

# Literary Representations of Death in *King Lear*

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MS Received February, 2013; Reviewed April, 2013; Accepted August, 2013

## Abstract

Literature primarily has to do with men and women. It tells us of their thoughts and fears, their joys and sorrows, their speculations about life and hereafter. Intertwined with the origins of literature itself, human consciousness of mortality has, for centuries, provided the impetus for reflection on the causes, meaning, and nature of existence. It is thus necessary to examine the literary representations of death in the classics which accord great importance to texts that deal with life and death, good and evil, the true and the false, despair and hope, redemption and salvation.

This paper studies Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a play reflecting upon a spiritual civilization which emerges dimly when Lear discovers the meaning of death. Vividly, the play raises enduring questions about human nature, human suffering, morality, mortality, religion and life's significance. *King Lear* is a play about the meaning of life that comes with recognition of death. Lear's notions about death as opposed to life are also vivid and contrary. The play presents a world where there can be no meaning of death outside of the meaning we create, because the universe is not a sentient being that can attribute values to things. Lear is both fearful and concerned about death. The reflection that qualifies our recognition of all that is valid in Lear's bitterness towards life includes such thoughts as that of the image Lear finds for the world, which is partly a projection of his own folly. Meanings and values attributed to death are to be discovered. It is in the pain of madness that Lear had learnt more about human nature than he knew before. The transitory period on earth is time for learning experience, at once real (it is more moving to us to know that the personage under discussion once lived and breathed) and morally instructive (perhaps, from their wisdom, we will learn how to live and how to die).

**Keywords:** Death, Salvation, Transitory period, Loss, Suffering, Pain, Misery

"About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters," wrote W.H. Auden (1966:123), the Old Masters to whom he refers are the Dutch painters but his comment applies equally to Shakespeare, whose plays depict a range of human suffering. Some of the forms of deprivation and catastrophe are more typical of the sixteenth century, the emotional blow depicted in them is regrettably, timeless: loss of parents and children; pre and post marital problems; unrequited love; anger and revenge; political coups; civil war, foreign invasion and civic destruction; madness; family rupture. This paper explores the most familiar arena of suffering in *King Lear*: death.

Shakespeare wrote that he could express the ideas and beliefs of his time only in the language of his time. These ideas, beliefs and words were formed by the society and power structures of the world he lived in (*Shakespeare the Basics* by

Sean McEvoy pp.4, 5, and 8). His plays are important in examining the existing ideas and beliefs of society then. The play *King Lear* provides us with ideas about death that helps us undertake the kind of close reading of passages required for examination. It is a play of excesses: it is as if Shakespeare thought of the pain and fear of being mortal. The play depicts grotesque death, and madness. It was disillusionment with life that drove Lear to the grotesque scenes. These terrible experiences lead him to accept that death was inevitable and horrible, that it sneaks up like a thief in the night—leaving madness and tragedy in its wake. This aspect of the play states that Shakespearean study is so much more than looking at the character and themes.

In *King Lear*, death is considered from different standpoints. We face death, deal with the death of a loved one, discuss the religious or philosophical significance of death, etc. In 16th-century life, death could not be so easily avoided; in 16<sup>th</sup> century plays, dying - the actual, repugnant effort of dying - played a significant role. Though Shakespeare's period was a time of great innovation some call, the sixteenth century the 'early modern' period, which suggests that Shakespeare's time stands at the beginning of the modern era in which we still live and was different from the medieval period which preceded it. It was a time when education, scientific knowledge and contact with other countries and cultures were rapidly increasing. Words from Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and other tongues were finding their way into the language to enable people to describe and understand new horizons - geographical, social, political, social, philosophical and scientific - which were opening before them.

A specialist of Greek philosophy asserted that Shakespeare was quite surprisingly knowledgeable and accurate. He often talks about the planetary motions of the heavens which have their counterpart in the immoral soul of man and that our souls would sound in accord with the grander music of cosmos were it not for the earthly and perishable nature of body:

Lear: ...by the sacred radiance of the sun,  
The mysteries of Heccat and the night,  
By all the operation of the orbs  
*From whom we do exist and cease to be.*

(Act I, I, 108-111)

Shakespearean tragedy derives ultimately from the Roman and the Greek tragedy on the one hand and the medieval religious performance of dance of death on the other. Shakespeare creates this psychological tragedy of the hero by presenting the moral conflict within his soul resulting in his death. Although *King Lear* is a play that does not deal with the hero's death, it is rather his daughter's death with which Lear has to deal. Only in this play the poignant reconciliation is cruelly blighted by the sudden murder of the young woman. And only in this play does the king have happiness so abruptly snatched from his grasp as he receives the mortal shock of seeing the beloved child die.

It is often alleged that high mortality rates inured Elizabethans to death: repetition either insulated them against loss or prevented them from forming strong

attachments to likely objects of the earthly death, such as children in the first place. Though Lear wishes that he must “Unburthened crawl towards death” (1.1.40) shaking all cares and business from his age, we find him fall prey to attachments that bring suffering.

The anguish in the play on the death of Lear’s dear daughter Cordelia is a recognizable emotion from the age where the bereavement—a child’s loss of a parent – does not seem any more detached. Lear has much difficulty in accepting the death of his daughter and cries out in his misery:

And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life!

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,

And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,

– *Never, never, never, never, never!*

( Act 5, III, 304-7)

It is a question which commentators often try to answer. Samuel Johnson, in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, found the death of Cordelia so painful that he could not bring himself to read again the ending of the play until his editorial duties obliged him to do so.

Gloucester, on the other hand, echoes Lear’s thought as he says “Machinations, hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves”. Both Lear and Gloucester are aware of old age and the approaching death, yet they are being blinded by the materialistic world and it is then that the strings of their life “began to crack”. Their diversion and considerations show that they created their own meanings for their lives and the lives of other characters, regardless of whether or not their lives will turn out as they have wished. Whether their lives are meaningful to others depends on how Lear and Gloucester had shown that they have judged them. The absence or presence of greater purpose of tragedy is as irrelevant as the finality of death for Lear and Gloucester. In the later acts of the play Lear is “child-changed father” which represents a certain stage of age and of further extermination instead of being put to death. His “heaviness of sleep” is an alternative to escape from world in death as he says:

You do me wrong to take me out o’th’ grave:

Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound

Upon the wheel of fire, that mine own tears

*Do scald like molten lead.*

(Act4, VII, 45-7)

In Christian tradition, to suffer on a burning wheel is one of the punishments of the damned. His fall has left him bereft of hope for living. He fails to recognize Cordelia and calls her “a spirit”. His question “where did u die?” can be seen as his vision to foresee her death.

Focusing on the uniqueness as well as the transitional status of the human existence under discussion, Shakespeare emphasizes the wonder with which

sixteenth century versions of anatomy regarded the human body as subjected to ruin and decay, before more mechanized Enlightenment attitudes prevailed.

Death reigns over our lives as a tyrant but Lear fails to understand the power of death. He is left startled at Cordelia's death and shrinks back with horror and dismay as he says:

She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass:

*If her breath will mist or stain the stone,*

(Act5, III, 260-1)

A writer concerned with kings, as Shakespeare surely was, might indeed think to show his monarch as a tyrant or a godly king. Lear thinks that he has control over death and says "...Thy banished trunk be found in our dominions, / The moment is thy death." banishing his loyal servant Kent. It is Lear's "ungoverned rage" that dissolves his life. Fool remarks that Lear "should'st not have been old till thou hadst been wise". This further illustrates Lear's incapability of judgment and understanding of life and death. He appears to share with the reading community all he has discovered concerning appetite and authority. The discovery is that appetite is well nigh universal and that authority is a sham (a false show). For the man who knows this, knows too how little he can dissociate himself from what he denounces. Aggression and self-assertion are alike 'irrelevant'; all that is left is 'patience' hardly distinguishable from despair. And in the rare moments of perfect happiness it is natural for Lear to wish for death since he knows the reason of his discontentment.

The play has a typical account of man's position that is composed materially of the four elements and contains within himself, as well as his rational soul, vegetative and sensitive souls after the manners of plants and animals. The constitution of his body duplicates the constitution of the earth. The constitution of the body duplicating the constitution of earth further states the fact that whatever is born will finally merge into dust. The cycle of seasons, life and death, youth and old age are but the concepts to reach the destination of life i.e. death as "the wheel is come full circle". Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* throws light on the same doctrine.

**Egeus: "Just as no one has ever died who did not live, so no one lives who will not die." Geoffrey Chaucer, *Knight's Tale*. 1387**

The consciousness of Lear is part of the consciousness of mankind. It is much later in scene 4, act I that Lear approbates and recognizes the power of death:

Life and death! I am ashamed

*That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus;*

(*King Lear* Act I, IV, 284-5)

Though it takes a long time for Lear to succumb to his arsenic attitude, Gloucester repeats and echoes his misunderstood claim on death when he orders to murder whosoever "conceals" Edgar. Gloucester's cry "my old heart is cracked, it's cracked" further enhances the dominating and humiliating blows of life as against

the solace that he seeks in death. The moral conflict within the soul results in the psychological tragedy of Lear and Gloucester to an extent that they want to die. It is after they have survived and escaped their own death that they turn back to mortality. Amid the destruction caused by death of the other major characters (Cordelia, Goneril, Regan and Duke of Cornwall) Lear and Gloucester face loss of death. Shakespeare records Lear's agonies with the scrupulous detail by using the words like "vengeance, plague, death, confusion!" to describe his mind's state while he exclaims "Death on my state" showing the chaos in his kingdom. The expression of crying "sleep to death" is the repetition of the famous metaphor of sleep and death. In *King Lear*, death is desired as a means and as an end in itself.

The play can also be seen as an affirmation of Christianity. Shakespeare's adaptations seem designed both to confirm and to subvert the sense of divine ordinance of events. The play reflects upon the Christian ideas on death and the fear of approaching death. Lear renounces in fear: I am mightily abused;

I should e'en die with pity

The play is more than a purgatorial experience culminating in reconciliation. We understand that death is necessary for bringing in the realization and learning that comes to Lear. The degree of power possessed by Death is higher than the power Lear has. The grates of mortality make him realize that he requires "patience" to live before he is patient enough to die.

Shakespeare renounces the biblical verse "What a blessed change then, will death make in your condition! Rouse up, dying saint, and rejoice; let death do his work, that the angels may conduct your soul to the world of light!" (Luke 23:3; John 14:3, etc.). He thinks that death might remove his greatest troubles and temptations and that he would be free from burdens which are inseparable to his present state. He would be free from bodily illness and failings; and from all the afflictions and sorrows of life. In the play one character echoes another; the blinding of Gloucester parallels the cruelty done to Lear; Gloucester loses his eyes and Lear's mind is darkened; Gloucester learns to "see better" in his blindness and Lear reaches his final insights, the recognition of his supreme need, through madness.

The felicity of death leads to frequent Elizabethan pun on "well", which functions both as an adjective meaning "in state of good fortune, welfare and happiness" and the euphemism for "dead". Lear wishes to "die bravely, like a smug bridegroom". His love for power makes him desire his end in a heroic way. Though his desire depends on his temperament, his opportunities, and his madness, in course of time it is largely moulded by his circumstances. While Gloucester comes to terms with the reality of life and says:

You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me;

*Let not my worser spirit tempt me again to die before you please.*

(Act4, VI, 16-8)

Innumerable Greek tragedies end with sobering admonition to count no man happy until he is dead, a theme articulated at the beginning of Richard II. "Though death be poor, it ends mortal woe," says York (2.1.152). Gloucester in the play



“renounces” the world as he “bids farewell” in despair by trying to “fall” and give away his life. He questions if “wretchedness deprived that benefit / To end itself by death”. He then decides to bear the “affliction” of life until he cries out “‘enough, enough’ and, die”. Similarly Lear pleads heaven to give him “patience” to bear the grievously culpable attitude of Regan and Goneril for exploiting his mental imbalance. It is then that he considers death as an escape from miseries of life and demands nature to touch him with “noble anger”. Death appears to render his life meaningless for he feels that there is no point in living if one has “unnatural hags” as daughters.

The death wish in Shakespeare’s plays is very evident in *King Lear*. “Life is but a flickering shadow.” (Macbeth) is what is echoed in *King Lear*. Kent says that “Man’s nature cannot carry / Th’affliction nor the fear”. Both Lear and Gloucester initially face the pain that is further followed by their detection of “smell of mortality” being the reason for it all. Lear’s reconciliation with Cordelia is thwarted by her death. His unfulfilled wish to die and escape the miseries of world has made him call death a “traitor”. He does not find the idea of his own death so distressing—it wouldn’t matter if his life comes to an end. The fact that all are eventually going to die has no relevance to Lear since his daughter should have lived on. Cordelia’s death acts as a source of cruel impulse that inflicts Lear.

Oswald’s “untimely death” leaves him with “no other deathsman”. Whereas Duke of Cornwall is “the death-practiced” duke as to him life of others has no significance and so does their death. Lear is “mainly ignorant” of death’s power as “the pain of death would hourly die, / Rather than die at once!”

In his play *King Lear* Shakespeare expresses the time span of life leading us towards death as a real learning experience, which informs us that the fear of disorder is never absent in the play. Perhaps, from Lear’s wisdom, we learn how to live and how to die. His reactions – protracted mourning, morbid thoughts, and inability to function or act decisively, anger at his daughters – are those of a person in early stages of grief that leads to his madness. He realizes that “when we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools.” He understands the ways of the world and realizes that certain emotions like death, pain, and suffering are common to all. His understanding and previous notion of death where the King exercises control over death by punishing the criminal (even in the king’s court in sixteenth century) seems irrelevant: for him Cordelia’s death is a shock. Soon when Cordelia’s death has passed upon him, his soul is swallowed up in life. The process of dealing with death is complicated by the fact that Lear has to live when he wishes – “if you have poison for me, I will drink it”. There was no precedent for the harrowing bleakness, the ruthless ironies and the harsh accidents of the conclusion.

The play throws light upon life as a philosophy of death through Cordelia’s character. King realizes, belatedly, the value of his daughter’s analogy of “salt” and they are reconciled. The expectations set up in the first act of the play are but only to be thwarted and lead to frustration in the later acts. We are made to denounce the world that accelerated Cordelia’s death but we should remember

that the same world gave birth to her. Cordelia sacrificed her life at the altar of filial love; and Kent suffered untold tortures for the sake of vindicating wisdom in chaotic kingdom of malicious people. It is expedient to keep in mind that Jesus Christ and the prophets survive crucifixion and persecutions. Lear's impulse and desire to be loved by the daughter Cordelia who is the "balm of his age" is unduly hampered by high degree of barbaric murder as she is hanged to death. It is through Edgar that Shakespeare gives us his philosophy that people must submit to death as to birth: in both the cases what matters is to be ripe for the occasion. Thus the premature death, suicide, is as inappropriate as premature birth.

Men must endure

Their going hence, even as their coming hither;

*Ripeness is all.*

(Act5,I,9-11)

*King Lear* is the best tragedy that expresses the Elizabethan theology of order in the universe. Lear's stature increases with his suffering unraveling the mystery of death. His awareness of the nature of man, of life and death emerges under agony. The tragedy presents his descent to bare death – "the thing itself". The play like all Shakespeare's tragedies also illuminates Lear's spiritual progress from various angles. This play provides an extended examination of death and grief, with trans-historical emotions about death embedded in a localized Reformation crisis about rituals of mourning. *King Lear* celebrates the common bond which lies beyond individual distinctions. It reaches towards 'the mystery of things' (v.iii.16), an absolute truth which encloses.

We still honor Shakespeare, for his art of writing is an integral part of the life of community at large. Shakespeare echoes those assumptions in wordplay on "womb" and "tomb" that dissolves a seemingly fatal opposition by making its terms interchangeable. His play *King Lear* serves a utilitarian purpose as it makes us aware of the fact that to live life is a spontaneous delight to attain death. Shakespeare's vision continues to influence us even today though the culture it originally served has long since disappeared.

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