

King Lear: Amalgamation of good and evil visions

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Abstract

King Lear is one of the most famous tragedies by the great Elizabethan playwright William Shakespeare. Perhaps this is the most exceptional play by Shakespeare not only for its protagonist's being an old-aged man who is nearly at the end of his life but also for its artistic blending of good and evil forces through the whole action line of the play. Here, as the protagonist is an old king, it is expected that he should have possessed some worldly wisdom being experienced by his lifetime achievements in this world. But unfortunately, the actual happening is the other way round – King Lear, the old king, is trapped by the devilish activities of the evil forces. This very play, King Lear, is often criticized for its contents of too much exaggeration of the evil forces and their frequent victory over the good ones, rejecting the traditional 'poetic justice'.

Keywords: Infidelity, Jealousy, Good and Evil, Overall Judgment

1. Introduction

In *King Lear*, the characters play the roles of agents of good and evil forces. Characters like Cordelia, Edgar and Kent are the representatives of reasonable force. In contrast, the other characters, Regan, Goneril, and Edmund, serve the purpose of representing the evil force in the play. From the very beginning of the play, we see an 'appearance VS reality' in the characters, especially in the evil characters. From the apparent face value of these characters, it is difficult to get the actual picture of the 'characters good' and/or 'evil'. Instead, in the very opening scene, we observe how Goneril and Regan, the two evil sisters, make a good impression before their old father, King Lear, and the audience.

On the other hand, the same old king banishes his youngest daughter Cordelia and his friend Kent only because he fails to understand their virtue from their too-good appearance, which is almost the fullest to the level of simplicity. In the play's subplot, we also see a parallel feature where Gloucester disbelieves his good son Edgar and trusts his illegitimate evil son Edmund's lies against Edgar. In both the plots, we find this contrast between appearance and reality in the characters, which in the first glimpse is not clear not only to King Lear and Gloucester but also to the audience to some extent. Thus, by adopting the style of contrast between real nature and the apparent actions of the characters, Shakespeare presents the 'good' and 'evil' forces through these agents, i.e., through these characters, in *King Lear*.

1.1 Premise

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* has become an exceptional play in world literature, crossing the boundary of the time frame of the Elizabethan era, perhaps mostly because of its unique blend of good and evil agents through the art of characterization, where the denial of poetic justice, i.e., the frequent victory of the evil forces over the good ones is remarkably horrifying, which ultimately gives it (the play) a mind-scratching identity of a universal tragedy with the extreme examples 'hubris' and 'hamartia'.

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1.2 Objectives

The primary objective of the present study is to examine the role of good and evil agents through the art of characterization, i.e., in the presentation of characters and their respective roles in the play. The objective of this research is also to review Shakespearean vision in the light of 'poetic justice', i.e., the dominance and winning of a specific force over another.

1.3 Scope and justification

The study is, in fact, a critical review of the role of the characters in the play *King Lear*, which ultimately tries to examine Shakespearean vision of 'good' and 'evil' in the light of poetic justice. So, the research has the scope to explore the differences between the characters' apparent intentions and actual motifs, making it a critical assessment of 'appearance vs reality'. Such research on the topic of the present study is genuinely unique in its origin. Though few related discussions might have taken place in some tertiary level classrooms while analyzing the characters of *King Lear*, any exact formal research on the said topic has yet not been found common as publications. So, the findings of the present research are expected to contribute to the field of character analysis as the 'appearance VS reality' is concerned and also in understanding Shakespeare's vision and handling of the role of characters in his plays, especially in his tragedies, as the research considers *King Lear* as an example.

1.4. Review and method

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* was studied critically as the primary source. Enough critical essays and criticism were collected to get additional ideas for the study as a secondary source. Books by A. C. Bradley and Samuel Johnson supported the subject matter. Different literary websites were also helpful for the review, and the 'observation method' was suitable for the progress of the research.

2. Discussion and findings

Shakespeare has presented here, in *King Lear*, the evil agents as the cunning, clever and shrewd characters, whereas, on the other hand, he brings before the audience the good agents as the honest and non-harmful characters who become the victims of the cunning attitude and clever acts of the evil characters. *King Lear* is a brutal play filled with human cruelty and awful, seemingly meaningless disasters. The play's progression of dreadful events raises an obvious query for the characters — namely, whether there is any possibility of righteousness in the world or whether the world is basically apathetic or even intimidating to the human race.

2.1 Mainstream of the play

Goneril and Regan please their father and get their share of the king's property using their cunning and clever tricks, hiding their evil motifs. In contrast, Cordelia is banished as she cannot please her father only because she is honest and unable to adopt treachery like her other two sisters. The exact parallel happens in the subplot of the play, where Gloucester is trapped by Edmund's lies and treachery, leading to their suffering of Edgar. So, here we mark the honesty in the agents of the good force and dishonesty in the agents of the evil force. Moreover, we also observe that good forces are frequently dominated by evil ones. Maybe it is a Shakespearean vision or concept of good and evil that makes the presentation so in the play.

2.2 Infidelity

Betrayal plays a critical role in *King Lear* and shows the workings of iniquity in both the familial and political realms — here, brothers let down brothers, and children deceive fathers. Goneril and Regan's betrayal of Lear raises them to control Britain, where Edmund, who has betrayed

Edgar and Gloucester, joins them. (Spark Notes Editors) Nevertheless, the play suggests that betrayers inevitably turn on one another, presenting how Goneril and Regan fall out when they both turn out to be concerned with Edmund and how their jealousy against one another ultimately leads to communal demolition. Furthermore, it is significant to consider that the whole play is set in proposition by Lear's sightless, idiotic infidelity towards Cordelia's love for him, which strengthens that at the compassion of every infidelity lays a slanted set of principles.

2.3 Jealousy and greed

A very common and significant negative side or aspect of human nature is jealousy, which we see neither in Cordelia, Edgar, Kent, or any other good characters in *King Lear*, like the Duke of Albany and the Duke of France. However, jealousy is very frequent in characters like Goneril and Regan – they are even jealous of each other to have more of their father's property. They are also envious of each other for having Edmund as their husband. On the other hand, Edgar becomes the victim of Edmund's jealousy – Edmund does evil to Edgar also because he wants to make the good son Edgar be looked down upon by Gloucester. Edmund successfully does that and gets his father's favour. Some critics believe that throughout the play *King Lear*, the audience has witnessed Edmund's growing success as a reward for his evil machinations.

And, very much related to jealousy, greed is another thing that the evils possess, which is not present in the good characters. It is the greed for property that makes Regan and Goneril so harmful by virtue. It is the greed for power that makes Edmund produce continuous lies before his father against Edgar. Whereas the opposite thing is found in the Duke of Trance, who knows very well that Cordelia will inherit nothing from her father, King Lear, if he marries her. So, on the one hand, we see jealousy and greed in the agents of evil force; on the other, we get honesty and a broader attitude in the agents of the reasonable force. The significant examples that can be quoted here in support of the reasonable force are: (a) Cordelia, being banished by her father, helps her father when he is in suffering; (b) Kent, who King Lear also banishes, helps the old king throughout the whole journey of Lear's life, and (c) Edgar, who though earlier escapes from the sight of his father when his father misunderstands and becomes furious towards him, does not hesitate to help his blind father Gloucester in danger. So, there is no doubt that, according to the Shakespearean concept, the good force is the barrier to virtuous ideals, whereas the evil force is impregnated with all the devilish motifs.

2.4 Good force with nature

The good force, as we see in *King Lear*, is always with nature. It never breaks the natural bond. By nature, a husband is bound to his wife, a child to his parents, and a servant to the master. In this play, Cordelia is bound to his father, King Lear, Edgar to his father, Gloucester, and Kent to his master, King Lear, fulfilling the demands of 'nature'. However, the evil force breaks this natural bond, hampering the natural order. When the rule of nature over human relationships is violated, the universe is disrupted; as we see when the daughters are cruel to their father, nature is not in good order – there is a stormy night. In *King Lear*, the affectionate and moral relations between/among the members of families are disrupted by the unnatural devilish actions of Regan, Goneril and Edmund – Regan and Goneril go against the father-daughter relationship and Edmund behave unnaturally both towards his father and his brother. While examining the Shakespearean vision of 'good' and 'evil' in *King Lear*, we cannot ignore this very treatment and presentation of both sides (good and evil) in maintaining and breaking natural law and order.

2.5 Against the tradition of 'poetic justice'

Going against the tradition of 'poetic justice', in *King Lear*, the evil characters are more intelligent and stronger than the good ones. On the one hand, the agents of reasonable force are presented here as meek, mild and gentle characters, while on the other, the evil agents are portrayed almost like grasping cruel beasts. – The Duke of Albany, though sympathetic to King Lear, is so meek in personality that he cannot protest his wife Goneril from maltreating her father. Edmund, the illegitimate son of Gloucester, is so cunning and clever that he simultaneously makes both his father and brother fools and succeeds in making plots against them. So, there is no denying the fact that the evil force is given more power and supremacy over the good one in *King Lear*, which brings forward a critical question: Whether Shakespeare has done justice or not? (Dr. Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare*)

2.6 Overall judgment

King Lear has again and again been described as Shakespeare's most significant work, the best of his plays, the tragedy in which he exhibits most fully his multitudinous powers, and if we were doomed to lose all his dramas except one, probably the majority of those who know and appreciate him best would pronounce for keeping *King Lear*. (Bradley, 1905)

In the overall judgment, the same question regarding 'justice' and 'injustice' in dealing with the 'good' and 'evil' in *King Lear* remains controversial. Dr. Johnson, in his *Preface to Shakespeare*, mentions that Shakespeare has often done injustice to virtue and morality. Though it is not that clear to the readers whether Dr Johnson has commented so only by assessing *King Lear*, if this comment is mainly based on *King Lear*, we should accept that because the readers have also noticed such unexpectedly exceptional, and sometimes, better to say 'peculiar' treatment of 'good and evil' in this play. Even an ordinary reader who is not a literary critic may often think that Shakespeare has done injustice to morality in *King Lear*, neglecting the good force and exaggerating too much of the evil force and its devilish dominating power. It does not escape from our sight that in every single action of the malevolent force in the play, there is a vividly described minute detail, whereas such attention is not there in the description of the actions of the good force. (Dr. Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare*)

2.7 Death-end of the play

According to Cliff, at the play's conclusion, the stage is littered with bodies, some deserving of death and some the innocent victims of evil. Cornwall has been destroyed by his honest servant; Edmund is killed by the brother he sought to usurp; both Goneril and Regan are dead, one murdered and the other a suicide; the obedient steward Oswald is dead, a victim of his compulsion to obey. In the end, no easy answer serves the question of divine justice, except that perhaps man must live as if divine justice exists, even if it is only a product of rich and wishful imaginations.

3. Concluding remarks

The concepts of good and evil, which can be understood and defined differently, are two broad concepts because of their diverse interpretations. The two abstract notions have been discussed throughout the centuries since human existence is disputed today. However, the meaning of good and evil was exciting in the Middle Ages and Renaissance period (Degünther, 2012). In fact, as readers of the modern era, it is impossible to examine William Shakespeare's intention to go against the traditional track of poetic justice or even what was in his mind when he wrote *King Lear*. Still, it is true that, though there is an exaggeration of the 'evil' over the 'good', Shakespeare proves his artistic genius by mingling the good and evil forces while presenting the

tragic consequences of the suffering human soul with an extreme example of 'hubris' the self-ego and 'hamartia' the error of judgment in both the main and subplots of the play *King Lear*.

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