



King Lear

by William Shakespeare

In a Nutshell

King Lear is a tragedy by [William Shakespeare](#) written at some point between 1603 and 1606. The play's action centers around an aging king who decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters, two of whom turn out to be mean, greedy ladies. For the past several decades, *King Lear* has been regarded as one of Shakespeare's greatest works, perhaps even better than [Hamlet](#).

Yet this was not always the case. For much of *Lear's* history, the play was regarded as a theatrical failure. It was too complicated, too dark, too violent. The on-stage blinding of one character was too much. Audiences were upset at the bleakness of the ending and the unfairness of innocent Cordelia's death. For much of the eighteenth century, the only version of *Lear* performed was a re-write that gave the play an improbable happy ending.

But in the 1960s, everything changed. After the [Holocaust](#) and two World Wars, the vision of human life presented in *King Lear* didn't seem overly cynical - it seemed pretty realistic. The play's graphic violence suddenly seemed appropriate. So did *Lear's* suggestion that gods either don't exist or, if they do, they like to torture humans. Critic [Jan Kott](#) famously compared *Lear* to [Samuel Beckett's](#) twentieth century [Existentialist](#) plays, *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*. Productions of *Lear* multiplied, and it's been riding a high tide of popularity ever since.

Why Should I Care?

Coming soon!