

Background *The Tragedy of King Lear*

Historical Context

- 24 March 1603 Elizabeth died
- 1605 Gunpowder Plot Guy Fawkes
- 1605 "Black Year" unlimited freedom; breakdown of court finances: 4,000 pounds for one masque, unworthies get knighthoods
- eclipse of 1606 and the visit of King Christian of Denmark - great
- depravity: "ripeness is all"
- 1606 plague 30K died
- this play written in summer of 1606.

Cultural Context

- Elizabethans show a movement from divine right to "what help prosperity" the common good?
- a godless pre-Christian England - rampant ambition, warrior King has what he has won, bullied wrested from others
- his goal is his welfare so thereby his people are secure
- Lear having to undo this warrior thinking, careless about himself, naked in the storm
- unable to take shelter, unable to do the natural instinctive thing, unmindful of his own welfare

Metaphoric Context

- king divinely chosen defines God's social order to maintain stability, harmony, justice
- truant king defies God's order for the world - disharmony, division,
- our judgment on a truant, negligent king's dereliction of his god-given duty:
- his duty to the country, his people, breaks their trust in him
- culture v nature
- overturned in Edmund proud of bastard nature
- art v human nature
- **pathetic fallacy** = nature in sympathy with human feelings
- nature expressed Man's state, mood
- Nature almost as a character in the play

Dramatic Context

- the storm scenes Act III:
- buckets of water
- drums
- howling of winds storm
- grass in hair
- Redemption of Lear, & Gloucester and even at end a hint of kindness
- change in Edmund

King Lear: Setting, Symbols, and Style

The setting of Shakespeare's *King Lear* is in a mythical England. The time period is an era that has never existed. This age is similar to the time period of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when kings rule the land and knights fight to protect their king's lands.

There are four main symbols in *King Lear*. The first symbol is **the letters** that the characters constantly circulate between each other. These **letters symbolize the betrayal** of the characters and the revenge that many of the main characters take against each other.

The second symbol is eyes. **Eyes symbolize knowledge**. When the Duke of Cornwall gouges out the Earl of Gloucester's eyes, he is trying to force out the knowledge that the Earl of Gloucester is hiding from the Duke of Cornwall.

The next symbol is the weather. The **weather depicts the turmoil** of the characters. When King Lear is in self pity and on the verge of insanity, the weather is stormy and threatening.

The final symbol is the flowers. The **flowers emphasize the inner peace** of the characters. After King Lear escapes from Dover, he runs off to a field of flowers. In the flowers, King Lear finds peace from the insanity that is taking over his mind and body.

William Shakespeare utilizes many aspects of style in his writing. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare uses many examples of allusions and imagery. Shakespeare employs the use of such contemporary and famous stories as "Jack the Giant Killer" and Samuel Harsnett's "Declaration." Some images that Shakespeare uses are several demons of various types and references to serpents.

Irony and humor fill *King Lear*. One such example of irony is the fool. A traditional fool is a naive comic used to entertain the king. Yet King Lear's fool is intelligent and filled with intellectual observations. In addition, the fool often creates a humorous atmosphere with his satirical remarks toward the king.

Shakespeare appears to enjoy the use of **metaphors and similes** in *King Lear*. Shakespeare uses similes and metaphors as often as possible. In one such case, Edgar addresses the fool as a "jolly shepherd."

Another technique of style that Shakespeare manipulates are apostrophes. King Lear is constantly **addressing nonhuman objects** during his period of insanity. In one such case, King Lear calls upon the storm to cast a lightning bolt down from the heavens to kill him.

Finally, and most importantly, is Shakespeare's writing style for his dramas. Shakespeare writes in a poetic style. He uses iambic rhythms and a pentameter line style. This gives his dramas a defined rhythm. In addition, he uses free verse, which excludes the use of rhymes.

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