

# 'A Destiny We Never Asked For': Gender and Gifts, Property and Power in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*

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Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991) is clearly intertextually related to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, yet it is a distinctly American postmodern text. In her NBCC Award acceptance speech, Smiley said that the novel was a "complex argument against a certain kind of farming and land use, that is leading us towards an environmental disaster, the destruction of the lives of people and of the moral life of our country".<sup>1</sup> The system under critique is one where industrial capitalist farming and a patriarchal value system interact; a system that exploits and poisons the body of land as well as the female body. Thus, this article will discuss Smiley's depiction of the Midwestern farming community of Zebulon County as a capitalist and patriarchal hierarchy. I will argue that the central movement in the narrative is analogous to Derridean deconstruction in its emphasis on exposing this masked and violent hierarchy.\*

Jacques Derrida provides a way to deconstruct such hierarchies, in a process that may be described in three phases. First, the entity that creates signification – the center of the system – is identified. Second, the opera-

1. Quoted in Bakerman, Jane S. "The Gleaming Obsidian Shard": Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*." *Mid-america: The Yearbook of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature* 19 (1992): 128-29.

2. This article was given as a paper at the Biennial Conference of the Nordic Association for American Studies in Turku, Finland on August 14, 1999.

tions of this center are shown to establish a violent hierarchy of center versus margin and thus to exclude all other signification. Finally, the center can be decentered, which opens for all previously excluded signification in non-hierarchical free play.<sup>3</sup> We can see the hierarchy of Zebulon County as an ideological text open for deconstruction, stressing that the term "ideology" is used to designate both a society's ideas and values and the resulting "systems of representation".<sup>4</sup> By using the term ideological text, one can more clearly see that ideology is a complex system that assigns meaning or value to objects, people, events and actions.

The ideological text of Zebulon County is one in which a person's identity – his or her meaning – is determined by money value: "Acreage and financing were facts as basic as name and gender in Zebulon County".<sup>5</sup> At the center of this system, we find Larry's gift to his daughters: the farm. In *Given Time* (1992), Derrida argues that a gift always initiates a cycle of debt, an economic circle of gifts and counter-gifts. The meaning of the gift is always inscribed with a demand for repayment. The paradox of the gift is therefore that for a gift to be *pure*, it must appear not to be a gift. Larry's gift to his daughters is presented to them – even forced upon them – in a grand display of power, with the other farmers in the community as witnesses. Larry thus goes to great length to emphasize that it is a gift and therefore also that he requires a counter-gift. Moreover, the gift comes as a complete surprise to them. As Ginny keeps emphasizing, "We didn't ask for the farm" (240). This surprise can be read with reference to Derrida's analysis of the verb "to give", where he points out that there is an etymological connection in Indo-European between "to give" and "to take".<sup>6</sup> To give something may also be to take something. This is relevant in the economic exchange of gift and counter-gift: by giving a gift, you take control over the recipient. It is a form of economic power-assertion: "To overtake the other with surprise ... is to have a hold

3. Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. (1972) Trans. and introduction Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

4. Kavanagh, James H. "Ideology." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Eds. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 306-20.

5. Smiley, Jane. *A Thousand Acres*. (New York: Fawcett, 1991), 4. All subsequent quotes from the novel are taken from this edition and will appear as page references in the main text.

6. Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time: Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 78-79. Hereafter cited as Derrida, *Given Time*.

on him, as soon as he accepts the gift ... [H]e is taken in, by the trap, overtaken, imprisoned, indeed poisoned ..."<sup>7</sup> The function of entrapment is clear, but the idea of a poisoned gift requires some explanation, as it seems to contradict the common usage of the term "gift". Derrida, however, argues that the words "poison" and "gift" have the same etymological origin in Latin, Greek, and Germanic languages.\* In the course of this article, we will find further evidence that the farm is a poisoned gift on several levels.

The fact that the gift of the farm is a part of an economic exchange and an assertion of power is further underscored by the way Larry phrases the gift-giving: as the formation of a *corporation* in which his daughters will have a share each (18). It is the underlying debt of this business proposal that weighs heavily upon the daughters. As Ginny says later: "Since then, I've often thought we could have taken our own advice, driven to the Twin Cities ... ducking forever a destiny that we never asked for, that was our father's gift to us" (220). Their destiny is their debt to Larry, a debt of filial duty that is masked by a demand for love. The brevity of the sisters' replies indicates that they see the economy of filial duty behind the business proposal. These are the responses of unwilling children being coaxed by their domineering father:

In spite of that inner clang, I tried to sound agreeable. "It's a good idea."  
 Rose said, "It's a great idea."  
 Caroline said, "I don't know." (19)

The significance of these brief lines becomes clear from the paragraphs that follow, in which Larry is described in God-like terms: "Trying to understand my father had always felt something like going to church week after week and listening to the minister we had, Dr. Fremont, marshal the evidence for God's goodness, or omniscience ..." (20). Larry is as commanding and mystical as God is, and their brief replies indicate that it is as inconceivable to Ginny and Rose to go against their father as it is to go against God.

The divine imagery used to describe Larry throughout the novel indicates his status as the center or transcendental signifier of this semiolo-

7. *Ibid.*, 147.

8. *Ibid.*, 78-82.

gical system. In religion, this transcendental signifier is God; in Zebulon County, it is Larry. He has the power of self-signification, as Ginny observes: "He shouts, 'I-I-I' roaring and glorying in his self-definition" (306). When Ginny complains to Rose that she does not understand Larry, she replies: "You're not supposed to, don't you get it? Where's the fun in being understood? Laurence Cook, the great I AM. ... Anyway, I understand him perfectly. You're making it too complicated. It's as simple as a child's book. I want, I take, I do" (211). The subtext here is God's self-definition to Moses: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you".<sup>9</sup>

Because of Larry's status as center, the other people in Zebulon County must read his signs in the ideological text. For example, his silences are very eloquent:

I said, "Daddy, have you got those pills the nurse gave you?"

The question went unanswered, so unanswered that it got to be like a question that no one had ever expected would be answered. Whether or not he had the pills turned out to be none of my business. That was the answer. (146)

His daughters in particular are attuned to his demands, and have to read even his silences as a text: "Daddy didn't answer. But in our life together, we had long passed the point of eloquent silences ... I could, of course, read by his demeanor that he was displeased ..." (177). Conversely, he marginalizes other people's signification: "Of course it was silly to talk about 'my point of view.' When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished. Not even I could remember it" (176). Larry's godlike status as center of the ideological text is one that enables him to assign *meaning* within Zebulon County. This is most important in his definition of human worth in economic terms, which can be read with reference to Derrida's comments on the etymology of the word "economy":

What is economy? Among its irreducible predicates or semantic values, economy no doubt includes the values of law ... and of home ... *Nomos* does not only signify the law in general, but also the law of distribution ... the law of sharing or partition ... the law as partition ... the given or assigned part, participation.<sup>10</sup>

9. Exodus 3.14.

10. Derrida, *Given Time*, 6.

At its simplest level, then, "economy" means "home law", and the status of the Cook family as a domestic capitalist and patriarchal entity is indicated in Ginny's account of the origin of their farm: "It was pretty clear that John Cook [Larry's father] had gained, through dint of sweat equity, a share in the Davis farm, and when Edith turned sixteen, John, thirty-three by then, married her" (15). From the start, the family was the male's reward for labor. Moreover, Larry's economic position enables him to distribute power and value beyond his family and assign people their parts or places in a larger system. The debt or duty that the farm represents is that his daughters must acknowledge his capitalist and patriarchal power, accept his power to assign value and values, and submit to their place within this economy.

In Zebulon County, the system of capitalist industrial farming needs to marginalize the signification of nature, while the patriarchal system needs to marginalize women. Thus, nature and women are assigned a subservient place in the economy of this ideological text. This gives a new meaning to the epigraph to the novel:

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 migrations of people, by the swift turn of a century, verging on change never before experienced on this greening planet."

The correspondence in *A Thousand Acres* between the landscape and the female body is that they must both be controlled and even poisoned. Animals and plants are exterminated without reflection because Larry, as Ginny puts it, hates untamed nature: "Daddy's not much for untamed nature. You know, he's deathly afraid of wasps and hornets. It's a real phobia with him" (123). A complex system of ceramic tubes – tiles – has drained the water from the land and provided the basis for wealth in Zebulon County. However, it also carries farming chemicals that poison the earth from within and are spread to the people drinking the well water.

The ideological text characterizes female characters in *A Thousand Acres* in bestial terms to such an extent that Ginny likens herself to a

11. The epigraph, quoted on the title page of the novel, is from Meridel Le Sueur, "The Ancient People and the Newly Come".

horse, dog, or sow. Rose and Ginny are poisoned *literally* through the poisoned water and *metaphorically* through incest and Larry's power games. On the literal level, Rose's breast cancer is caused by the farming chemicals, while on the metaphorical level her cancer symbolizes her destructive heritage of anger and greed. In Ginny's case, the poisoned water has caused all her miscarriages. Still, she is secretly trying to become pregnant, and it is when her husband Ty discovers this that the metaphorical poisoning of Ginny becomes apparent. She tries to restrict the issue to her right to control her own body, but as the female body is under the control of patriarchal ideology in Zebulon County, their argument is infused with social issues. Most significantly, Ty places his dream of the hog operation and his loyalty to Larry above his loyalty to his wife.

The poisoned gift is in short the farm and its poisoned water on the literal level and the destiny, duty, and debt it represents on the metaphorical level. When Ginny tries to lull Rose by giving *her* a poisoned gift, she is participating in the destructive economy where poisoned gifts and counter-gifts circulate. This second poisoned gift is pivotal in the novel, turning the plot from a destructive circle of gift and counter-gift to Ginny's deconstruction of the system from within. Up to this point, we readers have from our vantage point outside the fiction seen how the system of Zebulon County works. In Derridean terms, the reader has identified Larry as center and then seen how a violent hierarchy is set up to centralize and valorize a capitalist and patriarchal ideology while marginalizing nature and women. Ginny, however, has been caught in the signification of this system, unable to see behind the surface of naturalized signs. From this point onwards, however, Ginny is able to gradually follow a process analogous to Derrida's three phases of deconstruction. Whereas the system's textualization of nature and body prepared Ginny for this process earlier in the novel, it is not until this crucial event in the narrative that she sees more clearly the way in which the ideological text is structured:

It was a state of mind in which I "knew" many things, in which "conviction" was not an abstract, rather dry term referring to moral values or conscious beliefs, but a feeling of being drenched with insight, swollen with it like a wet sponge. (305)

Her insight is concrete and bodily, in keeping with the text she deconstructs from within.

On one level, she sees how the center of the hierarchy has excluded the signification of nature: "I walked across the fields ... I scouted around, looking for signs of the old pond, but I couldn't even tell where it might have been – the rows of corn marched straight across black soil as uniform as asphalt" (205). The signs have been obliterated; the wetness of wild nature has been suppressed by a militant ("marching", "uniform") culturizing force. On another, she exposes the way the signification of her own body has been suppressed by her father. Ginny begins to process information bodily, especially after Rose tells her about the incest they both underwent, but which Ginny has suppressed from her memory. The incest indicates that women are objects of property within the ideology of Zebulon County: "You were as much his as I was," Rose says. "There was no reason for him to assert his possession of me more than his possession of you. We were just his, to do with as he pleased, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops" (191). Thus, Larry's gift was not only poisoned, it was also an empty gift, designed to display his power. Obviously, it is meaningless to give one part of one's property (the farm) to another part of one's property (his daughters). Ultimately, then, the gift Larry presented to his daughters was a gift to himself – a narcissistic gesture. In Derrida's words, "The simple consciousness of the gift right away sends itself back the gratifying image of goodness or generosity, of the giving-being who ... recognizes itself in a circular ... narcissistic gratitude".<sup>12</sup> This is why, even after the gift has been made, Larry remains King of Zebulon County. He is justified in his own self-approving eyes and in the eyes of his subjects, his fellow farmers. This is because his actions, in Ginny's analysis, are part of a larger historical circle of violent transactions:

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 others 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 ... (342-43)

12. Derrida, *Given Time*, 23.

Ginny widens the scope of her deconstruction here. She exposes the link between Larry's personal actions, his role as transcendental signifier in Zebulon County, and the larger historical perspective of a capitalist and patriarchal tradition. The society they live in is based on the rape of the land and of young girls.

Once the violent hierarchy of Zebulon County has been decentered and exposed, Ginny can enter the third phase of deconstruction and open for previously excluded and suppressed signification. For example, she reclaims a memory of her body that was long lost: "One thing Daddy took from me when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my body" (280). Having opened for her own body's signification, she can break free from the system that has defined her place in its economy. First, she leaves the poisoned gift of the farm behind and goes to the Twin Cities. As she leaves the house, Ty yells to her, "I gave my life to this place!" and she replies, "Now it's yours!" (330). She thus moves out of the economic cycle of gift and counter-gift, emphasizing that the circle of exchange is between Ty and the farm and that she wants no part of it. She gives Ty her share in the farm corporation, but she does not see it as a gift. She sees it as a burden or destructive destiny escaped. Thus, it is a pure non-gift, a gift without economic power assertion. Second, she returns to retrieve and destroy the jar, *her* poisoned gift. This is when her deconstruction of the economy of Zebulon County is complete: "I had a burden lift off me ... the burden of having to wait and see what was going to happen" (367). The loss of this burden leads to Ginny's insight about her father in the very last lines of the novel:

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... This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all the others. (370-71)

The "gleaming obsidian shard" arguably refers to the poison jar, which according to the critic Margaret Rozga "is her safeguard against becoming like her father."<sup>13</sup> This important poisoned gift is what helps her remember that the destructive system of Zebulon County was one she

13. Rozga, Margaret. "Sisters in a Quest – Sister *Carrie* and *A Thousand Acres*: The Search for Identity in Gendered Territory." *Midwestern Miscellany* 22 (1994): 28.



both was an integral part of and a victim of. Derrida emphasizes the importance in the final stage of deconstruction of avoiding a relapse into logocentric thinking. Ginny keeps the obsidian shard as her safeguard against such a relapse.

In the epilogue to the novel, therefore, the legal and economic terms of inheritance and legacy no longer contain the capitalist and patriarchal imperatives of Larry's power system. The debt of the sisters' inheritance is now literal and official: The IRS has *given* them a "\$34,000 tax bill on the sale of the properties" (368). Most importantly, Ginny's inheritance is her knowledge of the violent hierarchy of Zebulon County, an understanding of its capitalist and patriarchal value judgments:

My inheritance is with me, sitting in my chair. Lodged in my every cell, along with the DNA, are molecules of topsoil and atrazine and paraquat and anhydrous ammonia and diesel fuel and plant dust, and also molecules of memory: ... All of it is present now, here; each particle weighs some fraction of the hundred and thirty-six pounds that attaches me to the earth, perhaps as much as the print weighs in other sorts of histories. (369)

This is her inheritance, a poisoned gift from her father, a destiny she did not ask for. The "molecules of memory" indicate that her body is a historical text written with the print of dirt and chemicals. It also indicates to the reader that the ideology of capitalism and patriarchy is not a natural and unchangeable monolith, but a social construct, a text that can be deconstructed. In its place, a free play can be established – a non-hierarchical economy in which gifts may be gifts and not assertions of power.