



# Greed for Wealth in Shakespearean Tragedy: A Marxist Reading of King Lear

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**ABSTRACT:** This research examines the theme of greed for wealth in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* through a Marxist perspective, focusing on the socio-economic forces that shape character actions and the tragic outcome. It places the play within the feudal system of Elizabethan England, where land and wealth determine power and social hierarchy. The study shows how Lear's division of the kingdom turns property into a source of conflict, leading to manipulation, rivalry, and betrayal among characters like Goneril, Regan, and Edmund. Using Marxist literary criticism, the research argues that the tragedy is closely tied to its economic context. Greed is presented not just as a moral weakness but as a result of a system where wealth equals power and security. The study also highlights the material aspects of the play that are often overlooked in character-based readings. Overall, it concludes that *King Lear* reflects and critiques social and economic inequality, making its themes relevant even today.

## Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is widely known as one of the greatest writers in the English language. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, and later moved to London, where he built a successful career as an actor, playwright, and poet (“William Shakespeare”).

Shakespeare made a huge contribution to literature, writing 39 plays, 154 sonnets, and two long narrative poems. His tragedies, like *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, explore deep human emotions and moral struggles, while his comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*, combine humor with social insight. His works have been translated into many languages and are still performed and studied around the world.

He died in 1616, but his influence remains strong. Shakespeare's ability to show universal human experiences like love, ambition, madness, and justice keeps his work meaningful even today.

*King Lear* is one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, focusing on power, family, and human weakness. At the center of the play is greed, the desire for more wealth and control, which goes beyond a personal flaw and becomes a social problem. It damages relationships, breaks trust, and leads to the fall of both the family and the kingdom. Shakespeare shows how the hunger for material gain can make people lose their moral values and hurt those closest to them.

Although greed is a common theme in literature, *King Lear* stands out because it connects personal actions with larger social and political effects. The characters' choices reflect the

society they live in, showing how wealth and power influence class and justice (Greenblatt, 2004, p. 55).

This study uses Marxist Literary Theory to examine these ideas. Marx believed that wealth and class struggle shape human behavior (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 14). Through this lens, the play reveals how land and property create conflict, leading characters toward betrayal and tragedy.

The play begins with King Lear deciding to divide his kingdom among his three daughters. He expects love and loyalty in return, but by asking them to declare their love publicly, he turns a private family matter into a competition. This moment shows how love is measured through wealth. By rewarding flattery and punishing honesty, Lear creates space for greed to grow, which later leads to chaos in the kingdom and his own suffering (Kermode, 2000, p. 102).

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To examine how greed for wealth functions as a central theme in *King Lear* and shapes the actions and fates of its main characters.
- To analyze the play through the lens of Marxist Literary Theory, highlighting the connections between economic power, class struggle, and personal relationships.
- To explore how Shakespeare's portrayal of greed reflects the social and economic structures of Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

### **Research Questions**

- How is greed for wealth depicted in *King Lear*, and in what ways does it drive the plot and character development?
- How does Shakespeare connect the pursuit of wealth to issues of class, power, and social hierarchy in the play?
- In what ways can Marxist Literary Theory help explain the economic and political dimensions of greed in *King Lear*?

### **Limitations of the Study**

Like any academic research, this study has some limitations. Firstly, it focuses only on *King Lear* and does not compare it with other Shakespearean plays or literary works, so the findings cannot be applied to all literature on greed.

Secondly, the study uses only Marxist Literary Theory, which primarily examines wealth, class, and economic power. While this gives strong insights, it does not explore other perspectives like feminism or psychology that could show different meanings (Belsey, n.d., p. 42).

Thirdly, the research depends on secondary sources for historical context. These sources may include the views and biases of other scholars rather than original research (Greenblatt, 2004, p. 64).

Fourthly, the study is limited by the lack of complete historical data from Shakespeare's time, so some ideas are based on interpretation rather than exact facts (Hadfield, 2002, p. 94).

Finally, the focus is mainly on greed for wealth, even though other themes like pride and betrayal are also important in the play.

Despite these limits, the study is still important because it offers a clear and fresh understanding of *King Lear*, especially in relation to wealth, class, and social issues.

## Literature Review

Terry Eagleton, in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, argues that literature should be understood within its historical and economic context. In *King Lear*, he highlights how the division of land reflects the material basis of political power (Eagleton, 2002, p. 34). While his work is important, this study goes further by focusing specifically on greed and wealth as key forces driving corruption in the play.

Stephen Greenblatt, in *Will in the World*, studies Shakespeare in relation to the Elizabethan social system and shows how his works reflect issues such as social mobility and ambition. Although he notes that *King Lear* critiques social order, he does not focus on greed or wealth as central themes. This study builds on his ideas by highlighting greed for wealth as a key force behind the tragedy (Greenblatt, 2004, p. 61).

Andrew Hadfield, in *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, discusses how *King Lear* critiques political power and class hierarchy. While he considers the role of wealth in authority, he does not fully explore greed within family relationships. This study extends his argument by showing how personal greed damages familial bonds (Hadfield, 2002, p. 87).

Jonathan Dollimore, in *Radical Tragedy*, analyzes *King Lear* through ideology, religion, and power, showing how it critiques social structures. However, he does not focus strongly on economic greed. This study emphasizes materialism and class struggle as central themes (Dollimore, 1984, p. 142).

Louis Montrose, in *Shakespeare's Body*, examines political and cultural concerns such as royal authority and land ownership. While he discusses land symbolically, he does not focus on greed as a motivating force. This study highlights greed for wealth as central to the tragedy (Montrose, 1996, p. 66).

Michael Neill, in *King Lear: A Critical Guide*, discusses social order, disorder, and Lear's concerns with authority. However, he does not directly emphasize wealth as a corrupting force. This study focuses on greed as a central driver of tragedy (Neill, 2005, p. 112).

Catherine Belsey, in *Critical Practice*, analyzes *King Lear* through language, power, and identity. While she explores authority, she focuses less on economic forces. This study differs by emphasizing wealth and class struggle (Belsey, n.d., p. 98).

Stanley Cavell, in *Disowning Knowledge*, interprets *King Lear* through existential philosophy and human vulnerability. However, he does not highlight greed for wealth as a central cause of tragedy. This study focuses on materialism and economic desire (Cavell, 1987, p. 87).

Terry Heller, in *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Mystery of the Human Heart*, gives a psychological reading of Lear's emotional breakdown. However, he does not fully examine economic causes. This study expands his approach by including greed and wealth (Heller, 1995, p. 74).

Overall, the literature review shows that while many scholars explore power and hierarchy in *King Lear*, fewer focuses specifically on greed for wealth. This study addresses that gap by using Marxist theory to emphasize how class struggle and material desire shape the tragedy.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology and focuses on the critical analysis of *King Lear* through the lens of Marxist Literary Theory. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research does not aim to measure or quantify data, but rather to interpret the text, its themes, and its historical and social meanings. This method allows for an in-depth understanding of how greed for wealth operates within the play and how it reflects broader socio-economic realities (Creswell, 2014, p. 4).

The research process involves close reading of the primary text, *King Lear*, to identify key scenes, dialogues, and character actions that reveal the role of wealth, property, and class struggle. These textual elements are then analyzed in relation to Marxist concepts such as materialism, class conflict, and the relationship between economic and political power. The analysis also considers the symbolic importance of land ownership and inheritance in shaping both personal relationships and political structures within the play (Eagleton, 2002, p. 5).

Finally, the study is interpretive rather than prescriptive. It does not claim to present a single correct interpretation of *King Lear*, but rather offers one possible reading informed by Marxist theory. This approach acknowledges that literary texts are open to multiple interpretations and that theoretical frameworks influence the meanings derived from them.

### **Marxist Reading of Greed in *King Lear***

*King Lear* is often associated with betrayal, madness, and broken family relationships; however, beneath these themes lies a deeper force: the desire for wealth and material power. Greed, particularly for land and property, functions not merely as a personal weakness but as a key cause of the tragedy. Using a Marxist approach, this analysis shows how economic power, class hierarchy, and human relationships are closely interconnected in the play.

Marxist criticism argues that literature reflects the economic conditions of its time, and that characters act according to their position within a given social system (Eagleton, 2002, p. 3). In *King Lear*, land functions as the primary source of wealth and authority, and its distribution determines political power. Lear's division of the kingdom is therefore not only a family matter but also a struggle over material resources and social status. This supports Marx's idea that economic structures shape both society and personal relationships, producing inequality within them (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 4).

### **Greed as a Catalyst for the Tragic Plot in *King Lear***

From a Marxist perspective, the opening scene of *King Lear* shows how human relationships are transformed into economic exchanges. Lear treats his kingdom as personal property and divides it among his daughters based on their verbal expressions of love. This turns affection into a transaction, where emotional value is measured through material reward (Marx & Engels, 1844, p. 72).

As the play progresses, greed becomes more evident through betrayal. After gaining power, Goneril and Regan no longer show loyalty to Lear because he has lost control over land and authority. This suggests that power and loyalty are closely tied to material advantage, and when wealth is removed, respect disappears as well (Eagleton, 2002, p. 12).

The subplot involving Edmund reflects a similar idea. His resentment arises from being denied inheritance, and he uses deception to gain wealth and authority. His actions demonstrate how competition for resources creates conflict even within families, supporting the Marxist argument that economic inequality leads to social struggle (Bressler, 2002, p. 207).

### **Class Conflict and Power Relations in *King Lear***

In *King Lear*, greed for wealth reflects the class structure of society, where land and inheritance determine power and social status. Marxist theory argues that control over land produces class divisions, and struggles over property reflect conflict between those who hold power and those who seek it (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 14). Lear represents the ruling class, and his decision to divide the kingdom creates competition among his daughters, leading to political instability and chaos (Eagleton, 2002, p. 21).

The subplot involving Edmund and Edgar also reflects class conflict. Edmund, as an illegitimate son, is denied inheritance and excluded from full participation in power. His attempts to replace Edgar and seize authority demonstrate how those without wealth may challenge the existing system. This situation highlights how greed and inequality weaken social order and generate conflict (Bressler, 2002, p. 211).

### **Commodification of Family and Relationships in *King Lear***

In *King Lear*, relationships based on love and loyalty are transformed into economic exchanges. Lear's "love test" requires his daughters to prove their affection in return for land, turning a family interaction into a contractual arrangement. From a Marxist perspective, this reflects commodification, where human relationships are treated as objects of exchange (Marx & Engels, 1844, p. 85).

Goneril and Regan exaggerate their love to secure wealth, while Cordelia refuses to participate and is punished for her honesty (Shakespeare, 1606/ 1997, 1.1.90). This demonstrates how material-focused systems suppress truth and genuine emotion (Eagleton, 2002, p. 17). Similarly, Edmund betrays his family in order to gain power, showing how the pursuit of wealth and status can destroy trust and loyalty (Bressler, 2002, p. 214).

### **Wealth, Hierarchy, and the Tragic Order in *King Lear***

This section explains how *King Lear* demonstrates the strong connection between wealth, power, and social hierarchy. From a Marxist perspective, land and property are not merely background elements but central forces that shape characters' actions and the play's tragic events (Eagleton, 2002, p. 23). In Lear's society, political power depends on land ownership, and social mobility often requires betrayal and moral compromise.

The chapter further highlights how the pursuit of wealth leads characters to neglect human values, resulting in both family breakdown and political disorder (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 34). Characters such as Goneril, Regan, and Edmund illustrate how greed fuels ambition and destroys stability, while the downfall of Lear and Gloucester reveals the fragility of power rooted only in material possession. Overall, the play is presented not only as a personal tragedy but also as a critique of a society structured around wealth and hierarchy.

### **Findings**

Firstly, greed in *King Lear* is not simply a personal flaw but a result of the feudal system, where land determines power and social status (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 14). Characters act according to their position within this system, which encourages the pursuit of wealth and material advantage.

Secondly, relationships in the play are shaped by economic interests, turning love and loyalty into transactions. Lear's "love test" demonstrates how affection is exchanged for property and material reward (Eagleton, 2002, p. 42).

Thirdly, class conflict plays a major role, especially through Edmund's rebellion, which arises from his exclusion from inheritance. This reflects how inequality creates tension and challenges the existing social order (Bressler, 2002, p. 162).

Fourthly, the pursuit of wealth leads to moral decline, as characters prioritize self-interest over justice and honesty. This weakens both family relationships and political authority.

Finally, greed for wealth results in widespread suffering and tragedy, affecting both individuals and society. The deaths and chaos in the play highlight the destructive impact of materialism (Eagleton, 2002, p. 55).

### **Recommendations**

Firstly, *King Lear* should be studied as a socio-political text rather than only as a personal tragedy. It reflects class conflict and economic power within the feudal system (Eagleton, 2002, p. 38).

Secondly, Marxist literary theory should be included in the teaching of the play. This approach helps students understand how wealth and class shape characters, relationships, and events (Bressler, 2002, p. 159).

Thirdly, modern interpretations should connect the play to present-day issues such as inequality and corruption, making it more relevant for contemporary audiences (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 21).

Fourthly, future research should explore the relationship between gender and class in the play. A feminist-Marxist approach could provide deeper insights into power dynamics and oppression.

Finally, readers and audiences should reflect on the ethical implications of wealth and power. The play can be used to discuss real-world issues such as inequality and social responsibility.

### **Conclusion**

This research examines the theme of greed for wealth in *King Lear* through a Marxist perspective, showing that the conflicts in the play arise from a system where wealth and power are closely connected. Lear's decision to divide his kingdom is not just a family matter but a political act that changes the balance of power. It reveals how land and property control authorities shape relationships, leading to tension and instability.

The actions of characters like Goneril, Regan, and Edmund are presented as outcomes of this system. Their desire for power and wealth reflects the competitive nature of a class-based society, while Edmund's struggle highlights the frustration of those excluded from inheritance and privilege. These characters act according to the material conditions around them, rather than simply out of personal evil.

The study also shows the human cost of greed, including the breakdown of family bonds, loss of trust, and moral decline. Suffering and tragedy affect not only individuals but the entire kingdom. Overall, this research argues that greed in *King Lear* is a structural issue shaped by economic forces, making the play both a personal tragedy and a powerful critique of social and economic inequality that remains relevant today.

Ultimately, the conclusion to be drawn from this research is that *King Lear* is as much a socio-economic tragedy as it is a personal or political one. Shakespeare's portrayal of greed is not confined to the actions of a few morally corrupt characters but emerges from the very structure of the world they inhabit. This insight reinforces the value of applying Marxist theory to canonical texts, not to reduce them to political messages, but to reveal the material realities that shape their characters, plots, and themes.

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