

Character analysis

Literature, William Shakespeare



Character Analysis King Lear- King Lear is first presented in the first scene as an egocentric man who is ignorant of the many flaws in his personality. Lear has formed himself a personality and defined himself as an individual and utterly refuses to give up this vision of himself, one can only imagine the figure that Lear must have once been considering the absolute dominance and control that he exerts over the others around him. As is revealed in the first act, Lear is drastically unrealistic about what is to happen to him during and after relinquishing the throne, and as the result of this great misunderstanding he banishes his loving daughter, Cordelia, leaving only his unloving, and eventually evil daughters, Goneril and Regan, to care for him. The fact that Lear requires his daughters to express how they love him in words, and his irrational reaction to Cordelia's response, shows that King Lear needs to feel that he is loved to remain mentally stable. In Act 2, Lear discovers his great folly as his daughters both remove him from their homes because of his untactful ignorance as to what a disturbance he is causing in both of their homes. Lear finds it incomprehensible that he no longer holds any wealth, authority and political stature, and struggles to maintain his sanity until it eventually breaks loose and Lear flees into the storm on the heath. On the heath, Lear struggles to accept the idea that he is now a weak, old man with no authority; a conflicting view compared to the one that he once had of himself. As Lear falls into madness, his actions start to show more and more of his fury and grief at his Machiavellian daughters and at his own mistake of disowning his only loving daughter, Cordelia. It may be said that only once Lear went mad could he clearly see that of which is happening around him. When Lear eventually comes out of his apparently insane state,

the audience is confronted with a completely transformed personality, in which Lear has replaced his egocentrism, arrogance and ignorance with compassion, empathy, and love. It appears that as a result of this great transformation, Lear holds a great remorse for his previous actions, and is thoroughly surprised when Cordelia forgives him for his actions. It seems suitable that this greatly compassionate Lear should die of emotional breakdown over his daughter's death, as he was so greatly pleased that she had returned to his presence.

Edmund: Edmund's character is one of the more evil and Machiavellian roles in King Lear, one highly comparable to that of Iago in Othello, as both of these characters unashamedly and unremorsefully bring down those around them in order to gain that which they hold most dear. Edmund sees himself as an innocent victim for his illegitimacy, and seeks to gain powers so as to create a world where illegitimate people can hold sway, and his father's (the Duke of Gloucester) disrespect for Edmund's illegitimate mother act as to undermine any of the feelings that Edmund may hold. Edmund uses his handsome appearance and quick wit in order to get what he wants, showing no remorse for his evil actions until it comes to the time when he realises that he is going to die and go to hell for his actions. Edmund, however, does hold some qualities that Iago does not, both better and worse. Edmund has great courage when it comes to battling for what he wants, as is shown by his battle with Edgar, and also works his evil in order to achieve something that he sees as worth fighting for, rather than the simple revenge that Iago seeks by setting up Othello's downfall. However, can also be seen as being more rational and intelligent than Iago, and so shows that he does bear an evil inside him, as

is shown that his only excuse for his actions is “ I must”, as he sees it simply for his own personal benefit, rather than thinking of the devastation that is happening because of his actions. Cordelia Cordelia is the play’s most virtuous and honest character, though she may be considered to be honest to the point of stupidity. Cordelia’s actions at the beginning of the play, in which she refuses to play Lear’s game of proving oneself to him falsely, is the point at which signifies the beginning of Lear’s downfall, though it may also be viewed that it is also only because of Cordelia that Lear underwent his transformation to become the compassionate man that he is at the end of the play. It seems that the only reason that Cordelia acts the way that she does in the opening scene is because she knows of the false way in which her sisters speak, and before leaving she tells them “ I know what you are”. The constant references to Christianity and Cordelia during the play show that Cordelia epitomises the virtue and love of Christian people. The reunion of Lear and Cordelia at the end of the play symbolises the apparent restoration of order in the Kingdom and the triumph of honesty, love and virtue over evil and spite. However, it is the death of Cordelia and Lear after this “ restoration” that makes the play so much more tragic, showing an unjust and cruel world. Regan and Goneril Regan and Goneril, for the most part of the play, are indistinguishable because of their equal ability at evil and Machiavellian actions towards their father and other people around them. The eldest sisters may be seen as smart, at least for the beginning of the play, in the way that they are capable of fooling their father into believing that they truly love him in order to receive wealth and a higher political status. However, any sympathy that the audience may still be

bearing for the sisters and the way in which Lear expects them to treat him quickly disappears as they turn Lear out into the storm, order his death, and then, most cruelly, play a part in gouging Gloucester's eyes out. Regan and Goneril epitomise evil within the play, showing no conscience and a continual greed for power that allows them to be successful at whatever they may attempt. It is this greed that eventually leads to their undoing, as both share a longing for Edmund and this turns them upon one another, destroying their partnership that was the source of the sisters' success. Gloucester and Edgar

Both Gloucester and Edgar serve the purpose of mirroring the actions of Cordelia and Lear. Through Gloucester, Lear is able to see himself and his own mistakes, as Gloucester has disowned his legitimate and loyal son, leaving only his illegitimate and evil son to care for him. Gloucester in a sense could only see when he became blind, much like Lear, who only became happy with life after he went mad. Edgar plays the role in the play of Cordelia's male equivalent, as both of them act as characters of extreme virtue and honesty to which all other characters fail to compare. Both Cordelia and Edgar also see the fault and remorse in their fathers and forgive their misguided parents in order to fight a greater evil that resides in their separate siblings. The Fool

The Fool serves the play in a great number of ways, though mainly the purpose of serving the King and story as a narrator and conscience to what is happening in the play. By acting as Lear's conscience, the fool attempts to teach and guide Lear as to understand that is going on around him, though the fool is only able to comprehend what is going on around him through the linguistic devices of which he knows so much. The fact that the Fool instantly recognises Lear's fault when Lear

banishes Cordelia, and still stays with Lear shows that the fool has a greater understanding of what is happening than Lear and also bears a great loyalty to his master. It may also be recognised that as Lear becomes closer and closer to reaching madness, the fool uses stronger and stronger linguistic devices to interpret what is happening in the play. Kent Kent, in part, acts as a commentator in the play, displaying judgement upon most situations in an attempt to guide Lear back to what he believes is the right path in life. The argument that Kent has with Lear at the beginning of the play is perhaps an image of what is to come after the argument, a battle between good and evil, for at this point in the play, Lear could be considered as a representative of evil, and Kent; good.