

Sample Essay

Feminist Theory & *King Lear*

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a deeply sad tale of a king who gives up his power and slowly goes crazy. His two oldest daughters, Goneril and Regan, each receive half the kingdom from him, but it soon becomes apparent that half is not enough for either of them. Everybody in this play is out to get everybody else, and everybody has a hidden agenda. However, as the drama ensues, the audience realizes that the women, Goneril and Regan, are really controlling most of the events in the story. Contrary to the cultural standards of his time, Shakespeare portrays women as the "stronger" sex in *King Lear*.

Feminist Criticism is a type of literary theory that wishes to point out how different genders, races, classes, religions, etc. are portrayed in a piece of literature. Feminists critics mainly care about how women are written about, and how women write. They want to know why women's works are rarely included in the canon, which is the group of works that are read, written about, and reprinted most often. They also wish to point out how a work either undermines or perpetuates certain stereotypes about women or other groups. They question how women are portrayed, why they are portrayed as such, and what effect it has on the reader and society as a whole. If negatives stereotypes arise, they desire to change these stereotypes which is entirely possible since all stereotypes are constructed, the theory wishes to point out to us. In other words, because stereotypes are just made up ideas that society has about a particular group, it is possible to destroy these stereotypes. Ultimately, they wish to question gender, challenging easy definitions of man and woman, male and female. Gender is not just about biological

factors, but about how society assigns certain characteristics to men or women. In fact, since gender too is constructed, it can therefore be deconstructed. This is what feminist critics wish to do.

In Act 1, Scene 4, Goneril tells her father, King Lear, that he has to reduce the number of his knights that follow him around and stay at her house with him. She is clearly the head of the house in this scene, as Albany, her husband, is not even there at first, and when he does show up, he proclaims, "MY lord, I am guiltless, as I am ignorant / Of what hath moved you" (1.4.258-259). The reason he does not understand why Lear is upset when he shows up in the middle of Lear & Goneril's argument is because he does not keep track of what his wife is doing: he simply lets her manage the household in whatever way she sees fit. Later on in the scene, Lear, talking to Goneril, says, "I am ashamed / that thou hast power to shake my manhood thus" (1.4.295-296). What Lear is saying in this quote is that he is ashamed that Goneril has enough power over him to make him sad, upset, and irrational, which are all traits typically associated with women. Goneril, Lear's oldest daughter, has enough power in this scene to force Lear's knights out of her house and to make him very upset. The men in this scene, Lear and Albany, are belittled by Goneril. Her husband, who has no idea what is going on, is told to stay out of it, and her father is told, without any respect at all, that he needs to get rid of some of his knights. However, this demonstration of power by the supposed "weaker" sex is just the beginning of Goneril's plan. Later in the story she uses her power to achieve much more sinister goals.

In Act 3, Scene 7, Regan and her husband Cornwall have captured Gloucester and threaten to pluck out his eyes for being a traitor. One of their servants sees how wrong

this is, and he tries to protect Gloucester by fighting Cornwall. Regan clearly does not believe her husband can handle the fight, for she says to another servant, "Give me thy sword. - A peasant stand up thus?" (3.7.80). Then she runs up to the servant and pierces him in the back, instantly killing him. This is another example of how Lear's daughters take control of several situations in the play. In this case, Lear's middle daughter, Regan, demonstrates her violent nature, first by plucking poor Gloucester's eyes out, and then by killing her own servant. The fact that she kills the servant, instead of letting her husband handle the fight, shows the audience that she has no confidence in her husband or his ability to get things done. All of the attributes that Regan shows in this scene are typically ascribed to males. Shakespeare has turned the tables on his audience, showing them that women can be just as evil, violent, and power-hungry as men.

Another example of the power that these daughters have is in Act 4, Scene 2, when Goneril tells Edmund that her husband is a coward, saying, "It is the cowish terror of his spirit / That dares not undertake" (4.2.11-12). She also says that "I must change names at home, and give the distaff / Into my husband's hands" (4.2.16-17). In other words, she plans to take charge of her household, and wants her husband to play the housewife from now on. In reality, she has been in charge of the household during the whole play, but this is the first time that she admits it to anyone, and she is likely doing so because she wants Edmund to know how she feels about her husband, so that he will become her lover.

Towards the end of the play when Goneril and Regan's troops are at war with France, the two sisters become extremely jealous of each other. Each of them wants Edmund for herself and wants the other sister out of the picture so they can control

the entire kingdom. In Act 5, Scene 3, Regan says she is "Sick, oh, sick!" and Goneril, to herself, says, "If not, I'll ne'er trust medicine" (5.3.98-99). This clearly implies that Goneril intentionally poisoned Regan. She is so power-hungry that she is willing to kill her own sister to get control of the kingdom, even though that control may be taken away if the King of France wins the battle, which is currently ensuing. Again, Shakespeare shows his audience that these two sisters are the "stronger" sex in the play. They are willing to do absolutely anything for power and wealth.

Throughout the entire play, Lear's two daughters, Goneril and Regan, each display their overwhelming urge to take control of the kingdom. They exhibit many characteristics typically displayed by men in order to prove that they are in control of every situation. However, in the end, both of them end up dead. While Shakespeare was indeed trying to show his audience that women can achieve whatever men can, he was also trying to show them that the power that these women sought destroyed them in the end. If these women had acted as women traditionally do, instead of displaying "manly" characteristics, maybe things would have turned out better for them.