

Tragic Hero and Heroine in
William Shakespeare's *King Lear*?

**Are Lear and Cordelia
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It has been made obvious that Lear is an aged man and a fool with personal defects and weaknesses all throughout the play. Had he been wise enough all the characters involved in the action would not have confronted their tragic ends. It is true that Lear has failed to deal with the situation in which he has not been humoured by his dearest daughter, and consequently his pride and arrogance have been injured especially in the presence of his entourage. He could have treated the situation in a way other than the one he did, but he did not. That he behaved with Cordelia and his other two daughters in the way he did has been the outcome of what his personality has imposed upon him. It is also true that Cordelia shares her father the defects that lead them to their tragic death. Cordelia's refusal to humour Lear and to satisfy his appetite for flattery contributes to their tragedy. Instead, Cordelia's refusal has ignited the *fire* of wrath within the heart of Lear. She could have extinguished that *fire* and comforted him with some sweet words of adulation. It must be noted, therefore, that not only is Lear responsible for the catastrophe, but also Cordelia who has already and unwittingly agitated her father's emotions and caused him to deprive her of inheritance and to decide what determines their inevitable end. Her refusal to humour her father in the court may be considered a crime according to the standards of royalty which are related to paying respect and homage to authority. Not to obey the wish of royalty in certain situations brings about anger and subsequent decisions on the part of the sovereign who will inevitably consider it an abuse. Marilyn French comments on this viewpoint saying that

Cordelia's crime in the court is that she is not swayed by the desire for power and possession into falsifying her feelings: She does not feed Lear's delusion of control. Nor does Kent. Both are therefore deprived of power and possession, the real goods of their society, as the fool continually reminds Lear. But the Fool, in despair,

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Kent, with firm confidence, and Cordelia, sorrowfully,
hold to another good, another truth.¹

As a typical character, Cordelia is an innocent girl who loves her father most as any other innocent girl in the world. Her individuality is accounted for by her inability to utter words of praise for her father in the presence of his royal followers, and thus she contributes to her tragic end. Although her father badly treats her the latter receives infinite love and generosity from her, for Lear's "pride is not just humbled, it is reduced from supreme autocratic power to utter penury and insanity; his quarrel with Cordelia is resolved in abject contrition from him and unlimited charity from her,"² as pointed out by Nicholas Brooke.

Despite the fact that the first scene of the play presents the ritual during which Lear divides his kingdom among his daughters the scene displays ridiculous practices on the part of Lear, the scene is considered then the spring board from which all the significant events and situations are to follow; it is childish that a king like Lear, formidable as he is, sells his kingdom at the price of words, just words and nothing else. In this respect Brooke believes that the scene is to draw our attention to subsequent events and not to the silly event contained in it—the division of the kingdom. The scene, he believes,

directs our attention forwards into what follows, not backwards into quaint speculation as to why Lear prepares a division of his kingdom into three *equal* parts, and then holds a competition to decide who gets the largest. Of course that is silly, regarded as dramatic action; but it is not dramatic in that sense, it is a ritual of the royal prerogative. And as a ritual, it is no sillier than most—for instance the official 'Opening' of a building that has been in full use for months or years.³

Lear, on the other hand, has suffered much from horror and anguish as soon as he begins to learn that the powers of evil have been working against him. His decision to divide the kingdom between his two wicked daughters, Goneril and Regan, turns things upside down, for he begins to realize that his two daughters with whom he decides to live alternately begin to gradually neglect him. He is then left helpless and submissive to those whom he has already nourished. This situation is reminiscent of animal behaviour that is usually found in the jungle. Alfred Harbage calls this situation as the "infiltration of animality in the human world, naked cruelty and appetite."⁴ Only occasionally does Lear express his remorse for his inability to muster what he has already lost—his kingdom,

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sovereignty, and children. He and Cordelia have been taken as prisoners at the end of the play. Their union and subsequent developments that account for Cordelia's murder at the commands of Edmund, and Lear's ignorance of her death are meant to widen the tragedy of both of them:

LEAR. We two alone will sing like birds i' the case.
When thou dost ask me blessing. I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies. ⁵

(V. iii. 9-13)

Harbage concludes that the play

ends as it begins in an allegorical grouping, commemorating humanity's long agonized, and continuing struggle to be human. The larger meaning gives our tears the dignity of an act of ratification and gratitude: to these still figures we have pitied we owe the gift of feeling pity. ⁶

Lear's defective behaviour towards his most favourite daughter can be interpreted in terms of his lack of self-control and his passion of wrath which pushes him to take rash and hasty decisions, for the

matter is already decided. Lear learns back to enjoy the culmination of the performance he has staged. But the words do not come, and he immediately casts her off. And to his fault of vanity is joined the fault of rashness. When his pride receives an affront he reacts intemperarily. ⁷

So, Lear's passions of wrath and rashness react and work instead of his reason.

An idea to illustrate the contrastive elements in the play lies in the fact that Lear at the beginning of the play is not Lear at its end. Foolery has been converted into wisdom throughout suffering. Thus, the play postulates the issue of education as an essential theme. George Ian Duthie points out that the play deals with "conversion, spiritual regeneration, [and] the attainment of salvation," ⁸ as major themes in the play. To use John Dover Wilson's words, Lear dies

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redeemed and not disobedient: "The Lear that dies is not a Lear defiant, but a Lear redeemed. His education is complete, his regeneration accomplished."⁹ Because of his folly and spiritual blindness, Lear rejects Cordelia. But he then kneels to her as soon as he gets spiritual insight and wisdom. The entire play is built up by means of contrast, the most powerful of all structural devices. Contrast pervades almost every minute detail in the play. An example of contrast shows a great gap between an old king with strong physique and formidable personality on the one hand, and his foolish attitudes and decisions on the other. The most foolish yet devastating decision made by Lear is his demand to be titular King retaining his title as king and prerogative rights and giving up the act of ruling. He decides that his kingdom should be ruled by his daughters with the help of their husbands with a view to supervising them as titular King, unaware of the fact that what he has done is just to destroy him and his children. The age itself in which this play was written and presented on the stage was one of contrast in almost everything. This is the reason why E. A. G. Lamborn and G. B. Harrison say the following:

'It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness.' Men who had read Lucretius still believed stoutly in witchcraft; Men who knew Socrates as a friend could none the less approve torture, burning, mutilation; men who had learned to smile at the old astronomy believed firmly that the fate of men could be read in the stars that rose on their birth.¹⁰

Obviously, in the first scene, Lear seems to hold a public sale at which not *goods* but emotions of love are to be sold and shown towards him, and the best territory of his kingdom will be given to the daughter who loves him best of the three. As indicated in the narrative, before the play begins, Lear divides the kingdom among his three daughters in such a way that Regan and Goneril will have equal portions and Cordelia will have a portion larger than theirs. This is made in this way because he has been quite confident that her love for him is greater than the other two daughters'. But the great gap between what he expects and what Cordelia utters concerning her love for him precipitates a great and horrible shock to him. Having received the adulation of both Goneril and Regan, he turns to Cordelia who he thinks will excel or do something better than what her sisters have already made:

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Cordelia. [aside] Then poor Cordelia!
And yet not so, since I am sure my love's
More ponderous than my tongue.
Lear. To thee and thine hereditary ever
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
No less in space, validity and pleasure
Than that conferred on Goneril. Now our joy,
Although the last, not least, to whose love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interested, what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
Cordelia. Nothing my lord.

(I. i. 78-91)

This shows that Cordelia should not be exempted from the blame laid upon her father's fault. His mischievous behaviour is prompted by her misuse of words which he considers a deliberate show of disrespect. She does not learn how to comfort and humour her father. Being the youngest offspring of her father, she is not mature enough to learn one fact about her father's love for flattery who in certain moments of weakness likes to be praised excessively. In this respect, Duthie points out that there

Are critics who feel disposed to blame her somewhat in the first scene. Surely they think she is a little too blunt—surely her affection for her father might have led her to pardon his error, and to humour him a little.¹¹

Cordelia does not learn how to comfort her father, for she could have easily composed and produced words which could have reflected her true love for him. Her fault is that she fails to utter truthful yet genuine words to express her love and gratitude towards her father. Therefore, it may be concluded that all three daughters exhibit faulty behaviour towards their father. Goneril and Regan show hypocritical words; Cordelia, high pride. Coleridge says that there "is something of disgust at the ruthless hypocrisy of her sisters, and some little of faulty admixture of pride and sullenness in Cordelia's 'Nothing'."¹² Cordelia's word "Nothing" may be ironically employed, for, it may describe Lear's personality in moments of weakness as being *nothing*. As a matter of fact, he really has become nothing as he does not possess a rational and orthodox mind to depend upon, and at the same time he does not depend upon the minds of others. This is well expressed when he dismisses Kent from his presence as the latter tries to

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amend the wrong judgment he has already committed. Lear, therefore has become nothing out of which comes nothing as soon as he has abdicated the throne—an idea in which he strongly believes and which he always utters. Perhaps ironically, the dramatist allows him to repeat it many times, for it accounts for the entire catastrophe of the characters concerned. Lear offers the throne to those people who will soon become his enemies and treat him as if he were of no significance at all. This indicates that Lear neither has a mind whereby he can produce sound and correct decisions that will preserve his dignity nor does he depend on the sound judgments of his entourage, and therefore, such a person as Lear appears to be soundly described as being *nothing*. Furthermore, Lear's behaviour in the way he does draws him to a state of nothingness that is fully shown in the situation in which he appears to be naked on the heath. Thus, the loss of mind is best suited to his personality in that particular moment, for his decision to leave the throne is to point to his loss of mind, property, power, and above all the entire lives of the royal family. Hence, he has become helpless, submissive and void of any power. Lear, consequently, has lost everything and his loss culminates into *nothing*:

There is a devastating irony in the word "nothing." Cordelia at the critical moment can only utter "Nothing" and Lear replies "Nothing will come of nothing." He is wrong—from this one word "nothing" begins the whole devastating tragedy.¹³

Cordelia, on the other hand might have learned what to say to her father but she did not. She is not like her sisters who have displayed bright and brazen speech whereby they can *buy* the kingdom. She has been asked to bid higher than her sisters and is expected to respond to her father's demand. To his disappointment, Cordelia cannot do anything against her will and principles. She may not be satisfied that she can buy a kingdom at the very cheapest price—just words of adulation. However, Cordelia does not realize that she definitely puts her father in a critical yet shameful situation. Perhaps, she rejects the style employed by her father when dividing the kingdom, which may be identical with the mechanism usually used in an auction. She very well knows that she is very kind to her father and that her kindness towards him exceeds her sisters', despite the fact that he has severely wronged her. At the same time, she very well knows that he will receive evil practices from those whom he has already favoured. Consequently, it has been made obvious then that all sisters know that their father despises truthfulness and favours falsehood, and above all, Cordelia guesses that the foolish practice made by Lear is made only to destroy him:

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Cordelia knows that Lear is rejecting the true and accepting the false. She also knows, or at least clearly suspects, that what he is doing in all probability turn out to his disadvantage as regards his own worldly prosperity and physical welfare. To her sisters she says, 'I know you what you are' (I. i. 272).¹⁴

Thus, Cordelia knows beforehand that her father will be badly treated by her sisters and their husbands: "Use well our father," she asks them, "To your profess'd bosoms I commit him" (I. i. 274-275).

It is worth mentioning that Shakespeare intends to present the protagonist and his family within a social context and within the circle of daily social activities, namely marriage and the subsequent circumstances and outcomes. An atmosphere of social dealings is created, so that the conflict

Is no longer apprehended as a conflict between the individual and society; the conflict is now within society itself. Disorder in the human soul is both the agent and the product of disorder in society. Social order is the condition, as it is the resultant, of sweet and affirmative being, without which man relapses into a beastly and self-destructive individualism.¹⁵

The play displays two contrastive settings, one is the polite and civilized towns, villages, and castles; the other is the realm of savagery and brutishness of beasts and naked madmen. Lear, Edgar (the disguised beggar) and the blind Gloucester have undergone beastly life on the heath. Social ills in society are the outcome of the ills within individuals. Evil breeds evil. The bastardy of Edmund "has such results that we see a 'fault,' where a woman has 'a son for her cradle ere she [has] a husband for her bed.'" ¹⁶ Bastardy in most societies is undesirable for its illegality and its subsequent evil results. Illegal relationships are not only rejected by social institutions but also by revealed religions. Edmund's evil deeds against his father, brother, King Lear, and Cordelia, though fictitious, are to point to the outcome of such an illegal sexual discourse which impregnated Edmund's mother. The question which arises here is who would inherit Gloucester's title and estates. This question upsets Edmund's mind and causes him to attempt to destroy his father and his half-brother Edgar. He has convinced his father that Edgar is plotting against him and at the same time he

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has convinced Edgar that he should hide himself in order to avoid the punishment of his father—an act which enables him to get rid of his brother and at the same time secures his inheritance of all things from Gloucester who believes everything Edmund tells him and arranges for the abdication of everything to him. As a result, social order especially legal relationships among men and women are necessary and should be ultimate for saving discipline:

There is nothing in the play that to cast suspicion upon the rightness of external order—there is much in the play to make us feel that without it we are lost, to affirm that not discipline, but indiscipline destroys. But there is also much to support the view that even discipline will destroy where it is not involved in self-discipline and in love.¹⁷

Shakespeare seems to say that self-centredness, personal interests, and narcissism are destructive powers to the country because they stand in opposition to those values which control, determine, and fix order in the entire country. Order is spoiled when evil characters intervene for their personal aspirations; each has a vision peculiar to himself or herself which reflects nothing but their own personal demands. Personal relationships seem to be governed by those demands, and *King Lear* exhibits personal relationships which are of higher significance than any other Shakespearean tragedy. To Sewell, personal relationships is dealt with in *King Lear* as "an end and not as a means,"¹⁸ for character is determined by personal relationships and not the latter are determined by character. On the contrary, Hamlet's personal relationship with his uncle, mother, and Ophelia, has been determined by the nature of his own character which has led him to his future actions. In *King Lear*, "in a large measure, the nature of the character is revealed in personal relationship."¹⁹ Therefore, as Hamlet's personal relationship can be separated from the nature of his character, personal relationships and character in *King Lear* are inseparable: "Personal relationships are the field of character-fulfilment,"²⁰ as pointed out by Sewell.

Loyalty and personal love are treated as major themes at the beginning of the play. They are the spring-board from which the other characters jump into the area of conflict and action. Lear demands that his three daughters shall express their personal love and loyalty in words towards him. The elder ones manage to satisfy his appetite for praise, whereas the third one fails. When the question of marriage is revealed, Burgandy declares that personal relationship

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should be something of benefit; the King of France, of value; Kent, of loyalty; Goneril and Regan, of self-interests. Both Goneril and Regan are on good terms when their interests meet and at war when their interests are threatened. The epitome of the moral exemplum to be obtained from Shakespeare's exposure of personal relationships on a large scale is to elaborate the themes of loyalty and love; real love turns into something else when material gains intervene into it. Thus, the King of France says:

.....Love is not love
When it mingles with regards that stand
Aloof from the entire point.

(I. i. 141-143)

Adherence to the bond of love and loyalty is found in many characters—the old man who leads the blinded Gloucester to his son Edgar; Cordelia who tries to restore her father to the throne; and Kent who does more than the requirements of his commitments. It is indicated that good and evil are mingled with sensible and practical conduct:

There is indeed throughout the play a deep sense of the evil; and Shakespeare makes it clear that the admixture of good with evil, of evil with "reason," is both proof and product of the fact that, morally, we are members of each other.²¹

It has been made clear that Lear may have been redeemed from his sins through suffering and pain. He realizes how much wrong he has been when badly treating Cordelia, and when dividing the kingdom between his two elder daughters, and when he has distanced himself from any power that might have saved both the throne and himself from being injured and destroyed by them. Redemption can only be obtained by means of good conduct and gracious and rightful behaviour:

Only through grace, perhaps, if at all, can man find blessedness; and Shakespearian tragedy is tragedy simply because in it Fallen Man seeks to find rehabilitation in "infiniteness"—but without grace. The tragedy is in the failure, perhaps the failure is general to the case of Man.²²

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From the start, Lear, as father, character, and King does not show any sign to attract the admiration, identification, and sympathy of the audience. Thus, his fall from good fortune to bad one cannot be placed within the domain of the fall of the tragic hero, whose end evokes pity and fear in spectators for the good inherent in his nature and the human weakness that is to befall him. Like Shakespeare's King Richard II, from the beginning of the play throughout, Lear does not show anything but all signs to indicate his wrongs as father and King simultaneously. Consequently, he cannot be called a tragic hero in the actual sense of the word. Jan Kott presents a significant remark in this regard:

Nearly all Shakespeare's expositions have an amazing speed and directness in the way conflicts are shown and put into action, and the whole tone of the play is set. The exposition of *King Lear* seems to be preposterous if one is to look in it for psychological verisimilitude. A great and powerful king holds a competition of rhetoric among his daughters as to which one of them is best to express her love for him, and makes the division of his kingdom depend on its outcome. He does not see or understand anything: Regan's and Goneril's hypocrisy is all too evident. Regarded as a person, a character, Lear is ridiculous, naïve and stupid. When he goes mad, he can only arouse compassion, never pity and terror.²³

As a conclusion, Lear and Cordelia cannot be regarded as tragic hero and heroine. Spectators do not sympathize with Lear for he, from the start, does not exhibit any sort of behaviour that may make the audience love or at least admire his character; nothing in him can be plausible; from the beginning, he satiates the audience by his foolishness which creates in them a sense of disgust and disappointment that comes from a king responsible for the freedom and welfare of his nation. Concerning Cordelia, she appears two times in the play and only for a very short period of time. The spectators may sympathize with her for the innocence and the sort of kindness she has exhibited towards her father, but not for the kind of mistake which she has committed against her father—not to humour and satisfy his wish for praise and take her part of the divisions and then direct the course of the events to the kind of setting which does not cause any harm to both the kingdom and her family as a whole. She does not deserve her lot. She did all that she could do in the situation in which the dramatist has placed her.

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Notes

1. Marilyn French, *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 231.
2. Nicholas Brooke, *Shakespeare: King Lear*, gen. ed. David Daiches (Woodbury, New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1963), 9.
3. *Ibid.*, 18-19.
4. Alfred Harbage, ed., "Introduction" to *William Shakespeare: the Tragedies, A Collection of Critical Essays*, 128.
5. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1968). All subsequent textual quotations are taken from this source.
6. *Ibid.*, 122.
7. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as quoted in George Ian Duthie, ed., "Introduction," to *William Shakespeare: King Lear*, The New Shakespeare Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), xvi.
8. George Ian Duthie, xx.
9. John Dover Wilson, as quoted in Duthie, xx.
10. E. A. G. Lamborn and G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare: The Man and his Stage* (London: Oxford University Press, n.d.), 67.
11. Duthie, xxiii.
12. Coleridge, in Duthie, xxiii.
13. G. B. Harrison, *Shakespeare's Tragedy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966), 158.
14. Duthie, xxvi.
15. Alfred Sewell, "Character and Society in *King Lear*," in Harbage, 139.
16. *Ibid.*, 140.
17. *Ibid.*, 140.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 141.
21. *Ibid.*, 142.
22. *Ibid.*, 146.
23. Jan Kott, *Shakespeare: Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1975), 102.

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