




## A CRITICAL STUDY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*: PLOT AND STRUCTURE



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### ABSTRACT

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This study sheds light on the dramatic devices and techniques which William Shakespeare used in constructing his play King Lear. It involves analyzing the structure and plot and main themes of the plays. Shakespeare used the Elizabethan five-act structure, which is derived from the Greek form and remains an often starting point for contemporary plays. The major plot in this play deals with king Lear and the misfortunes that he has to face as a result of the ungratefulness of his two eldest daughters. The central argument focuses on critiquing the notion that Shakespeare's plays are not original in their genesis. Some scholars go even further to suggest that Shakespeare has borrowed so much from Latin and Greek sources, ascribing them to himself, without acknowledgment. However, the present paper aims at challenging such beliefs and showing thereby the originality of Shakespeare's oeuvre of drama. This play is chosen among other plays as it represents most of the tragedies written by Shakespeare.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study contributes in the existing literature to identifying the dramatic devices and techniques which William Shakespeare used in constructing his play King Lear. It involves analyzing the structure and plot and main themes of the play. Moreover, it shows thereby the originality of Shakespeare's oeuvre of drama.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Among many other Shakespearean tragedies, King Lear, which was published in 1623, is considered one of the most tragic plays ever written in English literature. The tragedy of *King Lear* results when man's law gains precedence over the law of nature. The main source of tragedy in *King Lear*, therefore, is the character. Perhaps Shakespeare was more concerned with human behavior than any other elements of life. His major goal was to illuminate the dark side of humanity and penetrate into the heart of its nature. However, the four most significant generic contexts influencing this play are history, romance, comedy and tragedy.

In *King Lear*, there are many elements of dramatic conventions one should be aware of so that analyzing these elements can help to understand the action as connected, purposeful, and oriented to a logical end rather than considering it as a haphazard gathering of apparently accidental incidents. This confirms the fact that anything we are told by Shakespeare is for purpose and has some consequences. However, in constructing the tragedy of *King Lear*, Shakespeare uses different literary devices. The most important one is the use of double plot. This device

serves an important function, as it highlights the natural law as an crucial aspect of both plots. By emphasizing the important role of nature which seems absent in *King Lear*, Shakespeare is able to demonstrate the tragic consequences that result from the absence of such an important role.

The play appears in two forms or editions. First, it was printed in 1608 and referred to as the First Quarto. The second edition appears in a 1623 Folio edition. Because there exist to be some missing parts in the two editions, some recent anthologies include a combination of both editions.

## 2. THE PLAY STRUCTURE

The structure of the play was common among most Elizabethan plays. It is a five-act tragedy. Most Elizabethan theatre adheres to the five-act structure, which corresponds to the divisions in the action and makes the audience easily figure out and thus understand the various parts of the tragedy. The first act is the exposition, in which the playwright sets forth the problem and introduces the main characters. In addition, it establishes the nature of the conflict between Cordelia and Lear, among Goneril and Regan and Lear, and between Gloucester and Edgar. Consequently, the opening scene gives rise to the problem of domestic and personal relationships which are closely linked with royal power and authority. Act two is the complication (rising action) in which the entanglement or conflict develops further. The erosion of Lear's power and respect begins, the depth of the conflict between Lear and his daughters is revealed, and the conspiracy that unites Goneril, Regan, and Edmund is established. Act three is the climax in which the action of the play takes a turning-point and the crisis occurs. In this act, Lear has been cast adrift in the storm and his words reveal that he begins to lose his mind and his sanity. Likewise, the extent of Regan and Cornwall's depravity is revealed as they torture Gloucester, ultimately gouging out his eyes.

Act four is called the falling action, which signals the beginning of the play's resolution. In this act, we have Edgar reuniting with his father and Cordelia with Lear, who begins to recover from his madness. This act indicates that the story may be moving towards a good-triumphing-over-evil happy ending are the deaths of Cornwall and Oswald as it is approaching downfall of the conspirators and foreshadows the tragedy of the hero.

In the final act, (act five) the play draws to a close and the action brings closure to the play. This act presents the catastrophe to the play, wherein the conclusion occurs, a resolution to the conflict is established, and the tragedy is actualized. In this act, good and bad characters are dead: Regan and Goneril die, Edmund is killed in a duel with his brother, and Lear and Cordelia die. As the play draws to an end, Edgar is nominated to restore peace and control to the kingdom.

Having this short version about the story of the whole play in mind, one needs to understand how Shakespeare has structured his play so that it has become a great work of art. According to Steele (1991) Shakespeare has used an "explicit structure" to form his plays. They are written and structured in the same manner that a "book, chapter, and verse organize the text of the Bible. For Steele, "references to the dramatic works of Shakespeare should be keyed to act, scene, and line numbers, not to page numbers, not to running time" and these divisions "constitute the explicit structure of the plays." (ibid).

Basically, the way the plays are performed on the stage and produced in a written text has caught the attention of many scholars of Shakespeare. Steele (1991) argues that "Shakespeare scholars have recognized for decades that, in actual fact, plays were performed on the bare, unlocalized Elizabethan public stage without pauses for acts and scenes" (ibid). Of the original quartos, none of Shakespeare's plays is divided into numbered scenes and only *Othello* is divided into acts (Dobson and Watson, 2004). However, Shakespeare's plays were originally written without act divisions and performed without act pauses. Instead of using act and scene divisions, he has weaved his plays with stage directions and signals that indicate the end of one act and the beginning of another. Shakespeare's plays were performed in playhouses, with elaborate scenery, and staged with music, dancing, thunder, lightening, wave machines, and fireworks (Snuggs, 1960).

On the stage, a new scene begins when the stage is cleared and the action is not continuous, which is not characteristic of Shakespearean plays. According to Steele (1991) "*Shakespeare's original audience would have been much more affected by shifts from prose to verse, or from balcony to stage level, or from song to dialogue, than by arbitrary act or scene divisions*". This structure has its own significance as it makes the play sound more coherent and the actions more integrated and interrelated. Thus, the actions move smoothly without being interrupted or disrupted by arbitrary act or scene divisions. "*Shakespeare developed a great variety of strategies to ensure coherence and organic unity in his plays*" (Routledge Library Editions, 1986). As far as the written form is concerned, act and scene divisions are established by having a generous white space or typographical ornaments, which indicate the transitions between the scenes and the acts.

In terms of character performance on the stage, each time a new character enters or exits is signaled with the dynamic between the on-stage characters being altered. In *King Lear*, for example, the majestic entrance of Lear and his courtiers suddenly end the short conversation between Kent and Gloucester. There are, however, more complex situations, especially when two or more characters enter the stage simultaneously (Steele, 1991). A good way to understand the structure of Shakespeare's plays is through their characters. On this basis, Steele suggests that the act and scene divisions are not of great importance as to analyze Shakespeare's plays, but through the characters' interaction lies the importance of the play. He rightly assumes:

*"Moreover, the fundamental dramatic experience is not one of acts and scenes, but of characters in action and interaction. Drama has no narrator, no single omniscient perspective; instead, there are multiple and continually conflicting perspectives, much like those we consider in everyday life... . In many ways, Shakespeare's characters are the explicit structure of his plays; in the Globe playhouse, working manuscripts of plays were divided into individual parts for each actor, not into acts or scenes. Finally, then, text analysis software which limits itself merely to act, scene, and line divisions cannot capture the subtleties or complexities of the structure of Shakespeare's works."* (ibid).

In his article the structure of *King Lear*, Bowers (1980) claims that *King Lear* viewed as a modified classical tragedy. He added that the benefits of Shakespeare's innovation are clear. Instead of the first half of the play is devoted to the rising action concluding in the kingdom's division, after that sliding with some speediness down to the catastrophic consequences. Shakespeare allows himself almost the full length of the play to work out the far-reaching and complex results of Lear's tragic decision. This searching and detailed analysis of error and consequence provides the play its extraordinary weight and density. Generally speaking, Shakespeare used the Elizabethan five-act structure, which is derived from the Greek form and remains an often starting point for contemporary plays .

### 3. THE PLAY PLOT

Despite the fact that the major plot in this play deals with Lear and the misfortunes that he has to face as a result of the ungratefulness of his two eldest daughters, the sub-plot deals with the misfortunes that Gloucester has to experience as a consequence of the ingratitude of his bastard son Edmund. The similarity between the two stories is clear. Both men suffer the disastrous consequences of their madness and want of judgment in relying upon their wicked children. Each father is relieved and comforted by his good child, Cordelia, in the case of the main plot, and Edgar, in the case of the sub-plot (Nafi, 2015).

The use of double plot, though, seems to be one of Shakespeare's artistic devices to universalize his themes or present different perspectives about human beings. In *King Lear*, for example, "some critics believed that Shakespeare used the Gloucester plot to universalize his theme; others, to contrast Lear's reaction to his fate with Gloucester's" (Halio, 2005). The use of double-plot structure in *King Lear* is also meant to reflect Shakespeare's view of life, or to use (Goldberg, 1974) words, to incarnate "*the structure not of the protagonist's character, but of Shakespeare's own imaginative insight, his vision of the world.*"

*King Lear* is unusual, and unique in Shakespeare, in its distinctive structure. The climax takes place early on in the play. Despite the fact that the climax takes an actual form in act three, it really occurs in act one, scene one where the king sets forth the division of the kingdom among his ungrateful daughters and where the conflict between the daughters is exposed. Perhaps this foregrounding of the typical Shakespearean structure is meant to shed light on the impact of the foolish decision that the king makes to divide his kingdom and to give a full picture of the consequences of such a decision.

Principally, the play has many themes which are handled in various ways. The two plots reinforce each other and both have to do with the relationship between parents and children. They are not, therefore, woven together by mere coincidence. Rather, they both dramatize Shakespeare's attitude towards life and reflect his view of the whole world. As a consequence, Shakespeare has drawn these plots from a variety of sources. The main plot of *King Lear* and his three daughters comes from an old chronicle play called, "*True Chronicle History of King Leir and his Three Daughters*." The plot of Gloucester and his two sons comes from Sir Philip Sidney's popular romance, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (Abrams 886).

In the original story of *King Leir*, the king remains alive and returns to the kingdom as a king. This original play does not celebrate the sub-plot about Gloucester, Edgar and Edmond which Shakespeare adds to his play. The play, therefore, ends happily. In *King Lear*, however, Shakespeare has made radical changes in the dramatic structure of the original story which he draws upon. This poses puzzling questions: why did Shakespeare end his play with a tragedy? And why did he add another element of tragedy, which the sub-plot about Gloucester and his sons presents?

In fact, Shakespeare's dramatic structure of *King Lear* presents more universal aspects about human beings than does this original story. The play, therefore, was written to give a comprehensive picture of life and dramatize various approaches to it. On the other hand, some critics criticize and reject the abundance of death that takes place in the closing scene of Shakespeare's play. In the late seventeenth century, a reaction against what was seen as the excesses of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama took place. The tragedies of Shakespeare, Marlowe and Webster, in which stages were often littered with numerous corpses, were now seen unacceptable. An example of the effect of this on drama was Nahum Tate's alteration of *King Lear* (Cameron, 2001).

This approach continues in the Victorian age and among those critics who critique the structure of *King Lear* is A.C. Bradley who provided examples of its dramatic defects. He concludes the main motives of *King Lear*'s structure. He states that, "*Many of these [motives] relate to the sub-plot involving Gloucester and Edgar and to the vagueness of both the chronology and the geography of the play.*" The twentieth-century critics, however, respond to such criticism by emphasizing the fact that Shakespeare was not concerned with presenting a specific time and location and that this lack of precision has been a major factor in the play's universal appeal.

In an attempt to answer the question why Shakespeare changed the original story of his play and added the tragic element to it, Thomas P. Roche argues that although he believes Shakespeare to be a Christian writer, *King Lear* is not a Christian play. Rather, it depicts the plight of man before the Christian era, that is, before the salvation of man by Christ's sacrifice was available. "Shakespeare altered the story as it appeared in *King Lear* precisely to emphasize this fact (Halio, 2001).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The dramatic structure of *King Lear* reveals Shakespeare's topicality, whether he writes about a specific topic or variation of topics, or whether he writes about a particular time or for the ages, and finally, whether he writes about a specific group of people or about human beings in general. In his essay "What does Shakespeare leave out of *King Lear*?" Brink (2008) convincingly argues that by the virtue of his status in the canon, Shakespeare is associated with the view that great art is timeless and speaks to universals in the human condition. Shakespeare's fame, therefore, lies in the appeal to his persistent relevance, and his capacity to speak to one generation after another.

Consequently, the double-plot Structure in *King Lear* becomes evident of Shakespeare's indirect and allusive approach to topicality, an approach which Brink describes as "*manifesting political awareness that leaves interpretation to the audience*" (ibid).

Still, there are many different opinions among the critics with reference to the effect of the introduction of the sub-plot in this play. According to some, the subplot interferes with the structural unity of the play and weakens the dramatic effect of the Lear story by distracting our attention to the characters and events of the sub-plot. Others point out the skillful manner in which Shakespeare has interlinked the main plot and the sub-plot by keeping the unity of the whole play integral; and they also express the view that the dramatic effect of the main plot is reinforced by the sub-plot, rather than weakened by it. With regards to the structure of *King Lear*, it can be claimed that the two plots are greatly similar to each other in both cases and infatuated father proves to be blind towards his good-hearted and well-meaning child, while the unnatural child or children, whom he prefers, cause the ruin of all his happiness.

Finally, the plot in this play is an advantage, rather than a disadvantage. It improves the dramatic effect of the main plot and provides a real meaning to the play's form and structure. Therefore, in constructing his plays, Shakespeare followed no rules and had no dramatic theory. Every line of his plays has been carefully structured and well-constructed. The central argument focuses on critiquing the notion that Shakespeare's plays are not original in their genesis. Some scholars go even further to suggest that Shakespeare has borrowed so much from Latin and Greek sources, ascribing them to himself, without acknowledgment. They believe that his familiarity in Latin and Greek has helped him so much and contributed a great deal to the whole matter. However, the present paper aims at challenging such beliefs and showing thereby the originality of Shakespeare's oeuvre of drama. *King Lear* is chosen among other plays as it represents most of the tragedies written by Shakespeare.

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