

# Poetic Justice

## Poetic Justice Definition

In literature, poetic justice is an ideal form of justice, in which the good characters are rewarded and the bad characters are punished, by an ironic twist of fate. It is a strong literary view that all forms of literature must convey [moral](#) lessons. Therefore, writers employ poetic justice to conform to moral principles.

For instance, if a [character](#) in a novel is malicious and without compassion in the novel, he is seen to have gone beyond improvement. Then, the principles of morality demand his character to experience a twist in his fate and be punished. Similarly, the characters who have suffered at his hand must be rewarded at the same time.

## Examples of Poetic Justice in Literature

Let us analyze a few examples of poetic justice in Literature:

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### Example #1: *King Lear* (By William Shakespeare)

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In Shakespeare's *King Lear* we see the evil characters – Goneril, Regan, Oswald, and Edmund – thrive throughout the play. The good characters – Lear, Gloucester, Kent, Cordelia, and Edgar – suffer long and hard. We see the good characters turn to gods, but they are rarely answered. Lear, in Act 2, Scene 4 calls upon heaven in a most pitiful manner:

“... O heavens!

If you do love old men, if your sweet sway

Show obedience, if you yourselves are old,

Make it your cause. Send down, and take my part!”

Lear loses his kingdom by the conspiracies of his daughters Goneril and Regan, who are supported by Edmund. At Dover, Edmund-led English troops defeat the Cordelia-led French troops, and Cordelia and Lear are imprisoned.

Cordelia is executed in the prison, and Lear dies of grief at his daughter's death. Despite all the suffering that good undergoes, the evil is punished. Goneril poisons her sister Regan due to jealousy over Edmund. Later, she kills herself when her disloyalty is exposed to Albany. In a climactic scene, Edgar kills Edmund. In Act 5, Scene 3 he says:

“My name is Edgar, and thy father's son.  
*The gods are just*, and of our pleasant vices  
Make instruments to plague us.  
The dark and vicious place where thee he got  
Cost him his eyes.”

Here, “The gods are just” because they punish the evil for their evil actions.

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### **Example #2: *Oliver Twist* (By Charles Dickens)**

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We see the role of poetic justice in the cruel character Mr. Bumble, in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. Mr. Bumble was a beadle in the town where Oliver was born – in charge of the orphanage and other charitable institutions in the town. He is a sadist and enjoys torturing the poor orphans.

Bumble marries Mrs. Corney for money, and becomes master of her workhouse. Here his fate takes a twist as he loses his post as a beadle, and his new wife does not allow him to become a master of her workhouse. She beats him and humiliates him, as he himself had done to the poor orphans. Right at the end of the novel, we come to know that both Mr. and Mrs. Bumble end up being so poor that they live in the same workhouse that they once owned.

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### **Example #3: *Oedipus Rex* (By Sophocles)**

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A classic example of poetic justice is found in the Greek [tragedy](#) *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles. In the play, Oedipus has committed the crime of defying gods by trying to escape his fate. Therefore, he left the kingdom he lived in, and went to the new kingdom of Thebes. He killed the king of the city after a quarrel, and married the queen.

Later, we learn that the prophecy turned out true, as the man he killed turned out to be his father, and the queen his own mother. The Greek believed their destinies were predetermined – shaped by the gods and goddesses. Whosoever tried to defy them, committed a sin and deserved punishment.

### **Function of Poetic Justice**

Generally, the purpose of poetic justice in literature is to adhere by the universal code of morality, in that virtue triumphs vice. The idea of justice in literary texts manifests the moral principle that virtue deserves a reward, and vices earn punishment.

In addition, readers often identify with the good characters. They feel emotionally attached to them, and feel for them when they suffer at the hands of the wicked characters. Naturally, readers want the good characters to triumph and be rewarded; but they equally wish the bad characters to be penalized for their evilness. Thus, poetic justice offers contentment and [resolution](#).