

“The evil characters in the play ‘King Lear’ are far more interesting than the good”. Discuss. (2010)

Both honourable and wicked characters are effectively portrayed throughout the play ‘King Lear’. Shakespeare presents an intriguing mix of characters which greatly contrast each other and add to our enjoyment of the play. I, however, disagree that the evil characters are more engaging than the merciful. Throughout the play, both malicious and good characters change and develop, leading me to conclude that I cannot necessarily confirm that one triumphs the other in terms of interest. The evil characters, while unlikeable, are both controversial and exciting, and greatly contribute to the development of the plot. While some may find the good characters boring, it must be said that these pleasant characters present admirable qualities and are quite heroic and wise in their actions. The characters of Lear, Edmund and Goneril represent all that is unlikeable and immoral in a person, yet their unpredictable natures greatly enhance the storyline. On the other hand, the characters of Cordelia and Kent whom I would consider to be moral and pleasant characters, both display strong mind sets and clearly have their own opinions.

Lear is considered to be the main character in the play, given that it is he who lends his name to the title. The evil nature in Lear’s character is evident from the very beginning of the play, when he sets a cruel love test, demanding his daughters to profess their love for him, “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?”. This immediately grabs the audience’s attention as it is unheard of that a father would make his children compete for their inheritance. We are intrigued by Lear’s demanding and somewhat childish manner, “Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again”. When Lear banishes his youngest daughter Cordelia, as she refuses to profess her love for him, our suspicions of him being a harsh and rash character are confirmed. However, his banishing of Cordelia makes him somewhat interesting as a character as we see that he sticks to his word and is very strong minded, “Come not between the dragon and his wrath!”. Lear is also seen as malicious when he banishes Kent, his most loyal follower, for speaking his mind. We are shocked at Lear’s rashness in banishing Kent and feel compelled to take notice of this King’s unpredictable manner, “Out of my sight!”. This characteristic of being unpredictable is even more apparent in the scheming character of Edmund.

The character of Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son, is undoubtedly one of the most Machiavellian and cunning characters in the play. His malicious nature is evident from the moment we are first introduced to him in Act I Scene II, where he tricks his father into believing that his legitimate son, Edgar, is plotting to kill him. As we do not know much about Edmund's character at this point, we are enticed to find out more about him and what is fuelling his desire for power, "Edmund the base/ Shall top the legitimate". Although Edmund's cruelty is striking, I feel compelled to admire his creativeness in coming up with a plan to so effectively fool his father. Edmund is again shown as a wicked character when he blatantly betrays his father's trust by telling Cornwall that the French forces have arrived to help Lear. Edmund's lack of morals is clear, yet his ambition to achieve power also becomes increasingly evident, "The younger rises when the old doth fall". This ambition makes him stand out as a character. Edmund is not a loyal person, as is clear when he tricks his father, but also when he has love affairs with both Goneril and Regan, "To both these sisters I have sworn my love". Edmund seems to be a complex character who can't decide what he wants. This unpredictability makes him an interesting and exciting evil character to watch develop. Characters with several love interests tend to be more compelling than those without, and Edmund is no exception. His infidelity, while highlighting his lack of morality, also serves to prove him a more intense and intriguing character. His plot for one of the sisters to kill the other further reveals his deplorable and pure evil nature, as well as showing his sly and cunning attributes, "Neither can be enjoyed/ If both remain alive". Goneril, like Edmund, has wits that exceed those of other characters, which may be a reason why the pair are so attracted to each other.

Goneril, while undoubtedly evil, is also quite manipulative and clever. She flatters her father in the way he desires, thus is rewarded by being given half his Kingdom, "I love you more than words can wield the matter". This cleverness is admirable and shows her to be a strong character who knows what she wants. However, no sooner than she inherits half her father's Kingdom, she is plotting against him, "We must do something, and i' the heat". This evident wickedness startles us, and we wait with baited breath to see what her next move will be. Goneril's lack of compassion and cruelty towards her father intensifies when Lear comes to live with her. In her determination to rid him of all power, she tries to send Lear's knights away, "A little to disquantity your train". She is clearly heartless and holds no regard for the man who gave her life, as Lear points out, "Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend". It is however, unusual that Goneril, being a woman, would have so much power as at this time in history this would have been very

uncommon. This rarity makes her a powerful and memorable character, as well as highlighting her strong will. Goneril's wickedness peaks when she orders that Gloucester's eyes be gouged out, "Pluck out his eyes!". This is undoubtedly the most dramatic and shocking scene in the play, and the fact that such an act was ordered by Goneril emphasises her vicious nature and makes her an exciting, yet terrifying character. Goneril adds drama and suspense to the play as we are always unsure as to what she will do next. Although Cordelia is Goneril and Regan's sister, she is nothing like them and contributes something completely different to the play.

Cordelia would most definitely fall under the description of a good character, yet this doesn't make her any less exciting than her sisters. Cordelia's pure character shines through when she refuses to put into words how much she loves her father, "My love's/ More ponderous than my tongue". She doesn't think it's right to verbalise how much she loves her father, and therefore says nothing, "Nothing, my Lord". She does not exaggerate her love for the purpose of pleasing her father, which reveals her to be a decent and honest person. However, it is also clear that she is strong willed and does what she believes to be right, as she doesn't give into her father's pressure, "Mend your speech a little". This strength is admirable, especially considering it is her whole inheritance that is on the line. She is brave in a way that other characters are not, and this makes her a most compelling character. Cordelia is also seen as a moral character at the end of the play when she comes to her father's aid after being banished by him. Her sudden return was unexpected, which enhances the storyline as it adds excitement. This contributes to her being a noteworthy character. She is clearly loyal to her father and does not hold grudges, "How does my royal Lord?". She is willing to risk her own life in order to help her father, "Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia". This heroic bravery is admirable and adds depth to Cordelia's character. Cordelia is a most memorable character and is by no means overshadowed by those characters of villainous nature. A tremendous sense of loyalty to Lear is also apparent in Kent, another good yet striking character.

Kent could be said to be Lear's most loyal follower and is undoubtedly a good character. He tries, in vain, to advise Lear in his decision to divide the Kingdom between Goneril and Regan, "Reserve thy state". Kent's wisdom is apparent, which makes the audience respect him as a character. The contrast between the good and the evil characters is evident here when Lear pays little heed to Kent's sound advice and continues with his headstrong and ignorant stance, "Kent, on thy life, no more!". Kent's courage to stand up to Lear reveals a strong character and I

develop a respect for him because of this, “See better, Lear, and let me still remain”. I do not, however, have the same respect for the strong willed evil characters such as Edmund and Goneril, as their determination is in pursuit of others’ suffering, unlike Kent’s. As Kent confronts Lear at the beginning of the play, when we know little about Goneril and Regan, this warning intrigues us as we are left questioning what Goneril and Regan are really like. Kent clearly has Lear’s best interests at heart, which makes him an appealing and likeable character. Kent’s kind, good nature shines through when he returns in disguise to serve Lear after being banished by him. He is clearly a genuine and selfless character, who truly cares about Lear, “to serve him truly that will put me in trust; to love him that is honest”. Kent’s disguise is clever and creative and makes him stand out for all the right reasons, unlike the wicked characters whose corruptness makes them memorable. His sharp wits capture our attention. Kent’s endearing goodness and wisdom make him a captivating character, and not in any way boring or bland, which good characters so often are.

Both the Machiavellian and the virtuous characters are greatly developed throughout this play. We come to know and understand the characters and see the logic behind their sometimes-rash actions. However, I firmly believe that both the villainous and the saintly characters are equal in terms of the interest and entertainment they offer the audience. We cannot be fooled by the traditional idea that characters of darker nature are more engaging, merely because of their lack of morals. We must look at the whole picture, examine the context and observe how they relate to other characters before deciding which personalities we find more captivating. In the case of ‘King Lear’, all characters succeed equally in holding my attention. The virtuous characters are flawed, and the Machiavellian characters portray admirable qualities, but this does not take away from what they contribute to the play – it only adds to it. The complexity of the characters that Shakespeare creates means that the audience are presented with a cast of wholly entertaining and fascinating personalities. As Geoff Johns once said, “The characters that have grey areas are the more interesting characters. The hero who sometimes crosses the line and the villain who sometimes doesn’t, are just much more interesting”. This could not be truer for the characters portrayed in ‘King Lear’.

