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SHAKESPEARE FOCUS

KING LEAR

Leaving Certificate English

Text, analysis, commentary notes and sample essays

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MARTIN KIERAN AND FRANCES ROCKS


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MARTIN KIERAN AND FRANCES ROCKS

 GILL EDUCATION

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Hume Avenue
Park West
Dublin 12
www.gilleducation.ie

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**These key scenes required a detailed and close study.*

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Introduction

- The epic tragedy *King Lear* is widely regarded as Shakespeare's most intense and powerful tragedy. Written around 1605, it tells the story of an ageing, headstrong monarch who decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, according to which one recites the best declaration of her love for him.
- The play raises enduring questions about justice, morality, love and loyalty.
- Other universal themes include power, deception, cruelty and justice.
- Drama is a story – usually involving human conflict – relayed through dialogue and actions and performed by actors. Most Leaving Cert exam questions relate to characters, relationships, themes and dramatic techniques – all of which are closely interlinked. A good knowledge of the play's key or revealing scenes will provide a solid basis for answering questions.
- In studying the play, it is, of course, important to remember that the text was written specifically for theatrical performance. Despite any peculiarities or inconsistencies in the plot, audiences must accept the 'new reality' that Shakespeare has created in order to fully appreciate this intriguing stage drama.

The Legend of *King Lear*

Shakespeare's *King Lear* has been produced on stage and film thousands of times since its first performance in 1605.

The story of the old king and his three daughters was well known in England for centuries before Shakespeare wrote the definitive play. One early account of Lear can be found in the *History of the Kings of Britain*, written by Geoffrey Monmouth in 1135. Monmouth's account inspired several 16th-century narratives about Lear, including one in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (first edition, 1577). Even the great poet Edmund Spenser recounted Lear's tragedy in *The Faerie Queen* (1590).

William Shakespeare
(1564–1616)



All these versions were available to Shakespeare and are likely to have shaped the main plot of his version of the story. However, it is clear that Shakespeare relied chiefly on *The True Chronicle History of King Leir, and his three daughters, Gonorill, Ragan, and Cordella*, an anonymous play published in 1593.

In Shakespeare's drama, the legendary ruler of ancient Britain is a tragic figure who loses his authority through his own foolishness. The ageing king decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters and asks each of them to declare their love for him. He loses his mind after being humiliated and mistreated by his two older daughters.

When Cordelia learns of her father's condition, she raises an army to fight her sisters' forces. However, her soldiers are defeated, and she is imprisoned and hanged. Heartbroken over the death of his youngest daughter, Lear himself dies soon afterwards.

Shakespeare's Life (Dates of plays are approximate)

1564

Born in Stratford-upon-Avon

1582

Marries Anne Hathaway

1583

His daughter Susannah is born

1584

Birth of twins, Judith and Hamnet

1585

Moves to London

1590s

Writes first plays, *Richard III* and *Henry VII*

1593–96

Continues to write, including *Richard II* and *Romeo and Juliet*

1596

Death of his son Hamnet

1599

Invests in the Globe Theatre

1605

Writes *King Lear*

1606
(26th Dec)

First record of a stage performance 'before the King's majesty in Whitehall'

1608

First printed copies of *King Lear*

1609

Becomes part-owner of the new Blackfriars Theatre

1612

Retires and returns to Stratford

1616

Dies aged 52



Reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre on the south bank of the River Thames in London, England. Now used to host the plays of Shakespeare in an authentic setting.

Shakespeare's Theatre

Throughout Shakespeare's lifetime (1564–1616), professional theatre was a highly successful business that provided popular entertainment for people of all backgrounds. Shakespeare wrote for a specific acting company, known first as the Lord Chamberlain's Men and later as the King's Men.

Plays were performed in the royal courts, as well as in town squares, churches and guildhalls around the country. In London, the largest theatres were open-air arenas with room for several thousand people. These playhouses were made mainly of wood.

Indoor playhouses accommodated up to five hundred people, all of whom were seated. Lighting was provided by candles, making indoor theatres suitable for winter and evening productions.

The Globe

From 1599 onwards, London's most important outdoor theatre was the Globe in Southwark, close to the River Thames. Shakespeare's plays were also performed elsewhere, but the Globe was where the great playwright's best known dramas were first produced. The building stood approximately 11 metres high and had a diameter of about 26 metres. The inside of the structure contained three tiers of galleries that surrounded an uncovered yard roughly 17 metres wide.

The grounds surrounding the theatre would have been bustling with play-goers and local people. Stall holders sold merchandise and refreshments, creating a lively market-day atmosphere. The Globe would have particularly attracted young people and there were many complaints of young apprentices avoiding work in order to go to the theatre.

Staging

The bare stages of Shakespeare's day had very little scenery and few props except for objects required by the plot, such as a table or a throne. Setting and mood were suggested by the power of the play's language. In *King Lear*, this is particularly evident in the storm scenes on the heath.

Women never performed in plays (because acting was seen as a disreputable profession), and young boys usually played female characters. During Elizabethan times, there was a fast turnover of plays – and little or no time for rehearsal – so actors needed to have a very good memory.

Shakespeare's Text and Line Numbers

No original manuscript of *King Lear* has survived. Over time, the text has changed drastically owing to the work of editors and theatre artists. From the outset, *King Lear* existed in two main versions, the First Quarto of 1608 and the Folio of 1623. Many modern versions of the play (including this one) are based on the Folio, with the missing Quarto lines restored. Popular editions usually have some modernised spelling and punctuation. Line numbers may also differ, depending on the particular version.

Before Reading *King Lear*

When preparing for the Single Text *King Lear* question, it is important to become familiar with the entire play through a close reading of the text. Your written work should show evidence of effective analysis. You will be expected to support relevant points with suitable reference to key scenes. Some moments in the drama are particularly significant and worth studying thoroughly.

Remember that all commentaries and study guides are there to be challenged. There is no single 'correct way' to interpret *King Lear*.

In responding to exam questions, have confidence in developing your own ideas and always express yourself clearly. Identify the main elements of the question, so that your answer is coherent and well structured. Make sure to avoid unfocused narrative. Wherever possible, find your own examples from the text to support your views and use accurate quotations when appropriate.

Characters

The Royal House of Britain

LEAR – King of Britain

GONERIL – his eldest daughter

REGAN – his second daughter

CORDELIA – his youngest daughter

DUKE OF ALBANY – Goneril's husband

DUKE OF CORNWALL – Regan's husband

The Gloucester Family

EARL OF GLOUCESTER – Lear's loyal friend

EDGAR / POOR TOM – Gloucester's older son

EDMUND – Gloucester's younger, illegitimate son

Other characters

Fool – the king's loyal court jester

Earl of Kent/Caius – Lear's devoted supporter

Oswald – Goneril's steward

King of France – he marries Cordelia and is willing to support her efforts to rescue Lear

Duke of Burgundy – another suitor for Cordelia. He rejects her when he learns that she has no dowry

Curan – Gloucester's servant

Old Man – tenant of Gloucester

Doctor – attendant to Cordelia

Knights of Lear's entourage, gentlemen, soldiers, attendants, messengers, servants

The action of the play takes place in various parts of the kingdom of Britain.



Act 1

Scene 2*



OVERVIEW

Edmund complains bitterly about being regarded as inferior simply because his parents were not married. He is determined to inherit what is legally due to Edgar, his older, legitimate brother. Angry and defiant, Edmund refuses to accept the law and he reveals plans to pursue his own interests by tricking his father and brother. Gloucester is easily deceived and highly superstitious. He regards Edgar's apparent treachery as part of the general breakdown of society which has been prophesied by recent eclipses of the sun and moon.

** This key scene requires a detailed and close study.*

The Earl of Gloucester's castle

Enter Edmund, with a letter

Edmund

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
 My services are bound. Wherefore should I
 Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
 The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
 5 For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
 Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
 When my dimensions are as well compact,
 My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
 As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
 10 With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
 Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
 More composition and fierce quality
 Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
 Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
 15 Got between asleep and wake? Well, then,
 Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land:
 Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
 As to the legitimate: fine word, legitimate!
 Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
 20 And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
 Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper:
 Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

Enter Gloucester

Gloucester

Kent banished thus! and France in choler parted!
 And the king gone to-night! Prescribed his power!
 25 Confined to exhibition! All this done
 Upon the gad! Edmund, how now! what news?

Edmund

So please your lordship, none.

Putting the letter in his pocket

Gloucester

Why so earnestly seek you to put up that letter?

Edmund

I know no news, my lord.

Gloucester

30 What paper were you reading?

3 in the plague of custom: *denounced by the conventions of society*

4 curiosity of nations: *intrusive laws*

6 Lag of: *younger than*
 bastard: *child of unmarried persons*
 base: *low social status*

7 dimensions...compact: *well-designed and proportioned*

9 issue: *child*

14 fops: *fools*

21 top: *rise above*

23 choler: *anger*

24 Prescribed: *reduced*

25 Confined to exhibition: *restricted to a limited allowance*

26 Upon the gad: *in a rush*

32 terrible dispatch: *hastily consigning*

38 perused: *scanned*
for your over-looking: *for you to see*

44 an essay...of my virtue: *a way of testing my integrity*

47-48 idle and fond bondage: *redundant and stupid enslavement*

49 sways...suffered: *governs because it is endured*

58 casement: *window*
closet: *private room*

Edmund

Nothing, my lord.

Gloucester

No? What needed, then, that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket? The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see. Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles.

35

Edmund

I beseech you, sir, pardon me. It is a letter from my brother, that I have not all over-read; and for so much as I have perused, I find it not fit for your over-looking.

Gloucester

Give me the letter, sir.

Edmund

I shall offend, either to detain or give it. The contents, as in part I understand them, are to blame.

40

Gloucester

Let's see, let's see.

Edmund

I hope, for my brother's justification, he wrote this but as an essay or taste of my virtue.

Gloucester

[Reads]

'This policy and reverence of age makes the world bitter to the best of our times; keeps our fortunes from us till our oldness cannot relish them. I begin to find an idle and fond bondage in the oppression of aged tyranny; who sways, not as it hath power, but as it is suffered. Come to me, that of this I may speak more. If our father would sleep till I waked him, you should enjoy half his revenue forever, and live the beloved of your brother, Edgar.' Hum! Conspiracy! 'Sleep till I waked him, you should enjoy half his revenue.' My son Edgar! Had he a hand to write this? a heart and brain to breed it in? When came this to you? Who brought it?

45

50

55

Edmund

It was not brought me, my lord; there's the cunning of it. I found it thrown in at the casement of my closet.

Gloucester

You know the character to be your brother's?

Edmund

- 60 If the matter were good, my lord, I durst swear it were his; but, in respect of that, I would fain think it were not.

Gloucester

It is his.

Edmund

It is his hand, my lord, but I hope his heart is not in the contents.

Gloucester

- 65 Hath he never before sounded you in this business?

Edmund

Never, my lord. But I have heard him oft maintain it to be fit, that, sons at perfect age, and fathers declined, the father should be as ward to the son, and the son manage his revenue.

Gloucester

- 70 O villain, villain! His very opinion in the letter! Abhorred villain! Unnatural, detested, brutish villain! Worse than brutish! Go, sirrah, seek him; I'll apprehend him. Abominable villain! Where is he?

Edmund

- I do not well know, my lord. If it shall please you to suspend
75 your indignation against my brother till you can derive from him better testimony of his intent, you should run a certain course; where, if you violently proceed against him, mistaking his purpose, it would make a great gap in your own honour, and shake in pieces the heart of his
80 obedience. I dare pawn down my life for him, that he hath writ this to feel my affection to your honour, and to no other pretence of danger.

Gloucester

Think you so?

Edmund

- If your honour judge it meet, I will place you where you
85 shall hear us confer of this, and by an auricular assurance have your satisfaction, and that without any further delay than this very evening.

59 character: *handwriting*

60 durst: *dare*

61 would fain think it were not: *would like to think it was not his*

65 sounded you: *tried to discover your opinions*

67 sons at perfect age: *mature grown-up sons*

68 ward: *someone under control of a guardian*

72 sirrah: *young sir*

75-76 derive...intent: *find out what he intends to do*

76-77 should...course: *will not go wrong*

80 pawn down: *gamble*

84 meet: *suitable*

85 auricular assurance: *proof by hearing*

91–92 wind me into him: *discover what he is thinking*

93 unstate... resolution: *give up all I possess to be sure*

95 acquaint you withal: *let you know how I get on*

96 eclipses: *blotting out of light by the position of a planet*
portend: *foretell*

98 sequent: *succeeding*

103 bias of nature: *his natural course*

104 Machinations: *scheming plots*

110 foppery: *foolishness, stupidity*

111 surfeits: *over-indulgences*

114 teachers: *traitors*

118 goatish disposition: *lechery*

119 compounded: *conceived*

Gloucester

He cannot be such a monster –

Edmund

Nor is not, sure.

Gloucester

To his father, that so tenderly and entirely loves him. 90

Heaven and earth! Edmund, seek him out: wind me into him, I pray you. Frame the business after your own wisdom. I would unstate myself, to be in a due resolution.

Edmund

I will seek him, sir, presently, convey the business as I shall find means, and acquaint you withal. 95

Gloucester

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father. This villain of mine comes under the prediction; there's son against father. The king falls from bias of nature, there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders, follow us disquietly to our graves. Find out this villain, Edmund, it shall lose thee nothing. Do it carefully. And the noble and true-hearted Kent banished! His offence, honesty! 'Tis strange. 100

Exit

Edmund

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves and teachers, by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! My father compounded with my 110 115

120 mother under the dragon's tail, and my nativity was under
Ursa Major, so that it follows I am rough and lecherous. I
should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the
firmament twinkled on my bastardizing.

Enter Edgar

Pat he comes like the catastrophe of the old comedy.
125 My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o'
Bedlam. O, these eclipses do portend these divisions! fa,
sol, la, mi.

Edgar

How now, brother Edmund! What serious contemplation
are you in?

Edmund

130 I am thinking, brother, of a prediction I read this other day,
what should follow these eclipses.

Edgar

Do you busy yourself about that?

Edmund

I promise you, the effects he writes of succeed unhappily
as of unnaturalness between the child and the parent;
135 death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities; divisions in
state, menaces and maledictions against king and nobles;
needless diffidences, banishment of friends, dissipation of
cohorts, nuptial breaches, and I know not what.

Edgar

Do you busy yourself with that?

Edmund

140 When saw you my father last?

Edgar

The night gone by.

Edmund

Spake you with him?

Edgar

Ay, two hours together.

Edmund

Parted you in good terms? Found you no displeasure in
145 him by word or countenance?

121 Ursa Major: *Great Bear constellation*

124 Pat: *right on time*

125–26 Tom o'Bedlam: *a madman*

128 contemplation: *thoughts*

135 dearth: *scarcity*
dissolutions of ancient amities:
breaking up of old friendships

137 needless diffidences: *avoidable loss of*
trust

137–38 dissipation of cohorts: *dispersal of*
soldiers

138 nuptial breaches: *marriage breakdown*

153 have a continent forbearance: *keep a low profile*

155 fitly: *at a suitable time*

163 anon: *soon*

165 credulous: *easily taken in*
noble: *honourable*

168 practices: *trickery*

169 wit: *intelligence*

170 meet: *correct*
fashion fit: *shape to suit my purposes*

Edgar

None at all.

Edmund

Bethink yourself wherein you may have offended him, and at my entreaty forbear his presence until some little time hath qualified the heat of his displeasure; which at this instant so rageth in him, that with the mischief of your person it would scarcely allay. 150

Edgar

Some villain hath done me wrong.

Edmund

That's my fear. I pray you, have a continent forbearance till the speed of his rage goes slower; and, as I say, retire with me to my lodging, from whence I will fitly bring you to hear my lord speak. Pray ye, go; there's my key. If you do stir abroad, go armed. 155

Edgar

Armed, brother?

Edmund

Brother, I advise you to the best. I am no honest man if there be any good meaning towards you. I have told you what I have seen and heard but faintly, nothing like the image and horror of it. Pray you, away. 160

Edgar

Shall I hear from you anon?

Edmund

I do serve you in this business.

Exit Edgar

A credulous father and a brother noble,
Whose nature is so far from doing harms,
That he suspects none: on whose foolish honesty
My practices ride easy. I see the business.
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit:
All with me's meet that I can fashion fit. 170

Exit

Summary

The sub-plot has obvious parallels with the main plot. Just as Lear has children who are scheming against him, the Earl of Gloucester has a deceitful child. And just as the king mistakenly banishes the people who truly love him, so Gloucester will condemn the wrong person. In this scene, we are shown Edmund's evil intention right from the beginning.

Edmund's soliloquy (lines 1–22)

The opening monologue shows Edmund's true feelings and thoughts. Appalled at the preferential treatment shown to those regarded as illegitimate, simply because they are born outside marriage, he chooses to make Nature his 'goddess'. He vows to take his legitimate brother's birthright, 'I must have your land'. To achieve this, he will use the ruse of a letter to trick his father and gain what he believes is his entitlement: 'Edmund the base/ Shall top the legitimate'. His 'Nature' is a malicious force which seeks to overturn civilisation and order. Intensely resentful about his low social status, Edmund renounces the laws of society and religion. He is clever and persuasive, easily manipulating his father and brother. Somewhat surprisingly, he also charms the audience, who tend to sympathise with his predicament despite his callous scheming.

The devious act (lines 28–61)

Edmund exaggerates his attempts to hide a letter so that Gloucester's curiosity will be piqued and that he will want to examine it, 'Let's see, let's see'. Keen to give the impression that he means no harm, Edmund pretends that he is reluctant to hand it over. Gloucester insists on reading what is written and is horrified to discover that Edgar is suggesting that the two brothers should unite to murder their father and divide his wealth between them, 'you should enjoy half his revenue forever'. Horrified at this 'ungrateful' son, the old earl demands that Edgar be 'apprehended' at once.

The sub-plot closely reflects the main storyline as two foolish fathers wonder at the apparent behaviour of children who always appeared to love them. Gloucester seems out of touch with his family and shocked that children can be so disrespectful to their elderly parents, 'the oppression of aged tyranny'.

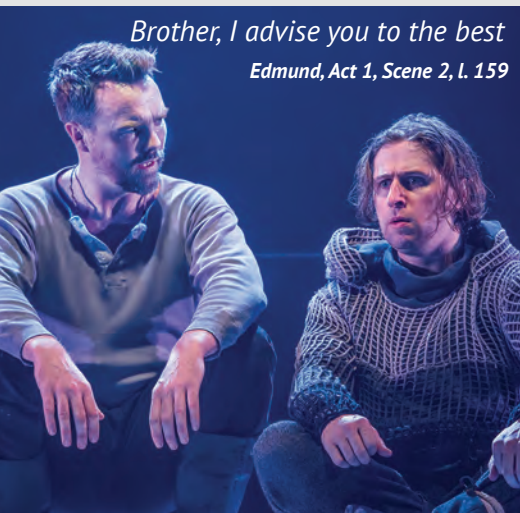
A rash father and a misleading son (lines 63–95)

Gloucester immediately jumps to the conclusion Edmund has pointed him towards, furiously damning the absent Edgar as an 'Unnatural, detested, brutish villain!' Edmund compounds the matter by advising his father to tread warily and 'suspend your indignation against my brother'. Edmund claims he would even bet his life that Edgar is not serious, but Gloucester is desperate to know the truth about Edgar's intentions: 'wind me into him'. The audience will wonder why he does not check the truth of Edmund's invented story by confronting his older son. His suspicions indicate a severe lack of communication between himself and his children.

Instead, he readily agrees with Edmund's plan to eavesdrop on Edgar so that he can end this uncertainty 'by an auricular assurance'. Edmund is delighted at this and pretends to comfort Gloucester by saying that he will organise everything and let his father know how he gets on, 'acquaint you with all'. Throughout this encounter, Gloucester appears as a naive, irrational character who is still stunned by recent events in court. Like Lear, he is influenced by individuals who are not what they seem.

Superstitious Gloucester (lines 96–109)

Gloucester reflects on how events change, blaming their fluctuations on the stars' realignments, 'late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good'. He is a superstitious individual who lives through his senses. Lear has also shown a similar trait in his personality, 'By all the operation of the orbs/ From whom we do exist and cease to be'. The illusions of both men emphasise the pagan background of the story, which is set in pre-Christian times.



Brother, I advise you to the best
Edmund, Act 1, Scene 2, l. 159

Proud Edmund (lines 110–127)

Edmund mocks his father's beliefs that the stars are to blame for man's actions, 'This is the excellent foppery of the world'. He believes that people often delude themselves with this superstitious explanation, 'An admirable evasion'. It is ironic that one of the play's villains holds such a rational view and shows his contempt for those who would blame unexpected evil on the movement of the stars. Edmund asserts that he himself would have been exactly as he is regardless of what star shone on his conception. He sneers at the approaching Edgar and delights in caricaturing Gloucester's previous speech, 'O these eclipses do portend these divisions,' while pretending to sing.

Execution of the plan (lines 128–164)

The unsuspecting Edgar is easily taken in by Edmund's treachery. Although he rightly deduces that 'Some villain hath done me wrong', Edgar never suspects his own brother. Like Gloucester, he places himself under Edmund's control, timidly inquiring, 'Shall I hear from you anon?' Like his gullible father, he accepts Edmund's opinions as truth. Edgar is clearly honest and trusting, but is far from being worldly wise. The scene begins and ends with Edmund's reflections. He is an astute judge of character and correctly identifies his father as 'credulous' and his brother as being too 'noble' for his own good. This allows him to deceive both of them with ease. Edmund is a realist and a schemer who is determined to rise in the world. Always the opportunist, he can now see his plans taking shape and he swears to get what he deserves: 'if not by birth, have lands by wit'.

The power of language

Shakespeare has set the scene for the unfolding drama and the audience has much more knowledge of the true state of affairs than the main characters. The playwright is using the technique of dramatic irony to increase the tension in the play.

Edmund reveals his true character in powerful and compelling soliloquies. He reels in the unsuspecting Gloucester by pretending to take his brother's part, claiming that he found the incriminating letter 'thrown in at the casement'. He continues to lie, 'I hope his heart is not in the contents'. He even swears that he would die for Edgar, 'I dare pawn down my life for him'. Edmund lets nothing stand in the way of his lust for power.

The language of astrology shows the limited outlook of both Lear and Gloucester. Man projects his problems and suffering onto the gods, 'These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us'. But Edmund, the pragmatist, scoffs at the idea that humans are 'drunkards, liars and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence'. Both Lear and Gloucester are shown to have an imperfect understanding of the world. Shakespeare is asking us to consider whether superstition ignores the moral responsibility we all should have for our actions. This is an ominous aspect of the scene.

Critical Analysis

1. In your opinion, is Edmund a likeable villain or a cold-blooded schemer? Give reasons for your view and support your response with accurate quotation from the text.
2. What is the dramatic significance of the Gloucester family sub-plot in the play, *King Lear*? Refer closely to the play in your response

Sample Paragraph 1 (Q2)

The sub-plot is like the main story of Lear losing everything. There are many things in common. Both fathers are very old men and have children who don't like them. The son Edmund is very clever and comes up with a great plan to inherit land, 'Edgar I will soon have your land'. He does not like his father because he is always showing off about how Edmund was not born inside of marriage. I think Gloucester is as bad a family man as Lear and he believes in the stars. The sub-plot is interesting because we like Edmund even though he is evil. Edgar is innocent too. He just believes Edmund as does Gloucester. I think this sub-plot is very dramatic in the play. (125 words)

Examiner's Comment

- ◆ Unfocused and unsuccessful paragraph that includes some random observations regarding Gloucester's family.
- ◆ Scant engagement with the question or understanding of the playwright's use of the sub-plot and its impact.
- ◆ Lack of accurate quotation and reference. Expression is note-like and poorly organised.

Sample Paragraph 2 (Q2)

In the play, *King Lear*, Shakespeare uses the dramatic device of a sub-plot to reinforce the effect of the main plot's message – the disastrous consequences of moral blindness in parents. Both plots feature a dysfunctional family headed by an old father who has sincere and also hypocritical children. Each father has a character flaw, Lear is impulsive, 'The best and soundest of his time had been but rash'. Gloucester is gullible, 'A credulous father'. Both are accurately manipulated by their deceitful children. These character flaws lead the fathers to make a tragic misjudgement of their sincere children, Cordelia and Edgar, who are then banished. Lear roars 'avoid my sight'. Both fathers have an unjustified trust in outward appearances so each is easily deceived. This corresponding sub-plot highlights the vulnerability of the old to the evil schemes of their ungrateful children. Goneril and Regan used the 'glib and oily art' of cynical flattery and lies to dupe Lear. Edmund uses clever duplicity to trick Gloucester, 'I hope for my brother's justification, he wrote this but as an essay or test of my virtue'. By matching the plot and sub-plot so closely, Shakespeare succeeds in making the narrative more believable and enables the audience to engage more deeply on his central theme of moral blindness. (213 words)

Examiner's Comment

- ◆ Top grade response showing a very good understanding of the dramatic importance of the sub-plot.
- ◆ Excellent opening sentence and strong supportive reference and quotation throughout.
- ◆ Several insightful points are clearly developed.
- ◆ Expression is impressive ('This corresponding sub-plot highlights the vulnerability of the old') and well managed throughout.

Key Quotes

<p><i>Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law/ My services are bound</i></p> <p>(Edmund) l.1-2</p>	<p>In this revealing soliloquy, Gloucester's younger son, Edmund, vows to follow the laws of nature where only the strongest survive and the weak become victims. He is extremely hurt and resentful that he is regarded as inferior because of his illegitimacy.</p>
<p><i>What needed, then, that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket</i></p> <p>(Gloucester to Edmund) l.32</p>	<p>Gloucester's curiosity is immediately aroused when Edmund pretends to hide a letter from Edgar. Its contents will suggest that Edgar is plotting against their father.</p>
<p><i>These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us</i></p> <p>(Gloucester to Edmund) l.96-7</p>	<p>The old earl is highly superstitious and believes that man's actions and circumstances are governed by heavenly influences.</p>
<p><i>in palaces treason:/ and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father</i></p> <p>(Gloucester to Edmund) l.100-1</p>	<p>Gloucester is shocked at the recent events in court when Lear was deceived by his two elder daughters and banished Cordelia. Ironically, Gloucester makes exactly the same mistake, believing the hypocritical Edmund while proceeding to exile his loyal son, Edgar.</p>
<p><i>Some villain hath done me wrong</i></p> <p>(Edgar to Edmund) l.152</p>	<p>Edgar is speaking the truth, but does not realise that the villain is his brother Edmund.</p>
<p><i>Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit:/ All with me's meet that I can fashion fit</i></p> <p>(Edmund) l.169-70</p>	<p>Edmund decides that he will seize power through the power of his intellect and he intends to use everyone and everything to his advantage. For him, the end justifies the means. He is the ultimate exploiter.</p>

Using *King Lear* as a Comparative Text

The Leaving Cert Comparative Study section is worth 70 marks – the second most important question on the exam paper.

In the Comparative section, plays, novels and films are all referred to as **texts**.

A **mode** of comparison is simply a framework in which to explore a text.

There are four Higher Level modes:

1. The cultural context
2. Theme or issue
3. Literary genre
4. The general vision and viewpoint

You are required to study **at least two** of the three modes prescribed each year.

Only **two** of these three modes will appear on the exam paper.

Each mode that appears on the paper will have a choice of **two** questions.

These questions take the format of single **essay-type question** for 70 marks **or a question divided into two parts**.

- ♦ Part (a) requires discussion of one text for 30 marks.
- ♦ Part (b) requires comparison of **two other texts** for 40 marks.

You are allocated **70 minutes** for the Comparative section.

You should aim to write about **1100–1150 words** in the single 70-mark answer.

For the two-part question, aim to write about **400–450 words for Part (a)** and about **600–650 words for Part (b)**.

When answering Comparative questions, candidates may compare and/or contrast, i.e. address similarities and/or differences in both the subject matter and style of their chosen texts.

The Cultural Context



Dysfunctional family relationships, and the use and abuse of power are central to the 'world' of the play

The cultural context is the society or 'world' of the text. It refers to the social setting, values, attitudes and day-to-day rituals. Our understanding of a text is enriched by knowing something about the culture in which the story is set.

Revealing features of a society include:

- ◆ family
- ◆ social status
- ◆ power
- ◆ morality
- ◆ violence
- ◆ patriarchy
- ◆ freedom
- ◆ religion

Remember!

Various aspects of cultural context will overlap at times. For example, family relationships and power struggles are closely interlinked throughout *King Lear*.

The Cultural Context in *King Lear*

The pre-Christian Britain in which *King Lear* is set is a largely uncivilised society where heathenism and individual self-interest prevail. It is a world of political intrigue, treachery and betrayal where the desire for power excludes most other values.

Lear's Britain is an extremely **hierarchical country**, demanding that respect be shown not just to the wealthy and powerful but to parents and the elderly.

We also encounter a warped society in which immorality and superstition take the place of religion. The playwright lets us see how vulnerable are old men such as Lear and Gloucester to the behaviour of unscrupulous children – and therefore just how fragile the social order really is.

Family Values

At the beginning of the play, Kent and Gloucester discuss Lear's successors ('it appears not which of the Dukes he values most'). The audience is immediately introduced to a world where parent-child relationships, succession and political power are important features.

Gloucester's son Edmund epitomises the **hypocritical society** that discriminates against illegitimate children. In this macho world, an old man can joke

about his 'whoreson' and boast that 'there was good sport at his making'.

Edmund's unnatural behaviour towards his father is mirrored by Goneril and Regan. The **pursuit of power** unites all three characters. By contrast, loyalty and honour are also evident in the story. Both Cordelia and Edgar show great love for their respective fathers. They are fully prepared to suffer for what they believe is right. The Earl of Kent and the Fool are equally devoted to Lear.

A Patriarchal Society

Lear's Britain was a man's world where the eldest legitimate son (such as Edgar) inherited his father's property and title. Young women depended entirely on their families and usually needed rich dowries to secure husbands. Yet Goneril and Regan are as ruthless as any of the male characters when it comes to gaining power. Their mistreatment of their ageing father shows utter callousness. Regan is particularly violent and plays a key role in the blinding of Gloucester.

The king's youngest daughter courageously leads the French army into Britain to challenge the rule of her two ruthless sisters. In redeeming her father, Cordelia represents another kind of **female power**. Shakespeare has reversed the roles of society – the women in *King Lear* are very powerful. In their different ways, all three daughters contradict the social order of the play.

The Importance of Royalty

In the Britain of *King Lear*, the monarch is head of both his own family and of the state. While Lear is presented as God's representative on earth and a ruler of almost mythical status, the play articulates obvious concerns about the divine right of kings and the **abuse of power**.

Shakespeare shows that kings are at their most vulnerable and human when faced with family and political problems. After Lear gives away his kingdom to Goneril and Regan, he is no longer protected by his regal status. Only when he suffers does the audience witness Lear's capacity for compassion, justice and courage. By then, however, these qualities are relatively ineffective in their impact on wider society.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* addresses crucial social issues of his times. These include the divine power of kings, sibling rivalry, inherited wealth and status, the impoverished underclass, justice and the law.

Gill Shakespeare Focus: King Lear is a new and beautifully illustrated version of the play which expertly assists students in understanding Shakespeare's great work and thoroughly prepares them for the Leaving Certificate examination.

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- ◆ **Summary** and in-depth **Critical Analysis**
- ◆ **Key Quotes** plus commentary
- ◆ Exam-style questions and **Sample Paragraphs** with **Examiner's Comments**.*

Essential study notes:

- ◆ **Characters** and relationships – analytical study
- ◆ Central **Themes and Issues**
- ◆ **Dramatic Techniques** – including imagery, letters, plot and sub-plot, irony and soliloquies
- ◆ Succinct treatment of *King Lear* as a **Comparative Text** – modes defined, key moments explored
- ◆ **Exam Focus** – purposeful use of key scenes, paragraphing succinctly, quoting effectively
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The Authors

Martin Kieran and **Frances Rocks** are experienced teachers and examiners who have written several Leaving Certificate English textbooks. Martin has worked for many years as **Chief Advising Examiner** for Leaving Certificate Higher Level English. **Frances** delivers **in-service workshops** for second-level teachers of English throughout the country.

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