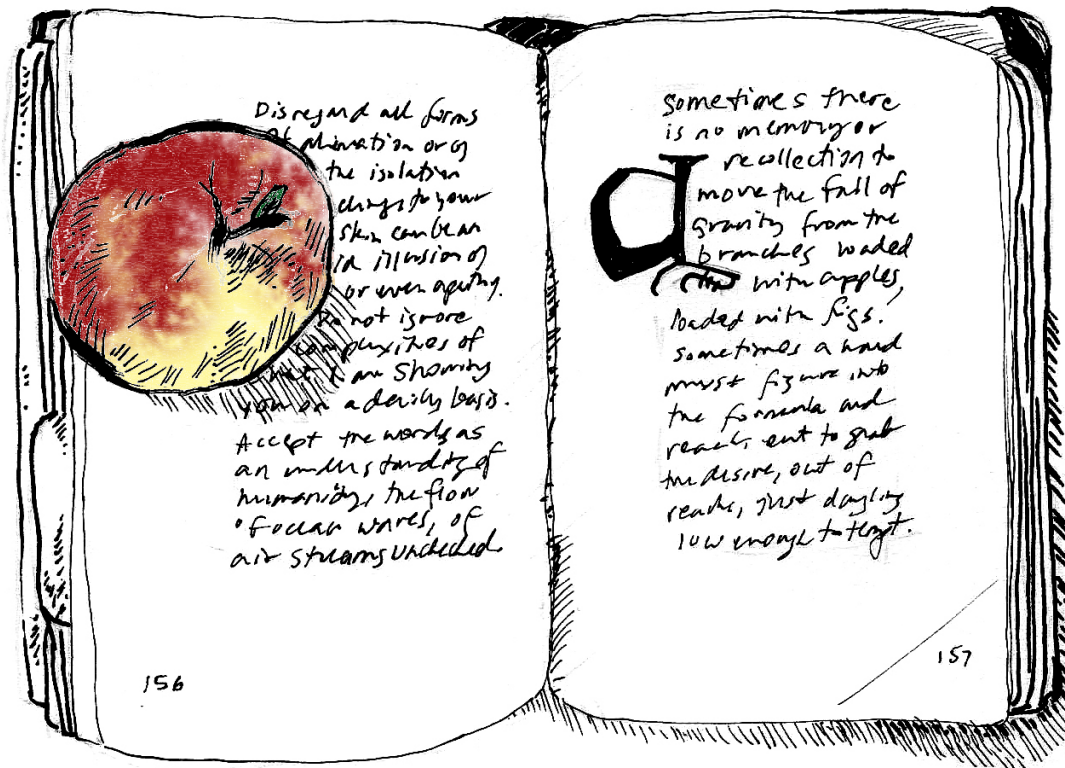


W. Shakespeare and *King Lear*



King Lear

Natural elements within the play are depicted as surreal or extremely violent.

One of the first instances of irrational behavior of nature is mentioned by the Earl of Gloucester.

- He states: “These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us: though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects (Act 1, Scene 2; p 1371). In a sense, unknowingly, his comment predict the events to unfold. Eclipses were seen as predictors of natural disasters or deaths of kings— even though through science the motion of sun and moon can be explained (see footnote #3).
- Later on in the midst of the thunderstorm (Act 3, Scene 2; page 1400) Lear rages out into the storm due to the reduction of his followers by his daughters and the disrespect compounded. Notice the ironic pun of his stormy anger and the violent windstorm. Here, through natural weather disturbances, Lear falls deep into a state of madness.

King Lear

In the end Shakespeare creatively plays with multiple definitions of the word “mad.”

Overall, throughout his work, his writing style often creates word associations or builds bridges between academic definitions of words and the common English vernacular. In this particular case, the staging of the thunderstorm promotes

- confirms a character’s further development to the audience as being easily angered or “stormy”
- Lear’s anger is the result of his daughters’ interference with his sense of reality: he does not want to admit the consequences of his past actions nor consider the possibilities of further traumas— he wants respect for what he represents as a former king of Britain
- the natural forces outside the castle echo the internal psychological forces at work within Lear’s head and within the play’s plot: three levels of thought are forming one force of action

King Lear

As a result, notice the word play in action which affects the theme:

Lear, somewhat over-reactive, with some justification, angrily storms out of the castle into the *unnatural* storm outside.

- The *supernatural*, violent thunderstorm impacts and shifts his potential madness into an actuality of character development.
 - > the storm itself can be seen as the supernatural element in the tragedy
 - > brought on by whom? —the pagan gods? —Fate? —Nature? —Lear?
- Thus, the character of Lear, as an

angry, mad man > enters angry storm > transforms to mad man

demoted of followers,
others' respect, self respect,
possessions, identity

demoted of mentality,
he *gains* an epiphany
moment near the end

King Lear

- **Before the storm**, he was a man who believed his possessions defined his stature in life, confirmed his identity
- His only remaining symbol of former status is his servant-Fool who willingly follows after him, unlike the one hundred retainers who see they will not gain the backing of the daughters; they abandon him
- **Within the storm**, Lear calls out to the destructive forces of Nature to destroy the essence of life itself, that is remove the procreative powers within humanity: “all germens spill at once” (III.ii.8).
- The Renaissance concept, that Nature is a chaotic force, is confirmed through example of a character’s personal dilapidation of mental powers
- The pagan concept, that the environment of the country echoes the mental state of the ruler, is also confirmed
- Important to ask yourself, is Lear totally insane at this point?

King Lear's Transformation

- 1. Within the storm, Lear **calls to the destructive forces of Nature**. In this sense he asks revenge from the source of his once royal authority, the environment of Britain itself: “[L]et fall / Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave, / A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man (III.ii.17-19). But notice *nothing* happens.
- 2. Because of this, he then **accuses the storm** (and Nature) of taking the same position of his daughters: “But yet I call you servile ministers, / That will with two pernicious daughters join / Your high-engendered batles ‘gainst a head / So old and white as this O, ho! ‘Tis foul” (III.ii.20-23). Notice the Fool suggests in riddles how it would be safer indoors, not struggling with the storm.
- 3. On page 1401, **he calls out to pagan gods** to find their (his) enemies. He emotes piteously that: “I am a man / more sinned against than sinning” (III.ii.55-56) and thus justifies his need of their aid in his cause. He views himself as the victim in a heavy self-pitying moment.

King Lear's Transformation

- 4. Critics point out an important **shift in Lear's mental make-up** where it becomes more apparent to the audience and to Lear himself, on page 1402, that: “my wit begins to turn” (III.ii.63). What is relevant at this stage of his characterization is to question whether his expression is just a casual declaration of an overview of the situation or does the phrase act as an overt observation or self-awareness of a dramatic shift in his own ability to comprehend his Universe. Either way, his perspectives have changed.
- 5. He also becomes **aware of another person's condition** outside of his own personal views. He acts in a compassionate, fatherly fashion towards his obedient Fool.
- 6. Finally, in a rather un-kingly-like fashion, he enters a hovel or make-shift drifter's shack in order to take shelter from the storm. **He submits himself to the full situation** admitting he is not in control.

King Lear

The thunderstorm portion of the play breaks into two developing story lines which play out into multiple sequence of scenes.

An exchange between the two situations show first Lear in the hovel and second with increasing conflict forming for the character of Gloucester.

- As Lear falls closer and closer to an extreme epiphany, Gloucester himself soon learns of Edmund's villainy.
- These two moments are easily contrasted, but it should be stressed they both run parallel with each other. With the violence of Gloucester's story shown to the audience, the expectation is that he will receive the more damaging of circumstances.

King Lear

Within the hovel, Lear's transformation takes on a new level.

The closer he begins to understand the lifestyles of other classes within Britain, other than the noble class, the closer he comes to a full mental breakdown.

- his self-pitying moment shifts into a complex myriad of sudden awareness: there are others in somewhat more dire situations than his own
- on page 1404, he states:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? *O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this!* Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just (III.iv.28-36; my emphasis).

King Lear

As the storm still rages outside the shack, Lear falls into a deep mental lapse of reason.

In the process, ironically, he starts philosophizing about the condition of all humankind and its placement in the grand scheme of the Universe.

- a confirmation of earlier statements from previous scenes is made clear at this point; Lear's condition has worsened— despite the lack of stability, he does provide the audience with strong observations
- in a rambling-like fashion he questions the supposed crazed figure of Edgar “Is man no more than this? Consider him well [...] Unaccomodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art” (III.iv.85-89).
- **in the aftermath of the storm**, Lear is a creature reborn out of Nature— after his experience of a violent epiphany moment, he is transformed into a newer version of himself
- in an ironic fashion, he gains clarity and a better understanding of his real position in the world— but at a cost of his full sanity

King Lear

During the storm's sequence of events, the Fool has remained at Lear's side.

Aside from the character of Kent, in disguise as Caius, the Fool alone remains loyal to his former King.

- For the most part, his commentary remain the most profound in the play, even in supposed foolishness he relates a subtle observation on events.
- He even defends his monarch in times of Lear's weak moments; a prime example is displayed before the storm sequence, when the daughter Goneril insults her father both as a man and as a former King; she reprimands him openly for past action of his retainers.
- In jest, the Fool suggests through puns she is a whore (I.iv.186).
- Lear acts as if he does not hear the insult, or he chooses to ignore it. Either way, his response foreshadows future identity issues. He states: "Does any here know me? This is not Lear / [...] Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (I.iv.188-192). The Fool responds: "Lear's shadow" (l. 193).

King Lear

The choice of reply made by the Fool is rather profound.

In the logic of the moment, Lear *has* become the shadow of his former self.

- In a symbolic reading, the King is soon to learn how much of his former life he actually has lost; in this moment he is *nothing*, just mere shadow.
- This ties in to an earlier exchange the two figures (fool and King) have when the Fool enters the play for the first time and openly chastises Lear for the turn of events: “Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?” (I.iv.106). This of course echoes the situation with Cordelia in the opening scene.
- In this case, Lear responds in almost tender fashion: “Why, no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing” (l. 107) which is almost word for word what he tells his youngest daughter: “Nothing will come of nothing: speak again” (I.i.81). Only the Fool has the bravery, and the gumption, to broach the subject. Indeed, he seems to have had a strong connection with Cordelia: “Since my young lady’s going into France, sir, the fool hath much pined away” (I.iv.57).

King Lear

The two strongest allies of the King, both daughter and fool, are never shown together in a scene.

Likewise, the fact both Cordelia and the Fool make a point of discussing “nothing,” raises issues with critics.

- Strategically, in the performance of the play itself, the part of the Fool could have been played by the same actor who played Cordelia— **or**
- Cordelia, the character may have been in disguise as the Fool within play’s development
- A strong point of reference which channels further discussion, after the sequence of storm scenes, after Lear is totally insane, the Fool disappears from the script, without explanation. It is related that he helps take the sleeping form of Lear off stage, into a litter, which will transport him to Dover. The Fool’s last line reads: “And I’ll go to bed at noon” (l. 74).
- Also an interesting note, near the very end of the play, when Cordelia is brought on stage, Lear states: “And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life?”(V.iii.345).

King Lear

It is important to close out a study of the play by examining the prevalent pessimism within the piece.

Looking at the last theme discussed, “Humanity’s placement in Nature”— a secondary bleak outlook answers with the resolution that there is no hope for humankind for survival in this Universe.

- In other words, humans do not have a place in the grand scheme of things.
- At one point in the play, after the blinding of Gloucester on stage, he changes to a very (understandably) miserable, bitter character. On page 1415, the former Earl has been reduced to a blind beggar, wandering the heath. He openly declares: “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; / They kill us for their sport” (IV.i.36-37). Through this pivotal moment, the play shifts away from any hope of happy closure.
- In one fashion, Gloucester’s suffering and later attempt at suicide prepares the audience for worse events concerning Lear and Cordelia.

King Lear

King Lear's final scenes of madness only heighten the pessimism.

On page 1425, he appears adorned with flowers, spouting nonsense phrases and talking gibberish.

- He has become an aspect of Nature at this point, swallowed up by it. No longer trying to control it, he has accepted his role in the full equation is small: humanity is meaningless and does not shift the Universe's concerns.
- He shifts his tone as well regarding procreation in a subtle ironic point, declaring: "Let copulation thrive" (IV.iv.108).
- Here Lear's archetype has shifted from Bitter Old Man, from Spoiled Child, — now he is following the symbol of Holy Madman, a figure who accepts his flaws and failing and embraces the lack of control.
- As a fluid character, he will shift yet again. But notice his control over others in the scene who view his madness as a horror.

The Final Message

Remember there are alternative versions published.

This factors into a complete analysis of the play, and in some case, may alter a strong foundation of criticism.

- The last lines on page 1444 read:

The weight of this sad time we must obey,

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.

The oldest hath borne most: we that are young

Shall never see so much, nor live so long (V.iii.363-366).

- The general “accepted” closure reserves the last speech for Edgar, a character no longer in disguise, a figure promoting a nobleman in his full faculties.
- However, a few versions use Albany reciting the short verse closing the scene.
- This is due to discrepancies between the first published collection of Shakespeare’s entire work in 1623 (referred to as the *First Folio*) and an earlier published draft from 1608 (referred to as the *Quarto*).

The Final Message

By placing the speech with Edgar presents a problem.

The expectation of the time required the last speech of a play to be recited by the highest-ranked nobleman on stage.

- Technically, within the hierarchy presented, Edgar as an Earl is lower in stature than the Duke of Albany.
- From a modern reading, closing with Edgar works better due to the fact this “casting” adds a sense of psychological closure— specially when weighing the differences of how Albany’s and Edgar’s plot lines are perceived in the full work.
- Likewise, there exists a heavy lack of a resolution; no one is confirmed king. **Kent openly dismisses** the notion, says he has “a journey [...] to go. / My master calls me; I must not say no” (V.iii.361-362). This statement implies he, like Lear, is close to death. The circumstances of the events has worn out Kent. **Edgar never accepts nor denies** the offer; he remains mute on that point.

King Lear

Overall, the play promotes a dark message by the closing scenes.

The work strongly promotes a sense of the Modern era's literary movement called Existentialism, a rather bleak, surreal look at the Universe.

- Like the Twentieth Century's cultural movement, Shakespeare's English Renaissance play sparks a sense that no gods over-look or control the Natural World. Humankind is struggling to survive but its own merits and flawed notions of morality and custom.
- Edgar relates "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (V.iii.364)— a line which promotes the message that humans should act through instinct and impulse, ignoring an established code of morality.
- Furthermore, no agent of justice is shown interfering in the unfolding tragic turn of events. Nature only administers a heavy, supernatural-like calamity as a confirmation of the dramatic closing. Nature does not change the course of events.
- Only an ill-timed act by Edmund, a change of heart, proposes a change in fate.