

# KING LEAR

Images and themes

# Note...

- Ideas are often developed through the **patterns of images** Shakespeare creates.
- Some of the images and themes remain **perplexing**.

# Nothing

- 'Nothing' and 'Nothingness' are important concepts.
- Lear loses: status, family, mind.
- Learns the value of Cordelia's 'nothing my lord' (Act 1 scene 1).

# Clothing

- Linked to ideas about appearance and reality.
- Oswald – often deceptive.
- Virtuous characters – assume disguises in order to survive.
- Fool, Kent and Edgar – humbly dressed.
  - Fool – motley (dissimilar, assortment)
  - Kent – as a man servant
  - Edgar – garb of social outcast
- Servants – source of hope, charity and justice.

# Clothing

- Ceremonial garments in court – suspect.
- Conceals truth.
- Act 5 – Lear's sanity is restored – ready to put on fresh clothes.
- No longer needs his crown of poisonous and bitter weeds, a symbol of his jarred senses.
- Cordelia instructs her servants to dress Lear in more fitting garments (irony).

# Animals

- ▣ References to **savage creatures** – associated with **Gonerill and Regan** (fiends and monsters).
- ▣ **Gonerill** – ‘**sharp-toothed**’ like a vulture with a ‘**wolfish visage**’ (Act 1, sc v).
- ▣ Lear calls her a ‘**detested kite**’ (Act 1, scene iv)
- ▣ Tells Regan she ‘**looked black ... most serpent like**’ (Act 1, scene iv)
- ▣ Gonerill and Regan are **destroyed** by their **animal instincts**.

# Animals

- Lear – ‘the hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long/  
That its had it head bit off by its young’ (Act 1 sc 4)  
– emphasises his **vulnerability**.
- Final scene: Lear and Cordelia **will “sing like birds in a cage”** (V.3.9).
- An **attractive animal** image, however, song-birds are passive, tame creatures.
- Are Lear’s visions of happiness **deluded?**

# Sight and Blindness

- The importance of seeing yourself and the world clearly is one of the key themes in King Lear.



Many images of:

- Sight and blindness
- Light and dark
- Eyes
- Weeping
- Monarch as candle
  - Source of light and life in the kingdom
  - When burns 'out' all the characters associated with him are left "darkling".

# Sight and Blindness

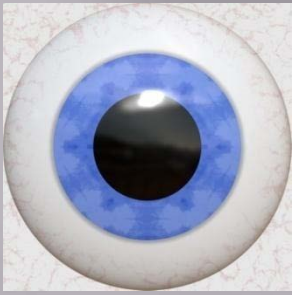


- After the **storm** – Lear sees more clearly when he meets Gloucester.
- IV, vi – **Black humour** – reference to sight
- Heightens **pathos and comic relief**.

**LEAR:** No eyes in your head, nor no money in your purse? Your eyes are in a heavy case, your purse in a light; yet you see how this world goes.

**GLOUCESTER:** I see it feelingly.

**LEAR:** What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears (IV. 6).



# Sight and blindness

- Puns might appear cruel.
- But Gloucester and Lear now 'see how the world goes'.
- Both 'stumbled' when they saw.
- Gloucester's blinding – physical manifestation of the mental torture endured by Lear on the heath.
- Cordelia associated with healing tears and radiant light.
- Lear struggles against weeping – until Cordelia dies.

# Madness

- A serious portrayal of madness.
- Different types of madness:
  - Political insanity – Lear
  - Abhorrent madness – Gonerill, Regan and Cornwall
  - Professional madness – Fool (comic relief)
  - Fake madness – Edgar (comic relief)
  - Half-crazed pity - Gloucester
- Does insanity cure Lear's moral blindness?
- What of the tormenting nature of madness?

# Bedlam (Bethlehem)

- A **hospital** often visited by **Elizabethans**.
- Visited for **entertainment**.
- To enjoy the spectacle of the **mad beggars**.
- Could Shakespeare have **intended** the audience to laugh at Poor Tom?



# Madness

- Pathos heightened by Edgar's craziness (Act III).
- Ultimately madness is deeply distressing:
  - Mock trial
  - Description of being driven close to suicide by devils.

# Suffering

- Intense, violent and relentless.
- Many characters driven almost beyond the limits of endurance.
- Femininity is closely linked to suffering.
- Even after his senses are restored – Lear continues to suffer. (Guilt)
- Gloucester dies of a broken heart.
- Lear's moment of greatest agony comes when Cordelia dies.
- By now, Kent welcomes death too.

# Suffering cont...

## Causes?

- Gloucester thinks that the **gods are sadistic**
- Lear **blames nature** (for his malignant daughters).
- Can all the agony experienced be **traced back to human acts of unkindness**.
- Characters suffer for their **own sins** or because they are **sinned against**.
- The state suffers too – in **disarray**.
- The **storm** serves as a **metaphor** for **England's suffering** as well as Lear's.
- Torments are **caused and perpetuated** by the characters themselves.

# What is learned through the suffering?

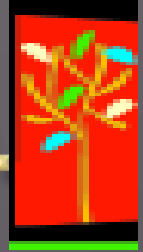
- The good **endure** and **help each other**.
- Lear and Gloucester become more **compassionate** - **reassess themselves** and the society they inhabit.
- Edgar becomes **stronger** and **fit to rule**.
- Three male characters **achieve heroism** through suffering.
- The best natures **can absorb pain and learn**.
- Does Shakespeare suggest that it is man's fate to suffer? 'When we are born we cry that we are come/  
To this great stage of fools' (IV.6).

# Nature



- On the **heath** (moor/moorland)
- Lear asks:
  - Why his daughters have such **hard hearts**.
  - What is the **cause of thunder**.
  - Wants to know if **nature is responsible** for his turmoil.
- **No straightforward answers.**
- **Conflicting views of nature** and what is natural.
- **Dominance** of evil characters – seems to indicate that nature is a cruel force in King Lear.

# NATURE as a cruel force.



- Edmund suggests that nature is a **malevolent goddess** who provides him with the **bad nature** necessary to challenge the status quo.
- Therefore his badness is natural.
- **Gonerill and Regan's** careers seem to confirm this.
- **Cruelty comes naturally** to them and they delight in it.
- No **natural order** for them, they seek **to create** their own selfish universe.

# Benign (kind, caring, gentle) nature

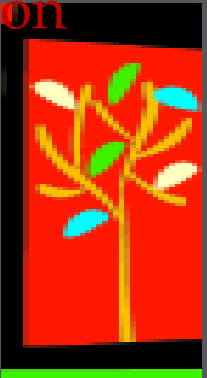
- Good characters see **evil trio** as unnatural.
- Kent, the Fool, Edgar and Cordelia see it as **natural to be loving, trusting and loyal**.
- Believe in a **natural order** which they struggle to **restore**.
- Yet they **suffer**.
- The king represents the **natural order**.
- **Transgresses** against the natural order when he:
  - fails to recognise Cordelia's worth – falsely calls her 'a **wretch whom nature is ashamed/ Almost t'acknowledge hers**' (Act 1 sc 1).
  - Gives Gonerill and Regan **power** over him.

# Nature cont...

- Lear's **unnatural dealing** leads to unnatural dealing in others.
- Gloucester makes **similar errors**.
- Their errors are **disastrous**. Lear's '**frame of nature**' has been **wrenched** '**From the fixed place**'. - suggests the **enormity of his crimes** against the **natural order**.
- An **enormous struggle** ensues, as nature tries **to reassert** herself.
- Storm** – both punishment and protest.

# Nature...

- At the end of Act V it is difficult to believe that nature is benevolent.
- Or that natural order has 'won'.
- Cordelia's death is problematic for those who wish to see the end of Lear as a triumph for nature and the hierarchy.
- Lear seems to suggest that nature is barbaric when he asks, 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all?' (V.III)
- Is Cordelia's death a final punishment for Lear's transgression against nature?
- Edgar's succession is hardly a triumph for the natural order.



# In answer to Lear's questions...

- Gonerill and Regan are most likely **naturally evil**.
- **No obvious reason** why they have hard hearts.
- **But** – Lear causes the thunder through allowing the **hard hearts** to reign.
- Nature **reflects the mistakes of man** in King Lear or does it?
- When man **stoops to folly**, the natural order is easily destroyed.

# Justice



- Characters in King Lear **judge** and put each other **on trial**.
- Gloucester and Lear **misjudge** their children , who seem to **posses better judgment**.
- Cordelia has the **measure of her sisters**.
- Gonerill and Regan's assessment of their father is **acute and accurate**.
- Edmund knows **exactly** how to take in his **gullible relatives**.
- It seems that **good judgment** is not the preserve of those with good intentions.

# Justice



- Lear and Gloucester's **faults** are **reflected** in the workings of **human justice**.
- **'Trials'** in the play are flawed.
  - Lear's 'love-test' is **ill-conceived** and has **disastrous consequences**.
  - **Trial** of Kent –
  - Lear's **mock trial** of Gonerill and Regan – presided over by **a fake madman and a lunatic court jester** (a parody of the love-test – highlights the absurdity of Lear's actions)
- Battle between **French and English** forces is another trial with disastrous consequences.

# Justice cont.

- Cordelia **hanged** in prison – the greatest **injustice** in the play.
- Act V – **human judgment** and the justice system look extremely **fallible**.



# Natural or poetic justice

- V.3. Edgar takes the law **into his own hands** when he challenges Edmund (**Wild justice**).
- We accept the **outcome** of the duel as **appropriate**.
- Edmund **deserves to die**.
- Also – Cornwall **killed** by his **own servant**.
- Gonerill and Regan are **destroyed by their jealous lust**.
- **Oswald** meets a sticky end.



# Thorniest issue...

- Do Gloucester and Lear deserve **to suffer** and die?
- **Harsh justice?**
- **Gloucester** pays **dearly** for his sins.
- **Lear** too – Cordelia taken from him just as he realises her merits.

# Social justice



- Lear and Gloucester **consider this topic** carefully and reach **radical conclusions**.
- Gloucester **calls on the heavens** to distribute wealth more evenly, Lear considers the lives of **the 'Poor naked wretches'** he paid so little attention to
- Lear rages** against **corrupt members** of the judiciary and appears **to sneer** at himself and all those who **presume to rule and judge** others when he says **'a dog's obeyed in office'** (1V.6)

# Does Shakespeare want us to remain uncomfortable about justice?

- Albany and Edgar.
- We accept the justice of their actions in V.III
- Human judgment still looks faulty.
- Albany has been overwhelmed by events.
- Edgar's bitter words about Gloucester's death seem callous.

# The Gods

- References to **pagan and Christian** deities.
- The characters **appeal** to them in times of crisis, hoping for **divine assistance**.
- Ideas about the gods can also be linked to the theme **of justice**.
- Their **attitudes** towards the gods reflect their natures.
- Conflicting views** from the characters.



# The Gods

- At the beginning of the play, Lear believes they are **on his side**.
- However, later he worries that the **heavens are hostile..**
- By Act V – seems to have **recovered his faith**.
- **Religious imagery** used to describe Cordelia (IV, sc 6)
  - identifies her as an **example of Christian goodness**.
- Cordelia and Edgar behave **with Christian fortitude** and the virtues of **patience, pity and benevolence**.
- Yet, Cordelia is **sacrificed** – hanged in (V.3).

# Justice – are the gods just?

- How can we believe that the gods are just when her body is carried on to the stage just after Albany's line 'The gods defend her' (V.3).
- Do we agree with Gloucester's assessment of the gods as capricious and sadistic?
- Edgar's faith is problematic too: 'the gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/ Make instruments to plague us' does not ring true when Cordelia is hanged.
- It is difficult to reconcile Edgar's belief in the justice of divine retribution with his description of his journey through the play as a 'pilgrimage' (V.3).

- Did Gloucester really **deserve to die for adultery**?
- Is Shakespeare making a case for **atheism**?
- Does **Cordelia's death** undermine every positive statement made about the gods in King Lear?
- Edmund professes **to worship** nature but shows **little respect** for any religion.
- When he does refer to the gods – speaks **ironically**.
- Edmund's **progress** is eventually **checked** by two god-fearing characters.
- The atheist is **not allowed** to defeat the faithful.
- **No straightforward answers.**