The Uses of Tragedy:

*A Thousand Acres* and American Exceptionalism

**Abstract**

As it explores the connections between American exceptionalism and the genre of tragedy, Jane Smiley’s rewriting of *King Lear* in *A Thousand Acres* undercuts the ways in which exceptionalists seek to aggrandize their mythology and its decline. Like tragedy, American exceptionalism glorifies the quest for freedom and magnifies whatever threatens it. *A Thousand Acres* suggests that tragedy and American exceptionalism glamorize extreme depictions of freedom and fate, thus discouraging Americans from seeking a moderate, realistic view of themselves and their place in the world. These tragic extremes are most obvious in Larry (the novel’s Lear figure) and his oldest daughter Ginny (the Goneril figure.) Larry, who repeatedly rapes Ginny and her sister when they are teenagers, serves to question tragedy’s celebration of the human will while Ginny serves to indict the genre’s glorification of fate and tragic inevitability. *A Thousand Acres* thus explores two facets of American exceptionalism: Larry embodies the state’s double standards and worst excesses while Ginny demonstrates its citizens’ disempowered response.
We’ve always known that America’s reign as the world’s greatest nation would eventually end. But most of us imagined that our downfall, when it came, would be something grand and tragic.


Jane Smiley notes that her 1991 Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *A Thousand Acres*, “exists in a cultural soup” (“Shakespeare” 175). Key ingredients? Ecofeminism, the farm crisis, and, of course, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Ingredients that have received less scrutiny are the generic conventions of tragedy itself. Madelon Sprengnether maintains that Smiley’s novel questions the meaning humanist critics invest in tragedy when they emphasize tragic dignity, the hero’s exemplary character, and the “unproblematized restoration of moral order” (10, 11, 17). According to Sprengnether and other readers, Smiley’s rewriting of *King Lear* demonstrates the sexism inherent in tragedy and its critical history.¹ I contend that Smiley’s critique of tragedy also performs other important cultural work. As Smiley depicts the rise and fall of her Midwestern Lear, farmer Larry Cook, *A Thousand Acres* explores the construction and decline of American exceptionalism. Conflating Shakespearean tragedy with domestic realism, the novel undercuts the ways in which exceptionalists seek to aggrandize their mythology and its decline.
Before examining Smiley’s novel itself, we must first consider the paradoxes and tensions that American exceptionalism shares with the conventions of tragedy. The tragic hero, like exceptional America, possesses outstanding characteristics that both define and destroy. Shakespeare’s tragedies feature “characters whose greatness is inextricable from the things that undermine it” (Danson 117). American exceptionalism can reveal a similar irony—a dangerous exemplarity, an “exemptionalism”—in which the model nation exempts itself from the example it claims to set. At the heart of this irony, for both American exceptionalism and the tragic hero, lies hubris, “an affliction born from success” (Beinart 4).

Fraught with contradictions, American exceptionalism and tragedy both evoke conflicting emotions. American exceptionalism can inspire Americans with both pride and fear. Similarly, “What holds most constant in all the defining and redefining [of tragedy] from Aristotle to modern critics is the notion of opposite emotions . . . coexisting in tension” (Snyder 8). Northrop Frye notes “a fearful sense of rightness (the hero must fall) and a pitying sense of wrongness (it is too bad that he falls)” (214). Roland Barthes observes that “tragedy exhibits . . . contraries in their radical insolubility” (qtd. in Pavel 240). According to Lawrence Danson, these contraries stem from the tragic hero who seeks to impose “his singular will upon the resistant world;” they flow from the tragic struggle “between individual autonomy and some shaping force . . . which limits that autonomy” (117). Tragedy exalts both freedom and fate.

More specifically, tragedy, like American exceptionalism, glorifies the quest for freedom and magnifies whatever threatens it. Consider this tension in two quotations from King Lear. Gloucester emphasizes threats to freedom, insisting that we have no
control over our lives: “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’gods, / They kill us for their sport” (Shakespeare 4.1.36-7). His son Edgar, in contrast, insists on human freedom. He implies that our actions—for better or worse—determine our fates: “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us” (Shakespeare 5.3.173-74). “This brace of quotations,” according to Ralph Berry, “props up the tragic spectrum like bookends.” Tragedy, he observes, explores “that mysterious realm between the poles, where intelligent and conscious people, with some control over their lives, encounter a dark and hostile Fate that ultimately overthrows them. For Shakespeare, it is this middle realm that is the arena of contending forces” (14).

* A Thousand Acres, however, suggests that tragedy and American exceptionalism glamorize the poles, thus discouraging Americans from seeking a moderate, realistic view of themselves and their place in the world. The polarity is most obvious in Larry and his oldest daughter Ginny (the novel’s narrator and Goneril figure.) Larry serves to question tragedy’s celebration of the human will while Ginny serves to indict the genre’s glorification of fate and tragic inevitability. At the novel’s beginning, Larry believes he can and should control everything and everybody while Ginny believes she can control nothing. With these diametrically opposed beliefs, *A Thousand Acres* investigates two facets of American exceptionalism. Larry embodies the state’s double standards and worst excesses while Ginny demonstrates its citizens’ disempowered response.

Larry dominates what Lori Ween calls the “nationalization” of *A Thousand Acres* (116). Several critics argue that he represents various aspects of American culture and identity: the American pastoral dream, Jeffersonian agrarianism, mastery over nature, Manifest Destiny, Whitman’s “grandiose individual,” “the ethic of ownership,” and the
rags-to-riches success story of the self-made man. These concepts and stories all contribute to American exceptionalism, yet no one has explicitly discussed exceptionalism itself in Smiley’s novel. This omission is striking given that American exceptionalism faced strong challenges both in 1979, when the novel is primarily set, and in 1991, when it was published. In 1979, Smiley’s characters face a looming farm crisis, an oil crisis, and the aftermath of the Viet Nam War. America was losing its agrarian mythos, its sense of independence, and its belief in its moral superiority and military might. In 1991, the novel’s first readers were adjusting to the end of the Cold War, an ending that forced the United States to redefine its exceptionalism—in part by redefining external threats to its freedom. It is in these contexts that I examine Larry Cook, who represents American exceptionalism and who more than threatens his own family’s freedom.

At the start of the novel, Larry resembles Aristotle’s tragic hero, “highly renowned and prosperous.” When eight-year-old Ginny describes Larry in 1951, we encounter an understated and naïve view of American exceptionalism. Ginny listens to her parents compare their farm to other farms, saying, “I nestled into the certainty of the way, through the repeated comparisons, our farm and our lives seemed secure and good” (Smiley, Thousand 5). In the next chapter, when the novel jumps to 1979, it is clear that Larry’s power and sense of moral superiority stem from his land and know-how. Ginny says, “. . . we lived on what was clearly the best, most capably cultivated farm. The biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer” (19-20). The grandson of English immigrants, Larry sees himself as the ultimate provider: “A farmer is a man who feeds the world” (14). According to his “catechism,” his expansionist “duty” is clear: “To grow more
food”; “To buy more land” (14). Larry is liberal individualism incarnate. He believes in discipline, hard work, and self-sufficiency: “luck is something you make for yourself” (132). Like a tragic hero before his fall, Larry seems impervious to disaster: “Everyone respects him and looks up to him. When he states an opinion, people listen. Good times and bad times roll off him all the same” (104-05). When people do criticize Larry, he dismisses them: “Envy likes to talk” (23). Believing “home was best” (64), Larry, like Frye’s tragic hero, is “exceptional and isolated at the same time” (38). He is also a scaled-down version of A.C. Bradley’s hero, a man whose fate “affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire” (10).

The novel situates Larry as an exemplar of a group that will not take no for an answer. Early in the narrative, Ginny notes that her neighbor Loren Clark was “feeling a little heroic, just as the men around our place were feeling” (6, emphasis mine). This heroism stems from their triumph over forces much larger than themselves. First, the weather: “the spring had been cold and wet, and no one had been able to get into the fields until mid-May” (6). Second, national and international politics: during the wet weather, “all the men were sitting around . . . worrying that there wouldn’t be tractor fuel for planting. Jimmy Carter ought to do this, Jimmy Carter will certainly do that, all spring long” (7). Readers sense the farmers’ feelings of powerlessness, their dependence on oil cartels and on a peanut farmer who surely doesn’t know as much as they do. Yet when the fields dry, hard work wins the day: “all the corn in the county had been planted in less than two weeks” (6). Larry and his fellow farmers are nearly defeated by forces beyond their control, but not quite. They outwit and outwork nature; they are captains of their fate. The end of the novel more explicitly associates farmers with the tragic hero’s
indomitable will: “The harvest drama commenced then, with the usual crises and heroics. Men against nature, men against machine, men against the swirling, impersonal forces of the market” (317).

Yet the novel ultimately subverts these “heroics” via the damage caused by Larry. At best, he is self-righteous and shortsighted; at worst, violent and rapacious. When his wife attempts to stop him from beating young Ginny, Larry says, “There’s only one side here, and you’d better be on it” (183). Such dangerous ego inspires feminist critiques of tragedy such as Smiley’s and Linda Bamber’s. According to Bamber, “Lear’s demands are obviously unreasonable, yet he is only expressing the unreasonable demands implicit in tragedy as a genre. The tragedy of our individualism lies in our efforts to make the whole world turn around us. . . . In tragedy we are invited to share in the hero’s fantasies of his own centrality” (23-24). With Larry’s abuse of his land and his daughters, *A Thousand Acres* depicts the sad implications of these fantasies—for both a family and a nation.

Larry perceives the natural world and his daughters as limitless resources existing solely to meet his needs. He repeatedly raped Ginny and her sister Rose when they were teenagers, but if readers are shocked by this incest, they shouldn’t be. Larry’s abuse of his daughters is the “logical” consequence of his strong sense of entitlement. As Ginny says, “He thinks he has a right to everything. He thinks it’s all basically his” (179). Such beliefs prompt Larry to revel in waste—perhaps a humorous jab at Bradley’s comment that the central feeling of tragedy “is the impression of waste” (23). In Bradley’s view of tragedy, we confront “a world travailing for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-
waste” (38). An alcoholic, Larry gets “wasted” every night. He buys $1,000 cabinets only to leave them outside in the rain. He and his neighbor Harold can “eat a whole pie, wedge by wedge” at one sitting, leaving none of the “pie” for anyone else (10-11). Larry, whose self-proclaimed duty is to “feed the whole world,” does not care about even his nearest neighbors. He buys their land when they can no longer afford it, pretending to assist them, yet his motto—“what you get is what you deserve” (35)—reveals his disdain for them. Larry does not simply mean that you reap what you sow (in his neighbor Cal Ericon’s case, farm failure); he also implies that you deserve anything you can buy or take. Larry’s land-grabbing obviously represents empire building, one of the novel’s many representations that challenge American exceptionalism. Far fromremedying the “corruptions” of “Old World” colonialism, America, like Larry, creates its own sort of empire (Bacevich 1-14; Hodgson xiii, 87). This point is emphasized by the many characters and towns Smiley names after “early explorer/exploiters” who were European (Alter 155).

Larry’s land management further exhibits American imperialism. Larry uses the water beneath his land to bolster his reputation and sense of entitlement. He doesn’t care about the environmental impact of his tiling any more than he cares about the Native Americans (and later his white neighbors) who were displaced so that he could acquire his thousand acres. For Larry, “time starts fresh every day” (216). He perceives his land as “new, created by magic lines of tile” he “would talk about with pleasure and reverence” (15). From Larry’s perspective, his drainage system not only displays his ingenuity and his “rightful” dominion over the earth, but it also fuels his own God-like status: he “created” the earth. Yet Larry is also responsible for the poisons that flow
through his fields and his family. His culpability subtly surfaces when Ginny equates her father with threatening underground water: “I feel like there’s treacherous undercurrents all the time. I think I’m standing on solid ground, but then I discover there’s something moving underneath it, shifting from place to place” (104). Ginny’s description of this subterranean water reverses the imagery usually associated with the pilgrims’ safe arrival in the New World. Her description ironically echoes a foundational text of American exceptionalism, *Of Plymouth Plantation*. William Bradford writes that God had brought the pilgrims “over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element” (126). Although Larry takes pride in creating “stable earth,” he resembles the poisonous water he has generated. The water thus calls to mind Donald E. Pease’s understanding of American exceptionalism: it is touted as a grand accomplishment, thus allowing Americans to “disavow” the violations that sustain it (34). “American exceptionalism,” Pease writes, “is a transgenerational state of fantasy, and like a family secret it bears the traces of transgenerational trauma” (38). Such trauma flows through Ginny’s story and through the water beneath her feet. This water symbolizes Larry’s abuse of power and his unexamined guilt.

Larry never comes to terms with his guilt. His loss of power does not lead to *anagnorisis* or tragic recognition: he is too hubristic to learn anything. Unlike Shakespeare, Smiley refuses to grant the self-destruction and downfall of her Lear an aesthetic dignity. I borrow the phrase *aesthetic dignity* from Harold Bloom, who argues that characters such as Richard II, Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth maintain an “aesthetic dignity” after they have lost their “human dignity” (268-69). In other words, their
language, their artistry, and their complexity make them compelling even after they have committed atrocities. In “the tragic tradition,” these characters evoke what R.A. York calls “reverence,” prompting us to see “some questionable grandeur in the suffering of the powerful” (137). *A Thousand Acres* refuses to grant such reverence and dignity to Larry Cook and the atrocities committed in the name of American exceptionalism.

With Larry’s death, Smiley completely subverts the lengthy death scenes that close most tragedies. To better appreciate the significance of her rewriting, consider Michael Neill’s theory that tragedy helps us battle “the horror of indistinction” (33). The fear that tragedy addresses is not simply that of our own mortality, but that of our expendability, the fear that our existence does not matter because nothing sets us apart from other people and creatures. In tragedy, Neill argues, death, the great equalizer, “paradoxically becomes a powerfully individuating experience, the supreme occasion for the exhibitions of individual distinction” (34). Death in tragedy has “didactic potential,” and it often secures the hero’s honor, granting him a sort of immortality (38-39). For instance, Lear’s protracted death is witnessed by every character that has managed to stay alive. His passing reinforces their loyalty, their regret, and their sense that he and his generation are exceptional. As Edgar states in the play’s final lines, “The oldest hath borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long” (Shakespeare 5.3.324-25).

Smiley reverses this deathly inflation of the tragic hero with Larry’s heart attack at the grocery store. She condemns the notion that one can seek distinction at any cost—that one can live as if the ends justify the means and be rewarded for it. She lambastes
tragedy’s implication that one can engage in any hubristic act and still be forgiven, mourned, and revered.

The only character present during Larry’s death is Caroline. Readers experience it third-hand when Ginny gets a letter from Rose months after the fact. Ginny describes the death and her reactions to it with some of the novel’s shortest and simplest sentences: “He was pushing the cart; she [Caroline] was guiding it down the aisles. He had a heart attack in the cereal aisle. I imagined him falling into the boxes of cornflakes. The funeral had been a small one. Rose had not gone” (335). More attention is lavished on the suicide of a character that barely appears in the novel, Larry’s rival Bob Stanley (339). Larry is merely one failed farmer out of many. He loses all authority and dignity as his youngest daughter Caroline guides his shopping cart and as Ginny imagines him dying amidst breakfast food that Larry—an eggs-and-bacon man—disdained. Larry’s rolling cornfields are reduced to boxes of cornflakes. Stripped of grandeur and distinction—his hubris utterly de-glamorized—Larry serves to critique American exceptionalism and those who romanticize its decline.

But Larry’s obvious lack of aesthetic dignity is always strikingly at odds with his inflated self-perception. The novel provides several early clues that Larry is not as powerful and savvy as he thinks. In the opening chapter, as Larry drives the family’s new Buick, eight-year-old Ginny observes “the farms passing every minute, reduced from vastness to insignificance by our speed” (5). Any reader familiar with Midwestern history recognizes Smiley’s darkly playful use of the word passing. She foreshadows the “passing” of farms, not from father to son, but from farmer to banker, to large corporation. Even before we recognize the novel’s Shakespearean subtext, we know that
Larry’s good fortune cannot last forever. Our sense of foreboding deepens when Ginny states, “In spite of the price of gasoline, we took a lot of rides that year” (5). For the novel’s first readers, Ginny’s words likely called to mind the energy crises, the Iranian hostage crises, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, and the Persian Gulf War. For post-9/11 readers, Ginny’s words summon even more painful memories and fears when we consider the United States’ dependence on foreign oil. We may feel like Ginny: “a passenger in a car . . . going out of control” (59). Larry’s Buick—once a symbol of his wealth and success—soon signals his downfall as he drives drunkenly about the countryside.

In American culture, the automobile symbolizes individualism, mobility, and freedom—key concepts of American exceptionalism—but in *A Thousand Acres* cars and trucks primarily represent entrapment and fatality. Pete kills himself by driving his truck into the quarry that is polluted with debris from a gas-guzzling culture: “hubcaps, tin cans, bashed-in oil drums” (247). After one of Mary Livingstone’s sons is killed in Viet Nam, the other is killed in a car accident. Ginny is sometimes captive in her father’s vehicles. When she is six or seven, she is alone in his truck playing with her dolls. “Possibly,” she says, “Daddy didn’t know I was there” (106). Then she and her parents are off to rescue Harold, who is pinned under his truck in some ooze. “Careening across fields,” Ginny is “huddled down bouncing in the corner of the box” (106). When they stop, Larry asks her to walk across a six-inch plank above the ooze to deliver whiskey to Harold. Although Ginny seems to remember this event fondly because her father praises her, she later says, “I could not drive with Daddy . . . without a looming sense of his
presence” (170). When she chauffeurs him to a chiropractor’s appointment, he insists that she wait in their stifling hot car.

This unreasonable demand is, sadly, only one of many ways that Larry crushes Ginny’s freedom and spirit. After she remembers his incest, she is literally trapped in a dressing room listening to him erase her own history while he talks with Caroline. Ginny compares herself to a horse “haltered in a tight stall, throwing its head and beating its feet against the floor, but the beams and the bars and the halter rope hold firm, and the horse wears itself out, and accepts the restraint that moments before had been an unendurable goad” (198). Not surprisingly, Ginny longs to escape “the trap that was our life on the farm” (307). The word freedom, she says, “always startled and refreshed me . . . I didn’t think of it as having much to do with my life, or the life of anyone I knew” (109).

Larry quashes the freedom—the ambitions and individuality—of nearly everyone in his family. Of her brother-in-law Pete, Ginny says, “That laughing musical boy, the impossible merry James Dean, had been stolen away” (32). Ginny’s mother, like Ginny herself, was afraid of Larry, afraid to laugh: “She had a great laugh when she let it out” (91). Rose forces her two daughters to attend a boarding school in order to keep them safe from Larry. Even Larry himself fears captivity. At the Fourth of July church potluck, he broods about nursing homes: “Terrible conditions. Their children put them there” (214).

Images of psychological and actual entrapment also proliferate beyond the Cook family. Ty’s father died in a hog pen. Mary Livingstone is mired in depression over her dead sons: “I could hardly move” (92). Jess once faced the threat of prison because he avoided the draft, and shortly after he returns to Iowa, he complains that his father wants
to keep him on their farm. The novel’s most prominent pet, the Ericson’s ironically named parrot, Magellan, lives in a cage that is often covered to silence the bird.

These images of confinement are deeply ironic given the ways in which American exceptionalism and tragedy construct freedom. It is the *sine qua non* of American exceptionalism. With its exemplary freedom, America has the duty to protect and promote freedom everywhere, and when its own freedom is threatened, so goes the exceptionalist myth, it is always by some external force or (racialized) Other: Communists, jihadists, or, in earlier days, Native Americans. Similarly, the genre of tragedy features an external force that destroys the hero’s freedom. According to Schlegel, “Internal freedom and external necessity . . . are the two poles of the tragic world” (qtd. in Koelb 276). “The tragic hero,” writes Frye, “is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance, or any combination of these” (207). Oscar Mandel calls this “something else” “inevitability” and maintains that it is “the *sine qua non* of tragedy” (24).

Smiley herself is “no longer attracted to the dire mechanism of tragedy” (“Iceland,” 179), and her disenchantment with tragic inevitability is evident in *A Thousand Acres*. It is not some nebulous Fate that destroys Larry and his family. Nor is it some external force or racialized Other that rapes his daughters and decimates his way of life. It is Larry himself.

With Larry’s incest, *A Thousand Acres* not only disputes tragedy’s emphasis on fate, but it also completely inverts a genre that has long bolstered American
exceptionalism, the captivity narrative. This narrative, like tragedy and American exceptionalism, fixates on threats to freedom. In Indian captivity narratives, a white Christian woman is stolen away and held captive by “heathen” natives. She then comes to represent goodness and innocence in need of white male protection. More recent “captivity narratives” similarly demonstrate the ways in which the United States relies on a vilified Other in order to define itself as the preeminent protector of freedom. In an article published the same year as *A Thousand Acres*, Susan Jeffords argues that the phrase *the rape of Kuwait* was used to justify the first Gulf War. The phrase created a “rescue” scenario in which Kuwait was the violated victim, Iraq was the villain, and the U.S. was the hero (204). In the 2011 collection *American Exceptionalisms: Winthrop to Winfrey*, Sara Humphreys similarly argues that “formulaic characters, such as the female captive and the exploited child”—specifically white ones—embody a “threatened national purity” and promote “a brand of righteous, moral American identity” (207-208).

Ginny Cook is such a character, a white female captive and a raped child. But it is, of course, her own father who raped her, and his ideology that holds her captive. *A Thousand Acres* reveals that the main threat to American freedom is not external, but internal—not some racialized Other, but its own dominant mythology. This rewriting of the Indian captivity narrative becomes more apparent when we consider three other elements of the novel. First of all, the novel calls attention to its own relative silence about Native Americans (a topic I will return to later). Second, there are no people of color in the novel—an unrealistic absence even for rural Iowa in 1979. Still more unrealistic, the novel’s characters never even mention people of color. When suffering is discussed, it is always white suffering—a key component of Indian captivity narratives
and American exceptionalism itself. Lastly, the novel’s rewriting of captivity narratives is evident in its many images of entrapment, particularly its strange allusions to Indian captivity narratives. Ginny feels herself “hook onto” Jess Cook’s “smile the way you would hook a rope ladder over a windowsill and lower yourself out of a burning house” (217). This passage calls to mind Mary Rowlandson fleeing her burning home after it was set ablaze by her Indian captors. Yet Ginny longs to escape a home that has been made intolerable by her own father. Pete, “stolen away” (32), tells a story that also challenges the captivity narrative’s construction of evil as external. When he is a young musician hitchhiking, a rancher picks him up and feeds him a steak dinner. Then in “the middle of the night,” the rancher, along with his two brothers and wife, hold Pete down and “shave his head and beard” (77). With this quasi-scalping, the ranchers resemble Larry. They masquerade as providers and protectors, but function as predators. Opening their home to Pete, the ranchers are not external threats, but “domestic” ones. Yet there is a key difference between the ranchers and Larry. Their victim is not a female child, but an adult male. In *A Thousand Acres*, captivity is pervasive and complex, refusing to confine itself to any sort of binary. The novel thus suggests that American society itself is captive, imprisoned from within, constrained by its own ideology.

This broad cultural commentary remains relevant even if we focus on Ginny as an individual character and as a victim of rape and incest. Certainly, as many readers have argued, Ginny represents America’s raped and polluted land. Yet this interpretation, informed by Smiley’s own ecofeminism, does not do justice to her complex portrait of Ginny or to the full range of symbolism that our culture attaches to sexual victims. According to Sharon Lamb, sexual victimization evokes “almost archetypal images . . . of
victim and perpetrator. The victim is pure, innocent, helpless, and sometimes heroic. The perpetrator is monstrous and all powerful” (118). In a review of *A Thousand Acres* and some fifteen other novels that depict incest, Katie Roiphe writes, “Because of the nature of the crime, the characters tend to be separated in crude shorthand: father, evil, daughter, innocent” (69). This “shorthand” echoes binaries that are central to the Indian captivity narrative and American exceptionalism. Roiphe, I believe, misses the fact that Smiley’s novel ultimately complicates such binaries. Certainly, many of the novel’s characters crave moral absolutes and a sense of innocence—desires that fuel both American exceptionalism and America’s fascination with sexual abuse victims. Yet, near the novel’s end, Ginny attempts to shed these desires, and with her struggles, *A Thousand Acres* challenges America’s desire to see itself as innocent, to believe that evil exists only outside its borders. Ginny’s struggles also convey the difficulty of moving past American exceptionalism.

Of course, Ginny’s struggles are so difficult because her abusive father trained her to see herself as a victim—someone with no power or freedom. Larry cast himself as an omnipotent Fate in control of Ginny’s destiny. It is inevitable that Ginny embraces a sense of tragic inevitability—at least for a time. Yet just as the novel refuses to lend aesthetic dignity to Larry’s hubris, so too does it withhold such dignity from Ginny’s fatalism.

This is not to say that *A Thousand Acres* minimizes Ginny’s suffering. The novel creates empathy for Ginny (and Rose and other victims of sexual abuse) even as it participates in a debate about victimhood. This debate, which peaked around the time the novel was published, is especially relevant to American exceptionalism post 9/11, when,
as Godfrey Hodgson observes, America often casts itself as “uniquely hated” (113). A key text in the debate about victimhood is Shelby Steele’s controversial book, *The Content of our Character*, published in 1990, one year before Smiley’s novel. As Steele warns his fellow African Americans against identifying as victims, he explains the allure of this identity. It offers a moral authority based on the victims’ innocence. “Innocence is power,” but, Steele insists, it is a power that individuals seek at the cost of their own personal power (5). Other writers (perhaps less attuned to the reality of oppression than Steele) bemoaned what they called the culture of victimization. According to Charles J. Sykes, author of *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character*, 1991 was a banner year for articles that decried the culture of victimization (13). This “culture” includes a refusal to take responsibility for our actions and attitudes, a tendency to blame others for our problems, a stake in our identity as victims, and a focus on our childhood grievances. For example, in a 1991 *Harper’s* article, John Rieff writes, “[I]f we were to use a new Jungian archetype to characterize our time it would be the wounded child” (51). In a *New York Magazine* cover story also appearing in 1991, John Taylor states, “In their rush to establish ever more categories of victims, lawyers and therapists are encouraging a grotesquely cynical evasion of the ethic of individual responsibility” (35).

Although Smiley, unlike Taylor, acknowledges that real victims (like Ginny and Rose) exist, and although she details the toll that incest takes on its victims, her novel also rejects a culture of victimization. Smiley creates extremely unflattering portraits of characters that seek innocence via victimhood. When Ginny leaves the farm, Ty plays the martyr: “I gave my life to this place!” (330). Jess often sounds like the quintessential “wounded child” of pop-psychology, blaming his parents and their generation for all his
problems: “Can you believe how they’ve fucked us over?” (55). “They have aimed to destroy us and I don’t know why” (196). Larry himself tries to play the victim, and after he succeeds, a “look of sly righteousness” spreads over his face (219). Rose says of Larry and Harold, “When they suffer, then they’re convinced they’re innocent again” (234).

* A Thousand Acres * makes it clear that there are no winners in the battle for righteousness or innocence. In an essay, “Shakespeare in Iceland,” Smiley writes,

> As the lawyer for Goneril and Regan, I proposed a different narrative of their motives and actions that casts doubt on the case Mr. Shakespeare was making for his client, King Lear. . . . The goal of the trial was not to try or condemn the father, but to gain acquittal for the daughters. The desired verdict was not “innocent,” but rather “not guilty,” or at least “not proven.” One thing I learned from *Hamlet* is that none of us are innocent . . . (172-73)

Insisting that no one is innocent, *A Thousand Acres* indicts America’s love affair with its own “innocence.”

By showing that Ginny has more in common with her father than she realizes, the novel also establishes a close kinship between American exceptionalism and a culture of victimization: both foster false perceptions about individual agency. Like Lear, Larry and Ginny know themselves “but slenderly” (Shakespeare 1.1.300). While Larry overestimates his agency, Ginny underestimates—or even denies—hers. Ginny’s passivity is obvious early in the novel when she goes along with the land transfer despite an “inner clang” (18). She is critical of her own passivity, her tendency to wait. Pondering her miscarriages, she says: “Who would stay with a mother who merely waited? Who accepted things so dully . . .” (147). Although she dislikes waiting—“it’s
boring to wait” (173)—she waits throughout the entire novel. During the storm scene, she is “waiting for the catalyst.” (186). Later, she “waited for Rose to die” (316). And at the novel’s end, as Ginny “waits” tables, she claims that she is free from “the burden of having to wait and see what was going to happen” (376).

We may think we understand Ginny’s passivity and fatalism midway through the novel when we discover the incest, but even after we learn about this abuse, many of Ginny’s fatalistic statements still seem exaggerated—their language too inflated for domestic realism, their sheer quantity far exceeding that of most tragedies. In fact, as the novel progresses, Ginny’s expressions of powerlessness seem less realistic—and more obviously vehicles for the novel’s satiric treatment of tragic inevitability. At the novel’s beginning, Ginny’s worst habit is “entertaining thoughts of disaster” or “expecting the worst” (65, 67). While these habits caricature our expectations of a tragic plot, Ginny’s words also sound like that of any pessimistic Midwesterner, as do her comments about the land transfer: “We didn’t have any choice” (98). But consider the following exchange between Ginny and Jess:

I [Ginny] said, “Remember this day. This is the day when everything I was worried about came to pass.”

“Really?”

I could tell by his face that he didn’t know what I was talking about. I said, “... Just remember that I knew it all ahead of time.”

“If you say so.” (100)

Here Smiley’s writing has a mock-heroic edge. Ginny’s first comment—with its repetition and its inflated language (“came to pass”)—seems odd in the mouth of an Iowa
farmwife. Jess seems to think so too: “Really?” He is a surrogate for the reader, who (even with an awareness of the Lear subtext) finds Ginny’s blend of fatalism and prescience over the top.

Nor is this mock-heroic moment an isolated instance. After Harold humiliates Ginny and Rose at the Fourth of July picnic, Ginny notes that they went “straight home, as if there were no escape, as if the play we’d begun could not end” (220-21). This allusion to tragedy calls attention to itself, as do the many times when Ginny sounds like a Greek chorus, the doom-saying prophet Tieresias, or a brooding tragic hero about to meet his demise. At the quarry, the last time that Ginny sees Rose’s husband, Pete, before he kills himself, Ginny alludes both to Shakespeare’s “mortal coil” and to the Greek image of the three fates: “The rope of my life, coiling into this knot, then out of it, seemed again more like a thread, easily broken” (249). The sober image of the Fates measuring the threads of our lives and then cutting them off is quickly deflated with Pete’s decidedly undignified death: drunk, he drives himself into the polluted quarry. The concept of Fate is further diminished by the scene’s darkly comic and heavy foreshadowing. Pete, for instance, glances at the quarry and says, “I suppose you might swim here if you were ready to take your life in your hands” (248).

Tragic inevitability continues to take a comic beating as Ginny’s references to it grow more inappropriate. When she plots to murder Rose with canned poisoned sausage (a comic murder weapon if ever there was one), Ginny muses,

Certainly, I thought, this is what they meant by “premeditated”—this deliberate savoring of each step, the assembly of each element, the contemplation of how death would be created, how a path of intentional circumstances paralleling and
mimicking accidental circumstances would be set out upon. . . . The perfection of my plan was the way Rose’s own appetite would select her death. (312, 313)

Smiley references the inevitability of the tragic plot and the *hamartia* of the tragic hero (“Rose’s own appetite would select her death”) as Ginny temporarily assumes the role of tragedian—creating her own revenge tragedy. Yet Ginny does not acknowledge her own creativity or agency: “One thing, I have to say, that I especially relished [about the poisoning] was the secrecy of it. In that way, I saw, I had been practicing for just such an event as this all my life” (312). Ironically, when Ginny finally resolves to exercise her will (albeit, in a typically passive fashion), she feels fated or destined to do so.\(^1\) She similarly erases her own agency when she decides to leave her husband. Instead of detailing Ginny’s thoughts or feelings, the novel cuts to a comic objective correlative, Ginny’s cooking: “The contained roar of the gas and then, a minute later, the first sizzling of meat juices, took on the volume and weight of oracular mutterings, almost intelligible” (330). Ginny’s most active assertion of will is seemingly out of her hands—determined by a quasi-Macbethian cauldron of pork chops. With such dark humor, *A Thousand Acres* undercuts tragedy’s glorification of inevitability and interrogates America’s culture of victimization.

This interrogation continues with the novel’s portrayal of tragic catharsis: purification via purgation. Often associated with bloodletting, purgation was designed to remove excess fluids and thereby temper excesses in a person’s character. The goal of purgation and catharsis is moderation, “healthy, balanced proportion” (Lucas 7). *A Thousand Acres* suggests that Americans cannot achieve this moderation until we stop pledging our allegiance to American exceptionalism and a culture of victimization. Both
promise a “cleansing” that is far more extreme than the purgation that informed Aristotle’s ideas about catharsis. American exceptionalism and a culture of victimization both extend the false hope that we can completely rid ourselves of guilt, a guilt symbolized by the novel’s poisoned water. Just as the poisoned water beneath Larry’s farm represents his guilt and America’s guilt, it also represents the repressed guilt of all Americans who refuse to examine their own sense of entitlement and their own acquisition of wealth.11

The desire to purge or remove such guilt is satirized with the novel’s most clearly comic character, banker Marv Carson. With an “innocent” smile, Marv foolishly details his obsession with toxins. “My main effort now is to be aware of toxins and try to shed them as regularly as possible. I urinate twelve to twenty times a day, now. I sweat freely. I keep a careful eye on my bowel movements” (29). Marv believes that such purging protects him from “[n]egative thoughts” and “failure of hope” (29). This toxin-shedding regimen parodies tragic catharsis. And it is ultimately ineffective: Marv constantly worries about the toxins in his body and “things at the bank.”

The novel also critiques the desire for catharsis and purification via Marv’s love affair with bottled water. He is seldom without a bottle, and it is always a different type. After the storm, Marv arrives with “a six-pack of little green bottles of Perrier water from France that he’d ordered from a distributor” (200). The last time he appears, he has “tall bottles of three different kinds of mineral water on his desk, one from Italy, one from France, and one from Sweden” (364). Ironically, Marv seeks pure water from other lands while he funds farmers who poison Iowa’s water. Perhaps he believes that he can avoid the consequences of his actions. Certainly, he reveals a desire to deny his own complicity
in the creation of toxins. With Marv’s wide-ranging attempts to find the purest water, Smiley satirizes America’s attempts to believe in its own invulnerability and innocence.

Marv’s obsession with pure water is also a comic version of Ginny’s desire for cleansing. Both characters devote the bulk of their attention to outside forces that they perceive as threats. Just as Marv wages battle with toxins, Ginny struggles with household grime. There is a relentless inevitability to her housecleaning, a sort of domestic fatalism: “On a farm, no matter how careful you are about taking off boots and overalls, the dirt just drifts through anyway” (120). Ginny keeps “busy seeking perfect order and cleanliness” (308), and she approaches her psyche in a similar way. As a victim of incest who has not yet come to terms with her past, Ginny continually struggles to feel clean and pure. Always attracted to water (the river, Mel’s pond, the swimming pool), she naively yearns for a sort of baptism that will wash her father and all her problems away. When she heads to the quarry, she thinks, “only water, only total, refreshing immersion, could clear my mind” (246). But the quarry is polluted, and the water that Ginny drinks, poisoned. Purification is not an option.

Although Ginny’s desire for purification is poignant and understandable, it also signals her denial—not only of her abuse, but also of her complicity with her father’s value system. For a large portion of the narrative, her financial security and her sense of self rest upon Larry’s world view. As she reflects on the 25 years it took Larry and his father to build their drainage system, she notes that she “was a beneficiary of this grand effort, someone who would always have a floor to walk on” (15). That she also suffers from this “grand effort”—her womb poisoned—does not erase the fact that she
participated in it, admired it, and benefited from it. Her victimization does not guarantee her innocence.

Ginny’s complicity largely stems from her narrow perspective—her failure to look much beyond her own sorrow and loss. She rightly claims that her father’s point of view overshadows her own, but it is also true that she seldom seeks other points of view. Nowhere is her lack of curiosity more obvious and more self-destructive than in her ignorance about the water under her feet. Jess once again serves as a surrogate reader when he explodes at her: “People have known for ten years or more that nitrates in well water cause miscarriages and death of infants. Don’t you know that the fertilizer runoff drains into the aquifer?” (165). Ginny is shockingly uninformed about her immediate environment, and she knows and cares even less about the world beyond it. She claims that the farm’s underground water teaches “her a lesson about what is below the level of the visible,” (9) but this is only partially true. When she begins excavating her family history, she recognizes the ways in which the American dream silenced and marginalized her female ancestors (Amano), yet, like her father, Ginny seems unaware that this same history damaged Native Americans. Even though she constantly broods over the destruction of the land, her narrative never includes the phrase Native Americans. The word Indian appears in the novel only once when Jess uses it as an adjective to describe a type of grass (247). In fact, Ginny makes only one oblique reference to Native Americans: “It seems to me, when I was a child in school, learning about Columbus, that in spite of what my teacher said, ancient cultures might have been onto something. No globe or map fully convinced me that Zebulon County was not the center of the universe” (3). With the de-racialized phrase ancient cultures and her silence about Native American
history, Ginny shows that she has yet to move past the Eurocentric view of history she learned as a child. Even though she comes to understand that her family was destroyed by Larry’s belief that he is “the center of the universe,” she fails to understand that “ancient cultures” in America were destroyed by a similar belief.

“Ancient” peoples are explicitly mentioned only one other time in the novel: in the title of the essay from which Smiley takes her epigraph, “The Ancient People and the Newly Come.” The author of the essay, Meridel Le Sueur, was a champion of Native American rights, and her essay devotes a great deal of space to Native American history. Le Sueur depicts white guilt when she portrays her own pioneer family: “The severity of the seasons and the strangeness of a new land, with those whose land had been seized looking in our windows, created a tension of guilt and a tightening of sin” (40). In A Thousand Acres, none of the characters acknowledge such faces outside the window, but Smiley makes their presence felt with Ginny’s thoughts about what lies beneath the surface of the earth. These thoughts resonate with a story that Le Sueur relates about the Plains Indians: “They had lived inside the mother earth and had come upon huge vines into the light. The vines had broken and there were some of her people still under the earth. . . . the government could not stop the Indians from prayer and the dances. They would take them underground with the unborn people” (44-45) Like Ginny’s resilient tomatoes and like her last unborn child, a painful past will make its way to the surface, demanding attention. Ginny’s frequent musings about the “sea beneath her feet” indicate mixed feelings about such knowledge. She wants to understand herself and her world better, but she is afraid of being overwhelmed. She is drawn to the subterranean water, but she also imagines that it is “ready at any time to rise and cover the earth again” (16).
Likewise, our nation’s buried past—our history of exceptionalism—threatens to engulf America as long as we push it beneath the surface.

How much of Ginny’s past remains beneath the surface? How are we to interpret the ending of *A Thousand Acres*? Critics are divided on this last question, and that division reflects the novel’s stance on tragic closure: even the most ambiguous endings are too tidy. In “Can Mothers Think?”, Smiley criticizes the grand gesture of tragic death that ends so many masterpieces. There is, in western literature, what has to be interpreted as a refusal to go on, a willingness on the part of the larger heroes to vacate the mortal world through conflict, suicide, or a failure of the will to live. Need I add that there’s always a mess to be cleaned up afterward that is not the concern of the dead tragic hero? (130)

*A Thousand Acres* implies that some messes can’t be cleaned up, some sins can’t be forgiven, and some mistakes have lasting consequences.

Such consequences are evident at the novel’s end. Even after Ginny leaves home, and even after she indicts American exceptionalism in the oft-quoted speech she makes to Ty—“You see this grand history, but I see blows” (342-43)—she remains entrenched in its belief system and damaged by her father’s legacy. Ginny works at Perkins, a restaurant chain that flies huge American flags, obvious symbols of American exceptionalism. Vivian H. Brooks, who works in Public Affairs for Perkins, tells a story about the flags that replicates the language of American exceptionalism:

> Since our humble beginnings as a single Pancake shop, our loyal patrons have repeatedly told us that the presence of the American Flag above our restaurants not only stirs their innermost emotions, but instills in them a sense of pride, a
community bond, an unspoken sense of thanks for being able to enjoy the freedom, and share in the wealth of this great country.

Waitressing at Perkins, Ginny is more passive and isolated than ever. Earlier in the novel, she recognizes that her ignorance about nitrates cost her five children, and she tells her husband, “We never even asked about anything like that, or looked in a book, or even told people we’d had miscarriages. . . . What if there are women all over the county who’ve had lots of miscarriages, and if they just compared notes—” (259). But at the novel’s end, three years after she leaves him and the farm, Ginny shuns information just as religiously as Marv shuns tap water: “News was what I didn’t want. I didn’t own a television or a radio. It didn’t occur to me to buy a newspaper” (334). Even though Ginny is going to college, she forms no community, no bonds with other women. She makes no connection between rural poisons and city poisons. Just as Ginny starts the novel in her father’s car, watching farms “passing” by (5), she ends it on I-35, where “you could hear the cars passing” (333), where “life passed in a blur” (336). Despite the unceasing passage of cars and trucks on the interstate, Ginny doesn’t understand that she is still part of the same oil-dependent system—the same vicious cycle in which she feeds people who poison the earth, ostensibly in order to feed other people. She sees no irony in the fact that one of her nieces wants to work in “vertical food conglomerates” (369). More important, when Ginny disposes of her poisoned sausages—a potentially liberating gesture—she chooses a method that echoes her father’s poisoning of the land: “I ground them up, I washed them away with fifteen minutes of water, full blast. I relied, as I always did now that I lived in the city, on the sewage treatment plant that I had never seen. I had misgivings” (366-67). With this final parody of catharsis, we see how little
Ginny has learned. She still ignores her own misgivings, she trusts others when she should not, and she still seeks a quick and easy cleansing.

Yet Ginny is the character who comes closest to achieving anagnorisis or tragic recognition. Of the three Cook sisters, Ginny is the only one who gains any insight from her family’s history and downfall. The differences between the sisters may, in fact, suggest various ways of responding to the complex and painful legacy of American exceptionalism. Caroline chooses nostalgia and disavowal, and Rose embraces anger. Ginny alone seeks perspective. In the novel’s final paragraph, as she recalls her jar of poisoned sausage, Ginny insists on the importance of remembering and attempting to understand the past:

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.

(371)

Ginny recognizes that her father was not as powerful and free as she thought, and she thus frees herself from the Larry of earlier pages, the larger-than-life figure “never dwarfed by the landscape” (20). She pays more attention to her inner landscape, to her own impulses and choices. As she considers the poisoned sausages, she acknowledges a connection with her father, a shared capacity for evil. To be sure, this insight is disturbing, but it is also empowering. Ginny now sees herself as more than a passive on-
looker, and certainly as more than a victim. In short, Ginny develops a more nuanced and realistic understanding of both her father and herself.\textsuperscript{12}

Ginny plans to “safeguard” this fledgling perspective as she would a “gleaming obsidian shard.” Obsidian—a stone that Native cultures used for weapons, tools, and ceremonies—also represents a part of America’s past that Ginny does not yet acknowledge. This volcanic shard demonstrates the power of things long buried: it signals America’s need to look beneath the surface. Just as Ginny probes her family’s secrets and history—and just as Smiley unearths tragedy’s problematic depictions of human agency—our nation needs to excavate its collective past and look beneath the surface of its mythologies. \textit{A Thousand Acres} urges us to abandon our hubris and fatalism and to explore the following questions: How do we exert our wills and exercise our freedom without hurting others? How do we acknowledge our limits without succumbing to apathy and despair?
Notes

1. Aguilar; Alter; Brauner; Keppel; Leslie; Mathieson; Schiff; and Strehle, “Daughter’s.”

2. Hodgson 154, Pease 9, and Söderlind 3. For a helpful discussion of these three sources, along with two other recent books about American exceptionalism, see Edwards.

3. Many of these aspects of American identity are interrelated. Nevertheless, it is worth noting representative readings of Larry related to each aspect. On the American pastoral dream, see Alter 155 and Farris. On Jeffersonian agrarianism, see Kirby 581-95. On mastery of nature, see Carden, “Remembering” and Sons; Carr; and Mathieson. On Manifest Destiny, see Carr 133. On “Whitman’s grandiose individual” see Doane and Hodges 73. On the ethic of ownership, see Nakadate 165. On the rags-to-riches story and the self-made man, see Amano; Carden, Sons 121, 127; Strehle, “Daughter’s;” and Weatherford.

4. My understanding of this redefinition is primarily shaped by Pease, but many scholars discuss the ways in which American exceptionalism depends upon Othering. See, for instance, the authors cited in note 5.

5. Hodgson 92-93. My ideas about this Othering have also been shaped by Strehle (“I Am” and “Chosen”) and writers who explore various types of captivity narratives: Humphreys; Jeffords; Sayre.

6. When referring to Ginny, I use the word victim instead of the more empowering term survivor because of the passivity and learned helplessness she exhibits for most of the novel. The concept of victimhood is also central to the novel’s exploration of tragedy and American exceptionalism.
7. Some readers who emphasize Smiley’s ecofeminism include Carden, “Remembering” and Sons; Carr; Høgås; Ozdek; Mathieson; and Slicer.

8. Doane and Hodges also influenced my view of the importance American culture assigns to sexual victims and their stories (63-78). I have also benefitted from Doane and Hodges’ ideas about how Smiley’s novel challenges the recovery story made popular by Ellen Bass’s and Laura Davis’s *The Courage to Heal* (1985).

9. My thinking about the externalization of evil has in part been shaped by Grove.

10. Surprisingly few readers note the humor of this poisoning scene. Exceptions include Cooperman 89; Eder; and Olson 29. However, Olson interprets Ginny’s disposal of the poisoned sausages much more optimistically than I do (29-32).

11. This water has inspired a range of interpretations. Doane and Hodges link the water to “horrific repressed memories and unexamined economic pressures” (75). For Ridi-Rosberg, the water conveys “the effects of trauma” (197). York sees it as “a symbol of concealment and moral threat” (136). Carden takes a more feminist approach, seeing the water as the “unsaid,” “a specifically maternal space, a forgotten, alternate landscape and discourse that undermines the foundation of the father’s authority” (“Remembering” 185). Ozdek similarly sees the water as a “matrilinear heritage” (68).

12. The novel subtly reinforces the connection that Ginny makes between herself and her father with the word *goad* (and to a lesser extent, *pricking*). In the novel’s final paragraph, Ginny uses these words to describe her father, but she also often uses them to describe herself (87, 160, 198, 210, 246). My reading of Ginny’s new self-knowledge was influenced by Leslie 47-48, Olson 32, and Rozga 28-29.
Works Cited


