

# King's insanity and the human's nature

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



Right or wrong, black or white, good or evil. Some aspect within the human psyche commands that specific and rigid classifications exist. There is a yearning to categorize every aspect, object, and experience ever encountered—once categorized, it is hard to adapt. Likewise, philosophers have long labored over questions concerning human nature: are we a race wholly separate from beasts or is our nature nothing more than bestial? Throughout Shakespeare's tragedy *King Lear*, specifically highlighted in one of Lear's speeches, the integrity of human nature is called into question. Although in his delusional state he attests that people are no better than beasts, cloaked in the façade of dignity, he is yet unaware of two characters that exhibit qualities that far exceed this assumption. In defying the animal instinct of self-preservation, opting instead to use reason guided by compassion, both Cordelia and Kent represent a contrast to Lear's bleak outlook on human nature. Furthermore, because they both act under pressure and thereby on pure instinct, their decisions adhere to the theory that human nature is not necessarily bestial (i. e. base and self-serving) but rather noble and loyal.

Negative and somewhat shallow, King Lear declares that he will divide his fortune and kingdom among his three daughters based on their ability to express their love for him. All while her sisters deliver their grandiose proclamations of love, Cordelia's asides reveal her mounting anxiety over this test of filial devotion (KL. I. I. 62, 76-78). Though evidently under pressure, Cordelia chooses not to flagrantly parade her love for her father and to "not make that reply;" instead she says "nothing," "unhappy that [she]...cannot heave [her] heart into [her] mouth" and knowing all the while

that “ nothing will come of nothing” (Sewell 143, KL. I. I. 89, 90, 91-92). In denying the opportunity to claim a portion of wealth, she ignores the basic animal instinct to ensure one's own survival and instead embraces honor and honesty. In his folly, Lear banishes his youngest and most beloved daughter, deeming her “ untender” and a “ stranger to [his] heart and [him]” (KL. I. I. 107, 116). Despite this brutal renunciation, Cordelia returns to aid her father after the fickle elder sisters strip him of his physical and mental worth. Desiring to bring “ restoration” and to “ repair those violent harms” with a kiss, Cordelia embodies the very essence of “ conduct (and character) in which reason is transformed by compassion” when she actively seeks and nurtures Lear in his hour of need (KL. IV. VII. 27, 29, Sewell 144). Essentially, Cordelia recognizes that her actions will not benefit her in any physical sense (which would drive an animal's motivation to act), but rather, she makes her decisions based on compassion and a keen awareness of honesty.

Seeing that Lear judges Cordelia unfairly, Kent steps beyond his boundaries of propriety in bringing this mistake to light. As a means of survival, courtly attendants recognize a certain level of respect owed to the ruler in order to maintain their positions and lives. Knowingly speaking beyond his realm of propriety endangers Kent's life and honored position, but his “ honesty has in it a bluntness something more than the mere requirement if its occasion” (Sewell 142). His close confidence with Lear commands that Kent be “ unmannerly when Lear is mad” and “ when majesty falls to folly” (KL. I. I. 147-148, 150). Kent immediately responds to Lear's accusation and condemnation of Cordelia because he sees the truth in her response and in their past relationship. Because his personal relationships to both Lear and

Cordelia determine his character, Kent disregards courtly standards in favor of pursuing that which is right and moral (Sewell 140). Lear discounts his admonishments and threatens banishment, but Kent remains steadfast in his desire to point out and correct the King's mistake. After he is banished, the "loyal" Kent returns to Lear's side, disguised in order to serve the "master whom [he] lov'st" and in whom he recognizes "authority" (Sewell 145, KL. I. IV. 6, 30). Through fights, storms, fools, madness and more fights, Kent supports and guides Lear from his "first of difference and decay;" after all of the trials of this worldly life, the faithful servant vows to follow his master even in death (KL. V. III. 294, 329). Because Kent cares more for the spiritual and moral reasons to aid Lear than the material benefits, he exhibits nobility not associated with animals.

Through his foray into madness, Lear sees society "without grace, without sweetness" and witnesses a "terrible picture of what may lie beneath the façade of social and political institutions...rotten and hypocritical" (Sewell 144). He sees only the negativity bred by the greed in Goneril and Regan. He sees only the fickleness of love-a force supposedly stronger than life.

Through his experiences up until that point, he speaks the truth. All that he once relied upon is gone. He neglects to see the compassion and loyalty that becomes so apparent to the audience and is blind to the forces working behind the scenes despite his former mistreatment of them: Cordelia who scours the countryside to rescue her father, Kent who stands by his side throughout all of the hardships. Human nature seems quite brutish to the naked eye, but to the keen and perceptive onlooker, human nature under

stress and at its most basic can be pure and loyal. All that is necessary is a sharper lens and a willingness to alter first impressions.