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English 240

14 December 2020

The Great Chain of Being

King Lear was written in the Elizabethan era, an era well known for being one of the most crucial periods in English history. Given its time, *King Lear* is one of the mediums that truly explored the nature of the Elizabethan era. The play itself contained many illustrations demonstrating the natural social constructs during Shakespeare's time. However, given its unique position in history, the "golden era" of England needs to be fully fleshed out in its entire cultivation. The zeitgeist of the time was well known for its development in culture through the renaissance, and its global domination in power through colonization. But most importantly, the Christian belief of "The Great Chain of Being", was one of the most essential aspects of the natural state involving the Elizabethan era. The concept of it derives from the significance of a hierarchy that illustrates the natural order in society. Given its Christian roots, the hierarchy ranked in the typical biblical fashion of the higher-ups consisting of God and angels, slowly ranking down to minerals. In the Elizabethan era, this phenomenon was the natural social construct for society, which Shakespeare highly valued in his plays. As the Fairfield university would say it, "Shakespeare sincerely believed in the Divine Order, and many of his plays revolve around this belief. Macbeth, Taming of the Shrew, Romeo and Juliet, and Hamlet are just a few of the plays that reflect Shakespeare's belief in the Great Chain of Being and his desire to

maintain God's Order.” In regards to it in *King Lear*, the entire nature of the Elizabethan era is the singular premise that is through its Great Chain of Being. Its significance of it all is through the medium that is the family dynamics of the parent against child. The most notable relationships truly demonstrating this nature consist of King Lear and his daughters, Gloucester and his sons, and their defiance to the natural order.

The concept of the natural order in *King Lear*'s case is often mostly illustrated in the same fashion as the order of the hierarchy. In this case, it's seen through King Lear's relationship with his daughters. As the academics of Brooklyn College would put it, “Shakespeare's *King Lear* simultaneous disorder in family relationships and in the state (child ruling parent, subject ruling king) is reflected in the disorder of Lear's mind as well as in the disorder of nature.” The disorder in family relationships refers to King Lear's main conflict revolving around his three daughters. As we know, the favoritism towards Cordelia, his youngest, is the most obvious case of the natural order. The common motif of the youngest sibling being praised while the oldest is usually not desired for. The characters even play into their natural order, Cordelia is highly regarded as a saint while Goneril and Regan are portrayed as ruthless and aggressive individuals, both challenging their father against his authority. As we see in Act 2, Scene 3-4, the back and forth dialogue through it all starts to truly illustrate the beginning of the demise of the king. His sudden realization of the disbelief in his daughter's action pushes him into madness and truly shows the natural order being trampled over. This leads to the entire premise being against the test of the natural order, as King Lear's tragic decision of providing them with his authority dilutes the natural state of hierarchy. This failure in maintaining the natural order leads to the main conflict in the play and is truly the entire establishment of the play.

Furthermore, King Lear's family isn't the only repercussion for this failure in the natural order, Gloucester and his two sons also become disarray in the scheme of it all. Its parallelism with King Lear's family dynamics is uncanny, also being illustrated as a father with favoritism with a weak relationship with his children. It also makes for an interesting illustration demonstrating that King Lear isn't the only fate to fall from the hands of his own children. As N.B. from Shakespeare's inquiries would say, "The same Nature that Lear refers to is the same that Edmund swears his allegiance to. Edmund ignores the natural order of things, as decided by society, by attempting to take his brother Edgar's rightful birthright." In this case however, his illegitimate son, Edmund, acting as the scapegoat for his real son, Edgar. This family dynamic is the most obvious case of parent against child/child against parent. As previously aligned with King Lear's fate, the natural order in which it is given is also trampled over through the means of Edmund. Given his status as a bastard, his most common natural order in his regards derives from his social order against his brother and father. As Edmund states in act 1, scene 2 "I only worship what's natural, not what's manmade. Why should I let myself be tortured by man made social customs that deprive me of my rights simply because I was born twelve or fourteen months later than my older brother? Why do they call me "bastard" and "lowlife" when I'm just as gifted in mind and body as legitimate children?" Edmund's proclamation of injustice for his discrimination in life is from the demise of the natural order. His actions and behavior go against all authority of his parents, consequently unbalancing the natural order.

To fully perceive the repercussions of it all, the most common variable it derives from is its source of not abiding by the natural order. Shakespeare demonstrated in *King Lear* that the repercussions that will occur if one were to go against the natural order. One rebellion to the

natural order will end in the destruction of all things in *King Lear*. This natural order is the one most significant and symbolic element to occur in the play. King Lear himself acts as the symbol of authority and the balance for natural order. Once that balance is gone, the pendulum swings to the extreme of things and starts to illustrate the importance of the natural order in the play. All the variables that acted to the demise of the order, Edmund and Goneril/Regan, all represent the complete opposite of the tenets provided. This fully allows the tragedy to reveal the unearthly law of the natural order. As we see through Edmund's betrayal to his father and brother and Goneril/Regan's to their father and sister, the parallelism exists to truly emphasize just how important the natural order is. By this law, Edmund breaks it through his ignorance to his father which serves as him abandoning the natural order which immediately brings consequences to him, same for Goneril/Regan.

This common motif of demise from hindering the natural order in *King Lear* truly emphasizes Shakespeare's devotion towards the concept of The Great Chain social construct. As we see throughout the play, the constant push-pull dynamics occur from the events arising from the toppling of the hierarchy that only breeds more anguish and destruction, truly living up as a tragedy. These portrayals of human nature and its social constructs become the premise of conflict for *King Lear*. Not only is this concept simply a Christian belief deriving from the Elizabethan era, but its true nature also lies within Shakespeare's illustration of *King Lear* in his current natural order and the realism elements surrounding it. The contradictions provided through Edmund and Goneril/Regan are the voice of reason against the acts of the natural order, providing justice in their cases for their discrimination within their family dynamics. Given its significance, this naturally occurring phenomena for the social constructs of society was heavily

utilized by Shakespeare to act as a medium that fully displayed the realism behind the current natural order in the Elizabethan era.

Word Count: 1,280

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