

# Psychology In Literature

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Sarah Baumgartner

Professor David Hartwig

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## Mental Illness in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

When I began writing in Middle School, my parents told me to write what I know. This simply meant that, as a twelve-year old, I could not write stories from the eyes of a mother or a war veteran because I had not lived those various experiences—at least I couldn't write them *well*. As I've grown older, my life experience has increased and the spectrum of things I can write about has naturally increased, too. Generally, I think the “write what you know” rule is something that most writers follow. With that in mind, it's interesting to read different types of literature from different authors—especially William Shakespeare.

It's no secret, a large part of Shakespeare's work falls in the genera of tragedy, *King Lear* included. Not only is *King Lear* a dark and twisted story but there are many instances where mental illnesses of various types are apparent in its many characters. Even though there were no diagnoses for numerous forms of mental illness during the time of Shakespeare's life, he writes about them very clearly based on today's criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Also known as DSM). As these disorders are brought up, it is interesting to wonder what Shakespeare *knew* about mental illness from experience.

Through the entirety of the play, Lear himself battles Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Brief Psychotic Disorder with a Marked Stressor, and Intermittent Explosive Disorder. Other characters like Edgar (also known as Tom o' Bedlam) potentially suffers from Borderline Personality Disorder and his daughter, Regan, and her husband, The Duke of Cornwall, clearly express Antisocial Personality Disorder during one scene.

Shakespeare spares no time introducing King Lear as a volatile and unsteady character. "In Act I Lear recognizes his own fragile psychological state 'O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! Keep me in temper; I would not be mad.'" (Richards). Within Lear's first lines it is clear that the King has great admiration for himself as he asks his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, to verbally express their love of him in order to divide his kingdom properly (*Lear* 1.1.35-53). At first, it can be interpreted simply as an arrogant request, but only a few lines later, we see that this need for admiration is deeper than just arrogance. After his eldest daughters finish their speeches expressing their profound love for their father and he grants them rule, he calls upon Cordelia, his youngest. Her response to her father is different: because she has not wed, unlike her sisters, she loves her father fully and she does not feel like her sisters were entirely truthful (*Lear* 1.1.95-104). Lear becomes unhinged and not only degrades Cordelia, but banishes her from his kingdom and removes her birthright, "Be as well neighbored, pitied, and relieved / As though my sometime daughter" (*Lear* 1.1.120-121). It is here it becomes clear that King Lear suffers from Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and this is the first glimpse of Intermittent Explosive Disorder as the two often go hand-in-hand throughout *King Lear*.

“The essential feature of Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy...” (Goldman et al. 658). By the diagnostic criteria of NPD in the DSM-IV, Lear fits this description well. It goes on to say that if someone with NPD is criticized or are undermined “They may react with disdain, rage, or defiant counterattacks.” (Goldman et al. 659). By examining Lear’s reaction to Cordelia, it is reasonable to assume this was his counter attack to being humiliated. This is also noticeable in other parts of the play. For instance, there is a scene when Goneril subtly asks her father to lesson his army because his men are “...so disordered, so deboshed and bold...” (*Lear* 1.4.236). Lear quickly defends the quality of his men. He then strikes his daughter down, calls upon Nature to make Goneril sterile, and if she were to bear a child he prays it “torment” her (*Lear* 1.4.271-279). The brutality of these remarks (as well as the way he dealt with Cordelia) suggests that his NPD is almost directly tied to Intermittent Explosive Disorder (IED).

Intermittent Explosive Disorder “...is failure to control impulsive aggressive behavior in response to subjectively experienced provocation...” (Disruptive 467). Throughout the play, when Lear’s ego is provoked, he back lashes with violent, almost instant, verbal. The outbursts of people who suffer from IED “...are generally impulsive and/or anger based, rather than premeditated...” (Disruptive 467). Lear clearly has impulsive episodes and cannot control his temper.

One of the more iconic scenes from *King Lear* is the storm and tempest scene. The storm begins at the exact moment Lear flees Regan’s portion of the kingdom. At this point, Lear has been denied from both his daughter’s kingdoms, and he wonders the wilderness with the Fool (*Lear* 2.4.262-284). There have been many interpretations of

the storm, a common one being that the state of Nature ties to the mental state of Lear's mind. In Act 3, Lear has a monologue about the severity of the storm and the treatment from his daughters. He calls out the storm and it is at this moment Lear reaches a breaking point.

I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness I never gave  
you kingdom, called 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. (*Lear* 3.2.16-20)

Lear has now transitioned from his narcissistic mind set and calls himself a poor, weak, old man. He also speaks to the storm as if it is alive. This occurs after the stress and anxiety of Cordelia leaving and his eldest daughters overthrowing him. According to DSM-IV, this could signify a Brief Psychotic Disorder with a marked stressor.

Brief Psychotic Disorder is described as "...a disturbance that involves the sudden onset of at least one of the following positive psychotic symptoms: delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech or grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior" (Andreasen et al. 302). The reason it is titled "Brief" is because these episodes are at least one day long, but shorter than a month. There are also certain criteria, one of which is a marked stressor. A stressor is an event that is significantly stressful or could cause anxiety (Andreasen et al. 302). Lear's breaking point happens shortly after his fall out with all his daughters and the loss of his kingdom. Those, in this case, are the marked stressors. Later in the play, he appears in a costume of wild flowers which clearly show Lear is still mad even after the storm had ceased (*Lear* 4.6.80-83). It is clear that this

episode lasts until shortly before his death. In the last scene of the play, Lear enters with the body of his youngest daughter Cordelia. Here, he cries and howls over her body saying, “This feather stirs; she lives! If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That I ever felt” (*Lear* 5.3.265-267). Lear waits to see if Cordelia breaths, and in this moment of anticipation, he renounces his sorrow and his madness. It is in his last moments that he seems to become sane again before dying over the body of his daughter.

Lear is not the only character who suffers from mental illnesses. Perhaps one of the more noticeable and obvious changes in a character is Edgar who later identifies himself as Tom o’ Bedlam. After being framed by his brother Edmund, Edgar believes he has angered his father and is chased out of his family. Edgar’s intentions are to simply disguise himself as Tom o’ Bedlam, a bare and dirty beggar. However, there are moments throughout the play where it can be argued that Edgar actually suffers from Borderline Personality Disorder.

Edgar’s initial intention is to hide his identity (especially from his father, the Duke of Gloucester), so he begins to play the role of “Poor Tom” rather convincingly. He not only appears physically different by dirtying himself and stripping himself of his garments, but he begins to speak manically. At first, it appears this is simply his attempt to mask his true identity. However, late in the third act of the play, it can be argued that the mental effects of hiding from his father and living as Poor Tom are not acting at all. Edgar begins to hear voices. “Farateretto calls me; and tells me Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness” (*Lear* 3.6.6-7) and “The foul fiend haunts poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale” (*Lear* 3.6.30-31) is the first instance where Edgar speaks of hearing voices

in his head. Later, he actually lists the names of “fiends” or demons that have possessed him at once.

Five fiends have been in Poor Tom at once; of list, as  
Obdicut; Hobbididance, price of dumbness; Mahu, of  
stealing; Modo of murder; Flibertigibbet, of mopping and  
mowing, who since possess chambermaids and waiting  
woman. (*Lear* 4.1.59-63)

It can be argued, here, that Edgar suffers from Borderline Personality Disorder.

“Individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder make frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment” (Goldman et al. 650). Edgar recently suffered from the “abandonment” of his father because of Edmund’s set up and betrayal. He also does not know what he has done wrong to anger his father, “...the loss of external structure can lead to profound changes in self-image, affect, cognition, and behavior... They may believe that this ‘abandonment’ implies they are ‘bad’” (Goldman et al. 650). Poor Tom (and ultimately his “possession”) emerged from that sense of abandonment from his father.

King Lear and Edgar suffer illnesses that do more harm to their own psyche. Some, more outwardly violent, illnesses are also apparent in other characters like Regan and her husband Cornwall. Not only does Regan (and her sister Goneril) plot to overthrow their father, but Regan and her husband Cornwall torture the Duke of Gloucester for treason. They tie him to a chair and Regan begins to pluck at his beard, which, in the time this play was written, was an extreme insult to a man. The scene rapidly escalates. Cornwall gouges out one of Gloucester’s eyes. By Regan’s command, he takes the

second eye too, “One side will mock another. The other too!” (*Lear* 3.7.73). In this scene, Gloucester is gruesomely blinded by Regan and Cornwall and their sudden leap to extreme violence shows that these two characters potentially suffer from Antisocial Personality Disorder *and* it can be argued that they too suffer from IED.

In order to treat Gloucester as they did, Regan and Cornwall seemingly disassociate him from being a living person and do not give him chance to defend himself: “The essential feature of antisocial personality disorder is a pervasive pattern of disregard for, and violation of, the rights of others...” (Oldman et al. 659). The definition in DSM-V goes onto state that, “...deceit and manipulation are central feature of Antisocial Personality Disorder...” (Oldman et al. 659). If Regan’s relationship with her father, King Lear, is examined, it is known that she lied to him and manipulated him to overtake a portion of his kingdom. The rapid escalation of the torture could be linked to the symptoms of Intermittent Explosive Disorder Regan could have been exposed to while growing up with her father.

In more than one instance, the different characters of *King Lear* suffer from various mental illnesses. By using today’s definitions and the symptoms written about in the play, the types of illness can be clearly defined. Whether it is Lear’s battle with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Intermittent Explosive Disorder, and Brief Psychotic Disorder, Edgar’s Borderline Personality Disorder, or Regan and Cornwall’s violent nature toward Gloucester, Shakespeare writes a compelling and dark tale that is filled with knowledge about the mental illnesses of the human mind. Although this play was written well before the definitions and criteria of these illnesses existed, Shakespeare, in order to write these volatile characters, clearly has some experience with them. Perhaps

the overlying question is what kind of experiences did he have...and was his knowledge through first-hand experience or through observation?

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