

# King lear: the character of edmund

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



(A) Edmund's plot to supplant Edgar and gain his father's inheritance begins in Act One Scene Two. What is the importance of this scene in the context of the play as a whole?

The character of Edmund is introduced in Act one Scene one of the play as Gloucester's illegitimate son. " I have so often blush'd to acknowledge him" he says this in front of Edmund. Gloucester does state that he loves Edmund as much as his legitimate son Edgar.

" Who yet is no dearer in my account" Although his father has expressed his love for both sons, Edmund must still feel segregated and unwanted and these feelings would have certainly pushed Edmund to betray his family. Until Gloucester's blinding near the end of the play, Edmund conceals this split personality to his father and brother keeping the pretence of a noble, loyal and trustworthy son.

Act One Scene Two is the first scene where we see the subplot unfold.

We know this because the characters speak in continuous prose, which reflects their status as the subplot characters. Edmund's plot against his father to gain his inheritance prematurely begins in the first scene. For the first time in this play, we hear Edmund speak through his soliloquy. His true thoughts and feelings are revealed to the audience and it is at this point where people would begin to change their opinion of Edmund to a scheming and ungrateful son. He uses humour and sarcasm, which highlights his intelligence.

Another important theme shown in Edmund's soliloquy is nature. He even mocks his father's views of nature, but appears to agree with him in order to gain his trust. He refers to nature throughout this soliloquy "Thou Nature, art my goddess" the word nature is personified by the capital N, signifying its importance to Edmund. He does not see why he should be branded as an outcast to society and believes he should have the same rights and privileges as his brother Edgar. He has been complimented on his strength; both in the mental and physical sense and are therefore he believes he is no less of his father's son than Edgar. He then decides, "Well, then, legitimate Edgar, I must have your land." This is an echo of the previous scene, where Goneril and Regan are deceiving Lear in order to gain his land.

In Edmund's soliloquy, he mocks society and their values and beliefs. He uses alliteration "bastardy? Base, Base?" with the hard sound of the letter B, for emphasis. He also repeats the word legitimate several times throughout his soliloquy. Most of the characters use or refer to the word nature during the course of the play. When Lear subjected his daughters to the test of love, this was going against the pattern of nature. When Cordelia refuses, he refers to her as "a wretch whom nature is ashamed" Lear believes that he is completely natural and any person who challenges him is unnatural. There are two types of nature that is prominent in the play; nature as benign and as malignant and each character conforms to one type. Gloucester, Edgar and Cordelia are benevolent and therefore attempt to make the country ordered and secure. These characters are all loyal and can be trusted. Edmund, Goneril and Regan however cannot, they are callous and selfish. Read also Edmund and Edgar essay

The characters involved in this scene echo the first scene and also involve the same theme. The real scheming children-Edmund, Goneril and Regan are being rewarded whilst the 'good' children-Edgar and Cordelia, are the children being punished as a result of parental naivety. Parental naivety and filial ingratitude becomes an important theme throughout the play. In the first scene, Goneril and Regan show their true characters, as does Edmund in the second scene. In the same scenes, both Lear and Gloucester are naïve to the fact that their children are lying to them in order to gain something for it; which in both cases is simple material goods, their parents' land and money.

These themes link with the theme of blindness. Both Lear and Gloucester are blinded metaphorically by their children's lies and deceit, whilst later on in the play Gloucester is actually blinded. This shows irony, because when Gloucester can actually see, he is blinded by Edmund's deceit and yet when he is blind he learns the truth about his sons. Before Gloucester's blinding, he did not have sufficient vision for him to make sound decisions, which worked to Edmund's advantage when he forged a letter that was supposed to be from Edgar. Lear is also an old man, and his sight is also failing him, as Kent notes "see better, Lear" he cannot see that Goneril and Regan are using him for what he is worth to them, until it is too late at the end of the play when he has lost everything.

A word that is used many times during the first scene especially is "nothing" when Lear asks Cordelia what she will say, she replies with a simple "Nothing, my lord" after the repetition of this word, Lear then says "Nothing

will come of nothing: speak again" Cordelia is adamant that she will remain silent, and does so, resulting in her being banished from Lear's Kingdom.

This is echoed again in the second scene, when Edmund is pretending that he does not want his father to see the letter from 'Edgar' When Edmund is confronted, he replies "nothing my lord" this statement is simply used as a manipulative catalyst in arousing Gloucester's suspicion - which inevitably works.

All of the themes are of great importance to the main plot and the play as a whole as they help to reinforce them.

WORD COUNT: 960

English Literature AS Level Coursework

King Lear

(B) Read the two critical extracts on Edmund and, using their ideas as a starting point, analyse your response to Edmund's character

Edmund is the youngest, albeit illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester. In the first scene of the play, we see his father joke about Edmund with the Earl of Kent in Edmund's presence. From then on, Edmund begins to deceive his father and brother, the rationale being to gain his father's wealth. I think that as a consequence of his illegitimacy, Edmund has acquired a Machiavellian attitude to life. Edmund is a villain; he plots against his own family for his profit. It is ironic that the beginning of Edmund's issues with society was because he was excluded from it, and yet we see him alienating himself from

his family and runs the risk of making himself an outcast if he is exposed. He is exceptionally intelligent as he is able to manipulate both his father and brother and he also gets Goneril and Regan to fall in love with him. As a result of this, Goneril poisons Regan and then kills herself. Goneril even plans to kill her husband to be with him, however she is discovered before she achieves this.

We see another side to Edmund during his dying scene. He repents and seems genuinely remorseful. He even manages to retain his sense of humour, emphasising his witty personality and intelligence. Although Edmund does play the part of a wicked person, his actions are not unjustified. His sadistic mannerisms are mitigated by his want of justice and equality. His father made jokes about both his mother and Edmund, when he was in the vicinity, which is uncaring and for a father to speak of his own child that way especially in his presence is inexcusable. In spite of this, Edmund remains to be clever and resourceful. He adopts a communistic attitude, as he opposes societies' attitudes.

Edmund would have made a fine psychologist, as he has the ability to play on peoples' characters and use it against them. He is also an effective stage manager, dramatist and actor. He is able to convince his father that his brother is plotting against him; equally he is able to convince his brother that his father is plotting against him. To help himself accomplish this in Act two Scene one, he uses the power of language. He speaks to Edgar with exclamation and speed, to ensure that Edgar has no time to rationalise the

situation and not comply with his plan. Although Edmund has committed many moral wrongs, he has yet to actually commit any legal wrongdoings.

Edmund is classed as a 'bastard' and therefore is treated as one. He does not receive anything from his father in the way of inheritance.

Also, his friends or his country do not respect him. To emphasize his status- or rather lack of status in society, there is the law of primogeniture. I think this is why Edmund appeals to the audience and there is great debate over whether Edmund is justified in his actions. In the modern day, Edmund would have been totally accepted and been treated equally and the modern day audience would disapprove of his treatment. In the first scene we begin to feel sorry for Edmund because he is different and is being mocked by his own father. However, when Edmund performed his soliloquy in the second scene I feel that the audience view of him would change. They would no longer feel sorry for him, but think of him as scheming.

Harley Granville-Barker wrote his opinion of Edmund in the year 1930, he believes that he is an "ignoble scoundrel" He is deceitful in the sense that he does not reveal his true desires to anybody, only in his soliloquy. I believe that Harley Granville-Barker considers Edmund as a coward-which indeed he is in some respects; he suddenly repents of all sins on his deathbed. S. L. Goldberg views Edmund more optimistically. Although he does highlight his bad points "amoral, a-social conception of nature" He also focuses on his finer qualities "sharp-witted" I think that S. L. Goldberg is particularly compassionate with Edmund in comparison to Harley Granville-Barker.

This could be because he lived in the time of the seventies and may take a more laissez-faire attitude towards life, which would be in keeping with societies ever changing opinion. Perhaps this is why Shakespeare chooses a 'bastard' son to adopt the role of the evil character. Society in Shakespeare's day openly frowned upon 'bastard' children and relationships outside of marriage, no doubt to compensate for the affairs and number of 'bastard' children there were then. The difference between now and the present day is, people have become less secretive and less elitist, the class system has almost certainly disappeared and 'bastard' children with single parents are overtaking the once mandatory popular nuclear family.

In conclusion I think that Edmund is misunderstood. He is simply taking the activists role in the play and standing up for what he believes in and his rights. He is one of the most, if not the most, intelligent characters in this Shakespeare play. If society and his father had of given him the respect and recognition that he deserves then Edmund would have no argument with this. Edmund seeks love and attention, but when this is shown from both Regan and Goneril he does not know how to react to this.

Consequently he acts as if they do not matter to him and turns it in to a sport of which one would be the most useful to him. This attitude echoes his father's in the opening scene, when he talks about the good sport at Edmund's making, treating women as an object. I do think that although Edmund received a misguided approach to life, he should take responsibility for his actions, which he does in the closing scene. He apologises but yet still retaining his humour and intelligence. Edmund had all of the fine qualities



that were needed in an Earl and even King, but he would never have been given a chance to express them.