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Shakespeare's nihilistic "blasted heath" universe

The most striking aspect of Shakespeare's "King Lear" is that, for all its horrific tragedy, for all the blood shed and lives lost, the end of the play offers absolutely no hope for redemption or renewal. Tragedies by definition end on a somewhat unfortunate or, well, tragic, note, but "King Lear" brings this tragedy to a whole new level. In this play, there are no benevolent supernatural forces guiding the hand of fate for good; there is no God, only apathetic gods. "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods, —
They kill us for their sport."

The universe depicted in King Lear seems a chaotic world where no outside force or greater moral good prevents the success of evil in all its iterations against the powers of good. Shakespeare creates vivid imagery of death and suffering to further his cause—among other things, Shakespeare allows the Duke of Cornwall to pluck out Gloucester's eyes onstage. The image of the "blasted heath" appears, a location so vividly desolate and hopeless that Milton later borrowed it to describe the chaos of Hell "Paradise Lost."

Shakespeare often offers hope for redemption in this play only to shatter it entirely. Cordelia and her husband return to battle the two power-hungry sisters, and the readers believe there is some hope left for the play, but the forces are destroyed and Cordelia is slain. Then Shakespeare offers hope that Cordelia may yet be alive – "The feather stirs," Exclaims Lear – but she dies anyway, in the arms of her betrayed, dejected, insane, broken father.

It is striking that Shakespeare, even with his fame, could get away with this portrait of a godless, chaotic universe. "King Lear" flies in the face of traditional philosophy and religion, and its nihilistic end shatters all sense of hope and redemption.

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Love Stinks

Love, as at least a motif, does not escape any Shakespeare play. It has been displayed as whimsical, fantastical, flimsy, and generally shallow. It drives several plots and brings several characters (Desdemona, Othello, Romeo, Juliet, Macbeth, Ophelia, etc.) to their deaths. In King Lear, when Cordelia refuses to tell Lear she loves him, Shakespeare is letting one of his characters finally show a brief picture of what love should be. Lear's shallow request to have his daughters appeal to his ego was not a good idea in the first place. Sincerity cannot be expected to make an appearance at a mockery of truth like the scene Lear crafted. The two daughters who did profess their love were proven dire liars. Sweet Cordelia refuses to profess her genuine love for her father in this setting because the setting does not allow for the type of love that Cordelia has. This love is right, this love is good; had Lear seen this, his fate would have been different. But Shakespeare doesn't allow any good deeds to go unpunished in this play, and so he rewards Cordelia's sweet heart with death and punishes Lear with death as well. It seems Shakespeare is bitter and no true love really exists in any of his plays, but at least here, he shows what, if it did exist, a pure love would look like.

Journal Entry 8

Blindness and Insanity Make Things Clearly Perceptible

In Shakespeare's King Lear, there are two elderly characters who suffer the most in the play. These characters are Lear and Gloucester. Their stories can be seen as similar in many ways. The biggest difference, however, is that while Lear slowly goes mad, Gloucester is blinded and remains sane. I think that Shakespeare was creating a parallel between these two conditions. Both men seem to be able to distinguish certain things more clearly after they each lose part of themselves. Lear realizes that Cordelia loves him and that Goneril and Regan are deceitful flatterers only after he begins to go crazy. In his insane ramblings, we also see that Lear better understands the weakness of human nature, how empty royal claims to power are, and the correlation of all human beings. Likewise, Gloucester understands, at the very moment of his blinding, which son is really good and which son is bad. Yet, both Lear and Gloucester fall into despair before their deaths. I also found it extremely intriguing that Lear begins to lose his eyesight in the moments just before he dies. And Gloucester wishes that he were insane, thinking that he may endure his misery more easily. There is an irony in this situation that proposes hopelessness to the already looming gloom that surrounds this play's ending,

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Love & Property

King Lear seems convinced that the love awarded to him is contingent on personal traits independent of his political power. He assumes that he can distribute his land among his daughters, lose certain symbolic constituents of kingdom, and remain exercising authority and eliciting obedience, as well as receiving the unconditional affection from his daughters. At the same time, however, it seems that the implications of the "love test" are that affection is to be rewarded with property. If this is how Lear's reasoning works, then it seems that a new order has established itself, where his daughters interpret love-for-property as a mere business transaction. Is Lear naïve enough to believe that the nature of his daughter's love does not shift in accordance to the reward they expect? Does he believe that his daughters are following expected norms of loyalty, honesty, and gratefulness?

If there is another order which is replacing ideas as held by Lear, then—as we commented in class—it surely is represented by Edmund. Edmund clearly realizes the nature of power, the variables of love, and the need for deception in order to rule. Moreover, he's similar to Iago not just in his calculating nature, but also in his so-called cynical realism—that which shatters through the self-deceit which other characters delve in.

In terms of theme, could we speak of the shift of ideological paradigms in a society and the benefits of replacing our own ideas and adapting ourselves to change? Could Lear have had insights similar to Edmund's and salvaged himself? To what extent does the need for a stable identity prevent us from shifting paradigms? Can we make the change when our identities are profoundly ingrained in the ideas of a period, and the advent of the new poses an utter contradiction to our beliefs about ourselves?

Fatal Attraction

I find that the relationship between Edmund, Goneril, and Regan is interesting. Many of Shakespeare's plays feature love triangles; Orsino, Viola, and Olivia for *XII Night* and the four lovers in *A Midsummer's Nights Dream* are a couple of examples. But in *King Lear* the lovers are also the evil characters. The love in *King Lear* is different because it is more like lust than anything else, but I guess even evil people need love.

King Lear's two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, are controversial because they go against their father's will. This is a pretty big deal because men are the authority of Shakespeare's time and it would be considered crazy if two women sought power reserved for men. I think it is interesting that the two daughters that the audience is supposed to be against are the most modern characters in the play. Goneril and Regan go against social norms and stand up against their father a reaction far more interesting than Cordelia's reaction to do nothing. Goneril and Regan both attain power while Cordelia only accepts her banishment by her father and then ends up as another man's wife. Cordelia doesn't do anything to improve her situation all she does is accept the actions of men as absolute.