

# Expectations and blindness in king lear

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



Shakespeare, with his brilliant portrayal of Lear's conflict with two opposing forces: aesthetics and reality, continues to draw both readers and audiences with Lear's many meanings and interpretations. The main character, King Lear, is the object of universal identification with his obliviousness as to who people truly are, and the discovery of truth. It is this identification that exceeds the Elizabethan period, making King Lear a play for all times.

With his world about to be shattered, Lear will realize that the world he was living in as King, is not so nice as it seems. King Lear is the story of how a man “once obsessed with image and power”(Hamilton 175) is forced to see that those around him are not who he believes they are. The issue of vision and insight, and the absence of it, is a major theme in Lear. This theme is portrayed through the characters of King Lear, Gloucester and Edgar. The lack of insight, or “blindness”, is very symbolic.

Blindness is defined as “unable to see; lacking the sense of sight;”(Dictionary). For Lear, blindness was not physical; it was his flaw. Lear's blindness to see who a person really was, based on their character and personality, was obvious at the beginning of the play regarding Cordelia and Kent. Gloucester, on the other hand, was originally blind because he also had a flaw against seeing the truth. He is physically blinded by Cornwall, but after he gains the vision that Lear lacks.

Lear's understanding that vision is not only physical came too late, and is the cause of his downfall. Lear knows absolutely that he is not only a King, but the father of the family unit, the patriarchal figurehead. He believes these titles makes him better than everybody else, that everyone else bows to him. Because of this, he demands high levels of public affection, that he

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wholly expects to receive. Lear emphasizes his expectations at the start of the play, repeatedly referring to nature and “offices of nature”(2. 4. 94-202) to which he thinks everyone must listen to because it would be “unnatural” to ignore them. (2. 4. 320) Lear thinks it is his right for others, especially his family, to bestow pure and unlimited love and devotion on him; it is this belief that causes him to split the Kingdom - which to the Elizabethan audience would be something only crazy people would do. Lear's oldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, as trained, exaggerate their feelings by proclaiming their love for their father exceeds all others, and they are rewarded for their expressions “... with wealth but with the power to dictate the conditions of public life, the power to make a new kingdom in the shell of the old, to become the new Lears. ” (Basney 18) Sharon Hamilton compares Baptista (The Taming of the Shrew) and Lear, explaining their behaviour: “In both plays, the fathers show preference to the hypocritical daughters and set down, by direct statement and implication, the public role that they want them to play. Both Baptista and Lear flatter themselves on being good fathers, and both see as the test of their effectiveness the daughter's compliance with her prescribed role.

Above all, each man values reputation and status and eschews any word or act that reflects badly on his public image. The shallowness of their outlook is revealed by the presence of a sister who is the... daughter's temperamental opposite”(Hamilton 93). Lear then turns to Cordelia, and knowing she loves him he demands the same thing: to speak her love for him to receive a portion of the kingdom. However, unlike her sisters, Cordelia

is not going to follow her father's expectations. Cordelia “ raises the issue of obligation itself in an unprotected..... way.

She states the moral framework”(Basney 18) of how she can't love Lear all forever; her love will be split when she is married - like how her sisters should have been. Of course, Lear is outraged by the thought that his expectations, that Cordelia fawn over him and flaunt her love for him publicly, will not come true. Lear then disowns Cordelia. Kent, having more insight than Lear, is able to see the honest love Cordelia has for Lear. Kent tries to prove to Lear that he is making the wrong choice in disowning his daughter and he is not seeing her love for him.

Lear replies angrily with “ Out of my sight! ”(1. 1. 179) to which Kent answers, “ See better, Lear, and let me still remain/ The true blank of thine eye. ” Lear's windows to reality, Kent and Cordelia, are banished and for now, Lear alone is able to make his own decisions. Meanwhile, Gloucester is also a victim of blindness. Like Lear, Gloucester can't see which of his two sons truly love him. Edmund forged the letter that was allegedly written by his brother, saying Edgar is planning to kill Gloucester.

His father sees the letter and is instantly convinced. He was made to believe, by his blindness and some help from Edmund, that Edmund loved him and Edgar was the son plotting to kill him. G. Wilson Knight comments on the parallels between the main plot of Lear and Gloucester's sub-plot: “ The Gloucester-theme is a certain indication of our vision and helps us to understand, and feel the enduring agony of Lear..... Now all the Lear effects are exaggerated in the Gloucester theme. ” (Knight 139)

Unlike Lear though, Gloucester is blinded by the Duke of Cornwall; from that moment on, Gloucester's vision starts clearing up. “ I have no way and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw”(4. 1. 19-20) is the climax for Gloucester as he can now see the truth. Gloucester realized he was blind to the truth and how he was more blind when he could see physically. He knows now that he doesn't need his eyes to see and understand because he can understand better in his mind, without the aesthetics, or the outward appearance, to trick him.

Eventually, Lear's strong trust in his expectations eventually spirals down into severe instability and “ madness as he figures out –by the events of the play- that his expectations can't be achieved. Lear's downfall caused is because of this fault of his mind, And he knows it: O Lear, Lear, Lear! Beat at this gate that let thy folly in, And thy dear judgement out. (1. 4. 287) Lear now see's his daughters “ as aspects of his self, now tainted”(Hamilton 118). The insanity he goes through is the punishment for his “ blindness”.

Lear was once a master of nature itself, as he believed, as a God; he realizes that he is 'slave' to nature in the form of weather. The arduous, painful power of the storm drowns him, in desperate fallacy, and creates a strong nostalgia and the extreme longing for affection. Lear “ see[s] how this world goes” like blinded Gloucester, “ see[s] it feelingly”. (4. 6. 162-4) The blinding of Gloucester was an exaggeration of cruelty, the same horrible cruelty that led Lear to madness. Lear and Gloucester gain sympathy from the audience, adding to the heaviness of the tragedy's ending.

Edgar and Cordelia are the rays of hope in Lear, because even after their fathers have wronged them because of their blindness, the children return to

their fathers and "... put all their efforts into comforting and restoring them.... "(Hamilton 174) The irony of Lear and Gloucester's blindness is made even more sad because Kent, Cordelia and the Fool are aware of their ignorance. These three characters can tell what is going on, but they cannot do anything to fix it. Lear is blind to Cordelia's honest love for her father, instead embracing Goneril and Regan's expected proclamations of, what really is false love.

As Lear goes mad, he finally see's what he has done by placing " roles" on those around him, and see's the roles his daughters play, that he created, are not who Regan and Goneril truly are. Yet as soon as he realizes his mistake, shredding his blindness, insanity moves in. The Fool and Kent both remain loyal to Lear, always trying to make him see what is really going on. " Lear is constantly reminding us with convincing representations of obligation, faithfulness, and care, without allowing us to take the kind of comfort from them that we want. " (Basney 27)

What Basney means here, is that while Cordelia, the Fool and Kent show their faithfulness in Lear, while Edgar cares for his blind father, Lear and Gloucester are not aware that they have people who care for them and love them unconditionally. The audience wants Gloucester and Lear to see that the most loyal people have never left or betrayed them. However, Kent and Edgar " must go underground. The disguise of goodness is the principle of Lear's new kingdom. "(Basney 20) Through Cordelia, the Fool, and Kent, Shakespeare created a connection for the audience to sympathize with, drawing the audience emotionally closer to each character.

With every piece of advice disregarded or neglected, a feeling of urgency rises, until the audience can only wish that there is hope somewhere. Everyone sees what they wish to believe; that is, people's expectations shape what is actually in front of them, so that they see what they want to see. It's these factors that make Lear's characters so relatable. G. Wilson Knight expands on this: "Our vision has thus been uniquely focused to understand that vision of the grotesque, the incongruous, the fantastically horrible, which [was] the agony of Lear's mind" (Knight 142).

We can feel Lear's pain, we can sympathize with him. This play shows that we need to look beyond what our eyes can see and pay more attention to what is really going on. We must avoid seeing what we should not see, and stop not seeing what we should. We must be able to see blinded and not be blinded by sight. In King Lear those who appear blind have the best vision, those who seem fools are the wisest, and those who don't speak much really know the most.