



A THEMATIC SIGNIFICANCE OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S 'KING LEAR'

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ABSTRACT:

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was an English poet, playwright and actor. He is widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called 'England's national poet' and the 'Bard of Avon'. His plays have been translated into several languages and are performed to a great extent than other playwrights. He wrote tragedies such as Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth which are considered to be among the finest works in the English language. Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, Shakespeare's works have been continually adapted and rediscovered by new movements in scholarship and performance. His plays remain highly popular and are constantly studied, performed, and reinterpreted through various cultural and political contexts around the world. Several researchers have projected thematic significance in an individual manner. Considering this, the researcher has presented all themes in this research paper. Present research paper explores thematic significance of Shakespeare's 'King Lear'. There are varied themes such as: redemption and regeneration, compassion and reality, Justice, appearance versus reality, nature, madness, sight and blindness, authority (power) versus chaos, reconciliation, Madness, Good versus evil, Sin, punishment and redemption etc. William Shakespeare's 'King Lear' communicates thematic significance through which it becomes convenient for the audience the gist of the drama.

'The theme of a play is the underlying message, central idea or critical belief about life. It can be stated through dialog or action or can be inferred after watching the entire performance. The theme is the philosophy that forms the base of the story or a moral lesson that the characters learn.'

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a complex and brutal play, filled with human cruelty and awful, seemingly meaningless disasters. It reveals the theme of **redemption and regeneration**. The play consists of the misfortunes and sufferings of Lear. In the opening scene of the play, the audience visualize that Lear, king of Britain, is a wretched old person of more than eighty. He has ruled his kingdom and household in an efficient manner. Now he wishes to retire from his responsibilities and lead a peaceful life. He makes up his mind to divide his kingdom among his three daughters: Goneril, Regan and Cordelia and also marks the territories on the map. To satisfy his vanity, he declares that he will divide the kingdom in proportion to the degree of love which each professes for him. His youngest daughter, Cordelia, is his favourite. He also knows that she loves him the most. In spite of this, he disinherits her because she fails to

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Compassion and reality is another significant theme that runs throughout the play. It is an important theme that runs throughout *King Lear* is the triumph of compassion and reconciliation in the face of tragedy. Despite his banishment, Kent returns to Lear's service disguised as a peasant in order to protect him in Act 1 Scene 4. Act 3, scene 3. Lear demonstrates compassion for his fool despite his own deterioration into madness. Lear tears off his own clothes on finding 'Poor Tom' and laments the trials and tribulations of the poor. As Lear and Cordelia are reconciled in Act 4 Scene 7, she tells him she has 'no cause' to hate him.

King Lear deals with terrible events and raises a serious question whether there is any possibility of justice in the world or whether the world is indifferent or hostile to human beings. *Justice* is prominently witnessed in 'King Lear', Act 2 Scene 4. Lear's daughters' Goneril and Regan suggest their father to give up his servants and cast him out into stormy weather, bolting the door behind him. This is in response to Lear's erratic behavior towards Cordelia and his distribution of power. Lear's response to this in Act 3, Scene 2 is that he is 'more sinned against than sinning.' Lear later insists on a mock trial to bring his daughters to account in Act 3 Scene 6. Act 3 Scene 7 Cornwall engraves Gloucester's eye out for helping Lear. Gloucester like Lear has shown favor to one of his children over the other, he learns from his mistakes the hard way. The illegitimate Edmond is vanquished by his legitimate brother Edgar in Act 5 Scene 3. This is in response to his jealousy of his brother; having orchestrated his brother's banishment and punishment for killing the innocent Cordelia. Gloucester muses, realizing it foolish for humankind to assume that the natural world works in parallel with socially or morally convenient notions of justice (Act 4, Scene 1, Lines 37-38). Edgar, on the other hand, insists that "the gods are just," believing that individuals get what they deserve (Act 5, Scene 3, Line 169). But, in the end, we are left with only a terrifying uncertainty—although the wicked die, the good die along with them, culminating in the awful image of Lear cradling Cordelia's body in his arms. Lear dies heartbroken having lost the only daughter who truly loved him. The excessive cruelty and portrayal of human suffering in the play make the world seem terribly unjust. Throughout *King Lear*, characters constantly appeal to the gods for aid but are rarely answered. The play suggests that, either the gods do not exist, or they are unimaginably cruel. *King Lear* seems to argue that it is up to human beings to administer justice in this world.

The play highlights the theme of *Appearance versus Reality*. In the beginning of the play, Lear believes his older daughters' flattering promises of love, rewarding them with his kingdom. While banishing his truthful daughter Cordelia and his close kinsman Kent. In Act 1, scene 2 Edmond devises a plan to harm the good reputation of his brother Edgar who is fiercely jealous of due to his higher social status because of his legitimacy. Edmond discredits Edgar's character to his father Gloucester. Gloucester rejects his son Edgar based on a forged letter written by his deceptive son Edmond in Act 2, scene 1. Gloucester is later blinded and told he has been betrayed by Edmond, not Edgar. For most of the play, Edgar has been disguised as a poor man. Kent is also disguised in order to help Lear.



of his ways is an ingredient vital to reconciliation with Cordelia, not because Cordelia feels wronged by him but because he has understood the sincerity and depth of her love for him. His maturation enables him to bring Cordelia back into his good graces; a testament to love's ability to flourish, amid the horror and chaos that surround the rest of the play.

Shakespeare's play 'King Lear' uses double paradox in the form of: Reason in **madness** and Madness in reason. It demonstrates the downfall of both the King and a family of greatness. Lear's family and kingdom demonstrate a parallel as they are torn apart and conflicts arise immediately. When a person unfit to lead is given power, chaos will follow and this exactly happens in the play. The paradox explains how the sane characters act with insanity and the characters that have gone mad, show more insight and act normal-minded. King Lear reveals this double paradox. Before he goes mad, he banishes both Kent and Cordelia; however during his lapse in sanity he sees the error of his ways and grows as a King and as a father. In the beginning, Lear displays his fatal error in the entire play. When Cordelia refuses to lie as her sisters did of her affection for him, he refuses to have her in his kingdom. A quote from Act- I show Cordelia being honest to her father:

*'Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me...
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father'*

King Lear is an exploration of **Good versus Evil**. The wronged daughter Cordelia does right thing and the villainous son Edmund plays every dishonest trick to rise to power. King Lear explores shades of grey between good and evil. Regan and Goneril don't start out as the wicked sisters but they're corrupted by greed. Lear himself starts off as a jerk that banishes his one good daughter but learns to be a better person by the final act. Gloucester does the same thing and realizes how metaphorically myopic he was after literally losing his vision. Albany marries to the wicked Goneril and allies with the villains.

Sin, punishment and redemption are embodied in 'King Lear' Act. 3, scene 1. The connotation of sin is found in the tragedies of Shakespeare. They reflect the sinful behavior of several characters in the play. Goneril, Regan and Edmund are projected as devils and not human. Goneril and Regan persecuted their old father, drove him out of their house and left him homeless in the wilderness. They would be willing to kill each other to be Edmund's queen. They are selfish and their blood is cold. Edmund demands that all of his desires must be satisfied. His unsatisfied ambition extends past Cornwall to English Throne. He disrespected God and claimed,

"All with me's meet that I can fashion fit. My father compounded with my mother under the Dragon's tail and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows I am rough and lecherous. Fut, I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing."
(William Shakespeare, 1999: 435)

Regarding Lear, he is arrogant and self-centered king. He welcomes poisoned flattery but interprets well-intended criticism, whether from Cordelia or Kent, as treason. Lear's ego seems fully capable of demanding the sacrifice from his daughters, especially from his



To conclude, themes help the audience to hold the grip on the play. In fact, they are fundamental and often reflect universal ideas in a literary work. The researcher has tried to elaborate the several themes for the better comprehension of the play to the audience.

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