

KING LEAR CHARACTER STUDY

CRITICAL COMMENTS ON THE CHARACTER OF KING LEAR: (AQ 3)

- 📖 **BK STUART, 19767** – “Lear would rather have flattery than the truth”

- 📖 **WILLIAM HAZLITT** (Shakespearean scholar) says it is Lear’s “**blindness to everything but the dictates of his passions or affections, that produces all his misfortunes**”

- 📖 **FRANK KERMODE** - “the love he seeks is not the sort that can be offered in formal or subservient expressions”

- 📖 **CHARLES LAMB** – “Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage”
 - “to see Lear acted [...] has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting”

- 📖 **HAL HOLBROOK** - “boisterous, demanding, arrogant. He expects absolute obedience”.
 - He is “not a man of conscious intellect”
 - “Lear slips into madness...a direct result of Lear’s refusal to face the awful truth that has exploded in his mind”
 - “the paranoia of age is stalking him”
 - “Lear is not a man of conscious intellect”
 - “He has clung steadfastly to the conviction that he is a loving father, despite all evidence on the contrary”

- 📖 **ARNOLD KETTLE** – “Lear is a hero”
 - “Lear’s madness is not so much a breakdown as a breakthrough. It is necessary”.
 - “It is through his madness [...] that Lear comes to a new outlook on life”
 - “his incapacity to deal with the inhumanity of the new people is what drives him into a solidarity and later, an identification with the poor”

GENERAL NOTES ON THE KING'S CHARACTER:

- Lear is a tyrannical patriarch and a complex tragic hero (this is someone who is from noble birth and who is brought down by the circumstances of the tragedy).
- The fact that the tragedy is brought on him, the king, could provoke feelings of concern in the audience as they are lower than him, so if it could happen to him it could happen to anyone.
- However, we do begin to sympathise with him as in Act 2 as his better qualities are revealed. For example, his hiring of Kent/Caius shows that he inspires loyalty and his interaction with the Fool shows a more tolerant side to his nature.
- His insanity is a learning process. He needs to suffer to improve his understanding of himself and the society around him.
- Lear is preoccupied with appearances but as the play progresses he learns to distinguish between appearances and reality and becomes much more self-critical as he emerges into a more humble, loving and attractive character.
- However, some people believe that he remains self-obsessed and vengeful as he struggles to accept responsibility for his elder daughters' cruel natures.
- At the end, his reconciliation with Cordelia shows him at his best as here he has accepted his powerless and diminished status and sees himself primarily as Cordelia's father. His language reflects this progress as the old royal 'we' is gone and replaced by using the first person.
- He revenges Cordelia's death by killing the person responsible for hanging her – his love for her goes a long way in redeeming him from charges of egotism. He has clearly learned the value of true emotions.
- However his wisdom comes too late, his sufferings have been in vain.

HOW DOES THE KING'S LANGUAGE CHANGE AND DEVELOP THROUGHOUT THE PLAY? : (A02)

- ★ At the beginning Lear speaks in verse, as was traditional for high-status characters.
- ★ However, as Lear increases in madness, he shifts from verse to prose and back again, signalling the disruption in his mind.
- ★ It is also seen that at the beginning of the play Lear uses the third person (the royal 'we') but adopts the first person ('I', 'methinks') when he recognises he is powerless. This change reflects his change in status.
- ★ Lear begins the play with an imperative style suited to a monarch – his first words are an abrupt order to Gloucester and even in his madness he strives to dictate to the elements by instructing the storm. At the end of the play he is still giving orders, but the tone has changed into one of polite request and his final words are an impassioned plea for confirmation that Cordelia still lives.

ACT BY ACT ANALYSIS OF KING LEAR'S CHARACTER :

ACT 1

MEMORABLE QUOTES MADE BY LEAR:

- "Which of you shall we say doth love us most"
- "nothing will come of nothing"
- "Yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself."
- "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child!"
- "Who is that who can tell me who I am"
- The Fool answers that Lear is now simply "Lear's shadow"
- "Come not between a dragon and his wrath"
- "Does anyone here know me? This is not Lear"
- "Where are his eyes?"

- Lear begins the play in high respects.
- He soon introduces his love test which foolish and irresponsible
- When Cordelia declares she loves him only as her bond allows, Lear's words suddenly turn violent and hateful towards her. He says he will "disclaim all [his] paternal care" just because she was fair and honest. She becomes "a stranger to [his] heart". According to literary critic Stephen Greenblatt, this is Lear's biggest "folly." Cordelia is the one daughter that actually does love him and so his banishment of Cordelia sets the play's tragic events in motion.
- We see that this pattern of anger is not simply a one off as he also acts rashly towards Kent when he attempts to defend Cordelia.
- In Trevor Nunn's 2009 film of the play we see Lear shaking – this shows potential weakness in him, thus hinting at what is to come about as the play progresses.
- However, at this point in the play Lear is still able, agile and in good health as Goneril states that he is out hunting. By highlighting this it dramatically shows the rapid decline Lear later undertakes in the play.
- Lear's decline in power begins as the act progresses. His threats of whipping the Fool are not taken seriously and this may be so as the Fool possibly believes that Lear will not carry through with his threats.
- When asked "who is it who can tell me who I am?" the Fool answers with 'Lear's shadow' – a shadow is insubstantial, it cannot do anything and so this shows that Lear is lacking in power and fading away.
- As Act one progresses, we see Lear treating Goneril very badly, telling her he wants her to be sterile and comparing her to a serpent (which is associated with the devil). This again shows the very harsh nature of Lear's character. Perhaps he is not "more sinned against than sinning", he could be believed to have had a significant input in his own downfall. Maybe his daughters wouldn't have been so ungrateful if he had treated them more fairly and kindly?
- Already in this first act Lear begins using 'I' instead of the royal 'we'. He starts to question his own identity which we know is fleeting as even servants begin disobeying him and his

followers are dissipating - Lear's number of followers has always been a symbol of might, importance and fighting power. With less of them he won't be able to assert himself and therefore his threats seem more and more empty and his speeches become more and more disjointed, hinting at the madness to come.

ACT 2

MEMORABLE QUOTES MADE BY LEAR:

- "I shall go mad"
 - "art thou my flesh, my blood, my daughter; or rather a disease that's in my flesh"
 - "you see me here [...] a poor old man, as full of grief as age"
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- At the beginning of the act Lear wants to know where Regan is and decides to look for her (instead of sending a servant- highlighting his powerlessness)
 - He is angry when he returns as Cornwall and Regan said they are sick and cannot speak to him. Lear thinks they are tricking them. His powerlessness is further emphasised as he cannot do anything about their excuses.
 - Lear continues to insist that he can stay with Regan with all his knights (they are so important to him as they show his power, dignity and status), this is such a foolish belief. He is still clinging to the myth of Regan's womanly/gentle nature. The insistence to stay with the daughter who allows him to keep the most knights reminds us of the dangers of measuring love in words and numbers and is as blind and foolish as his love test.
 - Lear then shifts his attention as to who put Kent in the stocks as it is disrespectful and humiliating to him. His questions are ignored again showing loss of power.
 - At this moment the only two people Lear has with him are a Fool and his stockinged servant – it does not portray a good image.
 - We also see the sisters cutting off Lear when he is speaking showing his decline of status.
 - In addition, when Lear pleads that he is suffering Regan refers to him using the cold word "sir" rather than being warm and referring to him as "father". She later progresses to insulting him calling him 'Old Man'.

ACT 3

MEMORABLE QUOTES MADE BY LEAR:

- ★ He calls himself a “poor, infirm, weak, and despis’d old man”
- ★ “I am a man more sinn’d against than sinning”
- ★ “my wits begin to turn”
- ★ Regan calls him the “lunatic king”
- ★ When speaking of Poor Tom he states “Nothing could have subdued nature to such a lowness but his unkind daughters.”
- ★ “Unaccommodated man is no more than a poor, bare, forked animal”.

- **HAROLD BLOOM** believed “the descent from Monarch to ‘unaccommodated man’ conveys most potently man’s fragility, fallibility and fatality”

- The phrase ‘unaccommodated man’ (of which this was its first recorded use in the English language), is evidence of Lear’s madness, for he speaks in prose of the unaccommodated man like a bare animal and therefore in contrast to his earlier speech in blank verse and iambic pentameter.

- ★ Lear rants at the storm (the violent imagery and properties of the storm reflect Lear’s state of mind) and ignores the Fool (showing increasing isolation). The storm is raging and Lear is caught in his own inner storm.
- ★ He wants revenge on the world.
- ★ We now see Lear moving away from being solely obsessed and focused on the ingratitude of his daughters to considering sin in general.
- ★ Lear now recognises how precious things like shelter are and agrees to go to the hovel.
- ★ We see Lear becoming conscious of the plight of the poor and the outcasts. Ironically, now that he is on the verge of madness, he can see more clearly. Furthermore, his concern for Kent, the Fool and Poor Tom suggest he is learning compassion and the pity we feel for him increases as he learns to pity others.
- ★ He himself links the storm with his mental state and turns again to the theme that torments him; filial ingratitude. He says the storm does not affect him because he is suffering from inner torment

- ★ Lear knows that if he carries on focusing on what his daughters have done he will go mad and so he prays, not to the gods, but to the 'poor naked wretches' which he ignored when he held power. We see Lear learning compassion through his devastation and suffering.
- ★ Lear then wants to know what it means to have nothing and tries to undress (he has learned the need to look beyond appearances) - when Lear is forced to face reality he tries to remove his kingly garments and when his sanity is restored later in the play he is put in fresh clothes.
- ★ Lear is in a mad world of his own thinking about vengeance and decides to 'try' his daughters. We have a movement away from a Lear who wants violence to a Lear who has a desire for justice and although the whole scene illustrates his madness, at the same time, we can see him trying to move towards a society where the rule of law is important.

ACT 4

MEMORABLE QUOTES MADE BY LEAR:

- "I am mightily abused"
 - "I am a very foolish fond old mad"
 - "I am mainly ignorant"
 - "I am old and foolish"
 - "I fear I am not in my perfect mind"
 - "For Gloucester's bastard son was kinder to his father than my daughters"
 - "for I lack soldiers"
 - "a man may see how this world goes with no eyes"
 - "Robes and furr'd gowns hide all"
 - Cordelia calls him a "Child-changed father" – could be changed by his children, or changed back into a child.
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- The king is so ashamed of his unkindness that he will not see Cordelia; as Lear has begun to regain his wits, the clarity of vision has brought with it distress and regret. Father and daughter now share the same emotion: sorrow.
 - In this act Lear is wearing a crown of weeds; the king is now associated with nature rather than the world of the court, which is fitting given his interest in justice and the human condition. It is also significant as we are seeing the disintegration of his mind in a physical portrayal.
 - His mad speeches in the act do tend to have an undertone of true meaning, there is a subconscious connection of words in his mind. This connection of words and ideas in his mind shows that there is some sort of coherence and perhaps some hope of him regaining his sanity. In his madness he realises his daughters were flattering him and did not mean a word they said as he says "they told me I was everything; tis a lie". His mad speech here is also in prose – highlighting his increasingly fragmenting mind.

- In madness comes wisdom. This is particularly seen as Lear now believes that rich, powerful men can hide their sins and that an outer show of authority can conceal a façade of which evil can hide
- As the act progresses and when the doctor says it is time to wake Lear, he is brought in on a chair (and our sense of restoration is heightened when the words addressed to him are respectful) and Cordelia kneels by his chair.
- In Oliver's 1980 film version of the play, when Lear is asleep, his beard is shaved off – perhaps alluding him with the beard plucked Gloucester.
- He wakes thinking he is in hell. He doesn't seem to recognise Cordelia and falls on his knees (this and the use of first person pronouns suggests Lear has accepted his diminished status) showing her that he regrets wronging Cordelia (however he doesn't accept responsibility for Goneril and Regan)
- The tragedy of this play is that Lear's wisdom comes too late
- He finally gives in to weeping, perhaps he has learned the lesson that Cordelia was trying to say in act 1, that language cannot truly express emotion.

ACT 5

MEMORABLE QUOTES MADE BY LEAR:

- ❖ "Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so."
 - ❖ "I might have saved her, now she's gone forever"
 - ❖ "mine eyes are not o'th'best"
 - ❖ Kent believes that "the wonder is he hath endur'd so long"
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- ❖ Lear and Cordelia have been captured and is given a death warrant by Edmund.
 - ❖ Lear enters with Cordelia in his arms and is distraught – we learn that he committed one last act of heroism; he killed her hangman. He then tumbles into madness again.
 - ❖ It must be remembered however that Cordelia's death ultimately resulted from his own misjudging of her at the beginning of the play
 - ❖ He is then told of Goneril and Regan's death but it has no effect on him and he just continues grieving and, choking, he asks someone to undo his button
 - ❖ A psychoanalytical interpretation of Lear at the end could perhaps suggest that he had regressed to a sort of childhood and a pre-ego stage where a realistic awareness of the world had not yet been formed. If he had regressed to this stage he would be dominated and controlled by his id and super-ego which could possibly be shown through his madness and impulsive anger though out the play.
 - ❖ Lear dies, perhaps believing that Cordelia still lives. Like Gloucester he dies feeling both joy and pain.