

How far do you agree that “the play of king lear presents us with a bleak and cru...

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

How far do you agree that “ The play of King Lear presents us with a bleak and cruel world and offers us no comfort at the end Much of Shakespeare’s King Lear follows themes such as betrayal on the part of the antagonists and the protagonist’s blindness of the events which have befallen them. For example in a rage with Kent Lear exclaims ‘ Out of my sight!’ with Kent’s retort simply being ‘ See better Lear’ this motif of a characters blindness continues throughout the play. Some of the characters can be seen to be prolifically cruel throughout the play and while many of these characters die by the end of the play their actions still have ramifications. Gonerill and Regan for example strip their father of his self awareness and leave him to scramble for his sanity on an unwelcoming and bleak heath. Lear is not exempt from blame for his circumstances but the disastrous and tragic consequences seem to out balance the flaws in his fragile mind. This is a tragedy however so Lear’s downfall as the result his hamartia was expected for the katharsis of the Jacobean audiences to be achieved. The play has a sinister atmosphere but Shakespeare may have tried to include moments of comfort either for the tension of the drama or to give the audience a sense of hope. In Act 1 of King Lear Shakespeare seems to foreshadow the key themes of the play which often have sorrowful consequences for many of the characters. For example when Lear decides that he will test his daughter’s flattery in exchange for their share of the kingdom, ‘ Which of you shall we say doth love us most, that we our largest bounty may extend’ the contest seems to be an empty gesture as Gloucester and Kent had already discussed that both dukes could already expect an equal share of England ‘ for

qualities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety'. The kings' empty words are soon mirrored by his children's as Gonerill remarks that 'Sir, I love you more that word can wield the matter' and 'A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable' her hyperbole contradicts her when she goes on to explain further. Regan too expresses her true feelings poorly by simply agreeing with her sister 'I am made of that self-mettle as my sister' this sounds as if it were just a shallow echo of Gonerill without conviction of love Lear expected. However Lear does not recognise this as the audience might and so when Cordelia decides that she must 'Love, and be silent' and says 'nothing my lord' Lear indicates his own future 'Nothing will come of nothing' Because of Gonerill's lack of seniority her expressions of love are devalued and mean nothing so that when Cordelia characterises her feelings towards Lear as loving him 'According to my bond, no more nor less' she reestablishes the verbal integrity. To a Jacobean audience the theme of nothing may be more prevalent just from Lear's initial speech 'Know, that we have divided in three our kingdom...' To a Christian audience this may have emulated Matthew 12. 25 'Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation'. Yet even when in the most dire circumstances compassion is shown by various characters. After he is thrown into a storm and in his words Lear's '... wits begin to turn' he still shows pity for the fool when he asks 'Come on, my boy: how dost, my boy? art cold?' This is either one of few examples of Lear's selflessness or his attempt to cling to his only symbol of reality. The injustice of many of the characters are obvious throughout the play. But there are some signs of pity

and compassion and of loyalty too. This is usually due to a possible feelings of obligation to family or superiority which contrastingly in other examples become treachery. For example Gloucester's ultimate punishment for his trust in Edmond is that Cornwall puts out the Earl's eyes. A servant protests at the brutality of Gloucester's treatment '... But better service have I never done you' Along with Cordelia and Kent the servant pays the ultimate price for this and is killed. The King's fool is mourned at the end of the play by Lear because of his selfless attitude towards helping Lear's understanding ' So out went the candle, and we were left darkling'. When Gonerill begins to undermine Lear's sanity the fools says this to relay it to Lear. The loyalty of both the Fool and Kent to Lear can be seen as a comforting thought, suggesting that the king who had lost everything still maintained allies. The Fool used seemingly frivolous songs to try and guide Lear however unsuccessfully into a better situation. Kent too remained loyal, even after Lear had banished Kent he felt a need to serve his master faithfully. Unfortunately in the final act Lear states that ' my poor fool is hanged' and after Lear's death Kent says ' My master calls me i must not say no' suggesting he must follow Lear into death. In this instance the folly of humans are overrun by the divine goodness of nature. However the play may also send another spiritual point, a more nihilistic one; if in fact there is such a thing of gods then they are not sympathetic to the tribulations of human society and are as cruel to them as any animal. This is perhaps inconceivable to Lear as he scorns Gonerill and Regan's behavior as ' unnatural' and uses animal image and similes to describe them, her tongue

is said to be ‘ serpent like’ and whose gratitude is ‘ sharper than a serpent’s tooth’. Both may be biblical references to the greed and wickedness of mankind. Edgar too describes himself as a ‘ dog in madness’ and ‘ wolf in greediness’ here we know that unlike Lear Edgar is not mad and so his word may be taken as a small parable of mankind’s fragility. At realising his two eldest daughters are betraying him Lear calls to the heavens to take his side and strike them with a storm ‘ ‘ O heavens ! If you do love old men, if your sweet sway, show obedience, if you yourselves are old, make it your cause. Send down, and take my part!’ The cruel dramatic irony being that it will be Lear who suffers a terrible storm on the heath and in his mind. As well as this the audience may see that Lear’s language hasn’t changed from the beginning of the play when he still held a position of power. Lear’s first words of the play is a command ‘ Attend the lords of France and Burgundy Gloucester’ This imperative sentence shows his authority which even when Gonerill and Regan reduce his only semblance of his kingship, his army to nothing he still clings to like a child, ‘ Send down and take my part!’. This may be the root of Lear’s downfall. At the time of King Lear’s first performance, England was in political and economic turmoil Elizabeth I’s still recent death and the Gunpowder plot scared Shakespeare’s time in history. King Lear then may be a partly a criticism of an inherently unfair society. To an Elizabethan audience Edmond’s self interest to not ‘ stand in the plague of custom’ and not uphold his loyalty to the king and his father was of a growing trend. At the time then Edmond may not have been seen as a villain but perhaps a free thinking individual who was prepared to do whatever it

took to be successful. The apparent lack of justice in King Lear is shown by King Lear himself ‘ I am a man, more sinned against than sinning’ Lear often reaches for some wider reason for his misfortunes but perhaps finds little comfort in the end when he realises his mistakes too late to change the play’s resolution. This aspect of the story follows the theories of tragedy from Aristotle and so Lear can be said to be a ‘ tragic hero’. However if King Lear can be seen as a spiritual play then Lear’s ending is one of redemption and since both Gonerill and Regan die the kingdom can once again rise from the ashes. Cordelia too serves this metaphor embodying Christ’s noble crusade against evil with a french army and dying a martyr for her father but not without speaking with him and so restoring Lear’s jagged mind even if only partially. King Lear depicts the cruelty of humankind and the breakdown of a man’s mind, the social and family ties around him and his kingdom. The token examples of compassion, shown to the audience to some extent only amplify the Shakespeare’s ‘ darker purpose’ of a savage loss of morals. What little justice thats offered at the end, Edgar prevailing over his brother for example can not compensate for the punishment that Lear and the other characters endure. The very notion of ‘ nothing’ is so significant by the end of the play the most of the characters are literally reduced to nothing.