

King Lear THEMES

NOTHING

- As Lear loses everything he learns the value of Cordelia's 'nothing my Lord'. He learns how empty Goneril and Regan's words were.
- In act one scene four the Fool taunts Lear with the word 'nothing'.
- 'Nothing' causes Gloucester the same trouble as Edmund too uses false words to gain everything. Gloucester too loses everything. Edmund pretends that his fake letter is 'nothing, my lord', copying Cordelia's reply.
- 'Nothing' shifts its meaning as it echoes through the play.
- 'Nothing my lord' is used to show how she has nothing to say. However Lear's response 'nothing will come of nothing' adds a new meaning; she will inherit nothing.
- The word will shift from 'no words', 'no wealth', 'no meaning', 'no brains' to 'no identity'.
- Lear goes through this loss of identity, which is highlighted when the fool says "thou art nothing". Its meaning here is echoed by Edgar when he disregards his true personality – "Edgar I nothing am".
- Cordelia's phrase "no more nor less" is echoed by Lear when he describes himself in the terms of his new understanding and says "not an hour more or less".
- Many of the characters will be left with nothing at the end of the play, they will be brought to nothing, losing life itself.

CLOTHING

- Clothing is linked to the ideas of appearances and reality. Outward appearances are often deceptive.
- The clothing of Lear's closest companions on the heath is significant as they are all humbly dressed.
- In spite of their inferior status, which is signified by their clothing, servants are frequently the source of hope, charity and justice.
- Ceremonial garments are the clothing of the court and conceal the truth. Lear cannot see beyond them.
- Goneril, Regan and Edmund cover up their depravity with attractive exteriors.
- When Lear is forced to face reality he tries to remove his kingly garments.
- When Lear's sanity is restored Lear is ready to be put in fresh clothes.

ANIMALS

- There is recurring references to savage creatures which are associated with Goneril and Regan. They are cruel predators. They are ultimately destroyed by their animal instincts.
- In addition Lear is described with an image of a hedge-sparrow which emphasises his vulnerability. It is also further emphasised at the start of the final scene when Lear pictures

his life in prison where he and Cordelia will 'sing like birds in a cage' – here however is the first time we are presented with an attractive animal image. However, song birds are passive, tame creatures; this image hints that Lear's visions of happiness are deluded. Lear likens his daughters to predatory birds and beasts

- He calls Goneril face "wolvish" and her tongue "serpent-like"
- In his madness he sees Goneril and Regan as "pelican daughters" who cruelly feed on his flesh.
- Lear calls Oswald a "woreson dog"
- Poor Tom describes himself as a "fox", "wolf", "dog" and "lion".
- Human behaviour also sinks to the level of "forked animal".
- Gloucester even reduces humans to insignificant insects ('as flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods')

SIGHT AND BLINDNESS

- Lear is unable to see anyone's merits or faults clearly.
- The Fool sums up Lear's folly with a metaphor when he says 'so out went the candle and we were left darkling' – this line serves as a prediction for when Lear is shut out in the storm and is overwhelmed by dark thoughts – we might also see Lear as the candle whose light has gone out; as monarch he is the source of light and life in the kingdom and when he 'burns out' all the characters associated with him are 'left darkling'.
- Gloucester's blinding is the physical manifestation of their mental blinding.
- The physical pain Gloucester experiences brings him a new insight into his past errors as he says "I stumbled when I saw". His new-found awareness of the nature of the world is expressed when he says "I see it feelingly".
- Lear banishes Kent with "out of my sight" and Kent's reply is "see better, Lear" – identifying moral blindness.
- Lear is unable though to see through the falseness of Goneril's claim to love him "dearer than eyesight".
- Gloucester also ironically talks of not needed spectacles to read Edmund's traitorous letter.

MADNESS

- Other Renaissance dramatists used 'mad scenes' for comic effect. However Shakespeare wanted to use a serious portrayal of madness in this play.
- Lear's rash decisions in act one might be viewed as political insanity.
- The bloodlust seen by Goneril, Regan and Cornwall is an abhorrent kind of madness.
- Lear compares madness to the torments of hell.
- The storm - which reflects Lear's madness – is appallingly destructive.
- There are many types of madness; the Fool's professional madness (his clowning), Edgar's fake madness and Gloucester's half-crazed pity.
- The end of the play and Lear's madness seems to make, from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, him regress to a sort of childhood and he sees Cordelia as a mother-figure. It could be the influence of repressed or unconscious desires on personality.

SUFFERING

- ▶ Lear speaks of his daughters – especially Goneril – attacking him physically. He tells Regan that Cordelia ‘struck’ him with her tongue around his heart.
- ▶ His daughters are also a ‘disease that’s in my flesh’ – Goneril and Regan have wounded Lear and now eat away at his flesh.
- ▶ Lear also employs images of the torments of hell when he rages against female sexuality in act 4. Femininity is closely linked to suffering.
- ▶ Even when Lear’s senses are restored he continues to suffer.
- ▶ Gloucester and Lear are overwhelmed by their suffering; Gloucester dies of a broken heart while Lear seems to choke to death when Cordelia dies. Kent also seems to welcome death.
- ▶ Gloucester seems to blame the sadistic gods for the suffering while Lear believes it is because nature gave him two malignant daughters.
- ▶ However, if characters suffer for their own sins it seems particularly harsh on Cordelia and Edgar.
- ▶ Throughout the suffering there are a few benefits; the good endure and help each other, Lear and Gloucester become more compassionate and reassess themselves and Edgar becomes stronger and fit to rule.

NATURE

- ▶ Lear wants to know whether nature is responsible for his suffering.
- ▶ We are, however, presented with conflicting views of nature; the dominance of the evil characters might lead us to feel like nature is a cruel force as cruelty seems to come naturally to them. But the good characters seem to show that the evil characters are unnatural.
- ▶ The storm can be viewed as nature trying to reassert herself.
- ▶ Perhaps we are meant to see Cordelia’s death as the final punishment for Lear’s transgression against nature.
- ▶ The idea of ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ occurs 51 times in the play
- ▶ C. F Danby argued that Shakespeare presents us with 2 different versions of nature; the traditional view that nature is rational and ordered and the opposite view of man being governed by selfishness.

DISEASE AND PAIN

- ▶ The political and moral disruptions that arise due to Lear’s division of the kingdom are echoed in recurring images of pain and disease.
- ▶ Lear’s madness and Gloucester’s blinding are parallel examples of mental and physical suffering.
- ▶ The language is studded with images of sickness and ailments.
- ▶ Kent identifies Lear’s banishment of Cordelia as a ‘foul disease’.
- ▶ Lear sees Goneril as a ‘disease that’s in my flesh’
- ▶ It is all, however, partly counterbalanced by the language of healing.

JUSTICE

- ✚ The workings of human justice reflect Lear and Gloucester's faults. The 'trials' that occur at the beginning are all flawed.
- ✚ Gloucester's blinding is an appalling example of human injustice. Cornwall and Regan pervert the law to satisfy their own craving for revenge.
- ✚ Cordelia's death could be the greatest injustice in the play.
- ✚ By the end human justice and the justice system look extremely fallible.
- ✚ Edgar also later takes law into his own hands when he challenged Edmund; this is 'wild justice'.
- ✚ We also see 'poetic justice' when Cornwall is turned on and killed by his own servant, when Goneril and Regan are destroyed by their jealous lust and when Oswald meets a sticky end.
- ✚ The biggest question about justice is whether Gloucester and Lear deserve to suffer and die. Gloucester pays very dearly for his sins (although some Elizabethans believed that blinding was the appropriate punishment for adultery). Lear pays for his sins by having Cordelia taken from him just as he recognises her merits.
- ✚ There also is the aspect of social justice – Gloucester calls on the heavens to distribute wealth more evenly while Lear considers the lives of the poor that he paid so little attention to.
- ✚ At the end of the play we are presented with two new agents of justice; Albany and Edgar. However human judgement still looks faulty – Albany has almost been overwhelmed by events and Edgar's bitter words about Gloucester's death seem callous.

THE GODS

- ✚ There are many references to the pagan and Christian deities.
- ✚ The characters appeal to the gods in times of crisis.
- ✚ The attitudes towards the gods reflect their natures.
- ✚ Ideas about the gods can also be linked to the theme of justice; are the gods just, indifferent or destructive? We hear conflicting views from the characters.
- ✚ Cordelia and Edgar behave with Christian fortitude. The religious imagery used to describe Cordelia identifies her as an example of Christian goodness. But she is sacrificed so how can we believe the gods are just when her body is carried on stage just as Albany's line says 'the gods defend her'. At this moment we are likely to agree with Gloucester's pessimistic assessment of the gods as been capricious and sadistic.

THE FAMILY AND FEUDALISM

- ✚ Renaissance society was patriarchal; men did not pass on their power and wealth when they reached old age as they retained their power until they died.
- ✚ The Jacobean age was a time of social and religious change. The traditional assumptions about gender and class were being questioned. Critics believed 'King Lear' reflects the anxieties of the period. The play charts the breakdown – not just of a character – but of a whole way of life.
- ✚ In act one scene one Lear behaves like a medieval monarch; he expects obedience.

FEMINISM IN THE PLAY

- 📖 Women are silenced in King Lear – there is two extremes; the saint like women and daemon women who all die off in the end.
- 📖 We also know nothing of Lear’s wife – there is no literal mother in the play.
- 📖 With psychodynamic explanations, Freud viewed the development of gender as governed primarily by the child’s relationship with the father.
- 📖 In one of the earlier plays to which Shakespeare used as a source and followed quite closely, it opens as “Dearest Queen” however Shakespeare only refers once in passing to this queen.
- 📖 We are shown only fathers – the play shows a patriarchal conception of the family in which children owe their existence to their fathers alone.
- 📖 However what the play depicts is the failure of a fathers power and the emotional penalty he pays for it.
- 📖 When Lear begins to feel the loss of Cordelia and recognises his own vulnerability he calls his hysterical state of mind “the mother” – which, in Freudian terms, can be interpreted as his repressed identification with his mother.
- 📖 Many people in Shakespeare’s time suffered the trauma of maternal depravation as a child when their wet nurse departed and the effects of this, as stated by Bowlby, leads to a tendency to make excessive demands on other and be angry when they are not met.
- 📖 Lear wants 2 mutually exclusive things at one; to have absolute control over those closest to him and to be absolutely dependant on them.
- 📖 Coppelia Kahn believed in this feminist interpretation of the play. She believed that “Lear’s madness is essentially his rage at being deprived of the maternal presence”
- 📖 Lear believes women are tainted by their sexual capacities. He calls tears “women’s weapons”
- 📖 Lear’s phrase ‘degenerate bastard’ to Goneril could be used to argue that Queen Lear must have had an affair
- 📖 The end of the play marks the death of all the female characters. The new suggested order is entirely male.