

# The important contextual influences on shakespeare's "king lear" essay



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## The Important Contextual Influences on Shakespeare's King Lear Samuel

Johnson describes the age of Shakespeare as a time where "speculation had not yet attempted to analyze the mind", and although he is correct in his statement, people of the Renaissance had many pre-formed conceptions about issues concerning their own lives.

Shakespeare took much of his inspiration for his plays from history, but also from situations that affect his own generation. Plays were one of the main forms of entertainment in the 16th century and so they had to be very carefully written as it was important that the audiences enjoyed them.

Shakespeare relied quite heavily on the pain of real human emotion in his scripts to allow the audience to empathize with the characters and therefore relate the extreme situations in the plays to their own lives. In King Lear madness is one of the most dominant parts of the plot, as the King is slowly driven insane by his daughter's deceit and betrayal.

The quotation that perhaps best outlines Lear's reason for madness is "O Regan, Goneril, your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all - O, that way madness lies; let me shun that. No more of that. (III, IV, 19-21). Although this is a very important aspect of the plot, it is by no means the only idea that Shakespeare has used within this play. Another element that inspired Shakespeare in King Lear is the presence of the supernatural. There are continual references to the devil with the play, especially in reference to Poor Tom (Edgar) who is said to be possessed by the five fiends, "Flibbertigibbet", "Obidicut", "Hobbididence", "Mahu" and "Modo".

Another important part of any Shakespearian play was the actual theatre it was performed in. During the medieval times there were no playhouses or acting companies and plays were performed out in the open or from the back of a cart. But at the beginning of the Elizabethan/Jacobean period theatres became a more prominent feature in towns and cities and soon Shakespeare's plays were being performed in a variety of different locations. The most famous Shakespearean theatre is probably the Globe Theatre in London (pictured above) which was rebuilt in 1599 and partly owned by Shakespeare himself.

In 1613 the theatre burned to the ground after a cannon was accidentally fired through the roof, but was rebuilt again later with a stronger roof. The Globe stood until 1644 when it was finally torn down and replaced by a brewery. However it is still known as one of the finest theatre's built during this time period and was the original home of Shakespeare. Another important aspect of King Lear is nature and this has been considered the foundations of the whole play as it dominates almost every line, from the portrayal of human nature to the use of animal imagery.

The chain of being is one important aspect of this in respect to the differences between animals and humans, something that is particularly relevant to Regan and Goneril. Throughout this play a semantic field of animals is used to describe the qualities of certain characters, and as you read through the plot and begin to understand the basic storyline the audience begin to see the relevance of these references in regards to King Lear's two daughters. During the play they are described as undesirable creatures such as dogs, kites and a variety of other animals, creatures that

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are stereotypically unkind, creating the impression that Regan and Goneril both harbour these qualities and so are no better than beasts themselves.

The great chain of being, or scala natur?, is a classical and western medieval conception of the order of the universe, whose chief characteristic is a strict hierarchical system. This hierarchical system begins with the most important form at the top, God and the spirits, and works down until it reaches the least important, the elements like earth and rock.

Humans are an exception to the chain of being as it is divided between spirit and flesh, but as humans are both they cross the boundaries. By referring to Regan and Goneril as beasts they are being dehumanized and therefore have decreased in importance in the chain of being, as all comparisons are made in a derogatory manner and suggest that they are conflicting with the natural order of existence. Astrology is defined as “ the study of the positions and aspects of celestial bodies in the belief that they have an influence on the course of natural earthly occurrences and human affairs and events” and this idea plays a very important part in King Lear. Events are regularly referred to as being predestined by the planets and that the outcomes are unchangeable as it is fate. This is probably one of the most significant aspects of the play as many of the characters genuinely believe that the proceedings are in no way connected to them, when they quite obviously are.

During the renaissance era many new ideas and a deep curiosity in all things mystically was discovered and people began to use astrology to predict the future and explain inexplicable events. Shakespeare attempted to use ideas that his audience could relate to in their own lives and as astrology

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interested such a large volume of people during the Elizabethan period, this is used as one of the main points in the majority of his plays (there are at least 100 references throughout his 37, and King Lear is no exception to this rule. However, there are conflicting opinions between the characters in King Lear, as they do not all believe that the planets predestine their actions. There is such a confrontation between Edgar and Gloucester in which Edgar scorns his fathers for putting the planets in such high regard when it is obviously their own decisions that decide their destiny. Shakespeare gains his inspiration from every aspect of life, but by being consistent in his choice of main ideas (in the case of King Lear: astrology, nature and madness) an entire world is created within the story.

The true meanings behind certain comments made within Shakespeare's plays were probably best understood by the audience at the time as they directly related to their lives, but even now it is very interesting to read into the reasoning behind why certain ideas were included. King Lear's plot and sub-plot address the quintessential essence of humanity and by analysing the ideas presented within the story a more accurate degree of understanding can be gained and the very depth at which the subjects are discussed can be increased.