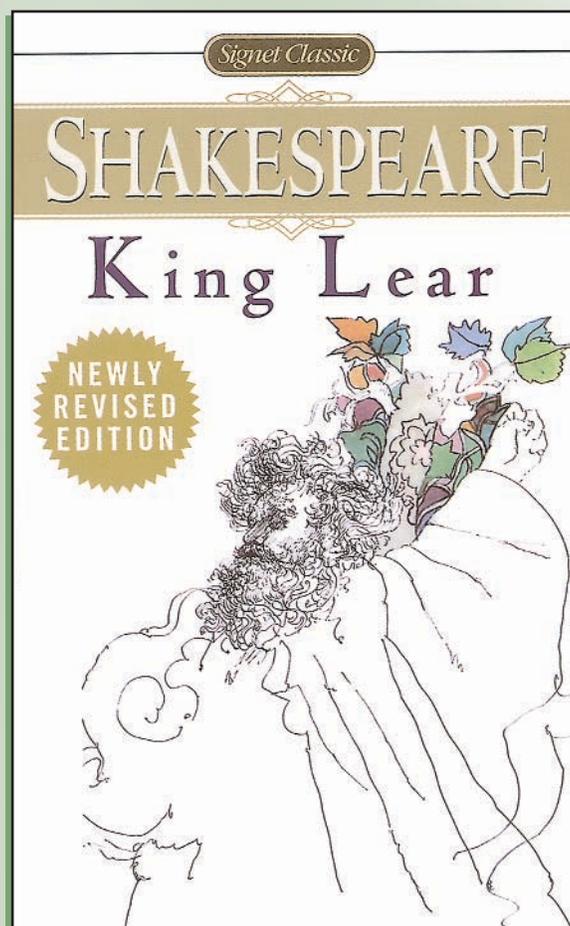




A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE SIGNET CLASSIC EDITION OF

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S
KING LEAR

By LEIGH ANN HERN



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INTRODUCTION

While *King Lear* is thought to be one of Shakespeare's more difficult works, the play is accessible to advanced high school students and certainly to most college students. The topics of (1) natural, (2) unnatural, (3) self-knowledge, (4) public perception, (5) written words, and (6) spoken words are accessible to both levels of student. Whether we can express our opinions or not, each of us has a basic belief about each of those topics. Sometimes the feeling is innate and inexpressible. Shakespeare questions this feeling and shows his Elizabethan audience what can happen if accepted belief is challenged. He turns events on their ear and plays out a tragedy that speaks as eloquently today as it did more than three centuries ago.

Naturally, accepted beliefs came from Elizabethan philosophy; however, many of those beliefs persist in our culture. The much studied Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero express a particular view concerning appearances: a person's countenance and station of birth are relative to the inner person—the more noble the birth, the more noble the soul; the more fair the countenance, the more fair the soul. Shakespeare's world was no less interested with a person's appearance and the flattery by which one would ply another. This yet is true, and often we define ourselves by our appearance or by what others say about us. In *King Lear*, appearances, station, and how what others think influences our actions are examined through relationships found in family and service: father and child; nobleman and servant (Bradley, p. 226). Even though we believe that what we look like and what we say are reflections of who we are, Shakespeare, in *King Lear*, shows that appearances and words are ever deceiving and are not clear indications of the soul or the mind. Even though Goneril and Regan are of noble birth, they hardly show noble souls; and although Lear can hardly be considered to have a fair countenance, he does develop a most fair and loving soul.

In a world dependent on words for communication, each of us comes to value the spoken and written word. Students of all ages can readily identify with a child who "says what his parents want to hear." Older, non-traditional students understand the need to hear a child's expression of love. Communication between the generations is complicated by our perception of the elderly. At what age is one "old?" When should a person retire? Older students identify with the desires of children to be successful and supplant the older generation in the power structure; the young express an impatience to be in charge and free from the ideas of the "older" generations. Yet, in their desires and expressions, they do not "appear" as dutiful or respectful children. A related issue the play explores is the granting of the power of an office to a younger generation without releasing the largess that attends that office. Can one retire from the position of CEO and retain the respect and authority given to a CEO? Elizabethans, three centuries ago, struggled with the same type of questions. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare offers a world where the natural and unnatural are intertwined, appearances and self-perception are confused, and words—written and spoken—are deceptive.

OVERVIEW

SYNOPSIS

ACT I, SCENE I. [PP. 39-51]

King Lear's palace, Britain. The Earl of Gloucester and the Earl of Kent discuss how Gloucester loves his two sons equally: Edmund (the elder), gotten illegitimately; and Edgar (of questionable parentage), gotten before Gloucester married Edgar's mother. Although he loves both sons, Edgar is his heir. Their brief discussion frames the next, larger portion of the scene. Upon his entrance, King Lear announces that he will divest himself of the burdens of rule by dividing his kingdom among his three daughters: Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. To measure which daughter deserves the bounteous "dower," he calls upon them to speak of their love for him. Goneril and Regan speak well and are rewarded equally. Cordelia, believing the evidence of her love is greater than her words, speaks "nothing." Lear disinherits Cordelia for her untender feelings and divides the remaining third—as well as his power—between Albany and Cornwall, the husbands of Goneril and Regan, respectively. When Kent tries to dissuade Lear from the rash decision, he is exiled from court. Even though Cordelia is dowerless, France accepts her hand in marriage for her "unprized precious" virtue.

ACT I, SCENE II. [PP. 51-58]

The Earl of Gloucester's castle. Edmund introduces his plot to overthrow the claim of his legitimate brother Edgar by giving a forged letter to Gloucester that implicates Edgar in a scheme of patricide.

ACT I, SCENE III. [PP. 58-59]

The Duke of Albany's palace. Goneril is irritated with Lear's rude, demanding behavior in her home. She instructs Oswald, her steward, to tell her servants to be less serviceable and colder to Lear and his knights. Goneril wishes to force Lear into a confrontation so that she may address his offensive behavior.

ACT I, SCENE IV. [PP.60-73]

A hall in the Duke of Albany's palace. Kent returns disguised to serve his king faithfully. Within the scene, the Fool imparts wisdom (ln. 121-130) [p. 64] to Lear and in short tells Lear that he was a fool to give away his titles and land, placing himself in the care of his daughters (an unnatural position that the child should "parent" the father). Goneril enters, demanding that Lear lose half of his retinue (50 men) if he is to stay with her. Lear roars at her ingratitude and then assails Albany when he enters, even though Albany is innocent of his wife's decisions. Lear resolves to live with his more "natural" daughter, Regan, and he leaves with his men. Over Albany's objections to not be so rash or harsh, Goneril calls upon Oswald to carry a letter to Regan informing her of what has transpired with Lear and asking her to stand with her sister against their father.

ACT I, SCENE V. [PP. 73-75]

The Duke of Albany's palace. Lear sends the disguised Kent to Regan with letters explaining his side of the argument. The Fool engages Lear in a verbal battle in which the Fool admonishes Lear for his unnatural, unfatherly, unkingly behaviors.

ACT II, SCENE I. [PP. 76-81]

The Earl of Gloucester's castle. Edmund learns that Regan and the Duke of Cornwall will be at the castle that night, thus setting in motion his new plan to usurp his father's title. Edgar enters. Edmund feigns knowledge of a plot against his brother and urges Edgar to flee. Edmund cuts himself and pretends upon his father's entrance that Edgar has attacked him because Edmund would not aid him in the patricide. Regan and Cornwall enter. Regan informs Gloucester that she has received letters from both her sister and her father and asks Gloucester to advise her.

ACT II, SCENE II. [PP. 81-88]

Before Gloucester's castle. Kent and Oswald enter; they trade insults and blows and are parted by Edmund, Regan, Gloucester, and Cornwall. Cornwall suggests that Kent should be placed in stocks while Gloucester advises against punishment since it would displease the king. Regan decides to favor her sister rather than her father and issues the orders to have him punished.

ACT II, SCENE III. [P. 89]

A wood. Edgar realizes that he will have no place of refuge as the "traitor son" of Gloucester; therefore, he resolves to disguise himself as a madman. "Edgar" will become "nothing."

ACT II, SCENE IV. [PP. 90-102]

Before Gloucester's castle with Kent in the stocks. Enter Lear and the Fool to find Kent in the stocks. Lear is angered by Gloucester when he says that Regan and Cornwall will not see the king. Regan and Cornwall finally enter, releasing Kent from his stocks. Lear asks Regan to admit him and his retinue to her home. Regan tells him to return to Goneril, to apologize for his behaviors, and to ask her forgiveness. Goneril enters; the sisters side together against their father. In a fury, Lear exits with the Fool and Kent into a raging storm.

ACT III, SCENE I. [PP. 103-105]

A heath. Still storms. Kent informs a Gentleman loyal to the king that there is a division between Cornwall and Albany and that France sends an invasion force to England.

ACT III, SCENE II. [PP. 105-109]

Another part of the heath. Still storms. Lear rants to the wind about the unnaturalness of daughters turning against a father. The Fool rhymes that Lear has caused all the trouble himself. Kent persuades Lear to take shelter in a hovel.

ACT III, SCENE III. [PP. 109-110]

Gloucester's castle. Gloucester confides the rift between Cornwall and Albany to Edmund, informs him of the impending French force, and advises him that they must side with Lear. Edmund plots to tell all to Cornwall, hoping to depose Gloucester and gain the title for himself.

ACT III, SCENE IV. [PP. 111-118]

The heath before a hovel. Lear, Kent and the Fool meet Edgar disguised as "Poor Tom," a madman and beggar. Lear's madness and despondency at his situation deepens. Gloucester finds the king and tells him of Goneril's and Regan's commands—to lock Lear out from shelter in hopes that he will die in the storm. All go into the hovel for protection from the storm.

ACT III, SCENE V. [PP. 119-120]

Gloucester's castle. Edmund reveals Gloucester's letters describing support of Lear and the French power to Cornwall. Cornwall grants the Earldom to Edmund who is now referred to as Gloucester by the parties against Lear.

ACT III, SCENE VI. [PP. 120-125]

A chamber in a farmhouse adjoining the castle. Gloucester leaves to find better lodgings than the farmhouse. Lear holds a mock trial of the absent Goneril and Regan with Edgar as the Magistrate, the Fool as his partner, and Kent as one commissioned to dispel justice. Lear eventually sleeps. Gloucester returns with news of a plot to kill the king outright. He, Kent, and the Fool take up Lear in his sleep and begin a journey to Dover where they shall meet the French power and Cordelia.

ACT III, SCENE VII. [PP. 125-130]

Gloucester's castle. Cornwall sends servants after the elder Gloucester and sends Goneril and Edmund after the fleeing king. The elder Gloucester is captured, brought before Cornwall, and interrogated. At Regan's goading, Cornwall attempts to pluck out the eyes of Gloucester as punishment. A servant tries to stop Cornwall but is run through in the back by Regan. Cornwall is hurt in the fray yet is able to finish the blinding of Gloucester. Afterward Gloucester is thrust out at the castle gate to "smell his way to Dover."

ACT IV, SCENE I. [PP. 131-134]

The heath. Gloucester is led onto the heath by an old man, where they are met by Edgar (still disguised as Poor Tom). At Gloucester's urgings, Edgar agrees to lead him to a high cliff at Dover.

ACT IV, SCENE II. [PP. 135-139]

Before the Duke of Albany's palace. Oswald reports to Goneril and Edmund that Albany has changed his mind about his wife's ambitions and the plight of the King, expressing displeasure in her actions. Goneril promises herself to Edmund should Albany not survive the coming battle. Edmund exits and Albany enters. A messenger enters, informs the two that Cornwall is dead from the wound he received, and gives Goneril a letter from her sister. Albany is dismayed that Edmund does not wish to avenge his father's blinding. With further information of Edmund's perfidy, Albany appears to become more resolute against his wife.

ACT IV, SCENE III. [PP.140-142]

The French camp near Dover. A gentleman informs Kent that the King of France has returned home but has left the

Marshal; that Cordelia was moved to tears when she read Kent's letters; and that shame prevents Lear (who is now in Dover) from seeing Cordelia.

ACT IV, SCENE IV. [PP. 142-143]

A tent in the French camp at Dover. Cordelia sends a soldier to find her father to bring him under her doctor's care. A messenger tells her that the British Army is advancing toward Dover.

ACT IV, SCENE V. [PP. 144-145]

Gloucester's castle. Oswald notifies Regan that Albany's army is on the march. Since Gloucester's condition would rouse public outrage against the sisters' reign, thus giving strength to the cause of Cordelia and the French, Regan advises Oswald to post a reward for anyone who kills blinded Gloucester. She bids him remind her already-wedded sister Goneril that Edmund is better suited for her widowed hand.

ACT IV, SCENE VI. [PP. 146-158]

Fields near Dover. Edgar as Poor Tom pretends to take his father to a cliff edge where Gloucester "falls." This is done so Edgar may return to his father as a solicitous stranger and so Gloucester may believe himself "reborn" without the "fiend" that has possessed him, thereby achieving a catharsis of his troubled soul. Lear enters in wild dress, a "natural" man. After some discussion, the King begins the last step of his catharsis when Gloucester "recognizes" him as the King. When a gentleman from Cordelia finds Lear, he runs, unwilling to face "capture." Oswald enters with the intent to kill Gloucester; Edgar intervenes and kills Oswald in a fight. Edgar reads Goneril's letter and decides to give the letter to Albany.

ACT IV, SCENE VII. [PP. 158-162]

A tent in the French camp. Lear has been dressed again in royal robes and wakes to speak with Cordelia. He asks her forgiveness. A gentleman reveals to Kent that Edmund leads Cornwall's troops.

ACT V, SCENE I. [PP. 163-166]

The British camp near Dover. Edmund sends a gentleman to find what is Albany's "mind" and purpose. Regan questions Edmund about his intent with Goneril. Albany enters with his wife and soldiers. In an aside, Goneril confesses that she does not want to lose Edmund to her sister. Albany enjoins Edmund to use Regan's forces with his against the French. A disguised Edgar enters and delivers to Albany Goneril's letter that was intended for Edmund. Before leaving, Edgar instructs Albany to issue a challenge against Edmund's claim for Gloucester's title and land, revealing that someone (actually Edgar himself) will answer the call, proving Edmund's perfidy. In a soliloquy, Edmund vows to side with either sister who shows the most power and affords him the best opportunities for advancement.

ACT V, SCENE II. [PP. 166-167]

A field between the two camps. The French lose the battle, and Cordelia and Lear are taken captive.

ACT V, SCENE III. [PP. 167-181]

The British camp near Dover. Edmund imprisons Lear and Cordelia. After they are taken off, Edmund instructs a Captain to hang Cordelia but to make it appear to be a suicide. Albany, Goneril, and Regan enter. Albany treats Edmund subversively. Regan and Goneril argue, resulting in Regan offering herself to Edmund. Albany starts to intercede, and Regan encourages Edmund to battle for her. Albany challenges Edmund's claims to nobility and accuses him of traitorous behaviors. A herald issues a general challenge from Edmund to anyone of nobility in the army to disparage his claims. Edgar responds as planned; they fight, and Edmund falls. Albany charges Edmund with treachery, presenting Goneril's letter to him. Goneril leaves, and to save his soul, Edmund confesses all he has done. A gentleman enters with a bloody knife and reports that Goneril has poisoned Regan and then killed herself. Before he dies, Edmund reveals his orders to the Captain to hang Cordelia. A gentleman is sent to prevent the murder, but he is too late. Lear enters, carrying dead

Cordelia in his arms. Lear believes that he sees Cordelia breathe, after which he dies. There is some question—and considerable discussion—about Lear's emotional state when he dies: joyous in perceiving Cordelia's life or grief-stricken in realizing Cordelia's death? Edgar and Kent are enjoined by Albany to take up the crown together. Kent refuses because of his age, and Edgar feels obligated to obey duty.

ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY IN *KING LEAR*

True to Shakespearean tradition, *King Lear* borrows its tragic elements from several types of tragedies that were popular during the Elizabethan Renaissance. Even though *King Lear* is classified as a chronicle play (a type of drama which draws its English historical materials from the sixteenth-century chronicles—such as Holinshed's), Shakespeare uses elements of Senecan tragedy sometimes called Classical tragedy, and the morality play.

As a tragedy, *King Lear* portrays a protagonist whose fortunes are conditioned by his hamartia. As defined by Aristotle, the protagonist of a tragedy should be a person “who is not eminently good or just, yet whose fortune is brought about by some error or frailty.” This error is not necessarily a flaw in character; hamartia can be an unwitting misstep in definite action or the failure to perform a definite action. Lear's hamartia is the capricious division of his powers and kingdom before his death—more particularly, the disavowal of Cordelia because she will speak “nothing.”

To enhance this chronicle with a tragedy of character, Shakespeare incorporates a few Senecan elements: (1) the use of stock characters—a faithful male servant (Kent); (2) the employment of sensational themes drawn from Greek mythology, involving much use of “blood and lust;” and (3) stichomythia—dialogue that is conducted by two characters speaking in alternate lines (though strict regularity is not maintained). To balance the stock characters, Shakespeare also used characters that were consistently good or evil in their intent, echoing the pattern of a morality play. Edmund, Regan, and Goneril embody avarice, envy, anger, lust, and pride; while Edgar and Cordelia embody faithfulness and unconditional love.

Other elements which became unique to Elizabethan tragedy make *King Lear* a psychologically horrific viewing: most horrors are executed off stage to be reported by a messenger, yet Shakespeare keeps the blinding of Gloucester in full view of the audience, pandering to popular tastes. In all, the Senecan influence on English tragedy is seen most in drama as a field for the study of human emotion.

Note: Further study of Shakespearean tragedy is found in A. C. Bradley's seminal work, reprinted in the Signet Classic edition of *King Lear*, pp. 225-242.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *KING LEAR*

Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written around 1137, was the first known writer to recount an integrated story of Lear and his daughters, though the figure of Lyr or Ler dates from ancient British mythology. In the sixteenth century the chronicler Raphael Holinshed adopted the story from Geoffrey and inserted it into his *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande and Irelande*, as did Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* and John Higgins in *A Mirror for Magistrates*, all of which have been suggested as probable sources for *King Lear*.

However, the principal direct source for Shakespeare's play appears to be *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, despite the differences between the two. Whereas Shakespeare's drama ends on a tragic note, the old chronicle presents a happy ending in which Cordella's forces are victorious against the armies of Gonerill and Ragan, and Leir is restored to his throne, where he reigns for a few years and dies peacefully. Lear's madness was also not a part of the chronicle story, nor was the tragic subplot of Gloucester and his sons, a story Shakespeare adapted from Philip Sidney's “The Tale of the Blind King of Paphlagonia,” published in his *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*.

Two other important sources for *King Lear* were John Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essays* and Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popishe Impostures*. Critics have pointed out that over one hundred words Shakespeare never used before he wrote *King Lear* can be found in Florio's translation, and that Montaigne's most famous essay, “Apology for Raymond Sebonde,” contains references to the major themes presented in Shakespeare's play. Harsnett's *Declaration*, many commentators have acknowledged, provided Shakespeare with the name of the fiends Tom O'Bedlam mentions in Act IV, Scene i, [pp. 133-134] as well as other features of the three storm scenes. Finally, the true contemporary story of Sir Brian Annesley, who was unjustly treated by two of his daughters in a competency trial and defended by a third (remarkably named Cordell), has also been suggested as a possible source. (From *Shakespearean Criticism*, vol. 2, p. 88).

Note: Further study of the sources of *King Lear* is found in the Signet Classic edition, pp. 190-211.

SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

In the high school classroom, students tend to perceive Shakespearean language as “Old English.” This perception allows for a short lesson that teaches the history and development of the language. Students can research each period (Old English, 449-1100; Middle English, 1100-1500; and Modern English, 1500-present) and present their findings to the class, providing examples of words that were added to the language. Advanced students can select dialects from each period (Old English—Northumbrian, Mercian, West Saxon, and Kentish; Middle English—Northern, West Midland, East Midland, Southern, and Kentish) and explain the linguistic development of the dialect as influenced by invading civilizations.

Once students learn that Shakespeare is considered “modern” and appreciate to some extent the manner in which the English language developed, they can more readily accept the dynamic use of English that was unique to Shakespeare's works. Equally amazing is that Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language as well as added new meanings to known words. This alone keeps Shakespeare's works from being considered stagnant. The dynamic aspect of language is well-documented by the editor's use of glossing for more difficult translations in the play. The glosses can be another example to students of the mutability of language. As an exercise, students can brainstorm words that are currently in use that did not have the same meaning for their parents' generation.

Shakespearean English can be difficult to understand, but the emotions tied to the words (love, hate, jealousy, sorrow) are readily understood by students of all abilities. Allow students opportunities to discuss and teach the meaning of the language and, thereby, the meaning of the play. The following are a few suggestions to engage students.

**King Lear* is replete with metaphors involving animals. Usually the animal is a reference to a behavior. Students should be familiar with this device as own their language carries similar metaphors—“Sly as a Fox,” “Busy as a Bee,” Students can search through the play for metaphors that decode behavior. Discussions can involve why Shakespeare chose that particular animal rather than another, leading to a more abstract concept of writing effective poetry. After these discussions, a natural activity would be for students to write animal metaphors of their own.

“that she may feel/How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is/To have a thankless child.” (Lear, I, iv, 294-96) [p. 70]

“When she shall hear this of thee, with her nails/She'll flay thy wolfish visage.” (Lear, I, iv, 314-315) [p. 71]

“Such smiling rogues as these,/Like rats, oft bite the holy cords atwain/Which are too intrince t' unloose; smooth every passion/That in the natures of their lords rebel,/Being oil to fire, snow to the colder moods;/Renege, affirm, and turn their halcyon beaks/With every gale and vary of their masters,/Knowing naught, like dogs, but following.” (Kent, II, ii, 75-82) [p. 84]

“O Regan, she hath tied/Sharp-toothed unkindness, like a vulture, here.” (Lear, II, iv, 133-34) [p. 95]

“She hath abated me of half my train,/Looked black upon me, struck me with her tongue,/Most serpentlike, upon the very heart.” (Lear, II.iv.158-160) [p. 96]

“Because I would not see thy cruel nails/Pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy fierce sister/In his anointed flesh rash boarish fangs.” (Gloucester, III.vii.57-59) [p. 128]

“'T' th' last night's storm I such a fellow saw,/Which made me think a man a worm.” (Gloucester, IV, i, 32-33) [p. 132]

“Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?” (Albany, IV.ii.40) [p. 137]

“They flattered me like a dog, and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there.” (Lear, IV, vi, 97-99) [p. 150]

“Edmund, I arrest thee/On capital treason; and in thy attain't/This gilded serpent.” (Albany, V, iii, 83-85) [p. 171]

- *Unlocking Shakespeare's Language: Help for the Teacher and Student* (NCTE, 1989) is an excellent guide/workbook to help students understand Shakespeare's language. It contains explanations and planned activities engaging students in close study of his language.

Since actors perform the play's language, students can paraphrase the monologues and soliloquies and then act them out for their classmates. More able students may find it challenging to act the original work, giving meaning to the language through intonation and movement.

BEFORE READING

Before reading the play, students would benefit to know the basic story of *King Lear*, just as did Shakespeare's audience. Selections from Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, Sidney's *Arcadia*, and the *True Chronicle History of King Leir* are in the Signet Classic edition (pp. 193-211). Shakespeare's audience would have been familiar with these versions of the story. Average students may benefit from viewing a film version of the play (1969, directed by Peter Brook, starring Paul Scofield and Irene Worth, b/w, 134 min.); however, the director's interpretation of the play may influence students' perceptions of character, plot, and theme. Another option would be to read a story version of the play. Charles and Mary Lamb authored *Tales from Shakespeare*, available in a Signet Classic paperback, a book that retells Shakespeare's major plays into short stories.

JOURNAL TOPICS

Students should be more comfortable discussing difficult themes found in the play by writing about them in response journals. Take every opportunity to help students make connections between the play and the journals and invite students to relate their own experiences to that of the characters. Such comparisons between personal and fictional accounts make the play more accessible to students. The following topics can be used for journal writing and/or small group discussion:

1. Most people identify themselves by what they do—athlete, scholar, entrepreneur, accountant, doctor, waiter, etc. Does your vocation—a regular occupation, especially one for which a person is particularly suited or qualified—define you? Is that who you are? How do you decide who you are?
 2. During your life you have either heard (or have said), “My parents/teachers just don't understand.” What does this really mean? Explain how this type of “generation gap” affects or has affected you.
 3. One of the more recent concerns of our nation is how to accommodate a growing senior citizen population, yet as individuals we tend to ignore the concerns of the elderly until we are counted among them. We seem to be overwhelmingly interested in being and staying young. When the time comes, how will you take care of the senior citizens in your family? What are your concerns about growing older?
 4. Part of the fun of acting is dressing up and for a time being someone other than yourself. You experience the same type of fun if you dress up at Halloween, go to a costume party, or maybe even attend a prom or other formal occasion. However, clothes do not necessarily change who you are. How may appearances be deceiving?
 5. In a nation that demands that promises be in writing before they are honored, the spoken word and its meaning is devalued. How are spoken words deceptive? Describe a time when you have been deceived—or you have deceived someone—by spoken words.
 6. In the check-out line at your local grocery you are assaulted by tabloid headlines blaring alien dogs, four-feet tall walking frogs, and a host of other oddities. You give these little credence, but most of us are influenced by advertising claims. How deceptive is the written word? How do you protect yourself from such deceptions? Describe a time that you have been deceived by written words.
 7. “Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long upon the land” (Exodus 20:12). Most have heard this Old Testament commandment, but what does it mean? How do you honor your parents? How important is it?
 8. Find an article in a newspaper or a magazine that details an injustice. Respond to that injustice. How should the injustice be righted?
 9. Think back to when you did something wrong and another person was hurt, emotionally or physically, by your error. Did you confess your error? Why or why not?
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WHILE READING**A. READING THE PLAY**

All Ability Levels: Shakespeare's work is best appreciated when it is performed. The meaning of the words becomes clearer when heard. Emotional intent is more easily divined when other students listen to what is said. Reading out loud, performing the play, listening to an audiocassette, or watching a film version provides a rich context to reiterate word choice and to introduce denotation and connotation.

B. CRITICAL QUESTIONING

Lower Ability Levels: Critical thinking questions ask a student to use insight and make connections between the plot of the play, the inference of the words, and what she or he knows of the world. Because this activity may be difficult for some students, utilize mixed ability groups to discuss the questions. Utilizing cooperative learning by assigning one or two questions per group and then having students teach the class should encourage them to extend themselves beyond obvious answers.

Higher Ability Levels: Students may use the questions as a study guide before they make a closer analysis of the play with the teacher and their peers.

ACT I

1. Why does Lear favor Goneril's and Regan's professions of love over Cordelia's? (I, i)
2. How is this favoritism related to the exiling of Kent? (varied opinions)
3. Why does Edmund wish to overthrow Edgar's claim to his father's title? (I, ii)
4. In what manner has Lear offended Goneril and her household? (I, iii)
5. How is she justified in her anger? (varied opinions)
6. According to the Fool's arguments, how has Lear "deserved" this poor treatment from Goneril? (I, iv)

ACT II

1. How does Edmund make himself appear to be the better son in Gloucester's eyes? (II, i)
2. Why should the reader not be surprised at Regan's decision to side with her sister rather than her father? (II, ii)
3. List and discuss Edgar's reasons for playing the part of Poor Tom. (II, iii)
4. How do Goneril and Regan assert power over their father, thus driving him into a raging storm? (II, iv)

ACT III

1. How does the information that France sends troops impact the political strife that is beginning in England? (III, i—varied opinions)
 2. In what manner has Lear caused all the strife that occurs between himself and his daughters? (III, ii)
 3. In what sense are the Fool's assertions true? (III, ii)
 4. In what sense are the Fool's assertions false? (III, ii)
 5. In what sense is it ironic that Gloucester confides his good intentions in his illegitimate son, Edmund? (III, iii)
 6. Compare the madness of Lear to the madness of Poor Tom (Edgar). (III, iv)
 7. How is Edmund rewarded for his treachery? (III, v)
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8. What are the judgments of mankind issued against Goneril and Regan in Lear's court? (III, vi)
9. How is the blindness of Gloucester symbolic to the blindness of Lear? (III, vii —varied opinions)

ACT IV

1. Why would Gloucester prefer to be led by the madman (Edgar) rather than by a faithful retainer? (IV, i)
2. How does Goneril compound her sins against her family? (IV, ii)
3. How does Albany perceive his wife? (IV, ii)
4. Why is it natural that Lear would not wish to see his daughter Cordelia? (IV, iii)
5. How does Regan compound her sins against her family? (IV, v)
6. How does Edgar begin the process of righting the unnatural events that have occurred? (IV, vi)
7. How does Cordelia react to her father's words? (IV, vii)

ACT V

1. How is the division between Goneril and Regan furthered? (V, i)
2. Why does it seem that Edmund has more power than any other character? (V, iii)
3. In what manner and under what authority does Albany reclaim any power that Edmund may have? (V, iii)
4. Under what circumstance may Edgar answer Edmund's challenge? (V, iii)
5. How does Edmund justify or reconcile himself with his fall from grace? (V, iii)
6. What one act would provide possible redemption for Edmund, and why is Edmund compelled to perform that act? (V, iii)
7. How is the power of the realm realigned at the end of the play, and why do we not have a feeling of completion or satisfaction from this realignment? (V, iii)

C. READING JOURNALS

All Ability Levels: A reading response journal helps evaluate a student's understanding, analyze a character, or discuss a difficult or interesting aspect of the play. A reading response journal may be required in which the student writes personal responses, observations, questions, feelings, and even digressions about the reading. Uses of a reading journal are limitless; however, minimum requirements and the method of evaluation should be discussed with students before given as an on-going assignment.

Lower Ability Levels: The reading journal may be used after a scene has been discussed to serve as a "post-test" or to record the student's thoughts before leaving the classroom and losing the feeling of the moment.

High Ability Levels: The reading journal may be used to replace questions, especially if students are asked to read outside the classroom.

D. DISCUSSION/RESEARCH MATERIAL

THEMES

Lower Ability Levels: Small group discussions may help students understand these complex themes. While most students will have a unique opinion about a theme, they may have more difficulty understanding the messages embedded in the language. Allowing students to discuss their opinions in small groups encourages them to explore new perspectives and the language, prompting the group to find a more precise meaning or importance of a theme. Possibly, assign one theme to each group, giving each specific objectives. Then the groups may teach the other students in the class about the theme.

Higher Ability Levels: While small group discussions will help broaden the perspective of all students, academically motivated students benefit from research. Distribute copies of criticism, allowing a close analysis of the work. Encourage students to question the critics and formulate their own ideas about the themes in the work. Once students are comfortable with the material, they may write a short research paper discussing their findings about a theme.

- The natural and the unnatural are found often in Shakespeare's plays. Within *King Lear*, Shakespeare twines natural occurrences (an eclipse) around unnatural politics (I, ii, 112-127) [pp. 55-56], linking them to provide an unusual context for discussion. Some characters believe (as did some of the Elizabethan audience) that the astronomical events portended the "unnaturalness" of all that occurs in *Lear*. However, Edmund—who is central to the subplot—believes "this is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars" (I, ii, 128-131) [p. 56]. Shakespeare questions if man determines his own fortune rather than nature, fate, or destiny. Given the follies sown by Lear and Gloucester and the destruction that is reaped from the guilty and innocent alike, one would be inclined to agree with Edmund's first assessment; yet before his death, Edmund admits that fortune's wheel has come full circle, depositing him below his brother where he began his quest for land and legitimacy. Rather than interpreting Shakespeare's intent for the students, have them write opinion essays, discuss in small groups, or debate the theme.
- Closely related is the theme of self-knowledge and appearance or reputation as a definition of the character or person. To be known as honest and moral is as important as to behave honestly and morally. Edgar says as much when he resigns himself to "be" Poor Tom (II, iii, 1-21 [p. 89] & IV, i, 1-9 [p. 131]). But how we perceive ourselves may not be how we are perceived by others. Lear believes himself a great and respected King; Goneril, Regan, and the Fool constantly remind him that he is an old man who has lost his kingdom, his faithful daughter, and his wits through his own folly. Part of this description is found in the relationships of the characters. Just as our parentage defines in part who we are, Lear becomes nothing more than Goneril's father or a shadow of his former self when he relinquishes his kingdom. Shakespeare is posing questions of public perception and self-knowledge. Do these concepts exist in harmony, or do they conflict?
- In no other Shakespearean play is more made of nothing. "Nothing" binds a daughter to her father, and "nothing" is a note that severs a father's love and in turn makes a son "nothing." Always one to make something from nothing, Shakespeare offers an intriguing look at the deconstruction of two men. Lear, in his whimsical desire to hear how he is esteemed, makes the error of trusting the substance of spoken words. He is not concerned with the truth and thus mistakes Cordelia's response for an insult, a non-answer. She will not give him the words he desires because they do not hold the substance of what she knows to be truth. Until the final scene, Lear asks who and what he is, and he is told (most bluntly by the Fool) that he is nothing. He no longer has importance to the other characters. However, Kent, the Fool, and Cordelia make him more than nothing by serving faithfully, speaking bluntly, and loving unconditionally (respectively).
- Ironically, if Gloucester had trusted in words as did Lear, then his ruin would not have occurred. When Edmund says the letter (the forgery) he holds is nothing, he is truthful. Yet, Gloucester would not trust the truth of the words. He must see the fact of the matter and must read the letter to determine if it is nothing. The metaphor of sight and of recognition is closely tied to the theme played out in this sub-plot. Since Gloucester will only trust in words he sees, he will continue to be deceived until he loses his sight. He is forced into a world where he must rely on only the sound and general meaning of a word when he is blinded by Cornwall. Through this deprivation, he regains his sight or his understanding of truth and is able to recognize Lear as a voice that is the king. For even in his madness, Lear is more kingly at the end than at the beginning of the play.

QUOTATIONS

Students can use these quotes as the basis for response journal writings and discussions of Shakespeare's themes.

LOVE

"Which of you shall we say doth love us most,/That we our largest bounty may extend/Where nature doth with merit challenge." (*Lear*, I, i, 53-55) [p. 41]

"What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent." (*Cordelia*, I, i, 64) [p. 41]

"I am sure my love's/more ponderous than my tongue." (*Cordelia*, I, i, 79-80) [p. 42]

"I cannot heave/My heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty/According to my bond, no more nor less." (Cordelia, I, i, 93-95) [p. 42]

"You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I /Return those duties back as are right fit,/Obey you, love you, and most honor you." (Cordelia, I, i, 98-100) [p. 43]

"Love's not love/When it is mingled with regards that stands/Aloof from th'entire point." (France, I, i, 240-242) [p. 48]

"Since that respects of fortune are his love,/I shall not be his wife." (Cordelia, I, i, 250-251) [p. 49]

"I'll go with thee./Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty,/And thou are twice her love." (Lear, II, iv, 257-59) [p. 100]

NATURE

"with strained pride/To come betwixt our sentence and our power,/Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,/Our potency made good, take thy reward." (Lear, I, i, 171-174) [p. 46]

"therefore beseech you/T'avert your liking a more worthier way/Than on a wretch whom nature is ashamed" (Lear, I, i, 211-213) [p. 47]

"Sure her offense/Must be of such unnatural degree /That monsters it" (France, I, i, 220-222) [p. 48]

"Is it but this? A tardiness in nature/Which often leaves the history unspoke/That it intends to do." (France, I, i, 237-239) [p. 48]

"Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law/My services are bound. ... Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take/More composition and fierce quality/Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,/Go to th'creating a whole tribe of fops/Got 'tween asleep and wake?" (Edmund, I, ii, 1-2 ... 11-15) [p. 51-52]

"His very opinion in the/letter. Abhorred villain, unnatural, detested, brutish villain" (Gloucester, I, ii, 80-82) [p. 54]

"Though the wisdom of Nature can reason it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide." (Gloucester, I, ii, 113-116) [p. 55]

"A credulous father, and a brother noble,/Whose nature is so far from doing harms/That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty/My practices ride easy." (Edmund, I, ii, 192-195) [p. 58]

"Degenerate bastard, I'll not trouble thee:/Yet have I left a daughter." (Lear, I, iv, 260-261) [p. 69]

"Which, like an engine, wrenched my frame of nature/From the fixed place; drew from my heart all love,/And added to the gall." (Lear, I, iv, 275-227) [p. 70]

"Hear, Nature, ...Suspend thy purpose...Create her child of spleen, that it may live/And be a thwart disnatured torment to her." (Lear, I, iv, 282-290) [p. 70]

"Seeing how loathly opposite I stood/To his unnatural purpose" (Edmund, II, i, 51-52) [p. 78]

"and of my land,/Loyal and natural boy, I'll work the means/To make thee capable." (Gloucester, II, i, 85-87) [p. 79]

"You cowardly rascal, nature disclaims in thee. A/tailor made thee." (Kent, II, ii, 55-56) [p. 83]

"We are not ourselves/When nature, being oppressed, commands the mind/To suffer with the body." (Lear, II, iv, 105-107) [p. 94]

"O, sir, you are old,/nature in you stands on the very verge/Of his confine." (Regan, II, iv, 145-147) [p. 96]

"Allow not nature more than nature needs,/Man's life is cheap as beast's." (Lear, II, iv, 265-266) [p. 101]

"making just report/Of how unnatural and bemadding sorrow/the King hath cause to plain." (Kent, III, i, 37-39) [p. 104]

"Death, traitor; nothing could have subdued nature/To such a lowness but his unkind daughters." (Lear, III, iv, 70-71) [p. 114]

"How, my lord, I may be censured, that nature thus gives way to loyalty, something fears me to think of." (Edmund, III, v, 3-5) [p. 119]

"Opresshd nature sleeps." (Kent, III, vi, 96) [p. 124]

"Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature/To quit this horrid act." (Gloucester, III, vii, 87-88) [p. 129]

"I fear your disposition:/That nature which contemns its origin/Cannot be bordered certain in itself;/She that herself will sliver and disbranch/From her material sap, perforce must wither/And come to deadly use." (Albany, IV, ii, 1-36) [pp. 136-137]

"Nature's above art in that respect." (Lear, IV, vi, 86) [p. 149]

"O ruined piece of nature!" (Gloucester, IV, vi, 136) [p. 151]

"I am even/The natural fool of fortune." (Lear, IV, vi, 192-93) [p. 154]

"Thou has one daughter/Who redeems nature from the general curse/Which twain have brought her to." (Gentleman, IV, vi, 208-210) [p. 154]

TO BE "KNOWN"

"I know what you are,/And, like a sister, am most loath to call/Your faults as they are named." (Cordelia, I, i, 271-273) [pp. 49-50]

"'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself." (Regan, I, i, 295-296) [p. 50]

(Lear) "Dost thou know me, fellow?" (Kent) "No, sir, but you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master." (I, iv, 27-29) [p. 61]

"Does any here know me? This is not Lear." (Lear, I, iv, 232) [p. 68]

(Lear) "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (Fool) "Lear's shadow." (I, iv, 236-37) [p. 68]

"Why, what a monstrous fellow are thou, thus to rail on one that is neither known of thee nor knows thee!" (Oswald, II, ii, 25-27) [p. 82]

"I know, sir, I am no flatterer. He that beguiled you in a plain accent was a plain knave" (Kent, II, ii, 112-113) [p. 86]

"Sir, I do know you,/And dare upon the warrant of my note/Commend a dear thing to you." (Kent, III, i, 17-19) [p. 104]

"I know thee well. A serviceable villain,/As duteous to the vices of thy mistress/As badness would desire." (Edgar, IV, vi, 256-258) [p. 157]

(Herald) "What are you?" (Edgar) "Know, my name is lost;/By treason's tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit:/Yet I am noble as the adversary/I come to cope." (V, iii, 120-124) [p. 172-173]

(Albany) "Know'st thou this paper? (Goneril) "Ask me not what I know." (V, iii, 162) [p. 174]

APPEARANCES AND SIGHT

"Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter;/Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty;/Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;/No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;/As much as child e'er loved, or father found;/A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;/Beyond all manner of so much I love you." (Goneril, I, i, 57-63) [p. 41]

"I profess myself an enemy to all other joys/Which the most precious square of sense professes,/And find I am alone felicitate/In you dear Highness' love." (Regan, I, i, 74-78) [p. 42]

"Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least,/Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds/Reverb no hollowness." (Kent, I, i, 154-156) [p. 45]

"See better, Lear, and let me still remain/The true blank of thine eye." (Kent, I, i, 160-161) [p. 45]

"Sith thus thou wilt appear,/Freedom lives hence, and banishment is here." (Kent, I, i, 182-183) [p. 46]

"I do profess to be no less than I seem, to/serve him truly that will put me in trust, to love/him that is honest, to converse with him that is/wise and says little, to fear judgment, to fight/when I cannot choose, and to eat no fish." (Kent, I, iv, 14-18) [p. 60]

"How far your eyes may pierce I cannot tell" (Albany, I, iv, 352) [p. 73]

"Draw, seem to defend yourself; now quit you well." (Edmund, II, i, 32) [p. 77]

(Gloucester) "Now, good sir, what are you?" (Edgar) "A most poor man, made tame to fortune's blows;/Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows,/Am pregnant to good pity." (IV, vi, 223-226) [p. 155]

"NOTHING"

"Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again." (Lear, I, i, 92) [p. 42]

"If aught within that little seeming substance,/Or all of it, with our displeasure pieced,/And nothing more, may fitly like your Grace,/She's there and she is yours." (Lear, I, i, 200-203) [p. 47]

"Nothing. I have sworn. I am firm." (Lear, I, i, 247) [p. 49]

"The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see. Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles." (Gloucester, I, ii, 34-36) [pp. 52-53]

"Find out this villain, Edmund; it shall lose thee nothing." (Gloucester, I, ii, 124-125) [pp. 55-56]

Kent: "This is nothing, Fool." Fool: "Then 'tis like the breath of a unfeed lawyer—you gave me nothing for't. Can you make no use of nothing, Nuncle?" Lear: "Why, no, boy. Nothing can be made out of nothing." (I, iv, 131-136) [pp. 64-65]

"I had rather be any kind o' thing than a Fool, and yet I would not be thee, Nuncle; thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides and left nothing i' th' middle." (Fool, I, iv, 189-192) [pp. 66-67]

"I am better than thou art now: I am a Fool, thou art nothing." (Fool, I, iv, 199-200) [p. 67]

"So your face bids me, though you say nothing." (Fool, I, iv, 201-202) [p. 67]

"Have you nothing said/Upon his party 'gainst the Duke of Albany?" (Edmund, II, i, 27-28) [p. 77]

"art nothing but the composition of a knave" (Kent, II, ii, 20-21) [p. 82]

"Away, I have nothing to do with thee. (Oswald, II, ii, 35) [p. 83]

"Nothing almost sees miracles/But misery." (Kent, II, ii, 168-69) [p. 88]

"Poor Turlygod, Poor Tom, That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am." (Edgar, II, iii, 20-21) [p. 89]

"tears his white hair,/Which the impetuous blasts, with eyeless rage,/Catch in their fury, and make nothing of" (Gentleman, III, i, 7-9) [p. 103]

"No, I will be the pattern of all patience,/ I will say nothing." (Lear, III, ii, 37-38) [p. 107]

"Go to; say you nothing." (Gloucester, III, iii, 8) [p. 110]

"Couldst thou save nothing?" (Lear, III, iv, 64) [p. 113]

"Death, traitor; nothing could have subdued nature/To such a lowness but his unkind daughters." (Lear, III, iv, 70-71) [p. 114]

"The wretch that thou has blow unto the worst/Owes nothing to thy blasts." (Edgar, IV, i, 8-9) [p. 131]

"Y'are much deceived: in nothing am I changed/But in my garments." (Edgar, IV, vi, 9-10) [p. 146]

"thou are in nothing less/Than I have here proclaimed thee." (Albany, V, iii, 95-96) [p. 171]

AFTER READING

A. ACTIVITIES

All Ability Levels

- All students can enjoy stage craft. Ask students to cast and perform critical scenes from the play. Luckily not everyone must act; set design, costuming, make-up, musical choreography, and directing are critical aspects of producing scenes from a play. Just as producers and directors do today, encourage students to create and recreate *King Lear* as they imagine it should be performed—perhaps Lear is a mafia boss in the 1940s relinquishing his "kingdom" to his children. For final production, don't hesitate to secure AV equipment and film the sequences.
- Ask students to rewrite poetic passages into prose, possibly adding humorous or authentic regional dialects. Ask students to share their work in small groups or whole class discussions.

B. READING EXTENSION

All Ability Levels

- Have students compare the original stories of King Lear to Shakespeare's version. Discuss which versions are the most satisfactory and what makes them so. Excerpts from Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Sidney's *Arcadia*, and *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* are found in the Signet Classic edition (pp. 193-211).
- Both Keats and Shakespeare use the imagination to illustrate the beauty that is held in sorrow and the suffering that is found in serenity. Compare Keats' works to *King Lear*, searching for the moments of beauty and suffering that excites speculation in the reader yet does not provide answers.

C. RELATED READING

Since students will have spent some time learning and discussing *King Lear*, a good extension is to read books and plays that have similar themes or plots:

Lower Ability Levels

- Dickinson, Peter. *The Blue Hawk*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 1976. (loyalty, courage, and love)
- Green, Hannah. *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964. (self-knowledge)
- Kerr, M. E. *What I Really Think of You*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982. (self-knowledge)
- Miller, Arthur. *The Death of a Salesman*. New York: Penguin, 1949. (self-knowledge)
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. (natural vs. unnatural)
- Sarton, May. *As We Are Now*. New York: Norton, 1973. (aging in a youth-oriented world)
- Zindel, Paul. *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*. New York: Bantam, 1984. (older generation)

Higher Ability Levels

- Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. New York: Signet Classic, 1961. (appearances)
- Galsworthy, John. *The Forsyte Saga*. New York: Scribner's, 1982. (materialism and confused affections in a family)
- Giraudoux, Paul. *The Madwoman of Chaillet*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1958. (natural vs. unnatural)
- Plato. *The Republic*. New York: Penguin Classic, 1977. (order and the individual)
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SUGGESTED TITLES

The Signet Classic edition lists numerous readings on Shakespeare, his times, his theater, *King Lear*, and other miscellaneous references. The following is a list of criticism offering supporting and alternative criticisms of the readings published in the Signet Classic volume.

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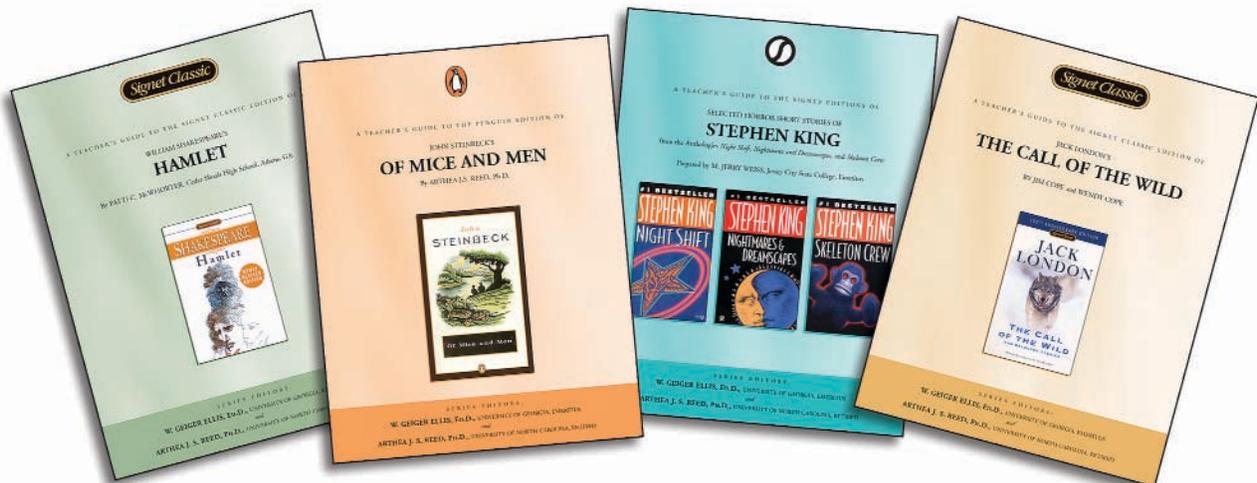
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