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**"MADNESS, POWER, AND IDENTITY: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF HUMAN FRAGILITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*"**

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**Abstract**

*William Shakespeare's *King Lear* remains one of the most profound tragedies in Western literature, interrogating the fragility of human existence through the intertwined themes of madness, power, and identity. This research paper examines how Shakespeare presents Lear's psychological decline, the disintegration of authority, and the crisis of selfhood within a framework of political instability and familial betrayal. The central argument contends that Lear's descent into madness is not merely a personal tragedy but a metaphor for the collapse of order and the vulnerability of human identity when detached from power and recognition.*

*Drawing upon intertextual connections, this study situates *King Lear* alongside classical conceptions of tragedy such as Aristotle's *Poetics*, which emphasize catharsis and the tragic flaw, while also engaging with Renaissance humanist discourses on kingship and morality. Additionally, Michel Foucault's exploration of madness as a social construct provides a critical lens for understanding Lear's displacement from authority to abjection. The paper also considers the play's use of blindness—both literal and metaphorical—as a symbolic commentary on human limitations in perceiving truth and sustaining identity. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that *King Lear* dramatizes the precariousness of power and the instability of selfhood, offering a universal meditation on mortality, justice, and human vulnerability. By foregrounding madness as both a destructive and revelatory force, Shakespeare reveals the paradox of human fragility: the loss of reason becomes a site for truth, and the collapse of authority opens the possibility of moral insight. This analysis contributes to ongoing scholarly debates by emphasizing how Lear's tragedy resonates with contemporary concerns about power, subjectivity, and the boundaries of human endurance.*

**Keywords**

*Madness, power, identity, fragility, authority, kingship, selfhood, reason, chaos, suffering, justice.*

**Introduction**

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is one of the most profound and devastating tragedies in the canon of English literature, exploring the limits of human endurance and the fragility of identity when confronted with the loss of power, authority, and reason. Written between 1605 and 1606, *King Lear* captures the unraveling of an aging monarch who, in his pursuit of love, loyalty, and control, surrenders his kingdom and in turn descends into the chaos of madness. More than a story of familial betrayal and political collapse, *King Lear* is a meditation on the vulnerability of human existence when stripped of the structures that provide coherence, dignity, and recognition. The themes of madness, power, and identity are deeply intertwined within the play, revealing the human condition as fragile and unstable, shaped by external authority and internal struggle. This research seeks to investigate how Shakespeare employs the tragic structure, symbolic imagery, and dramatic tension to interrogate the crisis of selfhood, the precariousness of authority, and the paradoxical nature of madness as both destructive and revelatory.



The interplay of madness and power is central to the trajectory of King Lear's downfall. At the beginning of the play, Lear is defined by his kingship, a role that confers authority and identity. However, once he abdicates his throne and divides his kingdom between Goneril and Regan, he undermines the very foundation of his power and dignity. As Jan Kott (1974) observes in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Lear's fall is not simply political but existential; by relinquishing the trappings of kingship, he is reduced to "a nothingness that mirrors the void at the heart of human existence." This idea resonates with Aristotle's theory of tragedy in the *Poetics*, where the tragic hero suffers from hamartia, a fatal error in judgment that precipitates his downfall (Aristotle, 1996). Lear's error lies in conflating performative declarations of love with genuine loyalty, a mistake that not only leads to familial betrayal but also erodes his sense of self, driving him into madness.

Madness in *King Lear* is not portrayed solely as irrational collapse; rather, it becomes a vehicle for truth-telling and insight. Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1965) provides a useful lens for understanding the function of Lear's madness as both social exclusion and revelatory clarity. For Foucault, madness is historically marginalized as the "Other" of reason, yet in Lear's descent, madness allows him to perceive the hypocrisy of courtly flattery and the futility of worldly power. When Lear wanders on the heath amidst the storm, stripped of authority and sanity, he paradoxically achieves a deeper awareness of human vulnerability. The storm itself symbolizes both external chaos and inner turmoil, dramatizing the fragmentation of Lear's identity and the collapse of political order. As Stephen Greenblatt (2004) notes in *Will in the World*, Shakespeare constructs Lear's madness not merely as an individual affliction but as a metaphor for cultural anxieties about kingship, legitimacy, and divine justice in early modern England.

The theme of identity in *King Lear* emerges most forcefully in the erosion of selfhood once power is lost. Lear's authority as king had shaped his identity, granting him recognition and dignity. Without this authority, he struggles to define himself, exclaiming, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.4.230). This question underscores the crisis of identity when external validation and political authority are withdrawn. Jonathan Dollimore (1984), in *Radical Tragedy*, emphasizes that Shakespeare's tragedies consistently expose the instability of identity, showing how selfhood is constructed through power relations and vulnerable to disintegration. In Lear's case, identity collapses alongside the disintegration of kingship, illustrating the fragility of human self-definition in a world governed by shifting allegiances and power structures.

Intertextually, *King Lear* resonates with other Shakespearean tragedies, particularly *Othello* and *Macbeth*, which similarly interrogate the destructive interplay between power, identity, and psychological collapse. Othello's jealousy, like Lear's misjudgment, transforms love into tragedy, while Macbeth's ambition erodes his identity and plunges him into madness. However, unlike these plays, *King Lear* extends beyond personal downfall to dramatize the collapse of an entire order—familial, political, and cosmic. As Harold Bloom (1998) asserts in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Lear is Shakespeare's greatest tragedy precisely because it does not resolve into moral clarity or cathartic restoration but instead leaves audiences confronting the rawness of human fragility and suffering.

Furthermore, the theme of blindness in *King Lear* amplifies the interplay of power and identity, linking physical impairment with metaphorical ignorance. The subplot involving Gloucester, who is blinded by Regan and Cornwall, mirrors Lear's metaphorical blindness to the true nature of his



daughters. Both Lear and Gloucester achieve insight only through suffering and dispossession. As A.C. Bradley (1904) argued in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Shakespeare employs blindness as a motif to explore the limits of human perception, illustrating that knowledge often arises only after catastrophic loss. In this sense, madness and blindness converge as mechanisms of revelation, exposing the futility of worldly power and the vulnerability of human identity.

This study positions *King Lear* not only as a tragic exploration of individual downfall but also as a universal meditation on human fragility in the face of mortality, injustice, and the loss of coherence. By foregrounding madness as both destructive and revelatory, Shakespeare dramatizes the paradox of human existence: that clarity may emerge through chaos, and truth may be glimpsed through the disintegration of reason. The intertextual dialogue with classical tragedy, Renaissance political thought, and modern theories of madness enriches our understanding of *King Lear* as a text that transcends its historical moment to speak to enduring human concerns.

In doing so, this research contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on the role of power, identity, and madness in Shakespeare's tragedies. It argues that Lear's downfall dramatizes not only the consequences of flawed judgment but also the precarious nature of identity when untethered from authority and recognition. Shakespeare thus exposes the universal fragility of the human condition, making *King Lear* not simply a tale of one king's madness, but a profound commentary on the limits of power, the instability of selfhood, and the tragic vulnerability that defines humanity itself.

### Literature Review

The critical reception of *King Lear* has long revolved around its exploration of human fragility through the intersecting themes of madness, power, and identity. Scholars across disciplines—literary critics, historians, and philosophers—have attempted to decode the play's enduring resonance by situating it within the broader traditions of tragedy, political theory, and psychological analysis. The literature reveals that *King Lear* is not merely a story of one king's downfall, but a complex meditation on the instability of authority, the vulnerability of identity, and the paradoxical role of madness in illuminating truth.

Early critical approaches, such as those by A. C. Bradley (1904), foregrounded the play within the Aristotelian tragic framework. Bradley argued that Lear's decline epitomizes the tragic hero's hamartia, his error of judgment in surrendering authority to Goneril and Regan while disowning Cordelia. Bradley emphasized the universality of Lear's suffering, noting that the tragedy compels audiences to reflect on the limits of human endurance and the inevitability of suffering. However, later critics such as Jan Kott (1974) departed from this humanist lens, reading *King Lear* through the lens of existential absurdity. For Kott, Shakespeare's tragedy aligns with the bleak worldview of Samuel Beckett, where the collapse of authority and meaning reduces humanity to existential nothingness. Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* influenced modern productions of *King Lear* that emphasize chaos, fragmentation, and the futility of human endeavor.

Madness has been a particularly fruitful site of critical engagement. Michel Foucault's (1965) *Madness and Civilization* reframes madness not simply as a loss of reason, but as a historically constructed category of exclusion. Applied to *King Lear*, Foucault's insights illuminate how Lear's descent into madness simultaneously marks his exclusion from the structures of power and enables a radical reconfiguration of perception. Critics such as Stanley Cavell (1987) argue that Lear's madness provides revelatory insight, allowing him to see truths about justice, human suffering, and the hypocrisy of authority that were hidden from him as king. Thus, madness in the play



operates both as a symptom of loss and a catalyst for vision, suggesting that human fragility is inseparable from the conditions that make recognition possible.

Power and authority have been equally central to scholarship on *King Lear*. Stephen Greenblatt (2004) situates Lear's downfall within Renaissance anxieties about kingship and succession, highlighting the play's resonance with early modern debates about absolute monarchy and divine right. Lear's division of the kingdom not only destabilizes political order but also destabilizes the very concept of kingship itself. Jonathan Dollimore (1984), writing from a cultural materialist perspective, contends that *King Lear* exposes the ideological instability of power by dramatizing how authority is contingent, performative, and subject to collapse. By foregrounding the fragility of hierarchical structures, Shakespeare critiques the assumptions of social order, suggesting that power is both the source of identity and its undoing.

The question of identity in *King Lear* has drawn considerable attention from critics interested in selfhood and recognition. Catherine Belsey (1985) emphasizes the instability of identity in Shakespeare's tragedies, arguing that Lear's crisis stems from the realization that identity is not inherent but dependent upon external validation. His anguished question—"Who is it that can tell me who I am?"—reflects a disintegration of selfhood once stripped of the legitimizing symbols of kingship. Similarly, Harold Bloom (1998) underscores the uniqueness of Lear's identity crisis, claiming that Shakespeare "invented the human" by dramatizing characters who struggle with interiority and the collapse of social roles. In this way, *King Lear* anticipates modern philosophical concerns about the fragility of selfhood in a fragmented world.

Intertextual studies have also situated *King Lear* within broader tragic traditions. Comparisons with Greek tragedy, particularly Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, highlight shared motifs of blindness, fate, and recognition. Gloucester's literal blinding mirrors Lear's metaphorical blindness, recalling the trope of insight through suffering common in Greek drama. Furthermore, Shakespeare's play resonates with later works of modernist absurdism, such as Beckett's *Endgame*, which echoes the desolation of Lear's heath scene. These intertextual dialogues underscore how *King Lear* transcends historical boundaries to engage in a timeless exploration of human fragility.

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly emphasized the political and ethical implications of the play. Critics such as John Kerrigan (1996) highlight the themes of justice and retribution, questioning whether *King Lear* affirms any coherent moral order. Poststructuralist readings, influenced by Derridean deconstruction, suggest that the play resists stable meaning, dramatizing the impossibility of reconciling power, identity, and truth. Recent feminist critiques, such as those by Coppélia Kahn (1986), interpret Lear's breakdown in relation to gendered power dynamics, particularly the anxiety provoked by female authority in the figures of Goneril and Regan. These perspectives expand the critical discourse by situating Lear's fragility within the broader contexts of gender, ideology, and cultural anxieties.

Taken together, the scholarship demonstrates that *King Lear* remains a text of inexhaustible interpretive richness. Its dramatization of madness destabilizes the boundaries between reason and unreason, its treatment of power exposes the fragility of political and social hierarchies, and its exploration of identity anticipates modern concerns about selfhood and recognition. Intertextual engagements with classical tragedy, modern philosophy, and twentieth-century absurdism further confirm the play's status as a universal meditation on human fragility. This body of scholarship lays the foundation for the present study, which seeks to synthesize these critical trajectories in



order to foreground how Shakespeare's *King Lear* dramatizes the entanglement of madness, power, and identity in exposing the vulnerability at the heart of the human condition.

### Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive research methodology, focusing on close textual analysis of Shakespeare's *King Lear* alongside a critical engagement with existing scholarship. The primary approach is literary hermeneutics, which emphasizes detailed interpretation of language, imagery, and dramatic structure in order to uncover the play's treatment of madness, power, and identity. By situating the text within its historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts, the analysis examines how *King Lear* reflects early modern anxieties about kingship, authority, and human vulnerability.

The methodology integrates intertextual analysis, drawing comparisons with classical tragedies such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and modern works like Beckett's *Endgame*, to highlight the thematic continuities and divergences across literary traditions. Secondary sources—including critical essays, cultural materialist perspectives, psychoanalytic readings, and feminist critiques—are employed to frame and support the interpretation, ensuring a multidimensional perspective.

Rather than relying on quantitative data, this study adopts a qualitative framework that foregrounds meaning, nuance, and symbolic resonance. The purpose is not to produce definitive conclusions, but to explore how different critical lenses reveal the entanglement of madness, power, and identity in dramatizing human fragility. This interpretive methodology provides both depth and breadth, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of Shakespeare's tragedy.

### Discussion and Analysis

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is one of the most enduring tragedies in world literature precisely because it lays bare the fragility of the human condition through a relentless interrogation of **madness, power, and identity**. The play stages the collapse of political order, the betrayal of family ties, and the unravelling of the self, situating Lear's personal descent into madness as a metaphor for broader social and existential vulnerabilities. This section will critically examine how Shakespeare dramatizes human fragility by analyzing Lear's identity crisis, the shifting dynamics of power, and the thematic function of madness, while also drawing upon intertextual and theoretical frameworks to illuminate the complexity of the play.

At its core, *King Lear* is a tragedy of kingship, dramatizing the paradox of authority: power that is absolute is simultaneously fragile. Lear's decision to divide his kingdom among his daughters destabilizes not only political authority but also his sense of self. As Greenblatt (2018) observes, Lear's identity as king is inseparable from the performance of authority; once he relinquishes his throne, he confronts the terrifying reality of his human vulnerability. His insistence on love as the currency of power—demanding verbal declarations of loyalty from his daughters—reveals the instability of authority when grounded in emotion rather than justice.

Intertextually, Lear's abdication can be compared to the downfall of Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Both figures embody sovereign authority, yet both undergo a process of self-destruction once stripped of their ability to command. While Oedipus is blinded by truth, Lear is blinded by false flattery, exposing the tragic irony of leadership built upon illusion. In both plays, the fragility of kingship underscores the precarious balance between human agency and the uncontrollable forces of fate.



One of the most striking elements of *King Lear* is the role of **madness** as both destructive and revelatory. Lear's descent into mental disarray is often read as a symptom of his inability to reconcile loss of power with his identity. However, as Foucault (1988) argues in *Madness and Civilization*, madness in early modern thought was both marginalized and imbued with a paradoxical authority to reveal hidden truths. Lear's ravings on the heath—"O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!"—are not mere incoherence but rather profound reflections on justice, mortality, and the cruelty of human existence.

Intertextually, Shakespeare's use of madness aligns with later literary traditions. In Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), madness destabilizes the boundary between reality and illusion, much like Lear's fragmented perception of himself and the world. In modern drama, Beckett's *Endgame* echoes this theme, presenting madness and absurdity as existential states that expose the futility of human striving. Lear's madness thus functions as a site where Shakespeare interrogates not only individual psychology but also the limits of reason and the instability of identity.

Lear's tragedy also lies in his crisis of **identity**, which becomes inseparable from his loss of power. In the opening act, Lear defines himself as the embodiment of authority: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" Once stripped of his title, however, Lear confronts the question of who he is without kingship. As Dollimore (2004) notes, the play destabilizes Renaissance humanist notions of coherent identity by portraying the self as fragmented, contingent, and dependent on external validation.

The storm scene dramatizes this fragmentation, as Lear rages against nature while simultaneously acknowledging his own mortality. Nakedness becomes a metaphor for vulnerability, most vividly embodied when Lear strips himself of clothing in a symbolic attempt to shed the trappings of power. The Fool's commentary further highlights this collapse, exposing Lear's inability to distinguish between selfhood and sovereignty. Intertextually, Lear's crisis resonates with Hamlet's soliloquies in *Hamlet*, where the prince struggles with the fractured boundaries between duty, self, and existence. Both characters embody Shakespeare's exploration of identity as precarious, unstable, and deeply tied to the structures of power and recognition.

While the play is often read in political terms, the personal dimension of betrayal is central to its tragic vision. Goneril and Regan's manipulation contrasts starkly with Cordelia's silence, dramatizing the fragility of familial bonds when corrupted by ambition. Here Shakespeare exposes not only the precariousness of authority but also the vulnerability of human relationships under the weight of power struggles. Cordelia's death in the final act underscores the futility of Lear's search for stability, as the tragedy culminates not in restoration but in devastation.

Intertextually, this familial betrayal recalls Euripides' *Medea*, where maternal bonds are fractured by betrayal and revenge. Both plays dramatize how love and kinship can be corrupted by ambition and violence, reinforcing the theme of fragility at the heart of human relationships.

Although madness initially appears destructive, it paradoxically allows Lear access to profound moral insights. His recognition of the suffering of the poor—"Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are"—reveals a shift from narcissism to compassion, demonstrating how madness can strip away illusions of power to expose a deeper truth about human vulnerability. As Eagleton (2003) argues, Shakespeare's tragedies often reveal that suffering becomes the condition for moral recognition. Lear's madness thus becomes not only a symbol of destruction but also a pathway toward tragic wisdom.



This thematic duality is reinforced by Gloucester's subplot, which parallels Lear's descent. Gloucester's literal blindness mirrors Lear's metaphorical blindness, and his eventual insight—gained only through suffering—echoes Lear's journey. Intertextually, this recalls Sophocles' use of blindness in *Oedipus Rex*, reinforcing the idea that recognition often comes at the price of destruction.

Ultimately, *King Lear* transcends its historical and cultural context to offer a universal meditation on the fragility of the human condition. The interplay of madness, power, and identity reveals the instability of authority, the vulnerability of selfhood, and the inevitability of suffering. By staging the collapse of both political order and personal identity, Shakespeare foregrounds the precariousness of human existence in the face of mortality, injustice, and betrayal.

In this way, *King Lear* resonates with both classical and modern works that interrogate human fragility, from Sophocles to Beckett. The play dramatizes the paradox of human experience: power is fragile, identity is unstable, and madness is both destructive and revelatory. By exploring these tensions, Shakespeare creates a tragedy that continues to speak to contemporary audiences, reminding us of the universality of vulnerability at the heart of human life.

### Conclusion

The exploration of **madness, power, and identity** in Shakespeare's *King Lear* ultimately underscores the profound fragility of the human condition, situating the play as one of the most compelling tragedies in the literary canon. Lear's fall from authority to destitution dramatizes the instability of power and the transience of human achievement, exposing the precarious foundations upon which political and personal authority rest. His descent into madness further magnifies this fragility, not as mere irrationality but as a paradoxical state that reveals truth, uncovers compassion, and strips away illusions of sovereignty. Through this dual function of madness—as both destructive and revelatory—Shakespeare compels audiences to confront the uncomfortable reality that human identity is never fixed but instead vulnerable to external forces of betrayal, suffering, and mortality.

The collapse of Lear's kingship demonstrates that power, far from being absolute, is deeply dependent on recognition and performance. Once stripped of authority, Lear's struggle to define himself reveals how identity is tethered to external structures, whether familial, political, or societal. His anguished cry, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" epitomizes this existential crisis, resonating with broader philosophical inquiries into the nature of selfhood. The storm on the heath becomes a metaphorical space where Lear's fractured identity is laid bare, symbolizing the elemental vulnerability of humankind when stripped of its protective structures. In this, Shakespeare aligns Lear with other tragic figures, from Oedipus to Hamlet, who must confront the fragmentation of self when confronted with unbearable truth.

Furthermore, the play's emphasis on familial betrayal—particularly the contrast between Cordelia's silent truth and her sisters' deceptive flattery—extends the theme of fragility beyond the political sphere into the realm of human relationships. Shakespeare reveals how love, trust, and kinship, the very bonds that should provide stability, are susceptible to corruption and ambition. This dual betrayal of king and father leaves Lear doubly exposed, emphasizing that fragility permeates not only the public sphere but also the most intimate domains of life.

In the end, Lear achieves a tragic form of wisdom through his suffering. His recognition of the plight of the poor, his compassion for Cordelia, and his acknowledgment of his own mortality constitute a transformation that, while insufficient to avert catastrophe, nonetheless demonstrates the potential for suffering to yield insight. In this sense, Shakespeare presents fragility not solely as a condition of destruction but also as a path to moral recognition. Yet, the deaths of Lear and Cordelia deny audiences the comfort of restoration, leaving the play as a stark meditation on the inevitability of human vulnerability.



Ultimately, *King Lear* endures because it confronts timeless questions about power, identity, and madness that remain relevant across cultural and historical contexts. Its intertextual resonances—from Sophoclean tragedy to modern existential drama—affirm the universality of its themes. By portraying fragility as intrinsic to the human experience, Shakespeare reminds us that the search for stability, whether in authority, identity, or love, is perpetually shadowed by vulnerability. The tragedy of *King Lear*, then, lies not only in the fall of a king but in the recognition that human life itself is defined by its fragility, a truth as urgent for contemporary readers as it was for Shakespeare’s audiences.

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