

The blindness of king lear

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



In the classic Vincent Price horror film, THEATER OF BLOOD a demented Shakespearean actor murders critics who have savaged him in the past with a series of gruesome traps based on death scenes from Shakespeare's work. At the film's conclusion, a critic faces permanent blindness as punishment for being blind to the actor's greatness in the same way King Lear was blind to his own folly and ego.

When one reads the TRAGEDY OF KING LEAR, one can see that the curse of Lear is that he was blind to the full spectrum of the consequences of his actions. Lear had a single minded approach to how he defined his outlook of the world and such blindness lead to the deaths of his friends and family as well as the creation of a needless war with France.

At the beginning of the play, Lear wishes to divide his throne amongst his three daughters. Lear opts to tie the division of his throne into the performance of his daughters in a speech delivery contest and this raises the ire of Cordelia, as she refuses to take part in such a contest. This results in Lear disowning her and that set into motion a chain of events where Cordelia marries the leader of France which provides France with the justification to invade Lear's country to seize territory; these events would never had been possible without Lear's narrow-minded paranoia governing his psyche and his actions.

From this, it is evident that Lear's "blindness" to his daughter's feeling lead to the "blindness" in being able to see the consequences of his actions. Lear conducted himself in a manner that was impetuous and ego driven. His inability to understand that he was not being insulted or rejected by Cordelia, but rather Cordelia (a character who is clearly defined as having a

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strong moral core) was rejecting the notion that she should compete with her sisters for her father's rewards.

The irony to this is that because King Lear saw an enemy where an enemy did not exist, he fed the real enemy (France) with the justification it was loosely looking for in order to take an action against Lear.

FOOL

No, he's a yeoman that has a gentleman to his son;
for he's a mad yeoman that sees his son a gentleman
before him.

The character of the Fool often represents Lear's subconscious, as it is the character of the fool that impresses upon Lear the importance of paying attention to what actually "is" and what truly exists in the world, as opposed to paying too much attention to what is merely his own personal perception of reality; a perception that is tailored by Lear's desire for what he wishes to be true. That is, what exists and what one wishes to exist are two separate creatures.

Conversely, this is not to infer that Lear is merely paranoid. There is great need to be wary of foreign invaders and influence. History has shown that the world has suffered my imperial expansions into sovereign territories and it would not be outside of Lear's proper reason to worry that a foreign power would wish to threaten the stability of his kingdom. It had not been without precedent that members of royalty's own family conspired against them, so Lear's response was not without merit. Lear's problem, however, derived from the fact that he saw enemies where enemies did not exist (as was the

case with his daughter), took the advice of those who ultimately were not helpful to him (his close associates) and, essentially opted to ignore the advice of the person who had his best interests at heart: the Fool.

FOOL

He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath.

With that statement, The Fool provides a cohesive logical center to the character of Lear, who has gone blindly adrift amidst his own conspiracy theory passions. It is ironic that the Fool truly is the wisest person in the cast of characters, yet is outwardly dubbed a fool, while those who should know better are in decisive or outright wrong.

At certain points, Lear does at least initially make an attempt to take the advice of the Fool or at least give the Fool's advice serious contemplation as evidenced in the following response to the Fool's commentary:

KING

LEAR

It shall be done; I will arraign them straight.

Come, sit thou here, most learned justicer;

Thou, sapient sir, sit here. Now, you she-foxes!

At this point, it appears that Lear is leaving some of his blindness behind and has finally seen the truth. The Fool has made a wise-man of the king, as the king appears to finally understand the concept that a clear understanding of a real threat vs. a perceived threat is reached. Lear's problem, however, is that he is always seeking third party validation of his beliefs. He will prescribe to the Fool's advice for a short time, but then will waiver and side

with his associates who are more willing to tell him what he wants to hear. This allows the Fool to become symbolic of a moral conscious. When the Fool appears and reappears throughout the play, it symbolizes Lear's central, endemic problem: reason, logic and clarity of thought are inconsistent with Lear. As a leader, his judgment is not sound and prone to radical faltering.

A great deal of the irony of the play derives from the fact that while Cordelia appears to be the instigator of the loss of Lear's throne, it is actually she who is the one who seeks to restore Lear. Lear's other daughters, Goneril and Regan, ultimately prove that their loyalties lie with the material aspects of the throne and their true natures surface when they start to squabble amongst themselves over the affections of Edmund. All of this provides a scenario that is more damaging to Lear's self-preservation than he initially perceived. In other words, he never should have directed his venom towards Cordelia, but did so because of his perpetual blindness towards what actually is vs. what he perceives reality to be. In reality, the threats lie with the "good" daughters such as Goneril, as evidenced in the following dialogue where it is clear she shares little regard for the value of Lear's life.

GONERIL

By day and night he wrongs me; every hour
He flashes into one gross crime or other,
That sets us all at odds: I'll not endure it:
His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us
On every trifle. When he returns from hunting,

I will not speak with him; say I am sick:
 If you come slack of former services,
 You shall do well; the fault of it I'll answer

In the following passage, a clearly unhinged King Lear tries to make sense of the disastrous situation that he finds himself in, all the result of the foolish wedge he drove between himself and his daughter(s) when he conceived of the ill-advised and ill-fated speech contest:

KING	LEAR
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No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:
 We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
 And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
 Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
 Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;
 And take upon's the mystery of things,
 As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
 In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones,
 That ebb and flow by the moon.

Unfortunately, as much as he wishes it were possible, Lear can not correct the past. It has been said that all human beings develop their core, central beliefs revolving around the fact that their life experiences create their perception of the world.

In Lear's situation, as a King and leader of a nation, he was never used to hearing the word "no" as those looking to remain in the favor of the king and avoid his wrath would simply not take up a position that the King would perceive as threatening. Hence, King Lear developed a predictable and thoroughly unhealthy cause and effect response to the word "no" to where any negative sentiment would result in retaliation to the (perceived) threat.

Ultimately, Lear realizes his error when he loses his throne, sees his family fall apart and then has to contend with internal soul searching in order to find some sort of moral lesson that could at least rationalize the entire experience within his own heart as having ultimately been worth a greater good. That greater good is, essentially, Lear realizing the error of his ways, but his realization does nothing to reverse the damage. In fact, the final result of all the conflict in the play yields the death of Cordelia, the only daughter who truly loved him.

As such, Lear eventually must give up his blindness to what his emotions have created and see the world for what it truly is. Unfortunately for King Lear, these realizations come very late in the equation and his lessons are learned at a point that is far beyond where a benevolent conclusion could have been reached. This is why the story of King Lear is called a tragedy.