**BLINDNESS AND SIGHT**

The theme of blindness is shown paradoxically in King Lear. It is primarily shown through the characters of Lear and Gloucester.

Lear:

Lear experiences blindness throughout the play, fooled by words and unable to truly see the truth of his situation until he is overcome by madness. At the start of the play he refers to his eyes as ‘old fond eyes’, (A1,S4,304-305) indicating that they have always served him well in the past, but we see the deteriorating of his ability to see reality as disorder ensues in the play.

Initially, Lear is blinded by the words of his daughters’ Regan and Goneril who proclaim the they love him ‘dearer than eyesight’ (A1,S1,57). He fails to see the truth that his daughter Cordelia loves him while Goneril and Regan do not. There is irony as Lear commands Cordelia to ‘hence and avoid my sight!’ (A1,S1,125) and tells Kent ‘Out of my sight!’ (A1,S1,158) when in reality, he is already not seeing them for who they are, his loyal daughter and servant. Kent pleads Lear to allow him to ‘still remain the true blank of thine eye’ (A1,S1,159-160). As a consequence of Lear’s blindness, his favourite daughter is banished from his Kingdom and disowned by her father, Kent disguises himself as a servant looking for a master to serve and Lear himself alienates his closest and most loyal companions.

Lear continues to be unable to see the reality when Goneril dismisses 50 of his knights and has her servants treat him badly. He flies into a rage, vowing to live with Regan with his 100 knights. Here Lear fails to see that it may have been unfair to impose 100 unruly knights on his daughter’s household, and also that Regan too may not want to have 100 knights dominating her home. Lear here claims his actions to be just by proclaiming that ‘O reason not the need! Our basest beggars are in the poorest thing superfluous.’ (A2,S4,261-262)

As Lear descends into madness, his physical sight becomes clouded, when he irrationally attacks a joint stool, believing it to be Goneril, yelling ‘False justifier, why hast thou let her ‘scape?’ (A3,S6,55). It is only when Lear truly succumbs to madness, and completely loses his mind, that he gains his sight, the ability to see the reality of his actions and situation. He counsels Gloucester ‘A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears’ (A4, S6, 151-152) From this quote we can see the Lear has had the realisation that what you believe to be true may only be true on the surface – in order to discover the truth you must truly listen to what is happening around you.

Gloucester:

Gloucester is fooled by Edmund into thinking Edgar has a plot against him. Gloucester believes that Edmund is his loyal and natural boy but fails to see that Edmund is really using him for his own personal gain. Only once Gloucester has had both his eyes removed he starts to see the truth. “O my follies! Then Edgar was abused. Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him.” (A3,S7,93-94)

It is only now that Gloucester is physically blinded that he begins to see the truth that Edgar was innocent and Edmund was the son plotting against him. Gloucester says “I have no way, and therefore want no eyes; I stumbled when I saw.” (A4,S1,18-19). Gloucester is beginning to understand that when he could see before he was blind he made mistakes because although he had his sight he could not see the truth.

When Lear is talking to Gloucester, he says, “A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears.” (A4,S6,151-152). Lear is explaining to Gloucester how he doesn’t need his eyes to be able to see he just needs to look with his ears by listening to see.