Redemption In King Lear

In King Lear, William Shakespeare displays two similar characters with many vices. Lear is a foolish, gullible king who has many tragic flaws including moral blindness, vanity and greed. Furthermore, Gloucester is an egocentric man that suffers from moral blindness and is living in his sin of adultery. Both characters lack in reason and restraint but ultimately go through an alike journey of loss to reach redemption. Through their loss of privilege, alienation and suffering Lear and Gloucester are able to acknowledge all their vices and take responsibility for them which ultimately allows them to redeem themselves.

Lear and Gloucester are both men who have lived with status and with that comes a great deal of privilege. Only recently released of his role as a king, Lear continues to want status so he wishes for 100 knights, but his evil daughters reduce his knights to nothing and Lear is forced into the wilderness. In the wilderness, Lear gets a glimpse into the life of the poor and begins his journey to redemption. Lear says, “Poor naked wretches...O, I have ta’en too little care of this!” (KL.3.4.34-39) Lear, realizing the horrible conditions the poor are living in admits that he did not take care of the poor as a king, he begins to realize his flaws as a king as well as care for others eliminating his vanity. Likewise, Gloucester is deceived and betrayed by his son Edmund who claims his title as well as his sight. This loss of privilege triggers something inside Gloucester which allows him to see how poorly he treated the poor, Gloucester says,

“He has some reason, else he could not beg.

I’ the last night’s storm I such a fellow saw,

Which made me think a man a worm. My son

Came then into my mind, and yet my mind

Was then scarce friends with him. I heard more

since.” (4.1.38-43)

Gloucester admits that he regrets calling the poor man he saw a worm as he did not acknowledge his condition, he recognizes his moral blindness and begins to change his outlook on those of lower class. Through this loss of status, Lear and Gloucester are able to appreciate the world beyond the privileged one they know and take a step towards redemption.

Lear and Gloucester are betrayed in the play by their children which leads them to be alienated from society. Upon finding out that Goneril and Regan have reduced Lear’s knights to nothing Lear rages in the storm and says, “I am a man more sinned against than sinning.” (3.2.60-61) Lear acknowledges that he has sinned but also that he has made many mistakes as a parent which made his daughters evil and thus allowed them to sin more against him. Lear takes responsibility for his role in making Goneril and Regan evil which is supported by his earlier speech in which he says, “But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter; or rather a disease that’s in my flesh, which I must needs call mine.” (2.4.248-250) Lear is able to understand his

misconduct which consequently brings him closer to redemption. Similarly, once Gloucester gets his eyes plucked out he isolates himself in Dover and says, “If I could bear it longer and not fall to quarrel with your great opposeless wills, my snuff and loathed part of nature should burn itself out. If Edgar live, O, bless him!” (4.6.46-49) Gloucester realizes the wrong in his sin of adultery and recognizes that his sin and lack of restraint, the loathed part of nature, should be burnt. He also realizes that he did not treat Edgar properly as he was quick to believe Edmund without any reasonable information. Taking responsibility for his wrongdoings leads Gloucester further along the path of salvation. As a result of their alienation, Lear and Gloucester become aware of their mistakes as people and as parents and it prompts them to move towards redemption.

Lear and Gloucester each experience a type of suffering, where Gloucester deals with physical suffering, Lear deals with psychological suffering however both types allow the characters to realize all their vices. After being deceived by his daughters Lear undergoes a lot of psychological suffering while trying to understand how he got to this point which rids him of his moral blindness. Lear says, “Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off off, you leadings! Come, unbutton here.” (3.4.110-112) Lear is looking at Edgar and realizing that an unaccommodated man is what a true human is, not disguised by the things of civilization, and consequently is able to see all his vices. Now recognizing all of his vices Lear tears off his clothes metaphorically casting off his vices and bringing him to redemption. Whereas, Gloucester gets his eyes plucked out after being betrayed by his son Edmund and endures a great deal of physical suffering which allows him to regain his moral sight. Gloucester says, “I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw.” (4.1.21-22) Gloucester realizes that when he had his sight he did not morally see and made many mistakes. The physical removal of his eyes allegorically represents the removal of his vices and allows Gloucester to finally reach redemption. The suffering of Lear and Gloucester, although different, allowed them to realize all their vices attain salvation.

It is evident that through Lear and Gloucester’s loss of privilege, alienation and suffering, one can attain redemption. Once a character with many tragic flaws, Lear is able to realize his vices and change to redeem himself and ultimately die an honourable death. Moreover, Gloucester a man ignorant of the wrongness of his sins and suffering from moral blindness is able to go through a similar journey as Lear and once he redeems himself dies when and how God intended him to. In King Lear, William Shakespeare uses the characterization of two alike characters to emphasize how loss allows even the most vice-filled people to transform and redeem themselves.