

Female Imprisonment, Incest, and the Supernatural: *A Thousand Acres* as Gothic Narrative

Female imprisonment, subjugation to the patriarchy, hidden secrets, the supernatural, and incest all inundate and darken Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. Such themes are generally ascribed to the Gothic, yet few—if any—scholars have examined Smiley's novel as a Gothic narrative. Instead, scholars tend to situate *A Thousand Acres* as a novel of domestic realism, as an adaptation and re-telling of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, as a postmodern tale about repressed memory, and/or as a tale about environmental toxicity. However, I argue that interpreting Smiley's novel as a Gothic narrative can help lend additional insight into the feminist origins of the story.

As scholar Susan Strehle points out, Smiley's novel begins as a seemingly innocuous tale of domestic realism. Smiley positions her female characters in relation to dominant men such as Larry Cook and Harold Clark. In such an environment, the female lineage has become either very nearly erased, with the women preceding Ginny and her sisters having all died and with little knowledge left about them, or subjugated to the land and, thus, the patriarchy. However, where Strehle ultimately examines Smiley's use of domestic realism in relation to *King Lear*, I believe Smiley from the onset creates the perfect environment for a Gothic narrative in which the dark secrets of the Cook family are ultimately revealed, including incest, subjugation of the female, and the supernatural (as represented in various forms by Ginny's miscarried children, the mysterious baby in the photo, and Rose's phantom breast).

Research for this paper will include scholarly insight into gender roles in the Gothic; scholarly interpretations of Smiley's novel, particularly in relation to female imprisonment, incest, and the supernatural elements of the story, but also including postmodern readings (such as false memory syndrome, and environmental toxicity) that may help situate the novel in a critical context. The paper will rely to a large extent upon close readings of Smiley's novel, identifying passages that support this thesis.

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