


## Shakespearean's Tragedy: A Descriptive Study on King Lear by William Shakespeare

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### ABSTRACT

This study concentrates on comic relief at Shakespearean's tragedy. The problem facing EFL students at the English language department with Shakespeare's plays is the harsh language used and understanding the themes he treats. Although King Lear is thought to be one of the most challenging works of Shakespeare, the play is accessible to progressive high school students and most university students. The study aims to break down the classic language in King Lear to make it easy for students to understand the play and thus enjoy the entertainment aspects of the story. The authors used the action research- documentary research. The nature of the study demanded that we had to collect documentary evidence from reference material prescribed by the University of Benghazi for the instruction of literature at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Such material was only available on the internet and course instructional material used by lecturers of the English language department at the faculty of Arts and Science Kufrah. At the end of the study, the authors offered several recommendations.

### 1. Introduction

Reading and enjoying literature is an academic exercise not only reserved for the westerner or the well-educated. Libyan learners of English should study plays. English literature is particularly very important for their vocabulary improvement and linguistic expression. In their entire study at the faculty of Arts and Sciences Kufrah, the students have been given a chance to read the history of English literature with its accompanying prose, drama and poetry genres.

The students love all these genres of literature, but their complete understanding of English literature can only come with a full reading of Shakespearean drama. The language may be somehow outdated as compared to the modern English the students are taught at the undergraduate level, but they find the literature great interesting. Besides the language improvement they gain, the life and works of the great English dramatist; William Shakespeare is something we cannot neglect as Libyan EFL learners and lecturers.

The authors chose to study the major themes in Shakespeare's well-known tragedy, King Lear, because of its richness in all elements of drama that every dramatist would like to pass across to the reader or the audience in the theatre. The students do face many difficulties understanding Shakespearean language, as said earlier. Therefore, the authors hope that this study would be a starting point for all Libyan researchers and lecturers in general and those at Benghazi University in particular. With the major reading difficulties highlighted and the thematic analysis made, our fellow friends and future English language majors should be able to read and enjoy the works of Shakespeare and other English writers and dramatists.

#### 1.1 The Statement of the Problem

While King Lear is believed to be one of Shakespeare's most challenging works, the play is available to advance high school students and certainly to most university students.

The problem EFL students at the English Language Department faced with Shakespeare's plays is the difficult language and understanding of the themes he treats. This study tries to address these two problems because we believe that a better understanding of these issues will help literature students and Arab readers understand Shakespearean drama correctly.

### **1.2 Questions of the Study**

1. To what extent is the theme of tragedy in King Lear reflected in Shakespeare's life and day?
2. How does the theme of tragedy in King Lear enhance students understanding of the playwright's point-of-view towards the society he wrote about?
3. Why do EFL students find it difficult to understand Shakespearean literature?
4. What should be done to make EFL students love reading Shakespearean literature?

### **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are:

1. To help Libyan readers and students of King Lear see King Lear's cultural richness and show how the play's values are similar to those of Libyans and Arabs in their modern age.
2. To break down the classic language in King Lear to make it easy for students to understand the play and thus enjoy the entertainment aspects of the story.
3. To show the richness in the language used by Shakespeare and enable students to improve their native-like language abilities by using the saying in the play during speech and writing.

### **1.4 Motivation and Justification of the Study**

#### **1.4.1 Motivation**

Shakespeare was a famous playwright. In all his plays like King Lear, he wanted to entertain the reader and audience, but he also wanted to educate them of the day-to-day social realities - good and bad time. For our love for literature, we wanted to understand other people's (European) cultures in order to compare it with ours and see what we could do to improve or preserve it with our Lives today.

We realise that Shakespeare's plays are very entertaining and easy to understand if one takes time to read them. We knew that if we chose any topic that had to do with Shakespeare's works, it would be easy to find reference material on the Internet, although this was not quite the case at the end of our study.

However, other lecturers at the English language department and friends encouraged us to conduct this study. All the moral and material support we had and the motivation to conduct the study were high

#### **1.4.2 Justification of Study**

Libyan students study English as a foreign language. Their drive to attain native-like status is difficult, but many try to make a difference in the end. Reading and understanding English literature, therefore, is a challenging exercise. Most literature is written in plain English; still, they find it hard to understand the language. The case of Shakespearean literature (English) is made much harder due to the classic and poetic nature of the English Shakespeare uses.

The misconception is that Libyan students cannot understand Shakespearean literature. This is wrong. On this fact lies the justification for which we chose to conduct this study in the first place. We wanted to give Libyan students a different image of Shakespeare's works, the greatest playwright that ever lived.

### **1.5 Significance of Study**

Although Shakespeare's plays are very interesting to watch on the film stage to native English speakers, it is not the case with Libyan and most Arab non-English speakers who study English as a foreign language. Many students think Shakespearean literature is impossible to understand - the most difficult area of literature.

This study will be of great help to students because the detailed explanation of the story and the analysis of the theme of tragedy will make Shakespeare's plays not as difficult as they think. This study will encourage students to read Shakespeare's plays and thus understand his messages.

### **1.6 Scope and Limitation of the Study**

#### **1.6.1 Scope of Study**

In this study, we have discussed the theme of tragedy in detail as a reflection of Shakespeare's life and days. We have analysed this theme in the light of its reflection on the values propagated in King Lear – life and days of William Shakespeare. For its relevance to the main subject of the paper, we touched on another topic like the life of Shakespeare.

We have also examined the history of drama in general and English drama in particular. The study is not a historical study, though we should point out that all these side topics have only been analysed because they have some significant degree of importance to the research problem.

### **1.6.2 Limitations of the Study**

The authors regret that they could not research deep into the story of King Lear as they would have loved to. As such, they acknowledge that the study has some weaknesses. They would have loved to discuss, but they could not go that far due to lack of time and references. They would have also loved to discuss other topics like the role of characterisation in the development of the themes of the play, but for obvious reasons, they were not able to. Therefore, they have suggested that future researchers at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Kufrah conduct further research on the issues left out.

### **1.7 Method of Study**

#### **Action Research: Documentary Research**

The nature of the study demanded that we had to collect documentary evidence from reference material prescribed by the University of Benghazi for the instruction of literature at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Such material was only available on the Internet and course instructional material used by lecturers of the English department.

This study was, in every sense, an action research study. Action research is defined as the type of research in which teachers or would-be teachers at an educational establishment identify a teaching or learning problem affecting students' performance, then together - as a team find a solution. According to the principles of action research, such a solution benefits all those involved in the study.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Technical Expressions and Terms used in the Study**

- **Drama:** Drama is a literary composition written to be performed by professional actors on stage (or theatre), before an audience. It involves conflicts, actions and a particular theme. Eye-catching makeup, facial expressions and body language of the artists are prominent features of a live drama - performance.
- **Play:** Another name for drama.
- **Theatre:** A building or arena where a play or drama is performed.
- **Comedy:** A story (play) that begins happily and ends happily.
- **Tragedy:** A story (play) that begins happily and ends sadly.
- **Theme:** A subject of some central or significant interest in a play or story as presented by the playwright.
- **Life of Shakespeare (Bibliography):** The date-by-date account of Shakespeare from the time of his birth to the time of his death.

### **2.2 William Shakespeare's Biography**

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is the supreme English poet and playwright, universally recognized as the greatest of all dramatists. A complete, authoritative account of Shakespeare's life is not well known. It lacks to some degree. His day of birth is traditionally held to be April 23. It is known he was baptized on April 24, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. He was the third of eight children - the eldest son of John Shakespeare (d. 1601), a locally prominent merchant, and Mary Arden (d. 1608), daughter of a Roman Catholic member of the landed gentry.

It is largely held that Shakespeare was probably educated at the local grammar school. As the eldest son, he ordinarily would have worked at his father's shop to learn and eventually take over the business, but according to one account, he was apprenticed to a butcher because of reverses in his father's financial situation. According to another account, he became a schoolmaster.

It is believed Shakespeare arrived in London about 1588 and by 1592 had attained success as an actor and a playwright. Not long from that time, he secured Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton (1573-1624). The publication of Shakespeare's two fashionably erotic narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) and of his *Sonnets* (pub. 1609, but circulated previously in manuscript) made him popular as a poet in the Renaissance manner.

The *Sonnets* describe the devotion of a character, often identified as the poet himself, to a young man whose beauty and virtue he praises and to a mysterious and faithless dark lady with whom the poet is infatuated. This line of writing seems to have some link with the story of King Lear. The ensuing triangular situation, resulting from the attraction of the poet's friend to the dark lady, is treated with passionate intensity and psychological insight.

However, Shakespeare's modern reputation is based mainly on the 38 plays that he apparently wrote, modified, or collaborated on. Although generally popular in his day, these plays were frequently little esteemed by his educated contemporaries, who considered English plays of their day to be only flashy entertainment.

Shakespeare's professional life in London permitted him to share in the profits of his acting company, the Chamberlain's Men, later called the King's Men, and its two theatres, the Globe and the Blackfriars. His plays were given a special presentation at the courts of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I more frequently than those of any other contemporary dramatists. It is known that he risked losing royal favour only once, in 1599 when his company performed "the play of the deposing and killing of King Richard II (The life and death of King Richard the Second)" at the instance of a group of conspirators against Elizabeth. They were led by Elizabeth's unsuccessful court favourite, Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, and Southampton's earl. In the subsequent inquiry, Shakespeare's company was absolved of complicity in the conspiracy.

After about 1608, Shakespeare's dramatic production lessened and it seems that he spent more time in Stratford. There, he had established his family in an imposing house called New Place and became a leading local citizen. On April 23, 1616, he died and was buried in the Stratford church.

Although the precise date of many of Shakespeare's plays is in doubt, his dramatic career is generally divided into four periods: (1) the period up to 1594, (2) the years from 1594 to 1600, (3) the years from 1600 to 1608, and (4) the period after 1608. In all periods, the plots of his plays were frequently drawn from chronicles, histories, or earlier fiction, as were the plays of other contemporary dramatists.

Four plays dramatizing the English civil strife of the 15<sup>th</sup> century are possibly Shakespeare's earliest dramatic works. These plays (e.g. *Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III* (c. 1590-92) and *Richard III* (c. 1593)), deal with the evil results of weak leadership and national disunity fostered for selfish ends. The cycle closes with the death of Richard III, a study in satanic malignity, and the ascent to the throne of Henry VII, the righteous founder of the Tudor dynasty, to which Elizabeth belonged. In style and structure, these plays are related partly to medieval drama and partly to the works of earlier Elizabethan dramatists, especially Christopher Marlowe.

In the first period, Shakespeare wrote a good number of comedies, e.g. *The Comedy of Errors* (c. 1592), *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1593), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (c. 1594) and *Love's Labour's Lost* (c. 1594). Shakespeare's second period includes his most important plays concerned with English history, his so-called joyous comedies, and two major tragedies. The second-period historical plays include *Richard II* (c. 1595), *Henry IV, Parts I and II* (c. 1597), and *Henry V* (c. 1598).

Outstanding among the comedies of the second period is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595), *Much Ado About Nothing* (c. 1599), *As you Like It* (c. 1599) and *Twelfth Night* (c. 1600), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c. 1599) and the tragicomedy, *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596).

Two major tragedies, differing considerably in nature, mark the beginning and the end of the second period. *King Lear* (c. 1595), famous for its poetic treatment of the ecstasy of youthful tragedy, dramatizes the fate of victimised by the feuds and misunderstandings of their elders and by their hasty temperaments. On the other hand, *Julius Caesar* (c. 1599) is a serious tragedy of political rivalries, less intense in style than the tragic dramas that followed.

Shakespeare's third period includes his greatest tragedies and so-called dark or bitter comedies. The tragedies of this period include *Hamlet* (c. 1601), *Othello* (c. 1604), *King Lear* (c. 1605), *Antony and Cleopatra* (c. 1606), *Macbeth* (c. 1606), *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1602), *Coriolanus* (c. 1608), *Timon of Athens* (c. 1608). The two comedies of this period also are dark in mood. Of these, *All's Well That Ends Well* (c. 1602) is less significant than *Measure for Measure* (c. 1604), which, more clearly than any other of Shakespeare's plays, suggests a picture of morality in Christian terms.

The fourth period of Shakespeare's work comprises his principal tragicomedies. These are: *Pericles Prince of Tyre* (c. 1608), *Cymbeline* (c. 1610), *The Winter's Tale* (c. 1610), *The Tempest* (c. 1611), Two final plays, sometimes ascribed to Shakespeare, presumably are the products of collaboration. The plays in this category are *Henry VIII* (c. 1613) and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (c. 1613; pub. 1634).

Finally, Shakespeare's employment of poetry within the plays (typical of *King Lear*) to express the deepest levels of human motivation in relation to individual, social, and universal situations is considered one of the most astounding accomplishments of the human intellect.

## 2.3 King Lear: The Story

### 2.3.1 The Main Characters in the play

**King Lear:** King of Britain. He is very old and ready to divide his kingdom into three parts, which he plans to give to his three daughters. He is deceived by two of his daughters and eventually driven to madness.

**Goneril:** Lear's oldest daughter. She is plotting against Lear to remove him from power.

**Regan:** Lear's middle daughter. She conspires with Goneril to remove their father from power.

**Cordelia:** Lear's youngest daughter. She is the only daughter that loves her father but is disinherited and banished when she will not tell him how much she loves him.

**King of France:** One of Cordelia's suitors. He marries Cordelia and takes her to France after her father becomes angry with her.

**Duke of Burgandy:** Cordelia's other suitor. He will not marry her after she is disinherited.

**Duke of Cornwall:** Married to Regan. He is every bit as ill-intentioned and malicious as his wife.

**Duke of Albany:** Married to Goneril. After learning about Goneril's mistreatment of her father, he becomes very angry with her and decides to have mercy on Lear.

**Earl of Kent:** Friend to Lear. He is banished when he tries to stick up for Cordelia but returns to aid Lear disguised as a servant.

**Earl of Gloucester:** Father of Edgar and Edmund. He is tricked into fighting against Lear and abandoning Edgar by Edmund.

**Edgar:** Son of Gloucester. Edgar runs into hiding when Edmund tricks Gloucester into thinking Gloucester wants to kill him. He disguises himself as Poor Tom and helps his father after Edmund throws him out.

**Edmund:** The illegitimate son of Gloucester. He is very jealous and envious of Edgar. Through trickery, he has his brother Edgar banished and his father blinded.

**Lear's Fool:** Court Jester to King Lear. He points out truths that Lear seems to miss. He ridicules Lear for banishing Cordelia.

**Oswald:** Steward to Goneril. He relays messages between Goneril, Regan, and Edmund when plotting to take over the country.

### 2.3.2 King Lear: Summary and Plot

#### Act I

The play opens with Kent and Gloucester discussing whom they think will inherit the kingdom after King Lear steps down. King Lear comes in and announces that he is going to divide his kingdom up between his three daughters. But first, his daughters must express how much they love him. Goneril and Regan quickly tell Lear how much they each love him. When Cordelia, the youngest and most liked daughter, is asked to speak, she says that she loves her father, but she cannot express the depths of her love in words.

Lear is outraged and quickly disinherits her. Kent tries to tell Lear that he is foolish, but Lear accuses him of treachery and throws him out of the kingdom as well. The Duke of Burgundy says he will not take Cordelia for a wife without a dowry. The King of France steps forward and says that he does not care if Cordelia has a dowry or not. He says he will marry her for her virtues. France and Cordelia then leave for Dover to prepare to depart to France. Meanwhile, Goneril and Regan have already started plotting how to take Lear's rule away.

Edmund complains about being the illegitimate son of Gloucester at Gloucester's castle. He is jealous of Edgar and reveals a plot to win his father's love by treachery. He plans to show Gloucester a forged letter which reveals that Edgar wishes to overtake Gloucester's land. Gloucester enters, sees Edmund hiding the forged letter and demands to see it. Gloucester angrily exits just before Edgar enters. Edmund tells Edgar that their father is extremely angry with Edgar, but says he does not know why. He advises Edgar not to go out unarmed. Edgar leaves and Edmund delights in what he has done.

When Lear goes to visit Goneril at her castle, Goneril is outraged by her father's behaviour. Lear has struck her steward, Oswald, for criticizing his fool. Lear has also brought a riotous group of men to stay with Goneril. Goneril commands Oswald to make her father and his men as uncomfortable as possible, so they will leave and go to Regan's to be treated with equal coldness. She goes off to write Regan a letter about their father.

Kent enters in disguise. He has a plan to present himself to Lear as a servant to assist Lear. Lear and Kent both strike Oswald after he behaves rudely to Lear. Goneril enters, angry with Lear. She tells Lear that if he wishes to stay, he must get rid of some of his men and treat her more respectfully. Lear angrily leaves for Regan's household. Goneril sends Oswald with a letter to Regan to inform her of Lear's coming. Lear sends Kent with letters to Gloucester.

**Act II**

At Gloucester's castle, Edgar is warned by Edmund that their father Gloucester is coming. Edmund convinces Edgar to draw his sword and flee. After Edgar leaves, Edmund wounds himself and calls for Gloucester. Edmund then tells Gloucester that Edgar wounded him after joining Edgar in taking their father's power. Gloucester quickly sends servants out to find Edgar. Cornwall and Regan enter and explain that they have come to Gloucester's castle because she received a letter from Goneril about Lear's behaviour.

Oswald and Kent meet outside Gloucester's castle. Kent immediately recognizes Oswald and accuses him of taking sides with Lear's evil daughter, Goneril. Kent draws his sword but Oswald simply screams and draws the attention of Cornwall, Regan, Edmund, and Gloucester, who come to find out what has occurred. Oswald claims that Kent has had no reason to strike him or draw a sword on him at Gloucester's castle.

Kent insults Regan and Cornwall and they immediately call for the stocks. They decide to keep him in the stocks for a whole day, even after the Gloucester protests. After they leave him, Kent ponders a letter from Cordelia. Cordelia expresses her appreciation for Kent in the letter since he has disguised himself to help Lear.

Edgar explains that he has narrowly escaped being hunted by hiding in a hollow tree in the woods. He decides that he will have to disguise himself to ensure his further protection. He explains to the audience that he will go into disguise as a beggar and call himself Poor Tom. He strips his clothes and covers himself with dirt, knotting his hair and wounding himself as a disguise. After this transformation, he no longer looks like himself.

Lear finds Kent in the stocks at Gloucester's castle. Kent tells Lear that Lear's daughter Regan and her husband gave him this terrible punishment. Lear begins to feel ill and goes to search for Regan. Lear is outraged that Regan and Cornwall will not speak with him upon returning. Regan and Cornwall finally show up. They try to act casual around Lear and set Kent free. Lear explains how horrible his visit with Goneril was and Regan simply tells him that he is old and should trust any advice his daughters offer him.

Regan tries to get Lear to return to Goneril but Lear pleads with her to take care of him. Goneril arrives and Lear is appalled when Regan takes her by the hand. He asks who put Kent in the stocks and Cornwall takes responsibility. Regan pleads with Lear to return to Goneril's again. Instead, he leaves the castle with Kent and his fool. A storm is heard approaching.

**Act III**

With the storm in full force, Kent rushes onstage trying to find King Lear amidst the woods. Kent meets one of Lear's gentlemen and mentions that French spies have entered the country and are almost ready to invade. Kent sends the gentlemen to Dover to report the King's poor health. He gives the gentlemen a ring and his purse to show Cordelia if he should meet her. They both exit to look for Lear.

Lear is seen raging against the storm with his Fool. The Fool begs Lear to put aside his pride and seek shelter at the castle. Lear refuses, saying that the storm is helping his daughters punish him. Kent enters and finds Lear. He mentions that he has never seen a worse storm and urges Lear to take shelter in a nearby cave. Lear agrees for the sake of his Fool and they all exit to the cave.

Gloucester complains to Edmund that Cornwall and Regan have taken over his castle at his castle. Edmund pretends to agree with his father. Gloucester then tells Edmund of a letter he received about French forces coming to aid King Lear's cause. Gloucester sends Edmund to stay with Cornwall while he goes off to aid Lear. Edmund immediately goes to Cornwall and tells him of Gloucester's plans.

Back in the cave, Lear requests to be left alone. His mind is slipping from stress and sorrow. Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, has been hiding in the same cave for shelter from the storm. He speaks in a language that makes no real sense and walks about acting crazy. Lear becomes interested in Poor Tom and asks him about his life. Gloucester finds his way into the cave and urges Lear to come with him to better shelter. He does not even recognize Edgar, hidden by his disguise, as his own son. Gloucester and Kent decide it is best to invite Tom to come along with them to get Lear into a better shelter.

Back at the castle, Cornwall and Edmund further discuss Gloucester's treason. Edmund pretends to feel bad about exposing his father and Cornwall comforts him. Cornwall tells Edmund that Gloucester's treason is much worse than his own and not to worry. Cornwall makes Edmund the new Earl of Gloucester and demands that he finds his father. Edmund notes that he hopes to find Gloucester in Lear's company to legitimize his story further.

Gloucester leads the group to better shelter before heading off to find help. Lear holds a mock trial for his daughters' treasons. He becomes enraged and suffers a great outburst during the trial. Kent tries to calm Lear down and urges him to be patient.

Gloucester returns and urges Kent to keep Lear protected, as there have been death threats. He tells them that help is waiting to take the group safely to Dover.

Cornwall orders Goneril to bring him the letter about the French invasion and orders his servants to seek out Gloucester. Edmund is asked to go with Goneril. Oswald enters and tells everyone that Gloucester has successfully moved Lear and his company to safety. Gloucester enters accompanied by servants and Cornwall immediately has him bound to a chair.

Gloucester calls for Lear's daughters to have revenge brought upon them. In a rage, Cornwall blinds one of Gloucester's eyes. A servant tries to stand up for Gloucester but is quickly stabbed by Regan with Cornwall's sword, but not before he wounds Cornwall. Cornwall then blinds Gloucester's other eye. Gloucester calls out for Edmund only to hear Regan reply that it was Edmund who turned him into Cornwall. Regan has Gloucester thrown out of the castle.

#### **Act IV**

Gloucester is led through the woods by an old man and laments that he wants to see his beloved Edgar once again. Soon, Edgar shows up dressed as Poor Tom and Gloucester asks Tom to escort him to Dover, committing suicide. Edgar tricks Gloucester by telling him that they have reached the top of the cliff, but when Gloucester tries to jump, he only falls flat on his face. Edgar then runs up pretending to be someone else and says, what a miracle it is that Gloucester did not die from the fall. Gloucester becomes depressed that he is not even allowed death.

At Gloucester's castle, Oswald finds Goneril and Edmund. He warns them that Albany's attitude about everything has changed. Albany is displeased by Edmund's behaviour and is happy about the French invasion. With a vow to unite as lovers and rule the kingdom, Goneril sends Edmund to find her husband Cornwall. She finds Albany very angry at her for the treatment she has given her father. Albany learns that Edmund supplied the information that got Gloucester blinded and that Cornwall died from a wound inflicted during the blinding. He promises to avenge Gloucester's blinding.

Regan greets Oswald and tells him that they should have just killed Gloucester because the blinding left too much room for sympathy. She also explains that she is worried about her sister uniting with Edmund. Regan tells Oswald to remind Edmund of the promises he made to her.

Kent finds the gentlemen he had sent ahead to Dover and learns that Lear and Cordelia have not yet been reunited because Lear feels ashamed at his treatment of her. Lear comes upon Edgar and Gloucester and comforts Gloucester about his blindness, saying that pretence is the biggest flaw in authority. When Cordelia's gentlemen find Lear and try to bring him to Cordelia, Lear fears he is being captured and runs away.

Oswald finally finds Gloucester and attempts to kill him, but Edgar steps in and kills Oswald instead. Edgar takes the letter Oswald was carrying to Edmund and reads it. He becomes enraged to learn about Goneril's wishes to kill Albany and marry Edmund.

Cordelia has found Lear and ordered him to be cared for by a doctor, who has to drug him to settle him down. Cordelia expresses her thanks to Kent for sticking by her father through all the turmoil. She expresses her anger at her sister's treatment of Lear, who wakes up a bit confused at where he is.

#### **Act V**

Regan interrogates Edmund about his relationship with Goneril. He tells Regan that she is the only sister he is intimately involved with and that the partnership with Goneril is just business. Regan says that she would rather lose the war with France than lose Edmund to her sister. Goneril and Albany talk about the importance of staying united with Regan while facing France. However, Edgar's disguised sneaks in and gives the letter he took from Oswald to Albany.

Edgar tells Albany to send word if he needs help at any time. Edmund ponders which sister he should choose, finally deciding to stick with Goneril if she can manage to kill Albany. He expresses that all he wants is to rule a reunited Britain.

When the war begins, Lear and Cordelia lead the French. Edgar leaves Gloucester while he goes off to fight with Lear and Cordelia. He quickly returns with the news that Edmund has taken Lear and Cordelia prisoner. Edmund gives a death sentence to his captain to carry through. Albany praises Edmund's valour but reminds him of his position in the state. Regan declares her partnership with Edmund and calls him an equal. This makes Goneril jealous. Albany accuses Edmund of treason and challenges him to a duel.

Regan mysteriously falls ill. A disguised Edgar shows up to fight Edmund. Edmund falls but is kept alive until he can be fully incriminated. Albany reveals his knowledge of Goneril's letter, and she flees in anger. Edmund admits that he is guilty and Edgar reveals himself. Edgar tells Albany how he cared for Gloucester in disguise until he died shortly after Edgar revealed his true self.

He tells them that Gloucester died overwhelmed with joy and sorrow. Edgar is also met by Kent, who reveals his disguise and tells of his loyalty to Lear and Lear's impending death.

A gentleman brings in the knife that Goneril used to kill herself after admitting that she poisoned Regan out of jealousy. Kent comes hoping to bid Lear farewell and ask about his reunion with Cordelia, but Edmund reveals that he and Goneril ordered Cordelia to be hanged, so it would appear to be suicide. Lear enters carrying the lifeless body of his precious Cordelia. He tells them all that he killed the executioner but was still too late. He is overcome with grief and inconsolable. They are all informed that Edmund has died. Lear then dies mourning over the body of his daughter. Albany's hands shared the rule of the kingdom to Kent and Edgar, but Kent says that he will soon follow the others in death. Edgar is left as the next King of Britain.

## 2.4 Elements of Tragedy in King Lear

True to Shakespearean tradition, *King Lear* borrows its tragic elements from several types of tragedies that were popular during the Elizabethan Renaissance. Even though *King Lear* is classified as a chronicle play (a type of drama that draws its English historical materials from the sixteenth-century chronicles—such as Holinshed's), Shakespeare uses elements of Senecan tragedy sometimes called Classical tragedy, and the morality play.

As a tragedy, *King Lear* portrays a protagonist whose fortunes are conditioned by his hamartia. As defined by Aristotle, the protagonist of a tragedy should be a person "who is not eminently good or just, yet whose fortune is brought about by some error or frailty." This error is not necessarily a character flaw; hamartia can be an unwitting misstep indefinite action or the failure to perform a definite action. Lear's hamartia is the capricious division of his powers and kingdom before his death—more particularly, the disavowal of Cordelia because she will speak "nothing."

To enhance this chronicle with a tragedy of character, Shakespeare incorporates a few Senecan elements: (1) the use of stock characters—a faithful male servant (Kent); (2) the employment of sensational themes drawn from Greek mythology, involving much use of "blood and lust;" and (3) stichomythia—dialogue that is conducted by two characters speaking in alternate lines (though strict regularity is not maintained).

To balance the stock characters, Shakespeare also used characters that were consistently good or evil in their intent, echoing the pattern of a morality play. Edmund, Regan, and Goneril embody avarice, envy, anger, lust, and pride, while Edgar and Cordelia embody faithfulness and unconditional love.

Other elements which became unique to Elizabethan tragedy make *King Lear* a psychologically horrific viewing: most horrors are executed off stage to be reported by a messenger, yet Shakespeare keeps the blinding of Gloucester in full view of the audience, pandering to popular tastes. In all, the Senecan influence on English tragedy is seen most in drama as a field for studying human emotion.

## 2.5 King Lear: Themes & Analysis

### 2.5.1 Analysing Shakespeare's King Lear

Like all of Shakespeare's tragedies, *King Lear* is a complex play that can be understood on many different levels and from various critical perspectives; it cannot be said to have one particular meaning. The reader can sometimes feel overwhelmed by its depths. This is a play about a King and his three daughters in broad terms.

Lear alienates Cordelia, the loyal daughter, while her two sisters plot to seize power. Add to that some nobles, both loyal and treasonous, and you have a plot with plenty of conflicts.

#### Good vs Evil

One of the broadest themes to emerge from this play is the classic conflict of good vs evil. Cordelia, the wronged daughter, only does what is right, and the villainous son, Edmund, plays every underhanded trick in the book to rise to power. But it is not so simple as that. *King Lear* is complex, and that means nothing is black and white.

This play explores all those shades of grey between good and evil. Regan and Goneril don't start as the wicked sisters, but they're corrupted by greed. Lear himself starts as a jerk who banishes his one good daughter but learns to be a better person by the final act.

Gloucester does the same thing and only realizes how metaphorically shortsighted he was after literally losing his vision. Even Albany, a character married to the wicked Goneril, and allied with the villains, shows honour by the play's end. *King Lear* is not only an exploration of good and evil. It is also a look at whether redemption is possible.

## 2.6 Natural Order

Shakespeare often deals with the balance of order in his plays. In comedies, something happens to upset order, and then the characters enter a state of lawlessness where anything can happen until the order is ultimately restored. The marriage that



typically happens in the final act of a comedy is symbolic of the restoration of order, and the audience leaves satisfied that all is right in the world.

The tragedies operate on a different wavelength. They call the order into question, and while the order is restored in the end, it does so in a way that does not feel very satisfying or permanent. *King Lear* challenges order from the opening scenes. Lear tests his daughters and values the exaggerated proclamations of love from Regan and Goneril. These unnatural (and untruthful) statements carry more weight with him than Cordelia's heartfelt silence. Regan and Goneril continue to break natural order by turning against their father and plotting to rule the kingdom. They even go so far as murder and suicide - huge crimes against the natural order.

On the other hand, Cordelia remains true to her role as daughter and refuses to rebel against her father, even after he mistreats her. While her sisters attempt to get their way through subterfuge and treachery, Cordelia returns to Britain at the head of an army to righteously rescue her father and save his kingdom. In a comedy, Regan and Goneril would get what was coming to them, and Cordelia would marry the hero; but Shakespeare avoids the obvious happy ending in this play. While the biggest offenders do die, Cordelia is also killed. The order that would have spared her life arrives too late, and Lear dies of a broken heart.

The conflict between the brothers Edmund and Edgar also represents a test of order. Edmund is illegitimate, so even his birth goes against the order; but he offers an interesting counter-argument. He says that he represents a different type of order, the survival of the fittest. His ambition and ruthlessness represent nature's way of establishing the rule. Edmund doesn't need some accident of birth to give him legitimacy. He tricks his father into banishing the legitimate son, Edgar, thus breaking the order of the family and nearly succeeding with his plan.

In the end, however, Edmund dies and Edgar takes power. Those who attempted to usurp power meet with justice, but it's not as easy as that. Albany stands to take the throne at the end of the play, and although he was Goneril's husband, he was also allied with the villainous characters for most of the play. Order is restored, but it's a tenuous balance and the audience is left doubting whether the fragile peace will last.

## **2.7 Other Interpretations**

The play can also be understood as a study of a family in turmoil. Lear's family is in shambles due largely to Lear's selfish and reckless actions. Shakespeare seems to suggest through his characterization of Lear, that a strong family unit depends, at least in large part, upon a strong parental figure to keep the family in order. And yet, Lear's family falls apart because the one strong leader makes poor decisions. This implies a strong leader isn't necessarily a good one, and that he or she must be able to consider other opinions.

The play might also be understood as an extended lesson in humility. Lear is, on the surface, a man who seems to have it all: wealth, power, and nobility. However, when Lear loses everything (and is forced to encounter those who are true without the sort of power and privilege that he once took for granted), he learns to empathize with common people. Lear's encounter with the tremendous storm also teaches him of the power that the natural world exerts over humankind, and how weak even the most powerful person is in the face of it. In a larger context, the play shows humanity's place in the grand scheme of things, and how it's not as high as we'd like to think.

Some critics consider the play to be sexist, something which Shakespeare is often accused of. They find the character of Cordelia to be idealized, simplistic and rather unrealistic in her goodness. Also, the main villains in the play are mostly women, leading some critics to complain that the world of *King Lear* is one in which women are either angels or devils. However, others argue that Shakespeare does not idealize women and instead shows them as capable of greed and evil as men.

*King Lear* is a Shakespearean tragedy open to many critical interpretations. One major theme in the play is the conflict between good and evil and the grey area between those opposites. Another theme is the upset and eventual restoration of order. Some characters defy the traditionally held natural order, and others uphold it. Unlike comedies, tragedies such as this play ends with the order in doubt. The conclusion does not tie everything neatly together, and the audience is left to question whether the order will remain for long. *King Lear* can also be read as an examination of family, and a lesson in humility. Some critics find the female characters to be sexist representations, while others see them as breaking from stereotypes.

## **2.8 Character Analysis King Lear**

Lear is the protagonist, whose willingness to believe his older daughters' empty flattery leads to the deaths of many people. In relying on the test of his daughters' love, Lear demonstrates that he lacks common sense or can detect his older daughters' falseness. Lear cannot recognize Cordelia's honesty amid the flattery, which he craves. The depth of Lear's anger toward Kent, his devoted follower, suggests excessive pride — Lear refuses to be wrong. Hubris leads Lear to make a serious mistake in judgment, while Lear's excessive anger toward Kent also suggests the fragility of his emotional state.

Hubris is a Greek term referring to excessive and destructive pride. In the ancient Greek world, hubris often resulted in the death of the tragic, heroic figure. This is the case with Lear, who allows his excessive pride to destroy his family.

Throughout the play, the audience is permitted to see how Lear deals with problems. He is shocked when people do not obey as they have since Lear is king and expects to be obeyed. However, instead of dealing with issues, Lear looks to the Fool to distract him with entertainment, to help him forget his problems. He has been insulted and demeaned as a king, but he is not prepared to face those who are responsible.

Instead, Lear often responds to problems with anger and outbursts of cursing, even a physical attack when provoked. When confronted with insults, Lear is helpless, at the mercy of his daughter and her servants, and he often succumbs to despair and self-pity. The once-omnipotent king struggles to find an effective means of dealing with his loss of power.

Eventually, the king reveals that he is frightened and apprehensive for his future, but he refuses to submit to another's decisions. Lear wants to remain in charge of his destiny, even though his choices are poor or filled with danger. Thus, Lear chooses to go out into the storm because he must retain some element of control. The only other choice is to acquiesce to his daughters' control, and for Lear, that option is not worth considering. Lear is stubborn, like a willful child, and this is just one additional way in which he tries to deal with the events controlling his life. As a child flees a reality too harsh to accept, Lear flees into the storm.

Despite his despair and self-pity, Lear is revealed as a complex man, one whose punishment far exceeds his foolish errors, and thus, Lear is deserving of the audience's sympathy. Eventually, Lear displays regret, remorse, empathy, and compassion for the poor, a population that Lear has not noticed before. Lear focuses on the parallels he sees to his own life, and so in a real sense, his pity for the poor is also a reflection of the pity he feels for his situation.

Lear is the anointed king, God's representative, and thus, he shares the responsibility for dispensing justice on earth. He recognizes that he bears responsibility for both his problems and for those of others, who suffer equally. His understanding of his complicity in the events that followed is a major step in accepting responsibility and in acknowledging that he is not infallible. Because of his suffering, Lear has also learned that even he is not above God's justice.

### 3. Findings

Shakespeare's life is interrelated and shade lighter on students understanding of English drama. The theme of tragedy in King Lear is a reflection of Shakespeare's life and days. The theme of tragedy in King Lear also enhances students understanding of Shakespeare's point-of-view towards Elizabethan society. Therefore, it helps the reader's overall understanding of the play, King Lear. EFL students find difficulties understanding Shakespearean literature due to the following reasons: nature of Shakespearean English, lack of motivation from teachers and fear of cultural influence. As such, Libyan literature and language students need a lot of encouragement from society and teachers to develop interest and love for Shakespearean literature.

### 4. Conclusion

King Lear is in the most part classified as a tragedy, however, it closely resembles Shakespeare's comedies than his other tragedies. It is a true-tragedy story overcharged with love and fate, life and light, and the unaged stupidity of older people and the life-affirming interest and resourcefulness of young ones. Stupid parents do not know what is best for their children or themselves.

King Lear begins with the materials for a comedy - the stupid parental generation, the instant attraction of the young people, the quick surface life of street fights, masked balls and comic servants.

In fact, one can see King Lear as a transitional play in which Shakespeare incorporates the elaborate comedy elements of his earlier work with tragic elements that were later perfect in great tragedies. — *Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and Romeo and Juliet*. The protagonists of the play must deal with the external forces that hinder their relationship, but, unlike the great tragic heroes, they are deprived of the internal conflict that makes it a great tragedy.

While no one can deny the merits of Shakespeare's powerful, inspired verse, the theme of tragedy Shakespeare stresses in *king Lear* also seem to reflect his creativity as a writer while at the same time showing the audience facts about his life and the socio-cultural and political picture of his age - Elizabethan England in particular, and Europe in general.

To understand properly how this is so, we should examine each theme, especially the theme of tragedy. We hope the reader will gain something important from this study as it reflects the true life of Shakespeare and his days.

## 5. Recommendations

According to the above-mentioned findings, the authors recommend the following:

1. Teachers should break down the classic language in King Lear – literature to make it easy for students to understand the play and thus enjoy the entertainment aspects of the story.
2. Teachers should help students of King Lear– literature to see the cultural richness of King Lear– literature and also show how the play's values are similar to those of Libyans and Arabs in their modern age.
3. Teachers should also make students read extra texts such as new papers/magazines, articles, poems, short stories and make learners sum them up, paraphrase them and speak about them to their classmates or in social events organized by the school.
4. The introduction of university theatre in all Libyan universities enable students to write and produce plays that are culturally, linguistically and communicatively rich in bringing out students' speaking ambitions within the university and other out-of-class social activities.

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