

## King Lear: A Commentary

Shakespeare's King Lear is a play that makes use of many recurring themes, all amply represented in the intertwined conflicts within and between two families of power: that of Lear and his daughters and that of Gloucester and his sons. The excerpt is a testament to this; Gloucester's words and the context behind them illuminated several, if not all the recurring themes such as blindness and sight, the heavenly and the mortal, the natural and unnatural. The structure of the soliloquy reveals two different situations: the nature of heavenly and the nature of the mortal. The content of the lines and the structure that they take both contribute to the image of change and contradiction.

The context of Gloucester's speech reveals the first recurring theme is King Lear: that of blindness and sight. The speech shows that Gloucester is very perceptive in matters not his own. His observations with regards to Lear's treatment of Cordelia and Kent are proof of his own inherent sight, with which he senses the injustice of Lear's decisions. Because he was indirectly informed by Edmund of the supposed treachery of Edgar, Gloucester then connects these two events to conclude that their's is a time of conflict, when both parent and offspring are equally capable of betraying the trust of the other. "bond cracked betwixt son and father.... there's father against child." However, he is not able to detect that he is blind to his own son Edmund's treachery. This irony is even more tragic because his blindness comes with the matters that directly affect him.

The heavenly and the mortal aspect of the speech come in the form of relationships between the heavenly bodies and the relationships between mortals. Gloucester believes that the movement of the heavenly bodies is indicative of the what is happening or what is about to happen to the mortals on Earth. There is also mention

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that science could already explain some of the comings and goings of the heavenly bodies in “Though the wisdom of nature can reason is thus and thus,” he still easily connects the movements of the heavenly bodies a major factor in the condition of human nature, “yet nature finds itself scourges by the sequent effects.” Also, the very nature of the phenomena involved, i.e. “ These late eclipses in the sun and moon...” describes darkness or a lack of light. This is reflected in the dark way that the relationships between the humans are broken off. The progression actually becomes more and more extreme, starting with a simple “Love cools” to the penultimate “bond cracked betwixt son and father.... there’s father against child.”

For the theme of the natural and unnatural, the entirety of the speech and the above themes all contribute to the strength of the contrast between natural and unnatural. Interestingly, the word “nature” is mentioned a number of times in the text, and each instance makes use of a different meaning for it. In the line “Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects,” nature is mentioned twice, making use of vastly different definitions: the first meaning natural science and the second meaning human nature. Although the meaning of the whole line was already revealed to be the belief of Gloucester in the mortal reflecting the heavenly, the usage of the same word for different, even contradictory meanings suggests that nature is as much what humans know to be true as what humans believe to be true. Later, nature is mentioned again, in “The King falls from bias of nature,” and here nature is defined as a natural inclination. However, the use of the word nature again suggests that nature can also be a mover of change because it was King Lear’s nature which caused him to act that way to Cordelia and

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Kent. On the other hand, the natural and the unnatural is also taken up as a theme in the speech's description of the heavenly and the mortal. "These late eclipses in the sun and moon" show that the eclipses do not happen all the time, and their recent occurrence is something unnatural and strange. This then reflects itself in the unnatural way that people's relationships are being threatened because people are supposed to be naturally faithful to these basic relationships. Since these relationships are being compromised in the most fundamental of levels, the stability of the country as a whole is being compromised as well. This is can be seen in the mention also of the King, who split the power in the country between his two daughters and split their relationship with Cordelia, mirroring the various relationships being broken off in Gloucester's speech.

These themes recur, so they also appear in the other parts of the play. This speech that Gloucester spoke is actually a very descriptive foreshadowing of the events of the play, especially near the last parts of the speech, "We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves." This line already details the very plot of the play beginning with the end of an age. This end represents Lear giving up his power, the choice that started all the conflict in the play's plot. Along with his power, the line could also be describing the end of Lear's wisdom. With the start of that decision, his lack of wisdom spiraled into a descent into madness and ultimately, death. Each character who died at the end of the play actually follows this formula because with the end of that natural stability came the unnatural disorders that shaped their deaths.

Gloucester's speech is only a small part of the play, which still has several other recurring themes, but its relevance covers both the basic and complex plot. Through the use of different themes of contrast, the speech reveals several contradictory aspects of the nature of man, especially with regards to change and constance.