

King Lear characters

Some characters are based on familiar dramatic types from Renaissance drama.

Sometimes, because of the functions they play in the plot, characters seem to act inconsistently (e.g. Edmund acts kindly at the end because it will increase the dramatic tension)

Shakespeare is not primarily concerned with motives but is more interested in the effects of the characters' decisions and natures and how events shape their characters.

The characters can vary depending on the interpretation on the director.

KING LEAR

- He is a complex tragic hero (this is someone who is from noble birth who is brought down by the circumstances of the tragedy) who is both a tyrannical patriarch and a demanding child.
- The fact the tragedy is brought on him makes the audience concerned as they are lower than him, so if it can happen to him it can happen to anyone.
- He is preoccupied with appearances.
- However we do sympathise with him as in act 2 his better qualities are revealed. Such as 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.
- 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.
- Some people believe that he remains self-obsessed and vengeful as he struggles to accept responsibility for his elder daughters' cruel natures.
- His reconciliation with Cordelia shows him at his best and 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.

GONERIL

- Initially Goneril seems to be the dominant sister. She is the one who decides something must be done to ensure Lear's treatment of Cordelia do not extend to her and Regan.
- She is also the one who raises the issues of Lear's knights and provokes the first confrontation with her father in act 1 scene 4.

REGAN

- In the beginning Regan seems happy to follow Goneril's course of action.
- However, we get hints of sadism in act 1 scene 2 when she urges Cornwall to inflict further punishment on Kent.
- Then in act 2 scene 4 she leads the onslaught against Lear. She and Goneril now seem to be equally evil.

GONERIL AND REGAN TOGETHER

- Both sisters share many character traits; they are both threatening and autocratic, cold and ambitious.
- **THORNDIKE** calls them "inhuman sisters" and **HUDSON** even calls them "personifications of ingratitude"
- They both lust after Edmund in a predatory and unfeminine way.
- They're both assertive which would have been shocking to a Jacobean audience as renaissance models of femininity required women to be quiet and submissive.
- They are often described using animal imagery and by the abhorrence of female sexuality, especially by Lear.
- In act 1 scene 1 we may temporarily sympathise with them as they are not Lear's favourite and they clearly have been told so.

CORDELIA

- Cordelia has one of the fewest lines.
- Some critics see Cordelia as destructive as she should know what he is like and realise that he will be upset and offended by her response. However, why should she play along with something so belatedly wrong and lie just to flatter an old man. The reality is if she really cares for her father and wanted to protect him from Goneril and Regan who she knows are evil, she should have gone along with what he wanted. However again if she was the favourite she would never have see that side to him and might not have expected him to react in that way.
- In the film Cordelia is wearing white.
- She seems to reacts quite maturely when Lear is in a rage with her.

- Some critics interpret her refusal to speak flattering words and her acceptance of France as acts of defiance; she is in direct contrast with patriarchy on both occasions, refusing to submit to her father's will.
- If we follow this then it is possible to interpret her death as a reward for her early disobedience.
- However these views do not really fit with the Cordelia we see in acts 4 and 5 or with the consistently high esteem in which she is held by the good characters.
- In act one scene one she is simply trying to alert Lear to his poor judgement. Her refusal to participate in the love test can be seen as a sign of her integrity.
- We are presented with a perfect daughter; one who is honest, empathetic (she feels pain when hearing about Lear's sufferings), selfless and full of pity and love.
- Her death might also be a final example of man's inhumanity to man. Shakespeare perhaps wants to show the full horror of the consequences of Lear's actions.

GLOUCESTER

- He acts rashly and ruthlessly.
- His adultery might be seen as a failure to take his patriarchal responsibilities seriously.
- He is as blind as Lear
- However, when he takes action he is brave and determined. He helps Lear on the heath. He acts heroically in act three scene seven when he denounces Goneril and Regan ferociously.
- Like Lear, he becomes increasingly generous as he suffers. He expresses great pity for Lear and his developing concern for social justice mirror Lear's.
- His pain and despair further reflect Lear's. He confesses sadly that he is 'almost mad' himself when thinking about Edgar's supposed treachery.
- Even after his 'fall' he remains suicidal. He welcomes Oswald's sword and is still deeply depressed.
- His hark thoughts play a key role in maintaining the bleak atmosphere
- His willingness to die perhaps points towards the carnage of Act five Scene three. His death can be seen as a 'dry run' for Lear's – Gloucester dies when his 'flawed heart' 'burst smilingly'.
- He is punished very harshly for his misjudgements of character. He is probably the character 'more sinned against than sinning'.

EDGAR

- He plays so many roles and performs such a wide range of functions and many may believe he might simply be a plot device. In addition Shakespeare does not spend much time in establishing Edgar's virtues before having him disguise himself.
- He starts the play as a relatively passive character who is easily manipulative but later in the play he shows many acts of heroism.

- As he moves from one disguise and role to another his characterisation progresses and he grows in stature.
- Edgar also comments on Lear and Gloucester's suffering thus guiding audience responses to them.
- Edgar is also actively generous. He feels only sympathy for the father who rejected him.
- In act 5 he becomes an agent of justice.
- He may be viewed as the only character unsullied enough to rule after Lear's death. He has committed no crime. He has never questioned the authority of his elders and he took action when necessary.

EDMUND

- He never apologizes for his wickedness; he revels in it.
- He rejects the hierarchy that has made his father and brother so prosperous. But he wants to succeed in society's terms.
- He is subversive and is responsible for the deaths of three princesses as well as the cruel maiming of his father.
- His progress is halted too late to save Lear.
- He is defeated when Albany and Edgar reassert the values of the old order. Now he is forced to reject his code and submit.
- Gloucester thus publicly recognizes Edmund to be his child. The act of introducing an illegitimate child to a friend was very rare in the Elizabethan era and shows the great respect Gloucester has for Edmund

THE FOOL

- He is the voice of conscience, social commentator, truth-teller, representative of Cordelia, vehicle for pathos, Lear's alter ego, dramatic chorus and a provider of comic relief.
- When he first appears he is extremely critical of Lear. His sarcasm is blunt and hard-hitting.
- He pines when Cordeila goes to France and many of his speeches are designed to alert Lear to his daughters' true characters.
- However, unlike Cordelia, he is never punished for his truth telling, and in return he remains steadfastly loyal.
- He draws attention to the chaos Lear has caused in the kingdom. The implication of many of his speeches are that he has wronged the country as well as himself.
- The Fool pushes Lear towards the truth.
- The fact that he often calls Lear 'nuncle' is significant as it is an affectionate, childlike abbreviation which emphasises the Fool's simple dependence on Lear.
- Leo Tolstoy says "there upon begins a prolonged conversation between the Fool and the King, utterly unsuited to the position and serving no purpose"
- Why does the Fool then just disappear? Some suggest Jacobean audiences would have been disconcerted by the disappearance of a character half way through a play. Other's think the Fool is dropped as he is no longer needed; his job was only to help Lear see clearly. It is also

possible that the same actor played the Fool and Cordelia and so they could not be on the stage at the same time.

- The Fool speaks in childlike couplets to reflect Lear's infantile state of mind.
- Although there are signs that this relationship is becoming strained in scene four when Lear warns 'Take heed, Sirrah, the Whip', it is telling that the whip is never used, nor any other rebuke for the Fool
- Freudian readings explored the Fool as a kind of lost fragment of Lear's self – a personification of his conscience or super-ego trying to rein in the violence of his wayward id.

KENT

- He is loyal and blunt. He addresses Lear well as 'my lord' and only resorts to blunt language when his respectful interjections are ignored.
- He is determined to stick to the 'old language' of Lear's court which can be seen as a measure of his loyalty. It might also indicate that Kent is a conservative, backward-looking figure.
- We can argue that he does not learn from his mistakes; he sees Cordelia being banished for being honest yet does the same, he then later honestly insults Oswald.
- During Lear's madness Kent is reluctant to allow Poor Tom to accompany his master, failing to recognise the beggar's suffering and is appalled that the king has no better company. Is this moral blindness?
- He seems to not be fooled by appearances as much as the other characters (for example he says he does not like Oswald because of the way he looks – he recognises the truth beyond appearances.)
- Kent is representative of the hierarchy that Lear destroyed when he gave away his power. It is no surprise he expects and hopes to die in act five; the world has moved on and Kent has no place in it now.
- Kent's warnings in act one are all justified by the events of the play. We can trust him. He also takes his banishment without a grudge. Out in the storm he only thinks of his master.
- Kent keeps us informed about important developments in the plot.
- He does, however, begin to seem worn down in the second half. He endures as long as his master needs him

ALBANY

- Albany can seem problematic. He certainly lacks Goneril's force and decisiveness.
- He is absent from the play for two acts and speaks with a new energy and decisiveness when he reappears. He also seems to have dramatically altered his opinion on his wife.
- His abuse of Goneril when he accuses her of mistreating Lear indicates that we can now trust him.
- He even denounces and arrests Edmund and after the fight he continues to play an authoritarian role. Shakespeare now wants us to see him as an agent of justice and correct morality.

CORNWALL

- Cornwall is morally dubious. He is responsible for the most shocking act of violence in the play; Gloucester's blinding.
- There is also significance in the way Cornwall meets his death; his own servant turns on him, just as he turned on his host and his king. This is poetic justice.

OSWALD

- He is a faithful servant to Goneril.
- He is Goneril's agent in corruption and his bad qualities mirror his mistress's warped nature.
- He is a cowardly liar and as self-seeking as the evil characters.
- He is keen to receive a financial reward and so is only too ready to kill Gloucester.
- Oswald also provides a parallel with Kent and awakens Edgar's valour.
- In Sam Mendes 2014 production Oswald is smaller than Kent further emphasising his cowardice and bad nature