

# Sight and consciousness: an interpretive study in king lear

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



The images of sight given, taken, or abused resonate deeply in King Lear from Kent's first imperative, " See better, Lear" (I. i. 158), to the painful images of a stumbling, eyeless Gloucester. Such imagery, drawn both dramatically and verbally, illustrates well the theme of consciousness. Consciousness in this play refers to seeing the world without through the lens of the world within. The success of King Lear as a satisfying tragedy relies on this issue of consciousness. This theme is most potently manifest in the play through the classic inversion of sight and blindness: paradoxically, those with healthy and normal eyes see both a self and world distorted while only those who have been robbed of their sight physically, like Gloucester, or metaphorically, like Lear, can apprehend their truer nature. In the play's initial scenes we behold Lear as a vain old man, motivated by a desire for necessary dependents while refusing to yield his own independence. Two of his daughters, keenly aware of their father's desires, acquiesce to his designs and play up to his increasing insecurity. Cordelia, the third, youngest, and favorite daughter, refuses to make her love a show and denies her father the cruel pleasure of seeing her bend to his warped will. Her love, more true than either of her elder sisters', is ignored. Lear cannot appreciate Cordelia's candor for what it is. Instead of realizing her pure devotion, he casts her from his house, his fracturing sense of self precluding his better apprehension. Kent, Lear's chief lieutenant, immediately recognizes his chief's grave error. Undeterred by Lear's growing anger, Kent proceeds to call his master to task, saying, " See better, Lear; and let me still remain/ The true blank of thine eye" (I. i. 170-171). Kent perceives the pure love underlying Cordelia's seemingly rude front, and in asking Lear to " see

better,” implores his master to look beyond his own pride and inner weakness to the true intention of his most honest daughter. Lear, still bound by monarchical arrogance, pays no heed to Kent and dismisses him from service. Sightless with eyes, Lear’s only path towards consciousness of own condition and the true motives of others is through his metaphorical blinding, which, as we shall see, is effected by gradual disintegration of his decaying inner self. The thematization of sight and blindness is underscored by the parallel plot of the family Gloucester. The Earl of Gloucester, like Lear, is aged and insecure about his position. He is threatened by the prospect of his own superfluity and is easy prey for his son, Edgar’s, deception. In this way he is blind to the true nature of his children. Gloucester, as we see, pays dearly for this sightlessness, losing his physical sight before becoming conscious of his own wrongs. Lear’s tragic descent into blindness begins shortly after abdicating his sovereignty. As early as Act I Scene 4, Lear becomes disoriented, questioning his own identity in terms of sight. “ Doth any here know me? This is not Lear/ Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? where are his eyes?” (I. iv. 201-202). Lear is no longer sure who inhabits his body, masquerading in his trappings. He is losing the ability to see out the same set of eyes that he utilized in the opening scene. His shell appears similar, but his place in his environment is indisputably different. Lear, as he conceives of himself, would never be treated as his daughters have in fact treated him. This separation of selves, the distinction between different layers of being, is the first step toward both his greater awareness of self and social context ~~and~~ the redeeming consciousness to which Lear must in the end come. This displacement comes to a climax in Act III as Lear is let loose to

wander the barren heath in the night. Torn from the self-preserving dominance of this former position, Lear is left not only as a physical wanderer but as a psychic one as well. His psyche, so long bound up with the authority of kingship and fatherhood, has become untethered. Lear's wandering across the wasteland of the harsh English landscape is representative of his travail across the flat and desolate contours of his own mind. He has fallen into a tortuous dream, lost and alone in his own psyche; his blindness to reality has brought about his lapse into unconscious madness. To be redeemed Lear must awaken from the nightmare of his unconscious and discover a new apparatus of sight. We see the beginnings of this reconstruction in Lear's interactions with the disguised Edgar. Pondering the pitiful figure of Edgar, Lear announces, "Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but a poor, bare, forked animal as though art" (III. iv. 98-100). With this pivotal epiphany Lear begins to replace his own self conception with a more genuinely human and alternative. Lear, in this state, is unaccommodated: he has lost his position, the love of his daughters, and at this point, even clothes and shelter. He is Tom O'Bedlam. He is the Fool. In becoming conscious of Edgar's condition and its similarity to his own, Lear opens the way to a new self-consciousness. Gloucester's own descent into blindness occurs more precipitously. Not until the end of Act III does Gloucester ever question his understanding of the events around him. It is only when Regan tells him that Edmund has betrayed him does his world shatter. Fittingly, this realization occurs just as Gloucester's eyes are plucked out by Cornwall and Regan. The one immutable fact on which he had based his entire conduct during the first half of the play is revealed as a lie.

This awakening, though, comes too late, as his former blindness to the truth is literalized in physical terms. Gloucester's immediate move is to despair. He curses the gods and their open malevolence, declaring "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for sport" (IV. i. 37-38). He can conceive of no other course but to wallow in self pity. He makes no efforts to reconstruct himself and "see" again. In fact, Gloucester begs for death. He pays an unknown man, his son Edgar in disguise, to take him to the cliffs of Dover so that he can cast himself into the sea. Edgar's behavior here is very interesting. He says in an aside, "Why I do trifle thus with his despair/ Is done to cure it" (IV. vi. 34-35). He evidently sees the suicidal charade as an attempt to cure his father's most desperate malaise. The substance of this act is to renew Gloucester's inner sense of worth and revive his consciousness. After Gloucester's meeting with Edgar, Shakespeare provides us with one of his most pathetic scenes: the mad King Lear meeting the blind Earl of Gloucester. The exchange between these two displaced patriarchs speaks directly to the relation between sight and consciousness. LEAR: Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light. Yet you see see how the world goes. GLOUCESTER: I see it feelingly. LEAR: What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes.(IV. vi. 143-147)Lear, having himself traveled from metaphorical blindness into limited sight, works to share this realization with his old friend. The clarity of normal vision moves us to complacency and delusion; true awareness of ourselves and others can only be achieved when reliance on convention and unimpeachable authority is removed. Lear has learned this at last, but this will not save him from final tragedy. The theme of consciousness, illustrated dramatically through the

sight and blindness of Lear and Gloucester, provides King Lear its tragic significance. Lear, as tragic hero, begins the play blind to the truth of his own condition and those around him. Only through his fantastic fall into madness does he find a conception of self and the world that awakens him to consciousness. Gloucester's parallel move toward consciousness uniquely contextualizes this theme and provides the analog of physical blindness through which Lear's own metaphorical blindness can be better understood.