



King Lear – DEB Pre Sample Answer

“The themes evident in King Lear are skilfully presented through a series of dramatic symbols and images.”

Discuss this view, supporting your answer with suitable reference to at least two of the themes evident in the play.

Note:

When you are told to discuss at least two of the themes in the play, you should aim for three or four if possible.

This is a very wide-ranging question so the important thing is to choose the themes /images/symbols you are most familiar with and make a good case for those rather than trying to talk about every single theme/image/symbol in the play in a superficial manner.

You can begin by discussing themes and say how various images/symbols portray those themes or you can begin by discussing images/symbols and say how they highlight certain themes. The approach you take is up to you. Neither is more correct than the other.



Sample Answer:

Note: Reference to the question is highlighted in yellow.

The use of dramatic, recurring, images and symbols in King Lear allow us to fully appreciate themes such as appearance and reality, love and loyalty and the nature of evil. The images or symbols may initially appear or be referenced only briefly but they grow in potency as the play progresses and they are repeated.

The clothing imagery and the various disguises used in King Lear highlight the distinctions between corrupt power and loving loyalty as well as the distinction between appearance and reality, central themes in the play. Those who wear the most elaborate, beautiful and expensive outfits are often the most cruel and corrupt. Lear refers to this in Act 4 Scene 6:

Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks:
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.

At the beginning of the play, Lear believes that things are as they appear and so puts trust in Goneril and Regan's false professions of love while at the same time failing to see the true value and honesty in Cordelia and Kent's speeches.

Because so little value is placed on truth, loyalty and honesty, several characters in the play are forced to adopt disguises in order to protect themselves. The banished Kent disguises himself as Caius, a lowly servant, and Edgar disguises him self as an even more lowly creature, a bedlam beggar. It is significant that both adopt such costumes and places in society as it emphasises their humility and essential goodness. Neither is concerned with

personal glory but instead both are focused on providing help and support for those who have, after all, betrayed their love and loyalty.

This realization that a person may be blinded to the truth by material possessions is one to which Lear comes when he wanders on the heath in the storm. For the first time he appreciates how the poor in his kingdom have suffered, calling them 'poor naked wretches' and bemoaning the inability of their ragged clothes to defend them from the elements. When Lear meets Poor Tom he dramatically strips off his own clothes in solidarity with the beggar's nakedness. Clothing imagery makes it clear to the audience that crowns and robes mean nothing and that at heart 'unaccommodated man' is but a 'poor, bare, forked animal'.

It is only when Lear has reached true self-awareness that he is clothed once more. Cordelia's attendant tells her that while the old king was asleep they 'put fresh garments on him'. Lear is finally deserving of royal attire in a way he was not at the start of the play. The skilful use of images of clothing and disguise have shown not just the king, but also the audience how appearance and reality are not necessarily one and the same and that love and loyalty can appear in the strangest of guises.

One of the strongest and most memorable images used in *King Lear* is animal imagery. Serpents dart, wolves are savage and even Cordelia's imaginary enemy's dog bites her! All of these violent and sometimes horrific images serve to strengthen the impression of horrific evil and cruelty that pervades the play. The animals to which the evil characters are compared are all predators which feed on the flesh of other creatures: wolves, tigers and kites for example. One of our first animal references occurs in Act 1 when Goneril reveals her true nature to her father and advises Lear to reduce his train of knights to a manageable number. Lear feels utterly betrayed by her actions

and cries, 'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child! This is one of several times Goneril is likened to a snake. When Lear tells Regan of Goneril's ill-treatment of him and is adamant that he can never return to her, he says that his eldest daughter 'struck me with her tongue, / Most serpent-like'.

The critic D.J. Enright tells us that the purpose of animal imagery in King Lear is not to show how the two are similar, but rather to distinguish between them. **By linking the behaviour of certain characters to the behaviour of animals, we see how inhuman and dangerous their actions are. If man is reduced to the level of a beast, then chaos and bestial cruelty may rule the day.** Albany predicts such an outcome when he says that Goneril and Regan are 'tigers, not daughters' and if their behaviour continues unchecked then 'Humanity must perforce prey on itself / Like monsters of the deep.'

It was Lear and Gloucester's inability to distinguish between appearance and reality and to exercise good judgement that led to the tragic events of the play and the imagery of sight and blindness reinforces these themes. When Lear disowns Cordelia – ordering her 'out of [his] sight', and then disowns Kent too, Kent advises him to reconsider his rash action and urges him to 'See better'.

Unfortunately, by the time Lear does begin to 'see better', it is too late. When Goneril turns on Lear, ignoring his summons and telling him coldly to behave a little more wisely and appropriately, the old king is so shocked that he asks:

Doth any here know me? This is not Lear:

Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?

Gloucester is also blind to the reality of his children's natures. Although Edgar has done nothing whatsoever to deserve suspicion, Gloucester

immediately believes Edmund's forged letter and turns on his innocent and good son. Ironically, when asking Edmund to show him the letter, Gloucester says three times, 'Let's see'. His desire is satisfied when Edmund, with feigned reluctance, hands it over but of course Gloucester does not realise that what he sees is nothing like the truth.

His cruel blinding shows Gloucester that he has made a terrible mistake. He tells the old man who leads him on the heath:

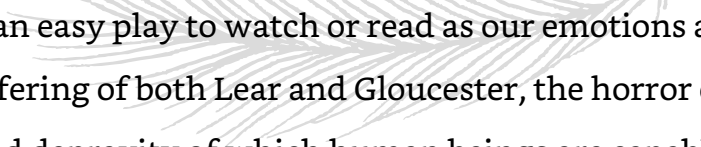
I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;

I stumbled when I saw

It is only when Gloucester loses his physical sight that he gains moral insight.

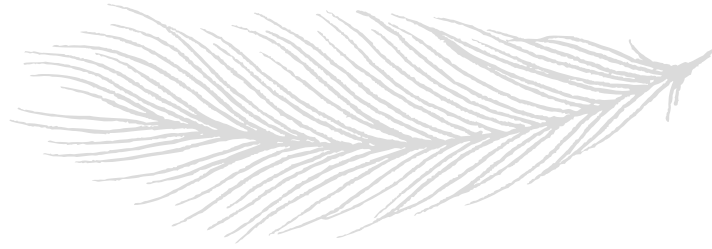
His blinding symbolizes the blindness of both father figures in *King Lear*. Both men come together in Dover towards the end of the play and bemoan the fact that they have used such poor judgement and that their poor decisions have cost them so dearly.

If there is great suffering in the play, there are also moments of hope and expressions of love. Cordelia's unwavering love and support for Lear provide the most uplifting moments in the play. Interestingly, Shakespeare chooses to make Cordelia less of a real person and more of a symbol of perfect goodness as the play progresses. Divine imagery is used to bring about this transformation. Her language in Act 4 when she tells the sleeping Lear 'O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about' is an echo of Jesus' 'I must be about my father's business.' We hear from one of her attendants that news of Lear's predicament caused her to shake 'The holy water from her heavenly eyes'. Sadly, Cordelia's saintly goodness and deep love for Lear cannot save either of them, a fact Cordelia acknowledges when, in another symbolic link to the divine, 'We are not the first / Who with best meaning have incurred the worst'.



King Lear is not an easy play to watch or read as our emotions are wrung by the dreadful suffering of both Lear and Gloucester, the horror of seeing the depths of evil and depravity of which human beings are capable, and the bittersweet expression of true love and goodness exemplified by Cordelia's efforts – albeit tragically unsuccessful – to help her stricken father. There is no doubt that the powerful imagery and symbolism enhances our appreciation of these themes and makes seeing or reading the play an unforgettable experience.

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