

King Lear | Sample answer

“In King Lear honour and loyalty triumph over brutality and viciousness”. Write your response to this statement supporting your answer with suitable reference to the text. (2010)

Loyalty and honour are traits which are strongly evident in some of the characters in the play King Lear, however I do not necessarily agree that the honourable ultimately triumph the brutal and selfish characters in the play. While some characters initially appear to be of good intent, they are often revealed to be spiteful and unpleasant. On the other hand, the character of Cordelia first appears to be headstrong and cruel, but in the end, she is shown to be a character of honour and compassion. The loyal and noble characters feature strongly in the play; however, their good deeds are often counteracted by malicious characters, and therefore I cannot say for certain that honour and loyalty triumph over brutality. While the love test reveals both admirable and vicious qualities among Lear's daughters, Edmund's betrayal of his brother, Goneril's lack of respect for her father and the gouging out of Gloucester's eyes reveal some of the characters' evil ways. However, Kent and the Fool's loyalty to Lear and Cordelia's courageous return to her father's aid show that honour and morality are traits which are evident among characters.

The love test set by Lear in Act 1 Scene 1 is undoubtedly one of the most memorable moments in the play. It seems absurd to the modern viewer than a father would ask his daughters to compete for their inheritance, “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?”. However, this love test reveals a lot to us about the nature of his daughters. Goneril and Regan do not hesitate to flatter their father, eager to present themselves as loyal and worthy of his Kingdom, “I love you more than words can wield the matter”. Cordelia takes a more honest approach and does not lie to her father about the extent of her love for him, “I love you Majesty/According to my bond; no more nor less”. While Cordelia's bluntness is somewhat honourable, it does not win her any part of the King's Kingdom, “Nothing will come of nothing”. While Lear's decision to divide his Kingdom between the two daughters who praised him may initially appear to be showing loyalty triumphing over brutal honesty, it quickly becomes clear that this is not the case, “Time shall unfold what

plighted cunning hides". When it is revealed to us that Goneril and Regan's intentions are not as pure as initially thought, "We must do something, and i' the heat", it is evident that cunningness has triumphed over honour in the competition for Lear's Kingdom. Edmund's forging of a letter in Edgar's name also reveals to us how being of cunning nature can lead a character to victory.

Being Glouster's illegitimate son has caused Edmund to develop into a spiteful and jealous character who is seeking revenge, "Edmund the base/Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper". Edmund's decision to betray his brother by forging a letter with plans to overthrow their father in Edgar's name reveals his malicious nature. It is clear that he does not honour the truth and has no loyalty to either his father or his brother. Edmund's greedy lust for power and wealth has led him to disregard his morals and behave in a wicked manner, "stand up for bastards!". Glouster's readiness in believing this tale of Edgar shows how he expects the worst of others and anticipates them to act cruelly towards him, "Unnatural, detested, brutish villain!". This reveals to the audience that in this world, it is the norm for spite and viciousness to win out over honour and goodness, "Let me, if not quite frustrating as it is a clear example of brutality triumphing over morality and of how justice does not always prevail. Edmund's brutal nature leads him to further victory when he convinces Edgar that his father is after him in order to get him to go into hiding, "Brother, I advise you to the best: go armed". Edgar's honour and regard for the truth leads him to fall straight into Edmund's trap by unquestioningly taking his brother's advice, "Some villain hath done me wrong". It is strikingly clear that the good and moral characters are so often taken advantage of by the wicked, much to their detriment. Edmund's wickedness towards his father is reminiscent of the way in which Goneril behaves towards Lear.

Despite the fact that Lear has divided his Kingdom between Goneril and Regan, he still wishes to hold on to the luxuries that come with being King, such as that of having a train of knights. However, as a new ruler of the Kingdom, Goneril is only too aware that it is within her power to reduce Lear's number of knights, "A little to disquantity your train". She has no regard for her father's needs and is motivated by the selfish desire to reduce his power completely in order to safeguard her new position. She openly criticises her father's ruling of the Kingdom, "Makes it more like a tavern or a brothel/Than a graced palace", highlighting her lack of respect and loyalty towards him. Her greedy desire for power has caused her to behave in a vicious and discourteous manner and it is evident that she does not honour the man who gave her life, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is/To have a thankless child!". In Goneril's case, it is clear that her desire for

power has caused her evil streak to win out over any allegiance to her father she possessed. While Goneril undoubtedly behaves in a despicable manner, Lear's own behaviour is far from faultless. He also shows little respect for his daughter and lets his anger get the better of him, "Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend". Goneril quickly goes from being one of Lear's favourite daughters, one of the chosen ones to inherit the Kingdom, to being a "Detested kite!" whom he doesn't honour or trust, "Thou liest!". Lear's erratic and selfish behaviour overshadows his loyalty and love for his daughter. While Lear somewhat redeems himself later in the play, Goneril is further seen to be a deplorable and vicious character with no honour when she orders Gloucester's eyes to be gouged out.

The plucking out of Gloucester's eyes in Act 3 Scene 7 is undoubtedly the most gruesome and horrific scene in the play. Such a heinous act involved the wills of four malicious characters – Goneril, Regan, Edmund and Cornwall – all eager to outdo each other in the extent of their cruelty, "Hang him instantly!" "Pluck out his eyes!". This competitiveness between them to be the most malicious results in their forgetting about morality and justice. I am particularly appalled by Edmund's ready acceptance of his father's fate, which again highlights his lack of loyalty to his father as well as his undeniable viciousness. This ruthless act of plucking out Gloucester's eyes shows all characters involved to be heartless people who don't honour other human beings, "Ingrateful fox, 'tis he". This scene also indirectly shows Goneril and Regan's unfaithfulness towards their father. By harming Gloucester, who they know to be one of their father's dearest friends, they are portraying an evident lack of care for their father and his relationships. As we have seen before, their brutality does not stop short of hurting family members, "lunatic King". Gloucester's naivety leads him to believe that the 'loyal' Edmund will come to his aid, but Goneril informs him on no uncertain terms that Edmund does not honour his father, "It was he/That made the overture of thy treasons to us, /Who is too good to pity thee". Goneril's lack of empathy for this injured old man makes clear to us that her own selfish desires cancel out any compassion within her. While this play is not short of characters whose Machiavellian ways triumph over their integrity and dignity, there are also characters who display more likeable, honourable attributes.

Two characters who are heart-warmingly loyal to Lear are those of the Fool and Kent. Despite having been previously shunned by Lear, "Out of my sight!", Kent returns in disguise to serve his friend and stays by him in the storm, "I will go seek the King". Kent's loyalty is impressive, even if somewhat unexpected, as most characters would completely have abandoned the King after

being spoken to by him in such a rude manner. This makes it clear to us that Kent is not an evil nor bitter man, but one of moral values and honour. Despite on occasion mocking the King, "I am a fool, thou art nothing", it is clear that the Fool honours and respects the King when he stays with him out in the storm, "court holy-water in a dry house is better than this rain-water out o' door". In the case of both Kent and the Fool, their faithfulness and dutifulness towards the King wins out over any grudges or hostilities they may hold against him. They stay with Lear in his time of need, highlighting how both characters are not necessarily after the King's wealth, but are genuinely concerned for his welfare. I personally find the Fool and Kent's loyalty to Lear to be courageous and honourable, especially considering that this loyalty could result in them being punished by the Kingdom's new rulers. Lear's own honour and goodness is also seen for the first time during the storm scene. Up until now, he has been portrayed as a selfish man with little dignity, "I am a man/More sinned against than sinning". However, a more caring and faithful side to him is seen when he allows the Fool to go in out of the storm first, "In boy: go first. You houseless poverty". We now see that it is within Lear's capabilities to be an honourable man whose morality outweighs his brutally demanding attributes, "O, I have ta'en/Too little care of this!". This leads me to believe that Lear is fundamentally a dignified and respectful character, however circumstances have on occasion caused him to become vicious and ruthless. The compassion that Lear displays towards the Fool is mirrored in his own daughter, Cordelia, when she returns to help her father.

Cordelia's return to support Lear as he is losing his mind shows her to be the most loyal of his daughters, despite the bad treatment she received from her father. She is visibly upset when she hears of her father's suffering, "an ample tear trilled down/ Her delicate cheek", which highlights how her love and faithfulness to her father triumphs any bitter grudges she may hold against him due to her banishment. When Lear hears of Cordelia's return, he is embarrassed to meet her as he is ashamed of his own vicious actions, "A sovereign shame so elbows him" I am rather pleased to see Lear show some remorse for his actions as it reveals to me that he respects and honours the dignity of others, as well as values his daughter's loyalty. This compassion Lear shows highlights his human side, opposed to the cold, unforgiving attributes of his personality that we saw at the beginning of the play. By returning to Lear's aid, Cordelia is putting her own life at risk and for this I cannot but respect and admire her. Although she has proven herself to be strong willed, "Nothing, my Lord", she is clearly not vicious like her sisters as she has no intention to fight them, "No blown ambition doth our arms incite". The good within Cordelia outweighs the bad, but unfortunately the same cannot be said about her sisters.

Throughout the play 'King Lear' faithfulness and dignity, as well as cruelty and wickedness are seen as attributes possessed by characters. While some characters are evidently more honourable than vicious, there are characters that are presented as evil throughout the play and have no redeeming qualities. Therefore, I cannot conclude that loyalty and honour triumph over brutality and viciousness. The characters of Cordelia, Kent and the Fool are seen as honourable and respectful characters throughout, even though they have reason not to be. Lear, on the other hand, is initially portrayed as cruel and selfish, yet he comes to see the error in his ways and he develops into a character whose morality outweighs his bad deeds. Unfortunately, the characters of Edmund, Goneril and Regan are too blinded by their lust for power and wealth to see the faults in their behaviour and any honour or loyalty that they possess is masked by their evil ways. In my opinion, honour and loyalty do not necessarily triumph over brutality and viciousness as both moral and wicked attributes in characters are portrayed equally throughout the play. Through the depiction of both honourable and brutal characters throughout the play, Shakespeare shows us the value of being a loyal and dignified person. I thoroughly enjoyed studying the play 'King Lear' and found it to be a very worthwhile experience.