
CLIMATE AS CLIMAX IN ‘KING LEAR’

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Abstract: Shakespeare’s tragedies are among the most analyzed and discussed literary works. In his tragedies Shakespeare follows the Aristotelian pattern of drama, so it is easy to notice there all the elements of a tragedy presented in Aristotle’s Poetics. In this paper I will define what climax in literature is and explore the climax of one of the four great tragedies of Shakespeare, that of *King Lear*. As a masterfully structured play, the central part of the play is the climax itself. But what is the climax of this play, how is it presented, does it have any impact on the characters, how does it change the course of events, etc? Answers to these questions will be given here. As an example of the interactions between men and weather conditions in Shakespeare’s drama, I will explore climate as climax. The climactic moment of the play is the storm, in the 3rd act, when we see the psychological rage of King Lear. Unsurprisingly, Shakespeare exposes the issue of how the local weather durably affects the nature of men as well as by the way their humours are temporarily changed by climate and environment. Yet, I will argue that this issue actually prompts him to reverse traditional points of view in order to show that things also work the other way round. Indeed, in some of his plays, the playwright insists on men’s unfortunate capacities to provoke violent climactic disorders and to generate chaos on earth. So, it is not only the weather and climate that affect the behaviour and humour of people, but the way people feel and behave. The case with King Lear is a perfect example of this problem. The storm that Lear finds himself is actually reflected in his inner state, in his psychological rage due to his disappointment with his two daughters, and facing with the harsh reality for a father, but mostly for being unjust to his younger daughter, Cordelia.

Keywords: King Lear, Climax, Climate, Storm, Tragedy

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare’s plays are subjects of many studies and analysis. Complexity of his plays gives researchers a lot of ideas and possibilities to write, starting from the themes, characters, motives, devices, structure, tragic elements etc. As far as the structure of the plot is concerned, Shakespeare’s plays include the elements Aristotle had presented in his Poetics. A lot can be said about exposition, rising actions, falling actions, and resolution in his plays, but I decided to write about King Lear, more specifically about the climax of this great tragedy. King Lear is a very powerful play, dealing with very serious and important issues, like relationship between father and children, between siblings, the effects of excessive pride, psychological state of the king etc. However, it also has very powerful soliloquies, wonderful artistic language and vocabulary, and all this presents the masterful style Shakespeare created in his plays. As stated above, this paper deals with one of the elements of a tragedy, the culminating moment of King Lear, its climax. But what is a climax in literature, what does it mean?

WHAT IS CLIMAX IN LITERATURE?

As we know, according to Aristotle, the basic elements of plot are as follows:

Exposition: Characters and setting are established and the conflict, or problem, is introduced.

Rising action: The conflict begins to affect the characters, complicating their lives.

Climax: The conflict is faced during the main, most dramatic event of the story.

Falling action: The story begins to slow down, showing results of the climax.

Resolution: The story is tied up and concluded.

The focus of my study is the climax. The phrase climax is derived from the Greek word *klimax* meaning “ladder.” It represents the highest point of tension or drama in the plot of a narrative. In most cases, climax represents the moment when the main problem of the story is faced and solved by the main character or protagonist and the point at which ‘the highest level of interest and emotional response is achieved’⁴¹.

Reading a story is like climbing a ladder, with the climax at the top.

⁴¹ According to Encyclopedia Britannica



As we see, the climax, or crisis, is the decisive moment, or turning point of a storyline, at which the rising action of the play turns around into a falling action, and where the conflict reaches its peak. It may or may not correspond to the highest point of interest in the drama. In a five-act play, the climax is close to the conclusion of act 3. Later in the 19th century, five-act plays were replaced by three-act plays, and the climax was placed close to the conclusion or at the end of the play.

As a structural element of a play, a climax helps readers understand the importance of the previously rising action to the point in the plot where the conflict reaches its peak, and thus makes them mentally prepared for the resolution of the conflict. Hence, it is important to the plot structure of a story. Moreover, climax is used as a stylistic device or a figure of speech in which words, phrases, and clauses are arranged in an order to increase their importance within the sentence.

It can be pointed out that, in order to be interesting or compelling, any composition must have a climax, as a story without a climax lacks emotion and change, which is what we require and want in art.

CLIMAX IN KING LEAR

Shakespeare's plays often used the supernatural, the weather and other natural phenomena as dramatic devices. He used the weather on many occasions to set the mood for the action or the mind of a main character, or in other words, the weather has a great impact on the hero, the plot and in some cases vice-versa. In this paper the focus will be on the weather and climate in *King Lear*, an acousmatic⁴² play full of lightning and thunder. There are important thematic ideas expressed in the storm scenes in *King Lear*, including: the weather, madness, nature and pride. Nature plays a prominent role in this play, both metaphorically and as a plot element which moves the action. The metaphorical use of nature is strongly implied throughout *King Lear*, a sad story in which an aging monarch's own daughters plot against him, disappointing him and eventually destroying him. Shakespeare uses stormy weather in *King Lear* to emphasize Lear's inner turmoil as he sees the smallness of man in this universe. Namely, this is the climax of the play which is perfectly structured, since the climax, being the highest point of emotional response, is exactly in the central part of the play, in the III act, and all this is being analyzed in this paper.

We know that Shakespeare used different sources for his plays, so the fact that terrible storms devastated England and Northern Europe in the spring of 1606, might be a great motive the weather to set the mood for the action or the mind of a main character in *King Lear*. Another key source may be a first-century poem by Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, so the dominance of weather images in this play probably owes much to his interest for Lucretius's use of meteorological models in order to explain the creation and destruction of material objects and living beings.

The storm is central to the play's structure, spanning eight scenes over Acts II and III, three of which are played out in the rain (III.1, III.2 & III.4) and another in which the King is sheltered in a hovel while the storm rages outside (III.6). The moment the old king gets driven out into the heath by the cruelty of his two daughters, a violent storm breaks out. King Lear, the Fool and Kent are in the storm. In act III, scene 1, King Lear wants to out storm the furious wind and rain as he is not satisfied with the destruction of the storm. He tears his silvery white hair and is himself in a state of rage. He even wants to stop the process of creation. In early meteorology thunder had natural causes, so the wrath of God was often invoked to be the reason for the occurrence of natural disasters, but the apocalyptic language and images in *King Lear* do not signal the wrath of God, but they actually signify the absence of Gods. In the play, one cannot see God behind the storm. Thunder actually is considered to act as a consciousness-

⁴² *Acousmatic* sound is sound one hears without seeing their originating cause - a invisible sound source

raiser, element which made Lear understand the reality around him. He is literally enlightened by the flashes of lightning when the sun had always blinded him. The climate is actually so harsh in the tragedy that Shakespeare seems to depict, albeit metaphorically, a “climacteric”⁴³ year. However, this refers to Lear as well, since being over 80 he belatedly goes through a climacteric year of sorts which makes him endure all sorts of disasters.

So, the storm in Lear works inventively on a number of levels: the elemental storm, the social storm which shakes the divided kingdom, the inner storm that drives Lear mad, and all are interrelated and support one another to achieve the sense of overall darkness and despair. In this scene, Lear spirals downwards into insanity, seething and shouting at the storm. The contrast against his fool, who is accompanying him, reveals Lear’s madness and inability to think straight because of the state he is in. He begins his downfall to madness and the fool attempts to persuade Lear into finding shelter with his daughters, but Lear is proud and ignores the wise words of the fool. It isn’t until Kent finds them that Lear agrees to find shelter in a hovel. The extreme weather matches the extreme anger, hurt and disappointment that Lear feels, and this mix of emotions is transmitted to the audience primarily through the harsh ‘winds’ and ‘thunder’. The storm marks one of the first appearances of the apocalyptic imagery that is so important in *King Lear* and that will become increasingly dominant as the play progresses. The chaos reflects the disorder in Lear’s increasingly crazed mind, and the apocalyptic language represents the projection of Lear’s rage and despair onto the outside world: if his world has come to a symbolic end because his daughters have stripped away his power and betrayed him, then, he seems to think, the real world ought to end, too. As we have seen, the chaos in nature also reflects the very real political chaos that has engulfed Britain in the absence of Lear’s authority. As Lear has lost authority over his daughters, he has undoubtedly lost authority over his country, he is not capable to restore his position and lead the country, and thus England will fall in the hands of one the greatest villains, Gloucester’s illegitimate son, Edmund. The most painful fact is that Lear’s daughters help Edmund and contribute to the chaotic state of the country. And all this will Shakespeare recognize as the dramatic background to the tempest of human emotion. A C Bradley says that the storm in *King Lear* refers to the storm in the human affairs, and thus to the storm which is present in the heart and soul of King Lear, reflecting the psychological state, inner state of old King Lear, caused by nothing than his pride. We are entitled to think that Shakespeare initially conceived these storms as purely interior, metaphorical storms. “*O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! / Keep me in temper. I would not be mad,*” Lear begs the sky not long before the weather deteriorates (I.5.45-46). These lines suggest that the King sees in the sky the reflection of his own mind, that later is expressed in “*minded like the weather, / Most unquietly*” (III.1.2-3).

However, Lear is trying to face down the powers of nature, an attempt that seems to indicate both his despair and his increasingly confused sense of reality. Both of these strains appear in Lear’s famous speech to the storm, in which he commands, “*Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow! / You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!*” (III.2.1–3).

Lear’s attempt to speak to the storm suggests that he has lost touch with the natural world and his relation to it—or, at least, that he has lost touch with the ordinary human understanding of nature, however, we can say that here the thunder is ‘the voice of a harsh Nature endowed with human features’.⁴⁴ In a sense, though, his discourse against the weather embodies one of the central questions posed by *King Lear*: namely, whether the universe is fundamentally friendly or hostile to man. Lear asks whether nature and the gods are actually good, and, if so, how life can have treated him so badly. His imprecations do not stop with a curse upon himself. He calls for destruction of the universe, wishing both the microcosm and the macrocosm, or himself and the universe, to be crushed, so that his curse is at the same time both self-destruction and revenge upon his daughters. In a sense, Lear and the macrocosm are one; the storm in his heart and the clash of the elements are fused into one gigantic cataclysm. The terms of the storm metaphor are therefore interchangeable, and both Lear and the cosmos become simultaneously retaliator and victim of ingratitude. Although some of the language is strange, Lear's anger is alive, and we see it when he calls on the wind and the rain to destroy him and the world that he has made. He sees the storm as a pattern for what is happening around him. The violence of the natural world reflects the violence that has become a

⁴³In Mirriam Webster Dictionary the term is explained as The grand (or great) *climacteric* was held to occur in the 63rd (7 x 9) or the 81st (9 x 9) *year* of life. Today, “*climacteric*” can refer to male or female menopause, which typically occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, but the general “turning point” sense is not usually tied to a specific age

⁴⁴Gwilym Jones, *Storm Effects in Shakespeare in Shakespeare’s Theatres and the Effects of Performance*, eds. Farah Karim Cooper and Tiffany Stern, London, Bloomsbury, The Arden Shakespeare, p. 50.

common place in what was his kingdom. In such a world, it is very easy to start believing that we have little power over the violence and instability of the socio-political world, and given the increasing unpredictability of climate change-related, extreme weather events, no hope to do anything other than rebuild after natural disasters and adapt to them. Disappointed he says:

*“Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters:
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children,
You owe me no subscription: then let fall
Your horrible pleasure: here I stand, your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man:
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That have with two pernicious daughters join'd
Your high engender'd battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. O! O! 'tis foul!” (III.2. 13-23)*

Here he is powerless in front of powers of nature, and seems to give up. The storm is used as a symbol to expose the unfathomable grief and repentance of Lear's heart. But the most dramatic function of the storm scene is when the old King goes mad. The madness represents the climax of his suffering from which he will eventually emerge as a new man. With the cooling down of the rage of the storm, we notice a change in the heart of the old king. It marks a new beginning. The redemption of King Lear starts. He can now see into the depth of his heart where truth has been born out of the selfish and arrogant attitude. His vision is now clear and he confesses: "I am a man/ More sinned against that sinning" *III.2, 49-50). Arguably, the importance of the storm scene lies in the fact that Lear's madness is fully realized; but also through this battle with madness, he gains the clarity he never had when he was of 'sound mind.'

So, Lear's plea to the "oak-cleaving thunderbolts" (III.2.5) which threatens his life during this famous episode of the storm on the heath is undoubtedly the climax of the tragedy. Here we undoubtedly notice and have the reference to nihilism, like in the example 'Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once / That makes ingrateful man"(III.2.8-9).⁴⁵ The old Lear, here, strives to at once achieve the annihilation of both the feminine and the masculine principles of creation. This is also seen earlier in the play, when he sharply answers his daughter Cordelia: "Nothing will come of nothing" (I.1.90). These kinds of statements clearly echo the principles of atomism, according to which "nothing can ever be created by divine power out of nothing."⁴⁶

As a consequence, critics like Robert Markley have argued that "Lear is not wandering through a metaphoric storm that marks his poetic madness and signals the disruption of the natural order but an all-too recognizable figure who registers the complex connections between climactic instability and its potential consequences: the loss of agricultural harvests and the fracturing of ideologies of national unity, patriarchal authority, and socioeconomic stability."⁴⁷ It is indeed tempting to read *King Lear* as a reflection of the real since, according to Simon C. Estok, the tragedy conveys the "ecophobia" of an audience traumatized by "bad harvests" and "cold weather," and the play proves particularly "vivid in its foregrounding of environmental unpredictability and in its dramatization of a fear of nature."⁴⁸

According to this, we can say that *King Lear* was probably not primarily written as a play emphasizing the disasters of a literal climate, but rather as a play which conflates the storm with Lear's inner experience, considering Lear himself the storm. In other words, Lear is the storm. Lear's state of mind, as we said, was due to his misjudgement, the fact that he believed in the flattering words, and not the sincere love of his youngest daughter. Apparently his excessive pride wanted to hear how much his daughters love him, and not see the real and sincere love.

CONCLUSION

⁴⁵ Antonio Clericuzio, *Elements, Principles and Corpuscles. A Study of Atomism and Chemistry in the Seventeenth Century*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2000, p. 14

⁴⁶ Lucretius [Titus Lucretius Carus], *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. R. Latham, Harmondsworth, Penguin Classics, 1955, 1.545-47:

⁴⁷ Robert Markley, "Summer's Lease: Shakespeare in the Little Ice Age, p.137

⁴⁸ Simon C. Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare. Reading Ecophobia*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, Kindle edition, 438/4160 .

In Shakespeare's plays, we can clearly notice many examples of climactic scenes. Significantly, clement weather, in his work, is always transient. In fact, the playwright focuses on the stability of unstable, or bad, weather, in order to convey tensions, be they political, social, or aesthetic. Thanks to recurring allusions to well-established climactic patterns, he manages to put to the fore a complex, changing, and interactive relationship between man and Nature. Except in *King Lear*, the element of weather or climate can be seen in many other plays, like in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the weather is clearly disturbed by human behaviour, and the opposite happens in *Romeo and Juliet*, where weather dictates the mood and the fate of the characters, in *Macbeth* where it stresses the tone of the plot, etc.

However, the relationship between man and nature is much more ambivalent, and much more subtly treated in *King Lear*, a mature tragedy in which the playwright presents the influence of weather upon man, and of man upon weather, in an acute awareness of the environmental problems posed by man's behaviour. When Shakespeare wrote this particular play, lands so far unknown had been colonized, science and technology had been through unprecedented advances, and the control of nature had become much more attainable a goal. The wind is both a generative and a destructive force, depending on man's ability to adapt and evolve. Climate, here, bridges the gap between man and nature. It becomes an actor and is no longer a simple excuse for powerful stage effects. It is a force to be reckoned with, a major element of the world's balance. Ultimately, if climate owes nothing to supernatural causes, it proves an experimental, technical and a sensual experience at the same time.

To conclude, we may say that, the storm scene reveals the psychological discerning of Lear and it directs the reader's attention in insight into the mind and conscience of Lear. The storm in Nature actually corresponds to the burning of Lear's heart, which is the central point in the play, both thematically and structurally.

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