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King Lear

William Shakespeare · *c. 1606 · original English text*

An old king divides his realm by a public test of love and casts off the daughter who will not flatter him. The play follows pride to nakedness, false love to cruelty, and true loyalty through storm, blindness and death. There is no rescued ending: Cordelia is hanged, and Lear dies with her in his arms.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

When pride has stripped a king of everything, what is left — and who has truly loved him?

"Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish."
Lear to Cordelia · Act IV, Scene VII

Lear learns too late that love is not a speech for a prize. Cordelia's truth, Kent's loyalty, and the suffering that humbles the king are the play's goods; the ending does not cancel the cost of the first refusal.

KEY CHARACTERS

Lear
pride, rage, repentance too late

Cordelia
truth and costly loyalty

Goneril & Regan
flattery turned to cruelty

Kent
faithful service in disguise

Gloucester
blindness, then patience

Edgar
endurance; a son's duty

Edmund
ambition and betrayal

The Fool
truth spoken in jest

Albany
conscience waking late

PATIENCE AND RIPENESS

> *"Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither; / Ripeness is all."*
> **Edgar to Gloucester** · Act V, Scene II

> *"The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us:"*
> **Edgar to Edmund** · Act V, Scene III

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Love-Test
ACT I, SCENE I

He will give the kingdom to the loudest love.

- **Lear** means to divide Britain among his three daughters and keep the name of king
- **Goneril** and **Regan** flatter him; **Cordelia** will say only that she loves him according to her bond
- In a rage he disinherits her and banishes loyal **Kent**, who protests
- The King of France takes Cordelia without a dowry
- Meanwhile **Gloucester** is deceived by his bastard son **Edmund** against honest **Edgar**

> *"Nothing will come of nothing: speak again."*
> **Lear to Cordelia** · Act I, Scene I

02
Thankless Children
ACT I, SCENE II – ACT II

The daughters who promised all begin to strip him of dignity.

- Goneril and then Regan reduce his train and his honour
- Kent returns in disguise to serve the king who banished him
- Lear's fool stays with him and tells him the truth in riddles
- Edmund betrays Edgar; Edgar flees and will take the name of Poor Tom
- Gloucester is drawn toward Lear; Regan and Cornwall begin to treat him as an enemy

> *"How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child!"*
> **Lear** · Act I, Scene IV

03
The Storm
ACT III

On the heath, a king learns what wretches feel.

- Lear goes out into the storm rather than submit
- He prays for "poor naked wretches" and confesses he has taken too little care of them
- He meets Edgar as Poor Tom, and his wits begin to turn
- Gloucester secretly helps the king, against the new powers
- Cornwall blinds Gloucester; a servant mortally wounds Cornwall

> *"Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, / How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, / Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you / From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en / Too little care of this!"*
> **Lear, on the heath** · Act III, Scene IV

04
Dover
ACT IV

The blind are led, and the rejected child returns.

- Edgar, still disguised, leads his blinded father and keeps him from despair
- Gloucester says the gods kill men for their sport; Edgar will teach him patience
- Cordelia lands with a French force to aid her father
- Lear is found, dressed, and restored to his youngest daughter
- He asks her forgiveness; she has none of his unkindness to remember

> *"I am a very foolish fond old man, / Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less;"*
> **Lear, waking** · Act IV, Scene VII

05
The Battle and the Deaths
ACT V

Victory goes to the wicked for a moment; the cost is not recalled.

- Lear and Cordelia are defeated and taken; he imagines a prison of shared prayer
- Edgar defeats Edmund in trial by combat and is made known
- Goneril poisons Regan and stabs herself; Edmund's reprieve comes too late
- Cordelia is hanged on Edmund's order; Lear enters with her in his arms and dies
- Kent will follow his master; Albany and Edgar remain to bear the weight of the time

> *"Come, let's away to prison: / We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage: / When thou dost ask me blessing I'll kneel down / And ask of thee forgiveness."*
> **Lear to Cordelia** · Act V, Scene III

Pride & Humility | True and False Love | Loyalty | Justice | Suffering & Sight | Forgiveness

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Set Cordelia's "bond" beside her sisters' speeches. Who is actually loving the king?
2. The Gloucester plot mirrors Lear's: a father believes the wrong child. Watch how blindness and insight trade places.
3. Lear's prayer for "poor naked wretches" is a turn. What has he finally seen?
4. This is the tragic ending, not the old staged version in which Cordelia lives. Why does Shakespeare refuse a rescue?
5. Kent and the Fool stay when staying costs them. What does loyalty look like when the king is no longer useful?
6. Compare Edmund's "natural" ambition with Edgar's patience. Who is ready at the end, and for what?

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #1532, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/king-lear/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.