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PG.  
SEM-I  
CC-II  
UNIT II  
KING LEAR (Main Plot, Sub Plot  
and Paradox  
and Paradox  
Tragic Vision)

## MAIN PLOT, SUB-PLOT AND PARADOX IN KING LEAR

Shakespeare has ~~so~~ cleverly entwined the apparent main plot with the sub-plot that it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Admittedly, there is the plot involving King Lear and his division of his kingdom among his daughters, his misjudgement of the <sup>pretences on the part</sup> of Regan and Goneril, and his mistrust in his loyal daughter Cordelia and lastly, realising his mistake, suffering and eventually poignantly recoiling to the love of Cordelia. Then there is the sub-plot involving Gloucester & his two sons: here too the father is fooled into favouring Edmund, the wicked son and spurning Edgar, the loyal son. He too suffers through suffering and eventually like Lear, is progressively poignantly recoiled to Edgar.

The two plots become progressively entwined. Gloucester is brutally blinded by Cornwall, the husband of Regan; Goneril & Regan, though married, are both sexually attracted to Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son, & their jealous rivalry for his favour leads to their downfall. Goneril poisons Regan and kills herself. After an attempted letter persuades Albany to order Lear's arrest, rather tardily, Albany becomes an ally of the dejected Lear and Cordelia. Edmund is slain in a duel with Edgar, & Edgar's report that Gloucester <sup>too</sup> had is soon followed by the death of Lear, which itself seems to express those two "extremes of passion" of joy and grief.

This intertwining of characters seems simply a consequence of Shakespeare's determination to organise the drama on very strong thematic lines. The stories of Lear & Gloucester are both subordinate to the same large pattern or canvas on which Shakespeare has painted the drama. In both cases, the same principle is at work. Lear betrays the morality of the family and the laws of the statecraft; the consequent suffering deranges him, but denying his derangement, he has moments of moral lucidity and eventually

is reconciled to his daughter. Gloucester too has ~~brothered~~ <sup>strung</sup> the morality of the family, by fathering Edmund outside wedlock. He finds himself and eventually aware of his mistakes, he reacts to the son who has really striven on his behalf. In both cases hence we find 'nature' to be the main factor.

Shakespeare emphasises that nature has two contrasting aspects. On the one hand, there is <sup>gentle, fortunate, kind,</sup> benign or 'green' nature, which constitutes the creative process of life when it appears to be cooperative with decent humanity. That is the nature of spring time & summer, of pastoral agriculture, of the springing seeds and harvest time. On the other hand, Shakespeare mentions the malign or the 'red' nature. Nature which is 'red' in tooth & claw, violent and predatory; the winter windy storms & the tempest, and the nature of ferocious wolves and tigers. Shakespeare sees corresponding forces in human nature. Some people are benign, loving, cooperative, nurturing while others are malignant, resentful, competitive, <sup>voracious, greedy,</sup> rapacious & appetitive in the sense that they maybe greedy for power or for illicit sexual pleasures. Edmund says, 'Thou Nature, my goddess; to thy law I'm tied' in insight linked to the themes of "madness and <sup>height, clear, easily understood</sup> ~~blindly~~". Both are part of the larger theme of wisdom gained by suffering and a very important theme could be called 'the problem of theodicy' or divine justice.

Why is it that good people often suffer and the bad ones often tend to prosper? This is the question that King Lear seems determined to express in particularly vivid searching and harsh ways. Repeatedly, in the play, characters invoke or refer to a variety of duties and metaphysical forces: God, Love, Heavens, Apollo, Nature and the heavens. Repeatedly there is a questioning of these forces that seem to govern our destiny and so insistently, the play seems to hurl to us the sheer raw bloody stuff

Suffering of  
Lea & Gloucester

of human injustice and suffering. The suffering of Lea is painful enough but the blinding of Gloucester is notoriously terrifying, and the death of the virtuous Cordelia seems to set problem of theodicy in the most explicit of ways. Lea referring to Cordelia as his 'poor fool' crucified in 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?"

This is a crucial question in the play. Dr Samuel Johnson, the greatest critic of 18th said that he found the death of Cordelia so painful that he could scarcely bring himself to read again the end of the play, and contemplated sadly this test in which the wicked prosper and the good and virtuous undergo misery.

Source materials  
adopted

One way of trying to clarify our sense of Shakespeare's intentions is to look at his use of the source materials. Changes to the ~~source~~ source should be a guide to his purposes. And if we look at the ways in which he adopts the source materials of King Lear, a very big paradox emerges. His adaptations seem to be designed both to strengthen & weaken the sense of divine ordinance of the events.

Source material  
of Gloucester's  
story

First, let us consider the material about Gloucester and his two sons. This derives from the story of divine the ordinance of the events King of Paphlagonia in Sir Philip Sidney's 'Arcadia'. Though there were various versions of King Lear story, written before, Shakespeare wrote his play, he was the first writer to combine in Lear material, the Paphlagonia material. There are many parallels between the two concurrent stories of misguided parenthood; rivalry between siblings, suffering in the wilderness and eventually reconciliation of father with the loving child. In Sha. play, Lea & Gloucester, during their separate wanderings, gain remarkably similar

Moral realisation

moral insights. In both cases, there is a recognition of the need for the high to have compassion & clarity for the needs of the low. So, when we consider that both Gloucester & Lear have exact, have misjudged their children, have suffered on account of it, but later have come to kinder <sup>to appear to desire, ordered</sup> ~~tells~~ down it creates the impression that this is an ordained suffering. We find that divine powers have acted to punish but also to enlighten these evil noblemen. So without the parallelism between the progresses of the two men, we would not gain a strong sense of divine power at work.

Establish the power of divine ordainment

While some of Shakespeare's changes to the sources seem designed to establish the sense of <sup>desire, law, established, religious rights</sup> ordainment, others seem to challenge <sup>the</sup> and belief in divine ordainment: this is the paradox. The stronger our sense of patterning of the previous events, the stronger will be our sense of the disruption of that patterning of the class. Tragedies usually end somberly, but the ending of King Lear seems to be exceptionally bleak and harsh.

Sources of King Lear

But that is only half the part of the big paradox. The story of King Lear had been told by many writers before Shakespeare such as Geoffrey of Monmouth, by Higgin in his *Spur of Magistrates*, by Holshed in his *Chronicles*, by Spenser in his *Fairy Queen*, by the author of the anonymous play entitled *The True Chronicle History of King Lear*. And in all these versions the story of King Lear ends relatively happily. After his reconciliation to his virtuous daughter, he is restored to the throne & seems set to live happily ever after. In most versions he continues to reign and dies eventually of old age. Certainly, in some versions, the daughter dies by suicide in prison after having been defeated in a rebellion by her nephews. But that happens a very long time after the reconciliation. Only in Shakespeare's text does Cordelia

the deep fear; only in Shakespeare do we have that hideous sense of reconciliation blighted by the sudden and cruel murther of the daughter; and only in this version is the King's happiness snatched away from his grasp and he receives the mortal shock of seeing the beloved child dead. There was no precedent for the utterly harsh and bleak quality of Shakespeare's ending of the story. And we also notice that Shakespeare has gone out of his way to accentuate that harshness. The death of Cordelia is a consequence, among other things of sheer absentmindedness. When Kent asks Albany, "where the king is", Albany replies:-

"Treat them as you forget!"

Speak Edmund, where is the king? and where is Cordelia!  
In total forgetfulness, rescue is sent so late. Albany even appeals for divine aid:

"The Gods defend her!"

Chance  
Role of

But within half a line on his appeal to the heavens, Lear enters with Cordelia dead in his arms. Later Albany tries to regret a pattern of moral justice:-

"All friends shall taste

The ways of their <sup>virtues</sup> ~~deservings~~, & all jobs

The cup of their deservings."

But again, the text harshly undercuts this assertion for it is there that Lear cries out, "And my poor fool is hang'd" as if to say "How can this death possibly fit any pattern of moral justice?"

All this ~~too~~ shows that character is not directly responsible in causing the tragedy of King Lear. Though the tragic flaw <sup>of being rash, passionate & full of self-interest</sup> in Lear's character leads him to division of his kingdom & banishment of his loved & faithful daughter. The course of tragedy is hastened by the insanity of King Lear. Same in the case of Gloucester. His belief in the wrong & wicked son leads to the tragedy. Another thing that contributes to tragedy is 'Chance'. It is pure chance that order of revenge is unable to reach on time of murder of Cordelia. A profound sense of Fate or Destiny underlies all the tragedies of Shakespeare.