Explore the ways in which Shakespeare treats the theme of control in King Lear. You must relate your discussion to relevant contextual factors and ideas from your critical reading.

Shakespeare explores the theme of control by presenting the complex theme in multiple ways. Control is presented as misused since once the characters gain it, their selfish and corrupt nature is bought to light. Lear however, has the most control at the start of the play. His failure however, to distinguish between appearance and reality results in his downfall causing him to lose all control and become helpless throughout the course of the play. Shakespeare emphasises this drastic shift in control via the changing in the attitudes of different characters and illustrates how demands are now taken from Lear’s daughters.

Control is presented as central to the play as when Lear divides his kingdom between two of his daughters, Goneril and Regan, they then betray Lear leaving him with no control. At the start of the play, Lear’s strong sense of control is portrayed via his dialogue as he says, “Come not between the dragon and his wrath”, the use of the metaphor with Lear referring to himself as the “dragon” illustrates Lear’s awareness of his own power and control as he compares himself to a powerful beast. His sense of control as well as his power and authority is portrayed via his use of forceful language as he demands to “come not” and refers to his “wrath” emphasises his authority and his status as King during this time the King was seen as divine appointed by God himself therefore as a result of societal attitudes, Lear was in full control of his kingdom.

Kent however, foreshadows the shift in control as despite Lear’s authority, he demands Lear to “see better Lear”, the use of the imperative portrays Kent demanding the King to distinguish the false appearances of Goneril and Regan with the honesty of Cordelia. Lear’s failure to “see better” results in his complete loss of control. Goneril and Regan can be seen to have more of a control over Lear via their manipulative language therefore entrapping him as oppose to Cordelia who is honest. They exaggerate their love for Lear greatly claiming it is “dearer than eyesight”, this simile can be seen as ironic as it emphasises Lear’s inability to see the truth.

Shakespeare aims to warn his audience against threatening the existing hierarchy by emphasising that it is appointed by God since the shift in control results of the disruption of natural order. This is demonstrated by the uprising of nature as the storm can be seen as natures “rage” since as soon as Lear is betrayed by his daughters, nature seems to react. The unnatural shift in control can be seen to “crack natures moulds” emphasising that by Goneril and Regan gaining control, they have gone against God and natures “moulds” by breaking away from Lear and being evil. Lear further refers to himself as a “despised old man” which contrasts to his previous reference of himself as a “dragon” therefore demonstrating his loss of control.

Shakespeare presents Lear’s loss of control via the disobedience of other characters. This is emphasised by the way Lear is addressed by other characters as at the start of the play, Kent refers to Lear as “Royal Lear, whom I have ever honoured as my King”, this demonstrates the scale of respect Lear has as a result of his control since he can exile individuals as a result of disrespect just as he did with Kent and his own daughter emphasising his scale of control. This directly contrasts with Oswald’s reference to Lear as “My Lady’s father” when Lear asked him “who am I”. This portrays that his daughters’ control has resulted in his disrespect which is what allows his daughters to control him. Shakespeare’s effective use of the fool to portray the truth captures the fact that Lear’s loss of control is a result of his own doings as “thou gav’st them the rod and put’st down thine own breeches” portraying that Lear has no one to blame but himself. This is supported by Michael Billington as he believes the fool is both Lear’s outer critic and inner conscience therefore emphasising his truthful input. This however can be seen to contrast the scene when “some servant for some reason” chose to intervene when Gloucester was being tortures. Tol Stoy was unable to comprehend this however it can be seen to represent true loyalty as well as humanity which is rare in this play.

Shakespeare also presents Edmund as having a strong lust for control as he calls upon the gods to “stand up for bastards” and goes to large extents in order to manipulate Gloucester that Edgar is plotting his murder. This is significant as it illustrates how far Edmund is willing to go as he even harms himself as part of his plan – “Look sir, I bleed”. This is supported by Greenblatt who believes mental anguish is closely intertwined with physical anguish therefore capturing Edmunds extreme lust for control resulting in his rebellion against the Jacobean social structure. When he does become the Earl of Gloucester, he orders the murder of Cordelia and Lear. This illustrates Shakespeare’s emphasis on the unnatural shift in control and how it results in distraction therefore portraying that God’s distribution of control should not be interfered with as it is for the best. Shakespeare demonstrates this as the characters who rebelled against the control structure all die at the end of the play, this is ironic as the characters that are driven by control, ultimately end up powerless. However, their actions also result in the death of Lear and Cordelia emphasising the idea that actions have major consequences.

In conclusion, Shakespeare presents control as rigidly embedded within the Jacobean social structure and that the rebelling of the natural divine hierarchy, put in place by God, results in destruction. This is supported by David Kastan who says “Shakespeare’s characters are not able to create new worlds for themselves from the ruins of the old one” therefore emphasising the scale of the destruction as the death of Lear and Cordelia demonstrates that there is no revival from this doom as a result of unnatural shift in control.