

# Animal imagery in king lear

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



Animal Imagery in King Lear A common misconception during the Elizabethan Era is that humans are superior to animals. Fudge shows this by stating: “ where there is a fear of the collapse of difference, there is also an urgent need to reiterate human superiority” (Fudge 2). Throughout King Lear, Shakespeare challenges this boundary that has been desperately enforced by humans for so many years. The strict distinction between humans and animals is trivialized as Shakespeare continuously alludes to the relationships between his characters, animals, and other species.

With this being said, the audience is able to see how the play King Lear, exposes a number of Shakespeare’s interesting literary choices. One that is used frequently within the play is animal imagery, where the characteristics of specific individuals relate to the qualities associated with a particular animal. Through the use of a dragon, serpent, and bird, Shakespeare utilizes animal imagery to relate common understandings and representations of animals to highlight both the characters’ true qualities and their relevance through a feminist lens.

The juxtaposition of human and animal in King Lear is effective in establishing the idea that humans and animals are not as dissimilar as many believe, and in fact possess many of the same underlying qualities. The image of a dragon is used by Shakespeare to portray King Lear’s emotions. Although dragons are traditionally mythological creatures, their possessive qualities and explosive personality are traits that humans also possess. For example, Lear refers to himself as a dragon when he states, “ come not between the dragon and his wrath” (1. . 126). At this point in the play, it is

evident that Lear possesses qualities of a dragon as he is very easily enraged, and views himself as a very powerful and important person.

He becomes enraged at the fact that his prized possession or treasure, Cordelia, is being put in jeopardy by her response. Lear and a dragon both show how the concept of change can make one become very vulnerable. Although Lear's inflexible personality causes him to banish Cordelia, the thought of losing his favourite daughter will become everlasting in his mind.

Both a dragon and Lear have become so accustomed to their roles of protecting, that the idea of change may cause them to lash out. Furthermore, Lear shows how he feels superior to everyone below him in the hierarchy. His actions reveal that he sees himself as untouchable and is willing to pose threats to anyone he may feel uncomfortable or intimidated by. Even though Kent is giving Lear priceless advice, Lear's current state of vulnerability causes him to usher threats and make idiotic decisions.

Lear's comments out of anger and his comparison to being a dragon shows how males have ultimate authority over women, and are able to speak their minds without consequences. In addition, men can be distinguished as the dominant gender since Lear parallel's a dragon's characteristics of being a very powerful creature and leader. Although Lear is willing to divide his kingdom up, he does not suggest that he is willing to give up any of his power. Lear still wants to remain as a leading figure and have full authority over everyone.

There is no mention of a Queen being present, or the balance of power shifting to anyone else other than Lear. Therefore it is evident that

Shakespeare uses animal imagery to show Lear's fiery personality and male authority. Traditionally, snakes are seen as predatory animals that are feared by almost everyone. Being related to a snake is not normally a positive comparison, thus, one must commit a significantly evil action to be called one. The first reference to a snake is when Lear is ranting about Goneril to Regan.

He states, "[Goneril] struck me with her tounge/ most serpant-like, upon the very heart" (2. 4. 169-170). In a traditional fight, a snake is almost powerless; however, it is known that by being smart and deceptive, snakes can be victorious in battle. Goneril shows this by flattering her father's ego in order to obtain his riches. Once she takes her father's wealth, she orders him to get rid of his knights, and ultimately kicks him out, with nowhere to go. Goneril's cunning ability allows her to destroy her father, while benefiting herself.

These villainous actions that she commits come as a surprise to Lear because he is blind to the fact that he is being cheated and robbed of his possessions from the second he offered the division of his kingdom. Just like a snake, the element of surprise is utilized by Goneril to catch her father off guard and thus, diminish his power without any consequences. Furthermore, this shows how greed and wealth can cause humans to make rash decisions, and therefore be compared to poisonous beasts. As the play comes to an end, one can see how the quote becomes very ironic as Goneril decides to poison her sister.

Therefore not only does she possess the same mentality as a snake, she also follows through with her actions physically by the use of poison. Through a <https://assignbuster.com/animal-imagery-in-king-lear/>

feminist lens, one could say that men are quick to blame women for their actions and mistakes. Lear is too busy feeling sorry for himself to realize that he was the cause of his own sadness and destruction. However, instead of acknowledging this fact, he immediately refers to his daughter as a snake. The representation of women as snakes shows the imbalance of power in society.

In order for women to make their own decisions, they must be sly and quiet about them because they have no right to speak their minds in front of men. Therefore, instead of stating their own opinion, they must comply with the needs and wants of the men around them. Even if they have an excellent idea, it will most likely be opposed by men simply because women are viewed as being less capable or credible. With this being said, Shakespeare uses the image of snake to highlight the many evil and manipulative qualities that humans possess.

Shakespeare utilizes the image of a bird to reflect both positive and negative attributes within his characters. Unlike most animals, birds are able to express both predatory and peaceful instincts. Towards the end of the play, the reference of a bird is seen in a positive way, as it represents the renewal of life and freedom. This is present when Lear states, “ we two alone will sing like birds in a cage” (5. 3. 10). The quote emphasizes irony as both Lear and Cordelia are literally in prison like a bird in a cage.

Despite the fact that they are captive, and about to lose their lives, their overall happiness is restored because they are together once again. After the climax of the play causes extreme pain and agony for both characters, being together with the one whom they can trust and care for is the best possible

reward, regardless of the setting. Now that Lear and Cordelia are free from the evil sisters, they can live happily for the rest of their lives. This in turn causes them to sing like birds, or in other words, express their true happiness.

This is a very controversial moment in the play, as it is the moment when Lear finally brings good-spirits to the tragedy that has taken place. Now that he is free of his arrogance and illusions, he is able to see the true love of Cordelia. The use of a caged bird describes Cordelia's character perfectly. Throughout the play, she is expected to play the traditional role of a woman, which is to look pretty and "sing" charmingly. This suggests that women are expected to act only in the way that their male authorities desire.

However, although Cordelia has done nothing wrong and has continued to be a loyal wife and daughter, she still ends up dead as a result of her sisters actions. Just like a caged bird, women are forced to live through the terms of their owners. Therefore, even though they have the ability to be free, they are obligated to listen to whatever their owners want. Also, this shows how men view themselves as providers, and the advantage of this is they recognize that majority of women would not be able to cope by themselves in a male dominated society.

On the contrary, Shakespeare uses the image of a bird to show their more predatory and savage-like behaviours. These birds contradict the traditional image of a bird as they are very dangerous and aggressive. Throughout the play there are multiple references to these birds such as, "the hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,/ that it's had it head bit off by it young" (1. 4. 203-204). The fool states this to Lear because he is aware of the evil

actions that both Goneril and Regan are committing. Both daughters are raised by Lear therefore they know all his weaknesses and are able to take advantage of them.

Also, once they are able to realize that their father is becoming old and weak, they take this opportunity to rid him of his power very quickly. The next examples of predatory birds in the play are once again used to make reference to the two evil daughters. However, this time Lear calls Goneril a “detested kite” (1. 4. 254), and states that both of them are “pelican daughters” (3. 4. 74). Lear now realizes that he has been deceived by his daughters and that his power has been stripped from him. These two references are also ironic, as these two birds are known to eat the flesh of decaying corpses.

In many ways Lear represents a decaying corpse, as he is becoming old and powerless; therefore he can be easily taken advantage off. Thus, the image of birds throughout the play is critical because it allows Shakespeare to portray the positive and negative attributes in his characters. Throughout history, the disparity between animals and humans is unclear. However, Shakespeare effortlessly brings light to this subject as he is able to indirectly reveal the personalities of his characters by making connections to the qualities of particular animals.

This literary method is known as animal imagery, and the characteristics that both humans and animals share allow one to conclude that they are very much similar in the way they act. In King Lear, a dragon, serpent, and bird emphasize animal imagery as they reflect common understandings that can be related to the actions of the characters in the play. Through a feminist <https://assignbuster.com/animal-imagery-in-king-lear/>

analysis of the characters, it is evident that the Elizabethan Era was dominated by male egos. Therefore, one can see the importance of animal imagery as it not only shows the similarities of humans and animals, but allows Shakespeare to be comprehended on another level.