

William shakespeare's king lear: a review

[Experience](#), [Failure](#)



In a harsh world, one must adopt a rational and realistic outlook to be successful. Often, humans who act upon their uncontrolled, undirected whims of emotion folly into their own failures and even their demises. It is a failure to act rationally that leads to the tragic ending of Shakespeare's play, King Lear. In the concluding Act V, all main characters of both plots die except for Albany and Edgar. The tragic ending is an inversion of the conventional development of justice in Aristotelian tragedies, where good triumphs evil with almost always a happy ending. This success usually follows the tragic hero's anagnorisis thereafter they overcome their hamartia to resolve the main conflict. Though Shakespeare did not follow Aristotelian tragedy plots, the ending of King Lear still causes the reader to question why Cordelia must die after King Lear has already regained his sanity. It is what transpires after Cordelia's death, where King Lear descends again into madness that clarifies the point of Cordelia's death. Shakespeare's use of peripeteia with Cordelia's death reveals that Lear has actually failed to amend his hamartia. Cordelia is characterized as emotional, virtuous, and naïve which Lear indulges making her an effective tool to demonstrate Lear's failed anagnorisis. It is obvious that Cordelia has a deep relation to emotion, given Shakespeare choice to name her Cordelia which means heart in Latin. Cordelia is symbolic of truth and virtue, as setup by her characterization when she defends her claim that her "love's more richer than [her] tongue" (Shakespeare 1. 1. 79-80). Cordelia symbolizing virtue is confirmed by Lear's statement that "thy truth...be thy dower" and France's decision to "[her] virtues here I seize upon" (Shakespeare 1. 1. 112, 1. 1. 273). In an objective view of Cordelia, this characterization demonstrates

emotion's dominance over her actions and, resultantly, a naïve quality of Cordelia. It is Lear's investment into these qualities of Cordelia that prevents his true anagnorisis which consequently calls for the death Cordelia as a testament to the failure. Lear's investment into the virtuous and emotional qualities of Cordelia perpetuates his hamartia, justifying the tragic ending of the play. As a king, Lear is required to overcome his various personal longings for the sake of his kingdom, a quality that can be summated as rational. Lear overindulges in emotional trifles and is unable to separate his decisions from his 'heart,' making him unfit to be the king. There are subtle hints to his heart guiding his decision, such as his plan to award Cordelia the largest portion of the kingdom, demonstrating his preference to her emotion rather than the cold rationale of Goneril. Lear's indulgence in his emotions is most clear in the beginning with his reaction to Cordelia's refusal to flatter him. Lear's diction at this time with the use of words such as "untender," "heart," and reference to "loving her most" demonstrates that his decisions are in response to an emotional injury (Shakespeare 1. 1. 110, 1. 1. 119, 1. 1. 128). In this fashion, Lear has committed a similar act of naivety to Cordelia, where emotions and principle overshadowed rationality, which also came in the form of advice from Kent. This emotional dominance is so engrained into Lear's character that when he attempts to make her a "stranger to [his] heart," he becomes unbalanced and pushed into action that begins his descent into madness (Shakespeare 1. 1. 119). In this sense, Lear's anagnorisis would consist of him remediating his emotional dependency, and becoming acceptably rational. Yet in Act V, Lear displays emotional irrationality when he tells Cordelia "let's away to prison; we two

alone will sing like birds I' th' cage" (Shakespeare 5. 3. 9-10). Lear's lighthearted tone here suggests a quality of irresponsibility unbecoming of a king since he has been emotionally satisfied. Objectively, Lear should not be so accommodating. Because Lear has failed to attain a true anagnorisis, where he becomes wise as a king should be, Cordelia must die to expose his failure. It is also the final stroke that crushes Lear's heart to kill him as punishment for his failure. King Lear follows the eponymous tragic hero and his journey to try and amend his hamartia. Lear fails to amend his emotional dependency, as suggested by his continued affinity for Cordelia. Lear's failure mandates the death of Cordelia as a testament to his failure, to bring about his death, as well as to provide a pathway to rule for the only sensible and wise 'good' character, Edgar. In this fashion justice is served accordingly, punishing those who fail in their duties or to meet expectations, and rewarding the one who fulfilled them. Word Count: 777