

# 2009 Q1 Comparative – Theme and Issue |

## Sample Essay

**“Important themes are often expressed in key moments in texts.”**

**Compare how the authors of the comparative texts studied by you used key moments to heighten your awareness of an important theme.**

The three texts that I have studied, that show how key moments are used to heighten the awareness of an important theme are; ‘King Lear’ by William Shakespeare, ‘Room’ by Emma Donoghue and ‘A Winter’s Bone’ directed by Debra Granik. While there are a range of themes which are strikingly relevant across each of the texts, the theme which stood out to me due to its dynamic principles and varying interaction levels was the theme of parenting. In this essay, I will be comparing how key moments from each of three texts heighten the reader’s awareness of this theme.

Essentially, the importance of good parenting lies at the heart of ‘King Lear’ by William Shakespeare. We are immediately introduced to the theme in Act I, scene (i), where we meet Lear and his three daughters Goneril, Regan and Cordelia along with their respective husbands or suitors. We also meet Gloucester and his two sons, Edgar (his legitimate son) and Edmund (his illegitimate son.) Lear attempts to divide his kingdom between his daughters based on the results of his “love test.” Although his kingdom should be divided equally, Lear clearly loves Cordelia (his youngest daughter) more and wants to give her the largest section of his wealth. In return, Lear expects excessive flattery and gushing confessions of love. But instead, Cordelia's reply is honest, “Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave, my heart into my mouth. I love your majesty according to my bond, no more nor less.” Her refusal to indulge her father has disastrous consequences as Lear, against the protests of his loyal servant Kent, banishes her. In my opinion, this is the key moment that brings the theme into focus for the reader. This moment defines the play as we can’t help but wonder, if Lear had listened to Cordelia and Kent, could the tragedy

have been avoided? A parent should always be there for their child, but Lear was far too conceited to realise this.

The importance of a good parent-child relationship is vital in the development of the child and their values as they get older. This is clearly demonstrated by Ma and Jack in 'Room'. The fact that Lear is taken in by Goneril and Regan's false words, indicates that he doesn't know his children very well and their relationship resembles a forced obedience rather than familial love. While Lear is nowhere near the excellent parenting of Ma in 'Room', he certainly could not be compared to Jessop in 'A Winter's Bone.' Unlike Jessop, Lear is a present father figure, even if he is a rather grandiose one. However, when Lear's daughters inevitably reflect his behaviour, he blames it on "filial ingratitude" rather than his own deficient parenting. Gloucester somewhat mirrors Lear's actions in a parallel storyline which also proves to be fatal. Such thoughtless abuse of power as a parent augurs the future of the play and we get a sense that Lear will pay for his rashness. In both cases, the relationship between father and child is destroyed through a lack of awareness and hasty judgment based on emotions. This is the key moment in the play where the theme foreshadows the terrible tragedy that is to come, and the reader is made aware of how important this theme really is. 'Room' by Emma Donoghue, demonstrates just how difficult and complicated parenting can be. Unlike both 'King Lear' and 'A Winter's Bone', the relationship between parent and child is a relatively good one. In my opinion, the key moment that brings the theme into focus, is the first moment. The novel is narrated by five-year-old Jack. However, Jack is not like most children his age. Jack and his mother are prisoners, held captive by a character only referred to as 'Old Nick'. Old Nick kidnapped Ma when she was nineteen years old and she has been living in 'Room' for the past seven years. Ma is everything to Jack as she is the only person he has ever known except for Old Nick, his biological father. The novel opens with Jack declaring 'Today I am five.'" No more than three lines later, he is looking to Ma for affirmation. Once we are made aware of Ma and Jack's situation, we begin to realise that the act of parenting is the one thing that keeps Ma going. Before Jack was born, Ma had lost a child giving birth which contributes to her severe depression or she "Gone" days. He is initially unaware of the "Outside" world, a decision Ma made when he was born. Understandably, Jack is fully dependent on Ma. This is a stark contrast to 'King Lear' but similar to 'A Winter's Bone' where Ree's siblings rely on her completely in the absence of parents. Ma insists that Jack take care of his physical and dental health, something that she neglected before she had him, "For me, see, Jack was everything." It is not until they escape that Ma truly begins to understand the

extent of the grave ordeal that they had both gone through. Dr Clay assures her that Jack is still “plastic” and will eventually forget Room, but Ma must live with the memories forever. Ma’s attempted suicide shows us just how dark her world had gotten and makes us admire her even more for her incredible parenting under the circumstances. With the help of her family and medical professionals she “turns a corner,” but during this time Jack must learn to survive without his mother. He is plunged into the unknown and forced to live with, essentially, two strangers. However, both Ma and Jack work to overcome their demons and are eventually reunited. While Jack would not be alive if it weren’t for Ma, it is entirely comprehensible that Ma would not be alive if Jack had not come along when he did, “I was alive again. I mattered.” Ma’s unwavering determination and love for her child had a significant impact on me, as a reader, and it forced me to draw a personal reflection on the power and influence of parenting, “Scared is what you’re feeling, brave is what you’re doing.”

‘A Winter’s Bone’, directed by Debra Granik, also focuses on the theme of parenting. However, the absence of at least one coherent parent contrasts this text with ‘King Lear’ and ‘Room.’ In this text, seventeen-year-old Ree Dolly is on her own. Family is paramount in the Ozark setting where clan wars rage and drug abuse is rife. Ree clings to the idea that blood is “s’posed to mean somethin’,” a line that she uses to provide her with leverage and immunity against those who wish to harm her, such as the Miltons’. As with ‘King Lear’ and ‘Room’, the theme of parenting is apparent from the opening scene. We witness the arrival of the local sheriff who is there to notify Ree about her father’s impending court trial. Jessop (Ree’s father) is a meth manufacturer and a known associate of the most powerful family in the village, the Miltons’, run by Thump Milton. However, Jessop has not been accounted for since he made bail and the sheriff warns Ree of the consequences if he doesn’t show up to court. Namely, the loss of the family house and land. Personally, I feel that this is the first inkling we get of Ree’s incredible stoicism, the moment that portends her character for the remainder of the film. I certainly would not have been as collected in that situation. A comparison could be drawn here between Ree and Ma in ‘Room’. They both face unimaginable circumstances but remain strong for those dependent on them. Ree assures the sheriff that her father will be in attendance and he leaves, somewhat unconvinced. We get the feeling that this is not the first time Jessop has disappeared, leaving Ree to adopt the role of parent to her younger siblings. While Jessop may provide money and shelter for the family, his lack of fatherly responsibility leaves Ree in charge of a broken household. Her mother is mentally ill and also relies on Ree to look after her. Although Ree is

clearly struggling to search for her father and take care of her siblings, she never wavers and remains adamant that they will keep the family home. When Ree's neighbours offer to take her younger brother, she refuses, offended that anyone should even think about splitting her family up. Ree teaches her siblings survival skills such as hunting, cooking and ultimately how to defend themselves. She goes to extensive lengths to save her family and eventually the Miltons' take pity and come to "fix" her problem. Considering the odds stacked against her, Ree does remarkably well but the fact still remains that she should not have been put into the situation in the first place. She is a child, trying to play the role of both a mother and a father. Unfortunately, such situations are not uncommon in today's world, which I believe makes this text even more thought provoking and makes us acutely aware of just how important the role of a parent is, "Something real wrong was going on."

To conclude, key moments from each of the texts I have mentioned above, have heightened my awareness of the important theme of parenting. 'King Lear' shows us that even a present parent can have difficulty overcoming their own views and values in order to understand their children. While Lear may not have been perfect, he eventually sees the error of his stubborn ways and tries to rectify it. 'Room' demonstrates how a parent can be just as dependent on their child as the child can be on them. 'A Winter's Bone' provides an in depth look at how absent parents can have a considerable impact on the children. The theme of parenting runs through the core of each of the three texts and can be clearly identified through key moments.