MA99 EDUCATION

King Lear: Topic Notes

NSW ENGLISH ADVANCED 11-12 SYLLABUS 2024 FOR HSC 2028 AND LATER

What this document is. These are the topic notes for King Lear. They take the play in order, act by act and scene by scene, then step back to how it is built, which text you are reading, and how the play has been received. The last pages are for working on with a pen.

What it does not do. The Study Guide in this folder is arranged by idea and holds the quotation bank, the character table and the critical perspectives. These notes point to those and do not reprint them. The guide tells you what the play is about; these notes show you where in the play it happens.

Locating evidence. References are to act and scene, because line numbers differ between editions. Quotations are checked against the Project Gutenberg text, which combines the two early printings of the play. Section 4.5 explains why that matters, and why your own edition is the one to quote.

1. Where you are with the play

Eight statements. Tick only what is true today.

- ☐ I can say what happens in each act without looking.
- ☐ I can explain how the Gloucester plot mirrors the Lear plot, scene by scene.
- ☐ I know which scenes Cordelia is in, and which the Fool is in.
- ☐ I can explain why the storm scenes alternate with scenes indoors.
- ☐ I know that King Lear survives in two early texts, and one difference between them.
- ☐ I can state A. C. Bradley's and Jan Kott's readings of the ending fairly.
- ☐ I have a one sentence argument about the play that a reasonable person could deny.
- ☐ I have written at least one timed response on this text.

1.1 Interpreting your score

Count the ticks and read the matching row.

TICKS	WHAT IT MEANS	GO HERE FIRST
0 to 2	You know the story in outline. Start with the scene sequence.	Sections 3 and 4
3 to 5	You know the play. You do not yet have a position on it.	Sections 5 and 6
6 to 8	You have a position. Test it under time.	Section 7, then the Practice Questions

Date this. Run the same statements again at the end of term. Record a score now and compare it with a later score to measure progress.

First run. Date: _____ **Score:** _____

End of term. Date: _____ **Score:** _____

2. What the course asks of this play

One focus area, one substantial text, read whole.

King Lear is taught in Year 11 under **Critical study of literature** in the English Advanced 11-12 Syllabus (2024), first examined at the HSC in 2027. The focus area asks for an informed personal response to one substantial text in its entirety: its construction, content and language, its distinctive qualities and value, the contexts of its composition and reception, and the perspectives of others.

THE FOCUS AREA ASKS YOU TO CONSIDER	THE QUESTION FOR KING LEAR
The whole text	Can you use Acts 2 and 4 as confidently as the love test and the storm?
Construction, content and language	What do the double plot, the alternating storm scenes and the repeated word nothing do?
Distinctive qualities and value	Why has a play this bleak been ranked, for two centuries, among the greatest in English?
Composition and reception	What did an abdicating king mean at James I's court in 1606, and why did audiences prefer a happy ending for 150 years?
The perspectives of others	Can you state the redemptive and the absurdist readings fairly, and choose between them?

The table's left column is MA99's paraphrase of the focus area, not NESA's wording. All six Year 11 outcomes, EAV-11-01 to EAV-11-06, attach to it.

2.1 Three things you may have been told that are no longer true

MYTH 1 · KING LEAR IS THE MODULE B TEXT, AS THE 2017 SYLLABUS HAD IT.

Correct position

The 2024 syllabus has no module letters. The Year 11 focus area is Critical study of literature. Your study of the play is recognisably the same work; the name and the description are not.

If your notes say Module B, which was the 2017 name, change the label and keep the notes.

MYTH 2 · THE ESSAY MUST PROVE THE PLAY HAS TEXTUAL INTEGRITY.

Correct position

That was the central phrase of the 2017 description. The 2024 Year 11 description does not use it. It speaks instead of distinctive qualities, construction, value, composition and reception.

The double plot is a superb argument for the play's unity. Make that argument if you believe it, as your judgement, not as the syllabus's requirement.

MYTH 3 · THERE IS ONE TEXT OF KING LEAR.

Correct position

There are two early texts, the Quarto of 1608 and the Folio of 1623, and they differ by hundreds of lines. Most school editions combine them. Section 4.5 shows why a single quotation can belong to only one.

You do not need to become an editor. You need to know which text your edition follows before you build a paragraph on its last scene.

3. The play in order

Five acts, 26 scenes in the text used here, two families, one storm.

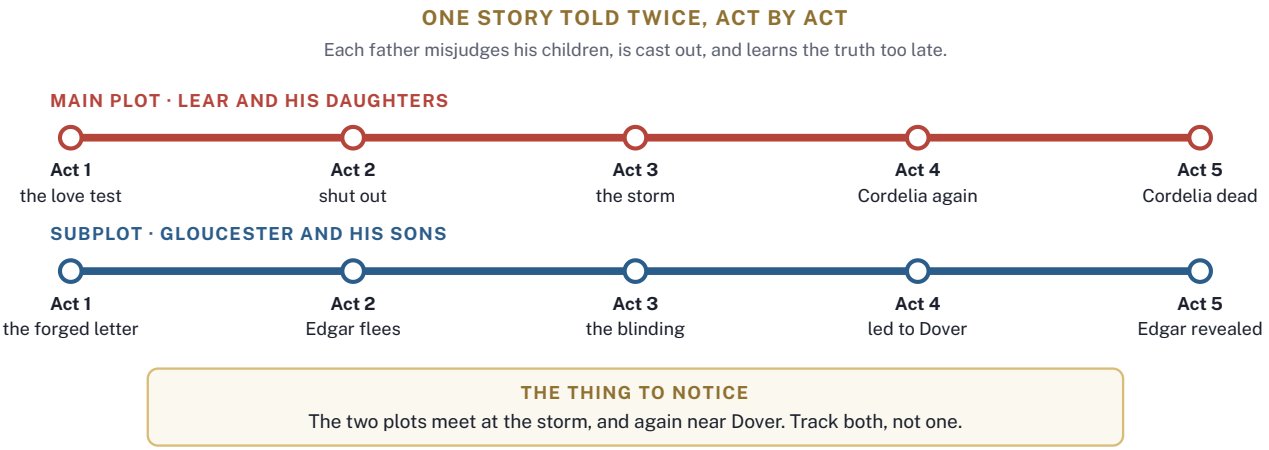


Figure 1 · The two plots, act by act. The subplot is not a sideshow; it is the argument said twice.

Lear has by far the largest part: in the transcription used here he speaks about 1.9 times as many lines as the next largest role, Edgar. Yet the play is built so that we watch him lose, scene by scene, everything that made him large.

3.1 Act 1 · the division

SCENE	WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT SHAKESPEARE IS BUILDING
1.1	Lear divides his kingdom by a public test of love. Goneril and Regan flatter; Cordelia says “Nothing, my lord” and is disinherited. Kent objects and is banished. France takes Cordelia without a dowry.	Authority staged as ceremony, and a king who cannot tell performance from love. The two elder sisters confer at once.
1.2	Edmund, Gloucester’s illegitimate son, calls on Nature as his goddess and forges a letter to turn his father against Edgar.	The subplot begins, and with it a second meaning of nature: appetite rather than order.
1.3	Goneril tells her steward Oswald to treat her father’s knights with neglect.	The daughters move quickly. Lear has given away the power to object.
1.4	Kent returns in disguise and enters Lear’s service. The Fool appears for the first time. Goneril demands Lear reduce his knights; he curses her.	Loyalty now has to hide. The Fool says what no one else dares.
1.5	Lear sets off for Regan and prays: “Let me not be mad”.	The first sign of the collapse to come.

3.2 Act 2 · shut out

SCENE	WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT SHAKESPEARE IS BUILDING
2.1	Edmund fakes a wound and convinces Gloucester that Edgar tried to kill him. Cornwall and Regan arrive and take Edmund into their service.	The villains find each other.
2.2	Kent quarrels with Oswald and is put in the stocks by Cornwall.	A king’s messenger humiliated: an insult to Lear himself.
2.3	Alone, Edgar decides to disguise himself as a mad beggar, Poor Tom: “Edgar I nothing am”.	The legitimate heir becomes nothing, the play’s keyword made into a person.
2.4	Lear finds Kent in the stocks. Regan and Goneril together cut his knights to none. He cries “O, reason not the need” and goes out into the rising storm.	The two daughters close the door, literally. The act ends with Gloucester’s house shut against the king.

3.3 Act 3 · the storm

Act 3 is built on alternation. Scenes on the heath, where the king has nothing, are cut against scenes indoors, where the powerful plot. Track the pattern: it is one of the clearest pieces of construction in the play.

SCENE	WHERE	WHAT HAPPENS
3.1	Heath	Kent tells a gentleman of division between Albany and Cornwall, and of help coming from France.
3.2	Heath	Lear defies the storm, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks", and calls himself "More sinn'd against than sinning".
3.3	Castle	Gloucester confides his loyalty to Lear to Edmund, who resolves to betray him.
3.4	Heath, the hovel	Lear prays for the "Poor naked wretches" he never considered as king, then meets Poor Tom, sees "unaccommodated man" and tears at his clothes.
3.5	Castle	Edmund gives Gloucester's secret to Cornwall and is rewarded with his father's title.
3.6	Farmhouse	Lear, mad, puts his absent daughters on trial, a passage in the Quarto only. This is the Fool's last scene.
3.7	Castle	Cornwall and Regan blind Gloucester. A servant tries to stop them and wounds Cornwall. Gloucester learns Edmund betrayed him.

> Act 3 alternates. Heath, castle, heath, castle. The storm outside and the cruelty inside are the same event.

3.4 Act 4 · seeing

SCENE	WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT SHAKESPEARE IS BUILDING
4.1	The blind Gloucester is led by Poor Tom, his own son, whom he does not recognise, and speaks of the gods as boys killing flies.	The play's darkest line about the heavens, spoken by a man who has just learned the truth.
4.2	Albany turns against Goneril. News comes that Cornwall has died of his wound.	The alliance of the wicked begins to split.
4.3 and 4.4	Cordelia is reported grieving for her father, then appears seeking him.	She returns after two acts' absence. The report scene is in the Quarto only.
4.5	Regan questions Oswald about a letter from Goneril to Edmund.	The sisters now compete for the same man.
4.6	Edgar pretends to lead his father over a cliff at Dover. The mad Lear, decked with flowers, meets the blind Gloucester. Edgar kills Oswald.	The two plots meet. Edgar names the paradox: "reason in madness".
4.7	Lear wakes in Cordelia's care, calls himself "a very foolish fond old man", and kneels to her.	The reconciliation the play has been withholding. The audience is allowed to hope.

3.5 Act 5 · the end

SCENE	WHAT HAPPENS	WHAT SHAKESPEARE IS BUILDING
5.1	The British forces prepare. Edmund weighs which sister to take.	Appetite, again, running the state.
5.2	Cordelia's army loses. Edgar tells his despairing father that "Ripeness is all".	Endurance offered in place of hope.
5.3	Lear and Cordelia are captured. Edmund orders their deaths. Edgar defeats Edmund. Goneril poisons Regan and kills herself. Edmund tries too late to undo his order. Lear enters with Cordelia dead, and dies.	Order restored among the survivors, and nothing restored to Lear. Kent asks whether this is the "promis'd end".

4. How the play is built

Five decisions of construction, each of which is an argument.

4.1 The double plot

Shakespeare took the Lear story from an older play and the Gloucester story from Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia, and braided them. Each father misjudges his children, rewards the false one, casts out the true one, and learns the truth through suffering. Lear's blindness is moral; Gloucester's becomes literal in 3.7. Each plot makes the other look less like an accident and more like a law.

4.2 The storm and the alternation

The storm is the play's centre in both senses: it falls in Act 3, and it is where Lear's power ends and his understanding begins. The alternation of heath and castle in that act means the audience never gets to believe the storm is only weather. Every heath scene is followed by the indoor politics that produced it.

4.3 Nothing, and seeing

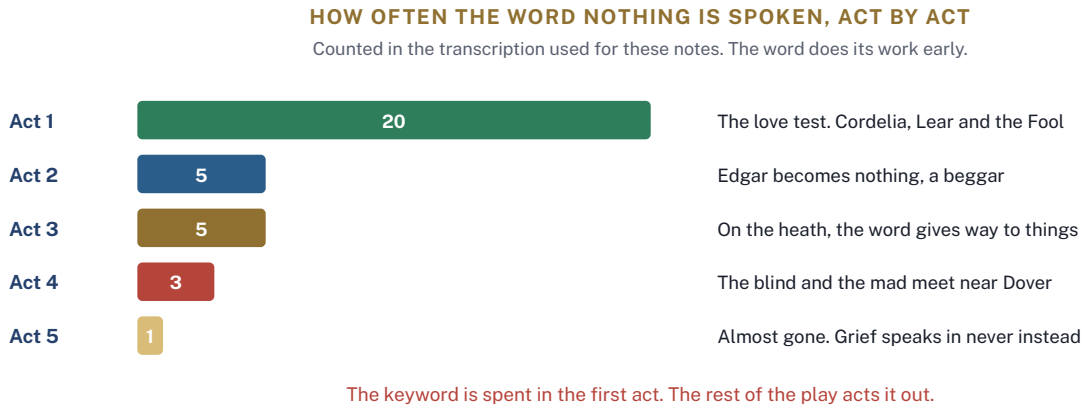


Figure 2 · The keyword, counted. It is spoken most before anything has been lost.

The word eyes follows the opposite pattern: 5, 4, 4, 20 and 5 times across the five acts, peaking in Act 4, after Gloucester has lost his. The play talks about nothing before it happens and about eyes after they are gone. That is an argument about knowledge arriving too late.

4.4 Absence and disguise

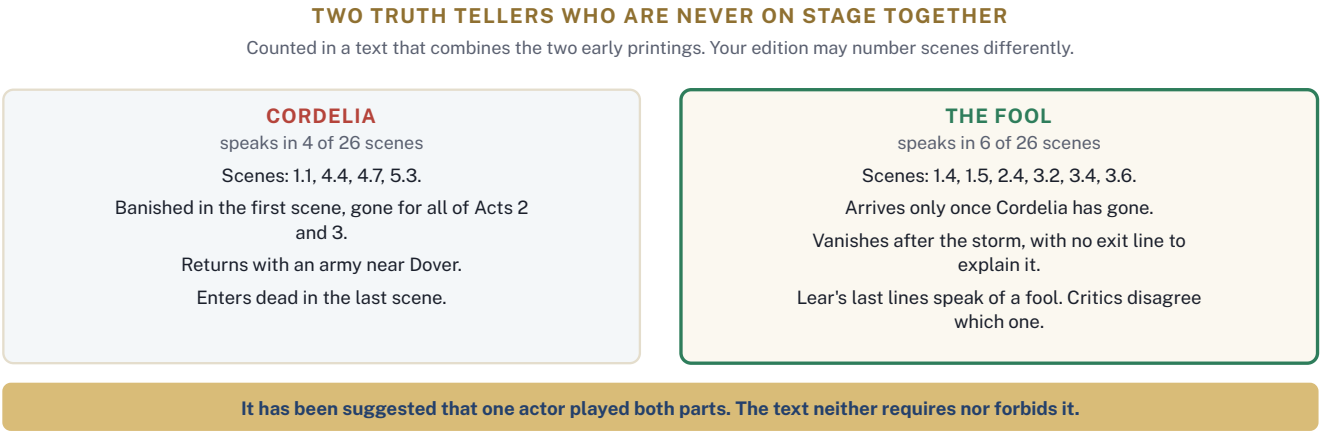


Figure 3 · The two characters who tell Lear the truth are never on stage together.

Kent and Edgar both survive by disguise, one as a servant called Caius and one as Poor Tom. Loyalty in this play has to go into hiding to keep working. Ask what it says about a kingdom that its honest men can only serve it in costume.

4.5 Which King Lear?

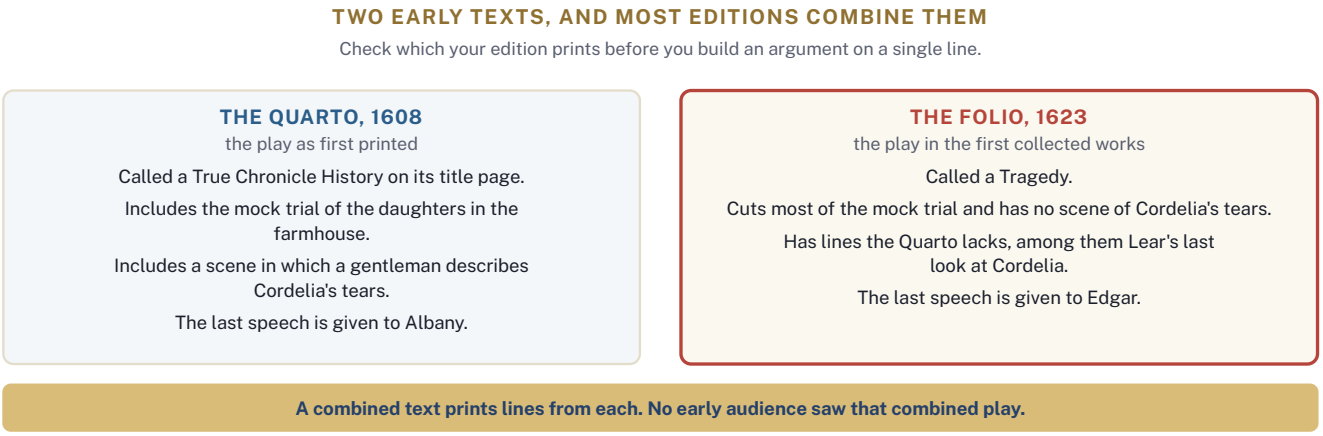


Figure 4 · The two early texts. Most school editions combine them.

From the eighteenth century until the 1980s, editors merged the two texts into one. From the 1980s many scholars argued they are two versions, the Folio perhaps Shakespeare's own revision, and some editions now print them separately. For a Year 11 essay the practical consequences are small but real: the mock trial in 3.6 is Quarto only, and Lear's final lines, pointing at Cordelia's lips, are Folio only. If your argument rests on either, say which text it is in.

Try this now

Open your edition at the last page.

Find who speaks the play's final lines.

Check the introduction: which early text does your edition follow there?

5. Composition and reception

What it meant in 1606, and what it has meant since.

5.1 Composition

Shakespeare wrote King Lear around 1605 to 1606 for the King's Men, his company, and it was performed before James I at Whitehall on 26 December 1606. James had united the crowns of Scotland and England in 1603 and spoke often of the union as a single body. A play that opens with a king dividing Britain into pieces would not have sounded neutral in that room.

Shakespeare's sources show what he changed. The anonymous King Leir, published in 1605, ends happily, with the old king restored. Shakespeare let Cordelia die, added the Gloucester plot from Sidney, and took the names of Poor Tom's devils from a 1603 pamphlet by Samuel Harsnett attacking exorcists.

5.2 Reception

WHEN	WHO	WHAT HAPPENED, IN BRIEF
1681	Nahum Tate	Rewrote the play with a happy ending: Lear restored, Cordelia alive and married to Edgar, and no Fool. Tate's version held the stage until the 1830s.
1765	Samuel Johnson	In his edition, confessed he had been so shocked by Cordelia's death that he could hardly bear to reread the last scenes.
1904	A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy	Argued that Lear is purified by suffering, so that the play might almost be called "The Redemption of King Lear".

WHEN	WHO	WHAT HAPPENED, IN BRIEF
1960s	Jan Kott, and Peter Brook's staging	Kott's essay King Lear, or Endgame read the play as close to Beckett's absurdist theatre. Brook's 1962 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company followed that lead.
1983	Gary Taylor and Michael Warren, eds.	The Division of the Kingdoms argued that the Quarto and the Folio are two distinct versions of the play.
1985	Akira Kurosawa, Ran	Relocated the story to medieval Japan, with three sons in place of daughters. A reimagining that shows how portable the structure is.

Notice what the reception tells you about value. For 150 years audiences would not accept the ending, and yet it is the ending that has made the play central since. A response that uses that fact has found evidence for the play's distinctive quality in its history, not only in its lines.

> Tate's happy ending is the best single piece of evidence you have that the real ending hurts.

6. Building your informed personal response

The argument is the judgement you make between readings.

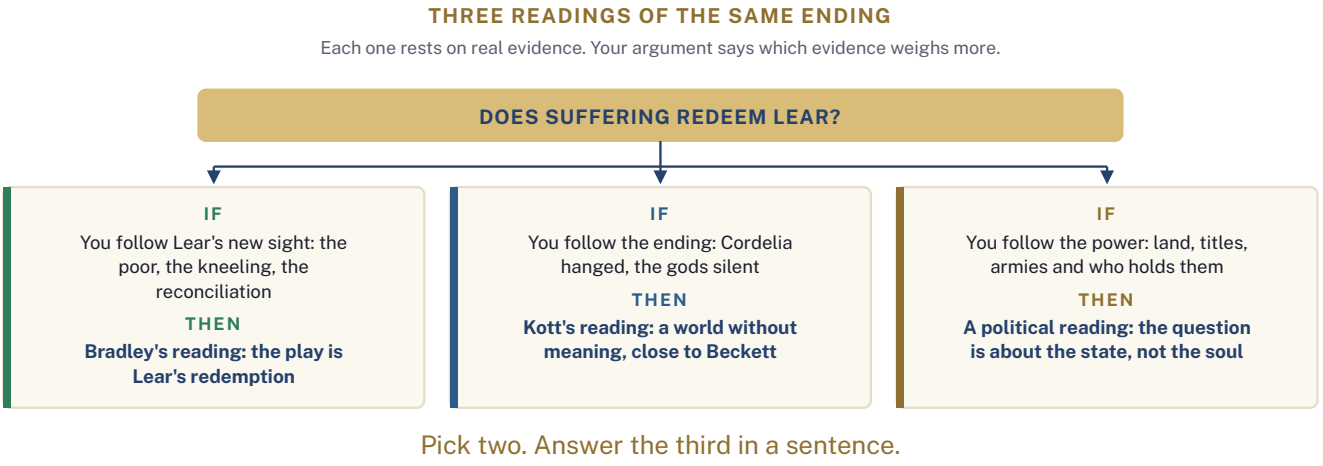


Figure 5 · Three readings of the ending. Each is supported by the text.

IF YOUR THESIS IS THAT THE PLAY	YOUR STRONGEST EVIDENCE	THE OBJECTION YOU MUST ANSWER
redeems Lear through suffering	3.4, the poor naked wretches; 4.7, the kneeling; Lear's final attention to Cordelia	Cordelia is hanged after the battle is lost, for no purpose the play explains
denies meaning to suffering	4.1, the gods as boys killing flies; the death of Cordelia; the fivefold never	Edgar, Albany and Kent survive and speak of duty and endurance
is about the state before the soul	1.1, the map and the titles; the sisters' alliance; Edmund's rise; the French army	The play's most memorable moments are private: a father, a daughter, a hovel
is valuable because it refuses to decide	The reconciliation followed at once by the loss	Say which half of the refusal matters more to you, or it is not yet a judgement

A thesis somebody could deny

Weak: King Lear explores suffering and justice.

Better: King Lear lets its king learn pity only when pity can no longer save anyone.

Better still, because it judges: the play's greatness lies in refusing the consolation its sources and its first audiences wanted, and Tate's century of happy endings proves how much that refusal costs.

6.1 Six scenes to know

SCENE	WHAT IT IS EVIDENCE FOR
1.1 the love test	Authority as performance; nothing; the division of the kingdom
1.2 Edmund's first soliloquy	Nature as appetite; the challenge to inherited order
3.4 the hovel	Lear's new pity; unaccommodated man; Poor Tom
3.7 the blinding	Cruelty in the house of power; the servant who resists
4.7 the waking	Reconciliation; the play allowing hope
5.3 the last entrance	The ending every reading has to account for

YOUR OWN SCENE

Choose a seventh scene that nobody in your class uses, 2.4 or 4.2 perhaps. Fill in the row.

SCENE	WHAT IT IS EVIDENCE FOR	THE QUOTATION I WILL LEARN

7. The weekly drill, cards and tracker

Drill

TWELVE MINUTES, ONCE A WEEK

Pick one scene from section 6.1. Work without the book for the first three steps.

MINUTES	WHAT YOU DO
0 to 3	Write down what happens in the scene and where it sits in the act.
3 to 6	Write one sentence about construction: its mirror in the other plot, or what comes just before it.
6 to 9	Write the reading it supports, and the reading it resists.
9 to 12	Open the book. Check your details. Learn one quotation of fifteen words or fewer.

> Twelve minutes a week beats three hours the night before. Every time.

SIX CARDS FOR THE FRONT OF YOUR FOLDER

Cut along the dashed lines. Each one reads in four seconds.

THE SHAPE

- Five acts, two plots, one storm
- Fathers misjudge their children
- The storm at the centre, Act 3
- Blindness made literal, 3.7
- Cordelia dead, Lear dead, 5.3

CONSTRUCTION

- Double plot, mirrored
- Nothing, spoken early and often
- Sight and eyes, most in Act 4
- Fool present only 1.4 to 3.6
- Disguise: Kent and Edgar

CONTEXT

- Written about 1605 to 1606
- Performed at court, 1606
- James I and a united kingdom
- Old Leir play ends happily
- Subplot from Sidney's Arcadia

RECEPTION

- Tate's happy ending, 1681
- Johnson could not reread it
- Bradley, 1904: redemption
- Kott, 1960s: Endgame
- Kurosawa's Ran, 1985

YOUR ARGUMENT

- One sentence someone could deny
- Both plots, not one
- Say which text your line is in
- Weigh redemption against waste
- End on value, not summary

KEY SCENES

- 1.1 the love test
- 3.4 the hovel, Poor Tom
- 3.7 the blinding
- 4.7 the waking and kneeling
- 5.3 the entrance with Cordelia

Figure 6 · Cards to copy. Six cards. Cut them out and keep them in the front of your folder.

Your progress on this text, dated

Come back every few weeks and date it.

Improvement in a written subject is invisible from the inside, which is why students who are getting better so often believe they are not.

> Come back in a month and read your first thesis. It will look different, which is the point.

DATE	WHAT I DID	WHAT CHANGED

Coverage and limits

These notes cover King Lear in full, act by act, for Critical study of literature in the English Advanced 11-12 Syllabus (2024), Year 11.

The play is in the public domain. Every quotation is fifteen words or fewer and was checked by machine against the Project Gutenberg text, a combined text of the Quarto and Folio.

Counts of words, lines and scenes are computed from that text and will differ in other editions.

No claim is made about how responses are marked. The first HSC under this syllabus is 2027.

Companion documents in this folder: Study Guide, Exemplar Essay, Summary, Glossary and Practice Questions for King Lear.

About this resource

MA99 EDUCATION

Scope

NSW English Advanced, Year 11. Written to the NSW English Advanced 11-12 Syllabus 2024, Critical study of literature, for students sitting the HSC in 2028 and later years. Every literary text quoted or printed here is in the public domain, apart from passages marked written for MA99, which are original. Quotations were checked against a published text, and critics are named with the work and year.

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