

Writing about *King Lear*

Essay question

How does Shakespeare present Lear's state of mind in this extract? Compare and contrast his feelings and attitudes here with another part of the play.

Act 3 Scene 2, lines 26–40

KING LEAR Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!
 Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters: I
 tax not you, you elements, with unkindness; I
 never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
 You owe me no subscription: then let fall Your
 horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave, A
 poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man: But
 yet I call you servile ministers,
 That have with two pernicious daughters join'd
 Your high engender'd battles 'gainst a head So
 old and white as this. O! O! 'Tis foul!

FOOL O nuncle, court holy-water in a dry
 house is better than this rain-water out o' door.
 Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughters' blessing:
 here's a night pities neither wise man nor fool.

KING LEAR Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!
 Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:
 I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
 I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
 You owe me no subscription: then let fall
 Your horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave,
 A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man:
 But yet I call you servile ministers,
 That have with two pernicious daughters join'd
 Your high engender'd battles 'gainst a head
 So old and white as this. O! O! 'Tis foul!

Plan your essay

Work with the extract above and complete the table below as you explore your ideas.

Remember, Lear has just confronted Goneril and Regan and they have demanded that he reduce his train of followers if he wants to stay with them. Lear has been locked out of Gloucester's castle and a great storm has erupted.

<p>What is your interpretation of this part of the play?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is happening here and how does this relate to the rest of the play? • What does it show about Lear's feelings and judgement? 	
<p>What strikes you about Shakespeare's language?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What vivid images or descriptions are used in this passage? • How does Lear's language, in particular his extended use of personification, reflect the events of the play and Lear's responses to them? <p>E.G: Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters: I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness; I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children, You owe me no subscription...</p>	
<p>What strikes you about Shakespeare's dramatic craft?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How might this scene be portrayed on stage? • What actions, tone of voice or gestures might be suggested in the language Lear uses? • What is the relationship between Lear and the Fool and how do they interact here? • How might Lear display an extremity of emotion that mirrors the violence of the natural world?... <p>E.G.: ...here I stand, your slave, A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man: But yet I call you servile ministers, that have with two pernicious daughters join'd your high engender'd battles 'gainst a head so old and white as this.</p>	
<p>How does this passage compare to other parts of the play?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does Lear change in the course of the play? 	

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you describe the way Shakespeare provides a dramatic experience for the audience as well as the development of Lear's character? • What other parts of the play explore similar themes of madness and betrayal? | |
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You will now have some concrete ideas that you can include in your essay. You might like to reorganise your ideas or add in other examples from the play to make a clearer plan. Use mind maps, bullet points or flow charts with words, images, sentences, thought bubbles and prompts that are intelligible to you. If you plan your essay or argument thoughtfully in detail before you begin writing, you will find that your ideas will be easier to structure and develop later.

Structure your essay

You will need to follow certain rules to give your writing a clear structure. Your essay should have:

- an **introduction** (with a clear sense of the direction in which your argument will go)
- a **main body** to develop your argument (with each paragraph making a point of dramatic or thematic significance, and referring in close detail to the script)
- a **conclusion** (that declares where your argument has arrived).

Write carefully

Your aim is to write clearly and concisely in the present tense and with sentences that are carefully punctuated. Remember to be specific in the points that you make about the play and the references you use from it, and in how you address the key points of the essay question.

Remember Shakespeare's skill as a playwright and poet

Shakespeare made specific choices about language and the dramatic representation of character, plot and theme on stage. Remember to identify some of the literary devices and dramatic techniques that he has used and explain their effectiveness. A good way to remember to do this is to make sure that you mention Shakespeare's name in every paragraph as you comment on the techniques that he is using.

Remember to use quotations and include analysis of the script

You will want to be a thoughtful reader of *King Lear* so that you can explore the implications of words and ideas in the script. Your analysis should show that you are aware of metaphors, similes and other literary features, and that you consider the implications of genre, audience and context. Your close analysis of words and phrases from the script must be connected to the big issues raised by the play. Try to think in terms of relating your detailed analysis to the major ideas that the play explores.

Learn from others

Although you should endeavour to be as original as possible, your critical voice is inevitably going to be strongly influenced by others: your teacher, other members of your class and film versions, as well as the views of actors and critics. Learning from others adds to the effectiveness of your argument, it does not dilute it: but remember to give credit where it is due.