

# An Examination of the Theme of Suffering in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*

Layla Farouq Abdeen  
Head of the Department of English Language and Literature  
The World Islamic Science and Education University (WISE)  
Amman - The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan  
Email: Layla.abdeen [AT] wise.edu.jo

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**ABSTRACT----** *This article will attempt to examine the theme of suffering in William Shakespeare's King Lear and Julius Caesar in relation to some of the main characters in each play. Since both plays are tragedies, a lot of suffering is definitely concerned. However, the kind of suffering differs in each play in the sense that the suffering of the tackled prominent characters in the first play is self-inflicted whereas the suffering of the selected main characters in the second is not. The prominent characters that will be examined from the first play are: King Lear, Cordelia, Kent, the Earl of Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund; and from the second: Julius Caesar and Brutus. To elaborate, this article will demonstrate how Lear's decision to divide power among his daughters leads to his own misery and suffering just as the adopted attitudes and characteristics of the other mentioned characters lead to their own suffering as well. On the other hand, since Julius Caesar defeats Pompey in the civil war that takes place just before the play opens, he is to be crowned 'King' by his people who offer him their love, respect, and obedience. This is not well perceived by some distinguished senators who kill him because they see themselves fitter in ruling. The assassination is basically led by Brutus who is persuaded to take part in the conspiracy through deception and who dies at the end of the play for being dragged in this matter for the wrong reasons. In that sense, the suffering of both Caesar and Brutus is consequently inflicted upon them from others and not due to their own conducts.*

**Keywords-----** King Lear, Julius Caesar, tragedy, and self-inflicted suffering.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article will attempt to examine the theme of suffering in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar* in relation to some of the main characters in each play. Since both plays are tragedies, a lot of suffering is definitely concerned. However, the kind of suffering differs in each play in the sense that the suffering of the tackled prominent characters in the first play is self-inflicted whereas the suffering of the selected main characters in the second is not.

## 2. PURPOSE AND PROBLEM

Some critics believe that suffering and agony are the same despite the nature of the misery. However, this article tries to argue that a thin line maybe drawn between the types of human suffering. The article will try to show that one may be able to differentiate between types of suffering.

## 3. IMPORTANCE

The research and examination conducted in this respect may be novel in the sense that not only the consequences of these tragedies will be investigated, but also the reasons behind their existence.

## 4. ESSENTIAL ANALYSIS OF THE TWO CONCERNED PLAYS

### a. KING LEAR

To start with, *King Lear* has two strongly linked plots; the first of which is the main plot of King Lear and his three daughters, while the second is the subplot of the Earl of Gloucester and his two sons. In order to save England from an inevitable civil war after his death, the ageing King Lear, who apparently has no male heir to the throne decides on dividing his Kingdom, England, between his three daughters: Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia.

In order to carry out his decision, King Lear asks his three daughters to state how much they love him so as to accordingly grant them a fair division of that state. This act was intended on King Lear's part to be executed in a playful manner since according to Robert B. Heilman in his article "The Unity of King Lear" in *Shakespeare: King Lear*, love is more genuinely expressed by deeds rather than words (152).

So at the time that both Goneril and Regan utilize their hypocrisy and cunning to answer their father in a most pleasing manner, Cordelia prefers to be honest and, therefore, states her love in a straight forward way that turns out to be very unsatisfactory to the King's ego. Cordelia's attitude here is justified by Alessandro Serpieri in his article "The Breakdown of Medieval Hierarchy in King Lear" in *Shakespearean Tragedy* to be a rejection of the competition itself since she turns out to be wiser than her father for having inner insight that enables her to recognize the weak evidence provided by mere words (90).

A.C. Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy* points out that King Lear loves Cordelia the most and that he knows that she loves him the best. As a result, he is looking forward to the supreme moment in which Cordelia would outdo her sisters in the expression of affection and would consequently be rewarded with the most 'opulent' division of the Kingdom. But since she does not measure up to his expectations it seems natural to him that she put him to open shame (204). In that respect, and due to the rank of Lear, his reward is generous and in the counter sense his punishment is to be extremely correlating with the weight of the reward itself as Peter Ure in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, states that the love of King Lear's daughters is to be paid over for the gratification of the ego (13).

The King is beseeched by his trustworthy friend, the Earl of Kent, to calm him down and not to be swift in voicing decisions that will eventually result in his and the country's damnation. But the infuriated King remains stubborn, and refuses any thoughts of reconsideration by bursting out:

Peace, Kent!

Come not between the dragon and his wrath.

I loved her the most, and thought to set my rest

On her kind nursery. Hence, and avoid my sight!

So be my grave my peace, as here I give

Her father's heart from her! Call France; who stirs?

Call Burgundy, Cornwall and Albany,

With my two daughters' dowers digest this third:

Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her. (1.1.122)

It is essential to examine the exact words of the characters as H. Granville-Barker states in his article "King Lear" in *Shakespearean Criticism 1919-1935* that the dialogue of *King Lear* is remarkable for its combination of power and freedom due to the product of the matter and the nature of the play (122), while Ifor Evans points out in *The Language of Shakespeare's Plays* that the language of *Julius Caesar* is both lucid and well defined (186).

In this respect, it is evident here that King Lear is unwise to issue such a hasty and unjust verdict on his only sincerely loving daughter. Consequently, it is from the very beginning of the first scene that his suffering becomes evident and, therefore, commences in the play. To elaborate, many characters suffer due to this irrational behavior adopted by the King. To start with, Cordelia is the first to immensely suffer in the sense that she is perceived by her father as an undesired burden so he immediately banishes her as a means of punishment.

Cordelia is then placed in a most difficult situation and insulting situation when she is offered as an available commodity to anyone willing to take her even without a dowry. The suffering increases when she is refused by the Duke of Burgundy upon becoming disowned by her father. She is then married off immediately to King France in a very sorrowful manner with no accompanying festivities or a single loving person to bid her farewell.

The suffering of Cordelia in such a manner is ironical since she is the only daughter who shows sincere love and devotion to her father, and she, of all his other daughters, is the one to be harshly punished by him for her honesty that

was misread and erroneously comprehended. In that sense, Cordelia suffers because of her sincerity and straightforwardness.

It is also interesting to point out here that despite the fact that King Lear's basic intention is to punish Cordelia, he also punishes himself by prohibiting himself from seeing her ever again. He torments himself by this very act since he was planning on spending the remainder of his days with only her. He, therefore, starts to lack the things that are most essential for a man of his age: Status and condition. In this regard, he does not experience any peace of mind nor any physical comfort due to his actions that even the fool can perceive as foolish.

In fact, the fool at one point informs the King that he is no longer King Lear but merely: "Lear's Shadow" (1.4.225). At another point, the fool tells the King: "If thou wert my fool, nuncle, I'd have thee beaten for being old before thy time" (1.5.37). In that respect, the fool is frequently utilized to foreshadow King Lear's lack of wisdom and insight that lead to agonies.

Kent, the sincere advisor and friend of the King, also suffers by being likewise abolished from the Kingdom due to the advice that he offers to the King. Like Cordelia, he suffers because of the same reason, his honesty and sincerity, and is also punished in the same manner, abolishment. It is clear here that in an instant of rage, King Lear commits one grave mistake after the other without recognizing anyone whether a dear daughter or a close confidant. He is in that regard, shunning away all of those who not only sincerely care for him but also love him for what he is not for what they would gain from him. In other words, he is by that not only punishing those closely related to him, but also himself, and this naturally adds to his own sufferings.

However, he tries to survive based on false hope by turning to his eldest daughter: Goneril to stay with, but upon her suggestion to cut down the number of his escorting knights from one hundred to fifty, he turns to Regan who also turns him down by reducing that number to nothing at all. All of this takes place in accordance with their preplanned scheme to weaken their father's remaining authority after being highly regarded and carefully obeyed. At this point, Lear realizes that his suffering is not to cease since he becomes in fact a homeless madman.

Moreover, Goneril makes it a point for her steward, Oswald, to lightly deal with her father when he encounters him. She also instructs Oswald to inform any other servant to behave in such a manner in order to ridicule the "King". All of this is carried out by Goneril in order to deprive the suffering King from any remaining self-esteem whether perceived by others or by himself.

These very cruel acts reveal that both Goneril and Regan, in actuality, hate their own father. Of course such mean attitudes are heartbreaking and cruel enough, but coming from a very close blood relation, a bond, such as a daughter, make them even worse since they are simply unnatural. Consequently, King Lear becomes isolated and exiled as an outcast by his own flesh and blood. As a result, he comments by the following when he is first unexpectedly turned down by Goneril:

I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad.

I will not trouble thee, my child; farewell.

We'll no more meet, no more see one another.

But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;

Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,

Which I must needs call mine. Thou art a boil,

A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle,

In my corrupted blood.(2.4.216).

At this point, King Lear is in a state of immense suffering, he is totally disturbed both psychologically and mentally. He finds no comfort where comfort is to be sought, so he simply departs to nature where a violent storm takes place. The storm is considered here to illustrate the turbulent condition King Lear is suffering from in the sense that it is to mirror his agonies and despairs by becoming an old madman with no one to turn to and nowhere to go. Here the

macrocosm in that regard, the natural forces depicted in the storm, are employed to correlate with the disturbed state of the microcosm, man as illustrated by King Lear in the sense that his suffering is reaching to a paramount.

Like King Lear, the Earl of Gloucester is deceived by the cunning schemes of his illegitimate son, Edmund, against his legitimate son, Edgar. These well constructed plans finally succeed and result in the abduction of Edgar by Gloucester. This taken measure to a great extent the abolishment of Cordelia by King Lear. Bradley argues here that the main purpose of the parallel similarities between the two plots of the story in terms of turning the hearts of fathers against their children and the hearts of brothers against each other is to suggest a universal existence of such conditions created by the conducts of these characters that would definitely lead to suffering. (214-215)

Like King Lear, Gloucester suffers both physically and morally. To elaborate, he is being punished by the Duke of Cornwall for being loyal to the King by refusing to hand over the letter. Cornwall is enraged to be disobeyed and captivates Gloucester in his own home and plucks his eyes out. So Gloucester suffers due to the friendship and obligation that he shows towards his Monarch. He, consequently, becomes blinded and wanders in the woods. But here his suffering does not remain on one level which is physical, but it also expands to another mental level.

It is relevant to point out here that even though Gloucester loses his eyesight, yet he starts to gain some kind of inner insight which enables him to discover the wicked plotting of Edmund against Edgar, and it is here that his agony is aggravated since he is a father that sided with one son against the other without adequate investigation. As a result, Gloucester reaches a great state of despair and suffering which he cannot tolerate any longer, therefore, he sets his mind on taking his own life in order to put an end to his ongoing torment had it not been for the prompt intervention of Tom o' Bedlam.

Tom o' Bedlam happens to be Edgar in disguise. He also suffers from the plotting of his brother in the sense that he first conceals his true identity most of the play. He then becomes an outcast living in the wilderness deprived from what he is entitled of. To elaborate, Edgar puts his trust in his brother without confiding in his father as well. He is basically kind hearted and naturally good. Based on that, he believes what he is told especially coming from a close relative as his brother. But it is because of these particular characteristic traits that he suffers.

Edmund on the other hand, is the opposite extreme of his brother. He is an opportunist who does not recognize any bond and lacks any sense of loyalty to anyone. His evilness is a result of his sense of deprivation being an illegitimate child. He is, consequently, unrecognized and this is the reason of his constant condition of inward suffering. To elaborate, his evil conducts are in fact a reaction to the state of denial that he is attempting on altering. To illustrate, he says the following:

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
My services are bound. Wherefore should I  
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit  
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,  
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines  
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base? (1.2.1)

Edmund is tormented because he has no right to inherit. This evokes a sense of not only competition but also jealousy towards Edgar and a sense of hatred towards his father and the community as a whole. In order to stop this state of restlessness, he seeks to be recognized by getting rid of both his brother and father and by ceasing the opportunity of the unstable state affairs to become his head figure, but he is wounded due to a duel that takes place between him and his brother. He eventually dies due to the wound inflicted by Edgar basically because of his own greedy and exploiting nature.

It is evident from the above examination that all the suffering that King Lear goes through is basically a consequence of his own actions. Likewise, all the other tackled prominent characters suffer one way or another due to their own conducts regardless to whether these acts were basically intended to be good or bad. In other words, the

suffering of these key figures in *King Lear* is self inflicted, but this is not the case in terms of the selected characters in *Julius Caesar*.

### b. JULIUS CAESAR

To begin with, it appears as Caesar attempts to spare Rome and its provinces from the agony of the eruption of a civil war by becoming the sole ruler of the state by being crowned as the sole King. This is perceived to be very positive by the people who have been inflicted with miseries and agonies due to previously ongoing civil wars (vi). Nevertheless, his desire to unite the country is misread by some socially prominent Romans such as Marcus Brutus and Cassius to be negative ambition that would eventually exploit the state by the production of a tyrant.

But Wolfgang Clemen argues in *Shakespeare's Soliloquies* that Brutus reaches to an erroneous conclusion since he generalizes about the customary attributes of ambition among those in high ranks. In that sense, Brutus's own reasoning is evidently not based on what is, but on what might later be (114). As a result, all that he is convinced of by Cassius is based on mere speculations that have no concrete evidence.

However, both Brutus and Cassius want to kill Caesar, yet each of them has a different reason for doing so. According to L.C. Knights in *Hamlet and Other Shakespearean Essays*, Cassius thinks of himself more worthy in governing than Caesar since he is physically fitter (86). Therefore, a strong sense of envy is felt on Cassius's part who decides from the very beginning of the play to terminate Caesar. In order for this to materialize, he has to make use of a close friend and confidant of Caesar. Alexander Leggatt in *Shakespeare's Political Drama: The History Plays and the Roman Plays* stresses the fact that Brutus in particular is the one chosen by Cassius to execute this conspiracy due to his stubbornness (143), in the sense that once Cassius succeeded in convincing Brutus of assassinating Caesar, Brutus' mind could not be changed since he says to Cassius:

That you do love me, I am noting jealous;  
What you would work me to, I have some aim;  
How I have thought of this and of these times,  
I shall recount hereafter; for this present,  
I would not, so with love I might entreat you,  
Be any further mov'd. What you have said  
I will consider; what you have to say  
I will with patience hear, and find a time  
Both meet to hear and answer such high things. (1.2.161)

Moreover, Brutus views himself as a patriotic Roman, who loves Caesar but loves Rome even more. He is deceived by Cassius into believing that Caesar very likely will turn into a dictator signifying that he has showed certain characteristics that would eventually result in that. As a result, Cassius makes use of Brutus's political influence on Caesar.

A violent storm breaks out, and once more the macrocosm, is utilized to reflect the disturbance of the microcosm, i.e. Caesar. As a result, due to that storm, and in accordance with the warning directed to him by the soothsayer in regard to the 'ides of March' and based upon Calpurnia's bad dream, Caesar decides on declining to go to the Capitol on the specified date. But being convinced by a conspirator, Decius Brutus, that this attitude will be negatively taken against him by his people, he succumbs and departs to the Capitol.

No doubt that Cassius is cunning and, therefore, plots his scheme to the very last detail. He is, in fact, more intelligent than Brutus by suggesting to also kill Mark Antony which would have been very useful and by also suggesting to wait for the approach of the army of Antony and Octavius rather than for his army and that of Brutus to march to them. In both cases, the judgment of Cassius turns out to be the better thought of in comparison to those of Brutus in regard to the same incidents.

Even though Caesar is suspicious particularly of Cassius based on what he says about him: “Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look; / He thinks too much: such men are dangerous” (1.2.193), he might have been assured by the presence of his friend Brutus, and that is why he did not expect at all Brutus’s participation in the assassination and voiced his sorrowful disappointment by saying: “Et tu, Brute? Then fall Caesar!” (3.1.77)

In other words, Caesar could not bear the idea of Brutus’s betrayal in the sense that he was resisting the stabs of others, but when he came to recognize Brutus, he just gave up, having no interest in living anymore. In this regard, the suffering of Caesar is not inflicted by himself, it is rather inflicted by others on him; mainly Brutus and Cassius.

Yet also Brutus suffers at the end due to the treachery of Cassius since Coppèlia Kahn in *Roman Shakespeare* argues that Cassius offers to serve as a mirror for Brutus trying to convince him that he will reflect the hidden worthy matters that need to be resolved (80). Cassius in that sense is manipulating Brutus to serve as a tool, a means to his own ends. He even exploits him by tricking him into thinking that the several letters that are thrown at his window are from the Roman citizens who are awaiting his action. In this regard, Cassius is deceiving Brutus into thinking that he is some kind of savior of the people.

In this sense, Brutus could be viewed as being framed in behaving in such a manner that resulted in the killing of Caesar. Consequently, one could argue that also the suffering of Brutus, which leads to committing suicide, was not self inflicted being entirely designed by Cassius.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, since both *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar* were written by Shakespeare as tragic plays, no doubt that a lot of suffering is involved especially in relation to the tragic heroes. However, based on the above examination, it is evident that suffering could be categorized as being either self-inflicted or not based upon the actions of the concerned protagonists. Consequently, each of these plays, *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*, serves to be a strong example of one of these two different types of suffering.

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