



King Lear Exploring Madness

Throughout Shakespeare's *King Lear*, madness looms. Lear worries that he's going mad, Edgar disguises himself as a madman, and other characters comment on the madness and lunacy that so often dominate the action. Consider these seven examples from Acts 1–3. For each example, answer these questions:

What is the context of this quote? (i.e., What is happening here?)

Is the madness real or imagined? How do we know?

Who is the sane one at this point in the play?

Then, add three more examples with citations, drawn from Acts 4 and 5. Trade your quotations with a partner and analyze each other's choices by answering the questions above.

Finally, with your partner, use all of the examples to answer the questions at the end of this worksheet.

1. KENT:

Let it fall rather, though the fork invade
The region of my heart. Be Kent unmannerly
When Lear is mad.
(No Fear: 1.1.147–149)

Response:

At this point in the play, Kent knows that his beloved king is making a terrible mistake by falling for his two eldest daughters' false professions of love and disowning the daughter who truly loves him, Cordelia. Kent is the first in the play to call Lear "mad," and Lear's actions show poor choices, though he is not truly "mad" yet. Kent, an honorable servant, is willing to stake his own relationship with his king by being truthful. Kent is the sane one here and remains so throughout the play.

2. LEAR:

O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!
I would not be mad.
Keep me in temper. I would not be mad.
(No Fear: 1.5. 39–41)

Response:

3. LEAR:

I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
Or ere I'll weep.—O Fool, I shall go mad!

(No Fear: 2.4.281–283)

Response:

4. EDGAR:

Pillicock sat on Pillicock hill. Alow, alow, loo, loo!

FOOL:

This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.

(No Fear: 3.4.71–72)

Response:

5. GLOUCESTER:

Thou say'st the king grows mad. I'll tell thee, friend,

I am almost mad myself.

(No Fear: 3.4.154–155)

Response:

6. FOOL:

Prithee, nuncle, tell me whether a madman be a gentleman or a yeoman?

LEAR:

A king, a king!

(No Fear: 3.6.9–10)

Response:

7. SECOND SERVANT:

Let's follow the old earl, and get the Bedlam

To lead him where he would. His roguish madness

Allows itself to any thing.

(No Fear: 3.7.109–111)

Response:

Your chosen quotes:

8.

Response from partner:

9.

Response from partner:

10.

Response from partner:

Questions for Discussion:

1. Which characters are mad? Which characters are sane? Who pretends to be mad? Who pretends to be sane? Does each character's condition change in the course of the play or remain the same?
2. What does *King Lear* suggest about madness and sanity among kings/leaders and the people who serve them?
3. How does *King Lear* inform your understanding of madness in the modern world?

RL.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informative texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.