

Significance of edgar's character and its influence

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The Subtlety of Edgar's Importance in King Lear

Any great work of literature stems from the cohesion of many elements to create a piece that is memorable and captivating. William Shakespeare's plays gained notoriety for the ability their characters to captivate the human spirit as well as his eloquent use of language. As a testament to his skill as a playwright, some of his most interesting characters could exist in the background of the play while still driving the narrative of the story. For example, King Lear tells a gripping tale of characters who forsake their families to pursue their own self-interests, unlike the character Edgar who selflessly works to bring about the resolution of the story, despite his own betrayal. His altruistic dedication to those who are helpless and his positive influence on even the most depraved characters make Edgar the most important figure in King Lear. The audience first hears of Edgar in Act 1 Scene 1 in a conversation between Gloucester and Kent where Gloucester laments his bastard son Edmund and praises his true son Edgar. Gloucester assures Kent that he loves his children equally despite Edmund's beginnings, because his mother was pretty and he enjoyed bringing him into this world. Though Gloucester loves his children proportionately, Edmund's illegitimacy designates Edgar as the heir of Gloucester's title and wealth. Edmund tricks Gloucester into believing Edgar wants to murder him, which allots Edgar's inheritance to Edmund. The emotional trauma of being hunted by his own father leaves Edgar an outlaw beggar who puts on an act of being deranged to ensure his safety. From this point in the story, Edgar comes in and out of the play in the character of "Poor Tom," who mutters unintelligibly to himself. In this way Shakespeare keeps Edgar in the action, but not

seemingly important as he moves in and out of scenes for the first two acts, doing nothing substantial. This allows Edgar to move the narrative of the story forward from the background, slowly building up to the last two acts when he completely changes three characters' lives.

The first character Edgar positively affects is King Lear himself. Suffering from a broken heart and an overwhelming sense of guilt, Lear is slowly slipping into madness. He has cast out Cordelia who is the only daughter who truly loves him and is now under the thumb of his two spoiled and evil daughters, Regan and Goneril. The audience knows Edgar's insanity is an act to conceal his identity, but there are times when Edgar appears to get lost in his disguise " Poor Tom" and actually seems to be going mad. The deranged " Poor Tom" becomes a template for Lear to project his own problems onto. When Lear sees Edgar's insane ramblings he asks him, " What, has his daughters brought him to this pass? / Couldst thou save nothing? Didst thou give them all?" (3. 4. 62-63). Lear assumes that Edgar has ended up in this state of lunacy because he too has given everything to his daughters and they in turn have forsaken him. Kent tries to tell Lear that Edgar has no daughters, but Lear responds with, " Death, traitor! Nothing could have subdued nature / To such a lowness but his unkind daughters" (3. 4. 69-70). Lear refuses to believe Edgar has no daughters, because only greedy daughters could rob a man of his sanity. Throughout the scene in the hut Edgar is talking to himself as " Poor Tom," muttering incomprehensible nonsense. When Gloucester comes to retrieve Lear from the hut, Lear refuses to leave without Edgar, saying, " I'll take a word with this same learned Theban. / What is your study?" (3. 4. 150-51). Lear is convinced that

Edgar is a wise man who knows much about the world that others do not. The interaction of Edgar and Lear positively affects both characters' mental states. Through Edgar Lear becomes more willing to accept help from others and is able to come to terms with his daughters' betrayal and his own horrible treatment of Cordelia. Edgar makes an aside, saying his troubles seem far easier to bear now that he has seen the state that Lear is in. He realizes Lear's daughters have betrayed him in the same way that Gloucester has betrayed Edgar. Edgar announces his plan to stay in the shadows and observe, then come forth and prove his innocence when the time is right. (3. 6. 102-15). Lear's own suffering pulls Edgar out of his act of insanity and makes him resolute to help Lear and to reveal his true identity when the time is right.

Edgar is also the difference between life and death for Gloucester, despite the fact that Gloucester's actions forced Edgar to become an outlaw. Had Gloucester not been so quick to believe Edmund's claims about Edgar, Edgar would not have been forced take on the identity of an insane man and wander the moors as a homeless beggar. Even considering this Edgar, acting as " Poor Tom," still cares for his father after Cornwall blinds Gloucester for supporting Lear. After the loss of his eyes and learning the truth about Edmund, Gloucester becomes suicidal. His sense of guilt is so extreme that he asks Poor Tom to lead him to a cliff so he may jump to his death. Instead of complying, Edgar tricks him into believing he has jumped off an imaginary cliff and that the Gods have saved him because he is too important to die. If not for Edgar, Gloucester might have hired another boy take him to an actual cliff and jump to his death. Edgar's actions let Gloucester believe he is about

to end his life and force him to confront his feelings of guilt and regret about Edgar. In this way he can move from the sins of his past to a potentially bright new future helping to repair the kingdom. Witnessing this, Edgar is tormented to see his father this way— crying, “ How should this be? / Bad is the trade that must play fool to sorrow, / Angering itself and others.—Bless thee, master!” (4. 1. 38-40). Edgar knows he could end his father's suffering if he revealed himself as Edgar, but Edgar cannot risk the wrong people learning who he really is. Edgar knows he has a bigger purpose to serve in this play, and must wait until he confronts Edmund to unveil his true identity.

Every appearance of Edgar in King Lear is building up to the fifth and final act of the play. Edgar approaches the Duke of Albany in the disguise of “ Poor Tom,” and gives him a letter stating that if the Duke wins in battle, then he should blow the trumpet as a signal for a champion to come forth. He may look wretched, but he will defend his claims when the time comes (5. 1. 40-45). Edgar's dedication to his disguise has been for this moment so that the Duke of Albany does not recognize Edgar or know who the promised champion will be. When the Duke wins the battle against France, Edgar can shed the identity of “ Poor Tom” and face Edmund as his outlaw brother. Over the course of the play Edmund has developed into a deceitful and self obsessed villain, putting plans into motion to murder Lear and Cordelia, and convincing both Regan and Goneril of his intent to marry them. Edmund becomes so pretentious that he ignores the orders of the Duke of Albany and addresses him as an equal even though he is still a bastard. This act of pretention snowballs, showing Edmund's intentions with Albany's wife, Goneril, and her sister, Regan. When the Duke exclaims that Edmund is

under arrest for capital treason, the trumpets are sounded for Edgar to appear. Edgar comes forwards and tells Edmund, " Thy valor and thy heart, thou art a traitor; / False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father; / Conspirant ' gainst this high-illustrious prince" (5. 3. 133-35). Edgar has bided his time for this moment, making moves from the background to finally bring the downfall of his traitorous brother. Edmund and Edgar duel and Edmund falls, emboldening Edgar to tell his brother who it is that has defeated him. Upon hearing everything Edgar has done to assure his downfall, Edmund has a change of heart, telling the others, " I pant for life. Some good I mean to do, Despite of my own nature" (5. 3. 243). Edgar's impact on Edmund has been so great that Edmund wants to go against his own nature and do good. Edmund is so affected by Edgar that he uses his final moments before death trying to take back his last heinous act. Edmund tells Edgar and Albany about the man he has sent to kill Lear and Cordelia, but Edmund's warning is too late to save Cordelia from death and Lear subsequently dies of grief. Though Edmund's attempt to right a wrong ends up being in vain, Edmund dies a changed man with the possibility of redemption that he did not have before. Edgar changes Edmund from a man who was filled with deceit and greed to a man working to reverse his evil deeds in the last minutes of his life.

Edgar is able to single-handedly affect positive change in the lives of three very important characters in King Lear. Shakespeare brilliantly uses a character that seems unimportant and lives in the shadows to affect change and bring about the resolution of the story. Edgar and Lear have the biggest impact on each other. Lear shines a light on Edgar's own sufferings and

helps him return to sanity as he realizes his own misfortunes could be much worse. Edgar gives Lear the ability to speak on his daughter's betrayals and the guilt he is consumed with over his treatment of Cordelia. Edgar and Lear both walk away from their encounter changed men with a better grip on reality. Edgar goes on to save his father from death as he helps Gloucester work through his feelings that are leading him to suicide. Gloucester spends the first half of the play hunting Edgar after falling into Edmund's trap, and still Edgar does everything in his power to save his father and care for him as he deals with his new disability. Furthermore, Edgar does not reveal his true identity to his father, even though his heart aches to show Gloucester that his son is alive and still loves him. He stays dedicated to the disguise of an insane beggar for which he experiences disgust and discrimination, all to save the kingdom from his brother. Edgar also wins the duel against Edmund and causes his brother to repent his evil deeds. Although Cordelia was not saved in time and Lear died as a result of his grief, Edgar's efforts were not in vain as Edmund spent the last minutes of life trying to undo his mistakes. In a moment of passion, Goneril kills Regan followed by herself, motivated by the jealousy of their shared affections for Edmund. Because of Edgar's actions, three of the vilest characters of the play are dead. The consequences of Lear's mistakes and Edmund's greed have now been undone, ending the play on a tone of hope as the kingdom looks for a new ruler to unite them.

Edgar's actions throughout King Lear are acts of selflessness and good will as he works to help those who have wronged him and save the kingdom from the actions of his brother. Edgar stays devoted to bringing about the

downfall of his wicked brother, even when it means maintaining a disguise that brings judgment and disgust from others. Without Edgar, Lear might not have regained his sanity and reunited with Cordelia, Gloucester would have committed suicide, the Duke of Albany would have no proof of the extent of Edmund's betrayal, and Edmund would not have died a changed man. Shakespeare cleverly uses a character that works from the background of the play to bring about the resolution, while influencing the individual development of three of the most important characters in King Lear.