

Shakespeare's major theme in king lear

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Albert Schweitzer once said that The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others. Compassion is feeling sympathy, being kind, and caring for others. In William Shakespeare's play King Lear, an important theme is that it's important to show kindness to others, even in difficult times.

Shakespeare demonstrates this theme through King Lear's conversations with his daughters, especially the youngest, Cordelia, and his conversations with his friends. King Lear follows the story of an aging king and his daughters as he gives up his throne. The majority of the play focuses on Lear's descent into madness at the cruel hands of his daughters Regan and Goneril, and concludes with their death and Lear's reconciliation with his other daughter Cordelia. Along the way, Lear's interactions with his friends and daughters show the audience the power of compassion.

King Lear's daughters are a primary example of Shakespeare's demonstration of this theme. Very early in the play, after Lear has divided his kingdom up between his daughters, his noble advisor Kent attempts to persuade Lear that he's judged his youngest daughter Cordelia's love too harshly. Answer my life my judgement, thy youngest daughter does not love thee least, nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound reverbs no hollowness. (I, i, ll. 151-153). After the false, flattering words from his daughters Goneril and Regan, Lear's inability to see that Cordelia's love was too great to be put into words caused him to lose his daughter and his advisor Kent, who was exiled when his compassion caused Lear to become

furious at him. Kent knows his attempt to show the king how to fix his relationship with honesty and compassion will cost him his title, his status and Lear's trust, yet he does it anyway.

Eventually, Lear tries to mend the rift he's caused with Cordelia. Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not. If you have poison for me, I will drink it. I know you do not love me, for your sisters have, as I do remember, done me wrong. You have some cause; they have not, King Lear says in Act 4, Scene 7 in lines 69 to 73 as he apologizes to Cordelia when he realizes he was wrong and misjudged her. Cordelia's response, No cause, no cause, (IV, vii, ll. 74) shows her continued love for her father, as is also demonstrated in Act 4, Scene 3, lines 25-30 Faith, once or twice she heaved the name of father' pantingly forth as if it pressed her heart, cried sisters, sisters!

Shame of ladies, sisters! Kent, father, sisters! What, i' th' storm, i' th' night? Let pity not be believed.' There she shook the holy water from her heavenly eyes, and clamor moistened. Then away she started to deal with grief alone. Despite being banished by her father, she still loves him and grieves for him. Her love resonates throughout the story and she is the only character to stand by Lear after he has lost everything – his crown, his mind, and his cruel, oldest daughters.

Regan is one of those cruel older daughters, and very early on in the story she shows the audience her cold heart. ...Shut up your doors: he is attended by a desperate train, and what they may to incense him to, being apt to have his ear abused, wisdom bids fear. (II, iv, ll. 348-351). Her husband Cornwall responds with Shut up your doors, my lord. Tis a wild night. My

Regan counsels well. Come out o' th' storm. (II, iv, ll. 351-353). Not only does Regan force her father out into a dangerous storm, she locks the door behind him as well. Cornwall, and especially Regan, show no kindness to Lear throughout the entire story, even though he is Regan's father and their former king. The drastic consequences of this lack of kindness towards Lear eventually cause the deaths of both Regan and her husband, as Cornwall is murdered in a duel by Lear's friend and Regan is poisoned by her jealous sister Goneril. They would never have started fighting unless Lear had driven a wedge between them with the division of the kingdom.

Goneril, Regan's older sister, also shows no compassion for Lear. Gloucester, a friend of Lear's, tells Regan that I would not see thy cruel nails pluck out Lear's poor old eyes, nor thy fierce sister in his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs. (III, vii, ll. 55-57). Regan's nails are described as cruel, and Goneril's boarish fangs depict her as a savage animal who shows mercy and kindness to no one, not even her own father.

Regan and Goneril were each given half the kingdom by their father, and ruled over it for a short period of time; however, at the end of the play, Goneril poisons Regan and kills herself. This commentary by Shakespeare shows the audience that while cruelty and anger may initially get you farther than compassion, kindness will be better for everyone in the end.

In addition to his daughters, Lear's friends are among the other characters who demonstrate Shakespeare's theme of compassion throughout the story. In Act 3, Scene 4, Lear, whose mind is quickly deteriorating, asks Kent, Wilt break my heart? Kent, who remained undyingly faithful to the aging king,

replied with I had rather break my own. (III, iv, ll. 4-5). The dedication, loyalty and empathy towards Lear that Kent demonstrates through the entire play show the audience the strength of Kent's love towards the king, even after the king banishes him early in the story. The adoration that Kent has for King Lear reveals his strength of character and loyalty to the king, as not many people could continue to love and help someone after they have been mistreated by that someone the way Kent was.

Just a bit later in Act 3, Scene 4 during lines 23 to 27, Lear shows his own compassion for one of the first times in the play. Prithee, go in thyself. Seek thine own ease. This tempest will not give me leave to ponder on things that would hurt me more. But I'll go in. (To Fool) In, boy. Go first. You houseless poverty- nay, get thee in. I'll pray, and then I'll sleep. His telling the Fool to go in ahead of him and make himself comfortable shows how he is putting his dear servant before himself, even in the depths of his madness. His treating a servant better than himself, a former king, shows how much empathy Lear has gained throughout the story.

Several scenes earlier in the story, Lear realizes how uninformed he was when he says Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are, that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm, how shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you from seasons such as these?

O, I have ta'en too little care of this! Take physic, pomp; expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, that thou mayst shake the superflux to them, and show the heavens more just. (3. 2. 65-71). He's feeling for the first time what it's like to struggle and be poor, and he wishes, now that he knows what the

poorest people go through, that he had done something more about it while he was king. It took losing his power and his mind to make Lear realize that he could have done something to help these people, which is Shakespeare's way of telling his audience that they should always try to better others' lives, even if they don't fully understand what others are going through until they experience it themselves.

The theme of It's important to show kindness to others, even in difficult times is heavily implied throughout Shakespeare's King Lear, demonstrating why caring about other people is valuable. His quiet, loving daughter Cordelia's love is explained by Kent after Lear banishes her, and Lear later apologizes to Cordelia, mending their relationship after a period of argument. His other daughters, Regan and Goneril, end up dead after they show no kindness to their father. Even Lear's own compassion was demonstrated through his sympathy for the Fool in his wild madness. Kent, also, showed great kindness to Lear despite Lear's hatred of him. Throughout the story, Shakespeare demonstrates that we should always try to be kind even when bad things may be happening in your life. After all, according to Albert Schweitzer, the meaning of life is to show compassion to others.

Shakespeare, William. King Lear. Trans. John Crowther. Spark Publishing, 2003.