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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching William Shakespeare's

King Lear

from

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *King Lear*

KING LEAR IS A PLAY, or – more specifically – a tragedy. A Shakespearean tragedy generally involves a tragic hero (King Lear) who occupies an elevated position in his society (Lear has ruled as king over a vast kingdom for many years). A key character trait, often a tragic flaw (King Lear, an aging man, commits a vast error in judgment), motivates the tragic hero to perform a particular action or set in motion a series of actions (King Lear considers himself too old to continue to rule his kingdom. He decides to give up power and divide his kingdom among his three daughters. Lear fails to accurately evaluate his daughters' love and commitment).

This series of actions creates intense suffering and desolation both for the hero and for the society at large (King Lear banishes his youngest daughter Cordelia, the only daughter who truly loves him, and falls victim to the rivalries of his older daughters Regan and Goneril. Regan and Goneril disrespect their father and banish him from their respective courts. Lear is forced to roam the countryside during a terrible storm. He gradually loses his sanity. Lear's youngest daughter Cordelia and her husband, the King of France, come to aid Lear. They invade the kingdoms of Regan and Goneril, and a war ensues, claiming the lives of many loyal followers of the old king. The intrigues of Regan and Goneril eventually lead to Cordelia's death). Eventually, the hero dies (King Lear, sick and insane, follows his youngest daughter Cordelia to the grave upon learning of her death). The few survivors lament the tragic events and promise to restore order and peace. Often, the hero's inability or failure to make the right decision functions as a catalyst to the action or series of actions (Lear makes a mistake when he divides his kingdom; he makes yet another mistake when he banishes Cordelia and trusts Regan and Goneril).

Feminist Theory Applied to *King Lear*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY. Feminism in literature is an even newer area of study and thought. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts to reevaluate their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are clearly rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminine scale.



Activity One

Examining Women's Responses to the Expectations Set Upon Them as Daughters and Wives

1. Have all groups review Act I, scene i in order to consider select passages in light of Lear's challenge to his daughter: "Tell me, my daughters, / Since now we will divest us both of rule, / Interest of territory, cares of state, / Which of you shall we say doth love us most? / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge" (Act I, Scene I).
2. Divide the class into small groups.
3. Depending on the number of groups, assign each of the following passages to one or more groups:
 - Act I, Scene I—all passages spoken by Regan
 - Act I, Scene I—all passages spoken by Goneril
 - Act I, Scene I—all passages spoken by Cordelia
4. Each group should examine the assigned passages carefully, and note answers to the following questions by citing and explaining specific examples and quotes that illustrate each answer:
 - How does King Lear measure his daughters' ability to lead a kingdom?
 - What does his challenge reveal about Lear's expectations as a father and a ruler?
 - Does each daughter perceive his challenge as a reasonable way to measure her ability to rule?
 - How does each daughter respond to Lear's challenge?
 - What does each daughter's response reveal about her attitude toward her father?
 - What does each daughter's response reveal about her attitude toward the kingdom she is about to inherit?
 - What does each daughter's response reveal about her attitude toward marriage and her husband?
 - What, if anything, do the passages reveal about the nature of women?
 - What stereotypes, if any, does each daughter exhibit in these passages?
 - Is any daughter portrayed as a sympathetic character?



Marxist Approach Applied to *King Lear*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

The Marxist approach to literature is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea was called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of society) would be placed in the hands of the masses who actually operated production, not in the hands of those few who owned it. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theories by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, ideologies



Activity One

Examining Characteristics of Feudalism, Capitalism, and Communist/Marxist Philosophy

1. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) research key elements of feudalism, capitalism, and communist/Marxist philosophy. A visit to the computer lab or library might be a good starting point for this activity. Students should create charts or note sheets to collect and compare the information they find.

Psychoanalytic/Freudian Criticism Applied to *King Lear*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Examining Characters' Motivations

1. Have students (independently, in pairs, in small groups) examine the following key scenes:
 - Act I, Scene I
 - Act II, Scene II
2. Ask students to generate a two-column chart for each of the following characters that includes specific information and quotes relating to the character's speech and actions in one column and information and quotes relating to the character's motivations (conscious or unconscious) in the other column. Characters to be considered:
 - King Lear
 - Goneril
 - Cordelia
 - Regan
 - Edmund
 - Edgar
 - King of France
 - Duke of Burgundy
 - Duke of Albany
 - Duke of Gloucester
 - Kent
3. After comparing the charts, consider the following questions by generating a classroom discussion about each character:
 - How do readers learn about each character's motivations? Through the character's speech? Through comments made by other characters? Through the character's actions?
 - Is there any discrepancy between the way King Lear thinks about himself and the way other characters think about him?
 - Do any characters have dreams or inner monologues? What is revealed about a character through dreams or inner monologues that would not otherwise be revealed? Consider Cordelia's asides in particular.