

King Lear

Learning Intentions

The Plot

- **Know the story inside out:** Summarise the main events, focusing on the beginning, middle, and end.
- Be able to explain the **key turning points** in the narrative and their significance.

Summary of the Main Events

Beginning: The reason for future chaos

- King Lear decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters—Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia—based on who loves him most.
- Goneril and Regan flatter him with deceitful, exaggerated professions of love. Cordelia, honest and sincere, refuses to pander and responds with measured truth: *“I love your majesty according to my bond; no more nor less.”*
- Lear, enraged by Cordelia’s perceived disloyalty, disinherits her and divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan.
- The Earl of Kent, loyal to Lear, protests against the king’s decision and is banished.
- Meanwhile, in the subplot, the illegitimate Edmund schemes to overthrow his legitimate brother Edgar and gain favour with their father, Gloucester.

Key Turning Point #1: Lear's Foolish Decision

- Lear’s rash decision to abdicate power while retaining authority sets the stage for chaos. His inability to see through Goneril and Regan’s deceit, coupled with his rejection of Cordelia’s honesty, marks the beginning of his tragic downfall.

Middle: The Descent into Madness

- Lear’s authority is quickly undermined by Goneril and Regan, who begin to strip him of his dignity and followers.
- In a pivotal scene, Lear realises his daughters’ betrayal as they refuse him shelter and reduce his retinue to nothing. He famously rages against the storm on the heath, symbolising both external and internal chaos.
- Lear descends into madness, regretting his mistakes and gaining self-awareness. He begins to empathise with the plight of the poor and powerless, marking a shift in his character.
- Meanwhile, Gloucester is deceived by Edmund and turns against Edgar. Gloucester's loyalty to Lear leads to his capture and horrific punishment: his eyes are gouged out by Regan and her husband, Cornwall.
- Gloucester, now blind, is led by Edgar (in disguise as Poor Tom) towards Dover, where Cordelia and the French army plan to confront Goneril and Regan.

Key Turning Point #2: Lear's Madness and Gloucester's Blinding

- Lear's madness and Gloucester's blinding symbolise the destruction of old order and justice. Both characters gain clarity through suffering, with Lear realising his folly and Gloucester learning the value of true loyalty.
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End: The Tragic Resolution

- The French army, led by Cordelia, is defeated, and Lear and Cordelia are captured.
- Edmund orders Cordelia to be hanged, even as Edgar challenges and defeats him in a duel, revealing his treachery to Gloucester, who dies shortly after.
- In the final moments, Lear enters carrying Cordelia's lifeless body, devastated by her death.
- Lear himself succumbs to grief and dies, leaving Albany, Edgar, and Kent to restore order in a kingdom ravaged by betrayal and chaos.

Key Turning Point #3: Cordelia's Death and Lear's Final Realisation

- Cordelia's death underscores the tragedy's bleakness and the ultimate cost of Lear's initial blindness. Lear's grief-stricken acknowledgment of her love completes his journey of self-awareness but arrives too late to save him.
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Why These Turning Points Matter

Lear's Decision to Divide the Kingdom:

- This moment lays the foundation for the play's central conflicts. It shows Lear's inability to see the truth and his obsession with appearances, which sets the stage for betrayal and chaos.

Lear's Madness and Gloucester's Blinding:

- These moments show that suffering can lead to insight. Both Lear and Gloucester learn to see the truth—literally and figuratively—but only after immense pain and loss.

Cordelia's Death and Lear's Grief:

- The play's conclusion is devastating because it denies the audience the resolution they might hope for. Cordelia's death feels deeply unfair, but it drives home the play's themes of human frailty and the unpredictability of justice.