King Lear Essay, Research Paper

Lear: The Tragic Character

In William Shakespeare?s King Lear, the similar events that Lear and Gloucester experience result in a parallel plot sequence for the story. Lear and Gloucester are similar characters because they are experiencing similar problems while playing the role of a father. Their children also have a similar eagerness for power, a problem that both Lear and Gloucester should not have to deal with while addressing serious mental and physical dilemmas. And although the two characters are very similar, the story of King Lear is tragic, and Gloucester?s is not. Lear?s tragedy is a result of bringing fate upon himself, which in turn stripes Lear of everything, and only in his final moments does Lear resolve some of his problems with a catharsis. To ensure that Lear?s story is indeed tragic while Gloucester?s is not, an examination of tragedy is necessary. Also, the overall situation and well being of the two characters is helpful in deciding who brings upon their own problems, and who becomes a victim throughout the play. Decisions made by Lear are also determining factors of tragedy, even from the very beginning of the play.

The events that Lear and Gloucester experience are similar, but their positions in society are different. Consequences are much higher for mistakes made by Kings, rather than mistakes made by the Earl of Gloucester. Aristotle says that a real tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious or grave involving someone of elevated status. The same person, however, brought demise to one?s own self and to the surrounding characters. When Lear gives up his kingdom to his daughters, he has completely ceased any continuation of the family?s lineage to the throne. Also lost along with Lear?s kingdom is a substantial amount of power over the people. With Lear inevitably losing his throne in the near future, the people stop listening to him. The noble Kent tries to convince Lear that he has made a mistake. He advises: ?See better, Lear, and let me still remain the true blank of thine eye.? (p. 6) After this comment, Lear becomes angry with Kent and exiles him for life. Gloucester?s issues are much more minor: there is little disruption from the man, only anger brought upon him by his bastard son Edmund. Gloucester would not fit Aristotle?s definition of a tragic figure; nobody will show interest for the unfortunate events Gloucester goes through.

The children of Lear and Gloucester follow similar story lines, as greed becomes the character flaw among many of the players. The action taken by Lear leaves a tempting opportunity for Reagan and Goneril when Lear decides to divide his kingdom. Lear enters the room and says: ?Meantime we shall express our darker purpose?To take all cares and business from our age, Conferring them on younger strengths, while we unburthen?d crawl toward death.? (p. 2) At this point both Reagan and Goneril give exaggerated accounts for their love to Lear in order to get the part of the kingdom they desire. Reagan gives an extravagant speech: ?I find she names my very deed of love; only she comes too short: that I profess?I am alone felicitate in your dear highness? love.? (p. 3) Reagan and Goneril are a dynamic duo through the course of the play; they become more corrupt and greedy toward the completion of the play. The characteristics of Edmund are fundamentally evil. He is a static character, always associated with evil people and taking cruel actions. When trying to start a violent conflict with Edgar, Edmund says: ?Some blood drawn on me would beget opinion.? (p. 32) Edmund takes similar courses of deception later in the play, but he does not become as tragic of a character.

Lear?s rash, impulsive, and insecure flaws, creates demise for himself, while Gloucester is simply a victim of events. Lear gives up his kingdom while Gloucester becomes attacked and has his eyes gouged out. Lear created the problems to follow after the division of his property. Gloucester on the other hand, was in an unfortunate place at an unfortunate time. The catharsis experienced by both men was in a similar format as well. Lear, who now knows he is worth nothing, swears to gain vengeance and return some dignity to his last moments. The dynamic Lear says: ?I will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom. What! I will be jovial: come, come; I am a king, my masters, know you that.? (p.95) Gloucester is acted on again with his catharsis. It took the horrific experience of having his eyes gouged out in order to establish a sense of vision. Gloucester says: ?I have no way and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw: full oft?t is seen, our means secure us, and our mere defects prove our commodities.? (p. 78) Only after the attack did Gloucester become a character with better vision.

The character King Lear fit Aristotle?s definition of tragedy. He was a lofty character that brought about his own misfortune, and in the end of the play experienced a moment of catharsis. Gloucester was not a tragic figure, for few people created concerns for the old man with grave misfortune during the play. If Lear would have lived longer, or if foolish decisions were not made, Lear?s story would not have been a tragedy. If Lear did not have his greedy children deceiving him, they would not have let their father lose control of the Kingdom, as well as the family lineage to the throne. The disasters could have been avoided, but they were not, so the story becomes a tragedy.

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