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The Tragic Genre from Classical to Contemporary: King Lear and A Thousand Acres

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I teach twelfth grade English at Hill Regional Career High School in New Haven, a magnet school for students interested in business, medicine, and science. There are three sections of English for seniors, and I have the upper two tracks, Honors and Advanced Placement. The Advanced Placement course is designed to assist students in preparing for the A.P. English Literature and Composition exam in May. Students who do well on this exam may be given college credit for their participation, so its rigor requires them to develop into careful and critical readers and precise and thoughtful writers. The Honors course is designed for students who are prepared and ready for a challenging curriculum of reading and writing, but it is more flexible in regard to writing assignments than the Advanced Placement Course, which is primarily expository essays and research papers; the Honors English feature more creative writing and artistic expression. Both courses consist primarily of the traditional canon of British and world literature, though there are some modern and American selections. Our schedule allows for in-depth coverage of works of literature and for good use of a writing workshop. Our classes meet every other day, with periods of eighty-two minutes each, so little time is wasted on trivialities like attendance, announcements, etc. My class numbers are quite small, with my largest class at seventeen members and my smallest at eleven. With two periods of Advanced Placement and two periods of Honors English, I have fewer than sixty students. Students are motivated and bright, but bring deficits with them in the areas of grammar and mechanics, and do not always demonstrate an ability to read analytically and write with style and grace. These are skills I try to teach in whole-class mini-lessons and through individual conferences. Close readings of texts may occur as part of class activity or as homework, and writing assignments are generally done at home and in class, with time allotted for a writing workshop and writing conferences with me. An average class, then, would include a discussion of a reading assignment, a close examination of areas of ambiguity or difficulty in the text, a mini-lesson on a skill area such as grammar or punctuation, and a writing workshop in which students write and revise as I walk around, conferring with all students in turn and each again as needed.

The study of tragedy occurs in both courses, and usually includes a study of classical tragedy with *Oedipus*, *Antigone*, and *Agamemnon*; a study of Shakespearean tragedy with *Hamlet* and/or *King Lear*; and a study of contemporary tragedy with *Death of a Salesman*. While the worth of these works is not at question, it would be helpful to have texts of similar quality and theme that would better represent and engage our students. Our school materials are somewhat diverse, but I have not been successful in developing the sort of learning experience that I would like: bringing a classic to life through the use of contemporary works which feature diverse characters and themes. When works of similar worth but vastly different culture, period, and theme

are paired, the students will have more reason to like - and to successfully analyze - both. They are fairly adept at identifying theme in works, but are less likely to see elements of genre, and this skill is one that I would like to hone for my Advanced Placement and Honors students. They can see books as works of art unto themselves, as instigation for thought, or as a reflection of the real world, but they are less adept at comparing works in a search for common elements and structure within a genre. My thought has been that if students were given works of similar merit, structure, theme, and genre, they may begin to recognize and categorize shared qualities.

By the time that we begin our study of *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*, my students will have learned about Aristotle's elements of tragedy and A.C. Bradley's thoughts on the qualities of the tragic man. This, I feel, is very important to the understanding of the text, and while I will introduce it earlier in the year with Greek tragedy, we will continue to address the elements of tragedy and qualities of the tragic man as we read *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*. I have included some lessons on tragedy here, but I feel it is important to note that the bulk of my teaching on this would have occurred earlier, and that the lessons included here are built on that foundation. I would suggest that any teacher attempting to use this unit do so only after introducing the concept of tragedy as a genre, and in particular the differences between classic, Shakespearean, and modern tragedy.

King Lear

I chose *King Lear* as the classic tragedy to work with. Famous for its difficult plot and its intriguing themes of family, loyalty, madness, and community, it is rich with ideas to pursue. Arrogant, powerful, and sure of himself, Lear decides to retire and pits his three daughters against one another for the choicest pieces of his realm: they must outdo one another in professing their love for him. Two sneaky daughters (Regan and Goneril) compete as directed, and the third, Cordelia, states simply that she loves him according to her bond, no more nor less (I.1.97-99). Outraged, he cuts her out of the will and divides the land between the other two, prompting them to scheme with one another to reduce his meager luxuries, and then against one another to be more powerful and have the love of Edmund, the bastard (and bastardly) son of the Earl of Gloucester. Gloucester and his legitimate son Edgar are betrayed by his illegitimate son Edmund in a story that parallels the mistreatment of Lear by Goneril and Regan. Other characters include Kent, who counsels Lear against his rage at Cordelia and is exiled because of it, and yet disguises himself to help Lear fight against the humiliations heaped upon him by his ungrateful daughters. Edgar, the legitimate son of Gloucester, is misused and also tries to work against the greed of Regan and Goneril. Cordelia's refusal to pander to her father's ego wins her the love of the King of France, who takes her away after Lear shames her and sends her back with his armies as he begins his successful war against England under the power of Regan and Goneril. Morally, *King Lear* is a tale full of violence, greed, betrayal, and malice. The violence of *Lear* is gut-wrenching, with a particularly horrible scene (III.7) where Regan and her husband, the Duke of Cornwall, pluck out Gloucester's eyes for his support of the king and his supposed treason. There are few characters of good and honorable nature, and those that are, like Edgar, for example, are rather slow about identifying the treachery all around them, and are unable to prevent evil from taking its toll. Lear's eldest daughters are unquestionably evil, as is Gloucester's illegitimate son Edmund. Lear, self-absorbed and secure in his reign, apparently never bothered to ensure his daughters were raised to be good and moral women, thinking perhaps that his greatness alone deserved their awe and love. Gloucester's alliance with an easy woman produces a bastard son whose character reflects his immoral conception and who actively resents the limitations of his birth. Part of Lear's

development as a tragic character is that he comes to an understanding of his poor assessment of both his daughters and the world around him; he had not appreciated the lives and struggles of lesser men, and in his exile learns the difficulties faced by his subjects and the avarice of Regan and Goneril. In the end, most everyone dies, as Goneril kills Regan and then herself, Lear and Cordelia are sent to prison where she dies first and he after, and Edgar kills Edmund. Edgar and Kent are left to restore order to the realm.

At first glance, the modern tragic genre is rife with characters of moral problems that are reflective, and perhaps simplistically stereotypical, of modern social ills. Novels about the drug-addicted, sexually abused, beaten-up, and put-down abound in popular fiction; for many of the novels, Aristotle's "embellishment of language" is the jargon of drug rehabilitation therapists and criminal defense lawyers. I did not want to choose a book that was about the cold, hard life of the streets or the rage-to-riches-to-rags story of the criminal American ethnic minority group. Rather, I wanted a book that would explore the themes of *King Lear* without having to depend upon a sensationalized setting. It is easy for an author to take underprivileged characters and make life worse; I wanted to see characters whose suffering didn't arise from low socioeconomic status.

For this reason, it was difficult to find a book that I could pair with my chosen classic, *King Lear*. I was pleased to find *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, and found it to be quite promising. Our main character, Okonkwo, works harder than others to prosper due to his father's moral weakness. Successful and proud, his farm is wildly successful, and he marries wisely to improve his situation. His willingness to work hard mirrors his willingness to be inflexible and harsh in his relationships with others, and it is this rigidity that causes his personal and political downfall. Unable to bend like others in his tribe, unable to admit his wrongdoing and change with the times, Okonkwo's stubbornness leads to the deaths of those close to him and to his own suicide. While Okonkwo has all of the qualities of a tragic hero, he is casually cruel and not particularly likeable, which makes one less likely to empathize with him. As I read the book, I found myself to be distracted by thousands of questions about family relationships, social hierarchies, and the history of the colonialization of the African people. *Things Fall Apart* is a good book and a good fit for *Lear*, but I was even happier when I found Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*.

A Thousand Acres

A Thousand Acres is the story of *King Lear* updated for a modern audience hungry for an understanding of the malady that ripped apart Lear's family. Unlike *King Lear*, *A Thousand Acres* has one of the "bad" daughters as its narrator, which provides insight into the bitter conflict that undoes the family in the end. Those familiar with Shakespeare's play may be bothered by the idea that such stately patriarch could unknowingly produce such selfish schemers as Regan and Goneril, and Smiley's novel gives us the back story. In this novel, set in Iowa farm country, Larry Cook's two eldest daughters (Ginny and Rose for Goneril and Regan) have been waiting on him hand and foot since the death of their mother, cooking every meal and washing every stitch of clothing as their husbands (Ty and Pete for Albany and Cornwall) dutifully assist the demanding Larry in the daily operations of the farm. His youngest daughter (Caroline for Cordelia) escapes, at the urging and through the support of her sisters, to become a successful lawyer. Caroline marries another lawyer and lives a sophisticated life in Des Moines. Smiley closely follows Shakespeare's plot lines with the kind of details that fill this novel to bursting, and provide an intense glimpse into the private life of a family whose farm represents a small kingdom surrounded by smaller kingdoms, all green with envy and eagerly awaiting their opportunity to judge as the pillar of the community begins to crumble into decline. Larry Cook is Lear in the modern sense:

As a leader of his community, he has proven himself to be wise and has maintained his position and the respect of his neighbors until he decides to assume the role of advisor and retire as his children assume his position. He is the owner of a farm maintained and improved through his family's hard work, and his land has grown to an impressive thousand acres through his clever manipulation of the less able farmers around him. His retirement is hastily planned and executed, and it is his pride that prompts him to disinherit Caroline, who simply states that she is not sure that his decision to incorporate the farm is a good idea. Incensed that she is not grateful and agreeable, as Ginny and Rose and their husbands are, he cuts her out of his will and refuses to speak to or about her. After the signing of the documents, Ginny's husband Ty works harder than ever to improve the farm and embarks upon drastic changes that are rather risky, and require them to borrow a great deal of money, something that Larry Cook had been unwilling to do. Ginny and Rose continue to take care of Larry until his drunken driving, wasteful spending, and general erratic behavior prompt them to attempt to set limits on his behavior. Angry and incoherent, Larry runs out into a storm as Ginny, Rose, and Pete restrain themselves as his insults grow ever more mean-spirited and cruel. Like Lear, Larry curses Ginny with infertility and calls a sickness down upon Rose, who has recently won a battle with breast cancer. Only Ty, Ginny's husband, attempts to keep Larry inside during the storm, but he is unsuccessful.

Larry wanders to the farm of his good friend Harold Clarke (Gloucester), who takes him in and begins a smear campaign in their small community against Ginny and Rose for their betrayal of their father. In a parallel subplot, Harold's son Jess (Edmund) has returned to the fold after a thirteen-year absence due to Jess's flight to Canada during the Vietnam War. Jess has been wandering, and wants to take up organic farming on his father's land. Jess's brother Loren is an exact copy of Harold, and would farm exactly as his dad did. Jess sleeps first with Ginny and then with Rose, and his alliance with Rose infuriates Ginny, who mixes up some poison sausage for her sister. Larry has taken refuge with his friend Harold and initiates discussion with Caroline about how his farm has been taken from him. Pete, angry with Larry for years of high-handed treatment, sabotages a piece of farm equipment Larry had been using, but it is Harold who uses it next, and it is Harold who is blinded. Caroline files suit against the incorporation of the farm, seeking to declare that her sisters and their husbands are not farming wisely and that the farm should revert back to Larry, but their case is thrown out. Ultimately, Caroline takes care of Larry as he grows more and more disconnected with reality. Ty attempts to save the farm under the burden of debt and the inability to work it after the death of Rose's husband Pete, but is unable to do so after Ginny leaves him to find another life as a waitress in a small town. Rose takes over after Ty leaves, but succumbs to cancer in the end and dies owing more for the improvements on the land than it is worth; Ginny and Caroline must pay off the debt after they sell the farm.

Smiley's characters are fuller and more developed than Shakespeare's, with more information by which to judge. Rather than a greedy daughter, Ginny is agreeable to her father, and signs the incorporation agreement to please him. Even her attempts to control his behavior are well-intentioned, since his drinking and driving pose an obvious threat to himself and those around him. Ginny is led first by her father, then her husband, and then Jess as her lover, but throughout this, her relationship with Rose is the most powerful. It is Rose that reminds Ginny of their childhood, and it is Rose that awakens Ginny's anger with her father and with Rose herself. Eventually, we learn that Larry began molesting Ginny and Rose after his wife died, and that they acquiesced partly in order to protect Caroline from him. Ginny's memories of this were buried, but Rose's were not, and Rose is openly hateful of him throughout the novel. Caroline never understands why Rose is so mean to her father, and blames Rose for being vicious. Ginny elects not to tell Caroline the truth, and after Rose's death allows Caroline to continue to think of their father as a man betrayed by his daughters. Ginny regrets her jealousy about Pete, and removes the poison sausage from Rose's pantry before anyone is hurt. Ginny's infertility is probably caused by the chemicals used on the crops, and Rose's cancer may also be linked to modern farming methods. Their way of life - the seemingly pure and simple life of the farmer - is

filled with dangerous chemicals, deadly machinery, precise rules of behavior, and old grudges that live forever.

Unlike classical tragedy, which concerns itself with the fall of a man in high place to a lower position through some flaw or weakness, in modern tragedy we see how the pressures of life or the world warp and twist the average man into a shadow of what he used to be or may have been. He falls, but from a lower position than the classical or Shakespearean tragic man. Larry Cook is our *King Lear*, twisted by his family's fever to farm economically and aggressively, by his emotional detachment from his ancestors and his progeny, and by his inability to see himself as a man guilty of the sexual abuse of his daughters: rather than face up to his behavior, he goes mad. His daughters are not evil and greedy beings, but thinking and feeling products of his inadequate parenting and outright abuse. They can be manipulated, but they are much more complex than Lear's daughters, for Ginny and Rose both have legitimate grievances and an inability to prevent Larry from making his mistakes. When his errors are disastrous, like incorporating the farm before he was ready to give up his leadership, driving drunk, and angrily walking into a dangerous thunderstorm, they pay for them too. Larry's neighbors censure Ginny and Rose for not preventing these disasters. Their weapons against their father are mainly wheedling and flattery, not enough to prevent him from feeling the sting of consequence. Caroline, the "good" daughter, is only good because her sisters have protected her from their father's dark side; Caroline is free to remember a father strong and good, and sisters that were less ambitious and independent. Her career and her freedom are possible because Ginny and Rose made sure that she got the most out of her school experiences and went to college, unlike Ginny, who compliantly married early and moved into a house on the Cook farm, or Rose, who taught elementary school for a while before being brought back to the farm when her husband's music career did not provide the steady income they needed. Why does Caroline stand up for Larry? Because she doesn't know what he is like, and what Ginny and Rose sacrificed for her.

Objectives

My objectives for placing these two works together are the following:

- to facilitate the kind of close and careful reading required of literature
- to compare Shakespearean tragedy to modern tragedy
- to recognize the cultural and moral values that may be found within Shakespeare's culture and in *King Lear*
- to recognize the cultural and moral values that may be found within modern culture and *A Thousand Acres*
- to assess why Jane Smiley developed her characters and themes differently than Shakespeare
- to assess literary devices, such as the use of drama versus the novel, the first-person narrator, and recurring motifs and imagery

Strategies

In order for my students to demonstrate and expand their understanding of my objectives, they should be given a number of assessments. I have included an outline for several units of study, and each of these units should be further divided into two to ten lessons, depending upon the objectives for each. For example, Unit 1 should require only one or two class periods, but Unit 2 will be longer because it includes more reading and lessons to be taught as their reading progresses. You may find more detailed lessons below, identified by unit number and lesson number. Aside from their extensive reading, students should have rich and varied experiences in writing, thinking, speaking, and categorizing.

Unit Outline

Unit 1

- The definition of tragedy per students
- The definition of classical tragedy per Aristotle
- The definition of Shakespearean tragedy per A. C. Bradley
- The definition of modern tragedy per Holman
- Elements of the tragic character
- Review of tragedy in the movies per discussion of the elements: Students will assist in finding movies that fit, such as *Scarface* , *New Jack City* , *Bullworth* , etc. We will address the likelihood of powerful characters not fitting our criterion of a tragic character - being faulty, but not depraved, for example.

Unit 2

- Intro to classical tragedy as in *Oedipus* , and Shakespearean, as in *King Lear*
- Alignment of elements of tragedy and elements of tragic character to *Lear* during our reading
- Vocabulary support appropriate to *King Lear*
- Shakespeare's use iambic pentameter, blank verse, and prose to suggest elevated or low characteristics of his characters
- Cultural values of individuals, family, and society

Unit 3

- Discussion of modern application of tragic elements and tragic characters
- Culture of *King Lear* 's time
- Discussion of modern American farming and its problems and realities versus our traditional view of the wholesomeness of the family farm.
- Introduction of *A Thousand Acres*

Unit 4

- Alignment of *A Thousand Acres* with characteristics of the tragic man and elements of tragedy
- Common elements of *A Thousand Acres* and *King Lear*
- Discussion of cultural values of individuals, family, and society of both books.

Unit 5

- Search for art which is representative of both books
- Search for background information about culture and period for both books.
- Organize ideas into thematic comparisons and alignment with genre
- Write paper contrasting both, presenting information and relevant artwork to the class via poster, power point presentation, transparencies, etc.

Lessons

Unit 1: Lesson 1 of 2 Tragedy - Classical, Shakespearean, and Modern

1. Pair/Small group discussion and definition of tragedy

2. Discussion of common elements identified by students
3. Discussion of examples of tragedies in real life
4. Differentiation between misfortune and tragedy
5. Selection of a book, play, or movie known to all students from previous classes, such as *Othello* , *Romeo and Juliet* , *MacBeth* , and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* .
6. Introduction to Aristotle's elements of tragedy and characteristics of the tragic man
7. Small groups: align one of the tragedies they already know with elements of tragedy and characteristics of the tragic man.
8. Homework: review a movie or another literary work and align it with elements. Present in small groups or whole class at the next class period.

Unit 2: Lesson 5 of 10 Characterization

1. Authors prompt us to form opinions about a character in a number of ways:
 - a. through the character's speech and actions
 - b. through the way other characters speak and react to them
 - c. through the speech of others when the character is not present
 - d. through information directly given by the author
2. Obviously, in drama there is little opportunity for the authority to insert ideas aside from the stage directions or dialogue. In *King Lear* , then, we must look closely at dialogue. Who speaks? Who listens?
3. Students should select a character to follow carefully for Act 1. In this act, every reference to, comparison of, or speech by the character should be carefully analyzed for the following:
 - a. respect and courtesy shown to and by the character
 - b. recurring motifs and ideas expressed by the character
 - c. decisions made by the character and the factors that influenced them
 - d. consequences experienced by the character
 - e. the language used to describe the character. Is it flattering, disdainful, truthful, moral, or something else?
 - f. the character's ability to assess situations accurately
 - g. the way the character fits in with his/her community
4. Students should complete a graphic organizer/note-taking strategy for the accumulation of these details throughout the remainder of the play. See Characterization, parts 1 and 2, for examples.
5. Small groups should meet and share information first according to members who have studied the same character, and then members should be jigsawed so that each group contains a

member who studied a different character. These meetings will occur at the end of each act.
6. Whole class share on overhead or board. Save and refine characterizations, and refer to them when discussing later developments and *A Thousand Acres* .

Unit 4: Lessons 1 and 2 of 8, Characterization in *A Thousand Acres*

1. Introduction to Modern Tragedy
2. Students will begin with a t-chart of characters from *King Lear* that lists major characteristics, motives, actions, and consequences. This chart would have been made in Unit 2.
3. On a separate sheet and as students read *A Thousand Acres* , they will identify qualities about each character, similar to what they did for *King Lear* .
4. At the end of the novel, students will compare and contrast the characterization of Smiley's characters to Shakespeare's characters.
5. Some questions/ideas to guide them:
 - a. Which characters have increased development? What is that development?
 - b. Who is telling the tales? If *Lear* is a drama and therefore more objective, does one find Ginny in *Acres* to be an unreliable narrator?
 - c. How have motives changed? Are the motifs that were present in *King Lear* present in *A Thousand Acres* ? How are they expressed?
 - d. Are values and morals the same for the characters in these works?
 - e. Which scenes are added/deleted/altered to fit the form of a novel and the modern setting?
 - f. A great deal of emphasis is placed on how Lear rules Britain wisely, and a great deal of emphasis is placed on Larry Cook's farming abilities. Is there evidence to challenge these assertions?
 - g. Smiley's Edmund becomes Jess, a bastard no more, but a Vietnam

War draft-dodger and would-be organic farmer. How does the character of Jess reflect modern sensibilities and timely themes?

h. Comment on the reality of Ginny's infertility and Rose's breast cancer versus the curses Lear places on his daughters.

Unit 5, lesson 1-3 of 3

1. As students keep their characterization logs through notes or graphic organizers, they will develop their comparisons into an essay that will examine a character pair from *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*. Students have learned of the 5 modes of literary analysis (formalist, meta-textual, expressive, mimetic, and pragmatic) and will use them for this paper. The analysis must include discussion of the character pair as family members, community members, members of a particular age, and as means for the authors to express the values and morals that are inherently important in the literature. The essay will be 5-7 pages in length and will use quotations and outside sources.

2. Students will confer with me as well as with other students, and will use computers in the room to edit and revise papers over two class periods.

3. Students will present their papers in class via the use of power point, overhead transparencies, posters, etc.

Elements of Classical Tragedy, per Aristotle

1. It is an imitation of a single, unified action that is serious, complete, and probable, and has a certain magnitude.
2. It concerns the fall of a person whose character is good, believable, and consistent.
3. The fall is caused in part by some error or frailty in the protagonist and not by a vice or depravity.
4. The language is embellished with each kind of artistic ornament.
5. The tragedy is presented in the form of action, not narrative.
6. It arouses in the audience the emotions of pity and terror resulting in a catharsis of these emotions.

Elements of a Shakespearean Tragedy, per A. C. Bradley in *Barron's Guide to the A.P. English Exam* :

1. Although a tragedy may have many characters, is it preeminently the story of one person or at most two.
2. The story leads up to and includes the death of the hero.
3. The story depicts also the troubled part of the hero's life, which precedes and leads up to his death.
4. The hero is a conspicuous person, a person of high degree.
5. The suffering and calamity are exceptional, of a striking kind. They are as a rule unexpected and are a strong contrast to previous happiness or glory.
6. The suffering and calamity extend far beyond the protagonist so as to make the whole scene one of woe.
7. This scene becomes the chief source of the tragic emotions, especially pity.

Elements of Modern Tragedy - drawn from literary terms dictionaries

1. Status - Concerns the plight of a character fitting the classical model in temperament save for the fact that he is not necessarily of high status.
2. Society - may serve as the oppressor for our tragic man. Without the means to fight his battles, protect himself or his family, or to seek moral/intellectual guidance, he may have been poorly served by an uncaring and unkind society.
3. Audience - The audience may feel empathy for the tragic man because his story is believable and common. Unlike classical tragedy, where the tragic hero is collectively and publicly mourned, the modern tragic hero may pass into death without recognition and ceremony.

Aristotle's Characteristics of the Tragic Man

1. A belief in his own freedom. He makes choices when faced with dilemmas, and he has the faith and courage to accept the outcomes of his choices.
2. A supreme pride. The pride seems a reflection of arrogance and conceit. It seems to demonstrate a superiority to fellow human beings and an equality with gods. But it gives the tragic hero a unique power and dignity.
3. Capacity for suffering. He suffers because he believes in what he is doing and because he feels both guilt and guiltlessness at the same time. He justifies his actions, yet is not convinced they are just. He has the strength to endure the pains inflicted upon him. He has no fear of death. He questions the forces with and without him that drive him to the actions that destroy him.
4. A sense of commitment. Once the forces of the conflict are set in motion, he is committed. There is an inevitability that moves him to the resolution. He can stop the movement by a change in decision, but his dedication leads him to assert the freedom to let the process follow its chosen direction.
5. Vigorous protest. The tragic hero objects with vehemence, logic, and pain against the situation in which he finds himself. He does not accept his fate against the situation in which he finds himself. He does not accept his fate meekly. He cries out against the gods, against his own weakness, against the world, against the forces that placed him in jeopardy.
6. Transfiguration. The suffering of tragic man refines him. He learns from his agony, and his awareness lies in his deeper understanding of the human condition. He is ennobled and softened by his experiences. He begins to see more clearly his place in the universe and the greatness that is human potential. He rises from the ash heap a wise and more humane individual, and his death is not an obliteration because he leaves a memory of glory.
7. Impact. Out of the tragedies of life faced heroically and questioningly, out of the desire to know

the why of pain and suffering, out of the frequent nobility with which a few heroic beings face the punishments of life comes a deeper understanding of the human condition, not only on the part of the tragic hero but also on the part of the other characters in the play, as well as the audience who participate in his agony.

***King Lear and A Thousand Acres* Characterization Paper Project**

You must choose two characters, one from *King Lear* and one from *A Thousand Acres*, to compare in a thesis paper. Your paper should reflect a critical analysis of both works, and it should demonstrate your ability to write with precision, clarity, and insight. You must pick two characters that correspond between the two works, such as:

<i>King Lear</i>	<i>A Thousand Acres</i>
<i>King Lear</i>	Larry Cook
Goneril	Ginny
Regan	Rose
Cordelia	Caroline
Edmund	Jess
Gloucester	Harold

The following qualities are necessary for your paper to be well-rounded and complete:

1. A thesis statement - remember, a thesis statement is your opinion or perspective on your chosen subject. It's a controlling idea; it is not an announcement of your subject, a title, or a whole paragraph. Get this right before you begin and you will save yourself a lot of trouble.
2. Use an alternating pattern for this comparison/contrast paper. That means that your paper should follow this general format:
 - I. Introduction: thesis + preview of main contrast points
 - II. Quality 1 of pair: how it changes from one work to the next, why this change is significant, and what reason you can give for the change.
 - III. Quality 2 of pair...
 - IV. Quality 3 of pair...
 - V. Quality 4 of pair...
 - VI. Quality 5 of pair...
 - VII. Conclusion: a restated thesis that echoes your strongest points and emphasizes your biggest ideas about the works and the characters.

Of course, you may not have exactly five points, but do have 4-7.

3. Use direct quotations. If you are comparing Larry Cook to *King Lear*, look for speeches that correspond and use them in your text. Cite them correctly and include a bibliography.

4. Acknowledge the difference a narrator makes. Which places in *King Lear* allow (or require) the actors and director to "fill in" gaps in the character? How does the first person narrator, and our knowledge of the family secrets, color our view of the events that take place in *A Thousand Acres*?

5. Write with clarity, style, and grace. Read your draft aloud to determine whether or not it makes sense before you give it to a peer editor or me. Impress with sophisticated ideas, and not your SAT vocabulary. Take a firm stand with intelligence, and not belligerence.

6. Create a title that gives some hint to your position.

(charts available in print form)

Works Cited

Principal Texts

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Folger Library. Ed Louis B. Wright and Virginia A. LaMar. New York: Washington Square Press, 1957.

Smiley, Jane. *A Thousand Acres*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991.

Textbooks and Reference Materials

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. S.H. Butcher. New York: Hill and Wang, 1989. For a discussion of tragedy, begin with Aristotle. The concepts are simple and profound.

Cudden, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* . Fourth edition. London: Penguin Books, 1999. A very good discussion of tragedy and a general help with literary terms, though a bit wordy, full of obscure references, and less readable for students.

Dudley, Kathryn Marie. *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland* . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. An excellent source of information about modern farming.

Holman, C. Hugh and Harmon, William, contributor. *Handbook for Literature* . Sixth edition. New York: Hungry Minds, Inc., 1992. My favorite literary terms book - simple, concise, and very readable for students.

Nadel, Max and Sherrer, Arthur, Jr. *How to Prepare for the AP English Examination* . Fifth Edition. New York: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1992. This book has been very useful for students preparing for the advanced placement exam. It also contains an excellent discussion of tragedy and uses Hamlet and Oedipus as examples for discussion.

Skwire, David and Skwire, Sarah E. *Writing with a Thesis: A Rhetoric and Reader* . New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998. This is a decent writing guide, and it has a particularly good section on organization in writing.

Background and Enrichment Reading List

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart* . Anchor Publishing, 1994. This would be a good book to work with *Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* . It is a classic that is frequently taught in high school and college.

Aeschylus. *Orestia* . Trans. Robert W. Fangles. New York: Penguin Books, 1984. While Oedipus and Antigone have been better liked by my students, this is another option for classical tragedy.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet* . Folger Library. Eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992. Great tragedy.

Sophocles. *Oedipus the King* . Trans. Bernard M. W. Knox. New York: Washington Square Press, 1972.

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman* . Arthur Miller, New York: Penguin Books, 1976. This is a wonderful modern tragedy. Students like the family dynamic and feel like they can understand the difference between the classic and modern tragedy when they read this.

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