

King Lear | Sample Answer 2006

“Reading or seeing King Lear is a horrifying as well as an uplifting experience.” Write a response to this view, supporting the points you make by reference to the text.

There are undoubtedly horrifying as well as uplifting moments in the play “King Lear” written by William Shakespeare. However I believe that Shakespeare is never black and white. Although there are moments of uplifting nature, I think that the events of the play are primarily horrific to watch. King Lear is a tragedy after all, tragedies, while not really meant to instruct the audience, are certainly intended to show how our own human nature is our worst enemy. I think the most uplifting part of reading this play was its overall message - which for me, is to look beyond the surface; the title, job, sex or rank, of a person to see what is in their heart. To not be too quick to listen to the easy words someone might speak, but to take care to watch how they behave before judging them or their actions. Unfortunately this message is told through the mistakes and loss of many characters.

The horror of the play begins in Act 1 Scene 1, with Lear’s cruel love test, in which he determines how he shall split up his kingdom between his three daughters by how much they love him - *“Which of you shall we say doth love us most?”*. This test in itself is horrific, and aids our depiction of Lear - a brutal, narcissistic man. I was shocked at Lear’s childish manner when his only loyal daughter Cordelia spoke of how she *“loved her father according to her bond, no more, no less”*. The fact Lear would rather hear flattery over honesty further shows his juvenile personality. When Lear banishes his youngest daughter Cordelia, our suspicions of him being a harsh and rash character are confirmed. Lear’s insane outburst towards Cordelia was certainly a horrific scene to watch - *“I disclaim all my paternal care”*. We are forced to take notice of the King’s unpredictable manner when he further banishes his loyal servant Kent, much like Cordelia, for simply being honest with him, *“Come not between the dragon and his wrath!”* After a dramatic and horrifying

sequence, I was reminded of the good in people when the King Of France still chose to marry Cordelia even without a dowry or title. Small moments of light such as this one only seem to appear following ones of horrific nature, which tinges them with severity in my opinion.

Without a doubt Act 3 Scene 7 is one of the most horrific scenes in literature. In this scene we see innocent Gloucester get brutally tortured by the evil Goneril, Regan and Cornwall, after they find out he warned and aided the King's escape to Dover. We see Gloucester being loyal to Lear by concealing his whereabouts, to which Regan begins to pluck out the hairs of his beard. As if this was not wicked enough, to intensify the cruelty Goneril's evilness peaks when she orders to "*pluck out his eyes*". This is unquestionably the most horrendous and dramatic scene in the play.

Cornwall, without hesitation, listens to the evil sister and gouges out the poor man's eyes, leaving him blind. The plucking out of Gloucester's eyes is so brutal that not even Cornwall's servants can stand by without acting. One servant attacks Cornwall for his bloodthirsty act, wounding him, but is evidently killed by Regan who stabs him with a sword. In this scene Gloucester finds out that it is actually Edmund who has betrayed him, not Edgar. When Regan reveals Edmund's treason, Gloucester is quick to recognize his folly. Although it is satisfying that Gloucester now knows the truth about his sons and regrets his wrong doings, it in no way uplifted me from my shocked and horrified state after reading that barbaric act.

The storm scene has dramatic importance and symbolic significance in the context of the play. It constitutes the dramatic centre of the whole tragedy imparting a contribution to the development of the main plot. Here is where Lear gains clarity and understands his misconduct towards the poor - "*O, I have ta'en/Too little care of this!*". The storm makes psychological change in Lear, this remarkable development - a change from ignorance to knowledge has taken place in this scene in the case of Lear. Lear grows wiser and kinder than he has been in the beginning. While this change is very much a positive one, I find it horrific that Lear had to hit rock bottom before he found clarity. In this scene we see Lear feel the condition of people lower than him, people with no shelter, no food, no rank. Before Lear was cruel to these people, only caring about himself. It is

only when he is confronted with the harsh reality of these people he gains some basic human dignity and admits his immorality.

The ending of the play is unbearably sad and horrific, so much so that for more than a century, it was considered too tragic to perform. What I found to be truly horrific was that a lot of the suffering that is endured in Act 5 Scene 3 seems somewhat meaningless. Firstly, Lear's reconciliation with Cordelia momentarily seems to make all Lear's suffering worthwhile. When she dies, Lear's redemption is snatched away. Secondly Cordelia's death seems nonsensical. The person who wanted her dead, Edmund, has changed his ways and is now dying himself, so her death serves no political purpose. Also Goneril and Regan do not face punishment for their crimes as they both commit suicide. Finally, Lear dies before he can reconcile himself to his loss. His last words are: *"Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!"*. In his dying moments, Lear still has not accepted that Cordelia is dead. The blindness that caused Lear to give his kingdom to the wrong heirs and fail to see Cordelia's love, persists through the end of the play, as Lear is unable to see that his mistakes have resulted in the death of the one person who truly loved him. As a reader I found no clarity to all the horrendous acts experienced throughout the play, further adding to the horror of reading it.

It is only through death and suffering that we see how important the message of the play is. If only Lear, and even Gloucester had listened to their heart instead of mindless gossip and their own self-absorbed minds, maybe they would have seen who was clearly loyal and honest with them. Instead they caused their own untimely deaths and the death and suffering of their loved ones. Even the overall message of the play, although deemed as uplifting, is portrayed in a horrific manner. I can decidedly say that the events I read in King Lear are some of the most horrific scenes I have come across. Shakespeare is truly the king of tragedies and "King Lear" will forever be one of his greatest. Although deeply disturbing in parts, the play is thought-provoking in its complex plot and ambiguous ending.