

Getting to Know *King Lear*

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Ingratitude is a 'marble-hearted fiend', but it becomes even more hideous when shown to one's own father. This is the strong opinion of the aged whimsical king in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Lear's judgement is inhibited by his ego, and he sadly ends up deranged and raving in the stormy moors. Filial ingratitude or the lack of gratefulness towards one's parent, is the basic theme of this highly complex play written in early 17th century. *King Lear* is a very bitter tragedy with no allowance for the traditional poetic justice which always punishes the perpetrators and rewards the victims. A bit similar to *Hamlet*, the play closes with all the major characters dead, and a country left to the care of people who have no big claim over it. In the latter half of seventeenth century, in the Restoration period, Nahum Tate's adaptation of the play, titled *The History of King Lear*, nearly overshadowed Shakespeare's original. Tate had given the play a happy ending and made several changes that would fit the tastes of an age which was very different in temperament to that of Elizabethan romantic exuberance.

The king and his daughters: Lear, a legendary Celtic king of pre-Roman times has become old, and decides to divide his land among his three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Written at a time when James I had just united England and Scotland, this idea of division itself bears the forebodings of evil consequences. Evidently a strong king much respected by his people, Lear exhibits his hubris, which is a highly inflated ego, and exhorts his three daughters to tell him how much they love him, before he would grant them the promised domains.

The daughters profess their love: This was meant to be a perfunctory procedure as he had already planned the division. But to his utter dismay, the much-loved youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to follow the fashion of her two sisters who had already professed their love for dear papa on laudatory terms which are overtly hyperbolic. Cordelia is so upset by the obvious insincerity of her siblings that she declares that she loves her father only as much as a daughter should rightfully love her father, and when she marries he would lose some more of her love for him.

Characters to remember

Lear	: Celtic King of England
Goneril, Regan, Cordelia	: Daughters of Lear
Duke of Burgundy	
King of France	
Earl of Kent	: English nobleman

Division of the land: Flying into an irrational rage Lear disinherits Cordelia and banishes her from his country. The Duke of Burgundy, a suitor of Cordelia, promptly changes his mind, but the King of France accepts her as his wife and they leave England. Cordelia's share of the land is divided and merged with those of Goneril and Regan. Lear also banishes his loyal courtier, the Earl of Kent, when he strongly points out his folly in misjudging his daughters.

After the Division: Goneril and Regan had agreed to accommodate the

King along with one hundred of his knights in their homes in turn. Once the land become theirs the sisters reveal their true colours and make life uncomfortable for their father and his men. Kent rejoins Lear disguised as a servant and who along with Lear's sardonic Fool become his close companions in the harsh times. Highly enraged by the insulting words of his elder daughter Goneril, Lear storms out of her home, affirming that his second child Regan will treat him better. Goneril's temper is so bad that her gentle husband, the Duke of Albany can do little to abate it.

Characters to remember

Duke of Albany	: the noble husband of Goneril
Duke of Cornwall	: the depraved husband of Regan
Earl of Gloucester	: Loyal to Lear
Edmund	: Gloucester's wicked illegitimate son
Edgar	: Gloucester's legitimate son
Fool	: Loyal jester of Lear

At the house of the Earl of Gloucester: Parallel to the story of Lear runs the tale of the Earl of Gloucester and his two sons. Edmund the illegitimate son, whom the father is ashamed to acknowledge, plots the destruction of Edgar, the legitimate son. Lear follows Regan and her equally depraved husband, the Duke of Cornwall, to the castle of Gloucester. He discovers that Regan had put Kent, now disguised as Lear's servant, in the stocks, and realises the magnitude of his folly in trusting his two elder daughters. We see here the supreme moment when

the aged king breaks down, rants like a mad man and rushes out to the wild moors ignoring the thunderstorm that rages out there. He is accompanied by the loyal fool and later joined by Kent. In the moors Lear meets Edgar who has gone into hiding, to escape the murderous schemes of his brother Edmund.

Two wronged fathers in the moors: Instigated by Edmund, Cornwall tortures and blinds Gloucester for his sympathy towards Lear. Cornwall is in turn killed by a follower of Gloucester. We also learn that Cordelia is soon to land with a

French army to support her father. Blind Gloucester also wanders around in the moorland hoping to jump down from the Cliffs of Dover and die. Edgar finds him and helps him without revealing his identity. Lear continues to roam the moors, totally broken and miserable, and is both supported and teased by the Fool.

Love intrigues and final tragedy:

Both Goneril and Regan are in love with Edmund and send him love letters. Edgar intercepts one of these and discovers that Regan has designs to have her husband Albany killed. Cordelia lands with the French army and she is briefly reunited with her father. Goneril poisons and kills Regan in a fit of jealousy, and later kills herself. Edgar fights with Edmund and mortally wounds him. The death of Gloucester is announced, and soon after we see a miserable Lear enter with the dead body of Cordelia, who was hanged under the orders of Edmund. Lear dies of a

broken heart and a very weary Kent declares he will soon follow his master. We learn that Albany and Edgar alone are left to take care of the land.

From the publication of Nahum Tate's version of Lear in the late seventeenth century, up to the mid-nineteenth century, Shakespeare's *King Lear* was largely neglected due to its overt tone of pessimism as evidenced by statements like; "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport." (*King Lear* 4.1.41-42). In Tate's play poetic justice is in place, with Cordelia and Lear remaining happily alive at the end of the play, and it is much tame and domestic when compared to Shakespeare's stallion which is relentless and untameable. In the twentieth century, however, *King Lear* regained the attention it deserved, as its nihilism and existentialist tone opened up opportunities for fresh interpretations and insights.

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