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King Lear Essay
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Significant Themes In King Lear

Shakespeare's Tragic play *King Lear* is full of themes, metaphors and imagery that expose the destructive imperfections of human beings. The ugliness of the characters is made clear through Shakespeare's comparison of humans to the recklessness of animals and nature. The choices made by the characters in *King Lear* lead to a miserable chain of events that result in their demise. King Lear's retirement from the Throne and decision to split his kingdom into thirds is what opens the play and kicks off the tragedy. His foolish challenge for his daughters is that they need to profess their love for him and whoever proves that they love him the most, receives the largest of the kingdoms. "Since now we will divest us, both of rule, Interest of territory, cares of state - Which of you shall we say doth love us most? That we our largest bounty may extend where nature doth with merit challenge"(Shakespeare 1.1.55). In both the Lear plot and Gloucester plot, the betrayal of familial loyalty for political power make Shakespeare's King Lear a tragedy through the destructive themes of nothingness, blindness and chaos.

Chaos is a theme that takes over this tragedy and is the cause of destruction for the characters. The plot of King Lear itself is chaotic because there are two plots happening at the same time that contribute to each other. The chaos in King Lear caused by Lear's reaction of his daughter's filial ingratitude is seen through the madness of the storm both in nature and in Lear's mind and the plot confusion between Gloucester plot and Lear plot leading to issues of betrayal, blindness and confusion. Lear gives his authority to Goneril and Regan, unworthy of this power, which ends not only his family, but also all of Britain in chaos. The conflict in Lear's mind is a

constant struggle intensified throughout the play. The external factors of the storm scene reflect the internal, mental storm of Lear. “Poor naked wretches wheresoe’er you are, that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm”, the pitiless storm is a reference to his mental state (Shakespeare II.28 f.). The symbol of the storm emphasizes the power of nature and in turn, the powerlessness of the King and humanity itself. This forces Lear to recognize the reality that he is weak and will soon die. As things become more chaotic, Lear hides from his previous authority, which further emphasizes his weaknesses. Being on the edge of insanity, Lear states, “The tempest in my mind Doth from my senses take all feeling else Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude...In such a night as this! O Regan, Goneril, Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all- O, that way madness lies; let me shun that. No more of that”(Shakespeare II. 12-22). Because the actions of the characters throughout *King Lear* are so chaotic and immoral, the storm could be nature’s way of expressing that they need to recognize their mortal and powerless nature as human beings. “As an interior weather the same chaos will force him to introspect and to reorder his awareness”(Skulsky 11). Lear does recognize his and the rest of our insignificance in the world after being in the midst of the powerful realm of nature. It is this realization that eventually brings him closer to sanity. Although this awareness is positive improvement, his internal torment continues to exist. “Increase of sanity is increase of sorrow- a kind of postoperative anguish”(Skulsky 13).

From a theme of chaos, the metaphor of blindness becomes an issue for certain characters in *King Lear*. In the chaos of the storm there is also darkness. In the storm scene, it is literally dark for Lear making him unable to see but he is also blind to the realities of the world. Gloucester becomes blind literally and it is compared to Lear’s mental blindness. Lear is blind to the fact that Cordelia, the good daughter, truly loves him even though she says “nothing”.

Unfortunately, this honesty of Cordelia and acceptance that she cannot top her sister's rhetoric is her tragic fall. In a way, even though Cordelia is a good character, she is blind because if she knew her father, she would know that in order to win, you must express love in words. She is not completely blameless in this tragedy. When Goneril and Regan profess their false love for Lear and as a result are given the power, Lear was blinded by the reality that they do not care about him and only want authority. Lear is blind because he "has confused effusive declaration of love for love itself"(Dye 514). When Cordelia says nothing in response to Lear's request, he is blind to the fact that she does indeed love him but she feels that words are not necessary to express her love. Lear is so stubborn that he refuses to see the truth in Cordelia's statement. Lear only finds words important rather than meaning, which shows his lack of understanding about what love is. "The reality of Cordelia's genuine devotion to her filial bond is contrasted with Goneril's and Regan's artificial affirmation of this bond"(Dye 515). Both Lear and Gloucester are blind to their "good" children. Edmund, in disguise as the good son, makes his father blind to reality. Edmund "pretends to lead his blind father to his death at the cliffs of Dover. "Through the illusion of death Gloucester is led to an acceptance of the afflictions of life- a form, however shadowy, of an acceptance of reality"(Dye 516). Both father figures in King Lear possess blindness, loyal children and disloyal children. Gloucester is physically blind while Lear is metaphorically blind but they are both blind to the truth. "It is his [Lear's] want of insight, his 'blindness of heart', which constitutes his tragic flaw"(Bennett 150). They also both banish their loyal children and it isn't until after Gloucester becomes physically blind and Lear turns mad that they realize their fatal mistake. Gloucester did not see that it was Edmund who forged the letter from Edgar warning that he will kill his father. In the final scene, Lear and Cordelia are forgotten about. The blindness and forgetting of Albany caused Cordelia's death

because he did not stop the execution. When Cordelia's dead body is carried in, Lear is devastated and begins to die. He contemplates whether or not his daughter is actually dead and when he takes his final breath, he believes Cordelia lives, "Do you see this? Look on her! Look, her lips, Look there, look there-"(Shakespeare V. III). We see once again that Lear is blind to reality.

Nothingness is something that needs to be recognized in *King Lear* as a major theme as well. For different characters and in different contexts, "nothing" means something different. Cordelia's response to Lear, "Nothing my lord" "Nothing?" "Nothing." "Nothing will come of nothing: speak again" is what opens the theme of nothingness. Nothingness can be seen in Lear's lack of understanding for what love is and how his interpretation for the meaning of love means "nothing". In the dialogue between the Fool and Kent after the poem recited, "This is nothing, Fool"(I.iv.134), "The jester ironically twists the response of Kent to comply with what is on Lear's mind: 'Can you make no use of nothing Nuncle?'(I.iv.136-137). As such, it refers to the King's inability to 'make use' of Cordelia's answer to him earlier"(Fleissner 67). The significance in Lear's decision to split his kingdom in three parts results in "nothing" but destruction found in the familial and political division. In the storm scene, Lear loses control in a mad rage of anger; a gentleman mentions that the elements of the storm make "nothing" of his behavior. This goes back to the idea that nature is more influential and the rage of the storm overpowered the internal and external rage of Lear. Lear's intentions were to retire from the throne and have his most loyal daughter take the larger kingdom. The death of Lear, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia is telling to the fact that Lear left "nothing" of himself behind of his throne. This tragedy began with Cordelia's "nothing" response and ended with the nothingness of Lear and his reign.

The betrayal of Lear's daughters and characters throughout is portrayed through the blindness to truth, forgetting, darkness and the element of nothingness. Political power and influence was more important to Regan, Goneril and Edmund, which cause them to deny their filial loyalty. The chaos between the two filial plots of Gloucester and Lear cause blindness physically and metaphorically to these characters resulting in a tragic end. The vulnerable human condition is something emphasized with the chaotic and dark storm, which symbolizes the internal struggle. Tragedy is seen in the unfortunate "nothingness" of Lear's thrown. This is ironic because it was his goal to be remembered but, again, nature's power takes over and the weak and sinful characters forget. This reminds us that we as humans are insignificant in the realm of the world, nature continues through time while we die. Death is emphasized at the end of the play with the image of the corpses on stage. Death for Lear though is a release from the pain and madness of life, "The wonder is, he hath endured so long"(5.3.315). Does Lear learn from his mistakes or reap the consequences of his life choices? The answer here would be no he did not. This reflects the tragic reality of life that is it doesn't matter. Nothing matters in the scope of things; human beings in a destructive world live, make either moral or evil choices, and die. Shakespeare's *King Lear* perfectly depicts the most tragic split between goodness in the world and madness and death. It is up to us as human beings which aspect of the world surmounts in the end.

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