

# Responsibility in king lear

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HONS 265

19 September 2018

Responsibility in King Lear

Winston Churchill's statement

The price of greatness is responsibility, sets a high standard for individuals who hold a position of authority.

Such a position holds a great amount of power. However, power comes with the responsibility to use it for the benefit of others, not for oneself. William Shakespeare's King Lear explores this notion of power and responsibility. In the play, King Lear greatly lacks the characteristics of a good leader. He demands everyone around him to follow his personal orders, those that only benefit him. Gregory Doran's adaptation of King Lear (2016) provides an excellent visual representation of the story using theatrical elements that further emphasize King Lear's dynamic character throughout the play.

King Lear matures through hardship and realization of his flaws as a monarch, especially the consequences that come with the misuse of power. While he does not completely change his ways, the audience sees how his values change over the course of the play. By using elements such as set design, costumes, lighting, and the actors' performances, the Gregory Doran production of King Lear conveys the importance of a monarch and the obligations of leaders and rulers to provide and care for their people. Doran's

production of King Lear clearly expresses King Lear's uneager approach to his responsibility as the authoritative figure of his people within the first scene of the play where he plans to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. In this particular scene, King Lear is dressed in ornate clothing, adorned with golden discs that resemble the sun, which symbolize his divinity as a monarch. He sits on a tall platform in the midst of his people, implying that he is set apart from his people because of his sovereignty.

The director also focuses the lights on King Lear, further emphasizing his importance as the king of England. Leaders such as Lear must carry a great responsibility providing for their people. Lear, however, does not comply with the caliber that many consider in a good leader. In *Ethics and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas explains the responsibility of one to the Other, saying, since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having taken on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility is incumbent on me (96). Human beings naturally exist in face-to-face relations with other humans, bringing about Levinas' philosophy. Levinas focuses on the idea of putting the needs of those who one interacts with before his or her own, despite the fact that the Other's needs do not pertain to oneself.

Kent Lehnhof uses Levinas' philosophy in relation to the story of King Lear, pointing out the flaws of King Lear and his responsibility as a monarch. Lehnhof comments, Lear is blithely doing what being does: seeking its own interests, maintain its own existence, apprehending and assimilating the world unto itself (488). It is human nature to satisfy the needs of oneself before reaching out to others. But according to Levinas' ethics, humans are

obligated to take responsibility for the Other. Lehnhof claims that King Lear's actions were the opposite of what Levinas understood as responsibility.

In the play, Lear proclaims, tis our fast intent to shake all cares and business from our age, Conferring them on younger strengths, while we Unburdened may crawl toward death (1. 1. 37-40). King Lear plans to divide his kingdom among his three daughters as a result of his old age and his desire to give up his responsibilities as a monarch. He would much rather focus on his own needs before his time comes to an end. Because of Lear's true intentions, he reveals himself as selfish and demanding, expecting those close to him to follow his ridiculous commands. Lear goes on to say, Tell me, my daughters – Since now we will divest us both of rule, Interest of territory, cares of state – Which of you shall we say doth love us most, That we our largest bounty may extend Where nature doth with merit challenge. – Goneril, Our eldest born, speak first (1. 1. 48-53).

It is here in this moment that Lear's dictating character clearly emerges in the story. Lear surprises readers by demanding flattery from his daughters, since such behavior is not expected from a father. The language Lear uses in this quote lacks kind, loving words that a father should use when speaking to his daughters. Instead, Lear shares his plan with his daughters as an incentive for them to tell him how much they love him.

In Doran's production of the play, King Lear's loud and stern tone also contributes to his intimidating demeanor. Lear avoids looking at his daughters, Goneril and Regan, while they praise him. Instead, he holds his head up with pride, taking pleasure in the glory and praise. Throughout this

scene, King Lear pulls away from the idea that he no longer carries the responsibility for his people; instead, he believes that his needs are much more important. Lear's behavior in this first scene takes him on a journey where he learns the dangers that come with power and irresponsibility as a result of selfishness.

As the play continues, the theatrical elements in Doran's production change dramatically as Lear begins to suffer as a result of his inability to let go of his power and avoiding the responsibility that comes with authority. Shortly after Lear divides his kingdom between Goneril and Regan, he decides to visit each of them in their homes. As soon as he arrives at Goneril's residence, he says to her servants, Let me not stay a jot for dinner. Go get it ready (1. 4. 8).

Lear's arrogance blinds him from acknowledging that the people he is directing do not work for him. His self-absorbed tendencies still follow him even after relieving himself of his responsibility as a leader. Lear's clothes in the production identify his transition from being a monarch to becoming a subject in his former kingdom, yet he is still demanding and unwilling to recognize that the world does not revolve around him the way that it did before. Lear still wears his large, furry robe, but it no longer has the golden discs that symbolize his divinity and royalty. Because he is no longer king, he also loses his crown. Aside from Lear's costume, Doran also uses lighting to indicate the change in Lear's status. In the first scene, while Lear is still king, the lighting is bright and warm, focusing more on King Lear than on those around him.

While Lear is in Goneril's palace, the lighting becomes cooler and darker. Lear is no longer the center of attention as the light subtly illuminates the entire stage to display all the characters on stage. The stage also includes a smaller number of props than before. By using minimal props, the stage feels more empty, representing the emptiness that Lear feels now that he is no longer king. Without the responsibilities that he used to have, he is viewed as more selfish than in previous scenes, since he does not have any obligations to his people anymore. Lear acknowledges his emptiness, yet he does not know what is missing. He asks, Does any here know me? Why, this is not Lear. Does Lear walk thus, speak thus?

Where are his eyes? Either his notion weakens, or his discernings have lethargied?" Ha! Sleeping or waking? Sure 'tis not so. Who is it that can tell me who I am? (1. 4. 217-221) Following King Lear's stepping down as king, he still followed by a group of a hundred knights, indicating that Lear is still enjoying the perks of power and authority, while not having either of those things anymore. Lear's knights are very rowdy in Goneril's palace, leading Goneril to treat her father very rudely and making him leave. Goneril shows him her true colors, after expressing her love to her father. This is something that Lear is not used to, causing him to ask the question, Does any here know me? This question suggests that Lear does not really know who he is without his power, leading him to an identity crisis. Although King Lear suffers mentally in order to realize his selfish ways, he, unfortunately, still holds the same intentions of running away from responsibility. At the end of the Doran's production, Lear's character undergoes another costume change.

His extravagant robe is replaced by a slightly worn out, white tunic. People usually associate white with purity, and humility. Towards the end of the play, Lear and his daughter Cordelia reunite and reconcile with each other. He finally realizes what he lost. His power and three daughters are what he realizes as the result of his emptiness, leading him to admit to the wrong he has done. However, he does not completely change his ways. He says to Cordelia, for your sisters/ Have, as I do remember, done me wrong (4. 7. 73-74). While Lear's accusations against Goneril and Regan are true, Lear fails to admit that his wrongdoings are the root of his entire problem, indicating that he still has a tendency to run away from responsibility. In the final act, Lear eventually ends up in prison with his daughter, Cordelia. He says to Cordelia, So we'll live,/ And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh/ At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues (5. 3. 11-13). Prison describes an institution of confinement and captivity, rather than freedom. Lear is clearly not in his right mind, because he uses prison as an opportunity to be free by allowing him to escape for even more responsibility. Even though King Lear realizes his mistakes, as exhibited by the white tunic, he still has flaws that need to be ironed out, since he still puts the blame of his wrongdoings on others, shown by the worn-out condition of his tunic.

As King Lear's life comes to an end, his selfishness and irresponsibility go with him. Lear is able to realize his ways, but he is unable to fully amend his character before his death. Throughout the play, King Lear undergoes a change in his selfish character through suffering and the help of those special to him to realize his flaws. He does not, however, completely change his character since he fails to accept that it was all his fault. Gregory Doran's

production of King Lear reveals the theme of the consequences that come with taking advantage of power. Resulting from Lear's lack of perception and wisdom and his desire to live laidback and carefree, he soon realizes of doing so.

Shakespeare's play demonstrates the dangers of living an irresponsible life; Lear loses everything he has, including his daughter who loves him unconditionally. The play teaches the lesson of responsibility and the consequences that follow due to the lack of it. .

King Lear. Directed by Gregory Doran, written by William Shakespeare, performance by Antony Sher, Natalie Simpson, and Nia Gwynne. 2016, Royal Shakespeare Company. King Lear Translation. SparkNotes, SparkNotes, [www.sparknotes.com/nofear/shakespeare/lear/](http://www.sparknotes.com/nofear/shakespeare/lear/). Lehnhof, Kent R., Relation and Responsibility: A Levinasian Reading of King Lear. *Modern Philology*, vol. 111, no. 3, February 2014, pp. 485-509. Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity*. Duquesne UP, 1985 Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Edited by R. A. Foakes, Bloomsbury, 1997.