

King Lear

Sample Analytical Paper Topics

The following paper topics are designed to test your understanding of the play as a whole and to analyze important themes and literary devices. Following each question is a sample outline to help get you started.

TOPIC #1

Shakespeare has woven the subplot into the main plot in *King Lear* to intensify the emotional effect of the tragedy. Write an essay analyzing the way in which the subplot parallels the main plot. Discuss the areas of father-child relationships, political power, and the deaths of the protagonists in the double plot.

Outline

- I. **Thesis Statement:** The emotional effect is heightened in *King Lear* with Shakespeare's use of a subplot that mirrors the father-child relationships, the corruption of political power, and the death of the protagonist in the main plot.
- II. **Parallels of father-child relationships**
 - A. Lear's daughter Cordelia parallels Gloucester's son Edgar.
 1. Both Cordelia and Edgar are loyal to their fathers to the end.
 2. Cordelia is banished and Edgar is forced into hiding.
 - B. Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan parallel Gloucester's son Edmund.
 1. Goneril and Regan flatter Lear just as Edmund deceives Gloucester.
 2. Both Lear and Gloucester talk of the ingratitude of their children.
 - C. Lear and Gloucester are both blind to their children.
 1. Lear is blind to Cordelia's love and to Goneril and Regan's ulterior motives.
 2. Gloucester is blind to Edmund's deceit and trickery.
- III. **Parallels of greed in political power**
 - A. Goneril and Regan seek political power.
 1. They strip the King of all his train of followers.
 2. They reject the King's title and turn him out into the storm.
 - B. Edmund has high political aspirations.
 1. He allows Gloucester to be blinded for his own political gain.
 2. He usurps Edgar's legitimate title as the future Earl of Gloucester.
 - C. Kent and Edgar both lose their nobility.
 1. The Earl of Kent is banished for his honest defense of Cordelia.
 2. Edgar loses his claim to nobility through the deceit and trickery of Edmund.
- IV. **Parallels in the deaths of Lear and Gloucester**
 - A. Both die in the presence of their loyal children.

1. Lear dies with Cordelia in his arms.
2. Gloucester dies after Edgar has revealed himself as the Duke's son.
- B. Lear and Gloucester both die in "extremes of passion."
 1. Lear dies of a broken heart. "Break heart, I prithee break!"
 2. Gloucester's "flaw'd heart" bursts of "joy and grief" after his reunion with Edgar.
- C. Both die with renewed insight.
 1. Gloucester needs to be blinded before he can see Edmund's deceit and Edgar's loyalty.
 2. Lear needs to suffer the rejection of his older daughters before he can see Cordelia's loyalty.
 3. Both find that the loss of title and position humbles them.
- V. **Conclusion:** The subplot intensifies the emotional impact of the main plot in the areas of child-parent relationships, the corruption of political power, and the death of the protagonist.

TOPIC #2

Through suffering, King Lear is transformed from an arrogant, dictatorial king and father to a man who realizes the folly of his past life. Write an essay tracing the progress of his transformation as he suffers significant losses in his life.

Outline

- I. **Thesis Statement:** King Lear is humbled as he suffers the loss of his title as king, is deprived of common shelter from the storm which leads him into madness, and is denied the love and respect of his family that would comfort him in his old age.
- II. **Loss of title and position**
 - A. Division of the kingdom
 1. Flattering the King, Goneril and Regan each win half of the kingdom.
 2. Dedicated to the truth, Cordelia is banished by the King.
 - B. Goneril reduces Lear's train by 50 followers.
 1. Lear goes to Regan, but she turns him away.
 2. Regan and Goneril reduce his train of followers to none.
 - C. Lear has been turned out of his daughters' houses.
 1. Regan and Goneril seek his life.
 2. Near Dover, Lear makes a mockery of his title by wearing a crown of weeds on his head.
- III. **Loss of shelter from the storm**
 - A. Lear wanders bare-headed through the rain, thunder, and lightning.
 1. Only his Fool keeps him company, commenting on his folly.
 2. In disguise, the banished Kent joins Lear and the Fool.
 - B. Haunted by the rejection of his daughters
 1. He cannot believe his daughters would do this when he "gave them all."
 2. In the light of her cruel sisters, Cordelia's image begins to improve.
 - C. Driven into madness
 1. Lear's daughters have brought him to this.
 2. Lear feels that Edgar (Tom o' Bedlam) must also have daughters responsible for his madness.
 3. Lear wishes to become "unaccommodated man."
 - D. Lear chides himself for his lack of care for the poor, homeless wretches out in the storm.

IV. Loss of family

- A. Lear realizes the folly of trusting Goneril and Regan
 - 1. Lear has succumbed to the flattery of his older daughters.
 - 2. Lear realizes he is not “ague proof.”
 - 3. Goneril and Regan have stripped him of everything.
- B. Lear begins to trust Cordelia
 - 1. Lear wants to go to prison with Cordelia where they will be together to mock the courtly vanities of his past life.
 - 2. Loss of family has stripped Lear of the sin of pride.
 - 3. When Cordelia is hanged in prison, Lear dies of a broken heart.

- V. **Conclusion:** Lear’s transformation has led him from a king and father whose insight has been blinded by his own ego, to a man who has learned to see “feelingly,” not only for his daughter Cordelia but also for the poor, homeless wretches out in the storm.

TOPIC #3

Appearances versus reality is one of the major themes in *King Lear*. Write an essay analyzing this theme in relation to Shakespeare’s use of disguise and imagery, and his characterization of both good and evil characters in the play.

Outline

- I. **Thesis Statement:** In *King Lear*, the theme of appearances versus reality is brought out through the use of physical disguises, the imagery of the poetic drama, and the honesty or deception of the major characters in the play.

II. Appearance versus reality brought out through characterization

- A. Evil characters
 - 1. Goneril and Regan are characterized as flattering, deceptive daughters, who later turn against Lear.
 - 2. Edmund is outwardly well-mannered and proper but inwardly deceitful and vicious.
 - 3. Oswald is stoic and loyal to his mistress, but inwardly self-seeking.
- B. Good characters
 - 1. Cordelia does not flatter her father but shows the depth of her love for him through her loyalty.
 - 2. Hiding from Gloucester, Edgar shows his devotion by caring for him after he loses his sight.
 - 3. Kent, though banished for his honesty, shows his devotion to the King through his constant care after his daughters have deserted him.
 - 4. The Fool brings out the biting truths in the world of the play.
- C. Growth of characters
 - 1. Lear grows from a proud, deceitful king to a humble man, caring for none of the illusory trappings that were once so important to him.
 - 2. Gloucester grows from a man who stumbled when he saw to one whose insight improves when he loses his eyes.

III. Appearances versus reality brought out through physical disguises

- A. Edgar is disguised as Tom o’ Bedlam.
 - 1. He is innocent of the crime for which he is accused.
 - 2. Ironically, he becomes the sole leader of the world at the end of the play.
- B. The noble Earl of Kent is disguised as Lear’s servant.
 - 1. He has been banished for his honesty in defending Cordelia.
 - 2. Kent is one of the three top leaders at the end, but he declines.

IV. Appearances versus reality brought out through the imagery of the play

A. Clothing masks illusions.

1. Lear is stripped of his royal robes and appears in a crown of weeds.
2. Lear states that “Robes and furr’d gowns hide all.”

B. Images of sight

1. Goneril claims falsely that Lear is “dearer than eyesight.”
2. Gloucester says, “I stumbled when I saw.”
3. Begging Edmund to show him Edgar’s supposed letter, Gloucester says, “If it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles.”

V. Conclusion: Shakespeare’s use of characterization, imagery, and physical disguises in *King Lear* reveals the universal theme of the false world of outward appearances not only in the action of the play but also in the world at large.