

## King Lear | Sample Answer 2016

**“Shakespeare explores both the destructive and redemptive power of love throughout the play “King Lear””. Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the play.**

“King Lear” is one of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies. It is filled with moments of destruction as well as redemption, with love being the source of many of them. Shakespeare explores how powerful love can be, not only on the recipient but also on the person possessing it. He explores love between family members, romantic love and also love for a place/location. He highlights the repercussions and consequences that accompany this powerful emotion, making “King Lear” a thought-provoking and relevant play, even 400 years after being written.

Through reading the play “King Lear”, it is apparent that even the most pure and honest love can have destructive power. This can be seen in the character of Cordelia. Cordelia’s love for her father King Lear is shown to us in Act 1 Scene 1 with the “love test”. Here Lear decides to divide his kingdom amongst his daughters in accordance to how much they love him - *“Which of you doth say doth love us most?”*. Instead of resorting to flattery simply to gain land such as her sisters, Goneril and Reagan had - *“I love you more than words can wield the matter”*, Cordelia does not *“heave her heart into her mouth”* and proclaims sincerely to her father; *“I love your majesty according to my bond, no more no less”*. While Lear is blind to Cordelia’s honest affection - *“Nothing will come of nothing, speak again”*, it is clear to the audience that Cordelia is the only one of Lear’s three daughters that has loyal and pure feelings for him.

Unfortunately we soon see Lear's narcissistic nature emerge in this scene, when he banishes Cordelia - *“Out of my sight!”* as well as *“disclaim all paternal care”*. Cordelia’s faithful love to her father results in her losing her title, dowry, family and kingdom all at once. This harsh outcome serves to highlight the power of love, and that it does not always lead to happiness.

Cordelia's loyal, honest, and good nature as well as her love for Lear also tragically lead to her death at the end of the play. After hearing news of her father's mistreatment at the hands of her sisters, she returns to England from France with an army to try and save him. Cordelia's virtuous nature and love for her father are glorified in her return, as she instantly forgives Lear for his mistreatment of her when she hears he needs help. Unfortunately however, during her return herself and Lear get captured and she is killed under Edmund's instructions. She dies in her father's presence, and this tear worthy scene amplifies the harsh reality that the power of love can be destructive, even to the most undeserving.

Similarly, Kent's (Lear's loyal servant) love for the king leads to destruction. Kent, much like Cordelia, is devoted to Lear and only has pure intentions for him. He urged Lear to *"see better"* after banishing Cordelia, however he is only met with a similar outburst - *"do not come between the dragon and his wrath!"*. He too is unfairly banished from the Kingdom by Lear, and likewise he instantly forgives the king after his mistreatment. Kent's loyal and selfless nature are revealed to the audience when he disguises himself as a peasant called Caius, in an attempt to keep Lear safe - *"To serve him truly that will put me in trust. To love him that is honest."* Throughout the play he continues to be Lear's right-hand man, advising him even when he loses his sanity. Kent sticks by Lear's side right up until his death in the final scene, in which Kent responds with - *"I have a journey, sir, shortly to go. My master calls me."* In the final scenes we see two people's love for Lear end in their untimely deaths, stressing love's destructive power further.

We can also see romantic love have destructive powers in "King Lear" additionally. Throughout the first half of the play we see sisters Goneril and Reagan sticking together in an attempt to overthrow their father - *"I'll write straight to my sister/To hold my very course"*. They are seen as a somewhat wicked duo to the audience. That is until, the evil some say even more malicious, Edmund shows interest in both of the sisters. His sentiments are not honest however, as just like the women, his aim is to manipulate and overthrow his father Gloucester - *"That which my father loses: no less than all; the younger rises and the old doth fall"*. It is clear evil is drawn to evil as Goneril and Reagan take these sentiments to be true, when in reality they only serve as props in

Edmund's devilish plan - *"Which of them shall I take? Both? One? Or Neither? Neither can be enjoyed, if both remain alive."*

These false sentiments quickly cause the two sisters to fall out and become rivals for the bastard's heart. Their love for Edmund leads to destruction as it results in both their deaths in the end scene. Goneril, after revealing her immoral nature throughout the entire play, stays true to her character and poisons Reagan to be with Edmund - *"If not, I'll ne'er trust medicine."* Not long after however does she take her own life out of guilt, leaving both sisters dead with Edmund by neither of their sides.

Through all the destruction that love does cause in the play, it does have its redeeming moments also. In the first half of the play we see Lear being selfish, uncompassionate and narcissistic. However, in the famous "storm scene" we see Lear gain insight and become a kinder man. The pathetic fallacy used in this scene highlights Lear's mental state as he is caught in a thunderstorm. We see him bellowing at the weather - *"Here I stand, your slave,/A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man"*. However the rain can symbolize Lear's selfish thoughts being washed away as he gains insight into his mistreatment of not only his daughter, but also the people in his kingdom - *"O, I have ta'en/ Too little care of this!"*.

Lear gains redemption from his love for his Kingdom. He sees the lower class barely surviving and for the first time in the play, we see Lear feel compassion and consideration towards others. Through the madness he experiences in the pouring rain of the storm, he gains insight into the lack of care he has shown others and tries to help the fool - *"In boy; go first. You houseless poverty"*, He realises he has not looked after the needy in the kingdom and wishes for better - *"show the heavens more just!"*. It is his love for the Kingdom and being King that leads Lear into redemption, even though his clouded sanity.

"King Lear" has shown me two very different sides to love; some ending in redemption and others in destruction. These extreme fates of some of the characters in the play, highlight the severity of the power of love. While it can cause people to gain insight and redemption even through altered sanity like Lear, love can also lead to ultimate destruction, like the unfortunate Cordelia and Kent.

I believe Shakespeare expertly explored both powers of love in his play “King Lear”, and it has forced me to think about my own thoughts on the powerful emotion. For this reason and the reasons above, I agree with the above statement.