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# The Theme Of Existentialism In William Shakespeare's Play King Lear

## King Lear Final Paper

Existentialism is the belief that it is up to each individual to give meaning to his or her own life, to live with authenticity. To be authentic, in Baker's terms, is to "be one who faces the human condition, resolutely accepts his finitude and his death, creatively responds to life, manfully assumes responsibility for all his decisions". While Baker examined different existentialistic categories, such as the experience of "certain elementary emotions" or the "possibility of transcendence of space-time limitations", the one that struck me the most was one's relations towards others. Lear himself is the greatest example of existentialism, he "started inauthentic and became later, authentic". In a philosophy that at its heart, is "full self-responsibility for the individual", the discovering of such is no better examined than through the character of Lear.

This play explores many different types of relationships, from "the relations of parents to children" to political relationships between a king and his subjects and vice versa. Most notably however was Lear's "education in humanity", or the change in the way he treated others. He for a long time was the tyrant, "when I do stare see how the subject quakes" and as the play progresses, he learns to be, quite simply, a man. He first, had to "unlearn court flattery", to achieve empathy. "They told me I was everything," he says; "'tis a lie; I am not ague-proof". This was a sort of initiation into reality, something one usually has at a much younger age. I think the reason why he before this, was not educated "in the bare fundamentals of the human condition" was because he was revered so much as a godlike figure that he never learn how to be man. Nonetheless, as Lear learns concern through others, sees the injustice of social order, and finally, "wakes to the undeserved but nonetheless miraculous reality of Cordelia's love", he himself, becomes authentic. This character is the essence of existentialism, and his transformation is at the very core of the play. Before he asked for the world, to be the ruler of the land without political responsibilities. Now, he asks but little of life, only to be with Cordelia, he says "Come, let's away to prison./We two will sing like birds i' the cage./When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down, /And ask of thee forgiveness". The sheer humility in Lear's words towards the end of his life show how different he was from the person who insisted on empty flattery in the opening scenes of the play. This break from the limitations of the human condition transcendence Lear as a character into the freedom existentialism allows.

In his article, Baker explores different existential categories in order to show how "King Lear" "deals profoundly with the existentials of the human condition". However, I maintain that this can be shown through just one example Baker gave, one's relations to others, and even more specifically, King Lear's relations to those around him. Existentialism is the belief that it is up to each individual to give meaning to his or her own life, to live with authenticity. The King Lear we meet in the beginning of the play was selfish, narcissistic and lacking in genuineness. However, through losing his title of King and reverting back to a helpless state, King Lear learns to be Lear, the man. His newfound responsibility for his actions, in turn, allow him absolute freedom. This is the purest example of how "King Lear" is an existential piece, and this is without even mentioning the multitude of characters who could have just as easily shown this or the other examples Baker provides outside of the realm of relationships.

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\*I only used the article as reference but because I got it off classroom, there was no way to cite it.

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