

Character's journey through madness to maturity

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As one of the most significant moments in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the scene described in Act 4, Scene 6, lines 131-146 provides insight into the parallels within the play and offers a definition of true meaning through irony. King Lear is the focus of this passage, and it is here where he hits the pinnacle of his transition from madness to maturity. Furthermore, the passage reveals parallels between Lear and Gloucester, their children, and their respective situations. The two can be compared and contrasted to further a reader's understanding of how they influence the play as a whole. Accordingly, Shakespeare's use of language allows several inferences to be made during the course of the scene.

Lear opens the passage with the line, "Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality" (4. 6. 132), introducing the fact that he wants to rid himself of all traces of humanity. By doing so he brings himself to a "common" level, allowing himself to appear as though he has been fully overtaken by madness. Going insane has shattered his ties with the norm. This madness, however, serves as maturation in Lear's case; finally, he realizes the mistake he made in banishing Cordelia. At this point in the play, Lear has hit the height of his insanity as well as the peak of his wisdom. He calls to his fool - the only person in the play from whom he takes advice - signifying their shared sensibility.

The transition to Gloucester shifts the point of view, as Gloucester thinks on a completely literal plane. "Oh ruined piece of nature" (4. 6. 133), he calls to Lear, remarking not only on his own glory, but on Lear's, as well. His eyes have been gouged out of his head, and although he thinks he has survived a terrible fall, Gloucester is humbled by his mortality. He notes that "this great
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world / Shall so wear out to naught," as though he and Lear are the only people in the world that have not been consumed by treacherous materialism. No one knows what is "right" anymore, and the world will inevitably rush towards an apocalyptic end because of the disappearance of morals and ethics.

Lear's outlook has changed so much that Gloucester must ask, "Dost thou know me?" The maddened Lear responds to Gloucester by saying, "I remember thine eyes well enough." Lear suggests that he remembers how Gloucester used to be, and notes that Gloucester cannot be easily fooled by physical perception. He says, "Dost thou squinny at me?" (4. 6. 135) when it is clear that Gloucester cannot use the power of sight to determine who is speaking to him.

Now that Lear has moved past appearances, he continues by saying, "No, do thy worst, blind Cupid; I'll not love" (4. 6. 136). Lear refuses to love anyone again, even Gloucester - though he may think that he has some parallel with Lear. Regan and Goneril broke his trust, and Lear has realized that it was he who drove away the one daughter who truly loved him. Lear matures because of his realization about how Cordelia differs from her sisters. Gloucester relates to this because it was Gloucester's poor judgment that caused his good son, Edgar, to leave. Both Lear and Gloucester were manipulated by children that did not truly love them, underscoring the theme of appearance versus reality.

Later in the passage, Lear edifies Gloucester by telling him to "Read /thou this passage. Mark but the penning of it" (4. 6. 136-137). Vision in King Lear

is often skewed and untruthful. Multiple times the words “ eyes,” and “ see” appear in a passage, yet contradict their literal meaning and impose closer, emotional attachment. Gloucester must use his heart and mind to see the reality of his loved ones and the world that surrounds him. Here, however, he fails to grasp this point and retorts with the line, “ Were all thy letters suns, I could not see” (4. 6. 138).

Shakespeare's playful mention of Edgar in the passage provides another parallel with the rest of play. Edgar, who is the rightful son of Gloucester, has hidden himself from his father, recalling how Cordelia has been banished by her father. He speaks in a saddened tone, “ I would not take this from report. It is, /And my heart breaks at it” (4. 6. 139-140). Edgar, like Cordelia, has only true love for his father. He leads Gloucester off a cliff so that his father will believe that it is his divine right to survive. Edgar, like many other characters in the play, takes on multiple guises to establish a relationship with his father. As Poor Tom he induces compassion in Gloucester, and then aids Gloucester and Lear as the Fool. Edgar also becomes a nobleman who teaches his father the value of life after leading him off of a cliff.

Although Cordelia does not pursue a near-death experience or disguise herself for her father's benefit, she does parallel Edgar by constantly ensuring that she is updated on her father's status. Kent is Cordelia's messenger, just as Poor Tom is Edgar's connection to his father. She and Edgar are unlike Goneril, Regan, and Edmund; their siblings do not care about their fathers' conditions, and scheme to rid the great men of their power.

Lear also exhibits his newfound maturity to Gloucester when he says, "are you there with me?" However, Lear's statement suggests that Gloucester is prioritizing wealth over what is truly important: how he defines himself. Lear tells him that "Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light." This imagery suggests that were he placed on a scale, Gloucester would find that his wealth and social standing would outweigh his physical being. The fact that Lear is trying to rid Gloucester of his shallow nature reveals that Lear has found meaning in life, and is finally able to understand the difference between what is seen and what is meant.

The focus of this passage is on Lear's sudden maturation. The irony inherent in the fact that his maturity arises as a consequence of his madness is revealed through his relationship with the Fool. As in most of Shakespeare's plays, the Fool is the wisest character of all, bestowing truth and knowledge onto the King. As mentioned previously, the Fool, the King, and Edgar are connected by parallel ideas of maturity through madness. Lear is the prime example of this, as he finally understands the implications of his decision to favor Goneril and Regan over Cordelia. Gloucester's reconciliation with Edgar does not occur until the end of the play, but this passage serves to foreshadow that event.

Shakespeare's King Lear is a prime example of the theme of appearance versus reality. The real truth lies within what most people would disregard as insanity, capturing Shakespeare's ability to use irony to suggest that judgment should not be based on appearances.