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The Relation To and the Importance of Henry Dawes, and the Dawes Act, to Green Grass, Running Water

Henry Dawes was not culturally enlightened, especially when it came to American Indians. Although as a US Senator, Dawes was very involved in Indian policy, and he penned the historically renowned Dawes Act. The act shaped the lives of Indians all over the country, changing them in favor of white Americans, and effectively complicating Indian living. Famously quoted for defining civility, Dawes is a target of ridicule for contemporary author Thomas King. King's culturally loaded novel, *Green Grass, Running Water*, uses as an integral part of the narrative, and a target for simple humor. Henry Dawes was politically very active during his lifetime. After attending Yale Law, he served both as a House Representative and a Senator in the State Legislature of Massachusetts. He was also involved in written media as an editor for two local newspapers, a skill that would prove useful to him in the future. In 1875, Dawes was elected to the United States Senate, a position which he held for two subsequent terms. During his time as a Republican Senator, he was a member of the Committee on Indian Affairs, the position that poised him to draft the Dawes Act (Congress). Even before the Dawes Act came about, relations between the American Indian tribes and the United States Federal Government were already tense. Held together by treaties and reservations, there was a thin thread that kept the two organizations from full scale war. The Federal Government carried out a number of removals and seizures that increased the frequency of skirmishes, so much so that Dawes was inspired to conceive a new system of control (Kelly). This new system would assist the US Government by 'civilizing' the Indians, and giving them private land that each individual could own. Dawes believed that

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the ownership of private property would spark civility. As Dawes put it, such civility meant that the Indians would “ wear civilized clothes... cultivate the ground, live in houses, ride in Studebaker wagons, send children to school, drink whiskey...” and other such acts. The Dawes Act created a system to allot land already reserved for Indians to Indian individuals by splitting up their existing reserves. In order to repackage the land, they would have to officially disband the tribal governments and adhere to the ‘ protection of the laws of the United States’ Strictly speaking, the goal of the act was to protect Indian Rights (PBS). The hidden agenda, however, was to get Indian tribes to modernize, and accept state and federal law (Kelly). In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King initially uses Dawes as a target for humor. Near the beginning of the novel, there is a character named Henry Dawes in a college class. Just as Dawes was not known for an enlightened and studious perspective on American Indians, the student displays a particular ignorance towards American Indians. This character reveals King’s view on Dawes’ almost comical ignorance (King). King subsequently uses the Dawes Act as hidden inspiration to shape the Dam, which is the main threat to the Blackfoot in the story. The Dam is allegedly built to make the Blackfoot millionaires while at the same time impeaching on their reserve land and offering them no palpable benefits. Just as the Dawes presented his act as something that would benefit the Indians, the Dam does not smoothly deliver. Eli personifies the fight of all Indian tribes in America in the 1800s that did not benefit from the act, which brought them arid land but no income to start businesses. Eli refuses to let the Dam wash away his home, and therefore halting the entire process. His actions make him a tragic hero in the novel, as his stubbornness leads him to his death. Fittingly, his death is a result of the demise of the <https://assignbuster.com/the-reaction-to-and-the-importance-of-henry-dawes-and-the-dawes-act-to-green-grass-running-water/>

damn, which parallels the way the US Government's attempted attack on Indian culture was no match for the will and moral fiber of those Indians (King). While Henry Dawes made a name for himself through his act, Thomas King uses his name for a different purpose. Using all of the fundamental principles that the Dawes Act supposedly embodied, King weaves a narrative representing comedy as well as the looming threat to the Blackfoot. While the Dawes Act may not have crumbled down in the way the Dam did, it is important to note the significance of the Dam, as well as its demise in the novel. Through Eli's strong will and the ultimate destruction of the Dam, King shows the strength that comes out of the unity of blood, culture, and family. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, the blood of the Blackfoot is certainly thicker than the water of the Dam. Works Cited" Congress, (1816 - 1903)." Bioguide. congress. gov. US Congress, n. d. Web.. Kelly, Kerry C. " Maps of Indian Territory, the Dawes Act, and Will Rogers' Enrollment Case File." Archives. gov. National Archives, n. d. Web. 17 Sept. 2012.. King, Thomas. *Green Grass, Running Water*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. Print." PBS - The West: The Dawes Act." PBS. PBS, 2001. Web. 17 Sept. 2012..