

Aspects of Tragedy: Text overview – *King Lear*

Read our overview which shows how you can consider *King Lear* in relation to the genre of tragedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail. The ideas suggested here provide plenty of scope for debate.



'Was this a face

To be opposed against the warring winds?

To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?

Overview

The full title of Shakespeare's play *The Tragedy of King Lear* firmly establishes the play in the tragic genre, though as is often the case with Shakespeare, the play asks more questions than it answers. Central to the narrative is the eponymous king of eighth century England and father of three daughters. The main plot opens with a most elaborate ceremony with the king describing how he has 'divided in three our kingdom' so that he can 'unburdened crawl towards death' so that 'future strife may be prevented now'. The irony is heavy and the opening is full of tragic implication. Even though the play is set in a pre-Christian world, Lear's abdication, given the political and religious beliefs at the time when Shakespeare was writing (1604-1605), contravenes the natural order. While the division of the kingdom might be an octogenarian's whim, as king by divine right and God's representative on earth, he should not abnegate responsibility, no matter how attractive, and hand control to his daughters. Far from preventing strife, his decision makes it inevitable, not least of all because despite his abdication, Lear continues to see himself as king. His bad judgement is foregrounded in the opening, and is compounded by his excessive pride and vanity.

Lear's hubris is dramatised in his desire to hear his daughters compete, in what is often called the love test, for the largest slice of land by saying which of them 'doth love us most' (though, of course, there is no real competition: he has saved the best bit for Cordelia – what can she say to draw a third 'more opulent' than her sisters). When Cordelia refuses to play the game, his decision to banish and disown her, in favour of Goneril and Regan sets in place the wheel of fire – that which secures not only his personal downfall into madness but also that of his country which is cast into civil war and laid open to invasion from France. In the play, Shakespeare also creates a subplot which runs parallel to the central story. This focuses on the tragic fall of Gloucester. Gloucester's pride, moral weaknesses and misjudgement of his two sons, leaves him vulnerable to the schemes of Edmund, his illegitimate son, whose desire to overturn custom, have his father's recognition, title and lands is laid out in his antagonistic soliloquy where he states 'Well then legitimate Edgar, I must have your land'. Gloucester's terrible physical blinding parallels Lear's descent into madness. The play ends bleakly despite the English victory in the war with France. At the end almost all the major characters are dead: Lear, Gloucester, Cordelia, Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund. There are moments of catharsis (Lear's realisation of Cordelia's worth, Gloucester's understanding that he was blind when he had eyes and Edmund's intention to do some good before he dies) but those moments all come too late. It could be argued that whereas in *Hamlet* 'the rest is silence', in *King Lear*, the rest is nothingness.

Chaos and disorder

'Nothing' is a key word and concept in this play. Cordelia's reply of 'Nothing' to Lear's request to tell him how much she loves him, is the catalyst for his uncontrollable rage. The subplot also begins with a focus on 'nothing'. Edmund's deliberate and manipulative use of 'nothing' when Gloucester asks him what he is reading triggers Gloucester's curiosity and anger. He is led by the nose as an ass to believe that Edmund is reading a letter, apparently written by Edgar, plotting Gloucester's overthrow. What ensues in both cases is a descent into chaos. At the end of the play, England is a land closely resembling an apocalyptic state. In this world, social and political order has collapsed; power is no longer desired and no-one wants to rule the devastated kingdom. It could be argued that Lear delivers his country into chaos when he hands over power to Goneril and Regan. They are given custody but are most unsuitable custodians. As the play moves from order to chaos, nature reflects the human world. At the centre of the play is a tumultuous storm. Nature's violence helps to send Lear into madness. On the heath, the storm rages and Lear seeing the disguised Edgar, pretending to be a mad Bedlam beggar, believes he is a great pillar of justice. The world is turned topsy-turvy. It is a world where fathers are against children, sisters against sisters, brothers against brothers, children against fathers, and poor Tom, the philosopher and 'learned Theban'. It is also a world in which the gods play with human lives like flies to wanton boys, where justice is mocked and where language itself breaks down.

Power and the tragic hero

At the start of the play, Lear is a king and a father. He has land and position which give him economic and political power. Significantly he also has natural personal qualities: an authority which makes Kent loyal and respectful, and a warmth that inspires love in Cordelia and the fool. His personal attributes suggest that there is something of greatness and humanity in him. However, his foolish abdication and division of his land show how fragile his greatness is. Lear thinks he can give away his property and still retain authority and command affection. However, without his title and his land, he is nothing. Kent tries to make this clear when he tells Lear to 'reserve thy state' but Lear is full of pride and arrogance and, like Gloucester, he does not see how this world goes though he has eyes. As a result his tragic fall is inevitable and he suffers a catastrophic reversal of fortune. His suffering when he understands the true natures of his daughters, his subsequent descent into madness, seen in his wanderings during the 'tyranny of the open night' and his ultimate death, are hallmarks of a tragic hero. He is also a tragic hero in his recognition of his errors and his learning that the world of man is only little. On the heath, when his mind is laid bare, he understands that kings, without their titles, are just ordinary men, and that rich men, stripped of their clothes, are no more than the unaccommodated naked wretches represented by Poor Tom. He learns too that as a king he took too little care of the poor of his kingdom and that a barking dog might be the true image of authority. His being bound upon the wheel of fire also helps him to understand the true value of love, that love cannot be measured and that Cordelia's 'nothing' meant everything.

Tragic villains

Edmund's soliloquy in Act 1 establishes him as a traditional tragic villain, and one who is also intelligent, energetic and attractive. His illegitimate status as 'bastard' induces some contempt from his aristocratic contemporaries and perhaps invites audience sympathy. However, there is ambiguity in his presentation. Although it might be understandable that he should feel aggrieved that the legitimate Edgar is destined to inherit his father's land, it is also important to note that Edmund is Gloucester's 'younger' son and were he legitimate he would not inherit the land anyway. Primogeniture would see to that. It might well be that modern western audiences will also question the fairness of that custom too, but Edmund does not rail against his being a younger son, only against his position as a bastard. In his role as villain though he helps to disrupt natural order and also becomes an over-reacher: he is not content when he is made Earl of Gloucester and wants no less than ultimate power of the country, hence his cruel flirtations with both Goneril and Regan. His clever manipulations of his father and brother show that he is a master schemer. He also becomes Lear's antagonist when he instructs the prison guards to hang Lear and Cordelia. His revelry in his own villainy, seen when he states 'I should have been that I am/Had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardising', suggests he is a villain without conscience. However, it seems that

Shakespeare felt some sympathy for him in giving him a deathbed repentance when some good he means to do 'despite of [his] own nature'.

In contrast, there is, on the surface, little to redeem Goneril and Regan. They are the villains, the pelican daughters, whose betrayal causes Lear's suffering, madness and ultimately his death. When he sees their duplicity, he calls them 'unnatural hags', and certainly their behaviour and vicious language do little to suggest they are otherwise: they flaunt the Old Testament edict to honour their father, Regan participates in and enjoys the blinding of Gloucester and Goneril's lust for Edmund and jealousy of her sister leads her to plot against the lives of Regan and her own husband. Such behaviour is of course sickening and marks them both as consummate villains. In this respect they are representations of life at its lowest. Albany suggests that if the gods do not intervene to curb their vile offences then humanity will inevitably prey on itself 'like monsters of the deep'. However, it is also possible to see Goneril and Regan as victims of a sort. Their father's violent temper and irrationality is something they say they have long known and long had to live with; they have also had to endure his obvious favouring of Cordelia. Some modern feminist critics reexamine their roles as villains and recast them as victims.

Fate and the hostile or absent gods

In *King Lear*, fate is clearly not on the side of the good but then ultimately it is not on the side of the bad either. Different views about the power of fate (or God) are expressed by different characters at different points in the play. These views often contradict each other. Certainly the play raises the question as to whether outcomes are character driven or controlled by the gods. Edmund suggests that he determines his own fortune and that belief in planetary influence is an 'excellent foppery of the world' while Kent is more fatalistic believing that the stars above govern our condition. It is possible to read the play as protest against Christianity and faith in a kindly God. Human suffering can be seen to be the direct responsibility of remote and indifferent gods, gods who have the power to frustrate human intent. Albany's call for the gods to defend Cordelia is followed by the entrance of Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms, suggesting that the gods are not listening or are not there at all.

Sometimes the gods are seen as ministers of justice. Edgar believes that Gloucester's adultery is justly punished by his fathering Edmund: 'the gods are just and of our pleasant vices/ Make instruments to plague us' and if the storm represents fate, then perhaps here the gods are presented as being angry that Lear's abdication has caused turmoil plunging his country into civil strife.

However, more terrifyingly, the randomness of the behaviour of the gods suggests that there is no order in the universe at all. In his despair, Gloucester claims that the gods capriciously toy with lives, like flies to wanton boys, killing us for their sport. It is hardly surprising with this philosophical mindset that Gloucester is driven towards suicide. It is easy to argue that Gloucester's world view is the view shared by audiences at the end of the play. Although all the

wicked die, so do Lear, Gloucester, the Fool and Cordelia, whose death in particular makes no sense. Here it could be argued that Shakespeare is atheistic.

However, it is not the gods who kill Cordelia, but the servant of Edmund who hopes to curry favour by carrying out Edmund's wishes. It is human greed that is behind the event, suggesting that human beings are as cruel as any gods above.

It is also, of course, valid to read the play from a Christian standpoint. The Christian references are surely not accidental. Cordelia goes about her 'father's business' just as Christ went about his and Edgar's efforts to help his father are seen as a pilgrimage. It is also significant that he saves his father from suicide and defeats in mortal combat, the instrument of darkness Edmund. If a Christian reading is taken then audiences have to see that the play alludes to a life beyond the temporal. Cordelia's death could be seen as a requirement, a sacrifice to cleanse the world.

In the end, perhaps fate is best seen as a mixed affair in King Lear: a factor in the tragedy, but of no greater importance than human fault and human virtue.

Death and resolution

At the end of the play, the stage is littered with bodies. Lear and Gloucester die of broken hearts, Cordelia is murdered, Regan is poisoned by Goneril and Goneril commits suicide. Cornwall has earlier been killed in retribution by one of his servants and although alive, Kent seems suicidal (he has a journey shortly to do). The deaths of Cordelia and Lear can be said to account for the play's unbearable pessimism, so monumental in proportion that Nahum Tate in the 19th century provided an alternative ending in which Cordelia lives and marries Edgar. This alternative play held sway for over 150 years.

Yet, despite the bleakness, many readers and audiences are able to see the emergence of positives. The reconciliation scene between Lear and Cordelia is tender and beautiful and may well be remembered even after the curtain falls. Cordelia feels tenderness and pity for her father and cannot understand the evil inflicted on him by the daughters who bolted their doors against him when the wind roared and the rain soaked his bare head. Lear, Gloucester and Edgar learn through their suffering and arguably become better men. Edgar is motivated by love and is a saviour and a survivor. He is given the final words of the play and although he expresses no desire to lead the country, the ending is ambiguous; he does not say that he will not help to sustain the 'gored state'. In performance, directors might well suggest that he will rise to his country's needs.

A further positive is that all the evil characters are dead; the play seems to suggest that evil will ultimately self destruct. Importantly though virtue survives – even claiming the lost soul of Edmund who finally means to do good despite his own nature.

It could also be argued that while Cordelia's death is a crueller end than those of her sisters (she is hanged like a common thief), what distinguishes her is that she is loved and is mourned. The same could be said for Lear and Gloucester

and the Fool. When Albany is told of Goneril and Regan's deaths, no tears are shed: he sees the deaths as a judgement of the heavens which though making him tremble, touches him not with pity.