

Two Wheels of Fortune Within the Plots of King Lear

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare is one of the prominent and leading authors who have been beyond the times and inspired the following authors with their Works. His Works, the plays in particular, not only demonstrate the historical and cultural characteristics of the period but also opens some doors for the societies of every century. That is because he focuses on the universal themes, matters and problems which have been and are still the issues discussed on. The play *King Lear*, for example, is so significant that it contains the problem seen in any family all around the world. The main idea of the play is the father (King Lear) experiences tragic events due to that he believes the lies of two of his daughters (Regan and Goneril), distrusts the frankness and honesty of his third daughter (Cordelia); and portions his heritage out among them unrighteously. Indeed, as a tragic character King Lear commits a tragic flaw and gets punished. The plot of the play is fundamentally constructed on the process of this punishment. On the other hand, there is another story about a father (Earl of Gloucester) and his mistake. In the study the stories of the father King Lear and Earl of Gloucester are discussed and analyzed within the scope of the wheels of fortune. Finally, the aim of the study is to compare and contrast King Lear's story as the main plot and the Earl of Gloucester's story as a sub-plot so as to find out the differences between the tragic hero and a pathetic man.

Introduction

King Lear is one of the successful and significant examples of Shakespearean Tragedies. It is called as a cosmic drama or a cosmic tragedy as well, since it has some characteristics different from Shakespeare's other tragic plays such as *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. In *King Lear* when a tragic mistake is committed not only the characters but also the universe gets demolished. Besides, there are two plots which have similarities but go on in a divertive way. The first one is King Lear's as a tragic hero and the second one is Gloucester's as a miserable human-being. We are presented the journey of these two characters' that make mistakes taking them to the similar catastrophe but having quite different impacts. Therefore, it is better to explain the plots one by one in order to point out what makes the play tragic and what the difference between a tragic hero and a man who cannot be a tragic hero although he experiences similar disappointing events.

Discussion

To begin with, the first scene in the Act I is the most important part of the play, because it includes the lots of the characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy. The scene begins with the dialogue between Kent and Gloucester. They talk about King Lear's dividing his land. It is pointed out Gloucester has two sons Edgar and Edmund. Edmund is his illegitimate son. Their dialogue is so important that it is implied there will be two plots throughout the play one is about King Lear and the other is about Gloucester and his sons. After that, King Lear declares he has decided to divide his kingdom into three. Before explaining it he asks his daughters to tell their feelings and thoughts about him. This is the striking scene in which King Lear makes mistakes preparing his tragic end. Both

Goneril and Regan exaggerate their love towards their father. Regan's "I am made of that self metal as my sister" (I; i; 71) is ironic and includes the truth, yet not in a good way. It can be a foreshadowing for their similar dismissive attitudes towards their father. Cordelia disappoints her father with her speeches full of just the truth but not enough to please him. Then King Lear gets angry with her and changes his mind. He gives her part to his other daughters who have told lies by overestimating their love towards their father too much.

What is more, it is fairly obvious that King Lear's tragic flaws are his desire to be loved, praised and worshipped; his weak love towards Cordelia which changes into anger suddenly when he does not hear what he desires and his unequal love towards his daughters as he expresses he loves Cordelia more than Regan and Goneril. "We see that Lear has confused effusive declaration of love for love itself. He asks only for the illusion of love and does not recognize the real thing when it confronts him. His mistake is even more fundamental in that he does not understand what love is." (Dye, 514). While King Lear is dividing his kingdom into two of his daughters Kent intervenes and says "see better Lear, let me still remain the true blank of thine eye" (I; i; 163-4). He tries to convince Lear to return from his fault but he does not listen to him, instead he dismisses Kent.

Moreover, the dialogue between King Lear and the King of France is significant as well. There the King of France expresses he cannot understand how Lear's great love to Cordelia can suddenly change oppositely. Cordelia says she has not done a dishonorable thing to lose his love, but Lear says "Better thou Hadst not been born, than not t'have pleas'd me better." (I; i; 232- 4). It is pointed out the greatness of his love depends on his getting praised and worshipped. "Lear never really thinks in terms of love: he talks about his kindness and generosity and how much he's given them and how grateful they ought to feel." (Frye, 103). The King of France proposes to marry Cordelia as he thinks she is so innocent that marrying her will be a gift to him. At the end of the scene Regan and Goneril talk to each other about what they will do in the future. It is explicitly seen what they have uttered to their father about their love is a lie and it is foreshadowing of their cruel attitudes towards their father in the future.

Furthermore, the second scene is so essential that Gloucester's plot begins within it. The soliloquy of Gloucester's bastard's son Edmund, is very important, as he mentions a letter which he himself has written but will say to Gloucester that it has been written by Edgar. The letter includes lies that will destroy the love between Gloucester and Edgar. When Gloucester reads it he gets angry with Edgar. During their dialogues Gloucester talks about eclipses in the sun and moon and he says soon after these natural phenomena bad things happen. It is one of the characteristics of the play which make it cosmic drama. Later on, Edmund tells lies to Edgar as well and convinces him that his father is too angry with him. Here we see Machiavellian characteristics of Edmund; he is a good speaker, a good actor, he is manipulating Gloucester and Edgar with his lies very successfully.

Moreover, Shakespeare focuses on each plot one after another so as to make us compare both of the plots while reading the play and because of that, the plots continue in a parallel way. To go on, Kent comes to the Duke of Albany's palace in disguise. He introduces himself to Lear as a strange man and asks Lear to take him under his service. Then Lear hears his daughter and his son-in-law do not love and respect him anymore and he gets furious with them. It is the first time it is realized King Lear has become just Lear. Later on, the Fool comes and talks very obviously and honestly. He expresses the king did wrong by dividing his kingdom to his daughters Goneril and Regan. However he is a fool and no matter what he says is not taken seriously by Lear. He is just responsible for entertaining him. After that Goneril enters and she talks to her father as if he were neither a king nor her father but an old man she has been looking after for years. Lear decides to go to his other daughter Regan. Before leaving, Lear curses his daughter. King Lear experiences his tragic fall step by step; he does not fall down very abruptly and quickly.

Likewise, Edmund goes on manipulating Gloucester and Edgar. When he and Edgar are alone at Gloucester's castle he tells lies to him asks him to leave there as soon as possible. He asks Edgar to pretend to fight with him while their father is approaching. After Edgar runs away Edmund wounds himself so that he makes Gloucester believe his lies very easily. The new version of Iago manages to convince him. "Edmund, though of course

essentially distinguished from Iago, often reminds us of him, and in the soliloquy, 'This is the excellent foppery of the world,' is in the very tone of Iago's discourse on the sovereignty of the will." (Bradley, 202). In this plot Gloucester behaves as if he is a naïve man who believes whatever he hears very easily without questioning. However, "Naïveté and complacency thus provided for the temporary delivery, as they have provided for a similar delivery in our time, of a well-intentioned if imperfect civilization into the hands of a coalition of Machiavellians" like Edmund. (Spencer, 305). It is one of the important points preventing him from being a tragic hero as he does not use his free will which is quite indispensable for a tragic play.

What is more, Lear, comes to Gloucester's castle to meet Regan as she has gone there after hearing his father is about to visit her. He wants to stay with Regan but she rejects it and he feels too much pain when he is treated disrespectfully by his daughter Regan as well. While they are talking Goneril comes. Now Lear is between his daughters neither of whom accepts him. He cannot endure their attitudes and feels great repentance but it is too late:

You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!

You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,

As full of grief as age; wretched in both!

If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts

Against their father, fool me not so much

To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,

And let not women's weapons, water-drops,

Stain my man's cheeks!--No, you unnatural hags,

I will have such revenges on you both

That all the world shall,--I will do such things,--

What they are yet, I know not; but they shall be

The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep;

No, I'll not weep:--

I have full cause of weeping; but this heart

Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws

Or ere I'll weep.--O fool, I shall go mad! (II; iv;265-89).

He curses them and goes out. Soon after his departure interestingly natural phenomena such as tempest and storm begin to happen which demonstrates it is a cosmic tragedy and nature is also influenced by the unacceptable and upsetting incidents happening around Lear.

Lear is alone on the earth he has no place but nature to inhabit. He has thrown down from the highest level to the lowest. He has been deceived as a father by his daughters and is punished as a king by Shakespeare. He is paying the price of his tragic mistake little by little. On the other hand, his feelings towards his daughters Goneril and Regan, to whom he has divided his kingdom, have changed rather oppositely. "It is during and after the storm that characters of the play begin to show their real nature, and from then on we have something unique in Shakespeare: a dramatic world in which the characters are like chess pieces, definitely black or white: black with

Edmund, Goneril, Regan and Cornwall; white with Lear, Cordelia, Edgar, Gloucester, Kent and eventually Albany.” (Frye, 104). Additionally, Lear addresses to the Nature:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
 You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
 Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once,
 That make ingrateful man! (III; ii; 1-12).

Nature gets worse as he goes on his cursing and it becomes so dangerous that no one can bear its intensity if they are outside.

Furthermore, in the third scene of the Act III, it is the first time when King Lear's and Gloucester's plots connect to one another. Shakespeare connects the two wheels of fortune so as to help the audience follow the plots at the same time successfully and also he strengthens the unity of the play. In addition, Gloucester talks to Edmund and expresses he is not content with Regan and the Duke of Cornwall as they have prevented him from helping King Lear. He confesses that he has received a very important letter in which it is written some group of army are approaching to the land and they are planning to get Lear's revenge. He also plans to help the king. However, he has done wrong to tell it to Edmund as he is going to inform the duke.

Gloucester goes to the shuttle at which Lear stays to help him. It is still stormy since “comes that feeling which haunts us in *King Lear*, as though we were witnessing something universal- a conflict not so much of particular persons as of the powers of good and evil in the world.” (Bradley, 216). Gloucester says to Lear “our flesh and blood, my Lord, is grown so vile, that it doth hate what gets it.” (III; iv; 148-9). It demonstrates the similar upsetting situation of Lear and Gloucester. Gloucester emphasizes both have been betrayed by their own children, yet there is very important difference between both of the fathers that Lear himself is the main reason of his disappointing situation, whereas Gloucester is the victim of the cruel plan. This is one of the explicit points in the play making Lear a tragic hero and Gloucester a victim, but not pathetic enough. Indeed, there is a dramatic irony in Gloucester's speech even though he means Edgar as a cruel son; it is not Edgar but Edmund who has abused his father.

The semi-devil Edmund tells Cornwall what Gloucester has said to him recently. He gives the letter in which it is written the French army is preparing to fight them to him. Cornwall promises him that he will be the earl of Gloucester instead of his father. After that, the stewards bring Gloucester and Cornwall questions him. He then plucks out Gloucester's eyes. He screams and calls Edmund to get his revenge, yet Cornwall says Edmund himself has told everything. Gloucester realizes (sees) the reality but it is too late, as he is blind now. He is punished by Humanist Shakespeare; since he cannot see the truth with his own eyes then it is not necessary to have them.

Blind Gloucester has to go on his life outside which is very dangerous because of the storm. “Gloucester's sufferings have made him lose faith in the goodness of the gods and the rationality of the universe” (Rackin, 30). His saying “As flies to wanton boy are we to th'Gods, / They kill us for their sport” (IV; i; 44-5) is so significant that he criticizes Gods in a way which is not accepted by Shakespeare. He does not allow his mortal creatures to

oppose the immortal God and he punishes the ones committing it. Later on, Gloucester tries to commit suicide by jumping into the cliff but he does not manage it, since Edgar, who has disguised himself as a beggar named Tom, has taken him to a safe place from which he jumps but does not die. While they are talking, mad Lear comes. Even though he behaves very strangely his sentences include true points. Edgar says "o matter, and impertinency mix'd,/ Reason in madness. (IV; vi; 73-4). Gloucester's blindness and Lear's madness obviously designate the difference between their mistakes and punishments. The former's mistake is made because of his inability to see the reality with his own eyes, while the latter's mistake is made due to his ill thoughts in his own mind.

What is more, Lear and Cordelia meet and they reconcile. "The restoration of Lear to himself and to Cordelia brings the spiritual climax of the main plot." (McNeir, 199). It is thought they will have a happy end and everything will change into the way they wish, but the expectations get demolished, since at the end of the war between the army under the command of Edmund and the army of the King of France, Edmund's army wins; Lear and Cordelia are captured. Edmund orders the captain to hang Cordelia so that he will get promotion. Goneril, Regan, Albany and Edmund begin to quarrel. Goneril and Regan express their feelings towards Edmund. Then, Goneril poisons Regan and commits suicide. Indeed, Edmund himself causes Goneril and Regan to die, since both of the sisters have fallen in love with him and he has flattered with them at the same time. Albany attempts to kill Edmund but he proposes a duello. Edgar within the uniform of a knight challenges Edmund. They fight Edgar beats him. Then he explains he is Edgar himself. Later on Edgar informs his father Gloucester is dead. The semi-devil Edmund begins to suffer while he is dying and tells Edgar and Albany that he has sent his man to kill Cordelia and so they should be quick to save her. However it is too late. Cordelia has already been dead. She cannot go on her life in a male dominated society and in fact "Cordelia's refusal to compete with her sisters in singing her father's praise is more than just a rebellion against Lear's obvious faults; it is a rebellion against authority" (Allgaier, 1034). Edmund can not bear his wound and maybe his painful repentance and dies too. Lear cannot bear Cordelia's death and he dies as well. At the end the Duke of Albany declares their duty is to restore the social order.

In the play only Edgar, Kent and The Duke of Albany do not die. That is because they have not made any mistake that will cause them to get punished. Goneril and Regan die because of their misusing their father. Cordelia gets murdered as she has hesitated to express her real love towards her father. The Duke of Cornwall is killed due to his very cruel attitude towards Gloucester. Gloucester's eyes are plucked since he has not been able to see the reality with his own eyes. Then he cannot endure it and dies because he has believed Edmund's lies very easily. Edmund dies as well because of his cruel and satanic attitudes towards his father and brother. King Lear dies since he has made a tragic mistake by dividing his kingdom into two of his daughters who do not deserve it.

Edmund has not only the Machiavellian characteristics but also some characteristics of a Devil; therefore, he is semi-devil character. For example, he repents and suffers at the end of the play and then dies. This humanistic characteristic differentiates him from a devil like Iago. The reason why Shakespeare presents Edmund in that way might be because he teaches the audience of his time that although one is a bastard he is a human being as well and he may one day regretful of all the mistakes he has made so far. Shakespeare also demonstrates being bastard or something else is not the mistake of that person, as no one has any right to choose his/ her identity when he/she is born.

Moreover, Kent and Fool are the other characters who have significant roles in the play. Kent represents the kingly qualities Lear has lost and Fool stands for the human qualities he has forgotten. At the end of the play King Lear regains his identity before he dies and so Kent and Fool finish their duty. Throughout the play both of them accompany Lear and they are always on his side even in his very weak and bad days.

In addition to King Lear's plot and Gloucester's plot, as the main characters of their plots they have different positions as well. King Lear is the tragic hero since he has the characteristics such as being mostly a noble man who has vanity to be loved, praised and worshipped as a tragic flaw. He decides in isolation and uses his freewill to divide his kingdom which is his tragic mistake. He goes identity crisis when he realizes his daughters Goneril and

Regan to whom he has divided his kingdom do not want him. Then he reaches the point of no return. At the end he pays the price of his tragic mistake by death. All of these factors help him gain the title of a tragic hero. However Gloucester is between being a tragic hero and a pathetic victim. Due to the fact that "Gloucester's personality is orchestrated in a lower key than Lear's. His language lacks Lear's impassioned poetry, and his mind does not go as directly to the heart of a problem as Lear's." (Ellis, 284); and besides, he has not a tragic flaw which can cause him to make a tragic mistake that may take him to the point of no return at which he might experience identity crisis because of which he will die he is obviously not a tragic hero. On the other hand because he is not as innocent as a character that is called a pathetic victim he does not have that title either. Indeed, Gloucester makes a mistake by getting deceived by Edmund. His flaw is his believing the wicked boy very easily without questioning. He has a flaw but not a tragic one; otherwise everybody would be a tragic hero as everybody has flaws and makes mistakes.

Conclusion

Taking everything into account, in *King Lear* Shakespeare presents tragedy of a King who has troubles with his identity as a king and a father. He treats his daughters as if he were a Godlike King rather than their father. Besides, Gloucester is another father whose story is also pointed out in the play as a subplot. The reason why his plot is told as well as Lear's plot is because Shakespeare obviously emphasizes King Lear's tragedy is not caused by his fault in his fatherhood. If it were like that then Gloucester's story would be tragic as well since he is a father who has wrongness in his fatherhood too. Finally, within these two plots Shakespeare shows the difference between King Lear as a tragic hero who is a round character and Gloucester as a human being who is a flat character and between a tragic plot and non-tragic plot.

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