean tragedy evokes pity, fear and mystery (mystery at how life can be wasted). While other characters are certainly involved in the plot, a Shakespearean tragedy focuses on one person – the 'hero'. The hero is in conflict with himself – conflicts with other characters are secondary to his individual emotional, inner conflict. The hero must have important social status so that the effects of his downfall can be seen to have wide-reaching consequences (and thereby have a universal effect). An essential ingredient of the hero's downfall is immense suffering which starkly contrasts with his previous happy or fortunate existence. The focus of the suffering is primarily on



the hero but will extend to incorporate other characters (e.g. the Fool, Kent, Gloucester) so that the impact is magnified. Bradley noted that the tragic hero must die and that the audience should be left in no doubt that death will be the result. The suffering and “calamity” are caused by human action (rather than supernatural forces). For example, in *King Lear*, the evil actions of Goneril, Regan and Edmund inspire further evil acts until the combination makes the catastrophic outcome an inevitability. The malign forces within *King Lear* are curtailed before the denouement so that the focus can remain steady on the central figure – the tragic hero. The defeat of Edmund, Goneril and Regan offers momentary hope to the audience that all will end happily for Lear – and this fleeting hope serves to intensify the catastrophe when it comes in the final 70 lines of the play.

The fall of the hero (from revered and respected to wretched and damned) must be catastrophic so that the power of *fate* is clearly seen, especially when set beside the impotence of man. Fate or coincidence can be seen in *King Lear* when the order to free Cordelia and Lear is given moments too late.

According to Bradley, seeing the punishment in terms of justice is unhelpful as the suffering is clearly disproportionate to the initial sin/flaw/error of the hero. The emphasis on the hero’s suffering invites the audience to form an emotional attachment with the hero; such feelings of pity make our purgation of emotion all the more complete when the tragic hero’s final suffering is manifested.

Read more at: www.shakespeare-navigators.com/bradley/



A04 Connections

Students should be keenly aware that there are equal marks available for their treatment of the extract and the wider text in the exam. The focus should be on parallels or connections between the extract and the wider text which are relevant to the key terms of the stimulus statement. It may be beneficial for students to prioritise connections that also reveal their knowledge and understanding of the dramatic methods (A02) and the nature of Shakespearean Tragedy (A03).

When studying the play, you will note many connections and it may be useful to track elements which show parallels or contrasts. For example:

Through *themes*

The madness of King Lear compared to the feigned madness of Edgar/Poor Tom.
The treatment of justice – Lear’s mock trial of Goneril and Regan compared to Albany’s judgement of Edmund and Goneril.

Through *dramatic action*

Violent episodes such as the gouging of Gloucester’s eyes could be contrasted with the duels or Kent/Caius being placed in the stocks.

Dramatic episodes that evoke pity – the Dover cliff scene could be compared to Cordelia’s death.

Through *character interactions*

Relationships – Goneril and Edmund’s relationship compared to the relationship between Regan and Edmund; or Lear and the Fool’s relationship compared to the relationship between Gloucester and Poor Tom.

Through *language*

Kent’s insults towards Oswald compared to the insults Lear levels at Goneril.



A05 Argument and interpretation

For your response to convince the examiner, it is important to have a well-structured argument so you need to plan before you write. It is a good idea to underline the keywords of the question before you begin to read and annotate the extract given – it will help you focus on the most relevant features.

Constructing an essay argument requires you to write thematically rather than chronologically, so make this easier for yourself by adding any relevant references from the rest of the play next to the notes that relate to them. You will be able to link them more easily and avoid missing connections that could have earned you marks before you go on to your next paragraph.

A very strong argument will examine alternative interpretations and explain why these have been dismissed as infeasible or ill-fitting. This does not need to form a large part of your essay, but it will show the examiner that you have thoughtfully considered other points of view and made an informed decision to reach your own conclusions.

Specimen Question:

That the sub-plot involving Edmund, Gloucester and Edgar adds little to the tragedy.

By referring closely to Extract 2, printed in the accompanying Resource Booklet, and to other appropriately selected parts of the text, show to what extent you agree with the view expressed above.

Your argument should include relevant comments on Shakespeare's dramatic methods, and relevant external contextual information on the nature of Shakespearean Tragedy.

N.B. Equal marks are available for your treatment of the given extract and other relevant parts of the text.

Creating a cogent and focused response to the stimulus statement requires careful planning. Sustaining a focus on the key terms of the question – “sub-plot involving Edmund, Gloucester and Edgar”, “adds little”, “tragedy” – is imperative. The use of textual referencing should be judicious. For example, references which demonstrate knowledge and understanding of Shakespeare's use of dramatic methods (A02) in both the extract and the wider text (A04), and relevant comments on the nature of Shakespearean Tragedy (A03) will enhance the efficacy of the response.

Students may find that alternative interpretations are worthy of exploration. For example, that the sub-plot echoes, complements or intensifies the main plot in terms of moral message, theme, imagery, characterisation as well as in terms of dramatic action.



Consider:

- the interaction in the extract between the untrustworthy child (Edmund) and the gullible parent (Gloucester) serves to remind the audience of Lear's attitudes and actions during the 'Love Test' in which his hubris – or hamartia – is revealed. The structural development of the sub-plot mirrors that of the main plot and so adds to the intensity of the feelings of pity and fear evoked
- Edmund's plotting to destroy Edgar and Gloucester in the extract is reminiscent of Goneril and Regan's conniving against Lear and so increases the audience's understanding of the moral issues interrogated in the play
- the villainous characterisation of Edmund as shown in the extract echoes the hard-hearted and duplicitous characterisation of Goneril and Regan, intensifying the audience's pity for the victims of their plotting (Gloucester and Lear respectively)
- Edmund's response to Gloucester regarding the letter in the extract:

'Nothing, my lord.'

echoes Cordelia's response in the 'Love Test' – yet Edmund's motives are strikingly different, encouraging the audience to further recognise Cordelia's innocence and judge Lear's treatment of her negatively

- Gloucester's use of imperatives in the extract echo those of Lear in the opening scene, linking both of the misguided and peremptory fathers. In this way Gloucester is used as a reflection so that the audience can better understand Lear and his tragic fate
- reference to Gloucester's age in the letter reminds the audience of Goneril and Regan's 'justification' for their poor treatment of Lear because of his age and Lear's flawed character:

Regan: Tis the infirmity of his age...

Goneril: The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then must we look from his age...the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them.

- the speed with which Gloucester's opinion of Edgar transforms in the extract echoes Lear's quick reversal of affection towards Cordelia during the 'Love Test', reminding the audience of Lear's hamartia
- imagery of blindness/eyesight in the extract, e.g.:

'Let's see. – Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles.'

has numerous links in the wider text which illustrate Lear's metaphorical blindness following his fall, and his process of anagnorisis as he gains moral insight and recognises his errors

- as an antagonist, Edmund's beseeching of the goddess Nature (by which he seems to mean a selfish pursuit of one's own interests) in his soliloquy in the extract contrasts with Lear, Gloucester and Kent who implore Nature's assistance to combat the forces of evil and reduce their suffering throughout the play
- repetition of 'legitimate', 'base' and 'bastard' in Edmund's soliloquy in the extract may point to Edmund's motives in the sub-plot. As this motive is not paralleled in the main plot, it may serve to distract the audience from focusing on Lear's fall from grace
- Gloucester's folly (inability to discern between his faithful and selfish children) reinforce Lear's moral blindness that is to cause his peripeteia. The fact that both fathers fall victim to such flaws serves as a stark warning to the audience
- this episode in the extract marks the beginning of Edmund's conspiracy and Gloucester's downfall. While the focus of suffering must remain on the hero, a feature



of Shakespearean Tragedy is that the suffering will be more widespread and will affect other characters too

- the Gloucester sub-plot illustrates how the calamity has been architected by human forces (i.e. Edmund) rather than by the gods – a key concern of Shakespearean Tragedy
- the use of the sub-plot contravenes the Unity of Action and its associated settings (e.g. Gloucester's castle, the cliff at Dover, etc.) contravene the Unity of Place. These elements were for centuries accepted as features of Classical Tragedy. This contravention may be considered to enhance or detract from the tragedy of *King Lear*.

Remember:

- Stick to the key terms used in the question.
- Think what the question is really asking you.
- Argue clearly – explore opposing points of view but explain why they don't sway you.
- Make connections throughout the text, demonstrating your knowledge of the play and your ability to link concepts, ideas and references.



Activities

- The word 'nothing' appears 34 times in the play. Consider the different meanings and impact of its use.
- Consider how the images associated with sight and blindness contribute to the moral message of the tragedy.

Links

BBC Radio production of the text

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JylxvHvdtA>

27 clips from the National Theatre production

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_womZ_BE0Q&list=PLJgBmjHpqgs6EhaYJXFYXe5xyqCxCpeAh

Sam Mendes production for the National Theatre

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnYInEJ1-v0>

Ian McKellan's insight into the character of Lear

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahFtoCq6CHw>

Globe Theatre creating the *storm*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oPGDjhcJuOg>



General Glossary for A2 1

– this glossary is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

Antagonist	The main character who opposes the protagonist or hero in a narrative or drama; in simple terms he/she is the villain. (See protagonist.)
Aside	A brief remark made by a character during dialogue which is understood not to be addressed to or heard by other characters. In an aside true feelings are voiced, as distinct from what is being said for others to hear. See also soliloquy.
Blank verse	Non-rhyming lines of poetry, the standard verse form of Elizabethan drama, also known as 'iambic pentameter'. Each iamb is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, like the sound of a heartbeat – five iambic feet make a ten syllable pattern per line, a rhythm frequently used in Shakespeare's work.
Characterisation	The means by which a character's traits are established, often through action and dialogue in drama.
Climax	The moment of greatest tension in a drama. It is usually near the end of the play where the rising conflict results in a high point of intensity.
Costume	The clothes or outfit worn by a character.
Denouement	The plot resolution of a narrative.
Dialogue	The words spoken between two or more characters in a play, novel or poem.
Dramatic convention	A set of rules which all parties in a dramatic performance accept (including, importantly the audience), e.g. the 'Three Unities' in classical Greek drama, the Shakespearean soliloquy, the missing fourth wall of a traditional nineteenth-century stage set, the impenetrability of disguise in Shakespearean drama.
Dramatic irony	A stylistic device where the audience is aware of the implications of a speech or act, but the character(s) involved is not. The audience has an understanding that the characters do not have.
Figurative language	Non-literal language – similes, metaphors, hyperbole and synecdoche, for example – used by writers to communicate additional meaning about characters and situations.



Imagery	This word generally applies visually, to vivid or figurative language used in a more than literal way that stimulates a picture in the imagination. Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. Auditory imagery appeals to the imagination by echoing or creating sound effects.
Juxtaposition	Placing two contrasting characters, things, ideas close together to illuminate meaning or create tension.
Lighting	Refers to the way the stage is lit and the equipment which provides artificial light effects.
Metaphor	Where one thing is described directly as another, to enhance meaning or effect. When this is used for a more protracted purpose it is called an extended metaphor.
Meter (or metre)	The pattern of rhythmic accents in poetic verse, formed of stressed and unstressed syllables in certain numbers and combinations.
Metonymy	A form of figurative speech in which a closely related term is substituted for an object or idea. One example would be referring to royalty or a monarch as “the crown”.
Motif	A dominant or recurring idea or figure of speech within a work of art or within the work of an artist, musician or writer.
Pathos	A quality of a play’s action or dialogue that stimulates the audience to feel pity for a character. Pathos is always present in tragedy, and may be present in comedy as well.
Props	Items used on stage by the actors.
Protagonist	The principal character in a novel or drama (See antagonist).
Soliloquy	A speech in which a character’s true feelings or intentions are voiced, usually but not always when that character is alone on stage. In general, soliloquies are longer than asides, which have the same revelatory function, and do not always involve turning ‘aside’ from an ongoing dialogue.
Sound effects	Sounds on the stage used to create the setting or atmosphere of the play, or for other dramatic effect.
Stage/Set design	This refers to the visual scenery on the stage, the creation of the background in which the play is set.
Stage directions	The directions written in the play script to indicate how the characters should speak and move. Shakespeare seems to have written very few explicit stage directions. These were added by later editors. There are however plenty of implicit stage directions in the Shakespearean text.

**Structure**

The way in which the parts of the plot are organised.

Synecdoche

A form of figurative speech where the whole concept of something is referred to by one of its parts. An example would be calling a car “wheels” or asking if someone can “lend a hand”.

Theme

A main idea or concern explored in a work of art.