Conflict In King Lear – Historical And Social Context Essay, Research Paper

Conflict lies at the heart of tragedy. How have the various conflicts in King Lear been presented and received in different historical and social contexts?

In your response refer to at least three critical interpretations (including your own) and use elements of two productions of the play you have seen to support your points.King Lear is undoubtedly Shakespeare?s greatest tragedy, and quite possibly the greatest of all time. Although the final scenes of the play may make us cringe and leave a foul taste in our mouths, it would be wrong for us to wish that they be altered. The death of Cordelia, despite being heartrending and seemingly unnecessary to most people, stems from a number of underlying conflicts within the play that send messages relevant to every audience member. Interpretations of these messages have varied since the initial performance of King Lear in 1606 and are continually shifting and adapting to changes within society and human development in general. Similarly, productions of the play have differed considerably depending upon the personal circumstances and views of the director as well as the audience, who are ultimately responsible for discovering their own personal interpretation of the play. Nahum Tate?s The History of King Lear, written in 1681, is one of several attempts at rewriting King Lear during the 18th and 19th centuries in order to make it apply better to a specific audience and be less sensitive to political issues of the time, in this instance the restoration of Charles II to the English throne. Although still called a tragedy, Tate?s version sees Lear return to rule his kingdom and Cordelia marry Edgar. Although the main conflicts still exist, Shakespeare?s point about the nature of humanity is diminished by the complete, calculated redemption at the play’s conclusion. While several of the conflicts within King Lear have been altered over the past 400 years in order to increase the appeal of the play to a particular audience of the time, ultimately the timelessness of Shakespeare?s language will see the original play outlast any such imitation.

One reason for the longevity of King Lear is the way it confronts issues that are central and relevant to any society throughout any period of time. The exchange of power between children and their parents and the ensuing conflict occurs in every generation as parents struggle to give up control of their children while the children themselves long for independence. The ingratitude of children towards their parents is a fundamental part of this conflict and one that Michael Ignatieff considers the play principally revolves around. In what can be termed a post-modern interpretation of King Lear, Ignatieff argues that the conflict evident between Lear and his two eldest daughters, Gonerill and Regan, is a result of the most elementary of parental mistakes. He claims that Lear?s curses upon Gonerill (I.iv.229-244) that attempt to bring barrenness and sterility upon her are far from ravings of dementia but a result of an unspoken primal anger that dwells within all families, which is the fury of old men at the failure of their own powers and the subsequent envy of the sexual ripeness of their own children .

Jonathon Miller heightens the conflict between Lear and his eldest daughters in the BBC production of King Lear in 1988 through the use of several effective film techniques, especially during the scene in which Lear curses Gonerill. In this scene, Lear curses Gonerill?s beauty and her potential for motherhood as he thinks this is all that matters to her, and sees this as being the ultimate punishment. Gonerill attempts to tell her father, in a nice way at first, that he and his retinue have overstayed their welcome and that the men that follow him have turned her home into ?more like a tavern or a brothel? (I.iv.200). Lear seems to be both shocked and frustrated with the fact that Gonerill is confident and assertive enough to speak to him about such a matter, and takes such offence that he attempts to spoil the one thing that he envies of her and sees as being central to her existence ? her sexuality. Gonerill?s hands move from her waist up onto her stomach and chest, clutching at her symbols of womanhood, as if Lear might try to take them away from her. Gonerill squirms uncomfortably as her father delivers his speech and the images of the Fool, Kent and Albany in the background show signs of absolute shock as they turn their heads away when Lear calls for her infertility. Lear calls for Gonerill?s sterility not because he sees it as being a fitting punishment for her treatment of him but due to a combination of the intense anger and jealousy he felt after confronting her, causing his emotions to take control of his actions. The medium of film allows the director to convey emotions much more explicitly by switching between shots of different magnification, thereby influencing the audience?s views on different characters much more easily.

King Lear is supposedly set a few hundred years before the birth of Jesus, meaning Christianity did not even exist at the time and England was simply made up of different types of paganism. However, the audience that the play was written for in the 17th century were overtly Christian and so numerous biblical references as well as Christian themes were incorporated into the production. Jessica Wylie in her religious interpretation sees the one underlying conflict right throughout King Lear with biblical connotations being that between nature and law. She says that right from the opening scene Gloucester introduces us to the concept of masculine law order (represented by the Roman conquerors) contrasted with the feminine chaos of Celtic witchcraft (represented by the spirits of Nature) by using this idea to describe his own two sons . Gloucester emphasises the role of Edmund?s mother over his own in the conception of Edmund, identifying Edmund with womb-bearing females, while he goes on to mention, almost immediately, that he has another son ?by order of law?, Edgar, implying that he is of greater credibility. Jessica Wylie states that the conflict between these two socio-religious systems is shown by Edgar, the son of law who feigns the behaviour of the bewitched and Edmund, the son of Nature who feigns the behaviour of the lawful.

This exclusion of Edmund, the ?illegitimate?, was carried through strongly in the production of King Lear staged at the Bondi Pavilion on Tuesday 15th May. In the opening scene, Kent and Gloucester are dressed in black dinner suits, evidently awaiting the arrival of someone important. As they are talking, Edmund is standing slightly behind them and out of the conversation, wearing simply black pants and a tight black t-shirt. Once Edmund has been introduced to Kent, Gloucester?s constant remarks of Edmund being a bastard come across as being far more serious than just a slight joke but as being deliberate mocking and taunting of him, even though it is by no fault of his own that Edmund was born the way he was and was in fact Gloucester?s complete responsibility. The medium of a live on-stage production meant that the actors were able to interact more closely with the audience than if they were simply watching the performance on television. Being in a very small and cramped auditorium where you feel as if you can almost touch the stage allowed the director to make it clear to the audience where conflicts existed within the play, as tension is much more easily picked up.

Personally, I found the conflict between man and nature a minor theme simply used to allow the message of the major conflicts come across in a stronger way. I believe that Lear?s inner conflict far outweighs any religious or social conflicts in the play due simply to the fact that if conflict lies at the heart of tragedy then a tragic hero lies at the heart of conflict. Lear?s fall from a position of power and authority into a life of rejection and insanity evokes pity from the audience as, despite often being rash and impatient, we feel that he doesn?t deserve this much punishment. I see the storm as being a reflection not only of the chaos and disorder that has descended upon Lear?s kingdom but also of the conflict occurring within Lear?s mind. In fact, I feel that the reason Lear embraces the storm so much is because it provides a welcome distraction from the inner battle he is constantly fighting against himself. My personal background, coming from a conservative, middle-class family and attending a private school, has a definite impact on the value I place upon intellectual control, as it is almost impossible to progress in society without it, making Lear?s situation seem all the more tragic.

The conflicts evident within King Lear are not confined to one specific time period or generation and meaning continues to be drawn from them today. The fact that it has survived for almost 400 years indicates the versatility of the play and its ability to transcend historical and social boundaries. The large range of important and relevant issues that are presented throughout King Lear and much of Shakespeare?s work not only encourages new productions to be staged, bringing forth new views and ideas, but also promotes a greater awareness of these issues within the general public. This continuous cycle will ensure that King Lear and the rest of Shakespeare?s plays remain highly valued and respected for centuries to come.

Bibliography:Jessica Wylie ? ??Fairies and Gods?: A Socio-Religious context for King Lear?

Joel Grothe ? ?William Shakespeare?s King Lear in the 1770s?

Michael Ignatieff ? ?Reconsidering Lear?

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