

Understanding *King Lear*: A Psychoanalytic Approach

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Abstract

This project examines King Lear through a psychoanalytic lens, delving into the emotional and psychological complexities within Shakespeare’s iconic tragedy. By focusing on Lear’s deep need for love and affirmation, particularly from his daughters, this analysis uncovers the internal conflicts and unconscious motivations that shape his downfall. Using key scenes, selected reenactment clips, and excerpts from the text, the project explores the emotional dynamics between Lear and his daughters. Ultimately, this perspective offers a richer understanding of how unresolved desires, psychological tension, and familial betrayal drive both the character’s unraveling and the broader themes of the play.

Introduction: Power, Family, and the Fragility of Identity

Shakespeare’s *King Lear* stands as one of his most powerful and emotionally charged works, exploring the complexities of family, authority, and mental deterioration. At its core is King Lear, a monarch nearing the end of his reign who chooses to divide his kingdom based on his daughters’ declarations of love. Goneril and Regan respond with embellished adoration, while Cordelia’s refusal to overstate her affection leads Lear to banish her in anger. He entrusts his kingdom to Goneril and Regan, whose betrayal soon follows.

As Lear loses power and stability, the play traces his descent into madness, revealing how pride, misplaced trust, and emotional fragility can unravel both personal identity and political order. These developments serve as fertile ground for

psychological analysis, particularly through the lens of Freudian theory and object-relations models of parent-child dynamics.

Exploring the Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation

This study applies psychoanalytic theory to examine Lear’s emotional world and how it influences his decisions and ultimate fate. Lear’s character is marked by an intense craving for validation, especially from his daughters, which signals a deeper psychological void. His demand for public affirmations of love reveals not just insecurity but a dependency on external validation for self-worth.

Cordelia’s honest but restrained response triggers a profound rejection, not just of her, but of reality itself. Lear’s choice to disown her emerges from unconscious fears of abandonment and inadequacy. As

his daughters, Goneril and Regan, begin to undermine him, Lear is stripped of authority, dignity, and clarity—plunging into a psychological breakdown that mirrors his eroding sense of identity.

Methodology and Materials

The analysis draws from textual excerpts and reenactment clips to contextualize Lear's behavior and emotional responses. These materials support a close reading of key moments that highlight the breakdown of familial relationships and the progression of Lear's mental state. The selected scenes help visualize Lear's unraveling and provide interpretive access to non-verbal cues, such as tone, posture, and

gesture, that deepen our understanding of the psychological turmoil at play.

Conclusion: The Mind Behind the Madness

Through a psychoanalytic lens, *King Lear* becomes more than a political or familial tragedy—it is a study in the fragility of the human psyche. Lear's overwhelming need for love, his rejection of Cordelia, and his spiral into madness underscore the powerful role of unconscious desires and unresolved emotional wounds. This approach reveals the complexity of human behavior in Shakespeare's work and reminds us of the psychological forces that shape not only characters on the page but also people in the real world.

Recommended Citation

Khan, A. (2025). Understanding King Lear: A psychoanalytical approach. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com>