

King lear and a thousand acres

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King Lear and A thousand acres comparison The one social issue that hasn't evolved since the 17th century is the ever present schisms between families. People have always cheated, parents have always chosen favorites, and the struggles for wealth and power have always torn families apart. Most notably, these conflicts have been portrayed in Shakespeare's King Lear and Romeo and Juliet, but the theater of family argument has also shone through in modern works such as Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres.

Both King Lear and A Thousand Acres are enduring pieces of literature that have redefined the family complex, portrayed the death of families through jealousy and greed, and examined the reoccurring theme of fate versus free will. Both King Lear and A Thousand Acres focus on the patriarch of a family and how he decides to distribute his assets. King Lear focuses on how Lear, the King of England, will distribute his kingdom amongst his three daughters, Cordelia, Regan, and Goneril.

A Thousand Acres, on the other hand, takes a much more modern approach by detailing the life of Larry Cook, a successful Iowa farmer, and how he attempts to evade inheritance taxes by dividing his farm amongst his daughters, Caroline, Rose, and Ginny. In both literary works, the father distributes his holdings before his death, which, while at the time seems like a savvy tactic, ends up having detrimental repercussions for both men. To highlight the actions undertaken by the main characters, both authors also develop a subplot focusing on a friend of the respective fathers and how he deals with his two sons.

In King Lear, Lear's friend, Gloucester, debates upon the merits of his two sons, Edmund and Edgar, wavering in his decision on which of his sons is

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loyal and which son will inevitably betray him. Similarly, in *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley develops the subplot of the tensions between Harold and his two sons, Loren and Jess. A major theme in both pieces is the issues of love, family relationships and the loyalty that can either be steadfastly present or blatantly nonexistent. In *King Lear*, Lear must decide how to distribute his kingdom.

Instead of dividing it equally among his heiresses, he relies on superficial declarations of love from his daughters. Regan and Goneril flatter their father claiming unyielding love, while Cordelia, the daughter that Lear previously held closest to his heart, doesn't quite flatter her father so blatantly. While Lear takes this as an insult, Cordelia is simply sure that her "love's/ More richer than [her] tongue," so there is no reason to even attempt to articulate her unabiding love for her father (I. i. 81-82).

Lear's egotism, however, prevents him from realizing that Cordelia actually does love him the most, so he capriciously disowns and banishes her from his kingdom. While *King Lear*'s naivete makes him disown a daughter that does love him more than the others, the distinction in the quantity of how much a daughter loves her father is not nearly as evident in *A Thousand Acres*. In the novel, Caroline warns her father against incorporating the farm prematurely, which is shown in this dialogue between herself and Ginny: ' He's handling over his whole life, don't you understand that?

We have to receive it in the right spirit. And Rose and Pete and even Ty are ready to receive it. Just do it this once. Last time, I promise. ' ' That's another thing. I'm not ready to receive it. I think it's a bad idea for him, and it's certainly a bad idea for me. Frank was appalled when I told him. ' (Smiley 34)

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Like how Cordelia will take no part in complementing her father, Caroline refuses to go along with the transfer of the farm, citing that it will not only have deleterious effects on Cook, but herself as well.

In *A Thousand Acres*, it doesn't seem like Cook chooses how to distribute his farm based on how much each daughter loves him, but the extent to which each daughter will stand up to him. Rose and Ginny go along with the farm transfer, but when Caroline stands up to her father, he "took the door in his hand and slammed it shut in her face" (39). So while Larry's motives for why he disowned his daughter are slightly different, it doesn't change the fact that out of rage and lack of thought he whimsically disowns a loving daughter.

In both *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*, the concept of loyalty is ever present in regards to how the daughters treat their father once he no longer is in control. In *King Lear*, Lear chooses to divide his kingdom amongst his daughters Goneril and Regan. While initially doing so has no negative effects for Lear, eventually his daughters begin to treat him with uttermost disrespect. The below excerpt from the play depicts the turning point when Regan and Goneril begin to try to manipulate their father and remove every ounce of his previous power: Goneril: Not only, sir, this your all-licensed fool, But other of your insolent retinue Do hourly carp and quarrel; breaking forth In rank and not-to-be endured riots. Sir, I had thought, by making this well known unto you, To have found a safe redress; but now grow fearful, By what yourself too late have spoke and done. (I. iv. 191-197) In this section, Goneril is complaining to her father about his contingent of knights that have been causing distraction and disaster at Goneril's palace. While her <https://assignbuster.com/king-lear-and-a-thousand-acres/>

complaints are somewhat sensical, this shows the turning point where Goneril and Regan begin to no longer care about Lear's own personal mental standing.

The continued enlistment of Lear's knights represent the last remaining token of Lear's kingdom. By attempting to, and later succeeding in, disbanding Lear's knights, the daughters take away the one thing that Lear still controls. He no longer rules over his kingdom, or even his own house for that matter. This really shows how the daughters seem to care only for themselves and place little thought on Lear's perspective. By contrast, in *A Thousand Acres*, Rose and Ginny don't take away Cook's power, but he actually forfeits it.

Instead of staying active in the farm, Cook seems to be willing, on the surface, to take a backseat in the farm's operation. Ginny describes Cook's mentality accurately in the below quote: I paused at the kitchen door and watched the unyielding back of his head for a few seconds. When I drove past the front of the house again, he hadn't moved. I couldn't shake the sense that his attention menaced Ty, the guiltless cultivator, concentrating innocently on never deviating from the rose laid out before him. The green tractor inched back and forth, and my father's look followed it like the barrel of a rifle. 67) While Cook may wish to be involved in the farm, he seems content sitting in his chair gazing over the fields that were previously his. Unlike Regan and Goneril, Rose and Ginny actually want their father to be more involved. When Cook drives under the influence and crashes his car, Ginny is incredibly upset with her father, saying that " They aren't preventing him from working. He doesn't want to do anything. He never goes

out to the barn even to stand around. They do everything now, and that isn't easy either" (116).

So while Regan and Goneril want their father to become less active and be completely complacent, Rose and Ginny are urging their father to help with the farm and be a more active farmer. A major contrast in the two pieces is the differing motives fueling the daughter's actions. In King Lear, Goneril and Regan's actions seem to be empowered by greed and the accumulation of power. The daughters could care less about their father, but they dote him with complements because they know it will help them gain control over more of the kingdom.

In A Thousand Acres, on the other hand, it seems that Rose and Ginny want what is best for their father and the farm. While it is indisputable that their own interests are also at heart (due to the fact that the incorporation of the farm does leave Rose and Ginny with significant holdings), the character's initial empathy for their father shows that unlike Goneril and Regan, the Cook daughters do care for their father's best interest. Caring for their father's standing shows that they are still loyal to him; unlike Regan and Goneril, Rose and Ginny do not betray their father, but their father betrays them.

The characterization of the *dramatis personae* in King Lear, and especially how his daughters treat him, paint the character of Lear as a tragic hero. We feel for Lear and his tragic circumstances, while in A Thousand Acres, readers feel very little empathy for Larry Cook. Instead, Rose and Ginny act as the tragic heroes, who must face their father's wrath and their sister's frivolous demeanor. As with the main plots, the subplots in both pieces

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discuss the relationships between family members and the presence of loyalty versus betrayal. In King Lear, we note great loyalty in the character of Kent.

Kent is the only character who stands up for Cordelia, and is the only character to warn Lear against her banishment. When Lear banishes Kent as well, Kent returns in disguise and acts once again as a loyal servant. This loyalty is repaid by Lear at the end of the play, when Lear decides to reward loyalty by passing the throne to Kent and Edgar. Conversely, the subplots in King Lear also show elements of betrayal, specifically in the relations between Gloucester and his two sons. Gloucester initially damns and mocks his illegitimate son, Edmund, and praises his legitimate son, Edgar, as is typical in the natural order.

Edmund schemes against his brother, and eventually convinces his father that Edgar is in fact the one scheming against Gloucester. By turning in Gloucester to Cornwall, Edmund creates the situation that leads to Gloucester's blindness, ultimately betraying him to the utmost degree. In addition to the concepts of loyalty and family relations, both authors breach the topic of women's role in society. As an example, both the authors disrupt the natural order. Traditionally, kingdoms (and farms for that matter) would transfer from fathers to sons, not fathers to daughters.

In both King Lear and A Thousand Acres, the male patriarch decides to pass on his land to his daughters. While it would be custom for the female heir to forfeit power to their husbands, neither Goneril or Regan allow their husbands to take control. In the following quote, Goneril debates with her husband on the merits of his passivity: Milk-livered man! That bear'st a
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cheek for blows, a head for wrongs; Who hast not in thy brows an eye discerning Thine honor from thy suffering; that not know'st Fools do those villains pity who are punished

Ere they have done their mischief. Where's thy drum? France spreads his banners in our noiseless land; With plumed helm thy slayer begins threats; Whiles thou, a moral fool, sit'st still, and criest ' Alack, why does he so? ' (IV. ii. 55-64) In this excerpt, Goneril is asserting herself against her husband, Albany. While Albany sympathizes with Lear, Goneril argues that all sympathy towards Lear and the French will end the "noiseless" state of the English kingdom. Goneril, the wife, is standing up to her husband and telling him how things should be done.

Finally, Goneril ends the argument by saying " Marry, your manhood now" (IV. ii. 75). By saying this, Goneril is essentially asserting herself as the man in the relationship who will be making all future decisions. In *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley also touches on the theme of feminism, but more specifically women's independence. Similar to the circumstances in *King Lear*, Rose and Ginny take over their father's farm. Instead of the girls taking over the daily running of the farm, their husbands handle all of the farming and the women revert to their original roles: cooking, cleaning, and homemaking.

When Pete dies, Ginny runs off, and Ty eventually leaves for Texas as well, Rose is left to handle many of the daily farming tasks herself. At one point, Rose is the only person farming their thousand acre farm, which is undoubtedly an arduous task. By ending the novel in this manner, Smiley is showing that while women in the sixties still had a demeaned role in society, they did have the ability to match or even supersede their male

counterparts' actions. A final theme present in both pieces is whether fate or free will dictate our daily actions and routine. In King Lear, the prevailing life force is definitely free will.

All of the characters, even Lear, make numerous decisions (note: these are decisions made by the characters, not decisions thrust upon the characters) that determine their final circumstance. An example would be how Goneril and Regan chose to treat their father. Their poor treatment of their father leads to a family schism, a war between nations, and their eventual death. Lear's opinion of fate versus free will is also rather interesting. You see me here, you gods, a poor old man, As full of grief as age; wretched in both! If it be you that stir these daughters' hearts Against their father, fool me not so much

To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger, And let not women's weapons, water-drops, Stain my man's cheeks! (II. iv. 294-300) While Lear's actions seem to fall under the category of free will (for he chose to disown Cordelia and to distribute his kingdom), his above statement makes it seem like he places merit with the Gods. He says to the Gods that if it is in fact them who have been meddling with his daughters' hearts, then they should just put him out of his misery by ending his life. In A Thousand Acres, by contrast, the bulk of the characters' lives seem to be guided by fate.

Rose didn't choose to get cancer, Ginny didn't bring on her miscarriages, and judge's decision was out of the daughter's hands. Similar to how the patriarchal figure has opposite beliefs as the majority of the other characters in King Lear, Cook seems to believe in free will. Ginny, describing her father's beliefs: " The lesson my father might say they prove is that a man gets what

he deserves by creating his own good luck" (137). Cook's thought is that waiting for fate to act in your favor will do nothing for you, but instead, you need to make your own luck, which is a major concept in free will.

Many people believe that *A Thousand Acres* is simply a copy piece of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, but in fact, many elements give autonomy to Smiley's novel. *A Thousand Acres* is a unique piece, with unique characterization, unique circumstances, and unique narration. In *King Lear*, Lear is the tragic hero and Goneril and Regan are the antagonists. In *A Thousand Acres*, however, Larry's abuse of the daughters make him much more of the antagonist, with Ginny and Rose as the tragic heroes.

While the reader's alliances change between literary works, both pieces show the necessity of loyalty and the consequent disaster of betrayal. Additionally, the thematic value of both pieces at points can differ greatly; while *King Lear* focused on women's independence, *A Thousand Acres* takes on a more modernistic approach by discussing what women must do to gain this independence. Overall, while the pieces do have many similarities, when read congruently, the contrasts only further enhance the overarching themes and morals of both works.