

Symbolism of blindness

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Symbol of Blindness in King Lear Blindness is usually defined as the physical ability of the eye to see. But in King Lear by William Shakespeare, blindness is not just a physical quality but also a mental flaw that people possess. This mental flaw can then lead to people making bad decisions because they can't see the truth. In King Lear, the recurring images of sight and blindness that are associated with the characters of Lear and Gloucester illustrate the theme of self-knowledge and consciousness that exists within the play and these characters.

Gloucester's characters plot parallels that of King Lear's. Throughout the play, we explore what is meant by eyesight or the lack of it. King Lear is the first and the main character that faces problems by this idea of blindness. In act one, Lear asks his three daughters to express their love for him in order to get the share of the land and dowry. Goneril and Regan come up with an elaborate speech that uses wit and deceit.

She starts off by saying " Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter; dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty; beyond what can be valued, rich or rare; no less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour; as much as child e'er loved, or father found; a love that makes breath poor, and speech unable; beyond all manner of so much I love you" (Foakes 1. 1. 55-61). The metaphorical language and beauty of Goneril and Regan's speeches blind Lear.

Cordelia truly loves him a lot but he doesn't see it in her response when she says " Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave; my heart into my mouth: I love your majesty; According to my bond; nor more nor less" (Foakes 1. 1. 93-95). But on the other hand, Cordelia's speech makes him feel less powerful. Her

language is legalistic and delimiting. It suggests that it is a contractual relationship (Kronenfeld 96). By using the word bond, she makes it more formal but she's talking to her father so she should be able to express her feelings in a less formal way.

She declares her love to be of no surpassing quality. She is not like her sisters because it is not in her nature to solicit her father with outward showings of love but instead will show it through her actions (Kronenfeld 106). He misunderstands her love and is unable to see the love she actually has for him because of the way all three of the daughters respond. The two older sisters flatter their father instead of speaking the truth so they can get what they want and this leads to Cordelia being disowned.

The cause of his blindness appears to be an infatuation with his own rank and station, which is a result of senility. Lear's kingdom is used as a symbol of affection towards his three daughters. In the first act, it is implied that Cordelia is his favorite daughter. He feels that dividing up the land by the level of love they show to him is the right thing to do. He does not see that Goneril and Regan will use this as a chance to become his favorites. They will say whatever they need to for their own benefit because they are greedy.

Driven by his own blindness, King Lear begins to make many mistakes not just with his daughters but also with his loyal supporter Kent. His blindness doesn't allow him to see the truth in a person's personality and character. When Kent hears about Cordelia getting disowned, he is shocked by the decision that King Lear. He tries helping King Lear understand the truth about his daughters but ends up getting banished himself. King Lear wants Kent “ out of my sight” (Shakespeare 1. 1. 159). Kent responds by saying “

See better, Lear; and let me still remain; The true blank of thine eye” (Foaks 1. 1. 60-161). Kent is trying to make him reconsider his decision but Lear’s anger gets the better of him and he banishes him from the Kingdom. The blank can refer to the center of a target but also the absence of something which captures the ambiguity and vulnerability of our seeing. Kent was King Lear’s eyes and ears and literally helped him see things clearly. Without Kent, he is even blinder to the reality than before. Kent disguises himself and manages to get rehired by King Lear which further shows his blindness. He knew Kent very well and yet couldn’t figure out that he was the same person.

His vision and insight on other people never really improves and this leads to his downfall and eventually his death. Shakespeare uses a lot of offstage episodes which also shows the blindness to the audience. This indirect mode of presenting highly significant events generates doubt and confusion because the audience can’t see what is happening but is known only by reports of those who claim to have observed them. But it is hard to rely on here say because of characters like King Lear who are oblivious and blind from the truth.

Due to King Lear’s lack on insight, it causes him to make bad judgements and leads him to endure great emotional pain and suffering as a result. It is through his and Gloucester’s characters that Shakespeare has allowed the audience to see what great emotional torment can plague a person because of disloyalty especially when it is that person’s fault due to a lapse in judgement. Shakespeare uses the plot of Gloucester to explicate Lear’s plot by contextualizing Lear’s blindness with Gloucester’s physical loss of vision.

His character is very similar to Lear's because they both couldn't tell which of their children truly loved and cared for them. Edmund blindsides his father into believing that Edgar was plotting to kill him so this would allow him to gain power. Gloucester was easily convinced that the letter was real and never considers thinking if his son could actually do such a terrible thing. Both Lear and Gloucester are very quick to believe their children that use their language in a smart way to deceive their fathers.

Gloucester also ends up disowning Edgar even though Edgar is the son who truly loves him. He doesn't feel that he is making any wrong decisions and feels that "Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles" (Foakes 1. 2. 363-364). The word need means requiring something that's important so in this case, being able to see the truth is a necessity but Gloucester feels that he doesn't need that. It denies him the ability to distinguish between his good and evil sons. Gloucester ends up getting his eyes gouged out which is like a wake-up call for him.

Edgar feels that "The Gods are just and of our pleasant vices; Make instruments to plague us; The dark and vicious place where thee he got Cost him his eyes" (Foakes 5. 3. 170-173). Not only does Edgar deceive his father but believes that his father got what he deserved. The blinding of a man is a symbol for the destruction of one's manhood like getting castrated (Halio 222). Gloucester is an adulterer and is somewhat proud of this fact. Edgar goes on to say "Met I my father with his bleeding rings, Their precious stones new lost; become his guide, Led him, begg'd for him, sav'd him from despair" (Foakes 5. . 188-191). Edgar uses the word stone to refer to Gloucester's lost eyes because it is a slang term for testicles which implies

that the blinding was like Gloucester getting castrated (Halio 223). Once Gloucester became physically blind was when he actually started seeing clearly. It is very ironic when Gloucester says: " I have no way and therefor want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw. Full oft ' tis seen Our means secure us, and our mere defects Prove our commodities. Ah dear son Edgar, The food of thy abused father's wrath!

Might I but live to see thee in my touch, I'd say I had eyes again! " (Foakes 4. 1. 18-24) His inability to see the realities of his sons when he was mentally blind but managed to see his son's true colors when he was physically blind because his eyes were gouged out. He eventually learns that vision is not just through your eyes but rather through your heart and mind. Gloucester's subplot paralleled that of King Lear's. Cordelia's silence throughout the play usually signals acquiescence as she never stood up against her father or her older sisters.

In Shakespearean tragedies, it generally conveys feelings of fear, despair, and confusion but Cordelia's silence is evidence of her strength and constancy. Cordelia's silence in the first few acts can be compared to her unwillingness to communicate in the later scenes. Lear is very similar to Cordelia in the sense that they both are very inarticulate when expressing emotions. After everything that her father has done to her, Cordelia is still devoted to helping her father and brings an army to help him. She doesn't need to try to convince her father with words but instead her actions show it all.

They are able to reconcile their relationship because of the love that she has for her father unlike her sisters who are willing to do anything to get power.

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Even though he has wronged her, she sees that he has recognized the errors of his ways. Cordelia is the only loyal daughter King Lear has. Even though she is silent and doesn't have great communication skills, you can still feel the love she has for her father from the few things that she says. Throughout the play, Shakespeare uses King Lear and Gloucester to demonstrate how metaphorical blindness can cause a person to make erroneous decisions.

King Lear's lack of sight led him to banish Cordelia and Kent, the two people that supported him the most. Similarly, Gloucester is affected by this metaphorical blindness as well and leads to detrimental decisions for him and his family. Ironically, when Gloucester gets literally blind, he starts to think clearly but it is too late at this point to improve things. Only after they lose everything, they recognize that their blindness to honesty has cost them everything. Cordelia chooses to stay silent which she thinks is beneficial but in turn ends up getting her and her father killed.