

Imagery and Symbolism

Remember, when you are discussing imagery and symbolism in the play, to focus on the effect it has on your appreciation of the play. This is similar to the style questions in comprehensions in that you should never point out a feature of style without using a verb to describe its impact on the reader or audience.

Here is a **short** list of some of the verbs that you might wish to use:

Amuses

Appals

Disgusts

Emphasises

Evokes

Heightens (our sense of outrage, our sympathy, our curiosity etc.)

Horrifies

Intrigues

Provokes

Repulses

Revolts

Saddens

Shocks

NOTA
BENE

The notes I have given here are not organised as you would write them in an essay but are merely provided to aid your revision. Select those which are relevant to the question and make sure that they are part of coherent paragraphs.

Man and Nature

In Renaissance thinking, the balance of the natural world could be easily upset as it was linked to the nature of man. If a person or people behaved in an unnatural way, then disorder in the wider world was inevitable. Lear acts in just such a way when he divides his kingdom between his daughters and hands them his power. At the time, it was believed that the king ruled by divine right, so was never in a position to simply stop being king. When Lear relinquishes his authority, he sets in motion a train of events that will inevitably lead to disharmony and disaster.

Similarly, Goneril and Regan's unnatural behaviour in refusing to remain subordinate to their father would be shocking to Shakespeare's audience. Although it is Cordelia that Lear originally accuses of behaving like 'a wretch whom nature is ashamed / Almost to acknowledge as hers', it is actually Goneril and Regan who are unnatural daughters in that they treat their aged father appallingly and subvert the social order of the day. All Cordelia says is that she loves her father as she should, according to her duty and that she will love her husband as she should when she is married. However, Lear - in his vanity - interprets her words quite differently and rejects her as a result. He uses imagery drawn from nature when he casts her out, calling on the 'sacred radiance of the sun' to bear witness to his disowning his youngest child.

Goneril, Regan and Edmund are all examples of children who reject the natural and proper order which says that children are duty-bound to love and honour their father. Edmund's case is even more interesting than Goneril and Regan's however, in that he is actually a 'natural' son but not a son according to the law of the land. It is Gloucester who draws our attention to this, making it perfectly obvious that while he loves his illegitimate son, he is not his son 'be order of law', unlike Edgar.

Edmund's reaction to his situation is to reject the 'natural' duty owed by a son to a father and to embrace instead the more primal and basic laws of nature in which the strongest prevails and self-interest is the main motivation for all action. In his soliloquy at the start of Act 1 Scene 2, Edmund makes his rejection of the social order clear:

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines
Lag of a brother?

He ends his speech with a cry that every student of the play remembers, even when they have forgotten all other key quotes: 'Now, gods, stand up for bastards!'

When Lear discovers that Goneril and Regan have betrayed him, we see just how strong is the link between man and nature. This is the most famous scene in *King Lear*. In it, we see that Lear, driven out into the night by the refusal of his daughters to acquiesce to his request to keep his knights, calls on the storm to destroy the entire world. He wants the world to be flattened, flooded and struck by lightning. He urges the winds to rage and blow. It is his wish that the world be so devastated by this storm that there be no future and no life as he hopes that mankind will be wiped out. Lear's fury and despair are evident in this scene.

The storm on the heath reflects the storm that is in Lear's mind and, for a short time, distracts him from his sorrow and anger at his daughters' treatment of him: 'This tempest will not give me leave to ponder / On things that would hurt me more'. The storm shows us that the connection between

man and nature is so strong that if the balance is one is disturbed, the balance of the other will be equally thrown. To a modern audience, this might not seem as disturbing as it would to a person of the time in which the play was written, but we are perhaps more removed from the idea that what happens in the natural world directly impacts on us. This is changing – albeit slowly – as we come to grips with environmental concerns, but the people of Shakespeare’s time were far more at the mercy of nature and the elements than we are today.

The idea of the natural order of the world and the social order of the world being linked is not unique to *King Lear*. In *Macbeth*, when the good king Duncan is murdered by Macbeth, the natural world begins to fall apart. For more detail on this, go to my Macbeth notes on this site.

All of those who flout the natural order of things (according to the understanding of social laws of the time) are dead by the end of the play. Because of their actions, innocent characters such as Cordelia and Kent are dead too. Albany and Edgar alone remain and both represent obedience to the natural social order. In their hands the kingdom will be safe and secure.

Animals

Animal imagery in King Lear is linked to pain and suffering. Serpents dart, wolves are savage and even Cordelia's imaginary enemy's dog bites her! All of these violent and sometimes horrific images serve to strengthen the impression of physical pain and horror that pervade the play. The animals to which the evil characters are compared are all predators which feed on the flesh of other creatures: wolves, tigers and kites for example. For their appetites to be satisfied, others have to die. Ultimately, the characters linked with these natural killers turn on one another and in the deaths of Goneril, Regan and Edmund we see the death of the animal nature and the restoration of a proper social order.

The critic D.J. Enright tells us that the purpose of animal imagery in King Lear is not to show how humans and animals are similar, but rather to distinguish between them. By linking the behaviour of certain characters to the behaviour of animals, we see how inhuman and dangerous their actions are. If man is reduced to the level of a beast, then chaos and bestial cruelty may rule the day. Albany predicts such an outcome when he says that Goneril and Regan are 'tigers, not daughters' and if their behaviour continues unchecked then 'Humanity must perforce prey on itself / Like monsters of the deep.'

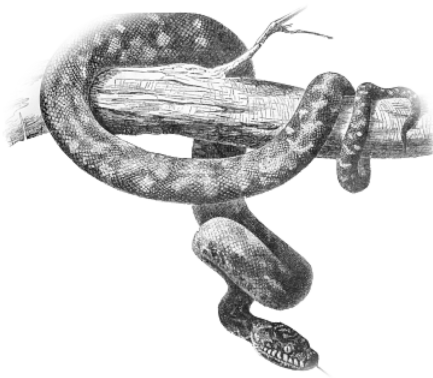
One of our first animal references occurs in Act 1 when Goneril reveals her true nature to her father and advises Lear to reduce his train of knights to a manageable number. Lear feels utterly betrayed by her actions and cries, 'How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child!x

This is one of several times Goneril is likened to a snake. When Lear tells Regan of Goneril's ill-treatment of him and is adamant that he can never return to

her, he says that his eldest daughter ‘struck me with her tongue, / Most serpent-like’.

The final comparison between Goneril and a snake occurs in Act 5 Scene 3, when Albany calls his wife a ‘gilded serpent’ who has made love to Edmund despite being married.

For a woman to be compared to a serpent conjures up the image of the snake in the garden of Eden leading Eve to tempt Adam and thus bring about the exile of mankind from paradise. Although *King Lear* is ostensibly set in pre-Christian times, this is only one of many Christian references in the play. Shakespeare’s audience would have been quick to pick up on this biblical link as one of the common man’s other great source of drama and entertainment was – surprising as it may seem – lengthy religious sermons.



In Act 2, Scene 4, Regan attempts to persuade Lear to return to Goneril’s castle. He is appalled and says he would rather ‘be a comrade with the wolf and owl’ than subject himself to his daughter’s cruelty once more. For a king to be willing to reduce himself to the level of a beast heightens the horror of the situation in which he finds himself.



When the Gentleman tells Kent of Lear’s crazed wandering in the open air, he compares his situation to those of wild animals and says even they would hesitate to be abroad in such stormy and inhospitable conditions:

This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,
The lion and the belly-pinched wolf
Keep their fur dry, unbonneted he runs,
And bids what will take all.



To see any elderly man – let alone a king – running about in the open with nothing to protect him from the elements when even the animals seek shelter is heart-breaking.

Shakespeare was an accomplished story-teller but he was no naturalist. In Act 3, Scene 4, he describes Goneril and Regan as ‘pelican daughters’. In his time, it was believed that pelicans fed their young by stabbing their own breasts with their long beak and giving the blood to their chicks. This vampiric image is appropriate, however, as Lear implies that Goneril and Regan are taking his life’s blood and draining him of everything that makes him who he is.

Underneath all of our sophistication lies an animal, and *King Lear* shows us just what happens if that creature is left to rule our behaviour. At the same time, however, we see that without the trappings of civilization, man is reduced to a pathetic beast. Lear acknowledges this when he says to Edgar (Tom O’ Bedlam) that ‘unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor bare, forked animal as thou art’.

The two main aims of animal imagery in the play are to show us that if we behave like animals, then we will be subject to dreadful pain and suffering and that if we reduce ourselves to the level of beasts, we lose our basic humanity. Animals live by a simple set of rules: kill in order to survive if that is what it takes. If humans adopt this philosophy, then all is lost.