

## The Research on Death in *King Lear*

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As one masterpiece by Shakespeare, *King Lear* has been aroused a hot argument about its miserable ending since it come out to press. This paper will take this controversial ending as the starting point, focus on the seemingly unfair ending of Lear and Cordelia's tragic death and making a thorough textual study on its death theme. By a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the ending, I attempt to reveal the deep-seated significance behind the characters' forlorn death. The death of Lear and Cordelia are not the absence of "poetic justice", but an elaborate arrangement by Shakespeare. With the death of a series of characters, the playwright expresses his own understanding on human existence. Shakespeare clearly makes his choice and assents the kindness of human nature.

*Keywords:* Shakespeare, *King Lear*, death, humanism, existence, redemption

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare does not adhere to the principle of common morality play, i.e. "good is rewarded with good and evil with evil", but ends it with the woeful death of Lear and Cordelia. Even though Goneril, Regan and Edmund die in the fight, it could not stand for the victory of justice. The death of them attribute to the strife within the evil group. No reader ever failed to ask that why would Lear and Cordelia die, and to ask it with something more than pain. It is as if Shakespeare said to us: "Did you think weakness and innocence have any chance here? Were you beginning to dream that? I will show you it is not so" (Bradley, 1992, p. 213). Since *King Lear* came on the scene, the argument about the dire ending and death has never stopped.

Most discussions of tragedy assume its end should be death and regard death as the great tragic fact (Bradley, 1992, p. 162). The study on the uniqueness of death ending in *King Lear* would help us a lot to understand the deliberate arrangement by Shakespeare. At the same time this paper would reveal the profound significance of the death in the play. The fates of the characters in *King Lear* are of universal significance which is of great importance on human beings' existence.

### The Humanistic Significance of Death

In *The Humanist Tradition in the West*, Alan Bullock claimed that "Whatever we know or do not know of the author, the plays themselves-that is a different matter. That has never been a more comprehensive representation of the human tradition in Shakespearean plays. As much 'Shakespeare', not the man but the plays he wrote, has a secure and central place in the humanistic tradition" (Bullock, 1986, p. 104).

By the end of *King Lear*, altogether six people die, with one (the Fool) mysteriously disappeared, none of who seems to be ennobled or elevated by his or her death. The theme of death in *King Lear* serves as a moral motive. Millions of readers hope for a happy ending is that the deaths of Edmund, Goneril, Regan and Gloucester should be followed by the escape of Lear and Cordelia from death, and that we should be allowed to imagine the poor old King passing quietly in the home of his beloved child to the end which cannot be far off. In such case, why did Shakespeare arrange the unhappy ending? What's the significance behind the death?

If Lear, Gloucester and Albany are set apart, the rest characters in *King Lear* are clearly fall into two distinct groups, which are strongly, even violently, contrasted: Cordelia, Edgar and Kent, the Fool are the virtue group, Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Cornwall, Oswald are the evil group. These characters are in various degrees individualized, most of them completely so; but still in each group there is a quality common to all the members, or one spirit breathing through them all. The virtue group has unselfish and devoted love while the evil group has self-seeking. On both sides, further, the common quality takes an extreme form; the love is incapable of being chilled by injury, the selfishness of being could not be softened by pity; Lear, Gloucester and Albany are between the two extremes. So far if *King Lear* just a play that focus on the conflicts and deceit between two groups, it is hard to imagine that it deserves the prestige today.

In *King Lear* Shakespeare reveals the human essence at the most extend. In the form of apologue, Shakespeare sets conflicts between different characters to express the nature of spiritual existence, i.e. the ultimate existence of human beings lies in the pursuit of spiritual existence and the spiritual transcendence. Shakespeare made a delicate arrangement on the fate of the characters to express his thought on the ultimate meaning of human existence. One who pursues worldly existence as his ultimate goals would go to his doom. On the other hand, the deaths of Lear and Cordelia indicate their disdain of secular world.

Spiritual pursuit does not just refer to the chase of spirit, but realize spiritual transcendence by the pursuit of spiritual existence, i.e. surpass the worldly existence and the limitations of human beings. The transcendence of spirit does not refer to leave the world. To Lear, the transcendence means the cries on the heath, the blame and regret of his own deeds, the approach to love and kindness, even the discard of the body. Spiritual pursuit did not mean to convert to God, either. It only can be obtained in the sublimation of hardships. Bradley pointed that the sublimation of Lear's personality originates from the hardships he endures. Lear does not obey the monition of Christianity that "Whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also", but killed the murderer for Cordelia instead. The truth of spiritual transcendence is fighting against the tragic reality with perseverance and courage.

Bradley pointed out that the poet Shakespeare "seems to preach to us from end to end, 'Thou must be patient', 'Bear free and patient thoughts.'" Is this not true? Life is suffocated with the suffering. To live, we must learn to endure, to be patient. *King Lear* presents us a world somewhat like our own, "composed wholly of painful feelings—utter depression, or indignant rebellion, or appalled despair." Although Cordelia lost her life in front of reality, the love, forgiveness and death of her brought the readers tremendous shock. From the perspective of Shakespeare, people may be failed but could not be defeated. What people can do is to face his failure with perseverance. Hardship is just temporary, only love and endurance could lead people to realize the ultimate existence. Thus what *King Lear* implies is not pessimism or depression but what Bradley called the mysterious solemnness.

### Death: The Call of Love

Like all tragedies, Shakespeare's tragedies are impregnated with moral values and moral feeling. Johnson thought it a great merit of Shakespeare that, he had a truer sense of the nature of human life (Gardner, 1971, p. 116). What differentiates man from man in Shakespeare's universe is not superior fellow-feeling, to be moved to pity, and to show mercy. He was called the "gentle Shakespeare" by his contemporaries. It is not an adjective we should expect to be used of a great writer of tragedies, plays full of violence and cruelty. But there is in the tragedies an ideal of "humanity" which the word "gentle" fits (Gardner, 1971, p. 143).

Shakespeare's tragedies are pervasively concerned with love in much wider sense: love of parents for children, and children for parents, of friend for friend, and husband for wife, of master for servant, and servant for master. This is the source of the greatest suffering in them: Hamlet's grief at his father's death and horror at his mother's falseness, Othello's agony at his loss of faith in his wife, Macbeth's discovery that he has condemned himself to a solitude in which all men hate him, Lear's discovery that his own flesh and blood reject him. The destruction, by breaking or poisoning, of the ties of affection, the bonds that bind man to man in the giving and receiving of love, is peculiarly central to Shakespearian tragedy which also contains glimpses of a spiritual happiness that has the quality of blessedness and peace in the exchanges of love. The supreme example is the meeting of Lear and Cordelia when like a loving and dutiful daughter she kneels to ask his blessing and he struggles to kneel to her for her forgiveness.

*King Lear* is not just a tragedy about an old man but also a tragedy of society and life. The miserable theme is to express humanity and cold society, the earnest love and fake love, the conflict between history and ethics. In the tragedy, Shakespeare lights up the destruction of morality, displays the evil of human beings, and expresses the richness and variety of human's inner world. Therefore Shakespeare is the first one who showed the depth and width of the in a comprehensive way.

The principles of Lear, Cordelia and Kent are in a stark contrast with that of Edmund and Goneril. Although Lear experienced a lot of hardships, even Cordelia lost her life, the dogma they advocated finally defeat the extreme egoism. Lear leaves this world because love is enthroned in his death and in the love-enthroned death the sea of troubles in life ceases its sound and fury once and for all. Death, engulfs the body of Lear, but helps him achieve his repentance and spiritual love with Cordelia. Some critics consider that the characteristics of ambition and struggle on Edmund represent the aggressive spirit of the capitalist class to some extent. On all accounts the spirit of ambition should not trample on the earnest interpersonal relationship. Under no circumstances could we exchange morality for social progress. This lugubrious close exactly gave voice to Shakespeare's appeal.

The fates of the characters are more than a deliberate and labored arrangement but a naturally and instinctively expression of love. It touches us when Lear in his enormous anguish sees that the Fool is shivering. No reader nor critic can deny that it is the sincere love of Cordelia that moves people. She is the person who insists on the call of her own heart. Without love people will be reduced to the egotistical monster. Love lays the foundation of a self-approval life and provides power for people. After tasting the purest love of sincerity, Lear has no sentimentally attachment to the ugly world. He finishes his journey with no regret. This ending indicates that even facing the spread of egoism. our playwright still holds faith in love and goodness. Like the

blooming flowers. Cordelia, Lear and other lovely characters carry the scent of sincere love to the cold and corrupted world.

Without love people would be reduced to the egotistical monster. Love is the only requirement of being clear-headed and provides power for people. Love lays the foundation of a self-approval life. After tasting the purest love of sincerity, Lear has no sentimentally attachment to the ugly world. He finishes his journey with no regret. This ending indicated that even facing the spread of egoism, Shakespeare still has faith in humanism. Thus we have the confidence to say those characters are like the blooming flowers which carry the scent of humanism to the capitalism.

Shakespeare usually ended his tragedies by simply expressing love, the quintessence of all loves, whether erotic, parental, filial, amicable, or feudal. There wells up again and again in Shakespeare's tragedies the sense of the beauty of "mercy, pity, peace and love" as the true "human image". It is not deliberate and laboured but expresses itself naturally and instinctively in moments and in short phrases, for example, it touches us when Lear in his enormous anguish sees that the Fool is shivering. Therefore, the quintessence of all loves in *King Lear*, whether erotic, parental, filial, amicable, or feudal are well worth of examining.

### **Death: Punishment or Redemption?**

The solitude and anxiety of Lear rests with his problem in life that he is confronted with the absence of God. Lear is confused with the significance of being existence. The God in *King Lear* was neither to torment him nor to teach him a "noble anger", but to lead him to attain through apparently hopeless failure the very end and aim of life. Facing the reality of hardships, tear and blood, what should Lear do? If God is almighty, just and glorious, why do people still suffer the pain? The only explanation for that is the absence of God. The contradictory between the omnipotence of God and the sufferings of reality got reconciled through self incrimination and self redemption.

Originally the love of Lear is twisted Christian love with the desire of worldly possessions. The cruel reality forces him back to the Christian love. Feeling heartache with the absence of God, Lear cries his anger and regret to the heaven. Considering of the tribulation, it is necessary and reasonable for Lear to inquire God. Unfortunately God does not give him any clue. Lear has to explore the solution in the Christianity all by himself. The absence of God leaves people freedom and ordeal as well. People should face the sufferings in life and also the mess in sense. The madness of Lear illustrates that human beings could not definite the significance of existence without God or Christianity. The storm purifies Lear's soul which endues him with the ability to see the truth of love. By loving people, Lear realizes the significance of life; being loved by other people, Lear obtains the truth of happiness which is weaved by Christian values. The foundation of love is not authority, power or status but respect and understanding instead. Therefore to some extent, the philanthropism of religion has become the belief of humanism.

Shakespeare depicts the degeneration of human beings in his works, the virtue people suffer a lot. The writer still has faith in justice that the evil might overwhelm virtue for a while, but the victory would belong to virtue at last. Human beings should have the faith that God always stays with justice and goodness. From the perspective of Roy Battenhouse, to test and improve humanity, it is God who consents people suffer hardships.

Behind the profound Christian concept is that under the control of God, it is possible for human beings to go forward.

Humanism stresses too much on the secular desires of people while denies the essential Christian values completely. In consequence of that, there arises great crisis on the ideal of humanist. Reflecting on the defect of humanism, Shakespeare turns to Christianity for solutions. Shakespeare absorbs the essence of Christian culture to curb the expansion of extreme egoism and reinforce the achievements of humanism. As far as Shakespeare concerned, only the death close of Cordelia and Lear could reveal the importance of philanthropism, forgiveness and redemption. Confronting with the merciless reality, Cordelia and Lear lose their lives which shock the readers greatly. The selflessness, kindness and forgiveness of Cordelia bring enormous comfort to the readers. Starting from this point, Cordelia lives in the heart of public forever. Through the reflection of Christian values, Lear realizes the sin of him and finishes his satisfactory redemption with death.

The death of body did not represent failure but brought the redemption of soul. In fact the seemingly absence of poetic justice is the result of self-redemption of the characters. Actually madness and death are essential to the self redemption of Lear. Shakespeare uses Christian oracle to imply the greatness of love and expect love. *King Lear* indicates that without love, people become the egoistic monster. Love is the requirement of being clear-headed and the source of personality. Love is free from the disturbance of egoism and evasion. By the through understanding of the *Bible*, Shakespeare describes the love between Lear and Cordelia. Actually during the process of seeking love, Lear and Cordelia experience hardships and surpassed the religion. Finally they find the belief and courage to overcome sufferings.

Behind the deaths of different characters lies the deep reflection of Shakespeare. With the Christian values of philanthropism and forgiveness, Shakespeare sheds light on the ultimate meaning of human beings. His assertion on the existence of human beings in *King Lear* aims to moralize public and maintain social stability. The world of *King Lear* is permeated with Christian values which are in accord with the essence of humanism. Shakespeare reveals his profound understanding on human nature. Instead of breaking from the traditional culture completely, in *King Lear* Shakespeare retains the essence of Christian culture to curb the spread of extreme egoism.

### Conclusion

*King Lear* was written at the prime of Shakespeare's career. For this reason in Chapter Four, it is essential to discuss the popular drama values in Elizabethan Age. These prevalent values might have an impact on the playwright and finally resulted in the miserable ending of *King Lear*. The view that tragedy, which draws its matter from history, exists to display the just judgments of God is the most common view of tragedy in the Elizabethan period. As a matter of fact, it was Christianity that cultivated the humanistic spirit and western culture. Christianity has a profound influence on people and literature. No one could deny the succession and continuity between humanism and Christian culture. What's more, humanists held the flag of Reformation at the very beginning. That explains the similarities on core values between the humanism and Christianity. The characters of Cordelia, Lear and Kent represent the humanistic pursuit of Shakespeare, i.e. the goodness of human nature. On the contrary, the aggressive Edmund stands for the rising the bourgeoisie whom have strong ambitions to succeed. He is eager to break the chains on him and prove his ability. The extreme individuality of

Edmund brings catastrophe to himself and the whole kingdom as well. Facing the attack of Machiavellianism, the social morality is being collapse. Reflecting on humanism and human nature, Shakespeare took his step towards Christianity.

Nevertheless, Shakespeare did not just make a copy of Christian values but take the essence of Christianity to curb the spread of extreme individuality. With the core values of Christianity, the new life and new world could move forward along the path of healthy development. More importantly, Shakespeare tried to keep balance between the reason and natural desires. He aimed to lead human desires under the guidance of reason and purify the madness and vulgarity of desires with the Christian love. For Shakespeare, turning back to Christian values is definitely not a setback but advancement.

It is remarkable that in Shakespeare's tragedies, the hero usually achieves a new perception and a fresh recognition in their death. Death becomes the ultimate price he pays for his understanding of life and of the world, and hence ennobles him and lifts him to the magnificent heights. Shakespeare wrote this death ending for *King Lear* deliberately, for he believed his own choice on being existence. Only the pursuit of spiritual existence would bring man peace and joy. Just as what Walter C. Foreman says: Most of the tragic characters eventually long for death, desire it, seek it, either as a rest from suffering or as the only thing consistent with their integrity, with their sense of the value of their own lives (Foreman, 1978, p. 257).

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