

Analysis of King Lear from the Perspective of Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy

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Abstract

William Shakespeare is one of the most influential writers in all of literature and is universally recognized as the foremost poet and playwright to have written in the English language. *King Lear* is considered one of Shakespeare's greatest works and stands as a masterpiece of world literature. It is renowned for its complex characters, profound philosophical insights, and its exploration of the human condition. This essay hope to examine *King Lear* through Aristotle's tragic lens, revealing how Shakespeare's masterpiece explores human suffering, power's corruption, and family dynamics. It discusses the play's structure, character development, and emotional engagement, highlighting its moral and social implications and its timeless relevance. The research underscores the play's alignment with Aristotelian principles, offering a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's insight into the human condition.

Keywords: King Lear, William Shakespeare, Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy, Plots, Catharsis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The introduction mainly consists of two parts, providing a brief overview of the essay from the perspectives of literature review and research questions. This helps to clarify the structure of the article and facilitates understanding of the subsequent content.

1.1 Literature Review

This article explains the reasoning behind selecting certain texts and the innovative perspectives that were chosen. It highlights the significant research value of the text *King Lear*. The play holds significant literary value for its profound exploration of human nature, morality, and the consequences of power and familial relationships. Additionally, there has been limited analysis on the combination of Aristotle's theory of tragedy and the novel, making this essay focus on the aspect a unique and innovative contribution.

1.1.1 Research on King Lear

A few academics concentrated on the variety of themes in this play. Hu Peng conducted a comprehensive analysis of homeless image. He pointed, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare enriches the literary beggar image of Bedlam's Tom by appropriating the language of contemporary vagrants, showcasing the cultural anxiety towards beggars. At the same time, through the description of the living conditions of vagrants, he subtly

criticizes the shortcomings of the Poor Laws, evoking sympathy and facilitating an interaction between *King Lear* and reality [1]. According to Cui Shu, Shakespeare's works profoundly and meticulously express universal human nature. We need to start from the most real state of human nature, and feel with the main character of the play the extinction and recovery of human nature, betrayal and revenge, jealousy and anger, so as to seriously think about the revelation of life and the life brought to us [2].

Some scholars have focused on the figure of speech employed in the *King Lear* from various types. MR Best believed that the climax of the play, where Lear dies holding his dead daughter in his arms, is paradoxically different in the two versions; one is pessimistic, the other deeply ambiguous, as Lear dies believing Cordelia is alive [3]. James Kuzner analyzed the irony in Shakespeare's portrayal of blindness in *King Lear*. With attention to the play's "Dover cliff" scene, he showed how Shakespeare puts a particular device—dramatic irony—to strange use [4].

Other scholars mainly paid attention to the psychological analysis in the novel. For example, Val Richards conducted analysis that psychoanalytic encounter can involve more participants than two, with 'ghosts' or 'images' from the past of each richly

complicating the interaction, while, always, it is what is happening 'now', at the moment of the meeting, that is the source of meaning and psychic healing [5]. He Xinyue and Leng Shuang stated that under the influence of the development and changes of self and object psychological representations in the environment, King Lear underwent changes in psychological structure and state due to changes in external environment and interpersonal relationships during the period of being a king and the period of wandering in the wilderness. In the process of shaping the image of King Lear, Shakespeare portrayed different character images at different times by describing the changes in Lear's circumstances, and presented them to the audience through simple yet intense dramatic language [6].

Overall, the study perspectives for *King Lear* are diverse, and research topics are profound, which is evident enough that this work holds an important status in the history of ancient drama as well as research studies. It is considered to be the finest example of the prominent dramatic work.

1.1.2 Research on Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy

More researches have been done on Aristotle's theory of tragedy, with many scholars applying it to various texts to examine the distinctive literary merit of each work. Ma Wenqi pointed out that Aristotle's *Poetics* is the source of the history of the construction of "tragedy". She focused on five concepts in the *Poetics*, namely, "complex tragic action", "the fault of the tragic figure", "pity/fear", "katakatastasis" and "philosophical meaning", and tried to provide a new interpretation of Aristotle's theory of tragedy by sorting out the meanings of these concepts in relation to each other [7]. James MacAllister examined the goal of this study was to infer from Aristotle that tragic art can morally educate in three main ways: via emotion education, by helping the audience come to understand what matters in life, and by depicting conduct worthy of moral emulation and conduct that is not [8]. According to Liao Jin Luo, Aristotle believed that tragedy was rooted in character weaknesses and behavioral faults. However, character traits and behavioral patterns are not innate, intrinsic and eternal essential attributes, but acquired, constructed and constantly flowing individual attributes. Thus, the root cause of tragedy is not a weakness of character or a fault of behavior, but the subject's way of life and the economic, political and cultural interactions within that way of life [9]. Giovanna Pinna aimed to show that idealist philosophers and romantic critics concur in constructing a unitary model of the tragic conflict that is partly defined through its contraposition to the 'Senecan' conception of tragedy as a representation of suffering and as a dialectic of passions. Seneca here stands for an entire line of European dramaturgy, which involves Shakespeare and culminates in French Classicism. This contrast does not merely concern a literary model, but also, more generally, the conception of subjectivity underlying the dramaturgy of passions. This paper thus

helps to shed light on the controversial relationship [10]. Zhang Qian discussed the theory of tragedy elaborated by Aristotle in his work *Poetics*, which put forward five characteristics distinguishing it from other forms of art, as well as the character of the tragic hero and the tragic character, which he considers to be an intermediary who is of noble birth, of intermediate character, and who is guilty of errors and faults. She can see Shakespeare's application of the theory of sublime tragedy in the layout of the plot of Othello, i.e. the seriousness and complexity of the plot, its organic composition and the effect of the ending [11].

To conclude, there is ample literature and convincing evidence on the prominent dramatic work *King Lear*, which forms a strong research basis. However, there is still a lot of room for research into the Aristotle's theory of tragedy. In order to conduct a more detailed exposition, the essay will combine the text of *King Lear* with the perspectives of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, exploring the specific manifestations in the drama.

1.2 Research Questions

This article's research questions primarily focus on three aspects. Firstly, how does the character of King Lear embody Aristotle's concept of the tragic hero, particularly in terms of his hamartia and peripeteia? Secondly, in what ways does the structure and plot of *King Lear* align with Aristotle's theory that a tragedy should evoke a catharsis of pity and fear in the audience? Lastly, how do the elements of recognition and suffering in *King Lear* contribute to the play's effectiveness as a tragic drama according to Aristotle's principles?

2. King Lear and Tragedy Definition

This article is mainly based on two theories for analysis and research: the post-trauma theory and the ecologies of war theory. The former concentrates on how people adjust, heal, and develop following a traumatic experience in addition to the actual traumatic incident. The latter examines the relationships and interdependencies that exist between social institutions, technology, and the environment and war.

2.1 Basic Plots and Themes

King Lear is a Shakespearean tragedy that delves into the themes of power, family dynamics, and the descent into madness. The play opens with the king's decision to divide his kingdom among his daughters, based on their declarations of love. This act initiates a cascade of betrayals, as his eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, reveal their cruelty post-inheritance, leading to Lear's banishment. Cordelia, disowned for her honesty, returns with a French army to aid her father. A subplot involves Gloucester's family, where deceit and manipulation lead to tragedy. Lear's journey spirals into madness, reflecting the harshness of life and betrayal. The narrative concludes with Lear and Cordelia's poignant reunion, their subsequent capture, and the

tragic deaths of key characters, leaving a devastated kingdom in their wake. The theory suggests that trauma is not just a harm, but also an opportunity for individual development and change. The focus of post-traumatic theory is on individual resilience and adaptability, and how to rebuild life and identity after trauma. It emphasizes the agency and creativity of individuals in the face of trauma, as well as the role of social and cultural factors in the process of trauma recovery. In the post-traumatic growth theory, therapeutic approaches focus more on individual resources and strengths, and how to utilize these resources to promote recovery and growth. Therapeutic approaches may include mindfulness, narrative therapy, community support, and resource mobilization. Representatives of post-traumatic theory include psychologists such as Carol Gilligan and Judith Herman, who emphasize the potential for personal growth and transformation in individuals after trauma. Their work highlights the positive changes and adaptive abilities of individuals after trauma.

The tragedy of *King Lear* is underscored by themes of familial betrayal, where Lear's division of the kingdom sparks a series of downfalls. The corrupting nature of power is evident in characters like Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, while Lear's pride blinds him to their true selves. Madness symbolizes Lear's emotional turmoil and serves as a broader commentary on humanity. The play juxtaposes the unyielding natural world with societal constructs, particularly through the storm scenes. Cordelia's genuine love and the unwavering loyalty of characters like the Fool and Kent stand in stark contrast to the deceit and treachery that pervade the play. The interplay between appearance and reality is a constant motif, as facades of love and loyalty are gradually stripped away. The concept of divine justice and the role of fate in human lives are recurring, suggesting a form of retribution for the characters' actions and highlighting the unpredictability of fate. "King Lear" remains a poignant exploration of the human condition, with its themes continuing to resonate with modern audiences.

2.2 Adaptability to Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy

King Lear is a quintessential example of a tragedy that aligns well with Aristotle's theory of tragedy as outlined in his work *Poetics*. Aristotle's theory emphasizes the importance of plot, character, thought, diction, melody, spectacle, and the tragic elements of pity and fear to evoke a catharsis, or purgation of emotions, in the audience [12]. *King Lear* effectively uses the elements of pity and fear to evoke a cathartic response in the audience. The suffering of the characters, the anticipation of tragic outcomes, and the emotional journey of the audience all contribute to the powerful impact of the play and its alignment with Aristotle's theory of tragedy.

3. Application of the Six Points of the Plot

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, he discusses the structure of a tragic plot and differentiates between simple and complex plots, as well as between plots driven by character and those driven by suffering. He also describes two types of plot development: discovery (anagnorisis) and reversal (peripeteia).

3.1 Simple Plot vs Complex Plot

A simple plot, according to Aristotle, follows a straightforward sequence of events without significant complications or subplots. It is driven by a single central action or conflict. A complex plot, on the other hand, involves a series of interrelated incidents and includes peripeteia (reversals) and anagnorisis (discoveries), which contribute to the tragic effect [12].

King Lear is a complex plot. It is not a simple story of a king dividing his kingdom; rather, it involves multiple layers of deceit, betrayal, and human folly. The plot's complexity arises from the interplay between Lear's relationships with his daughters, the subplot involving Gloucester and his sons, and the political turmoil that ensues. The tragic events are not linear but are interwoven, leading to a series of reversals and discoveries that deepen the tragedy.

3.2 Plot of Suffering and Plot of Character

Plot of Suffering is driven by the suffering of the protagonist, which is often the result of circumstances beyond the character's control. Plot of Character, in contrast, is a plot driven by character focuses on the protagonist's actions and decisions, which lead to their downfall [12].

King Lear is both a plot of suffering and a plot of character. The suffering is evident in the cruel treatment of Lear by his daughters and the injustice he faces. However, the plot is also driven by Lear's character, particularly his pride and lack of insight, which lead to his tragic decisions. The suffering of other characters, such as Gloucester and Cordelia, also contributes to the plot's complexity and emotional depth.

3.3 Discovery Plot and Reversal Plot

A discovery plot involves a moment of recognition where a character realizes something significant, often about their own identity, the true nature of another character, or the consequences of their actions. A reversal plot involves a sudden change in the protagonist's fortune, often from prosperity to adversity, which is triggered by a decision or action.

King Lear features both discovery and reversal. Lear's anagnorisis occurs when he recognizes the extent of his mistake in banishing Cordelia and trusting the wrong daughters. This recognition comes too late and is accompanied by his descent into madness, which is a profound example of peripeteia. Gloucester's plot also includes anagnorisis when he realizes the deceit of his

son Edmund and a peripeteia when he is blinded by Regan and the Duke of Cornwall.

4. Catharsis and Tragic Effect

The “Ecologies of War” theory, as applied to *King Lear*, offers a framework for understanding the complex interplay between war, society, and the environment. This theory points that war is not only a military conflict but also a social and ecological phenomenon that shapes and is shaped by the cultural, economic, and environmental contexts in which it occurs. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s classic novel, the aftermath of World War I and the ecological consequences of the American Dream create a unique ecology of war that influences the characters, their relationships, and the broader society.

4.1 Fear, Pity and Catharsis

In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, he defines pity (eleos) as a feeling of sorrow that arises from the sight of a character’s suffering, and fear (phobos) as the emotion that comes from the anticipation of similar misfortunes that could befall the audience themselves. Catharsis, in this context, is the emotional cleansing or purging that occurs when an audience experiences these emotions through the medium of the tragic play.

Pity is evoked in *King Lear* through the suffering of the protagonist, King Lear, and other characters. Lear’s journey from a powerful king to a broken, mad old man is a central source of pity. His tragic flaw, which is his inability to see the true nature of his daughters and his own pride, leads to his downfall. The audience feels pity for Lear as he realizes too late the consequences of his actions and the betrayal by his daughters. The suffering of Cordelia, the loyal and virtuous daughter who is disowned and later killed, also evokes deep pity. Her fate is a poignant reminder of the consequences of familial betrayal and the fragility of innocence.

Fear is elicited through the anticipation of the tragic outcomes that could befall the characters and, by extension, the audience. The fear of madness is a significant theme in the play, as Lear’s descent into madness is a terrifying spectacle. The audience may fear the loss of sanity, as it is a condition that can befall anyone. The betrayal by Goneril and Regan also instills fear, as it is a reminder of the potential treachery within families and the fragility of trust. Furthermore, the loss of power and the consequences of Lear’s decision to abdicate are a source of fear, as they demonstrate the precariousness of power and the potential for chaos when it is mishandled.

The combination of pity and fear in *King Lear* leads to catharsis. As the audience witnesses the tragic fates of the characters, they experience a range of emotions that result in a form of emotional cleansing. The tragedy allows the audience to confront their own

fears and sorrows in a safe and controlled environment. By empathizing with the characters and experiencing their emotions vicariously, the audience can gain a deeper understanding of the human condition and the potential consequences of certain actions. This emotional journey can lead to a sense of purification or release, as the intense emotions are processed and resolved through the cathartic experience of the play.

King Lear effectively uses the elements of pity and fear to evoke a cathartic response in the audience. The suffering of the characters, the anticipation of tragic outcomes, and the emotional journey of the audience all contribute to the powerful impact of the play and its alignment with Aristotle’s theory of tragedy.

4.2 Moral Revelation and Social Impact

King Lear reveals the moral failings of its characters, particularly the tragic flaw of pride in Lear. The audience witnesses Lear’s anagnorisis, or recognition, of his mistakes, which is a critical moment for moral revelation. Lear’s realization of his own folly and the consequences it has wrought serves as a reminder of the dangers of unchecked pride and the importance of humility. The play also explores the moral implications of betrayal and deceit, as seen in the actions of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. Their treachery not only leads to their own downfall but also causes immense suffering to others, highlighting the destructive potential of such behaviors. Cordelia’s steadfast loyalty and honesty, despite the personal cost, stand in stark contrast to the deceit of her sisters. Her character serves as a moral touchstone, illustrating the virtue of truthfulness and the importance of loyalty.

The plots in *King Lear* simultaneously resonates with the viewer or reader and may lead to some social implications. *King Lear* offers a critique of power and governance, showing how Lear’s decision to divide his kingdom based on flattery leads to chaos and suffering. This can prompt audiences to reflect on the qualities necessary for effective leadership and the potential pitfalls of power without wisdom. The play delves into complex family relationships, particularly the father-daughter dynamic in Lear’s family. It raises questions about the nature of familial love, the expectations placed on children, and the consequences of familial discord, which are social issues that continue to be relevant. Lear’s descent into madness is a powerful exploration of the human condition, touching on themes of aging, loss, and the fragility of the mind. This can lead to a deeper understanding of mental health and the importance of empathy and compassion in society.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the tragic play *King Lear* by William Shakespeare stands as a timeless masterpiece that embodies the essence of Aristotle’s theory of tragedy. Through its intricate plot, the play explores the depths of human suffering, the corrupting influence of

power, and the complexities of family dynamics, all of which contribute to a profound moral and social commentary. The characters of Lear, Cordelia, and Gloucester, among others, undergo transformative journeys that evoke feelings of pity and fear in the audience, aligning perfectly with Aristotle's notion of catharsis.

The research presented in this essay has delved into various critical perspectives on *King Lear*, highlighting the play's adaptability to Aristotle's tragic elements, such as the ultimate catharsis experienced by the audience. The analysis of the play's structure, from simple to complex plots, and the interplay between plots of suffering and character, has shed light on the multifaceted nature of the tragedy. Furthermore, the application of the six points of the plot has demonstrated how *King Lear* effectively employs discovery and reversal to heighten the dramatic effect and engage the audience emotionally.

The essay has also examined the social and moral implications of the play, emphasizing the relevance of its themes to contemporary society. The portrayal of power, betrayal, and the human condition in *King Lear* encourages audiences to reflect on their own values and the impact of their actions on others. The play's enduring legacy is a testament to its universal appeal and its ability to provoke thought and inspire empathy across generations.

As a work that continues to be studied, performed, and analyzed, *King Lear* not only enriches our understanding of tragedy but also serves as a mirror to society, reflecting the best and worst aspects of human nature. The research questions posed in this essay have been addressed through a comprehensive examination of the play's alignment with Aristotelian principles, offering a deeper appreciation for Shakespeare's profound insight into the human experience and the tragic form.

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