

Specimen Paper

The tragic outcome of both plays results from a failure of leadership.

The outcomes of 'King Lear' and 'The Burial at Thebes' can both be described as tragic and are due to a failure of leadership, however, there are other external factors acting against the main protagonists that also lead to their failure as leaders. King Lear is in an elevated position of responsibility but in my opinion, he makes a fatal mistake of dividing his kingdom which is an irresponsible decision as a leader. Creon has great stature too but he also makes a fatal mistake that is not characteristic of a leader by disallowing Polyneices' body to be buried despite not consulting with the gods. The tragic outcome of both plays are undoubtedly due to a failure of leadership, but there are obvious external factors that also lead to the tragic outcome.

A successful leader is one who demands respect and authority from his people, this happens for both Lear and Creon at the beginning of the plays, for example, staging allows to emphasise Lear's greatness as King of England, "Sennet. Enter a servant bearing a coronet, King Lear, Cornwall, Albany, Goneril, Regan and Attendants." This ceremonial procession is an effective technique used by Shakespeare as it is impressive and suggests the great power of Lear. The props that are used are highly significant, the sennet symbolises the high rank of King Lear and the coronet is a symbol of his kingly power. Thus, our first impression of Lear is one that is not of a failed leader but of an imperious king who strikes awe into the audience. Heaney also uses stage directions to portray the greatness of Creon, "Enter Creon with his guards." Creon would be dressed in costume to portray his importance to the audience. However, Lear is an established leader whereas Creon is only a new leader. The greatness at the beginning of the plays contrasts with the tragic outcome at the end of the plays therefore emphasising their descent into becoming failed leaders.

In both plays the protagonists make fatal mistakes that reflect a failure of leadership as a result of a lack of judgement. King Lear has "divided in three our kingdom" which would be alarming for the audience as this is not the action of a responsible leader. This "darker purpose" would have also been shocking for the Jacobean audience who would remember how the taxing question of succession had loomed large during the reign of Elizabeth I as they were particularly concerned about the possibility of a civil war. King Lear creates the 'love test' therefore he is dividing the kingdom on the basis of the words of his daughters, this is an egotistical and foolish idea and clearly not one of an efficient leader. A successful leader is meant to create a sense of stability but by dividing the kingdom into three he is making the territory weaker. By abdicating his throne, Lear is disturbing the Great Chain of Being by putting his daughters above him and he is insulting the Divine Right of kings because in the Jacobean era kings were viewed as representatives of God and so to freely give away his role he is disrespecting society and religion which shows a failure of leadership. When Cordelia states "I love your Majesty according to my bond; nor more nor less", Lear's response is wrathful as Cordelia has damaged his pride by not using embellished language to state how much she loves him in the same manner that her sisters have done. Lear demonstrates one of his fatal flaws as a leader as he is metaphorically blind to Cordelia's genuine love. Lear even admits that he was going to give Cordelia "one third more opulent" which again emphasises his failure of leadership as he divided the kingdom unfairly due to favouritism. Lear shows his hamartia of pride as he "disclaims all paternal care" from Cordelia then carries out a symbolic action, "This coronet part betwixt you." This is the greatest mistake a leader could make and Lear will learn the consequences of being a foolish leader and giving everything that he owned to his two malevolent daughters through his suffering.

Similarly, Creon makes a fatal mistake due to his hamartia of pride and stubbornness. Creon first states that a good leader must "act in the interests of all citizens" and he then judges "the man who has all the good advice, and then, because his nerve fails, fails to act in accordance with it." Despite claiming to have the interests of the state in his mind, he acts in a contrary manner as he fails to take the advice of others and acts in an autocratic manner. Creon creates the edict to not bury Polyneices as he is seen as a "traitor". This decision would have had a similar reaction from the audience in comparison to when the audience heard about the division of the kingdom in 'King Lear' as Greek burial rites were of great significance to people because if one was not buried properly then they would not be able to enter the Underworld and would never find rest, hence why Antigone is so passionate to bury her brother. This suggests that both King Lear and Creon show