

# King lear – dramatic impact

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



The final scene in the play offers the audience closure, and could be seen as the climax to events. The extract begins with death already a clear undertone to proceedings; with Cordelia being dead in Lear's arms. Shakespeare creates an impact through the use of the characters themselves, the action that occurs in the extract, the situation that unfolds and the tension built up during these situations.

The extract begins with Lear drawing attention upon himself with the use of repetition and exclamatives 'Howl, howl, howl, howl!' this gives an immediate impact and tension with regards to what is to follow.

The words are particularly interesting as they not only express Lear's anguish, but also have an imperative feel to them, especially with the exclamation giving the impression of a command. This leaves the audience questioning whether Lear has really developed and changed at all during the duration of the play.

This can be explored further with Lear's repeated use of the first person singular 'I', which shows yet again that it is the way in which problems affect him rather than all the characters as a whole.

It is particularly poignant when Lear first says 'you murderers' and later 'who are you?' to Kent. The lack of recognition of Kent, the man who has served him so loyally would stir up emotion in the audience. As well as denouncing Kent as a murderer along with everyone else in Lear's presence. These factors combined create strong emotions adding to the catharsis felt and plant a fear for what more there is to come.

The imagery used is also very powerful in creating tension such as ‘ That heaven’s vault should crack’ I believe it is a metaphor for expressing Lear’s discontent with the Gods, as religion was much more prevalent for Elizabethans this would be especially striking and powerful. Shakespeare also uses irony such as ‘ Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little’. It is ironic that in the first act Lear dismisses Cordelia and now the situation has been subverted, and he is left willing her to breathe. The whole situation of Cordelia dying in her fathers arms creates a strong sense of pathos which would be highly impacting for the audience. More so an Elizabethan audience who are not accustomed to witnessing such an ending, during that time it was more common for poetic justice to be served and the ‘ good hearted’ characters to live while the evil characters perish.

The final speech by Lear is what I believe to be the most saddening and yet enlightening parts of the whole play. He questions ‘ Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life’. This again questions the way in which the gods are working through the use of animal imagery, giving an idea that Lear has lost faith in religion. There is also the pun of my ‘ poor fool’ which gives way to questions regarding Cordelia being the Fool in disguise as they never appear on stage together at any one time. The repetition of ‘ never’ shows denial and would be disturbing for the audience to watch this powerful king broken, on his knees showing signs of madness and instability. The only comfort is that it could be thought that Lear dies with some sense of relief as he believes Cordelia may still be alive shown with ‘ Look on her: look, her lips’.

A lexicon of passing can be seen such as 'promised end', 'dead', 'absolute' and 'life'. This gives closure to the play, which would likely stir discontent amongst the audience who are not ready to end in this fashion thus adding to the overall impact.

Overall the extract uses a theme of death and madness to convey a cruel closure that leaves much sympathy and regret towards the characters' actions. The unspoken characters such as Edgar and the paralinguistics of such characters would also add to the tension of such a scene, especially after the events that unfolded previous to this finale. The different images and attitudes exposed as the extract closes come together to create a memorable and impacting scene. Also read about role of the fool in King Lear essay

The most interesting aspect of the extract is the use of repetition to portray grief and madness. Goffman's theory of 'face' was useful in seeing how Lear loses 'face' as he is taken over by grief and how other characters such as Kent never lose 'face' or loyalty. Aristotle's version of tragedy was also important in spotting the clear sense of pathos created. *Harmartia* was also particularly striking in Lear as he chose to blame others for what was originally his actions. In deconstructing the extract I drew on possible paralinguistics that could be seen in other performances such as in a modern version of King Lear in which Lear is kneeling down, appearing very weak. I also drew on literary techniques by examining imagery, style and language and linguistic models by analysing grammar and connotations of the words.

Overall my understanding and interpretation of the extract was based on both literary and linguistic approaches.