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Power and its price: Female roles and the consequences of gaining agency in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*

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**Power and its price: Female roles and the consequences of gaining agency in
Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres***

by

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Introduction: Similarities Between *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* are two of the most powerful and influential novels by contemporary American women writers. "In the attention they give to it, scholars, general readers, students, and critics alike continue to assess *Beloved* as one of the great books of this century" (McKay 4). Morrison's novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Smiley's novel has also earned much praise; in 1992 Smiley was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. However, despite the well-deserved acclaim surrounding these novels, critics and readers have not paired these two writers or examined these famous novels side by side. In fact, at first assessment, *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres* seem irreconcilably different.

Listing the Differences

Readers quickly perceive the differences between the novels. The most fundamental difference comes from the fact that Morrison is an African American writer concerned with African American culture, especially African American women and their experiences, whereas Smiley focuses largely on many different characters and life in white American society. Although both women write about their own culture and history, this distinction influences many aspects of the novels and contributes to the contrast between them. Readers also experience distinctive landscapes and diverse characters through Morrison and Smiley. Specifically, Morrison's *Beloved* places readers in post-Civil War Ohio, among a community of ex-slaves, while Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is located in thriving rural Iowa, shortly before the farm crisis of the 1980s. The dissimilarity in setting extends to the time period of

the novels; there is a century difference between *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres*. The disparate physical and temporal settings set the foundation for very different narratives.

Additionally, the societies and people portrayed seem more different than similar. *Beloved* focuses on the remnants of a family torn apart by slavery; it not only tells the story of this family but also tells the stories of various individuals who have shared the common experience of being slaves. The characters are gathered together mainly through proximity and experience and are struggling to survive and to recover from slavery. By contrast, the characters in *A Thousand Acres* make up a traditional family and the rural society portrayed is apparently filled with successful, nuclear families. The people in Smiley's novel reap the benefits of a lifetime of hard work, including expansion and affluence, and the Cook family, though lacking a matriarch, seems to be thriving. The cultures of ex-slaves and Iowa farm families seem to have nothing in common.

Furthermore, different familial relationships are emphasized in each novel. *Beloved* focuses on the mother-daughter relationship while *A Thousand Acres* highlights the relationships between father and daughter, sisters, and husband and wife. The main characters, Sethe, in *Beloved*, and Ginny, in *A Thousand Acres*, seem as dissimilar as the novels themselves. Sethe is a no-nonsense, capable, and unforgiving woman who is surviving despite the trauma she endured as a slave and later being abandoned by almost everyone important to her, including the ex-slave community. In contrast, Ginny seems meek, accommodating, and malleable, especially towards those she loves best in her family: her sister, her nieces, and her husband. She apparently enjoys every benefit of her affluent agricultural family and society. These distinctions highlight how Sethe and Ginny seem to be very dissimilar.

Discovering the Similarities

A more careful inspection of these novels, however, reveals that they are much more alike than different. Beneath the differences in setting, culture, and family structure, the themes of *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres* and the experiences of the protagonists are quite similar. A conscientious reader recognizes the same patriarchal influences deeply engrained in nineteenth-century slave and twentieth-century rural cultures. Patriarchy has created and maintains control over the societies that Sethe and Ginny inhabit and asserts control over the women themselves. However much their hundred years of separation may seem to divide these two women, Sethe and Ginny are united because the main environmental force acting upon them is their oppression and subjugation by a malevolent patriarchal system. The sinister men empowered by the patriarchy and embedded in the lives of Morrison's and Smiley's female protagonists have an undeniably powerful and negative impact on the women. For example, whether it is Schoolteacher, who blatantly enslaves and oppresses Sethe, or Larry Cook, whose abuse entraps Ginny mentally and physically, these men represent the prominent patriarchal forces that seek to enslave the bodies and minds of women.

Living under patriarchy has a profound effect on Sethe and Ginny beginning with how their subjugation shapes their identities in comparable ways. Understanding and discussing the identities of the main characters of *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres* requires some basic knowledge of psychology and sociology as both disciplines have studied identity in depth, especially what influences identity and how identity is formed.¹ These two disciplines approach the idea of identity in unique ways, but modern theories combine these disciplines into a comprehensive socio-psychological perspective. Social psychology takes

into account the undeniable factors of society and relationships in the development of identity. This discipline offers many insights to understanding the self, identity, and especially the function of roles.ⁱⁱ As such, it can assist readers in understanding Morrison's and Smiley's novels, and above all the characters of Sethe and Ginny.

An individual's identity is complex and includes personal, social, role, and moral components. These components are influenced by many factors and inextricably intertwined; Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke state, "Not only can we not easily disentangle group identities from role identities; we also cannot easily separate the group and role identity from the person identity" ("Identity Theory" 228). Stets and Burke add, "although group, role, and person identities provide different sources of meaning, it is likely that these different identities overlap" (234). Also, according to S. Stryker's theory of salience hierarchy, different portions of identity can become more important and therefore produce stronger emotions (paraphrased in Stets and Burke, "A Sociological Approach" 12-13). Sethe's and Ginny's circumstances cause their personal, social, and moral identities to be undeveloped or malformed, contributing to their role identities taking over. Moreover, trauma is a common factor for the protagonists of both novels. Trauma can impact people in very different ways, but according to research by Scott A. Ketting and Leslie L. Feinauer, in the case of sexual abuse "females tend to internalize their symptoms. The internalization is exhibited through symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and dissociation" (117). Susan J. Brison adds, "long-term effects [of trauma] include the physiological responses of hypervigilance, heightened startle response, sleep disorders, and the psychologically yet involuntary responses of depression, inability to concentrate, lack of interest in activities...and a sense of a fore-

shortened future (DSM III-R.12)” (138-39). The trauma Sethe and Ginny experience has a strong impact on their identities.

One of the first and most important influences on identity is early relationships, particularly the family.ⁱⁱⁱ The family can impact a child from birth throughout its life. Although the families are very different in *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres*, Sethe and Ginny are similarly and irrevocably affected by their familial relationships. For Sethe, the lack of a traditional family, specifically the absence of her mother and father, contributes to making her strong and capable as she faces the world, both during and after her enslavement. When she has children, she becomes even stronger; she is a natural and fierce mother, as proven by the lengths she takes to protect her children. Similarly, Ginny’s quiet strength also may originate from her lack of a mother; this strength is reinforced as she joins with her sister Rose to become surrogate mothers to their sister Caroline. In addition, she and Rose give each other strength as they put up with their father’s demands and when Rose needs care, Ginny quickly steps in. Ginny becomes the force that holds her family together, a position that certainly requires great strength. Initially, it seems that Sethe and Ginny gather strength from having families. Both women support the people they love, and their love gives them a purpose and makes them capable of withstanding horrible circumstances. Ironically, even as their familial relationships make Sethe and Ginny strong and capable, these relationships also limit them. Sethe is capable of freeing herself and her children from slavery because of her powerful attachment to her children, but this devotion subsequently has horrible consequences. Ginny relies just as much on her family as they rely on her, and this reliance prevents her from achieving independence.

Social psychology also tells us that familial relationships can have a strong negative impact on children, especially in the case of physical and sexual abuse. Abuse by a parent or caregiver can constitute what Jennifer J. Freyd calls betrayal trauma. According to Freyd in “Betrayal Trauma: Traumatic Amnesia as an Adaptive Response to Childhood Abuse,” betrayal is “a conflict between reality and the need to maintain trust in caregivers” (321). In her book, *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*, she adds, “Betrayal is the violation of implicit or explicit trust. The closer and more necessary the relationship, the greater the degree of betrayal. Extensive betrayal is traumatic” (Freyd 9). Betrayal trauma refers mainly to sexual abuse, especially incest. According to D. Russell, “the most psychologically damaging sexually abusive relationship is that in which the father figure is the perpetrator [because] fathers were more likely to use force, impose intercourse, and sexually abuse their victim more frequently” (paraphrased in Ketring and Feinauer 112). Research conducted by Scott A. Ketring and Leslie L. Feinauer found that children sexually abused by the father (especially female children) were more traumatized by the experience than were victims who were abused by other perpetrators (118). Freyd’s theory of betrayal trauma attempts to explain why:

Consider the pressure on a child who is sexually abused by a parent or other adult who has power and authority over that child. The child *needs* to trust his or her parents and caregivers. Childhood sexual abuse, whether molestation or even penetration usually leaves no lasting physical evidence. It is neither explained nor understandable to the child. It is often not even acknowledged by the perpetrator, except to say it didn’t happen or wasn’t what it seemed to be.... To know is to put oneself in danger. Not to know is to align oneself with the caregiver and ensure survival. (*Betrayal Trauma: The Logic* 3-4).

David Spiegel agrees that children “want their parents to love them, and depend upon them for their survival. Thus they have to ‘get along’ even when the cost of doing so is putting up

with sexual and physical exploitation” (20). Furthermore, Freyd posits that for children who cannot escape, such as Ginny, traumatic amnesia can occur (*Betrayal Trauma: The Logic* 10). This theory greatly contributes to understanding Ginny, not only why she endures abuse, but also why she represses it. It also makes clear how sexual abuse committed by the family can impact a child.

In addition to considering how the family affects an individual, we also must consider how the family and individual are influenced by the larger society. Social psychology tells us that because individuals are unavoidably steeped in their community and the larger cultural environment, identity includes the social identity.^{iv} “*Social identity* refers to a sense of self that is built up over time as the person participates in social life and identifies with others. Its frame of reference is not the immediate situation and its role, but rather a *community*” (Hewitt 97). But not only is the individual affected by society, the family is as well. Moreover, the individual is affected by society through the family. Society dictates what is acceptable and proper for families, and what the roles of individual family members are. Smiley recognized this when she stated in an interview, “the family is the pivot between the individual and the society” (Berne 38). The societies surrounding the families of Sethe and Ginny are based on patriarchal values that require the commodification of groups and individuals. In *Beloved*, society has declared that Sethe, as a slave woman, can be used physically and sexually at the whim of Schoolteacher and his two young students. Only Sethe’s body and the work it can do has worth; thus this society has no concern for Sethe as a woman or as an individual. In *A Thousand Acres*, society has placed Ginny at the mercy of her father because her value is intrinsically attached to her role as daughter. What is more, her value seems solely based on what she can do or provide for her father, whether it be

working to support her family or being used to fulfill her father's sexual needs. Ginny is so firmly entrenched in her family and her place in society that for much of the novel she seems to be unaware of her own desires. Sethe, on the other hand, is aware but consciously and consistently puts herself aside for the greater good of her family. Pushing aside their individuality and personal aspirations maintains the status quo in their cultures rather than challenging it.

Additionally, each society tries to silence women as it imprisons them. These societies demand unquestioned service and allow no dissent as they subjugate and oppress women. According to Nancy Chodorow, "Social and psychological oppression...is perpetuated in the structure of personality" (385). Not only is oppression passed down in society, but a personal and familial identity that allows one to be oppressed can also be passed down from generation to generation. Surprisingly, despite how pervasive and insidious these societies are, Sethe and Ginny not only survive but also become strong. This strength allows them to gain true moments of agency as they escape their circumstances. Unfortunately, this small positive result cannot undo the effects of years of abuse and pain.

If...a female's self-identity is formed through relationships, then a disturbance of early familial relationships would more drastically affect the perception of self for a female than for a male. Few experiences distort family relationships as significantly as do traumatic acts of sexual abuse. Because young women rely more on relationships than do young men to gain a sense of themselves, it is assumed that women who were abused by someone in a close familial relationship would be more likely to have a difficulty creating a healthy self-identity than men who were victimized by abuse. (Ketring and Feinauer 110)

Both Sethe and Ginny are abused sexually, physically, and emotionally and it is no surprise that because of the trauma that they suffer, their personal and social identities do not develop in a healthy way.

Understanding Sethe and Ginny also demands an analysis of their role identities. The role identities of both women are vital to their selves, so much so that these role identities become the most salient component of their identities and supersede all others. The change trauma begets in Sethe's and Ginny's role identities becomes clear when we investigate the ways the two women perceive, define, and act on their roles.

Human beings are role-making and role-taking creatures who typically see themselves as members of one or another social group or collectivity. They derive a sense of what they should do as well as the energy for doing it from their sense of likeness with others and their participation in joint purposes. They can also define themselves in opposition to the group and derive a sense of location and energy from their perceived differences from others. (Hewitt 94)

We accept the names and roles, and, as society has preconceived definitions of these roles, we accept the definitions as well.^v John P. Hewitt states that people “of today inherit social roles” (6). Yet each individual brings a unique personal and social identity to his or her roles (Stets and Burke, “A Sociological Approach”). Not only did women of the past have a limited set of roles available to them, but they also were more constrained by their roles than men were.

In patriarchal societies women's roles usually were limited to traditional female roles related to the family, above all the roles of daughter, wife, and mother. These roles were typically defined in a strict, traditional way; this limitation is evident in both *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres*. Sethe and Ginny display how women and the various female roles they take are affected by the cultures that consume them. Both women perceive their roles as the most important part of their identities and come to define and perform their duties in those roles in an extreme way. This is a result of the abuse they have survived and a lack of personal identity and self-worth.^{vi} Sethe epitomizes the role of mother, having been denied the roles of

daughter, sister, and wife, whereas Ginny has been denied the role of mother, and so becomes extreme in her performance of her wifely, sisterly, and daughterly duties. Ginny and Sethe rely heavily on their roles because “by taking on a role identity, persons adopt self-meanings and expectations to accompany the roles” (Stets and Burke, “Identity Theory” 227). Their lives are defined by their roles because they have not been allowed to develop strong individual identities or self-value. Furthermore, because of the flaws in their social identity and their society, their self-concept and sense of self-worth are wholly dependent on the performance and success of their female roles.^{vii} Their extreme definition and performance of these roles causes each woman to act in surprising ways towards the person she loves the most.

At the same time, because of and in spite of their roles, each woman gains independence. “[T]here is also agency. As agents, individuals can make or create a role by making behavioral choices and decisions and engaging in negotiation and compromise and well as conflict” (Stets and Burke, “Identity Theory” 9). Agency might also be understood as the autonomous self. This view “holds that the self is the locus of autonomous agency, that which freely makes choices and wills actions” (Brison 153). Agency can allow people to do things that seem outside their role identity, or that conflict with their roles. However, because of the inextricable and deep influence of the factors that shape the self, agency cannot be separate from identity. Agency must not be truly autonomous and a capacity for agency must exist, perhaps deep in the personal identity, possibly as the result of certain influences, or as a converse reaction to horrible circumstances. In the case of Sethe and Ginny, the extreme way they define their roles and their extreme performance of these roles affects their identities, which in turn affects how they act as agents of their lives.

An additional component of Sethe's and Ginny's identities that is affected by familial and social roles is their morality or their moral identity.^{viii} Most readers would generally agree that the patriarchal societies portrayed in *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres* are unethical. The morals of the society and individuals who control that society are certainly questionable if the society encourages oppression and abuse of select members. Society defines what is morally acceptable and its standards are enacted and perpetuated by the main social groups – that is, families, peers, and schools.^{ix} Modern theory on moral identity formation suggests that the strongest influences on morality are outside the family.^x Despite the debate on what that impact is and how strong it is, there is little doubt that immediate family does have some effect on the moral development of an individual (L. Walker 261-64, Smetana 319). Parents can have a strong positive impact on the development of moral identity (Hart, Atkins, and Ford 384-85). Knowing this, it is logical to conclude that parents can have a strong negative effect as well. An understanding of moral identity development can add insight into Sethe and Ginny and how they perform their roles.

In the case of Sethe, just as the lack of a traditional family and her experiences as a slave have shaped her identity, especially her role identity, they have also impacted her morality. This effect is interesting and unexpected because not only does Sethe refuse to adopt the morals of a vicious society, but she also resists that society in an extreme way. Sethe seems to make her decisions based on some inner moral compass that points her toward doing what is just, despite common belief and the law of her time. However, because she has had little or no contact with individuals or groups that behave in more ethical ways than slave society, she has no positive model for her moral identity. Instead, the pendulum of her resistance swings far past what is right. It is clear to Sethe that slavery is wrong, so she

determines that it must be right to do whatever it takes to keep her children out of slavery. When her options are limited, she knows only death will keep her children out of slavery. Her moral identity is formed by and subject to her role and her role demands that she protect her children from slavery. Therefore, it becomes necessary that she kill her children to keep them free, whether or not murder is a justifiable means to that end. The strength of her resistance and the power her role has over her morality are certainly based in the trauma she has suffered and society's influence.

Ginny's moral identity also seems to become confused as a result of the many negative influences on her. She has been taught that appearances are vital and that no matter what is happening a family must look strong and good. In truth, she learns that a nice appearance covers many evils, many betrayals. Ginny is not only betrayed by her father who rapes her, but she is subsequently betrayed by her husband, although subtly, and by her sister, Rose. Some betrayal she can and has withstood, but being betrayed by the person she loves the most, Rose, makes her capable of both leaving and murder. Ginny's morality is strongly affected by her roles. At first, her roles demand that she put everyone before herself. However, after being betrayed repeatedly, Ginny begins to put herself first and remove herself from the roles that have subsumed her. The pendulum of Ginny's morality, like Sethe's, swings to the opposite side. Instead of doing everything that is right and good for others, she must do what is right for herself through any means. Protecting herself and gaining independence means completely dissolving her most important relationship. This action displays how Ginny's morality has suffered; murder becomes necessary for Ginny to save herself, just as murder becomes necessary for Sethe to save her children. Each woman targets the person she loves the most.

A basic knowledge of identity development and specific components of identity can help readers understand *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres*. An examination of the relationships and identities of Sethe and Ginny, as female protagonists, provides insight into how their roles and morality develop in similar ways, despite their different circumstances. This thesis focuses on what factors influence their separate and yet similar identities, discovering how each woman gains power in spite of the trauma and circumstances that limit her and examining what the consequences of this power are.

***Beloved*: The Power and Price of Sethe's "Thick" Love**

Twenty-first century readers know that American slavery was horrible. We know the facts as described by history, and we even know about some individual slaves' experiences as reported in slave narratives. Despite this knowledge about slavery and the abuse slaves were subjected to, we are lucky that it is impossible for us to truly understand. Because we cannot understand slavery through personal experience, fictional narrative helps readers negotiate the slave experience. One such narrative is Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. According to Herbert William Rice, in *Beloved* "We are seeing the jagged ends of the slave experience, not just the long-sought freedom, but the nightmare of trying to live freely again" (108). Similarly, Nancy J. Peterson asserts, "*Beloved* explores the traumatic crises caused by slavery and the devastating psychological effects that linger...Morrison creates a narrative that constantly drifts from present and back again, as bits and pieces of memories float to the surface, then sink back to the bottom" (*Beloved: Case Studies* 22). In order to offer her audience greater understanding, Morrison creates an array of characters who have varying experiences. Their stories unfold both in the present of the novel, and in the past. "But Morrison doesn't really *tell* these incidents. Bits and pieces of them leak out between the closed eyelids of her characters, or between their clenched fingers. She twists and tortures and fractures events until they are little slivers that cut" (Snitow 27). Inescapable memories are threaded into the lives of the ex-slaves – and their stories thread their way into the minds of the readers.

Beloved goes beyond relating occurrences typical of slave life to imagining some of the most horrific incidents and the damage those incidents cause. In *Beloved*, Morrison dares to imagine a female slave's experiences, a mother's experiences. The oppression of slavery

was especially degrading to women because of the added elements of sexual exploitation and losing their children. As difficult as this must be to imagine and make accessible to the reader, Morrison saw the story as necessary. In an interview Morrison states, “There is a necessity for remembering the horror but of course there’s a necessity for remembering it in a manner which can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive” (Darling 247-48). Readers must learn from and deal with what happens throughout Morrison’s novel, just as the characters in the novel struggle to negotiate their lives both during slavery and afterwards. Morrison created Sethe, but the novelist also explains in the Foreword to the 2004 edition of *Beloved* that she based her main character on Margaret Garner:

a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owners plantation....The heroine would represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom. The terrain, slavery, was formidable and pathless. To invite readers (and myself) into the repellant landscape (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts. (XVII)

In order to understand what causes a woman to commit infanticide, readers must understand the woman herself in terms of what she has faced.

Female slaves experienced much abuse and various forms of subjugation. Alice Walker describes black women in the South in a way that provides a basis for understanding the effects of slavery on women. In addition, Walker’s description could also help readers comprehend the women in *Beloved*. Walker writes: “They stumbled blindly through their lives, creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope” (213). Walker’s words describe key moments in Sethe’s life, for example, the times when Sethe is close to failing in her mission, giving up hope, and near death, yet Sethe struggles on. Walker recognizes that African American

women fight a continuing battle, during and since slavery. When women overcome this struggle and their subordination to create something good in their lives and in the world, they gain hope and provide hope to other women. It is because of Sethe's struggle to save the best things in her life, her children, that Morrison names her a heroine.

Sethe is a heroine because even though she does not seem to dare to hope for herself, she certainly dares to plan and act to ensure that her children will never be slaves. Sethe may have been abused, mutilated, and traumatized but she is not rendered weak and impotent because of the ordeal she survived. Instead, she becomes strong, especially in her maternal role; Sethe becomes the ultimate mother whose sole mission is to protect her children. She gains power as a result of her experiences as a slave and from her love and dedication to her children. It is good that Sethe is allowed to keep and love her children and that she gains power through the strength of her love and in spite the trauma she has suffered. However, her power and her role as a mother necessitate a terrible action, the consequences of which are devastating. Unfortunately, "Love in Morrison's novels can be dysfunctional, excessive, unusual, pictured as an absence or twisted, destructive" (Alexandru 204). Sethe's excessive and often desperate love causes her role as a mother and a protector to become distorted and she resorts to murdering her child to save the toddler from slavery. Committing infanticide and the consequences of her actions traumatize Sethe in a way that slavery did not.

Surviving Slavery: Finding Power Through Trauma and Maternal Love

Understanding Sethe and her actions requires scrutinizing the two leading motivators in her life: trauma and maternal love. These motivators have a potent impact on Sethe's identity and thus her actions. Because of trauma and maternal love Sethe becomes "heroic,

naïve, rash, strong, loving, murderous, all-sacrificing, completely absorbed in her own explanations...a dynamic mixture of weaknesses and virtues” (Peterson, *Beloved: Case Studies* 96). Sethe’s experiences during slavery can be separated into distinct periods: the period of her life before she was at Sweet Home and her time at Sweet Home. Throughout her enslavement, and the rest of her life, the horrors Sethe is subjected to are terrible, especially compared to her time enslaved by the Garners when slavery doesn’t seem so bad. Overall, Sethe suffers much distress as a result of being a slave but her identity develops in an interesting and unusual way because of what she encounters. Whereas trauma can affect people in a negative way, Sethe is made strong by the trauma she endures. Her experiences as a slave make Sethe into a girl with “iron eyes and a backbone to match” (Morrison 10).

Sethe does not remember much about her experiences as a young slave, but she was clearly affected by them because she “was thirteen when she came to Sweet Home and already iron-eyed” (12). She does not know where she was born, “Carolina maybe? Or was it Louisiana?” (37), has no memory of her father and likely never met him (94), and does not remember being abused or beaten. “She remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing” (74). Nevertheless, she does remember the other slaves and the environment. This selective memory does not indicate that Sethe did not experience the horrors of slavery. Her lack of memory suggests that nothing struck her as memorable because abuse and injustice were a usual part of life for slaves. Sethe would have learned this as a young girl. Moreover, as an adult, Sethe “worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe” (7). This defense could have begun at a very young age. Not remembering might mitigate the effects of slavery’s trauma, contributing to why Sethe becomes strong, rather than dispirited or broken.

Among what little Sethe does remember besides the singing and the dancing, is that she saw her mother from afar, “pointed out as one among many backs turned away from her, stooping in a watery field” (37). Sethe relates simply and matter-of-factly the conditions that break the bond between mother and child. “By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks – that’s the way the others did. Then she went back in the rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was....She didn’t even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember” (72). Although separated by the circumstances of slavery, “Sethe clearly loved her mother, but remembers little about her, and her memories are tainted by a great legacy of fear and resentment. Sethe’s experiences as a daughter revolved around the fact that her mother was almost never around” (Cullinan 90). Despite the absence of her mother, Sethe remember three vital things concerning her mother; these memories have an incredible impact on Sethe’s identity as a woman and a mother.

The first important memory Sethe has is that her mother was branded on her ribs underneath one of her breasts. The brand “was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin” and Sethe’s mother emphasizes, “This is your ma’am....I am the only one got this mark now....If something happens to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know by this mark” (Morrison 72). Sethe’s mother attempts to forge a connection with her daughter; but these words cannot bridge the physical and emotional separation between Sethe and her ma’am. These words are gruesome and indicate the cruelties inflicted on Sethe’s mother. “Sethe’s mother’s words dramatize the cruel disconnections slavery wrought between mothers and daughters. Her words also speak to the harrowing circumstances of slaves, who might be beaten beyond recognition or sent to a cruel death” (Peterson, *Beloved: Case*

Studies 30). Sethe also knows that her mother was hanged and that she “never found out why” (Morrison 73). It is possible that Sethe has suppressed her knowledge of why her mother was hanged. After all, even slave children would know that the most common reason slaves were killed was for attempting to escape and Sethe could deduce that her mother was killed for this reason. The knowledge that Sethe’s mother probably abandoned her is traumatizing. The traumatic nature of these experiences might explain why Sethe has so few memories; likely, Sethe repressed the memories that were too difficult for her young mind to bear. According to Deborah Horvitz, “her memories [of her mother] are buried not only because their relationship was vague and their contact prohibited but also because those recollections are inextricably woven with feelings of painful abandonment. If Sethe remembers her mother, she must also remember that she believes her mother deserted her” (95). Finally, the last thing Sethe knows about her mother is told to her by Nan: “Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe...She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never” (Morrison 74). Sethe does not recall this memory until she is talking to Denver and Beloved about her ma’am. It comes back to her suddenly as “something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind” (73). This memory was not forgotten, but was so difficult to bear that Sethe’s young mind pushed it away because she could not deal with it. Her early memories, her memories of her mother especially, are repressed because of they are rife with horror, abandonment, and shame.

Sethe learns about slavery through what she remembers about her mother. Her knowledge of her mother's brand, her mother's death, and the children her mother threw away display to the reader and to Sethe that slave women are especially vulnerable to horrible abuse. Sethe also learns quickly that slavery can damage individuals and destroy families. Slavery creates a "chaotic space of mother-love/mother-pain, daughter-love/daughter-pain" (Christian, "Somebody" 97). Knowing about her mother's rape and her other babies provide evidence of the sexual exploitation of slave women and what it means to bear unwanted children. As Horvitz points out, "enslaved women, not in possession of their own bodies, survived barbaric beatings, rapes, and being 'swallowed' ... The price they paid was...an enormous one; those that survived often did so with no shred of basic integrity or dignity regarding their bodies" (Horvitz 101). Sethe's young experiences impress upon her the peril she is in not only as a slave, but also as a woman. Even as a girl, Sethe begins to understand how slavery is especially brutal towards mothers. Sethe already knows that "slave mothers were denied the very experience of motherhood" just as she was denied the experience of daughterhood (O'Reilly 127). Knowing that "Slavery as a system...made mothers afraid to love their children completely" has already traumatized Sethe and begun to change her (Peterson, *Beloved: Case Studies* 35-36). Trauma has created Sethe's resistance to how slavery limits mothers. Sethe finds strength and resolve in her knowledge and moving to Sweet Home allows her to rebel against the "cycle of mother-daughter loss, perceived abandonment, betrayal" (Horvitz 94). It is clear to those she meets at Sweet Home that her experiences have made her strong and able to endure.

Sethe's adult anger is an even stronger indication of the effects of her enslavement. "As small girl Sethe, she was unimpressed. As grown-up woman Sethe she was angry"

(Morrison 74). When Sethe first arrives at Sweet Home the deeper effects of her early experiences are not visible; yet when she becomes a mother, it becomes clearer how her identity, especially how she defines herself as a mother, has been influenced. Because Sethe was never mothered or allowed to develop a relationship with her mother, she has not had the opportunity to learn how to be a mother (Christian, McDowell, and McKay 212). She has been “Cut off from her motherline” (O’Reilly 88). The truth is that none of the major characters in *Beloved* have been mothered (Christian, “Does Theory Play Well” 62). However, Sethe is the only woman in the novel who is allowed both to bear children by her chosen husband and raise them. Thus, lack of maternal knowledge has a stronger impact on her than it does on other female characters. She misses the practical advice: “I wish I’d a known more, but, like I say, there wasn’t nobody to talk to. Woman, I mean” (Morrison 188). Andrea O’Reilly suggests, “Sethe also realizes that mothers bequeath more than practical advice...In loving her daughter, the mother enables the daughter to love when she herself becomes a mother; motherlove fosters self-love. Mothering is thus essential for the emotional well-being of children” (88). However, because of what Nan tells Sethe about her own mother, Sethe does know that a mother has power over her children, and can choose whether they live or die. She also knows that her mother chose to get rid of the children that were fathered by rape. Memory and experience both impact Sethe’s identity, and according to Rafael Perez-Torres, her sense of self is developing based on her initial “experiences of exploitation, marginalization and denial” (91).

What occurs while Sethe is at Sweet Home solidifies the identity that is already being formed, especially the role identity of mother. When Sethe comes to Sweet Home it is owned and run by Mr. and Mrs. Garner who are different from other slave owners in many ways.

[T]he world created on the Garner plantation in *Beloved* [is atypical of slavery]; there are not beatings, food is plentiful, and freedom of judgment and action are not only allowed, but encouraged. Sweet Home – before the arrival of Schoolteacher – is every slave’s dream of how that intolerable condition can be made tolerable. Women are not raped; men are not beaten like mules; and Garner is willing to allow slaves to hire their time and purchase their families and themselves. (Harris, *Fiction and Folklore* 176)

Garner’s slaves realize that they inhabit a strange and unusual place. The atypical conditions at Sweet Home apply to both female and male slaves. Although Paul D states, “It wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home,” all the slaves at Sweet Home know that when Mr. Garner was still alive, it was a rare place for slaves (Morrison 16).

The rarity of a place like Sweet Home can be understood by examining the experiences of Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs recognizes that Sweet Home is different and states, “Sweet Home was a marked improvement” from the place she had been before (165). Her many experiences with the brutal life of a slave highlight how slaves were often treated abominably.

[I]n all of Baby’s life, as well as Sethe’s own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen, or seized. So Baby’s eight children had six fathers....her two girls, neither or whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. (27-28)

Not only has slavery brutalized Baby emotionally by taking away her children, but also by the time she arrives at Sweet Home, slavery has already “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue” (102). At Sweet Home, Baby Suggs was “exempted from the field work that broke her hip and the exhaustion that drugged her mind; in Lillian Garner’s house...nobody knocked her down (or up)” (165). Nevertheless, just because Baby

Suggs' life is physically less taxing doesn't mean she is less of a slave. Understands this causes her conflicting view of Sweet Home.

It's better here, but I'm not. The Garners, it seemed to her, ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted to know. And he didn't stud his boys. Never brought them to her cabin with directions to 'lay down with her,' like they did in Carolina, or rented them out on other farms. It surprised and pleased her, but worried her too. (165)

She recognizes that the harm slavery has already done to her cannot be undone and that even good conditions cannot undo the fact that slavery is fundamentally wrong.

At Sweet Home, Baby Suggs gets to keep her son Halle with her for "Twenty Years. A lifetime" (28). In addition, Mr. Garner allows Halle to rent himself out in order to earn the money to buy his mother and free her. Keeping her child, however, did not mean that the child was truly hers to raise, know, and love because the Garners own Halle. Her relationship with her son is limited because he is too busy working to buy her and being freed means leaving her son behind in slavery. Although freedom is every slave's dream, Baby Suggs' freedom is tarnished because her life becomes void of her child.

[W]hen Halle looked like it meant more to him that she go free than anything in the world...she chose the hard thing that made him happy...What for? What does a sixty-odd-year-old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged dog need freedom for? And when she stepped foot on free ground she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn't; that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in this world. It scared her. (166)

Leaving the only child she was allowed to know and love proves to be worth it as Baby Suggs experiences freedom. Freedom would never have been possible if not for the Garner's atypical type of slavery. In slavery she suffered much and her children were taken away from her, but in gaining freedom she is taken away from her last child.

Another indication that the Garners were different than other slave owners is that Garner's male slaves were called men.

[T]hey were Sweet Home men – the ones Mr. Garner bragged about while other farmers shook their heads in warning at the phrase.

“Y'all got boys,” he told them. “Young boys, old boys, picky boys, stroppin boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one.”

“Beg to differ, Garner. Ain't no nigger men.”

“Not if you scared, they ain't.” Garner's smile was wide. “But if you a man yourself, you'll want your niggers to be men too.”...Then a fierce argument, sometimes a fight, and Garner came home bruised and pleased, having demonstrated one more time what a real Kentuckian was: one tough enough and smart enough to make and call his own niggers men. (Morrison 12-13)

Mr. Garner takes a small step from a traditional view of slaves first by seeing his slaves as people. He takes another small step by seeing them as adults and giving them minor control over their work. This seems like a positive thing, especially because Garner's male slaves believe that they are men and try to act like men. For example, it is because they are men that “The five Sweet Home men looked at [Sethe] and decided to let her be...The restraint they had exercised possible only because they were Sweet Home men” (12). The fact that slaves are men at Sweet Home saves Sethe from rape. Unfortunately, treating the Pauls, Sixo, and Halle like men doesn't convince them that all male slaves are men.

[Paul D] grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to – but they didn't want to since nothing important to them could be put down on paper.

Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know? Who gave them the privilege not of working but of deciding how to? No. In their relationship with Garner was true metal: they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to. (147)

Paul D sees Sweet Home as a utopia for slave men. Especially compared to his later experiences under Schoolteacher and in Georgia, Paul D can only see how good Mr. Garner

was. Morrison uses Garner's form of slavery as a foil to schoolteacher's form of slavery, providing a sharp contrast not only in terms of Baby Suggs' and the Sweet Home men's lives, but especially emphasizing the changes for Sethe.

At Sweet Home Sethe is a house-slave, certainly as busy as the field slaves, but not overworked in cruel, outdoor conditions. In addition, neither her fellow slaves rape her nor does her master and she escapes being forced to reproduce for the slave owner's profit. All of these differences are an absence of something harmful that often occurred on other plantations. The absences in this case are positive, but there are presences that are even more positive for Sethe. The presences that improve Sethe's enslavement at Sweet Home are her husband and children. Sethe selects Halle for her husband and soon becomes a mother. The birth and presence of her children has an astonishing effect on Sethe - she learns quickly how difficult it is to be a mother and a slave. Despite that Sethe was never mothered, she knows that her role is to protect her children. Working for the Garners, it seems like the worst she has to protect her children from were the everyday dangers: fire, accidents, and themselves.

Judging by the experiences of Baby Suggs, the Sweet Home men, and Sethe, Sweet Home was truly a great place, "fine and loose and free" (33). They believe that slavery must not be so wrong if people like the Garners exist. The slaves even feel free "because they had been isolated in a wonderful lie" (260). Morrison uses the word "free" intentionally in order to create a contrast between the slight, limited freedom the Sweet Home slaves feel and actual freedom. Baby Suggs realizes the difference immediately when she is freed and leaves Sweet Home. Moreover, the difference between the best form of slavery – Garner slavery – and the worst is made even clearer by the change that occurs at Sweet Home when schoolteacher takes over. Schoolteacher has a more traditional slave owner's view of black

people and slavery. Schoolteacher sees slaves as “beasts of burden [and] sub-human” (Bjork 17).

Schoolteacher intends to undo the ways in which Mr. Garner spoiled his slaves. “He had come to put the place right” (Morrison 267). The changes have a dire effect on the slaves as they “withstand oppression at a number of levels” (Smith 247). Under schoolteacher, work increases and the slaves are examined, observed, even measured. “Schoolteacher’d wrap that string all over my head, ‘cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth. I thought he was a fool” (Morrison 226). The slaves do not understand but one day Sethe overhears schoolteacher instructing the two young men. “Sethe, who initially thinks that schoolteacher is a fool, is humiliated on discovering [that schoolteacher is teaching his nephews that she is an animal]. Sethe is constructed as animalistic: that is, as fundamentally and biologically different from white people” (Bouson 140). Because of schoolteacher Sethe “learns of the shaming power of the white definers: their power to define her as less than human” (139). Morrison “is suggesting that the slave was not just deprived of rights or even of life itself. He or she was deprived of the freedom to be human” (Rice 107). Measuring, observing, and humiliating are just the beginning of how schoolteacher changes things at Sweet Home.

Schoolteacher and his pupils begin treating the Sweet Home slaves in horrible ways. Sethe begins to struggle with her workload and caring for her children; she “is dashing back and forth between house and quarters – fidgety and frustrated trying to watch over [her children.] Without Mrs. Garner’s help her work increases as do schoolteacher’s demands” (Morrison 263). Although Sethe already knows that slave owners view blacks as property from her early experiences, she is a young woman now, an intelligent, strong, young mother whose maternal role takes over her identity and consumes her. Through Sethe and using the

story of Margaret Garner, Morrison no doubt wanted to explore motherhood in the landscape of slavery. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Morrison states, “With *Beloved*, I began to think about motherhood. It’s not the all-encompassing role for women now, it can be a secondary role, or you don’t have to choose it. But on the other hand, there was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother” (270). The value of motherhood and mothers’ longings is often negated by slavery. Sethe knows that her children will be the victims of schoolteacher if she does not get them away from Sweet Home. Being able to raise her children has created a powerful love within Sethe. “I wouldn’t draw breath without my children” (Morrison 239-40). Sethe cannot allow her children to be taken away from her or to suffer under slavery; she must protect them. Sethe repeats throughout the novel that she “had to” get her children away from Sweet Home (9, 19, 111). She also knows that the only thing that can save her children is freeing them. Escaping slavery is no easy feat, and Sethe is pregnant and had three young children to save making her challenge seem insurmountable.

The escape goes awry, Sethe is caught, and as punishment schoolteacher’s nephews “came in there and took my milk...Held me down and took it...Schoolteacher made one open up my back” with a cowhide whip (19-20). “They dug a hole for my stomach so as not to hurt the baby” (239). These events are significant first because they explicitly portray how slavery affects women. “The commodification and appropriation of slave mothering is symbolically dramatized...through the white men’s brutal taking of Sethe’s breast milk” (O’Reilly 129). Second, “This central shame event” has a traumatic impact on Sethe (Bouson 141). Sethe “feels dirtied when she is suddenly exposed to the magnitude of schoolteacher’s disgust for her race” (141). Third, “even after the children are weaned, Sethe describes her motherlove metaphorically as breast milk....That is why the white men’s theft of her breast

milk so devastates Sethe: her 'stolen milk' metaphorically signifies the motherlove that is denied to her as a slave woman" (O'Reilly 130). Last, when Sethe is beaten she is left with a horrible scar. Amy Denver describes this scar: "It's a tree...A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk – it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder" (Morrison 93). The beating and the scar make clear that Sethe has been irrevocably changed both physically and mentally. "Sethe's scarred back is a visible reminder of her traumatic abuse, both her physical violation and her psychic wounds" (Bouson 142). Some effects of the trauma are still there after years, but the immediate effect of the abuse contributes to Sethe being the heroine of *Beloved*.

In Sethe's case, the trauma she endures makes freedom even more important – not only for herself, but for her children. Even though the physical abuse and loss of blood weakened her, she is resolute that she will get to her children. "First beating I took was the last. Nobody going to keep me from my children" (Morrison 238). Sethe focuses solely on the fact that she needs to get her milk to her nine-month old daughter - this keeps her going, despite the difficulty of her journey. "Sethe's monumental body and abundant milk give and sustain life....Sethe experiences her own existence only in relation to her children's survival" (Wyatt 213). Sethe never stops to consider her own safety; "All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me" (Morrison 19).

It seems miraculous that Sethe managed to make it into freedom and that she managed to give birth to her premature daughter and both her and the baby survive. Her escape attests to her strength and the power of her mother's love. Sethe gains power from her

role as a mother and, although she has help, she becomes an agent in her own life by escaping slavery and saving her children. “Morrison’s maternal standpoint defines motherhood as a site of power” (O’Reilly 45). In spite of the trauma Sethe endures, she has managed not only to survive, but also to become an incredibly strong mother. Sethe is an example of “how slavery defined and reconstructed...femininity,” particularly maternal identity (Watson 163). Darling reminds us, “Under...slavery, if you made that claim, an unheard-of claim, which is that you are the mother of these children – that’s an outrageous claim for a slave woman” (252). Yet Sethe does not allow slavery to nullify her status as mother. “Through her love for the children, Sethe finds the confidence and courage to resist slavery and she becomes a hero of epic proportions” (O’Reilly 134). She claims her children as her own by saving them and she claims the role as mother by fulfilling her mission to protect her children.

I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, *Go on*, and *Now*. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big...and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide. (Morrison 190).

When Sethe comes out of slavery she is powerful. She grasps her power and her mother love even harder and enacts that power. “Sethe stakes her position in the world of the novel by using the only form of discourse she has at hand. The power to name is the power to mark, the power to locate and identify. This is the power Sethe assumes for herself in deciding the fate of her children” (Perez-Torres 100). Sethe managed to become an agent of her life and her children’s lives.

Finding Freedom: Maternal Love Begets Trauma

After she gets to freedom, Sethe has “twenty-eight days – the travel of one whole moon – of unslaved life...Days of healing, ease and real-talk” (Morrison 111). During these twenty-eight days Sethe enjoys freedom and the joys of motherhood, and freedom reinforces Sethe’s role identity as a mother until “mother-hood...was critical to the concept of self and to the very survival of one’s self” (Christian, “Somebody” 97). Peterson adds, “Sethe’s fierce attachment to motherhood and mothering is heroic, on the one hand, and potentially dangerous, on the other” (*Beloved: Case Studies* 34). The danger is displayed when, at the end of her twenty-eight days of freedom, Sethe takes her role as protector to the extreme.

Sethe learns quickly what it means to be a free mother. “One of the aspects of freedom to be a mother, [is] to love her children without fear or restraint. So crucial is mothering to Sethe’s sense of her own self-identity and self-worth that milk is the key image associated with her...Sethe is proud of the fact that” she had enough milk for all of her children, enough love and power to save everyone (Peterson, *Beloved: Case Studies* 34). Being able to provide basic care for her children, an opportunity that many slave women are denied, bolsters her role identity. “Nursing serves as a figure for the totality and exclusivity of mother-daughter fusion” (Wyatt 221). Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos concurs: “Sethe repeatedly cites her milk as a kind of panacea, even as the bonding element of her family” (74). According to Barbara Christian, Sethe’s emphasis on her milk displays that she “sees herself completely as her milk, that is, she pares herself down to one thing, which is the way slaves were considered” (Christian, McDowell, and McKay 217). Sethe knows how lucky she is to have escaped slavery and relishes the fact that she can nurse her children.

Sethe's ability to love her children is even more important than being able to care for them. Typically, "loving as a slave...meant loving small, loving in an unobvious way so that whatever was loved did not become part of a technique of punishment" (Rushdy 46). Both Paul D and Ella realize the danger of loving. Despite that Ella is a free woman, she states explicitly to Sethe, "Don't love nothing" (Morrison 108). Paul D agrees, thinking, "Risky...very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (54). Throughout the novel it is clear that Sethe disagrees, or perhaps because of the circumstances of her life, she cannot help the remarkable way she loves her children. Sethe realizes that, as a slave, she "couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love" (190). Only when they are freed is Sethe able to love her children "[F]reedom is linked to the ability to love" (Rice 106). She also realizes the power of her love. When her house at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio is haunted by the ghost of the baby girl Sethe murdered, her other daughter, Denver, is amazed at the ghost of the baby. "'For a baby she throws a powerful spell,' said Denver. 'No more powerful than the way I loved her,' Sethe answered" (5). However, Sethe does not realize that during her twenty-eight days of freedom, her definition of a mother becomes extreme and possessive.

Being free not only affects how Sethe experiences being a mother, but also offers her the opportunity to be nurtured and mothered for the first time in her life. When Sethe arrives at 124 Bluestone, she needs much care and attention. Baby Suggs nurtures and mothers Sethe just as if she were an infant unable to care for herself.

She led Sethe to the keeping room and, by the light of a spirit lamp, bathed her in sections, starting with her face. Then, while waiting for another pan of heated water, she sat next to her and stitched gray cotton. Sethe dozed and woke to the washing of her hands and arms. After each bathing, Baby covered her with a quilt and put another pan on in the kitchen....When Sethe's legs were done, Baby looked at her feet and wiped them lightly. She cleaned between Sethe's legs with two separate pans of hot water and then tied her stomach and vagina with sheets. Finally she attacked the unrecognizable feet. (109)

Baby Sugg's care allows Sethe to begin recovering from her physical wounds. It also allows both Sethe and Baby Suggs to begin to heal emotionally from the trauma slavery has inflicted on them. "Baby's experience of child-loss as a mother has a corollary in Sethe's experience of mother-loss as a daughter" (Peterson, *Beloved: Case Studies* 30). Baby Suggs has yearned to be a mother and finally, when Sethe comes to 124 Bluestone, she can be. "Baby Suggs, denied the right to mother her own children pours her heart into caring for Sethe as though she were her own daughter, and provides Denver with a constant source of grandmotherly and motherly love and wisdom, especially when Sethe is not available physically or psychologically" (32). Nurturing Sethe helps Baby gain back some of what slavery took from her. Just as Baby needs to be a mother, the experience of being a daughter is beneficial to Sethe, who may not have realized it, but has yearned for a mother. "This yearning to be a daughter originates from Sethe's own displaced identity" (O'Reilly 88). Sadly enough, Sethe does not truly appreciate the value of being mothered by Baby Suggs until Baby has died. She especially misses Baby's capable hands. "Sethe remembered the touch of those fingers that she knew better than her own. They had bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples, stitched her clothes, cleaned her feet, greased her back and dropped just about anything they were doing to massage Sethe's nape when...her spirits

fell” (Morrison 115-16). Caring for and being cared for helps both Baby Suggs and Sethe as they recover.

Sethe also receives the support of the ex-slave community in Ohio. If not for the ex-slaves, Sethe would never have made it into free Ohio. Stamp Paid ferries Sethe across the Ohio River into freedom (Morrison 106-7). Ella also assists Sethe, and provides relief in the form of food and supplies, tells her that her children arrived safely, and helps Sethe get to Baby’s home (108). Physical freedom is vital, but “The twenty-eight days of having women friends, a mother-in-law, and all her children together; of being part of a neighborhood; of, in fact, having neighbors at all to call her own” are just as important (204). The community teaches Sethe much and she feels their “fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better. One taught her the alphabet; another a stitch. All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day...Bit by bit...she claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (111-12). Sethe has already claimed her children, but suddenly she knows what it means to claim her self. Her first month of freedom and claiming herself also makes her power grow. Sethe gains power and becomes an agent of her own life, reinforcing her most important role as protector of her children. The more she is able to love herself, the more she can love her children. Sethe also gains pride, which adds to “her black feminist sense of self-sufficiency” (Bell 55).

By the end of Sethe’s first month of freedom, her identity as a mother and her motherlove are extreme and fixed. “Sethe defines herself [solely] as a maternal body” (Wyatt 211). Because of everything she has experienced

Sethe had developed her own understanding of motherhood and a mother’s responsibilities, and this understanding was starkly different than what others expected. She loved far more than she was ‘allowed’ to – and yet her love led her to

behavior that other mothers, even those who felt far less passionately about their children, saw as a complete failure of maternal care. Sethe's maternal voice spoke in extremes, never having been tempered by interaction with others. (Cullinan 99)

The combination of trauma and freedom has caused all other portions of her identity to be subsumed. "Contemporary feminist readers often fault Sethe for defining her identity through her maternal role" especially when considering the effect it has on her later actions (O'Reilly 137). Her definition of a mother allows no exceptions to the rule that she must protect her children. Morrison creates circumstances in which Sethe feels she must take whatever action is necessary to meet this requirement. This indicates that her experiences have affected her moral identity. Morrison reveals the price Sethe pays for her power by exploring "with depth and honesty the dark and painful side of mothering, the fact that mothering can extinguish the developing self of the mother, sometimes even before that individual can really begin – and sometimes forever" (Demetrakopoulos 70). Trauma and maternal love have given Sethe power, but the change in her identity has horrible consequences.

The consequences of Sethe's power begin to become apparent only about three weeks after she gains freedom. Her maternal power has become overwhelming, consuming, and repulsive. Morrison displays this first through the party that occurs about a month after Sethe comes to 124 Bluestone. The party is an excessive celebration that offends the black community and causes them to withdraw their support for the Suggs' family. The whoop, as Baby calls it, seems well-deserved but quickly crosses a line that displays more pride than pleasure.

[I]t grew to a feast for ninety people. 124 shook with their voices far into the night. Ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry....Baby Suggs' three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve). Sethe's two hens became five turkeys. The one block of ice brought all the way from Cincinnati – over which they poured mashed watermelon mixed with sugar and mint to make a punch –

became a wagonload of ice cakes for a washtub full of strawberry shrug. 124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, Holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? (Morrison 161).

The community places the source of the infraction on Baby, but in truth, the celebration is in honor of Sethe and her babies escaping and surviving. Sethe's pride and power infiltrate the party and turn it into a prideful and gluttonous show rather than a celebratory gathering. The neighbors despised the "reckless generosity displayed at 124. Whispered to each other in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled for pride. The scent of their disapproval lay heavy in the air" (162). Because of this disapproval and resentment, "nobody sent a fleet-footed son to cut 'cross the field" to warn the residents of 124 Bluestone when slave catchers appeared in the area (184). Being alienated by the ex-slave community leaves Sethe and her children vulnerable and allows them to be found by schoolteacher.

When schoolteacher comes to take her children back into slavery, Sethe must take action again to protect her children. She knows that she "couldn't let [the children] live under schoolteacher" so Sethe desperately does the only thing she knows will save them from slavery forever (192). She attempts to explain to Paul D, but "Sethe can never explain what she did because the event is outside the logic of words and justifications....Her act was a physical and emotional reaction, the culmination of her life up to that moment" (Krumholz 123). Because of this she can only remember:

Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat she heard wings....And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nonono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (Morrison 192)

Sethe does not run or try to hide, but again she has defied slavery by enacting her power. This, however, cannot be seen as Sethe being a positive agent of her of her life. “The meaning of Sethe’s refusal – and the assertion of her own agency – is however, lost” because of what she does to her children (Perez-Torres 101). Sethe dares to become God over the lives of her children; the horrible, unthinking reaction, displays that Sethe’s identity is solely as protector. Sethe only succeeds in murdering one of her children, the crawling-already girl and injuring her sons. Her infant daughter, Denver, is luckily unharmed, yet Sethe does succeed in keeping all of them from slavery.

Morrison has created an unthinkable situation for her characters. Sethe’s attempt to save her children through murdering them shocks both the other characters and readers even though Sethe is not the only woman who kills a child. “Sethe has precedence in her action; her own mother killed some of her children” (Harris, *Fiction and Folklore* 160), but Sethe’s act is different from similar actions of other slave women. Sethe’s mother is not condemned; nor is Ella, who let a child die through neglect because of the circumstances of how it was fathered. There is no censure for these women’s actions, either from their fellow slaves, or in Morrison’s language and narrative. It appears that the slave women in Sethe’s community create a distinction between killing a child that they were unable or unwilling to love and killing a beloved child. Yet because they never had the opportunity to experience the depth of motherlove that Sethe has, they do not understand its power and what that love might ultimately require. “Sethe had to determine what it would mean to preserve her children’s lives: did that involve simply keeping them physically alive, or did it mean keeping their souls safe from the ravages of slavery, even if that led to their deaths? Can it be a maternal act of preservative love to murder one’s child?...Sethe had only seconds to decide” (Cullinan

93). Bouson states that proponents of slavery in the novel use Sethe's actions to justify slavery by proving how barbaric slaves were (145). However, it is clear to critics that Sethe acted out of love (Otten 81, Peterson, *Beloved: Case Studies* 36, Watson 157, O'Reilly 137). Because of the shame and humiliation Sethe suffered "she attempts to protect her children from being dirtied by whites" (Bouson 146). Because of her experiences, "for [Sethe], death is preferable to slavery" (O'Reilly 125). Sethe's power may have been caused by the existence and conditions of slavery, but it comes to supersede the power of slavery.

Morrison provides her readers with a way to understand the circumstances that would cause a woman to murder her children, but she certainly does not condone the act. Baby Suggs displays general ambiguity about the morality of Sethe's action. According to J. Brooks Bouson, Morrison's narrative shows "uncertainties and ambivalences in presenting the infanticide" (147). In addition, according to Jean Wyatt, "The novel withholds judgment on Sethe's act and persuades the reader to do the same, presenting the infanticide as the ultimate contradiction of mothering and slavery" (214). Perhaps this indicates that Sethe's act was both right and wrong. "Morrison's assertion that killing Beloved was the right thing to do, but that Sethe didn't have the right to do it seems to support this idea; given the moment in slavery and the moment in Sethe's anxious existence, only that solution seemed possible for her" (Harris, "Escaping Slavery" 340). Despite the strength and power Sethe has gained, she cannot break free from the psychological bondage that puts white men out of her reach. Instead, she directs the violence at what she can control. Incredibly, not only has the physical and psychological trauma she endured made her a unique and strong agent of her life, but it has also condemned her to the consequences of killing her child. Committing infanticide traumatizes Sethe in a way that slavery did not.

The Price of Sethe's Power

Sethe's power as a mother has already begun to have consequences by the time she murders the child. "[P]laced in an environment of freedom, love is identified as power. Yet, when the conditions of freedom are not entirely fulfilled, love can also be the basis of great vulnerability" (Alexandru 195). This vulnerability causes Sethe's love to become "too thick" (Morrison 193). Moyers, in an interview with Morrison asks, "What kind of love is that?" and Morrison answers, "Some of it's very fierce. Powerful" (267). Many other characters recognize the risks of love, but Sethe does not recognize this until after it has caused her to murder her child. Too late she realizes "Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer" (Morrison 155). This adds to the many things she realizes she did not know about mothering. "For Morrison, there is a learning process in becoming a free mother...[Sethe] is overly possessive in relationship to her children, some people might say, because she was not mothered" (Christian, "Does Theory Play Well" 62). Gaining power means creating the definition of her role as she goes. "Denied normal motherhood by the culture that envelopes her, Sethe carries mother instinct to an absurd and grotesque length" (Demetrakopoulos 78). The extremity of Sethe's power is revealed as negative because it necessitates that she commit child murder. "In such a context, Sethe's act of love for her children is an expression of freedom. She takes the risk and chooses to love them....Sethe's act emphasizes the perverse nature of slavery; a mother must kill her children to protect them. Sethe can choose not to love, or she can choose to kill what she loves to protect it. Either choice begets a loss of some part of the self" (Rice 106). Sethe's extreme role as mother ends up compromising her children's freedom. "Making another human being one's own 'best thing', then, is ultimately to devolve into a condition worse than slavery and into a transference of devotion from the source of life to its image.

Such a transference can only lead to warping distortions, not to freedom. Human freedom, finally, is not about ownership or possession; it is about responsibility, caretaking” (Harris, “Escaping Slavery” 340). By murdering her child, Sethe’s maternal power becomes an act of ownership that allows her to choose life or death for her child. “[Morrison] reveals in Sethe the ineluctable duplicity of the human condition, the moral capacity both to choose and to bear the consequences of choice” (Otten 86). Committing murder is more than a simple choice; it is one of the consequences of what she has suffered under slavery. Sethe’s act of ownership mimics the cruelty of slavery and causes intense trauma.

The price of Sethe’s power far outbalances what little good it does. The price of that power is the horror and trauma of the immediate “desperate but heroic act of mother love” Sethe takes to kill her daughter, and in everything she subsequently suffers (Bouson 147). In the end it seems that Sethe’s power is negated “by the dark, negative aspects love tends to take” (Alexandru 194). Staying free is an important and permanent result, but killing her daughter has changed the quality of that freedom and Sethe’s life. Sethe’s strength and power is little consolation as she buries her daughter. Sethe is broken down by the trauma that has “punched the glittering iron out of Sethe’s eyes” for a short period of time (11). Sethe risks more than she realizes; “In protecting Beloved by killing her, Sethe risks losing her own humanity” (Otten 107).

After “the Misery,” one of the major consequences of Sethe’s actions is that the community alienates and abandons the residents at 124 Bluestone. “Sethe is viewed in the community [as] too proud, too self-sufficient, too independent, generally too much her own for the neighbors” (Harris, *Fiction and Folklore* 158). Sethe’s isolation is pervasive throughout the novel. When Sethe, Denver, and Paul D go to the carnival, Sethe knows that

those who see her dressed in her nicest clothes “would think she was putting on airs, letting them know that she was different because she lived in a house with two stories; tougher, because she could do and survive things they believed she should neither do, nor survive” (Morrison 56). The community alienates Sethe because of her independence and pride. “The community...takes offense at Sethe’s claim of maternal self-sufficiency” (Wyatt 224). Morrison describes the silent “dance of pride, fear, condemnation and spite” between Sethe and the community (Morrison 202). Even as Sethe is being taken to jail, her pride is an affront to her neighbors. “She climbed into the cart, her profile knife-clean against a cheery blue sky. A profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably” (179). Because of this pride, “Just about everybody in town was longing for Sethe to come on difficult times. Her outrageous claims, her self-sufficiency seemed to demand it” (202). The community is angry, yet Sethe endures, alienated, but capable of caring for and providing for her family.

Being independent helps Sethe to be resigned to her situation. Sethe does miss those “twenty-eight days of...being part of a neighborhood; of, in fact having neighbors at all to call her own [but she understands and accepts that] all that was long gone and would never come back” (204). However, she does not act to change her situation or try to justify herself. If Sethe had humbled herself to the community she could have regained their trust and support, even though it is clear that the community does not understand why Sethe committed murder. “Morrison deliberately creates a character whose strength will not break under the weight of the atrocities that push her maternal bonds into such isolation – away from her community...it is almost as though her mind becomes contained, bound by her motherhood” (Demetrakopoulos 72). Instead of trying to undo the offense or connect to and

soothe her neighbors, Sethe “returned their disapproval with the potent pride of the mistreated” (Morrison 112). Sethe’s independence and pride, condemned by the community, also cause her to maintain the status quo, rather than seek to change her situation.

In addition to being alienated by the community, Sethe is abandoned by almost all of the people she comes to love. As a young girl Sethe believes that her mother had chosen to abandon her to try to escape slavery. This abandonment would have been a conscious choice on her mother’s part, and, because it resulted in her mother’s death, it was complete. In addition, Sethe cannot help but feel that because her husband, Halle, did not make it into freedom he has also abandoned her. She asks Paul D, “What’d [Halle] leave then if not me?” (81). She believes that since she made it out of slavery, he should have been able to as well although Paul D informs Sethe that her husband was prevented from escaping and driven crazy by witnessing what happened to her (81). Moreover, Sethe is abandoned by her two sons. “Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old...the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne” (3). The boys cannot take the haunting of their home. “[T]he baby ghost haunts her sons right out of the house, isolating [Sethe] into a totally female realm” (Demetrakopoulos 73). But it is more than the haunting that causes the boys to leave. They also cannot withstand what their mother has done and knowing what her power makes her capable of. They run off “perhaps overfull of the mother love than almost killed them as children” (Snitow 27). It seems that Sethe can tolerate abandonment by the community, feeling abandoned by her mother and her husband, and her sons leaving her. However, it is not strength that is getting her through life anymore, but resignation; Sethe becomes numb.

Baby Suggs also abandons Sethe by giving up and letting herself die. No doubt Sethe misses the others that have disappeared, but Sethe misses Baby Suggs the most because Baby Suggs became like a mother to Sethe. Not only did she take care of Sethe when Sethe made it to freedom, but she was the positive force in Sethe's life that helped her wait for Halle and begin to recover psychologically.

Helped her endure the chastising ghost; refurbished the baby faces of Howard and Buglar and kept them whole in the world because in her dreams she saw only their parts in trees; and kept her husband shadowy but there – somewhere....She wished for Baby Suggs' fingers molding her nap, reshaping it, saying, "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down....Lay all that mess down."...And under the pressing fingers and the quiet instructive voice, she would. (Morrison 101)

She was also a positive force for the rest of the ex-slave community through loving them and teaching them to love themselves (102-4). Baby Suggs is truly hurt, but not by the fact that Sethe murdered her baby, or the haunting of the house, but by the reaction of the community. What causes Baby to "just up and quit" is not shame but the fact that that slavery could harm her free life (208). "[T]o acquire a daughter and grandchildren and see that daughter slay the children (or try to); to belong to a community of other free Negroes – to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed – and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance – well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy" (209). This is why Baby gives up and lets herself die. "Baby Suggs... has to accept [her] failure" (Otten 88). Baby has become convinced that nothing she can do, no great love, no call, no support and nurturing of everyone around her can stop white people and slavery.

Baby Suggs is hurt irreparably by how the community ostracizes the residents at 124. "[T]here had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends" (Morrison 14). Instead of

being able to receive much needed love and support from Baby, Sethe has to assume the mother role to care for Baby and Sethe again is abandoned when Baby Suggs dies.

“Paradoxically, while she appears to have a strong self because of her pride and independence, she marshals her prodigious strength only to maintain a home for Denver and Baby Suggs” (Demetrakopoulos 73). Sethe easily shifts from being mothered to mothering. She switches naturally into her most prominent role, but losing Baby is hard on Sethe for another reason. The reason that losing Baby is difficult for Sethe is that “Sethe blamed herself for Baby Suggs’ collapse” (Morrison 105). Baby Suggs’ willing death has left Sethe abandoned once again and Sethe suffers the guilt of knowing that she caused Baby’s misery.

Denver is the one person who does not abandon Sethe. Yet Denver is both alienated from the community and from her mother. Even though Sethe has worked to provide for Denver’s physical needs it is clear that everything that has happened, and the haunting that serves as a constant reminder, have made Sethe neglect her remaining daughter because she is often trapped in the past. Her mother’s neglect and the haunting have a strong impact on Denver. “Solitude had made her secretive – self-manipulated. The consequence was a timid but hard-headed daughter Sethe would die to protect” (117). Although Sethe would do anything to protect her daughter, Denver becomes aware how little she knows about her mother, how little Sethe tells her only after *Beloved* arrives. “Denver noticed how greedy she was to hear Sethe talk” (75). As mother and daughter, they have survived much together, but their relationship has suffered. “Sethe’s and Denver’s relationship embodies both the strengths and the costs to black motherhood deriving from slavery” (Peterson, *Beloved: Case Studies* 28).

In addition, as Denver grows, she is alienated from the community because of her mother. “Sethe further fixates on the past by never mingling with the Black community, by protecting the only child who stays with her, her daughter Denver, from the past without seeming ever to think of the girl’s future or need for community. When we first enter the home, only Sethe and Denver inhabit it, and it is claustrophobic indeed” (Demetrakopoulos 73). At the beginning of the novel, after Paul D shows up, it seems that Denver has reached her breaking point. “I can’t live here. I don’t know where to go or what to do, but I can’t live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don’t like me. Girls don’t either....It’s not the house. It’s us! And it’s you!” (Morrison 17). Denver blames Sethe, no doubt rightfully, but it does not seem that Sethe knows that she has alienated her daughter.

Initially, it seems that the price of Sethe’s power is tolerable. Sethe can withstand “All that leaving” (14). She can endure being alienated and the death of Baby Suggs. She can survive living in the haunted house and being constantly reminded of her past. However, this long-suffering does not indicate strength anymore; it indicates resignation and numbness. The true price of Sethe’s power and her actions becomes clear. Despite everything, at the beginning of the novel, Sethe is offered what seems like one last chance at happiness when Paul D comes into her life. He is a remnant of Sethe’s past, but offers her a future. Paul D and Sethe are bound by their experiences at Sweet Home. Sethe’s life begins to change immediately upon the arrival of Paul D. “Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry” (20). Through their catching up, Paul D makes Sethe remember and reveal what has happened to her. He listens and tries to understand, but “Even someone as sympathetically inclined as Paul D does not quite grasp

Sethe's emphasis on her milk" (Peterson, *Beloved: Case Studies* 34). However, the telling and Paul D's listening makes Sethe break open the hurt inside her and feel again.

Along with opening Sethe up, making her reveal her scars and story, Paul D drives the ghost out of the house. When the house ghost protests to his presence and the fact that he takes all of Sethe's attention, he responds aggressively. "Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!... You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!" (Morrison 22). The removal of the ghost symbolizes Sethe being relieved of her past and her guilt. Because of Paul D, Sethe again experiences some happiness. Finally, Sethe realizes how empty her life has been. "Every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color. There was something wrong with that" (47). She realizes how numbed and resigned she had become, but with Paul D she has "the temptation to trust" and wonders, "Would it be all right? Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and *count on something?*" (46). Paul D convinces her that she can have a better life, make a better life, and that she can remember, mourn, and heal because he understands and is there to support her. Finally, it seems that Sethe has paid the price and can move on.

Then *Beloved* re-appears. "[T]he past will not be kept at bay" (Smith 346). The past, in the form of *Beloved*, "had appeared and been taken in on the very day Sethe and [Paul D] had patched up their quarrel, gone out in public and had a right good time – like a family. Denver had come around, so to speak; Sethe was laughing; he had a promise of steady work, 124 was cleared up from spirits. It had begun to look like a life" (79). However, the spirit of the murdered baby is unwilling to give Sethe up without a fight. Because Paul D has usurped the dead baby's place in Sethe's life, and exiled the baby's spirit from the house, the spirit manifests itself physically and becomes *Beloved*. "[A]s soon as one ghost is gone from 124

and the male...takes its place, another ghost immediately appears” (Ramadanovic, *Forgetting Futures* 130). Beloved challenges Paul D; first “she moved him”, drives him out of the house (Morrison 134). Next, she causes Paul D to shame himself by “Fucking her when he was convinced he didn’t want to” (148). Paul D battles back, meeting Sethe after work one day, asking her to start a real family with him (151). Finally, “It was Sethe who did it. Unsuspecting, surely, she solved everything with one blow” by choosing Paul D and moving him back into the house (153). Sethe wants both Beloved and Paul D in her life. She wants “to launch her newer, stronger life with a tender man” (117). Regrettably, Beloved does not want to let her. Beloved cannot get rid of Paul without the possibility of angering Sethe and losing her. So she waits and it is the influence of the community that finally succeeds in making Paul D abandon Sethe as well.

Although Stamp Paid, as a prominent member of the ex-slave community, claims to not judge Sethe, he does not even consider her when he decides that Paul D has the right to know what happened eighteen years previously at 124 Bluestone. Just when Sethe is finally living again, she is made again to suffer the consequences of her actions. When Stamp Paid shows Paul D the newspaper clipping, with a drawing of Sethe, that reports the events at 124 Bluestone, Paul D repeats over and over that it can’t be Sethe that the article is talking about because “That ain’t her mouth” (181). Paul D does not recognize the image of Sethe, perhaps because the iron is gone from her eyes, perhaps because he knows her mouth, perhaps because clearly he does not want it to be her in the newspaper, and perhaps because what she has been through has changed not only her identity, but also her face. Yet he does know that she is a “sweet, sturdy woman” (86) who “did not squint into the wind” (151), just as Denver knows her mother as a “quiet, queenly woman” (14). Paul D thinks he knows Sethe, but “He

is incapable of understanding maternal loss and how the potential for loss could compel a slave woman to become both a victim and an agent of a daemonic desire for familial survival” (Bjork 157). Paul D asks Sethe to explain, but he cannot understand and states “What you did was wrong, Sethe” (Morrison 194). Obviously, Paul D cannot help but judge her and this is what drives him away from her. As he leaves, Sethe steels herself once again, relying on what iron is left in her. “He must think I can’t bear to hear him say it. That after all I have told him and after telling me how many feet I have, ‘goodbye’ would break me to pieces. Ain’t that sweet” (195). After all, she has much experience with being abandoned and alienated and she can and will suffer through it. Sethe questions, “The worst was over, wasn’t it? She had already got through, hadn’t she?” (114). But the worst is not over for Sethe.

The worst begins with the appearance of Beloved and the departure of Paul D. Beloved is vital to the story. Morrison states in an interview with Marsha Darling that she asked herself “who could judge Sethe adequately, since I couldn’t, and nobody else that knew her could, really, I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed” (248). According to Peter Ramos, Beloved’s “ability to signify what haunts the characters in the novel” is most important (60). Bouson adds, Beloved symbolizes “the power of trauma to possess and trap its victims” (134). Once she becomes a physical presence, “Beloved regains her story, her spirit and voice, but in order for her to perpetuate them, she must envelop the only one who can truly nourish and preserve her presence. She yearns to exist and to be loved by her mother as a separate self” (Bjork 157). Sethe changes dramatically because of Beloved; she is amazed and pleased that her daughter returns. “You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter” (Morrison 240). Initially, Beloved’s presence awakens Sethe. “Not since that other escape had she felt so alive” (225). Sethe can

finally explain and make her daughter understand. She revels in the fact that “I don’t have to remember nothing” (216). Simpson asserts, “And because Beloved and Sethe can communicate through memory, Sethe no longer has to explain” (71). Again, she thinks that she must have finished paying the price for her actions and that she and her daughters will suddenly be a true, happy family.

However, “anything dead coming back to life hurts” (Morrison 42). Beloved coming back to life, and Sethe trying to justify Beloved’s murder, makes Sethe suffer much more than the other trauma she has endured. Beloved cannot and will not forgive Sethe, no matter how hard Sethe tries to atone. “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it” (295). Beloved begins taking over Sethe’s life slowly. “Beloved becomes...a living and usurping power that controls and subsumes her” (Perez-Torres 102). First she shows up on the doorstep, moves in, and stays. Next, she monopolizes Sethe’s time and attention, leaving nothing for Denver and nothing for Sethe. The guilt that Sethe feels makes her go to extremes to mother Beloved. Sethe “sets about remothering Beloved with a ferocity and single-mindedness that again bespeak Sethe’s iron will” (Demetrakopoulos 76). Unfortunately, nothing Sethe can do will appease Beloved.

Sethe tries to give Beloved the childhood she was denied, seeking Beloved’s understanding and forgiveness.

But once Sethe had seen the scar, the tip of which Denver had been looking at whenever Beloved undressed - the little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under her chin – once Sethe saw it, fingered it and closed her eyes for a long time, [Sethe and Beloved] cut Denver out of the games. The cooking games, the sewing games, the hair and dressing-up games. Games her mother loved so well she took to going to work later and later each day until the predictable happened: Sawyer told her not to come back. And instead of looking for another job, Sethe played all the harder with Beloved, who never got enough of anything:

lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk. If the hen had only two eggs, she got both. It was as though her mother had lost her mind. (281-82)

But without a job, Sethe has no way to provide for or protect her children. “By denying to Sethe the power to support herself, Beloved initially attacks Sethe’s spirit of independence. She sends her into a stupor” (Harris, *Fiction and Folklore* 159). Beloved diminishes the independence and strong role of protector that Sethe has relied on. Sethe can only rely on her motherlove, which turns out to be as needy as Beloved’s desire for that love. “Sethe’s love becomes self-sabotaging” (Watson 161). Being consumed by Beloved is the price that Sethe pays for everything that she has experienced and everything she has done. The physical price is that Sethe starves. “Denver watched her mother go without – pick-eating around the edges” (Morrison 285). What is more, “The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became” (294). Beloved’s inability to forgive and her punishing existence, cause Sethe to give up. “By relinquishing her will to survive, Sethe again becomes Beloved’s willing victim” (Harris, *Fiction and Folklore* 159). Sethe has lost everything.

Sethe’s power is fully destroyed; however, “Sethe’s extreme punishment galvanizes Denver into action” (Otten 92). Watching her mother suffer “ultimately sets Denver free. She is free enough to end the cycle of terror enveloping her mother and their family by establishing a life of her own in the outside world: in the black community” (Story 26). Denver draws on an inner strength that allows her to seek help. She begins by going to the only place she has ever travelled to by herself, Lady Jones house, and inquires about getting work so that she can provide food for her mother. Just the act of asking for help causes a strong reaction in the community that has remained distant for eighteen years. “Denver’s reintegration into the community [causes the women to] become inspired to respond to

Denver's call with an understanding of and a compassion for" the residents at 124 Bluestone (Bjork 160). It is no surprise that Sethe's daughter would also have great strength; Denver's strength, rather than alienating people like Sethe's self-sufficiency, draws the community together. Denver can "reunite others in the struggle to restore wholeness to a fallen community" (Otten 92). The community responds by providing food and a job for Denver. Denver acts as an adult, switching roles with her mother. "Denver actually midwives two female souls into the toils of adult individuation – her mother Sethe's as well as her own" (Demetrakopoulos 75). In addition, she becomes savior to her mother, just as her mother was once Denver's savior. "The live daughter as rescuer supplants the dead daughter as succubus, Sethe's girl child does finally mean her life" (75). Because of Denver it becomes clear that Sethe has succeeded as a mother, not only because of the way Denver acts, but also because of the fact that her daughter has grown up to overcome how slavery and its effects have traumatized her. "Perhaps the heroism of Sethe's thick love is best seen by the fact that it inspires reciprocal loving acts from others" (Peterson, *Beloved: Case Studies* 39). Especially from her daughter.

Denver and the community save Sethe from paying for her power with her life. Not only do they provide needed food, but also they banish Beloved. As Denver becomes more integrated among the neighbors, the story of what is happening to Sethe circulates. Although the women have shunned Sethe for many years, they "didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present" (Morrison 302). Many of the women, including Ella, have done horrible things because of slavery. "As the characters recount their past, made present in the resurrected Beloved, they must come to grips with the choices they have made, to acknowledge their lost innocence and attempt to recover wholeness" (Otten 87). They can do

this best as a community, supporting one another. Thus, “thirty women made up a company and walked slowly, slowly toward 124” (Morrison 303). These women pray, yell, and sing and the power of the community’s song “broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (308). “Enacting a rescue fantasy and illustrating the potentially healing communality of those who have survived a common traumatic experience,” the women come together and succeed in removing Beloved (Bouson 157). This event shows that “mothers need community,” according to Demetrakopoulos (77). The collective power of the women immediately seems to resurrect the power of Sethe.

Instead of focusing on the women in her yard, she sees only a white man approaching her door. Again, Sethe resorts to violence when Beloved is threatened. “The first time schoolteacher comes into her yard, Sethe commits self-murder; she kills a part of herself by killing her child. But some eighteen years later, when Bodwin appears on his horse-drawn cart...she attacks him, claiming for herself a kind of wholeness by attacking, instead of a part of her self, a white man, emblem of the original threat” (Koolish 185). Critics generally agree that Sethe “needs to reenact the ritual of killing the baby, and she needs to turn the pick or the saw in the right direction...That is healing” (Christian, “Does Theory Play Well” 66). Sethe’s attack on the symbolic source of her trauma also suggests that Sethe is finally free from her past (Bouson 158, Otten 94). The support of her peers enables Sethe to grasp her power one last time. “As a freed woman with a group of her peers surrounding her, Sethe can act on her motherlove as she would have chosen to originally...The reconstruction of the scene of trauma completes the psychological cleansing” (Krumholz 119). This final act may indicate that Sethe is freed from her guilt and finally is finished paying for what she has done, but it also means that Sethe is no longer a mother. Beloved is gone and Denver does not need her

anymore. “Only a mother knows the cost of mothering. The strength it takes to break the bonds of even the normal amount of guilt incurred in the process is prodigious; to break the bonds of guilt that Sethe carries takes many women” (Demetrakopoulos 78). Even with the guilt gone, it may have been too late for Sethe to truly recover from the consequences of everything she has done.

Whether or not Sethe will heal is uncertain and critics discuss both possibilities. There is little doubt that the banishment of Beloved is positive for Sethe in the fact that it saves Sethe’s life and takes away the daily reminder of trauma. But does Beloved disappear because she was driven out or does she disappear because she knows the rest of her mother’s life will be focused on her, even after she is gone? “Beloved’s retreat may in reality be a departure from a battlefield where she has won, accomplished what she set out to do...it becomes clear that Sethe is nearly deranged. She is decidedly no longer the figure of authority and independence that she had been before Beloved’s arrival” (Harris, *Fiction and Folklore* 162). Being consumed by Beloved causes Sethe to be “broke down, finally, from trying to take care of and make up for” (Morrison 286). Denver is convinced that her mother wants forgiveness refused and has lost her mind – indicating that Beloved has won.

Some critics believe that the conclusion indicates a positive life and future for Sethe, and certainly that her price has been paid (O’Reilly, Rushdy, Griesinger). No doubt there is a positive note to the fact that the women in the novel do survive. “Black women, in the midst of both racism and sexism, did survive, and their ability to do so was the glue that bound together black communities” (Bjork 18). It is also positive that “Morrison, through a complex interweaving of peopled spaces, shows how homes and communities serve as places to gather strength, formulate strategy, and rest” (Jesser 75). The renewed relationship with her

daughter and neighbors is certainly good, as is the fact that Paul D returns to 124. “When Sethe finally connects with Paul D she moves towards individuation, becomes connected with her own animus energy” (Demetrakopoulos 73). Paul D is a certainly a good influence on Sethe’s continuing life. “Though Paul D thus encircles Sethe physically, his intent is not to subsume her” (Wyatt 225). Strong relationships would suggest that there is more healing after the novel ends. These hopeful theories, however, ignore the last image Morrison provides of Sethe.

In the final pages of the novel, it becomes clear that even after Beloved has disappeared, Sethe is too damaged to move on. Morrison places Sethe in same room, in the same bed, and under the same quilt that Baby Suggs where spent the remainder of her life. Just as Baby said her marrow was tired, Sethe states, “I’m tired Paul D. So tired. I have to rest a while...I don’t have no plans. No plans at all.” (Morrison 320). These non-plans may not include dying, but they also do not seem to include living. It is possible that Sethe with regain her strength and be able to do what Baby Suggs could not now that the community has rescued, forgiven, and embraced her. But Morrison closes the novel with an image of Sethe mourning, and still suffering because she believes that “[Beloved] was [her] best thing” (321). Despite that Paul D tried to tell her that she is her own best thing, Sethe’s questioning reply of “Me? Me?” displays her inability to believe (322). “For healing to take place, dissociation must give way to the full reclaiming of that wounded self” (Koolish 173). Even if Sethe has claimed her traumatized self, it is clear that she does not claim the best parts of herself. “*Beloved* also ends on a melancholy note, as if a whole and unified identity could only be an object of nostalgic longing” (Ramadanovic, “Trauma’s Narcissism” 187). However positive it is that the community has come to support Sethe and offer her the chance

for healing, it seems probable that Sethe is unwilling or unable to shake off everything that has happened, and continues to suffer. Truly, the price Sethe pays for her power is terrible.

In the end “there linger[s] too much hope and too much despair” (Bjork 162). Morrison has created much hope in her novel, through how Sethe appears to overcome trauma and how she gains power. Yet this hope quickly mingles with despair. This paradoxical combination is displayed in how trauma and motherlove have both contributed to and denied Sethe independence. Perhaps hope and despair are inseparable, as power and its consequences are entwined for Sethe. Trauma and love have motivated Sethe, helped her gain an incredible power that saves her children, but never truly allows her to be independent. Despite her moments of agency and power, the conclusion shows that Sethe is tragically damaged by the trauma she has suffered and the trauma she has caused.

A Thousand Acres: The Price of Ginny's Independence

Jane Smiley writes, “*Beloved* is one of the few American novels that...is dense but not long, dramatic but not melodramatic, particular and universal, shocking but reassuring... and likely to mold or change a reader’s sense of the world” (*Thirteen Ways* 542). According to Smiley, “One of the reasons *Beloved* is a great novel is that it is equally full of sensations and of meaning” (541). *Beloved* is unique in that Morrison takes a time and a place that the modern reader almost assuredly has no personal experience with and makes it accessible. Morrison creates a story and a protagonist that can arouse disgust and sympathy, simultaneously. Smiley, in *A Thousand Acres*, takes a familiar landscape and shows the horror that can occur beneath the surface. Smiley displays hidden, unexpected horrors and the consequences. In doing this, Smiley’s story and protagonist can arouse a similar disgust and sympathy. Whereas Morrison began her novel by thinking about motherhood, freedom, and Margaret Garner, Smiley began with the father-daughter relationship, and Shakespeare’s tragedy *King Lear*. Morrison began by imagining what could cause a woman to murder her child, while Smiley began by trying to understand the anger of Goneril and Regan. In an interview with Faye P. Whitaker and Susan Carlson, Smiley says, “Where do women get that anger? They get it from being abused” (148). Smiley re-imagines *King Lear*, from the perspective of the oppressed rather than the oppressor. She shifts the perspective and moves the story to rural Iowa in order to tell the story of the daughters.

Many readers are somewhat familiar with rural culture; Midwesterners especially comprehend what it means to farm, both the high value of farmable land and the hard work needed to sustain a productive farm. The role of the farmer is to produce, but what is the price of the high level of production that farming has achieved? According to Barbara

Mathieson, “Smiley is...radical in linking the social, political, and personal problems of patriarchy inherent in Shakespeare’s play with a twentieth-century awareness of the physical domination and economic exploitation of the natural world by industrialized human cultures” (128). While twenty-first century, eco-conscious Americans are concerned with the effect of farming on our planet, Smiley, almost two decades ago, was concerned not only with the exploitation of the land, but also with the exploitation of the people on the land. She sums these concerns up stating: “Three other threads that tied up for me in *A Thousand Acres* were feminism, environmentalism and a vaguely Marxist materialism” (Smiley, “Shakespeare in Iceland” 169). To tell this story she “made Goneril [Ginny] my star witness...she was an appealing witness as well – cautious, judicious, ambivalent, straightforward” (172). In *A Thousand Acres*, the Cook family and farm are portrayed through Ginny’s eyes. “Smiley’s landscape not only creates a backdrop for her narrator Ginny’s changing sense of her own organic life, but...suffers a violation analogous to that visited upon Ginny’s body” (Mathieson 127). It is through Ginny’s experiences that the reader comes to understand how rural life exploits the land, as well as women.

Ginny has been relegated to traditional, domestic roles not only by the patriarchy that has predetermined what is accessible to women, but also because she knows no better than to subscribe to the rules of her society. Thus, Ginny’s sole worth is as a daughter, sister, and wife and her self is defined by these roles while her self-worth is determined only through how well she performs the duties of her roles. “Her role and area, both domestic, limit her” (Strehle 211). Initially, Ginny gives extraordinary effort, putting her family first in all things, but she begins to understand the consequences of her roles, how they have limited her and how her family has exploited her dedication. “Smiley constructs a fictional character and

writes the story of how that character writes her self” (Nothstein 1). Ginny also begins to garner strength from resisting. She grasps a previously unknown power, and uses it to extricate herself completely from the family that has betrayed her by never loving her as much as she loved them and by never putting her first, but always allowing her to put them first. She uses her power to relinquish the roles that have subsumed her. Ginny surreptitiously acts against her husband’s wishes, outright ignores her father’s demands – switching roles with him and treating her father like a child in need of discipline – and remembers how he sexually abused her, and faces the betrayal of her sister, Rose. Smiley’s characters, especially Ginny, experience “the dominant order of their lives disintegrating as the polite lies of family love and interpersonal relationship are unmasked, and a profound sense of vulnerability emerging as comfortable myths are sandblasted away” (Mathieson 128). As this occurs Ginny’s power allows her to face what she has suffered because of her roles and finally she is able to gain independence. It seems easy for Ginny to leave her husband, Ty, and her father, Larry. Conversely, apparently Ginny cannot gain agency unless she takes drastic action to separate herself from her sister. In order to become independent, she must break her strongest bond and the separation must be complete, something only achieved by ending her sister’s life. This action displays not only the price of Ginny’s independence, but also the influence and consequences of Ginny’s roles.

Ginny and Her Father: A Daughter’s Subjugation, Awakening, and Resistance

Since foremost to understanding Ginny is understanding her role as a daughter, it is also necessary to understand Ginny’s father. Smiley based Larry Cook on King Lear and explains in “Shakespeare in Iceland” that Larry: “struck me as the sort of person, from the

beginning to the end, that you would want to stay away from – selfish, demanding, humorless, self-pitying” (160-61). Larry, like Lear, reigns with an iron fist over his domain. “Larry’s existence is one of unchecked narcissism and aggression – unchecked because both qualities are validated by” his life and his success as a farmer (Masse 50). Ginny is raised with a clear “understanding of her father’s power” (Smiley, *Acres* 185). This understanding affects both how she sees him and how she sees the world. She understands that her father epitomizes both father and farmer.

My earliest memories of him are of being afraid to look him in the eye, to look at him at all. He was too big and his voice was too deep. If I had to speak to him, I addressed his overalls, his shirts, his boots. If he lifted me near his face, I shrank away from him. If he kissed me, I endured it, offered a little hug in return. At the time, his fearsomeness was reassuring...and we lived on what was clearly the best, most capably cultivated farm. The biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer. That fit, or maybe formed, my own sense of the right order of things. (19-20)

Larry’s power is not only over the land that he farms, but also over his family. Throughout the novel, Larry asserts his power over his three daughters, Ginny, Rose, and Caroline. Initially Ginny simply accepts his role and hers. Ginny’s knowledge of her father’s power and her acceptance of the patriarchy he maintains color her young understanding of the world. “[I]t seemed to me when I was a child in school...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” (Smiley, *Acres* 3). Perhaps Larry believes the same thing and that is why he assumes the role of dictator over his land. As the supreme ruler, “Daddy acts as the God-like spokesman of the catechism that subsumes all people as either objects or agents of his economy of ownership and production....Daddy positions Ginny and her sister Rose as exploitable resources supporting his farm system, claiming his daughters as possessions that satisfy his needs” (Carden 186). Moreover, “Larry

Cook embodies a number of attributes associated with patriarchy” (Malmgren 438). For example, as a child Ginny does not understand how her father uses her. Instead, she only sees that everything appears to fine; she states, “I nestled into the certainty of the way...our farm and our lives seemed secure and good” (Smiley, *Acre*s 5). In *A Thousand Acres*, appearances are truly deceiving.

In the middle of the twentieth century, young women had limited choices. “The options of the daughters were very limited. They almost always amounted to a denial of self to an acceptance of an identity constructed by the fathers....Daughters tended to accept these options” (Sheldon 14-15). Ginny and Rose are certainly limited by their father and the life their father teaches them. It was a daughter’s duty to obey her father no matter what. Ginny learns to be afraid of her father as a result of the punishments she receives at his hands. She tells us, “I was terribly afraid of him as a child” (Smiley, *Acre*s 125). Ginny’s fear is clear when she describes some of the more horrible moments of her childhood. For example, she remembers being “severely punished for wandering off” when she was three years old (47). As Sinead McDermott points out, “Ginny remembers this memory so clearly [because] it is associated with (the fear of) punishment. Indeed, it is noticeable that almost all of the memories of childhood that emerge in the novel are associated with punishment, and an explicit connection is made between the father’s excessive beatings of his children and the later sexual abuse” (400). Even at that young age Ginny seems to know that having too much fun, or angering her father, “was to flirt with danger” (Smiley, *Acre*s 47). Ginny’s fear of her father is reinforced a few years later, when she loses a shoe at a Halloween party. When her father discovers she is missing the shoe he does not ask for an explanation or consider that maybe another child took the shoe and its disappearance was not Ginny’s fault. Immediately

Ginny shrinks away from her father; justifiably her first reaction is to try to hide. Neither Larry nor Ginny's mother will let her hide. "When I got to the middle of the room, he grabbed my arm and pulled me over to the doorway, leaned me up against it, and strapped me with his belt until I fell down" (183). As a little girl, no doubt Ginny's fear of her father was simply a normal part of her life. As an adult she acknowledges it, yet brushes off how scary her father was. Ginny tells her niece, "You should have seen what it was like when we were kids. We had all sorts of hiding places, but if he called our names, we had to answer within ten seconds. That's just the way he is" (84). Like a tyrannical dictator, Larry relies on fear to control his family. Because "farms and farmland are identified with fathers, the authority figures who secure the land," Ginny does not question her father's right to punish her (Malmgren 432). Ginny is fully indoctrinated in the rural patriarchy. She does not question the fact that her father's power extends over her body and gives him the right to physically abuse her.

The abuse she suffers and her fear of her father shape Ginny into a meek, subservient young girl. "Daughters, however, according to the dominant father-daughter discourse, are expected ultimately to be compliant and to accept that father and the system he represents" (Sheldon 14). Ginny relies on being a good child, obeying her father because she is following the model of her mother, because of her fear, and because it is what her father demands.

[I]t was borne in upon me daily that I was "getting out of hand." That was the phrase my parents used. Daddy would tell Mommy that I was getting out of hand, or Mommy would tell me that. I know, too, whose hands I was getting out of, just as I knew what it meant to be in her hands. If Mommy wasn't around, the hands were Daddy's. We were told, when we had been "naughty" – disobedient, careless, destructive, disorderly, hurtful to others, defiant – that we had to learn...I must have been trying to keep tabs on those wayward parts of me that kept wandering into naughtiness. (Smiley, *Acre*s 278)

This learned subservience has a strong impact on her. Ginny recognizes this when she states, “In my recollections, Daddy’s presence in any scene had the effect of dimming the surroundings” (48). Ginny’s life is dimmed by Larry’s needs. Thus the vast majority of her life is spent taking care of her father. Ginny wonders, “How did we get so well trained?” but she already knows (227). In fact, this training is so complete that she cannot seem to discuss anything with her father unless it connects to “the domestic sphere, which, as a woman, she is granted some license to discuss” (Nothstein 9). Larry makes sure that he maintains the status quo, requiring his daughters to do the same. “He resisted efforts to change his habits...Rose said our mother had made him like this, catering to whims and inflexible demands” (Smiley, *Acre*s 48). Larry maintains a “perennial subordination of others” (Masse 44). The subordination, the abuse, and the exploitation, however, are covered carefully by the appearance of prosperity.

Larry’s power extends beyond his immediately family, as he is also an authority figure in the community. “Larry [has] genuine achievements and [is] at one time well-regarded in [his] world” (Masse 44). Because Larry is the epitome of a good farmer the community respects him. When he is speaking with other farmers, it is “as if Daddy should have the last word” (Smiley, *Acre*s 18). Ty, Ginny’s husband, says, “He doesn’t like to be challenged or brought up short. But he’s a good farmer. Everyone respects him and looks up to him. When he states an opinion, people listen” (104). Both Ginny and the community have been fooled by appearance. “Larry...is the would-be center of the universe, seeing both land and people as things to control and shape according to his own desire” (Masse 47). Larry’s power is supported by the respect of the community and the care of his daughters.

Ginny's identity has been shaped by her experiences with her father and her beliefs about him as a young girl.

Her story of him constructs a farmer of mythic proportions and she doesn't find the overshadowing overbearing quality inappropriate. Her values form in relation to his size, and his power to farm. He becomes the foundational principle that situates Ginny in the world. Her position...can only be whatever role he gives her, because she submits to his power and depends upon it for protection...Ginny's identity, therefore, is subsumed by a 'daughter' quality determined by her relation to Larry, and constructed before she was born. (Nothstein 4)

Her fear of him influenced her personality and her behavior, making her a "stubborn and sullen" child (Smiley, *Acres* 64). She struggles to be "agreeable" with everything her father does and demands (19). She states, "I didn't complain very often" (87). In order to abide by her father's wishes and to not cause trouble "Ginny usually accepts a conflict-solving ending which is in the interest of the father and consistent with his code of values. She sacrifices part of her identity" (Sheldon 13). As a child, Ginny certainly accepts her father's code. "I was, after all, my father's daughter" (Smiley, *Acres* 94). During her first fourteen years, she neither realizes that there are any other options for her, nor does she have the power to individuate herself because she has been thoroughly subjugated by her father. She is fully aware that "He is this place" (104).

Larry's influence continues and has more impact after Ginny's mother dies. Her mother was not much of a buffer between Ginny and her father. Her mother acceded to all of Larry's wishes, and once she becomes ill, Ginny has to grow up very fast both. "I knew exactly what was to come, how unrelenting it would be, the working round the seasons, the isolation, the responsibility" (136). When Ginny's mother becomes sick, she and Rose "nursed her for two months, in the living room. I missed two hours of school in the mornings; Rose missed two hours in the afternoons" (54). Losing her mother was

undoubtedly hard, but Ginny quickly fills her role. The morning after the funeral “My father woke me at five-thirty to make his breakfast, as I had done since the beginning of my mother’s illness” (292). Not only do Rose and Ginny take care of her mother and her father, but they also become responsible for Caroline. “My father, though, simply declared that Rose and I were old enough to care for our sister, and that was that” (61). This care included everything Caroline needed and wanted. “Caring for her changed from dressing her and feeding her and keeping her out of trouble to collaborating with her, supporting her plans.... Rose and I always thought we’d done well with her, guiding her between the pitfalls and sending her out to success” (243).

Ginny and Rose provide a different type of upbringing for Caroline than they had. They seem to protect Caroline from her father. Thus, Caroline never learns to be afraid of Larry, which in turn, makes Caroline his favorite. “With Caroline, it was like she didn’t know there was anything to be afraid of. Once, when she was about three, he lost his temper at her, and she just laughed like he was playing a game” (125). Unhampered by fear and buffered by her sisters, Caroline is able to individuate herself from the farm and from her family. Caroline attends college, becomes a lawyer, and moves to Des Moines. “Rose and I were always proud of how well we had done with Caroline, proud that we had taken good care of our doll, and the reward was the knowledge that she would live a life that each of us had thought about with some longing” (318). Because of Ginny and Rose, Caroline is able to do what they cannot: escape.

If Ginny’s childhood under her father were not enough for the patriarchy to gain complete control over her actions and beliefs, then her teenage years, filled with the duties of wife and mother, complete her subjugation. Ginny has already accepted her role and her

father as dictator. She has lost, or never truly develops, a sense of self separate from him. “I had been with my father so constantly for so long that I knew less and less about him”

(Smiley, *Acres* 105). Being so close to him, being encompassed and subsumed by Larry, means that she cannot understand her father.

Perhaps there is a distance that is the optimum distance for seeing one’s father, farther than across the supper table or across the room, somewhere in the middle distance: he is dwarfed by trees or the sweep of a hill, but his features are still visible, his body language still distinct. Well, that is a distance I never found. He was never dwarfed by the landscape – the fields, the buildings, the white pine windbreak were as much my father as if he had grown them and shed them like a husk...My mother died before she could present him to us as only a man, with habits and quirks and preferences, before she could diminish him in our eyes enough for us to understand him. I wish we had understood him. (20)

Being a good daughter (which in Ginny’s case means acting as an obedient wife and mother) becomes the most salient part of her identity. She knows no other option, either as a child or as an adolescent.

Her lack of options and her female roles are reinforced by what little she knows about her mother. Because Ginny’s mother dies, Ginny is never able to truly connect to her mother or create the attachment that helps develop her identity. She never experiences a closeness with her mother that would separate her from her father. “My mother died before I knew her, before I liked her, before I was old enough for her to be herself with me. As a mother, her manner was matter-of-fact and brisk....She did everything quickly and never lingered affectionately....There was no melding with the child into symbiotic fleshy warmth....I have noticed that a mother left eternally young through death comes to seem as remote as your young self” (93). Ginny never gets the chance to ask her mother’s advice, let alone know her. As she grows, she does not get the chance to identify with her mother and build her personal

self by comparing and contrasting with her mother. Instead, she mindlessly follows the only example she has known.

Moreover, Ginny can only connect to her mother through memory. “Now, when I seek to love my mother, I remember her closet and that indulgence of hers” (224). She knows a little about her mother’s history, but her mother’s life is erased from the house and from Ginny’s life after she dies (227). Ginny, however, does learn one important thing about her mother from Mary Livingstone: “She was afraid for you. For the life you would live after she died....She knew what your father was like, even though I think she loved him....For one thing, she wanted you to have more choices. I know she wanted you to go to college. She never wanted you to marry so young, before seeing some other places and trying some other things” (91). Mary’s words and learning of her mother’s wishes are important to Ginny, but cannot undo the years of training that she has had. She does not suddenly see other options for her life. The life and history of Ginny’s paternal grandmother, Edith, is also absent. “Edith was reputed to be a silent woman....I used to wonder what she thought of [her husband, Ginny’s grandfather], if her reputed silence wasn’t due to temperament at all, but due to fear” (132-33). This absence is significant in the agricultural patriarchy of Ginny’s world. “The absence of Edith’s story in the telling of the family legacy suggests a history of silencing female members of the family....By revealing the long-silenced stories of women who inhabit the sidelines of the success stories Smiley criticizes the rags-to-riches myth that encourages male dominance” (Amano 33). Edith’s death, the death of her mother from cancer, Mrs. Clark’s death from cancer, and Rose’s cancer display to both Ginny and the reader what farm life can do to women. Rose says that farm wives “collapse under the strain” (Smiley, *Acres* 187). Nevertheless, Ginny seems oblivious; she appears not just resigned, but

content with her life in Zebulon County. According to McDermott, “*A Thousand Acres* constructs the past as something not fully recuperable, accessible only in the form of fleeting images and emotions that can never be fully accounted for” (404). Her childhood and most of her adulthood pass, and Ginny is oblivious to how she is limited and how independence is denied to her.

The consequences of Ginny’s childhood and teenage years become clear during her adulthood. “[T]he developing pattern of the natural landscape in Smiley’s novel unfolds as a narrative of loss, alienation, and exploitation” (Mathieson 128). This is the pattern of Ginny’s life. “Ginny Cook is the pure product of her father’s upbringing and values. She is obedient, quiet, clean, self-deprecating, careful of appearances, ashamed of her body, unable to take pleasure....She is defined by what she does not know, which includes both past sources of her own personal identity – what happened to her between the ages of nine and eighteen” (Strehle 213). Ginny’s adult identity is molded by her youth and she becomes a woman who still is afraid of her father. “I felt a visceral flutter of fear. It was his voice that did it, I think” (Smiley, *Acres* 172). She has become the perfect daughter, obedient, uncomplaining, and well trained. Rose tells Ginny: “You’re such a good daughter, so slow to judge, it’s like stupidity” (151).

Larry’s exploitation is represented through Ginny having to cook for Larry. “[E]very time he has her cook for him, he asserts his power to crush her self-esteem” (Olson 3). Being subjugated by her father has made her feel “worthless and unlovable” (Smiley, *Acres* 185). Not only does she feel this about herself, but she suspects that her father and perhaps the other people she loves, those people that she thinks love her, also feel this way about her. This is a severe consequence of the way her father treats her. Yet, Ginny never addresses this

within herself or with her father; in fact, Ginny's general rule is to "Pretend nothing happened" (22). Ginny never adds to conflict by speaking about it. This rule makes many things unmentionable. "If she is to maintain her place on the fatherland, to live the only way she knows how – as her father's daughter – Ginny must accept as natural this boundary of speakable and unspeakable, must act as a participant in her own silencing" (Carden 187). This is one of many negative ways that Ginny has been influenced.

Another way Ginny has been affected by her upbringing and her role as a daughter is in her pessimism. Ginny has developed the "habit of expecting the worst" (Smiley, *Acres* 66) and "entertaining thoughts of disaster" (65). Although Ginny does not realize it, this habit is undoubtedly the result of her circumstances. One of the most horrible effects is that Ginny does not even consider that not only is her father's treatment of her wrong, but that she could escape his tyranny. Ginny's family, especially her father, prevent her from becoming independent. Not only does her father rely on her, but she has also come to rely on her father. Her role and her mindset are so ingrained that even the word freedom evokes a reaction. "It was such a lovely word... 'freedom,' a word that always startled and refreshed me when I heard it" (109). The patriarchy has suppressed her self so completely that she cannot imagine any other life, especially a better, happier life. Caroline marvels, "'Lord! Why didn't either of you ever leave? I can't believe you never had any other plans!' Such remarks would annoy Rose no end, but I liked them. They showed how well and seamlessly we had adhered to our principles" (64). Initially, Ginny is pleased by her dedication to farm life. She admits that she relies on what is safe and known, and "admitted to myself that I'd been afraid to leave" (27). Later Ginny asks herself, "How was it that everyone had left the land and we had stayed behind? How was it that I had not even thought of college, of trying something else, of

moving to Des Moines or even Mason City?” (147). She even tells Rose: “I guess I never really thought about not living on the farm” (187). Although some of these statements indicate that Ginny has remained unaware for the most part, on some level these statements also display that she is beginning to understand that she has been exploited.

Ginny’s developing awareness is emphasized later when she begins to feel that “there was no escape” (219). Ginny cannot escape is because she subscribes to her father’s teachings and believes that she has no other options and because she has no resources outside her family. “The isolation of living on a farm and under their father’s dominance and control reveals the potential danger for women and girls in traditional patriarchal society” (Hall 373). The time and energy required for Ginny to care for her father does not allow her to make friends or have relationships outside the farm. Not only does she lose her mother, but also she never creates necessary friendships and relationships with other women in her community. “Ginny’s relative isolation from her neighbors and her lack of a network of sustaining friendships (excepting the sororal bond with Rose) deny her the familiarity with the circumstances of the communal present necessary to support more discerning assessments of individual and relationship behaviors” (Alter 149). Ginny has no way to escape; thus, she stays, despite that she is beginning to awaken to what it means to stay and suffer.

Another reason Ginny stays, even after she begins to realize how much she has been and is still sacrificing, is because she feels that she deserves a reward. Ginny learns about deserving from her father: “Deserving was an interesting concept, applied to my father. His own motto was, what you get is what you deserve” (Smiley, *Acre*s 35). Moreover, Larry believes “That a man gets what he deserves by creating his own good luck” through hard work (137). Larry might say that he inherited a good farm because he deserved it, and that he

made his own luck through his hard work that improved that farm. Ginny also is “a beneficiary of this grand effort, someone who would always have a floor to walk on. However much these acres looked like a gift of nature, or of God, they were not” (15). However, Ginny shifts Larry’s philosophy slightly and believes that she will get what she deserves. Everything she has withstood should entitle her to a great reward. When her father decides to incorporate the farm for his daughters, Ginny “saw it as a kind of illicit reward for years of chores and courtesy” (25). This idea is reinforced when Ginny is told, “you’re a good girl, and unselfish, and you will be rewarded” (92). She tries to wait patiently for this reward, but she has her doubts, especially as her familial relationships suffer and the family begins to tear itself apart.

The disintegration of the Cook family at first appears to be the result of Larry’s decision to incorporate and give his daughters and sons-in-law control. It is actually the result of what Larry has done to his daughters. The good appearance of the Cook farm covers abuse, incest, and shame. “The feeling of shame that was still animating my flesh with goading particularity and self-consciousness” has a strong impact on Ginny (210). This shame manifests itself clearly when she forgets to bring eggs to her father’s house to cook him breakfast one morning.

I looked him square in the eye. It was my choice, to keep him waiting or to fail to give him his eggs. His gaze was flat, brassily reflective. Not only wasn’t he going to help me decide, my decision was a test. I could push past him, give him toast and cereal and bacon, a breakfast without a center of gravity, or I could run home and get the eggs. My choice would show him something about me, either that I was a selfish and inconsiderate (no eggs) or that I was incompetent (a flurry of activity where there should be organized procedure). I did it. I smiled foolishly, said I would be right back, and ran out the door and back down the road. 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. (114-5)

Ginny connects her shame both to her body and to her performance of her daughterly duties. She has failed her father's test, failed to provide him with the perfect breakfast. It is not only embarrassing to her that she has been so negligent of her role as a daughter, but that she let her father test her.

Ginny's developing awareness is displayed by the fact that she recognizes the test and is disappointed in herself for allowing it. Unfortunately, Ginny's awareness is not fully developed yet. This is clear when she thinks of her body; her embarrassment indicates more than the natural self-consciousness of a thirty-six year old woman who has enjoyed a plentiful diet and gotten a little soft. Ginny is unaware that her father's molestation of her is the actual source of her shame. When Rose tells Ginny about the sexual abuse she suffered, Ginny denies being abused: "It didn't happen to me, Rose...I don't know what to say! This is ridiculous!...I mean the strangest thing is how idiotic I feel, how naïve and foolish" (192). Ginny's shame and her denial, her continued lack of self-awareness are significant effects of what she has suffered. Though she denies the sexual abuse, she realizes, "this discomfort was not new, but I recognized it newly" (101). Her recognition of the physical and psychological abuse she has suffered is vital to her becoming fully aware.

Ginny's developing consciousness helps her understand her father. She finally is beginning to see him clearly. She understands his viewpoint, but can finally separate it and him from herself enough to think about the morality of his behavior. This shift can be seen in conversations that she has with Caroline, Rose, and her father. First, when Ginny tries to convince Caroline to apologize, Ginny pleads, "Can't you just make allowances?" (34) and

tells Caroline that “This isn’t a question of right and wrong, it’s a question of what he wants to do” (35). Ginny sees her father’s perspective clearly, and acts on his perspective, not her own and not anybody else’s. “There is only room for one point of view in a narcissist’s household” (Masse 48). But Rose tells Ginny, “Jeez, Ginny, don’t you get tired of seeing his side? Don’t you just long to stand back and tell the truth about him for once? He’s dangerous!” (Smiley, *Acres* 150). These two conversations display how Ginny acts as a buffer between her sisters and her father. She sees her sisters’ perspectives, and yet she consistently tries to soften them toward her father, knowing that he will not soften.

In the previous conversations, Ginny’s point of view is nonexistent. Only once does Ginny verbally assert that she does have a point of view. She tells her father,

“I don’t think you even think about anything from our point of view.”

“You don’t, huh? I bust my butt working all my life and I make a good place for you and your husband to live on, with a nice house and good income, hard times or good times, and you think I should be stopping all the time and wondering about your, what did you call it, your ‘point of view?’”

I felt myself redden to the hairline, and pushed my place away. “I just want to get along Daddy. I don’t want to fight. Don’t fight with me?” (175)

As soon as Ginny’s father argues with her, she retreats in order to avoid confrontation. Ginny gives in because “It was easy, sitting there and looking at him, to see it his way.... When he talked he had this effect on me. 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).

Yet this statement also displays that she is conscious of the effect her father has on her.

Understanding that she “was somehow at his mercy” is groundbreaking for Ginny (196).

Ginny must recognize her father’s influence over her before she can begin to resist her father and gain power over her own life. Realizing how he has crushed her shows a change in Ginny’s thinking that eventually leads to a change in her behavior.

Ginny feels life changing, both in the family and in herself after the incorporation of the farm. She says to Jess, “Remember this day. This is the day when everything I was worried about came to pass....Just remember that I knew it all ahead of time” (100). After the transfer of the farm Ginny vacillates between pacifying her father and being controlled by him, to taking a more powerful role. One particular moment when Ginny displays strength and power is after her father drives while intoxicated and puts his truck in a ditch. Ginny not only berates Larry for his irresponsibility and actions, but also essentially orders him to help out on the farm. Afterwards she feels the power of taking charge wash over her.

It was exhilarating, talking to my father as if he were my child, more than exhilarating to see him as my child. This laying down the law was a marvelous way of talking. It created a whole orderly future within me, a vista of manageable days clicking past, myself in the foreground, large and purposeful. It wasn't a way of talking that I was used to – possibly I had never talked that way before – but I knew I could get used to it in a heartbeat, that here I had stumbled on a prerogative of parenthood I hadn't thought of before (I'd thought only how I would be tender and affectionate and patient and instructive). (148)

Ginny states, “Power pumped through me” (149). Although her power is still a daughterly power, focused on taking care of her father, the change in Ginny is significant. “Ginny genders the farmland male – an extension of her father's body – and locates the language spoken on it within the register of paternal law. But she unearths beneath these acres a specifically maternal space, a forgotten alternate landscape and discourse that undermines the foundation of the father's authority” (Carden 185). As she grasps her female power, Ginny's awareness develops, and vice versa. Ginny “acted more decisive and made rules” (Smiley, *Acres* 154). She is amazed and pleased at “how [her] state of mind had evolved....I don't know why I was surprised to discover everything changed, since it was obvious in retrospect that I had sought to change it” (171-72). However, she is still battling against her father –

who does not give up his control of her easily. Just shortly after she initiates her power, Ginny finds herself being commanded by her father again. Ginny wonders, “Where was the power I had felt only days before, the power of telling rather than being told?” (173). Rather than make a scene, Ginny backs down, as she has done her whole life.

The physical, psychological, and emotional abuse she has suffered has indeed strengthened Ginny. She seems strong enough to endure any pain and hard work to support her family. It takes a special kind of strength to put others before oneself and yet Ginny does this unconsciously because she has been trained all her life to do so. However, when her life changes, mainly because of the transfer of power on her family’s farm, she also begins to understand. She rethinks her family’s history and her father’s place in her own history. “Ginny also comes to realize that ownership of the land is not always firmly rooted in the honest soil of hard work, frugality, and good habits. She acknowledges that her father obtained title to some of their thousand acres through shady dealing and manipulation” (Malmgren 435). Ginny also begins to develop self-awareness. She discovers a small stash of strength and power that allow her to momentarily reverse roles with her father. “And, as he begins to lose control, Ginny begins to understand the pleasure of having it...The reversal of the parent/child roles is cast as less an issue of aging than as retribution for wrongs in the past, a proper rebalancing of power” (Masse 51). Unfortunately, this newly discovered power and her awareness of it are not enough to overcome her father’s continued subjugation of her.

As she imposes more control over her father, he reacts horribly. “Ginny and Rose *are* willing to look after Larry but they increasingly want the rules to be theirs, not his...and emphasize that he is indeed dependent. The result is a tide of narcissistic rage unleashed at both of them” (49). Ginny is incapable of escape even as her father rages at her, “You barren

whore! I know all about you, you slut. You've been creeping here and there all your life, making up to this one and that one. But you're not really a woman, are you? I don't know what you are, just a bitch, is all, just a dried-up whore bitch" (Smiley, *Acres* 181). Larry expresses Ginny's own insecurities before the whole family. Moreover, Harold Clark schemes to humiliate Ginny and Rose before the community at the church potluck. Through all of this, Ginny continues on. "My job remained what it had always been – to give him what he asked of me, and if he showed discontent, to try to find out what would please him" (115). Even the knowledge that her sister, Rose, was sexually abused by their father is not enough. She states, "it was easier to be her sympathetic supporter than her fellow victim" (231). It is not until Ginny remembers and acknowledges that her father raped her, too, that she finally separates herself from her father and her role as daughter.

Ginny finally truly sees the man her father is and is able to overcome the traumatic amnesia she developed as a result of her sexual abuse. "In order for Ginny to remember her father raping her, she must re-remember the history of paternal ownership that has shaped her world and her worldview" (Carden 188). Ginny's memory is triggered when she visits her childhood bedroom. "Lying here, I knew that he had been in there to me, that my father had lain with me on that bed, that I had looked at the top of his head, at his balding spot in the brown grizzled hair, while feeling him suck my breasts" (Smiley, *Acres* 228). Both Ginny and the reader now understand the extent of exploitation and ownership that her father has imposed on his daughters. "[I]t cannot surprise that Rose and Ginny are revealed as victims of incest, an act that is justified and naturalized as another form of ownership by the now-corrupted pastoralism of father and community" (Alter 156). Rose had earlier emphasized her father's power and ownership of them to Ginny: "You were as much his as I was. 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” (Smiley, *Acres* 191). After Ginny remembers being sexually abused she understands not only how her body was owned but she begins to understand all of the smaller ways that her mind, her thoughts, her self, her identity were prescribed and formed by her father. “He shouts, ‘I-I-I’ glorying in his self-definition...and then he impresses us by blows with the weight of his ‘I’ and the feathery nonexistence of ourselves, our questions, our doubts, our differences of opinion. That was Daddy” (306). “Gradually, Ginny realizes that she and Rose *have* been shaped by Larry’s battering, by his sexual abuse, by the consequent secrecy and isolation it imposed, and by his refusal to allow her – or anyone in her generation – autonomy” (Bakerman 130). Ginny finally understands the extent of how her father has shaped her life.

This knowledge allows Ginny to individuate herself. “Ginny applies a new interpretive lens to...her life. She...contemplates the traditional roles of herself and other women on local farms, and reevaluates the extent to which the welfare of farm women has been served by these roles” (Nothstein 4-5). She knows that her father, the man who was supposed to protect and care for her, has merely used her to further her own ambitions and sate his lusts. Ginny also questions the society that not only created her father, but that silences women and puts them at the mercy of their patriarchs. Rose puts this into words:

But he did fuck us and he did beat us. He beat us more than he fucked us. He beat us routinely. And the thing is, he’s respected. Others of them like him and look up to him. He fits right in. However many of them have fucked their daughters or their stepdaughters or their nieces or not, the fact is that they all accept beating as a way of life....That’s the thing that kills me. This person who beats and fucks his own daughters can go out into the community and get respect and power, and take it for granted that he deserves it. (302)

Ginny is shaken as she questions the foundations of her life and struggles to shake off the negative influences that have formed her, but certainly this process is difficult. Without her father, and her role as his daughter, Ginny does not know who she is.

Ginny begins to understand Larry's 'I' as something so large, aggressive, and all consuming that no one else can have an 'I' in its wake....She has experienced herself as nonexistent because Larry Cook has had to be everything. He leaves nothing for anyone else but servitude and silence...Ginny's recognition of him...as a person who has violated her mind as much as her body marks a redefinition of her understanding of self. (Nothstein 5)

In order for her to create a new self and take conscious control over her identity, she must actively resist what her father has done to her. Her resistance begins with the ability to remember. "[R]emembering can be a form of resistance to the erasure of women's lives and of domestic histories of abuse" (McDermott 394). Furthermore, Ginny "understands her body as the site of both her victimization and her resistance" (Carden 192). Remembering what has happened to her makes Ginny feel that she has begun a "new life, yet another new life" (Smiley, *Acres* 229). This new life includes a new identity.

Ginny's resistance is catalyzed by her returning memories. In addition, resistance is possible because of the absence of her father. Because Larry has left the farm, Ginny no longer has to deal with his demands, and not having him in her life allows her to begin to recover from his lifelong influence. Tyler Kessel concludes that Ginny merely needs to discover the self that was hidden: "Not until she begins the reconstruction of her identity through memory retrieval does Ginny find the self that should have never been concealed" (243). However, I would argue that this self has not simply been concealed but has been prevented from fully developing because of the trauma Ginny has endured and the psychological effect of her father's subjugation. "Smiley demonstrates that male dominance

within the family and broader community hides the violence and incest” (Hall 372). In fact, creating her self is not only an act of resistance, but it is an act that engenders more resistance. In the end she is not simply resisting her father, but the rural patriarchal society encompassing her. “This dynamic of hidden, unexpressed resistance...means expressing and exercising defiance rather than hiding it; it means disrupting normalcy. Ginny begins to transgress the boundaries of paternal prescription and to give voice to the buried land and the silenced women” (Carden 184). As she resists her father and her society, her roles of wife and sister also become suspect. Ginny realizes that the overt way her father subordinates her has made her vulnerable to being subsumed by her other roles. Only when she shucks off the control of her father and acquires the power of her self can Ginny begin to explore and discover how her other roles – the roles of wife and sister – have also limited her.

From Daughter to Wife: Ginny’s Continued Silence and Subjugation

Ginny’s relationship with Ty appears to offer her a respite from the demands and subjugation of her father. Compared to her relationship with her father and his malignant influence on her, Ginny and Ty’s marriage is a great improvement. Ginny recognizes many ways in which Ty is a good husband. “I got married to Ty when I was nineteen, and the fact was that even after seventeen years of marriage, I was still pleased to see him every time he appeared....Over the years, it became clear that Tyler and I were good together” (Smiley, *Acres* 12). Although Ginny has not been able to give Ty a child, he affirms his love for her “anyway, no matter what” (25). This affirmation is vital to Ginny and binds her to him. Ginny loves Ty even more as she feels his love for her. “My love for Ty, which I had never

questioned, felt simple...like belief" (144). Ginny feels comfortable and safe in her relationship with her husband.

Ty's love, however, cannot help her overcome her sense of shame. The shame that has become a part of Ginny also infects her marriage to Ty. Before their wedding she scrubs herself as clean as possible (279). Ginny relates this kind of cleaning to the cleaning that women on farms do to keep the farm dirt out of the house and keep up a pleasant appearance. However, knowing that Ginny's shame is the product of her father's abuse of her, it is clear that her obsessive cleansing is an attempt to remove the touch of her father from her body. Even in her loving relationship with Ty, "sex did make me touchy....He made the best of it, and I never refused him" (279). Her own body is a reminder of her father's touch and control and she cannot get over that feeling with her husband. "One thing Daddy took from me when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my body" (280). Despite this, it appears that she and Ty have a strong, intimate marriage.

She especially appreciates the way he seems different and better than other women's husbands. "A lot of women I knew complained that their husbands hardly talked to them...Ty told me everything...Conversation came so easily to him that other people seemed somehow choked by comparison. And his conversation was hopeful and good-humored" (25). Even though her relationship with Ty is the newest in her life, she has come to rely on him to fulfill emotional needs that are denied to her as a daughter. This adds great strength to her marriage. "Her unswerving faith in Ty...rests on his apparent openness and candor. She is convinced that Ty tells her everything" (Malmgren 445). She does not realize that Ty, too, is silencing her by means of his constant and ongoing conversation. The more he speaks, the less room there is for Ginny's voice. Ginny remains unaware, even when Ty overtly prompts

her to be silent. “When Ty urges her to ‘be patient, endure, maintain hope’ he demands her silence and encourages her to emulate Daddy’s model of Edith, the silent woman over whose body the homosocial bonds that ensure continuity of male ownership were cemented” (Carden 190). Ty’s intentions towards Ginny are never malevolent, but he exerts the same sort of control over her as her father.

Ginny is subservient to Ty not because he is constantly making demands of her, but because of his expectations. Ty maintains the standards of rural patriarchal society through his silent expectations. Ginny needs no period of transition after her marriage; she does not struggle to perform as a wife and homemaker, no doubt because her daughterly duties also required her to perform as a wife. Her movement is seamless although she is adding more work and responsibilities to her life. Rather than being separated from her former life because of her marriage, Ginny and Ty reside and work on the family farm. Her livelihood remains tied to her father and the farm. Her role as wife does not supplant her role as daughter; she simply adds the role and its duties.

Along with becoming a wife Ginny also desires to become a mother, but unfortunately Ginny has had five miscarriages. Her inability to carry a child is likely the direct result of chemicals she has consumed through the water. She learns this when Jess Clark asks her why she has no children and she acknowledges her miscarriages. He declares:

“It’s the fucking water.”

“What?” [Ginny asks.]

“Have you had your well water tested for nitrates?”

“Well, no.”

“Didn’t your doctor tell you not to drink the well water?”

“No.”...

“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? I can’t believe this.” (Smiley, *Acres* 164-165)

Ginny has been poisoned. Her conversation with Jess reveals two very interesting problems with farm life in general, and Ginny's life on the farm specifically. First, although farming practices in the 1970s have created huge yields guaranteeing the affluence of the Cook family, the land now requires huge amounts of fertilizer. Fertilizer is necessary because the natural fertility of the land has been stripped away (Mathieson 135). Technology (both the equipment and the chemical fertilizers) has increased yields, but simultaneously has had a negative impact on the land and the people living on that land. "The novel repeatedly parallels the technological invasion of the landscape with the mastery and abuse of the female characters....Chemical poisoning of farmland for agricultural power not only causes but echoes the poisoning of the women's bodies in the novel, leading to cancer and a plague of miscarriages" (135). Both the land and Ginny's body have suffered because of the way farm patriarchy exploits them.

Ginny's conversation with Jess also reveals the silencing of women. Not only has Ginny never thought to have the well water tested but also she never even mentioned her problem to her doctor or to other women (besides her sister). If she had not been silenced in order to make life look good on the Cook family farm, she might have learned about the effect of nitrates on childbearing women much sooner. When she mentions the problem of nitrates to Ty, she states, "We never even asked about anything like that, or looked in a book, or even told people we'd had miscarriages. We kept it all a secret! What if there are women all over the county who've had lots of miscarriages, and if they just compared notes – but God forbid we should talk about it!" (Smiley, *Acres* 259). Ty shrugs off Ginny's concern, relying instead on the accepted, traditional farm knowledge that "The ground filters

everything out!...Everybody knows that!” (259). This argument displays the rift that develops between Ty and Ginny. “In giving voice to her miscarriages she gives voice to a pattern of neglect and abuse from men which is folded into the dough from which she and the people around her make their daily lives” (Nothstein 10). Ginny still longs for a child, but her own husband stands in her way. In addition, Ginny realizes what it would mean to bring a child into the rural patriarchy. “Ginny oscillates between her longing for a maternal femininity unmediated by paternal authority and her awareness that bearing a child in the farm locale would re-silence her and continue Daddy’s tradition of the land. In the end, she extricates herself from this position between impossible desire and inevitable defeat” (Carden 196).

Ginny slowly comes to realize that Ty, too, has used her selfishly. Before marrying Ginny, Ty had farmed one hundred sixty acres. Ty was lucky to marry a woman who carried with her a thousand acre farm. “The freight of his look was seventeen years of unspoken knowledge that he had married up and been obliged to prove his skills worthy of...a thousand acres” (Smiley, *Acre*s 104). Ty is the product of patriarchal culture, expected to perform well in his role. While neither Ginny nor Smiley indicates that Ty had an ulterior motive for marrying Ginny, it is clear at once that the transfer of power to him and Pete excites Ty. During the transfer he focuses on his own wishes, just as he has done for most of their marriage. The only true wish that Ginny has expressed throughout their marriage is the desire to have a child. After Ginny’s first three miscarriages, “Ty said he couldn’t bring himself to sleep with me unless we were using birth control...For a year I dutifully resigned myself to not even trying” (26). Ty refuses to keep trying for children because of his disappointment over each miscarriage. Initially, Ty’s wishes supersede Ginny’s desire to have a child. She compromises her wants and bends to her husband’s wishes.

Before long, however, Ginny begins to resist her husband's power over her. Whereas it takes a lifetime of abuse and subjugation for Ginny to realize what her father has done to her and resist, Ginny's resistance to Ty comes comparatively easily. Ginny lies to Ty and puts her own needs before his. This is possible because her relationship with him is the newest and knowing he loves her allows her to defy him. She believes that the end justifies the means, and when she produces a child she is giving Ty what he really wants, and she is also certain that Ty will be ecstatic and forgive her deception. In addition, her relationship to Ty is not based on fear, punishment, and overt exploitation/abuse. This also allows her to defy him. Getting pregnant becomes Ginny's "private project":

I imagined how I would carry it to term without a word, waiting to see when Ty or Rose began to stare at me, hesitating to ask if I was putting on too much weight. If I kept the secret, I thought, I could sustain the pregnancy. Except that when I did get pregnant I was so excited that I told Rose, and so when I lost the baby, one day when Ty and my father had gone to the State Fair for the weekend, I had to tell Rose, too. Then she made me promise not to try any more. She said I was getting obsessed and crazy. So I didn't tell her about the next one and when I lost it the day after Thanksgiving, no one knew....I wasn't quite ready [to try again]. I also wasn't ready to give up. (26)

Ginny's continued attempts to get pregnant, against her husband's (and her sister's) wishes are the first sign of her resistance. As Jane S. Bakerman observes, "[I]n a brilliant bit of foreshadowing, Smiley uses Ginny's secrecy to show how badly she misses the autonomy, the full adulthood, denied her by her father" (132). Although Ginny's deception and actions against her husband's wishes might seem immoral, they are monumental and necessary to her journey to put herself first and escape the oppression of the farm.

The second way that Ginny separates herself from her marriage to Ty is through her relationship with Jess Clark. Ginny is drawn to Jess from the moment he enters her life.

"When he showed up, things were complete. When he didn't show up, they were about to

be” (Smiley, *Aces* 156). She studies him, discovering how different he is from the men she has been surrounded by. Jess has an interesting effect on Ginny; she finds herself opening up to him. “I felt suddenly shy about speaking so openly to someone I hadn’t seen in thirteen years” (22). It becomes clear that Ginny has needed someone to talk to who is outside her own family. “Certainly the talks we had then shared...were unique in my experience” (69). With Jess, Ginny experiences intimacy she has not felt even in her marriage. She is interested in him and his life, and begins to explore the world outside Zebulon County through him. “I suspected that there were things he knew that I had been waiting all my life to learn” (69). Jess opens Ginny’s eyes with the weight of his passion, which contains both anger and joy. He tells her, “Can you believe how they’ve fucked us over, Ginny?...Don’t you realize they’ve destroyed us at every turn?” (55). Because of Jess, Ginny’s perspective on her life and her family changes. “But now I saw with fresh conviction that it was us, all of us, who were failing, and the hallmark of our failure was the way we ate with our heads down, hungrily, quickly” (102). Ginny also says, “my sense of the men I knew had undergone a subtle shift” (113). The more aware she becomes, the more she acts in ways that break down the connections holding her to the farm.

Knowing the men in her life differently contributes to knowing herself differently. Ginny is beginning to imagine a different life for herself through exploring adultery (Bakerman 132). When she has sex with Jess she responds in a way she has never experienced before.

Then, afterward, I began all at once to shiver.

He pulled away and I buttoned three buttons on my shirt. He said, “Are you cold? It’s only ninety-four degrees out here.”

“Maybe t-t-t-terrified.”

But I wasn't, not anymore. Now the shaking was pure desire. As I realized what we had done, my body responded as it hadn't while we were doing it – hadn't ever done, I thought. I felt blasted with the desire, irradiated, rendered transparent. (162-63).

The experience of committing adultery is the act that helps her overcome some of her shame, in a way that being with Ty never could. "Sex with Jess had been an act of resistance and desire, a dangerous flouting of appearances and of Daddy's definition of female sexuality, a reaching out for alternatives" (Carden 197). Knowing Jess and having sex with him endows Ginny with a separateness and a strength that she has never know before. "I could distinctly remember the strength I felt as I walked away from Jess" (171). This strength is fleeting, yet the lasting effect is that being with Jess has truly changed the way she thinks about her life and the people in her life. This relationship allows her to separate herself from her husband and also to gain an objective understanding of him. Moreover, Jess helps Ginny become aware of how her father and her life on the farm have shaped her.

As Ginny discovers what her father has done to her, Ginny also begins to see the many ways in which Ty has also been selfish. "I saw him pursuing his self-interest all these years, all in the guise of going along and getting along" (Smiley, *Acres* 154). She questions the honesty of Ty's responses to Larry, labeling Ty "duplicitous" and "self-serving" (248). Ginny becomes more and more embittered towards her husband as the novel continues. "Here was Ty, too, camouflaged with smiles and hope and patience, never losing sight of the goal... taking advantage of opportunity, unfailingly innocent" (306). Ty's innocence hides the fact that he promotes his own self-interest. His influence on Ginny may be less sinister than Larry's, but Ty's subordination of Ginny maintains her oppression. Ty, even more so than her father, should have put Ginny first because he loved her. Instead, he refuses to try to have a baby because he is focused on his own interests and the interests of the farm.

According to Nothstein, “Her marriage to Ty can be understood as an extension of her childhood with her father. She has remained powerless” (16). Carl D. Malmgren looks at Ginny’s marriage to Ty in an even darker way: “Larry Cook in effect selected Ty Smith to stand in for him with Ginny” (440). Ginny’s marriage simply reinforces her subjugation.

Ginny now understands that the patriarchy, maintained by her father and his male predecessors, also shapes her husband. She understands the pattern of women’s lives, including her own, and recognizes that she has been silenced by the rural patriarchy. “The male-dominated institutions of this farm country...have long taken their toll on women.... [T]he men to whom they defer important decisions fail to take their interests into account. The choices made by men, the values of men...have harsh repercussions for women” (Nothstein 8). Ginny has already suffered much in her female roles, but this suffering is necessary for her to gain the strength and power to resist. “She will no longer be subsumed by her marriage or her daughterhood” (16). Anger, built upon the abuse she has suffered as a daughter and a wife, fuels her ability to discover her self and the power to escape her confining life.

Crushed by Her Sister: Ginny’s Most Toxic Relationship

After examining Ginny’s relationships with her father and husband, there is no doubt that these two men have negatively impacted her in alarming ways. That Larry and Ty enforce patriarchal ownership and exploitation is not surprising. Conversely, it is surprising that Ginny’s deepest and most important relationship, her relationship with her sister Rose, also crushes Ginny. This is arguably the most toxic relationship in the novel, judging by what Ginny must do in order to escape the influence of her sister.

Ginny's relationship with Rose is based on similar experiences that have knit them together inextricably.

All my life I had identified with Rose. I'd looked to her, waited a split second to divine her reaction to something, then made up my own mind. My deepest-held habit was assuming that differences between Rose and me were just on the surface, that beneath, beyond all that, we were more than twinlike, that somehow we were each other's real selves, together forever on this thousand acres. (Smiley, *Acres* 307)

This passage makes clear that being Rose's sister has an incredible impact on Ginny. Rose envelops Ginny, but she only sees the benefits of having her sister nearby. "The fact was that we had known each other all our lives, but we had never gotten tired of each other. Our bond had a peculiar fertility that I was wise enough to appreciate" (62). One benefit of being close to her sister both physically and emotionally is that "Ginny looks to Rose to fill the gap left by missing maternal language" (Carden 197). If Rose is not in Ginny's life, she would have no relationships with women and would be completely subject to men and their patriarchy.

Ginny cannot remember her life before Rose and adores her sister. Sharing their lives and experiencing the same trials, bind Ginny and Rose in a unique way, even for sisters. Their first shared trial is the death of their mother and both girls care for their mother during her illness. "Initially, Ginny sees herself as wholly united with Rose, a comradeship strengthened, she supposes, by their mother's early death and by their joint responsibility for Caroline. Confident that she and Rose share a sustaining practicality and an understanding of themselves and life, Ginny relies upon their" sisterhood (Bakerman 133). After their mother is gone, Rose and Ginny work together to care for Caroline and protect her from their father. "We were her allies. We covered for her and talked Daddy out of his angers" (Smiley, *Acres* 64). Because of her sisters, Caroline enjoys an upbringing that is much less strict than the upbringing Ginny and Rose had. "We agreed that she was going to have a normal high

school life, with dates, and dances and activities after school” (64). Caroline is spared Larry’s abuse and able to escape the farm and create a strong, independent identity.

In addition, because of Rose, Ginny has the opportunity to act as a mother. Rose’s daughter’s, Pammy and Linda, “were nearly my own daughters” (8). At first, Rose’s ability to have babies hurts Ginny.

Linda was just born when I had my first miscarriage, and for a while, six months maybe, the sight of those two babies, who I had loved and cared for with real interest and satisfaction, affected me like poison. All my tissues hurt when I saw them, when I saw Rose with them...I was so jealous, and so freshly jealous every time I saw them, that I could hardly speak, and I wasn’t very nice to Rose, since some visceral part of me simply blamed her for having what I wanted, and for having it so easily (it had taken me three years just to get pregnant – she had gotten pregnant six months after getting married). Of course, fault had nothing to do with it, and I got over my jealousy then by reminding myself over and over, with a kind of litany of the central fact of my life – no day of my remembered life was without Rose...so I got over my jealousy and made my relationship with Rose better than ever. (8)

Rather than jeopardize her relationship with her sister, and lose all maternal opportunity, Ginny squelches her own desires and puts their relationship first. Ginny also takes a maternal role when Rose is diagnosed with cancer. “I threw myself into feeding her, cleaning her house, doing her laundry, driving her to Zebulon Center for her treatments, bathing her, helping her find a prosthesis, encouraging her with her exercises” (8). Caring for Rose and her daughters attaches Ginny even more firmly to her sister.

Ginny would undoubtedly say that not only have she and her sister always been together, but also they have always supported each other. When Larry confronts his daughters “Rose took my hand and squeezed it, as she had often done when we were kids, and in trouble, waiting for punishment” (180). When he verbally attacks Ginny, enraged by Ginny taking charge and telling him what to do, it appears that Rose stands up for her sister.

We do our best for you, and have stuck with you all our lives. You can't just roll over us. You may be our father, but that doesn't give you the right to say anything you want to Ginny or to me....We didn't ask for what you gave us. We never asked for what you gave us, but maybe it was high time we got some reward for what we gave you! You say you know all about Ginny, well, Daddy, I know all about you and you know I know. (182)

When Ginny is frozen and humiliated, Rose quickly responds. Together they seem to represent a “[u]nited front” (Smiley, *Acre*s 153). Upon closer inspection however, Rose uses her father's attack on her sister to confront her father and stand up for herself. She attempts to “find some way to get out from under what Daddy's done to me before I die...I *can't* accept that this is my life, all I get. I can't *do* it” (238). This passage makes clear that Rose is motivated not out of love for her sister or the need to ease her sister's pain, but by her own anger and pain. Rose's selfishness surprises Ginny because she had assumed that just as she had put her sister first, that her sister would put her first. Ginny realizes that she does not even know her sister.

The first time she is surprised that Rose would betray her is when she learns that Rose told Ty about her fourth miscarriage. “I'm surprised Rose would betray me like that,” Ginny states (258). Ty replies, “Your desires aren't at the top of Rose's agenda, Ginny” (258). However, Ginny does not believe Ty and is shocked again when Rose reveals that she and Jess were having an affair. “Ginny is struck by [Rose's] selfishness, her desire to have everything for herself” (Carden 197). Yet Rose is candid and blasé about her jealousy and selfishness, stating, “You don't think I would let him have anything private with my own sister, do you?” (Smiley, *Acre*s 303). It is clear to Ginny that her sister does not put her first. “I guess you want everything for yourself” (304). Ginny begins to see how Rose and their father are alike. “They were two of a kind, that was for sure” (68). Malmgren observes, “She

discovers that Rose is finally her father's daughter, more daughter than sister. For one thing, Rose inherits many of Larry's worst qualities, such as his possessiveness and hypocrisy... She also literally supplants her father" (440-41). Rose's betrayal has a greater impact on Ginny than the trauma she was subjected to by her father and her husband's selfishness. "It is Rose's betrayal that hurts Ginny the most – drives her nearly mad, in fact – because that was the relationship she had the most faith in" (Malmgren 440). Rose's betrayal opens Ginny's eyes fully.

Ginny realizes that Rose has crushed and hurt her in a way that no male could. Throughout their life together, Ginny "didn't argue. I never have with Rose" (Smiley, *Acres* 61) and "couldn't resist her" (216). Even though Rose says, "I won't hurt you," Ginny knows her sister's words are untrue (304). "Ginny learns that the words of the father, husband, lover, and even sister are not reliable, that all these characters use language to manipulate her or to mask their self-serving ends" (Malmgren 446). She knows that "Rose had been too much for me, had done me in" (Smiley, *Acres* 304). Moreover, she is weighed down by the certainty "That there was...no escaping being sisters" (345). Conversely, Ginny knows that though she cannot escape the effect her sister has had on her, she must separate herself from Rose. This extrication is not as simple as not speaking to her sister, or moving a few more miles down the road; she must extinguish their relationship completely.

Gaining Power through Betrayal

Everyone Ginny loves betrays her, first her father, then her husband and her lover, and finally her sister. "Over the course of the summer, the 'floors' she thought were so firm – those formed by her relationships...one by one turn into false bottoms until she is in a state

of free fall, helplessly falling and fallen” (Malmgren 435). She becomes aware that there is little about her entire life that has been truly good, and she also becomes aware that she lacks a sense of herself separate from her relationships and her roles. Many critics focus on the father-daughter relationship and how Ginny learns to resist her father’s oppression (Kelly 1, Strehle 213). This relationship is indeed important and has a very strong influence on Ginny (and Rose), but Ginny’s relationship with her husband, her role as wife, is equally important because of how Ginny is surprised and affected by her husband’s betrayal. Moreover, her relationship with Rose, her role as sister, is most important judging by how Rose’s betrayal affects Ginny.

Ginny’s relationship with her sister is both the most detrimental and also the most beneficial. It is Rose who helps Ginny remember and deal with the abuse of their father. It is also Rose who, because of her betrayal, finally inspires Ginny to seek independence. When this last relationship crumbles, Ginny experiences a freedom that she has never known. No longer does she have to censor herself or adapt her self to anyone else. After her discussion with Rose, “the profoundest characteristic of my state of mind was...how palpably it felt like the real me...I felt intensely, newly, more myself than every before” (Smiley, *Aces* 305). Finally, Ginny can discover her self, unrestricted by all relationships. “Ginny, though, is tired of being an identity-less void...or conforming to society” (Sheldon 44). Her understanding of herself is the direct result of understanding the people around her.

The strongest feeling was that now I knew them all. That whereas for thirty-six years they had swum around me in complicated patterns that I had at best dimly perceived through murky water, now all was clear. I saw each of them from all sides at once. I didn’t have to label them...Labeling them, in fact, prevented knowing them. All I had to do was to imagine them, and how I “knew” them would shimmer around them and through them, a light, an odor, a sound, a taste, a palpability that was all there was to understand about each and every one of them. In a way that I had never felt

when all of us were connected by history and habit and duty, or the “love” I had felt for Rose and Ty, I now felt that they were mine. (Smiley, *Acres* 305-6)

By shucking off all of her roles and coming to a full understanding of everyone in her life Ginny seeks her independence. She accomplishes this task, but her power and strength come only as a result of what she has suffered.

Ginny’s strength grows slowly, through patience, endurance, and a growing hatred for her sister. “My hatred of her burned steadily in spite of everything that brought us together” (317). In order for her to continue with her life, she must rid herself of Rose and the farm completely. “I knew I had to do something to rid myself of the sight and the sense of their nearness” (309). Ginny realizes that the only way her role as sister will end is through death. Methodically and purposefully, Ginny plots to murder her sister by poisoning her.

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. One thing, I have to say, that I especially relished was the secrecy of it. In that way, I saw, I had been practicing for just such an event my whole life. (312)

As Ginny enacts her power and attempts to assert her independence she feels “a sense of pleasure and pride in [her] planning” (313). Ginny uses her domestic skills to prepare the sausages and kraut. “She puts her farm-wife’s experience to use in a deadly scheme against her sister. Disillusioned and disenchanted, Ginny [realizes her] ugly new self truly reflects Larry Cook’s bitter heritage” (Bakerman 135). Ginny “creates the poisoned phallus as a symbol of Rose’s alignment in the paternal economy” (Carden 197). The process of planning her sister’s death, and finally taking a definitive action to end her most damaging relationship makes Ginny feel that “what was unbearable was now bearable” (Smiley, *Acres* 314). Ginny is finally acting on her desires, needs, and self-interests. Luckily, “Rose’s switch to

vegetarianism saves Ginny from becoming a murderer, and this is one ironic sign of hope” (Olson 6).

Although her actions seem extreme, it is necessary for Ginny to seek her sister’s death in order to finally gain independence. She is ridding herself of her roles one by one, first daughter, then wife, and now sister. Even as Ginny gains power, her rage cannot reach her father because he is inaccessible, both as an untouchable, monolithic patriarchal power and because he has moved to Des Moines and died. He remains inaccessible; perhaps suggesting that women can never truly overcome or recover from the way the patriarchy has subsumed them. Rose, however, is accessible to Ginny and therefore becomes the target of Ginny’s rage, and Rose represents the same ownership over the land and over Ginny as Larry did. “Frankly, she’s your dad all over again” states Ty (Smiley, *Acres* 340). Plotting to kill Rose finally allows Ginny to act out against her father, but it is just the first step to achieving independence.

Emotionally and psychologically Ginny has separated herself from her family. All that is left is for her to physically leave Zebulon County, and attempting to murder Rose opens the door. She not only sees her family for who and what they are, but she also sees rural society for what it is. “Faced with cultural reinforcement of subordinate status and restrictive roles, women find little space in which to negotiate for self-expression pleasure, and power” (Carden 184). Ginny also sees for the first time that the artifacts of her life are shabby – her life is shabby. “The house looked somewhat better, thanks to my obsessive work, but the furnishings were old and mismatched, the carpeting and vinyl dark with stains that simply didn’t respond to the products available for removing them. Shit, blood, oil, and grease eventually hold sway in spite of the most industrious efforts” (Smiley, *Acres* 328).

Ginny's awareness is complete and she finally leaves the farm, her family, her past, and the self that has been limited (Sheldon 62, Nothstein 17). This action displays that Ginny has gained agency – both over her mind and her actions, and over her body/location. “In order to stop acting as a partner in her own silencing and a silent partner in the poisoning of land and women, Ginny redefines the meaning of femininity” (Carden 196). Ginny's definition and pursuit of her new self necessitate that she leave the farm. She has taken full ownership of her life and her story exemplifies “a mode of political resistance against the domination of subject peoples (specifically women)” (Nothstein 2). Smiley indicates that Ginny can only resist and truly gain independence by leaving her previous self and roles behind to seek a new identity and life.

Ginny asserts her power by leaving everything behind her. She takes only a small amount of money, the clothes on her back, and her car. Clearly, she does not want any artifact of the farm with her, and she will not rely on any part of her previous life to found her new life. Ginny does not claim ownership of anything but herself. “Ginny chooses not to replicate Larry's pattern” of possession and exploitation (Masse 51). Furthermore, “By reclaiming her own point of view, Ginny affirms her status as an autonomous subject and becomes capable of resisting male power” (Kelly 3). The fact that Ginny is able to become independent is significant because she becomes “a woman who has freed herself” (Sheldon 61). Only her struggle and her ability to grasp her power make freedom possible.

Regrettably, what she must endure in order to gain strength has already had a terrible impact on Ginny. Not only has she already suffered severe consequences, but her freedom also comes at a huge price.

The Consequences of Independence

The new life that Ginny establishes in Minnesota is vastly different from the one she leaves behind in Iowa. However, just because it is different, does not mean that it is truly better. Ginny realizes “the good part is already over” (Smiley, *Acres* 195). One of the most apparent changes is that Ginny will no longer put anyone else first. On the positive side this means that no one will ever be able to control Ginny again. Ginny revels in the anonymity, ease, and simplicity of her new life – “that blessing of urban routine” (336). Her routine and life have also helped her shed the remnants of her past roles. “[T]he feeling of myself as a married person was something else that had lifted off long before” (341). However, Ginny’s new life is very isolated. Her desire to avoid all risk of ever being controlled relegates her to an isolated existence. Todd W. Nothstein claims, “in this isolation there is hope” (18). But Ginny’s inability or unwillingness to create positive new relationships reveals a pervasive negative effect of what has happened to her. This fear signifies that “she recognizes that her new ‘I’ is not an absolutely liberated, morally righteous and complete entity” (Nothstein 15). If she were truly able to recover, she might become less afraid of being controlled. If her identity is truly whole and healthy, it is unlikely that she would let someone take her power and strength away. Whether or not Ginny has chosen her isolation, and whether or not she intentionally keeps herself distant from all relationships, isolation is a severe consequence that limits her ability to be happy.

The most striking difference between her life in Minnesota and her life in Iowa is that in Minnesota, Ginny has developed an identity independent and separate from her earlier roles and from the farm. Ginny supports herself by waitressing and appears content with the life she has built “I had a garden apartment, two bedrooms up and a living room and kitchen

down, with a little deck overlooking the highway in the back and a little concrete stoop and my parking place out front” (Smiley, *Acre*s 335). Her words are simple and direct, lacking all emotion. This may indicate contentedness, or it may indicate resignation. What she does not realize is that “In leaving [Ty], she exchanges her wife’s apron for that of a waitress at a Perkins restaurant – only now, her servitude gives her independence and self-esteem. Ironically, Ginny discovers she is a superior waitress, good at empty small talk with customers, and better at her job than her co-workers” (Olson 5). But there is no benefit of connection and support between her and the people she serves; there is no emotional return. In addition, her job binds her, perhaps not as strongly, but in a similar way that her roles bound her to the farm. Viewing Ginny’s situation in this way reveals that although she may be independent, she is not free.

Ginny’s lack of freedom and her discontent are displayed in many ways. When Ty visits her she can easily let him go, despite her surprise and some lingering hurt. What lasts is the memory of how they met.

I was taking off my sweater when I saw a rangy, good-looking older boy waving at me. I was flattered, so I smiled and waved back in spite of my habitual fearfulness. It was Ty, and when he saw me wave at him, his face went blank. I looked around. The girl he was waving at was two rows in back of me. After we started dating, five years later, he swore he could not remember this incident, and I’m sure he didn’t, but it was burned into my memory as a reminder of the shame you courted if ever you made the mistake of thinking too well of yourself. (Smiley, *Acre*s 344)

Rather than remembering the many good years of their marriage or all the things she loved about Ty, Ginny concludes with a memory of their relationship that emphasizes her shame. Ginny may never get over her shame, just as she will never get over the betrayal of her sister and her response. Although Ginny has left Iowa, she has kept in sporadic contact with Rose. Rose has not been poisoned to death, despite Ginny’s efforts; however, as she is dying from

cancer she draws Ginny back to Iowa and back to the farm. “Even so, when she really wanted me, she got me” (345). Ginny resists weakly; “I wore my uniform, which seemed like it would protect me, and it didn’t occur to me to pack anything” (345). Wearing her uniform reminds not only Ginny, but also Rose, that Ginny has a new life and new obligations. Nevertheless, when she encounters Rose in the hospital, Rose gives the orders and Ginny takes them. Rose states, “Take the girls back with you. They’re ready to go....Tell me you’ll take them” (346); Ginny complies. Ginny momentarily ends up back where she began. “It seemed an impossible defeat that I was back in this kitchen, cooking....although I knew that I would certainly have come had Rose told me about her condition, it galled me that I hadn’t even begun to resist” (348). Ginny is not free from her sister. She is also not free from her anger at her father, her sister, and herself. She is not free from the anger at the way their father has damaged them both.

Although Ginny escapes life on the farm, she never escapes what the farm has done to her. She could be considered lucky. After all, many women lived and died on farms, poisoned by the life and chemicals (Strehle 217, Mathieson 137-38). In addition, Ginny has suffered and continues to suffer psychologically and emotionally. *A Thousand Acres* reveals “the tenacious and damaging control exerted by patriarchal ideals on the lives of girls and women” (Strehle 218). Trauma and subordination have formed Ginny’s character and she traumatizes herself through her attempt to kill her sister. Although this act is necessary as it is the precursor to her being able to move away from the farm, through this act Ginny comes to a full understanding of evil. She understands how her father could be who he was and do everything he did and her own horrible capacity for evil.

Once the family farm is sold to pay off the debt and taxes, Ginny can never be drawn back to the farm. Pammy and Linda are free from the responsibilities and roles that Ginny and Rose had, although it is unclear at the end how much they have been affected by what has happened, particularly the death of their parents. The cycle of abuse and suppression by the male patriarchy has been broken, but Ginny must live with the consequences of her trauma and her independence. Critics generally appear to agree about the meaning of the obsidian shard at the conclusion of the novel. For example, Levin states,

The reference to the “shard” in the novel’s closing line is as ambiguous as the conclusion itself. This chip of darkness, a fragment of the evil at the heart of her family, is a memento she will carry forever. It is not immediately clear, however, why Ginny must “safeguard” it. The chip is important because it is hard and tangible....In sum, Smiley offers no satisfying resolution....If the resulting world is bleaker, it is also a realm where women can exist independently, and that is its victory. (5)

Mary Paniccia Carden agrees, but adds a more positive spin: “But in the end [Smiley] offers hope for Ginny’s resistant new self” (198). Kyoko Amano claims that Ginny is content (38), and Leslie identifies that Ginny’s triumph “is that she does not forget who she is and where she comes from” (47). Catherine Cowen Olson, Barbara Mathieson, and Nothstein also view Ginny’s survival as a victory. There is also a degree of hope indicated by Smiley in an interview with Whitaker and Carlson: “[Ginny] can only survive if she can reestablish a world view that incorporates evil and doesn’t necessarily forgive it but is able to imagine it as a human thing....If you take out Ginny’s own commission of an evil act, then you are not giving her a way to come to terms with evil in others; she becomes a perennial victim” (159). When Ginny gets rid of the poisoned sausages she “had a burden lift off me that I hadn’t even felt the heaviness of until then” (Smiley, *Aces* 367). However, this cannot lift the burden of knowledge, or the continuing consequences of her life and her new freedom.

In conclusion, it is difficult to see Ginny's new life as much better than her old life because, although she has achieved independence of self and identity, she is still suffering the consequences of everything that has happened and that she has done. Ginny sees these consequences as her inheritance, an inheritance that has been passed down to her, and that she passes on to readers. Her inheritance includes a monetary debt. "I pay two hundred dollars a month, every month, and I think of it as my 'regret money,' ...regret is part of my inheritance" (368). Money and regret are only small pieces of the price Ginny pays. "Solitude is part of my inheritance, too" (369). She loses her ability and her willingness to establish intimate relationships. But memory and knowledge are the most persistent and damaging consequence – memory of what her father, husband, and sister have done to her, and knowledge of what she is capable of in return. "I remember my dead young self, who left me something too, which is her canning jar of poisoned sausage and the ability it confers, of remembering what you can't imagine" (370). No amount of strength, power, or independence can free Ginny from her inheritance, what has been done to her, and what she has done.

Conclusion: The Unexpected Similarities Between Sethe and Ginny

Beloved and *A Thousand Acres* are unique and powerful novels. But considering how different the novels appear to be, it is amazing that they yield women who are so remarkably similar. The similarities between Sethe and Ginny are unexpected because the landscapes they inhabit seem very different, yet these landscapes, and the societies Sethe and Ginny are enmeshed in, are founded on the same patriarchal values that exploit women nearly everywhere. The institutions that degrade these women, though a century apart in history, are more similar than different. Exploitation begins at birth for both Sethe and Ginny and this is part of the reason that Sethe and Ginny are so similar. Sethe, being born into slavery, is the victim of overt ownership and exploitation, whereas the institution that subjugates Ginny, the rural patriarchy, is not as obvious, but just as malevolent. Either way, both women are subjected to horrible abuse and trauma, simply because of their circumstances. Trauma, for Sethe and Ginny, is physical, sexual, psychological, and emotional and has a strong impact on the women, forming their identities in similar ways.

It is significant that both Sethe and Ginny never have the opportunity to really know their mothers. This is part of the trauma they suffer. Losing their mothers means that neither woman has a chance to develop the mother-daughter relationship that helps young women develop a healthy sense of personal identity. Although their lack of feminine guidance means that they lack immediate models for their female identity, Sethe and Ginny easily and completely adopt their roles. Even though Sethe was never mothered, when she has children she knows that it is her duty to provide for, care for, and protect her children. Ginny knows that as a daughter and wife she must love and obey her father and husband. As a sister, Ginny believes her responsibility is to love and care for her sister. Sethe and Ginny believe in their

roles and the purpose of their roles absolutely – so absolutely that their roles subsume all other portions of their identities. In fact, their roles are the only component of their identities that give purpose to their lives. This purpose is multi-faceted and is based on maintaining the relationships that are most important to them and on creating the illusion of control over their lives. Because of the way they have been owned and exploited, it is necessary for Sethe and Ginny to control their lives in whatever way possible. The need for control is often a result of trauma. “In order to recover, a trauma survivor needs to be able to control herself and her environment (within reasonable limits), and to be reconnected with humanity” (Brison 154). Sethe and Ginny gain strength, despite and even because of the trauma they have suffered. Being strong allows them to perform their roles in spite of their circumstances.

Moreover, relying on their roles adds to their strength. Part of this strength is expressed in their patience and endurance throughout their lives. Sethe and Ginny are long-suffering, and seem able to overcome horrible trauma. However, when their circumstances become intolerable, both Sethe and Ginny gather their strength and use their power to escape. Sethe’s power and dedication to her children enable her to flee slavery although she is pregnant and physically beaten. Her escape is her true moment of agency and proves how strong she has become. At this moment, Sethe takes control of her life and her children’s lives, and, in order to protect her children, acts decisively and succeeds in bringing them all into freedom. Ginny too exerts her power by leaving the scene of her torment; she gains the strength to escape from her situation and becomes an agent of her own life. Both women gain enough power to remove themselves from the circumstances that cause them suffering. It is inspiring, considering their circumstances and the extent of their subjugation that Sethe and

Ginny are able to gain any power whatsoever. Additionally, it is even more promising that they succeed in becoming independent.

Unfortunately, independence, for both women, comes at a very high price. As Sethe and Ginny steep in their roles, and as they gain power, their moral compass becomes skewed. Although Sethe has escaped slavery, she carries the memory of the horrors of slavery and her personal trauma. Once freed, Sethe's power grows, especially as she loves and claims her children, and her definition of her maternal role becomes extreme. She knows that above all else she must continue to protect her children; thus, when her children are threatened Sethe seeks the one thing that she knows will keep her children out of slavery forever: their death. This action epitomizes Sethe's role as mother and her power while exposing that Sethe's morality has developed in a skewed way because of her experiences. Ginny's morality has also been affected by her life, her trauma, and her roles, causing her to enact her power in a similar way. The stimulus is different – Ginny does not react violently because the people she loves are threatened; Ginny turns to murder because she is betrayed by Rose, the person she loves the most. Her morality shifts in order for her to extricate herself from the farm and her roles. Enacting her power and taking control of her life means separating herself from her strongest and most damaging relationship.

Sethe's and Ginny's worlds, and the people who exert control over them, have been revealed as morally unacceptable. "It is not a moral failing to leave a world that has become morally unacceptable" (Brison 158). Yet the ways Sethe and Ginny exert control is questionable, at the least. Because of these actions, there can be no doubt that their identities and their choices have been impacted in a negative way by everything they have been through. These terrible actions display that Sethe and Ginny continue to pay a high price for

what they have been through. Although they have gained strength and power as a result of their lives, their identities and morality suffer.

The price of their power becomes even clearer in the way they suffer after they enact that power. The conclusions to both *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres* indicate first that both Sethe and Ginny are survivors. “What is the goal of the survivor? Ultimately it is not to transcend the trauma, not to solve the dilemmas of survival, but simply to endure” (157). They have proven their ability to survive the horror that is enacted upon them and the horror they enact upon themselves and others. However, at the conclusions of the novels, both Sethe and Ginny exist in a sort of limbo – alive, but certainly not thriving. Sethe has lost all strength and power and has become dependent. Ginny may be independent, but her life is tainted by her inheritance, the constant reminder of where she has come from and what she has done. Sethe and Ginny have paid the price for their roles and their power throughout their lives and they will continue to pay that horrible price until the day they die.

Analyzing how Sethe and Ginny come to gain power and the price they pay for that power reveals how *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres* are truly alike. These women give the novels incredible power because they display the tension between achieving independence and its consequences. Although neither Morrison nor Smiley would call their protagonists feminists, it is clear that Sethe and Ginny epitomize women’s struggles for agency. The tension in the novels is not resolved, and the conclusions leave readers uncertain if surviving this struggle and achieving moments of agency are worth the price. In the cases of Sethe and Ginny, it does not seem that they will ever truly recover, or that the consequences of what they have done will ever end. Morrison and Smiley challenge readers to rethink history, understand a feminine perspective, and deal with the conflicts that define their main

characters. In addition, readers of *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres* cannot help but wonder how patriarchy still influences women.

Although female roles change as society changes and recently have been affected by the increase in opportunities for women and the break down of gender stereotypes, patriarchal influences still subordinate women. Modern women often struggle to balance all their roles and certainly recognize the tension in their own lives. Because the stories of Sethe and Ginny are applicable to modern women, *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres* remain powerful novels. Readers and critics readily recognize this power judging by how often these novels are studied and the awards the novels have received. Power not only has a strong effect on the characters in the novels, and comes with a horrible price, but power also has an impact on the reader. "I have put down a book because I was too inspired by it to keep reading. I could feel some sort of joy or power flowing from the book to me" (Smiley, "Shakespeare in Iceland" 166). Because of Sethe and Ginny, power and knowledge flow from the novels to the audience. The power of *Beloved* and *A Thousand Acres* is certainly not joy, just as the power in Sethe and Ginny's lives does not bring joy. However, Sethe and Ginny survive, and readers come to understand power and its price.

Endnotes

ⁱ Theorists and scientists have much debated the impact of biology and the environment when it comes to understanding human identity and behavior. For example, Social psychologist John P Hewitt states: “[S]ocial programmed instincts or drives have been supplanted by learning as the most important factors underlying human behavior. The human world is primarily cultural, and human conduct is shaped by knowledge, skills, values, beliefs, and ways of living...individuals are not guided by instinct, but must themselves rely on society and culture for their own survival” (Hewitt 4).

ⁱⁱ *Self and Society: A Symbolic Interactionist Social Psychology*, a textbook authored by Hewitt, reviews an interesting theory on the development of self. For more information on symbolic interactionist theory, refer to Hewitt. In addition, Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke have contributed two important works that have aided my understanding of identity, “A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity”, a chapter from the *Handbook of Self and Identity*, and an article entitled “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow states, “I would suggest that a quality of embeddedness in social interaction and personal relationships characterizes women’s life relative to men’s. From childhood, daughters are likely to participate in an intergenerational world with their mothers, and often with their aunts and grandmothers, whereas boys are on their own or participate in a single-generational world of age mates. In adult life, women’s interaction with other women in most societies is kin-based and cuts across generational lines....Women in most societies are *defined* relationally” (379).

^{iv} Along with Hewitt’s definition of social identity, Stets and Burke state: “The nature of the self and what individual’s do depends to a large extent on the society in which they live” (“Sociological Approach” 1). In “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory” they add, “[S]ocial categories precede individuals; individuals are born into an already structures society. Once in society, people derive their identity or a sense of self largely from the social categories to which they belong. Each person, however...is a member of a unique combination of social categories; therefore the set of social identities making up that person’s self-concept is unique” (225).

^v Stets and Burke indicate, “[W]hen persons categorize themselves as a member of a group or role, they do so by seeing themselves as an embodiment of a (group or role) prototype or standard. This prototype/standard contains the societal meanings and norms about the social category or role, serving to guide behavior...individuals view themselves in ways defined by the social structure” (“Sociological Approach” 30-31).

^{vi} Personal or person identity is defined by Stets and Burke as “the set of meanings that are tied to and sustain the self as an individual...Person identities penetrate role and group identities...Once a role or group identity becomes established, however, person identities may have little impact” (“Identity Theory” 229). Hewitt adds, “Along with social identity, people form a sense of personal identity. Where the former is anchored in a sense of belonging and of likeness to others, the latter involves a sense of separateness and difference” (98).

^{vii} According to Stets and Burke, “In general, the self-concept is the set of meanings we hold for ourselves when we look at ourselves. It is based on our observations of ourselves, our inferences about who we are, based on how others act towards us, our wishes and desires, and our evaluations of ourselves” (“A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity” 5).

^{viii} The definition of morality is taken from Walter Smetana: “Morality is...an individual’s prescriptive understanding of how individuals ought to behave towards each other” (Smetana 312).

^{ix} Social domain theory states, “children construct different forms of social knowledge, including morality as well as other types of social knowledge, through their social experiences with adults (parents, teachers, other adults), peers and siblings” (Smetana 311-12).

^x This conclusion is expressed by Lawrence J. Walker in a short editorial introducing an issue of the *Journal of Moral Education* intended to bring to the forefront theory and research revitalizing the idea that the “family context [is] foundational for children’s moral development” (262).

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