*To what extent is* King Lear *indebted to the techniques of the Morality Play?*

*King Lear* is to some extent indebted to techniques of the 15th and 16th century Morality Play. At their most basic level, *King Lear*’s characters and plot seem to be rooted in the Morality Play. Lear, the play’s protagonist, represents the archetypal human character who must struggle through the progression of innocence (an elderly king seeking what he perceives as best for his kingdom and his future) to temptation and fall (the faith he puts in his elder daughters, only to be cast out from their homes into the storm). However, *King Lear*’s characters are more complex than typical Morality archetypes. Similarly, the play’s resolution deviates from that of a typical Morality Play. Finally, *King Lear*’s relationship to religion and overall message deviate from the Morality Play’s domain, showing how reality and morality both are not as simple as good and evil, black and white.

*King Lear*’s conflict stems from Lear and others contending with the wills of characters representing Vice and Virtue. Goneril and Regan, Lear’s elder daughters, take on the Vice role, appearing kindly and virtuous on the surface, flattering their father with their words, but revealing their true natures through dastardly actions later on, such as bonding together to rid Lear of his knights and expel him from their homes (“What need you five and twenty? Ten? Or five?... What need one?” [2.4.256-259].) Lear puts his faith in these Vice figures when he accepts Goneril and Regan’s flattery in 1.1, bequeathing them the kingdom over Cordelia, his younger daughter representing Virtue. Cordelia ‘cannot heave her heart into her mouth’ to flatter her father, as her love and familial ‘bond’ are too complex to be put into words – a typical Shakespearean display of powerful and genuine feeling. Lear’s inability to distinguish Vice from Virtue in the characters of his daughters leads to his downfall, the slow stripping of all that makes him dignified and even human: his knights, his daughters, his home, his clothes, and even his sanity.

Similarly, Vice and Virtue are also embodied in the second family structure of *King Lear*. Gloucester’s sons, Edmund and Edgar, also represent Vice and Virtue figures respectively. Edmund frequently delivers soliloquys to the audience detailing his dastardly plans, making the audience complicit as he works to turn his father against Edgar, his virtuous and legitimate brother, and seize power within the kingdom. However, Edmund’s characterization is one example of Shakespeare’s deviation from Morality Play origins. Unlike most Vice characters, who are simply evil without cause or motivation, Edmund reveals to the audience in his first soliloquy how he seeks recognition and dignity for bastard children like himself, typically viewed as inferior to ‘legitimates’ like Edgar despite being comparable in quality. Edmund claims their “dimensions are as well compact, / (their) mind as generous and (their) shape as true / as honest madam’s issue” (1.2.7-9). Though perhaps not reason enough to justify Edmund’s outright betrayal of his father and brother and manipulation of Goneril and Regan in his grab for power, this soliloquy provides Edmund with a motivation, complexifying his character and making it more difficult for audiences to write him off as merely evil or Vice.

In addition to characterization, the resolution of *King Lear* deviates from typical Morality Play structure. Morality Plays centered around the idea of promoting Christian orthodoxy, encouraging moral reform among their often-illiterate audiences who couldn’t otherwise absorb these religious teachings. Most Morality Plays end with redemption for the protagonist, overcoming the temptations of evil to receive the salvation that comes with acceptance of true goodness. These plays centered around the idea that humans had control over their post-death fates while on Earth. *King Lear* grapples with direct conflict between right and wrong – Lear even imagines putting his own daughters on trial for their crimes, a courtroom being an institutional manifestation of this morality struggle. However, the play does not end with the realization of moral justice. Goneril and Regan turn against each other and each meet their deaths; Edgar triumphs over Edmund just as Edmund begins to seek remorse. And Lear is reunited with Cordelia, his beloved daughter and Virtue, only to rejoice over their confinement together to prison, and later for her to die in his arms. This situation is entirely ludicrous – it is not hard to conceive how *King Lear*’s conclusion and its nihilism later gave rise to genres such as theatre of the absurd. There is no happy ending for Lear, no redemption or reward for his suffering, or even comprehension of the meaning behind it. Only death. *King Lear* is set in a pre-Christian universe, as shown through frequent references and pleas to gods, plural. Like in Morality Plays, characters examine the gods and their circumstances on a cosmic scale. However, without the foundations of Christian doctrine, *King* *Lear*’s characters and audience alike are left wondering what kind of a universe they reside in, and what meaning, if any, their suffering yields. The tragic terror of the play’s conclusion is that no one can prove that suffering is not meaningless because they cannot uphold whether the universe has meaning or cares about human lives. Unlike typical Morality Plays or other Shakespearean tragedies, *King Lear* ends with no sense of restoration of order to the world.