

Blindness and insight in king lear essay

Literature, William Shakespeare



Blindness and insight is a repetitive theme in William Shakespeare's classic tragedy, King Lear. Shakespeare primarily uses the characters of King Lear and Earl of Gloucester as a means of depicting this theme. Although Lear is not physically blind, but the lack of guidance, intelligence, and insight in a sense blinds him. On the other hand, Gloucester loses his sight but in turn gains the insightful vision that Lear does not possess. It is apparent from the two characters that clear vision and insight are not derived entirely from physical sight. The lack of insight despite having physical sight is what causes Lear's demise, while gaining clear vision and insight despite losing his physical sight prevents Gloucester from suffering the same fate as Lear's. The purpose of this essay is to explain the paradox of this theme and to explore how it is significant within the context of this play.

The theme of blindness is perhaps the most important theme of Shakespeare's play since it appears throughout the play, in both the physical and metaphorical sense. Initially, both Lear and Gloucester are symbolically blind even though they have physical sight. Yet, they do not see the true intentions of their children; they embrace the ones deceiving them, and wrongfully exile the one who is truly devoted, faithful, and trusty. The theme of blindness also fits into the context of each character's responsibilities as well. Gloucester becomes metaphorically blind to his responsibility to his kingdom as the Duke. He commits adultery that results in the birth of an illegitimate son, who later betrays him, and almost leads him to his downfall. Similarly, Lear becomes blind to his responsibility as the King. He decides to renounce his throne and hand over power to self serving people, which leads to his demise. Moreover, the fact that Lear felt regretful about not

caring for the less fortunate people of his kingdom is proof that Lear was metaphorically blind to the needs of his people.

Lear's lack of insight clouds his vision throughout the play. He seems to be blind to other people's characters, which prevents him from identifying them for who they really are. Kent attempts to reason with a narrow-minded and pertinacious Lear, when he gets angry at Cordelia. Lear banishes Kent by saying, " Out of my sight!" while Kent attempts to advise him to " better, Lear, and let me still remain" (Shakespeare). Although Lear tells Kent he does not want to see him again, but the truth is he never truly saw him for who he was. Kent was only interjecting for Lear's own benefit, but Lear's " King Lear [had] a fierce ego that" (Maulucci) blinded him from seeing that. When Kent decides to remain near Lear in disguise, it is revealed that Lear's physical vision is also superficial. Kent manages to deceive Lear wearing a simple disguise. Unfortunately, Lear gains insight just before his death, where he realizes Kent's noble and sincere character, but by then it was too late to salvage that honest relationship.

The lack of direction also mars Lear's insight. Despite being able to see, he has a poor foresight, he is unable to predict what his actions might do. Along with his lack of insight, this denounces his relationship with Cordelia, his dearest daughter. Lear tries to find out which one of his daughters has the most love for him. Lear's two older daughters, Goneril and Regan do not truly love him as much as they should, they simply put on an act to flatter and fool Lear, and succeed at it. On the other hand, Cordelia truly loves her father the most, she sees through her sister's false façade, and so she expresses that her love for him is " According to [her] bond, no more nor

less" (Shakespeare I. i. 95). Unfortunately, a naïve Lear is not able to understand what she really means, and is fooled by Goneril and Regan's flattery, believing that they love him the most, while Cordelia does not love him at all.

Kent, who is an insightful individual like Cordelia, immediately understands what Cordelia meant to say through her dialogue and that she is the only daughter who truly loves Lear. Kent even attempts to convince by saying that "[his] youngest daughter does not love [him] least" (Shakespeare). Of course, Lear does not have the insight that Kent has; he is not able to understand the deeper intentions of his daughter, he merely sees what is on the surface and believes it. His growing anger and diminished foresight even causes Lear to disavow Cordelia, saying that he "Ha[s] no such daughter" (Shakespeare) and that he does not want to see her face ever again. His inability to see what the future might hold for him prevents him from realizing the outcome of this action. Ironically, out of his three daughters, it is Cordelia whom he wishes to see, and asks her to "forget and forgive" (Shakespeare). Lear is almost nearing death when he finally begins gaining a clearer vision and some direction, but it is too late. He had been condemned from the beginning because of his lack of his metaphorical blindness and lack of insight.

Through King Lear's character, Shakespeare shows readers that even though most people have physical eyesight, it does not mean that they have insight as well. However, through Gloucester's character he shows us that clear vision and insight can exist even without physical eyesight. Before Gloucester went blind, he was quite similar to Lear; he was too gullible and

easily deceived. He did not see things beyond what they were on the surface. When Edmund, Gloucester's younger illegitimate son, gives him a false letter that reveals that Edgar, his legitimate son, is conspiring to kill him for his wealth, Gloucester believes it to be the truth. Gloucester immediately calls his innocent, legitimate son an "Abhorred villain, unnatural, detested, brutish villain" (Shakespeare). Gloucester has no insight into Edgar's character and that causes him to doubt his own flesh and blood, his own son. This is when Gloucester's life starts going into a downward spiral, setting him up for the same fate as Lear's because of his lack of clear vision.

On the other hand, Gloucester's vision actually clears when he goes blind; he gains insight, and begins seeing things for what they really are. When Cornwall captures Gloucester, he says that "[he] shall see / The wingèd vengeance overtake such children. / Cornwall. See't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair. / Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot" (Shakespeare). However, without a clear vision and insight, Gloucester would have never been able to seek revenge on Cornwall. Soon after, Cornwall plucks out Gloucester's eyes, blinding him, but Cornwall's own servant stabs him, killing him. It is ironic that even though Gloucester wanted to see vengeance be taken upon Cornwall, Cornwall was killed after Gloucester lost his sight. Moreover, Cornwall's death is also a result of his own lack of clear vision since he gets busy gouging out Gloucester's eyes, turning his back on his servant whom he apparently trusted. Gloucester walks out of this incident without his eyesight, but in turn, his vision is cleared and he gains insight.

After going blind, Gloucester begins seeing things clearly through his heart rather than his eyes. It becomes apparent that Gloucester is aware of this when he says that “[he has] no way therefore want[s] no eyes; / [he] stumbled when [he] saw.” (Shakespeare). Eventually, Gloucester comes to realize that he does not need his eyes to see because now he could see more clearly than before, in the metaphorical sense. He realizes that when he had physical eyesight he had never been able to see the things for what they really were, and that it was after his eyes gouged out that he started seeing the reality of things. Thus, since he had no eyes, he started using his mind and heart to see. Unlike Lear, who had physical eyesight throughout his life but lacked insight until prior to dying, Gloucester gained the insight that Lear lacked despite losing his physical sight.

All of the above indicate how theme of blindness, both physical and metaphorical, as well as its connection to insight or the lack thereof, fits in the context of the play with regards to understanding appearance versus reality. Nothing in Shakespeare’s tragedy is as it appears. The theme of physical and metaphorical blindness of both the main characters is also displayed through different disguises that appear throughout the play. This, in relation to the theme of lack of insight, shows that our senses, even our physical sight can be easily deceived. Lear is deceived by men in disguises twice. First his own loyal earl Kent, after being exiled, returns in disguise as Caius and Lear fails to recognize him. The second time, Lear is deceived by Edgar in the disguise of “ poor Tom” and is unable to recognize who he is. For Gloucester, his actual physical blindness prevents him from recognizing his own son when he meets him, even though he should have recognized his

voice.

After encountering Gloucester near the cliffs of Dover, Lear becomes curious of how insightful Gloucester is, even though he is blind. Lear even asks him how he is able to see the world for it really is even though he has no eyes. Unlike Gloucester, Lear has his eyes but does not have a clear vision, and is therefore unable to relate to him. Despite having seen and realized his mistake, Lear holds the narrow-minded belief that seeing is only possible through the eyes. However, Gloucester is proof that this is not true, and it is possible to see from within, even if in the metaphorical sense, the reality of things. Gloucester tries to explain to Lear that “ physical [] sight [is] limited and do[es] not give a man insight into the spirit” (Brown), and that the heart, mind, and emotions are the true source of clear vision. It is unfortunate for Lear that he is unable to understand this concept till the moment he is nearing death.

In Shakespeare’s King Lear, physical sight blindness, both physical and metaphorical, and insight are very important themes that are depicted by both main characters of the tragedy’s two plots. Metaphorically speaking, Lear is as blind as Gloucester (Lofgren), especially to what is happening around him, Gloucester realizes that losing one’s physical eyesight does not mean the loss of clear vision and insight, in fact, for Gloucester it does the opposite. What Shakespeare is apparently trying to say throughout the play that we cannot truly see the world through our eyes, we need to look through our heart. The eyes can see the physical world, but they cannot detect its hidden evils, and thus, the eyes are not the only source of clear vision. Lear’s failure to understand things are not always as they appear to

be ultimately leads to his downfall. However, Gloucester sooner than later learned to distinguish between appearance and reality and managed to avoid a similar fate. Perhaps, Lear could have avoided this tragedy if he had used more than just his eyes to see.

Works Cited

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