

Existential questions and the works of gods

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



The characters in Shakespeare's play King Lear endure immense physical, psychological, and emotional torment before meeting their demises.

Shakespeare's exploration of their pain underlines two existential quandaries. First, the play's violence begs the question of whether we, as readers, are consoled by our abilities to make sense of the plot developments, whether through catharsis or other means, or whether we feel the final bloodbath was for naught. Another significant question that the play poses regards the role of the gods. Shakespeare's characters universally accept their roles and often allude to them, but those who experience suffering and hardship often question the gods' function as preservers of human justice.

To develop these questions of the existence of divine retribution, Shakespeare juxtaposes Gloucester's and Edgar's interpretations of the gods' treatment of human lives. Edgar references the system of individual divine justice, for example, when he explains, "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/ Make instruments to plague us" (5. 3. 172-3). His attitude starkly opposes Gloucester's earlier declaration that "As flies to wonton boys are we to th' gods; / they kill us for their sport" (4. 1. 37-8).

Gloucester's claim may appear more in line with the play's developments than Edgar's. However, I argue, Edgar's insight should not be discredited as oversimplified or naïve. Neither should one assume that the gods have reformed in the interim. Rather, I will offer what Albany describes as the "comfort to this great decay" (5. 3. 304) by applying the Judeo-Christian model of God's "mysterious workings" to justify suffering. By highlighting how tragedy afford characters new perspectives, and by articulating how in

the most tragic moments unlikely characters take the moral high ground by resisting human rights violations, I hope to show that the bloodbath of the play's conclusion, and the existential status of humankind, is not futile.

The parallel experiences of Lear and Gloucester exemplify this form of divine retribution-which, while cruel and circuitous, can be considered comforting from a humanistic standpoint. Although both characters are well-intentioned noblemen, they each possess a fatal flaw. Lear is ruled by his ego, resulting in the pseudo-love test he administers to his three daughters to determine their respective inheritances. Meanwhile, Gloucester is such a gullible character that he believes Edmund's fabrication of Edgar's plot to murder him. As a result, both Lear and Gloucester initially favor their "evil" over their "good" offspring; ironically, they believe the latter to have committed the crimes their siblings then commit. Nevertheless, in spite of their poor judgment, both characters possess a redeeming quality. They are both willing to offer whatever charitable gestures they can to "poor Tom o' Bedlam," Edgar in costume as a wandering beggar. The gestures are relatively meager. However, they display that, despite their suffering, Lear and Gloucester each begin to adopt egalitarian worldviews that contrast their previously-held monarchical principles.

It is only after Lear's wicked daughters ruin him, however, that he becomes truly charitable. Goneril and Regan strip him of his royal material possessions and symbolic power, exemplified by the number of guardians he possesses, which they assure him he does not "need." Reduced to a miserable pauper, Lear begins to aid those less fortunate than he (who,

ironically, are now relatively few). However, Lear does not come to this realization without suffering great personal anguish and mental detriment. In response to Regan's claim that his unruly servants no longer serve him any necessary function, as she and her sister can adequately provide for him, he proclaims:

Lear:

O reason not the need! Our basest beggars

Are in the poorest thing superfluous.

Allow not nature more than nature needs,

Man's life is cheap as beast's. Thou art a lady;

If only to go warm were gorgeous,

Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,

Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But, for true need-

You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need. (2. 4. 264-71)

Thus, Lear agrees that although his maintenance of royal amenities do not correlate directly to his functional capacities, his lack of them refuses him his true royal identity. His poverty renders him indistinguishable from a "poor, bare, forked animal" (3. 4. 108). Furthermore, Lear comments on Regan's preference to dress stylishly, rather than to keep warm. He puns on the word "gorgeous" to show that these symbolic gestures, which can confirm one as

a human rather than mere mammal, can be more vital than the most primal human needs. Therefore, his daughters cannot calculate his need for these validation mechanisms. He becomes so troubled by the abnegation inflicted by his daughters that he loses control his emotions and is driven to insanity.

Nevertheless, by being stripped to the core of his existence, Lear comes to terms with his unadorned and exposed self and is forced to examine his inner character. In doing so, he discovers that humanity is not, in fact, predicated upon the individual collection and hoarding of resources. Rather, he concludes, it is of more value to practice humanistic socialism by “Do[ing] poor Tom some charity, whom the foul fiend vexes” (3. 4. 61), a notion he never would have considered in his role as the King of England. Lear, concerned about the well-being of “Tom o’ Bedlam” (Edgar in disguise) comments:

Lear

Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with

Thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man

No more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow’st the

Worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the

Cat no perfume. Ha! Here’s three on’s are sophisticated.

Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no

More but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.

Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.

[Begins to disrobe]

Fool:

Prithee, nuncle, be contented; 'tis a naughty night

To swim in. Now a little fire in a wild field were like an

Old lecher's heart-a small spark, all the rest on's body

Cold... (3. 4. 102-13)

Upon Lear's realization that his life is no more valuable than that of a beggar, he is willing to sacrifice his own comfort and well being for that of Tom. Lear comments that death is a more favorable status than bearing a tumultuous storm unprotected. This foreshadows Kent's remark upon Lear's death that "The wonder is he hath endured so long" (5. 3. 324), regarding the proverbial tempest that ruined Lear's later life. Nevertheless, despite the trials and difficulties Lear endures, he remains willing to help someone even more desperate than he. His actions exemplify the play's theme that, in the most destitute circumstances, individuals sacrifice to help others, and his utilitarian rationale highlights his newfound idealism Lear's most genuine and clear-minded moment is juxtaposed with the Fool's most irrational one. The Fool previously offered Lear, whom he loves as family and calls "uncle," wise and witty advice. Now, however, he cannot comprehend Lear's actions of giving his garments to a beggar in the storm; the Fool, concerned more

about Lear than the beggar, protests on the grounds that "'tis a naughty night to [for Lear] to swim in" (3. 4. 110-11).

Similarly, Gloucester also suffers immense physical anguish at the expense of his own actions. When questioned by Cornwall and Regan about his alleged decision to send Lear to Dover, he proclaims, " Because I would not see thy cruel nails Pluck out his poor old eyes;... (3. 7. 57-8). This line proves morbidly detrimental to him, as immediately thereafter Cornwall professes " See't shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair. Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot" (3. 7. 68-69) proceeding to put out both of his eyes. At this horrific moment, Gloucester seems more than justified in his blaspheming of " O cruel! O you gods!" (3. 7. 89) as they appear to ignore his plea for them to intervene on his behalf. Yet even amidst this inhuman torture, Shakespeare provides an unlikely set of moral protagonists: the three court servants who defend the noble, humane Gloucester. Drawing his sword against the royal Cornwall, the First Servant rebels against the status quo and gives his own life in Gloucester's defense. The Second and Third Servants also attend generously to the blind Gloucester; the Second Servant seeks out a visual aid for him in Tom o' Bedlam, while the Third Servant explains, " I'll fetch some flax and whites of eggs To apply to his bleeding face. Now heaven help him" (4. 1. 107-8). By balancing humanitarian violation with humanistic acts, Shakespeare articulates the notion that gods are not evil, but rather mysterious in their workings. The situation even provides the possibility of systemic changes to the hegemonic servant-master English monarchical framework. Furthermore, the inevitable bloodbath

leads to the hope in King Lear that a humanitarian political institution, under Edgar and Albany, may follow.

After the servants have paired the now-blind Gloucester with his noble son Edgar, still disguised as Tom o' Bedlam, Gloucester, who has lost all faith in the moral integrity of the gods' rulings over human endeavors, says to poor Tom:

Gloucester:

Here, take this purse, thou whom the heavens' plagues

Have humbled to all strokes. That I am wretched

Makes thee the happier. Heavens, deal so still!

Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,

That slaves your ordinance, that will not see

Because he does not feel, feel your pow'r quickly;

So distribution should undo excess,

And each man have enough. Dost thou know Dover?

Edgar:

Ay, master.

Gloucester:

There is a cliff, whose high and bending head

Looks fearfully in the confined deep.

Bring me but to the very brim of it,

And I'll repair the misery thou dost bear

With something rich about me. From that place

I shall no leading need.

Edgar:

Give me thy arm.

Poor Tom shall lead thee. (4. 1. 66-82)

As a result of Gloucester's destitution, he, like Lear, is now willing to help Tom in a small-scale redistribution of wealth, evidenced by the lines "so distribution should undo excess, and each man have enough." In his desire to commit suicide, Gloucester offers Edgar his purse and observes, "That I am wretched Makes thee the happier," evidencing the notion that some good is to come of tragic suffering. Furthermore, one whom "the heavens' plagues Have humbled to all strokes" may prosper, as Gloucester promises Tom that he will "...repair the misery thou dost bear With something rich about me." The symbolic gesture promises that the meek will inherit the earth.

Thus, the comfort provided by the ending of “ King Lear” stems from the noble gestures of individuals in crisis. It also comes from the prospect of calm after the storm, as Albany decrees that Kent and Edgar must “ Rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain” (5. 3. 327). One hopes that the final bloodbath, while terribly tragic in terms of individual human suffering, will catalyze a humanistic/socialist movement alluded to by the ideological transformations of Lear and Gloucester. The change will be led by Kent and Edgar, who both will repair the wounded state and institute systemic changes for a democratic society.

Through these circuitous, mysterious means, Shakespeare’s ever-present but often-doubted gods provide a tangible moral framework, serving their worldly function as arbiters and enforcers of divine retribution. Thus, despite the terrible pain, suffering, and mistreatment inflicted upon inherently good and incidentally bad characters alike, Shakespeare has provided us with a masterpiece that explains timeless quandaries of why bad things happen to good people. He also rationalizes the purpose of one’s existence through godly means. Thus, while the seeming irreconcilability of the overwhelming suffering and hardship poses questions about Shakespeare’s regard for the audience’s comfort, by providing an allegorical equivalent of pseudo-apocalyptic Biblical stories, Shakespeare encourages his audience to imagine a more favorable ideological framework.