

Act Five



The Subplot

- Update your summary of the subplot action. In the final scene, we get a lot of information from Edgar about the action that has occurred off-stage. Make sure you are clear on this.
- Why do you think Edgar is used to speed up the plot of the play in this act? What connection exists between the pace of action and tension?
- In the end, Gloucester is a mirror of Lear and in fact a tragic hero. Briefly address how Gloucester fulfills the expected characteristics and stages of the tragic hero. Why do you think Shakespeare would include this mirror plot with another equally tragic hero?

The Animal Imagery

The animal imagery continues in this act. Below are two extracts from Lear which include animal references. Comment on their significance to the development of the animal symbolism. You may want to refer to the Elizabethan Great Chain of Being to strengthen your answer.

1. *“No, no, no, no! Come, let’s away to prison. We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage.”* A5 S3 L8
2. *“No, no, no life! Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life and thou no breath at all?”* A5 S3 L305

The Villains' Greed

In this act, we are fully exposed to the greed of our villains via the love triangle that is uncovered.

- Find out what the 'seven deadly sins' are. Reflect on how much actual death (across the whole play) can be attributed to one of these sins.
- Goneril, Regan and Edmund begin as sympathetic villains. Do you think they stay that way? Explain your reasoning. Comment on how 'greed' gets the better of each of them in the end.

Lear's End

The tragic hero must face a fate that is more than they deserve. Aristotle termed this their 'nemesis'.

- What fate does Lear face? Hint: it's not just death.
- Do you think that we could classify this as a true nemesis, as Aristotle intended the term to mean? Justify your answer.
- As Lear dies, Kent says "*Vex not his ghost. O, let him pass! He hates him that would upon the rack of this tough world stretch him out longer.*" A5 S3 L12. What do you think he means by this? Do you believe that letting death take him is almost a kindness towards Lear at this point? Justify.

A Tragic Heroine?

There is some debate about the notion that Cordelia could be classified as a tragic heroine.

- Respond to this idea. Do you agree that she could be considered a tragic heroine? In your response, reference the five key aspects of the tragic hero figure. Use quotations from the text to support your ideas.

Catharsis

Right up until the final moment of the play, the audience is taken on a rollercoaster of emotions. Finally, with the last lines, these emotions can be released. This feeling was what Aristotle was referring to when he used the term ‘catharsis’.

- Summarize the emotions that should have been released at the end of the play.
- Research catharsis and its purpose. Why do we experience it and why would an author want to create a text that evokes catharsis?
- Consider the amount of dramatic irony and foreshadowing used throughout the play. Explain how the tension created by this is broken in the final act and how this contributes to the cathartic experience. Use quotes to support your answer.

The Big Messages

In the final scene of the play, there are two lines which summarize the main tone of the play and also the warning that readers are given.

“All’s cheerless, dark and deadly.” A5 S3 L290

- Reflect on how this accurately summarizes the tone and action of the play. Is there ever any happy highlights?

“The weight of this sad time we must obey, speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.”

- Analyse this line for its thematic value. How can this be read as one of the single most important warnings of the text? Use quotes to support your answer.