

## CONTENTS

<b>Act One Scene One</b>	Commentary	1
	Overview	19
	Student Response	21
<b>Act One Scene Two</b>	Commentary	23
	Overview	32
	Student Response	33
<b>Act One Scene Three</b>	Commentary	35
	Overview	36
	Student Response	37
<b>Act One Scene Four</b>	Commentary	38
	Overview	47
	Student Response	48
<b>Act One Scene Five</b>	Commentary	50
	Overview	52
	Student Response	52
	Commentary Practice – General	53
	Practice Commentary 1	54
	Model Commentary	56
	Commentary – Further Suggestions	57
	Additional Essay Questions (A Level)	58
	A Level Questions: An Overview	58
<b>Act Two Scene One</b>	Commentary	61
	Overview	64
	Student Response	64
<b>Act Two Scene Two</b>	Commentary	65
	Overview	70
	Student Response	70
<b>Act Two Scene Three</b>	Commentary	72
	Overview	72
	Student Response	73
<b>Act Two Scene Four</b>	Commentary	74
	Overview	82
	Student Response	83
	Practice Commentary 2	85
	Additional Essay Questions (A Level)	89
	Additional Essay Question (AP)	89
<b>Act Three Scene One</b>	Commentary	90
	Overview	92
	Student Response	92
<b>Act Three Scene Two</b>	Commentary	94
	Overview	99

	Student Response	99
<b>Act Three Scene Three</b>	Commentary	101
	Overview	102
	Student Response	102
<b>Act Three Scene Four</b>	Commentary	103
	Overview	112
	Student Response	112
<b>Act Three Scene Five</b>	Commentary	114
	Overview	115
	Student Response	115
<b>Act Three Scene Six</b>	Commentary	116
	Overview	120
	Student Response	121
<b>Act Three Scene Seven</b>	Commentary	122
	Practice Commentary 3	123
	Overview	126
	Student Response	127
	Additional Essay Questions (A Level)	127
	Additional Essay Question (AP)	128
<b>Act Four Scene One</b>	Commentary	129
	Overview	134
	Student Response	134
<b>Act Four Scene Two</b>	Commentary	137
	Overview	138
	Student Response	139
<b>Act Four Scene Three</b>	Commentary	140
	Overview	141
	Student Response	142
<b>Act Four Scene Four</b>	Commentary	143
	Overview	143
	Student Response	143
<b>Act Four Scene Five</b>	Commentary	145
	Overview	146
	Student Response	146
<b>Act Four Scene Six</b>	Commentary	148
	Overview	161
	Student Response	161
<b>Act Four Scene Seven</b>	Commentary	164
	Overview	170
	Student Response	170

	Practice Commentary 4	172
	Additional Essay Questions (A Level)	175
	Additional Essay Question (AP)	175
<b>Act Five Scene One</b>	Commentary	176
	Overview	176
	Student Response	177
<b>Act Five Scene Two</b>	Commentary	178
	Overview	179
	Student Response	180
<b>Act Five Scene Three</b>	Commentary	181
	Overview	194
	Student Response	195
	Practice Commentary 5	197
	Additional Essay Questions (A Level)	199
	Additional Essay Question (AP)	199
<b>Further Essay Questions (International Baccalaureate)</b>		200
<b>Further Essay Questions (A Level)</b>		201
<b>Advanced Placement Free-Response Questions</b>		202

## SAMPLE SECTION

### Act Two Scene One

#### *Commentary*

The two stories, Lear's and Gloucester's, move closer together in this scene. We learn immediately that Regan and Cornwall are about to arrive at Gloucester's castle (not very far from their own). We also learn that Edmund did not know they were coming; and that he does not know, either, about the impending conflict between Cornwall and Albany. He is presented to us here, then, as a man for the moment on the edge of things, but alert to emerging possibilities – possibilities that may help him to move towards the centre: *'The Duke here tonight? The better best'* ('The news couldn't be better'). He must act quickly (with *'briefness'*), but also carefully – he has something tricky (*'of a queasy question'*) to do. 16

He is an opportunist. He uses the imminent arrival of Cornwall to do what? 25-29

- o Frighten Edgar, by suggesting that he may be thought to have spoken out against Cornwall.
- o Confuse him, too, since *'said /Upon his party 'gainst the Duke of Albany'* is another ambiguity. It can mean either spoken on Cornwall's behalf (*'party'* – part) against Albany or spoken critically about Cornwall's *'party against'* (conflict with) Albany.

We defined irony on page 4 as 'a statement made by a character in a play which is shown by later events to have greater significance than perhaps he, or the audience, or both, realised at the time.'

*'In cunning I must draw my sword upon you'* doesn't fit very well, though, does it? Why not?

Both Edmund and we the audience know what Edmund's *'in cunning'* means; only Edgar does not. He thinks it means 'cunningly so that I deceive our father and help you.'

31

We needn't redefine the term – our 'perhaps' allows room for this example. The audience's (and Edmund's) awareness of the irony is *current*: we know *now* what he is up to and therefore, in full, what he is saying. So his words will not take on extra meaning in the light of later events; but they will take on extra weight when we see how awful the results of his cunning are.

It is night, as we have said. Edmund calls for light at the very moment he is working to send his father into the darkness of misunderstanding. The torches Gloucester brings in with him will not help him.

That's all fairly obvious symbolism; but it should remind us to look out for other symbols in the play. Have there been any others so far?

The coronet which Lear divides in two, perhaps.

Here's an essay question to which we can attach any further examples we may find:

*'In a play the physical objects we see on stage, the actions of the characters, and the words and images they use when speaking, must seem real; but they must also, in drama which is to last, mean something beyond themselves.'*

*Use this statement as a starting-point for a discussion of symbols in the plays you have studied.*

Does Edmund imply any scorn for the *'drunkards'* who have injured themselves so that they can drink a health in blood to their lovers? Not really, but we do sense that he distances himself from such behaviour. He is perhaps more careful of his own welfare than that...but he steels himself to do what is necessary (stab himself) now. Much is at stake.

36-37

When Gloucester enters Edmund does several other things (up to the end of his first longer speech – *'he fled'*, line 57), which show him to be a skilful schemer. What are they?

- o He delays telling Gloucester which way Edgar has run, since he does not want him to be caught yet.
- o He plays on Gloucester's superstition: Edgar, he says, was praying to the moon, associated with Hecate, goddess of witches.
- o He tells the major part of his story in two rambling, disorganised sentences which suggest a state of shock.
- o He adds effective detail to his account of Edgar's sword. It is first of all *'sharp'* (and he has a wound to prove it) and it was also *'prepared'* (against Gloucester).
- o He switches to the present tense in *'charges'*, bringing alive the most violent part of the episode.
- o He points up the contrasts between Edgar: and himself:
  - cowardly (*'gasted by the noise I made... he fled'*)
  - *'unnatural'*
  - *'prepared'*
  - brave (*'bold'*);
  - *'loathly opposite'*
  - unprepared (*'unprovided'*)

Gloucester's *'Let him fly far'* does not mean 'He'd better run a long way, otherwise we'll catch him.' 57  
That might suggest a secret wish on Gloucester's part that Edgar *should* escape. It means, rather, 'No matter how far he flies...' He is completely eager to bring his son to justice.

Justice? Gloucester is as ready to condemn his son out of hand as...?

Lear was ready to condemn Cordelia.

We suggested earlier that Edmund could be described as cheeky. Is there anything in his next speech 65-78  
(*'When I dissuaded him...'*) to support that suggestion?

- o He says Edgar told him he would deny writing the letter if it was produced against him, even if it seemed to be in his handwriting. So the piece of evidence he used initially against Edgar he uses again here to show that Edgar is refined in his trickery. His account of what Edgar is supposed to have said sounds just as authentic as the letter. Edmund is finding all of this easy, since he's talking (just as he wrote) as his bitter and rebellious self, and pretending it's Edgar. That's what's cheeky.
- o He slips in a reminder that he is an *'unpossessing bastard'*. It's quite possible he intends the phrase to jog Gloucester into promising to put things right for him. That's cheeky, too – and successful (*'I'll work the means /To make thee capable [of inheriting].'*)

There's a play (Shakespeare's, not Gloucester's) on *'natural'*. The word can mean: 85

- o naturally loving
- o legitimate
- o illegitimate.

The fact that it can mean such very different things extends one of the play's themes – perception (sight and seeing). How we view (and describe) someone depends very much on where we're standing at the time.

Can you see some irony in *'capable'*? 86

Edmund is showing himself very capable, in a different way.

Gloucester called Edgar a *'strange...villain'* (line 78); Cornwall says as he enters that he has heard *'strange'* news. The word is stronger than 'surprising', and suggests, once more, unnaturalness.

*'Vengeance comes too short /Which can pursue th'offender'*: Explain the irony here. 89-90

Regan herself will also become guilty of betraying a parent.

Why does Regan refer to Edgar indirectly as *'my father's godson'*? 92

Lear is very much in her mind; and she now attempts to associate Edgar's bad behaviour with his.

*'Tended'*: Why the past tense?

96

Goneril has probably told her in the letter that she has requested that the most *'riotous'* of his knights be cut off.

Edmund – opportunist – tells her what he wants his father to hear.

97-98

There are several further examples of irony in the next twenty or so lines. Find them.

- o *'You have shown your father a child-like office'*
- o *'natures of such deep trust'*
- o *'I shall serve you truly, sir, /However else'*

106-107

116-117

118

Why does Cornwall say he will need the support of men like Edmund? Because a fight with Albany is pending?

Why does Regan say she needs Gloucester's advice? Is she really concerned to do what is right? Or is this only an excuse to stay for the night?

### **Overview: other things to note**

#### Setting

- o Night (allowing obscurity and confusion); and winter (*'out of season'*), when life is already harsh.
- o Servants carry tales.
- o Rank applies: Gloucester needs Cornwall's authorisation to deal with Edgar as he wishes.
- o Rules can be bent: Edmund may be able to inherit after all.

#### Character

- o Gloucester: *'My old heart is crack'd, it's crack'd'* he cries; but hasn't he shown much more anger than sorrow?
- o Edmund: Stage manager again, but this time more of an actor as well. Convincing, to everyone. His quick prayer to *'briefness'* (his own speed) and *'fortune'* (his own luck) is in contrast to the prayer he says Edgar made (to the moon), and to his father's superstitiousness: he is responsible for his own future.
- o Regan: Cautious. There is some imprecision so far in Shakespeare's presentation of her, just as with Goneril.

#### Action

- o The Gloucester story clanks a bit in the first part of the scene.
- o The conflict between Cornwall and Albany doesn't happen: Shakespeare just allows the possibility to float in the background.

#### Ideas

- o Balance: *'Our father he hath writ, so hath our sister, /Of differences...'* Who's in the right?

#### General

- o Gloucester, a betrayed father, is invited to be party to the betrayal of another father, Lear (part of the play's pattern). He doesn't see it (one of the play's blindnesses).

***Student Response***

‘Why does Edgar agree to the pretend fight? He has nothing to gain from that.’ (Edwina)

‘He’s probably just woken up and doesn’t know what’s happening, so he just does what his brother says.’ (John)

‘Edmund’s younger than Edgar, isn’t he? He’s talking more like an older brother.’ (Samer) ‘And Edgar goes along with that.’

We decide that this could be another of the play’s inversions.

\*\*\*\*\*

‘I think Cornwall’s hen-pecked. Regan talks about their palace as ‘my house’. Then he’s in a hurry to agree with her plan to be away from home, as if he wants to keep her happy. When he starts to tell Gloucester why they’ve come she interrupts and takes over.’ (Sandra)

Everyone’s impressed at how well Sandra has brought together several bits of evidence. They’re less impressed when I offer them another essay:

*Show how the dramatists in plays you have studied explore the relationships between men and women, and discuss the means by which they make that exploration dramatically interesting.*

‘What does *dramatically interesting* mean? (Edwina)

\*\*\*\*\*

END OF SAMPLE SECTION