

# A comparison of protagonists in king lear and in the children of men



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A Brief Study of Protagonists in The Children of Men and King Lear Who is a hero? Is he the one who risks all in order to gain all or is he the one who is radically transformed in the pursuit of a goal? A hero should privilege optimism over nihilism. Every great movement on this earth owes its growth to great personalities. Movements, started with an idea from an independent mind. Some motivated by poverty, others by misery. Similarly, the protagonists in The Children of Men and King Lear were motivated by various factors.

The protagonists in The Children of Men and King Lear, Theo and Lear go through life-changing experiences which eventually highlight their inner personality. The protagonist with the better metamorphosis eventually triumphs. Upon close examination it would seem that both characters share similar climacteric changes. Each is unwilling to maintain power and yet, is transformed by other characters and children. In Children of Men, Theodore Faron, historian of the Victorian age is the epitome of passivity. The first instance where we see Theo's unwillingness to take responsibility is when he steps down from Xan's council.

Theo shares no regret when he resigns. He is apathetic about the deception practiced by Xan's government, the ill-treatment of Sojourners, the diabolic condition of the Man Penal Colony and the inhumane policy of the Quietus. The passivism of Theo has reached such extremes that he demands ocular proof to protest against Xan's government, he needs to be a spectator at a Quietus to comprehend the gravity of the inhumane manslaughter. Another instance where Theo demonstrates his responsibility is when he denies Jasper's request to move in with him.

Theo is reluctant to take the “ increasing responsibility for a difficult old man, repels me [Theo] (James 69). The compelling fact which stuns us is Theo’s confession of his own estrangement, “ I don’t want anyone to look to me, not for protection, not for happiness, not for love not for anything” (James 37). His sense of nihilism is tangible. Unlike Theo, Lear foolishly surrenders his power to his daughters. He gives up his authority to his daughters but he dislikes losing the benefits associated with king. Lear appears to be an arrogant man.

He misinterprets money and power as love and respect. Lear is more interested in words than true feelings. His demand for flattery rather than filial gratitude is quite bizarre. Lear is easily deceived by Goneril’s and Regan’s flattery. Ironically, Cordelia’s honesty is misinterpreted. Lear values appearance over reality. As a result, Lear suffers relentlessly in order to compensate for his sins. The astounding fact of Lear is aware of his nihilistic future. He does “ not [want to] be mad, not mad sweet heaven! /Keep me in temper. I would not be mad! (Shakespeare Act I, v, 45-6). The wisdom in Lear has faintly appeared in the storm. He sees the treachery of his daughters which in turn instills hatred in his heart for them. Lear becomes self-aware of his pitiful situation. Therefore, Lear takes the audience through his journey toward his enlightenment. Certain characters in both the works portray a missing component, mainly attributes of the protagonist. Miriam in *The Children of Men* highlights the missing compassion of Theo. Miriam, through her thought and action, sparks benevolence in Theo.

They are under no moral obligation to bring change but the existing benevolent attitude in Miriam transforms Theo’s attitude as he takes

massive strides to be the harbinger of change. Theo would not have got involved with the Five Fishes if Miriam had not cycled her way to Theo's house. The power hungry attitude of Rolf also influences Theo's innate personality as he assumes the leadership role when Rolf flees. Identically, the wise Fool tries to thrust Lear towards sanity saying, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst / been wise" (Shakespeare Act I, v, 43-4).

The Fool encourages Lear to follow the sensible path but Lear, unlike Theo, completely disregards the Fool's suggestion. Lear ignores the Fool's prediction that Regan is vicious as Goneril. The Fool is the whispering voice of sanity encouraging Lear to go through a decisive process to salvage self-knowledge. A series of bad decisions allow him to see the world as it truly is. The self-realization would not have been so evident in the play if the rational Fool had kept his foreshadowing to himself. Thus, other characters have amply influenced the protagonists.

They are partly responsible from bringing out the metamorphosis of the person. In both the works, children immensely influence the character of the protagonists. Theo participates in the activities of the Five Fishes because it involves a child. A child is so important, that it will shape the future of humanity. Theo is thoroughly changed as "He was swept by a tide of emotion which rose, buffeted and engulfed him in a turbulent surge of awe, excitement and terror" (James 221) after his initial encounter with pregnant Julian.

Theo is seen as the father of the new human race because of his association with Julian's baby. It is ironical given that he killed his own daughter Natalie (James 167). On the other hand, King Lear abandons the responsibility of <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-protagonists-in-king-lear-and-in-the-children-of-men/>

parenthood. He transforms from a decent father to a father who invokes nature to render Goneril sterile, to make barren her sexual relationship with Albany (Shakespeare I, iv, 287-8). Constant rejections from his daughters transform Lear from a caterpillar to a butterfly.

Lear is not as strong, arrogant and filled with pride as he seems in the beginning of the play. He associates animals of the lower stratum with his daughters. He curses at Goneril calling her a 'sea monster' and a 'serpent'. He sees the glimpse of the truth even though for a short while before his untimely death. In conclusion, *The Children of Men* and *King Lear* are magnificent literary works separated by almost 400 years of societal changes yet they reverberate with the same idea, the idea that men must rise against anarchism in the hopes of the best possible future.

The children constitute the basis of the future. Theo instills a positive future when he wears the coronation ring which symbolizes power has shifted and change is inevitable. The baby has brought out this change in him. Lear learns that once time and age have weakened one, without money and power one is almost helpless against the ravages of greed and power-hunger - but his final speech to Cordelia suggests that he also learns that, finally, greed and power - hunger do not really matter. James and Shakespeare's humanism represents a forward-looking rather than a nostalgic sensibility.

It suggests the essentiality of investing in our children to instill goodwill for the future. Eventually, many characters paid for this knowledge with their lives. The distinguishing difference between Theo and Lear is that Lear realizes this too late whereas Theo discovers this knowledge at the right time to revive the people of Britain. Though in the end Lear is able to understand

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his flaws, he is never able to use the knowledge he has attained to emend his destructive attitudes and behavior. Thus the inability to amend makes King Lear inferior to Theo.