Shakespeare's *King Lear*, since first staged and published in the early seventeenth century, has been the subject of extensive literary interpretation and the object of intense critical debate. The key issue here is whether *King Lear* is a classical tragedy with a redemptive moral or a play with a profoundly pessimistic, even nihilistic, view of man and the world he briefly inhabits. The critics of Shakespeare's tragedies are broadly grouped as said by Kiernan Ryan thus:

> In the two dominant and complementary interpretive manoeuvres, the tragedies are presented either as dramatising the validity of the established social order and vindicating conventional beliefs and values, or as reconciling us to what is perceived as our intractably flawed human nature, and thus to the inescapable necessity of the given human condition, however monstrous and unbearable its cruelty and injustice.¹

This is the substance that a large number of Shakespearean study guides and journals on tragedies have taken for granted. The fate of the tragic hero seems to lie in what he does; some kind of 'moral flaw' is searched in him. Shakespeare's tragedies are convoluted into tales of temptation and damnation. If the tragedies are re-read we realize that Shakespeare presents in his tragedies not this but the greatness of men set against their helplessness, who are caught in those

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circumstances which are outside their control, who in Cordelia's words "with best meaning, have incurr'd the worst" (King Lear. V. iii. 4). King Lear is the tragedy which represents a real picture of life, and strikes the human psyche and symbolizes human sentiments, which teaches that human sufferings at times could be enormously disproportionate to human follies.

In tragical pathos, in dramatic force, in grandeur of sentiment and diction, King Lear has no superior in all the wide range of the world's drama. The language often rises to or even exceeds the sublimity of Aeschylus and Sophocles. A. W. Schlegel states that:

\[\text{\ldots in King Lear the science of compassion is exhausted. The principal characters here are not those who act, but those who suffer. We have not in this, as in most tragedies, the picture of a calamity in which the sudden blows of fate seem still to honour the head which they strike, and where the loss is always accompanied by some flattering consolation in the memory of the former possession; but a fall from the highest elevation into the deepest abyss of misery, where humanity is stripped of all external and internal advantages and given up a prey to naked helplessness.}\]

The tragedy, further seems to be dealing less with merely the human beings, or human passions, or human frailties, but more with the phenomenon of human suffering itself.

King Lear is the play which depicts the misfortune resulting from the fatal ingratitude shown to a self-conscious king, an old man, and most important, a father, by his two elder daughters. Lear is indeed "a man more sinned against than sinning". The play depicts Lear's sufferings which are so intense that we do

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develop a feeling of righteous anger for his elder daughters who have inflicted so much pain upon him and in the end we tend to excuse him for the wrong that he has done to Cordelia and to Kent. We feel pity and admiration for his heroic efforts to be patient, the nature of his repentance towards the end of the play touch us and the scene of the reunion with Cordelia moves us to the core. The sub-plot of Gloucester makes us experience the agony of Lear as a reduplicated universal predicament. Therefore, in the end we are forced to feel that though the storm which overwhelmed Lear in the beginning of the play seems to be generated by his own deeds, he is in fact more a patient, that is, a sufferer, than the agent, the wrong doer.

The tragic action begins when Lear, the ruler of Britain enters his state room and announces his plan to divide the kingdom among his three daughters. He intends to give up the responsibilities of government as he is now over eighty and wishes to spend his old age visiting his children. Moreover, anticipating the trouble that might arise after his death about the division of the kingdom he well in advance wants to sort out the matter and so himself takes the responsibility of dividing the kingdom among his three daughters. And here lies the paradox of the play, the king who wants to shake off all the responsibility and care so that he can “unburthen’d crawl toward death” (I. i. 40) faces the heaviest burden of unmerited grief. The play makes us at once aware of how problematic things can turn out to be: man may intend something good but its fulfillment he can never be sure about. It also exposes how unreliable our customary formulations and generalizations can be when we see the spectacle of the man as old as King Lear “four score and upwards” (IV. vii. 61) who must renounce the family and, the legitimate comforts of the world, and plunge into untold misery.
In the opening scene we find Lear displaying a childish vanity and arrogance. Lear has already decided to divide his kingdom among his three daughters and has marked the territories to be allotted to them on the map. He does not propose to make any alteration in the divisions he has already made. Yet he commands his daughters to proclaim which of them loves him the most, promising to give the greatest share to the most deserving daughter. The love test at the beginning of Act I, scene i, sets the tone for this extremely complex play, which is full of emotional subtlety, conspiracy, and double-talk, and which swings between confusing extremes of love and anger. Lear’s demand that his daughters express how much they love him is puzzling but it may conceal the sense of insecurity and fear of an old man who needs to be reassured of his own importance. Of course, rather than having a true assessment of his daughters’ love for him, the test turns out to be an invitation to flattery by the treacherous daughters.

Lear’s scheming older daughters, Goneril and Regan, respond to his test at once with flattery, telling him in wildly overblown terms that they love him more than anything else. Goneril, the eldest daughter speaks first. She tells her father that she cannot even put her professed love into words: “A love that makes breath poorer, speech unable / Beyond all manner of so much I love you” (I. i. 59). Regan, the middle daughter, speaks next. She follows her sister’s lead by saying, “I find she names my very deed of love; / Only she comes too short” (I. i. 70-71). The excessive and pompous speeches of Goneril and Regan are gaudy speeches delivered to match Lear’s own awkward demand.

Finally it is Cordelia’s turn to express the depth of her love for her royal father who demands still more from his joy, his youngest daughter, and turns to her with the greatest expectation:

What can you say to draw
But when queried by her father, Cordelia, Lear's youngest and favourite daughter refuses to speak. In contrast to her sisters, whose professions are banal and insincere, Cordelia does not know how to flatter her father: this is an immediate reflection of her honesty and true devotion to him. "Love, and be silent," (I. i. 61) she says to herself. When her father asks her the crucial question as to what she can say to merit the greatest inheritance, she answers only, "Nothing, my lord," (I. i. 86) and thus seals her fate. Lear insists "Nothing will come of nothing: speak again" (I. i. 89) and when she still fails to satisfy him, he exclaims "How, how, Cordelia! Mend your speech a little, / Lest you may mar your fortunes" (I. i. 93-94). Lear here is hopeful and under the impression, may be that Cordelia is not able to speak what she wishes because of some reason, or has forgotten her lines. We see here Lear waiting to hear a particular kind of speech which would surpass even the absurd protestations of love made by Goneril and Regan.

Cordelia's reply "Nothing" is a word that reappears throughout the play with disastrous connotations. "Nothing" is a key word that is repeated several times in the play, thus emphasizing the word's importance. Cordelia's utterance, "nothing" is echoed at the end of the play when she is dead and nothing remains of her. When Gloucester sees nothing he is finally able to see the truth and when Lear emerges from nothingness of his mental decline, it is to know that Cordelia has always loved him the most.

When pressed further by her father Cordelia says, in the love contest:

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth: (I. i. 90-91).

Cordelia loves her father Lear according to the bonds of blood relationship, as paternity demands. She answers her father in plain words but with sincerity and
love. Her response is in keeping with Elizabethan social norms, which expect a daughter to love her father because that is the law of nature. According to nature man is part of a hierarchy, from God, to King, to child. Cordelia tempers her reply with reason to a simple unembellished statement, that the honour she accords is but due to a father by his daughter:

I love your Majesty
According to my bond; no more nor less. (I. i. 91–92).

So when Cordelia refuses to barter her love for material profit, Lear, in response, in sheer arrogance and injured self-esteem gets enraged and sees Cordelia's reply as an obstinate rejection. He disowns Cordelia by denying her all affection and paternal care:

Let it be so; thy truth then be thy dower:
...Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee from this for ever (I. i. 107, 112-15)

King Lear banishes Cordelia and divides her share of the kingdom between her two flattering sisters Goneril and Regan saying:

With my two daughter's dowers digest the third (I. i.127)

Cordelia's answer hurts Lear's pride; he needed an overwhelming protestation of love to justify his gift of the best portion of his kingdom.

The earl of Kent, a nobleman who has served Lear faithfully for many years, is the only courtier who disagrees with the king's actions. Kent tells Lear he is insane to reward the flattery of his older daughters and disown Cordelia, who loves him more than her sisters do. Lear turns his anger on Kent, banishing him
from the kingdom and telling him that he must be gone within six days. Lear's intense anger towards Kent also suggests the fragility of the King's emotional state, who believes to be scorned by those from whom he expected fuller support.

Indeed anger marks the play's opening scene. Lily B Campbell makes a very relevant observation on anger, citing Aristotle:

The foundation of all Renaissance discussion of anger is to be found in Aristotle [who] defined anger as:

"an impulse, accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one's friends" (Rhetorica, 1378a).

Anger, according to Aristotle, always rises from injured self-esteem, from some slight inflicted upon an individual. . .

Since a man expects to be respected by his inferiors, he expects those to respect him to whom he believes he is superior in birth, capacity, goodness, or anything else. Furthermore, he expects those whom he has treated well, as well as those whom he is now treating well, to respect him. According to Aristotle, then, the man who is slighted by those who he thinks ought to respect him and feel grateful toward him is the more easily offended.

Furthermore, Aristotle pointed out that the slight is most keenly felt if that aspect in which we think ourselves most worthy of consideration is treated slightingly. . . Anyone who shows in speech or in action a tendency to slight rather than praise these qualities upon which we base our self-esteem will be the recipient of our anger. But we will be most angry with friends than with others, with those who have previously treated us becomingly and now change, and with those people who do not adequately appreciate or return kindness.

Aristotle also says that the feeble are more given to anger than are the strong, and old men than young.3

3 Lily B Campbell, Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion, (Methuen, London, 1930), p.177-78
Lear's folly in the opening scene though seems enormous, is apparently intended well and is harmless. After all, he has merely sought publicly to be glorified with the presumed confidence that his youngest daughter Cordelia who loves him most would surpass in protestation of love his other daughters. His intention was to spend the rest of his life with his youngest daughter whom he loved most and it is clear from his statement:

I lov'd her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery (I. i. 122-23)

The present situation in which he is to live with his two elder daughters one by one is forced upon him and if his original plan according to which he was to stay with Cordelia had been successful there would have been no such disastrous consequences. He seems to be acting under a simple human situation unaware of what future holds for him. Many scholars and critics have gone over the play pointing out moral faults in Lear and have found those in him. They lay the whole blame on Lear for his inevitable doom. The *hamartia* of Lear simply does not lie in the fact that he divided the kingdom in folly but in that by which he banished Cordelia and Kent, both his well wishers. Though it can be that Lear with more insight could have conceded his doom, the theory that the protagonist of the tragedy must possess a serious 'moral flaw' does not hold true in this case too. He has created the conditions that certainly make his suffering possible; but to lay the entire blame on him would be to deny the presence of uncertainty that is always there in life and the part played by 'the gods' in making man's plans go amiss. If Cordelia would have been able to gratify Lear's vanity the tragedy might not have occurred at all. Bradley rightly interprets the initial situation and puts King Lear in the right focus:

...the dependence of the division on the speeches of the daughters, was in Lear's intention a mere form, devised as a childish scheme to gratify his love of absolute power and his hunger for assurances of
devotion. We may say that the main cause of its failure was not that Goneril and Regan were exceptionally hypocritical, but that Cordelia was exceptionally sincere and unbending. And it is essential to observe that its failure, and the consequent necessity of publicly reversing his whole well-known intention, is one source of Lear's extreme anger. He loved Cordelia most and knew that she loved him best, and the supreme moment to which he looked forward was that in which she should outdo her sisters in expressions of affection, and should be rewarded by that 'third' of the kingdom which was the most 'opulent'. And then—so it naturally seemed to him—she put him to open shame.4

In the same way, when Kent takes Cordelia's side, Lear's self-esteem is injured further and in anger he banishes both Cordelia and Kent. So Lear is strongly angered with friends both Cordelia and Kent, with those who have previously treated him affectionately and now seem shockingly changed, and is now thrown with those who do not appreciate his love and kindness. We realize throughout the play that neither his good intention nor his faith in Cordelia falters though he banishes her in anger. In fact, as the play progresses he feels a deep remorse for the wrong he has done to his sweet, loving Cordelia. Deprived of his dearest, Lear desires avidly only for one thing: to have the respect of his two elder daughters. And that he does not get. On the rashness of the King towards Cordelia and Kent, Bradley rightly comments:

...a long life of absolute power, in which he has been flattered to the top of his bent, has produced in him that blindness to human limitations, and that presumptuous self-will. . .5

5 ibid., p.243.
There is a glaring and dramatic contrast between Goneril and Regan who were exceptionally hypocritical in their protestations of love and Cordelia who was exceptionally sincere and unbending. Thus a fond father is duped by his two elder daughters to disinherit the third, previously and deservedly dearer to him, and far nobler. Goneril and Regan scheme together in secrecy. As they recognize that they now have complete power over the kingdom, they agree that they must act promptly to reduce even any semblance of their father's authority. Lear is to spend the first portion of his retirement at Goneril's castle. Goneril quarrels with Lear by charging that he has struck her people and complains that Lear's knights are becoming "riotous" (I. iii. 7) implying that Lear himself is an obnoxious guest. Seeking to provoke a confrontation, she orders her servants to behave rudely with Lear and his attendants. She even becomes adamant in her demand and asks Lear to restrain his knights and reduce [disquantity (I. iv. 246)] his train by dismissing half of his one hundred knights. The Fool rightly gives the example of the cuckoo while referring about Goneril. He says, the cuckoo lays an egg in the nest of the sparrow and when the egg has been hatched, the sparrow feeds the young one of the cuckoo. This young one, when it grows up tries to make room for itself by hitting off the head of the sparrow which had been feeding it. Lear's daughters behave in a similar way. Goneril reduces Lear's men to fifty at which Lear is shocked. An enraged Lear regrets the handing of his power over to Goneril. He curses his daughter, calling on Nature to make her childless. Lear's outburst is understandable as we should expect from any such royal fathers Oedipus curses his own children likewise. Surprised by his own tears, he calls for his horses. He declares that he will stay with Regan, whom he believes will be a true daughter and give him the respect he deserves. The position of Lear makes us think about the limitations of a man: he can hardly defend himself against unanticipated heartlessness and all that he can do is burst into a wild rage.
Lear begins to question his own identity when he realises that Goneril plans to frustrate his position. He asks:

Does any here know me? This is not Lear. . . .
Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (I. iv. 223–228).

Lear, shorn of the paraphernalia of authority, looks first senile to Goneril. He wonders whether he is really himself anymore or whether he has lost his mind. Driven to despair, even at the end of Act I, scene v, he says, “O! let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven” (I. v. 43), foreboding his eventual insanity.

Lear leaves Goneril's place by saying “I have another daughter” (I. iv. 303) subconsciously realizing now that he had banished the one daughter Cordelia who really loved him disinterestedly. Regan too with her husband Cornwall goes to Gloucester's castle to avoid the imminent visit of Lear. Cornwall even orders Kent to be put in the stocks knowing very well that he is insulting the king's messenger and hence the king himself. The stocks were a punishment used for common criminals, and their use for Lear's serving man could easily be interpreted as highly disrespectful to Lear's royal status. She almost seems to welcome the idea of inviting Lear's anger. Goneril and, as we soon discover, Regan enjoy being in power and conspire to destroy Lear's illusion of personal authority. Lear discovers in Regan a daughter who is just not loving and kind, but a new monster who denies all the daughter-father relationship, and negates the very concept of filial relationship. Both Goneril and Regan combine together to oppose Lear and both the sisters adopt a callous attitude towards him to rob him of even a small number of knights to attend upon him. Their plan to whittle down Lear's retinue from a hundred knights to fifty may not seem devious, but they soon wish to purge his knights altogether.

Goneril: Hear me, my Lord,
What need you five-and-twenty, ten, or five,
To follow in a house where twice so many
Have a command to tend to you?
Regan: What need one? (II. iv. 258-62)

This gradual diminishment of Lear's attendants symbolizes the gradual elimination of any remnants of power. Knights and servants are part of the formal pomp that surrounds a powerful king, and Lear sees his loss of them as indicative of his daughter's scorn for his dignity not only as a former king but even as a father. The stunned Lear responds not with a new curse but in an act of wilful abasement in pain, asks for her forgiveness and bare subsistence:

Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;  
Age is unnecessary: on my knees I beg  
That you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food. (II. iv. 151-53)

Rosalie L. Colie states the Elizabethan ethics, where she notes that:

In England, a mark of respect paid to parents by their children was kneeling for their blessing: in a sermon of 1629, far later than this play, Donne wrote, 'Children kneele to aske blessing of Parents in England, but where else?'

While referring to the play Rosalie further writes that:

The king's gesture of kneeling to his children is not just a momentary criticism of the children's behaviour to him, but also a confirmation of the Fool's sharp words, that he has made '[his] daughters [his] mothers', and must kneel to them to supplicate the elemental support that fathers

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Instead of expecting any respect from his monster daughters Lear accepts in agony of the reversal, all the rude expressions intended to offend or hurt him, suffers deliberately offensive acts, runs from one ungrateful daughter to the other, begs, prays and bargains till he stands at last debased and helpless when his two daughters refuse him any hospitality at all. Maynard Mack (1965) writes that:

[Goneril and Regan are] the two daughters whom Kent calls ‘dog-hearted’, Albany calls ‘Tigers, not daughters’, and the gentlest voice in the play calls ‘Shame of ladies’... [by them] Lear is first squeezed dry of all his remaining dignities and illusions and then spat away. . .The motivation of the sisters lies not in what Lear has done to them, but in what they are. . .they are paradigms of evil rather than (or as well as) exasperated spoilt children.  

From the beginning itself to the end of the play we, as the audience, are aware at least relatively where the right is and where the wrong, where virtue resides and where vice. We are aware from the beginning of the play of the monstrous nature of both Goneril and Regan, but Lear has little idea of that because though he loves Cordelia more for her loving and kind nature, he has no reason to believe that the other two would be so cunning and ungrateful. Moreover man does not know in advance as to from which direction and in what form the disaster will strike him and nor does he know what to make of the specific disaster. And that happens to Lear. It is now clear to Lear that he has blundered in handing over his power to Goneril and Regan. Lear's error is that, in stepping down from the throne, he has also given up all of his both formal and moral authority to those who do not actually love him. But this error committed by

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7 op. cit., p. 211.
him unknowingly cannot be stated as some kind of ‘tragic flaw’ in his character. He no longer has the power to command anyone to do anything, even to give him shelter or food, his daughters, each of whom is now a queen over half of Britain, wield special authority over him. We feel grieved for Lear beyond words when he addresses the heavens:

You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man,  
As full of grief as age: wretched in both!  
If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts  
Against their father, fool me not so much  
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger  
And let not women’s weapons, water-drops,  
Stain my man’s cheeks! (II. iv. 270-76)

After seeing the ingratitude of Goneril and Regan towards their father we seem to question ourselves as Bradley rightly does:

How can there be such men and women? We ask ourselves how comes it that humanity can take such absolutely opposite forms? And, in particular to what omission of elements which should be present in human nature, or, if there is no omission, to what distortion of these elements is it due that such beings as some of these come to exist? This is a question which Iago forces us to ask, but in King Lear it is provoked again and again. And more, it seems to us that the author himself is asking this question. “Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?”

The more we search the more we tend to realize that there is some power beyond that is behind the workings of things. Kent has this to say:

It is the stars,

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9 op. cit., p. 225
The stars above us, govern our conditions. (IV. iii. 32-33)

In King Lear this feeling is raised through the characters by Shakespeare not just once but many times. Any situation is multi-faceted; there is order above and order within the cosmos. From macrocosm to microcosm, that is from the King to a worm all are handled by some higher power. Worldly beings do not seem to be causing the events but it seems that the stars, the unknown power above us which seems to be governing our actions and our state of happiness or misery. Human existence is controlled by a higher agency which is beyond the comprehension of man. If that is so, then how is man held wholly responsible for any thing that goes wrong? If things are handled elsewhere by a higher power, then to look for some flaw or even one radical weakness in the tragic protagonist is to be grossly lopsided.

The picture of the world painted in King Lear is full of “filial ingratitude” (III. iv. 14). The humanity is shown to be stripped of all hope when you consider the cruelty of the son of Gloucester and the two daughters of Lear. Gods also seem to be conspiring with his ungrateful, monster-like daughters. “Man’s life is cheap as beast’s” (II. iv. 265). Lear’s first appeal to gods is:

O Heavens,
If you do love old men, if your sweet sway
Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old,
Make it your cause: send down and take my part! (II. iv. 187-90)

He is confronted with the “wolvish-visage” (I. iv. 306), “sea-monster” (I. iv. 259), “marble-hearted fiends” (I. iv. 257), “serpent-like” (II. iv. 158), “Most savage and unnatural” (III. iii. 6) daughters who refuse him the bare minimum care and the respect necessary for an old man like Lear, and more than that, for their own father who had given them everything he had. Both Goneril and Regan are
“Tigers not daughters,” (IV. ii. 40). It is as if forms of falsehood are disguised as women who assume the shape of monsters. Dr Johnson argues:

It is disputed whether the predominant image in Lear's disordered mind be the loss of his kingdom or the cruelty of his daughters.¹⁰

Further citing Mr. Murphy he writes:

. . .the cruelty of his daughters is the primary source of his distress and that the loss of royalty affects him only as a secondary and subordinate evil ...Lear would move our compassion but little, did we not rather consider the injured father than the degraded king.¹¹

Lear’s another appeal to the gods where he seems to be asking them to take notice of his pitiable and heart-rending condition:

You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man,  
As full of grief as age; wretched in both! (II. iv. 270-271)

is answered by the gods by pouring in heavy rains and breaking storm. The gods here are portrayed not merely as wanton boys, but we find them deaf and dumb too who cannot hear the tragic cries of Lear. We are indeed made to think about the fragile condition of man where,

As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' Gods;  
They kill us for their sport. (IV. i. 35-36).

We watch Lear being stripped first of an extraordinary worldly power, then of ordinary human dignity, then of the very necessities of life. Even the Heavens

¹¹ ibid., p. 223.
above seem to reject his plea for any grace from them. Here we have nihilism in its starkest form: there is no order, no goodness in the universe, it seems to be subjected only to caprice and cruelty. This theme of despair in the face of an uncaring universe makes *King Lear* one of Shakespeare's darkest plays. For Gloucester, as well as for Lear, there is no possibility of happiness in the world; there is only the "sport" of the inscrutable gods. This is what Marilyn French also writes:

In fact, all three of his daughters challenge his will. Cordelia refuses to bow to his impossible demand in I.i; Goneril and Regan deny him what he has asserted as his right, afterwards. He begins to move outside the hothouse of certitude: 'I did her wrong', he mutters. When the storm too ignores the rightness of his cause, defies his commands, when he finds himself exiled from all . . . wet, hungry, and cold, he cracks entirely. But what is destroyed is not the man, Lear, but the King, Lear...Toppling from power does not strip him of his manhood; it confers humanhood upon him.¹²

Thus, in this dark world where gods seem to be conspiring against Lear, he tries to develop humility and simplicity in order to redeem himself and that is what Shakespeare wants us to notice.

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sanity disintegrates. We find Lear and his courtiers plodding across a deserted heath with winds howling around them and rain drenching them. The storm marks one of the first appearances of the apocalyptic imagery that is so important in *King Lear* and that becomes increasingly dominant as the play progresses. The chaos reflects the disorder in Lear's own mind, and as we have seen, the chaos in nature also reflects the very real political chaos that has engulfed Britain in the absence of Lear's authority. Lear, like the other tragic characters, is unused to such harsh conditions, and he soon finds himself symbolically stripped bare. He has already discovered that his cruel daughters can victimize him; now he learns that a king caught in a storm is as much subject to the power of nature as any other man. When Lear is cast out into the storm, the tempest in the heavens echoes the tempest in his mind. The positioning of the storm, and its symbolic connection to the state of mind of Lear at first suggests that the King's state of mind is shown to be as turbulent as the winds and clouds surrounding him. Shakespeare's use of pathetic fallacy, a literary device in which inanimate objects such as nature assume human attributes, amplifies the tension of the characters' struggles by elevating human passions to the level of natural forces. Lear is trying to face down the powers of nature, an attempt that seems to indicate both his despair and his acceptance of the reality. Both of these strains appear in Lear's famous challenge to the storm:

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Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks! (III. ii. 1–3).
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The powers of the roaring wind and pouring rains mirror the tormented soul of Lear. Nature seems to be convulsed with the tragic and pathetic state of Lear. Lear's attempt to speak to the storm suggests that he has now become one with the natural world and his relation to nature makes him closer to it and his is a more than an ordinary human response to nature. Lear's encounter with the rough weather embodies one of the central questions posed by *King Lear*: namely,
whether the universe is fundamentally hostile to man. Lear asks whether nature and the gods are actually good and if so, how life can have treated him so badly.

Lear calls upon the storm in which he raves:

Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:  
I tax you not, you elements, with unkindness;  
I never gave you kingdom, call’d you children,  
You owe me no subscription: then let fall  
Your horrible pleasure; here I stand, your slave,  
A poor, infirm, weak, and despis’d old man.  
But yet I call you servile ministers,  
That will with two pernicious daughters join  
Your high-engender’d battles’ gainst a head  
So old and white as this. O, ho! ’tis foul. (III. ii. 15-24)

Lear now possesses a ‘noble anger’ and while enraged, tells the thunder that he does not blame it for attacking him because it does not owe him anything and what seems to vex him is why should the rain, wind and thunder, when they have no cause, collude and collaborate with the unnatural daughters. The abandoning of the struggle and embracing of the misfortune is the mark of growth in Lear and as Barbara Everett suggests:

Lear is at his most powerful and, despite moral considerations, at his noblest; the image of a man hopelessly confronting a hostile universe and withstanding it only by his inherent powers of rage, endurance, and perpetual questioning, is perhaps the most purely ‘tragic’ in Shakespeare. 13

This turning point of the play shows that Lear is now at the nadir of his fortunes and the tragic depths are at hand. But it also exhibits that Lear starts educating himself by cultivating patience. Lear adopts the tone of righteous indignation; the 'noble anger' overtakes his curses and gone now are all the traces of his desire for self-glorification which he had exhibited in the beginning of the play. The play represents a man from one act of folly to pass through the fire of hell to learn bitter lessons and redeem himself through extreme suffering. Shakespeare uses this paradigm of folly- suffering- redemption, to convey to us that we must look for every particle in the play which makes his hero come to terms with all the struggles and accept all the blows of fate patiently. This consummation of crucifixion is indeed Lear's own attempt at reinvention through un-delusion and clarity of spirit.

Lear becomes aware of the sufferings of others, besides his own sufferings as he suddenly notices his Fool and asks him, "How dost my boy? Art cold?" (III. ii. 68). He adds, "I have one part in my heart / That's sorry yet for thee" (III.ii.72-73). Here, Lear takes a real and compassionate notice of other human beings. Kent leads Lear through the storm to the hovel. He tries to get him to go inside, but Lear resists, saying that his own mental anguish makes him hardly feel the storm:

...this tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else (III. iv. 12-13).

Lear’s reply demonstrates that that the symbolic connection between the storm outside and his own mental disturbance is significant. Lear’s physical sensitivity to the storm is more than matched by his mental and emotional anguish. Enid Welsford states:
Lear hardly feels the storm because he is struggling to retain his mental integrity, his 'knowledge and reason', which are not only, as he himself calls them, 'marks of sovereignty', but the essential marks of humanity itself:

O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!
Keep me in temper, I would not be mad! . . .

Lear's dread is justified; 'sweet heaven' rejects his prayer...now that Lear has lost his sanity, he has enlarged his vision. As his wits begin to leave him, he begins to see the truth about himself; when they are wholly gone he begins to have spasmodic flashes of insight in which, during momentary lulls in the storm of vengeful personal resentment, he sees the inner truth about the world.14

Lear sends his Fool inside to take shelter and then kneels and prays. He reflects that, as king, he took too little care of the wretched and homeless, who have scant protection from storms such as this one. He seeks shelter in the hovel merely for the Fool's sake and prays for the miserable and houseless poor. He does not pray for himself; instead, he asks the gods to help "poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm" (III. iv. 28-29).

Lear's obsessive contemplation of his own humanity and of his place in relation to nature and to the gods is heightened still further after he meets Edgar in the guise of a bedlam beggar, who is clad only in rags. Lear's wandering mind turns to his own fine clothing, and he asks, addressing Edgar's largely uncovered body, "Is man no more than this? Consider him well" (III. iv. 100-1). As a king in fact as well as in name, with servants and subjects and seemingly loyal daughters, Lear could be confident of his place in the universe; indeed, the universe seemed to revolve around him. Now, as his humility grows, he becomes conscious of his real relationship to the universe. The bedlam beggar provides him with the living example of the poverty which he pities and by tearing off his

clothes he tries to "Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel" (III. iv. 34). Lear identifies himself with the "unaccommodated man" (III. iv. 105), "poor, bare, forked animal" (III. iv. 106) stripped of everything that made him secure and powerful. The destruction of Lear's pride leads him to question the social order that clothes kings in rich garments and beggars in rags. He realizes that each person, underneath his or her clothing, is naked and therefore weak. He sees too that clothing offers no protection against the forces of the elements or of the gods. Lear's attempt to bare himself is a sign that he has seen the similarities between himself and Edgar: only the flimsy surface of garments marks the difference between a king and a beggar. Each must face the cruelty of an uncaring world. Lear has also internalized the Fool's criticisms of his own errors, and thus he no longer needs to hear them from an outside source. This self-criticism and newfound sympathy for the plight of others marks the continuing humanization of Lear. He wishes the rich people to part with some of their superflux and give it to the poor. This concern for others reflects the growth of Lear's humility, which eventually redeems him. We notice in Lear a transformation of his very person, from the inability to accept the truth to undergo all sufferings patiently, to acknowledge his flaws, to face self-knowledge, to repentance, which in the end enables him to win Cordelia's forgiveness as he achieves his full humanness.

Apparently, the traditional view of the tragedy does not seem to satisfy any longer where man is centrally located and where every cause seems to arise from him and gods are seen to be just. While Irving Ribner stated that the play "affirms justice in the world, which it sees as a harmonious system ruled by a benevolent God", which Dollimore rephrases as "the Christian claim that the suffering of Lear and Cordelia is part of a providential and redemptive design". Instead, for the last few years the humanist view is predominant and as Dollimore argues:

When he is on the heath King Lear is moved to pity. As unaccommodated man he feels what wretches feel. For humanist tragic paradox arises here: debasement gives rise to dignity and at the moment when Lear might be expected to be most brutalized he becomes most human. Through kindness and shared vulnerability human kind redeems itself in a universe where the gods are at best callously just, at worst sadistically vindictive . . . the humanist view likewise centralizes man but now he is in a condition of tragic dislocation. . . If that suffering is to be justified at all it is because of what it reveals about man's intrinsic nature—his courage and integrity. By heroically enduring a fate he is powerless to alter . . . man grows in stature even as he is being destroyed. 17

The truth seems to lie somewhere between the straightly Christian and the anguished humanist positions.

Lear has realized, despite what flatterers have told him that he is as vulnerable to the forces of nature as any human being. He finally understands that his older daughters were sweet-talking to him:

They flattered me like a dog. . .
To say 'ay' and 'no' to every thing that I said! (IV. vi 96-98)

He cannot command the rain and thunder and is not immune to colds and fever (the "ague" of IV. vi. 105) Lear now understands that no amount of flattery and praise can make a king different from anyone else: "Through tattered clothes small vices do appear; / Robes and furr'd gowns hide all" (IV. vi. 162-63). An important thing to notice is that although Lear's physical journey moves tragically from the loss of his kingdom to the loss of his life, on the other level, his psychological progress in the play charts a more optimistic upward path. In his

17 ibid., p.189.
isolation, confusion, and anger, he learns how to be a good human being; he regains his lost ability to empathise with all living creatures, no matter how wretched and ignoble they seem. His psychological journey, therefore, takes him from being a king to being a man, which ironically confers on him self-knowledge and insight which was lacking in his royal condition. About Lear’s madness some of the most memorable phrases in the play come from these descriptions when Cordelia assesses Lear’s condition and she says he is:

As mad as the vex’d sea; singing aloud:
Crown’d with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds,
With hordocks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers,
Darnel, and all the idle weeds . . . (IV. iv. 2–5)

Lear’s madness, which is indicated here by both his singing and his self-adornment with weeds, is tragic and ironic and marked by an embrace of the natural world. Rather than perceiving himself as a royal or heroic figure who transcends nature, he understands that he is a small, component of it. Lear learns from his mistakes and becomes a better and more insightful human being and his values do change over the course of the play. As he realizes his weakness and insignificance in contrast to the awesome forces of the natural world, he becomes a humble and caring individual. He comes to cherish Cordelia above everything else and to place his own love for Cordelia above every other consideration, to the point that he would rather live in prison with her than rule as a king again.

This self-awareness gained through suffering enables Lear to reunite with Cordelia, not as a king condescending to his subject, but as a father embracing his devoted daughter. Awakened from his restorative sleep, he looks deeply into her eyes and discovers his proper place in the world around him:

For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child, Cordelia. (IV. vi. 68-69)
Lear's psychological journey in the play has finally made him worthy of Cordelia's unconditional love, which he could only experience and appreciate as a man, not as a king. Lear's progress takes him on a spiritual journey through death and purgatory, which concludes in a heavenly reunion with Cordelia. When Lear gives up his throne at the outset of the play, he dies as a king so that he can be reborn as a man. His agony in the storm which follows with his "death" is purgatorial in nature because it punishes him not for his sins but purifies him for the eventual reunion with his daughter, whom he describes in celestial terms after awakening from his sleep:

You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave.
Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead. (IV. vii. 45-48)

He thinks he is in hell, having been rescued by an angel. The wheel of fire is a "traditional metaphor in the medieval legends and visions of Hell and Purgatory" as noted by Kenneth Muir. Envisioning hell is not difficult for Lear, since Cordelia as some heavenly spirit has only just rescued him from a hellish existence on the earth. Thus, Lear's purgatorial torment, complete with all the possible instruments of torture, has so thoroughly cleansed his spirit that he can finally experience, at the very end of his life, the regenerative love of his angelic Cordelia. Armed with this knowledge, Lear can express his newfound humility and beg repentance. "I am a very foolish fond old man" (IV. vii. 60), he tells her sadly, and he admits that:

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me, for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.

---

Love and forgiveness, embodied in Lear's best daughter, join with his humility and repentance, and, for a brief time, happiness prevails. Throughout the play, *King Lear*, we are awaiting to see this reunion of Lear and his daughter Cordelia. While Lear hides from Cordelia out of shame, she seeks him out of love, crystallizing the contrast between her forgiveness and his repentance. Shakespeare has miraculously depicted a heavenly reunion of Lear and Cordelia in incredibly religious imagery. The phenomenon of embracing suffering is a true mark of the condition of purgatory. And Cordelia's angelic 'charity' exactly matches the abysmal humility of Lear. Call the scene Christian or humanistic; it certainly reaches the climax of high poetic and dramatic art where all the elements find their perfect place in a higher synthesis.

The play's emotional extremes of hope and despair, joy and grief, love and hate, are brought to the fore in the final scene. Lear's address to Cordelia at the beginning of the scene is strangely joyful. When he is being taken to prison we find in him no trace of the desire to take revenge, in fact he has left behind all those attributes of anger and has gained a new stature. He inhabits an intimate world that knows only love and no pride:

> We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage;
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,
> And ask of thee forgiveness: (V. iii. 9-11).
This expression of 'kneeling' glances back at his own words to Regan but is uttered with a heaven of difference. Lear asks for nothing more than to be with Cordelia. Shakespeare has been careful to counterbalance defeat on the physical level with victory on the psychological and spiritual realms. At this very instance we are reminded of the words of Edgar where he states:

Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither;  
Ripeness is all. (V. ii. 9-11)

What Edgar speaks holds true for Lear as in his endurance he has gained a wider vision of life. He is ripe in mind as more age and experience has taught him wisdom. He is a man who has learned humility and has achieved spiritual health only through enduring patiently. The play portrays the profound truth of life and depicts man's journey from birth to death wherein a man comes in this world crying realizing beforehand the sufferings of this life and he leaves this world crying after playing his part on this great stage. It is only through enduring patiently all the blows of fate and evils that cause suffering, can man gain a real and precious wisdom and redeem himself from all the wrongs he has done. Lear learns to recognize this painful truth when he says to blind Gloucester:

Thou must be patient; We came crying hither:  
Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air  
We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee: mark.  
... When we are born, we cry that we are come  
To this great stage of fools. (IV. vi. 176-178, 180-81)

and in this cognizance lies his greatness. Lear speaks of life as beginning where in man has to continue to suffer and end in suffering and he further feels that we have to seek the strength to bear all since there is no end to miseries in this life.

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19 refer p.155 above, lines (II. iv. 151-53).
We are reminded of the words of Hamlet when he says, "the readiness is all" (*Hamlet* V. ii. 219). Man's wisdom lies in the ripeness and readiness of mind to accept all the errors committed by him and to seek forgiveness for the wrongs he has done to others. This ripeness is all that matters if Lear were to face in life the slow and agonizing journey towards death. Lear dies only after he has gained wisdom through suffering and heavenly compassion through the redemptive grace of Cordelia.

One may argue that Albany's words ring hollow where he reassures that:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{All friends shall taste} \\
\text{The wages of their virtue, and all foes} \\
\text{The cup of their deservings. (V. iii. 301-3)}
\end{align*}
\]

This refers to the suggestion that the good and the evil both ultimately get what they deserve and upon this notion rests the belief of many scholars that Shakespeare's tragic characters reach to their tragic doom because of some 'grievous flaw' in them, and as Merilyn French rightly comments:

\[
\text{. . .to pounce on Lear's guilt or flaw, to see the drama as one of sin leading to punishment, penitence, and salvation, seems to me to diminish him in a way the play itself refuses to do. For we love Lear not because he is right, or because he is more sinned against than sinning but because of the depth of his passion.}^{20}
\]

Can anyone deny the fact that gods give their approval most readily to the kind of sacrifice which Lear and Cordelia make. Lear's inspired utterance is significant in reminding us of this:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,} \\
\text{The Gods themselves throw incense (V. iii. 20-21)}
\end{align*}
\]

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\(^{20}\)op. cit., p.250.
Lear is not thinking of the gods who toy with us as wanton boys do with flies. These are gods who know. It melts our hearts and gains our sympathies too, that had been frozen. The good are seen growing better to liberate their souls and from conceit and confusion. To err is indeed human, and to mend is more profoundly human. Lear's suffering cannot be seen as a punishment that visits a blundering soul but as an agent of growth and maturity. If he is punished for a chance folly, so enormously, it is indeed monstrous. Gods though they seem to be hostile greatly honour these magnificent souls. Though we do not find this transfiguration of man through suffering, Aeschylus's vision stands vindicated in the spectacle of Lear's life. The great insight is not found accomplished in dramatic terms in Greek tragedy. Shakespeare fully achieves the Aeschylean ideal. Who can say that the Greek tragedy fell short and the Shakespearean tragedy was triumphant? One must acknowledge that the tragic muse evolves from Aeschylus to Shakespeare: Shakespeare's tragic imagination only completes what Aeschylus began. The tragic substance belongs to the human heritage.

Most of the virtuous characters die along with the villains, making it difficult to interpret the scene as poetic justice. We may feel that the disloyal Goneril and Regan, the treacherous Edmund, the odious Oswald, and the brutal Cornwall richly deserve their deaths. But, in the last scene, when the audience expect some kind of justice to be doled out, the good characters Gloucester, Cordelia, Lear die as well, and their bodies litter the stage alongside the corpses of the wicked. This final, harrowing wave of death raises, yet again, a question that has burned throughout the play: is there any justice in the world? "Is this the promised end?" (V. iii. 261). Lear enters with Cordelia dead in his arms, howling over her dead body:

Howl, howl, howl, O! you are men of stones:
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever. (V. iii. 256-58)

Lear now asks:

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? (V. iii. 305-306)

This question can be answered only with the stark truth that death comes to all, regardless of each individual's virtue or all. The great 'rage' may be killed in him but Lear kills the person who hanged Cordelia signifying that he is not a person who wavers in his action. He still is the same King Lear, 'every inch a king' (IV. vi. 107), who cannot tolerate injustice and denial of love. He is not a person in whom we witness a mere change of personality but maturation. As W R Elton writes:

. . . anger marks both Lear's opening scene, when he rages at Cordelia, and his closing scene, when at her death he storms at the heavens. . . . as in [this case it is] Lear's desired 'noble anger' which, instead of bursting forth, comes deliberately called.  

When wronged he is not ready to excuse and at the same time, when he does something wrong himself he is ready to kneel down and ask for forgiveness. The only hope for him was to die with Cordelia by his side and when even that vision is denied he enters into a great gloom and a noble rage. Certainly we also with Lear feel the same kind of agony for the death of Cordelia who seems to be punished by the gods for no fault of hers. Nahum Tate's ending which resurrects


22 Nahum Tate, *Dedication and Prologue to his version of King Lear*, 1681; included in *Shakespeare: King Lear A Casebook*, ed. by. Frank Kermode, (Macmillan, London, 1992), pp.25-26
Cordelia and Dr Johnson's more honest version where he finds Cordelia's death shocking that he wants to avoid it are instances of the same kind of feeling of despair and anguish at the event. And as for Lear he suffers the last affliction of all because of the death of Cordelia and any facile theory of poetic or any other justice stands discarded. Lear never deserved this ultimate punishment of seeing Cordelia dead in his arms.

A. W. Schlegel rightly observes:

After surviving so many sufferings, Lear can only die; and what more truly tragic end for him than to die from grief for the death of Cordelia? . . . According to Shakespeare's plan the guilty, it is true, are all punished, for wickedness destroys itself; but the virtues that would bring help and succor are everywhere too late, or overmatched by the cunning activity of malice.24

Kent rightly says, "The wonder is, he hath endur'd so long:" (V. iii. 315) and in his grief and madness, Lear expires in a flash of utterly illusory hope, thinking that Cordelia is coming back to life:

This feather stirs; she lives! If it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt (V. iii. 264-66)

Lear, now an embodiment of love, affection and humility seems to go past all the sorrows experienced by him in his life and dies looking at Cordelia's lips and face:

Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there! (V. iii. 307-8)

23 op. cit., p.222.
24 op. cit. p.32.
It seems to him that she is still alive. Thus W R Elton is right in saying that:

Lear dies between extremes of a kind of joy in his desperate illusion of her lips' movement and of grief in his emphatic knowledge that his daughter was needlessly butchered.  

The poignant ambiguity of emotion is inclusive: the tragedy of unmerited death and hope of life are held in equilibrium in the climactic moment of Lear's own death. Lear's dying in grief for Cordelia is his dying in bliss. Though he wanted to live in happiness under her care, he has now the compensation of dying with a vision of a living Cordelia.

Similarly, Gloucester, as Edgar announces, dies partly of joy: "his flaw'd heart, ... 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, / Burst smilingly" (V. iii.195-98). For everyone else in King Lear, love seems to lead only to death. In perhaps the play's ruthless final moment, we are left with only a terrifying uncertainty: the good and the evil alike die. The corpses on the stage at the end of the play, of the young as well as the old, symbolize despair and death just as the storm at the play's center symbolizes chaos and madness. We are left wondering whether there is any justice, any system of punishment and reward in the "tough world" of this powerful but painful play, where though the wicked ones perish the good ones have no hope to survive. The ending with Edgar's words is a poor consolation. The modern deconstructive critics view that in this tragedy there is no vision of order. The way things happened, the play would prove that there does not seem to be any central belief in justice, which means it does not have any moral kind of fulcrum. But we should not forget that chaos is part of cosmos. We have final visions of love in the worlds of Edmund. Even Edmund, learning of the death of Goneril and Regan, says,

Yet Edmund was belov'd.

25 op. cit., p.200.
Even the cruel Edmund thinks of love in his last moments, a reminder of the warmth of which his bastard birth deprived him:

I pant for life; some good I mean to do
Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send,
Be brief in it, to th' castle; for my writ
Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia.
Nay, send in time. (V. iii. 242-48)

Even Satan forgot his mission after seeing the Paradise of Adam and Eve as Milton writes in his *Paradise Lost Book IX*:

Such pleasure took the Serpent to behold
This flow'ry plat, the sweet recess of Eve
Thus early, thus alone; her heav'nly form
Angelic, but more soft and feminine,
Her graceful innocence, her every air
Or gesture or least action overawed
His malice, and with rapine sweet bereaved
His fierceness of the fierce intent it brought.
That space the Evil One abstracted stood
From his own evil, and for the time remained
Stupidly good, of enmity disarmed,
Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge; (455-66)

The wheel is come full circle affirming and reinforcing the basic moral fabric.
Edmund, the one who was making fun of stars now says, "I am here" (V. iii. 173).
The words of Albany ring in our ears:

The judgment of the heavens, that makes us tremble,
Touches us not with pity. (V. iii. 230-31)
When we see the spectacle of divine justice wreaking punishment on the evil ones we do not pity them for their sufferings. We realise suddenly the moments when God does not seem to pity the loved ones too. We just tremble with fear when God's justice beats evil ones. Does it not mean that there is justice in this world as Edgar says:

The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us; (V. iii. 169-70)

There is nothing particularly facile in the words of Albany or Edgar. But we do wonder at the inexplicability of justice. This fact is certain: the good ones die in grace, while the bad ones, in disgrace.

vi

The final words of *King Lear* uttered by Edgar are not just leaves drifting in the wind but profound statements from a man of faith who has witnessed the entire chaos:

The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
Shall never see so much, nor live so long (V. iii. 322-325)

These sober and sombre words emphasise the true meaning as well as the experience of the play. These words exhibit the texture of the play where Lear has seen and borne so much in his life time, that his experience of life is so profound and heart rending that none, not even a person like Edgar, can ever experience
such convulsion in the rest of his whole life. We feel pity for the vulnerable situation of man after having envisioned the condition of Lear, and we experience terror for the world where in the workings of the divine elements remain incomprehensible forever. Shakespeare does point out that Lear's appeal to the gods is put down. This is a deconstructive vision. Then how do we explain Edgar's statement, "the Gods are just". This kind of basic morality does not conflict with the general chaos. The tragic sense depends upon this kind of dichotomy between human actions and its consequences. We see the victims of the world rising to the stature of the angels who take upon themselves the mystery of the things. Here we are forced to comment as George Steiner writes in *The Death of Tragedy* with insight:

Tragedy is irreparable. It cannot lead to just and material compensation for past suffering... We are punished far in excess of our guilt. It is a terrible, stark insight into human life. Yet in the very excess of his suffering lies man's claim to dignity. Powerless and broken, a blind beggar, hounded out of the city, he assumes a new grandeur. Man is ennobléd by the vengeful spite or the injustice of the gods. It does not make him innocent, but it hallows him as if he had passed through flame. Hence there is in the final moments of great tragedy, whether Greek or Shakespeare or neo-classic, a fusion of grief and joy, of lament over the fall of man and of rejoicing in the resurrection of his spirit. No other poetic form achieves this mysterious effect; it makes of *Oedipus, King Lear* and *Phedre* the noblest yet wrought by the mind.26

*King Lear* is a profound tragedy. The entire life of Christ was tragic as he subjected himself to the fate of man when he submitted himself to the ignominy with open eyes and walked the tragic path. That means, the very fate of man is tragic; so is all human existence. It is this tragic paradigm which we witness in Lear. The good suffer more not because there is not any justice but because the good ones are made heavenly here on this very earth through suffering. Only the

26 George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, (Faber and Faber, London, 1961), p. 8-10.
good are seen suffering while the evil ones just disintegrate. Those who are good
are further transformed through their sufferings, like gold thrown in fire. The
lesson of either life or of tragedy is a hard one. The favour of the gods is forceful
wisdom, the privilege of being educated through suffering. The sufferings on
earth are divinely imposed in order to refine and purify human character.

‘Tis Zeus alone who shows the perfect way
Of knowledge; He hath ruled,
Men shall learn wisdom, by affliction schooled. (Agamemnon: 215-17)

It is only God who leads mortals on the way of understanding where wisdom
comes through suffering. Even as by the law of gravity things must fall, so men
must suffer to gain wisdom. One who suffers alone can be wise as experience
teaches. Life is a path through tribulation towards perfection: moral and spiritual
enlightenment is forged in a furnace of suffering. Punishment is inflicted by Zeus
not in exercise of vengeance or in the interest of an abstract justice but for the
instruction and improvement of the doer. This type of tragic vision can redeem all
Shakespearean tragic heroes. When they die they become more beautiful.
‘A terrible beauty is born’ to use W B Yeats’s words. They are enriched by
tragedy and so they enhance our sense of joy because we do feel that they have
not died in vain. This should be applied to all the tragedies whether Greek or
Shakespearean. Any conventional or formal questions on the existence of justice
on the earth become irrelevant when the protagonist almost reaches the shore of
spirituality. Nobody can question the greatness of these tragic protagonists as
their greatness is released by the entire tragic programme, call it discipline or
cross, whatever you like. So in that sense all great tragedies are Christian
because it was Christ who first taught men that they must suffer not because they
are guilty of any particular sin but because only on the cross they can be reunited
to divinity.
As we have noted before a happy ending has been contrived for this play, which is approved by Dr Johnson. For them the "Truth and Virtue shall at last succeed". According to them the deaths of Edmund, Goneril, Regan is justified but Lear and Cordelia should be allowed to escape death and spend the rest of their lives together happily. Dr Johnson writes that "all reasonable beings naturally love justice" and according to him this is what the play denies. Lear according to him is denied restoration with the death of Cordelia and he is made to suffer beyond any human expectations and limits of pain. His point is to some extent justified as we tend to expect some justice from the gods above us for the pain and anguish experienced by Lear. Cordelia's death shatters all the hopes of justice in this world but we should not forget that Lear is "bound upon a wheel of fire" (IV. vii.46-47) and only death can bring peace to him. Death is said to be necessary and absolute. Unamuno De Miguel puts it as the "tragic sense of life". Walter Benjamin writes that:

... the determination of the tragic character to die is also only apparently heroic. ... Death thereby becomes salvation.26

Moreover what Lear wants is not his royal robe and sceptre but forgiveness from Cordelia for the wrongs he has done to her and peace and happiness by her side which finally redeems him and he dies with the hope that Cordelia is still alive. Lear no longer wishes to live is clear from the words of Kent:

O! let him pass; he hates him
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer (V. iii. 312-314)

Bradley rightly comments:

27 op. cit., p.222.
There is nothing more noble and beautiful in literature than Shakespeare's exposition of the effect of suffering in reviving the greatness and eliciting the sweetness of Lear's nature...there is no figure, surely, in the world of poetry at once so grand, so pathetic, and so beautiful as his. Well, but Lear owes the whole of this to those sufferings which made us doubt whether life were not simply evil, and men like the flies which wanton boys torture for their sport. Should we not be at least as near the truth if we called this poem *The Redemption of King Lear*, and declared that the business of the gods with him 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? 29
(Italics mine)

The most important thing to notice is that Lear does not shirk his responsibility and he accepts the wrong he had done to Cordelia. This acceptance of the reality is the mark of a great human being, who unlike any ordinary person does not deny or try to shift the blame on anyone else. It is their goodness only that makes Shakespeare's tragic characters accept the wrongs they have done to others and makes them at once admirable as moral giants. There is something Christian in King Lear as he recognizes that he bears responsibility for both his own sufferings and for those of others too, and suffers with deepening humility. His understanding of the fact that no one is above God's justice is a very important value. In accepting responsibility and in acknowledging that he is not incapable of any failure or error in life redeems a Shakespearean tragic hero at once. Lear's humility is as authentic as Hamlet's own before Laertes, though in a far different context.

Shakespeare's tragic characters grow so tall in their stature by the end of the play that they become epitomes of goodness. They, in fact, reach to such moral stature that by the catastrophe we can comment that Aristotle's remark

29 op. cit., p.246.
about the tragic hero taken as 'not being eminently good'\textsuperscript{30} should be modified to mean 'not being eminently good to begin with'. *King Lear*, in fact, forces every spectator to believe that through his sufferings and by enduring them patiently, Lear by the end of the play has become an enlightened soul. Marilyn French rightly argues:

\begin{quote}
\ldots at the penultimate moment of the play, Lear seems very large indeed... he does not drown in guilt, he retains will, he retains prowess enough to kill Cordelia's killer, he renounces power-in-the-world, and desires only felicity, love, harmony. He has achieved full humanness.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

So finally, we can say that Tragedy is a spectacle of the growth of a great but erring soul which is overwhelmed by forces far beyond his understanding and control, but rising in greatness to stand finally firm in the teeth of an all-devouring calamity. If Lear had been handicapped by an innate flaw, he would not have risen to his fullness in the end. The tragic hero, is not 'pre-eminently good', in the sense of perfection but, he has the potentiality to rise to the fullest stretch of his *arête*, excellence, by the end of the tragic course. Precisely because they rise so high the fall of the tragic characters is so awesome.

\textbf{vii}

Shakespeare's tragic heroes are thought to be 'slaves of passion' by Lily B Campbell. She thinks that in them there is domination of passion over reason and writes that:

\begin{quote}

\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{31}op. cit., p.256.
Shakespearean tragedy made concrete Elizabethan moral teaching, and that teaching was central about the conflict of passion and reason in man's soul. When passion rather than reason controls his will, man errs or sins. And the punishment for error and for sin is first of all seen in the turbulence of soul created by passion. . . [Then] the disintegration and turmoil grow.32

All that we can say is that all the actions of Shakespeare's tragic heroes are not controlled by a calculative reason. But there is always some or the other reason behind what the tragic protagonist does. He walks on a double-edged razor path as whatever he does he is bound to cause his fall. He is caught in the web of fate, chance and many other circumstances and the divine factor also pays its part. We see in Othello how the unsuspecting frankness and open nature of the Moor is played upon and exasperated by the artful dexterity of Iago. What aggravates the sense of pity and terror in us and anguish in the case of Lear is not so much his lack of reason but the petrifying indifference, the cold and calculative selfishness of his daughters. Shakespeare's Hamlet explores the steep and thorny way of self-realization from this very capacity to reason. There is a 'method' in the 'madness' of the great heroes. To borrow from Pascal, they have a reason, which Reason does not know.

The reason which the tragic hero takes as his subject is always that which strikes him as proper. His follies are rooted deep in the human heart whose bond is the hardest to loosen. There is a tug and war in the tragic heroes who possess noble nature. The mind of Lear, staggering between the weight of attachment and the hurried movements of reasoning, is like a tall ship driven about by the winds, buffeted by the furious waves, but that ship still rides above the storm though having its anchor fixed in the bottom of the sea; or it is like the sharp rock circled by the eddying whirlpool that foams and beats against it, but can not cut the rock. Such are the characters that Shakespeare has drawn who are wrenched from all

32 op. cit., p. 248.
its accustomed holds but still are great souls. Shakespeare's characters are masterpieces in the age of restless inquiry; they contain the highest examples of the force of individual reasoning. The great soliloquies of either Hamlet or Othello are, to borrow Wordsworth's definition of imagination 'reason in its most exalted mood'.

Bradley's observation is significant:

If we confine our attention to the hero, and to those cases where the gross and palpable evil is not in him but elsewhere, we find that the comparatively innocent hero still shows some marked imperfection or defect—irresolution, precipitancy, pride, credulousness, excessive simplicity to sexual emotions, and the like. These defects or imperfections are certainly, in the wide sense of the word, evil, and they contribute decisively to the conflict and catastrophe.

But it was this kind of view that really made critics search for some defect in the hero. For centuries this tag of *hamartia* unfortunately misled people to a flawed vision of tragedy so that scholars and critics consciously started digging into the tragic protagonist to find some fault in him to explain the cause of such an enormous suffering, heart-rending calamity and fatal disaster. A relevant objection to Bradley's approach to the Shakespearian protagonists could be that he does not isolate the realm of great art enough and see that what is perhaps desirable to handle the actual complexities of real life is not possible in the realm of art which is guided by the internal laws specific to the creation of art. The tragic protagonist is said to possess all the virtues and only one fault, flaw or mistake of judgment. One frailty seems to tar their image and for critics one frailty is enough to label such enormous characters, but tragedy is not brought about by this one frailty. Evidently the virtues which he possesses should be enough to save him and avoid the tragic catastrophe. Here I would like to refer to the story of

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Everyman where he tries to save himself by analyzing his past deeds and by accepting all his sins. Just one virtue of his, faith in God, saves him from all the miseries of life and ultimate death. But Shakespeare was writing at the time of a huge change in the Renaissance England where it was impossible for him to believe that the universe was ruled by an order as there was a lot of turbulence and chaos everywhere. Shakespeare was sensitive to the explosion of new ideas around him. Thus a Shakespearean play would not turn only on a particular, singular shortcoming of a tragic character as the play holds a mirror to a complex society and a whole complex age. A play is a microcosm. So, when that is so how can we pin the protagonist down to one frailty? We have to realize that any situation, even in life, is not uni-centred but poly-centred. Though the world of art has verisimilitude, it has its own complexities which shape it.

What needs to be apprehended is we should do justice to the Shakespearean tragic hero's moral fibre in a world of good and evil and also to understand the controlling factors that work in each play to create a kind of hostile environment for each hero. Since what the tragic protagonist of each tragedy faces must be entirely due to the outcome of his actions, it must seem to be really because of his error, that whichever other factors whether it is luck or chance or accident or supernatural or even the gods seem to be subsumed under one crucial error. What is required of us is to see the conception of tragic hero as more than a set of readily nameable defects which seem to motivate that hero's choices and actions in a well-nigh pre-destined world. Our response to the tragic hero should be to identify his fundamental and basic personality which remains the same throughout the play for it consists in a particular or individual way of handling the intricacies of life. Both the world that surrounds him and his own individual self should be taken into consideration, for any fuller undertaking of the dramatic situation.
With Shakespeare's tragic heroes their words and their actions are enough to communicate their thoughts and their beliefs or whatever they say and do. Shakespeare wanted to present his tragic characters not as persons with vices but virtues. The reality of Shakespeare's tragic heroes lies precisely in what they acknowledge their confronting of any situation or relationship, in what they take their world to be. For example, Lear takes his daughters by their words and does not doubt them as no father has any reason to believe that his children will treat him with filial ingratitude and thus anger overtakes him when he is even refused basic amenities of life by his two ungrateful daughters. And as for his banishing of Cordelia, Lear accepts the wrong he has done to her and does all that he can to ask for forgiveness of her and gods above us. No tragic hero can be viewed separately from his basic noble nature and the wrongs that others have done to him, the sufferings he has undergone, the majestic way in which he acknowledges his responsibility and then accepts death ultimately as a consummation. That is what Shakespeare means to say in the play.

One more basic reality to which Shakespeare wants to draw our attention is that he seems to include his tragic vision and endorsement of the fact that the protagonist eventually comes to terms with the truth of life as he has encountered it and reaches his spiritual heights within the given situation, at the end of the play. Only when the tragic heroes are conceived in this way where their total moral strength is counted we can say that we can do justice to such masterpieces. We would have done justice to the tragic vision only when we honour their integrity unfractured by the so-called hamartia. Hamartia seems to be the excuse; their integrity is the truth.