

Lecture Sheet

KING LEAR

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King Lear is the story of sin, suffering, realization, redemption and regeneration of Lear, the King of Britain, a dotty 80-year-old ruler. At his retirement age, Lear wants to hand over the responsibility of ruling the kingdom to his three daughters: Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, still enjoying the power of being king. Therefore, he arranges a “love test” for them. But he fails to realize the true love; rather rewards the false love and punishes the true love and the innocent characters. Thus, he commits sin which leads to his own suffering, realization and finally regenerates into a new man. For this reason, John Maule Lothian (1949: 27) calls King Lear as “the spiritual history or regeneration of King Lear” (p. 27)

At the very outset of the play, the audience sees Lear as a man that uses his materialistic things as a device to control everyone around him. Lear wants his daughters to show their undying love to him, but two only “love” him for what they can get from him.

The avaricious Goneril declares that her love for her father knows no bounds:

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;

Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty;

.....

No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;

As much as child e'er loved, or father found;

(1. 1. 39-43)

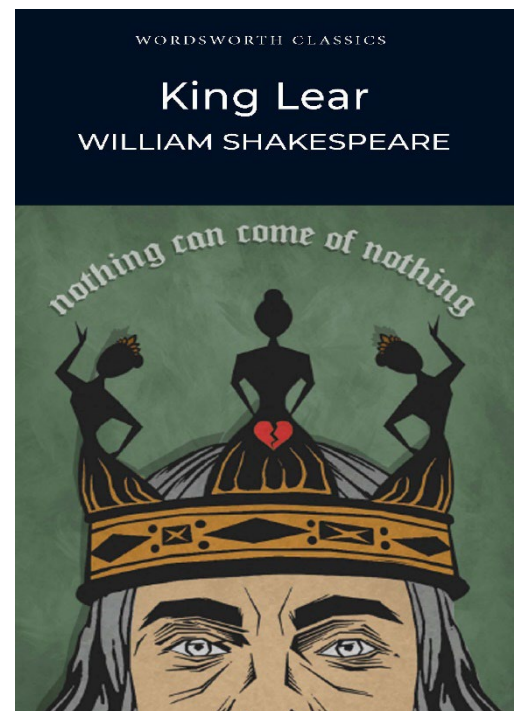
Equally avaricious Regan says Goneril comes up short, declaring,

“I am alone felicitate
In your dear highness’ love”
(1. 1. 59-60).

Much pleased, Lear now asks his favorite daughter, Cordelia, what she can do to win the richest share of his kingdom. She replies,

...I love your majesty

According to my bond; nor more nor less. (1. 1. 77-78)



Here, Lear is so ignorant, so childlike that he cannot differentiate between the flattery of his first two daughters and the truthful expression of love of Cordelia. Angry now, Lear warns her to

“mend your speech a little,
Lest it may mar your fortunes”
(1. 1. 79-80).

But Cordelia stands fast, refusing to take part in the foolish contest.

Consequently, Lear disowns her and divides his property between Goneril and Regan. Even, out of his ‘hubris’ he banishes the Duke of Kent from the country when he advocates Cordelia’s honesty and true love saying,

“I’ll tell thee thou dost evil”
(1. 1. 161).

This is the story of Lear’s committing sin. Therefore, he, as in many literary pieces, must suffer a lot and gather true knowledge.

Lear’s mental suffering begins when he is ignored at his stay in Goneril’s hostage. To their utilitarian treatment, he is now merely an “idle old man” (1. 3. 18) who has relinquished his authority, and not to be “endure[d]” (1. 3. 7) any more. He is further frustrated and angry when his second daughter and her husband have so far refused to come forth from their chamber to see him.



Lear’s suffering does not end here. In a rage, he storms out with his fool into a tempestuous night and experiences physical suffering. The king observes that nature has joined with his faithless daughters to torment him and mimic his raving anger. He suffers from the same mental and physical suffering as the Mariner in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” did:

“Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.
Lear’s reflection on his suffering is,
“I am a man

More sinn'd against than sinning"
(2. 2.49-50)

Suffering in the stage of experience leads human beings to some sort of realization. In King Lear, Lear's realization is that he is "bound upon a wheel of fire" (Act IV. 7. 45), that is, life itself is like a wheel, one that continuously turns with or without our allocation. The Fool describes Lear's condition,

"...thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now; I am a Fool, thou art nothing."
(1.4.)

The Fool's statement suggests that Lear is now left with nothing. Because, the wheel has turned full circle and the journey must begin once more. S L Bethell (1988:4) comments on Lear's current status,

"Lear, after being bound upon his fiery wheel in this life, attaining humility and patience, is ... fit for heaven." (p.4)

The realization or knowledge through suffering can transform and regenerate a contemptible human being into a careful and good person. Lear appears to redeem himself by the end of the play as a humble and caring individual. Standing for a moment in the rain, Lear regrets failing to do more to help the poor, saying:

"How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
... defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! (3. 4. 38-41)

Ironically and paradoxically, Lear's progressing mental derangement makes him keenly aware of his faults and weaknesses. At the beginning of the play, he is sane but mad; at the end of the play, he is mad but sane. The first three lines from Emily Dickinson's one-stanza poem, though he probably wrote without any thought of King Lear, aptly sum up Lear's behavior:

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—
(Published in 1861)

After all the hurdles, when he meets his daughter, Lear, though it was too late to make justice to Cordelia, Lear tremendously regrets for his fault but gets overwhelmed with joy and will never get flattered by any empty word. In his words;

"He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven,
And fire us hence like foxes. "
(Act V, scene iii lines 22-25)

To end our discussion, the process of sin, suffering, redemption and regeneration is a recurrent happening in the world which began with the journey of Adam and Eve. In Lear we see a

flawed figure who by misfortune and loss finally comes to revelation and personal transformation. However, Cordelia's death at last is very much pathetic, though critics like R. A. Foakes (2001: 34) in his introduction see her in the following way,

“In the receptionist interpretation... Cordelia was seen primarily as the agent of Lear's regeneration, and idealized as a saint figure, or an embodiment of love.” (p.34)

Jesus Christ was also an agent of the regeneration of mankind, but he also lost his life.