Chaos In King Lear – As Reflected In The Supernatural, Nature Essay, Research Paper

A device which Shakespeare often utilized to convey the confusion and chaos within the plot of his plays, is the reflection of that confusion and chaos in the natural environment of the setting, along with supernatural anomalies and animal imageries. In King Lear, these devices are used to communicate the plot, which is summarized by Gloucester as:

This villain

of mine comes under the prediction: there s son

against father. The King falls from bias of nature:

there s father against child.

(Act 1, Sc.1, 115 – 118)

The bias of nature is defined as the natural inclination of the world. Throughout the play King Lear, the unnatural inclination of nature, supernatural properties and animal imageries are used by Shakespeare to illustrate the chaotic state of England, which was caused by the treacheries of the evil characters.

Gloucester is a character in the play who firmly believed that man s fate has supernatural properties that are controlled or reflected by the heaven and stars:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon

Portend us to no good. Though the wisdom of

nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds

itself scourged by the sequent events.

(Act 1, Sc. 2, 109 – 113)

This is proclaimed by Gloucester as he is told by Edmund of Edgar s supposedly treacherous plot to remove him from power. Gloucester s trust in Edgar faltered as a result of Lear s irrational banishment of Cordelia and Kent, coupled with recent anomalies in the heavens. Gloucester believed that Lear s actions also came as a result of the star s unusual behaviour. Edmund, the treacherous and bastard son of Gloucester, exploits Gloucester s blind believe in the stars in his plot to oust Edgar out of the inheritance and ultimately to gain all of Gloucester s wealth and land:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that

when we are sick in fortune (often the surfeits of

the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains

on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves,

thieves, and treacherous by spherical predominance;

drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced

obedience of planetary influence; and all that we

are evil in, by a divine thrusting on.

(Act 1. Sc. 2, 125 – 133)

As a result of the irrational acts of trust by Lear and Gloucester, the state of England crumbled due to corruptness and treachery of Regan, Goneril and Edmund. At the point of ultimate chaos, Lear is disdained by his two evil daughters and has none of the power and honour of his kingship, and the state of nature reflects this chaos in the form of a tumultuous storm:

Blow winds and crack you cheeks! Rage, blow!

Crack nature s molds, all germens spill at once

That makes ingrateful man.

(Act 3, Sc. 2, 1 – 11)

This is evident that the chaotic state of the plot is reflected by the chaotic state of nature. This storm also enters the play at a point where Lear can be observed as near madness in his mental state. Lear s unstable emotions causes him to remain in the rain, even as Kent has found a place of shelter:

The Body s delicate. This tempest in my mind

Doth my senses take all feeling else

Save what beats there.

(Act 3, Sc. 4, 15 – 17)

From Lear s emotions of disgust towards his ungrateful older daughters, comes words of malice depicting his two daughters as conniving animals which have wounded the parent. Lear proclaimed Goneril and Regan as Those pelican daughters (Act 3, Sc. 4, 81), as young pelicans are thought to feed off their parents blood. In the mock trial held by Lear, along with Edgar, the Fool and Kent, Lear remarked Goneril and Regan as dogs:

The little dogs and all,

Tray, Blanch, and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me.

(Act 3 Sc. 6, 65 – 66)

At this Edgar responded by supporting Lear with his depiction of his daughters as dogs by singing a hymn about heinous canines:

By thy mouth or black or white,

Tooth that poisons if it bite,

Mastiff, greyhound, mongrel grim,

Hound or spaniel, brach, or lym,

Bobtail tike, or trundle-tail,

Tom will make him weep and wail;

For, with throwing thus my head,

Dogs leapt the hatch, and all are fled.

(Act 3, Sc. 6, 69 – 76)

Aside from the evil sisters being comparable to nothing but canines, Edmund is also depicted as an animal of slimy deeds as Edgar called him A most toad-spotted traitor (Act 5, Sc. 3, 166) while he was challenging Edmund to a duel as Poor Tom.

The usage of the supernatural, chaos in nature and animal imageries to represent the disorder in the state of England and the characters in King Lear by Shakespeare is very extensive, in that almost all incidents and characters are compared to or depicted with some form of natural characteristic. By reflecting the chaotic properties of the plot in nature, Shakespeare endears the situation to the audience by illustrating it with a more familiar quality. The usage of supernatural anomalies and superstitions strengthens the audience s believe of the situation as it is acceptable during Shakespeare s time that the fate of man is associated with the workings of the heaven and stars. Furthermore, by comparing both the evil and good characters to animals which corresponds to the nature of that character also heightened the audience s grasp of the evilness and goodness of that character. Through examination of these comparisons with nature, association with the supernatural and depiction of animals in King Lear, it can clearly be seen why this is one of Shakespeare s most successful tragedy as the audience is deeply entrenched into the plot and the characters by his skillful writing.

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