

# King Lear: family relationships, human nature and its failings

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



“ I love your majesty according to my bond; no more nor less” (I. i. 94-95). Good morning teachers and HSC students. King Lear, a timeless story of family relationships, human nature and its failings. But what makes this play “ timeless”? The fact that it contains universal themes of love, jealousy and family relationships makes it applicable to modern times even though it was written for a 16thcentury audience.

Two critics that have commented on the thematic concerns of family relationships and human nature are Maggie Tomlinson in “ A violent world” and Jim Young in “ Still through the hawthorn blows the cold wind”, both of which I’ll be discussing, today in detail.

The concept of family relationships is a prevalent theme that can be viewed on many levels, such as the deterioration, renewal and the nature of familial bonds. There are many family relationships in the plot of King Lear, with the two major ones relating to the sub plot of Gloucester and the main plot of Lear.

In both these relationships, betrayal is the major factor that contributes to the deterioration of the kinship. In Gloucester’s case, through the simple act of humiliating Edmund, where Gloucester says in his presence “ There was good sport at his making and the whoreson must be acknowledged” (1. 1. 21-24), he created a rift in the relationship. Maggie Tomlinson brings up a rather significant point when she comments on the nature of the relationship and the trust that is abused.

She states “ The evidence is simply not the sort of thing any one let alone a father would believe in” This illustrates the trust that is built in these types of

relationships and the ability of it to be exploited. Family relationships are also seen between the daughters and King Lear. Shakespeare cleverly investigates the nature of relationships through Lear's test to see who loves him the most.

Goneril and Regan are portrayed as manipulative people with the gift of words and courtly manners, but it can be noted that Cordelia also loves her father but cannot express it where she says " I am sure my love's more ponderous than my tongue" (I. i. 76-78). With the absence of a maternal figure, one could question how much Lear love's, let alone, knows about his daughter. The fact that he banishes Cordelia, when she cannot express her love, shows the little knowledge he has of her weaknesses and strengths or the state of his mind. After surrendering his power, Lear demands love from his daughters Goneril and Regan, but does not receive, so he begins to plead.

Jim Young comments on this deteriorating relationship, where Lear's perspective is that his daughters owe him love because of the material gifts he has given them " Thy half of the kingdom thou hast not forget, where in I thee endowed" ( II. iv. 177-181). This emphasises the obligations of the forced relationship instead of its natural occurrence. Another aspect that is deeply investigated in King Lear is human nature and its failings. To define human nature it is the attributes of humankind that are assumed to be shared by all human beings, making it a timeless theme.

To be human is to fault and to learn from one's mistakes. Temptation is a core aspect that causes these faults and is part of human nature.

Throughout the play, temptation can be seen especially through that of Lear. Its human nature to feel love but one of Lear's flaws is his pride, he wants to be praised, hear how much he is loved. But this flaw in his nature of temptation causes his downfall and the loss of his sanity. In his confusion, he becomes metaphorically blind. It is only during the storm that he receives his own test, where things might change or cease.

It is in this storm that he goes back to nature as a primal being, where the only thing that distinguished him from an animal, was stripped, that is the ability to think and reason. Here, he is stripped of all clothes, and hence dignity presenting the failing of one's nature. Young goes on to say that Lear only becomes sane because of those around him especially the Fool. The Fool stands by with Lear and shares his sufferings but is specific about one point: "Never give your power to anyone".

It is human nature to want power and respect, and when Lear gives it away, as seen through the losing of his knights, he himself becomes a fool. Lastly, Shakespeare also investigates human nature's connection to redemption in Edmond. Edmond seeks redemption before he dies, where death is the redemptive justice. Knowing that he was not to live, he tried to change his evil nature by notifying others to go and save Cordelia from his murderous messenger, but as Maggie Tomlinson said, Shakespeare cleverly incorporates the attempts of a person to change their nature.

Here, Edmond fails and is responsible for Cordelia's death. Tomlinson brings up the question if whether this shows that we can attempt to change, but it is our human nature to be conservative and not dwell into unfamiliar

territory, and hence Edmond tries to do good by saving Cordelia but only fails. King Lear will continue to remain a timeless story, and enlighten audiences about family relationships and human nature, for years to come. One could only wonder if those in Shakespeare's time appreciated the play, the amount it is appreciated now. Thank you.