

Character Analysis of King Lear

King Lear is a tragic hero. He behaves rashly and irresponsibly at the start of the play. He is blind and unfair as a father and as a ruler. He desires all the trappings of power without the responsibility which is why the passive and forgiving Cordelia is the perfect choice for a successor.

Character Motivation and Behavior

The audience may feel alienated towards him at the start of the play considering his selfish and harsh treatment of his favorite daughter. A Jacobean audience may have felt disturbed by his choices remembering the uncertainty surrounding Queen Elizabeth I's successor.

As an audience, we soon feel sympathy for Lear despite his egotistical manner. He quickly regrets his decision and can be forgiven for behaving rashly following a knock to his pride. Lear's relationships with Kent and Gloucester demonstrate that he is able to inspire loyalty and his dealings with the Fool show him to be compassionate and tolerant.

As Goneril and Regan become more conniving and vile our sympathy for Lear grows further. Lear's rages soon become pitiful as opposed to powerful and authoritarian his impotence of power maintains our sympathy with him and as he suffers and is exposed to the suffering of others, the audience can feel more affection for him. He begins to understand true injustice and as his madness takes over, he is beginning a learning process. He becomes more humble and, as a result, realizes his tragic hero status.

However, it has been argued that Lear remains self-obsessed and vengeful as he ruminates on his revenge on Regan and Goneril. He never takes responsibility for his daughter's natures or regrets his own flawed actions.

Lear's greatest redemption comes from his reaction to Cordelia at their reconciliation he humbles himself to her, speaking to her as a father rather than as a king.

Two Classic Speeches

O, reason not the need: our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous:
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life's as cheap as beast's: thou art a lady;
If only to go warm were gorgeous,

Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st,
Which scarcely keeps thee warm. But, for true need,—
You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!
You see me here, you gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!
If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
Stain my man's cheeks! No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both,
That all the world shall—I will do such things,—
What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep
No, I'll not weep:
I have full cause of weeping; but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
Or ere I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad!
(Act 2, Scene 4)

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
Crack nature's moulds, an germens spill at once,
That make ingrateful man!...
Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
You owe me no subscription: then let fall
Your horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man...
(Act 3, Scene 2)