

Gloucester: The True Tragedy

Shakespeare's *King Lear* tells the stories of a pair of family tragedies: the madness and death of both Gloucester and Lear. They both mirror and contradict one another throughout the play. We see each feeling betrayed by the child who truly cares about them, while going along with the lies of the other. The theme of being stripped to nothing recurs through the play, whether by outside forces or one doing so willingly. Lear and Gloucester are both stripped to nothing and go into madness. Lear's descent begins when his daughter Goneril would not let him stay with her. It truly kicks in when both daughters leave him in the storm, making him realize that Cordelia was the daughter he should have counted on. Gloucester begins to become mad when he loses his eyes, but his realization that Edgar is his good son is what fully strips him.

The two plot lines have enough similarities that a casual reader might not see the point in having them both. Shakespeare included them for the comparison. The stripping down of Gloucester to nothing is significantly worse and more tragic than Lear's. He loses his sight, despairs after realizing he wronged his good son and will not be able to see him again, and desires to end his life. Lear is kicked out of his daughters' castles and left in a storm, but this does not compare to what Gloucester has gone through.

I think the most important difference is how they came out of madness. Gloucester comes out as a more humble and caring version of himself who realizes the wrong that he has done. I believe, while Lear is seemingly renewed once he comes out of madness, it is actually all playacting. I believe Gloucester's story acts as a way to expose how Lear remains false to the very end. It shows true tragedy and playacting tragedy

side-by-side. The scene of Gloucester's suicide attempt is where we see true despair, madness, and nothingness and the beginning of escaping it.

The scene begins with Gloucester walking with Edgar who is acting as Tom. Gloucester questions whether or not they are actually climbing a hill. When Gloucester claims he cannot hear the sea, Edgar says "Why then, your other senses grow imperfect by your eyes' anguish." (IV, vi, 5-6) Gloucester then takes note that Edgar has slightly changed the character of Tom; he "speak'st in better phrase and matter than thou didst." (IV, vi, 7-8) Edgar denies any change other than his clothing, further emphasizing the thought that Gloucester's other senses may be beginning to fail. Going back to the idea of Gloucester's true tragedy, he has not just lost his sight, but now he fears he is losing his other senses as well. Edgar may have said this in order to push him even more towards the desired suicide, for it needs to happen in order for Gloucester to overcome his madness and despair.

Edgar and his father then reach the location that is supposed to be the top of the cliff. This part is possibly the most playacting done throughout *King Lear*. Edgar, through his playacting as Tom, strips himself down to nothing, unlike Lear and Gloucester who are stripped down by the circumstances. By doing so, Edgar learns and becomes an even better person. It is similar to Gloucester's successful return from nothingness and also to Lear's playacting. It is brought up as an alternative to Lear and Gloucester's situations. Willingly shedding everything will better oneself in the end.

Gloucester is now ready to be on the edge of the cliff. He gives Edgar a jewel, saying "Fairies and gods prosper it with thee." This pretty much means that he wishes Tom the best in life and that the gift will allow him to prosper. Earlier in the play,

Gloucester would probably have never dreamed of being so kind and generous, yet being stripped of everything he had has humbled him. While Gloucester is thinking about others at this moment, Lear only thought about himself as he begins to come out of madness. "Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia." (V, iii, 21) Once reunited with Cordelia, Lear states that she has given up so much for him, while he has not really done anything for her. Even when he desires to ask for forgiveness, he does so, so he can continuously be forgiven.

"Why I do trifle thus with his despair is done to cure it," Edgar says, concerning his father's madness. He is going through all of this playacting in order to help his father. This is the important difference between him and Lear. Lear's playacting is done for selfish reasons and his refusal to face the truth, while Edgar only thinks of others. I believe this is why Edgar was able to successfully playact his way in and out of nothingness, while Lear was not.

Gloucester then begins to pray to the gods. It is the gods' "great opposeless wills" (IV, vi, 38) for him to die, and he believes he is no longer able to fight it. Even in his final moments before death, Gloucester shows that he is a changed man by saying "if Edgar live, O bless him!" (IV, vi, 40) This is similar to Lear's death later in the play, when he is concerned for Cordelia. The difference is that Lear can be seen as selfishly wanting Cordelia alive, opposed to Gloucester just wanting the best for his son.

After Gloucester falls to the ground, Edgar has a moment of panic concerning his father's life, stating "and yet I know not how conceit may rob the treasury of life when life itself yields to the theft." (IV, vi, 41-43) Gloucester wanted to die so badly that sheer

willpower could have caused the fall to kill him. Edgar sees life in his father, which is something that Gloucester does not see in himself, so he hopes the fall was not fatal.

“Thus might he pass indeed. Yet he revives.” (IV, vi, 47) Edgar believes him dead, but then sees him stir. This scene is similar to, and in a way foreshadows, the scene between Lear and Cordelia. There is an uncertainty about someone’s death along with one being concerned about it. We see that Edgar is much more sincere in his concern, for he was doing this to help him. Lear lashes at everyone around him, and is mainly concerned for himself.

Edgar, as a new character, proclaims how Gloucester had “been aught but gossamer, feathers, air, so many fathom down precipitating.” (IV, vi, 49-50) Edgar explains how his father had practically been carried down the cliff and his life was a miracle. Gloucester realizes the reason he lived is because the gods did not want him to gain from death. “Twas yet some comfort when misery could beguile the tyrant’s rage and frustrate his proud will.” (IV, vi, 61-63) is the first glimmer of hope for Gloucester’s revival from madness. It is almost as if, even though he did not die, he is still okay, because he challenged the gods. He took a little bit of pride in his moment of rebellion. Lear never has a moment like this. His only comfort was in Cordelia being there to take care of him.

“Upon the crown o’ the cliff what thing was that which parted from you?” (IV, vi, 67-68) Edgar questions Gloucester. If the cliff was as high as Edgar made it out to be, then the man at the bottom should not have been able to see Tom at the top. This could have been a sort of test to check Gloucester’s awareness.

Edgar describes himself as a demon: “his eyes were two full moons... a thousand noses, horns whelked and waved... some fiend. (IV, vi, 69-72) Edgar wants Gloucester to think that a demon was tempting him into killing himself. He wishes to convince his father that he does not actually desire death. He also wants him to believe the gods “have preserved thee.” (IV, vi, 74) This connects back to when Edgar told him it was as if he was as a feather. If the gods deem him important to keep alive and the devil was tempting him to kill himself, then maybe Gloucester would realize his life still has worth.

Gloucester decides that he will “bear affliction till it do cry itself out ‘enough, enough’ and die.” (IV, vi, 75-76) Edgar succeeded in at least giving his father a second chance at life. At this point Gloucester is happy with the explanation that he was tricked. Gloucester is not fully pulled from the madness until it is revealed that Edgar has been with him. At this point he dies satisfied with his life, knowing he has left a good son in his place.

Lear is never fully pulled from his nothingness. In some cases it appears he has, but it is playacting. He tries to give himself things such as Cordelia’s forgiveness. Throughout the play, his entire front is false. Gloucester is the true example of how people can become better when they are put through tragedy.