

# Suffering in king lear



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

About suffering they were never wrong, The Old Masters; how well they understood its human position; how it takes place while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along. (W. H. Auden, 'Musée des Beaux Arts') Discuss some of the ways in which Shakespeare's plays use the interaction and distance between their protagonists and surrounding minor characters to illuminate the 'human position' of suffering. This quote, taken from Auden's poem Musée des Beaux Arts, deals with the incongruous nature of human suffering, an idea that we are provoked to think about when reading many of Shakespeare plays.

However the play which comes to mind first when any reader of Shakespeare hears the word suffering is surely King Lear, which arguably contains the most amount of pain and personal torment of all of Shakespeare's work. Although appearing in the Quarto edition as The History of King Lear, the indescribably tragic plot led the Folio edition to be named The Tragedy of King Lear. Many adaptations and rewrites chose to drastically change the whole idea of the play by omitting perhaps the most heart-breaking part and the grandest loss; the death of Cordelia.

What is never lost, however, is the numerous examples of suffering. As a major theme, suffering can be discussed in relation to many different elements of the play, one which has a strong and obvious link to the idea of suffering is the interaction of major and minor characters. More specifically though we will look at how this, along with distance between characters, highlight suffering and create interesting ideas in relation to the human position of pain. Before looking in detail at the ideas which these points provoke, defining the terms interaction and distance seems crucial.

With regard to interaction we will be looking at how smaller, less significant characters mix with and relate to the more important characters when suffering is being dealt with. It will also be necessary to explore how these minor characters react to the pain and suffering that both they and the major characters endure. There are several ways in which we will approach the idea of distance. Distance often becomes synonymous with position, both on stage and in society and this idea helps us to see the huge part distance plays in the play.

In this context we can manipulate the word distance in order to explore the literal or locational sense, to discuss distance with regard to relationships and how connected characters are and also to discuss social distance or how connected characters social groups are. Suffering appears in King Lear in abundance and in many different forms. The human position of suffering is something which some characters find challenging to comprehend; pity is not a character trait possessed by many in the play.

Most characters, especially the most important ones, for example Goneril and Regan are pitiless to the extreme, but a few minor, and sometimes even unnamed characters show extraordinary sympathy towards others' suffering. Not only are the more sympathetic characters less important, they are also usually characters of lower social class. This difference in outlooks from the two socially distant groups bring about the first instance of distance playing a part in dealing with suffering.

Making those capable and those incapable of pity so socially distant renders the distinction between the two unmissable, thus highlighting both the

cruelty of the upper classes and the kindness of the lower, showing that the human capacity to feel for others survives through the most desperate times. No discussion of suffering in King Lear can be done without looking at the most disgusting act of cruelty to be put on stage in Shakespeare's time; the blinding of Gloucester.

Referred to by Samuel Johnson as "an act too horrid to be endured in dramatic exhibition"[1] this scene is still regarded today, despite our exposure to excessive Hollywood violence, as shockingly inhumane. Such repulsive violence is considered by critic G. Wilson Knight as entertaining to the "uneducated"[2] but the events in this most controversial scene show the exact opposite. The uneducated minor character present at Gloucester's torture is so deeply affected by the savage events that he rebels and challenges his own master. "Hold your hand, my Lord:

I have served you ever since I was a child, But better service have I never done you Than now to bid you hold. " (3. 7. 75-78)[3] This quote also brings about how close the servant must feel to Cornwall, although socially distant from his master he has grown up with him and thus is a member of his extended family. Cornwall represents the major, upper class characters, whilst the attempted rescue and compassionate advice is done by a lower class, minor character. This action exemplifies the question of interaction with minor characters illuminating the human position of suffering.

Servants are rarely given such important roles in Shakespeare plays but here we see an unnamed character being so affected by the violence and inhumanity of an important character that he rebels and eventually dies in

an attempt to save Gloucester's remaining eye. This is an example of a minor character crossing a boundary set out by social etiquette and moving physically closer to the major players, making the unspeakable act seem frighteningly real. Although the torture would in itself still be shockingly grotesque, the servant's horror illuminates further Gloucester's suffering.

An interesting omission from the Folio edition of King Lear is the closing thirteen lines which can be found in the quarto version. In the quarto ending we see more empathy and kindness from lower class minor characters after Cornwall leaves the stage. Left alone with Gloucester, the servants of Cornwall and Regan show their sympathy and disgust at the behaviour of their masters. Their humanity contrasts so starkly with the inhumanity of Cornwall and Regan that Gloucester's suffering seems even more harrowing than ever.

This also adds to the breaking of social norms in this scene; whilst upper class Regan and Cornwall behave like animals, one servant dies nobly, and their own servants disobey them and show great kindness to Gloucester by leading him to safety. This brings in the idea of distance in two very different ways. Firstly, by having the major characters exit the stage, Shakespeare creates a physical distance between the major and minor characters, allowing the minor characters to deal with the suffering at hand without their masters present.

Without the surveillance of the major characters, they behave honourably and with great kindness, contrasting to, and therefore emphasizing the horrific way in which the Cornwall and Regan acted. This also links to the

idea of social distance as the lower class citizens behave once more with more decorum than those of higher social stance. It is a shame many editions of the play choose to remove this part of the scene as I feel it is an instance where the minor characters truly add depth and understanding to suffering.

Unfortunately, Gloucester's suffering does not end there. In Act 4 Scene 5 we see him deal with psychological turmoil in its extreme; the contemplation of suicide. Though his despair is quite understandable, we cannot be sure whether it is self pity and anguish at his own position or disheartenment and sorrow at the unfair world that surrounds him. However what we can be sure of is Edgar's wish for his father to live. Although Edgar is not a minor character in himself, in this scene his role is that of a minor character as he is in disguise as Poor Tom.

His manipulation of the events in this scene also bring into play distance as despite being physically and emotionally very close to his own father, Gloucester is unaware of this due to his blindness. Edgar uses the alias of Poor Tom to create a distance between him and his father with aim of helping his father manage his suffering. Blindness brings about the question of distance in an interesting way and enables Edgar to manipulate someone close to him, whilst in disguise as a minor character to ease suffering.

By choosing the disguise of a peasant, he creates a social distance between the two characters to further detach himself from his father. However when Edgar talks to Gloucester after the supposed fall from the cliff he uses the voice of an ordinary gentleman, to convince him to choose life, presumably

done knowing that his father would not take the advice of a supposedly mad peasant but would be much more trusting in somebody less socially distant from himself. What is curious though, is how Edgar chooses a stranger's voice, someone distant from his father, for this.

Perhaps avoiding the voice of someone close to him spares Gloucester his pride and maintains a neutral perspective. Here his father's Blindness also allows Edgar to lead Gloucester to believe he has fallen a great distance. In doing so, this allows him to give his father a sense of divine intervention "Thy life's a miracle . . . / . . . / The clearest gods . . . / . . . have preserved thee" (4. 5. 65, 86-87) and in telling his father the God's have intervened, Gloucester resolves to suffer patiently, "henceforth, I'll bear/ Affliction..." (4. 5. 88-89).

Edgar's fantastic manipulation of this scene uses both distance and interaction between two seemingly different and supposedly minor characters and Gloucester in order to manage terrible sufferings. What we mustn't forget is the suffering of the King himself. Although it is easy to be distracted by the brutal action taking place elsewhere in the play, all of this has been caused by Lear and his own mistakes. Something all the conflicting groups define themselves by is their attitudes to the suffering king, and the conflict between them has stemmed from his movements.

Lear's sufferings arguably begin before the play does, for why else would be stepping down from his position as King? However it is not until Act 3 Scene 4 when the King begins to show signs of madness that we really begin to see the effects his sufferings have had on him. The very moment before

he goes mad, Lear for the first time begins to think about those around him and starts to consider the injustice of suffering with regard to others who may have suffered more than him. This deepening of his character is due to his own exposure to suffering and it continues throughout the scene.

This altruism climaxes when instead of using the shelter of the hovel himself, he allows his fool to shelter there, showing care for this a minor character's condition. He then kneels and prays, something we have yet to see him do, and surprisingly, does not pray for himself; Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,? That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,? How shall our houseless heads and unfed sides,? You looped and windowed raggedness, defend you? From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en? Too little care of this! (3. 4. 31-36)

That final sentence is the first time we hear any assumption of responsibility from the King, who, like many protagonists of great stature, is not accustomed to seeing his exploring his own faults. This speech functions as a piece of unprompted self-criticism highlighting an increasing sensitivity to others, something which was unarguably missing from his character beforehand when he did not look inside himself for the solutions, but instead blamed the minor characters around him, for example in his disowning of Cordelia. He now examines his own heartlessness of the past, and tells himself to “ expose thyself to feel what wretches feel” (3. . 37). Here interaction and distance are relevant in the sense that whilst Lear is distant from others he begins to feel for them more. Through his own suffering he has begun to understand what minor characters feel and experience the problems his subjects have known. This major change in the King's



personality shocks the audience and therefore illuminates his psychological turmoil. This huge adjustment was provoked by cruelty and suffering being subjected onto him by his daughters who, although not minor characters, are minor compared to the King.

Through his own debasement the King takes a human position and begins to truly comprehend pain and misfortune. We have seen in many different areas of the play that the contrasting positions of minor and major characters have worked well in highlighting the cruelty and suffering taking place. One effective way in which this has been done is by forming a link between the minor characters and the audience. For a lot of the play the minor characters are present but silent and often come to life after major characters have left the stage, for example in the all important Act 3 Scene 7.

Shakespeare allows these characters to act an audience that have the ability to become interactive giving the play a real sense of having a true human position at all times We could refer to social distance a central theme in the play. After all, the backbone of the plot is the slow and painful demise of a King of wealth, power and responsibility to a madman suffering an identity crisis whom nobody respects, or, in other terms, Lear's agonizing and troublesome move down the social scale, gradually becoming more distant from his social peers of the past.

This way of looking at distance has allowed us to not only deal with physical and emotional closeness, but also examine the effect the hierachy of King Lear's society had on dealing with suffering. Bibliography Shakespeare,

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C. Carey & I. Lea, 1825). ----- [ 1 ]. Samuel Johnson and Arthur Murphy, *The works of Samuel Johnson*, ed by Alexander Chalmers (Boston: H. C. Carey & I. Lea, 1825). [ 2 ]. George Wilson Knight, *The wheel of fire: interpretations of Shakespearian tragedy*, 2nd edition (Sussex, Psychology Press, 2001) [ 3 ]. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Hampshire: Macmillan Publishers, 2008). All subsequent quotations from Shakespeare’s plays refer to this edition.