"That ebb and flow by th' moon": The Dynamics of Flow Theory and Optimal Experience in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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Received: 15/06/2022 **Accepted**: 25/06/2022 **Published**: 20/07/2022

Abstract

The aim of the research is to apply Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory to William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Commonly, flow and optimal experience are equated with happiness as well as positive characters since they pertain to the realm of positive psychology. The analysis has demonstrated that tragic and/or agonising characters can endure flow and optimal experiences amid cathartic situations. The challenging part of the research has shown that flow and optimal experience are likely to happen with villainous characters performing wicked deeds. The applicability of the flow theory on King Lear as a tragic hero who is not forcefully wicked has been demonstrated. The Fool/Lear relation has been scrutinised to prove that their intertwining has reinforced flow and created feedback. Edmund's soliloquy is not an embittered speech by a malcontent as conventions have shown; it is rather an optimal experience exhibiting important flow components such as freedom and focus. Moreover, there is semantic parallelism between plot and subplot as for the interconnectedness between flow and evil characters. The study of the mutilation scene orchestrated by the wicked sisters and Cornwall shows that flow does not require that the executed task should be of a benevolent nature; it does not also require that the perpetrator of the action ought to be good-natured or warm-hearted. Flow and the optimal experience can happen amid chaotic, violent, criminal, and even sadistic acts.

Keywords: Flow theory, optimal experience, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, King Lear, Focus.

1. Introduction

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi introduced flow theory in the 1970s while working on activities about pleasure. Positive psychology has been influenced by Csikszentmihalyi's views and findings of the theory. However, the concept has not been applied before in literature. The rationale beyond the present research is not only to introduce flow theory as a concept from the field of positive psychology; it is also to prove that positive psychology could be used in criticising and interpreting literature. The objective of the research is to find a way how to read a Shakespearean text from the perspective of this theory. The present article is born, thus, out of two legitimate questions. The first is how can one establish a link between positive psychology and literature knowing that bridges between psychoanalysis and literature have been already built for more than a century. The second one is about the space, the place, and the scope of the triangular relationship between tragedy, joy as well as malice within a Shakespearean play far away from the conventional beaten track of comic relief. The research will attempt to show that, through the study of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* ([1606], 2009), flow is not only related to benevolent characters but also wicked ones. The most crucial factor to be considered in the state of flow is its relation to joy during the exercise of one action or one performance. The analysis will also demonstrate that flow happens with evil characters during their vile deeds because their undertaken actions are keen to the heart of their perpetrators. After a brief survey of the concept, an empirical study will be carried out to examine the applicability of the flow theory to benevolent and wicked characters in action in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Hamlet* ([1602], 2008). Our study will show that Csikszentmihalyi's theory is not only limited to benevolent characters in search of happiness; it could also function with characters in agony as well as wicked characters wholeheartedly engaged in activities of toil or evil deeds but, at the same time, activities they enjoy wholeheartedly. The present analysis will humbly constitute the first cornerstone for the empirical investigation of Shakespeare's characters from the perspective of flow theory. More importantly, the challenging part of the analysis consists in dealing with a concept from positive psychology on both tragic characters as well as malevolent ones.

2. Literature review

The concept of flow has been investigated by scientists and researchers from different disciplines, notably in the fields of psychology and, more precisely, cognitive, and positive psychology. In literature, the concept of flow has been hardly used which is one major reason not to include recent studies on the matter because of their inexistence. Even though psychoanalytical interpretations dwelled exhaustively and prolifically on the plays of Shakespeare from different angles, there is no existing research dealing with his plays from the lens of positive psychology, specifically, according to Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. The only attempt to build a bridge between literature and positive psychology has been provided by Rogayeh Farsi and Vida Dehnad who have tried, in their article "Flow Theory and Immersion in Literary Narrative" (2016), to "draw lines between flow state and the experience" of reading a literary text (Farsi &Dehnad, 2016, p.1). Farsi and Dehnad's article has focused on

considering immersion as a form of flow; it has not attempted to read a literary text from the perspective of flow theory. Their article establishes a common ground between flow and narrative theory of immersion, which is "a subcategory of affective theory in literary studies" (Farsi and Dehnad, 2016, p.1) mainly developed by Richard J. Gerrig in *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (1993), Victor Nell in his work *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (1988) and Marie-Laure Ryan in *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (2010).

However, Farsi and Dehnad did not study the correlation between flow theory and literature. Consequently, the need to investigate the relationship between Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow and literature has become necessary to bridge the gap between positive psychology and literature on the one hand; and pave the way for exploiting the plays of Shakespeare from the lens of this theory, on the other.

Positive psychology stipulates that a state of flow requires utter immersion while doing a particular activity. MihalyCsikszentmihalyiin *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990) claims the correlation between the states of happiness and flow. He also believes that flow happens when individuals are absorbed in the activities they undertake. Csikszentmihalyi calls the moment of absorption "the optimal experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3) which brings with it a "sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3). According to Csikszentmihalyi, the concept of flow operates when individuals engage actively in a process that contributes to determining "the content of life" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4) and during which nothing outside matters. The concept of flow is intrinsically in close relation with the optimal experience, which is the culmination of pleasure and the peak of good performance activity. Flow is, consequently, a stage or a state of mind that combines a moment of peak or the best performance at different levels, mainly the affective, the cognitive, and the physiological ones. This combination between emotions, knowledge, and sensations is in harmony with physiological transformations that bring about the optimal experience which is a psychological state of satisfaction that happens during peak performance.

In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990), Csikszentmihalyi explains the method, the birth, and the meaning of the concept of the optimal experience with the focus on the idea that the ones who experience flow are the ones who perform; more precisely, they are the ones who take pleasure while being engaged in an activity. Csikszentmihalyi mentions in his book that he has relied, during his long process of research, on hundreds of representative cases belonging to different areas and fields from arts, sports, music, and medicine during the exercise of their activities which they do consider as preferred ones. His theory of optimal experience which is intrinsically related to the concept of flow describes people in enjoyable activities where nothing exterior matters to them (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4).

The most critical matter is that Csikszentmihalyi does not discuss whether individuals who experience flow and pleasure are benevolent or malevolent ones. The

missing detail is important since the second part of our forthcoming study will be built on this observation. At the same time, Csikszentmihalyi insists that the state of flow occurs during an exercise, an activity, and not during free time. The coming investigation of the state of flow within Shakespeare's *King Lear* will examine characters deeply involved in action, performance, and exercise motivated by deeds and behaviours which procure pleasure for them. The coming analysis will be an empirical attempt to show how the flow theory could be used in dealing with benevolent as well as malevolent characters. M. Biasutti dwells in his article "Flow and Optimal Experience" (2011) on the birth of flow theory; he states that flow theory is "based on research examining people who did activities for pleasure" (Biasutti, 2011, p. 522). The state of flow, according to his research takes place in activities of pleasure or activities cherished by the ones who execute them.

3. Benevolent tragic characters and flow

In *King Lear*, an old ageing self-indulgent monarch overtaken by the folly of grandeur summons the whole court in the most pompous fashion and parades an inflated self. The love test undertaken by the King is a metatheatrical act of performance that is a token of intense activity. Biasutti qualifies the "state of flow [as an] intense experience [similar to] being carried like a river of flows" (Biasutti, 2011, p. 522). Indeed, performing the role of the mighty monarch on the part of Lear in front of his daughters as well as the whole court becomes an exercise of enjoyment and an optimal challenge that combines pleasure and full engagement in the undertaken activity. Bjornestad and Schweinie (2008), in their chapter entitled "Flow Theory" and published in *Psychology of Classroom Learning: An Encyclopaedia* (2008), corroborate the idea of Csikszentmihalyi that all activities displaying flow are the ones without expectations. In that vein, they believe that "such activities were viewed as worth doing for the sake of doing them rather than a means to another end" (Bjornestad&Schweinie, 2008, p. 413). This idea could provide a satisfactory answer to all the critical reception that has considered King Lear's love test as a vein one or as an act of foolishness. Meanwhile, at face value, Lear's abdication of his kingdom looks like childish, irresponsible behaviour; theoreticians of flow could consider the whole episode a serious attempt by the King to live an optimal experience. In that context, Bjornestad and Schweinie believe that

> Csikszentmihalyi […] and his colleagues, Rathunde, Whalen, and Nakamura[1], defined optimal experiences as those that were accompanied by a merging of action and awareness, strong concentration on the task at hand, and a loss of awareness of time. At such times, people concentrate so hard on the current task that they forget about time and the world around them. They are thoroughly engrossed. (Bjornestad&Schweinie, 2008, p. 413)

In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990), Csikszentmihalyi establishes the correlation between confidence and willingness to achieve a particular goal as a sine qua non requirement to experience a state of flow. At the same time, he introduces the importance of focus and attention as another prerogative. In that vein, he claims that situations of optimal experience are the ones in which attention can be freely invested

to achieve a person'sgoals because there is no disorder to straighten out, no threat for the selfto defend against. We have called this state the flow experience because thisis the term many of the people we interviewed had used in their descriptions of how it felt to be in top form: "It was like floating," "I was carried, on by the flow." It is the opposite of psychic entropy—in fact, it is sometimescalled negentropy—and those who attain it develop a stronger, more confident self because more of their psychic energy has been invested successfullyin goals they themselves had chosen to pursue. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 40)

Lear, at the beginning of the play, is transported; he shows precepts proper to the flow theory like confidence and focus. Everything he does is for the sake of achieving his goal, which is the division of the kingdom. His first entrance is theatrically remarkable and impressive; it displays the power of the institution of the monarchy where the crown, the symbol of potency, power, and pleasure, is theatrically exhibited: "Enter one bearing a coronet, then King LEAR, then the Dukes of CORNWALL and ALBANY, next GONERIL, REGAN, CORDELIA, and attendants" (Shakespeare, 1.1. opening stage direction). The presence of foreign ambassadors and delegations such as the royal Lords of France and Burgundy is a graphic staging of power. The reference to the dowry, which is supposed to be given by the monarch to the one who will choose Cordelia as a wife, is another token of the monarchical institution on display. Once Cordelia is disowned by the King, she is rejected by other royal figures, such as the Lord of Burgundy. the King himself insists that Cordelia, who has lost the recognition of monarchy, is not only disowned, but she does not have anyone to protect her

> Sir, will you, with those infirmities she owes—
> Unfriended, new adopted to our hate,
> Dowered with our curse and strangered with our oath—
> Take her or leave her? (1.1.207-210)

Lord Burgundy recognises the mightiness of the institution of the monarchy when he overtly declares that he cannot get or rejoice in anything that the King himself is willing to offer. The act of offering goes much more than sealing a marriage; it has instead to do with a dowery beholding the mightiness of power

> Most royal majesty,
> I crave no more than hath your highness offered.
> Nor will you tender less. (1.1.198-200)

The love-test scene is about the euphoria of a King enjoying an exercise that entertains him the most, which is the practice of power. The scene also develops the consequences of the exercise of power perpetrated by Lear on other protagonists and the kingdom in general. King Lear, in this episode, fulfils all the eight characteristics of the flow state as mentioned by Csikszentmihalyi,which are the complete concentration on the task, clarity of goal, transformation of time, and the sensation of being rewarded. He, as Csikszentmihalyidescribes, indulges in an action that provides no effort and is easily done. At the same time, there is a fusion between awareness and self-consciousness

absence since the King is transported by action. All in all, the King feels he has full control over the situation and is transported by joy.

Moreover, the attitude of the King in the opening scene reflects some significant factors necessary to the flow experience such as focus, freedom, and feedback. As for focus, the old monarch seems totally into what he does and utterly immersed in playing the king's game. All that matters for the King, is listening to his daughters and parading an inflated self in front of the court. No interferences or distractions are allowed; all the courtiers and the nobility are to abide, attend the show, listen, and subdue to the euphoria of the King. The focus of Lear has been sharpened; it is directed to only one end, which is fake infatuation on the part of his daughters. As for freedom, Lear executes what he intends to do without fear or hesitation or the slightest apprehension of committing mistakes and without weighing the risks. The whole exercise is an egoless one. "It is like an egoless thing, in a way" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 62). Lear, after having listened to the hollow speeches of his two daughters, indulges in delivering a bombastic sermon where the iambic meter and ornate metaphorical language in a serenade-like mode dominate the scene. The tempo is that of felicity, and the mood is that of a mixture between euphoria and joy.

> To thee and thine hereditary ever
> Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
> No less in space, validity, and pleasure
> Than that conferred on Goneril. But now, our joy,
> Although our last and least, to whose young love
> The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
> Strive to be interessed. What can you say to draw. (Shakespeare, 1.1.79-85)

In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990), Csikszentmihalyi enumerates the eight characteristics of flow which correspond without ambiguity to the attitude of King Lear during the love test

> The phenomenology of enjoyment has eight major components. When people reflect on how it feels when their experience is most positive, they mention at least one, and often all, of the following. First, the experience usually occurs when we confront tasks we have a chance of completing. Second, we must be able to concentrate on what we are doing. Third and fourth, the concentration is usually possible because the task undertaken has clear goals and provides immediate feedback. Fifth, one acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life. Sixth, enjoyable experiences allow people to exercise a sense of control over their actions. Seventh, concern for the self disappears, yet paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over. Finally, the sense of the duration of time is altered; hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 49)

All the factors mentioned above by Csikszentmihalyi correspond to the first scene in the play. Lear has deliberately chosen to divide his kingdom and is keen on completing this task. During the whole episode, has been capable of showing focus and concentration to

the point that nothing and no one would disturb him from achieving his goal. Lear is so involved in what he does; he naturally and comfortably excels in performing the role of the King whose subjects are to subdue or to be banned in case they subvert. Despite the staccato responses of his daughter Cordelia which mark notes of discord, Lear has been transported and carried away by his music. The ceremonial experience and his display of power have been enjoyable for him to the point that he transcends the obligations imposed on him as a King and a representative of God on Earth with the divine mission of preserving the unity of his kingdom.

There is, however, one factor necessary to the flow experience which is called feedback. Feedback consists in receiving input about one's action so that future performances would both improve and provide pleasure. At this level, Lear ignores the warnings of the Lord of Kent and the sensical response of the Duke of France. Feedback, as a flow factor, will take place later and will be generated by the carnivalesque character of the Fool, who will teach Lear more than anyone else in the play during the storm on the heath. The Fool is the one who provides "feedback" as an essential factor in Lear's experience of flow. It should have been evident that the state of flow and the optimal experience King Lear parades at the beginning of the play could be very comparable to other characters in the plays of William Shakespeare and notable Prince Hamlet during the preparation and the performance of the play-within-the-play or the carnivalesque characters of the Gravediggers in Act five, scene one of *Hamlet*[2].

Lear indulges in using the royal "we"; his opening lines come almost as a monologue with the whole court listening to him and no one daring to interrupt him. His first utterance is an order: "give me the map there" (1.1.37). Lear, at the beginning of the play, is inhabited by overpowering emotions to the point that he does not pay heed to the warnings of the Earl of Kent, reminding him that it is sheer madness to recompense vain flattery and turn a blind eye to his youngest daughter and accusing him of "sheer madness" (1.1.52). Not only does Lear ignore Kent's warnings, but also, he does prove that he has become insensitive to his surroundings. His banishment of Kent corresponds to the moment where, in the middle of the optimal experience, the subject in action dissociates himself/herself from the world around them[3].

The exercise of power as a source of pleasure has been discussed by Michel Foucault, who, in the first volume of his book *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (2012), emphasises the spiral interconnectedness between pleasure and power by stating that they are organised in a circular pattern where power becomes an exercise of fun meanwhile pleasure becomes a manifestation of power. Foucault talks about "a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure […] Pleasure spread to the power that harried it; power anchored the pleasure it uncovered […] perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" (Foucault, 2012, p. 44). The exercise of kingship generates pleasure in power. Professor Jonathan Gosling uses the verb "powering" like "leading" as something one can do and enjoy (Gosling, 2019, p. 390). Clegg, Courpasson, and Philips state, in *Power and Organizations* (2006), that "power is to organization as oxygen is to breathing" (Clegg et al. 2006, p. 3). The power/ oxygen intertwining, so to use Clegg et al. imagery, shows how the exercise of kingship, the game's king, and the utilization of

power are so pleasurable to rulers and leaders, including King Lear. The old monarch could be compared, in that sense, to the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, who, in a letter to his friend, the journalist Roederer declares: "my mistress is power" (Jones & Gosling, 2006, p. 1). The exercise of power is felt bodily by the leader; it is a body experience and an assertion of both mental and physical dimensions. The body and the guts of Lear are competing on stage in an episode that procures an energising sense of competence and ability. Power is associated with abuse on the part of the ones who exercise it, and with experiences of powerlessness on the part of the ones who subdue to it. In the love test, Lear uses his power and abuses it. In this scene, the King finds an enormous scope to affirm his authority and impose discipline on others. His decision to divide the kingdom and chastise his younger daughter impacts all the subjects in his realm. The whole exercise triggered by the King creates a pleasure impact; it brings sensual satisfaction to Lear and makes him reach an optimal experience. It is at that moment where flow functions. The King, during the opening scene, extracts his pleasure from his ability to influence the whole world around him. The insistence of King Lear on the love test is a token of self-abnegation with a margin of risk-taking in a path that leads to pleasure and flow.

In the opening scene of *King Lear*, the ageing monarch, in a state of ecstasy, reaches a stage of focus and freedom that makes him disconnected from his reality and pushes him to put the pleasure of playing the role of a king before the responsibilities that kingship requires. The King's enthusiasm, his infatuation with power, and his desire to parade bravado and grandiosity require energy, focus as well as total absorption in what he does. Researchers on flow have determined that focus and freedom are important factors necessary to reach a state of flow[4].

Focus and the enjoyment of power on the part of Lear are explained by the fact that monarchs cherish and enjoy performing the role of kings in front of their courts. It is indeed what I call the "king's game" that stirs the kings of Shakespeare and pushes the adrenaline to the maximum. There is, within this game, a pleasure of power in interaction. Pleasure is demonstrated by the king, the one who dominates, but also by the subjects, the ones who subdue. These dynamics of pleasure through interaction happen in other plays by Shakespeare. Lear is not the only example introduced by the bard. In *Hamlet* ([1602], 2008), Claudius in Act 1, Scene 2 does the same as King Lear: he summons the whole court and presides a pompous bombastic gathering to exhibit an inflated self. It is with poise and without any effort that the blank verse flows in a scene where the rhythm is steady, and the tone is melodious. Claudius, in this scene, in the same way as King Lear, indulges in using the royal "we" and exaggerates manipulating hollow phrases[5].Like Lear in the love-test scene, Claudius is transported by his music in the middle of a stage-managed episode where other characters like Laertes sing. The striking resemblance and the similar emotional logic and semantic register in both scenes from both plays reinforce Foucault's idea of how power and pleasure are interconnected in a spiral way. At the same time, both scenes show how kings are absorbed by an activity in which they are capable of producing hyperfocus that pushes them to ignore the world surrounding them or to measure the consequences of their actions. The first part of

the analysis has demonstrated that Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow, which is inherent to the exercise of pleasure, could function with benevolent characters like King Lear. However, the article's focus will go a step further to prove that flow and optimal experiences are relevant to protagonists in a state of agony but also to villainous sadistic characters.

4. Malevolent or agonising characters and flow

The second part of the analysis will attempt to demonstrate that flow and optimal experience are not forcefully related to benevolent characters in a state of felicity; they could be associated with characters in a state of agony on the one hand, and malevolent or malignant characters, on the other. The episode of Lear on the heath in Act three, scene two, paradoxically speaking, is a scene of pain, toil, and agony where the old monarch endorses his humanity, forgets about his earthly condition, and creates a parallel world, reaching, thus, a state of flow with "feedback" and challenge of his conditions. Lear on the heath witnesses a process of purification which is of a healing and pleasurable nature despite oddities and ordeals. There is pleasure through pain which has been crowned by epiphanic understandings of the world. Amid the storm, Lear, in an ultimate moment of focus, does not hearken to his surrounding; he ignores Kent's bids to seek a shelter and keeps addressing the winds, the thunder, the rain, and the "great gods" as if he were delivering a solemn speech in front of an audience. The supernatural elements fade away and become a backdrop, a rear stage, and scenic props helping to cast the main hero in action and direct the whole attention on the powerful speech of the King. On the heath, Lear is the storm, and the storm is Lear. Despite the violence of natural elements, Lear continues to perform the game of the king since, like any mighty monarch, he delivers a long list of commands with the expectation that his orders would be executed

> Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!
> You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
> Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!
> You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
> Vaunt-curriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts. (3.3.1-5)

This scene is metatheatrical because Lear takes the heath for his court and performs the role of the King; he addresses the elements of Nature and gods as if they were subjects to obey and execute orders. He vehemently yells and transforms the whole situation from being subject to Nature's wrath into an agent who commands and controls the storm. What reinforces the detection of a sense of pleasure in this scene is the cordial interaction between Lear and the Fool amid chaos. Lear has the wits to enquire about the Fool "come on, my boy. How dost my boy? Art cold? (3.2.68). The same way the King rejoices in playing the King's game by fervently giving orders to violent elements of the storm like a mighty Greek god; the same way Lear enjoys playing the role of the caring father figure with the Fool; he keeps repeating the expression "boy" while he addresses the Fool. He, in that vein, is a reminder of King Claudius in *Hamlet*, who, in Act one scene two, is overtaken by both the rhythm and music of the king's game that

transport him to the point that he caresses Laertes and calls his name four times in less than nine lines. The presence of the Fool, apart from its evident carnivalesque dimension, is a token of a cordial and a good-natured atmosphere between him and the King. Despite the cutting speeches of the Fool, his relationship with Lear is rather an affectionate one to the point that he calls him "nuncle" Lear (2.4.117). Different stage performances have been aware of the particularity of the joyful "nuncle/boy" (my expression) relationship between Lear and the Fool to the point that the latter has taken different shapes and forms and identities in various stage productions of the play[6]. The Fool has been the companion of King Lear in a state of flow on the heath.

From another perspective, while keeping the focus on flow components in the Lear/Fool relation, there is a need to consider that focus is to be coupled with feedback during the optimal experience. Feedback is an essential element that shapes the trajectory of the flow experience. As I have stated earlier, feedback happens when characters during an optimal experience collect input about their activities which would be an opportunity to adjust and improve further experiences. Csikszentmihalyi insists on the importance of getting "immediate feedback" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 49) as an essential element to reach flow since it helps the character to accomplish an optimal experience. In that vein, the Fool is much more than a Bakhtinian carnivalesque voice from the margin that enhances the dialogic heteroglossic nature of the Shakespearean text. The Fool is a feedback provider to the point that the "nuncle/boy" relation becomes discursive with blurred boundaries. It is the Fool now who calls Lear a boy: "Dost thou call me fool, boy? (1.4. 152). The words of the Fool help Lear see better until he reaches the blessing of knowing who he is. Lear, at the death bed of his daughter, is in a state of felicity where life and political quarrels do not matter anymore to him

> Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
> The gods themselves throw incense. Have I caught
> thee?
> He that parts us shall bring a brand from heaven
> And fire us hence like foxes. Wipe thine eyes.
> The good years shall devour them, flesh and fell,
> Ere they shall make us weep. We'll see 'em starved
> First. (5.3. 22-27)

Lear, by the end of the play, reaches two essential elements of the flow theory which are focus and freedom. He tells Cordelia that he is no longer interested in politics and court manipulation. Later, in prison, he tells his daughter that the two of them will watch and laugh as different political factions engage in an endless struggle for dominance. Power doesn't matter to him anymore. Nothing equates to the joy of being with his beloved daughter.

The culminating point of the present research is a humble attempt to show that flow not only operates with benevolent protagonists but also functions very well with malignant characters at work showing malicious pleasure amid evil deeds and plotting. Edmund, in Act one, scene two, delivers a soliloquy in which he sums up his

philosophy about life and justice. His speech could, at face value, be interpreted as an epidermic reaction of a malcontent who suffers from the injustices of life. However, his words are a testimony of an acute sense of pleasure and joy, especially when he boasts about his personal qualities, which make him much superior to his legitimate brother. The soliloquy of Edmund is not, thus, the speech of a malcontent; it is instead an optimal experience so to use Csikszentmihalyi's phrase

> For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
> Lag of a brother? why "bastard"? Wherefore "base,"
> When my dimensions are as well compact,
> My mind as generous and my shape as true. (1.2.5-8)

Edmund, in the above speech, rejoices in his personal qualities. The feeling of joy is reinforced by his malignant stratagem to trap both his father and brother. This soliloquy is a demonstration of an optimal experience and a state of flow where the malignant character enjoys the exercise of concocting a skilful revenge plot against an unfair society. Possibilities of staging Edmund while he experiences a state of flow are vibrant. Elizabethan audiences could imagine Edmund pacing the floor of his father's palace or watching a mirror while soliloquising and displaying pride with the forged letter in his hand. The interrogations he delivers in his above speech are not a token of indignation; they are instead warnings and justifications for his villainous stratagems. The emphasis on the interrogative forms is a re-enactment of the sense of pleasure amid his plotting to hurt his brother and his father; meanwhile, his assertions that he is equal to his brother, hide a feeling of insidious superiority. He proudly announces his difference and uniqueness

> 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. (1.2.1-4)

His assertion to follow nature reflects the deep certainty of his superiority since obedience to nature rhymes with nothing but the satisfaction of his pride. He even goes further since he insists that his existence has been a result of passion and love and pleasure; meanwhile, his brother's existence is the fruit of a dull, boring institutional marriage. Edmund's conscience equates between happiness, joy, and his birth. In the same fashion as King Lear, Edmund displays all the manifestations of flow according to Csikszentmihalyi's descriptions. He experiences, in this soliloquy, a culminating moment of ecstasy and a state of flow where both focus on what he does, and a feeling of freedom empower him. Edmund's behaviour is characterised by jubilation that enhances his disconnection from reality. Edgar shuns all the laws of the aristocracy, mocks social and religious rules that deny bastard sons the right to inherit, and hilariously declares that he will seize the lands of his father. The following declaration is triumphant and joyful

> Well then,
> Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
> Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund

> As to th' legitimate. Fine word, "legitimate."
> Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed
> And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
> Shall top th' legitimate. I grow, I prosper.
> Now, gods, stand up for bastards! (1.2.16-23)

Nothing in the words above could prove that Edmund is an unhappy malcontent. Edmund's proof of concentration on concocting a careful plan to take revenge is a witness of his deep immersion in a flow state. Euphoria, elation, and a sense of jubilation and triumph affect the mood, the tempo, and the tone of his words. The overemphasis on the personal pronoun "I" declares that he is in a moment of self-glory where feelings of growth and prosperity are expressed. The culmination of Edmund's speech lies in the stunning inversion that concludes his soliloquy. Edmund's words "now, gods, stand up for bastards" is in diametrical opposition to his "Thou, Nature, art my goddess" that heralds his speech. The final phrases of his soliloquy reflect a triumphant self that does not need any help from supernatural powers. Edmund, in this scene, feels as powerful as King Lear at the beginning of the play; he emphasises the idea that humans can make their fortune when they rely on their capacities. He shows his power as a refined manipulator and an excellent actor who rejoices in manoeuvring with figures of authority like his father and performing a sense of mastery and potency. His words "All with me's meet that I can fashion fit" (1.1.190) are an excellent example of focus, tenacity, bright wit, energetic acting, and concentration on a task that brings pleasure in a flow state.

The structure of *King Lear* displays semantic parallelism between the plot and the subplot. The main plot revolves around a father and a figure of power who misjudges a child; the subplot also reveals the same story. Both plot and subplot unravel families jeopardised and harmony distorted. Interestingly, in the same way, the flow theory operates with Edmund, who is a villainous character in performance; it also functions with Goneril and Regan, the two malignant daughters of Lear who strike together and who reach culminating experiences of joy when they perform their criminal actions. Both sisters rejoice in uniting their efforts; they bless the idea of indulging in the joyful exercise of domination. Goneril and Regan decide to "sit together" (1.2.311) and "do something, and i' th' heat." (1.2.314). The unison of the two daughters proves that they are fully immersed in an energising activity where involvement and enjoyment are required. From the opening scene of the play, both sisters corroborate the idea expressed by Csikszentmihalyi, in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990), when he talks about individuals being in a state of full control while displaying exhilaration amid "optimal experience". (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 3)

The most intriguing and surprising characters who go through a state of flow while doing villainous and horrendous actions are Goneril and Regan. What the research attempts to prove is that flow, as a state which is related to pleasure, does not require either that the executed task is a benevolent or a generous one; it does not also require that the perpetrator of the action must be good-natured or warm-hearted. Flow and the

optimal experience can happen amid chaotic, violent, criminal, and even sadistic acts. As it has been revealed earlier in my analysis, the premises of wicked joy while doing evil deeds have been declared by the two elder sisters since the opening of the play. Not only do they decide to hit together and join their pernicious efforts, but also do they shun, without embarrassment, the "infirmity" of their father's age (1.1.339) and his "rash" (1.1.341). Their mocking of the volatile, mercurial temper and jubilant gloating over their younger sister's destiny with ease is another token of the joy they exercise while performing the role of the wicked castrating females in the play. For the sisters, cruelty affords an arousing pleasurable, and exciting sensation. Scientifically speaking, as has been proven by Buckels et al. in "Behavioral Confirmation of Everyday Sadism (2013), "sadists obtain pleasure from cruel behaviors." (Buckels et al., 2013, p. 2204)

The two sisters reach a climaxing moment where cruelty mixes with pleasure during the horrendous act of the plucking of Gloucester's eyes executed by the Duke of Cornwall. The brutality of the scene has been the subject of a plethora of interpretations. Zied Ben Amor, in his article "Mapping Sight and Blindness in *King Lear*(s) of William Shakespeare and Roberto Ciulli: Towards a Poly-optic Reading" (2020), has used the expression "kinaesthetic" (Ben Amor, 2020, p. 11) to qualify the reaction of the audiences to the episode of the plucking of the eyes and to insist on the visual reactive effect of the bloody deed on theatre goers. Ben Amor also believes that Goneril's act is a victory of female order over masculine potency; he indirectly insinuates that the plucking of the eyes of Gloucester is of a glorifying and joyful nature for the sisters

> The triumph of the gynocentric gaze takes place in Act three, Scene seven, when the two sisters order, comment on, watch and participate in the horrific performance of the plucking of Gloucester's eyes which is a sheer act of castration where they obliterate his sight, neutralize his gaze and confiscate his phallic power to empower theirs. (Ben Amor, 2020, p.15)

Undoubtedly, William Shakespeare has attributed an Aristotelian length and magnitude to the sequence so that the audiences would produce a cathartic response to a malefic scene that achieves abrasive theatrical effects. Santon B. Garner, in that vein, has explained in his book *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre: Phenomenology, Cognition, Movement* (2018) how Shakespeare has been intentional in making this scene a lengthy one to achieve particular graphic and sensory effects

> Shakespeare, by contrast, emphasizes the sensorimotor dynamics of blinding: the effort that Cornwall's servants have to make to hold the chair so that he can exert the required force and immobilize a powerless Gloucester, the sequence of removing one eye then the other, and the viscosity of the second eye when he digs it out ("Out, vile jelly"). (Garner, 2018, p. 232)

If Shakespeare creates dynamics of blinding, that is undoubtedly to generate two diametrically opposite reactions during the performance of the scene. On the one hand, the cruelty of plucking one eye and then the other creates a kinaesthetic effect on the audience. On the other, it enhances and lengthens the sadistic pleasure and the sense of joy experienced by the two sisters and the Duke of Cornwall. Flow, as a status, does not rhyme only with benevolent deeds. The euphoria and the enthusiasm of the Duke of

Cornwall and the two sisters are palpable; they mix up with mania and frenzy that echo the degree of their triumphant pleasure.

The Duke of Cornwall exalts in toying with metaphorical and physical connotations of sight. He displays a malicious pleasure in dwelling on the term "see" and amuses himself by changing its interpretation. He even amuses himself by calling the eye he plucks "vile jelly" (3.7.101). When Gloucester, not in the least impressed by the cruelty of Cornwall and the two sisters, metaphorically uses the term see until "winged vengeance overtake such children" (3.1.80), Cornwall maliciously insists on repeating the expression "see to transform it into an idiom while, with focus and pleasure, starts to pluck the eyes of Gloucester one by one in a situation that could be called an optimal experience

> **Gloucester:**[…] but I shall see
> The winged vengeance overtake such children.
> **Cornwall:**See't shall thou never. Fellows, hold the chair.
> Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.
> **Gloucester:** He that will think to live till he be old,
> Give me some help! — O cruel! O you gods!
> **Regan:** One side will mock another; the other too.
> **Cornwall:** If you see vengeance. (3.7.79-86)

The joy and the excitement of Cornwall are heightened by Regan's ironic request to pluck the second eye of Gloucester. Before Regan, Goneril heralds the scene by directing vigorous venomous and vicious verbal and physical assaults on Gloucester. One can detect the playful dimension and the pleasure of the wicked Lady in action when she plucks Gloucester by the beard, mockingly declaring, "So white, and such a traitor?" (3.7.45). Also, the playfulness and the sharing of roles between the two sisters is a token of complementarity; especially when it is a matter of doing their favourite hobby, which is bringing moral and physical torture to others. The scene also crystallises the degree of pleasure that both sisters exhibit from the opening lines of the play. If one sister utters a single word, the other is quick to retort in a swift ping-pong-like game playing: "REGAN: Hang him instantly/ Goneril: Pluck out his eyes" (3.7.5-6). The two sisters in action are vicious equals; they are, most importantly, in an optimal experience, which makes their performance acute, surprising, and stunning. The term pleasure has been concretely used by Cornwall as an answer to the sisters, which corroborates the optimal experience these characters go through during the mutilation scene: "Leave him to my displeasure" (3.7.7). The mutilation episode demonstrates many essential components essential to the flow theory since the acts inflicted by Cornwall and the two sisters do not require any expectations. The performance of the evil characters shows their confidence since they display a clear goal and effortless involvement. Most importantly, it is an act of empowering pleasure that procures a sense of joy and freedom for the ones who carry it.

5. Conclusion

The present article has attempted to apply the flow theory to literature in an unprecedented step. Most commonly, Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory has been equated with happiness as well as positive characters since it pertains to the realm of positive psychology. The central aim of the present research has been, thus, to see if the flow theory could be applied to a tragedy. The analysis has demonstrated that flow and optimal experience can be endured by tragic characters as well as agonising ones. Also, it has been shown that cathartic experiences are manifestations of flow. The challenging part of the research has proven that flow and optimal experience are likely to happen with villainous characters performing wicked deeds.

The first part of the analysis has focused primarily on the applicability of the flow theory on King Lear as a tragic hero and a character who is not forcefully wicked. The euphoria of the King, at the beginning of the play, shows how he has been transported into a game that the research has called the king's game. The second part of the analysis has attempted to prove that Lear encounters flow and reaches an optimal experience amid chaos and agony on the heath. The Fool/Lear relation has been scrutinised to confirm that their intertwining has reinforced flow and created feedback. The last part of the research has attempted to study the concept of flow experienced by malevolent characters. Edmund's soliloquy is not an embittered speech by a malcontent as conventions have shown; it is an optimal experience exhibiting important flow components such as freedom and focus. Moreover, there is semantic parallelism between plot and subplot as for the interconnectedness between flow and evil characters. The study of the mutilation scene orchestrated by the wicked sisters and Cornwall shows that flow does not require that the executed task is a benevolent or a generous one; it does not also require that the perpetrator of the action must be good-natured or warm-hearted. Flow and the optimal experience can happen amid chaotic, violent, criminal, and even sadistic acts.

The application of concepts like flow and optimal experience on the text has necessitated a thorough theoretical survey to prove that essential components such as confidence, willingness to achieve goals, absence of expectations, hyperfocus, clarity of goals, the transformation of time, the lack of self-consciousness, freedom, effortless involvement, and pleasure in power are present in the scenes under study. Some other theoretical concepts about the ideas of Foucault and power but also sadistic pleasure from the standpoint of psychoanalysis have been resorted to for the sake of showing the applicability of the flow theory in the Shakespearean play. Possible limitations of the research are due to the inexistence of recent studies dealing with literature from the perspective of positive psychology. No previous research has endeavoured to build a bridge between Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory and literature. Consequently, the article constitutes an invitation to study literature and, more precisely, Shakespeare's plays from the viewpoint of flow theory. There are appealing future opportunities for research, such as the study of carnivalesque and metatheatrical characters from the perspective of flow theory. The challenging side of the investigation consists in offering

new perspectives, questioning, and departing from conventional dogmatic certitudes such as classical views about malcontents, villainous characters, tragic heroes, characters in agony, and stock characters

6. End Notes

[1]See Csikszentmihalyi et al. *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure*. 1st paperback ed, Cambridge University Press, 1997. See also Snyder, C. R., and Lopez, S. J. Editors. *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

[2] Comparisons between King Lear, Prince Hamlet, and the Gravediggers are the subject of a forthcoming study that will concentrate on the validity of flow state and optimal experience with metatheatrical characters.

[3]Ashinoff and Abu-Akel have dwelled on the notions of absorption and hyperfocus from the perspective of flow theory in their article entitled "Hyperfocus: The Forgotten Frontier of attention" (2021). They define hyperfocus as follows: "Hyperfocus, broadly and anecdotally speaking, is a phenomenon that reflects one's complete absorption in a task, to a point where a person appears to completely ignore or 'tune out' everything else. It is generally reported to occur when a person is engaged in an activity that is particularly fun or interesting" (2021, p. 2).

[4] See Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1988). The flow experience and its significance for human psychology. In M. Csikszentmihalyi & I. Csikszentmihalyi (Eds.), Optimal experience: Psychological studies of flow in consciousness (pp. 15 35). Cambridge University Press. See also Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The psychology of optimal experience. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

[5] Expressions, like "wisest sorrow", "in equal scale weighing delight and dole", "defeated joy", and "one auspicious and one dropping eye" taken from the first lines of Act one, scene two, are hollow; they show the hypocrisy of the King and prove the idea that his speech has been rehearsed.

[6] The stage history of the Fool in *King Lear* has been the subject of many interpretations. Adrian Nobel's production of the play in 1982 within the Royal Shakespeare company casts the Fool as a music hall clown, as it has been stated by Paulo Da Silva Gregório in his article "Beyond the Absurd: Beckettian Tragicomedy Recast in Adrian Noble's *King Lear*" (2020). Sarah Hemming, in "Playing *King Lear's* Fool" (2018), which was published in the *Financial Times*, has summed up the stage history of the Fool, emphasising the different interpretations of this character from a drag queen to a dummy, to a waif.

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Citing this article according to APA guidelines:

Ben Amor, Z. (2022). "That ebb and flow by th' moon": The Dynamics of Flow Theory and Optimal Experience in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*". *ATRAS*, 3(2), 39-56. https://www.univ-saida.dz/lla/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2022/07/Zied-Ben-Amor3.pdf