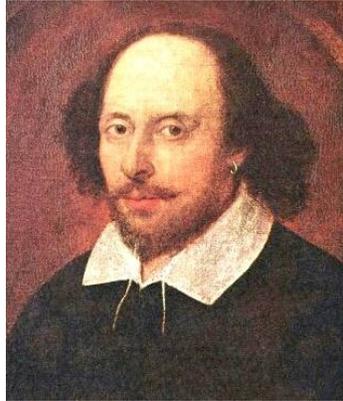


KING LEAR

by William Shakespeare



THE AUTHOR

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into the family of a prosperous tradesman in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. While in his mid-teens, he was forced to leave school because his family fell into a period of poverty, so that he had only a rudimentary education. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and already three months pregnant. The marriage produced three children in three years, but in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford to go to London to seek his fortune in the big city.

In London, he embarked upon a career on the stage, becoming a popular actor by the early fifteen nineties. In 1591, he penned his first play, *Love's Labour's Lost*. His early plays were comedies, and show nothing of the depth that characterized his later works. His plots were borrowed from a variety of sources, both ancient and contemporary. During his career, he wrote 37 plays, three narrative poems, and 154 sonnets.

His writing brought him fame and popularity, but he continued to act as well as write (critics love to speculate about which of the characters in his plays would have been played by the author). He eventually became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men when James I ascended the throne). Most of his plays were performed at local theaters like the Rose, the Globe, and the indoor Blackfriars. When the Globe burned to the ground in 1613 (a cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII*), Shakespeare retired, and died in Stratford three years later on his fifty-second birthday.

King Lear was first performed in 1606, during the era in which Shakespeare produced his greatest tragedies (including *Othello* and *Macbeth*; *Hamlet* was written a few years earlier). The play is set in pre-Christian England, and is probably the most "pagan" of all of Shakespeare's plays. It is also considered by many to be his finest work.

As does all great literature, the play goes beyond the bare bones of the narrative to address some of the fundamental questions associated with the human dilemma. What is man? Is his destiny the result of his own choices, or is he the helpless victim of the gods or an impersonal universe? Does life have a purpose? The interpretation of the play depends to a large extent on whether or not

the reader sees Shakespeare giving his own answers to these questions through the dialogue and events of the drama. If the pagan world view presented in *King Lear* is Shakespeare's own, man is both helpless and hopeless in an alien, hostile universe; the best he can hope for is the kind of genuine love that gives meaning to life, even in the midst of futility and death. If, on the other hand, Shakespeare is portraying the helplessness and hopelessness of man in the context of a pagan world view *while at the same time implying that such a world view is false*, there is much to be learned from his assessment. The extent to which Cordelia is viewed as a Christ figure will make the difference in the reader's conclusions regarding these matters.

One further historical point should be noted. The patent foolishness of the division of the kingdom in the first scene of the play would have hit a Jacobean audience hard. Recall that the entire focus of the Tudor dynasty, which had just come to an end with the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, was the unity of the kingdom after the brutal infighting accompanying the Wars of the Roses in the late fifteenth century. Henry VIII had broken with the Catholic Church, divorced Catherine of Aragon, then married Anne Boleyn (followed in quick succession by four more wives) because he wanted a male heir to guarantee the stability of the realm. How obviously foolish, then, would a king be who of his own volition divided his kingdom?

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- King Lear - The aging king of Britain who is the play's protagonist, he is an absolute monarch who loves to be flattered and does not take criticism well. In the opening scene, he divides his kingdom among his daughters based on their profession of love for him, then soon finds himself cast out by the two who had been most effusive. He does inspire the loyalty of Gloucester, Kent, Cordelia, Edgar, and the Fool, however. The movement of the play chronicles his descent into Hell and madness and his growth in understanding.
- Goneril - Lear's oldest daughter is the wife of the Duke of Albany. She is vicious and amoral. She challenges her father's authority, initiates an affair with Edmund, and seizes military power from her husband.
- Regan - Lear's second daughter, she is married to the Duke of Cornwall. She is much like her sister, and like her sister competes for the affections of Edmund while rejecting her father and her husband.
- Cordelia - Lear's youngest daughter is disowned by her father for failing to express her love in flowery words. She is admired by all the good characters in the play, is married by the king of France despite having no dowry, and loves, forgives, and cares for her father to the bitter end.
- Gloucester - One of Lear's nobles, he is the father of Edgar and the illegitimate child Edmund. Like Lear, he misjudges his own children, trusting Edmund and casting Edgar aside. Early in the play, he is weak and vacillating, but shows genuine courage as the play progresses, especially when and after he loses his eyes.

- Edgar - Gloucester's son, he spends most of the play taking on different roles. At the beginning he is weak and ineffectual; later he disguises himself as a madman to avoid his enemies, and uses the disguise to help Lear and Gloucester; finally, he emerges as a warrior against his wicked half-brother.
- Edmund - Gloucester's illegitimate son is the villain of the piece. He schemes to gain his father's inheritance, carries on with both Goneril and Regan, and seems completely successful in his plots until the final scene of the play.
- Kent - An outspoken nobleman and supporter of Lear, he is banished for his frankness, but disguises himself as the peasant Gaius and accompanies Lear in his exile.
- Duke of Albany - Goneril's husband, he is the dupe of his evil wife. He recognizes her schemes far too late, and denounces her and the other villains when the damage has already been done.
- Duke of Cornwall - Regan's husband, he is cruel and wicked and participates fully in the sisters' schemes.
- Fool - Lear's court jester accompanies him in his exile and gives him wise advice under the cover of foolish verses. Some directors have chosen to have the actress who plays Cordelia double in this role, suggesting another way of portraying her loyalty to her father.
- Oswald - Goneril's steward, he serves as her messenger as she carries out her plots.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little,
Lest you may mar your fortunes." (Lear, Ii, 96-97)

"I grow, I prosper.
Now, gods, stand up for bastards." (Edmund, Iii, 21-22)

Lear: "Dost thou call me fool, boy?"

Fool: "All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with." (Iiv, 152-154)

"Turn all her mother's pains and benefits
To laughter and contempt, that she may feel
How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is
To have a thankless child. Away! Away!" (Lear, Iiv, 293-296)

"Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise." (Fool, Iv, 44-45)

"I am a man more sinned against than sinning." (Lear, IIIii, 58-59)

"Out, vile jelly. Where is thy luster now?" (Cornwall, IIIvii, 84-85)

“As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods,
They kill us for their sport.” (Gloucester, IVi, 36-37)

“Ay, every inch a king.” (Lear, IVvi, 109)

“You do me wrong to take me out o’ th’ grave:
Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.” (Lear, IVvii, 45-48)

“The weight of this sad time we must obey,
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most: we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long.” (Edgar, Viii, 325-328)

NOTES

Act I, scene 1 - The play begins with Lear announcing his retirement from the cares of the state, and his intention to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. The size of their portions will depend on their professions of love to him. Both Goneril and Regan, his two older daughters, are effusive in their expressions of love, and receive substantial allotments. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to participate in the charade, and for failing to express her love for her father is disinherited. The remaining third of the kingdom is divided between the two older sisters. Lear gives up his kingly rule, retaining only a hundred knights, and expressing his intention of dividing his time between the houses of Goneril and Regan and their husbands. Kent objects to the proceedings, and Lear angrily banishes him. The Duke of Burgundy and the King of France, rival suitors for Cordelia’s hand, are summoned and informed that she has been disinherited. Burgundy gives up his quest, but the King of France vows to wed Cordelia despite her lack of dowry. She then leaves for France, after warning her sisters that she knows their true intentions, and exhorting them to care well for their father. Meanwhile, Goneril and Regan confer about how they will turn their father’s aged foolishness to their advantage.

Act I, scene 2 - At Gloucester’s castle, the scene begins with Edmund’s soliloquy, in which he expresses his intention to gain his legitimate brother Edgar’s inheritance. When Gloucester appears, Edmund tries to conceal a letter, which his father then demands to see. It is a letter forged by Edmund, purportedly from Edgar, expressing the desire that Gloucester would die so the sons could receive their inheritance now instead of being subject to the rule of an old man beyond his prime. Gloucester is furious, but Edmund cynically defends his brother. When Edgar appears, Edmund warns him that he has incurred his father’s anger for some reason or another, and advises him to avoid Gloucester’s company until Edmund can ascertain the nature of the problem.

Act I, scene 3 - At the Duke of Albany’s palace, Goneril complains that her father and his knights are acting riotously and abusing her servants. She orders her steward, Oswald, to treat Lear and his retainers coldly, hoping to encourage them to leave for Cornwall as soon as possible.

Act I, scene 4 - Kent, disguised as a peasant, arrives at Albany's palace, seeking to serve Lear despite his banishment. Lear begins to notice the extent to which he is being ignored and treated rudely by Goneril and her household. The Fool enters, and he banters with Lear, criticizing him for giving away his kingdom to two unworthy daughters. When Goneril arrives, she complains about the behavior of Lear's retinue, and suggests he reduce the number of his retainers to fifty rather than the hundred knights he now takes with him. Lear becomes angry, and orders his people to prepare to go to Cornwall, cursing Goneril with barrenness for her ingratitude. Lear and his retinue depart, and Goneril sends Oswald to Regan with a letter explaining what has transpired and encouraging her to treat their father no better. Albany, understanding nothing of what has just happened, wonders whether Goneril is harming their cause with her harshness.

Act I, scene 5 - As Lear prepares to leave for Cornwall, he sends the disguised Kent with a message to Gloucester informing him of what has occurred. The Fool then bandies with Lear about the King's folly.

Act II, scene 1 - The plot thickens. At Gloucester's castle, Lear is expected shortly, as are Cornwall and Regan. Albany and Cornwall are on the verge of war, each trying to expand his own share of Lear's domains. Meanwhile, Edmund continues to plot against Edgar. He warns Edgar of the rumors circulating against him, and, when he hears Gloucester approaching, convinces Edgar to stage a mock sword fight. Edgar runs off, Edmund slashes his own arm, then tells Gloucester that Edgar attacked him without provocation when he refused to participate in a plot against Gloucester's life. Gloucester swears out a warrant for Edgar's arrest, and threatens death to any who would harbor him. Cornwall and Regan arrive, and insist that, if Lear brings his retinue to their castle, they will make a point of being elsewhere when he arrives.

Act II, scene 2 - Goneril's steward Oswald arrives outside Gloucester's castle, where he encounters Kent in disguise. Kent insults him as one who panders to villains, challenges him to a duel, then beats him when he tries to run away. Gloucester, Cornwall, and Regan interrupt the fight, and Kent continues his stream of invective, including the nobles as well as Oswald. Cornwall orders him placed in the stocks till noon, but Regan insists that he should remain there all night, despite Gloucester's warnings that this would be a serious insult to Lear, whom Kent serves. Kent is then placed in the stocks, where he speaks of a letter he has received from Cordelia, then falls asleep.

Act II, scene 3 - Edgar, in a wood, speaks of his intention to disguise himself as a poor, naked, mad beggar, Poor Tom, in order to hide from his father's wrath.

Act II, scene 4 - Lear arrives outside Gloucester's castle and finds Kent in the stocks. Kent explains that, on arriving at Cornwall, he found that Oswald had preceded him, bearing a letter from Goneril. Regan and Cornwall then set off for Gloucester so as not to be at home when Lear arrived. He then spoke of the encounter with Oswald that landed him in the stocks. Lear is furious that his servant should be insulted in such a manner. Lear goes into the castle, but finds that Cornwall and Regan refuse to speak with him, pleading fatigue from their journey; he sends Gloucester back inside to bring them out and demands that Kent be released. When Cornwall and Regan arrive, Lear complains of his treatment by Goneril, but Regan defends her sister, begging Lear to return to Albany and apologize to her. Lear vows he will never do so, and again begins to curse Goneril. A trumpet sounds, and Goneril herself arrives. Regan tells Lear to go back with Goneril, since she will

be unable to host him until the month is up. Lear wants to bring his hundred knights to Cornwall immediately, but Regan insists she is not prepared to receive him, nor will do so unless he pares his retinue to no more than twenty-five retainers. Lear then offers to go with Goneril, figuring that fifty retainers is better than twenty-five, but she refuses to receive any retainers at all, and Regan agrees. Lear swears vengeance. As a storm begins to blow, Lear, Kent, and the Fool move away from the castle, while the others go inside and bar the door.

Act III, scene 1 - The storm continues to rage, and Kent speaks with a gentleman on the heath. Lear is roaming about in the storm with the Fool, crying out madly and tearing his hair. Kent tells the gentleman that France is about to invade Britain while Cornwall and Albany are conspiring against each other. He sends the gentleman to Dover with a message for Cordelia, and goes in search of Lear.

Act III, scene 2 - Lear, on the heath with the Fool, calls on the elements to destroy the earth and the human race with it. Kent finds them, and Lear continues to rail at the storm in all its ferocity. Kent directs them to a nearby hovel for shelter, while he returns to the castle to seek aid.

Act III, scene 3 - In Gloucester's castle, the old man speaks with Edmund, telling him that Cornwall and Albany have forbidden him to open his own home to Lear. He also tells his son of a letter he received about the invasion of Britain by the French. He goes to find Lear and relieve his suffering, telling Edmund to make excuses for him with the dukes. Edmund, however, determines to tell them, not only about Gloucester's decision to succor Lear, but also about the letter, implying that Gloucester is guilty of treason by siding with the King of France.

Act III, scene 4 - Kent guides Lear and the Fool to the hovel, which Lear at first refuses to enter. When they do go in, they find it inhabited by Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom. Tom emerges from the hovel, and Lear asks him whether his daughters have left him in his naked and beggarly condition. The storm stops. Lear, identifying with Poor Tom, strips off his clothing also. Gloucester arrives, bearing a torch, and they all enter the hovel.

Act III, scene 5 - At Gloucester's castle, Cornwall and Edmund conspire. Edmund shows Cornwall the letter from the King of France, and Cornwall determines that Gloucester will be punished for his treason and Edmund inherit the title.

Act III, scene 6 - In a farmhouse near Gloucester's castle, Lear stages a mock trial of his daughters with the Fool and Tom as judges. Gloucester arrives, warns of a plot against Lear's life, and tells Kent to take them to Dover, where they will receive protection from Cordelia and the French king.

Act III, scene 7 - At Gloucester's castle, Cornwall sends Goneril home with a message telling Albany of the French invasion, then sends his servants to find Gloucester. Goneril demands that he be hanged, while Regan insists that his eyes be plucked out. Goneril leaves, accompanied by Edmund, and Gloucester is brought in as a prisoner. He is bound and interrogated, and admits sending Lear to Dover. Cornwall plucks out Gloucester's eyes, and when a servant tries to prevent such cruelty, Regan grabs Cornwall's sword and kills him from behind. The blinded Gloucester calls on Edmund for help, but Regan cruelly informs him that it was Edmund who betrayed him; Gloucester now realizes his horrible mistake in misjudging his sons. Gloucester is cast out of the

castle, and while Regan attends to the wounded Cornwall, the servants determine to minister to Gloucester's injuries and lead him to Poor Tom.

Act IV, scene 1 - Blind Gloucester, led by an old man, meets Poor Tom on the heath, and asks him to guide him to Dover so he can end his miserable existence by jumping off the cliff there. Edgar recognizes his father, pities his blindness, and determines to go with him while continuing his masquerade.

Act IV, scene 2 - On the way to Albany's castle with Edmund, Goneril has become his mistress. Albany, meanwhile, shocked by the news of Lear's ill-treatment and madness and Gloucester's blinding, has finally recognized what a horrible wretch he has married. He accuses Goneril of heartless villainy, and determines to avenge Gloucester's eyes. Meanwhile, word comes that Cornwall has died of the wounds he received in his fight with the servants, and Goneril worries that Regan may try to move in on Edmund, who is on his way to Cornwall.

Act IV, scene 3 - Kent and Lear arrive at Dover. Kent, in conversation with a gentleman there, finds that the King of France has returned home to deal with pressing business, but that Cordelia remains. She is mourning over the way her father was treated by her sisters. Lear, meanwhile, refuses to see Cordelia because he is ashamed at his treatment of her.

Act IV, scene 4 - Cordelia, accompanied by a doctor, sends a band of men to find her father, who is madly roaming the fields. The doctor assures her that Lear can be cured by rest. Cordelia, hearing that the armies of Albany and Cornwall approach, affirms that the purpose of the French invasion is not military conquest, but to restore Lear to his rightful throne.

Act IV, scene 5 - Regan has arrived at Gloucester's castle. Edmund has traveled toward Dover, hoping to find and kill his father and ascertain the strength of the French army. Regan discovers that Oswald carries a letter from his master Goneril to Edmund, and suspects a love affair. It turns out that Regan, too, seeks marriage with Edmund, and is determined to foil her sister's amorous intentions. She offers a reward to Oswald if he kills Gloucester.

Act IV, scene 6 - Edgar leads Gloucester to what he tells him is the edge of the cliffs of Dover, but in reality is an open plain. Gloucester falls forward and faints, after which Edgar rouses him, telling him it is a miracle that he survived so great a fall. Lear arrives, clearly out of his mind, his clothes covered with wild flowers. Gloucester recognizes the king's voice, and mourns his madness. A gentleman arrives to take Lear to meet Cordelia, and Edgar continues to lead Gloucester by the hand. Meanwhile, the battle rages ever nearer. Oswald appears, intending to claim the reward offered for the death of Gloucester, but Edgar intervenes, and in the ensuing fight, kills Oswald. Edgar opens the letter that Oswald carries, and discovers that Goneril is encouraging Edmund to kill Albany and marry her. Edgar vows vengeance against the villains.

Act IV, scene 7 - Lear is with Cordelia, under the doctor's care, though still showing symptoms of madness. Lear finally recognizes Cordelia, but the doctor warns that he is still very weak and must be brought along slowly.

Act V, scene 1 - In the British camp, Regan asks Edmund if he ever slept with Goneril. He denies it, and affirms his love for her. Goneril and Albany arrive, and the latter expresses his misgivings about the justice of their cause, having heard that Lear and Gloucester had gone to Cordelia in the French camp. Nonetheless, he is prepared to fight along with Edmund against the French. Edgar arrives in disguise and gives Albany the letter he had taken from Oswald. After the others have left, Edmund debates his relationship with Goneril and Regan - which shall he have, or both, or neither? In any case, he is determined that Goneril shall dispose of Albany, and he vows to kill Lear and Cordelia if they come within his power.

Act V, scene 2 - Edgar, still leading Gloucester, reports that the French have lost the battle, and that Lear and Cordelia have been captured.

Act V, scene 3 - Edmund enters triumphant from battle, with Lear and Cordelia as prisoners, and sends them away to prison, ordering their guard to murder them when they get there. Albany, Goneril, and Regan arrive, and Albany demands that the prisoners be delivered to him for safe-keeping. Edmund puts him off, saying he may see them tomorrow. Regan declares herself given to Edmund, which is, of course, challenged by Goneril. Albany then attempts to arrest Edmund on a charge of treason, and accuses Goneril of plotting with Edmund to dispose of him. He then challenges Edmund to a duel. Regan says she feels ill, and Goneril, in an aside, indicates that she has poisoned her sister. Edgar appears to testify concerning Edmund's perfidy. Edmund and Edgar fight, and Edmund is mortally wounded, but not killed. He then confesses to his crimes as Goneril leaves the scene in a huff. Edgar then reveals his identity, and he and Albany profess friendship. As Edgar describes what he has been doing, he speaks of his father's death - Gloucester apparently had a heart attack, dying of a combination of grief and joy, when Edgar revealed to him who he was. A messenger enters, announcing that Goneril has killed herself, and that Regan has died from Goneril's poison. Edmund, dying and repentant at last, tells the others of his decree that Lear and Cordelia should be murdered in the prison, and exhorts them to send immediately to bring them out. Edmund is taken away, and Lear enters, carrying the body of Cordelia, who has been hanged in the prison by Edmund's command. Lear, who killed the guard who was hanging her, mourns her loss, then dies. A messenger arrives announcing Edmund's death, and Albany, with the help of Edgar and Kent, assumes the rule of the kingdom.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, several of the major characters experience spiritual growth as their material circumstances decline. Choose one of the major characters in the play and discuss the relationship between that character's material and spiritual condition as the play progresses. Be sure to cite specifics.
2. In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Lear's understanding of love changes considerably as the play progresses. Discuss the evolution of Lear's concept of love with reference to his three daughters from the beginning of the play to the end. Cite specifics.

3. In Act IV, scene 1 of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Gloucester says, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport." Discuss the concept of Fate as it appears in the play. Does Shakespeare picture people as in control of their own destinies, or as helpless before forces beyond their control? Illustrate your conclusion with specific incidents and quotations from the play.
4. *King Lear* is set in pre-Christian Britain, and is widely acknowledged to be the most pagan of Shakespeare's plays. Do you believe that Shakespeare is here espousing the pagan world view of the play, or is he instead illustrating the hopeless consequences of such a worldview? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specific incidents and quotations from the play.
5. Compare and contrast the tests of love to which characters are subjected in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Merchant of Venice*. How does Shakespeare use one test to illustrate wisdom by contrast with folly and the other to illustrate folly by contrast with wisdom? Do you think Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia symbolize the same truths as the gold, silver and lead caskets?
6. Typically, in a Shakespearean tragedy, the crisis point that starts the protagonist on his inevitable fall toward destruction occurs in the middle of the play. In *King Lear*, however, it occurs right at the beginning, with the division of the kingdom among his daughters. How does this structural anomaly enhance Shakespeare's ability to develop both the downfall and the salvation of his hero?
7. Discuss the uses of the imagery of eyesight as it appears in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. What characters truly see, and which ones do not? Under what circumstances? Be specific.
8. William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is unlike his other tragedies in that virtue does not clearly emerge triumphant at the end of the play. Discuss what this implies about the view of human nature portrayed in *King Lear*, supporting your ideas with incidents and quotations from throughout the narrative.
9. In the last verse in the book of Malachi, speaking of the ministry of John the Baptist, the prophet says, "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse." In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, that curse appears indeed to have fallen in the playwright's portrayal of pre-Christian Britain. Discuss the extent to which Shakespeare faithfully pictures the nature of humanity apart from the redemptive work of Christ in the world. Use specific examples from the play to support your conclusions.
10. William Shakespeare's *King Lear* contains more animal imagery than any other of the great dramatist's works. What is the purpose of all these animal references? Choose three specific passages that make use of animal references and discuss the meanings of these references in context, and how they relate to the message of the play as a whole.

11. In Philippians 2:3, Paul exhorts the church in Philippi, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” The good and evil characters in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* can easily be divided according to the extent to which they follow Paul’s precept. Discuss the ways in which selflessness serves as the definition of genuine love for the characters in *King Lear*. Use specific examples to support your thesis.
12. What is the significance of the storm that rages during the central scenes of William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*? Discuss its symbolic meaning, and connect it to the themes of the play as a whole.
13. In the pre-Christian environment of William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the characters often ask the question, “Who or what governs the world in which we live?” Their answers vary, from nature to fate to the gods to the stars. How does the play answer the question? In a world without an omnipotent, benevolent Creator and Providence, how does one explain human suffering? Use specific examples from the play to support your argument.
14. In William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the ultimate redemption of the protagonist is brought about by suffering. Discuss from a biblical perspective the role of suffering in the development of character and cleansing from sin as it appears in Shakespeare’s great tragedy. Be sure to use specifics from the play and from Scripture in your discussion.
15. Discuss the role of prosperity and adversity in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. To what extent is it true that the nobility of the good characters is caused or brought to the fore by adversity, while the wickedness of the evil characters is brought out by prosperity? What biblical principles could be cited to support these relationships? Be specific.
16. Ancient Stoics viewed suicide as a noble denouement to one’s life, while Christians viewed it as a mortal sin. Compare and contrast these views of suicide as they appear in Shakespeare’s pagan plays, such as *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*, and his Christian plays, such as *Hamlet* and *Othello*.
17. For almost a century and a half, William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* disappeared from the English stage, replaced by an adaptation by Nahum Tate in which the ending was altered; instead of Cordelia dying, she marries Edgar and they rule Britain together. In fact, Shakespeare had altered the ending of the source from which he derived the plot; in it, Lear dies after his redemption, but Cordelia survives to reign, at least briefly. Which of the two endings do you consider more appropriate to the play as a whole? Why do you think so? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play. Your reasons should be better than “I like happy endings....”
18. Thinkers have long debated the relative roles of nature and nurture, heredity and environment, in the shaping of human character. Discuss the role of this debate in William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Does the playwright picture man as shaped more by nature or nurture? Why do you think so? Cite specifics from the play in building your argument.

19. In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the king, when defending his need for a sizeable retinue, tells his daughter Regan that man is separated from beast by having more than he needs ("Allow not nature more than nature needs..."); later, on the heath, he argues that the naked Poor Tom, who has nothing, represents true humanity ("... the thing itself"). Which do you think is right? Why? Support your conclusion both biblically and with specifics from the play.
20. Directors of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* often use the same actor to play Cordelia and the Fool; this is possible, since the two never appear together on stage. Do you think this type of casting sheds light on the play or detracts from its meaning? How would the play be different if the Fool were Cordelia in disguise?
21. The cliché that there is honor among thieves is rarely true in real life; those who live by cheating others are rarely faithful to their compatriots. Why do you think this is so? How is this truth illustrated by the relationships among the evil characters in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*?
22. Compare and contrast the true madness of Lear with the feigned madness of Edgar in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, paying particular attention to the nature of their respective conditions and their purposes in the context of the play. Use specific incidents and quotations from the play to support your thesis.
23. One of the great themes of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is the centrality and necessity of family ties to the welfare of society as a whole. Discuss how Shakespeare develops this theme, using specific illustrations from the play. How is this relevant to the society in which we live today?
24. Using specific incidents and quotations from William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, evaluate Lear as a king. Was he a good king? Why or why not? What are the characteristics of a good ruler?
25. In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, when Lear announces his intention to divide his kingdom among his daughters, his purpose is "that future strife may be prevented now." But, like the division of Alexander the Great's empire among his generals at his death and the division of Charlemagne's empire among his three grandsons at the Treaty of Verdun, the result is not peace but immediate warfare. Why is this the case? From a biblical standpoint, why should we not be surprised that such divisions lead almost inevitably to civil war?
26. Shakespeare's plays make frequent use of the concept of foreshadowing. Discuss the use of foreshadowing in the opening scene of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and show how the language and actions of Act I, scene 1 point toward all that is to follow. Be specific.
27. "Anger hurts him who feels it even more than it hurts the one on whom he seeks revenge.... It is the most destructive of passions." Discuss the extent to which William Shakespeare's *King Lear* demonstrates the truth of this statement. Use specific incidents and quotations from the play to support your conclusions.

28. Using the opening scene of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, discuss the difference between love and flattery. How do these differences work their way out through the rest of the play?
29. In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the main plot concerning Lear and his daughters is duplicated by the subplot involving Gloucester and his sons. Compare and contrast the two main plots that carry the action of Shakespeare's great tragedy. Why do you think Shakespeare duplicated his themes in this way?
30. The Roman philosopher Seneca said that "the law of benefitting between men is this: that the one must forthwith forget that he has given, and the other must never forget what he has received." Discuss various ways in which this "law of benefitting" is violated by the characters in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Be specific.
31. Discuss the theme of concealment as it appears in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Some characters in the play conceal their identities while being faithful to their natures, while others conceal their natures while being open about their identities. Which characters are more admirable, and why? Use specific incidents and quotations to support your discussion.
32. In Act III, scene 2 of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the old king, railing against the storm, cries out, "I am a man more sinned against than sinning." Do you agree? Why or why not? Support your conclusion with specific incidents and quotations from the play.
33. One of the ironies of life is that wisdom often comes "out of the mouths of babes." Those who have little of this world's wisdom speak words that confound the wise. In the light of this tendency, discuss the roles played by the Fool and Poor Tom in dispensing wisdom to the aged king in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Use specific incidents and quotations to support your discussion.
34. In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Cordelia, leading a French invasion to restore her father to the throne, cries out, "O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about." Here she echoes the words of Jesus as a young man in the Temple in Luke 2:49. To what extent would you consider Cordelia to be a Christ figure in the play? Support your conclusions with specific incidents and quotations.
35. The character of the Wise Fool is commonplace in literature. Compare and contrast Arthur's jester Dagonet in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* to the Fool in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Do the two characters speak the truth in the same way? How do they influence their masters? How do they elucidate key themes in the two stories?
36. Compare and contrast the roles of Wamba the fool in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and the Fool in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The concept of the wise fool is an old one in literature, and suggests that the simple possess a wisdom that exceeds those who are supposed to be wise in the ways of the world. In your comparison, be sure to include the nature of the wisdom displayed by the fools, the extent to which they influence the plot, and the ways in which the ideas they express mirror those of the author.

37. Compare and contrast Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit* and William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Give special attention to the characters of Lear and William Dorrit on the one hand and Cordelia and Amy Dorrit on the other. What themes do the two works have in common that the authors express through these central characters and their relationships?
38. Compare and contrast the protagonist of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Michael Henchard, to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Give special attention to the strengths and weaknesses of character and the extent to which their self-destructive behavior brings about the downfalls of both men.
39. Compare and contrast the madness of Ahab on the sea in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to the madness of Lear on the heath in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Be sure to address the causes of the men's madness, the consequences of that madness, and the overall view of the nature of the cosmos that the two stories reflect.
40. Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* makes use of the character of the cabin boy Pip in much the same way that Shakespeare, in many of his plays, makes use of the character of the fool. Compare and contrast the role of Pip in *Moby Dick* to that of the Fool in *King Lear*. Give attention to the wisdom of the characters and their relationship to the protagonists.
41. Compare and contrast the characters of two of Shakespeare's illegitimate sons, Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Edmund in *King Lear*. Both are villains, but are they villains for the same reasons? Does Shakespeare provide adequate motivations for their villainies? Do you find significant differences in their characters? To what extent is the behavior of the men due to inherent evil, and to what extent is it due to the way they are viewed and treated by society? Support your answer with specifics from both plays.
42. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, the faithful Sicilian nobleman Camillo is the rock against whom the mad follies of Leontes may be measured. Compare his role to that of Kent in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Consider not only the characters of the two men, but also their roles in the plots of the plays and the ways in which they serve to bring out the characters of the monarchs they serve.
43. Compare and contrast the roles played by the world view of pre-Christian Britain in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In which story is pre-Christian paganism more central to the point of the author? Support your conclusion with specifics from both works.
44. Compare and contrast the extent to which man is nothing more than a victim of blind fate in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Which story do you believe is more fatalistic? Does either leave room for human dignity or self-determination? Why do you think so?

45. In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Gloucester says, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport." This line is quoted in Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* as one possible explanation for the collapse of the bridge. Compare and contrast the explanations for human calamity given in Shakespeare's play and Wilder's novel. What do they have in common, and in what ways are they different? Does either author in the end agree with Gloucester's gloomy assessment?
46. Compare and contrast the role played by Egdon Heath in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* to the way similar terrain functions in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Be sure to consider matters of setting, plot, and character and incorporate specific references from both works of literature.
47. In Desiderius Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, the goddess argues that folly is the source of true wisdom, while the wisdom of the supposedly wise is mere folly. William Shakespeare, writing a century after Erasmus, often made use of the figure of the wise fool in his plays. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is *King Lear*. Compare and contrast the portrayals of the wise fool in the two works. Does the wisdom of the Fool in Shakespeare's play come from the same source as that in Erasmus' encomium?
48. In Act V, scene 4 of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Bosola bemoans his accidental stabbing of Antonio by saying, "We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and bandied which way please them." Antonio responds, "Like wanton boys, whose pastime is their care, we follow after bubbles blown in the air." Compare these expressions of the idea that man is the helpless victim of fate with Gloucester's lament in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, they kill us for their sport." Do these comments reflect the beliefs of the playwrights? Do the respective plays support these fatalistic ideas? Why or why not?
49. Both Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and William Shakespeare's *King Lear* deal with the efforts of an individual to do battle against the power of Fate. Both, of course, ultimately fail, yet the playwrights want us to admire them for the effort. Compare and contrast the two plays in terms of their views of Fate, the ways in which the protagonists challenge it, and the consequences, both for themselves and others, of their determination.