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# Jane Smiley's "A Thousand Acres": A Feminist Revision of "King Lear"

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

JANE SMILEY'S "A THOUSAND ACRES": A FEMINIST REVISION OF "KING  
LEAR"

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Diana Lombardic

2014

To: Interim Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Diana Lombardic, and entitled Jane Smiley's "A Thousand Acres": A Feminist Revision of "King Lear", having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Asher Z. Milbauer

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Date of Defense: June 3, 2014

The thesis of Diana Lombardic is approved.

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Interim Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
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Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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by

Diana Lombardic

Florida International University, 2014

Miami, Florida

Professor James Sutton, Major Professor

Jane Smiley retells the tale of "King Lear" through the perspective of one of the evil sisters, in her novel "A Thousand Acres". While the literary canon places William Shakespeare and his plays at the top of the list, I disagree that the canon should denote what is considered "classic" and what would be disregarded. Jane Smiley's novel is not canonized, but why? Her feminist revision of "King Lear" answers why Goneril and Regan were so evil. I argue that "King Lear" (both the text and the play) does not provide the evidence of dysfunction that Smiley's novel exhibits. "A Thousand Acres" opens up questions about gender formation, issues that are misrepresented and occluded in Shakespeare's "King Lear". By bringing the trauma of incest to the forefront of the novel, its reverse emotional structures allow the reader to obtain a new perspective to a complex four-century-old play.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. SMILEY'S REVISION .....	1
II. FIRING THE CANON.....	12
III. THE FARMING OF MEMORY .....	28
IV. LIFE GOES ON.....	65
REFERENCES .....	70

## I. SMILEY'S REVISION

There has been a growing trend in the twentieth century for novelists to refashion canonical texts as a major literary venture. William Faulkner, Hermann Hesse, John Updike, Angela Carter, and among many others have attempted to retell earlier stories and fairytales. All these novelists employed the “mythical method,” a literary term describing the overt challenge those novels pose to earlier tales that have achieved mythic significance (Schiff, 367). For example, Angela Carter uses feminist revision to rewrite fairy tales from the heroine’s point of view. In her novel, the *Bloody Chamber*, she examines adolescent sexuality in classics such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Snow White* (Tuttle, 184). What motivates those and other authors to attempt to manipulate a revered text in a contemporary setting? One relevant reason is to test what happens to the source story with changes in culture and time, especially in regards to gender, race, and class. As people evolve, and our values and ideals become more progressive, we view the literary canon in a different perspective. Reshaping an old story becomes in itself a creative exercise for many writers, but not every modern version will necessarily be successful. John White’s *Mythology in the Modern Novel* suggests that the mythical method must do more than just deliver an interesting contemporary version of the story; at the same time, the revision must make the reader “feel the chosen analogy has enriched his understanding of the primary material” and that “slavish imitation” would be “devoid of surprise and lacking in life.” In recasting, the writer must change his/her outlook, shift the emphasis, and focus on different aspects of the earlier story (White, 108-112).

Respectively, I believe Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*, winner of the 1992 Pulitzer Prize, does an outstanding job retelling *King Lear* (1606), Shakespeare's great

tragedy of family (and natural) strife. Smiley creates a feminist version of *Lear*, providing a voice to the maligned heroines, Goneril and Regan. In an interview soon after the release of her novel, Smiley explained that her creative reimaging was the result of a significant failure within Shakespeare's text. "I'd always felt the way *Lear* was presented to me was wrong. Without being able to articulate why, I thought Goneril and Regan got the short end of the stick. There had to be some reason his daughters were so angry. Shakespeare would attribute their anger to their evil natures, but I don't think people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century think evil exists without a cause. I knew where that anger came from..." (Anderson, 3). Jane Smiley retells *King Lear* so that it awakens contemporary issues, like gender roles.

Smiley's revision of *Lear* is certainly not the first such effort. Other writers, early and late, have felt compelled to adapt *King Lear*, finding something in the play that required re-working. Famously, Nahum Tate in 1681 found the ending of Shakespeare's play unacceptable, altering the text such that both Cordelia and King Lear actually survive. Much more recently, Edward Bond (1971) wrote his revision with a bigger political message, particularly in regards to socialism; and in Akira Kurosawa's 1985 film, *Ran*, the major roles are re-ascribed to sons and the evil deflected to an ambitious and cruel daughter-in-law. Smiley is not the first to re-imagine *King Lear*, but she is the first to re-frame the story from the perspective of Goneril and Regan, thereby crafting what I term a "feminist" *Lear*.

Moreover, the Shakespearean text itself is understood to be notoriously unstable. Many disputes still exist about the early versions of the play, especially between the quarto versus the folio texts (Schiff, 399). *The Division of the Kingdom: Shakespeare's*



*Two Versions of King Lear* examines the Quarto of 1608 and the First Folio of 1623. Since the 18th century, editors have fused these two documents to produce a third, composite text that forms the basis of all modern productions and critical interpretations. Recently scholars have begun to challenge this editorial tradition, arguing that the Quarto and Folio texts represent distinct and coherent versions of the play that should not be combined. The essays in *Division of the Kingdom*, written by an international team of scholars, re-examine the early texts from a series of distinct but interlocking perspectives, in wide-ranging discussions with profound implications for all readers of Shakespeare. More specifically, Randall McLeod critiques in his essay within the *Division of the Kingdom*, “Gon. No more, the text is foolish,” the difference between editorial commentary and typos between the folio and quarto texts. McLeod asserts, “Fraught with both the dead and living weight of textual tradition, we need to ask rigorously how and what we read- I mean *exactly*” (Taylor and Warren, 188). Editors have the power of authorial revision to improve Shakespeare’s text based on their taste and motives. First of all, Goneril’s name is spelled differently in the two versions: “Gonorill” in the Quarto and “Gonerill” in the Folio. Furthermore, how the editor changes the language and the use of the word alters the perception of the character. The quarto and the folio differ when it comes to assigning roles of speech for each sister. In the quarto, Gonorill snaps back at Cordelia: “Prescribe not us our duties?” (1.1.285). However, in the folio, Regan says that line with minor alterations, “Prescribe not us our dutie.” The quarto enhances Gonorill’s aggression, while in the folio, Regan is assertive and Gonerill sits back and delivers a long impersonal speech. The contrast in characterization leads to speculation as to what language is appropriate for each sister (Taylor and Warren, 166). All of these

facts- the play's own instability, its "canonicity," and its familiarity due to frequent performance and re-imagining- open up the space for Smiley's novel.

Thus, in my thesis I argue that *King Lear* (as both the text and the performance) fails to provide the evidence of dysfunction that Smiley's novel manifestly exhibits. Told from a female perspective, *A Thousand Acres* opens up multiple questions about gender formation, and issues that are either misrepresented or occluded in Shakespeare's play. The significance in comparing the play and the novel is twofold. First, the reader will understand female character motivation that was left unexplained from the play. Secondly, the novel expands on contemporary issues, like gender bias, that *King Lear* could not address.

Thus, the novel answers many questions that a contemporary reader entertains after finishing *King Lear*. A highly psychological and abstract play, *King Lear* focuses on an elderly male guilty of reckless and impetuous decisions. The shock of his daughters' plot to divide his kingdom and kill him heightens the conflict, but their motives are never thoroughly explained. Yet many declare the play one of Shakespeare's greatest works. English literary critic William Hazlitt writes, "To attempt to give a description of the play itself or of its effect upon the mind, is mere impertinence: yet we must say something. It is then the best of all Shakespeare's plays, for it is the one in which he was the most in earnest. He was here fairly caught in the web of his own imagination" (*Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, 108). Imagination is a fitting word to describe the author's creation of *King Lear* and its title character. Lear is a complex character who has the audience's pity despite rash haste, violent impetuosity, blindness to everything but the dictates of his own passions or affections. However, because my interest lies with Goneril

and Regan, not Lear, I must challenge the automatic surrender to Shakespearean pieties, such as “imagination” or “genius.” Such terms, as used by Hazlitt and other critics, apply to the tragic hero, not his tormented daughters. Because of my focus on the female agents, I must insist that the play leaves something unsaid, and that secret, exposed and explored in Smiley’s novel, involves the worst sort of paternal malfeasance, Lear’s (prior) predatory sexual attacks upon his daughters.

One fundamental problem with the play is its adherence to patriarchal norms and traditional father-daughter relationships. Smiley herself remarks, “The battle between fathers and sons has to do with the exclusion of sons from the world of men. It’s a matter of power. Once they’re let in, the battle is over. But when daughters are really angry, and have a good reason to be angry, they, in a lot of ways, can never be included. For daughters who have been abused, there is a kind of irreconcilability that is much more radical than anything the sons could ever come up with” (Anderson, 3). Smiley uncovers here how social structure maintains and preserves patriarchy through the violent exclusion of, or casting out of daughters. Patriarchy is not only employed to keep control of the household, but its adoption or formation provides an excuse for paternal physical and mental abuse of daughters. Many of Shakespeare’s plays, especially his comedies, are founded upon this dynamic, and, in the comedies, transcended. But in *Lear*, in particular, the harsh realities of the father-daughter relationship are explored tragically, transplanting laughter and marriage. Nevertheless, because it focuses and sympathizes with Lear, the play leaves Goneril and Regan more than dead; they are also hated as unsympathetic harsh “bitches” who get what they deserved. Patriarchy is thereby preserved.

Because it reverses these trajectories, *A Thousand Acres* shows Goneril and Regan in a much different light. By centering upon incest as the dramatic and literal trauma, Smiley confronts the secret that was not obviously spoken in *King Lear*. Marina Leslie suggests in her work, "Incest, Incorporation, and *King Lear* in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*," that incest should not be confused with an expression of love, "but as a brute exercise of power and control" (Leslie, 34). In my thesis, I will push Leslie's insight further by examining if there is any shame or guilt within Smiley's Larry or Shakespeare's Lear. Both characters exhibit a primitive social response to shame when they divide their land. Understood as a part of their identity, when the father divides his land between daughters, he exposes his vulnerability. In order to compensate, both fathers also try to shame their daughters. Larry Cook calls Ginny a "barren whore" (181) mirroring Lear's degradation of Goneril:

We'll no more meet, no more see one another:  
But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter;  
Or rather a disease that's in my flesh,  
Which I must needs call mine: thou art a boil,  
A plague-sore, an embossed carbuncle,  
In my corrupted blood. (2.4.29)

In Act II, Lear refers to Goneril like a disease, a sore that festers upon his flesh. It is even fitting to assume it can be a sexual reference to her promiscuity, considering her name sounds very similar to *gonorrhoea*. After such menacing words, the reader cannot witness any sentiments of remorse from Lear. Any feeling of guilt Lear may have had was mainly directed towards Cordelia. Does Larry Cook feel shame or guilt about his nocturnal visits into his daughters' bedrooms? If he cannot recollect his actions, what is there to feel

shameful about? Does Lear care about (possible) prior predatory actions? Does his later “repentance” (Act IV) indicate any softening toward Goneril and Regan?

Within Shakespeare’s work, Lear loses his control when he negotiates the generational exchange of property. Consequently, the patriarch descends into madness as the elder daughters gain some of the power their father once had. Rapidly, the father becomes the child and his daughters become the parents (Schiff, 400). The intimate connection between humans and land date back to Genesis as a cycle, where humans were created from the land, made to exist to take care of it, and then eventually absorbed back into the Earth (Schiff, 400). Furthermore, there is a need for a “harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle or gratification” (Kolodny, 4). Thus in dividing the kingdom between his two “faithful” daughters, Lear simultaneously abases himself before both land and offspring.

Instead of a kingdom, Smiley sets her novel on a farm to convey more clearly for our time that the feminine has been abused and mistreated, using the land as a metaphor for the female body. Men have controlled the farm, possessed it, violated it, and exploited it for decades. Larry Cook’s treatment of his land parallels the treatment of his daughters. He gradually accumulates his neighbor’s land, plowing it over and making it his own, just as he forcefully creeps into his daughters’ bedrooms to molest them in the middle of the night, plowing them in the most frightful manner imaginable. Both actions—the rape of the land and the rape of his daughters—spring from his desire to control and possess. His daughters are coterminous with his land, except for the youngest Caroline, who escapes his incestual advances, and escapes the farm, demonstrating that her life was the least

controlled by Larry Cook. Caroline's life in *A Thousand Acres* differs greatly from the doomed Cordelia in *King Lear*, who dies an unjust death. Yet, both characters are "free" to make their own voices heard.

Because gender roles, sexuality, and female identity are key issues to be explored within both texts, my theoretical approach will necessarily employ a feminist (and partly psychoanalytic) lens. I will use philosophers and theorists such as Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, and Toril Moi for their insights on the [mis]representation of women and their "otherness." After centuries of male dominance, women's self identities are being reimagined as culturally constructed and beyond the dictates of biological destiny. As Simone de Beauvoir states, "one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one" (11). The effort for a woman to identify herself without first identifying her gender is difficult. Men have the privilege of being able to define their selves without emphasizing their "maleness." Yet man has long defined the "eternal feminine" and a woman learns her role in culture and circumstance through the construction of civilization (de Beauvoir, 13).

During Shakespeare's era, feminism was not yet an idea or concept open to exploration and critique. Despite writing an array of roles for his female characters, we can't really call Shakespeare a feminist. Nevertheless, it is instructive to apply feminist theory to his works, since many of his leading women were unconventional themselves. The uncanny humor in having men play women (who might also have to play men) must be taken into account when they are given power, a characteristic not normally connected to femininity. In particular, such questions about the inversion in *King Lear* are particularly resonant, especially in considering the relationships of Goneril, Regan, their

father, and even their husbands. Goneril and Regan take on masculine characteristics while Lear chides himself for showing feminine vulnerability. On the other hand, *A Thousand Acres* conveys the sisters Ginny and Rose as passive women struggling to fit in amongst a group of men who make life changing decisions for the future of their farm. Their situations in the novel force them to be confined to the roles of daughter, farm wife, and/or mother—they are effectively, territorial “pieces” to be possessed, and thereby never seem to gain the agency of Goneril and Regan.

The history of women’s oppression, according to feminist theory, stem from patriarchy. Even in marriage, the woman is a symbol or sign for the reproduction of the last name and the commingling-intercourse-of two families. Butler explains, “Patrilineality is secured through the ritualistic expulsion of women and, reciprocally, the ritualistic importation of women” (53). In relation to the family structure, in both the contemporary novel and in Shakespeare’s play, there is the crucial absence of a mother figure; she has been “erased,” or is in the process of being forgotten. Larry Cook’s wife is occasionally recalled in *A Thousand Acres*, but Lear’s wife is not mentioned at all in *King Lear*. Thus, we might say that female-authored texts use memory to change the present. “Feminism is a re-remembering, a re-assembling of our lost past and lost parts of ourselves. We search for our mother’s gardens...we search for our mothers...”(Greene, 300). *A Thousand Acres* is told from Ginny’s perspective, and incorporates her recollections of the past, so the reader is called upon to value female memory. “Memory is especially important to anyone who cares about change, for forgetting dooms us to repetition...” (Greene, 291). Smiley fills in the gaps of the family history by recalling the death of the mother, describing her as a typical farm wife who secretly rebelled against the repressive

environment of the Iowa farm, which her daughters are now enduring. Her literal absence is countered by her metaphorical presence; Ginny's act of remembering provides hope for the future of Ginny and Rose, and even her granddaughters, Pam and Linda.

However, the ending of the novel is left unresolved. Although Smiley's novel does not conclude with the same amount of bloodshed as *Lear*, it is far from optimistic for both the men and women. *King Lear*'s ending continues to draw controversy in regards to Cordelia's death. "Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of reader, and to the faith of the chronicles" (Johnson, 296). Many readers and viewers of the play would have preferred to see Cordelia prevail over the enemies of the kingdom and enjoy several more years of happiness with her father—see Nahum Tate. On the other hand, most have seen the death of Goneril and Regan as a fitting and judicious conclusion for two malicious women who have even betrayed each other. However, in Smiley's novel, things wrap up a bit differently. Caroline does not die, but she merely disappears from the narrative. Rose passes away from cancer, and not the poison sausages Ginny prepared for her out of a jealous revenge. Most importantly, Ginny is given a second chance, which is not often seen in a tragedy. Ginny is able to leave her Iowa farm life behind her and attempt to create a new identity on her own, in the city of St. Paul.

Although I will analyze *A Thousand Acres* and compare it to *King Lear*, I cannot quite call Smiley's revision "Goneril's story," even though Smiley remains faithful to the play. Ginny becomes her own unique identity, akin to, yet separate from, Shakespeare's tragic heroine. Ginny's experiences with life are completely separate from Goneril. By writing *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley gives voice to Ginny, and thereby participates in the



feminist project. “For feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster political visibility of women” (Butler, 2). Ginny’s nostalgia will always leave her a victim of paternal abuse, yet her ability to share her story will mark her as a survivor.

## II. FIRING THE CANON

Before diving into Smiley's novel and Shakespeare's play, I want to investigate the term "literary canon." What is literature? Who determines and judges works of fiction to be considered of such cultural significance that will be studied in school for centuries? How is it that some works are judged masterpieces while others are judged transitory and soon discarded or forgotten? Such questions, central to the concept of "canon formation," are crucial to this thesis, which investigates and compares a "masterpiece" with an acclaimed contemporary novel whose canonical place has yet to be determined.

The literary canon is a guide, for those lost at sea amongst thousands—hundreds of thousands—of literary works and accomplishments. Historically, the Romans and Greeks used the term "canon" to signify acts or works as a standard rule of excellence (Komara, 232). In Greek, *kanon* is defined as a "rule" or "measure," thus giving it an authoritative quality. However, in accordance with the Christian church, *canon* came to refer to sacred writings (Komara, 232). David Ruhnken, a Dutch scholar who studied Greek grammar in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, began using the term *canones* when speaking of orators and poets (Patey, 17). Interestingly enough, he applied the term to a "selective" group of writings by secular authors, in complete opposition to the ecclesial idea of a *canon* (Komara, 232). Ruhnken popularized the term and suggested a norm that would blend well with authority. Ruhnken's idea of the canon has remained current for centuries, consequently igniting misunderstandings and debates about canonicity (Komara, 234). Wendell Harris, author of *Canonicity*, explains, "A more nearly precise word than *selection* was so much needed that *canon* quickly became almost

indispensable, despite its entanglement with concepts of authority and rule not necessarily relevant to literary canons. Not surprisingly, the normative sense of the term has clung alongside its elective sense: selections suggest norms, and norms suggest an appeal to some sort of authority. However, the criteria for selecting literary texts are derived not from authority, but from chosen functions” (110). Thus, the question really is, what are the functions and uses of literature-what do we want it to “do,” what do we expect of it? Does *King Lear* perform a task or answer a question that Smiley’s novel fails to address? Alternatively, does *A Thousand Acres* show us something that Shakespeare’s tragedy obscures? Our answers to questions like these will determine what worth we give to the two texts, how we “place” them or select them for so-called “canonicity”.

Another of the most frequent citations on the literary canon comes from Ernst Robert Curtius’s *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Curtius considers how some works can be regarded as *classic*. It’s a delicate question to ask: what is a classic? Or, how does a “classic” come to be? French literary critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (1804-1869), states that admiration and authority craft and fashion a classic. “The word *classic* was particularly first used by the Romans. With them not all the citizens of the different classes were properly called *classici*, but only those of the chief class, those who possessed an income of certain fixed sum...the word *classicus* was used in a figurative sense by Aulus Gellius, and applied to writers: a writer of worth and distinction” (2). But again, we are back in the same indeterminate space. Who “admires” a work, and why? What is that “admiration” and supposed “authority” based upon? These questions suggest that determining a “classic” is based on external judgments and power

structures, not true, or real, internal/inherent value within the text. Might a work be “classic” or “canonical” simply because, language, an emperor or monarch, or rich patron deemed it so?

Sainte-Beuve goes on to illustrate that the rise and fall of literature, was based upon such judgments by authorities from the middle ages to the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, in various countries on what is deemed classical. Thus, France, Italy, and Spain each had their own impressive lists of literary wealth, such as the medieval chansons, Montagne, Voltaire, Pascale in France; Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch in Italy; the Cid-author and Cervantes in Spain. England of course followed suit: Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton. If something, the 18<sup>th</sup> century only strengthened these ideas and standards of what was deemed classic canonical literature in each national spectrum. Definitions of what was considered a classic set strict restrictions on literature, defining the classical authors as those “who have become models in any language whatever” (Sainte-Beuve, 6).

The idea of “fine” literature did not actually exist for many centuries; this category was a recent development really taking hold in the 18<sup>th</sup> century European cultural centers. Foucault explains “literature” as an idea born from extreme changes in structure of authority, education, and knowledge, so that by the nineteenth century, society was able to engage in the “pure act of writing,” in the process becoming the independent “form of language that we now call ‘literature’.” (300). Therefore, in just the past 200-300 years, literature has changed from being a didactic instrument to an “autonomous creation” (Ross, 397).

Thus, within the humanist culture that now exists, literature has become aesthetic and the consumer (reader) is the one who primarily benefits and becomes “humanized

and liberally educated” (344). There is less focus on production, invention, and writing, but rather a new emphasis upon consumption, reception, and reading. Before the eighteenth century, the reception of the reader was barely considered, if considered at all. Only the wealthy were literate, and therefore *literature* meant being able to read the letters on the page and not produce an imaginative play or poem.

David Patey explains further that social and political dispositions in the late eighteenth century proposed revisions in the canon. Some critics argue for elitist rankings of literary works. Either way, criticism of “literary art” and “imaginative literature” dominated the Romantic period. “The redefinition [of literature] was itself part of a larger intellectual shift, that remarkable transformation in concepts of art which yielded up, in the mid-eighteenth century, the new notion of the “aesthetic” (18).

As an author, successfully entering the canon represents a personal achievement of status and increased accessibility to readers. Literary works included within various anthologies are “guaranteed” to be of a high aesthetic quality. The canon claims to promise its readers that all works of art are so-deemed a privilege to read and experience. Such efforts are self-fulfilling and self-sustaining. Anthologies and lists practically place pressure on the readers to enjoy the works and ultimately agree that they rightfully belong on the list of classic literature. This routine is particularly evident in schools and universities. They are great books, because they are “great,” and you will agree to their greatness. “We read once you have read them;” so runs the logic of the canon as proposed and reinforced in the schools. Harris adds “vernacular literature did not enter the university curriculum until the nineteenth century. English became a school at Oxford only in 1893...and a major at most American universities still later...” (Harris, 113-114)

In regards to the classroom, the textbook and the curriculum are strictly limited to the amount of authors chosen to be taught. What authors or poets still hold the reader's interest from the preceding years? What authors in the textbook/anthology are the teachers most comfortable with; and what are the imperatives placed upon their teachings by principals, parents, school boards, and other authorities? In regards to Shakespeare, why are teachers still lecturing on him, despite the overall attitude of hesitation among students? Anthologists come up with the term "academic recirculation." Shakespeare, as well as many other writers, have been easily available in print and will continually be used because of their accessibility and their "authority." "...What is easily available in print tends to be what is being taught and written about; what is written about tends to be what one is teaching or others are writing about" (Harris, 114). The canon thus provides its teachers and students with lists of literary works that they should appreciate. The problem arises when the student does not understand the significance of the classic, the teacher feels unprepared to teach it, or it does not necessarily have appeal to either students or teachers. Such problems are often encountered in the forced teaching of Shakespeare in American classrooms everywhere.

As a novel reader, the canon limits the opportunities to read beyond the accredited and approved list. Some authors enter and some leave the canon as time progresses and attitudes shift as to what is considered relevant. But in fact, such changes are slow, small, and imperceptible. Canonizing authors immortalizes their work and frames it so the reader views it as an aesthetic piece. Thus, once in the canon, often always in the canon. The canon is exclusive, and thrusts most authors into the dark with other literary works

that have been unnoticed. “The member of the canon, gains an intensification not only from its segregation but also from the fact that residing in comparative isolation, it gains splendor, a glory often based on false notions of uniqueness” (Landow, 6). It is interesting that Landow describes those authors excluded from the canon as “exiled” or “excommunicated.” He thereby compares the Church to the canon, a perfect analogy, in fact, considering it was the Church who first created a canon of biblical texts. Being excommunicated means being unable to participate in sacramental life and having little or no communication with others. “Likewise, one of the most serious results of not belonging to the canon is that these works do not communicate with each other...any links between the un-canonical work and the canonical tend not to be noticed” (Landow, 7).

The connection between colonization and canonization is also significant. France, Germany, and England birthed many prestigious writers and works of literature, and they were also the super powers of imperialism. As the centers of empires, they colonized other countries and continents, and as global power spread, so too did the cachet of the imperial literature. How else to explain the importance of Shakespeare, for example, in America, Canada, Australia New Zealand, India, South Africa, and England? Colonization and canonization went hand-in-hand, and so too, as an effect, did the possible oblivion of those authors and texts from the colonized lands. To put it simply, what can American literature show to counter Shakespeare? The connection between colonization and canonization is suggested by Landow, who writes, “The great author is great because he (occasionally even she) has managed to convey an authentic vision of life” (Landow, 10). “Authenticity” becomes another colonizing tool. It is difficult to

argue against the canon, because even being anti-canon is some form of conformity. Instead, many critics might agree that it is more important to question and continue discussion and debate over the credibility of the literary works that enter and leave canon.

The canon will always be controversial because it is represented as the ultimate elite status of literary work. Harold Bloom is the Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University. In 1994, he published his own personal canon, entitled *The Western Canon: Books and Schools of the Ages*. His criteria for the list of preferred works include “originality, narrative power, ‘strangeness,’ and what he calls, ‘exuberance of diction’” (JBHE, 24). He cites the obvious: Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens...Joyce, Kafka, and Milton. There are over 1,500 titles and he groups them into four categories: the Theocratic Age, the Aristocratic Age, the Democratic Age, and the Chaotic Age. Three-fourths of the books on his list have stood the test of time, while others are potential candidates to be canonized.

The authors in Bloom’s canon are nearly all of European descent, along with a handful of American authors. However, the list encompasses almost exclusively all white dead males. Specifically, only one black writer has made it into Bloom’s canon: Frederick Douglas, for his work the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas an American Slave*. However, Bloom does list many authors of color and women, in his section on the Chaotic Age. Here, we find a canonical prophecy, a category of authors who *might* be good enough to have an opportunity to be in the canon, but each will have to “fight their way into the canon” (JBHE, 25). Bloom does not put much effort into defending any of these writers; they are after-thoughts, a gang of poseurs- all clamoring for recognition and acceptance. His personal preference for dead European male writers



is also dismissive of any theory or new form of criticism. Bloom has even created a “School of Resentment” built upon the theories of feminism, deconstruction, Marxism, new historicism, Lacanian theory, and semioticism (JBHE, 25). He scoffs at these theories and the idea of studying literature as a cultural phenomenon, “produced by sociopolitical urgencies. In this view, Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare- his plays were written by the social, political, and economic energies of his age. But so was everything else, then and now, because certain more or less recent Parisian speculators have convinced many (if not most) academic critics that there are no authors anyway” (Bloom, 16).

Bloom does not really want the reader to find the meaning of Shakespeare, as he feels it is equivalent to trying to find the meaning of life. He does not appreciate theories, such as Freud “reducing his personages to their supposed pathologies or family romances” (Bloom, 730). Bloom even dismisses Shakespeare on film, only praising “classics” like Ralph Richardson’s Falstaff. Actors simply cannot portray the complex character of Shakespeare effectively, and the audience will lose the sensation of the character. For Bloom, Shakespeare’s plays are quasi-divine in their power, and such divinity is *entirely* textual, that is, “scriptural.”

I do not want to argue, or even insinuate that Harold Bloom is a sub-par critic, completely biased by his devotion to *Bardolatry*, an excessive admiration of William Shakespeare. He certainly is a brilliant professor with an “impassioned defense of things that scarcely need defending” (Danson, 114). Bloom has valuable insights and observations. “Shakespeare’s plays are the wheel of all our lives, and teach us whether we are fools of time, or of love, or of fortune...” (Shapiro, 2). That is a beautifully

written statement expressing the notion that Shakespeare's literary works transcend time and are universal. Shakespeare might not have been revered in his lifetime, but he is certainly praised today.

Bloom's even more prominent work, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, suggests that Shakespeare invented human personalities through his characters. Bloom does not care for plot, politics, or action, instead he values characters who "take human nature to some of its limits, without violating those limits" and through whom "new modes of consciousness come into being." Bloom praises Shakespeare with such reverence; he claims that Shakespeare himself is the center of the literary canon. Even Shakespeare's great rival, Ben Jonson praised him as a writer "not of an age, but of all time" (Shapiro, 1).

A lofty 745 pages compiles Bloom's collection of Shakespearean essays. With passion and defense, he leads his readers through a comprehensive reading of each of Shakespeare's plays. Bloom's main argument is that prior to Shakespeare, there was characterization, but post-Shakespeare, we have developed into characters-complex, flawed humans capable of change. Bloom does not even engage in the conversation that Homer, Sophocles, or Virgil might have contributed to the development of such "personality" effects. Bloom goes to great length to protect Shakespeare from any outside influences. He dismisses other contemporary writers like Thomas Kyd, calling his *Spanish Tragedy*, "hideously written and silly," and listing John Webster, George Chapman, Thomas Middleton, and Ben Jonson as second class writers (Shapiro, 2). Bloom argues that no other writer can rival Shakespeare's creation of personality, and Bloom's idea of the invention of the human lies in the characters of the play. "The

dominant Shakespearean characters-Falstaff, Hamlet, Rosalind, Iago, Lear, MacBeth, Cleopatra, among them-are extraordinary instances not only of how meaning gets started, rather than repeated, but also of how modes of consciousness come into being” (Bloom, xvii).

Yet to say that Shakespeare invented the human *is* an overstated thesis. Readers and critics reinvent Shakespeare in their own image and in every age. When feminist critics read Shakespeare, many cannot help but notice male domination and feminine conflict, an attitude fitting for 16<sup>th</sup> century English society. Prominent 20th century feminist writer Virginia Woolf hypothesized Shakespeare having a sister and the possibility of her becoming a playwright like her revered older brother. While any historian can say the chances of that would be slim to none, today women have a stronger voice than ever before. “In her way, Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, was establishing the basic notion followed ever since by feminist literary critics: that the driving force in much of our literature is sexual identity and conflict” (Bernstein, 2). And, when our “old” literature inadequately addresses or exposes such issues, new texts might be needed to do so. *King Lear* is great, but it does not answer Woolf's question, our question, my question. Its canonicity blinds it to these issues: enter *A Thousand Acres*.

I believe Smiley replaces the tragedy found in *King Lear* with the trauma of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her novel illustrates the Cook family at the center of a thousand acre farming cooperative in Iowa. The perverse patriarch is Larry Cook, a farmer and manipulative businessman. His daughters, Rose and the narrator Ginny, live next door with their husbands, Pete and Ty. Caroline Cook, the youngest daughter, has escaped existence as a farmer's wife to become a lawyer. In parallel fashion to *Lear*, Larry

decides to rescind his ownership of the land and form a corporation of his farm holdings. He divides the land into thirds for each of his daughters. Rose and Ginny agree with his plan, while Caroline remains hesitant- “I don’t know” (19). The plot unfolds as Larry harshly reacts: “You don’t want it, my girl, you’re out. It’s as simple as that” (21). His tyrannical nature combined with a steady influence of alcohol, lead to the shocking and epic peril of the novel as the characters reveal their true selves, and the hidden dark secret of their family.

What’s so profound about *A Thousand Acres* is how Smiley tackles human nature and moral responsibility, particularly in family relationships. The overwhelming authority of the patriarch, especially in the isolated and insular farming community, clashes with resentment from paternal betrayal. Larry succumbs to an abusive madness when his daughters begin to take control over his well-being.

Focusing the narrative from Ginny’s viewpoint can be considered a feminist reading of *Lear*. Furthermore, recounting the family history through Ginny’s eyes makes *A Thousand Acres* a powerful tale of inequality, and of victimhood. Smiley wants to explain how tyranny goes undiscovered in *Lear*.

Whereas in *Measure for Measure*, fairness won out, and the hypocritical tyrant was revealed and punished, in *King Lear*, tyranny went unexplored. In fact, tyranny seemed to be embraced, and for no reason that I could discern. Was I supposed to pity Lear because he was a father? Because he was the king? Because he was foolish and/or senile? In *Measure for Measure*, the female characters were appealing in their intelligence; I didn’t understand the female characters in *King Lear* at all. So I set about correcting my friend William Shakespeare—something no sane adult would attempt. I gave the royal family a background and a milieu. I gave the daughters a rationale for their apparently cruel behavior...(Ayres, 150).

Like Lear, Larry's increasingly unstable mind exacerbates Rose's anger. "Daddy thinks history starts fresh every day, every minute, that time itself begins with feelings he's having right now. That's how he keeps betraying us, still right here in this room until there's true remorse. Nothing will be right until there's that" (Smiley, 216). However, Ginny's attitude throughout the novel is hesitant. She wants to keep the peace within the family, but the five miscarriages she has suffered stand "as a metaphor for her inability to create a new life out of the broken, battered remains of her own" (Allan, 11). Smiley concludes her novel, not in the same tragic manner as in *Lear*, but traumatic and desperate nonetheless. Jealousy and despair take over the last quarter of the novel as Ginny becomes heartbroken over the triangular love affair between her, her sister, and Jess Clark. The struggle for all characters is to keep up appearances in the farming community. This may be the same cause of Lear's inability to break his barrier against self-awareness.

In critiquing Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, I am concerned with the lack of canon-worthy consideration a feminist revision of *King Lear* receives- or more accurately, does not receive. Before embarking upon my analysis of Smiley, however, I believe it necessary to establish my position about Shakespeare and the feminine. Fundamentally, my preference for Smiley is not due to the fact that, as a female novelist, she is more genuine or more perfect in her feminisms- her novel is simply open to a form of critique that I feel Shakespeare's play cannot really withstand.

Shakespeare is neither an arch-feminist nor an old guard defender of the absolute patriarchy. He is simply a highly creative author bound to his period and its thinking about gender and sexuality. Thus, although it is extremely easy to dismiss him and his

Renaissance culture as misogynistic, this would not be very productive. In every history class, we are taught that the prominent power within 16th century European nations was a white male (but then, what about Queen Elizabeth?). True, most women were meant to wed and bear children by their teenage years, and disrupting the social structure could result in public punishment and shaming. The education of women was not highly advocated, and so many lacked literacy. Unable to express their ideologies and values, unless they were the Queen or some other highly positioned elite woman, Shakespeare is left to narrate his female characters from a male point of view; moreover, all the roles of women in his plays were taken by men or young boys on his stage. True, many feminist critics have relished the opportunity to rip his text apart and convey what they perceive as female gender suppression in his plays. In many of his tragedies, Shakespeare's women struggle with finding a voice, being open with their sexuality, and dealing with feminine hysteria. For example, in *Hamlet*, Ophelia has no voice. She tells her father, "My Lord, I do not know what to think," and her repressed consciousness leads to her madness (Freitas, 1). I cannot claim, however, that Shakespeare was sexist or anti-feminist, because his female characters in his comedies prove to be witty and clever, and Cleopatra is a fabulous tragic heroine.

However, I can argue that writing in a society that honored and represented a patriarchal structure, did hinder the presence and representation of women in his plays. Martha Nussbaum, writing about *prism gender*, explains that as "a prominent assumption...is that the male head of household is a beneficent altruist who adequately represents the interest of all his family members, and can be relied to distribute resources fairly" (189). She believes that "any question which challenges deeply rooted habits

seems threatening, especially when the challenge is to entrenched structures of power" (190). The family structure is a prominent power in Shakespeare's plays, and particularly in *King Lear*. However, Shakespeare writes only in his cultural context. The idea of feminism was not a consideration, and placing a patriarchal figure at the center of the family was (and possibly still is) common place. Culturally, Shakespeare is locked into a society reinforcing a cultural ideology invested in subordinating women. McCluskie points out, "Feminism cannot simply take 'the woman's part' when that part has been so morally loaded and theatrically circumscribed" (McEachern, 270).

The text is then more of a mirror of the cultural process. Shakespeare understands the pressure that patriarchy exerts upon its members, and he uses that influence to construct his plays and comment on the patriarchal systems, remarking on the price paid by men and women alike. Part of criticizing patriarchy is creating characters that rebel against the archetypes he inherits. Shakespeare wants to question the origin of power within the patriarchal structure. "In revising his sources he recasts and demystifies the role of the father, and, mimicking the action he presents, Shakespeare, in the rebellious but also revisionary act of rewriting, questions the power of fathers, a power that demands replication for the perpetuation of the patriarchal system" (McEachern, 272). Particularly in a father-daughter relationship, patriarchy is the prominent issue of a woman's relationship to her father. Marriage, specifically, is one event in a woman's life that may be difficult for a father, especially if he lacks a wife. The father must step aside from being the focal point, and stand in the periphery watching another man take his place. Either way, women are the center of transactions and men are either giving or taking them based on exogamous values. "A daughter's departure through marriage

marks the end of paternal control, although a control persists in the father's choice of his daughter's husband...exogamy creates a political order among men..." (McEachern, 273).

Similarly, kings are easily compared to fathers "for a king is truly *parens patriae*, the politic father of his people" (Kahn,12). In terms of marriage, daughters forge a political bond while sacrificing the integrity of the family. Patriarchy demands contradictions, because the father has to let go of one authority to hold onto another, so that a greater social order is maybe constituted. Shakespeare explores this contradiction by "focusing on movements of intersection of political and familial loyalties" (McEachern, 273). A daughter's departure into matrimony is a sensitive and emotional event for a father, and particularly in Shakespearean plays, it disrupts the bond between them. An excellent example is when Desdemona departs from her father in *Othello*: "Father, I perceive here a divided duty" (1.3.2). Another fine example is found at the beginning of *King Lear*, when Cordelia leaves Lear; and he is conflicted within the bifurcated structure of patriarchy. He feels a strong allegiance to his politics, while his daughter violates the integrity of the family to forge other political bonds. "Shakespeare's modifications of his sources foreground both the emotional complexity of the family order and the price at which ideological coherence is acquired" (McEachern, 274).

In the opening scene of *King Lear*, Lear is threatened by two problems. The political problem concerns the disintegration of England; and the social issue revolves around how his daughters' marriages might end his authority over his family. The dowry division between his daughters, although a public and formal way to renounce power, was more an informal attempt to preserve his authority. The humiliating scene of Cordelia's banishment was caused by a personal pressure, since her marriage would have



signified the end of his empire. So asking his daughters, “Which of you we say doth love us most,/That we our largest bounty may extend/Where nature doth merit challenge?” (1.1.51-53), is, in fact, his last attempt to control and constrain Cordelia. This scene is not about finding a husband for his youngest daughter, but about his acceptance of a dowry that will “relinquish Cordelia as he parts with his lesser possessions, and perhaps the loss...will be less to him among the loss of all” (McEachern, 284). As king, it is his duty to marry off his daughter to that “lord whose hand must take [her] plight” from him (1.1.101). But even the choice of suitor for Cordelia is planned, as Lear already has two son-in-laws, both occupying significant extremities of his kingdom. He refers to them as “our son of Cornwall/...our no less loving son of Albany” (1.1.41-42). When the duke of France accepts Cordelia as his queen, Lear loses territorial authority. The likelihood of the king of France leaving his country to live in England is unlikely as Lear leaving England to go to France.

These are all fascinating ideas, but they are not concerns in respect to gender and “the feminine.” They involve the historical and the political. Many might mistake *King Lear* as a “family tragedy;” an aged king battles with his daughters over land and life. However, it is really more of a “political tragedy,” (or as John Dollimore might call it, a “radical tragedy”) since the history and repercussions are distinct to that time period is one of the main reasons I want to strongly, and at such length, discuss Smiley's true *family* tragedy. In my next chapter, I will examine Smiley's novel- to answer questions that Shakespeare's play, canonical though it may be, cannot answer about fathers and daughters, about the feminine, and the betrayal of trust through abhorrent forms of love and sexuality, that bonds this family traumatically together.

### III. THE FARMING OF MEMORY

Smiley delivers the sensitive and taboo trauma of *A Thousand Acres* with graceful and simple prose. Taking a modern approach, she sets the novel on a thousand acre Midwestern farm instead of a medieval British kingdom. Using a traditional and conventional American setting, a reader would expect the clichéd *American Dream* story. However, *A Thousand Acres* is anything but a dream. It is a nightmare, unraveling scene after scene, revealing a horrible past that will forever scathe the novel's heroine, Ginny. The culture of the Midwest demands conformity, and keeping up with appearances is a necessity. Slowly, though, Smiley unleashes Ginny's story, her memories, and thereby reveals the landscape, the farming process, and the characters in the Cook family. It is within the theme of large-scale industrial farming versus more traditional farming that the central conflict between Larry and his daughters surfaces. What makes Smiley's novel a tragedy is how deceptive 'family' can prove to be. The two major plot changes the novel are the search for the mother and the incest by the father- all done via the memory-work of Ginny.

After reading the novel and revisiting *King Lear*, the reader develops a greater sense of sympathy for Goneril and Regan. James Schiff points out that the reader can now “understand why Ginny/Goneril has just cause for speaking of her father in such a manner, and we are likely to cheer her on” (375). Thus, Smiley uses *A Thousand Acres* to reformulate *King Lear* and give the narrative “female authority” (Walker, 7).

For feminist scholars, the novel presents a project to recover suppressed memories of violence toward women. One of the most powerful and explicit scenes of the novel occurs quite late, as Rose tells Ginny:

But he did fuck us and he did beat us. He beat us more than he fucked us. He beat us routinely. And the thing is, he's respected. Others of them like him and look up to him. He fits right in. However many of them have fucked their daughters or their stepdaughters or their nieces or not, the fact is that they all accept beating as a way of life. We have two choices when we think about that. Either they don't know the real him or we do, or else they do know the real him and the fact that he beat us and fucked us doesn't matter. Either they themselves are evil, or they're stupid. That's the thing that kills me. This person who beats and fucks his own daughters can go out into the community and get respect and power, and take it for granted that he deserves it (Smiley, 302).

Critics of the novel question Smiley's intention to rewrite Lear as Larry, a father who is involved in an incestuous relationship with his daughters. Those who argue about the purpose of the novel state that Smiley's revisions change the story completely and subvert the reasons behind Larry's abuse, comparable to how Goneril and Regan are pushed aside, and deemed as evil in Shakespeare's play (Ayres, 132). Giving Ginny the power to filter the situations and characters through her perspective also can be questioned, since a first person narrator claims "validity of one's person right to interpret her experiences" (Lanser, 19). How can we determine that Ginny is reliable and that her intentions are true? Lanser states Ginny's authority is difficult to establish, especially since the novel actually occludes the masculine position of authority, which is traditionally associated with an omniscient narrator (19). However, just as *King Lear* is written in such a way as to generate sympathy from readers for the title figure, so too, Smiley crafts her fiction so as to place Ginny within interpersonal and social relationships, thereby gaining the reader's sympathy. Susan Ayres makes a valid point in

arguing with any critics who feel Smiley's novel is a "cheap trick intended to manipulate the reader's emotions;" instead, it is a feminist re-vision, and it demands the reader's critical feminist perspective (133). Smiley wanted to become a "lawyer for Goneril and Regan":

I proposed a different narrative of their motives and actions that cast doubts on the case Mr. Shakespeare was making for his client, King Lear. I made Goneril my star witness, and she told her story with care. I made sure that, insofar as I was able to swing it, she was an appealing witness as well- cautious, judicious, ambivalent, straightforward...The goal of the trial was not to try or condemn the father, but to gain an acquittal for the daughters. The desired verdict was not 'innocent' but rather 'not guilty,' or at least, 'not proven; (Ayres, 132).

The novel makes it clear how difficult it is to create a women-centered experience when this dynamic seems to overthrow patriarchal authority. Smiley re-writes *Lear* not to gain sympathy from readers; rather, by inserting incest as the destructive reason behind the daughters' anger, she aims to convey the vulnerability of women to patriarchal violence. In terms of a feminist perspective, *A Thousand Acres* can be seen as radical because the novel "successfully contrasts dominant reality, and in the end of the novel, provides an alternative discourse that allows the primary female characters to subvert the patriarchal view" (Ayres, 133). However, if the reader is familiar with post-modern feminism, then "Smiley's re-vision does not successfully reclaim feminine sexuality, or jouissance [French term for *enjoyment*, particularly from an orgasm]. Rather, the shame of incest cannot be overcome" (Ayres, 133). Smiley provides a discourse for silenced female victims- and in its conclusion, this discourse is neither revelatory nor triumphant, but simply *present*, undistinguished- the survivor's tale.

As a "guardian of the unwritten history of the family," (Greene, 296) Smiley uses Ginny's therapeutic discourse-her memory work- to convey how the narrator tries to

overcome the trauma she has suffered. As an incest survivor, Ginny's primary domestic situation is not atypical. She has a controlling father, her mother has passed, and she has no chance to speak about her father's abusive behavior. Silenced, quelled, Ginny is forced into domestic and social alienation. However, as the novel progresses, she eventually finds the courage to emancipate herself from her painful nostalgia. The importance of Smiley's novel is its questioning of the patriarchal structure of male dominance that threatens a female's identity through familial and community pressures. *A Thousand Acres* analyzes the "patriarchal system, physical and mental orders, appearance versus reality, the 'territories' of land and female body, male violence and feminine fertility within the encompassing 'family romance'" (Lin, 97).

The most crucial relationship in the text is the one between father and daughter. Barbara Sheldon claims in her study, *Fathers and Daughters in Feminist Novels*, that there "exists a dominant father-daughter discourse, which determines the way roles of fathers and daughters are defined and perceived. This discourse is reflected in countless literary works and has shaped what I call the 'master plot of the father-daughter story'" (23). Sheldon points out that the "master plot" represents a typical relationship of a "powerful father and submissive daughter" (23). From the beginning, Larry Cook is demanding and unforgiving. His presence is not only strong in his household, but he is a well-known and begrudgingly respected local farmer. He claims ownership not only of his daughters, but of the land as well. Ginny recalls a time when, as a child, she: "went to first grade and the other children said that their fathers were farmers, I simply did not believe them, I knew that those men were imposters, as farmers and fathers, too. In my youthful estimation, Laurence Cook defined both categories." (19). At such a young age

for Ginny, Larry represents the epitome of power, as both the Father and the King of his un-mortgaged land. As a public figure of the farming community he is “one of the biggest landowners” in Zebulon County (Smiley, 141). His power is not to be doubted.

Land was just as important in Jacobean society, considering that those who owned land would also have the ability to control the people on it. As a king, Lear’s possession of land is connected to his high status. Without the “champaigns riched” and “wide-skirted meads” of his land, he risks the loss of authority over not only his subjects, but of his family as well (1.1.64-64). Relinquishing the symbolic status as king, also strips Lear of his familial identity. Like Larry, Lear is also a public figure prone to the anxiety that comes with the double imperative of serving his people and acting as a father to his children. When Lear offers his property to his daughters, it is clear through Goneril’s dulcet speech that she agrees with her father. It is also clear that her motivations stem from a hunger for power. However, in *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny’s response to Larry’s decision is much more ambivalent. She agrees to be amicable. “In spite of that inner clang, I tried to sound agreeable” (Smiley, 19). She is simply performing her role as her father’s daughter, conforming to the demands of loyalty. Furthermore, she looks at her husband for his support. She wants to appease him too and “realize some of his wishes” (Smiley, 25). “Ty was looking at me, and I could see in his gaze a veiled tightly contained delight- he had been wanting to increase the hog operation for years” (Smiley, 19). Such gazes and their attendant silences are constant within *A Thousand Acres*, associated with male power, reinforcing Ginny’s status as not just a daughter, but as a wife.

Ginny’s lifestyle falls into a culture paradigm known as ‘agrarian ideology.’ In

*Agrarian Women*, Deborah Fink explains that through agrarian ideology, women and land are both oppressed. They are limited to the land and obligated to be a mother, wife, and care-taker of the farm (25-26). As god-like in Ginny's eyes, her father asserts his authority over the family and the farm identifying himself to his family and to his community as "the biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer." (20). Even in that statement alone, the repetition of 'farm' shows just how central and necessary it is to the people of this community. The farm itself is a character in the novel, but is it too a victim, or a possible co-antagonist?

I agree with those critics of the novel who insist that the land- the Midwestern acres are untouched and pristine- suffer a pillaging and over-throw via Larry Cook and his sort of farmer, as do the women. Barbara Mathieson an eco-feminist, suggests that the rape of the sisters is just a part of the rape of the land. It is a parallel rape "Far more than exploring 'women's issues,' however...Smiley's novel recounts a universal human tragedy with implications for every being on the planet" (Ayres, 145). She says of Smiley, "Smiley is...radical in linking the social, political, and personal problems of patriarchy inherent in Shakespeare's play with a twentieth-century awareness of the physical domination and economic exploitation of the natural world by industrialized human cultures" (128). Mary Paniccia Carden agrees and states how Smiley's portrait of the American farm is "intended to unsettle American nostalgia for its mythical Rockwellian-hued past, tracking destructive gender-power dynamics to their roots" (Ayres, 145). Thus, Smiley was concerned about the environment early on, several decades before the onset of those practices and concerns we now label as eco-criticism. "Three other threads that tied up for me in *A Thousand Acres* were feminism,

environmentalism and a vaguely Marxist materialism” (Smiley, “Shakespeare in Iceland” 169). The landscape is not just a backdrop then, for the changes Ginny’s life endures; in fact, its violation is analogous to what happens to Ginny’s body. McDermott concurs, stating that Larry’s abuse of the land and his daughters are “justified by patriarchal discourse of property and implicitly condoned by his community” (395). Ginny tells her husband towards the end of the novel:

You see this grand history, but I see blows. I see taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did. I see getting orders to pay the price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was. Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own?...No, I think he had lessons, and those lessons were part of the package, along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what, poisoning the water and destroying the topsoil and buying bigger and bigger machinery, and then feeling certain that all of it was “right,” as you say (Smiley, 342).

In this particular passage, Smiley portrays the Midwest’s obvious cultural and agricultural practices. In this light, the novel’s epigraph, “The body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other. We were marked by the seasonal body of earth, by the terrible migration of people, by the swift turn of a century, verging on the change never before experienced on this greening planet,” becomes highly meaningful. McDermott reveals that the novel’s epigraph was taken from Meridel Le Sueur’s *The Ancient People and the Newly Come*, and refer to pioneers and the destruction of prairies as the Westward expansion displaced settled indigenous peoples out of what is now the United States (395). The natives are displaced; the land is raped; then the women are pillaged.

Friedrich Engels explains in his text, *The Origin of the Family*, that in the Stone



Age, the land belonged to the clan. Women and men worked equally by crafting a primitive division of labor. It was not until technology and metallurgy developed that men needed others to service them, to cultivate the fields and clear the land. Therefore, “private property appears: master of slaves and land, man also becomes the proprietor of woman. This is the ‘great historical defeat of the female sex.’” (de Beauvoir, 63). Engels argued that the Industrial Revolution would set women free, but de Beauvoir faults his thesis in her counter-claim that the rise of machines has in fact only further oppressed women. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir continues to draw parallels between the land and the feminine as she quotes the Laws of Manu: “Woman is like the field and man like the seeds.” In an Andre Masson drawing, there is a man with a shovel in hand, tilling the garden of a feminine sex. De Beauvoir asserts that woman in such a construct, is simultaneously her husband’s prey and his property (171).

For Larry, accumulating land has been a sign of success. Due to hard work, his family prospered. Larry Cook’s morality comes from his farming “discipline”: if you work hard and ‘respect your elders’, all will be “right.” Ginny explains, “On the way to Cabot or Pike or Henry Grove, my father would tell us who owned what indistinguishable flat black acreage, how he had gotten it, what he had done, or should have done with it, who got it after him and by what tricks or betrayals. Every story when we were children, revealed a lesson- ‘work hard’ or ‘respect your elders’...The story of how my father and his father came to possess a thousand contiguous acres taught us all these lessons, and though we didn’t hear it often, we remembered it perfectly” (Smiley, 132). Therefore, this narrative of acquisition functions for Larry to “reinforce his claim to ownership of the land, which comes to seem natural” (McDermott, 397). However, when

Ginny recounts the details of land accumulation, she sees points that have been glossed over by Larry's story of success. She thinks about Mel Scott's land, how it has been absorbed by Larry Cook, and she fears it has been acquired through manipulation and cheating. As Ginny walks through and illustrates the details of her farm, these memories serve not to "order" the land (as in a traditional pastoral the feminine often does); but rather, her detailed recollections bring back painful memories of loss and regret. "In the course of her narrative, the land is turned from a set of homogenous acres into a set of memory-sites: marginal, unproductive spaces at the dump and quarry, intimately relates to Ginny's childhood and described in her narrative in lyrical and evocative terms" (McDermott, 398). By giving the reader a historical perspective of the land, we can imagine what the land was like before the families settled it; this allows us to question Larry's "naturalized" ownership of it. The land has a history prior to the arrival of Larry Cook and his like, as much as their stories try to deny this.

The transfer of property and power usurps family relationships, even among those who are most loyal to each other. "The transfer of property upsets marriages, as well as exposing the tacit and already existing rivalry between siblings. The growth of sibling rivalry and the complex relations between spouses in *A Thousand Acres* heighten the reader's awareness of Goneril's position in a complicated structure of relations, one in which she is not only a daughter, but also a sister, and a wife" (Lindhe, 58). In *King Lear*, Lear announces the division of the kingdom to overshadow the potential for finding a suitor for Cordelia. In *A Thousand Acres*, Larry announces his decision to incorporate the land, dark news which overshadows the initial happiness surrounding Jess Clark's homecoming. We also see how Larry favors Caroline over the other daughters as Ginny

observes “He glanced at me, then at Caroline, and looking at her all the while, he said: ‘We’re going to form this corporation” (Smiley, 18-19). Later in the novel, when Jess Clark asks Ginny who is the favorite daughter, she explicitly tells Jess, “It’s always been Caroline, I’m sure” (Smiley, 134) Instead of giving an exaggerated and phony exclamation of love, à la Goneril and Regan, Ginny and Rose agree with their father's idea of incorporation to slightly different degrees. Ginny thinks it’s a “good idea” while Rose says “it’s a great idea” (Smiley, 19). Similar to Cordelia, Caroline responds to Larry’s idea with ‘I don’t know,’ an answer that has the same effect upon Larry as Cordelia’s ‘nothing’ did upon Lear. Being away from the farm for so long has led Caroline to “a different conception of family loyalty” (Lindhe, 62). She is detached from the rest of her family, uninterested in their odd rituals, such as spending their time together playing Monopoly and discussing Larry’s absurdities. (Monopoly is a symbolic game, considering the primary objectives of obtaining much property, money, and power as one can).

The farm may also be seen as the victim due to the rise of industrial farming. Chemicals are an evil necessity that is hard to avoid in this sort of farm agriculture. And, the use of chemicals proves toxic not just to the land, but to those on the land. “Remember that guy who used to pilot the spray plane when Daddy was having the crops sprayed from the air? He supposedly got very crazy as he got older. They used to find him in the crawl space under the kitchen hiding out...And he had this terrible rash. They didn’t know if it was some reaction to all those chemicals, or whether it was from crawling around under the house” (Smiley, 186). “The thing about anhydrous is that it does the damage almost instantly. After two minutes or so, the corneas are eaten away.

There isn't much the doctors can do besides transplants and those don't work too well."(Smiley, 232) The characters barely reflect on the possible dangers of ammonia and see it as only a repercussion of large-scale farming. Therefore, the farm and its culture cause its inhabitants to ignore their overall well-being and that of the land, as well. Larry, the true antagonist of the novel, is created by the demands of the farm, and the community respects his dedication. However, his flaws and weaknesses, which create a permanent scar on the family and the land, are not considered relevant to the culture. Families and the land they live upon are all screwed in the pursuit of a thousand acres.

Another source of confusion is that Larry Cook (and those like him) thinks being a good farmer means one is also an exceptional parent. In exposing the emptiness of such an equation, Smiley's novel questions the role of a good father. If Larry Cook is not an acceptable parent, what is? According to psycho-analysts, a real father is "the sum of nurturing, protection, affection, guidance and approval given by the father to his child..." (Leonard, 326). Larry Cook exemplifies none of these factors. This can only result in a major loss of self-esteem for his daughters. Ginny is not identified by her own individuality. She is seen as her father's daughter, as Larry is the "monolith" (Smiley, 115) she describes in the community. The reader sees Ginny long ignore her inner feelings. She pushes her sadness aside to tend to her male relationships, with the like of Larry and Ty. Leonard continues to explain "when a father holds himself aloof there is insufficient opportunity for day-to-day comparing and testing of the fantasized object with the real person. Moreover, constant lack of attention is experienced as rejection which is destructive to the sense of self-esteem" (Smiley, 329). Ginny relies on assurances from Larry, since her mother is not present in her life. Theoretically speaking,

a father's authority is not felt daily, but it is sovereign. A mother runs the trifling matters of the household, but the father's life is mysterious. Ginny says it herself when Ty and her argue about Larry. Ginny calls him 'secretive.' Typically, if a father shows tenderness towards his daughter, "she feels her existence magnificently justified...If she is refused love, she feel guilty and condemned forever; or else she can seek self-esteem elsewhere and become indifferent-even hostile-to her father" (de Beauvoir, 302). Ginny was always "afraid of him as a child" (Smiley, 125) and this fear is established when he punishes her for losing a shoe at a Halloween party. Before he even finds out about the missing shoe, Ginny is already terrified, and her first instinct is to hide from him. "When I got to the middle of the room, he grabbed my arm and pulled me over to the doorway, leaned me up against it, and strapped me with his belt until I fell down" (183). Fully catechized into the laws of rural patriarchy, Ginny was convinced at an early age of her father's power, and his right to physically abuse her body whenever he pleased.

However, I don't believe Larry Cook ever fully reflected on how destructive his behavior had been. Due to his mordant nature, I believe that he was completely oblivious to the pain and humiliation he inflicted on his daughters when they were children. In one particular scene, Ginny recalls when she lost a shoe and her mother "betrayed" her by asking about it. Her father became so angry he began beating her, and when her mother tried to intervene, he turned to her and said "'You on her side? There's only one side here, and you better be on it'....he grabbed my arm and pulled me over to the doorway, leaned me up against it, and strapped me with his belt until I fell down" (Smiley, 182-183). When she recalls this memory, her attitude changes and she has the courage to defy Larry and shame him in front of the family. "You don't deserve even the care we give

you...from now on you're on your own" (Smiley, 183). As an adult, Ginny wants to heal the figurative scars her father inflicted upon her- doing so means she must break with him quite forcefully, rapturing their relationship, such as it was.

The incestuous desires exhibited by Larry Cook parallel his greed over acquiring farmland. He even equates his own daughters with 'livestock.' "Ask him. He'll tell you all about the sows and heifers and things drying up and empty chambers" (Smiley, 10). The center of Larry's life is the economic prosperity of his farm, and his daughters need to add to that significance, and become manifestly part of it- "heifers" with "empty chambers." Ginny and Rose are not seen as fragile beings that Larry needs to protect and care for. Raising young girls requires the responsibility to help them grow and develop into confident women. However, living with a domineering and abusive father has "interrupted the process of their subject formation, their identity as young women remains somehow incomplete..." (Lin, 99). This identity struggle is most evident in Ginny's compromised nature. The rejection from her father only hurts her relationship with other male figures. She begins to withdraw not only from her father, but with Ty as well.

Ginny's marriage to Ty stems from her naiveté as a young woman. The mid-West farming community may put pressure upon young women to marry and become housewives, without much consideration for themselves. There is not much growth or room for self-awareness. As a grown woman, she is still uncomfortable with her body and her sexuality. Having been married to Ty at nineteen, she has "never touched my breasts except to position them in my brassier or to wash them with a washcloth" (155). She did not want her husband "to see [her] body," and sex "made [her] touchy. It was full

of contradictory little rituals” (Smiley, 148). The relationship Ginny has with Ty has been tainted by her repressed memory of incest. In a way, it poisons her sexuality.

Desire, shame, and fear. A freak, like a woman with three legs, but my freak, that I readily recognized from old days in high school and just after, when every date has the potential to paralyze me. The way I unparalyzed myself then was to break dates with boys who actually attracted me. The best thing about Ty had been that he attracted Daddy. I saw that he was clean and polite and familiar and good. Somehow that enabled the three –legged woman to walk, carefully, and very slowly, but with dignity (262).

The couple suffers through tension that seeps from the farm and work into their private lives in the bedroom. “The home or the bedroom is no longer a retreat from the outer world or from external and public conflicts” (Lindhe, 66). They argue about Larry and how to handle his behavior. Ty suggests to his wife, “You women don’t understand your father at all. He understands himself just fine. He’s just secretive, is all” (Smiley, 103).

Smiley characterized Ty as the counterpart to Ginny’s father. In fact, I believe that Ginny marries Ty only because it is comforting to her to be with someone that her father approves of. She says, “The best thing about Ty had been that he attracted Daddy” (262). Like Larry, Ty also comes from a farming background. He has his own hundred and sixty acre farm, and to Larry, Ty was like a “son.” Ginny claims that Ty has “always been patient, understanding, careful, willing to act as the bulwark against [Ginny’s] father” (Smiley, 155). Despite the fact that Ty never abused Ginny like her father has, Ginny’s marital relationship with Ty is emotionally unfulfilling.

Furthermore, Ty proves his disloyalty to Ginny on several occasions. When Larry succumbs to anger and madness during the storm scene and curses at Ginny, Ty stands literally behind him, “unmoving, hands in pockets” (Smiley, 195). Ty’s solidarity with

Larry results in a strained relationship with his wife. He could not rescue Ginny from her father's verbal abuse, stating only "Ginny, you and Rose are going about this all wrong" (Smiley, 153). He undermines his own status and power. Ty is still much more interested in keeping up with the status quo than disrupting the relationships within the community. He tells his wife, "I think people should keep private things private." (Smiley, 340) Although he is not directly referring to the incest Ginny reveals later in the text, it can be interpreted that he would not even want to discover this betrayal and possibly could not come up with a way to appropriately handle his wife's sensitivity to it.

Ayres explains that once Ginny remembers the incest, she no longer wishes to have sex with Ty. "Sex itself, which [she] had rarely if ever actually enjoyed, seemed now like it would be too close to those memories [of sex with her father] for comfort" (Smiley, 153). When Jess Clark returns from the West coast, her adulterous affair with him is an attempt to rediscover her sexuality. Jess Clark excites her, and subconsciously, she is rebelling against Ty and against her father.

Jess Clark's character is not as evil as the role of Edmund in *King Lear*. He comes across as a progressive character, concerned about the future of farming. He wants to try using organic material, he is concerned about the chemicals seeping into the water, and overall, he is a romantic figure. Jess is well traveled, cultured, and he returns to the farm as an outsider trying to bring in new ideas. Unlike the other male characters who abuse the land and the women, Jess is the opposite. He is a sensitive man, who is non-violent. He escaped the farm in the first place by dodging the draft to fight in Vietnam. Furthermore, he has empathy for the women in his life. The unpredictable life Jess has is one that Ginny wishes she could share. Ginny becomes aware of her sexual desire "I



could feel my flesh turn electric at those thoughts, could feel sensation gather in my nipples, could feel my vagina relax and open, could feel my fingertips grow sensitive enough to know their own shapes” (Smiley, 213) Mary Carden agrees stating, “Sex with Jess has been an act of resistance and desire, a dangerous flouting of appearances and of Daddy’s definition of female sexuality, a reaching out for alternatives” (197). Jess brings out the sexual feminine within Ginny that has been repressed by her father. Although she commits adultery, Ginny is looking for someone who shows consideration and concern about her emotional and physical well-being. Jess is the only one to openly question the well water on the farm. He shows Ginny a link between the poisoned land, Rose’s cancer, and Ginny’s multiple miscarriages. Larry Cook uses the nitrates in the fertilizer to increase productivity of the farm, but at the same time raping the land of organic honesty, and, quite possibly, compromises the health of his wife and daughters.

Unfortunately, Smiley writes Jess Clark as a wild card. After having sex with Jess, Ginny says it feels awkward, but she still “felt blasted with desire, irradiated, rendered transparent” (Smiley, 163). While his elusiveness garners interest, his lack of stability is the flaw in his character. He is unable to make a lasting connection with another female. Being unattached and single gives him the freedom to make choices that will only benefit him. He betrays Ginny when he has an affair with Rose, and Ginny does not see him in the same whimsical way. “A stranger, he looked canny, almost calculating. With no one looking at him and no occasion to exercise his charm, his face was cool, without animation or warmth” (Smiley, 322). What is extremely ironic and disturbing here, is that like Larry Cook, Jess Clark used both daughters to his sexual advantage. Therefore, the character of Jess starts to morph into the similar character of Larry Cook.

After realizing the trauma of incest, Ginny's sexual desire for Jess is overshadowed by her sexual repression. It is yet another broken male relationship Ginny has suffered through. On top of having distrust with the dominant male figures in her life, her close sister Rose has betrayed her too.

Rose was not portrayed as just a sister to Ginny. These two sisters were the only ones to stay on the farm, while Caroline escaped to the city. I believe Rose, although she is younger than Ginny, provides some maternal presence since their mother's passing. Unlike Ginny, Rose is a mother. She wants to take care of her family and she married Pete because she knew he would kill her father if anything happened to their daughters. However, Jess also provides some maternal support that Ginny yearns for. He is the only one to talk about her miscarriages and he even behaves in a way similar to a mother. He listens to Ginny, lets her talk about her emotions, and he understands her need to discover her sense of self. When Ginny loses that "maternal bond" she had with Jess, it "repeats and reinforces Ginny's pre-Oedipal horror of 'abjection' or mother-daughter separation, which has been forced already to repeat with the earlier death of her mother" (Lin, 101).

Just as they do in *Lear*, the sisters betray each other. Ginny begins to poison Rose with tainted sausages out of revenge. Rose "stole" Jess from her, not only by the means of lust, but also in terms of providing a mother-substitute. When a person loses a loved one, departure and, later, usually to some degree of detachment; it gives rise not only to a cry for help, but sometimes also a rejection of those who respond" (Bowlby, 31).

But as I stated previously, Rose is akin to the sisters' mother. Ginny says it herself when she looks at Rose and sees her mother. "Rose, in herself, in her reincarnation of our mother, would speak, or act out, the answers" (Smiley, 94). Ginny sees herself in Rose

too, possibly as an alter-ego. “My deepest-held habit was assuming that differences between Rose and me are just on the surface, that beneath, beyond all that, we were more than twin-like, that somehow we were each other’s real selves, together forever on this thousand acres” (Smiley, 307). Possibly they are forever together on the farm because of the trauma that has happened to them, and it bonded them in the most destructive way.

Yet Rose is destructive and unforgiving in her own right. As the polar opposite of Caroline, she is selfish and greedy for more land. It is the same polluted land (also afflicting Ginny) that could be killing Rose with cancer: “that call dividing in the dark...subdividing, multiplying, growing, Rose’s real third child” (Smiley, 323). Furthermore, the land and her father is Rose’s abuser, manipulating her mind and body to believe the lies. Ginny is disgusted when her sister accuses her of prostituting herself to their father so she can inherit more property. To Rose, her father chose her. She wants to believe she was his favorite. “I thought it was okay...since he was the rule maker. He didn’t rape me Ginny. He seduced me. He said it was okay, that it was good to please him, that he needed it, that I was special. He said that he loved me.” (Smiley,190). Replacing ‘rape’ with ‘seduce’ throws away the chance for Rose to become an incest survivor and speak against domestic and sexual abuse. Rose has already been poisoned from within, before the sausages, and before the cancer. Her mind is diseased with a shameless and calculating mentality. Ginny tells her, “You’re so calm that it’s more like you’re lying than it is like you’re dredging up horrors from the past” (Smiley, 191). Shocked that her sister can be so detached from an abusive memory, Ginny becomes Rose’s target. Rose flips the incestuous experience to interrogate Ginny on her recollections. Instead of comforting each other, Rose creates unnecessary hostility. She

chooses her father over her sister, and becomes the abuser herself when she presses Ginny to remember with bitter fortitude.

The only possible protector Ginny could have had was her mother. Smiley combines the dark secret of the Cook family with the mystery of the mother. Ginny spends time reconnecting with the memory of her mother by trying to find anyone that knew her. Ginny remembers her when she takes Pam and Linda to the swimming pool and Mary, an old friend of her mother's, confronts Ginny to apologize for not befriendng Ginny after her mother's passing. The reader begins to understand the mysterious personality and concerns of Ginny's mother when Mary reveals that her mother had been "afraid for you. For the life you would live after she died" (Smiley, 92). Mary explains that Mrs. Cook "knew what your father was like, even though I think she loved him" (Smiley, 91). Based on this assertion, it is possible that Ginny's mother knew there could have been a problem between her daughters and her husband. She was genuinely worried but there was no way to admit that fear to her daughters. She knew Ginny would not have been able to overcome his aggressiveness and control.

After her encounter with Mary, Ginny dives into the pool. While water can be seen as a spiritual cleanse, I perceive it here as representative of Ginny's subconscious. Ginny begins to remember her mother, despite her death at Ginny's young age. Ginny "died before I knew her, before I liked her, before I was old enough for her to be herself with me" (Smiley, 94). She mentions that she wishes she could feel a "symbiotic fleshy warmth" (Smiley, 93) despite the lack of physical closeness. She wants to piece together all the answers to the questions she has. "I could become her biographer, be drawn into her life, and into excuses for her or blame of her" (94). Now with Larry out of the old

family home, she is able to explore, look for clues about her mother. The closet of clothes contains the secret history of her mother. "...when I seek to love my mother, I remember her closet and that indulgence of hers" (Smiley, 224). Ginny searches the house for any traces of "her handwriting, the remains of her work and her habits, even perhaps, her scent" (Smiley, 225). The focus to 'find' her mother is an effort to discover a lost relationship. She wants her mother to be present in her life so that maybe she could have warned them "to tell us what to think of Daddy" (Smiley, 224). Unlike Rose, Ginny is not only missing her mother, but she has the inability to become one herself.

It is possible that the inability to become a mother leaves a missing piece in Ginny's transcendence. De Beauvoir states, "It is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her physiological destiny; that is her 'natural' vocation, since her whole organism is directed toward the perpetuation of the species" (524).

Susan Ayres explains that the longing for a mother is best interpreted by Luce Irigaray, a contemporary French philosopher and poststructuralist feminist. "Women often have a strained relationship with each other because they lack a maternal genealogy and a common language. Whereas men's speech provides a 'linguistic home that man has managed to substitute even for his dwelling in a body and that 'has used women as construction material,' women 'are deprived of speech' and need a 'woman-identified experience' consisting of 'primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support'" (Ayres, 138). Ginny tries to remember the history of her mother because they "had history...and for us this history was to be found in her closet" (Smiley, 223).

Unfortunately all her mother's belongings are gone, and Ginny can only find her father's things. It symbolizes the lost hope of ever finding physical evidence of her mother. The only place Ginny can re-connect with her mother is in her mind, away from the physical abuse of her father. Ironically, while discovering her mom, she brings back the painful experience of sexual abuse. Not only has she lost her mother, but she also lost her 'self.' She reacted to find her inner voice: "I screamed in a way that I had never screamed before, full out, throat-wrenching, unafraid-of-making-a-fuss-and-drawing-attention-to-myself-sort-of screams that I made myself concentrate on, becoming all mouth, all tongue, all vibration" (Smiley, 229).

That loud audible scream is a primitive act, "the beginning of speech" (Nakadate, 178). Ginny screams without control because the epiphany she has is a permanent, self-realization of betrayal. Her memory has been buried subconsciously, and the search for her mother turns out to be a search for self (Lin, 104). Ginny states, "My new life, yet another new life, had begun in the day" (Smiley, 229). Ginny's new life is a re-birth. Like an infant coming out from the womb crying, Ginny's voice announces she has been reborn, and it is a new opportunity to heal. Her outcry marks her break with the female duty of eternal silence. "Ginny's desire is for the language that can, and for the mother who could, provide alternatives to Daddy's ownership, disavow paternal right, introduce the unsaid into language" (Carden, 194). I have stated previously that Ginny relies on therapeutic discourse to handle the dark past of her family. Ginny's violent outcry is a result of the violence she has endured. She once believed, "I was, after all, my father's daughter, and I automatically did believe in the unbroken surface of the unsaid" (94), however, with the taboo topic out in the open, Ginny reverses the typical father-daughter

master plot. She no longer relies on Larry's voice, but discovers she can now speak for herself, able to abandon her father's oppressive nature. Mathieson points out Ginny's slow transformation as "the dominant order of their lives disintegrating as the polite lies of family love and interpersonal relationship are unmasked, and a profound sense of vulnerability emerging as comfortable myths are sandblasted away" (128).

Right before her dreadful realization, Ginny gains a better sense of agency as Larry becomes more reckless. In particular, her disputes with Larry reverse the father-daughter roles. During the storm scene, Larry argues with his daughters, but he tells Ginny, "You don't have to...tell me what I can do and what I can't do. You barren whore! I know all about you, you slut. You've been creeping here and there all your life, making up to this one and that one. But you're not really a woman, are you? I don't know what you are, just a bitch, is all, just a dried-up whore bitch" (Smiley, 181). The cringe worthy dialogue between Larry and Ginny is obviously reminiscent of Lear and Goneril, when Lear damns her fertility, and shouts, "Dry up in her the organs of increase;/ And from her derogate body never spring/ A babe to honour her!" (1.4.45-47). Both the play and the novel question the issue of female fertility. But, why? Larry's choice of words brings up the argument that I needed to include in my thesis. Larry debates Ginny's "womanhood." He questions whether she is a woman. What makes or does not make Ginny a woman? Why is she a bitch in his eyes?

Ginny's gender is a mark of her biological, linguistic, and cultural difference. Some theorists, like Simone de Beauvoir, argue that the female sex is marked (signified) and the masculine gender is conflated, resulting in defining women in terms of their sex and extolling men "as bearers of a body-transcendent of universal personhood" (Butler,

13). Larry degrades Ginny calling her a “dried up whore,” yet at the same time questioning her womanhood. It is the irony in sexuality that Larry takes aim at. Ginny is a sexual woman, she has had sex with her father and now she has sex with her husband (and Jess). But she lacks a family. She has never produced children, unlike Rose, and Ginny’s lack of offspring already puts her at a disadvantage to claim her “womanhood.” Strehle agrees with the argument by stating, “Indeed, sexual desire is the mark of their monstrosity; women who lust also lie, cheat, steal, and originate further corruptions of nature, giving birth to bastard who are themselves driven by lust and greed” (213).

When Larry calls Ginny ‘a bitch’, he clearly uses it to hurt her and deliver a misogynistic outcry. The term has been used constantly against women by men- and even women themselves. 'Bitch' is a slur, used since the 1400s. Its etymology defines women as suppressed, which in itself is divine, and this image equates them with sexually depraved beasts (Kleinmen, Ezzell,& Frost, 51). Larry reinforces patriarchal values by calling his daughter ‘a bitch’. His choice of language in that scene conveys his vulnerability and how Ginny might have emasculated him in front of the family. Ginny never uses the term itself to refer to her being or gain some sense of control.

Larry goes on to shout, “I gave you everything, and I get nothing in return, just some orders about doing this and being that and seeing points of view.” Is this everything supposed to be his manhood or his sexual advances? Rose counters his claim, and says, “We didn't ask for what you gave us. We never asked for what you gave us...I know all about you, and you know I know” (Smiley, 182). Despite the fact that this argument was a public dispute in front of Pete and Ty, the subliminal message here is clear. Rose is referring to the rape and threatening her father to reveal their family secret.



Ying-chiao Lin wrote *Father's Farmland, Daughter's Innerland* and explains how silence is suppression and survival. Ginny's inner-self is a place that is untainted by family relationships. She imagines her own innerland, a 'prairie' defined only as a "malarial marsh" (Smiley, 23). The fantasy allows her to cope with the paternal abuse, which has driven her to be inward, and to be silent. "...Most often, nearly invariably, [a survivor of violence] becomes silent about his victimization, though the experience nevertheless in every case remains somehow fundamental to his existence, and to his unfolding or enfolded conception of himself (Culbertson, 169). Ginny has attempted to suppress her past, and Smiley experiments with her narrative skills only to imply incest as something unspoken, unsaid, and unspeakable. "In calling on this silent realm as a text, a linguistic presence, Smiley illuminates a new set of values tied to the daughter's power of imagination- values of life-affirmation and self-affirmation" (Lin, 105). In a state of solitude, Ginny has freedom to find her own voice. The words she used before, were not her own. Her language was her father's language. Although the novel certainly does not end with a complete resolution, Ginny has been able to gain some independence. She takes on the mother-role by taking care of Rose's daughters and working in St. Paul as a waitress. She lives her life in solitude, yet still capable of "remembering what you can't imagine" (Smiley, 370).

Judith Butler examines the incest taboo in her book, *Gender Trouble*. In the section of reformulating prohibition as power, Butler questions whether "the prohibition against incest that proscribes and sanctions hierarchal and binary gendered positions be reconceived as a productive power that inadvertently generates several configurations of gender?" (98). Society has created the taboo so that the exchange of women between

clans is not blood related. It is a pervasive cultural fantasy that shows a disturbance in power. The incest taboo then divides the universe of sexual choice into permitted and prohibited sexual partners. Society then creates a juridical law to prohibit repressed desires and dictate sexuality by providing substitute desires (Butler, 101-3). Furthermore, it pegs incest as immoral, perverted, and criminal.

Today, incest is always contextualized as child abuse. Some feminists argue that incestuous abuse is about power, and since power and male sexuality are entwined, it is both sexual and about power (Bell, 121). The Father in an incestuous relationship is “understood as positioned within discourses of sexuality and the family that are in themselves unconcerned with incestuous abuse but which render the abuse ‘intelligible’” (Bell, 120). Not every father desires to abuse his children and it also does not mean that he is denying his repressed desires to commit any incestuous acts. Men have an understanding of their sexuality, masculinity, and their role within the family unit. Therefore, the prohibition of incest can either be obeyed or traversed.

When dealing with the issue of incest, Smiley perfectly describes a family situation that is conventional of those who have suffered from it. In *Father-Daughter Incest*, Dr. Herman has researched that the families in which informants grew up were conventional to a fault. “Most were church going and financially stable; they maintained a façade of respectability” (71). I appreciate how Dr. Herman uses the term ‘façade,’ as it appropriately fits the Cook family and the farming community they live in. On paper, Larry Cook exemplifies the ‘perfect’ father figure. He is a man who works diligently on the farm, provides for his family, and is respected by the other members of the community. Inside the Cook home, however, there is a different perspective. The reality

is that Larry Cook puts fear into the eyes of his wife and his daughters. Admiration from the community mutates into anger and hostility within the home. “While they were often feared by their families, they impressed outsiders as sympathetic, even admirable men” (Herman, 71). ‘Admirable’ is an extremely loose word to relate to Larry Cook.

Furthermore, his drinking problem only exacerbates his violence and temper. Ginny and Rose both use his drinking as an excuse when he is irritable or irrational. Research indicates, “Alcoholism has frequently been associated with incestuous behavior. In one study of imprisoned sex offenders, for example, 46 percent of the incestuous fathers were diagnosed as alcoholic” (Herman, 76).

Control was such a huge issue for Larry Cook. His land and his daughters are under his paternal tyranny and they always needed to “keep him happy.” Ginny and Rose were not only responsible for cleaning the house and making meals, but they unfortunately took on the role as ‘little wives’ after their mother died. They needed to serve their father with sexual favors. While King Lear forced his daughters to publicly verbalize their love for him, Larry Cook physically forces Rose and Ginny to let him take advantage of their sexual innocence. What should be a normal and healthy family is now dysfunctional and damaged. There is supposed to be an appropriate distance between father and daughter, but Larry Cook closes violates his boundaries.

However, Herman observes that in order to face past abuse, Ginny must “come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature” (7). Ginny begins to explore the dark secret that has shattered the idea of “family” and “father.” When she recalls being raped, Ginny does not remember everything. She says, “I remembered his weight, the feeling of his knee pressing between

my legs, while I tried to make my legs heavy without seeming to defy him” but she does not “remember fighting him, ever, but in all circumstances he was ready to detect resistance, anyways” (Smiley, 280). As a young girl, Larry has not only penetrated his daughters, but he took their most precious treasure, their body. Ginny is humiliated, dominated, subjugated, and conquered. Even in standard sexual intercourse, the woman is underneath the man, being defeated by his weight (de Beauvoir, 394).

The accusation of incest in *King Lear* versus *A Thousand Acres* revolves around the storm scene. In *King Lear*, Lear succumbs to madness when Mother Nature reveals her worst. Yet, in *A Thousand Acres*, Rose begins to narrate their first experience of incest when Larry drives off into dangerous weather. Rose tells Ginny how their father “came after us” (Smiley, 188). Rose continues her disturbing story as she says, “after he stopped going in to you, he started coming in to me... We had sex in my bed” (Smiley, 190). At first in denial, Ginny does not come to the realization of incest until she is in her father’s house and in her old childhood bedroom. “Lying there, I knew that he had been in there to me, that my father had lain with me on that bed, that I had looked at the top of his head, at his balding spot in the brown grizzled hair, while feeling him suck my breasts. That was the only memory I could endure before I jumped out the bed with a cry” (Smiley, 247).

Her fears are affirmed when she spots Caroline and her father shopping and over hears his tone of voice: “All soft and affectionate, but with something underneath that I can’t describe” (Smiley, 295). That ‘something’ is the perverse action and intentions of Larry Cook that only Ginny can sense but Caroline cannot detect. Ginny and Rose’s relationship with their younger sister was motherly. “Rose and I always thought we’d

done well with her, guiding her between the pitfalls and sending her out to success” (243). Caroline has managed to escape the horrors of the farm, only to come back naive to what has taken place. Caroline defends her father in front of her defeated sisters, as Ginny exclaims, “We saved you from Daddy!” (Smiley, 245). Caroline asks rhetorically, “Did I have to be saved from Daddy? From my own father?” (Smiley, 245). Conventionally, one would not think she would need rescuing from a parental figure, but in an amusing way, Caroline is ignorant to the malfeasance she could have suffered. In the last scene with Ginny, Caroline is still adamant in protecting Larry, telling her sister, “You never have any evidence! The evidence isn't there! You have a thing against Daddy. It's just greed or something...I realize that some people are just evil” (Smiley, 363). Ginny's first thought at the word *evil* is to think of her father, but she realizes Caroline is referring to her.

Ayres explains how Lear's increasing madness in the second half of the play is in the same mode as the increasing awareness of violence that the sisters are uncovering in the second half of the novel. “The incest plot provides a feminist re-vision of the *Lear* story by suggesting an alternative narrative violence stemming from the viewpoint of the silenced evil sisters” (Ayres, 141).

Smiley is confident in her plot change, as it fits her narrative because it is a persuasive argument. She justifies her rewriting by arguing that the “Narrative...always calls into question the validity of appearance, always proposes a difference between the public perception of events and their actual meaning. We see this all the time in our adversarial court system, where an event of apparent criminality has taken place, and the jury or judge must decide which narrative of the event is more likely to be true” (Ayres,

143). In essence, there are always two sides to every story and Ayres explains how Smiley's use of argument through narration shows how "the power of storytelling is especially effective in feminist re-vision because it provides an alternative discourse for silenced feminine voices and perspectives" (Ayres, 143). Therefore, *A Thousand Acres* fills in the missing gaps.

Critics of the novel want to argue that Smiley uses the incest plot to play at the reader's emotions. How can a reader fail to side with Ginny and Rose, knowing their father has been raping them? I believe Smiley's revision of *King Lear* is just as appropriate, in the same way as to how Shakespeare borrowed the plot lines from *King Leir*. When Shakespeare composed his own version of the folktale, he most likely consulted several versions of the historical *Leir* story, including the twelfth century version by Geoffrey of Monmouth, the 1587 version in Holished's *Chronicles*, as well as a contemporary play of *King Leir* produced in 1594 by the Queen's and Earl of Sussex's Men (Ayres, 145). Incest, although dramatic, is feasible since earlier critics have suspected Lear has had latent incestuous desires for Cordelia.

Smiley takes the themes of law and authority of the early modern kingdom in a contemporary setting, to demonstrate Larry's failure of authority as a sexual being and as a father figure. Rose and Ginny both react to their violations differently. Rose seethes with rage. She compares her father to Hitler and doesn't "care if they suffer," yet she wants her father to show remorse. Rose wants retribution. She "wants what was Daddy's. I want it. I feel like I've paid for it, don't you... You think a teenaged hooker costs fifty bucks a night? There's ten thousand bucks." Ginny's ethic is based on understanding. After her realization that her body has been taken, she thinks of her situation as a "riddle

of how we judge those who have hurt us when they have shown no remorse or understanding.” (Ayres, 146).

Like the confusion over their sexual molestation, Ginny never understood her father from the beginning. She says that “trying to understand my father had always felt something like going to church week after week and listening to the minister...marshal the evidence for God’s goodness, or omniscience, or whatever,” but the problem was that “my father had no minister, no one to make him gel for us even momentarily. My mother died before she could present him to us as only a man, with habits and quirks and preferences, before she could diminish him in our eyes enough for us to understand him. I wish we have understood him. That, I see now, was our only hope” (Smiley, 78). She has a conversation with Rose about their father:

[Ginny] said, “I don’t understand Daddy. I just don’t.”

[Rose:] “You’re not supposed to, don’t you get it? Where’s the fun in being understood? Laurence Cook, the great I AM.” She laughed again.

[Ginny:] “I want to.”

[Rose:] “I don’t. Anyway, I understand him perfectly. You’re making it too complicated. It’s as simple a child’s book. I want, I take, I do.” (Smiley, 250).

As simple as the language is in conversation, Smiley contrasts the different feminine and masculine ethics between the sisters. Ginny has a more “feminine” ethic because she tries to understand her father and see his point of view. Rose refuses to do such a thing, and demands justice. When examining the character of Rose, it's crucial to note that Rose not only fights her father, but she is fighting cancer as well. Rose is a hard-headed woman who battles the men in her life and it causes problems for her. When Pete breaks her arm in a domestic dispute, she wears a cast with the words, *Pete did this*. Robin West, a law professor best known for her work in feminine legal theory, explains

the ethic of justice “is typically associated with universal rules, consistency, reason, rights, the public sphere, and masculine virtues,” whereas an ethic of care “is typically associated with particularity, context, affect, relationship, the private sphere, and femininity” (Ayres, 147). By comparing the sisters’ viewpoints, the reader can begin to understand Smiley’s feminist concerns. She juxtaposes the old text with her new vision. It is her ideology and idea to use *King Lear* to suit her best purpose. Smiley offers “imaginary solutions to real problems” (Ayres, 147). Unfortunately, the problems of incest are too real. “*A Thousand Acres* demonstrates women’s vulnerability in a way that focuses on patriarchal violence rather than on what West calls patriarchal constructs” (Ayres, 148). In all standards of human society, Larry’s incestuous behavior is unnatural and unethical, and by psychologically scarring his daughters, his punishment of insanity and death becomes inescapable.” But Smiley is less concerned with poetic justice than with paternal abuse an act that is sinful inasmuch as it not only violently destroys a child’s innocence but also blurs the fixed, ultimately ‘moral’ boundary between parent and child” (Lin, 107). When Larry suddenly has a heart attack and dies, Ginny’s reaction is nonchalant and detached: “He had a heart attack in the cereal aisle. I imagined him falling into the boxes of cornflakes” (Smiley, 334). Even after his death, there is no real compensation for the pain the daughters have born. A painful memory will live on until their last dying breath.

The nostalgia that Ginny is suffering from is ironic because of its meaning. *Nostalgia* was first coined in 1688 by Johannes Hofer as a medical term for homesickness. It was then used as a regressive impulse and a “form of escapism in which the past was idealized in contrast to an unsatisfactory present” (McDermott, 390). Ironic



indeed, considering that Ginny's past was far from ideal. Annette Kuhn argues how understanding nostalgia does not have to result in a solidified irretrievable time. She states, that the memory-work should act as "an aid to radicalized remembering [that] can create new understandings of both past and present, while yet refusing a nostalgia that embalms the past in a perfect, irretrievable, moment" (8).

For a very long time, Ginny has forgotten her past, and memory allows us to change and "forgetting dooms us to repetition" (Greene, 291). In the first part of the novel, Ginny wonders, "How many thousands of times has this sight [her father working in the fields] aroused in me a distant, amused affection for my father, a feeling of forgiveness when I hadn't consciously been harboring any annoyance. It is tempting to feel, at these moments, that what is, is, and what is, is fine" (Smiley, 137). Ginny accepts the status quo of her life, letting her father remain dominant and living her life in repetition. It isn't until Rose shatters this status quo that she goes searching her lost memories. "As I neared the house, it seemed like Daddy's departure had opened up the possibility of finding my mother...now that he was gone, I could look more closely" (Smiley, 225).

Ginny is hesitant to remember everything from the past. However, her recovered memory therapy is her testimony. Smiley does not advocate that women suppress any traumatic memories, but instead take back what is left of their destroyed identities. Marina Leslie explains that forgetting "is kind of a death, but then so is also remembering...To underestimate her enduring emotional scars is to contribute to the suppression of what she has suffered and what her suffering has made her capable of" (48). Ginny not only testifies but she mourns the loss of her home and her family.

When she remembers what it was like to be a child, she says the “one thing Daddy took from me when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my body” (Smiley, 280). McDermott suggests that the way in which Ginny retells her childhood memories seem to “combine intense longing with pain and anxiety, or they combine a sense of immediacy with a sharp detachment and distance” (399). When she writes about Ruthie, a childhood best friend, she describes the memory of their companionship in retrospective narration:

I loved going to the Ericsons, and Ruthie was my best friend...What I think of is our babyhoods perched thoughtlessly on the filmiest net of the modern world, over layers of rock, Wisconsin till, Mississippian carbonate, Devonian limestone, layers of dark epochs, and we seem not so much in danger (my father checked the grates often) as fleeting, as if our lives simply passed then, and this memory is the only photograph of some nameless and unknown children who may have lived and may have died, but at any rate have vanished into the black well of time. (Smiley, 46-47)

In one aspect, Ginny misses her childhood friend who has moved away when Ginny was a teenager. At the same time, the end of her relationship with Ruthie marks the beginning of abuse. Her time with Ruthie was innocent. Even her relationship with her father was innocent and protective, since he “checked the grates often.” Smiley creates this wonderful moment for Ginny to look back at a time that was idyllic before it became perverse in her adolescence. However, after Ginny recalls many of her past event as a child, there is always some consequence that disrupts her fond memory. Many times spent with Ruthie resulted in being “severely punished for wandering off, for crossing the road, for climbing onto the well grate, though I don’t actually remember the punishment....I remember looking at Ruthie’s intent face and her fingers releasing something through the holes of the grate, and feeling love for her” (Smiley, 46-47). Even

though Ginny feels loss and longing for the past, the memories are an awareness of the pain. They do not set up her childhood as either picturesque or a safe haven.

Unlike Ginny, Larry's nostalgia is positive. "Larry is not generally presented as engaging in nostalgia in the text: the past for him is a source of useful maxims rather than something to be indulged in for its own sake" (McDermott, 400). As Larry succumbs to senility, and the relationship between Ginny and Rose becomes estranged, he reminisces about his past with Caroline. However, he incorporates Ginny and Rose's childhood memories and attributes them to Caroline. Larry mentions to Caroline about her velveteen coat, but in fact, Rose was the one with the coat. He even tells Caroline, "I couldn't ever get you to stay away from the drainage wells" (Smiley, 272), but it was Ginny that played around that area. When Caroline responds, "I don't remember any of that" (Smiley, 272), he ignores her statement and continues to reminisce about the good ol' days. However, the difference how Ginny recollects her past and how Larry revises it, is the refusal to engage with pain and loss. And if Larry is in denial about his past, he can never feel guilty or apologize to his daughters for his malfeasance.

As Ginny recovers from the trauma of her past, the process of her restoration to feel complete is through her story. Dr. Herman remarks, "This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (Smiley, 175). Ginny decides to reconstruct herself when she moves away from the farm and takes on a new role as a single, working woman. As she works through her painful past, Smiley's victim-narrator takes on a surrogate role, caring for Rose's daughters. Not only does she start a new life with different challenges and responsibilities, she fulfills the maternal role she could not assume. Slowly, Ginny will

lose the repressed feelings of shame and guilt, and become more emotionally accessible (Lin, 115).

However, her rape will always haunt her. “Remorse reminds me of Daddy, who had none, at least none for me... Waking in the dark reminds me of Daddy, cooking reminds me of Daddy” (Smiley, 370). And while Ginny can never reconcile herself completely with Rose, she can make up for any guilt with Rose’s children. A new sense of self-admiration can compensate for her past sense of self-loathing. She ends her narrative with:

And when I remember that world, I remember my dead young self, who left me something, too, which is her canning jar of poisoned sausage and the ability it confers, of remembering what you can’t imagine. I can’t say that I forgive my father, but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember- the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed, when he wandered around the house late at night after working and drinking, like the very darkness. This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all the others. (Smiley, 371)

The end of Ginny’s story is not celebratory, despite its echoing themes of survival, liberation, and female resistance. She is still fascinated by the past with no clear resolution. And while though this may be problematic, it is still a triumph, because she will never forget where she came from, and she can continue to bear witness to history (McDermott, 405). Ginny mourns the loss of a paternal love, a dead mother, and a marital bond after she gains insight on her father’s ‘unthinkable urge.’ She mentions the ‘gleaming obsidian shard’ as a sacred object to help protect her against future painful memories. The shard is symbolic of the rape, yet it is ‘gleaming’ because now it has been made concrete. The victory in her emotional injury is her ability to be honest with her past. She has survived the rape and the death of self that follows it, to be reborn as a new

woman who can tell her story. Ginny shows no signs of rage or accusation, but instead, a calm detachment (Lin, 116).

In a way, there are consequences to Ginny's independence. She calls the move to St. Paul a "blessing of urban routine," (Smiley, 336) but her isolation is only a reaction to her manipulated past. Ginny lives in fear of being controlled and she doesn't put much effort to interact or create positive social relationships. Is she truly happy? Her anonymity allows her to put herself first, and shed some of the past remnants of her life. "The feeling of myself as a married person was something else that has lifted off long before" (Smiley, 341). She describes her new life in simple terms, "I had a garden apartment, two bedrooms up and a living room and kitchen down, with a little deck overlooking the highway in the back and a little concrete stoop and my parking place out front" (Smiley, 335). She exchanges her life as a housewife for a basic diner waitress, bantering with customers and serving bottomless cups of coffee.

One theme of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is immanence versus transcendence. 'Immanence' is "degradation of existence into 'in-itself,' of freedom in facticity..." (16). Immanence is a stagnation, while transcendence "accomplishes its freedom only by perpetual surpassing toward other freedoms; there is no justification for present existence than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future" (16). Men occupy the sphere of transcendence while woman's oppression relegates them to immanence. De Beauvoir continues to explain that woman is an autonomous freedom and she must discover herself within the confines of men labeling her 'otherness.' Sometimes, we think of ideas like 'happiness' as point in life of immobility. We cannot judge happiness and say that a female worker would be happier than a housewife, and vice

versa. There could be no happiness without freedom. Was Ginny happy? No, because she was not free. How can she claim independence within dependence? How can she accomplish herself?

Ginny is possibly still discontent even with her new life in Iowa. The memory of what her father did to her is ineradicable. Furthermore, she also needs to process the shame and guilt that she had the ability and will to poison her own sister. The sausages did not poison Rose, but by the end of the novel she is almost dead of cancer. Even in her hospital bed, Rose still orders Ginny to take her girls back to Iowa. Ginny, of course, complies. She could not escape her sister, her father's traumatic actions, and her own anger. I believe she poisons Rose out of the trauma she has suffered. Maybe it was a way of seeing how evil can cultivate from within. The same evil her father generated, she had inherited as well. Maybe she can understand how that evil manifests within a human being. Getting rid of the poisoned sausages has "had a burden lift off me that I hadn't even felt the heaviness of until then" (Smiley, 367). Trying to poison her sister is certainly out of character for Ginny, but something that cannot be undone, knowing there was intent and purpose. Ginny will always be a victim unless she takes this "evil" and is able to see it as a human thing; but not necessarily forgive.

How will Ginny move on? Can she move on? Years of conservative upbringing has doomed her to fight a massive force bigger than she. Despite a rough childhood, Ginny can leave fate aside, and create her own destiny. She is the only one in control, leaving her "dead young self" behind to search for clarity and an inner peace.

#### IV. LIFE GOES ON

Smiley parodies *King Lear* to expose what was unacknowledged in the play. Contemporary women writers like Smiley adapt the traditional to express feminist views. These women writers “are attempting innovations in narrative form that are more radical in their implications than the dominant modes of fictional experiment, and much more radical precisely inasmuch as the context for innovation is a critique of culture and a literary tradition apprehended as profoundly masculine” (Strehle, 214). Smiley connects her novel to the patriarchal structure that erases women authority and authorizes their abuse.

Smiley re-centers the value structure of the narrative by placing Goneril/Ginny at the center of *A Thousand Acres*, allowing the “other side” of *King Lear* to exist and offer a radical critique of the culture that produced Lear and *King Lear*. “The critique may be born of love for the Bard, as Smiley has recently written, ‘Love means we want him to be with us, and so we have to renew him, out of joy, pleasure and desire, every time we feel him slipping away’” (Strehle, 214).

I cannot help but apply my discovery about *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* by relating it back to my profession of teaching high school students. As a young teacher, I see the unfortunate rising disinterest in literature. My students would rather spend hours on Instagram and Twitter than appreciate the art of fiction. It can be extremely challenging to get my students, who are low level readers, to enjoy fiction that is not necessarily low brow comedy or of elementary style writing.

I cannot say that works in the literary canon would be an impossible feat to teach, but it takes two parties to deliver and comprehend the instruction effectively. First, I need

a group of motivated and willing students, and second, it is my duty to deliver the literature in an enthusiastic manner with clear objectives and goals for assessing their understanding of it.

I appreciate *King Lear* for what it is and its use in literature and education. I studied Shakespeare's works for more than a semester in graduate school, and even participated in a study abroad program in Stratford, England. That experience alone was life changing. I have nothing but respect for the Bard of Avon's work and the people who devote their lives to keep it relevant in American culture. But is Shakespeare appropriate for high school students? Yes and no. *Hamlet* has been in the high school curriculum for decades, and it will probably continue to be. But my approach to teach classic literature might be better using a contemporary re-telling. Finding relevant themes with an easier language could be the catalyst to students reading tougher literature. If I had to decide whether to teach *King Lear* or *A Thousand Acres*, I would choose Smiley's novel.

We are living in a society that demands relevancy. How can we connect to literature? This is just one objective a teacher must be able to relay to her students. *King Lear* is a heavily psychological play, which even the best scholars still have a hard time understanding. It would be a great supplemental text to *A Thousand Acres*. The language is clear in Smiley's novel and the idea of incest is an interesting, taboo topic for high school students to discuss.

For female readers, it is a controversial debate about female authority usurping male patriarchy. In early literature, women are depicted either as saintly or promiscuous. This Madonna-whore complex has plagued women with the struggle to find balance. These prescribed images have to affect how women attempt the pen. Bloom has



mentioned his “anxiety of authorship;” the stress that Smiley’s novel will not be held at the same standard as her predecessor.

Furthermore, it is recognition to female writers and what they offer to the literary world. Up until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, most fiction dealt with analyses of male writers and approached female work with a negative attitude. Criticism of women’s literature by women was not readily accessible or published with frequency. It wasn’t until the late 1970’s that feminist criticism became noticeable and the anthology provided no male contributors. The new woman centered approach became the dominant male trend within Anglo-American feminist criticism. Three major studies on ‘women’s lib’ represented the “coming-of-age of Anglo-American feminist criticism: Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (1976), Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). All three of these books want to point out that, as Elaine Showalter explains, “the female literary tradition comes from the still-evolving relationships between women writers and their society” (quoted in Moi, 52).

*A Thousand Acres* is set in the same time period as these women were developing their criticism, and I believe it tries to convey the same point that society, not biology, has shaped not only women’s writing, but women themselves. Smiley and her heroine, Ginny, fight the “patriarchal strategy of subsuming women under the general category of ‘man,’ and thereby silencing them, was to be efficiently counteracted” (Moi, 55). Smiley and Ginny have a history to tell with “raw and unstructured facts.” In *A Literature of Their Own*, Showalter comments, “Thus each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without history, forced to rediscover the part anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex” (quoted in Moi, 55). Despite a phallogentric myth of

creativity, Smiley is the divine creator of *A Thousand Acres* and she challenges the image of femaleness and how it must seek to conform to patriarchal standards. Toril Moi, author of *Sexual/Textual Politics*, describes being of the 'eternal feminine' as angelic, docile, and above all, selfless (58). However, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, authors Gilbert and Gubar define this selfless to being dead inside. Surely, Ginny has been selfless most of her life and the novel conveys her servitude to her father, husband, and sister. Consequently, she has been dead inside until she is reborn at the discovery of her history. She is reborn, what the anti-feminine would describe, as a 'monster.' Ginny is a monster because she is "the obverse of the male idealization of women...the male fear of femininity. The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell- in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her" (Moi, 58). Moi conveniently cites Goneril and Regan as examples of monsters in *King Lear*, as opaque to man.

But the morbid ending to *A Thousand Acres* does not end the conversation about the characters and their feminist interpretations. I wonder if the story continued, what will happen to Ginny? Will she find love again? Can she love again and regain the confidence and strength to enjoy her new life? As tragic as the tale may seem, Ginny's renewed situation will be exponentially better than her past will ever be. Being stuck in a marriage that provided no love, no personal growth, no hope for a quality relationship; and forced to serve a father that treated his daughter like property, creating and abusing her body like his land, will be far more detrimental than her starting over on her own, working a menial job, but most importantly, recognizing herself as an individual with a new start.

Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is more than a novel about a personal tragedy and the dissolution of family. It shows me and any other reader who has the pleasure of reading this magnificent work, that we should live honestly with genuine intention, and despite our pain, we can still be graceful under pressure.

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