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King Lear: Research based essay

Tragedy in King Lear: “Which aspects of the play are the most tragic and how does Shakespeare use them?”

King Lear is a tragedy written at the beginning of the 17th century by William Shakespeare. Set in the medieval England, the play portrays King Lear, an old king of England, who divides up his kingdom and gives it away between his daughters. That event sets of his tragedy, during which he loses all of his power, is thrown away and rejected by his daughters, his kingdom plunges into chaos, ending with Lear's death. Alongside Lear's story, the viewer witnesses how the lord of Gloucester is used and fooled by his bastard son. Both of these characters end up abused, mistreated, and are considered as tragic characters by the Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Yet, they are not the only main aspects of that play that make King Lear a tragedy.

One of the themes in King Lear are the relationship between parents and children. In the beginning of the play, the viewer is immediately introduced to both families: Gloucester and his two sons, and Lear with his daughters. At first, both of these families look relatively close to each other, but very quickly the tragic element of the play is introduced: the families start to break down, starting with Lear, who does not see through the lies of his 2 daughters, who falsely promise that they love him, is enraged by Cordelia's response. In answer to her “Nothing”, he banishes her from the kingdom, breaking up his family. But it's only the beginning of the play, and matters will get only worse for Lear. The viewer eventually learns that Goneril and Regan's declarations were fake, and that they will continue to mistreat their father, reducing his entourage on every single occasion and bluntly disrespecting him. When Lear finally learns who truly cheated him, he proceeds to curse his own daughters. Yet his already weak position is reflected in his curse, as G. Wilson-Knight points it out: after a steady decline of Lear's power, his curse on the two sisters seems slightly comical when compared to the curse laid upon Cordelia and Kent. That said, the division in Lear's family is complete: Cordelia is in France, Lear charges out of Regan's castle into the thunderstorm, and the two sisters start to fight each other over their affection for Edmond, despite them being married. Gloucester and his sons are not too far behind Lear's family: Edmond, Gloucester's bastard son, tricks his father into believing that Edgar, Gloucester's legitimate son, is preparing a plot on his father's life. Gloucester, with his clouded judgement similar to Lear's, banishes Edgar and then proceeds to trust Edmond with everything. And like Lear, he finds himself betrayed by Edmond, his own son. All of this series of betrayals, trickery and blindness upset the natural order of life, in which families should stay together, parents supporting their children and children respecting their parents. Yet the viewer of this play sees none of this happen. This destabilisation of the very fundamental order of the society, which is the family, find it's way into other aspects of England: the thunderstorm that is seen throughout the end of Act 2 and the integrity of Act 3 can be seen as the very manifestation of Lear's rage. Nature also reflects itself in the kingdom: the state is in a massive disorder after being divided in two, and walks towards an inevitable conflict with France. This conflict with nature is one of the main aspects of the play that make it a tragedy.

Yet another, although more specific aspect of the play, is the theme of madness in the play. Starting from Act 2, the viewer sees both of the tragic heroes of the play become more and more powerless, and finally succumb to their primary instincts. The first to fall is Lear, during the thunderstorm. The erosion caused by the damage inflicted by his daughters is quickened by the weather with which he needs to fight with. Shortly after he leaves Regan's castle, Lear succumbs to madness, with his comical entourage: a fool that constantly criticises and mocks him, and Kent in disguise. Already in Scene 2 of Act 3 the viewer can see his madness: in the end of the scene he says “My wits begin to turn.”, and quits to find some place to sleep. He then meets Edgar, disguised as a madman, Tom'o'Bedlam. This madness creates a quite strong effect on the viewer, causing him to feel more pity for the old king, who descended to a level as low as this. But Shakespeare does not let the viewers forget that there's another tragic hero of the play: Gloucester. Betrayed by his bastard son whom he deeply trusted, blinded, he is forced to travel the land with the company of his son Edgar, who does not reveal his identity and proceeds to guide his father as different characters. During these travels, Gloucester contemplates upon the world, the order of the society, and finally, he thinks about throwing himself down the cliffs of Dover. After witnessing the gigantic disruption of nature from previous acts, Lear and Gloucester's madness deepen the tragic feel of the play. The sheer manifestation of powerlessness, destruction and lack of hope that these characters have at that point really mark their tragic downfall. This madness completes their definition of tragic heroes.

With Lear, Gloucester and other forces of good at the bottom at the end of Act 4, it is time for Shakespeare to give these characters some hope. Gloucester is convinced that life is still worth living, and abandons his pursuit of death. Lear, on the other hand, rejoins with Cordelia and is quickly cured from his madness. The contact with his good daughter restores his senses and makes him realize how wrong he was before and how low he has fallen. With all of these meetings and reconciliation, Shakespeare makes the viewer think that the good side still has some hope: the good is all back together, the Duke of Albany starts to oppose his wife and her sister, Cornwall dies off-stage by a wound he got by fighting a servant, and in general the camp of the evil is divided up. And this is where Shakespeare decides to hammer everyone into the ground. In the spirit of his tragedies, Shakespeare proceeds to practically kill all characters of the play: Gloucester dies from a heart attack when he discovers that Edgar was with him all along, Regan is poisoned by Gonerill, who then commits suicide, Edmond is killed by Edgar, Cordelia is executed by Edmond's henchmen, Lear dies from sorrow over Cordelia's death, and Kent leaves with a suggestion that he will end his life as well after the play is over. The death of almost all characters is common in Shakespeare's tragedies, to really mark the end of the play and really make the audience feel pity for these characters. The end in King Lear is particularly demoralizing because the characters could already see the end of their worries, they would be able to rest after their struggle and hope for a happy ending, but all of these dreams are torn apart by Shakespeare's pen. The play ends as Aristotle defined it to end: with the death of the main tragic hero, only that Shakespeare takes it a step above to really crush any hope remaining.

At the end of the day, after the curtains are drawn, and the viewers will pour out of the theatre, the aspect that will hit the the most will be the end of the play. It is the apparition of hope after all of the suffering that everyone has endured, like Cordelia's disinheritance, Gloucester having his eyes plucked out and having him become almost insane, Edgar and Kent forced to come back in disguise, and finally Lear abused, suffering from insanity. There are powerful themes and aspects throughout the play, but they only lead to the apotheosis of the tragedy: after all the abuse and mistreatment that everyone has suffered, they are not greeted by comfort. Instead, Shakespeare simply stabs them with his pen and leave them to die.