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The Struggle For Power

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a fascinating play about greed, power, and family relationships; through his characters, Shakespeare teaches his audience important life lessons. By not presenting them with a clear hero and villain, Shakespeare engages the minds of the audience and makes the characters real and relatable. Through plays such as *King Lear* and their characters, Shakespeare chronicles the human condition.

King Lear's greatest lesson is the detrimental results of greed and power. An overwhelming desire for one or the other leads to irrational actions, which drives people to madness. The human condition is what people instinctively desire and what motivates them to act upon achieving those desires and ultimately pursue what they believe will be happiness. From *King Lear*, it becomes evident that it is human nature to be greedy and desire power above all else. Greed, however, is a gateway emotion to what many believe will become overall happiness, which is different from what would actually lead to a fulfilling life. The struggle for power becomes a battle between good and evil and, therefore, a battle between which force will be triumphant.

Greed is the driving force behind many of the characters' actions throughout the play. Their desire to obtain control over the kingdom causes them to act outrageously. Perhaps if King Lear had not been so incensed by Cordelia's honesty and lack of declaration of affection and had simply divided the land fairly, then none of the following

events would have occurred. Upon making it a competition between the sisters, he set up the parameters for the struggle for power and land. In doing so, he becomes the recipient of public praise from his daughters in the process. Although he is claiming to relinquish his power to his daughters, he really is unwilling to give up the power he holds. Goneril and Regan, two of Lear's three daughters, desire the land and kingdom. They play into Lear's game, publicly professing their love for the King, while Cordelia, Lear's favorite daughter, insists honestly that, "I cannot heave / my heart into my mouth. I love your Majesty / according to my bond, no more nor less." (I.i.100-102). It seems that Cordelia is the only honest and genuine sister of the three. Lear, being displeased with her lack of effusive expression of love, banishes her from the kingdom. She leaves the kingdom with her new suitor, the King of France, and is not seen again for some time in the play, until she returns in Act IV to help her father, despite his expulsion of her from the kingdom. Her unconditional love for her father is what motivates her to bring in the French army to combat the chaos present in England under the leadership of her sisters and to try to help her father.

Edmund, a bastard son, wants the inheritance from his father, Gloucester, because he feels he deserves it; he feels entitled to it as Gloucester's son, but as long as Edgar, his half brother and Gloucester's legitimate son and full heir to the inheritance, is alive, Edmund will not get any of the inheritance. He feels wronged by the social order already set out for him by tradition. Even so, Edmund insists that, "the base shall top th' legitimate." (I.ii.21-22). This desire to manipulate the social hierarchy drives him to be deceitful, lying to both Edgar and Gloucester. Later in the play, to further his own agenda, he even convinces King Lear's daughters Goneril and Regan, that he loves them,

without actually telling either of them that he loves them. By deceitfully plotting to get the sisters to dispose of each other, he has greater chance of gaining more power.

The lies told by Edmund to Edgar and Gloucester are sinister and ruin Edgar's and Gloucester's life. They drive Edgar to leave the kingdom and take up living as a homeless man called Tom. They cause Gloucester to get his eyes gouged out at the demand of Regan and Cornwall. It is here in the play, where the audience begins to see some glimpses of Edgar's inherent goodness. It is while Edgar is disguised as poor Tom that he is reunited with his recently blinded father, Gloucester. Here, Edgar hears Gloucester's desperation to be reunited with Edgar, the son who really loved him all along, but chooses to keep up the charade of Tom. He uses his dishonesty in a positive way. He prevents Gloucester from committing suicide and convinces him he has "been preserved" and that the gods want him to survive.

Despite this brief ray of hope, an important statement about the human condition that Shakespeare is trying to make is that greed drives people to madness. In Act III, King Lear goes mad because of the betrayal by his daughters. He runs into the middle of a storm, crying to the weather, "Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!" implying that he deserves the wrath of the weather (III.ii.1). It is here that King Lear finally becomes self aware; he finds what it really means to be a king and realizes his failures. This storm parallels the struggle within Lear's mind and pushes his descent into madness. He also realizes that, by being vulnerable to the forces of the storm, he is not immortal and finally comprehends his transience. Until this point, he simply thought it was his divine right to be king and that he was a good father. Here he realizes the foolishness of his actions, not only with his daughters but with his country as well, as the

country devolved into chaos under their reign. Perhaps the most painful realization of all is that he banished the only person who really loved him, Cordelia. He knows now that he was wrong and yearns to right these wrongs.

In Act V, during the climax of the play, the madness of all the characters becomes prevalent. Lear is reunited with Cordelia and seems to forget all of the lessons he previously learned in exchange for the idea of a hopeful future with Cordelia. This is where Shakespeare highlights the reality of betrayal. Although Goneril, Regan, and Edmund were temporarily teaming together in their achieved power, they ultimately betray each other in an attempt to gain even more power. There is a distrust of others driven by envy and the unending desire for more power. The only result possible is more chaos and death. Goneril is driven to poisoning her own sister, Regan, because she wants the kingdom and Edmund to herself. Out of guilt for killing Regan, Goneril kills herself. Edmund orders the hanging of Cordelia. Edgar heroically kills Edmund and as Edmund dies, he tries to save Cordelia by confessing to ordering her death, but also by inflating his own ego with the words, "Yet Edmund was beloved. / The one the other poisoned for my sake, / and after slew herself." (V.iii.286-289). These unnecessary deaths highlight that although Goneril, Regan, and Edmund were temporarily teaming together, those that betray will ultimately betray each other. All of these exaggerated and unnecessary deaths comment on Shakespeare's views of the human condition.

The deaths throughout King Lear are all preventable. By exaggerating them and highlighting to the audience that none of them really needed to occur, Shakespeare is speaking to the human condition. Greed drives people to madness and causes them to do things that they would not normally do. He points out that in everyone, not only the

characters in the play, there are things people do out of selfishness and greed that are not inherently good actions. He invites people to question their beliefs and actions as well as the motivations behind them. All of the events in King Lear question the meaning of life. To most characters, the meaning of life is to gain happiness through ultimate power, no matter the ruthlessness involved in obtaining such power. But Shakespeare challenges the audience to think differently. His best examples of this concept are through the characters of Cordelia, Edgar, and Albany through their strength of character.

Throughout the whole play, these characters are the only ones who stand up for what is actually honest and ethical. Albany's insult to his own wife, Goneril, is one of the most impressionable outbursts: "O, Goneril / You are not worth the dust which the rude wind / blows in your face." (IV.ii.38-40). However, despite these characters' inherent goodness in the play, the good does not necessarily prevail. This concept of justice is questioned at the end of the play as well. Although Edgar lives and Shakespeare implies that he will obtain the throne, the cost of this achievement is great. So much death has occurred and the good die along with the bad; thus, good may not actually prevail over evil. Lear, at the end of the play, cradles Cordelia's body, his beloved and faithful daughter, and questions whether justice really exists in the world because his world has just collapsed. With the brutality of events among the characters of the play and the resulting destruction of life, Shakespeare raises the question of whether true justice can prevail in the world. The ultimate question is whether human nature and the human condition allow for a true justice to prevail or does true justice only battle against the chaos that they inevitably create? If so, human nature and the human

condition will always result in dishonesty, betrayal, death and loss despite the best efforts of humans to contain them.