

Character Studies - Checklists

We learn about characters by noting what they **say**, what they **do**, what **others say** about them and **how others act** in their presence.

In *King Lear* the soliloquies are an essential part of learning about the characters.

When you are studying characters in *King Lear*, it can be helpful to think in terms of the following checklists.

ROLE

- ✓ What is this character's role in the play?
- ✓ In which scenes does the character appear?
- ✓ Do the character's actions – or inaction – affect the plot outcome?
- ✓ Does the character have a dramatic function within the play?
- ✓ Is the character a hero, heroine or villain?
- ✓ Does the character act as a foil to another character?
- ✓ Is the character fully developed or one-dimensional?

QUALITIES

- ✓ Make a list of the character's qualities
- ✓ Divide the list into positive and negative qualities
- ✓ Do these qualities make the character appealing to an audience?

Why/Why not?

- ✓ Is the character fully fleshed out and not one-dimensional?
- ✓ Do we relate to the character because they are not perfect?
- ✓ Do the characters qualities / attitudes / values make them vulnerable to manipulation by others?
- ✓ Do the character's values change as the play progresses?

RELATIONSHIPS

- ✓ With which characters does this character have a relationship?
- ✓ List the types of relationship: husband / wife / subject / friend etc.
- ✓ Are these relationships functional or dysfunctional?
- ✓ Are the relationships equal or unequal?
- ✓ Who has the power in the relationship?
- ✓ Are the characters bettered by being in the relationship?
- ✓ Does the relationship face challenges?
- ✓ What threatens the relationship? Is it external forces or something within the character's personality that causes difficulties?
- ✓ Does the relationship undergo change?
- ✓ What are the key scenes where we see changes in the relationship?

When structuring an answer on a character, you should think of the following five questions:

1. How the character introduced and what is our first impression of him or her?
2. Does the character have to face any **challenges**, and if so, how does he or she react to them?
3. Does the character have to deal with a **major crisis** at a turning point in the play?
4. How is the crisis **resolved** and what role (if any) does the character play in the resolution?
5. What is our **final impression** of the character and is it different from our initial impression?

Has the character
undergone change?



Note Bene



- ✓ Any point you make must be supported by evidence from the text.
- ✓ Think in terms of key moments.
- ✓ Learning quotes out of context is of little use.
- ✓ As you study each character, you should highlight quotes

that give you an insight into his or her character.

King Lear

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

When we first meet Lear, he seems to be a powerful, decisive figure. He commands the respect of those around him and is clearly used to being obeyed. He announces his plan to divide the kingdom between his three daughters so that he can **'shake all cares and business from our age,'** and enjoy his final years in peace.

We soon realise, however, that Lear is vain and egotistical. He demands that his daughters tell him how much they love him and he says he will give the **'largest bounty'** to the winner of this bizarre love test. Although it is obvious that Goneril and Regan are flattering Lear and are not being sincere, Lear is more than happy to believe them. This is our first indication that Lear may be a poor judge of character. When Cordelia refuses to play along with this absurd game, Lear flies into a rage and we see that he has a terrible temper. Having initially said that Cordelia was his **'joy / Although the last, not least,'** he now changes his mind and calls her **'a stranger to my heart and me'**.

It seems that Lear is more interested in the appearance than reality. He wants to be treated as a king without having any of the responsibilities of a king and he wants his daughters to publicly declare their love for him.

When Kent tries to speak sense to Lear, the king again shows that he has a fiery temper. He warns Kent not to **'come between the dragon and his wrath'**. Lear refuses to listen to anyone who does not tell him what he wants to hear, even when they are clearly speaking from the best of

motives. By comparing himself to a dragon, Lear also shows us that he has a very high opinion of himself and sees himself as a figure to be feared and respected.

It is obvious by the end of the first scene that Lear is impulsive and acts without thinking things through. He banishes Kent and disowns Cordelia, even though they are, and always have been, completely loyal to him. His poor judgement has led him to punish the loyal (Cordelia and Kent) and reward the dishonest (Goneril and Regan). He also shows a vindictive spirit in his disowning of Cordelia and his banishment of Kent. It is not enough for him to banish both from his sight; he also threatens Kent with death and tries to talk Cordelia's suitors out of marrying her, claiming that she is not worth their attention. Only the King of France remains unmoved by his denunciation of Cordelia and he happily takes her as his wife.

Lear also seems to be a little naive in this opening scene. Does he really believe that he can separate the personal and the political? He abdicates all responsibility for the kingdom but seems to think he can keep all the trappings of kingship. It might be argued that his plan to divide the kingdom between his daughters now so that **'future strife may be prevented now'** is intended to be in the best interests of the kingdom, but it is clearly a flawed plan, and the way in which Lear plans to give the largest and best portion to the daughter who flatters him most adds to our growing conviction that he is perhaps losing his grip on those qualities which once made him a great king. This diminution of his authority and good sense is hinted at by Goneril at the end of the first scene when she says to Regan, **'You see how full of changes his age is.'** She also comments on Lear's **'poor judgement'** in banishing Cordelia.

The most important thing to remember from this introduction to the character of King Lear is that he understands himself as poorly as he does those around him. We cannot help but agree with Regan when she says that **'he hath ever but slenderly known himself'**. A more self-aware man would realise that his judgement was in question but Lear does not. He is convinced that he is right but as the tragic actions of the play unfold, Lear learns a bitter lesson and finally gains self-knowledge. Unfortunately, this knowledge comes at a very high price.

THE RETIRED KING

Lear, when he has retired, seems completely oblivious of the fact that he now has no real power. He still lacks judgement and seems to believe that he should be treated with the respect due a king. We see that Lear is arrogant and that he is in for a rude awakening at the hands of his daughters. He carries on as if he were king and is constantly shocked and distressed when he is not treated with the respect he feels is his due. He demands that his dinner be brought to him the moment he arrives at Goneril and Albany's palace: **'Let me not stay a jot for dinner; go get it ready.'**

He rages at Oswald for treating him as if he were simply Goneril's father and not the king: **'You whoreson dog! you slave! you cur!'** We see that Lear's temper is never far from the surface and his arrogance is still blinding him from the fact that he has given away all his power and is no longer a man of any real importance in the kingdom. When Goneril finally arrives and speaks to him about the conduct of his knights, Lear again flies into a fury, calling down terrible curses on her. He begins to mourn his folly in sending Cordelia away and wishes that Goneril might be barren or that if she did have a child, it would cause her misery and make her realise **'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child!'** Lear's

arrogance and quick temper are in evidence throughout Acts 1 and 2 and the only good decision he makes – to hire the disguised Kent – is made impulsively too: **‘if I like thee no worse / after dinner I will not part from the yet.’**

Yet, even in the midst of all of this rash behaviour, Lear is slowly beginning to realise that he is no longer powerful and that he no longer commands the respect he once did. It is difficult for him to separate what he believed was a God-given right to respect and honour with the reality, which is that such respect went with the kingship, not with the man himself. He is becoming aware that his judgement was poor when he banished Cordelia: **‘Woe, that too late repents’**. Only now does he begin to see that the love test was foolish and he acted unwisely: **‘Oh Lear, Lear, Lear! / Beat at this gate, that let thy folly in / And thy dear judgement out!’**

However, Lear still has a long way to go before he reaches full self-knowledge. He still believes, even when Goneril treats him badly, that he can go to Regan and be welcomed properly. **‘I have another daughter, / Who, I am sure, is kind and comfortable.’** Lear's pride and anger are still driving him, but he is becoming less and less the dragon we met in the first scene. He is beginning to see that he has not the power to do anything about the insults he receives and that his threats are meaningless. When he visits Gloucester's castle (following Regan there), he is initially furious that she does not come to meet him, but soon kneels at her feet, begging her to allow him and his one hundred knights to stay with her. He is becoming a helpless old man and fears that he might lose his mind. This feeling is exacerbated when he sees Goneril arrive at the castle. She is warmly greeted by Regan and they join forces, telling him that he cannot have any of his knights, as he does not need them. Lear begins to fear that

he is losing his mind. If he is not the king, then who is he? When he was at Goneril's palace, he had begun to fear that he was losing his identity.

On leaving Goneril's house, he struggles to hold onto his sanity: **'Oh let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!'**

Now, faced with the final indignity of having all his knights taken away by his daughters, Lear sees that he is **'a poor old man / As full of grief as age; wretched in both!'**

THE STORM SCENE

This is the most famous scene in 'King Lear'. In it, we see that Lear, driven out into the night by the refusal of his daughters to acquiesce to his request to keep his knights, is calling on the storm to destroy the entire world. He wants the world to be flattened, flooded and struck by lightning. He calls upon the winds to rage and blow. It is his wish that the world be so devastated by this storm that there will be no future and no life. He hopes that mankind will be wiped out. Lear's fury and despair are evident in this scene.

The storm on the heath reflects the storm that is in Lear's mind and, for a short time, distracts him from his sorrow and anger at his daughters' treatment of him: **'This tempest will not give me leave to ponder / On things that would hurt me more'**.

While he is out in the storm, Lear begins to become aware of the suffering of others, too. He worries that the Fool is cold, and he begins to see that he is human and that he is only **'A poor, infirm weak and despis'd old man'**. For the first time, Lear sees that power and wealth cover up the fact that

everyone is weak and helpless underneath. He is beginning to develop a social conscience.

On meeting Poor Tom, Lear empathises with him, to the extent that he too strips off his clothes. It has never dawned on Lear before now to think about his subjects – the ordinary people in his kingdom – but as he does, he begins to feel ashamed that he never did anything to help them when he was king.

Lear is also beginning to descend into madness in this scene. He is consumed with fury and obsesses about his daughters' ill-treatment of him.

He is aware that he is losing his grip on sanity: **'My wits begin to turn'**.

The surest sign that the once- proud king is becoming insane is the mock-trial he conducts, in which two pieces of furniture play the parts of Goneril and Regan. He claims that the Fool, Poor Tom and Kent will be the judges.

However, he soon loses control of his senses completely, accusing the 'judges' of conspiring against him and beginning to talk nonsense.

Eventually, he collapses in a state of exhaustion and mental anguish.

REDEMPTION

Lear is truly mad when he is brought to Dover to be with Cordelia. He wanders in the fields outside the French camp, ashamed to face Cordelia. He is aware that he has treated her badly and, although he is insane, he is now more self-aware than he ever was, in many ways. He talks nonsense, yet he has learned much about himself and about those who were once his subjects. He knows now that those who flattered him when he was king were doing so only because they knew he held all the power. Now he realises that he is just a man and that he, like so many others in power, had failed to realise that behind all the glamour of their lives lay selfishness and deceit.

When Lear finally meets Cordelia, he is overcome and believes she is dead. Humbly, Lear begs for her forgiveness and says that even if she wants to give him poison, he will take it. He feels that he deserves nothing better and acknowledges that whatever she may do to him, he deserves. Goneril and Regan treated him badly, although they had no reason to do so. Cordelia, claims the repentant Lear, cannot love him.

His delight at meeting Cordelia again makes Lear dismiss the importance of her army losing the battle, as he imagines she and he will be happy in prison.

THE DEATH OF LEAR

In the final, tragic scene, Lear enters with the body of Cordelia in his arms. He is utterly grief-stricken and feels that his cries of despair will crack the vaults of heaven. Lear cannot bring himself to fully accept that Cordelia is dead. He clings to hope, calling for a mirror: **'If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why then she lives'**.

There is an echo of the former king's power when we learn that he killed the man who hanged Cordelia – a fact which is borne out by a captain who saw him do so. However, his grief is too much for him to bear and he dies, a broken man.

Cordelia

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Cordelia is an honest, loving, virtuous daughter. It might be argued that she takes her honesty too far during the love test and is a little tactless when she refuses to flatter Lear. However, when we see later on in the play how untruthful Goneril and Regan's professions of love were, we sympathise with Cordelia and realise that she represents all that is good and decent. The fault is not Cordelia's for refusing to play along with this absurd game, but is instead Lear's for insisting on it in the first place. Cordelia herself points out that if her sisters have, as they claim, given Lear all their love, then they must have none left for their husbands. She says she does love her father, as a daughter should, but that is all she is willing to say. When Lear accuses her of being **'So young, and so untender'**, she responds by saying that she is **'So young, my lord, and true.'**

During the love test, we see Cordelia's pride and courage, as well as her honesty. She stands firm against her father's growing anger and is not intimidated by his wrath.

CORDELIA DISOWNED

Cordelia's behaviour after she is disowned by Lear does her great credit. She maintains her dignity, pride and composure. She is keen to let France know that she has done nothing wrong when he is told that she has been disowned by her father. She scorns Burgundy for not wanting to marry her without her dowry: **'Since that respects of fortune are his love / I shall not be his wife'**.

Although Cordelia has to leave England, she nevertheless plans to do whatever she can to protect Lear from Goneril and Regan, whom she suspects of harbouring evil thoughts. **‘I know what you are; / And like a sister am most loath to call / Your faults as they are nam'd’.**

Cordelia's loyalty and love for her father are shown in the fact that she begins to arrange to come to his aid almost the moment she leaves the court. When Kent is locked in the stocks, he tells us of a letter from Cordelia in which she says that she knows of his attempts to help Lear, and even before the storm scene, we learn from Gloucester that the French are in Dover, ready to strike. Cordelia's intelligence and resourcefulness are obvious in the way she foresees what might happen between her father and her sisters, and in the way she marshals the French army to come to Lear's defence. It is important to note that Cordelia makes it plain that she is not bringing her army to England for any sort of political gain, but only to help her father.

LEAR AND CORDELIA REUNITED

Cordelia's love for her father and her forgiveness of his treatment of her are clearly shown when the pair meet again at the French camp at Dover. Lear tries to kneel before her to beg her forgiveness but she does not want his apologies: ‘No, sir, you must not kneel.’ She loves her father regardless of his actions and bears him no ill- will for disowning her and favouring her treacherous sisters over her. When Lear says that Cordelia has good reason to treat him badly if she wants to, she protests that she has **‘No cause, no cause’.**

When her army is defeated in battle by the English, it is obvious to Cordelia

that the end is near. Her silence when Lear talks happily about how they will be together in prison 'like birds i' th' cage' tells us that she is more than likely aware of the end in store for her. Goneril and Regan would be unlikely to let her live. However, Cordelia faces her fate bravely, only lamenting that she could not help her father more: **'For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down'**. Her sorrow is only for Lear, showing once again the selfless nature of her love.

For a more detailed analysis of Cordelia's character and role in the play, see my sample essay on the educate.ie website: <https://educateplus.ie/free-exam-paper-solutions-pdf>. Go to the HL English exam solutions.

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Goneril

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Goneril is, like her younger sister Regan, the embodiment of evil in 'King Lear'. She is ambitious and hypocritical, happily flattering her father outrageously in the love test because she is cunning enough to see that this is what he wants. Unlike Cordelia, who refuses to lie to satisfy her father's vanity, Goneril is happy to lie.

As soon as the love test is over and Lear has departed, Goneril shows her true nature, plotting with Regan to lessen the little power their father has left. In this opening scene, we see Goneril manipulate both Lear and Regan. It is she who initiates the conversation about treating Lear harshly and she urges Regan not to think about it too long but to act **'in the heat.'**

UNLOVING DAUGHTER AND UNLOVING WIFE

When Lear visits Goneril, she turns on him immediately. Her language is cold and cruel and in stark contrast to the flattery and professions of love she uttered during the love test. She encourages her servants to treat Lear rudely: 'put on what weary negligence you please' and she constantly refers to his old age in a scornful manner. It seems that she, like Edmund, believes that the young should rule and the old should step aside.

Lear's knights have noticed Goneril's coldness to her father and the Fool says sadly that Lear was better off when he did not have to worry about Goneril's frowns or her lack of kindness. It is obvious to everybody that Goneril is not going to treat her father with the respect, love and honour she

claimed to hold him in when she flattered him during the love test. She has no need to pretend to love Lear any more. Instead, she seems to view him as a particularly troublesome child, who must be kept in his place.

Goneril is no kinder to her husband than she is to her father. She looks down on Albany for his weakness and obviously despises what she calls his **'milky gentleness'**.

RULED BY CRUELTY, AMBITION AND LUST

It is when Goneril and Regan join forces at Gloucester's castle that we see the full extent of their cruelty. Goneril is happy to allow Lear to spend the night out on the heath in the storm, although this may well lead to his death. We see now that she is capable of taking someone's life and that she has no compassion for her aged father.

The true extent of Goneril's savagery becomes horrifyingly evident when Gloucester is arrested for treason. Regan calls for Gloucester to be hanged immediately, but Goneril wants him to be tortured: **'Pluck out his eyes'**.

Goneril's passion for Edmund ultimately leads to her downfall. She becomes obsessed with him and begins to turn on Regan, suspecting her of harbouring designs on Edmund. It is ironic that Goneril, who happily lied to her father and claimed to love him when she did not, should now become a victim of the lying, manipulative Edmund. The letter which Edgar discovers on Oswald's body is from Goneril, asking Edmund to kill her husband so that they may be together. There seems to be no limit to Goneril's evil. Her jealousy of Regan becomes so intense that she poisons her sister and is grimly pleased to see the effects. She is not only an unnatural daughter, but

an unnatural sister, who can stand callously by and watch Regan writhe in agony.

Like her father, Goneril is a poor judge of character, for all that she is manipulative and cunning. She trusts Edmund and she underestimates her husband. In the end, her world collapses when Edmund is fatally wounded in the fight with Edgar, and Albany stands up to her, confronting her with her letter to Edmund: **'Shut your mouth, dame, / Or with this paper shall I stop it.'**

Goneril's manipulation and attempts to dominate Albany fail her, finally, and she realises that she has nothing left to live for. She takes her own life, confessing before she does so that she poisoned Regan.

Regan

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Like Goneril, Regan is quick to flatter her father during the love test. Having heard her sister's professions of love, Regan tries to equal, if not outdo, Goneril's outrageously exaggerated words of loyalty and adoration. She says that she is in agreement with everything her sister says but goes further, saying, **'In my true heart / I find she names my very deed of love; / Only she comes too short'**.

Regan's claim that she is **'an enemy to all other joys'** seems ridiculous, especially since she is married - a fact which Cordelia points out. She has had the advantage, of course, of seeing Lear's pleased reaction to Goneril's declaration of love, so she can reasonably assume that he will be fooled by her shamelessly manipulative speech too.

LED BY GONERIL BUT FULLY HER EQUAL IN EVIL

It is Goneril who first suggests to Regan that they must act together against their father and when Regan says she will **'further think on't'**, Goneril urges her to act quickly. Goneril is clearly the dominant sister and she manipulates Regan as she manipulates her father.

When she hears of what has happened at Goneril's palace, Regan decides to show her disrespect for Lear by leaving her palace before he arrives. Perhaps she is also a little less willing than Goneril to face her father and tell him he and his one hundred knights are not welcome. Goneril seems to be more the instigator of deeds than Regan is, though Regan follows her lead

happily enough. There is a difference too, in the way Regan and Goneril treat Lear when they meet him. Goneril tackles him immediately about his knight's behaviour, while Regan seems to be more diplomatic, at least initially. She says she is glad to see Lear and while she defends her sister's action, she is not as openly confrontational as Goneril. However, she is equally insulting and humiliates Lear by placing Kent in the stocks and by referring constantly to Lear's age. **'O, sir, you are old! / Nature in you stands on the very verge / Of her confine.'** She begs him to return to Goneril, possibly so her older sister can deal with him.

When Goneril arrives at Gloucester's castle, the sisters join forces against Lear and from this moment on, their evil knows no bounds. The presence of the other seems to encourage each to even greater acts of cruelty and savagery.

Regan may not initiate much of the action, but she is more than happy to agree with any act of cruelty, and indeed, to better it. Cornwall orders Kent locked in the stocks until noon, but Regan wants him to be kept there for longer: **'Till night, my lord, and all night too.'** Goneril wants Lear to reduce the number of his knights to fifty, but Regan proposes that it be cut to twenty-five. When Cornwall gouges out one of Gloucester's eyes, Regan encourages him to do the same to the other. She is present for the torture of Gloucester and seems unmoved by the violence. She is also more than willing to inflict death or injury herself, as we see when she stabs and kills the servant who attacks Cornwall. She rejoices in psychological cruelty too, taunting the captured Gloucester and delighting in telling him that it was Edmund who betrayed him. She shows no mercy for the blinded old man, throwing him out of the castle and announcing that he can **'smell his way to Dover'**.

RULED BY CRUELTY, AMBITION AND LUST

Like her sister, Regan becomes obsessed by Edmund and begins to be ruled by her jealousy and her desire. She even tells Oswald to warn Goneril against flirting with Edmund. She is desperate to know what is in the letter Oswald is carrying from Goneril to Edmund, and her paranoia starts to take over all her thoughts. Regan asks Edmund if he has slept with Goneril, so anxious is she to ensure that he is only hers.

When Edmund's forces win the battle against the French, the possessive, jealous Regan is quick to call Edmund her **'lord and master'**. Even as she says this, she begins to feel ill and is taken away to her tent. She has been poisoned by Goneril and she dies soon afterwards, evil to the end.

Both Goneril and Regan get their just desserts and their cruelty and deceit lead ultimately to their downfall and death.

Gloucester

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Our first impression of Gloucester is that he is a foolish, insensitive, superstitious man. He introduces his son Edmund to Kent, but jokes crudely about Edmund's illegitimacy and the fact that there was '**good sport at his making**'. He appears to find Edmund a bit of an embarrassment, although he does say that he loves him.

Gloucester's foolishness and poor judgement are shown when he immediately believes Edmund's preposterous story about Edgar wanting to kill his father. Like Lear, Gloucester is rash and impulsive and instantly curses Edgar without even trying to hear his side of the story.

His belief in astrology reinforces our impression of Gloucester as a gullible, slightly silly man.

POSITIVE TRAITS

Gloucester has many positive qualities, however. He is a loyal subject and shows Lear great respect, even when Lear has given away his kingdom and is no longer powerful. Gloucester does not curry favour with those in power, but questions Cornwall's decision to place Kent in the stocks, saying that '**the king must take it ill**'. His courtesy and decency are shown when he apologises to the stocked Kent, even though he believes him to be no more than a servant of Lear's. It might be argued that he should have done more to help Lear, but we must sympathise with his lack of power, even in his own castle. When he does help Lear, he pays dearly for it.

Gloucester's decision to offer comfort to Lear as the maddened king roams about the moors is a brave one. He knows he is risking his own life by doing this but as he tells Edmund, '**If I die for it, as no less is threatened me, the**

king my old master must be relieved.' Gloucester, under pressure, reveals a heroic side to his nature and we see that he is far more than the foolish-seeming man we met at the start of the play.

Our admiration for Gloucester deepens when we see how nobly he stands up to his captors' treatment of him. **'I am tied to the stake and I must stand the course'**. He defies Regan and Cornwall, saying that he is glad he has helped Lear to escape their clutches. Regan's gloating revelation that it was Edmund who betrayed Gloucester might be expected to cause the old man to collapse in self-pity and distress, but instead his first thoughts are of Edgar and he bitterly regrets the way he treated his son. Gloucester is physically blinded, but he sees the truth for the first time. He prays that the gods might forgive him and help Edgar.

Wandering on the heath, Gloucester is filled with despair. He tries to take his own life, so plunged in sorrow is he. However, when Edgar tricks him into believing that he has jumped from a high cliff but has been spared by the gods, Gloucester accepts his fate.

Gloucester's meeting with Lear in Dover is significant in that we see how much both men have changed and how much more they understand of human nature, though they are brought as low as they could possibly be. They have a greater degree of self-knowledge than they ever had when they were powerful and prosperous.

Yet, despite all of Edgar's efforts to help his father, Gloucester cannot be roused from his despair on hearing that Lear and Cordelia are in prison. We learn from Edgar that Gloucester died of a broken heart. The one note of consolation in his death is the fact that he was reconciled with Edgar at last, and that he died knowing Edgar had forgiven him.

Edmund

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Our initial impression of Edmund is that he is treated unfairly by his father. He has to stand by while Gloucester makes crude jokes about his mother and calls him – albeit with affection – a **'whoreson [who] must be acknowledged.'** Gloucester introduces him to Kent but comments that Edmund has been away from home for nine years and will be sent away again.

It is difficult, after this introduction, not to feel sympathy for Edmund when he delivers his soliloquy in which he bitterly comments on the insults that are heaped upon him for his illegitimacy, which is in no way his fault. He has good reason to be angry that he, along with other illegitimate children, is called 'base'. His repetition of the words **'base'** and **'bastard'** show us how deeply he feels about his social position. His cry, **'Now, gods, stand up for bastards!'** is a heartfelt one and it is hard not to sympathise with someone whose father is embarrassed by him and has denied him any sort of inheritance.

However, even though we may sympathise with Edmund's plight, his plotting: **'Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land'**, makes it clear that this is not someone to be trusted.

Edmund is a manipulative, amoral, cunning, unscrupulous, cold-hearted egoist. In this, he resembles Goneril and Regan. Yet, unlike them, he garners a little of our sympathy and maybe even some grudging respect. (It is worth noting that Shakespeare invests many of his evil characters

with positive features.) Edmund is clever, handsome, resourceful and verbally agile. Yet, as so often the case in 'King Lear', appearance is deceptive. The reality is that Edmund is utterly ruthless and only interested in furthering his own ends.

OPPORTUNIST

Edmund, unlike his father, is a good judge of character. Unlike his father, however, he uses any knowledge or insight he gains to serve his own selfish purposes. Whenever Edmund sees an opportunity, he seizes it. When Regan links Edgar to Lear's unruly knights, Edmund is quick to agree that Edgar was indeed '**of that consort.**' Ironically, Cornwall is so impressed by Edmund's seeming loyalty to his father that he takes him into his service.

Edmund is well aware that both Goneril and Regan desire him, but he has no interest in either of them. He enjoys stringing them along and being deliberately vague and formal in his answers when Goneril expresses her love for him: '**Yours in the ranks of death**'. He is well aware that both Goneril and Regan are keen to win his affections, and he is willing to play along with both of them until he is sure which one will be more useful to him. He has no romantic feelings for either: '**Which of them shall I take? / Both? One? Or neither?**' To Edmund, the sisters are merely pawns in his game and he does not care for them at all.

Edmund's treatment of his father and brother is far crueler than his toying with Goneril and Regan's affections. He knows that Gloucester and Edgar's lives will be at risk when he betrays them, but he does not care. Even Cornwall feels that what he plans to do to Gloucester might be too difficult for a son to see, but there is no hint that Edmund himself would object to

being present at his father's torture.

TOO CONFIDENT

Ultimately, it is Edgar's egoism and overconfidence which leads to his downfall. He doesn't know that Albany has been told of the plot on his life, and talks to him as if he were an equal. Like Goneril, he is caught unawares by Albany's new-found dominance and neither does he realise that he is facing a formidable enemy in the disguised Edgar.

REPENTANT OR MANIPULATIVE TO THE END?

At the end of the play, it is not clear whether Edmund's deathbed confession and repentance are genuine or just a further example of his manipulative character. He has, after all, had numerous chances to repent during the play, but he has not taken the opportunity to do so. Why should we believe him now? His egoism is clear as he comments on the fact that both Goneril and Regan loved him. Right up to the end, it seems that the person he thinks about most is himself: **'Yet Edmund was belov'd: / The one the other poison'd for my sake, / And after slew herself'**.



Edgar

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

We learn of Edgar before we ever meet him. We know that he is the legitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester and that his brother Edmund is plotting to take his place as Gloucester's lawful successor.

When we meet Edgar for the first time, he appears gullible and easily manipulated. Edgar's ready acceptance of Edmund's story that Gloucester is angry with him may make Edgar seem foolish and is only partly explained by Edmund's explanation that Edgar is **'a brother noble, / Whose nature is so far from doing harms that he suspects none'**. We are more inclined to agree with Edgar's other assessment of the reasons for Edgar's behaviour when he sneers that Edgar possesses a **'foolish honesty'**. This role of naive dupe is necessary, however, to enable Edmund to carry out his evil plans.

In many ways, Edgar is a mouthpiece for Shakespeare throughout the play, rather than a fully-developed character. For example, when he disguises himself as a Bedlam beggar, Edgar comments on what a terrible life such men lead. Through his character, we learn what Shakespeare thought of the social injustices of his time. It might be argued that Edgar is more important for what he represents – goodness and selfless love – than for what he actually is.

COMPASSIONATE AND SELF-SACRIFICING

Like Cordelia, Edgar represents selfless love and the redeeming power of such love and goodness. When he is outlawed, he does not turn against his

father but rather continues to love him and, when he takes the blinded Gloucester into his care, he treats him with kindness and devotion. Neither he nor Cordelia have their basic good natures ruined by all the hardships which have befallen them. Edgar continues to act nobly throughout the play and does all he can to help those in need.

FUTURE RULER

Edgar grows in stature as the play nears its end. He moves from being credulous and easily manipulated to being a level-headed, just, compassionate king. He brings Edmund to justice for his treatment of Gloucester and is determined to be the one to punish him: **This sword, this arm and my best spirits are bent / To prove upon they heart, whereto I speak, / Thou liest**'.

The future of the country appears to be in safe hands with Edgar and Albany.

