

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

King Lear

by William Shakespeare

written by Rebecca Challman

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1. In William Shakespeare's time, officials did not record births and deaths but rather baptisms and funerals. Based on those dates, scholars believe that Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564, and died on that same day fifty-two years later. The fact that Elizabethan society depended upon church records for census data shows how big a role the Church of England played in the politics of Shakespeare's day. In fact, it was illegal to be Catholic in England at that time. One can speculate, therefore, that Shakespeare set *King Lear* (circa 1605) in eighth-century England to avoid stirring up controversy with his explorations of societal norms and morality, his ruminations on the nature of fate, and his belief that the family is a fragile network on which to build a kingdom. If you wrote a story revealing your innermost opinions about controversial subjects, how would you avoid upsetting the masses? Write a one or two paragraph response.

2. In Shakespeare's time, the wealthy hired private tutors to teach their children at home. In the middle class, only boys attended school while parents taught girls at home. Choose one of the following, and write a persuasive paragraph.
 - A. Imagine a group of parents has asked you to convince officials to allow girls to attend school.

 - B. Imagine a group of parents has asked you to convince officials to ban corporal punishment at school.

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Act I

3. Shakespeare opens *King Lear* in *medias res*, (in the middle of the action). He begins with a King about to divide his kingdom between three daughters. How much they will get depends upon their replies to this question, “Which of you shall we say doth love us the most?” Cordelia, his favorite daughter, actually loses the contest. Lear then disinherits her and divides his kingdom between his two insincere daughters. Thus, Shakespeare draws the audience into this royal family’s drama, which will seal the fate of a nation.

If you were to write a play about your life, with what action would you begin? Write an opening scene in which the curtain rises on the event in progress. The event may have occurred in your childhood, last year, or last week.

4. Cordelia expresses her love for her father with a few simple words. The reader understands that she avoids flowery speech because her sisters’ empty flattery sickens her. She knows their words lack sincerity and meaning. King Lear, on the other hand, takes his daughters’ words at face value, and, therefore, finds Cordelia’s words insufficient. Can you remember an instance in your life when your words fell short? Were you unable to convince someone of the truth? Were they comparing you to others, or were they just not listening to you? Write a letter to the person or group involved in which you restate your case, and then offer an explanation as to why your words, at the time, were not enough.

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5. When King Lear asks Cordelia what she will say to garner a larger inheritance than her sisters do she replies, “Nothing.” To which he responds, “Nothing will come of nothing.” This late sixteenth-century English credo still applies as a modern adage, albeit in slightly different language: “Nothing from nothing leaves nothing.” An adage becomes such because of the universal truth it contains. Such a truth stands the test of time. Draw on experiences from your life in which you learned something that’s true for everybody. Write your own list of adages about work, love, or life in general.

6. Because of their skillful flattery, King Lear’s love contest ends in a draw between Goneril and Regan, with each of them getting half of the ancient Kingdom of Britain. Shakespeare was no stranger to flowery, flattering professions of love. He wrote 154 sonnets, one of which was to himself. Imagine a king commissions you to write the most convincing and flattering of love poems. Begin with this line from Shakespeare’s eighteenth sonnet: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”

7. King Lear swears by the Greek goddess of the moon, Hecates and by the Roman king of the gods, Jupiter. Jupiter was said to have been responsible for the lightning. Research the Greek and Roman gods and goddesses (often they are the same entities with different names in each culture, as the Greeks influenced the Romans). Imagine you are a chef who dreams of owning a restaurant. Invent a theme restaurant based on the mythology of deities, and then create a menu with twenty dishes reflecting the theme. Write a tantalizing description using appropriate imagery for each dish.

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8. The Earl of Kent is the only member of Lear's court who speaks out in the face of Lear's irrational behavior. Lear repays this honesty with anger and banishment, just as he rewarded Cordelia's honesty with disinheritance. If you were King Lear's advisor, how would you counsel him? Has there been a time in your life when you felt penalized for your honesty, or when you felt ostracized for disagreeing with a popular opinion? How did you deal with it? Write a two paragraph response.
9. The Earl of Kent disguises himself as a servant for hire and assumes another name in order to resume his loyal service to King Lear. Imagine someone goes mad, and banishes you from your community. Who would banish you, and why? What disguise would you assume, and what name would you adopt in order to return? Write an email to someone you trust explaining what has happened. Give that person the details of your new identity.
10. If you were the Earl of Kent, a nobleman, would you try to remain in Lear's service at any cost, or would you look elsewhere for employment? Imagine Kent places an ad in the newspaper in order to secure his dream job. How would the ad read? Write your own advertisement for your perfect job. Remember to describe yourself in glowing terms, and then describe the job you seek.
11. In Act I, scene ii, Edmund delivers a soliloquy. A soliloquy allows characters to reveal their innermost thoughts to the audience, while talking to themselves. In this case, Edmund soliloquizes about the injustice of society's prejudice against children born outside of marriage. After all, children have no control over the circumstances of their birth. What prejudice have you encountered in your life? Did the injustice of it anger you? Write a soliloquy expressing your opinion about something currently in the news.

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12. During the European Renaissance (14th through the 16th centuries), royalty often employed jesters to entertain them. These fools of the court would juggle, tell jokes or stories, sing songs, or perform tricks. These jesters remained employed, and alive for that matter, at the whim of their employers. They not only had to entertain, they had to avoid offending any member of the royal court. Shakespeare, however, uses Lear's fool to reinforce unsavory information in the form of riddles, rhymes, and limericks, all at the risk of angering the king. Imagine the president of the United States hires you to entertain the first family. How would you do that? Write a proposal outlining what songs or jokes you would perform. Include a list of topics you would avoid so as not to anger the president or offend his cabinet.
13. In Act I, Shakespeare skillfully unveils the subplot of *King Lear*: Edmund's disloyalty to his father the Earl of Gloucester. Illegitimate Edmund has his father's love, but he wants his half brother's inheritance; and he is willing to do anything to get it. This very exciting subplot is a secondary plot line. It runs parallel to the plot, but, because it lacks the intensity of the plot, it cannot stand alone. In a play where the plot consists of events from your life, what would be the subplot? Write an outline of the subplot.
14. When Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*, some scholars say he adapted a play published twelve years earlier called, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir, and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella*. The anonymous play was, itself, based on a Celtic myth about a river god who divided his kingdom between his daughters. In both versions, despite the king's poor judgment, the story ended happily with matters righted and the king back on his throne. Shakespeare rewrote the ending, however, to reflect his special brand of tragedy. Select a happily-ever-after story you have read, and rewrite the ending. Make it as tragic as the original plot will allow.
15. In Act I, scene iv, King Lear discovers the extent of Goneril's disloyalty. He curses her and says, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child." The metaphor perfectly describes the pain Goneril's ingratitude inflicts on him. Write at least two metaphors about things you have experienced. They can be humorous or serious. Example: I saw the sun, a flickering candle, dull and almost dead, through the fog.