

King Lear Essay Sample Notes

- **Use the seminar handouts, lecture notes, notes in the *Norton Anthology* etc for ideas. Make a list of points which you think are significant to the representation of madness in the play and find supporting quotations from the play.**

Lear seminar handout:

Lear as the embodiment of suffering man cf Job (*Bible*), a means of exploring the fundamental question of why the good suffer.

The Fool – licensed subversion, a kind of ludic authority (cf Feste in *Twelfth Night*). His jests remind Lear of his afflictions and may help to drive him mad. He's the sage/fool who sees the truth. He's also a safety valve for the audience, who might otherwise laugh at Lear and his insanity.

The play inverts the orthodox view of wisdom and foolishness. In the storm scenes Lear and Poor Tom show signs of madness but the Fool seems sane. He fades from the scene – Lear can act his own Fool. The King/Fool/madman was a common triangle in Renaissance literature.

The play explores the paradox of wisdom in madness. When sane Lear can't distinguish between Cordelia and her sisters. Lear acquires a kind of wisdom in insanity.

Lear is driven insane by a series of shocks: Cordelia's rebuff, Goneril's attack, finding the loyal Kent in the stocks, rejection by Regan.

The storm is a projection in the macrocosm (outer world) of the tempest in the microcosm (inner world). Lear hears thunder and knows that what he's feared will come – 'I shall go mad'. Edgar arrives pretending to be mad as Poor Tom, representing what Lear fears becoming. Ironically Edgar's fake madness precipitates Lear's real madness. In response to Edgar's insane torrent of speech Lear calls him 'philosopher', 'learned Theban'. Rather than recoiling when confronted by madness, he identifies with it and renounces reason.

The storm symbolises the mental disintegration of Lear himself but also the break-up of society and the threat to the universe itself under the impact of ingratitude and treachery.

Madness provides a different perspective and enables a particular kind of truth cf Hamlet, who can say things when apparently insane that it wouldn't be safe to articulate if he were deemed sane.

Aristotle handout:

Tragedy 'by means of pity and fear bring[s] about the purgation of such emotions' (catharsis).

'Our pity is awakened by undeserved misfortune, and our fear by that of someone just like ourselves'.

'The dramatic poet has by means of his representation to produce the tragic pleasure that is associated with pity and fear'.

Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall, 1999, pp.100-101. Photocopy.

'the tragic entails a fundamental sense of what remains painful, mysterious or uncertain' (p.101).

'Tragedy offends the sensibilities. It drags the unconscious into the public place.' Howard Barker, 'Asides for a Tragic Theatre'. Cited in Bennett and Royle, p.101.

- **Decide on which parts of the play you want to focus on. Remember that you need to analyse the text in detail and depth rather than giving an introduction to it so decide on a clear critical position. Rather than describing different scenes where characters exhibit madness, for example, consider why they appear to be mad and why it is significant eg paradoxically, Lear gains insight and wisdom in madness.**

Working definition of madness: 'disordered in intellect', 'frantic with pain' (*OED*)

The significance of madness is both personal and political. As King, Lear embodies England; he is its 'head', as he is 'head' of the family.

Thematic importance: inner chaos symbolising personal and political instability (reflects contemporary fear eg Elizabeth I was accused of political irresponsibility because she had no named successor).

Madness as dramatic tool – evokes pity and fear (see Aristotle)

Madness and character:

Lear – genuine psychological disintegration

The Fool – adopts the rhetoric of madness – a professional role

Poor Tom / Edgar – adopts madness as a disguise / release

- **Scenes of particular interest (feel free to come up with your own!):** end Act 2 sc 4 (vocabulary of madness), Act 3 sc 2 and 4 pp.1149-1151 and 1152-56 (Lear in the storm); Act 4 sc 6 pp.1157-9 (Edgar: 'reason in madness' l.170-1); end Act 1 sc 5 (Lear: 'let me not be mad').

III sc ii l.91-2 (Norton, p.1151) – fear of political instability. It's also an example of the Fool's apparent nonsense and song articulating important truths (cf Feste in *Twelfth Night*).

III sc ii l.45-8 (Norton, p.1150) – it's an unusually wild and terrifying storm, as if nature itself is reflecting Lear's inner turmoil. Lear makes the link in III sc iv l.13, 'this tempest in my mind' (Norton, p.1152).

III sc iv l.29-35 (Norton, p.1152) - Lear sees things from a new perspective, demonstrating empathy for the poor and contemplating humanity at its most basic level l.99-105 (Norton, p.1154).

III sc vii l.109-10 (Norton, p.1159) – madness as a great leveller.

- **Think about how you are going to structure your argument ie how you are going to introduce it, how you intend to prove your case and how you are going to present a clear conclusion.**

Introduction – introduce your topic and argument / approach clearly. If you're stuck, you can use a quotation from a critic who exemplifies the approach you want to take or a quotation from the play which is particularly effective in summing up the issues you believe to be most important. If you have a topic such as madness, tragedy, comedy etc, make sure that you have a clear working definition of the terms (from a dictionary or critic if necessary).

Proving your case – support every point with a quotation and analyse the quotation to demonstrate its significance to your argument. Seminar papers, like essays, are arguments and so you need to provide evidence.

You may structure your material chronologically (following the structure of the play, Act by Act) but make sure that you only address relevant scenes (not every one!).

It's possible to structure material thematically ie to address the different ways in which madness is significant.

You could read madness through a particular critical lens eg its significance in relation to theories of tragedy, psychology (don't forget it's an English essay, though!) or philosophy.

If you find a good quotation from a critic then you can use that to structure your argument – 'unpack' the critic's words and add your own quotations and argument.

There are many ways to structure your work and you need to find one which is appropriate to your material but do make sure that you have a clear structure – this will make your argument coherent and effective.

Conclusion – don't summarise your entire argument. Find a strong point / quotation (from text or critic) to clinch your argument and make sure that you state your position clearly.

These quotations were simply taken from a dictionary of quotations. In what sense do they shed light on *Lear* and how might you make use of them eg to structure your argument, as a means of introducing your argument?

- 'A madman is also a man whom society did not want to hear and whom it wanted to prevent from uttering certain intolerable truths.' Artaud, *Selected Writings*.
- 'Insanity – a perfectly rational adjustment to the insane world.' R.D.Laing, quoted in *The Guardian*, 1972.
- 'A man who is "of sound mind" is one who keeps the inner madman under lock and key.' Paul Valery, *Mauvais Pensees et Autres*, 1942.

Use quotations which are significant to your understanding, which fit your argument – find something which interests you.

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