



King Lear Puns, Rhymes, and Wordplay

Shakespeare loved to play with words, their sounds, their multiple meanings, and their musical rhythms and rhymes, and *King Lear* provides a wealth of such examples. Here are a few examples from Acts 1 through 3. For each example, fill in the missing word or phrase, cite the context, the kind of wordplay the example illustrates, and the effect of the figure of speech.

Kinds of wordplay to look for include:

Playful rhymes

Homophones

Metaphors/similes

Words with double meanings

Puns

Jests

Sarcasm

Irony

Nonsense words

Then, find at least two more examples in Acts 4 and 5 and add them to this worksheet. Be sure to cite your examples. Finally, answer the question at the end of the worksheet.

1. GLOUCESTER: I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazened to it.

KENT: I cannot _____ you.

GLOUCESTER: Sir, this young fellow's mother could,

(No Fear: 1.1.11–13)

Missing word(s):

Context:

Kind of wordplay:

Effect:

2. FOOL: Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue. So your face bids me, though you say nothing. Mum, mum,
He that keeps _____ nor _____,
Weary of all, shall want some.
(No Fear: 1.4.180–183)

Missing word(s):

Context:

Kind of wordplay:

Effect:

3. FOOL: May not an ass know when the _____ draws the _____ ?
Whoop, Jug! I love thee.
(No Fear: 1.4.210–211)

Missing word(s):

Context:

Kind of wordplay:

Effect:

4. FOOL: Fortune, that arrant whore,
Ne'er turn the key to th' poor.
But for all this thou shalt have as many _____ for thy daughters as thou canst
tell in a year.
(No Fear: 2.4.47-48)

Missing word(s):

Context:

Kind of wordplay:

Effect:

5. LEAR: Thou art a boil,
A plague-sore or _____
In my corrupted blood.
(No Fear: 2.4.218–220)

Missing word(s):

Context:

Kind of wordplay:

Effect:

6. KENT: What hath been seen,
Either in snuffs and packings of dukes,
Or the hard _____ which both of them hath borne
Against the old kind king, or something deeper,
Whereof perchance these are but furnishings—
(No Fear: 3.1.26–29)

Missing word(s):

Context:

Kind of wordplay:

Effect:

7. YOUR EXAMPLE:

Context:

Kind of wordplay and meaning:

Effect:

8. YOUR EXAMPLE:

Context:

Kind of wordplay and meaning:

Effect:

Overall, what effect do puns, rhymes, and other kinds of wordplay have on a play as serious and dark as King Lear?

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.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

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.

SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Answer Key

Sample Student Responses

1. GLOUCESTER: I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazed to it.

KENT: I cannot _____ you.

GLOUCESTER: Sir, this young fellow's mother could,

(No Fear: 1.1.11–13)

Missing word(s):

conceive

Context:

Gloucester and Kent are discussing Edmund's conception; he was born out of wedlock, and Gloucester is recalling Edmund's mother, apparently a mistress after Gloucester's marriage to Edgar's mother.

Kind of wordplay:

The word conceive has a double meaning: to bear a child and to understand.

Effect:

Early in the play we are set up to expect clever and bawdy banter about some extremely intimate family details. The play begins light-heartedly but quickly goes downhill.

2. FOOL: Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue. So your face bids me, though you say nothing. Mum, mum,

He that keeps nor _____ nor _____,

Weary of all, shall want some.

(No Fear: 1.4.180–183)

Missing word(s):

crust, crumb

Kind of wordplay:

This is a silly rhyme that reveals a deep truth.

3. FOOL: May not an ass know when the _____ draws the _____?

Whoop, Jug! I love thee.

(No Fear: 1.4.210–211)

Missing word(s):

cart, horse

Kind of wordplay:

This is a metaphor, or a flipped over expectation.

4. FOOL: Fortune, that arrant whore,

Ne'er turn the key to th' poor.

But for all this thou shalt have as many _____ for thy daughters as thou canst tell in a year.

(No Fear: 2.4.47–48)

Missing word(s):

dolors

Kind of wordplay:

This is a homophone or double entendre: dolors/dollars.

5. LEAR: Thou art a boil,

A plague-sore or _____

In my corrupted blood.

(No Fear: 2.4.218–220)

Missing word(s):

embossed, carbuncle

Kind of wordplay:

These are two words you'd never expect to see together as one evokes adornment and wealth, the other disease and infection.

6. KENT: What hath been seen,
Either in snuffs and packings of dukes,
Or the hard _____ which both of them hath borne
Against the old kind king, or something deeper,
Whereof perchance these are but furnishings—
(No Fear: 3.1.26–29)

Missing word(s):

rein

Kind of wordplay:

This is a homophone: rein/reign/rain.