

Mental Health through Literature

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Shakespeare's Time

In Shakespeare's time, physical and mental illness were said to be inseparable and mentally ill people were ridiculed. As we saw in the previous lesson, people would actually visit asylums, like Bedlam, for entertainment! Use this student sheet to help guide you through the article on *King Lear* and learn more about how the mentally ill were portrayed in literature.

Summary of *King Lear*

In *King Lear* (1606), a tragedy by English playwright William Shakespeare, Lear is king of Britain and has three daughters: Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. In the play, the first two daughters are married to British nobles; Cordelia is being courted by the king of France and the duke of Burgundy. King Lear decides to divide his kingdom among the daughters, based on who loves him most. The evil sisters Goneril and Regan profusely proclaim their love; Cordelia will not do this insincere thing. Lear takes Cordelia's inheritance away and divides his whole kingdom between Goneril and Regan. These two daughters then mistreat their father and he has a mental breakdown, rushing out into a storm, where he has a famous "mad scene." In the end, Goneril and Regan get what they deserve but Cordelia is hanged, and Lear dies from grief.

Answer the following questions as you read the essay Renaissance Views of Madness: *King Lear*.
<http://www.engl.uvic.ca/Faculty/MBHomePage/ISShakespeare/Resources/WorldView/LearMadness.html>

1. What evidence is given suggesting a mental disorder in the character of King Lear?

2. Describe the character of King Lear, as revealed in the essay.

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3. How was King Lear's behavior viewed by other characters and by society at large?

4. Would that behavior be regarded in the same way today? Why or why not?