

Guide to King Lear

About King Lear

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The story of King Lear and his three daughters existed in some form up to four centuries before Shakespeare recorded his version. Lear was a British King who reigned before the birth of Christ, allowing Shakespeare to place his play in a Pagan setting. Preceded by references in British mythology to Lyr or Ler, Geoffrey of Monmouth recorded a story of King Lear and his daughters in his *Historia Regum Britanniae* of 1137. Dozens of versions of the play were then written up, highlighting certain events, such as the love test, or expanding upon the story, such as creating a sequel where Cordelia committed suicide. Most of these versions had a happy ending, though untrue to the story, where peace was restored under the reign of Lear and Cordelia. Shakespeare however had no interest in writing a tragicomedy.

The main version that Shakespeare had likely read and from which he had definitely borrowed was *The True Chronicle History of King Leir and his Three Daughters*. He also borrowed from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicle of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (who adopted the story from Monmouth), Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Sir Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (from which Shakespeare drew his subplot), and John Higgins' *A Mirror For Magistrates*. He stole pieces and ideas from these versions to create the type of story he wanted to tell. For instance, *The True Chronicle* provides the basis of the story, though sentimentalizing it by ignoring the sequel. "Leir" is betrayed by two of his daughters but is reconciled to his youngest at the end. "Cordella" is accompanied by a Fooltype

character who is loyal to her and Leir is resealed on the throne after beating Gonerill and Regan's armies. Moreover, Shakespeare left out main components of the earlier stories of Lear and created wholly new ones as well. Most considerable of the changes was the creation of a subplot and Lear's descent to madness.

In Shakespeare's time, numerous events, historical considerations, relationships, and cultural trends influenced his writing of *King Lear*. Scholars tend to believe that the play was written after *Othello* and before *Macbeth*, thus assigning it to 1604-1605. Further proof of this comes from the apparent influence the 1603 texts, *A Declaration of Egregious Popishe Impostures*, by Samuel Harsnett, and John Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essays*, had on Shakespeare's conglomeration of the story. Critics have noted that more than one hundred words found in *King Lear* which Shakespeare had never before used can be found in Florio's translation. In addition, Montaigne's famous essay, "Apology for Raymond Sebonde," apparently refers to the same major themes which Shakespeare's *King Lear* presents. He also borrowed from a very convenient contemporary true story of a gentleman pensioner of Queen Elizabeth, Sir Brian Annesley, whose daughters tried to get him declared insane in late 1603 so that they could legally take control of his estate. The youngest daughter, named Cordell, intervened on his behalf. As Shakespeare's players were the king's men, he knew they would have to perform for King James I and his court. Subsequently, Shakespeare imbued his plays with certain aspects that would appeal to James. For instance, the dangers of a divided kingdom was often the topic of James' speeches because of his wish to unite Scotland with England. Further topics from the time which Shakespeare took into account were the honor and wisdom endowed to the elderly as opposed to the rash ambition of the young as well as the ritualistic reverence showed to royalty. Shakespeare himself had moved into his period of writing tragedies as he felt they were more respected by critics although audiences generally preferred comedies. After his publication of *Julius Caesar*, he was looked at as the greatest tragedian since Sophocles and was at the zenith of his literary capacity. The play was first performed for the King in

December of 1605. It was first published in a quarto in 1608 and titled M William Shak-speare His Historie, of King Lear. A completely revised version was reprinted by Shakespeare in a 1623 First Folio edition, now referred to as The Tragedy of King Lear. The two versions were conflated in the eighteenth century until editors realized how significantly different the two were and now each edition and the conflated text can be found.

About Shakespearean Theater

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Before Shakespeare's time and during his boyhood, troupes of actors performed wherever they could in halls, courts, courtyards, and any other open spaces available. However, in 1574, when Shakespeare was ten years old, the Common Council passed a law requiring plays and theaters in London to be licensed. In 1576, actor and future Lord Chamberlain's Man, James Burbage, built the first permanent theater, called "The Theatre", outside London city walls. After this many more theaters were established, including the Globe Theatre, which was where most of Shakespeare's plays premiered.

Elizabethan theaters were generally built after the design of the original Theatre. Built of wood, these theaters comprised three tiers of seats in a circular shape, with a stage area on one side of the circle. The audience's seats and part of the stage were roofed, but much of the main stage and the area in front of the stage in the center of the circle were open to the elements. About 1,500 audience members could pay extra money to sit in the covered seating areas, while about 800 "groundlings" paid less money to stand in this open area before the stage. The stage itself was divided into three levels: a main stage area with doors at the rear and a curtained area in the back for "discovery scenes"; an upper, canopied area called "heaven" for balcony scenes; and an area under the stage called "hell," accessed by a trap door in the stage. There were dressing rooms located behind the stage, but no curtain in the front of the stage, which meant that scenes had to flow into each other, and "dead bodies" had to be dragged off.

Performances took place during the day, using natural light from the open center of the theater. Since there could be no dramatic lighting and there was very little scenery or props, audiences relied on the actors' lines and stage directions to supply the time of day and year, the weather, location, and mood of the scenes. Shakespeare's plays masterfully supply this information. For example, in Hamlet the audience learns within the first twenty lines of dialogue where the scene takes place ("Have you had quiet guard?"), what time of day it is ("Tis now strook twelf"), what the weather is like ("Tis bitter cold"), and what mood the characters are in ("and I am sick at heart").

One important difference between plays written in Shakespeare's time and those written today is that Elizabethan plays were published after their performances, sometimes even after their authors' deaths, and were in many ways a record of what happened on stage during these performances rather than directions for what should happen. Actors were allowed to suggest changes to scenes and dialogue and had much more freedom with their parts than actors today. Shakespeare's plays are no exception. In Hamlet, for instance, much of the plot revolves around the fact that Hamlet writes his own scene to be added to a play in order to ensnare his murderous father.

Shakespeare's plays were published in various forms and with a wide variety of accuracy during his time. The discrepancies between versions of his plays from one publication to the next make it difficult for editors to put together authoritative editions of his works. Plays could be published in large anthologies called Folios (the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays contains 36 plays) or smaller Quartos. Folios were so named because of the way their paper was folded in half to make chunks of two pages each which were sewn together to make a large volume. Quartos were smaller, cheaper books containing only one play. Their paper was folded twice, making four pages. In general, the First Folio is of better quality than the quartos. Therefore, plays that are printed in the First Folio are much easier for editors to compile.

Although Shakespeare's language and classical references seem archaic to some modern readers, they were commonplace to his audiences. His viewers came from all classes, and his plays appealed to all kinds of sensibilities, from "highbrow" accounts of kings and queens of old to the "lowbrow" blunderings of clowns and servants. Even his most tragic plays include clown characters for comic relief and to comment on the events of the play. Audiences would have been familiar with his numerous references to classical mythology and literature, since these stories were staples of the Elizabethan knowledge base. While Shakespeare's plays appealed to all levels of society and included familiar story lines and themes, they also expanded his audiences' vocabularies. Many phrases and words that we use today, like "amazement," "in my mind's eye," and "the milk of human kindness" were coined by Shakespeare. His plays contain a greater variety and number of words than almost any other work in the English language, showing that he was quick to innovate, had a huge vocabulary, and was interested in using new phrases and words.

Character List

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Character List

Lear, King of Britain

An old king, he originally divides the kingdom among his three daughters but ends up refusing it to Cordelia as she will not flatter him like her sisters. He banishes her, though regretting this action once living with Regan and Goneril who are ungrateful and treat him horribly. He escapes to the woods and encounters poor Tom, a madman, with whom he sympathizes. He wishes to reduce himself to essential man. He then goes mad. Kent and Gloucester help him to Dover where he is reunited with Cordelia. They lead the battle with France against Albany and Edmund, but lose and Cordelia and Lear are taken prisoner. After Cordelia's death, Lear grieves and dies.

King of France

A suitor for Cordelia, France is not turned away by Cordelia's lost inheritance but finds her more attractive. He marries her and helps her try to avenge the maltreatment of Lear. He is absent for the large battle at the end.

Duke of Burgundy

The other suitor for Cordelia, he refuses to accept her without the promised inheritance.

Duke of Cornwall

Regan's husband, Cornwall matches her for cruelty and villainy. He puts Kent in the stocks and places his trust in Edmund once Edmund betrays his father. Most cruelly, he blinds Gloucester. He receives a fatal blow from a servant who defends Gloucester.

Duke of Albany

Goneril's husband, he appears at first to be similar to Cornwall. We soon learn that there is a conflict, likely for land, between the two of them. Once Albany learns of Goneril and Regan's harsh treatment of Lear, he becomes highly moral and is enraged with Goneril, calling her a monster. He leads the fight versus France but intends to take mercy on Cordelia and Lear. He aids Edgar in killing Edmund and tries to right some of the wrongs at the end by reinstating Lear's absolute power. After Lear dies, he names Kent and Edgar as joint rulers.

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Earl of Kent

Outraged by Lear's disinheritance of Cordelia, he steps in to support her decision. He too is banished. Ever loyal, he returns in disguise as a servant named Caius and aids Lear in this position. He exchanges communication with Cordelia and accompanies Lear to Dover. He reveals himself finally but the King is too mad to realize who Kent is and thus may never know. Kent is dying at the end and thus does not

accept Albany's offer to rule jointly with Edgar.

Earl of Gloucester

The parallel character to Lear in the subplot, Gloucester is tricked by his bastard son Edmund into thinking that Edgar wishes to kill him. He trusts Edmund with his secrets until it is revealed that Edmund has betrayed him. He is blinded for being a traitor and helping Lear escape to Dover. Edgar, as poor Tom, leads him to Dover where he is tricked out of committing suicide. He sees Lear in his madness and wishes it upon himself. The news of Edgar's true identity overwhelms him, cracking his heart.

Edgar, son to Gloucester

Hunted by Gloucester's men due to Edmund's trickery, Edgar disguises himself as poor Tom of Bedlam, a demonic madman, who believes the foul fiend is torturing him. He provides a character for Lear to sympathize with during his encroaching madness and leads his blinded father to Dover where he saves him from suicide. Using many different disguises, he kills Oswald, alerts Albany to Goneril's adultery, and slays Edmund. Once his identity is revealed, he informs the audience of the events they missed and becomes King at the end.

Edmund, bastard son to Gloucester

Resentful of his illegitimacy and having a cruel drive for power, he plots against his brother and father and succeeds. Once Cornwall dies, he gains even more power and Goneril and Regan vie for his hand. He plans to kill Cordelia and Lear after beating them in battle so that he can rule over a united Britain. He is forced to confess his crimes by Albany and killed by Edgar.

Old Man, tenant to Gloucester

A faithful attendant to Gloucester, he leads him through the woods after he is blinded. Gloucester chooses poor Tom to continue leading him but asks the old man to meet them later with clothes for Tom.

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Doctor

Cordelia's physician, he gives Lear a sleeping pill in an attempt to restore him to sanity.

Lear's Fool

The hired court Fool, he attends Lear regularly and points out the truths which are missed or ignored. Upset by Cordelia's banishment, he ridicules Lear for being foolish enough to banish the good daughter and trust the evil ones. He further mocks his decision to give up his authority so fully. Once Lear goes mad, the Fool seems incredibly sane, making Lear remain dressed and playing along with his ideas of a trial versus Goneril and Regan.

Oswald, steward to Goneril

Loyal to Goneril, Oswald helps her insult Lear. As a result, Kent's argument with him at Gloucester's castle lands Kent in the stocks. He acts as messenger between Goneril and her sister and Edmund. He alerts Goneril that Albany has changed and he carries her love letter for Edmund. Edgar intercepts it and kills him.

A Captain under Edmund's command

He is given instructions by Edmund to hang Cordelia and then is killed by Lear when he is in the process of doing so.

Gentleman loyal to Lear

Kent sends him to Dover with news of Lear's condition and a ring to identify him to Cordelia. Kent later finds him in Dover and he reports to Kent on Cordelia's reaction to the information which he had brought earlier in the play.

Goneril, daughter to Lear

The eldest daughter, she contrives to strip Lear of his power from the beginning, flattering him and leading her sister in how to act. She drives Lear from her house with coldness and then aids Regan in rejecting him and throwing him out into the storm. Disgusted by her husband's weakness, she tries to

persuade Edmund to kill him so they can marry. Her letter allows Albany proof against Edmund and

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herself. She poisons Regan out of jealousy and then stabs herself when she realizes that Albany knows of her intentions.

Regan, daughter to Lear

The other evil daughter, Regan conspires with Goneril to strip Lear of his power. She assists in sending Lear out in the storm and also helps Cornwall punish Gloucester. She herself grabs the sword and kills the servant who defends Gloucester. She wants Edmund for her husband after Cornwall's death and is very jealous that he is intimate with Goneril. She is poisoned by Goneril and dies.

Cordelia, daughter to Lear

The good daughter, Cordelia refuses to insincerely flatter her father with false estimations of love and is disinherited. France marries her and she becomes Queen. We hear of her knowledge of Lear's mistreatment and her movement to Dover with the French army through Kent. She takes Lear to a doctor to treat his madness. She and Lear are captured by Edmund when the French lose the war. Lear hopes to spend quality time with her, but she is hanged by Edmund before Albany can send help. Lear carries her body into the final scene and dies with her in his arms. Cordelia is a character in a Shakespeare play, whose depiction reflects gender roles in that era.

About Cordelia:

In Shakespeare's King Lear, Cordelia is the youngest daughter of the title character. Her hand had been sought by the King of France and the Duke of Burgundy. Her wedding to the Duke is the occasion of Lear's infamous test of his daughter's love, when Cordelia refuses to out-do her sisters in their proclamations of love and flattery.

Cordelia, rejected by her father and sisters, eventually marries the King of France who sends her with an army to rescue Lear from the clutches of the truly ungrateful sisters. But the sisters capture and hang Cordelia.

Despite her eventual defeat, Cordelia is truly the moral hero of the play, sacrificing all and transcending the traditional female role for the sake of loyalty, love, and truth.

Historical Basis of Cordelia:

Shakespeare borrowed the story of King Lear (Leir) and his daughters, including Cordelia, from several sources. One was Geoffrey Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain, written in 1135, and the others probably also derived the story from that account.

Does King Lear Play The Tragic

Does King Lear Play The Tragic:

Does King Lear Play the Tragic Hero, or the Autocrat?

It is quite possible to make an argument in favour of either answer, an argument that would prove to be quite a debate, although one answer would weigh in favour of the other. To prove this, certain elements would have to be analysed thoroughly, all aspects taken into context and sufficient research done into the matter. This is the only method in which a fair debate of the argument can be taken into consideration.

We can only find the answer to this question if we know what the two arguments mean; this will provide a solid base onto which the rest of the debate can rest, a foundation of fact. Aristotle, a great founder of the definition of tragedy used the word catharsis to describe the effects of true tragedy on the spectator. Aristotle stated that the purpose of tragedy was to invoke pity and terror, and thereby effect

the catharsis of these emotions. Other critics see tragedy as a moral lesson in which fear and pity are excited by the tragic hero's fate serve to warn the spectator not to similarly tempt providence. This interpretation is generally accepted that through experiencing fear vicariously in a controlled situation, the spectators own anxieties are directed outward, and, through sympathetic identification was the protagonist, his insight and outlook are enlarged.

Also, as importantly and significantly, Aristotle introduced the term hamartia, the tragic flaw, or an inherent defect or shortcoming in the hero of a tragedy. Aristotle casually described the tragic hero as a man of noble rank and nature whose misfortune is not brought upon him by villainy or corruption, but by some error of judgement. This imperfection later became known, or interpreted as a moral flaw, although most great tragedies defy such a simple distinction of the term. We could say that in many cases of tragedy the hero is never passive, but struggles to resolve his tragic difficulty with an obsessive dedication, that he is guilty of presuming that he is godlike, attempting to surpass his own human limitations.

The need, or lack of order in a society, could be a reason why the tragedy came to be, and is known in Greek terms as hubris. This ethical and religious thought portrays the resulting implications of impious disregard of the limits governing human action in an orderly universe. It is the sin to which the great and the gifted are most susceptible, and in Greek tragedy is usually the hero's tragic flaw.

As in this argument, the terms of an autocrat have to be observed with some scrutiny to ensure no bias comes into play. The term autocrat, meaning that a person was to rule with unlimited power and resources, and who has undisputed influence or authority, has applied to many rulers, and a prime, and certainly recent authentication of this fact arose in the early 20th Century, in China. During the first half of this century, China saw the gradual disintegration of the old order, a common theme in King Lear, and the turbulent preparation for a new society. The foreign political philosophies of leadership undermined the Chinese system and provoked a mass turnaround for the Chinese government. But they, with their old order firmly engraved into their operating procedures, found it difficult to prepare for democracy. But in this difficulty they had to place an autocrat at the head of state, and leave the revolutionaries with only minor footholds in the political system. This therefore meant that the people were not ready for the relinquishment of a dictatorship, as the people were not experienced in dealing with problems in such a different manor. Such a parallel may be hard to find throughout King Lear, yet alone in any of Shakespeare's works, but certain elements may hold familiarity with minor roles in King Lear. I believe, with the help of the information studied, that no parallel can be found between this autocracy and the role of King Lear in his self-titled play. It is possible that autocracy, common among certain themes that arise in King Lear, could be confused as the role of King Lear, but in fact does not. This thesis can be proven by the lack of any subjective data in favour of this argument, and the lack of a match in respect between its definition and presence in King Lear. In opposition, the theme of a tragic hero fits so perfectly into its definition by Aristotle and other great thinkers of his kind, that it would be almost impossible to argue against it. The studies by these great thinkers have proven to be most helpful in the study of this argument as their studies match and parallel the themes of King Lear almost perfectly. Such as hamartia and hubris, their provocative and deductive variation of the same theme proves a catalyst in an argument in favour of the tragic hero.

It is most certain that King Lear provokes pity and fear into the minds of the spectator, in a tragic story of morality, and mortality that is sparked by Lear's hamartia, his fatal flaw, arrogance and vanity combined with a stubborn and selfish outlook upon life, which proves to be his downfall.

Elements of Tragedy in King Lear

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One Work Cited King Lear meets all the requirements of a tragedy as defined by Andrew Cecil Bradley. Bradley states that a Shakespearean tragedy has to be the story of the hero who endures exceptional suffering and calamity. The story must also contrast the current dilemma to happier times. The play also depicts the troubled parts in the hero's life and eventually he dies instantaneously because of the suffering and calamity. There is the feeling of fear in the play as well, that makes men see how blind they are not knowing when fortune or something else would be on them. The hero must be of a high status on the chain and the hero must also possess a tragic flaw that initiates the tragedy. The fall of the hero is not felt by him alone but creates a chain reaction that affects everything below him. There must also be the element of chance or accident that influences some point in the play. King Lear meets all of these requirements, which have been laid out by Bradley.

The main character of the play would be King Lear who in terms of Bradley would be the hero and hold the highest position in the social chain. Lear, out of pride and anger, has banished Cordelia and split the kingdom in half between the two older sisters, Goneril and Regan. This is Lear's tragic flaw that prevents him from seeing the true faces of people because his pride and anger overrides his judgement. As we see in the first act, Lear does not listen to Kent's plea to see closer to the true faces of his daughters. Kent has hurt Lear's pride by disobeying his order to stay out of his and Cordelia's way when Lear has already warned him, "the bow is bent and drawn, make from the shaft" (I.i.152). Kent still disobeys Lear and is banished. Because of this flaw, Lear has initiated the tragedy by disturbing the order in the chain of being by dividing the kingdom, banishing his best servant and daughter, and giving up his throne.

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Due to this flaw, Lear has given way to the two older daughters to conspire against him. Lear is finally thrown out of his daughters' homes and left with a fool, a servant and a beggar. This is when Lear realizes the mistake that he has made and suffers the banishment of his two eldest daughters. Lear is caught in a storm and begins to lose his sanity because he can not bear the treatment of his two daughters as well as the error he has made with Cordelia and Kent. Lear also suffers from lack of rest when he is moving all over the place and the thing that breaks him is the death of his youngest daughter, Cordelia. This suffering can be contrasted with other happier times like when Lear was still king and when he was not banished by his two daughters.

The feeling of fear is when Lear is in the storm raging against the gods, "I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness. I never gave you kingdom, called you children, you owe me no subscription" (III.ii.16-18), telling them to rage harder since he has not done anything for them and that he didn't deserve what he has received from his two daughters. The fear is how Lear in a short period of time went from king to just a regular peasant and from strong and prideful to weak and unconfident. This shows that men do not hold their own destiny and that even though things may be great now you can be struck down just as fast as was to Lear.

The fall of Lear is not just the suffering of one man but the suffering of everyone down the chain. Gloucester loses his status and eyes, Cordelia and Kent are banished, and Albany realizes his wife's true heart. Everything that happened to these characters are affected by Lear in one way or another and if Lear had not banished Cordelia and Kent then the two sisters would have been able to plot against their father. Without the plot of the two sisters then Gloucester would not have lost his eyes and his status to Cornwall because he was guilty of treason.

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There is an element of chance in the play in which Edgar meets Oswald trying to kill his father because he is a traitor. Oswald asks Edgar, "give the letters which thou find'st about me to Edmund Earl of Gloucester. Seek him out upon the English party" (IV.vi.273-274). Edgar finds a letter to Edmund from Goneril about the conspiracy to kill Albany. This part in the play affects the outcome of Goneril

and Edmund in which will lead to both of their deaths.

The pain and suffering endured by Lear eventually tears down his strength and sanity. Lear is not as strong, arrogant, and prideful as he was in the beginning of the play instead he is weak, scared, and a confused old man. At the end of the play Lear has completely lost his sanity with the loss of his daughter, Cordelia and this is the thing that breaks Lear and leads to his death. Lear dies with the knowledge that Cordelia is dead and dies as a man in pain. "And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life! 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, never" (V.iii.367-370).

King Lear has met all the requirements that Bradley has stated as a Shakespearean tragedy. Lear has a tragic flaw that is his pride and prevents him from seeing the true faces of people. He also initiates the tragedy with the banishment of Cordelia and Kent as well as dividing the kingdom. Lear has also suffered and endured the pains of his error which leads to his death and which is contrasted to that of happier times. There is the feeling of fear in the play, which is of a King losing his crown and becoming a

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peasant. Lear has also created a chain reaction that affects everything down the chain. The element of chance is also introduced in the play with Edgar and Oswald, Oswald possessing the letter to Edmund. And the final part is the death of King Lear dying in suffering of the death of his daughter, Cordelia.

Hamlet and King Lear

There are a lot of similarities in two Shakespeare stories HAMLET and KING LEAR. I guess its because of the style in which Shakespeare wrote. William Shakespeare wrote three kinds of stories: comedy, tragedy and history. Both of these books are tragedies and they are very similar tragedies. In both of these stories there is a feud going on within the family. And in both the feud is between the children and their parents or relatives. Hamlet is looking for the revenge on his uncle for killing Hamlets father and hes upset with his mother marrying the murderer. Here Lears evil daughters try to completely destroy their father. Lear calls his daughters and asks them who loves the most. Regan and Goneril lie just to get Lears land and power. Cordelia honestly answers Lear and for that is given away to France, because Lear has gone out of his mind. After Lear gives out almost all his land he realizes his wrongdoing and tries to restore his power. But now its too late, because his daughters already took away all the land. He sees how evil his daughters really are and they dont love him at all, so he curses them. Now Lear appears to be crazy from his actions, but in reality he exactly knows what is going on. Hamlet saw the ghost of his father and it told Hamlet that his uncle killed him to become the king. This shows that the person will even commit murder to get control of the country, just like we see in KING LEAR. After the ghost appeared to Hamlet, he started to act like he was crazy. But just like Lear, in reality he wasnt crazy, he was thinking of how to get back at his uncle. The endings of both stories are very similar. Besides the fact that all the main characters in both stories die, its how they die that's interesting. Because Goneril wants to get Edmund, she poisons her sister Regan. Hamlets uncle wants to poison Hamlet, but by mistake he poisoned his wife, Hamlets mother. Hamlet by mistake kills his uncle servant Polonius. Because of the death of her father Ophelia (Polonius daughter) goes insane and later kills herself. Because Gonerils plan didnt work, she kills herself. At the end there is a duel between Edgar and Edmund, where Edgar kills his bastard brother. At the end of HAMLET there is a duel between Hamlet and Polonius son, where Hamlet wins but in process gets cut by a poisonous sword; He dies. And finally during the duel Hamlet also kills his uncle getting his revenge, but loosing his life. After Polonia is found dead, Lear totally goes insane and thinking that his daughter is still alive he dies. And at the very end Kent says, My master is dead I have no reason to live, and kills himself. Just like at the end of HAMLET, Hamlets servant and friend also says the same and also kills himself. In conclusion: both of these plays

are tragedies, a very close connections throughout the play, and a very similar endings.

Importance of Sight in King Lear

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In order to understand the theme of Shakespeare's great tragedy, "King Lear", we must explore what is meant by 'eyesight or lack of it'. Eyesight is a recurring theme throughout the play, which refers to the metaphorical and physical blindness of the characters.

From the beginning, Shakespeare lets the audience see King Lear as himself. Lear isn't given any premissconceptions and the audience is left to explore Lear's character on their own.

In the first scene the audience sees Lear proclaiming to his three daughters that, in order to be awarded her dowry, she must express her love accordingly to him. Goneril going first uses wit, deceit and Lear's state of metaphorical blindness to create such an indulgent speech of which no father could disapprove. "I love you more than word can wield the matter; dearer than eyesight, space and liberty...rich or rare; no less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor...beyond all matter of so much I love you" (Act I, scene I, 55-61)

At this point of the play, the audience has their first insight to Goneril's true personality, and Lear's lack of eyesight. It's not until we hear all three daughters' speeches that the audience is introduced to Lear's metaphorical blindness. The metaphorical language and beauty of both Goneril and Regan's speeches blind Lear. It is Lear's blinded state that stops him from understanding and accepting Cordelia's expression of her love. "Noting will come of nothing. Speak again." (Act I, scene I, 90)

Lear's eyesight blinds him of the truth. Cordelia's speech challenges Lear's intellect and portrays him as being less powerful, than he was implied to be in the beginning.

Cordelia's speech is the first point in the play where the audience sees the difference between the three daughters and the truth behind King Lear.

Goneril and Regan's' speeches give Lear exactly what he wants to hear. Lear seems to be entertained by the fact that each daughter is competing against each other's love towards him; or how great they can make out that their love is for him, is. It is for this reason, that when Cordelia finds it hard to heave her heart into her mouth; unlike her sisters; that Lear acts in such the way he did. "Let it be so, thy truth then be thy dower...by the sacred radiance of the sun, of Hecate and the night...I disclaim all my paternal care...a stranger to my heart and me Hold thee from this for ever." (Act I, scene I, 110-115)

Lear's anger ridden speech does not hide his frustration, and the fact that he is doing all the damage. Driven by his own blindness/lack of sight, Lear begins to make many mistakes, which later in the play, the audience sees him get his justice. He not only loses his daughter; in his darkened state, but probably the most loyal friend he had, Kent.

His next words, to Kent, make the point clear. "Come not between the dragon and his wrath. I loved her most, and though to set my rest on her kind nursery.-Hence and avoid my sight" (Act I, scene I, 122-124)

This quote says two things about Lear; that he can admit to his own wish for peace and rest, although he will not exhibit to the audience his need of it. Lear also cannot acknowledge the fact that both Cordelia and he are being stubborn and selfish to not allow love except on their own terms. Cordelia's speech says a lot about her character. Can it be said that even though she loves her father with duty, honor and love, she has failed him by not telling him what he wants to hear? It is strange the way Shakespeare made the audience aware of Cordelia's knowledge of Lear's blindness, but she did not she answer him. Sure, there is something wrong with Lear, who requires love to handed to him easily on a platter; but on the other hand there has to be something strange said about his daughter, who is aware of his metaphorical blindness, but does not fulfil his demanding needs. "I love you majesty according to my bond, no more nor less." (Act I, scene I, 92-93)

It seems Cordelia does a poor job to sell the fact she truly loves her father. Even though, once compared to Goneril and Regan's overly exaggerated speeches, Cordelia still shines out among them as the most innocent daughter, from the audience's perspective. Even when Lear's disbelief encourages him to give Cordelia another chance to "mend" her speech, Cordelia uses her plain, honestly spoken, simple language again; even after seeing the pain she caused her father by her "nothing" speech. Even when Cordelia does speak again, she does not go any further than saying that it is her duty to honor and love Lear. "You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I return those duties back as are right fit, Obey you, love you, and most honor you" (Act I, scene I, 96-98)

Shakespeare uses Lear's kingdom as a symbol of his affection towards his three daughters. It's implied throughout Act I, that Cordelia is Lear's favourite daughter, therefore receiving the most prized part of his kingdom. Not only does this show the daughters' ranking in Lear's heart but also, the blindness he is unaware of. It is suggested that Lear thinks that by dividing the land by level of love, he is being a good father. He does not see that Goneril and Regan deceive him and him just for their own greedy benefit. Lear does not see that Cordelia does not want his riches, but his love.

Gloucester like Lear is metaphorically blinded by his son's betrayal and is not able to see balanced until Regan and Cornwall physically blind him.

Gloucester again like Lear is challenged by Edgar's mistrust. In the blind panic of hurt and fear, Gloucester is easily persuaded and can openly not doubt his own sons loyalty, even though he had seen no evidence of any such thing. This shows the audience how much Gloucester relies on others judgements, so make up his own mind. Gloucester and Lear are both similar in vulnerability; neither can recognise in themselves. Lear thinks that "nature" has to be controlled and commanded, where Gloucester fears and mistrusts it.

Gloucester plays an important role in the play. The play would be inconceivable without the figure of Gloucester in it. Not because he is so important to the plot, nor because his experience parallels Lear's, but because his specific character and experience each subtly shape the other and realise an aspect of life necessary to those associated in the other characters - especially in Edgar and Lear. It's quite clear that this blinding course, the physical, emotional and moral pain of which he cannot neglect nor bear. Which is necessary to the action just because as an audience we too cannot avoid nor bear the horror of what is done to him and why.

key Facts King Lear

1

Key Facts

full title · The Tragedy of King Lear

author · William Shakespeare

type of work · Play

genre · Tragedy

language · English

time and place written · England, 1604–1605

date of first publication · First Folio edition, 1623

publisher · John Heminge and Henry Condell, two senior members of Shakespeare's acting troupe

narrator · Not applicable (drama)

climax · Gloucester's blinding in Act III, scene vii

protagonist · Lear, king of Britain

antagonists · Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan; Edmund, the bastard son of Gloucester

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setting (time) · Eighth century b.c.

setting (place) · Various locations in England

foreshadowing · Goneril and Regan's plotting in Act I foreshadows their later cruel treatment of Lear.

tone · Serious and tragic; the occasional bursts of comedy are uniformly dark

themes · Justice, authority versus chaos, reconciliation, redemption

motifs · Madness, betrayal, death

symbols · Weather plays an important symbolic role in the play, notably in Act III, when the tremendous thunderstorm over the heath symbolizes Lear's rage and mounting insanity; the actual blindness of Gloucester symbolizes the moral blindness that plagues both Lear and Gloucester himself in their dealings with their children; the "wheel" of fortune is another symbol by means of which Edmund, at the end of the play, conceives of his fall from power back into insignificance.

King Lear was first printed in 1608. This initial printing is now referred to as the First Quarto. Another Quarto version was printed in 1619, and King Lear appeared again in a 1623 Folio edition. The First Quarto contains 300 lines not found in the Folio, and the Folio contains 100 lines not found in the First Quarto. Because many differences exist between the Quarto and Folio editions, some recent anthologies of Shakespeare's works contain play text from both editions, and may also include a conflated edition derived from a combination of both the First Quarto and Folio versions.

Although the text was not printed until 1608, the play was performed in December 1606. The exact date of composition is not known, so scholars often try to base the point in time on references in the play

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itself. Because of this uncertainty and the textual references, the composition of King Lear may have taken place anywhere from 1604 to 1606.

The story of King Lear and his daughters was a familiar tale in Elizabethan England, where it was generally believed to be based on historical fact, having been taken from ancient British history. A legal case of the times also may be due credit for contributing to the drama. In an act that generated extensive publicity, two daughters attempted to have their father declared insane so that they might seize his estate. The younger daughter, Cordell, objected.

This similarity of name and plot might have sparked some interest in resurrecting a familiar plot.

However, accounts of King Lear surface in several texts; so, Shakespeare may have turned to other sources as well in exploring this ancient story.

Lear's story appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, published about 1135. This text includes insights into the kings of the ancient, pre-Christian Britain. Years later, Lear's story is repeated in Raphael Holinshed's 1577 book, *Chronicles of England*, which includes an ending in which Cordelia and Lear both survive her sisters' treachery. Cordelia succeeds her father to the throne, upon his death; but she is later imprisoned and commits suicide. The John Higgins 1574 edition of *Mirror for Magistrates* introduces the name of Albany and includes a story of Cordelia, in which she commits suicide — something that does not occur in the older play. The Lear story is also retold in Edmund Spenser's 1590 epic poem, *The Faerie Queene*, where Cordelia commits suicide by hanging. The Gloucester plot may have been taken from Sir Philip Sidney's 1590 poem, *Arcadia*, in which an old prince is blinded by his illegitimate son, but is ultimately saved by his legitimate son. Much of the events that occur to Gloucester are derived from this source.

The *True Chronicle of King Leir* is first entered into the Stationers's register in 1594, although there is no record of its publication until the 1605 edition appears. This source, while containing the basic Lear story, is grounded in Christianity, something not contained in the story of the ancient Leir or in Shakespeare's Lear. Many scholars do find ample evidence of Christian ideology in King Lear, but no overt emphasis on Christianity, as there is in Shakespeare's principle source. The old play has a happy ending, where evil is punished and good is rewarded, thus reinforcing the Christian belief in divine justice. Instead of proposing such easy answers, Shakespeare leaves his audience to ponder the role of

God and divine justice. As he did so often in borrowing from sources, Shakespeare wove threads of historical accounts and original writings to create the fabric of his own King Lear.

4

King Lear

King Lear

In King Lear, the unnatural elements seem to always dominate the natural elements throughout the play. There exists a reversal of order in the play where the evil prosper in the downfall of the good, and where man's life is meaningless and arbitrary. King Lear, the tragic hero, dies in the end despite the torment and agony he had to endure to regenerate and repent. But it is the worthless destruction of countless other lives because of Lear's own personal tragedy that supports the view of the brutality and the meaningless of man's life in the play.

Life in Lear's universe is brutal, and at times, merciless. All this has been brought about by the reign of evil in the play. The natural order of things has been reversed to such an extent that many of society's cherished values have been neglected and confused. Evil characters such as Edmund is praised by Gloucester for exposing the "treachery" of Edgar, while Edgar is denounced for his "villany". Love, based on selflessness and truth, is weighted in materialistic terms. A man's life, then, can only be considered arbitrary and meaningless in the chaotic universe of King Lear.

The character of Lear and Gloucester die in a state of joy, but they nevertheless die in the end result. Both had immeasurable sufferings for their follies, and yet both had gained wisdom - patience, insight, love - from their experiences. Both were shown to have the capacity for comparison during their ordeals and both were courageous enough to triumph over their weaknesses. Yet, despite their regeneration gained through suffering and pain, they are made to die in the end. Their deaths hardly seem just and proper if a man's life were not meaningless. But in King Lear, a man's life is meaningless indeed.

There were also many others who were not directly involved in Lear's personal tragedy that died for it. Because of Lear's follies and the subsequent reign of evil, the armies of France and Britain fought. That battle must have resulted in numerous death on both sides. The army of France, led by the King of France and Cordelia, had come in an attempt to overthrow the evil reign of Goneril and Regan, and to rescue King Lear. Cordelia was still bound by honour, duty, and obedience to Lear despite her banishment, and she at last, had come for her beloved father. Lear's folly had caused both armies to fight for his redemption and regeneration. The many deaths of soldiers from both sides are too numerous and insignificant to take note of in this indifferent universe of King Lear.

Finally, if the deaths of Gloucester and Lear seemed unfair, then the death of Cordelia can be considered totally unjust. Cordelia embodies the virtues of selflessness and honesty completely, and she had enough love to help her father despite his total mistreatment of her in the beginning. Cordelia dies brutally in the end, murdered by a captain bribed by Edmund. Her brutal death is such a devastating shock that one can only claim that a man's life is meaningless in King Lear. Cordelia, of all the characters, should not have died, and to die in such a brutal manner indicates the brutality of a man's life in King Lear.

It can be argued that the destruction of good by evil is a tragic fact of life, and while that may be true, there were simply too many deaths to be accounted for in the play. Finally, in King Lear, Shakespeare presents a theme that it is possible for man to carve his own path in destiny. By choosing an evil path, one can be self - destructive. Following a path of goodness allows one to have spiritual hope and bonds with fellow man. It is a just universe that allows the freedom of choice to exist for the individual and that also carefully monitors the prevalence of goodness.

Therefore, in King Lear, Shakespeare does not present an indifferent universe. He also does not present that man's life is meaningless. He does indicate, however, that there is justice in suffering, that evil proves to be futile, and that only through goodness is a sense of religious hope and spiritual bond possible. By illustrating these facts, Shakespeare wishes to indicate that not only is the universe 'not indifferent', but also that man's nature is very pertinent to the maintenance of justice on earth.

King Lear as hero

King Lear - Analyzing a Tragic Hero

Tragedy is defined in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary as:

1) a medieval narrative poem or tale typically describing the downfall of a great man, 2) a serious drama typically describing a conflict between the protagonist and a superior force (as destiny) and having a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion that excites pity or terror. The play of King Lear is one of William Shakespeare's great tragic pieces, it is not only seen as a tragedy in itself, but also a play that includes two tragic heroes and four villains. I felt that a tragic hero must not be all good or all bad, but just by misfortune he is deprived of something very valuable to him by error of judgment. We must be able to identify ourselves with the tragic hero if he is to inspire fear, for we must feel that what happens to him could happen to us. If Lear was completely evil, we would not be fearful of what happens to him: he would merely be repulsive. But Lear does inspire fear because, like us, he is not completely upright, nor is he completely wicked. He is foolish and arrogant, it is true, but later he is also humble and compassionate. He is wrathful, but at times, patient. Because of his good qualities, we experience pity for him and feel that he does not deserve the severity of his punishment. His actions are not occasioned by any corruption or depravity in him, but by an error in judgment, which, however, does arise from a defect of character. Lear has a "tragic flaw" - egotism. It is his egotism in the first scene that causes him to make his error in judgment - the division of his kingdom and the loss of Cordelia. Throughout the rest of the play, the consequences of this error slowly and steadfastly increase until Lear is destroyed. There must be a change in the life of the tragic hero; he must pass from happiness to misery. Lear, as seen in Act I, has everything a man should want - wealth, power, peace, and a state of well-being. Because a tragic character must pass from happiness to misery, he must be seen at the beginning of the play as a happy man, surrounded by good fortune. Then, the disasters that befall him will be unexpected and will be in direct contrast to his previous state.

In King Lear the two tragic characters, a king and an earl, are not ordinary men. To have a man who is conspicuous endure suffering brought about because of his own error is striking. The fear aroused for this man is of great importance because of his exalted position. His fall is awesome and overwhelming. When

tragedy, as in Lear, happens to two such men, the effect is even greater. To intensify the tragedy of King Lear, Shakespeare has not one but two tragic characters and four villains. As we have seen, the sub-plot - concerning Gloucester, Edmund, and Edgar - augments the main plot. Gloucester undergoes physical and mental torment because he makes the same mistake that Lear does. Like Lear, Gloucester is neither completely good nor completely bad. There is, for instance, a coarseness in the earl, who delights in speaking of his adultery. But he has good qualities as well. He shows, for instance, concern for Kent in the stocks, and he risks his life to help Lear. Gloucester's punishment, his blindness, parallels Lear's madness. These two tragic stories unfolding at the same time give the play a great eminence.

The important element in tragedy is action, not character. It is the deeds of men that bring about their destruction. Lear calls upon the "great gods," Edgar and Kent blame Fortune, and Gloucester says that the gods "kill us for their sport" (IV.i.37). But in reality the calamities that befall both Lear and Gloucester occur because of the actions of these men. Their actions, it is true, grow out of their characters: both are rash, unsuspecting, and vengeful. But the actions themselves are the beginnings of their agony, for these actions start a chain of events that lead to ultimate catastrophe.

A tragic hero gains insight through suffering. Neither Lear nor Gloucester realizes he has committed an error until he has suffered. Lear's suffering is so intense that it drives him mad; it is on the desolate heath that he fully realizes his mistake in giving the kingdom to his two savage daughters and disowning the one daughter who loves him. It is not until Gloucester has been blinded that he learns the truth about his two sons. These two characters learn to endure their suffering. When Gloucester's attempt to commit suicide fails, he decides to bear his affliction until the end. In his madness Lear learns to endure his agony. Later, when he knows he is to be imprisoned, he maintains this misfortune with a passive calmness. He has grown piritually through painfully achieved self-knowledge and through Cordelia's love. Tragedy in King Lear is not only seen through itself but, also through the character of the King and other characters. The Play of King Lear is a great tragic play that many tragedies try to compare to.

King Lear Characterizations

King Lear Characterizations:

*King Lear- old, physically and mentally weak, too trusting, deserves punishment for his folly, hot tempered and quick to judge, blind (false sense of judgement about others) and irresponsible as a father and a ruler, arrogant to take advice, divides power from responsibility, has a desire to rely on Cordelia's kind nursery, inspires loyalty,

coercive status, subject to flattery.

*Fool- truthful, rude yet perceptive, faithful, helps others see more clearly.

*Kent- the protagonist with Edgar, rude, rash, blunt, loyal.

*Cordelia- too respectful and dutiful, defiant to a degree, stubborn, is Lear's 'best object' most favoured, honest.

*Gonerill- vicious, autocratic, cold and ambitious, vindictive(revengeful), deceiving, strategic and relies on her status for power (aggressive), vile and cunning, decisive action and planning.

*Regan- (same as Gonerill) + inhumane.

*The Earl of Gloucester- superstitious, is a reflection of Lear- a complacent father, too trusting, acts rashly and ruthlessly, blind ruler.

brave and determined, heroic, pays harshly for his crimes of adultery.

*Edmond- the perfect characterised villain, ambitious, lusts for power and legitimacy, charming in a deceitful way, cunning and ruthless, sly.

*Edgar- the protagonist along with Kent, innocent in the whole process, too trusting, intelligent and quick to learn.

*Duke of Albany- lacks Gonerill's authoritative nature, slow to act, uncertain yet bold.

*Duke of Cornwall- fiery nature, equals with Regan, both combined as a powerful duo, inhumane and ruthless,

*Oswald- diligent, faithful to Gonerill, cowardly, seeks reward not power

King Lear king and fool

Kings and Fools

In Shakespeare's play King Lear, the main character is King Lear who starts off as a respected and powerful king. As the story progresses the king loses his power because of his own stupidity and blindness. The tragedy of this play is shown through the daughters of the king, the fool, and finally when Lear's sanity is tested.

At the beginning of the play, King Lear is powerful and harsh. He decides he doesn't want to be king anymore, and so he asks his daughters, Reagan, Goneril, and Cordelia to tell him how much they love him. He does this so he may give them a dowry to be married with. First, Goneril lies when she tells her father how much she adores him and would never disrespect him. Next, is the daughter Reagan, she does the same as her sister and lies to the king saying that she loves him with all of her heart. Finally, Cordelia tells her father that she could not tell him how much she loves him, because she had no words. The king was very upset with Cordelia and because of his madness towards Cordelia thinking that she did not love him as much as her other sisters, he divided the land in two and gave Reagan and Goneril each half. Cordelia on the other hand received nothing as her dowry and in turn no none would marry her except the King of France. Giving the land to the two daughters was the first of Lear's mistakes, for the daughters did not love him as much as Cordelia did, but they wished to have his riches. When Goneril and Reagan are in power they try to make Lear appear to be incompetent. They refer to him as "The Idle Old Man" in front of everyone and start to make even Lear think less of himself. Although the two sisters do this they also realize that Lear still holds a great deal of power in their areas, so they

decided something must be done about it. The "loving" daughters command Lear to let go fifty of his one hundred servicemen, saying that they will not pay for it and that it is unnecessary. Lear then starts to worry that if Goneril isn't happy then she in turn will make him unhappy and he agrees to let them go. Next, the fool is introduced. Shakespeare does this to show the deterioration of Lear that has taken place since the beginning of the play. The Fool is his name, however, he is a wise man. He is a tutor to Lear and tries to slow him down so that he will not lose his mind. However, in the process the fool makes subtle hints to Lear that he has made some bad decisions. These hints do not help Lear; they just provoke more thinking about what he might have done to himself by giving away his kingdom. After Lear leaves Goneril's castle, the former king travels to his other daughter, Reagan's castle. When he arrives there he discovers that Reagan and her husband have left. Little does he know that they had found out from Goneril that he was coming and they didn't want him to stay at their castle. He later travels to Gloucester castle and learns there that Reagan and Goneril are not fighting as they led him to believe. This makes Lear very upset, and Reagan orders him to be kicked out of the castle. Outside of the castle there is a very bad thunderstorm, this makes Lear believe that the elements have joined forces with his daughters to try and defeat him. He begins to yell at the storm in a fit of anger. From this scene it is quite apparent that Lear had nearly lost his mind. In conclusion, the reader is shown how Lear went from being a respected and powerful king to a regular man who seems to have lost all of his family. The two people that he trusted most were, in the end, the cause of his downfall. The people he did not trust were the ones who truly loved him and tried to protect him. Lear would not believe that he needed protection from his own daughters – this error in judgment cost him everything.

Plot Overview

Plot Overview

Lear, the aging king of Britain, decides to step down from the throne and divide his kingdom evenly among his three daughters. First, however, he puts his daughters through a test, asking each to tell him how much she loves him. Goneril and Regan, Lear's older daughters, give their father flattering answers. But Cordelia, Lear's youngest and favorite daughter, remains silent, saying that she has no words to describe how much she loves her father. Lear flies into a rage and disowns Cordelia. The king of France, who has courted Cordelia, says that he still wants to marry her even without her land, and she accompanies him to France without her father's blessing.

Lear quickly learns that he made a bad decision. Goneril and Regan swiftly begin to undermine the little authority that Lear still holds. Unable to believe that his beloved daughters are betraying him, Lear slowly goes insane. He flees his daughters' houses to wander on a heath during a great thunderstorm, accompanied by his Fool and by Kent, a loyal nobleman in disguise.

Meanwhile, an elderly nobleman named Gloucester also experiences family problems. His illegitimate son, Edmund, tricks him into believing that his legitimate son, Edgar, is trying to kill him. Fleeing the manhunt that his father has set for him, Edgar disguises himself as a crazy beggar and calls himself "Poor Tom." Like Lear, he heads out onto the heath.

When the loyal Gloucester realizes that Lear's daughters have turned against their father, he decides to help Lear in spite of the danger. Regan and her husband, Cornwall, discover him helping Lear, accuse him of treason, blind him, and turn him out to wander the countryside. He ends up being led by his disguised son, Edgar, toward the city of Dover, where Lear has also been brought.

In Dover, a French army lands as part of an invasion led by Cordelia in an effort to save her father. Edmund apparently becomes romantically entangled with both Regan and Goneril, whose husband, Albany, is increasingly sympathetic to Lear's cause. Goneril and Edmund conspire to kill Albany.

The despairing Gloucester tries to commit suicide, but Edgar saves him by pulling the strange trick of leading him off an imaginary cliff. Meanwhile, the English troops reach Dover, and the English, led by Edmund, defeat the Cordelia-led French. Lear and Cordelia are captured. In the climactic scene, Edgar duels with and kills Edmund; we learn of the death of Gloucester; Goneril poisons Regan out of jealousy over Edmund and then kills herself when her treachery is revealed to Albany; Edmund's betrayal of Cordelia leads to her needless execution in prison; and Lear finally dies out of grief at Cordelia's passing. Albany, Edgar, and the elderly Kent are left to take care of the country under a cloud of sorrow and regret.

Short Summary

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Short Summary

Act I:

The Earls Kent and Gloucester discuss the division of King Lear's kingdom. Lear has divided the kingdom into three parts, allotting the largest to Cordelia, his most favored of the three daughters. Lear first addresses his two eldest daughters, asking them to express their love for him before they and their husbands will receive the land he has allotted for them. It is a selfish request and Goneril, the eldest, responds readily. Regan answers his request next, attempting to outdo her sister, and thus says that she has given all of her love to Lear. Cordelia finds her sisters extremely boorish in their exaggerated and completely insincere flattery and refuses to participate. Upon her turn, she tells Lear that she loves him as her duty as a daughter requires but no more, as she will save some of her love for her soon to be husband. Lear becomes extremely angry but Cordelia still refuses to stoop to the level of her sisters. As a result, Lear strips Cordelia of her inheritance and her title. Kent steps in to support Cordelia's behavior but Lear will hear none of it. Insulted by Kent's opposition, Lear banishes him from the kingdom. The suitors then learn of Cordelia's position. Burgundy cannot accept her as a mate without the promised entitlements but France finds her more endearing in her sincerity and makes her his wife, Queen of France. Goneril and Regan plot to take all of Lear's power out of his hands quickly.

Edmund, Gloucester's bastard son, vows to steal the land and legitimacy of his half brother Edgar by manipulating both father and brother against each other. His father sees him hiding a letter he is carrying and forces him to show it. It is a fabricated letter from Edgar asking for Edmund's help in overturning their father. Gloucester is enraged but Edmund tells him to not jump to conclusions until he can arrange a meeting between himself and Edgar. Edmund then finds Edgar and alerts him to Gloucester's anger, suggesting he flee to Edmund's house and stay armed.

Lear resides with Goneril, who plans to drive him out of her residence and to her sister's by pretending that his knights and servants are creating havoc. She orders her servants to treat Lear coldly. Kent returns disguised and becomes Lear's servant, Caius. Lear is outraged at Goneril's charges and the coldness against him and his train. He curses Goneril and her unborn children before leaving for Regan's home. Albany reproaches Goneril for her treatment of Lear. Goneril sends her servant, Oswald, to warn her sister.

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Act II:

Edmund hears from a courier that there are rumors of conflict between Albany and Cornwall. He uses this idea when he encounters Edgar, informing him that he has offended both parties and is in danger. Upon hearing Gloucester, Edmund has Edgar draw his sword and then run off. Edmund wounds himself and pretends it was received in his duel with Edgar because Edgar had wished to kill Gloucester. Gloucester sends men out to capture Edgar and promises Edmund the land to which he has never been

privileged. Regan and Cornwall, who have traveled to Gloucester's castle to escape Lear's arrival, hear of Edgar's betrayal and place their trust with Edmund.

Oswald and Kent meet at Gloucester's castle, both delivering messages. Kent insults him for his previous treatment of Lear and begins to strike him. The noise brings Cornwall, Regan, Gloucester, and Edmund. Cornwall and Regan place Kent in the stocks as punishment. Lear arrives to find him there but cannot believe his own daughter and son-in-law were responsible. His Fool continuously ridicules his choices: chastising Cordelia, trusting his other daughters, and giving up his authority. Lear sends Gloucester for Regan and Cornwall but they refuse to see Lear until he threatens to wake them himself. They feign happiness in seeing him. Lear entreats Regan to feel sympathy for him because of Goneril's treatment of him but Regan instead says he should return to her for the intended month and apologize.

As Goneril arrives, he finally asks who put Kent in the stocks. Cornwall admits to it. Goneril and Regan unite to oppose Lear, claiming that he does not need one hundred knights and servants. When Regan proclaims that he could only have twenty-five with her, he wishes to return to Goneril whose previous promise of fifty must mean she loves him more. The two sisters then lower the size of a train they will allow to ten, then five, and then none. Lear is outraged and wishes to be with neither daughter, escaping out into the woods. Gloucester pleads with them to allow Lear back inside as a storm is approaching, but they refuse.

Act III:

Kent encounters one of Lear's train and sends him to Dover with his purse and a ring to show Cordelia if he sees her. He is to fill her and the others in as to Lear's condition and treatment. Lear is quickly becoming one with the storm as he approaches madness, though he reasons that the heavens owe him
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less than his daughters did. He rages on and on about betrayal and filial ingratitude. Lear admits that he has sinned but recognizes too that he was even more sinned against. Kent tries to get Lear inside a hovel for shelter. The Fool prophesies that when men are honest and sincere, England will fall apart. Lear sends the Fool into the hovel first but he comes out screaming when he meets Edgar disguised as the beggar, poor Tom of Bedlam. Tom's babble illustrates his demonic madness and Lear believes that he must have suffered from ungrateful daughters. Tom tells his history as a servingman given over to lust, bringing Lear to question the make up of man. Lear himself approaches unaccommodated, essential man. He attempts to strip off his clothes but the Fool stops him.

Gloucester confides in Edmund that he has received a letter with news of a movement to avenge the King. He tells him to remain silent on the issue. Gloucester then goes to find Lear, unable to follow the orders of Regan and Goneril, and hopes to take Lear to shelter. Lear would rather stay to talk with Tom, the "philosopher". Kent suggests that Tom accompany Lear to shelter and they move to it. The Fool, Lear, and Tom muse over the definition of a madman. Lear decides to hold a mock trial for Regan and Goneril and indict them for their offenses, placing the Fool and Tom as the judges. Lear has lost his wits. Gloucester returns with news of Regan and Goneril's plot against Lear's life. He has secured transportation for him and sends him off to Dover. Edgar remains.

Edmund eagerly uses Gloucester's confidence to forward his means by divulging it to Cornwall. He pretends to be sad that he is betraying his father. Cornwall makes him the new Earl of Gloucester, accepts him as a son, and calls for a search for Gloucester. He then sends Goneril and Edmund to Albany so that Edmund will not be present for his father's punishment. Regan and Goneril call for Gloucester to be hanged or blinded. Gloucester is brought to Regan and Cornwall, who tie him up. Gloucester is shocked by the rudeness of his guests. Once they tell him they have his letter, he admits that he has sent Lear to Dover because of the horrible cruelty of his daughters. Cornwall blinds one of Gloucester's eyes. A servant interjects angrily, wounding Cornwall, and Regan slays him. Cornwall then blinds the other eye as well and Regan notifies Gloucester that Edmund was the one who informed against him. Gloucester realizes that he has wronged Edgar. He is turned out into the storm, aided by a few loyal servants.

Act IV:

Gloucester is led by an old man though he wishes to be left alone. He prays to be able to see his son Edgar again. When they come upon poor Tom, Gloucester chooses to allow Tom to lead him because the time had come where madmen were leading the blind. Gloucester asks to be taken to a high cliff in Dover where he can commit suicide. He gives Tom his purse in an effort to better balance the economic

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inequality of the world. When they reach Dover, Edgar tricks his father into thinking he has climbed the steep hill. Thus when he tries to fall off the cliff, he merely falls flat. Before he falls, he blesses Edgar. Edgar runs back to him, pretending to be another stranger, and tells him that it was a miracle that he fell and did not die. He explains that a spirit left him at the summit, insinuating that poor Tom was a spirit and Gloucester believes him, though depressed that he is not even allowed death.

Goneril and Edmund are greeted by Oswald who alerts them to Albany's reverse in attitude. He is pleased by the invasion of France and displeased by Edmund. Goneril sends Edmund back to Cornwall, with a vow to unite as mates and rulers. She finds her husband enraged against her for the treatment he has heard she and Regan bore against Lear. He would tear her apart if she were not a woman. He then learns that Gloucester has been blinded and that Cornwall died from a wound caused by the servant defending him. Goneril feels torn about Cornwall's death. Albany learns that Edmund informed against Gloucester and he promises to avenge Gloucester's blindness. Regan is then greeted by Oswald. She remarks that they should have killed Gloucester as his situation arouses too much sympathy. Edmund is supposed to be looking for him. She is worried that Edmund and her sister are planning to become intimate and she warns Oswald to remind Edmund of the promises he has made to her.

Kent meets the gentleman he sent ahead to Dover and learns that the King of France has had to return, though Cordelia and others remain. He asks how Cordelia received his message and is told that she was a mixture of smiles and tears. Lear has not yet been reconciled to Cordelia because he is too ashamed to face her. She worries that he has gone completely mad but the doctor assures her that rest should help. Lear stumbles upon Gloucester and Edgar, rambling about the manipulation of his daughters and the evil nature of women. He recognizes Gloucester's voice and mentions, ignorant of Edmund's betrayal, how his adulterous ways have been more fortunate than Lear's legitimate ones. Lear tells him that blindness should in fact help him to see and that pretense is the largest flaw of most in authority. Cordelia's gentlemen find Lear and try to bring him to her but he thinks he is being captured and runs away.

Oswald tracks Gloucester down and hopes to kill him. Edgar intercedes. They fight and Oswald falls. He tells Edgar to give the letter he was carrying to Edmund. Edgar is infuriated to find that the letter is from Goneril and is in reference to her wish to kill Albany and marry Edmund. Lear has been found and given a sleeping drug by Cordelia's doctor. Cordelia thanks Kent for all of his support and goodwill toward the King. She bemoans the the horrific treatment her sisters have shown him. Lear is brought into them, barely awake and does not recognize them. Finally he understands that he is with Cordelia but is still very confused.

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Act V:

Regan questions Edmund as to his relationship with Goneril. He promises that he is not intimately involved with her. Goneril notes that she would rather lose to France than to her sister for Edmund's hand. Goneril and Albany discuss the importance of being united with Regan to face France. Edgar, still disguised, finds Albany and passes on the letter from Goneril. Edgar tells him to call by herald if he is needed again. Edmund soliloquizes on the question of which sister to choose and decides to take Goneril if she manages to kill Albany. He is most concerned with ruling a reunited Britain.

The battle begins. Cordelia and Lear lead one army. Edgar leaves Gloucester safely while he fights on their side. Edgar returns after the quick off stage war with the news that Lear and Cordelia have been

taken prisoner. Edmund is in charge of them and has them sent away to prison. Cordelia tries to be strong and Lear hopes the time will be one where they can catch up and talk about life. Edmund hands a death note to a captain of his to carry out. Albany praises Edmund for his acts of battle but reminds him he is a subordinate. Edmund lies, saying that Cordelia and Lear are merely being retained. Regan declares that as her new partner Edmund is an equal, which incites Goneril's jealousy. Albany responds with a claim of treason and challenges Edmund to a duel. Ill, Regan is escorted out. The herald sounds the trumpet three times and a disguised Edgar appears to fight Edmund. Edmund falls but Albany spares him until he can incriminate him. Albany quiets Goneril with the her letter though she maintains she is above any law as she is the ruler of it. She flees his anger. Edmund admits his guilt and Edgar reveals himself. In response to Albany's questioning, Edgar explains how he had been disguised as a beggar and that he has led and cared for Gloucester until his death. He died, overwhelmed by happiness and sadness, shortly after Edgar revealed his identity to him. Edgar was then met by Kent who also told of his disguise, Lear's state, and his own coming death.

A gentleman brings in the knife Goneril used to kill herself after admitting that she poisoned Regan. The bodies are called for. Kent comes hoping to bid Lear goodbye which reminds Albany to ask about Lear and Cordelia's condition. Edmund informs them that he and Goneril had ordered Cordelia hanged so that it would look like a suicide. A servant tries to stop it but Lear enters with Cordelia's body. He had killed the man who hanged her but she does not live. Lear is inconsolable. Kent tries to say goodbye to him but Lear barely recognizes him and likely does not understand that he has been undercover as his servant Caius all along. They are told Edmund is dead. Albany gives Lear back absolute rule and Kent and Edgar their rights. Still swooning for Cordelia, Lear dies. Albany then gives Kent and Edgar shared rule but Kent notes he will soon follow Lear, thus leaving Edgar as the next King.

Themes

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Justice

King Lear is a brutal play, filled with human cruelty and awful, seemingly meaningless disasters. The play's succession of terrible events raises an obvious question for the characters—namely, whether there is any possibility of justice in the world, or whether the world is fundamentally indifferent or even hostile to humankind. Various characters offer their opinions: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport,” Gloucester muses, realizing it foolish for humankind to assume that the natural world works in parallel with socially or morally convenient notions of justice (IV.i.37–38). Edgar, on the other hand, insists that “the gods are just,” believing that individuals get what they deserve (V.iii.169). But, in the end, we are left with only a terrifying uncertainty—although the wicked die, the good die along with them, culminating in the awful image of Lear cradling Cordelia's body in his arms. There is goodness in the world of the play, but there is also madness and death, and it is difficult to tell which triumphs in the end.

Authority versus Chaos

King Lear is about political authority as much as it is about family dynamics. Lear is not only a father but also a king, and when he gives away his authority to the unworthy and evil Goneril and Regan, he delivers not only himself and his family but all of Britain into chaos and cruelty. As the two wicked sisters indulge their appetite for power and Edmund begins his own ascension, the kingdom descends into civil strife, and we realize that Lear has destroyed not only his own authority but all authority in Britain. The stable, hierarchal order that Lear initially represents falls apart and disorder engulfs the realm.

The failure of authority in the face of chaos recurs in Lear's wanderings on the heath during the storm. Witnessing the powerful forces of the natural world, Lear comes to understand that he, like the rest of humankind, is insignificant in the world. This realization proves much more important than the realization of his loss of political control, as it compels him to re-prioritize his values and become humble and caring. With this newfound understanding of himself, Lear hopes to be able to confront the chaos in the political realm as well.

Reconciliation

Darkness and unhappiness pervade King Lear, and the devastating Act V represents one of the most tragic endings in all of literature. Nevertheless, the play presents the central relationship—that between Lear and Cordelia—as a dramatic embodiment of true, self-sacrificing love. Rather than despising Lear for banishing her, Cordelia remains devoted, even from afar, and eventually brings an army from a foreign country to rescue him from his tormentors. Lear, meanwhile, learns a tremendously cruel lesson in humility and eventually reaches the point where he can reunite joyfully with Cordelia and experience the balm of her forgiving love. Lear's recognition of the error of his ways is an ingredient vital to reconciliation with Cordelia, not because Cordelia feels wronged by him but because he has understood the sincerity and depth of her love for him. His maturation enables him to bring Cordelia back into his good graces, a testament to love's ability to flourish, even if only fleetingly, amid the horror and chaos that engulf the rest of the play.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Madness

Insanity occupies a central place in the play and is associated with both disorder and hidden wisdom. The Fool, who offers Lear insight in the early sections of the play, offers his counsel in a seemingly mad babble. Later, when Lear himself goes mad, the turmoil in his mind mirrors the chaos that has descended upon his kingdom. At the same time, however, it also provides him with important wisdom by reducing him to his bare humanity, stripped of all royal pretensions. Lear thus learns humility. He is joined in his real madness by Edgar's feigned insanity, which also contains nuggets of wisdom for the king to mine. Meanwhile, Edgar's time as a supposedly insane beggar hardens him and prepares him to defeat Edmund at the close of the play.

Betrayal

Betrayals play a critical role in the play and show the workings of wickedness in both the familial and political realms—here, brothers betray brothers and children betray fathers. Goneril and Regan's betrayal of Lear raises them to power in Britain, where Edmund, who has betrayed both Edgar and Gloucester, joins them. However, the play suggests that betrayers inevitably turn on one another, showing how Goneril and Regan fall out when they both become attracted to Edmund, and how their jealousies of one another ultimately lead to mutual destruction. Additionally, it is important to remember that the entire play is set in motion by Lear's blind, foolish betrayal of Cordelia's love for him, which reinforces that at the heart of every betrayal lies a skewed set of values.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Storm

As Lear wanders about a desolate heath in Act III, a terrible storm, strongly but ambiguously symbolic, rages overhead. In part, the storm echoes Lear's inner turmoil and mounting madness: it is a physical, turbulent natural reflection of Lear's internal confusion. At the same time, the storm embodies the awesome power of nature, which forces the powerless king to recognize his own mortality and human frailty and to cultivate a sense of humility for the first time. The storm may also symbolize some kind of divine justice, as if nature itself is angry about the events in the play. Finally, the meteorological chaos

also symbolizes the political disarray that has engulfed Lear's Britain.

Blindness

Gloucester's physical blindness symbolizes the metaphorical blindness that grips both Gloucester and the play's other father figure, Lear. The parallels between the two men are clear: both have loyal children and disloyal children, both are blind to the truth, and both end up banishing the loyal children and making the wicked one(s) their heir(s). Only when Gloucester has lost the use of his eyes and Lear has gone mad does each realize his tremendous error. It is appropriate that the play brings them together near Dover in Act IV to commiserate about how their blindness to the truth about their children has cost them dearly.

Types of Female Characters in Shakespeare:

Certain types of female characters often resurface in Shakespeare's plays, telling us a great deal about his view of women and their status in Elizabethan and Jacobean society.

The Bawdy Woman

These characters are sexualized, cheeky and flirtatious. They are often working class characters such as the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Margaret in *Much Ado about Nothing* or Audrey in *As you Like It*. Mainly speaking in prose, as befitting their low social status, these characters often use sexual innuendo when conversing. Low class characters like these can get away with more risqué behavior – perhaps because they have no fear of losing social status.

The Tragic Innocent Woman

These women are often pure and chaste at the beginning of the play, and tragically die once their innocence is lost. In stark contrast to his presentation of bawdy women, Shakespeare's treatment of young innocent women is fairly brutal. Once their innocence or chastity is taken away, they are literally killed to signify this loss. These characters are generally courtly, high born characters such as Juliet from *Romeo and Juliet*, Lavinia from *Titus Andronicus* or Ophelia from *Hamlet*. Their high social standing makes their demise seem all the more tragic.

The Scheming Femme Fatal

Lady Macbeth is the archetypal femme fatal. Her manipulation of Macbeth inevitably leads them to their deaths: she commits suicide and he is slain. In her ambition to become Queen, she encourages her husband to murder. King Lear's daughters, Goneril and Regan, plot to inherit their father's fortune. Once again, their ambition leads them to their deaths: Goneril stabs herself after poisoning Regan. Although Shakespeare seems to appreciate the intelligence at work in his femme fatal characters, allowing them to manipulate the men around them, his retribution is brutal and unforgiving.

The Witty, but Unmarriageable Woman

Katherine from *The Taming of The Shrew* is a prime example of the witty, but unmarriageable woman. Feminists have commented that their enjoyment of this play is marred by the fact that a man literally "breaks" Katherine's spirit when Petruchio says "Come on, and kiss me, Kate." – should we really

celebrate this as a happy ending? Similarly, in the plot to *Much Ado About Nothing*, Benedick ultimately conquers the feisty Beatrice by saying, "Peace, I will stop your mouth." These women are presented as clever, bold and independent but are put in their place by the end of the play.

The Married Off Woman

Many of Shakespeare's comedies end with an eligible woman being married off – and therefore being made safe. These women are often very young and passed from their father's care to their new husband's. More often than not, these are high-born characters such as Miranda in *The Tempest* who is married to Ferdinand, Helena and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Women Who Dress as Men

Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Viola in *Twelfth Night* both dress as men. Consequently, they are able to play a more active role in the play's narrative. As "men", these characters have more freedom, highlighting the lack of social liberty for women in Shakespeare's society.

Falsely Accused of Adultery

Women in Shakespeare's plays are sometimes wrongly accused of adultery and suffer greatly as a result. For example, Desdemona is killed by Othello who supposes her infidelity and Hero falls terribly ill when she is falsely accused by Claudio. It seems that Shakespeare's women are judged by their sexuality even when they remain faithful to their husbands and husbands-to-be. Some feminists believe that this demonstrates a male insecurity about female sexuality.