King Lear, Driven to Insanity


Bennett, unlike her contemporaries, wonders why Lear’s dementia must be a gradual process, with his madness occurring at one specific point in the play. She asserts that Lear’s four speeches directed towards Tom in reference to his hateful daughters in Act II are written in prose, and therefore depict that Lear is indeed in a state of madness. Shakespeare has eluded that it would occur, and it plays in juxtaposition to Tom, who is merely pretending to be mad. Should Lear have any subsequent moments of clarity, it is inconsequential, because his mind is already in a failing state.


Like Calderwood, Bell puts forward that theory that clothing, specifically the stripping of Lear is symbolic of the stripping of his sanity and his humanity. By making the connection between clothing and personality traits, Bell suggests that the condition of the characters’ state of dress symbolizes how they are able to personalize or depersonalize themselves.

Lear’s insanity is perpetuated by himself as he “unwarrantably and selfishly” sets up his daughters so that they are bound to profess their love to him (36). When Cordelia does not oblige, Lear unknowingly sets forth the actions that lead to his demise. Forced to endure insults from Goneril and begging at the feet of Regan, Lear’s age and dignity suffer the punishments of childhood, and is shamed when his confident Kent is locked in the stocks and taunted. Fleeing the outrageous insults of his daughters, Lear leaves shelter and endures a ferocious storm. After the storm, Lear encounters Edgar, who is pretending to be mad, and Lear asks him, “Is it the fashion that discarded fathers/Should have this little mercy on their flesh?” Displaying his sensitivity for the common man, something he could not achieve as a mighty King. He also admits that if he thinks too much of his daughters that he will go mad, proving that they are the accelerant to the fire that is ravishing his sanity.


Calderwood suggests that Shakespeare creatively un-creates, or deconstructs King Lear throughout the play. The theme of deconstruction is introduced at the beginning of the play when Lear attempts to marry off his daughters and divide his kingdom. Then his relationship with Cordelia is broken when he disowns her. Lear’s self destruction follows. Disrobing him, another form of reducing him, Shakespeare sends Lear out into a violent storm. His madness takes a firm hold of him, and he is further deconstructed by the unsophisticated, monosyllabic, repetitive language with spews nonsensically from his mouth.

Ignatieff recalls viewing and appreciating the *King Lear* at different stages in his life. Calling the play an “intimate violence of family life,” Ignatieff blames both father and child for not being able to love selflessly, thus causing their own cataclysm. He does not believe that Lear’s dementia is the root of his hateful ramblings towards his daughters during the tumultuous storm, but deep seeded anger, which normally remains hidden in the name of “family values”. The Fool suggests laughing at his circumstances as the only way to ward of insanity, which Lear cannot and eventually succumbs to madness. And in stark contrast to other critics, Ignatieff sympathizes with Lear’s daughters, calling Lear “violent, abusive, by turns imperious and then querulous, confused and pathetic.”


Kahn attempts to pinpoint the exact moment in which Lear goes fully mad. He postulates that in Acts II and III, he begins down the slope towards madness. In Act III, Scene vi., where critics before him cite as Lear’s turning point, Kahn admits Lear is merely “in a state which alternates between a kind of pathetic sanity and growing fits of lunacy” (312). He attributes this misconception to an edited version of the play which sets the stage direction as “Enter Lear mad”, and “Exit King running”, which is not in the original Shakespearean text, and the inclusion of a few mad scenes. He suggests that the “static state” of utter insanity is not inflicted upon Lear until well into Act IV, almost the end of the play, when he can no longer recognize the daughter

Lothian, like Ann Paton, suggests that King Lear in its barest form is a story with a “Once upon a time” plot. However, he focuses on what Lear hears as opposed to what he sees, and suggests that the conversation with his own Fool is when Lear comes to the realization that the error of his ways has led him to madness. After the storm, when the Fool finds Lear outdoors, in a full state of madness, they have a candid conversation about his demise as the King. And the Fool admits that there is “much wisdom which a fool can bring to a king”. Wisdom he would not be privy to had he not gone mad. The Fool subsequently ends up being his sole companion throughout the rest of the play.


Paton suggests teaching Lear as a story with a “once upon a time” atmosphere to gather the attention of students who are not connected to, or do not have an interest in Shakespeare. Cast the two sisters as the evil sisters and the one as good, who becomes ostracized. Then depict Lear as character who starts out majestically, but ends up being “plunged into utter darkness, the mental darkness of lunacy, before he can emerge into the light of understanding” (76). He finally sees the evil ways of his two daughters, but it has come too late to salvage his relationship with Cordelia and they both die.

The external factors, including Cordelia’s refusal to announce her love for her father and Goneril and Regan’s blatant mistreatment and disrespect for the King, outweigh the anguish he inflicts upon himself. Internally, the loss of power, pain of ostracizing Cordelia, and losing his identity contribute to King Lear’s mental distress. The catalyst for King Lear’s dementia occurs when Cordelia refuses to profess an exaggerated lover for her father and he denounces her. Aging and powerless, the King lives with Goneril who drives him mad by ignoring him, insulting his retinue, and making him believe he is senile. Now living with Regan, she too unmans and ages him with her verbal assaults, “Oh, sir, you are old” (II.iv.146). Thus, they trick him into disbanding his entourage, but he is maddened, “You unnatural hags, I will have such revenges on you both” (II.iv.280-281). He then flees into a storm which echoes the stormy tumult in his head, and he admits his insanity. “Oh, Fool, I shall go Mad!” (II.iv.288). “My wits begin to turn” (III.ii.67). Lear’s daughters, coupled with his inner turmoil, have succeeded in rendering him mentally incompetent and aware of his common, un-king like state. Having stumbled into the ongoing battle, King Lear meets his beloved daughter Cordelia, but his dementia causes him to forget who she is initially. “I fear I am not in my perfect mind” (IV.vii.64). Caught in the midst of war, Cordelia is hung in front of Lear, causing his piteous end, and he dies alongside her.


To accommodate different levels of learners, Teague splits up a classroom into five different groups, varying intelligences in each group and makes them follow a different
scene through the imagery. The imagery of Lear’s sight and how he tells Cordelia he loves her dearer than eyesight and then proceeds to tell her to get out of his sight, is emphasized before the reading of the text to depict how Lear views life as a King, and then through the eyes of lunacy. “Lear is spiritually blind, and his lack of vision leads him into chaos and suffering” (82). When his mind’s thoughts are practically incomprehensible, he sees everything clearly in Act I, scene iv, including the error of excommunicating Cordelia.