King Lear Study Questions

1.1
1. What do we learn about Edmund before line 35? The side note for lines 24-25 suggests that Edmund might not be able to hear the conversation until this point; why does it matter?
2. What is Lear planning in lines 39-48? What does he add to this in lines 148-155?
3. Who/What does Lear swear by in this scene (there are several), and what does this tell us about the play’s setting?
4. Why isn’t Cordelia getting her land when Goneril and Regan got theirs? Do you think Lear is justified in what he does to her? Explain.
5. What happens to Kent, and do think Lear is justified this time? Explain.
6. Cordelia has two suitors at the beginning of this scene; whom does she end up marrying, and why? What does this tell us about each of the two suitors? How does this reflect what Lear did to Cordelia?
7. In lines 329-355, when Goneril and Regan are talking alone, what more do we learn about them, about how they view Lear, and about what happened with all three sisters earlier in the scene? From what we’ve seen, do you agree with their view of Lear? Explain.

1.2
1. What does Edmund say about nature in his soliloquy at the beginning of the scene? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. What does Gloucester say about nature in 1.2.109-124? How much irony (any type) can you find in this speech?
3. What does Edmund say about human nature (1.2.125-140)? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
4. What’s curious about what Edmund says in 1.2.147-148? What’s further curious about Edgar’s response in 1.2.149?
5. How would you describe Edgar’s behavior in this scene, and what does it tell us about his character?
6. How are the events of this scene parallel to those of the first scene?

1.3
1. What problems is Goneril having with Lear and his knights? What does she tell Oswald to do about it?
2. What does Goneril’s plan seem to be? Does she seem justified in what she's doing? Explain.

1.4
1. How is Kent disguised, and why? Is there any irony in his exchange with Lear?
2. How are things going at Goneril's? Do her complaints of 1.3 seem borne out or not? How does Lear treat Oswald? (See especially 1.4.46, 49, 51, 77-90.)
3. How easy is it for us to understand Goneril's position in 1.4.194-246. What does Goneril ask Lear to do in 1.4.241-246? Given her description of the knights in the lines just before these, and earlier in the scene, is this a reasonable request?
4. What is the Fool's function in this part of the play and what are at least three examples of how he fulfills this function?
5. Albany first enters at 1.4.251.1 and remains onstage until the end of the scene. How would you characterize him based on what he does and says in this scene?

1.5
1. Pay attention to the interchange between Lear and the Fool (1.5.7-47). What does he also feel is beginning to happen (1.5.41-42).
2. Whom is Lear referring to in 1.5.23? What is he beginning to realize?

2.1
1. Who is coming to Gloucester's castle (2.1.2-4)? What news is there abroad (2.1.6-11)?
2. What do we learn about Edgar in 2.1.107-108?
3. By the end of 2.1, what has Edgar been blamed for or implicated in? By the end of 2.1, what rewards has Edmund received or been promised?
4. Why have Cornwall and Regan left home and come to visit Gloucester at night (2.1.140-149)?

2.2
1. What is the fight between Kent/Caius and Oswald all about?
2. How does he anger Cornwall and Regan? How is Kent/Caius punished? How can this be seen as an insult to King Lear?
3. How do Kent's actions in this scene (and in Act One) characterize him as a "plain dealer"?

2.3
1. How will Edgar disguise himself to avoid capture? How might this be considered social criticism on Shakespeare’s part?
2. Note the stage direction at the end of 2.2 and the beginning of 2.4 (or just read the summary of 2.3 on page 94). As far as we can tell, this is Shakespeare’s intent. What do Edgar and Kent have in common?

2.4
1. What is Lear’s reaction to Kent’s/Caius’s punishment? What does the Fool have to say about it?
2. Why won't Cornwall and Regan talk to Lear (2.4.85-88)? How does Lear take that answer?
3. Summarize what Regan says in this scene about Lear’s behavior, and then do the same for Goneril. Are they justified? Explain what you think.
4. Summarize what Lear says in this scene about his daughters. Is he justified? Explain what you think. Then compare and contrast what Lear says in this scene to what he says and does in 1.1.
5. By the end of the scene, what have Regan and Goneril stripped Lear of? Why was it so important to him?
6. How is the manner of Lear’s exit his own fault?
7. Contrast the reaction of Gloucester and the reaction of Regan and Goneril to Lear’s exit. How might this foreshadow future events in the play?
3.1
1. According to the Gentleman, where is Lear and what is he doing? Who is with him?
2. What does Kent say is happening between Albany and Cornwall? What military advances does he tell us about?
3. What does Kent ask the Gentleman to do? What does he give him, and why?

3.2
1. How does the storm that Lear endures on the outside mirror his emotional state?
2. Throughout the scene, what is Lear asking from this version of nature?
4. How is the Fool responding to all of this?
5. In 3.2.73, Lear says, "My wits begin to turn." Does he mean to madness or from madness? Consider what he says to the Fool in 3.2.74-80.
6. What, if anything, does Merlin's prophecy mean in 3.2.88-101? Why is it here?

3.3
1. What news and opinions does Gloucester confide to Edmund? What will Edmund do, and what does he expect to get as a result?

3.4
1. According to his mini-soliloquy in 3.4.32-41, what has Lear learned so far?
2. How does Edgar’s condition mirror Lear’s? What does Lear believe has caused Edgar’s/Poor Tom’s madness?
3. Why does Lear begin to admire and emulate Edgar/Poor Tom in 3.4.108-116?
4. When Gloucester arrives, explain what these characters on stage all have in common. With that in mind, which character not on stage would fit in with this group?
5. Why do you think the Fool doesn’t speak after line 120? Does it have anything to do with why Lear won’t go with Gloucester until the very end of the scene?

3.5
1. How are Edmund’s actions in this scene just like what he’s been doing? How, then, is this letter ironic compared to the others he’s used?

3.6
1. What does Lear do to Goneril and Regan (sort of) in this scene? How is this insanity, and how does it make sense?
2. What most recent news does Gloucester bring after he re-enters after line 90, and what do the characters prepare to do as a result?
3. What is Edgar talking about in his soliloquy at the end of the scene? What is the effect of his formal language here compared to how he’s been talking all through Act 3?
3.7
1. What do the lines in 3.7.5-7 tell us about Regan, Goneril, and Cornwall?
2. What message is Goneril taking to her husband Albany? Who is going with her and why?
3. Who’s going to Dover with Lear (3.7.17-21)? Why are they only showing up now? (Keep in mind, the events since the beginning of Act 2 have taken only 36 hours or so.)
4. Who is the first character in the play to die? What did that person do to bring about his death, and how is that important to this turning point in the play? What is the significance of the manner of his death and of who kills him?
5. How does the “trial” and punishment of Gloucester bring into question who in this play is sane and who is insane?
6. How do lines 103-112 make what’s happened to Gloucester ironic?
7. How do the other servants respond to what has happened (3.7.120-129)? Whom will they get to help Gloucester? Why is this ironic?

4.1
1. What is the point of Edgar/Poor Tom's abstract philosophical speech in 4.1.1-9? To which other characters might this speech apply?
2. What view of the universe has Gloucester reached in 4.1.41-42? What further meaning does this statement have when we take lines 35-40 into account?
3. Where does Gloucester ask Edgar/Poor Tom to lead him (4.1.81-88)? Why?

4.2
1. According to Oswald, how has Albany changed (4.2.4-13)? Do you think Albany has really changed? Explain.
2. What has apparently happened between Goneril and Edmund on the journey? Why is Goneril sending Edmund (she’s calling him Gloucester) back to Cornwall?
3. Describe what has happened to the relationship between Goneril and Albany.
4. What view of the universe does Albany hope is true (4.2.57-61)? What sort of a universe does he see operating in the death of Cornwall (4.2.95-97)?
5. How does Goneril respond to the death of Cornwall (4.2.102-106)?

4.3
1. What has happened to the King of France? Has Cordelia gone back with him?
2. What sort of picture of Cordelia do we get from the Gentleman's description in 4.3.12-37? What sort of universe does Kent see operating in this (4.3.38-41)?
3. Where is Lear? Why won't he see Cordelia (4.3.46-57)?

4.4
1. According to the Doctor, what does Lear lack, and how might Lear’s sanity be restored?
2. What imagery does Cordelia use throughout this scene that the Gentleman used in 4.3?
3. According to Cordelia’s speech in lines 26-32, why is France invading Britain?
4.5
1. What dispute is brewing between Regan and Goneril?
2. Even though Oswald works for Goneril, what job does Regan indirectly assign him in 4.5.41-42?

4.6
1. What does Edgar do to Gloucester in 4.6.1-98? What reason does Edgar give for doing it in lines 42-43?
2. As Edgar takes on the identity of a peasant at the bottom of the “cliff,” how does he describe Poor Tom in lines 86-89? Why (considering lines 89-93)?
3. Explain in your own words what effect the whole experience has on Gloucester. How does this relate to Gloucester’s famous line in 4.1.41-42?
4. Briefly explain each of Lear’s satirical speeches (in lines 129-146 and 175-189). How does each speech apply to the play as a whole?
5. How does Lear react when the gentlemen sent by Cordelia find him?
6. What military information does Edgar get from the Gentleman in lines 234-236?
7. In line 244, is Edgar slipping up, or is he saying what he means to say? He may be trying to make up for it in lines 246-248, but he does it again in line 284. Do you think Gloucester has figured out the truth? He makes no response to line 284, but then what does that make the rest of Gloucester’s statements and actions in this scene mean?
8. What is Gloucester’s response to Oswald’s attempt to arrest him?
9. How does Edgar feel conflicted about killing Oswald (4.6.280-282 and 286-287)?
10. What does Edgar learn from reading the letter Oswald was carrying? (This is the letter Goneril wrote to Edmund; she gave it to Oswald in 4.2, and Oswald refused to show it to Regan in 4.5.) What does Edgar plan to do with it?

4.7
1. Why does Kent refuse Cordelia’s request to stop disguising himself?
2. Would Cordelia’s comments in lines 36-48 perhaps be different if she hadn’t been in France from 1.2 to the beginning of Act 4? Explain.
3. How is Lear referring to himself differently in lines 68-79? What does this suggest about what has happened to Lear and what he has learned from it?
4. Who are the “good guys” in the upcoming battle, and who are the “bad guys”? How is this both ironic and not ironic?

5.1
1. What is the relationship between Edmund, Regan, and Goneril, as shown in 5.1?
2. Why is Albany fighting with Edmund and against Cordelia (5.1.27-30)?
3. What do we learn from Edmund's soliloquy (5.1.55-69)? What does Albany plan to do with Lear and Cordelia if they are captured? What does Edmund plan to do if they’re captured? Why?
5.2
1. Who has won the battle? What has happened to Lear and Cordelia?
2. What message does Edgar give Gloucester (5.2.10-12)? What is Gloucester's response? How does this conversation comment on the play as a whole?

5.3
1. What are the Cordelia’s and Lear’s different reactions to imprisonment?
2. What does Edmund ask the Captain to do (5.3.32-39)?
3. In line 47, to what does Albany attribute Edmund’s victory, and how is this ironic?
4. What is Albany making clear in lines 69-70? What argument develops as a result?
5. What is significant about lines 86, 115-116? What has Goneril done?
6. What two people does Albany arrest in 5.3.98-100? What is the charge, and what is the evidence? Is Albany guilty of this same crime? Explain.
7. Why does Edmund consistently deny being a traitor? Why does he agree to fight Edgar, even though he doesn’t have to (since Edgar hasn’t identified himself)?
8. How does the duel between Edmund and Edgar give this plotline a sense of closure? Does the plotline of Goneril, Regan and Cordelia get any sense of closure? Explain.
9. What is Edgar's view of the universe in 5.3.204-207? What is Edmund’s view of the universe in line 209? How do their views differ? Does Edmund’s view contradict what he’s said earlier?
10. What has happened to Gloucester? What effect does this have on Edmund?
11. What has happened to Goneril and Regan? What view of the universe does Albany express in response (5.7.274-276)?
12. What is Edmund doing in lines 291-295? What do you think about his comment about his own nature, considering what he’s said before?
13. What has happened to Cordelia, but not to Lear? What did Lear do just before coming onstage (see line 330)? What is your reaction to what’s happened to Cordelia? (In every other version of the Lear story, this doesn’t happen.)
14. What has happened to Edmund by line 358? Explain Albany’s single-line response to it.
15. 5.3.369 is one of the most studied lines in the play -- why?
16. What happens to Lear by line 375, and what has caused it?
17. To whose heart is Kent referring in line 378?

After the Play
Is this the way the play was "supposed" to end? What does this say about the nature of the universe, about which so many characters have had so much to say?