King Lear by William Shakespeare: Critical Analysis of Main Themes

The concept of themes is a ubiquitous concept portrayed in the literary novel of King Lear, this being one of William Shakespeare 's masterpieces. It presents the dilemma of human relations and highlights human nature's negative characteristics, such as infidelity and ungratefulness.

The first theme that can be observed is the theme of age. The theme of age is a vital part of the play. The play discusses age and the ageing process. When a person begins to mature, he begins to lose his meaning. In Act 2, scene 4 Lear states “You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man/ As full of grief as age, wretched in both!” He continues to make choices about his kingdom when King Lear continues to age and takes a gamble on the people who show their true affection for him. In Act 1, scene 5 the fool says to Lear; “thou should’st not have been old till thou had’st been wise”. The old King Lear does not acknowledge, however, that Cordelia is the faithful one. He trusts, sadly, the deceitful ones. On the other hand, in the eyes of the fabric of society in which he needs to sustain, Edmund still waits for his father, Gloucester, to die so that he can inherit enough to acquire social legitimacy. Really, the age of King Lear heralds a new social circle emerging around him where he is not the kingpin, but only a commoner with little influence like in the past. However, even in his old age, he wishes to maintain the same authority, which seems unlikely. That is why, without having to surrender his rights, he recognises that he is elderly and wants to retire. Old age, then, and the related traits of sacrificing rights.

Another theme that can be discussed is family relations. Family connections and love of family are also as prominent as King Lear manages the fidelity of his daughters by affection. While superficially, love is in abundance, it becomes terrifying when it comes to its execution and demonstration. Cordelia, however, displays real devotion to her father by remaining with him till the end when Goneril and Regan conspired to force the old man out of their castles. Goneril and Regan do not move from their role of holding the king out in spite of considerable emotional ramifications and legal and royal implications. Similarly, Gloucester's act of fathering Edmund appears to him to be a matter of childishness, allowing all others to suffer. The earlier act of seeing family love by gestures of love by King Lear seems to rely on the fact that he needs to guarantee family allegiance and blindly trusts the one who vocally promises to love him but later leaves him.

The theme of appearance and reality discusses the fabricated story of his children, Goneril and Regan, Lear claims they love her more than he feels he can. He also turns his mind away, however, from the fact that his daughter, Cordelia, loves him the most. He is misled by the appearances of his two older children, and he ignores his daughter, who displays genuine love and allegiance to him. Likewise, Edmond, Gloucester's illegitimate son, does not recognise this fact and conspires to ridicule his rightful son's child, Edgar. Another example of appearance and reality is that when Kent disguises himself in act 1, scene 4. Kent is disguised as a commoner, to offer his services to Lear. Lear accepts his offer and sends Kent to fetch his Fool. Kent, reveals his profound allegiance to the authority of Lear, which empowers him to go beyond the normal political business order. In his mask, Lear's inability to understand Kent offers a dramatic metaphor for his inability to see the true colours of his daughters. Goneril expressing her love

for King Lear in act 1 also connects to the theme of appearance and reality because her love is fake; “Sir, I love you more than word can wield the matter; Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty; beyond what can be valued, rich or rare; no less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor; as much child e 'er, or father found; A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable. Beyond all matter of much so I love you.” Goneril did not mean any of the words she had stated.

To conclude on the themes found in acts one and two of King Lear, I believe the themes I have chosen provide the most impact to the reader. This is due to how easy it is for the reader to relate to these matters. This creates a connection from the reader to the play, and enforces tragedy. The themes of age, family relations, and appearance and reality are throughout the play, these being the most predominant themes as they appear throughout acts one and two. Age being an inescapable theme, as time passes everyone gets older and faces the inevitable matter of death.