



RESEARCH PAPER

Lear's Journey from King to Man: A Textual Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The current article aims to explore how King Lear, the tragic protagonist of the play, undergoes transformation through the process of renunciation and suffering which play pivotal role in his journey from king to man. Shakespeare has depicted the depth of human nature in *King Lear* through the variety of characters caught up in intense human emotions. It is because of intense emotions that Lear behaves like a dictator, disinherits his daughter Cordelia and banishes the Earl of Kent. While employing the method of textual analysis, it examines how children, motivated by the materialistic ambitions, turn back against their parents and become ungrateful. Lear's two daughters soon show their true colors and rebel against their father. They reduce Lear to nothing and leave him to suffer on the heath. The findings of the study reveal that suffering causes awareness and brings a change in his personality.

KEYWORDS Tragedy, Representation, Human Nature, Textual Analysis, Renunciation, Suffering, Journey

Introduction

Absolute power corrupts absolutely. King Lear is the manifestation of this maxim. He abuses the power. His mistake is twofold: one, this he abdicates the throne which the kings usually never do. Two that he demands of a public demonstration of his love from his daughters which is actually a bed room question and court is not a suitable place for it. Above all, King Lear lacks judgment. Obsessed with power, he asks an insane question from his daughters: how much they love him. He tries to measure love in terms of material words and deeds and in return also rewards his daughters with material possessions. Love is an abstract and spiritual feeling and difficult to measure. It is due to the fact, he is unable to understand Cordelia's "nothing" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 1. Line, 80) that has spiritual connotation. Being a king, a material being, a commodity, he is used to see things in material terms and does not have human, spiritual vision. He becomes angry and disowns and disinherits Cordelia since she does not come up to his material demands and, subsequently, divides his kingdom between the two elder daughters, Goneril and Regan. His misjudgment and his concept that material is real causes his suffering. His two daughters kick him out of their palaces after receiving their parts of kingdom. The unaccommodated and unsheltered King Lear has to move to the heath where the external storm aligns with the internal storm, aggravates his suffering and thereby his journey from King to man starts. It is on the heath that a new Lear is born. The new Lear is an illuminated and enlightened person.

Literature Review

Shakespeare's *King Lear* falls under the category of great world literature owing to the playwright's powerful imagination, beauty of expression and the way it offers deep

insight into human nature. Since, its publication in 16th century, the play has not only given birth to a variety of works in other media like television, film, opera, music but also to the unending scholarly works that interpret and examine the play from ever new angles. For an instance, the seminal studies include William Hazlitt (1817), A.C. Bradley (1904), George Orwell (1947), Norman Maclean (1952), Lawrence Danson (1981), Kenneth Muir (1984), Ann Thompson (1988), Jeffrey Kahan (2008) and Kevin. J. Donovan (2023). These scholars have highlighted Lear's tragic flaw, and described him as a sublime character. Some scholars have analyzed King Lear in terms of linguistic, philosophical, psychological, historical, political and moral perspectives. The other critics have focused parent children relationships and power dynamics in the play. The survey of the existing literature shows that the play has been at the center of Shakespearean scholarship and the changing perspectives allude to the richness and beauty of Shakespeare's great art. However, despite the great bulk of literature related to King Lear produced in different periods of time, the researcher considers that Lear's journey from king to man is less explored area in Shakespearean studies. Hence, the research attempts to fill this gap through this article.

Material and Methods

The researcher has used the qualitative approach that is interpretive and descriptive in nature. While, using the method of textual analysis, the primary data is Shakespeare's drama *King Lear* that has been analyzed in detail. Whereas, the former researchers and scholar's works have been used as secondary data. The researcher has duly supported and substantiated his arguments with textual references and scholarly evidences wherever it was necessary.

Results and Discussion

The study aims to explore the gradual stages of Lear's journey from king to man and show what type of person Lear becomes at the end of the play. Lear's journey from king to man is at two levels. It is his personal journey from king to man and it also symbolically alludes the journey of the whole human race that seems to emerge victorious against the dark forces of the universe. Hence, King Lear transcends the temporal and spatial constraints and may be perceived as a universal allegory. W.H. Gardner (1944) considers him parallel to the Biblical Job and argues that "the stature and bearing of the sufferers [Job and Lear] give them a universal significance" (p.175).

King Lear, an eighty years old man, decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters – Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. His decision of dividing the kingdom is due to two precautionary measures. He wants to "shake all cares and business off [the] state" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 1. Line, 39) so that he may die peacefully and avoid future quarrels. But, the irony is that he also wants to enjoy prerogatives of a king even after the renunciation of the authority. As George Orwell (2015) remarks "Lear renounces his throne but expects everyone to continue treating him as a king. He does not see that if he surrenders power, other people will take advantage of his weakness..." (p.160). As a king, Lear is a vicegerent of God-a king who performs his duties properly. His abdication of the throne is a violation of the divine law which causes chaos and anarchy. Similarly, he fails to recognize the true worth of his daughters in his business-like love test. Like typical kings, he is surrounded by the flatterers who exploit him for their advantages.

Cordelia, King Lear's youngest daughter, fails in the love test. She is wedded to the King of France without dowry. Kent, an honest-hearted fellow, protests against King Lear's injustice. But Lear is a king and kings are always obeyed and never defied. He is far from the stature of a man when he informs Kent: "Peace Kent. Come not between dragon and

his wrath" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 1. Line, 111-112). It is pertinent to mention here that the whole play is replete with animal imagery. Shakespeare has used different animal images for the characters in the play which shows his true insight into and understanding of human nature. The characters' association with the animals reflects that they have fallen from the status of man and expresses their deterioration and degeneration. Here, the image of dragon is important and refers to Lear's association with animal and devil. It alludes to the fact that Lear has rejected sanity due to anger. As Kent replies to Lear: "... be Kent unmannerly, when Lear is mad" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 1. Line, 136-137). Lear's rejection of the dictates of wisdom and association with dragon because of uncontrollable anger exhibits that he has become "a passion's slave" (Campbell, 1930, p. 206). He will have to travel a long journey to become a man.

What is man and what are the attributes that must be visible in a man? Man is a person who controls his passions, has sound judgment and he is God fearing and God loving. Likewise, man is not a person who flares up and draws sword against his fellows upon trivialities as Lear does. Man is gentle, kind and considerate. Above all, he understands human nature and forgives his opponents since to forgive is to understand human nature. But King Lear does not forgive Kent. Rather, he orders his banishment when he protests against Cordelia's disownment and disinheritance. He lacks understanding of a human being. That's why, Kent appeals to Lear: "See better, Lear; and let me remain/ The true blank of thine eye" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 1. Line, 148-149). Ironically, King Lear has sight but he can't see. When he suffers, he will see things better than before. Like Gloucester, he will be able to see after the fall. Gloucester sums up this fact in these words: "I stumbled when I saw" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 15. Line, 17).

Kent's banishment is Lear's last order which he gives as a king. Then, he hands over the throne to his daughters, Regan and Goneril. However, he retains one hundred knights as his retinue and guards. Soon after gaining authority, both the daughters start showing their true colors. They turn their back against their old father and behave with him insolently and start dictating to him. First, Goneril's steward, Oswald misbehaves with Lear's court jester, The Fool. This leads to the clash of authority. Subsequently, Goneril and Regan reduce King Lear's retinue of knights. Despite all these explicit acts of defiance of his authority, Lear keeps on thinking that he is still a king. He believes that he has given the opulent portions of his kingdom to his two daughters, so they will always obey him and remain loyal to him. This belief stems from his pride of being a king and his material thoughts in case of all matters of life. It is also due to this approach towards life that he thinks love is a commodity and a bargain. He cannot recognize immaterial, spiritual and filial love of Cordelia when Cordelia replies: "Nothing, my lord" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 1. Line, 80) in response to Lear's insane test of love. Cordelia says nothing in spiritual terms. By which she means that she needs her father's blessings and pleasure and nothing else. Contrary to it, Lear interprets her nothing in material terms and retorts: "Nothing can come of nothing. Speak again" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 1. Line 81). Finally, his daughters reduce him to nothing, kick him from their palaces and leave him helpless on the heath to suffer the hot and cold of the weather. It's from the status of nothingness that Lear's journey from king to man starts.

Authority and its implementation coincide. Once you renounce authority, you're nothing, zero without a digit. Nobody cares a fig for you. This is what happens with King Lear. Lear's materialistic approach towards life precludes him to gain insight and think about the matters of life in spiritual terms. His materialism turns him into a grotesque figure, Leggatt (2004) rightly comments "As he clings desperately to the quantifying, bargain-striking view of love, his expression of it becomes increasingly grotesque" (p.74).

This grotesqueness becomes evident when he tells Goneril: "Thy fifty yet doth double five-and-twenty, / And thou art twice her love (Shakespeare, King Lear, Scene, 7. Line, 418-19). Both Goneril and Regan do not know about filial and spiritual love. Like their father, they also have materialistic bent of mind. Therefore, they dispossess their father, King Lear of everything and reduce him to nothing. The Fool, a friend a bitter critic of Lear, informs King Lear: Now thou art an O without a figure. I / am better than thou art, now. I am a fool; thou art nothing" (Shakespeare, King Lear, Scene, 4. Line, 184-186). As it has already been mentioned that Lear's status of being nothing and consciousness of this fact, plays significant role in the learning process and journey from king to man. The deprived Lear asks: "Doth any here know me? Why, this is not Lear. / Doth Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?" (Shakespeare, King Lear Line, 217-218). He comes to know what authority means and abdication of it was his great mistake because a person has worth as long as he has power. When he has no power, he is like a rolling stone, a nonentity. Now, he is Lear, an ordinary person and not a king. Like a common man, he suffers and experiences the tyranny of the cruel weather on heath. It is learning through suffering that is pivotal in Lear's journey from king to man. This is the process which God(s) have designed and planned for human beings. Hence, there is a purpose in it. Talking about the importance of suffering, Harold C. Goddard (1952) asserts: "Shakespeare believes that suffering and affliction, to those who will at least give ear, bring power to see things as they are" (p.111). In this case, Shakespeare is very close to the Greek playwrights who knew that wisdom comes through suffering. Lear's suffering starts in the wake of renunciation which consequently leads him to search- search for his identity. Thus, suffering and identity are interlinked. It is through this process, saints and mystics search their identity that leads them to the ultimate truth or God. This is what Oedipus at the end of his search.

Lear, the sufferer, also searches for his identity. It's painful as well pleasant process. It takes place when a person free from all worldly illusions. Power and authority are big illusions. They rob man of sense of distinction. Deprived of everything, Lear starts seeing things better. Once a king, but now a beggar, Lear comes to know that he is a shadow, nothing or a handful of dust. Material possessions and authority blur his insight into the phenomena of life. Otherwise, reality is crystal clear. At this stage, Lear, like Gloucester, may say: I stumbled when I saw" (Shakespeare, King Lear, Scene, 15. Line, 17). However, he has not yet reached that stage of man which will raise his stature as hero and exhibit him nobler and superior to Gloucester. It is also due to the fact that up to now his suffering is physical or external. He will initiate to heroism when his suffering becomes twofold – physical as well as mental. There is no doubt that Lear is stripped off material possessions such as power, money and even, his daughters, but, his self is the main hurdle in his way to become a man- a humble and a fellow caring person, a God loving and a God fearing entity. The self is an aggregate of worldly possessions and misconceptions. It makes a person egoistical, proud and ignorant. The dispossession and renunciation till now was prerequisite to enter the dark tunnel of the self so that he may confront his weaknesses, his flaws and foibles and know his limitations. It is only through this entrance into the tunnel, one may discover the full light. For this purpose, the enormity of suffering is important. The more you suffer, the wiser you become. It is only through suffering, man can gain insight into the phenomena of life and find this world "a vale of soul making and not a vale of tears" (Trilling, 1955, p.35). According to Knight (2001), the world for Lear becomes a purgatory. He is not only redeemed by these sufferings but also ennobled by them" (p.196).

In this context, Lear's exposure to the elemental forces becomes meaningful. Kenneth Muir (1984) also refers to this point: "The storm of Lear may be considered as much a symbol of divine intervention and judgment as the lightning and whirlwind which preceded the voice of God in Job" (p. 40). Lear, like a stoic, faces every buffet and blows of

the elemental forces without any complaint. He becomes as he himself says "the pattern of all patience" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 9. Line, 37). His stoicism is admirable when he says: "No, I will weep no more" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 11. Line, 16). Actually, storm serves another purpose here. Storm is symbol of Nature and man is part of Nature. Thus, Lear's exposure to the tyranny of the storm is significant since it purges him of all vanities and illusion through suffering and leads him towards consciousness. It is through suffering, the direct contact with Nature, Lear gains insight. Like Coleridge's ancient mariner, the post storm Lear is a changed person. Association of Nature lends a great knowledge to Lear. The reality dawns upon him and a new Lear is born upon the heath who prefers others to him, ignores his own suffering and prays for the poor fellow beings: "Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless night..." (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 11. Line, 25-26). Here, Lear's range of compassion and love transcends the personal. His heart melts and it beats with love and sympathy. Now, he walks in the light of God. Consequently, he moves from sight to insight and starts seeing things clearly. He realizes the injustice which he has done because of pride and authority. The next stage is confession: "O, I have ta'en / Too little care of this" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 11. Line, 29-30). Similarly, in Cordelia's case, Lear confesses: "I did her wrong" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 5. Line, 23). Reality flashes upon his mind like lightning upon the heath in the storm showing things occasionally clear. During this state of awareness, he sees Edgar as a Tom' O' Bedlam in a half-naked condition. Self-questioning and answering begins: Is man no more but this? Consider him well (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Line, 92-93) and then "thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Line, 96-97). Baffled by the tyranny of the intolerable weather and excessive thinking, Lear loses the balance of his mind. The old Lear dies in the storm scene and a new Lear takes birth after curative sleep and music:

You do me wrong to take me out o'th' grave.

Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound

Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears

Do scald like molten lead (ibid, Scene, 21. Line, 43-46)".

This awakening into new life is painful like the process of birth since whenever it comes, it comes with pain and labor. This is the last stage of Lear's journey from king to man. Now he is not a king but a man. As he says:

Do not laugh at me,

For as I am a man, I think this lady

To be my child, Cordelia (ibid, Scene, 21. Line, 65-67)".

When these lines are compared with what he spoke "Ay, every inch a king (ibid, Scene, 20. Line, 65-67)", the change becomes evident in Lear's character. So, the humble and repentant Lear begs Cordelia: "Pray now, forget and forgive./ I am old And foolish (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Scene, 21. Line, 83-84)". Lear reconciles with Cordelia and the two sing songs like birds in a prison. But, human joys are transitory. The course of life never runs smooth. Life is a mixture of joys and sorrows with sorrows dominating. The joys of father and daughter prove ephemeral. Cordelia is hanged to death and Lear also dies with dead Cordelia in his hands. Though in their death, they remain undivided.

Here, a question arises: Why does Lear die when he has completed his journey from king to man? Perhaps, he dies because his journey from king to man has completed and death is a soothing balm for this pilgrim of truth as it happens in the case of Oedipus Rex. Trilling (1955) is also of the same opinion as he says: "the captains and kings and lovers and clown of Shakespeare are alive and complete before they die" (p. 99). Or perhaps, in Hugo's (1987) words, death is the entrance into the great light. Or perhaps, this is a riddle that nobody can comprehend and solve. The more, human beings delve into the mystery of life and death, the more elusive it becomes and in the end, Sophocles (1984) seems right in *Antigone* that everything turns to water in my hands. Related to the previous question, another question comes in mind: Why did Shakespeare name the play King Lear and not Lear or some other title? Keeping it into account, Shakespeare's other plays, especially out of his four world class tragedies, are named Macbeth, Hamlet, and Othello but not King Macbeth, Prince Hamlet and General Othello. Why it is special in case of King Lear? While explaining the reason, Harold C. Goddard (1951) says: "He who masters his passions is king over them" (p.99). Lear who takes a birth after a storm scene seems a person who has mastered his passions and has become "a pattern of all patience" (Shakespeare, King Lear, Scene, 9. Line, 37). Hence, he is a man and King Lear, and after all, kings are men. In Hamlet, Horatio remembers Prince Hamlet's father, King Hamlet, as "a goodly king". But, Prince Hamlet expresses his opinion about his father with an emphasis on the word man: "A was a man, take him for all in all/ I shall not look upon his like again". (William Shakespeare, Hamlet, 2003, 1, 2.). Such a man is Lear too and this seems a glowing tribute by Prince Hamlet to King Lear.

Conclusion

The detailed analysis of Shakespeare's selected work, *King Lear*, reveals that Lear's journey from king to man exhibits his shift from materialistic view of life to spirituality. Renunciation and suffering play key role in shaping and transforming his personality. Prior to renunciation and suffering upon the heath in the storm scene, the old Lear considers him a king every inch. He views life from material perspective and measures it in terms of gain and loss, and cause and effect. His exposure to the elemental forces and experience of the worse weather conditions help him to discovery and self-realization. Subsequently, the changed Lear gains insight into the phenomena of life and passes through different phases of his journey from king to man. The new Lear comes to recognize that love, loyalty, friendship, filial bonds, and above all, understanding and forgiveness are precious and priceless qualities in the world that make human life peaceful and worth living.

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