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## SHAKESPEARE AND HIS TRAGEDY *KING LEAR*

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“ Shakespeare – The nearest thing in incarnation to the eye of God.”

Laurence Olivier

Shakespeare is perhaps most famous for his tragedies. Most of his tragedies were written in a seven year period between 1601 and 1608. These include his four major tragedies *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, along with *Antony & Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *Julius Caesar*, all of which are immediately recognizable, regularly studied and frequently performed.

The word tragedy was derived from the Greek word *tragoidia*, which means 'the song of the goat.' It is called "the song of the goat" because in ancient Greece the theater performers used to wear goatskin costumes to represent satyrs. Today in theater and literature a tragedy is a work that has an unhappy ending. The ending must include the main character's downfall.

### Element of Tragedy

- Tragic Hero – The tragic hero is usually the story's protagonist. He experiences overwhelmingly tragic events throughout the play. Tragic heroes almost always die at the end of the play
- Dichotomy of Good and Evil – Characters in Shakespearean tragedies often have to make choices between good and evil actions. Being a good character does not guarantee one's survival in a tragedy, which is often what makes the endings of these plays so painful.
- Fatal Flaw or Fatal Mistake - Character flaws like greed or other weaknesses can lead to personal destruction. More commonly, tragic heroes make fatal mistakes that lead them down a doomed path.
- Death and Destruction - Tragedies almost always end in death and destruction, as opposed to comedies, which end in marriage.

- Fate and Fortune- It is often strongly implied that the characters' fates are outside of their control, giving their doom a sense of inevitability.
- Revenge - Many Shakespearean tragedies, but not all, involve an element of revenge. Characters often threaten or kill one another as an attempt to avenge those who are dead.
- Supernatural Elements -Several of these plays, but not all, feature prophecies, witches, visions, and ghosts.
- Internal Pressures - A "head tragedy" is a story about a character whose ego or internal struggles cause his destruction. A lot of Shakespeare's tragic heroes experience internal pressures that push them to act in destructive ways.
- External Pressures - Some characters are pushed to destruction by external factors more than or as much as internal ones, including other characters or social structures that are working against the tragic hero.

*King Lear* is a tragic play which revolves around a King's life that undergoes a massive change due to his impulsive decision. King Lear was an elderly king who decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters before retirement. Thus, he asks them to express their love for him.

The oldest two flatter him a lot but the third one stays silent. This angers King Lear and he banishes her. Moreover, he divides the kingdom only between the two. After that, the eldest daughters reject him and force him to flee. The third daughter, who loves him dearly, fights for justice for her father. However, she loses the battle and is executed. Lear also dies of sorrow. Hence, King Lear summary tells us what a tragedy the story is.

*King Lear* is one of the greatest tragedies written by William Shakespeare. It tells us a story about a king whose ego gets the better of him. King Lear is an elderly king whose time for retirement is near. He decides to split the kingdom amongst his three daughters.

Before the division, he conducts a contest. It requires all three daughters to express their love for their father. He expects his youngest daughter, Cordelia to win as she loves him the most. The two older ones, Goneril and Regan, start flattering him. However, Cordelia doesn't say anything as she cannot express her love in words.

King Lear gets furious at her for saying nothing. After that, he divides the land amongst his two elder daughters only. The King of France still marries Cordelia despite her having no land.

On the other hand, Gloucester is also facing problems at home. His illegitimate son, Edmund, convinces him that his legitimate son, Edgar, wants him dead. Thus, Edgar flees and disguises as a crazy beggar.

After the division by Lear, both the daughters start treating him badly. This drives him mad so he runs off into a storm. Kent and his fool join Lear there. Moreover, Edgar also joins them and together they lead him out of the storm.

Finally, he reunites with Cordelia who is upset at her father's condition. She decides to go at war to bring justice to her father. Back at the kingdom, Goneril and Regan are falling in love with Edmund.

Goneril poisons her sister Regan so she does not get together with Edmund. Cordelia loses the war and is taken a prisoner along with her father. Edmund conspires to have her killed. Further, Edmund fights a duel with Edgar. He kills Edgar in the duel.

On the other hand, Goneril kills herself due to the guilt of killing her sister. They execute Cordelia for treason and thus, King Lear also dies out of grief at her death. So, it portrays how Lear becomes a tragic hero.

To sum it up, *King Lear* summary takes us through the transformation brought in Lear's life. Moreover, it also explains the reasons which lead to his death. Besides, it is also a perfect example of where one receives a punishment exceeding his crime.

*King Lear* summary tells us a great deal about flawed relationships we have with our parents. In addition, it also throws light on the personal greed of humans and the extent to which one is willing to go for it.

Like Shakespeare's other famous tragedies, *King Lear* features a noble-born protagonist who makes a fatal mistake that leads to widespread suffering and, eventually, the death of himself and several others. Lear makes his fatal mistake in the play's opening scene, when he divides his kingdom among his daughters according to the degree of love they profess for him. Failing to see that Regan and Goneril have lied about their love, he bequeaths all his land to them and condemns Cordelia, the only daughter who truly loves him.

Lear therefore remains blind to who his daughters really are, and this metaphorical blindness results in him making a decision that causes enormous suffering—including the literal blinding of Gloucester. Notably, just as Lear fails to see who his daughters are, over the course of the play he loses touch with his own identity. He cries out painfully in Act I, "*Does any here know me? This is not Lear . . . Who is it that can tell me who I am?*" (I.iv.197–201). Blind even to himself, Lear slowly goes mad and falls into psychological isolation.

One aspect of *King Lear* that makes it an unusual tragedy is that Lear, though certainly a tragic figure, is a relatively benign protagonist who realizes his mistakes and repents for them. To be sure, Lear often speaks in an abrasive and caustic way, displaying arrogance and peremptoriness toward other characters (notably Kent and Cordelia). But unlike some tragic protagonists he himself never becomes evil or directly commits any evil acts, even if he unleashes evil in the form of his daughters.

Ironically, Lear's madness is what enables him, at last, to overcome his blindness and see things clearly. His first moment of clarity arises in Act III, at the height of the storm. Lear hesitates before entering the hovel and expresses empathy for his subjects, whom he's literally and figuratively left out in the cold:

*Poor*

*naked wretches, whereso'er you are,*

*That*

*bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,,*

*How*

*shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,*

*Your*

*looped and windowed raggedness, defend you*

*From*

*seasons such as these? Oh , I have ta'en*

*Too little*

*care of this! (III.iv.288-33)*

Lear regains clarity at other crucial moments as well, like when he recognizes Cordelia at the end of Act IV and acknowledges that he has wronged her. He repents for his failure and hopes, as he tells Cordelia in Act V, for a chance to “ask of thee forgiveness” (V.iii.11).

Despite Lear’s moments of clarity, the play moves inescapably toward a tragic conclusion that, unlike other tragedies, does not feel very cathartic. Catharsis is the moment of release an audience feels after experiencing strong emotions. *King Lear* certainly engages the audience’s emotions, but whereas cathartic experiences lead to a feeling of renewal, Shakespeare’s play does not. For one thing, punishment in the play often outweighs the crime.

Even though Regan, Goneril, and Edmund all deserve their fates, Lear, Gloucester, and Cordelia all die despite their innocence. Moreover, no one learns valuable lessons through their suffering. Lear realizes his mistakes as a king and as a father, and his brief reunion with Cordelia offers a partial redemption. Yet the pain of Cordelia’s undeserved death sends him back into madness and suffering, and he literally dies of a broken heart.

Finally, with everyone from Lear’s family dead, there is no good candidate to assume the throne. Albany will continue to rule Britain, but his role in the play’s disastrous ending leads the audience to question whether the social order can really be repaired. By leaving the audience profoundly sad and virtually hopeless, *King Lear* ranks among Shakespeare’s bleakest tragedies.

### Reference

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