



***“Our Mere Defects Prove Our Commodities”*: King Lear as a Disability Narrative**

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:
AP English Literature and Composition
IB English A1 HL

Keywords: Literature, English, analysis, AP, IB, Shakespeare, Disability Studies, critical literary theory, Reader Response theory

Teaching Standards: See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: In this unit designed for an upper-level English literature class, students will analyze both *King Lear* by William Shakespeare and *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley using critical theories. Students will first engage in Reader Response theory to help their basic comprehension and interpretation of the works, and then the teacher will guide students through a Disability Studies perspective as applied to the texts. The unit models the type of analysis that can be performed on the texts and includes a number of successful strategies for high student engagement, including colormarking, annotations, small group discussion and Socratic seminar. The unit also provides background on Disability Studies and how to introduce it into your classroom, why it can be a useful critical theory to help students bring literature into the real world, a constant admonition for all English teachers. This unit meets or exceeds standards for AP, IB, and Common Core standards.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year in to 50 students in AP English Literature and Composition.

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“Our Mere Defects Prove Our Commodities”: *King Lear* as a Disability Narrative

Tiffany DiMatteo

Introduction

One can only teach *Macbeth* so many times in a row. While I adore the Scottish play and feel confident discussing the significance of ambition, power, gender roles, and fate with my students, I needed to broaden my Shakespeare repertoire (it is true that in six years of teaching I had taught three of the Bard’s plays and *Macbeth* was my constant go-to). In the summer of 2010, I sat down with a short stack of plays to read with the goal of working a new one into the curriculum. Within a few minutes, I was certain *King Lear* was the one. Truth, deception, choices, punishment, filial duty, love, rage, legitimacy—and that was just the first scene! When gathering background notes for the play, I came across a review of *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley, the novel which reframes *Lear* from one daughter’s point of view and transports the action to an Iowa farm in 1979. Thus the creation of an instant unit: students will read a modern prose novel at home, a Shakespearean drama in class, and analyze how they compare.

One of my attractions to *Macbeth* was the title character’s transformation throughout the play and the irony of the villain as the protagonist. Students who haven’t read *King Lear* but have heard of it may know it as the tragedy of the father who is wronged by two evil, ungrateful daughters. Once they read the play they understand that Lear is not a villain, but he is not an innocent bystander tortured by fate, either. I appreciate the verisimilitude that Shakespeare presents: Lear, an old man, wants everything to go his way, and he wants everyone to love him for it, too. I noted with interest that Goneril demonstrably loses patience with her father and his retinue only after they demonstrate bad manners and she “thought by making this well known unto [Lear]/ To have found a safe redress.”¹ However, rather than remedy the situation, Lear curses that daughter—in fact, disowning her—and travels to the next. Throughout the rising action, each character considers him/herself wronged and escalates, rather than defuses, the situation. The two sisters ultimately make decisions that allow them to be characterized as antagonists, but they themselves are manipulated by the ultimate villain, Edmund, who is arguably a victim himself of his father’s poor choices.

When teaching this unit, I have previously focused on interpreting the texts from the perspectives of Reader Response criticism and Feminist theory. It never occurred to me to examine them from the perspective of Disability Studies, primarily because I was unfamiliar with the field. Now, however, I cannot imagine the unit without it. Disability Studies adds a richness, depth, and authenticity to the study of literature than can

sometimes be lacking. Even in texts that are over four hundred years old or in the setting of a rural land dispute, there are universal experiences and themes that can connect a modern reader and have an impact, and that becomes more real when placed within the context of Disability Studies. Additionally, the myriad ways that disability is presented in these two texts encourage the reader to recognize the humanity in all of the characters, including the antagonists.

Curricular Context and Rationale

As a teacher for both the Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, I know that practically all of these students are college-bound and are voluntarily enrolling in an academically challenging and rigorous course that will prepare them for higher education. Additionally, both programs require that students move beyond comprehension and be able to interpret and analyze rhetorical and thematic elements of writing, and to be able to examine a text from a personal point of view as well as through the lens of critical theory. This unit, which pairs texts relative in plot and theme but disparate in cultural context, allows for a meaningful application of the course requirements for both the AP and IB programs.

AP English Literature and Composition is traditionally taught in the twelfth grade and is designed for students to think critically about literature and develop analytical skills equivalent to a college literature course. This is my sixth year of teaching the course and I am currently teaching my third incarnation of the syllabus. AP students are generally high-achieving, goal-oriented students who are accustomed to being successful at school. The College Board must approve the syllabus of the course, and students are expected to take the AP exam in May; a successful score is one that will gain college credit, typically a 4 or 5 (on a 5 point scale). The exam incorporates a multiple choice section with several fiction-based passages and questions that I have categorized as comprehension, interpretation, analysis, and technical or literary vocabulary. Students also write three essays in two hours; two essays are based on unseen literary passages chosen by the College Board and the third essay is an open-ended question that they will answer and support based on a text read during that year. *King Lear* has been referenced in the third question sixteen times in the exam's history, the most of any Shakespeare play.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program takes place during eleventh and twelfth grades. It is a rigorous curriculum that takes a more holistic approach to education; in addition to core academic classes, IB students are required to take Theory of Knowledge, a course designed to evaluate learning processes and illustrate connections amongst disciplines. IB students must also complete an Extended Essay of four thousand words and community service hours in the categories of creativity, action, and service (CAS). In English A1 HL (IB-speak for 12th grade literature, read in English), students are required to examine multiple genres of literature from different cultures, and each work is studied in-depth for a number of weeks. Choosing particularly rich texts that can

be critiqued from a variety of stances is an important element. In May, IB students take an essay-based exam and received a score of 0-7; when combined with their other IB scores, they may receive an IB diploma or certificates for completed courses. The type of critical thinking and analysis that is embedded in this unit would be beneficial to any IB syllabus.

The School

Myers Park is a large urban school in Charlotte, North Carolina; nearly 3000 students come onto our sprawling college-style campus every day. The student population is incredibly diverse. The school is located amongst some of the most expensive real estate that the area has to offer, yet 35% of our population is on free/reduced lunch. We house successful AP and IB programs as a neighborhood school, and have been recognized as one of the top 100 public high schools in America for several years in a row.

Objectives

Students sometimes struggle with what our purpose is in an upper-level literature class. Some walk into the class, expecting it to be straightforward and undemanding: they already know how to read and write. Anything that complicates that relationship is unnecessary. Why does the structure of the poem matter? What meaning can there be beyond the resolution of the plot's conflict? If we cannot know whether the author intended to include symbolism, how can it be important? Alternatively, some students who find the lack of a single correct "answer" consider the class to be difficult—also unnecessarily so. The process of recognizing one's own point of view as it reflects an understanding of a text can be complicated, but it is what develops strong readers who are critically aware of multiple contextualities—those that emanate from the literature and from the reader's place in the world. What I hope students will glean from this unit is a deeper understanding of how to read a text, why analysis is important, and how a piece of literature can provide context and relevance to history, culture, and perspective.

By the end of this six week long unit on an A/B day schedule, students will have read "The Blind Man" by D.H. Lawrence, *King Lear* by William Shakespeare and *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley in addition to two other short articles that will help them contextualize a new perspective: that of Disability Studies. Students will understand critical plot points and will interpret how structure, characterization, tone, and point of view create meaning. Most importantly, students will have analyzed the texts from multiple theoretical standpoints. Students will understand the metaphorical presentation of disability that has traditionally been applied to literature and how the relatively new field of disability studies can influence that interpretation and offer a different perspective—one that recognizes the social constructs that surround an author, a piece of literature, and the perception and treatment of disability (see Background for more information on Disability Studies).

Students will not only read the texts, they will annotate and colormark; colormarking has been proven to be an effective method for engaging and developing close reading for a multitude of learning types. Students will write in a reader's response journal which will demonstrate the ability to choose meaningful lines relative to literary techniques and devices and trace their personal development as a critic of the text. They will also participate in class discussions, both informal and formal. These will be structured so that students can offer interpretations, respond and question each other in small and large group settings, and show the ability to listen, analyze, and relate to both peers and text respectfully. Students will also write a formal essay choosing a theoretical perspective and interpreting a character from that lens. Finally, they will carry this knowledge through the year and apply it on the AP or IB exam, which will hopefully demonstrate mastery of reading, interpretation, and analysis. My personal goal is that it stays with them and provides a useful basis for high-level thinking and analysis in college and beyond. I anticipate this will be a difficult but valuable exercise for my students.

Literary and Critical Background Information

King Lear

Teaching Shakespeare in high school is so prevalent it could be written into an English teacher's employment contract. However, *King Lear* is not one of the most popular texts; as noted in *Shakespearean Tragedies*, "[It] is certainly the least popular of the famous four...It is also the least often presented on the stage, and the least successful there."² Literary critic Harold Bloom regrets each version he has seen on stage, and Charles Lamb claimed in 1812 that "Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage."³ What makes it so unpopular and so unsuccessful? Its level of tragedy is so constant and so domestic in nature—betrayal by one's family and stubborn pride in not recognizing the truth—that it makes the audience uncomfortable. Then there is Edgar's false portrayal of madness, Lear's questionable or even purposeful descent into madness, and the violent gouging of Gloucester's eyes—how does a modern audience cope with those?

A.C. Bradley argues, "*King Lear* seems to me Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but it seems to me *not* his best play." A play is, at its root, entertainment. While *Lear* is powerful and stunning in its scope and depiction of very human behavior—both positive and negative—it is hard to argue it is entertaining, or even cathartic. Shakespeare's tragedies are well-known for their high body counts at the end, but there is usually some level of vindication. Hamlet dies, but so does Claudius. Macbeth is righteously killed by Macduff. Othello kills Desdemona but then realizes his error and kills himself. In the end of *King Lear*, almost a dozen characters are dead and Kent is likely walking off stage to commit suicide.⁴ It is also hard to feel good about all the death when Lear does not recognize that Kent and Caius are one and the same and he dies clutching his dead daughter, trying to see whether she breathes: "Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her

lips, Look there, look there.”⁵ Sight and seeing are significant themes in the text, and the use of the word “look” four times in two lines is powerfully attempting to direct the audience’s attention as Lear himself dies. The play is powerful, meaningful, and significant, but hard to watch.

Despite the burden of “looking” at the play, *King Lear* is frequently referenced on the AP exam and covers such a breadth of themes and motifs that I am hoping it is taught more frequently, perhaps because of this curriculum unit. Additionally, I have found great success in AP with my students by pairing a play with a modern interpretation. This unit provides the time for *Lear* to be read aloud in class while concurrently reading *A Thousand Acres* at home, and then discussing the two works in direct comparison at specific points along the way.

A Thousand Acres

This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Jane Smiley, published in 1991, provides a fascinating alternative view of the *King Lear* plot. Smiley is clever in her appropriation: the major characters share letters, but not names (Lear becomes Larry, Goneril is Ginny, Regan is Rose, Cordelia is Caroline, Kent is Ken) and the kingdom of ancient Britain is now a thousand acre farm on the verge of incorporation in 1979 Iowa. The story comes from Ginny’s point of view; the eldest of three daughters to the hard and stoic Larry who has gained significant land, and therefore power, in his lifetime. I find it important to remind the students—and myself—that the text is an interpretation in addition to a modernization. *King Lear* is clearly the inspiration, but there are significant divergences.

In addition to modernization and interpretation, Smiley presents the reader with a different form: novel as opposed to drama. Theatre has the benefit of immediately drawing in an audience and propelling action forth so quickly that there is not time to stop and ask, “Hey, wait a minute. Why does Lear react so strongly when Goneril asks him to make his posse a little smaller? He disowns her and curses her out for that?” In the novel, there is the expectation of both time and space, so the author must provide more background and explanation than is required by the play. The action of the play begins in medias res and takes place over a few months, at most; the audience hurtles toward a terrible but seemingly inevitable conclusion. Smiley’s novel moves back and forth in time, going back at least three generations and providing the reader with substantially more background for a complicated relationship between father and daughters than just dividing up land; the present-day plot takes over a year and the final section of the novel takes place several years later. The plot must be adjusted in some ways to provide more time for the tensions to build and the characters to react, providing a sense of verisimilitude.

In previous iterations of this unit, students have focused on the plot, characterization, and meaning offered by Shakespeare and examined how Smiley interprets and presents

them in a modern context. We have discussed the successes and difficulties of such an adaptation, particularly as they relate to believability and meaning. For example, Smiley deals with the challenge of the relationship between father and his two troublesome daughters in a markedly modern way: In *A Thousand Acres*, Rose and Ginny were sexually abused by their father which explains their conflicted feelings about him. Rose specifies the relationship by saying, “He didn’t rape me, Ginny. He seduced me...he said that I was special. He said that he loved me.”⁶ This is a particularly disturbing revelation for the reader and for Ginny, who had repressed the memory so thoroughly that she did not remember the abuse until she makes up her childhood bed and it comes back to her in a rush of emotional and physical revulsion.⁷ Unfortunately, this moment is both horrible and believable to modern students. While there is no intimation of this whatsoever in *King Lear*, Sigmund Freud and other critics have raised the specter of physical or sexual desire between father and daughters in Shakespeare’s play, which may (or may not) have influenced Smiley’s reasoning.⁸

Critical Theory: Reader Response

Most students are familiar with Reader Response theory even if they can’t name it, as it has become the dominant lens through which high school students interpret literature; indeed, it is the requisite theory for both the AP and IB programs because students must connect to the text and provide their own analysis, without such secondary sources as Cliff Notes or Spark Notes. This is a valuable theory as a method of introduction to critical perspectives for multiple reasons. First, it values what the student thinks about the text. Second, students frequently want to know the “right answer” and this approach eliminates (or at least reduces) the focus on right versus wrong. Finally, the theory stresses relationships: between text and reader, and between the community created by the readers themselves. There is, however, a real fear that this theory embodies all of the overly subjective attitudes toward literary analysis. One may argue that “since our responses to literary texts are particularly and uniquely ours, then what is it that anyone, teacher or classmate, could offer that would either enrich or contradict them?”⁹ This criticism is a perfect example of why students must be explicitly aware that they are learning a critical literary theory, which is simply one way of interpreting a text, and not just sharing their feelings. While individual experiences affect the way we independently read a text, the text is what unites us and provides an objective starting point for analysis.

My favorite way of explaining Reader Response is that as long as the student provides text support for an opinion, it’s not wrong. While a bit simplistic, it is a good introduction and encourages students to value their own thoughts regarding a text, but it also gives them responsibility. They must be thoughtful about their responses, be able to explain their points of view and how it connects to the text, and listen critically to their classmates explain their interpretations and find connections and divergences, and to think about how and why these occur. This method also asks students to be metacognitive; they need to consider how their own life experiences influence how they

interpret the text. Finally, students engaged in this theory need to think of themselves as a community; their individual responses are important, but the group discussion creates another genuine response to the text that can bring to light different elements or issues.

These texts easily lend themselves to this kind of interpretation—the plots are so powerful that the reader cannot help but respond. Frequently students will walk in to class after having read a chapter of *A Thousand Acres*, shaking their heads, saying, “That was crazy!” or “What is WRONG with [insert character here]?!?” (I have actually been shouted at down the length of the hallway: “We are going to talk about the book, right?”) When reading *Lear* in class, they will look up with shocked or indignant expressions on behalf of the characters. I share these moments because they are important reminders that students can and will engage with texts that encourage it, and these do (as a sidenote, Shakespeare’s plots tend to get a positive reaction from all levels of students when properly scaffolded). This year’s students in particular seem to be open to reacting to the text but need help identifying interpretation and analysis strategies. Making visible the work of Reader Response criticism is a strong step in that direction.

Critical Theory: Disability Studies

The reality of disability has been staring at me through my background notes on *King Lear*; I just have not stared back. In my original notes for introducing the play to my students, I have written: “While dates vary amongst sources, the play was not performed between 1788 and 1820—including an outright ban on productions between 1810 and 1820. Why? King George III and his madness invited parallels to Lear’s, and therefore the play was considered in bad taste.”¹⁰ “The Madness of King George” is a well-known historical footnote, and there have been many attempts to diagnose him two hundred years post-mortem; as recently as 2013, a new diagnosis of bipolar disorder is based on an analysis of the King’s handwritten letters and the significant increase in verbiage when he was known to have an episode of illness.¹¹

I have struggled mightily with how to frame this both for myself in my classroom and for this unit. While I am entirely supportive of the framework of Disability Studies as “an examination of disability as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon” and “not medicine, rehabilitation, special education, or...therapy,” I cannot seem to shake the concept of acknowledging illness in medical terms.¹² I can appreciate neurodiversity but still feel compelled to name what is presented in the text; this is a fault I with which I continue to struggle. My curiosity found a multitude of resources that describe and diagnose Lear, including “a new diagnosis according to the modern diagnostic criteria, namely bipolar I disorder.”¹³ However, after reading and thinking about this diagnosis, I finally feel I can let go of this desire. Based on this most recent analysis of the text from a disability studies perspective, I stand behind the interpretation that Lear creates his madness, and this is detailed in the Teaching Strategies section below.

Teaching Strategies and Classroom Activities

First and foremost, my duty as an AP Literature teacher is to teach students analysis skills that can be applied to almost any field of study. The College Board requires that I challenge the students with interesting and complex texts that provide ample opportunity to interpret and analyze literary elements; students develop and hone those skills via active reading strategies, class discussion and seminar, and written responses. This unit provides excellent opportunities for all of those activities, and most of this section demonstrates the perspective from which I interpret and analyze and how I model this for my students.

This unit begins with a study of “The Blind Man” by D.H. Lawrence. While the plot is rather minimal, the characterization, mood, and meaning that are embedded in the text make this a strong introductory piece for this unit. The short story’s title character is injured in World War I; he lives an isolated and overall happy life with his pregnant wife when his wife’s childhood friend comes to visit. The title alone connects the text to Disability Studies, and blindness is important in both *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* symbolically but also as a way of life. In addition to blindness, the themes of family, intimacy, trust and judgment are implicit connections amongst the texts that can certainly be made explicit to strengthen their ties.

As a short story, it offers the opportunity to be read from multiple perspectives. The students’ initial assignment is to read the story with annotations for characterization and mood, paying attention to shifts and dichotomies. For example, the second paragraph establishes that “They were newly and remotely happy. He did not even regret the loss of his sight in these times of dark, palpable joy.”¹⁴ Note the foreshadowing in the reference to “dark” joy—is this merely a description of the blind man’s lack of sight or is it preparing the reader for the dramatic shift that is to come? Two paragraphs later the narrator reveals that “sometimes he had devastating fits of depression, which seemed to lay waste his whole being. It was worse than depression—a black misery, when his own life was a torture to him, and when his presence was unbearable to his wife.”¹⁵ In an initial discussion with students, I would ask them to examine the relationship that is being presented to the audience: what brings joy? What reveals the misery? How are they connected and what does this say about the relationship between husband and wife?

This quote is also a good potential starting point for examining the story from the perspective of Disability Studies. I would point out the author’s language: “He did not even regret the loss of his sight in these times of dark, palpable joy” (emphasis added). The use of the word “even” invites us to question its purpose: is the narrator positing that it is unbelievable that Maurice does not miss the ability to see? Perhaps—yet he is happy, even “serene.” This doubt is reiterated in the lines, “He was totally blind. Yet they had been very happy” (emphasis added).¹⁶ The presence of these qualifiers is

interesting and may reveal the author's knowledge of his audience rather than the narrator's disbelief. Who of the sighted among us would not question the ability to be blind yet happy?

Students will begin the unit with having read and annotated "The Blind Man" but with clear directions NOT to colormark (I usually introduce this technique early in the year and many students take to it and want to apply it to everything). At the beginning of the next class period, students will complete an entry/exit activity called 3/2/1: three characterizations (one each for Bertie, Maurice, and Isabel), two questions, and one comment on meaning or significance. We begin the class by discussing their reactions and characterizations of Bertie, Maurice, and Isabel, and then I hear some of their questions, which usually go unanswered for now. After 15-20 minutes, I would move on to their first critical reading: "He's Blind for a Reason, You Know." This short chapter illustrates the literary response to blindness, typically framing it as narrative prosthesis. It is, however, accessible to students and references Oedipus Rex—reminding students that they have encountered a famous blind character before. After reading the chapter, students would do a short journal entry about how the article influenced their thinking on the text: what does Maurice's blindness mean?

This would lead to a short discussion and some guided discussion based on finding some of the themes in the text, like blindness/darkness, happiness, fear/depression/sadness, intimacy/possession, and isolation/solitude. The last two are particularly interesting as different facets of the same concept. If you are alone, are you necessarily isolated? Or does/can solitude provide comfort? Likewise, can the intimacy that Maurice and Isabel share be framed as possession? If so, who possesses whom? And how does Bertie fit into that relationship? These are fascinating questions that can be more easily addressed after an intense colormarking session in which students visually identify these themes and see where they appear, how often, and whether there is overlap. The colormarking activity can take some time; I usually assign it for homework, but it could be completed in class as a small group activity.

The next piece is to read and respond to a short piece from Syracuse University: "What Is Disability Studies?" Students read the article and write a short journal response about their reaction to the field of Disability Studies, how any of the information connects to Lawrence's story, and whether it affects their interpretation of Maurice's blindness in connection to the Foster chapter. I found this one page description from The Center on Human Policy, Law, and Disability Studies and thought it was the perfect amount of information to introduce a radically new perspective to my students. It makes the effort to describe "disability as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon" and "not a characteristic that exists in the person or a problem that must be 'fixed' or 'cured.'" Indeed, it introduces the concept that those with disabilities are similar to other minority groups and it refers to "people first language, convey[ing] the idea that having a disability is secondary to a person's identity as a human being." This last piece of information is

immediately applicable to the short story because it is titled “The Blind Man”—the opposite of people-first language. This led to interesting conversations about their interpretations of the title and how it might be different if it were called “Maurice” or “The Man Who Was Blind.” One student even brought up the nuance of potentially titling it “The Man Who Was Blinded” because Maurice was not born blind; he lost his sight while fighting in World War I and his eyes are completely gone, leaving him with a substantial scar over his eye sockets.

After reading “The Blind Man” and introducing the idea of a Disability Studies point of view, we begin our paired study of Shakespeare and Smiley. Students are assigned a section of Smiley’s novel, broken into six “books,” due intermittently over the course of five weeks. As students read the novel at home, we will be reading *King Lear* aloud in class and discussing the two works in conjunction at certain points. The students are assigned six themes to colormark as we read the play: age, madness, “nothing,” sight and appearances, nature (weather and human), and fortune or fate. The point of this is to keep students active and engaged while reading in class and to make visible the themes and motifs that Shakespeare embedded in the text. While reading *A Thousand Acres*, students are encouraged to annotate and colormark, but their work is assessed via written journal responses that each cover a different topic (see Materials for Classroom Use). Students are made aware that their responses in both journals and class discussion are based on Reader Response theory in a brief lecture at the beginning of the unit. Students are also expected to regularly participate in informal and formal classroom discussions about the texts, primarily *King Lear*. The next few pages will highlight the type of analysis that can be teacher-modeled as a way of embedding the Disability Studies analysis.

The concept of madness is presented in two characters: King Lear and Edgar, son of Gloucester. Edgar is an interesting counterpoint to Lear because he is easier to define but he also complicates the Lear narrative. Edmund so fully manipulates his father, Gloucester, and his brother, Edgar, that Gloucester forces his “legitimate” son to run for his life. The entirety of Act II, scene 3 reveals Edgar in a forest acknowledging his predicament: he is a wanted man with no way out. In order to protect himself, Edgar takes on the disguise of one of the country’s “Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,/ Strike in their numbed and mortified bare arms/ Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary...Poor Turlygod, Poor Tom,/ That’s something yet: Edgar I nothing am.”¹⁷ When the audience next sees Edgar, he is fully immersed in the character of Tom, hiding in a hovel on the night of the storm. Tom is besieged by devils and can be a terrifying, pathetic character.

Knowing what we do about Edgar, how can we use that to interpret Lear’s madness? In other words, how does one name what is presented in the text? I asked students to consider three possibilities in light of the disability studies perspective: Lear is not mad and/or he chooses madness, and Lear is a victim of ageism.

Lear is not mad—this first argument is based on text in which Lear asks not to go mad, he threatens to go mad, and he announces his madness. In these examples, he sounds mad on the surface, but a contextual analysis demonstrates his sound reasoning. In spite of all of the base assumptions about the play, it does not take a particularly erudite reader to consider Lear’s madness as much a ruse as Edgar’s and based on an attempted manipulation of emotion in the given situation.

The first time Lear uses the word “mad” is at the very end of Act I, after he has unceremoniously left Goneril’s house because his knights had made her house a brothel. He is so offended by her lack of deference that he disowns her (“Yet have I left a daughter”¹⁸) and sets off for Regan’s house. In Act I, scene 5, the Fool is trying to distract Lear and Lear is not fully responsive; in between his answers to the Fool, he also says, “I did her wrong” and “To take’t again perforce! Monster ingratitude!”¹⁹ These are perfectly understandable: Lear is not able to be distracted because of the seriousness of his situation. He thinks of his daughter Cordelia and how her “most small fault” seemed “ugly” at first but is now minor in light of Goneril’s terrible disloyalty (this is also arguable, but there’s only so much I can cover). The second outburst is the result of his mind crafting a plan to retake his power because of Goneril’s “ingratitude.” Who among us has not had a conversation where we only participated on the surface while our thoughts were elsewhere?

This very human display, with which so many can relate, causes Lear to say, “O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!/ Keep me in temper, I would not be mad!”²⁰ This is his first use of the word, and the context should give us pause. Why is Lear fearing madness now? Perhaps what Lear thinks of as madness is what the audience thinks of as humanity. Lear has been a king and therefore like a god for most of eighty years. To be human is to be base—as Edgar tells us, to be mad is “to take the basest and most poorest shape/ in contempt of man.” Through this thinking, the loss of Lear’s authority and therefore his divinity makes him a lowly human, and a lowly human is a madman. Is this too reductive? Perhaps. But I would also caution that this is Lear, who has demonstrated a tendency to jump to conclusions; according to Goneril, “the best and soundest of his time hath been but rash.”²¹

Lear threatens and announces his madness in Act II, scene 4, as he is clearly attempting to manipulate the scene for sympathy. Upon arriving at Gloucester’s castle, he angrily demands to speak with Regan immediately, despite the fact that it may be 4 or 5 o’clock in the morning. When she arrives, Lear’s anger dissipates and he takes an entirely different tone because he intends to play on Regan’s sympathy: “Beloved Regan,/ Thy sister’s naught. O Regan, she hath tied/ Sharp-toothed unkindness like a vulture here. I can scarce speak to thee. Thou’lt not believe/ With how depraved a quality—O Regan!” All of the vitriol he had is gone as he now sells his pain and anguish to his daughter. Even as Regan fights back and speaks more aggressively than Goneril

ever did, Lear maintains his laser focus of hate on Goneril while warning Regan to not put herself in a similar position:

No, Regan, thou shalt never have my curse.
Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give
Thee o'er to harshness... Thou better know'st
The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.
Thy half o'th' kingdom hast thou not forgot,
Wherein I thee endowed.²²

He reminds Regan that she owes her current position of power and status to her dear old dad and that she should not forget that. However, when Goneril arrives and Regan clasps her by the hand, Lear realizes that he has misread the situation. Rather than return with Goneril to her home, he warns, "I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad." The moment goes even further downhill as the daughters proclaim Lear has no need for knights and servants. Lear invokes the gods as he attempts to curse his daughters but his anger overwhelms him: "I will have such revenges on you both/ That all the world shall—I will do such things—/ What they are yet, I know not; but they shall be/ The terrors of the earth." He ends this speech with "O Fool, I shall go mad!" as he heads into the storm that has been brewing.²³

This scene is a critical tie between the standard interpretation of *King Lear* (his daughters drive him mad) and this interpretation based on a closer reading of the text and the concept of madness as tool, not a weakness. It is important to remember Lear's use of madness as a strategy that has backfired on him as the reader enters Act III when his madness seems to take hold of him. For example, when Kent asks Lear to enter the inadequate shelter he has found, Lear says,

Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm
Invades us to the skin. So 'tis to thee,
But where the greater malady is fixed
The lesser is scarce felt. Thou'st shun a bear;
But if thy flight lay toward the roaring sea,
Thou'dst meet the bear i'th' mouth. When the mind's free,
The body's delicate. The tempest in my mind
Doth from my sense take all feeling else
Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude...²⁴

Despite the terrible storm outside, "the greater malady" is his familial turmoil and "the lesser" storm is "scarce felt" in its presence. I have posed Lear's conundrum to my students in different terms: You are being chased by a bear. It chases you to the edge of a cliff. You have two choices: jump off of the cliff to certain death or turn and fight the bear for a chance at survival. This makes a great warm-up discussion or writing prompt for the class period when this will scene will be read; it gives the students a better perspective for what Lear is feeling. It also connects back to Lear's frame of mind in Act

I, scene 4, the tension in his mind is what makes him a human and relatable character despite his flaws.

The idea that Lear's madness is deliberate plays out to the very end. In his final moments of the play, Lear claims to see Cordelia breathing, despite the fact that he watched her be hanged and he killed her executioner. "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,/ And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,/ Never, never, never, never...Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips,/ Look there, look there." Is Lear convincing himself that he is seeing what he wants to see? He wants Cordelia to be alive and so he creates a reality in which she is alive and he dies. Lear is not mad because he wants to believe his daughter is alive—he is a parent displaying his humanity.

This interpretation of Lear is equally applicable to Larry in *A Thousand Acres*—to a point. Based on all of Ginny's characterization of Larry as a hard-working man who drinks too much and holds a grudge, it is not hard to believe that he portrays himself as a victim of his daughters' ambition in order to gain sympathy. The night of the storm, Larry takes his son-in-law's truck. When Larry has been retrieved by Ty, Ginny's husband, Larry wants to confront his daughters. "Rose took my hand and squeezed it, as she had often done when we were kids, and in trouble, waiting for punishment. Daddy said, resentfully, 'That's right. Hold hands.'" Larry interprets his daughters' signal of unity and protection as stand against him and he lets them know it. He curses at them and infuriates them, then says, "Don't you make me out to be crazy! I know your game! The next step is the county home, with that game."²⁵ Larry goes into the storm and spends a week with his friend Harold Clark; all the while there are rumors spreading that his daughters sent him into the storm and they have stolen his farm away from him.

The next time they are all together is at the church potluck dinner; Harold pleads with Ginny to bring Rose and patch things up with their father. Larry shows up "transformed...his hair all standing up on end."²⁶ Ginny does as she is expected and sits next to her father but when she tries to speak to him, he interrupts her and says, "Their children put them there. And the conditions are terrible."²⁷ Rose immediately calls his actions a "ploy" and after the outburst in which it is revealed that Harold's attempts to smooth things over were just a ruse to publically humiliate the girls and as a terrible scene is unfolding, Ginny reveals that "Daddy shifted his chair and looked straight at me. A look of sly righteousness spread over his face."²⁸ While Larry's actions in this scene—his appearance, the repetition, and seeming disconnected from reality—all make him seem to be senile or mad, Ginny shows that it is in fact an act for the public, demonstrating the connection between interpreting Larry and Lear.

The court scene in Book Five of *A Thousand Acres* makes this argument a bit harder, but not impossible. Larry and Caroline are suing Ginny and Rose to get the farm back. Despite Caroline and Frank's perfect exteriors, Larry "looked like a goner" to Ginny and when he is on the stand, his first response doesn't address the question: "By God, they'll

starve there. The land won't produce for the likes of them. Caroline! It'll gag 'em!" A moment later he cries, "Caroline! Caroline's dead. Where is she? I think those sisters stole the body and buried her already."²⁹ As he says this, Caroline rushes to his side. This scene is an interesting parallel to Act III, scene 6, in which Lear puts his daughters on trial in absentia. While that mock trial has no conclusion, Larry loses the suit because the judge finds no cause to reverse the incorporation. It is possible that Larry has dementia or Alzheimer's—this idea has been introduced earlier in the text even though there is no medical diagnosis.³⁰ However, I ask my students whether it is also possible that Larry is again trying to manipulate the situation but he simply fails to persuade the judge. Near the end of Larry's testimony, "Rose lean[s] over to [Ginny] and says, "Ten to one, this is an act."³¹ There is the church potluck as evidence that he has the wherewithal to play on people's sympathies, and maybe even on their perceptions of age and emotions. He has certainly won the court of public opinion. Raising the question of Larry's mental abilities is an excellent discussion question that requires the students to engage the text closely for evidence. After each section of Smiley's novel, students engage in small group discussions that illuminate important themes in the text and make connections up to our progress in Shakespeare. A sample set of discussion questions is included in the Appendix. Additionally, a final analysis activity of the novel is a Socratic seminar, or whole class discussion, of the works in communion with each other. My questions for a formal assessment activity are included, as well.

An alternative Disability Studies perspective is that King Lear is a victim of ageism. Age discrimination is an integral part of Disability Studies and could be a useful application to this unit. Prior to looking for evidence, I would show students the short video, "Ageism," available on Youtube. Only six minutes long, it is a good primer on the background and prevalence of age discrimination. Students might begin class with a warm-up prompt: What is age discrimination? How are young and old people both potential victims of ageism? After sharing responses, students will watch the video and then examine the texts for the possibility that neither Lear nor Larry is mad, but rather victims of ageism.

There is evidence of age discrimination throughout Shakespeare's text, beginning in Act I, scene 1. First, there is the importance of the director's perspective as the actor playing Lear must announce his intentions: "[T]is our fast intent/ To shake all cares and business from our age,/ Conferring them on younger strengths, while we/ Unburthened crawl toward death."³² How does this sound? Sad? Mocking? Emotionless? Has Lear internalized the idea that he is no longer capable of ruling? Is he being forced out of power? This line can set the tone for the rest of the scene, especially as Lear prepares to test his children's love for him. However, at the end of the scene, Regan and Goneril discuss the shocking separation of Lear and Cordelia. While his personality contributes, he is acting differently as he ages: "You see how full of changes his age is;" "'Tis the infirmity of his age;" "the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them."³³ The idea that his age makes him incapable is brought up again in Act I, scene 3,

as Goneril expresses her displeasure at the behavior of her father and his retinue while they live with her: "Idle old man,/ That still would manage those authorities/ That he hath given away. Now by my life,/ Old fools are babes again."³⁴ Goneril clearly expresses ageism by proclaiming her father should be cared for like a child and it is silly of him to expect to maintain his power despite his advancing years.

Regan is even more forthright in her discrimination. In Act II, scene 4, she verbally assaults Lear: "O sir, you are old,/ Nature in you stands on the very verge/ Of his confine. You should be ruled, and led/ By some discretion that discerns your state/ Better than you yourself." She goes on to say, "I pray you, father, being weak, seem so" and "For those that mingle reason with your passion/ Must be content to think you old."³⁵ This forces Lear to justify his existence, as seen in the speech, "O reason not the need!" However, this in itself is a terribly human moment in which Lear must actually confront his daughters' disgust for him due to his age; he is believed to no longer be useful or capable of making decisions for himself. Once Lear begins to "go mad," that compounds the age discrimination. His feelings and words are dismissed, even from his closest follower, Kent; when Gloucester brings Lear and Kent to a farmhouse, Kent says, "All the power of his wits have given way to his impatience" and "trouble him not; his wits are gone."³⁶ Throughout the rest of the play, Lear is often referred to as "old man," not as much by his title or his name.

In *A Thousand Acres*, Larry may also be a victim of ageism. However, due to the difference in form, the attitude toward Larry is harder to define than in the novel than it is in Shakespeare's tragedy. Larry is presented as strong and authoritative from the beginning, but after he initiates the incorporation of the farm, signing over his land and his power, he is weakened. As Ginny drives Rose home from the doctor, Larry is staring out of his window at Ginny's husband Ty, working in the fields. Rose says, "This is what his retirement is going to be, him eyeballing Pete or Ty, second-guessing whatever they do. You didn't think he was going to go fishing, did you? Or move to Florida?"³⁷ This sets up the expectation that there are appropriate and inappropriate actions once one is retired, and Larry is not conforming to their ideas of what is acceptable behavior. The night of the storm, after Larry's outburst at his daughters, Rose responds, "This is beyond ridiculous, Daddy. You can't mean those things. This has got to be senility talking or Alzheimer's or something."³⁸ Later in the text, the merging between ageism and madness is harder to discern because of the possibility that it is all a ruse that fails to succeed.

There are other ways of interpreting these texts from a Disability Studies point of view. There is the theme of blindness and sight, which I will leave to others who implement this unit to model for their students. Another character to consider is Edmund. Does Edmund himself have a disability? He appears to be strong, determined, and absolutely bent on the destruction of his father; the downfall of Lear is merely a tragic consequence of his desire to punish Gloucester directly and Edgar indirectly. Could this

be characterized as a mental or emotional disability? A personality disorder? I am not fully endorsing this train of thought, but Professor Alison Hobgood validates the possibility: "One young woman [in class] posit[ed] Edmund's illegitimacy as a very broad form of impairment in the play. She imagined Edmund's blood as deviant, as the invisible physical marker of his stigma and bastardization. Edmund's biology, according to her logic, rendered him less able to function in a society that refused to acknowledge positively his unconventional kinship ties and mottled blood lineage."³⁹ Once students have been exposed to the Disability Studies perspective, they will be open to seeing multiple possibilities in terms of characters, situations, and interpretation. This will help them to be better critical readers of literature and more empathetic human beings.

Bibliography for Teachers

Appleman, Deborah. *Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2009.

This became one of my favorite sources! It is essentially a book-long argument for why high school students should be taught critical theory explicitly, and the author goes into detail for Reader Response, social-class, gender studies, postcolonial, and postmodern theories. There is also a wonderful appendix that provides student-friendly synopses of the theories and myriad activities and applications. Truly worth reading.

Ben-Moshe, Liat. "Infusing Disability in the Curriculum: The Case of Saramago's *Blindness*." *Disability Studies Quarterly*. no. 2 (2006). <http://dsq-sds.org/issue/view/33> (accessed September 25, 2013).

This article provided me with a strong basis for writing and constructing my unit. Ben-Moshe is a sociology professor who examines the novel *Blindness* by Jose Saramago from a Disability Studies point of view; she finds the usage of blindness to be problematic as metaphor. Also see below for Gallagher and Ware responses.

Bloom, Harold. "King Lear." *Invention of the Human*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998.

One of my go-to books for Shakespearean analysis, it challenges the students to read a bit differently. I ask them to read the chapter on Lear as the basis for our final paideia.

Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedies*. New York: Penguin Putnam, 2005.

Excellent background and specific lectures on the four great tragedies, including *King Lear*.

Foster, Thomas C. "Marked for Greatness;" "He's Blind for a Reason, You Know." *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

This informational text has been used by my colleagues for years, and I have used portions to encourage my students to better identify symbols and archetypes in literature. The chapters on blindness and physical difference, however, provide a powerful commentary on how literary studies have treated disability as another symbol and not as a mode of living, independent of literary stereotyping.

Gallagher, Deborah J. "On Using *Blindness* as Metaphor and Difficult Questions: A Response to Ben-Moshe." *Disability Studies Quarterly*. no. 2 (2006). <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/690/867> (accessed September 25, 2013).

Gallagher counters Ben-Moshe's point of view and argues that *Blindness* could very well be interpreted as a positive representation from a Disability Studies point of view. The perspectives in these articles provided me with a much-needed representation of differing opinions.

Gutuleac, Dmitri. "Ageism." Youtube video, 6:32. Posted by ProHelp 2010, April 24, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MqhEEAgyKZk>.

This video appears to be a college-level student project, but it is a well-done overview of age discrimination. The graphics and background music add to the presentation; even though it comes from a sociology perspective, I would encourage using this as a primer on age discrimination prior to a class discussion.

Hobgood, Alison. "Caesar Hath the Falling Sickness: The Legibility of Early Modern Disability in Shakespearean Drama." *Disability Studies Quarterly*. no. 4 (2009). <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/993/1184> (accessed September 25, 2013).

Another excellent source from the *Disability Studies Quarterly*; this article gave me a framework for analyzing Shakespeare through the lens of Disability Studies.

Hobgood, Alison P., and David Houston Wood. "Ethical Staring: Disabling the English Renaissance" and "Shakespearean Disability Pedagogy." *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*. Edited by Alison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

Excellent text that I wish I had more time to explore in-depth, but the two articles I read provided an excellent model for framing Disability Studies with Shakespeare. Immensely useful in helping me feel more comfortable with presenting this to my students.

Mullin, Emily. "Macready's Triumph: The Restoration of King Lear to the British Stage." *Penn History Review*. Vol. 18, issue 1 (fall 2010). <http://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1042&context=phr> (accessed September 29, 2013).

Interesting research on the performance history of *King Lear*; it was either not performed or produced with a happier ending for almost two hundred years—prior to William Charles Macready's production and performance of *Lear* in 1838.

Tate, Trudi. "Corporeal Fantasies: Visible Differences." *Modernism, History, and World War I*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.

There is a short analysis of "The Blind Man" which provided me with quite a bit of support with both literary and disability interpretations. It also gives some background on World War I history and Lawrence's contemporaries.

Truskinovsky, MD, Alexander M. "Literary Psychiatric Observation and Diagnosis through the Ages: *King Lear* Revisited." *Southern Medical Journal*. no. 3 (2002): 343-352. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11902704> (accessed November 7, 2013).

While not the point of this unit, the medical diagnosis of a fictional character based on the presentation of the text was fascinating reading and a good connecting point for students who feel compelled to diagnose Lear's mental state.

Ware, Linda. "The Again Familiar Trope: A Response to "Infusing Disability in the Curriculum: The Case of Saramago's *Blindness*"." *Disability Studies Quarterly*. no. 2 (2006). <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/689/866> (accessed September 25, 2013).

The third article about *Blindness*, this one uses the novel as a basis for examining Disability Studies in context of teacher education at the college level. As a teacher with no exposure to the field from my university education courses, I found this interesting and applicable in a high school context as well.

"What Is Disability Studies?" Syracuse University; The Center on Human Policy, Law, and Disability Studies. <http://disabilitystudies.syr.edu/what/whatis.aspx> (accessed September 27, 2013).

This short description is a nice introduction to Disability Studies: what it is and what it is not. Syracuse University is known for having a well-respected Disability Studies program, and I thought this was easily accessible for my students.

"What Was the Truth About the Madness of George III?." *BBC News*, April 15, 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22122407> (accessed November 11, 2013).

Another short article about diagnosis; I found the methodology—and the continued desire to diagnose—fascinating.

Reading List for Students

Foster, Thomas C. "He's Blind for a Reason, You Know." *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

Lawrence, D.H. "The Blind Man." *Selected Short Stories*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*, Signet Classics. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Smiley, Jane. *A Thousand Acres*. New York: Random House, 1991.

"What Is Disability Studies?" Syracuse University: The Center on Human Policy, Law, and Disability Studies. <http://disabilitystudies.syr.edu/what/whatis.aspx> (accessed September 27, 2013).

Materials for Classroom Use

***A Thousand Acres* journal assignments**

This will be a little bit different than our previous journals. Each section of the book has a particular focus which you will explore in your reader's journal. It is important that your journal be a place where you develop yourself as both a writer and critical student of literature, and this is the rationale for the shift in assignment structure. The type of writing should be neither formal essay nor text message, but revealing of a close reading of the material and your individual response to it. While I expect each entry to relate to the focus, do not feel you must answer every question posed; these are merely starting points for your own thoughts (similarly, "answering" the questions does not constitute a complete entry, either).

Book One

FOCUS ON: Character Development

Assignment: In your reader's journal, comment on the development of the narrator, her father, Rose, and Jess in Book I. Each character entry should be at least a half-page and include one quote you find particularly significant regarding that character's development (total should be about 2 pages). This is not a character summary or portrait; rather, you are analyzing the author's style and writing for ways in which you as a reader come to understand that character. For example, Ginny's first person narration gives us a much

clearer view of her as a character and necessarily colors all other character with her perception of them. Larry Cook, the father, is not much of a character in Book I but he still has a substantial presence—why?

Due dates: A → 10/14; B → 10/15

Book Two

FOCUS ON: Plot Development

Assignment: Offer a two page commentary on the development of the plot in your reader's journal. Again, NOT a summary, but an analysis. What complications arise, and how are they presented as complications? How does an author craft a plot? What elements are necessary, and what is present here? How do we the audience anticipate the plot based on the elements provided by the author? Please refer to pp. 63-73 in the Bedford Lit book for tips on plot development and use that as a guideline in your response. Include at least 4 quotations from the text that support any points you make.

Due dates: A → 10/22; B → 10/23

Book Three

FOCUS ON: Larry Cook

Assignment: In this section, Smiley develops Larry Cook as a true force in the plot and his character development continues not through his actions so much as through the effect he has on other characters and their reactions to him. How are his actions central to the continuation of the novel and further plot development? Explore the character of Larry and how he impacts those around him, particularly his daughters. Your commentary should be 2-3 pages and should include at least 3 quotations that substantially represent an important aspect of the character and/or his effect on others.

Due dates: A → 10/30; B → 10/31

Book Four

FOCUS ON: Gender expectations

Assignment: Write a 2-3 page commentary on the impact of gender roles and societal expectations in this section and throughout the novel thus far. Consider the role of Mrs. Cook—though absent, she is presented through memories by her daughter. What expectations did she live up to and provide for her daughters? What responsibilities do men have within the world of the novel? Provide at least 4 quotations that reveal some element of gender roles and expectations and analyze that in your entry.

Due dates: A → 11/4; B → 11/5

Book Five

FOCUS ON: Comparison to *King Lear*

Assignment: By this time, you should be able to draw clear parallels between this text and Shakespeare's. How are they similar? Where do they diverge, and why? What is your opinion on Smiley's treatment of the story of *King Lear*? Is it fair to call it a modernization, a retelling, or a reimagining, and why? Write 3-4 pages in your reader's journal, commenting on similarities and differences between the two works and analyzing those elements. Provide 5-6 quotes from the text that contribute significantly to your commentary and analysis.

Due Dates: A → 11/8; B → 11/12

Book Six

FOCUS ON: Tragedy

Assignment: Both *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* could be considered tragedies. Based on the presentation of the elements of tragedy according to Aristotle, Shakespeare, and modern interpretations, what are the strongest elements of tragedy that exist in *A Thousand Acres*? Did you have a reaction to the tragedy? If it did not evoke a reaction, why not? Focus your 4 page commentary on the elements and presentation of tragedy throughout the novel (you need not focus exclusively on Book Six), and provide 4 quotations from the text that you analyze in the context of tragic elements.

Due Dates: A → 11/13; B → 11/14

Sample Discussion Questions: *A Thousand Acres*, Book 2 small group discussion

The following questions are for group discussion, meaning they are open to interpretation and analysis. Each response should have text support.

1. Discuss at least three significant differences between the Ericsons and the Cooks, and what those differences reveal about the characters, their families, and the expectations of the community.
2. Explore the passage on pp. 54-55 that outlines Jess's reaction to his mother's death and his ostracism from the family. Characterize his emotion and what the audience learns about him. How could this passage compare to Edmund's soliloquy at the beginning of I.2?
3. Look at the development of Caroline's character in book 2. How does she progress from the woman with the door shut in her face to hanging up on Ginny during their phone conversation?
4. Why does Larry buy the kitchen cabinets? What does the purchase signify?
5. Look closely at the passage on pp. 90-92, when Ginny meets Mary Livingstone at the pool. What does Mary reveal, and what significance does that have?
6. Compare the final sentence of ch. 8 (p. 56) to the end of ch. 17 (128). What foreshadowing is embedded on p. 56, and what is still open to interpretation? Did you expect the event on p. 128?
7. What do you predict will happen from this point? Consider the plot complications introduced in this section.
8. What is the significance of the public perception regarding the incorporation of the Cook farm?

Sample Questions: *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* final discussion

1. Explore the significance of the role of Mrs. Cook from *A Thousand Acres*. Is she important? Why/why not? Provide examples to support your conjecture. Also consider the absence of Queen Lear (ish) from *KL* in your response.
2. What sense of morality is at work in *KL*? In *ATA*? Try to define the moral code or, failing that, explain the lack of morality and its purpose.
3. Is there any sense of justice contained in either text?
4. What is the role of suffering?
5. What would a happy ending in *Lear* look like? How would it change the meaning of the play?
6. Compare and contrast the characters of Edmund and Jess. How are they similar/different? Once the basic plot points are removed, do the characters have the same motivations? Is one more antagonistic/villainous than the other?
7. Explore the theme of nature in both texts; compare/contrast the way it is presented. Does the audience come to the same conclusion about nature from both? Why/why not?
8. How did the perspective of Disability Studies affect your interpretation of the texts?

Implementing Common Core Standards

My district—and state, for that matter—has just transitioned to the Common Core State Standards, which represents a nationwide effort to provide high quality and engaging classroom practices for all students. The English Language Arts Common Core is delineated in five key standards, or strands: reading, writing, speaking and listening, language, and media and technology. The Common Core represents a shift in expectations, because all students are to meet the rigorous standards as outlined.

This unit meets the criteria for a strong Common Core unit in several ways. For example, according to expectations from the Reading strand, students should “read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.” This is an essential part of this curriculum unit because students must be able to not only comprehend the plot of the text, but to engage in class discussions with

both small and large groups, which will be based on providing textual support for their opinions and explaining their interpretations and conclusions. Students will also “assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text,” which is another foundational element of this unit, especially due to the significance of the shift in perspective from one text to the other, which shapes interpretation and analysis.

This unit was also designed for an Advanced Placement class, which must also adhere to rigorous nationwide standards. AP classes are designed to provide a college-level course experience in a high school setting; students are introduced to demanding critical thinking and interpretation skills and are expected to apply them to their literature study. An AP English Literature and Composition course includes expectations like “students reflect on the social and historical values it reflects and embodies. Careful attention to both textual detail and historical context provides a foundation for interpretation.” As stated, this unit will include biographical, social, and cultural background so that students will understand and appreciate the context that plays an important role in the novel. The College Board also notes that “the approach to analyzing and interpreting the material involves students in learning how to make careful observations of textual detail, establish connections among their observations, and draw from those connections a series of inferences leading to an interpretive conclusion about the meaning and value of a piece of writing.” This is a necessary component of the unit because students are expected to note details that occur throughout the text, creating a cumulative interpretation that must be open to change as the novel progresses.

Endnotes

¹ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, I.4.210-211.

² Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedies*, 244.

³ Bloom, *Invention of the Human*, 476.

⁴ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, V.3.323-324.

⁵ *Ibid.*, V.3.312-313.

⁶ Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, 190.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁸ Freud, “The Case of the Three Caskets.”

⁹ Appleman, 32.

¹⁰ Mullin, “Macready’s Triumph,” 10.

¹¹ “What Was the Truth About the Madness of King George?”

¹² “What is Disability Studies?”

¹³ Truskinovsky, “Literary Psychiatric Observation,” 1.

¹⁴ Lawrence, “The Blind Man,” 165.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁷ Shakespeare, II.3.14-20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I.4.261.

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- ¹⁹ Ibid, I.5.25 and 40.
²⁰ Ibid, I.5.46-47.
²¹ Ibid, I.1.297-298.
²² Ibid., II.4. 169-180.
²³ Ibid., II.4.279-285.
²⁴ Ibid., III.4.6-12.
²⁵ Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, pp. 180-181.
²⁶ Ibid., 213.
²⁷ Ibid., 215.
²⁸ Ibid., 219.
²⁹ Ibid., 319-320.
³⁰ Ibid., 181.
³¹ Ibid., 321.
³² Shakespeare, I.1.40-43.
³³ Ibid., I.1.290, 295, 300-302.
³⁴ Ibid., I.3.17-21.
³⁵ Ibid., II.4.145-149.
³⁶ Ibid., III.6.4-5 and 86.
³⁷ Smiley, 67.
³⁸ Ibid., 181.
³⁹ Hobgood, "Shakespearean Disability Pedagogy," 190.