

A Thousand Acres Study Guide

A Thousand Acres by Jane Smiley

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Plot Summary

Written in 1991, *A Thousand Acres* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by author Jane Smiley. A film adaptation was released in 1997 starring Michelle Pfeiffer and Jessica Lange. The story takes place in a small farming town in 1979 Iowa and centers around the Cook family. The aging father of three daughters decides to hand his farm over to their care. However, things go wrong quickly as the father comes to believe the eldest two daughters is swindling him out of his money and his life. The story focuses on the events spinning out of control and how the events affect the lives of the Cook family. The story is told from the point of view of the oldest daughter, Virginia "Ginny" Cook.

A Thousand Acres begins at a pig roasting party hosted by neighbor Harold Clark. One of his sons, Jess, has returned after dodging the draft for thirteen years. At the party, Harold begins bragging about a new tractor he bought. The bragging infuriates a slightly drunk Larry Cook. He brags he is going to give his one-thousand acre farm to his three daughters and let them run the family business. The younger daughter, Caroline, is upset by the transaction, so Larry cuts her out of the deal.

Over the course of the next few days, Larry grows extremely erratic; while he was always an angry man, his temper is even more difficult to maintain. He is more distant with his daughters and sons-in-law, and he questions their every choice regarding the farm. He buys expensive furniture and leaves it out in the rain. He also wrecks his pickup truck after being extremely inebriated. His oldest daughters, Ginny and Rose, decide they have to be firmer with their father. They believe he cannot keep acting in this way. Larry is furious with them, though. One night during a storm, he curses both of them and then wanders out into the storm alone.

The day after the storm, Rose and Ginny begin talking about their father. Rose is furious at his actions, and she reveals both she and Ginny had been assaulted and raped by their father when they were teenagers. Ginny promptly dismisses this by saying she does not remember her father raping her. But Rose nevertheless remains furious at her father. The family decides to meet at the Fourth of July dinner at the church to keep up appearances. The daughters are worried the town is beginning to gossip about their family problems.

At the dinner, Larry is aloof and chatting with the townspeople and telling them children will only put their parents in a nursing home. His behavior worries Ginny and Rose, but they decide to pretend like nothing is wrong. The family all sit together at the dinner table in the center of the room, and then Harold, the neighbor, stands up and starts cursing both Ginny and Rose. He says they are trying to trick their father out of his hard-earned land, and then he accuses Jess of trying to steal his own farm to start an organic food business.

Days later, the family lawyer approaches Ginny and informs her Larry, with the help of Caroline, is suing both her and Rose for the farm. Their lawyer tells them to make the farm a model of perfection so they cannot lose the farm due to "mismanagement or



abuse,” which is the clause under which Larry is suing them. Because the farm was profiting and had paid its debt off two days early, Ginny and Rose win the suit. Because of the tension and disintegration of the entire family, Ginny leaves her husband and moves to Minnesota.

She learns months later her father had died a mere five days after the trial. Ginny had also signed over all her land to her husband and Rose. Almost a year later, she gets a call from Rose saying her cancer had returned, and she needed someone to take care of her two children. After Rose dies, Ginny and Caroline meet each other at their family homestead to divide the assets. They end up arguing, and Caroline storms out. Ginny decides to auction all the belongings her family left.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

A Thousand Acres is an American re-telling of Shakespeare's tragedy King Lear. In the introduction, Virginia "Ginny" Cook is describing her home of Zebulon County, Iowa. The country is flat, except for a small bump in the middle of a T-intersection in a road. From that rise, you could see the farmland of three neighboring farms: the Cooks, the Clarks, and the Ericsons. Everything was fine when Ginny was a child, and she believed the world was simple and easy to understand.

Years later, Ginny learns from Loren Clark his brother Jess is coming home after being gone for thirteen years. Nobody knew where he had been, other than he had escaped the draft by moving to Canada. Ginny meditates on how her younger sister Rose had been diagnosed with breast cancer, and Ginny had been doing the house chores for three homes. She cooked for herself and her husband Ty at their home, for her father at his home, and for Rose, her husband Pete, and their two daughters. Rose sent her two daughters away to boarding school the year she found out she had breast cancer. The move bothered Ginny; she and Ty had five miscarriages, so she saw Rose's daughters Pammy and Linda as her own children. The youngest Cook sister, Caroline, had left the family to become a lawyer in the city. She made obligatory visits but rarely spoke to her sisters. Because the last year had brought so much heartbreak, Ginny thought Jess' return would be a breath of fresh air for her family.

Chapter three reveals Ginny's great-grandparents had bought the family's land when they came from west England. They met a young man named John Cook who convinced them the soggy marshland they had purchased could be used for farming. John Cook married the great-grandparents' daughter, and they raised their family on the land. Ginny knew it was important the land stay in the family because of how hard her predecessors had worked to build up a profitable farm. Her father later acquired the Ericsons' land as well, bringing his own acreage count up to one thousand.

Analysis

The opening chapter shows how simply children view the world. Rather than looking at a family and understanding it for what it is, a family is measured by the amount of land it owns and by how well the family runs a farm. The Ericsons were not considered suitable farmers by the rest of the county because they had a mortgage on their home. The first chapter also begins to show how talkative the town is and how their opinions and their gossip matter to one another. Many people argued about the condition of Ericsons', and they all wanted the land for themselves. It wasn't about the merit of the people that lived there or how they interacted amongst themselves; instead, the people of Zebulon County saw the family as unfit to farm three hundred and seventy acres.



Ginny also discusses how families can make complete enemies of one another over little disputes about land. For Ginny, she did not see this as a problem because of how close she and Rose were. Especially now that Jess was back to help his own father with the family farm, it looked like Ginny's generation was going to enjoy the benefits of a close-knit family and the one thousand acres that her father owned.

A theme reoccurring throughout the novel is one of sensibility. Ginny's narration shows farmers respect the "sensible" ways of living. Finding new ways of doing a job was superfluous if the old way did it right. Ginny also explains her own marriage to Ty was sensible in her father's eyes because Ty grew up on a small farm with parents "sensible" enough to only have one child. He liked Ty, and Ty was sensible enough to listen to Larry's farming advice.

The last paragraph of chapter three contains water and ocean imagery, which is an important theme in *A Thousand Acres*. Ginny describes the land and the water flowing through it as a very thick lake or river. Others, though, saw only the upper layer of the land and described it as a sea. But it is important to note the land, its soil, and its nutrients are all one large body which can only be described as water-like.

Vocabulary

Imperceptible, ballbearing, silos, complacent, friable, mastectomy, ensuing, litany, limpid, stead, undaunted, sodbuster, cisterns, equity, joist, ostentatious.



Chapters 4-7

Summary

At Harold Clark's coming home party for Jess, he was showing off both his son and his new tractor. Larry was getting slightly drunk and upset because Harold had out-done him in the farming world by buying a new tractor. Later in the evening, Ginny noticed her sisters, Ty, and Pete were gathered around Larry. He was talking wildly about a new plan for the farm. He was going to incorporate the land, split the shares evenly between his daughters, and then build up their operations. Ginny was skeptical, but she didn't want to be difficult. Rose was excited about the prospect. Caroline, though, was completely against the whole idea.

Ginny later expresses her doubt about her father's plan and her worry the conversation had just tangled the Cook family's future. Ty, though, was excited about the prospect to build the farm to profit even more than it already did. Ginny mused about how good a husband Ty was to her, how he was always sensitive and tried to say and do the right thing in every situation. She also revealed he knew about only their first three miscarriages, though. Ginny kept the last two pregnancies a secret so he would not have to go through the pain again.

The next morning, Ginny discovers her father was gone from his home. When he drove up with the county banker, Ginny realized he was serious about dividing his land between his daughters. Ginny then talked about Rose and her husband Pete. Pete had been a talented musician, but he found his way to Zebulon County and married Rose. Four year ago, he broke her arm in a fight. She stood up to him, though, and he never hit her again. However, Pete could never win over Larry's affections like Ty did.

After the church service that morning, Ginny found Caroline and encouraged her to apologize for being negative about their father's idea. Caroline doesn't want to apologize because she feels like Larry is making a monumental mistake, but Ginny talks her into it anyway. She later talks with Jess about his past life. He was living in various places on the west coast and running a food co-op. He sold organic produce and meat, and he tried not to settle into one place for very long. Jess also revealed he followed Buddhism and other Eastern religions and beliefs. Soon, others started arriving at Larry's house to sign the paperwork. When Caroline came up and opened the door, though, Larry walked over and shut the door in her face.

Analysis

One of the main themes in the novel is capitalism's effect on the family. Before Jess entered her life, Ginny saw her family as sensible, practical, and hard working. As she explained at the beginning of the novel, the net worth of someone's land was their own self-worth. After speaking with Jess, though, she begins to discover the problems rooted



in her family because of these “values.” Jess is the representation of socialism and thoughtfulness, and he shows her how to view the world in way completely different than how she learned to view it from her family. It’s a journey she continues on for the majority of the story, and it unfolds with her own self-realization.

However, the sensible theme is present in other characters, too. It’s represented in the banker Marv Carson who discusses his eating regimen with Ginny over breakfast. When speaking about his eating habits and bowel movements, everything is for the nourishment of his body. While his methods seem strange to others, he sees his own way of living as practical and healthy. He believes it is the way everyone should live if they want to be the best they can be.

When Caroline refuses to participate in Larry’s idea, she is immediately scorned. The same thing happens to Cordelia in King Lear. Cordelia refuses to flatter her father, saying there is no way to prove love. This causes her banishment, though she still remains loyal to her father and his needs.

Vocabulary

Gable, contention, divulged, loquacious, wariness, husk, marshal, chute, resonance, aced, pinnacle, slurry, illicit, ostensibly, caroling, ebullient, sullen, corrosive, perennially, wheedle, goad, germination, ominous, incantation.



Chapters 8-12

Summary

Ginny begins the second book by reminiscing about the Ericsons. She remembers she always had fun at their home because it was more like a petting zoo than a farm. Ginny's father, though, was critical of Cal Ericson's farming skills. He believed men like Cal were an embarrassment to the farming community. He also looked down on Cal's aspirations, which were only to have a happy life with his family. Cal wasn't set on gaining mass amounts of land or wealth. Instead, he focused on his family.

Later, while Ginny was planting tomatoes, Jess approached her and began talking about the past thirteen years. He had a fiancée who had died in a car accident. The talk led to Ginny telling Jess about his own mother's death caused by breast cancer. He was never informed about it, though, because his mother thought he would come back on his own. Jess was upset about this because he believes the previous generation set their children up to fail.

Ginny then remembers Caroline as a child. She was easy-going and likeable. Ginny and Rose taught her how to be polite and respect her elders. In her teen years, Caroline had a flair for performing in front of audiences. She did well in both plays and on the debate team. Even though Ginny was her conspirator and kept the plays from Larry when they were children, she now found it difficult to discuss with Caroline how Larry left her out of the business deal.

Ginny, Ty, Rose, Pete, and Jess all found they enjoyed each other's company. Each night, they began playing the board game Monopoly together. Over these games, they discussed the past, the land, and Larry's deteriorating state of mind. They found out Larry has been driving alone to unknown places. He also bought an expensive set of wood cabinets, but he kept them outside in the run. He also bought a \$1000 white couch he didn't use.

Analysis

The Ericsons represent everything the Cooks do not; they value family over all else while the Cooks prefer monetary gain. Because Larry despises their farming mindset so badly, he tries to instill the same disdain for the family into his children. This is something young Ginny notices at a young age, but she is too shy to turn her understanding into action. This is also where Ginny shows a good farmer follows a certain code, like a religion. This code is one of monetary and physical gain. A good farmer keeps his belongings in clean working condition, and a good farmer relies on himself for anything he needs.

This section is also the first time the text hints at how the older generation set its children up to fail rather than thrive. While the farm children were being taught manners,



farming skills, and homemaking skills, they weren't being taught how to survive in the real world. The children were sheltered and led to believe the only righteous life was farm life. Anything deviating from those values and morals was deemed impractical.

The Monopoly game is an interesting symbol for the text to play with. It is the pinnacle of capitalism; you acquire land and money, and then you try to take other people's money for your own personal gain. It is a play on the character's own lives. They had been taught from a young age how to gracefully take other people's possessions and see it as a positive trait rather than seeing it as greed. Each of the five characters playing the game wanted in some way to have a stake of Zebulon County, and the Monopoly game is a reflection of their greed.

As for Larry, his mental state kept growing weaker and more senile, though Rose and Jess saw this as a trick. They believed old people only wanted sympathy so they could get away with hurting other people. The younger generation saw his actions as a sign he was completely out of control, and they wanted to take control from him before he self-destructed.

Vocabulary

Equestrienne, catechism, peripheries, basins, sinews, bequeath, pinafore, epochs, fad, averted, subdued, augers.



Chapters 13-17

Summary

While taking her nieces to the pool, Ginny talked to one of her mother's friends, Mary Livingstone. From Mary, Ginny discovered her mother used to talk to Mary about Ginny and Rose. Her mother was afraid for Ginny because she knew Ginny could never stand up to Larry. She wanted Ginny to have more life choices, but she didn't think Ginny could take the initiative to live her own life.

Meanwhile, Larry grew more cantankerous with each passing day. As his daughters tried to exert more control over his life to help him settle down, he rebelled. He eventually took his temper out on Ginny. By making her choose whether or not to fix him eggs for breakfast, she felt like she couldn't win. Either she ignored the eggs and acted selfishly, or she ran to her house to get eggs and acted like a fool. Ginny felt like her father knew she would cater to him. She felt demeaned and insecure, more insecure than she had ever felt before.

When Ginny finally speaks to Caroline, Caroline expresses she feels like Ginny and Rose are neglecting their aging father by allowing him the freedom to self-destruct. She still feels like the deal with a bad idea, and she wants Ginny and Rose to give control of the land back over to their father.

The next day, Jess takes Ginny to the "dump," a place where people used to drop off old furniture. However, many native plant species were beginning to bloom and thrive. The two talk about their families and how their fathers are suddenly becoming more difficult and senile. Jess also says he has noticed how Harold has begun to favor Jess over his brother Loren. The two then discuss organic living, but Jess realizes farmers in the mid-west don't want organic farming, and Harold would never let Jess use his farm to cultivate anything other than large crops. The two feel close with each other, so they kiss. Ginny realizes she has been waiting for Jess to kiss her ever since he came back to Zebulon County.

Analysis

When Ginny's father tests her ability to stand up for herself, she fails miserably. She runs to her house to grab the eggs, but in reality she is trying to run away from his gaze. She feels awkward and insecure knowing he is judging her from his window. She feels exposed and un-ladylike. At that moment, all pride she had in herself vanished because she let him take charge of her.

Again, Ginny cannot stand up to anyone, even her youngest sister. Although Caroline is the farthest away, she is the only one who has Larry's best interest at heart. She feels like tough love is the only way to make him feel useful. She wants Ginny and Rose to make him work. She sees that Ginny, Ty, Rose, and Pete are benefitting from Larry's



absence on the farm. She believes they all have the chance to put an end to the whole deal, but nobody is willing to give up their share of the wealth.

The “dump” is an area ironically named. While many people in Zebulon County used it as their dumping grounds, it has grown wild and beautiful since there has been no human presence to farm it and ruin the soil. It is at this place that both Jess and Ginny find refuge from their hectic families. It is also a symbol of Ginny’s growing sexuality. From this point on, she begins to see herself as more than just a failed baby-maker. Instead, she notices she is a woman.

Vocabulary

Predated, resonated, reciprocate, revenues, ludicrous, odysseys, jejeune, penance, garrulous, laconic, succinctly, wheedling, cajoled, parquet, cleft.



Chapters 18-23

Summary

At the beginning of book three, Ginny reveals her father's land was accumulated in less-than-professional ways. However, those stories had been forgotten by her father when he was telling them about how his family acquired one-thousand acres. Ginny's father and grandfather had bailed a man out of debt in exchange for all his land. The man's brothers were upset, saying the Cooks had cheated the man out of his land by manipulating their brother into farming the land badly. Ginny made the same connection to the Ericsons and how Larry couldn't wait to take over their land once they left.

One night while the five characters are playing Monopoly, they get a phone call saying Larry had been in a car wreck and was now at the hospital. Ginny and Ty bring him back to his home, and Ginny, in anger, told her father that he was going to start behaving. He needed to go back to work on the farm. Ty was upset at how Ginny was speaking to Larry, but Ginny was thrilled at the new-found confidence in herself.

During the next few days, Ginny was obsessed with thinking about Jess. She was so aroused she had sex with Ty one night and then Jess the next day. She proceeded to tell Jess about her five miscarriages, and then Jess became angry. He said the nitrates in the well water most likely contributed to all of her miscarriages. The next night, Ty was angry with Ginny because they had sex without protection. He didn't want Ginny to get pregnant and lose her child again.

A few nights later, a dangerous storm came to Zebulon County. While the Cook family was preparing for the storm, Larry stole one of his trucks and began driving it around. When Ty found him, he began cursing his daughters. He said they were stealing his land from underneath him and he didn't need him anymore. He then threatened he was going to take his property back from his children. Larry then disappeared into the storm alone.

Analysis

When Ginny thinks about her grandmother and what she had to deal with surrounded by men and their land, she realizes her grandmother probably had no freedom. Her grandmother was most likely dictated to by the men in her family. They most likely skipped over her value and instead looked toward the land as their one and only valuable possession. It was an unspoken rule for farmers to subjugate and forget about their women; there were more important things than family in their minds.

The storm represents water imagery again, as well as weather imagery. Water symbolically brings change, so it was common for a large amount of rain in a novel to represent the beginning of a change in one or more of the characters. In this case, Larry is the character who resolves to take back his land. He does not want his children to



cast him aside anymore; instead, he wants to live his life as a proud man. The violent nature of the storm plays into his rage and angry temper. The two complement each other and goad each other to lash out and strike harder.

The storm scene in King Lear is one of the most epic moments in English literature. However, Shakespeare uses the moment as a defining moment of change in Lear's life. The author uses the storm as a moment of change in Ginny's life. Larry is still angry and upset, and he, like Lear, shows no signs of compassion for his daughters.

Vocabulary

Millennia, saturated, frugality, parcel, encumbering, shrill, visceral, gauze, chastened, stoicism, malleable, benign, prerogative, cantankerous, bulwark, brocade, relish, absolve, amenable, wallow, quiver, replete, solvent, seismic, incubate, admonishment, seething.



Chapters 24-28

Summary

After the storm settles, Ty and Pete leave to find Larry while Ginny and Rose stay behind. Rose tries to remind Ginny of how horrible their father is by trying to talk about how he sexually abused them both as teenagers. Ginny, however, doesn't remember this happening, even though Rose swears that Larry used to go into Ginny's room every night when she was fifteen years old. To ensure the girls wouldn't tell on him, he told each of the two girls she was his favorite, and what they shared was special. Rose said she told Pete, and ever since then he has hated Larry.

Jess Clark came to Ginny's house the next day. He told her Larry wandered to Harold's house during the storm, and he had decided he was going to live with the Clarks from now on. When Harold and Ginny met to talk, he said the family should go to the church's Fourth of July dinner and show Zebulon County nothing was wrong with the family or the farm.

At the dinner, Larry was slyly avoiding Ginny and Rose. He was telling everyone he met how children put their parents in a nursing home to get them out of the way. When Harold ushered the family to a table in the middle of the room, he stood up and started cursing Ginny and Rose for what they were doing to Larry. He also brought Jess into his speech, saying he was a worthless deserter.

Analysis

When Rose tells Ginny about the abuse, she essentially reveals why she is so bent on her father's demise. She has been so angry with Larry ever since then and the only thing she can think about is getting what she believes Larry owes her for the abuse. This is a common theme in the novel. Many of the characters believe their parents owe them something for all the problems they caused in the characters' lives. Jess discusses this with Ginny when he talks about how his parents didn't prepare him to live in the world.

Another thing important to the characters, especially Ginny, is how strong the family appears to the public. Harold knows this quality in Ginny, so he tells her the church dinner will be the perfect place to put up a strong front for Zebulon County. However, it is easy to spot something is amiss when the building begins to get too hot inside the church. Like with the storm, the weather accurately depicts the tension building up in the room.



Vocabulary

Gist, credence, catalyst, blasé, dense, wry, extrapolate, savvy, paramount, iota, ostensibly, mucus, till, capaciousness, dissipate, abashed, deferential, vestibule, non-hybrid.



Chapters 29-34

Summary

After the church dinner, Jess moved out of his father Harold's house and moved into Larry's house while Larry stayed with Harold. Ginny went over to clean a room for Jess and chose her own room. She momentarily lay down on her bed when she suddenly remembered her father being on top of her, raping her. A few days later, Harold was blinded by ammonia when it sprayed into his eyes accidentally. Ty tried to talk with Ginny about it, but they ended up in a fight.

When Ginny was alone at her house, her family's lawyer came and delivered legal papers to the sisters. Larry and Caroline were suing them for neglect of the farm. When Ginny asked Caroline why she and Larry were doing this, Caroline was adamant that Ginny and Rose were conspiring against their father to make him go crazy. Ginny was about to tell Caroline about the sexual abuse, but she decided against it.

Ginny became overwhelmed with the family drama, so she drove up to a quarry. She accidentally met Pete there, and they talked about the case. Pete said he drove up to the quarry to be alone, and it was one of his favorite places to be. When Ginny went back home, she saw that Ty was furious working on the farm before the court halted the production of a new set of buildings. The stress was building between them, and they got into another argument about Ginny's miscarriages.

Analysis

When Ginny finally remembers her father raped her as a teenager, she says she began a new life. While she was still realizing why she was so shy and demure, this knowledge pushed her into anger and rage. Up until this point, she had immediately forgiven people if they hurt or wronged her in any way. From now on, though, Ginny would get angry toward a person if they hurt her. She let herself feel new emotions, and this is an important step in her self-discovery. But she still feels slightly held back.

This is apparent when Ginny speaks with Caroline about their father. She wants to hurt Caroline for bringing this on the family. She knows the news of Larry's abuse would shatter Caroline's image of him. However, she holds herself back because she knows it wasn't Caroline's fault her father abused her and Rose.

Vocabulary

Barometer, reprehensible, gored, peplum, interceded, repartee, alkali, briskness, pivoting, pre-incorporation, quagmire, tentative, galling, circumnavigating, dappled, ponderous, smote, gleeful, yoked, simper, vogue, avert, mire.



Chapters 35-41

Summary

Ginny, Ty, Rose, and Pete went to meet their lawyer, and he said Caroline and Larry didn't have much proof of mismanagement or abuse of the property. This made them feel better about the case, but the entire problem still ate at them. One night, Pete got drunk and went to threaten Harold and Larry. But he left and then drove his truck into the quarry and died. Rose was upset about Pete's death, but she was angrier with him for leaving her and the girls alone. She then admitted to Ginny she was having an affair with Jess. She also told Ginny she was jealous and spiteful, and she had been that way her whole life.

The news about Rose's personality and her affair with Jess rattled Ginny. She felt betrayed by Rose, who she had thought of as her ally for her whole life. So Ginny decided to kill Rose by poisoning her. She included a poison plant in a jar of sauerkraut and sausage, a food she knew only Rose would eat. She delivered the canned food and waited to see what would happen.

At the hearing, Ginny and Rose's attorney proves there was no mismanagement or abuse of the farm; the bills were paid early, and the crops yielded a decent revenue. When Larry was on the stand, he began to yell Rose and Ginny had killed Caroline. Caroline tried to tell her father she was alive, but he was out of control. When Caroline took the stand, she began blaming Ginny and Rose for her father's deteriorated state of mind. However, the judge saw the farm was being managed well, and to turn the farm back over to Larry in his state would be a bad choice. His verdict was in favor of Ginny and Rose.

After the hearing, Rose and Ty got into a small argument about buying a new oven range. Ty showed his disgust for the Ginny's behavior over the summer, so Ginny left immediately. She found a place to stay in Minnesota and didn't return to Zebulon County.

Analysis

Ginny admits in her narration she has always been purposefully ignorant about her body. She was embarrassed by her figure, and she tried to pretend it was never there. Even on her wedding night with Ty, she was very perfunctory and clean about the whole process. She attributes this to her father's abuse, but also the environment she grew up in. She was taught from a young age that her body was unimportant. Not only did her parents drill this into her, but she also saw land was more important to the men. A woman was nothing but a means to create children to gather more land in the family's name.



At this point, the rift in the Cook family is irreparable. Rose has pulled Ginny to her side and refuses to let her see or understand Caroline and Larry's side. Caroline only wants her sisters to treat their father right. She sees something is wrong, but the damage is already done. Ginny and Rose have successfully alienated Larry from his own ranch. Whether Ginny knew that was Rose's intention or not, she was a part of the action.

Vocabulary

Deflorate, rift, deferring, proliferated, obstreperous, parroting, nebulous, dirndl, visceral, galled, vacillated, voluptuous, squeamish, abounds, flatulent, exude, canny, ulterior, rural.



Chapter 42-46 and Epilogue

Summary

After Ginny moved to Minnesota, she got a job as a waitress in a diner. She enjoyed the work and liked to please others. It came naturally. She received short letters from Rose from time to time, but she didn't have contact with anyone from Zebulon County. One day, Ty appeared at the diner. He decided to give Rose all his land and move to Texas. He also wanted to finalize their divorce.

Months after Ty stopped by, Ginny got a call from Rose. Her cancer had returned, and she was in the hospital preparing to die. Ginny went back to Zebulon County to take care of the girls and settle the affairs of the estate. Ginny admitted to Rose she had tried to kill her with the canned food. After Rose died, Caroline and Ginny met at the farm to gather the personal belongings they wanted. Caroline was still bitter with Ginny about what she and Rose did to their father. Ginny again considered telling Caroline about the rape, but she let it go. Both girls left and auctioned off all the family possessions.

Analysis

After the trial, there was a large break in the younger generation of the Cook family. Finally gaining her independence, Ginny sees her life doesn't need to be wrapped in the family farm. While Rose thinks she and Jess are happy, she deludes herself into thinking they have shared something so deep he couldn't leave her. Ty is left running the farm practically on his own, and the work is beginning to show in both the farm and his features. However, Ty and Rose still believe they were on the "right" side of the argument and refuse to believe they could have done things differently.

Vocabulary

Vengeful, unencumbered, arctic, stalk like, enigmatic, sojourned, alienate, yoke, divvy, obscurity, ethnic, hexagonal, grievous, inert, conglomerates, redolence, herbicide, ruefully, candidly, obsidian.



Characters

Larry Cook

Larry, known as “Daddy” to his three daughters, is a well-respected farmer in Iowa. He owns one thousand acres of farmland. After his wife’s death, he begins to rape his two oldest daughters. He is a stern and angry man, though he tells everyone he is a “sensible” farmer. When he feels like his family isn’t managing his farm well, he sues in order to regain control of his land. However, he loses the case because his fears are unfounded. He died of a heart attack five days after the trial date. Larry represents King Lear, the man who split his kingdom between his three daughters. Lear also goes insane knowing he is losing his power and command over his daughters.

Ginny Cook Smith

Ginny is the story’s 30-something narrator and protagonist. She is extremely shy and self-conscious. Ginny always tries to please the people around her, and she is very careful not to get into confrontations. She has suffered greatly in her past, but she spent the majority of her years blocking the painful memories. Over the course of the novel, she experiences growth in her self-worth and value. She learns being a doormat isn’t in her best interest, and it has made everyone take advantage of her. Ginny represents the character Goneril from King Lear. She differs from Goneril because she is not as overtly manipulative or evil.

Rose Cook Lewis

Rose is Larry’s second daughter. She is hard-headed and stubborn, and she always wants to exact revenge upon her father. She later describes herself as jealous and hateful, always manipulating people to get what she wants. She developed breast cancer and went into remission. However, her cancer returned a few years later, and she died. Rose represents Regan from King Lear. She is vengeful and jealous. She wants her father’s land and money, and she will stop at nothing to get it.

Caroline Cook Rasmussen

Caroline is Larry’s youngest daughter. She was raised by Ginny and Rose to be polite and always honest. In some ways, she is the most honest daughter Larry has. However, Rose and Ginny twist her intentions as selfish and self-serving. After high school, Caroline received her law degree. She moved to the city to be a lawyer. Like Cordelia from King Lear, she does not go along with her father’s whim just because she wants part of the land. Instead, she knows the whole plan is a bad idea. She is kind yet firm with her father and only looks out for his best interests.



Ty Smith

Ty is Ginny's husband and the only son of a farmer. He is hard-working and respects Larry's farming advice, though he doesn't always see eye-to-eye with Larry's opinions about life. Ty wants to see the best in people, but he thinks there is a definite "right" and "wrong" to every situation. For the majority of the novel, he sides with Larry in thinking that Ginny and Rose are trying to take Larry's life away from him completely. Ty represents Albany in King Lear. He is good-natured and loyal to the father, but he still wants the farm land.

Pete Lewis

Pete Lewis is married to Rose. He was a musician for many years before he moved to Zebulon County to begin farming. Neither he nor Larry liked each other, but they respected each other enough to be civil. Pete drinks heavily, and he broke Rose's arm once. Once he learns Larry raped Rose, though, Pete holds a particular disdain for Larry. Pete got drunk one night and drove his truck into a quarry filled with water. He died and left his wife and children alone. Pete represents Cornwall from King Lear, though he is not as completely evil. They are both violent and despise the father, but Pete only hates Larry because he raped Rose.

Harold Clark

Harold owns a neighboring farm to Larry's. Even though the two men quarrel over farming topics, they respect each other and consider each other to be close friends. While many people think Harold is a fool, he is actually manipulative and uses the guise of a fool to trick people into letting their guards down. He takes Larry's side over the land dispute and similarly accuses Jess of trying to steal his own land. Harold is a mixture of Gloucester and the Fool in King Lear. Like Gloucester, he is falling into the same trap set by his son, but he readily plays the Fool to manipulate any given situation.

Jess Clark

Jess is the son of Harold Clark, another farmer in Zebulon County. He evaded the draft by moving to Canada. Later, he came back home to spend time with his family. Jess feels like the older generation should be ready to move on and leave their land to the younger generation, and he begins making his own plans for his father's farm. He has a brief affair with Ginny, but he has an even longer affair with Rose later. He cannot stay in one place for long, though, so he leaves for the west coast and never comes back. Jess represents Edmund from King Lear. He has affairs with both the oldest daughters, and he wants his father's land for his own ideas and gain, although Jess' reasons for land ownership are slightly more noble than Edmunds'.



Objects/Places

Zebulon County

The story takes place in Zebulon County, Iowa.

Larry Cook's 1000-Acre Farm

Larry owns one thousand acres of farmland and divides it between his two oldest daughters.

Harold's Red Tractor

Harold's new red tractor pushes Larry to give his children his land.

Monopoly

Ginny, Ty, Rose, Pete, and Jess play nightly Monopoly games. The game is a metaphor for the way the characters covet land and money.

The Picture of the Unknown Baby

Ginny notices a picture of a baby at her father's house, though she doesn't know who the baby in the photo is.

The Remains of Ginny's Fifth Baby

Ginny buries the remains of her fifth miscarried child in the dirt underneath the barn.

Legal Papers

The family uses legal papers to divide the land. Then legal papers are used to sue Ginny and Rose. Legal papers are also used to divide the land between Rose and Ty.

The "Dump"

The "dump" is area where people dumped old belongings, though it has bloomed into a beautiful landscape. Jess and Ginny meet there in secret.



The Abandoned Quarry

Ginny and Pete meet at the abandoned quarry. Pete later runs his truck into one of the holes and dies.

The Church

Ginny is uncomfortable going to church and talking with the preacher when she is looking for a therapist.



Themes

Feminism

A difficulty that Ginny discovers is how she and Rose are subjugated because of their sex. She and Rose are raped as teenagers, and their father pits their feelings against each other to keep his acts a secret. They are also thought of as reckless and over-emotional by all the men around them.

During her transformation, though, Ginny begins to wonder if all the women in her family were put down and cast aside. She feels like the land holds much more worth in the men's eyes than the women do, so her journey is also about her growth as an independent woman.

The Effects of Capitalism

The Cook family, along with all of Zebulon County, believes in the practical, hard-working ethics of capitalism. They believe that the only way to be respected is to gain more land and more possessions. However, they do not realize the obsession with wealth deteriorates their family dynamic.

While the family is wrapped up in their net worth, the Ericsons come to show Ginny there is more to life than embodying the perfect American dream. They represent a different way of thinking, a way of looking at what America as more than money, possessions, and land. Family and friends are the most important aspect of life. Unfortunately, the Cook family does not understand this way of thinking, and they silently judge the Ericsons for not being practical American farmers.

Farming Methods

Sections of the book are dedicated to farming methods, techniques, and plant development. The book takes an adamant stance that organic, non-toxic methods are better to use on farms. Jess Clark preaches about this throughout the entire book. He says farming native plants in a natural way will benefit the people in a healthy way. He says using non-toxic materials will cut down on sicknesses.

Toxic farming methods caused Ginny to miscarry her children. Also, toxic farming methods caused Harold to become blind. Using harsh pesticides and liquids is dangerous for both the plants and the people. It also impacts the land, making it unusable for future generations.



Water Imagery

Farmed land is often compared to a sea in *A Thousand Acres*. Seeing the land wave in the breeze often reminds onlookers of waves of an ocean. However, water also seeps through the soil, creating a thick mixture of minerals and nutrients. For farmers, rain is a double-edged sword. They need rain to water the crops and keep them alive. However, storms cause setbacks in harvesting operations, making it more difficult to turn a profit on the goods.

In the novel, the storm scene is one of the most important in the story. Larry is somewhat driven by the storm into a rage. He curses his daughters and lashes them verbally. He also uses the storm as a way to prove himself as a man. He battles the elements alone, man versus nature, and wants to prove to everyone that he is strong.

Style

Point of View

The novel is told in first-person from Ginny's perspective. The readers follow Ginny's trails of thought as she wanders into her own troubled past. She wants to figure out why she has become a placid, non-confrontational woman, so her thoughts revolve around her struggles to contain her own opinions.

As Ginny grows, though, she becomes more open with her ideas. Once she remembers certain events from her past and re-interprets others, she realizes she has been given a difficult legacy, an inheritance she did not want. She becomes bitter, but she tempers her anger with prudence and gentility.

Because of the novel's first-person point of view, which spans over a few weeks' time, most of the novel is Ginny's personal thoughts and feelings. There is very little action, and most of the action is told through the commentary rather than direct observation.

Setting

The story takes place in 1979 Iowa. Zebulon County is a small area with a few uninhabited main roads. The town is mostly comprised of farmers whose families have been there for decades. The setting in relation to the characters is important. The previous generation (comprised of Larry and Harold) had to deal with the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. These events made them tough and resilient. They believed nobody could farm as well as they could. However, the new generation falls along with the new times. New advancements in technology and techniques show them better ways of running things.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in contemporary English, so readers will follow the story with ease. There are many farming words and technical terms in various parts, but that only adds the authenticity of the setting. Also, the author uses specific word names to discuss native plants at the "dump." This also helps add to the setting, allowing the reader's imagination to create what these plants look like.

Structure

The structure of the novel is divided into six books and an epilogue. The first five books slightly mirror the five acts in Shakespeare's play King Lear. Each of the books has several chapters, though the novel is not evenly spaced amongst the books. The author kept this structure to allude to the play's own structure, and many of the major events in

the novel happen in the location corresponding to the similar events occurring in the play.

The novel contains one main plot with very few sub-plots. While the main plot may seem to be centered around the farm, it is actually centered around Ginny and her life, while the events about the farm take their toll. While the ending is not “happy” by any means, it stays true to the tragic tone that the play possesses.



Quotes

A thousand acres. It was that simple. (Chapter 1 paragraph 4)

Well, I've thought over every moment of that party time and time again, sifting for pointers, signals, ways of knowing how to do things differently from the way they got done. There were no clues. (Chapter 2 paragraph 13)

If Daddy got to them and hurt them in any way I would help them learn about evil and retribution. If he doesn't, then they can have the luxury of learning about mercy and the benefits of the doubt. (Chapter 30 paragraph 235)

It suited me, and it was easy to let it claim me every night, but I had wishes, too, secret, passionate wishes, and as I sat there enjoying the heavy, moist breeze, I let myself think, maybe this is it, maybe this is what turns the tide, and carries the darling child into shore. (Chapter 3 paragraph 27)

...to discipline the farm and ourselves to a life and order transcended many things, but especially mere whim. (Chapter 5 paragraph 46)

There was nowhere to be privately, contemplatively immersed, one of summer's joys. The energy we had brought with us, the expectation of fun, seeped away, and left us even more listlessly reluctant to go home. (Chapter 13 paragraph 95)

The whole way I was conscious of my body—graceless and hurrying, unfit, panting, ridiculous in its very femininity. It seemed like my father could just look out of his big front window and see me naked, chest heaving, breasts, thighs, and buttocks jiggling, dignity irretrievable. (Chapter 16 paragraph 114-115)

She was surrounded by men she had known all her life, by the great plate of land they cherished. She didn't drive a car. Possibly he had no money of his own. That detail was unrevealed by the stories. (Chapter 18 paragraph 133)

There has to be remorse. There has to be making amends to the ones you destroyed, otherwise the books are never balanced. (Chapter 30 paragraph 234)

I have often thought that the death of a parent is the one misfortune for which there is no compensation. Even when circumstances don't compound it. (Chapter 37 paragraph 292)

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. (Chapter 43 paragraph 342)

Forgiveness is a reflex for when you can't stand what you know. (Chapter 44 paragraph 356)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss the setting for the novel. Why is a farm in Iowa so important to the Cook family?

Topic 2

Discuss Ginny. Did she purposefully try to take control away from her father? What were her motivations? What changed after she found out that Larry raped her?

Topic 3

Discuss Rose. What drove Rose to ruin her father? Why did she carry the anger with her for so many years? Did Rose manipulate Ginny?

Topic 4

The novel deals with the issue of the effects of capitalism on American families. Does the text portray capitalism in a negative or positive light? Why?

Topic 5

What feminist tones does the novel take? What causes Ginny to grow in self-confidence? Why was she such a passive character?

Topic 6

What ecological tones does the novel have? Why did the author include these in the novel? Describe three moments in the novel that show the text's stance on ecological issues.

Topic 7

How did the male characters treat the women? Why did they treat them this way? Is there a connection between the feminism and the ecology in the text? Explain.



Topic 8

Does Larry go insane, or is it all a show? If he does go insane, what exactly drives him to madness? If it is a show, how does it benefit him?