

The Meaning of Suffering in Literature and Life

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Abstract

Suffering is an inevitable facet of life. All around the world countless numbers of people endure suffering from violence, abuse, natural disasters, and their own vindictive and self-damaging natures. It is difficult to make sense of and find meaning in the seemingly pointless suffering in our everyday lives. This paper explores the meaning of suffering through the lenses of Shakespeare's play *King Lear*, Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*, modern psychology, and the survivors of real-world catastrophes. Literature imitates life and by exploring it, along with modern research and real-world survivor testaments, this paper takes a holistic approach to making meaning out of the seemingly meaningless pain and chaos that suffering inflicts. This paper uses a wide array of circumstances and examples to scrape away at timeless questions that are all too often answered by thoughtless clichés.

Keywords: suffering, King Lear, A Thousand Acres, disaster, meaning

On December 26th, 2004, a 9.3 magnitude earthquake tore its way through Indonesia. The massive earthquake triggered a tsunami that this world has never seen before. Waves traveling at six-hundred miles per hour and standing twenty four feet tall tore their way through the cities and villages. The death toll began to pile, expenses climbed just as fast as the waves, and suffering and heartache were in sight everywhere. At the end of the day, three-hundred thousand people were dead, and millions more had their lives forever altered. Suffering was everywhere, and suffering still is everywhere today. Although it may not always be as extreme as it was for the victims of the 2004 tsunami, suffering is perhaps the most universal human emotion and everyone must battle with it on a daily basis. The battle often seems unwinnable, and leaves its victims wondering what the meaning of it all is. However, I believe that is precisely what the meaning of suffering is: its meaning is to make one ask for meaning. The meaning of suffering in personal life is to drive one to find meaning in his/her own life, and it accomplishes this by showing us both what is taken for granted and what is

truly valuable in life.

Gregory Eels argues in the *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* that suffering is what unites the human race. He writes, "We are all dislocated in some way in our lives, which is evident in the trauma of birth, sickness, old age, the fear of death, personal weakness, and separation from those we love" (Eels 42). The very fact that we feel, see, touch, taste, love, care, and exist invites the very nature of suffering into our lives. We suffer because we are human and we are human because we suffer. This suffering can manifest itself in different forms in our lives. According to Eels, suffering is often manifested in sickness, old age, personal weakness, and separation from loved ones (Eels 42).

Evidence of the effect of these different types of suffering can be witnessed in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. *King Lear* is a tragedy, a genre that includes a mighty hero or heroine with a fatal flaw that leads him/her to a demise at the play's conclusion. Throughout a tragedy, the main character is subjected to a series of painful and distressing events that leads him/her to the recognition of his/her fatal flaw and also leads the main character to a reversal of their fatal flaw. In *King Lear*, Lear is a powerful king who presents with the fatal flaw of selfish pride. As a result, throughout the story Lear becomes the very epitome of human suffering and he experiences each type of suffering previously mentioned by Eels. Lear suffers from the sickness of what appears to be dementia as he battles with his old age throughout the play. Lear is also constantly being confronted by his own personal weaknesses. This is evident from the very first scene of the play when Lear exiles his favorite daughter Cordelia in a fit of rage, a decision that Lear clearly regrets later. Lear must also deal with the betrayal of his other two daughters, Regan and Goneril, a betrayal that clearly seems to incite his anger to the breaking point. The king's anger is evident in Act 2, Scene 4, lines 280-281, when he lashes out at his daughters, "No, you unnatural hags, I will have such revenges on you both" (Shakespeare 1228). Like the individuals affected by the devastating effects of the 2004 tsunami, Lear must also endure the mortifying terror of a natural disaster. It is clear that Lear's life is full of suffering of all forms, but the real question of the play is whether or not the stubborn king learns anything through his suffering.

In the *American Journal of Bioethics*, Christopher McDougall and Diana Aurenque write, "The most intolerable feature of suffering is not suffering intrinsically, but the senselessness of suffering" (McDougall and Aurenque 35). Suffering is only truly suffering if it is devoid of any meaning or value. If suffering is embraced as an opportunity for an individual to improve, to grow and develop, suffering can have value and as McDougall and Aurenque stated, it is not "senseless". In Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*,

a modern adaptation of *King Lear* set on an Iowan farm, one can see just how unbelievably painful senseless suffering is. In Smiley's adaptation, Larry Cook (the Lear character) is presented as a hard, proud man with few to no redeeming qualities. To complicate matters, Larry sexually molests his two daughters at a very young age. Smiley presents Lear/Larry as a true villain in the novel, a character that readers cannot empathize with. *A Thousand Acres* is an adaptation that is even more morbid than the already depressingly tragic *King Lear*. What makes Smiley's novel so dark, is there is no silver lining, no lesson to be learned by Larry. Larry experiences true suffering because he suffers senselessly, without any personal growth and development or repentance. The suffering, weakness, and fragility, are what make us human. What we make of the whole mess all is what defines us.

If *King Lear* is viewed through this same lens of suffering described by McDougall and Aurenque, then the play may not really be all that tragic for Lear after all. The play is usually viewed as Shakespeare's darkest tragedy. As noted by Michael Goldman in *Critical Insights*, *King Lear* is relentless with its tragic force. Goldman noted that the play beats the reader down with its repetition. Lear is rejected by one daughter, then the other. Gloucester has one eye plucked out and then the other. The words are even repetitive with phrases such as "How! How! How!", "Never, never, never, never, never!", and "Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!" (Goldman). However, I think that if you can look past these elements, *King Lear* can be viewed as a play that depicts Lear's quest for happiness. The play begins with Lear seated on his throne in power, surrounded by his subjects, servants, and all his wealth. This scene on the surface seems to show the power, success, and possibly the happiness of the ruling Lear family. Despite this, a perceptive reader will notice that this is just a façade, and there is trouble brewing beneath the surface. At the onset of the play, Lear only believes he is happy, and that he has found true happiness in his possessions, wealth, and power. As Lear comes to learn, this is not true happiness but is rather a false reality built upon lies and false flattery. The king undergoes this epiphany in Act 3, Scene 4, lines 101-107, when he witnesses Edgar's pitiful state. He exclaims, "Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art" (Shakespeare 1232). By witnessing Edgar's suffering and through his own suffering, Lear discovers that material possessions mean nothing to him and finally begins to ask himself what the true meaning of life is. Suffering forces Lear to examine himself, something that the king was never forced to do before during his reign of pomp and

luxury. Here the reader can see the now humbled Lear driven to recognize the errors of his previous vanity and pride. The power of suffering as a tool for recognition is clearly evident. However, Lear is a stubborn man and must continue to undergo more extreme suffering and be driven past the brink of madness to finally find what exactly the true meaning of life is. In Act 4 Scene 6 lines 104-105, a defeated Lear is finally humbled: "They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie" (Shakespeare 1244). The feel-good aspect of *King Lear* is the fact that Lear does in fact find his meaning of life, and in turn, true happiness. True happiness for Lear as it turns out, manifests itself in the love he has for his faithful daughter Cordelia. This is evident in the play in Act 5, Scene 3, lines 8-19, when Lear and Cordelia are apprehended by Edmund and are about to be sent to jail:

No, no, no! Come, let's away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing I'll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who's in, and who's out;
And take upon's the mystery of things,
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,
In a wall'd prison, packs, and sects of great ones,
That ebb and flow by the moon. (Shakespeare 1250)

In Lear's most delusional, broken down, and pitiful state he gives the most beautiful and humanizing speech of the entire play. Here, right before the play's haunting conclusion, Lear has finally found true happiness. His beautiful words show that as long as he is able to spend time with Cordelia, to be with her and love her, he will be happy, even if that shared time is spent together in the stony walls of an unforgiving prison. These words represent the reversal Lear, the transformation from a proud King who cast out his own daughter to a loving father who wants nothing in the world but to hold his daughter and to be by her side. Lear is now prepared to die a happy man, even though he dies holding Cordelia's dead body in his arms. In fact, he is so delusional and so distraught that he still thinks she is alive. He says in lines 316-317, "Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!" (Shakespeare 1254). I envision Lear dying with a smile on his face, as he has truly found bliss in his final ignorance. It takes suffering of the most

extreme levels to drive a stubborn man like Lear to truly examine himself, to ask himself what the meaning of life is, and then to find it in his final moments on Earth.

Smiley's depiction of the Lear character presents a contrast between the views of suffering in Shakespeare's time and the modern world. Shakespeare presents suffering as a well needed tool, a type of sour medicine that is required to humble the proud and invoke real, drastic changes of character. This viewpoint could have originated in large part to the world at Shakespeare's time being viewed through a primarily Christian lens. At the time, the vast majority of the civilized world was Christian, and Christians viewed suffering in a positive light, as a service performed for the Lord to give him honor and praise. As time has progressed, the world has shifted from this largely unilateral Christian viewpoint. This thought shifting paradigm is presented in Smiley's depiction of Lear/Larry's senseless suffering in *A Thousand Acres*. Smiley presents suffering from more of a secular viewpoint, as a senseless aspect of this world, an aspect devoid of meaning, one that has no ulterior motive or mechanism. However, I believe that when viewed even from a secular viewpoint, Smiley's depiction of suffering through the character Larry, is depressing as well as inaccurate. Suffering is so much more, and is far from meaningless.

Lear is not the only character in the play that is driven to a change of heart and understanding through suffering. This reversal of attitude can also be seen in the characters of Edmund and Albany. Throughout the major sections of the play, Edmund serves as the main villain and he plays the part well because he is so especially evil and cunning. However, in the final scene when Edmund lays dying, he has a change of heart and issues an order to save Cordelia and Lear. Edmund's change of heart may be the result of two factors. Perhaps it was the intense pain of his own death or maybe it was the sight of all the pain around him that evoked empathy in his heart for Cordelia and Lear. Although his order ultimately fails, this small part of the play is very important because it shows that even the most evil character in the play can be driven to redemption through severe personal suffering and through the suffering of others. The same is similar for Albany, who begins the play on the side of the two sisters and Edmund, but as the play progresses and Albany sees all of the destruction brought about by Edmund, Regan, and Goneril, he too, like Edmund, has a change of heart. This displays how the suffering of others, can function in the same as individual suffering. Being witness to suffering evokes empathy and understanding both of which drive one to find meaning. Fultz, Schaller, and Cialdini (1988) noted a similar finding in a study examining the empathy in college students. The study showed that

college students in a controlled environment displayed increased levels of empathy when they observed their peers in a state of suffering. Empathy induced by suffering drove Edmund and Albany to a change of heart, which led to their redemption in the play. Shakespeare uses the characters of Lear, Edmund, and Albany to drive home his theme of redemption. He uses them to illustrate that even the worst of the worst can redeem themselves. The redemption of Edmund and Albany would not have been possible if the characters had not been subject to terrible suffering, which in turn caused them to doubt the meaning of the life they had been living.

The meaning of life is perhaps one of the most clichéd questions that is repeatedly asked in literary works. However, it is important to note that the real answer to this question is very far from cliché. Grady Hugh wrote in *Shakespeare* in 2009 with regard to the topic saying, "Meaning remains an allegory for us a signifier whose signified we have yet to define. But meaning is, precisely, for us to make, in both our present and in our future" (Hugh 159). The answer to the question is far from cliché, and it is far from definite. The answer differs for every individual and is constantly changing throughout his/her life. Therefore, it should be viewed like a puzzle, which constantly requires work to be solved, rather than an answer (Grady). In *King Lear*, Lear, Edmund, and Albany all find their meaning through the same means: suffering and redemption. However, in real life it is up to each individual to find this answer on their own, to experience life's euphoric highs and its spirit-crushing lows. It is up to each person to solve the puzzle of life on their own.

In life few things are either black or white, nearly everything lands somewhere in a gray spectrum. This is also true in *A Thousand Acres*, where I believe that Smiley presents both an inaccurate depiction of suffering through the Larry/Lear character and an accurate depiction of suffering through Rose/Regan. In the play, Regan is presented as an evil woman, with few shred of goodness. During *King Lear*, Regan schemes with her sister Goneril to steal Lear's kingdom and assists her husband Cornwall in tying up Gloucester and plucking out his eyes. Although she is not as evil as her sister, Goneril, in *King Lear*, it is still nearly impossible to any good qualities to Regan. However, in Smiley's novel Rose is a much more complicated character than Shakespeare's Regan. She is realistic, she has lived a life of great suffering both at the hands of cancer and through Larry's sexual abuse. In spite of this, a reader still has a hard time feeling sorry for her, due to her frequently self-serving, pernicious decisions. Rose, like Larry, lives a life full of suffering, and like Larry she is no hero, but the difference between Rose and Larry that makes Rose's story more realistic is that her suffering seemed

to teach her something. On her deathbed, Rose confides to her sister in regard to her father's heinous crimes, "Forgiveness is a reflex for when you can't stand what you know. I resisted that reflex. That's my sole, solitary, lonely accomplishment" (Smiley 356). Rose dies clinging to the fact that she is unafraid and that she never forgave her father. She dies stubbornly, holding onto an unyielding anger straight to the grave. Despite how dark it may sound, Rose found peace in it. I believe this is where Smiley truly depicts real human life. The fact is, suffering doesn't always provide some colossal, life changing epiphany, and sometimes it might not invoke any change at all. Sometimes, all that can be hoped for is to find a sliver, a shred, or any seemingly minuscule scrap of solace that provides peace. Sometimes, like in the case of Rose, that peace can be found in the simple confirmation of a long-held belief.

When I was a kid I fell down a lot. Sure, every young kid falls down. Kids are clumsy, and they are getting used to their bodies; it is nothing unusual. However, my situation seemed to be different. I was constantly stumbling and tripping over my own feet, and it just did not seem to make sense. I was an athletic kid and I excelled in sports. So why did I fall over all the time? It just seemed like I didn't walk quite right. Things started to take a real turn for the worse when my knees began to hurt. Not occasionally, not bumps and bruises, but chronic aches and sharp pains that attacked and pierced as if my joints were sixty years old. When I was in fifth grade, my parents took me to a knee specialist who put me through a gamut of tests. It turned out that my femurs were unnaturally curved, tilted at an odd angle that resulted in an extreme pigeon-toe (an inward turning of the feet): the cause of many twisted ankles and falls. Unfortunately, my hips were also turned at an awkward angle that put enormous stress on my knees. The only real cure was to break both femurs and hips and to realign them. Like most fifth graders I held on to the idealistic and improbable dream of becoming a professional athlete and this news was disappointing. Couple that with the fact that I loved sports more than anything and all that I wanted to do was to fill the shoes of my older brother who was a local sports legend. I found myself completely crushed. Thankfully, my parents refused the procedure. The result was many years of painstaking physical therapy and a handful of other less extreme surgeries down the road. I know I was a fortunate kid. I did not grow up in a place where food was scarce, I had a roof over my head, and I did not suffer a catastrophe on the scale of that of the Indonesian tsunami; however, they were my problems and my suffering all the same. As cliché as it may sound, this suffering really did help me to grow as a person. Suffering induced recognition and reversal in my life in a similar fashion to which it

did the lives of Shakespeare and Smiley's characters. Scholars claim that 'Art imitates life' and in my case and the case of many others, that phrase rings true as I read *Lear* and find myself relating to the tragic king. Much like in Lear's case, suffering gave my life meaning. It showed me what I wanted to do with my life: I wanted to pursue a career as a doctor, one who could devote his life to helping kids who found themselves in the same situation as I did. It helped me realize that my real future in this world was in my head, and that the power of my brain was going to take me much further than the strength of my back or body ever would. Being a cocky teenage athlete made this hard to grasp. Being insanely competitive made it even worse. However, once I fully realized how much further my mental capacities could take me, it made me unbelievably excited for my future. I am not going to say that I solved the grand puzzle of the meaning of life, because to say that as a twenty year old kid is completely ridiculous. However, I can confidently say that my suffering has led me to take a step in the right direction, to at least lay down the first piece to that great big puzzle.

Six years after the tragic Indian Ocean tsunami, a team of professors and scientists led by Asa Roxberg began a project to analyze the emotional well-being and psychiatric state of the survivors of the disaster. The team conducted their work by interviewing the survivors. Some of their findings were about what they expected: all of the survivors still felt a great deal of grief and sadness. Every survivor had lost family members, friends, and nearly all of their possessions. However, mixed into all of the suffering there were, surprisingly, some traces of joy (Roxberg et al.). The survivors said their joy arose from having survived and appreciating what aspects of their lives still remained. The survivors felt pride in the fact that they were able to overcome such a disaster and not be overwhelmed by the grief it caused. The survivors now had a new outlook on life, and a new meaning associated to it. The following quote from a survivor in one of the interviews sums it up very well, "I now try to build a new life. I do not know at all what the substance of this life will be except that it will include human warmth, love and good things" (Roxberg et al. 714). The tsunami inflicted suffering in its most ultimate form on many of its victims. Through that suffering, the survivors were driven to question what the meaning of life truly was. The answers varied among survivors, some said it was family, some said it was friends, some said it was about enjoying life or it was about being kind, while others said religion. The answers vary, but it appears that each survivor has solved the ultimate puzzle of the meaning of life.

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