

**The Complexity of
the Major Characters in Shakespeare's *King Lear***

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Introduction

King Lear is a tragedy by William Shakespeare probably written between 1603 and 1606. It is considered one of his greatest works. *King Lear* is based on a legend of Leir of Britain and has been widely performed as well as adapted for the screen.

This is the story of the ageing King Lear of Britain. He is tired and wants to divide the Kingdom between his three daughters. His two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, flatter him enormously, while the youngest one, Cordelia, refuses to comply. She simply tells her father that she loves him as a daughter should, no more, no less. She is banished and goes to France and marries the King of France who accepts to take her without a dowry. The Kingdom is divided between the two eldest daughters.

In the subplot, we follow Gloucester. His story is in many ways a parallel to the one of King Lear. Gloucester has two sons. Edgar is the older one and Edmund is the younger one. The crucial difference between the two is that Edgar is a legitimate son whereas Edmund is an illegitimate son who is jealous of his brother's position. Gloucester's fate is similar to that of King Lear. He trusts the wrong son and Lear trusts the wrong daughters. Gloucester trusts Edmund and not Edgar, Lear trusts Goneril and Regan and not Cordelia. Both of them will have to face the consequences and slowly become aware of the truth, as we shall see.

In this story, we learn about some of human nature's darkest sides. Family bonds are broken, people are betrayed and killed, we learn about adultery and utmost cruelty. Death is always present and in the end, only three of the main characters survive.

This is indeed a dark play. It is in fact so dark that it was rewritten in 1681 with a happy ending, in which Lear survives and Edgar and Cordelia get married. In this version, the King

of France and the Fool are omitted, making Cordelia's marriage to Edgar possible. However, times change, and in the nineteenth century, Shakespeare's tragic ending was reinstalled.

In this play, we meet people who are good, the heroes of the play, and we meet people who are evil, the villains. Most of us would easily agree that Edmund is evil and Cordelia is good. It certainly seems so, but a closer look will reveal the complexity even of characters that might at first glance appear flat.

The characters I call heroes are characters who turn out to be good at the end of the play. This does not necessarily mean that they are good the entire play or that all of their actions are good. This applies to the villains as well. Some of the villains are capable of good actions.

In this essay, I will show you some negative aspects and some positive aspects of all the major characters in the play. I will also take a look at the motivation. Why do these characters act the way they do? What are their reasons? I would like to show you some aspects of these characters that you probably do not think of when you read King Lear for the first time.

In chapter one, I will deal with the characters that I have chosen to call heroes. In chapter two, I will deal with the villains.

Chapter 1

Heroes

Cordelia

Cordelia is Lear's youngest daughter. She shows great courage and personal integrity when she refuses to take part in the ridiculous flattery game. She knows that she is not able to express herself in the way that her sisters do. Knowing her own father, the consequences can not have been a surprise to her so her refusal is obviously very brave. Even though Elizabethan England was a very hierarchical society and you had to show respect for the Royal family and the aristocracy, as well as for parents and elderly, it might have been

possible for her to be more persistent in the opening of the play. She might have told her father that she loves him but that she can not express herself as well as her sisters.

King Lear takes place in a pagan pre-Christian society, but Cordelia seems to be “an example of the Christian virtues of self sacrifice and acceptance of God’s will” (Boyce 128). We hear about “The holy water from her heavenly eyes” (4.3.31). I find Cordelia almost too good to be true and it seems as if Boyce is also of this opinion. “In her honesty and unqualified love she seems almost devoid of ordinary human personality traits” (129).

In this play, the part of Cordelia is small but important because her refusal to flatter her father is the starting point for everything that happens later on in the play. “Cordelia appears, and speaks, in only four scenes, and is on stage as a corpse for the play’s closing pages” (McLeish 63). It is easier to understand Cordelia if we think of her role as functional. She is not complex and developed because she does not have to be.

But even a character as good as Cordelia is able to surprise us. Cordelia is a traitor. I think of the interesting parallel between Albany and Cordelia when it comes to the war. You could say that they both fight on the wrong side. Albany does it in a moral sense of the word. He is good and should therefore fight with the good. Cordelia fights on the wrong side from a legal point of view. She is British but fights with the French so she is a traitor to her own country, whereas Albany fights with the British troops, which is of course the natural choice in a war. Cordelia’s choice is understandable from a human point of view because she has been banished by her own father, the king, and there is no doubt that this is a crisis and the situation is extreme.

Edgar

Edgar is traditionally viewed as the hero of the play. He has to suffer and go through a great deal because of the deceitful behaviour of his brother Edmund and the poor judgment of his father, the Earl of Gloucester.

Edgar is Gloucester's legitimate son. He is tricked by his brother and is forced to escape because of his father's mistake. In that way, his fate in the sub-plot is a parallel to Cordelia's fate.

When we first meet Edgar he is extremely gullible. Edgar is "remarkably credulous, as if he had reached adulthood without ever noticing that there are villains in the world" (McLeish 78). It is very easy for his brother Edmund to fool him.

His character changes and he shows that he can be tough and that he is able to kill. He saves his father's life by killing Oswald. Nevertheless, he is also cruel to his father and acts in a way that you might find difficult to explain and understand. He pretends to help his father to commit suicide. He does not reveal his true identity to his father until very late. "Never—oh, fault!—revealed myself unto him / Until some half hour past, when I was armed" (5.3.196-197). This is a puzzling choice and it might be Edgar's revenge on his father. After all, Edgar is a wanted man who has to appear in disguise because of his father's mistake. Being on the run, he is no longer the credulous man that he was in the beginning. Edgar "is as heartless in execution as any of Edmund's manipulations of other people" (McLeish 79). Edgar is a complex character with both good and bad sides and that is why he is a very interesting.

Edgar is treated very badly by both his father and his brother at the beginning of the play. But he learns and he is one of the three survivors in *King Lear*. Edgar can be seen as a symbol of justice. Justice is not something that comes easily, you have to fight for it, as indeed Edgar does.

Albany

Albany is Goneril's husband. He is first a villain but becomes a hero. In the beginning, he takes part in the original plot, i.e. Albany, Goneril, Cornwall and Regan against Lear. As the play develops, he turns against his former allies. Albany changes dramatically.

When Goneril says that Lear can not think straight and that it would be a great risk to let him keep a hundred knights, he argues that she may be exaggerating the risks. He says to his wife: "Well, you may fear too far" (1.4.326). So, in fact, he expresses doubt quite early in the play.

He realises that Goneril and Regan are two evil women and that they accepted the power Lear gave to them and then used it to humiliate him. He attacks his wife Goneril in very hard words: "You are not worth the dust which the rude wind / Blows in your face. I fear your disposition" (4.2.31-32). He goes on:

Tigers, not daughters, what have you performed?

A father, and a gracious aged man,

Whose reverence, even the head-lugged bear would lick,

Most barbarous, most degenerate, have you maddened. (4.2.41-44)

His reasons for action are goodness, patriotism and revenge. He is a man who is good at heart. He has no idea what is going to happen when Lear gives away the power to his daughters. When Lear is upset by the way he is treated by Goneril, Albany assures the king that he is "guiltless" (1.4.271). When the war starts, he fights against France. He is a patriot. "France invades our country" (5.1.26). With hindsight, this is a bad decision which helps Edmund gain control over Cordelia and Lear. According to Boyce, this is "poor judgement" (7). Albany has not yet understood the full extent of the events. Albany is also driven by a desire to revenge the blinding of Gloucester. Being vengeful might of course not be considered a good character trait, but at this point he has realised that the situation is very serious and that violence is unavoidable.

Gloucester I live

To thank thee for the love thou show'st the King

And to revenge thine eyes (4.3.95-98)

Albany shows the possibility of human error and “reinforces the play’s theme of human fallibility” (Boyce 7). It was a mistake to take part in the plot against Lear. Nevertheless, he is capable of admitting this and he is also capable of changing. He goes from being a married man to being a widower and he goes from being a villain to being a hero. He “represents moral growth in a degraded world” (Boyce 7). His development is truly remarkable and McLeish writes: “The character’s growth from ignorance to understanding lifts it above routine” (6).

Albany is one of the three survivors in the play. Albany’s change from villain to hero makes him one of the most complex and interesting characters in the play. Albany is a hero in the true sense of the word because he performs heroic acts and shows great courage and personal integrity. At the end of the play, he stands as a symbol of good and the possibility of change.

Lear

Lear himself is a person who inspires loyalty in some characters, e.g. Gloucester and Kent. Kent even retains his loyalty despite the fact that he has been treated very badly by the king. Lear is popular among the commoners. But he is hated by two of his own daughters. Lear “is both victim and perpetrator” (Boyce 363). You can not be indifferent to the character of Lear.

In the role of perpetrator, he treats Cordelia in a horrible way after the strange contest or flattery game. But the perpetrator soon becomes the victim when he gives up his power to Regan and Goneril.

Lear shows a considerable lack of understanding when it comes to his own situation. Regan says "He hath ever but slenderly known himself" (1.1.296-297). It is also obvious that he does not know his daughters well enough, even though their character traits come from Lear himself. Goneril and Regan have his pride, arrogance and fierce temper. Cordelia has his royal dignity, courage and stubbornness.

Lear changes from being a person used to absolute power and obedience to a more humble and caring person. He cares about the Fool: "How dost, my boy? Art cold?" (3.2.68). He attains some knowledge that would have been valuable as a king: "Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel" (3.4.34). Although he becomes insane and mad, he is able to feel ashamed when he sees Cordelia for the first time after having banished her. He can see his own actions from a different point of view.

Lear develops but it is still clear that his self-knowledge is surprisingly poor. He is an old man and has had a lot of time to understand and draw conclusions about life in general and his own situation in particular. He thinks of himself as kind: "So kind a father" (1.5.32). Boyce points out: "Still, his insight is at best flawed (364).

One might say that Lear is not a hero in a literal sense, because he performs no heroic acts. Furthermore, he is hard and tough at the beginning and he banishes his own daughter Cordelia without much hesitation. As a king, he is tough but not to the extent that he meets the criteria for being a villain.

Being a central figure, he is complex and human. He shows us his good and bad sides. Everything that happens in this play starts with Lear banishing his daughter Cordelia. Cordelia's role can be seen as more functional whereas Lear himself is both complex and human.

Metaphorically speaking, Lear is as blind as Gloucester. He is blind to the fact that Goneril and Regan flatter him to gain more power. He has not understood the dangers and the

negative aspects of being a person of power. People around a powerful man can say yes to your ideas and proposals just because they want something from you. He is blind to the fact that people around him, including his daughters, might have hidden agendas.

Gloucester

Gloucester is loyal to Lear. When we first meet him he is far too credulous. He is gullible in the same way as Edgar is and they are both easily tricked by Edmund. He does not even bother to hear what Edgar has to say. This is a mistake and he has to pay a price. Even before becoming blind, Gloucester did not always see things clearly: "I stumbled when I saw" (4.1.19). He means that he did not understand things correctly and that his conclusions have been erroneous. Gloucester is the symbol of blindness, both literally speaking and metaphorically speaking. He is blind the entire play, even before actually losing his eyesight.

On the whole, Gloucester is a kind man who shows love and affection for both his sons. He is an adulterer, which of course is not good, but he admits it and he declares openly that he loves his two sons. Furthermore, he shows courage when he does not want Kent to be put in the stocks.

Even if Gloucester is an adulterer with poor judgement, he is a man who is good at heart and that is why he is included among the heroes in this essay.

Kent

Kent is loyal to the king. In my opinion, he is loyal to a fault. He follows the king despite the warnings from the Fool: "If you follow him, thou must needs wear my coxcomb" (1.4.100-101). He is very blunt and outspoken. He is the first person who realises, or at least the first person to say, that Lear is about to make a mistake. He has an argument with Lear and says: "Good my liege" (1.1.120). Lear answers: "Peace, Kent / Come not between the dragon and

his wrath” (1.1.121-122). Their argument goes on and before leaving the king he openly defends Cordelia:

Fare thee well, King. Sith thus thou wilt appear,

Freedom lives hence and banishment is here

[*To Cordelia*] The gods to their dear shelter take thee,

maid,

That justly think'st and hast most rightly said! (1.1.183-187)

But Kent remains loyal to the king and he really struggles to protect him to such a degree that at the end of the play, he is so tired that he strongly implies that he is going to die. “I have a journey, sir, shortly to go / My master calls me; I must not say no” (5.3.327-328).

Kent is the earl of Kent and is a typical man from the county of Kent. He is “the stereotype of the proud and rugged man of Kent” (Cohen 328). According to Cohen this is “a stereotype well established in Shakespeare’s day” (328). This might help us to understand Kent better. The fighting spirit and loyalty are deeply rooted in him and he acts the way he does because he knows of no other way.

Kent is also a symbol of aristocratic values. When he quarrels with Oswald, he is the defender of the aristocratic society, whereas Oswald is the symbol of the young generation who wants to climb the social ladder. In this symbolic fight between aristocratic values and the young generation, aristocratic values win. Kent survives and Oswald does not.

Chapter 2

Villains

Goneril and Regan

Goneril and Regan are both power-hungry and, at first glance, you might find it hard to think of something that could distinguish one from the other. If we take a closer look we will see

that Goneril is more aggressive: “Only her greater aggression distinguishes her from her sister” (Boyce 222). Goneril “rages before she speaks” (McLeish 103). She takes the military power from her husband Albany. Regan, on the other hand, is “chiefly a follower of her sister” and “her somewhat cool and aloof quality presents a contrast with the more energetic Goneril” (Boyce 533).

It is hard to find any positive sides in these two women. Nevertheless, we must admit that they are clever and ambitious. They are at least clever enough to flatter their father when they can gain from it. As long as they have a common goal, they are completely loyal to each other. However, when they start to compete for the same man, Edmund, this loyalty is gone. This drama within the play adds even more tension to the events. When Regan talks about Goneril she says: “I never shall endure her. Dear my lord be not familiar with her” (5.1.17). When Goneril talks about Regan she says: “Oh ho, I know the riddle” (5.1.39). She means that she knows her sister and the tricks she is capable of. They are jealous. This “love triangle is an important part in the play’s atmosphere of moral collapse” (Boyce 168).

When the war begins the sister are, together with Edmund and Albany, “the defenders of Britain” (Cohen 380). “They lead the English in defence of their homeland against a French invasion” (Cohen 380). Cohen further says that this “would certainly have struck a chord of patriotism among some” (380). I have already said that Cordelia fights for France. The conclusion here must be that Regan and Goneril are patriots, whereas Cordelia is a traitor. As I see it, it is of course easy to understand and forgive Cordelia in this situation. Britain is facing a major crisis and the king of Britain, her father, has told her to go.

The hatred these two sisters show towards their father is remarkable. They hate their father to such an extent that one must ask oneself the obvious question why they hate their father so. Where does this hatred come from? One can easily start to wonder if there is more to this

relationship than meets the eye. In Shakespeare's text we learn that Cordelia is Lear's favourite daughter but nothing more.

If we take a look at modern films based on *King Lear* we notice that the filmmakers have asked themselves this question. This enormous hatred by two daughters towards their father must have a reason. *King of Texas* (2002) and *A Thousand Acres* (1997) are two films based on *King Lear*. In both films, the filmmakers have felt compelled to add more details to the relationship between the two daughters and their father to make it understandable.

King of Texas is Shakespeare-goes-west. John Lear's Texas ranch is big but he is old and the time has come to give away the ranch to his three daughters. There is certainly enough land to make everyone happy, but for two of the sisters, it is not enough.

The ranch owner Lear is a hard and unpredictable man. We learn that he had not three but four children. He had a son who is now dead. According to Regan and Goneril, all he cared about was his son and his youngest daughter. He did not care about his wife or about Goneril and Regan. This is their revenge because he has treated them badly. John Lear thinks he has been very kind but the lies the two daughters have to tell about how much they love their father is, according to Goneril, the price they have to pay to get the ranch. She says: "You did not give it to me. You sold it to me. You came up with a price" (*King of Texas*). John Lear had obviously not been a good father to Regan and Goneril.

A Thousand Acres is a film about an ageing father who retires and passes the thriving family farm on to his three daughters. He wants to turn the farm into a corporation but the youngest daughter does not think this is a good idea.

This is *King Lear* in a typical American community in the late twentieth century. When the youngest daughter objects, she is cut out of her father's will. This starts a chain of events that eventually brings out some dark secrets. Goneril and Regan are both victims of incest. Their father has sexually abused them. This has not happened to Cordelia. The reason for the

enormous hatred towards their father is revenge. Before dying, Regan admits “I didn’t forgive the unforgivable” (*A Thousand Acres*).

In my opinion, there is quite a difference between the sisters in the film. Regan is a very hard and unforgiving woman. Goneril is softer. She is a person you can feel sympathy for. She seems to suffer from the weird situation at the farm. In the end, she shows a loving side. She takes care of Regan’s two daughters with the clear intention of giving them a happy childhood. She has no children of her own. She also decides not to tell Cordelia about the incest.

For an audience in Shakespeare’s day it might have been enough to know that Cordelia is the favourite daughter and that Goneril and Regan are evil, but an audience today seems to demand more background information. We need to know more. We live in a more complex society and we are able to accept more complex explanations to difficult questions.

Cornwall

Cornwall is a domineering and violent man. He is cruel and the blinding of Gloucester is an act of utmost cruelty. He is driven by wrath and he actually has no formal right to pass any sentence upon Gloucester but he can not control himself.

Though well we may not pass upon his life
 Without the form of justice, yet our power
 Shall do a court’sy to our wrath, which men
 May blame but not control (3.7.25-28).

Cornwall is a man who quite clearly likes to be in command. Cornwall is wounded by the servant who wants to stop the blinding and the servant is then killed by Regan. But even as a deadly wounded man he does not stop giving orders about what to do with the blind

Gloucester and the dead servant's body. "Cornwall seems to see his end, but occupies himself with questions of order" (Cohen 374).

It was probably necessary for Shakespeare to let Cornwall die. Cornwall is a symbol of cruelty. "Cornwall's part is small, and in one mode only: cold-hearted cruelty" (McLeish 65). As the play develops and gets more ambiguous, there is no place for him. He can not exist in a world where the possibility of good exists. "His death is proof that the triumph of villainy will not be total" (Boyce 137).

Cornwall is indeed a cruel man. Nevertheless, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that he and Albany stop Lear from killing Kent in the first act. Lear is very angry with Kent and he is about to draw his sword when Cornwall and Albany stop him. "Dear sir, forbear" (1.1.165). We do not know why Albany and Cornwall do this. From Albany's point of view it is of course good that Kent survives, but from Cornwall's point of view, it would have been better to let Lear kill Kent. We might assume that this is so early in the play that Cornwall has not yet fully understood what is going to happen. He has not realised that there is going to be a splendid opportunity for him to gain more power. If this is not the case, we must draw the surprising conclusion that this is an act of humanity from Cornwall.

Edmund

Edmund is Gloucester's younger son and Edgar's brother. He succeeds in almost all of his schemes and wreaks destruction upon virtually all of the other characters. He sets up action, but quite often stands back and watch. Edmund is strong, knows what he wants, and gets what he wants. He has self-knowledge and admits that his driving force is the ambition to show that he, as a bastard, can be as good as a legitimate son. He is very selfish and uses everybody, including his own father and brother, to achieve his goals. In every situation, he can figure out

how he can benefit from it. From his behaviour, we can draw the conclusion that he is clever and has an analytic mind.

Knowing this about Edmund, it comes as a surprise when he accepts to fight Edgar in the final struggle that will eventually lead to his death. Edgar is in disguise and according to the laws of war, Edmund does not have to fight a stranger. Goneril tells him:

This is practice, Gloucester

By th' law of arms thou wast not bound to answer

An unknown opposite. Thou art not vanquished,

But cozened and beguiled. (5.3.154-157)

He shows some remorse but only in the end. Before dying, he realises that he was loved, he says: "Yet Edmund was beloved" (5.3.244). It is strange that he is content with the love of two evil sisters. He is actually loved by his father. Edmund himself can hear his father say to Kent: "But I have a son, sir, by order of law, some / year older than this, who is yet no dearer in my account" (1.1.19.20). Edmund knows that he is loved. He says: "Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund / As to th' legitimate" (1.2.17-18). When we first meet the legitimate son Edgar, he seems happy, and says hello to his brother Edmund: "How now, brother Edmund, what serious / contemplation are you in?" (1.2.141-142). In the absence of credible evidence to the contrary, we must assume that Edgar loves, or at least likes, his brother Edmund at the beginning of the play.

Edmund's choices can be even harder to understand if we consider the fact that his prospects for the future are bright. As an acknowledged illegitimate son to a nobleman, he does not have a bad life ahead of him. Moore writes about illegitimate sons in those days and says: "Such boys were normally raised as gentlemen in some other household, with the prospect of a career among the privileged elite" (187).

In my opinion, Edmund's ambitions and methods are so extreme that we can very well ask ourselves what he really wants. Edmund can not see any limits. He always wants something bigger and better and that is why it turns out bad for him in the end.

Edmund does not gain anything. He throws away his life for reasons that are hard to understand. He is blind to the fact that he is loved and that his future looks bright. You might say that Edmund is the third case of blindness in this play. Lear, Gloucester and Edmund are, metaphorically speaking, blind and therefore make strange choices. Only Gloucester actually becomes blind in the real sense of the word.

Edmund is also a symbol of the new man who does not care about the aristocracy. "Edmund represents the new man in his lack of chivalric scruples and his concern for his own advancement" (Boyce 168).

It is interesting to notice that his death is considered to be "a trifle" by Albany (5.3.301). Does he think of Edmund as a bastard or does he think of him as a villain? Does he think that the life of a bastard son has little value? We do not know for sure but he probably considers Edmund's death to be a trifle because Edmund is a villain. The reason for my assumption is that this is very late in the play and Edmund's true nature is now obvious to everybody. As an illegitimate son to a nobleman, Edmund was a member of the upper class and his life was valuable, but as a villain he deserved to die.

Oswald

Oswald is the chief steward in Goneril's house. He delivers messages, and he even accepts the order to kill the blinded Gloucester. He is ambitious, he does his job and he does it well. He wants to climb the social ladder and is told that if he kills Gloucester, he will be rewarded. In brief, he is Goneril's loyal henchman. According to Kent, he is "superservicable" (2.2.18).

Oswald is also a symbol. He represents “an ambitious commoner attempting to climb into the aristocratic circles” (Boyce 470). During the reigns of Queen Elisabeth and King James I the aristocracy experienced a crisis due to the rise of the gentry and the birth of the bourgeoisie. The aristocracy wanted to distinguish themselves from the newly rich.

Oswald is an ambitious and loyal man, but he is also a man who is willing to kill an old and blind man to satisfy his ambitions. That is why he is clearly a villain. Nevertheless, before dying, Oswald gives us the opportunity to learn about his inner life. He is a patriot. Oswald talks about “the English Party” (4.6.253). “This serviceable villain turns out to have a good side, which, in the light of his history, is somewhat awkward for his observers” (375). Cohen then says: “His loyalty to both his mistress and his nation are convincing” (375).

Conclusion

When studying the construction of heroes and villains in *King Lear*, it becomes apparent that the most interesting characters are those who have both good and evil character traits. I think of Lear, Albany and Edgar. All three of them have to go through a lot. They make good and bad decisions, but they develop and learn throughout the entire play.

Less interesting are Cordelia, Kent, Gloucester, Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Oswald. They are all basically good or basically evil, although not entirely good or evil. The only exception might be Cordelia who is good to a fault.

However, they are all needed in the play. The villains are allowed to be villains because the heroes allow them to be evil. Think of Edmund, for instance, who is allowed to be evil because his father and brother can not think of him as an evil person and thereby make it possible for him to commit evil acts.

It is interesting to ask oneself if there are winners in a play like *King Lear*. It is indeed a tragedy and even the survivors have to pay a price and suffer a great deal.

The three survivors of the play are Albany, Kent and Edgar. Do they have anything in common and does the play have a clear standpoint? I would say yes. Firstly, they are complex and human. The fact that they are human makes their decisions both good and bad, but there is no doubt that their intentions are good. Secondly, they suffer and learn. All three of them are most probably under a great deal of stress during most of the play and people under stress do not always make the best decisions. Thirdly, they are all characters in the play as well as symbols. Albany is the symbol of good and the possibility of change. Edgar is the symbol of justice and Kent is the symbol of aristocracy, traditions and old values.

Consequently, we have survivors on different levels. On one level the survivors are Albany, Edgar and Kent but on a deeper and more symbolic level we find three more survivors. These are the possibility of change, represented by Albany, the possibility of justice, represented by Edgar, and the victory of aristocracy, old values and traditions, represented by Kent.

But a victory does not come without fighting. The survivors all have a clear goal and their ambitions are easy to see and easy to understand. We know what they fight for and they are all true heroes who perform heroic acts.

All types of characters are needed in the play. A good character is good only if you compare him to an evil character, and vice versa, an evil character is evil only if you compare him to a good character. You have to know good to recognize evil and you have to know evil to recognize good. In *King Lear*, this is sometimes a difficult task at least at the beginning of the play. Many of the main characters are human and thus complex, and as such, they act in a human and complex way.

“Shakespeare accepted no simple views on the complexities of life” (Boyce 364). It is easy to agree here.

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