

# King lear: sense of renewal



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## King Lear: Sense of Renewal

Throughout Shakespeare's King Lear, there is a sense of renewal, or as L. C. Knights puts it, "affirmation in spite of everything," in the play. These affirmative actions are vividly seen throughout the play that is highly infused with evil, immorality and perverted values. These glimpses of hope seem to provide the reader with an underlying notion of human goodness that remains present, throughout the lurking presence of immorality and a lack of values. However, in the end it is questionable if these are true revelations, and if the affirmative notions are undermined, and thus less significant than the evil in which they are engulfed.

In Act I Scene I, the first glimmer of hope is revealed in the play at a time of madness, corruption and despair. In this scene, King Lear has created an environment of competition that promotes false flattery, among many other things as he divides his kingdom in relation to the amount of love his daughters profess to him. King Lear in his willfulness and arrogance does not see the

error that he makes in equating love with reward, in this competitive environment.

Cordelia is the only one of the three sisters who cannot fully participate in the competition to gain her father's inheritance by engaging in false flattery. Instead of trying to outdo her sisters, she merely describes her love in relation to their filial bond. Although her father views this as a degrading insult and banishes her, it is shown that through her filial bond, she loves her father with more depth and sincerity than her eager, self-absorbed sisters. Cordelia emerges amid the moral depravity and social decay as one who is honest and true to her beliefs.

In banishing his daughter Cordelia from the kingdom and taking away her inheritance, King Lear is destroying the natural order of society. She is left abandoned by both her father and her presumed suitor, Burgundy. Yet Shakespeare rewards Cordelia's noble character with another suitor, the King of France. Despite all that has occurred in relation to being left destitute and friendless,

France gladly accepts the estranged Cordelia as his bride to be and applauds her

virtues that he states, make her rich. In introducing him to the play,

Shakespeare provides the reader with another positive creature amid the powerful

and morally deprived members of society.

The honesty and dedication of the Earl of Kent throughout King Lear, is another example of affirmation to the reader that lasts throughout the entirety

of the play. He is introduced in Act 1 Scene 1 as he defends Cordelia and accuses Lear of exhibiting a monumental folly in banishing her. Although he approaches the discussion with a display of his admiration and dedication to the

King, he too is banished. Kent suffers unrewarded for exhibiting morality at a time that embraced corrupt values, and an unclear vision of the world's order and

humanity. Kent sees clearly through this disillusioned society and unfortunately like Cordelia, is punished harshly.

Act I Scenes iii and iv provide the reader with a sharp contrast between

the opposite states of morality and immorality. Shakespeare presents these scenes back to back, to provide the reader with a definite grasp of the values possessed by Kent. The first scene introduces the reader to a terrible perversion of values. In the next scene however, affirmation and goodness are described. In doing this one after the other, Shakespeare allows the readers to gain insight on the immoral acts embraced by society and the goodness embraced by Kent. He offers renewal to the reader after scene iii, in that he suggests that not all are as bad as one imagines after reading Act I scene iii.

In Act I Scene III, Goneril is instructing Oswald to insult her father

King Lear, and to treat him disrespectfully in every way possible. Goneril does

this to begin to take the power away from her father, and invest it in her own glory and authority. In shifting loyalty from King Lear to Goneril, Oswald is disrupting the defined order of loyalty and servitude. Instead of embracing the

traditional order of servitude, Oswald embraces the notion of power politics,

where authority can easily be given away. This scene is highly critical of the state of societies moral values to each other, in familial relations and political ones. It also begins to evoke the reader's emotions and encourages them to sympathize with King Lear, as everyone seems to be harshly turning against him.

The next scene reveals the opposite event occurring, a willing acceptance of King Lear's authority, regardless of selfish attempts to gain power. Faithful Kent, though previously banished by Lear, has returned in disguise to offer his servitude. In Kent's opinion, the authority of King Lear is seen in his personhood, in his face. Kent is a servant who is willing to serve his master despite political power struggles. Kent represents goodness in society and is contrasted sharply with Oswald in the previous scene. This contrast shown from one scene to the next is used effectively by Shakespeare to reveal the competing forces present throughout King Lear.

This example is affirming because it reveals that a noble man like Kent exists in this society, which is seemingly void of such attributions. However,

the opposite message is also portrayed. This can be seen in the unsettling view

that describes the result of being an admirable and humane person, in a society

with power in the hands of a morally divest circle of individuals.

Thus far, being an admirable character like that of Kent or Cordelia has lead to them to face estrangement from society. It has also disrupted the preestablished natural and societal order which inevitably will result in chaos.

These examples of affirming scenes and characters are purposely inserted by

Shakespeare into this play. This is because they offer encouragement to the reader with regards to the morale of society. However, they appear less significant than the overwhelming presence of decay and malice in society. It is as if while these positive notions are seen throughout the play, they also are constantly undermined by those evil characters who have the most power.

In Act III-Scene IV Shakespeare provides the reader with an excellent

view of how Shakespeare is able to contradict and undermine good and bad acts

throughout society. This scene is the epitome of the evil and sin adapted by most of the characters throughout King Lear. It is here that Gloucester's eyes are gauged out by Cornwall, in the presence of Goneril and Regan. This atrocity

represents the moral decay that these characters espouse to. In this scene however, a glimmer of hope can be found when one of Cornwall's own servants,

cries out for his master to stop, and draws his sword in Gloucester's defense.

However, he is quickly killed by Goneril, and Gloucester's other eye proceeds to

be wounded.

Although this servant represents a strive toward decency amid a malevolent society, he remains a helpless victim to their heinous acts. He is unable to protect Gloucester from their wickedness and ends up losing his own

life as well. Although Shakespeare again offers a glimpse of promise, evil again undermines it's efforts. The good are not rewarded for their principles



in this incident, as in the situations of Cordelia and Kent.

In his blindness, Gloucester is able to experience a sense of rebirth in that he gains a new and much more clear insight of the world. Previously, he had denounced his son Edgar as villainous due to the intentional set up by Edmund, in an attempt to gain the inheritance. It is while becoming blind that Gloucester learns the truth of the deception. This may give the act of becoming blind an affirmative action. However, it is this act that also leads Gloucester into another engagement of deceit.

As Edgar's character is in disguise, he becomes the moral voice throughout the play. He encourages community and for people not to suffer alone.

He sees the intensity of the situation and often does not want to be involved in society. In Act IV Scene I, Edgar's speech says that it is better to live in the real world and know one's relations, than it is to be false flattered or tricked, " Yet better thus, and known to be contemned/Than still contemned and

flattered"(p 939 lines 1- 2). After saying these lines, he begins to get happy,

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and expects that things will get better.

Edgar's positive attitude is reflective of hope in society and it's

conditions. However, Shakespeare undermines this when Edgar goes against his

own words and deceits his father. In Scene XI, Edgar fakes Gloucester's death

to provide his father with a miracle. He does this in an attempt to encourage

his father with strength and happiness. Yet this is undermined in the fact that

Edmund tricked Gloucester to begin with, and that delusion is what lead Edgar to

his initial despair. Thus a sense of rebirth and renewal is seen in this scene,

as Gloucester believes in the miracle and may have gained a sense of worth.

Yet

undermining all of this positive renewal and affirmation, is the disturbing fact of its illegitimacy.

Lear endures an obvious sense of rebirth throughout King Lear. The

rebirth of King Lear into the realities of the world is complemented by

Gloucester who makes a moral decision to aid Lear, and find him amid the storm.

It is in this storm that Lear is left to gradually become mad, do to the dispossession of power and lack of respect he endures. The cause of this process

is initiated with the outright betrayal of both Regan and Goneril. As they strip him of his possessions both mentally and literally, he begins to gain a new insight of the world.

Lear realizes the flaws of his character and the unjust human suffering he promoted throughout his life as king. When faced with Edgar who is disguised

as a beggar, Lear embraces morality and empathy as he tears off his clothes and

offers his sympathetic speech concerning those “ poor naked Wretches” he has

ignored for so long. King Lear seems to be stuck between sympathy for

Tom(Edgar) and terror regarding his own character. As Shakespeare offers the

rebirth of King Lear into morality and a world embracing human sympathy, he

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generates another sense of affirmation in the play. But as is later revealed, this new found knowledge may merely be a mock revelation.

In the end of this tragedy, King Lear may not be as enlightened as one had thought. He displays several relapses into his previous mindset as King.

This can be seen in his relations with Gloucester after he has experienced what

he thought to be a “miraculous” salvation from God. Lear appears shortly after

and begins to speak. His first words were, “I am the king himself”(p 949, line

83) After previously denouncing this role that is at the root of moral decay,

and dismissing such ornamentation associated with that position, he comes back

around to reestablish his natural right. Thus, his previous renewal and moral

insight are undermined by this declaration. He also goes on to offer money to

Gloucester, reaffirming old values of servitude. In suggesting that money gives

way to power and the ability to do anything desired, he critiques his own role.

Another example of Lear regressing in morality may be seen in relation to his reuniting with Cordelia. He implies that he wants a reduced kingdom where he has all that he wants:

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.

We two alone will sing like birds I' the cage . . .

.. So, we'll live,

And pray, and sing, and tell of old tales, and laugh . . .

Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too . . .

(p 959 lines 8-14)

Here, Lear says he want her love again, like he did in Act I Scene I. He is disregarding the fact that Cordelia has other bonds that she is devoted to, besides her father. He is unable to grasp the fact that she has established her own life without him. While this is a romantic act, it is oddly inappropriate, as he is reduced to a similar folly as in Act I Scene I. This implies that perhaps Lear has not learned anything at all but instead, lacks power to carry through his desires.

The ending offers testament to the fact that throughout King Lear the losses outweigh the gains. Cordelia was depicted by Shakespeare as what may be considered a light in the darkness. The fact that she dies in the end seems to take away any of the hope the reader of this tragedy may have begun to assert.

The fact that Lear dies with the illusion that Cordelia is alive, reveals that he dies with the mistake of hope. It is as if her death is the final symbol representing the triumph of immorality and the fact that the tragedy in this case, outweighs the affirmation.

The ending of King Lear is extremely intense and depressing. The play ends with the deaths of both bad and good characters. Although the play was infused with notions of hope and morality, in the end these glimpses were short lived, and may have been merely illusions and mock revelations. They offer no true affirmation on the status of society. This dismay is emphasized with the

fact that the kingdom is given to Edgar and Kent; dividing the kingdom is how

all of the trouble began to start with. Thus there is no new order and no clear direction for society, at the end of what proves to be a devastating tragedy.