

◆◆◆ **KING LEAR** ◆◆◆

COURSE PLAN METHODOLOGY: *King Lear* by William Shakespeare is represented by the abbreviation **KL**. The student should become familiar with the course plan, determining, with the help of parents, whether to read each synopsis beforehand, afterward, or as a study aid. The final week will offer students the opportunity to read and respond to one of the critical essays that follow the novel--**doing so is optional**.

COURSE TEXT:

- KL** ❖ Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Ed. Joseph Pearce. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008. (T3644)
- Lear** ❖ *Kolbe Academy Study Guide to King Lear*. Kolbe Academy Press: Napa, 2014. (The two-book set includes a student book with questions and a teacher book with questions and answers.) (T3644A)

A NOTE ON IGNATIUS CRITICAL EDITIONS: Kolbe Academy is fortunate in having *Ignatius Critical Editions* to offer for many titles in its British Literature Course, including for *King Lear*. The *Critical Editions* series "represents a tradition-oriented approach to reading the Classics of world literature." It "concentrates on critical examinations informed by our Judeo-Christian heritage."¹ We at Kolbe could not hope for a better tool to help students of all ability levels learn to appreciate the beauty, artistry, and wisdom to be found within the pages of a great book. Those students who are inclined to a deeper study of literature will thrive on learning how to examine a work to gain insights like those contained in the critical essays; those not so inclined will discover how to examine a text to learn what it truly has to say.

**CHARACTERS:**

Lear, King of Britain: The title character. He dispenses with the responsibilities of the crown only to discover that he has lost the power of the crown.

Goneril: Her flowery protestations of love for her father mask an unbridled will to power.

Regan: In league with her sister, she too will present a false face to her father and then turn on him.

Cordelia: The youngest and most beloved of Lear's daughters. She will refuse to make a show of her love for her father and will incur his wrath.

King of France: He marries Cordelia, Lear's loyal daughter, and acts to restore the crown to Lear.

Duke of Burgundy: He withdraws his suit to marry Cordelia when she is disinherited by her father and departs the scene as the King's friend.

Duke of Cornwall, husband to Regan: As the husband of one of Lear's disloyal daughters, he abandons natural morality in pursuit of power and gives vent to every ruthless impulse.

Duke of Albany, husband to Goneril: Sickened by Goneril's treatment of her father, he will remain loyal to the old king despite his marriage.

¹ *King Lear*. Ignatius Press (San Francisco) 2008. Back Cover.

Earl of Kent: King Lear’s loyal servant. He is banished by the king for taking issue with his actions towards Cordelia, but will steadfastly serve him though he must adopt a disguise to do so.

Earl of Gloucester: King Lear’s old friend and advisor. He will suffer betrayal at the hands of his kin in a manner that parallels that of Lear.

Edgar, son to Gloucester: Gloucester’s loyal son.

Edmund, bastard son to Gloucester: He betrays his own brother and father. Edmund is the center point of evil, bringing ruination to those he schemes with and against.

Curan: A Courtier

Oswald, steward to Goneril: An irreverent man, he provokes the old king in such a way that the breach between his mistress and her father becomes irreparable.

Lear’s Fool: The steady companion of the king. He says that which Lear must hear but cannot hear.

Old Man, tenant to Gloucester

Doctor

A Captain, subordinate to Edmund

Gentlemen

A Herald

Servants to Cornwall

Knights attending on Lear, Officers, Messengers, Soldiers, attendants

Scene: Pagan Britain

WEEK 1		
READING	KL	Read Act I and Act II (all) (Note: Act, Scene, and line number are indicated by 3 numbers in a row: 1.1.1, etc.)
Study Guide	Lear	Do Study Guide Questions for Act I and Act II
Synopsis	At the start of the play, the Duke of Gloucester introduces his bastard son, Edmund, to the Earl of Kent. The Duke will be betrayed by Edmund later in the play. Catch the undertones of embarrassment and awkwardness in his speech here. King Lear enters with fanfare. He has come to announce the division of his kingdom into three parts governed by each of his three daughters; but before granting their portions he asks each daughter to declare her love for him. Goneril and Regan, the two eldest daughters, proclaim that they love their father more than anything, perhaps more than life itself. However, Cordelia, his youngest, most beloved daughter, proclaims that she cannot “heave my heart into my mouth (1.1.93-94). Her love is “according to my bond, no more nor less” (1.1.95). Though it is wise to	

	<p>offer the affection owed by filial obligation, Lear is displeased with Cordelia's answer. Angered by her response, in part because he expected a more showy answer from the daughter that he knows in his heart bears him true devotion, Lear disinherits her, dividing her portion between her two elder sisters. Cordelia's suitor, the Duke of Burgundy withdraws his suit when he sees that she will have no dowry. An additional suitor, the King of France, impressed by her goodness, claims her as his bride. Kent, Lear's advisor, asks the king to reconsider. Rejecting Kent's plea for him to retain his office, Lear grows angry and banishes Kent. Lear departs with Burgundy whose rejection of Cordelia seems to confirm Lear in his sunken opinion of her. France draws Cordelia away. She admonishes her sisters to treat their father fairly. They taunt her for her poverty and claim that she is disobedient. As the scene ends, Goneril and Regan agree to stand united in opposition to Lear. In Act 1, Scene 2, Edmund reveals his scheme to displace Edgar in his father's (Gloucester's) affections and become his heir. Edmund shows his father a letter written by Edgar asking him (Edmund) to enter into a plot to kill Gloucester and divide the estate—the letter is a forgery. Gloucester denounces Edgar and agrees to hear Edmund's proof. Edmund has in the meantime warned his brother that someone has charged him with betrayal and that he should arm himself and flee until the matter is settled. Edmund feels sure that his design will succeed. Meanwhile, things are not faring well with the king while he is quartered with Goneril. Goneril insists that his retinue of 100 knights is excessive and his high-handed treatment of her servants, especially of her steward, Oswald, is intolerable. Lear retains the habits of a king, and has not yet learned that he no longer exercises the power of a king. Frustrated by the treatment he is receiving from all parties, Lear strikes Oswald. Kent (returned in disguise to be near the king) must intervene to prevent the steward from tussling with the king. Lear calls for his fool who delivers a series of sharp barbs about how foolhardy the king has been. After Goneril announces that she can maintain only fifty of his men, Lear goes to Regan for succor. At Gloucester's castle Edmund continues his calumnies against his half-brother Edgar. Gloucester claims Edmund as his natural heir. Regan and Cornwall have arrived to seek Gloucester's counsel about Goneril's break with the king. Upon hearing of Edgar's supposed disloyalty, they promise to support Gloucester against him. When Kent and Oswald meet at Gloucester's castle, the two tussle—Kent is outraged with the man for his rude treatment of Lear earlier in the day. For this disruption, Cornwall slaps Kent in the stocks, clearly showing that he has decided against Lear. Gloucester cautions him that the king would disapprove. Lear arrives and has Kent freed. Kneeling before Regan, Lear asks her to shelter him from Goneril's unnatural and dishonoring actions. But, when Goneril arrives, Lear discovers that his two eldest are in league with each other. Both participate in a debate about reducing his guard to first twenty-five and then to zero. Outraged and stunned Lear rushes out onto the moor where a storm is brewing. His fool and Kent follow him.</p>
Paper Topic	<p><i>Was Cordelia's answer to her father the king a prudent answer? Should she have modified her answer in order to check the treachery of her sisters? What was she hoping to gain by giving her answer (Hint: Think about how her answer might have influenced a less petulant man.). Examine her actual words to arrive at your answer.</i></p>



→ Key Points:

Introduction: The *Tragedy of King Lear* starts with a horrible lapse, a terrible failure of wisdom on the part of the King. Should not a king of advanced years be wise? He should, but Lear fails the wisdom test; fails it when he asks: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most/That we our largest bounty may extend/Where nature doth with merit challenge." There is nothing wrong with an old man wanting to be flattered and petted by his grown daughters, but when that gray head wears a crown, he dares not entrust his kingdom to flatterers—perhaps most especially when they are his own kin. Lear has made the classic blunder of those in power: He has shown his own weakness. Predictably, he has encouraged those who are only too ready to exploit his weakness and fill the power vacuum he has created. When Cordelia, his favorite, refuses to play his game he is at first taken aback, then hurt, and then angry. Had she to do it again would she have "mended her speech" as her father entreats her to do or would she still speak the word "nothing" in answer to his first inquiry? Perhaps, if she had known that her "nothing" would create an abyss that would swallow up all of their lives she might have answered differently. It is one of the most fascinating aspects of the play that the initial fissure should lead to complete rupture.

Genre: Tragedy

Setting: Britain in a Pagan, pre-Christian past (This fact is very important to understanding the chief interpretive question of the play: Is Shakespeare writing a play that pre-figures the existential despair endemic to the West in the wake of the world wars or is he presenting the inevitable despair of pre-Christian times.)

Themes: what is natural, familial bonds, the chaos that ensues when rightful authority abandons its responsibilities

Symbols: The crown, the army, the palaces

Conflict: Man vs. Man



Discuss: ◆ Was Cordelia wrong in not giving a more loving answer to Lear's question? ◆ Could old Gloucester have acted to prevent Edmund's betrayal? ◆ Could old Lear have acted to prevent Goneril and Regan's betrayal? ◆ Do you think Goneril and Regan's loyalty to each other will last?

Notes
