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King Lear Conversation Pieces

Some notes for thinking and talking

King Lear is considered one of the masterpieces of world literature and one of the most challenging roles an actor can play. It is a story of royalty and power and yet will be familiar to anyone who has had parents. It is set in a distant pre-Christian age and yet feels relevant today. King Lear deals seriously with some of the fundamental themes of human life such as family, ambition, justice and compassion. It has scenes of horrific cruelty and heartbreaking tenderness but also moments of black comedy which wouldn't be out of place in the plays of Beckett. It is a play about the meaning of life and a gripping story of one man's search for who he really is and what really matters.

William Shakespeare wrote King Lear sometime between 1605 and 1606. Did, as some say, he write it while self isolating during the Plague? Possibly. You will find various discussions of the theory online, including a good one by Andrew Dickson, in The Guardian.

The first recorded performance of the play was on November 26th, 1606, for King James I at Whitehall Palace. It is among the last tragedies that he wrote. Shakespeare was in his early 40s when he wrote King Lear, at a time of extraordinary output – even for him.

George Bernard Shaw, seldom prone to overstatement, claimed that “no man will ever write a better tragedy than King Lear”.

Key Moments

The Opening Scene

The first scene of King Lear is one of the most extraordinary Shakespeare ever wrote. Within thirty lines, we are introduced to almost every character in the play, before Lear enters to reveal his 'darker purpose'. His plan is to retire, dividing his kingdom between his three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. He also plans to secure a husband for Cordelia, the youngest. The Duke of Burgundy and the King of France are present, both suitors for Cordelia. Lear begins by suggesting a competition – his daughters must tell him how much they love him, and she who convinces him most will have the greatest reward



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The Storm

At the very heart of King Lear is the storm. It is the central element of Lear's journey, and a critical part of the audience's experience of the play. Lear's raging, howling tirade against the storm is one of the play's most famous moments – a mad old man howling against nature. The storm is an example of a kind of pathetic fallacy – a literary device in which inanimate objects are presented as having feelings, or very often – as here – when events in the natural world are made to mirror human experience. So, as Lear's madness builds and develops, so does the storm, and both reach their worst intensity together. As the king slowly returns to sanity, the storm breaks.

The Language

Language is a key tool for Shakespeare in King Lear. The play begins with Goneril and Regan's speeches flattering their father in an excessive display of glib and oily art, to speak and purpose not. From the extraordinary opening scene, Shakespeare draws attention to how the characters use language. After her two sisters' proclamations, and her asides to the audience, we are led to believe that Cordelia will express herself very differently.

Shakespeare does not disappoint us – instead of speaking at all, she simply insists that she has nothing to say.

Cordelia's eloquence and dignity are expressed in very clear and forthright language throughout the play – we are able to trust her precisely because she does not exaggerate or fawn like her calculating sisters.

King Lear's language shifts throughout the play – he begins in full, elegant control of his court, happily preparing for his retirement. His language is formal, but jovial, until Cordelia's refusal to comply with the flattering game he has invented. Immediately his language explodes into exaggerated metaphors as he grows angrier and angrier, likening himself to a dragon, and within moments he has banished both his daughter and his loyal friend the Earl of Kent.

His rages and madness escalate in tandem with his language, until we reach a point in the storm where all he can muster is the wild cry Howl! Howl! Howl! Howl!

In Shakespeare's plays, the standard way of speaking is blank verse – lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter. (This means a line with five beats and ten syllables.) Usually the rhythm



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is de-DUM de-DUM de- DUM de-DUM de-DUM, but Shakespeare is a genius at inverting these for dramatic effect.

For example, by the end of the play, Lear's whole world has been turned upside down, and though his madness has abated, he is reduced to abject misery. When news of Cordelia's death is brought, he exclaims Never, never, never, never, never!

The stresses in this line of pentameter are entirely reversed from the usual short-long de-DUM pattern, as Shakespeare weaves Lear's destruction even into the rhythm of his verse. By contrast, Shakespeare's characters speak in prose (ie, not verse) for very specific reasons. There are four distinct kinds of prose in the play:

1. the prose formal documents and printed speech, like the various letters
2. the prose of low-status characters, like the Fool
3. the prose of colloquial, casual dialogue, like the bawdy conversation between Kent, Gloucester and Edmund at the beginning of the play
4. the prose of people in altered mental states. King Lear shifts between eloquent verse and prose as he alternates between sanity and madness. (Shakespeare often has characters revert to prose when they are losing their minds – instances include Lady Macbeth, Othello, and Ophelia, to name but a few.)

Language as a Weapon

King Lear features some of Shakespeare's juiciest insults and curses.

Edmund: An admirable evasion of whore master man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star

Kent: You base football player!

Edmund: I have seen drunkards do more than this in sport!

Kent: What a brazen faced varlet art thou!

Kent: You whoreson cullionly barbermonger!

Kent: Thou whoreson zed, thou unnecessary letter!



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Lear: But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter; Or rather a disease that's in my flesh, Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil, A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle, In my corrupted blood.

Edgar: False of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand, hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey!

Edgar: Thou art a traitor, false to thy gods, thy brother and thy father!

Edgar: From the extremest upward of thy head to the descent and dust beneath thy foot, a most toad spotted traitor!

The most impressive insult is Kent's torrent of invective towards Oswald for not recognising him:

Kent: A knave; a rascal; an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking knave, a whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd, in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch: one whom I will beat into clamorous whining, if thou deniest the least syllable of thy addition.

Curses play a key role in King Lear – and it is worth noting that for Shakespeare's audience, a King's curse would have had almost magical properties. (For more about the mythic power of Kings and their status as divine representatives on earth, see *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer.) Shakespeare's audience would have taken Lear's savage curse to Goneril very seriously – for him to wish miscarriages and sterility on his daughter was more than a cruel expression of contempt, it could have had actual consequences.

Lear: Hear, nature, hear; dear goddess, hear! Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend To make this creature fruitful! Into her womb convey sterility! Dry up in her the organs of increase; And from her derogate body never spring A babe to honour her! If she must teem, Create her child of spleen; that it may live, And be a thwart disnatured torment to her! wLet it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth; With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks; Turn all her mother's pains and benefits To laughter and contempt; that she may feel How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is To have a thankless child!



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The depictions of women in the play's language are particularly colourful. Lear's two older daughters are referred to as wolfish, tigers, centaurs, pelicans – all in sharp contrast to the nobility and grace of Cordelia.

Themes

Reality vs Appearance

Much of the play revolves around people's inability to distinguish between appearance and reality – and their journeys toward the wisdom necessary to do so.

Perhaps Lear's greatest flaw is that he cannot see things clearly – from the very beginning of the play, we see him make poor choices based on a wrong-headed reading of the situation. His banishment of Cordelia and Kent, and his division of the kingdom between Goneril and Regan, bring about all the events that follow through the play. The play's tragedy stems from Lear's inability to distinguish between the appearance of love from Regan and Goneril, and the real heartfelt feeling expressed by Cordelia.

In the secondary plot featuring Gloucester and his sons, appearance and reality are likewise critical. Gloucester believes Edmund's lies and turns against his far nobler son Edgar. Shakespeare has several characters adopt disguises over the course of the play. Kent re-appears as Caius, Edgar dons several guises until he reveals himself to fight his brother, and even Lear attempts to change his outward appearance, first stripping off his robes and then later covering himself with flowers.

As he emerges from his madness, Lear wonders if Cordelia is an angel – Shakespeare here blurs appearance and reality for heartbreaking dramatic effect.

The Natural Order

King Lear contains more references to Natural and natural (or unnatural) events than any other Shakespeare play. In this play, children turn on their parents, bastards usurp their legitimate siblings and parents watch their children die. The laws of nature are broken repeatedly throughout.

Natural orders and hierarchies are inverted and abandoned throughout the play. At the very outset, Gloucester introduces his illegitimate son Edmund at court – immediately we are introduced to a world wherein old orders may not last. Gloucester himself has an eerily



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prescient feeling about the unrest that is in the natural world, foreshadowed by recent eclipses (always a sign of trouble in Shakespeare).

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects.

Edmund's speech in Act I Scene II proclaims "Thou, Nature, art my goddess" – he rejects all man-made systems in order to ignore and counter-act his status as a bastard. Edmund is twisting ideas for his own ends here – while he makes a case that it is man-made laws that prevent him from having a birth-right, it is of course against nature to betray one's brother and deceive one's father.

As the body count rises in the play, so does the number of violations of order – sister kills sister, brother kills brother, servant kills master, mistress kills servant, and so on. One of the play's most moving images is Lear's final entrance, bearing the corpse of Cordelia. The natural order is for children to bury their parents, but Lear only dies after seeing the corpses of all three of his daughters.

Wanton Gods

Central to the bleak chain of events in King Lear is the theme of justice, and the question of whether we live in a benign or malevolent universe. Is there any divine concern for the affairs of mankind, or is Gloucester right when he claims that "as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods – they kill us for their sport."

King Lear takes place in a pagan, pre-Christian Britain, where religion features only in the characters' personal prayers and outbursts. There are no priests or bishops in the play, and in fact the only mention of a priest in the play is the Fool's anachronistic prophecy during the storm. Is there any divine justice or consequence in the world of this play, or is man alone in this cruel universe?

Cruelty vs. Compassion

King Lear begins with the destruction of a family, a court and a kingdom. The cruelties visited upon almost everyone in the play escalate throughout, although mitigated by acts of quiet kindness.

The play contains one of Shakespeare's highest body counts, and people die in a variety of shocking ways. But the cruelty is not limited to physical violence – the play also features



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psychological cruelty and some of Shakespeare's most virulent insults. Kent attacks Oswald with uncharacteristic venom, and later Regan and Cornwall treat Gloucester with extreme cruelty. The tearing out of Gloucester's eyes onstage is one of the grisliest in the history of the theatre.

In contrast, there are moments of great kindness. Kent returns despite his banishment to watch over Lear. During the storm, as his madness escalates, Lear sympathises with and expresses concern for the Fool, and then empathises with Edgar as Poor Tom. During their reunion, Cordelia forgives Lear absolutely – she insists that there is 'No cause, no cause,' in response to her father's admission that she has some cause to hate him.

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