

A thousand acres: the danger of temptation and unnatural behavior



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* follows the novel's narrator, Ginny Smith, as she struggles with temptation and the mental and physical repercussions of being a victim of unnatural behavior. Larry, Ginny's father, practices chemical-based farming and breaks the natural bonds with his family by raping both his daughters, disrupting natural order. Biblical imagery and symbols such as contaminated water, Jess Clark's Christ and Devil allegory, and a dump mirroring the Garden of Eden enhance this theme of sexual enticement, and the consequences that result from opposing natural order. Tainted water transforms a natural element intended to baptize and help life flourish into a life-threatening element. Jess Clark and the aftermath of the dump that he brings Ginny to mirror the Garden of Eden, and the loss of self and loved ones that comes from succumbing to temptation. Through character's mental and physical responses to these symbols and their negative impact on their lives, Smiley suggests that giving in to unnatural behavior and temptation is easily done, but destructive.

Natural water that has been tampered with and contained by man with the intention of benefiting themselves transforms from a source of life to a poison. When Larry contaminates the water with chemical nitrates to enhance crop growth on his farm, instead of supporting life as intended, the water causes Ginny to suffer serial miscarriages. Larry has destroyed any chance of Ginny bearing any form of life by tampering with nature, instead of using water for salvation and life as God intended it to be. Harold, a neighboring farmer, also suffers from tainted water. Harold is blinded by the chemically enhanced water and, because there is no natural, pure water to wash out his eyes, he has no chance of regaining his eyesight. As a farmer,

Harold's natural place in society is taken away from him since he can no longer see to perform his duties. Pete's death most dramatically emphasizes this idea of water's turning from a source of life to a threat. Pete drowns himself in the quarry, a man-made pond, as a result of drinking too much alcohol, water that has been altered (and tampered) with by other substances by man. Additionally, Pete abuses the natural bonds that he has with Rose by physically abusing her in an unnatural state of mind due to alcohol, the same state of mind that eventually kills him. Defying natural order has obvious physical consequences for Pete, Harold, and Ginny, but affects the female characters mentally as well. Water is typically used for baptism, connoting cleansing or a fresh start, but the societal pressures that the pool Ginny and the girls visit cause them to act negatively and superficially. Rather than offering a relief as water is intended, the girls feel pressured to fit in and put on a false sense of confidence, acting unnaturally.

Smiley uses Jess Clark, who initially seems to serve as an innocent Christ archetype but quickly seduces Ginny, to emphasize the presence of the devil and temptation in innocence and intimacy. Jess Clark, who shares the same initials as Jesus Christ, brings a heat wave with him to Zebulon County suggesting that, while he may initially appear to symbolize a Christ character, Jess is just as hot and fiery as the devil himself. His homecoming is celebrated in the same fashion as the prodigal son's with his returning after 13 years, the biblical number for rebellion against the Eternal in favor of Satan (Mid-America Christian University). Jess returns seemingly innocent, and in touch with nature as Christ was, taking up vegetarianism and trying to adopt a kinder farming method for the environment. He brings Ginny to the

dump, his own Garden of Eden, where he seduces her and tempts her to have an affair. Snakes, symbols of the devil, slither around the dump, a man-made waste planted in the middle of poisonous flowers, suggesting that even what appears to be beautiful and innocent can be deadly. Jess demonstrates the dangers of temptation; the competition for his affection divides Ginny and her sister, and leads to her separation with Ty. Ginny loses her family, and her sense of who she is is completely destroyed.

Rebelling against the natural order of things, whether due to temptation or other incentives, has consequences. In *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny lets Jess's sex appeal get the better of her, while suffering alongside the other characters from the repercussions of tainted water. Her unnatural relationship with Jess and water destroys her relationship with her family and sterilizes her. The initial appeal of giving into temptation and unnatural behavior is what eventually results in the Ginny and the other characters' inevitable downfall.