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Lee Smith's The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen:
Children's Loss of Innocence

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed	5
Chapter Two: Family Linen	19
Conclusion	35
Works Cited	45

Introduction

Author Lee Smith recently published The Christmas Letters: A Novella. In 1996, it was described in the Chicago Tribune as follows: "Bless Lee Smith's heart. . . . Once again, her prose is apparently effortless. . . . Once again she has crafted a sparkling little gem of a story brimming with wit, charm, [and] heartbreak" (Weaver). This now highly acclaimed and distinguished author began writing years ago as a small child in the secluded town of Grundy, Virginia. Her works, including nine novels and many short stories, range in topics from Southern life and mountain customs to family feuds and profound relationships—each offering resounding voices, unique perspectives, and spirited approaches to the world.

Lee Smith's desire to write began as a child with her exposure to lively storytelling. According to Michelle Lodge, "As the only child of a large, extended family in the western Virginia town of Grundy, she [Smith] grew up hearing lively, long-winded discussions about politics and community affairs on the front porch of her home" (110). Smith followed her passion and published her first novel while still attending Hollins College in 1968. During her career, Smith has won many prestigious awards, including the O. Henry Award, the Sir Walter Raleigh Award, and the W.D. Weatherford Award for Appalachian Literature. Smith's writing has been categorized predominantly as Southern women's literature because of her experiences growing up in Appalachia. Lodge notes that Smith felt at first she had to write about glamorous people and exotic places: "The world she knew best, however, was that of hillbillies, high school majorettes and hairstylists in tiny

Southern towns" (110). Even though Smith writes from her personal experiences, her novels still include aspects of life to which all readers can relate. Smith recreates the difficult journeys people take in their lives, as well as the blessings they may receive on the way. Smith's novels explore many dismal aspects of Southern life, including the victimization of women, family turmoil, poverty, and death, while simultaneously portraying positive moments in life such as love, friendship, and fortitude.

Smith's characters experience life's changing conditions and are forced to deal with its many obstacles. In many of Smith's novels, there are characters, particularly adolescents, who experience hardships in life and cannot always understand at a young age why tragedies occur. Smith uses her adolescent characters to demonstrate how bleak society can be. Because of the naïve and carefree nature of a child, a tragedy for a child creates more sympathy and compassion and therefore emphasizes the bleakness of life. Yet the children also demonstrate the importance of balance. By creating children who achieve favorable things after hardships, Smith emphasizes the importance of advantages such as family and friends. Smith creates this balance in her novels, imitating life's variances.

In Smith's novels, this balance is most evident in her conclusions. In 1997, Charline R. McCord interviewed Lee Smith for The Mississippi Quarterly. After reading all of Smith's novels, McCord states, "Well, I started at book one and read you all the way through and found that you always did this miraculous tying up at

the end where you brought everything together in this wonderful way. . ." (McCord 107). Although Smith's novels create a certain resolution in the end, the endings are not always happy. Rather, they are closer to real life with all its twists and turns. In response to Charline R. McCord's statement, Smith states:

> I always think that's one of the things that is infinitely pleasurable about writing fiction. Because unlike in life, where things end up in all kinds of ways that you can't control and things are irrevocable—in a novel, you can work on it and make it at least, if not happy, sort of aesthetically balanced. (107)

The structure of Smith's novels featuring adolescent characters creates a winding path that leads to an ending that is balanced rather than unrealistically happy.

In Smith's first novel, The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed, published in 1968, the nine-year-old protagonist Susan witnesses the demise of her parent's relationship and is later raped. This loss of innocence leads to her curiosity about death and a negative view of the world. In spite of all this negativity, Susan is also surrounded by beauty and friendship, which provide her with strength and the hope of overcoming her misfortunes. A later novel, Family Linen, published in 1985 also explores the results of children's forced entrance into a world of harsh realities. Unlike the perspective in The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed, the characters' childhoods in Family Linen are seen through the aftermath of the conflicted adults' lives. The reader therefore looks back in time to see how childhood tragedy affects

the rest of one's life, as well as seeing the positive outcomes that occur even after a complicated childhood.

These novels offer different perspectives on the seriousness of adolescent hardships and on how the loss of innocence in a child results in the opening of his or her mind to the harsh realities that follow through adulthood. Lee Smith uses her young characters' loss of innocence in the novels The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen as a way to demonstrate and emphasize how unjust society can be and how bleak the institution of marriage is, as well as to illustrate life's unexpected moments of humor and happiness.

I.

Although she began writing as a young child, Lee Smith's first published work was The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed, published in 1968. The novel came from a short story "The Wading House," which Smith wrote while she was still attending Hollins College. The novel explores one summer of a nine-year-old girl, which brings with it the serious issues of death, sex, and adultery. Ironically, Lee Smith's first novels were not well received by the public, and publishers originally rejected The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed. After much persistence, Harper & Row, Publishers agreed to publish the novel and stated the following in a press release:

> Certainly the most beautiful writer in many years, 23-year-old Lee Smith is the author of a first novel which Virginia Kirkus describes as "the most imaginative limning to date of childhood's boundaries and inevitable incursions since To Kill a Mockingbird . . . . an outstanding new talent—an immaculately styled first novel." (Weaver)

Despite the trouble getting the novel published, the book was published and submitted to the Book-of-the-Month Writing Fellowship Contest, which Smith won, receiving three thousand dollars.

The negative reaction to the novel is partly due to its dark nature. Smith uses the main character, nine-year-old Susan, to create an impact on how serious certain tragedies can be. However, Smith creates a balance between the positive and the negative aspects in the character's life as a way to demonstrate life's

inconsistencies; with every tragedy Susan must endure, there is the possibility and the hope of a more promising future.

The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed begins with the main character, Susan, reflecting on her summer. Although the novel does include many grave tragedies, it begins with only typical problems a nine-year-old girl would expect to have. The biggest concern at first is which character she should pretend to be when playing make-believe with her friends: Little Red Robin Hood or Al Capone. Susan complains, "I was tired of the things we always played, and it was only the start of the summer" (26). As the summer progresses, Susan faces more weighty problems, such as growing up to be a young lady. The childhood crisis of maturing includes not wanting to wear makeup like her older sister, Betty. Not ready for make-up, or what follows—dating—Susan claims, "I'd give anything to be a boy. . ." (39). Susan must say good-bye to childish beliefs. However hard Susan holds on to her childhood, she cannot keep herself from growing up. After she has lost a tooth, Susan explains, "I had put it under my pillow and didn't tell, because I wanted to buy Elsie Mae a big Butterfinger with the quarter and have a surprise Butterfinger party with it. So I didn't tell, and the Good Fairy didn't come" (99). Susan tries desperately to hold on to her fantasies by believing Elsie Mae must help the tooth fairy and this is why the fairy did not come. Whether she is ready or not, Susan must face realities even more harsh than learning the truth about the tooth fairy. This is only the beginning of the hardships Susan must eventually encounter.

Susan's earlier problems only consist of normal childhood troubles However, she is about to be forced into a harsh world of reality during this summer. Susan must face as a child the situation of not having any parental care. Susan's mother, whom Susan imagines to be and addresses as a Queen, considers herself the center of everything, and with being a Queen, people must cater to her: "That's one of the rules: you have to be quiet when you wait for Queens. There are a lot of rules to know about Queens and how to act, and that's one of them" (4). According to author Elizabeth Pell Broadwell, in several of Smith's novels, ". . . the protagonists develop defenses that prevent them from acknowledging and examining the fragmented condition of their world and from achieving an integrated sense of self. Susan Tobey constructs a fairy-tale illusion to prevent knowledge of her parents' impeding separation . . ." (424-25). Susan therefore justifies her mother's neglect and aloofness as characteristics of a queen. Similarly, author Nancy Parrish in Lee Smith, Annie Dillard, and the Hollins Group, explains that Susan's method for coping is to transform her mother's world into a fantasy of queen and court (192). As part of the fantasy, Susan pretends her life is normal.

The Queen demonstrates her neglect when commenting on how gay Susan can be; the Queen's other daughter Betty states, "'Is Susan gay?. . . I never noticed Susan being particularly gay.'" Obviously not giving the issue or Susan much thought, the Queen replies, "'Oh maybe she's not . . . '" (4). Susan is aware of this neglect but does not give it much consideration; she is used to this treatment. Susan later describes the following episode:

> There was even a Baron in the court. He was big and tall and I liked him the best. At first I had hated him, when he started coming to the castle all the time. I thought the Queen liked him more than us, and she did, but then I figured out he was a Baron and so it was all right. (5)

Susan has learned to accept that she is not the most important person in her mother's life, nor is any member of the Queen's immediate family. Susan does not even feel that she is the Queen's daughter; when the Queen tells Susan that she is being sweet, Susan thinks, "But all good subjects act like they should, I thought" (37).

In another situation, Betty is discussing the Queen, and calls her "Mother." Susan replies, "'Who?' I asked. Sometimes I didn't put it together when someone called the Queen 'mother.' I never thought that, so sometimes I would have to stop and think" (40). Finally, at the end of the summer, Susan's mother commits one last neglectful act—she runs away with the Baron: "All the shimmery dresses were gone from the closets, and the bottles and jewels were gone from the dresser, and small things, like stockings, were thrown and fallen all over the room" (153). This cruel and selfish abandonment is done at a stage of Susan's life when she will need a mother's care and nurturing the most.

Susan's father, although not equally detrimental to Susan as the Queen, does not play a particularly supportive role in Susan's life. According to Nancy C. Parrish, Susan's father "doesn't fit neatly into her family story, partly because he has no clear power to balance that of the queen and partly because he doesn't

attempt to play the social role that so attracts the queen" (Lee Smith 192). When first introduced in the novel, Susan tells a story about her father and states, ". . . but you couldn't ever tell about Daddy. He didn't talk a lot" (3). This description holds true throughout the novel—he does not have much of a voice through the novel, nor in Susan's life. Not only is Susan's father quiet, but he is secretive as well. One day when Susan is bored, she goes into her father's workshop and finds "a little road through the junk" which leads to a closet full of pictures (69). Most of the photographs are of Susan's mother; thus Susan contemplates the following: "I couldn't figure why he didn't bring the pictures upstairs and hang them in the house, and then I thought that maybe the Queen didn't like them, or maybe that he never showed them to her. I didn't know which. It was very strange" (70-71). Susan's father, unable to communicate with his wife, could not possibly explain his need for privacy and his marital problems to his daughter. Although it is obvious that he loves Susan, he is not always around when she needs him, for he is absorbed with his own troubles.

Susan's lack of parental care forces her to be alone as well as to be more independent. As a result, Susan must face certain traumas alone that she should not have to face at her age. According to Broadwell, Smith's Something in the Wind and Black Mountain Breakdown also address impeding rather than aiding parents as in The Last Day the Dog Bushes Bloomed: "In each book, the daughter is torn between the opposing values embodied in her parents, who are themselves extreme examples of human fragmentation in Southern society" (424). Susan's parents

demonstrate the problem with relationships and marriage, something Susan must endure. Smith's choosing a child as the victim of such neglect produces a large impact on the reader and creates more sympathy for the situation. This example demonstrates the importance of parental guidance in children's lives and the serious effects on children if they are ignored. Susan is neglected and is not told what is going on with her family; therefore Susan must create a fantasy and in effect lie to herself. She is taught at a young age that she cannot deal with truth and must face misfortune alone.

Susan's neglectful home life is quite tragic and creates a bleak view of the family unit; however, with all tragedies, Smith creates some sort of balance, which at a minimum provides hope for the future. Susan does have a parental figure, although she is described as crazy and is a hired hand; Susan has Elsie Mae, whom she describes as follows: "I love Elsie Mae. She could say anything but she was always grinning about it. . ." (14). When Susan is hurt, it is Elsie Mae who comforts her: "Elsie Mae kissed me on top of my head and said if I would be quiet and go to sleep in a minute she would get me some vanilla wafers" (45). In another instance, Susan explains, "When Elsie Mae came back I got three Band Aids and a Hershey bar, and Elsie Mae sat in the red chair and told me a nice long story. . ."(72). Although Elsie Mae can never provide all that is expected from a mother, she does provide caring and nurturing that Susan would not otherwise receive. Elsie Mae, whom Smith uses to balance the negative aspects in Susan's life, is the counterpart of Susan's mother.

In addition to lack of parental care, Susan witnesses her parents' reactions towards each other as she watches the deterioration of their marriage. This creates a bleak view of the institution of marriage for Susan at a very young age. The Queen states, "'All marriages aren't made in a church. . . . Sometimes everything isn't all roses. Sometimes people have to get married" (109). Even Elsie Mae confirms the hardships of marriage: "'Oh, law. . . .You don't have to marry somebody just because you love them. And you don't have to love somebody just because you marry them" (112). Again, Susan is too young and too alone to have experience with such weighty issues. By showing such hardships for a nine-year-old, Smith allows the reader to understand the effects of the problem. The reality that all marriages do not last, or that marriages do not always occur out of love are truths many adults cannot handle; a nine-year-old child who already places her parents in a fantasy world is ill-equipped to handle. Smith illustrates through Susan what a calamity marriage can be, what effect it can have on everyone's lives (not just the married couple's), and the importance of addressing the problem.

Despite the cynical view of marriage expressed in the novel, Susan is again offered some sort of hope. Her sister Betty is engaged to a boy named Tom, with whom she is in love. Betty's marriage may prove to be a better example for Susan than her own parents' marriage. The Queen says to Betty, "You just don't know what you're missing. . . . You could do a lot better" (108-9). Betty dismisses her mother's idea of marrying for money or just to make her mother proud; she decides to marry for love and begins her relationship on stronger principles than her mother

had, who marries only because she is with child. Smith creates this balance in order to illustrate the presence of both positive and negative aspects in life and the importance of each. Betty's marriage cannot reverse the affliction caused by her parents on Susan, but she may be able to help provide Susan with a better model of what marriage is about.

In addition to the negative experience of parental neglect and the effect of a bad marriage, Susan is introduced to another harshness in the world, which some critics describe as pure evil. A neighbor of Susan's has a visiting child, Eugene, with whom Susan is asked to play. When first meeting Eugene, Susan describes him as follows:

> Eugene's eyes were what got to me. They were not blue or brown like most people's. They didn't have much color in them at all. . . . The secrets were all there behind the eyes, and I knew that they were there without knowing what they were, but I knew they were not nice ones. Eugene's eyes gave me goose bumps all over. (19-20)

After Susan has just met Eugene, he throws a rock at a mouse that Susan befriended. Yet this is only a subdued act considering what is to follow. Eugene continues his evil deeds as he creates an imaginary friend, little Arthur: "He has on a long black coat. . . . And he has a gun. . . . A great big gun. Loaded" (65). Little Arthur then dictates to the group of children what they need to do in order to be in his club: "'Little Arthur says we have to start this club . . . by mixing our blood.' He pulled out a long shiny knife, not a kitchen knife but a kill knife" (76). In another instance,

one of Susan's playmates had a deformed kitten with a hole in its back. Eugene insists on "helping" the kitten: "Eugene got my iodine. He did it again and again with very bright eyes" (127). After Eugene pours the iodine on the kitten, the kitten dies. Eugene instigates another act towards Susan and her friend Julia: "Little Arthur wants Susan and Baby Julia and Sara Dell to take off their pants and walk in front of the rest of the club" (141). The girls, intimidated by Eugene, comply with the order. Eugene also manipulates the group into destroying Mrs. Tate's roses; she is a neighbor whose husband is ill, and the roses are her only enjoyment.

All of the bad deeds that Eugene instigates at this point are wrong, but not necessarily detrimental to Susan's life. However, with his last "game" Eugene takes away what childhood innocence Susan may have left. Eugene decides on a new game, and "The name of the game is Iron Lung." (160). Smith uses this powerful image of an iron lung from the 1950's, the time the novel takes place; there was a terrifying fear of polio, which mostly affected children. The iron lung was a bulky and clumsy life-saving machine that instilled fear already before the children even knew what they were about to "play." Eugene describes it as playing a variation of doctor and nurse; Susan is the patient. The children begin playing, as described by Susan in the following passage:

> All of a sudden Little Arthur and Eugene came running out of nowhere and they were the Iron Lung. They jumped on me and pulled down my shorts and they were going up and down, up and down, up and down, on me with no clothes on, and they were the Iron

> Lung. . . . I was going down and down into the earth, and the Iron Lung was hurting me between my legs, and the dirt was coming up to cover me because I was dying. (162-6)

Eugene is forced to stop when Gregory, another playmate of the group, interrupts and threatens to tell his parents what is going on. This traumatic event in Susan's life completely takes away her innocence. Susan associates the rape with her own death, and now instead of pondering what childhood games she should play, Susan asks herself more disturbing questions about death and sex. Again, Smith uses a child as a victim of an adult crime to emphasize the horror of the crime and its presence in society.

Despite the horrible crime, Smith again creates a certain balance, leaving Susan and the reader with hope that Susan will not be totally destroyed. As little Arthur represents supreme evil, Susan also experiences the supreme good—God. In an interview with Lee Smith by author Linda Byrd, Smith states, "I have been, ever since I was a child, so drawn to the more ecstatic kinds of religions and the ecstatic elements of religions, but also terrified by them" (97). Smith explains her religious upbringing as, "I had been incredibly religious as a child, as a teenager, and I think probably the most, well, passion that I had felt had often been religious passion and within religious terms" (99). Smith's fascination with religion is reflected in the character of Susan. Although Susan experiences the worst possible trials in her life, she never stops seeking God: "I always used to look for God behind the clouds but I only saw him up there once, when I was seven" (18). Susan also explains, "When I

was seven I was holy. . . . One day I had a tea party in my playhouse for God, and he came, and ate a moon pie and drank iced tea" (46). After the horrible rape, Susan again looks for God:

> I tried to pray to God but I couldn't pray because I couldn't remember any prayers at all. I watched one firefly but it never moved and when I knew it was a star I prayed to it. "Dear star in heaven," I prayed. "Dear star, star, star." That was all I said but I said it over and over though the clear green air straight up to heaven. The star started to move, it danced in the sky, it winked at me and nodded, and the hard things in my stomach went away. (179)

Although Susan cannot remember a prayer, she begins to pray to everything around her, finding God in nature and in her surroundings. Susan cannot ignore what horrible events have occurred, but she can find some comfort in God.

Before the summer begins, Susan creates secret places that provide her with another source of comfort and security in addition to religion. First she invents the dogbushes: ". . . the dogbushes . . . grew all along the fence at the very back yard. I went on my hands and knees, way under the nicest one to the place where I always sat. I looked out between the green leaves. I could see everything but nothing could see me" (9-10). Susan also invents a "wading house":

> The way to the wading house was hard. That's what was so good about it. After I got there no scouts could track me down. . . . Then I went by a secret path through a field and through the blackberry

> bushes which tried to grab me as I went by. They reached out their hands at me but I got away. . . . The wading house was not a real house. It was a soft, light green tree, a willow, that grew by the bank of the stream. The way the branches came down, they made a little house inside them. The land and the tiny river were both inside the house, and it was the only wading house in the world, and I was the only one that knew about it. (11-12)

Both of these places are known only to Susan. They both are enclosed areas, which help to conceal Susan and keep her secure from the outside world. After the rape, Susan again goes to nature and her hidden spot for comfort: "I sat under the dogbushes and it was green, green all over the world, Everything was blooming hard and fast because it knew that soon it would have to die" (178).

The wading house and the dogbushes are a comfort to Susan, but they will soon disappear. Susan explains the night her town is declared a disaster area and the wading house is flooded: "The rain came down until I thought it never would stop coming. I remembered all about the Bible and Noah's ark, and I couldn't figure out who I would walk with if we all walked two by two" (129). Author Harriette C. Buchanan in the essay "Lee Smith: The Story Teller's Voice" explains: ". . . her ninth summer will be the last during which the dogbushes will bloom: the next summer she will call the bushes by their more ordinary name. . ." (327). Although the season is changing, things are beginning to die, and Susan can no longer find safety in the same things as before. The cycle will begin again, new things will

bloom, and Susan will still be strong: "Little Arthur was under the dogbushes now and I was not surprised. I understood then that wherever I went, for maybe the whole rest of my life, Little Arthur would not be very far away. He would be somewhere close outside. I knew that he would always be there, but it didn't scare me" (180). Evil and misfortunes will always be present in Susan's life, but she will be strong and not be afraid. The dogbushes are not the same, just as the wading house has been changed after it flooded.

The end of Susan's privacy and comfort signifies the end of her innocence; Susan must give up both at age nine. Smith demonstrates how atrocities effect the young and how devastating they can be. Fortunately, with the balance of still having her father, her religion, and her strength, Susan will endure.

The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed is at many points a bleak novel. The novel begins with Susan remembering the events of her summer as clearly as "the corsage under the glass bell in Mrs. Tate's parlor" (1). Later in the novel the reader discovers more about the corsage: "There was a corsage under a glass bell on a little round table. The flowers looked like new, and the ribbons and the pearl-headed pin, but I knew they were old. They were ages and ages old" (148). As the corsage was kept as a remembrance by Mrs. Tate, the events of that summer will be preserved in Susan's mind for "ages and ages" as well. Susan loses her parents, learns of the failures of marriage, and discovers evil through Eugene and his horrible acts. Dorothy Combs Hill states in her book Lee Smith, "It may be worthwhile to examine for a moment why Smith's outlook becomes so bleak. The answer would

seem to be that, as she looked around society, she saw no possible channels for creative female intelligence. . ." (30). Hill's idea of a "channel" for creative female intelligence, however, is present for Susan. Smith uses Susan's imagination, as well as her narrative voice, as an outlet for Susan to express herself. For this reason, Susan is able to overcome some of the darkness of the events of her life. Although Susan loses her innocence and will remember these tragedies indefinitely, the novel does not only have a bleak outlook. Smith uses Susan to illustrate to readers how cruel and surprising life can be; however, she also creates a balance that provides hope for the future. Along with Susan's misfortunes, she still has her father, now with the possibility of being less distracted; Elsie Mae, who although not her mother, has played the role of a mother more than her own; Betty, who may offer Susan a better view of marriage than her parents'; and God, who instills strength in Susan. Susan's hardships, however horrible and detrimental, are also entangled with joy and the possibility of a promising future, again demonstrating life's inconsistencies and the presence of both blessings and misfortunes in every stage of life.

II.

After the completion of her first novel and graduation from Hollins, Lee Smith continued her career in writing by teaching English at the Harpeth Hall School in Nashville, Tennessee, from 1971 to 1975, and at the Carolina Friends School in North Carolina, from 1975 to 1977. Smith also taught at Duke University and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and directed a summer writing workshop at the University of Virginia (Weaver). In addition to teaching, Smith continued her writing career by publishing short stories and novels, such as Fancy Strut in 1973, Black Mountain Breakdown in 1980, Cakewalk in 1981, and Oral History in 1983. As Smith's writing progressed, so did her fame. Smith won two O. Henry Awards for her short stories as well as other awards for her novels. The once maturing new novelist was now described by The New York Times Book Review as "nothing less than masterly" (Busch).

Lee Smith's Family Linen was published in 1985, and according to Dorothy Combs Hill, the novel " . . . outsold Oral History and won equally high praise from both critical and popular audiences" (14). The novel portrays a family in desperate need of making sense of each of their lives, as well as reconciling with one another. As in The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed, Family Linen explores the results of children's forced entrance into a world of harsh realities. Unlike the situation in Smith's first novel, however, the characters' childhoods in Family Linen are seen through the aftermath of the conflicted adults' lives. The reader therefore looks

back in time to see how childhood tragedy affects the rest of one's life as well as the positive outcomes that can occur even after a complicated past.

Family Linen is set in a small Southern town called Booker Creek. A very small town would give the impression that everyone knows everyone else's business; however, the five children of Miss Elizabeth Bird fight through the novel to understand her past as well as their own. Only after reading their mother's memoirs and learning from her sister Nettie do the five children discover the truth about her dysfunctional life, as well as gain insight into their own lives. The novel reveals slowly the truth as to why the main characters' mother has always been so cold and distant towards her children and why they have never known their real father, Jewell Rife. The story unfolds through the individual perspectives of each of Miss Bird's five children.

Lee Smith creates a separate voice for each of the five siblings, as well as an entire section devoted to each individual, narrated in the third person, allowing each to express his or her different perspectives and situations. The first section in Family Linen is devoted to the character Sybill, an "old maid" who distances herself from her family as much as possible. She experiences terrible headaches three or four hours a week and, as a last resort, tries seeing a hypnotist. Apprehensive of this first session, Sybill blurts out the following to the doctor:

> "Listen here . . . . I manage a condominium complex, twenty units. The Oaks. . . . I teach at the Roanoke Technical Institute, business English, high-school equivalency classes, basic skills. I'm the head of

> Language Arts. . . . I have twenty-six thousand two hundred dollars in my savings account and ten thousand dollars in my IRA. . . . I play bridge and rook, I go to the health club, if I gain a pound I go on the grapefruit diet right away. . . . I go to church, Betty and I go bowling, I've been on a cruise before. I keep up with current events." (20)

Sybill defines herself in this way. She is reduced to what she does for a living and what she owns. She does not have much of a social life or family and friends with whom to share things.

Sybil is alone in part because she is scared of relationships with men. She tells the doctor she is not interested in Edward Bing, a man in her building: "Besides, even if I *was* interested, which I'm not for one minute, believe me, I couldn't very well have an affair with him, could I? I mean a date, of course" (25). She continues to think while reminiscing of another man from the past, Joe Ross Miller, with whom she had toyed with the idea of having an affair, and who had also eventually left her without her having to make this choice, or without any explanation of why he left:

> Since that time—and that was a long time back—a man simply had not occurred. And gradually even the *idea* of a man has stopped occurring, so that without realizing it, without making any conscious decision, Sybill has put those things out of her busy, useful life as firmly as she sets out the trash on a Tuesday morning. (31)

Sybill's "busy" and "useful" life is only filled with emptiness as she pushes people away from her, much in the same manner as her mother. She is unable to have personal relationships with anybody. When the hypnotist wants to examine Sybill's subconscious, she angrily states, "I'm not here for any psychiatrics. . . . I want you to leave my subconscious out of this" (24). Sybill feels as though she had a decent childhood, yet is scared to visit her past.

Although Sybill fears her past, Smith creates a situation in which she has to confront it. The hypnotist continues and puts Sybill in a deep sleep. When she awakens, Sybill describes a dream she had, a dream that awakens her to a memory she has tried desperately to hide from herself. As a child, Sybill witnesses the brutal murder of her father by a woman she believes to be her mother. This secret leads to tension for the whole family. Whether they realize it or not, all the children are affected by this secret because of what it has done to their mother. This awakening to a terrible childhood provokes many questions inside Sybill; as a result, Sybil must face the problems of her childhood and their influence on the present day. Sybill therefore returns to Booker Creek to confront her mother, but instead finds her family gathered in the hospital where the mother has taken ill.

Lee Smith demonstrates the drastic effects a difficult childhood can have on one's life. The reader first witnesses Sybill's problems as an adult and is then allowed to see her past, where the problems began. Sybill's dream is described as follows:

> Then Sybill saw the figure out in the yard, with the long-handled ax upraised, and saw her bring it down again and again into the man who lay on the hillside in the streaming rain, the washing mud. Sybill saw everything: his face and hair all red with blood, the blood running down into the steep muddy yard, his black hat where it lay in the pouring rain, all that blood. (42)

Sybill now remembers the murder of her father. As a witness to such a violent crime, Sybill suffers physically as well as emotionally. She tries to confront her mother on the matter, but by the time she arrives in Booker Creek, her mother is on her deathbed and quickly passes away.

Sybill's sister, Candy, also demonstrates similar problems. Her adult life is less than ideal. She is raising her children alone as a hairdresser and is having an affair with her sister Myrtle's husband. Myrtle describes her as follows: ". . . Candy was just a terrible mother—all those kids ever did was play downtown on the sidewalk while she was doing hair. They never had any advantages to speak of. They raised themselves" (58). Like Sybill, Candy leads a complex life as she struggles daily with life's events.

Candy's childhood, as her adult life, is less than ideal: as Myrtle states, "Mother was *always* mad at Candy. She didn't even speak to her for several years, from the time Candy eloped with Lonnie Snipes until the time he was killed in Vietnam. Mother felt sorry for her then, or had to act like she did. . ."(58). Candy, like the rest of the children, does not experience a close relationship with her

mother. The narrator explains, "Miss Elizabeth and Candy never saw eye to eye. They were natural strangers" (123).

Candy and Miss Elizabeth, however, were more than just "natural strangers." The neglect Candy feels through her life comes not only from her Mother's coldness, but from her mother's knowing that Candy is not her own child. During Miss Elizabeth's marriage to Jewell Rife, he not only physically and mentally abuses Miss Elizabeth, but he also repeatedly rapes her mentally handicapped sister, Fay. Shortly after Miss Elizabeth becomes aware of the rapes and Fay's pregnancy, Jewell Rife disappears. In order to save herself from embarrassment from the town, Miss Elizabeth hides with Fay for nine months and returns to Booker Creek raising the child she calls "Candace" as her own. Until the Mother's journal is found and the truth revealed from the only other knowledgeable person on the matter, Nettie, the oldest of the three sisters, Candy is not aware of this deceit but always feels a certain neglect.

As a result of this relationship, Candy is forced to grow up without the emotional support one needs from a mother. Again, Candy's childhood reflects on her present day experiences and on how she raises her own children. Lee Smith uses Candy's relationship as a child with her mother to demonstrate its importance in the future. Childhood problems appear again at all stages of life.

The next oldest sister in <u>Family Linen</u> is Myrtle. Of all the siblings, Myrtle appears to be the most fortunate. She has a loving husband, money, and wonderful children. However, at a second glance, the reader perceives the truth: "But it's also

true that Myrtle has days when she feels like her whole life is a function of other people's, and it's also true that her children have turned into problem children" (48). Myrtle, whose husband is having an affair with Candy, is having her own affair as well. She does not feel complete in life: "Nothing was *wrong*, exactly, but she began to feel like she was missing out—on what, she couldn't have told you" (50). Like her sisters', Myrtle's adult life is complex and problematic.

Myrtle's troublesome adult life is the result of a tough childhood and the lack of parental guidance. Myrtle explains: "No matter how good we were, it was never good enough. Don, even though he was the quarterback, was not good enough for me to marry because he was an orphan" (57). Myrtle's childhood was so distressing that it almost brings her comfort to see her mother helpless: "A part of Myrtle was gloating, to see her mother so helpless" (57). Her mother's role in her life, when present, is more harmful than good. As a result, Myrtle's past integrates with the present. As she lacked something, or someone, from her childhood, Myrtle does not feel complete as an adult.

The next oldest sibling is Lacy, one of the children who is able to leave her hometown. Lacy, like Candy, is raising a child on her own; she too is unable to have a successful marriage. In her adult struggles, Lacy fights with the idea of getting back with her ex-husband and raising a child alone, uncertain as to which would be the better option. Like her siblings, Lacy's present life is lacking many important things, including the most important—happiness.

Lee Smith again uses the characters' adult problems to illustrate the effect childhood problems can have later in life. Lacy links her present-day anguish with that of the past: "In fact this was the strangest thing of all, to be staying here at Mother's while Mother was in the hospital. Lacy felt like an interloper, a snoop, and sometimes—most unsettling of all—exactly like the malcontent, unhappy child she used to be" (71). When she reflects on her childhood, Lacy remembers how negative her upbringing was: "For years Lacy had tried to put distance—real emotional, and psychological—between herself and Booker Creek. . . . She really thought she had struggled free of her childhood, of that shell that never quite fit. . ." (70). It was not even her own mother who had the largest part in raising her. The narrator explains:

> Sybill, almost ten years old when Lacy was born, took care of her until she was eight, until Sybill went off to school. They never write letters, now. Lacy buys Sybill a nice sweater every Christmas. Was Mother just tired of it, of raising children, by then? Were Candy and Arthur too much for her? Or was it some particular thing, or the lack of something, in Lacy? (129-30)

Lacy had a difficult relationship with her mother, as did all the children: "She never knew any of us, really. I wonder if she ever knew Daddy, or anybody" (69). Having a mother that does not even know her own children or husband, as Miss Elizabeth evidently did not, leads Lacy to distance herself from her own family. In search of comfort, Lacy first turns to religion:

> When was it, how was it, that Lacy ceased to believe? She remembers the way it was, believing, the rush of emotion, the way her head felt light. It seems that one moment she was a saint, and then she was a student, and then somehow she was married. All with a fearful intensity, with a total disregard for the facts. . . . She transferred all that belief straight from God straight to her professors straight to Jack. (129)

Although at one point believing in God, Lacy has turned from religion in search of another source of comfort. Her search, beginning from childhood, has remained unresolved.

The youngest of the siblings and the only male is Arthur. His adult life is arguably the worst of all the siblings. The narrator describes Arthur as follows: "Arthur doesn't give a shit about much of anything now" (87). In addition to having a bad attitude, Arthur suffers from alcoholism and other physical ailments: "He's got high blood and a bad heart, a weak stomach, low back pain and hemorrhoids and a terminal case of despair" (87). Like most of his sisters, he has suffered from a broken marriage; however, his ex-wife refuses to allow Arthur to see their child. Dreading this trip back to his family, Arthur reminisces about the last time he saw his mother: "The last time Arthur saw his mother, she said he needed a haircut and that he had been for her a source of constant pain"(107). Arthur's adult problems again stem from those of his childhood.

Like the rest of the family, Arthur did not have a good relationship with his mother. Arthur's problems as an adult could be the result of his unusual upbringing. Miss Elizabeth's oldest sister, Nettie, repeatedly stepped in to help Miss Elizabeth, although she was always too proud and embarrassed to ask. Nettie, therefore, had a large part in raising the children. Arthur remembers, "Nettie damn near raised him, or tried to. Nobody finished the job" (89). It was his Aunt Nettie who had the most part in raising him, not his mother. As he grew older, Arthur's relationship with his mother did not improve. He was part of a rock band and asked his mother to watch them play: "Miss Elizabeth used to look at them [the band] and cry. She would have died for sure if they'd had a Negro in the band. But more Negroes in town would have been good for her, in Arthur's opinion. It would have given her somebody to rise above, besides her own family" (95). Arthur's opinion of his mother is shared among his family; they all suffered from her condescending attitude.

Although Arthur did not have a father growing up, he did have the emotional support from Verner Hess, his stepfather. After the disappearance of Miss Elizabeth's first husband, Jewell, Verner Hess, who had always had feelings for Elizabeth, asked her to marry him. He, in turn, helped raise her children by providing the nurture and support both Miss Elizabeth and the children desperately needed. In search of one loving real parent, however, Arthur tries to find his birth father:

> Verner Hess was not his own daddy, and he was thinking about that. Arthur wished he was. But he was not, and somehow that had made

> some difference in his life, he'd be hard put to say just how. Arthur looked for his daddy for years and years and never found him, all he found was a string of women who said they'd known him, years ago. (101)

Arthur is never told the truth that his father is dead, not missing; not knowing the truth leads Arthur to have false hopes for the future and holds him back from having a deeper relationship with Verner Hess. Arthur's mother has scorned her children by her omission of the truth and by never allowing herself to have the desperately needed relationships with her children.

Each section of Family Linen is divided among the different characters in order to express different perspectives and experiences. However, in addition to the five siblings, the thoughts of the children of these main characters are given in the first person point of view. Don and Myrtle's son, Sean, for example, expresses his opinion on the living environment his parents have provided:

> I hate all this active-listening shit. Ever since they learned it last year in that class, you can't have a decent conversation with them. If you ever could. But now I mean you come home from school really pissed about something, I mean really pissed, and they say something like, 'Gee, son, you're very angry!' they say 'Yes! Yes, you are! I can tell you're angry!' and that's it. Then they smile a big faggy smile and go off whistling or something, and you feel like shit. You feel worse than you did before. (63)

As the main characters in Family Linen are undergoing many serious problems, the children are not being acknowledged; Myrtle is neglecting her own son as she tries to confront her mother's neglecting her. Smith uses the children of the main characters in order to express the danger of ignoring the problems directly in front of the characters and to illustrate how easily the same mistakes can be repeated if not confronted. Smith also uses first person in these situations in order to emphasize the importance of what is being said and to distinguish the children's problems from the parents'.

As the perspectives of the youth are differentiated by being told in the first person, so is the perspective of the mentally handicapped character, Fay. Fay is the sister of Elizabeth Bird, and because of her handicap, cannot contribute much to the novel as far as her perspective. Fay has become obsessed with television and often speaks incoherently: "But if Sybill was my baby I'd of drowned her, ha ha! Of course I would not, it's a terrible death, what a way to go, just look at Natalie Wood" (84). However unimportant Fay's perspective may seem, she is crucial in terms of the plot. The mysterious death of Elizabeth Bird's husband happened after one of the many times he had raped Fay. Nettie recalls the night she witnessed this atrocity:

> . . . her face looked awful, it looked—how can I tell it?—it looked like the end of the world. . . . While I watched her, Fay backed up to the sink and hiked up her skirt and hoisted herself up there, on the edge of the counter, spraddling her legs. . . . And the worst part about it was

> Fay's face, which I could still see, I could see her face all the time, over Jewell's back, above his white shirt. (233)

After this incident, Jewell was murdered and left behind his wife and Fay, pregnant with Candy, alone. Smith uses Fay in adulthood, just as simple-minded and innocent as a child, as the victim of such a terrible crime in order to emphasize the presence of evil in society. Unable to comprehend such evil, Fay is abused by Jewell and then has her child taken away from her to be raised as Elizabeth's.

The family secret is slowly revealed after Sybill's dream awakens her memory. When she first tells her siblings that she remembers her father's murder, they believe she is hysterical and perhaps having a breakdown. After they have all come to terms with their Mother's journal and her horrible situation with their father, they are more willing to believe. Finally their Aunt Nettie reveals to them the story of when she found their mother after Jewell's disappearance:

> Her eyes were empty and flat, she looked like she had had a nervous breakdown, which I guess she had. . . . I don't know how long Elizabeth sat there. I do know it was a day or so. She had soiled herself, waiting. Fay and the children had eaten up what was there. . . . You never saw such a place. (239)

Sybill's dream finally becomes a reality when Don hires men to dig up the back yard of Miss Elizabeth's house to insert a pool. The bulldozers uncover a "half-rotted corpse" and bits of bones and cloth they all know to be part of Jewell Rife. As the children listen attentively to Nettie's explanation of Miss Elizabeth's past, the

question of who killed Jewell Rife is never entirely answered. Although most of the evidence points to Fay, it is quite possible Miss Elizabeth did it herself. Smith reveals this family secret towards the end of the novel when the characters have had time to reflect on their own lives. They are now ready to accept the past and move towards the future.

Despite the tragedies and broken relationships, Family Linen provides hope for the characters' future. As in The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed, Smith reminds the reader that with all misfortunes there are blessings, and no matter how bad life can be, there is always something positive. The novel ends with a joyous occasion, a family wedding. Don and Myrtle's daughter, Karen, returns home with her boyfriend and with child. They decide to have a small poolside wedding, "mostly family, under the circumstances, but everybody in town knew the circumstances . . ." (257). According to Elizabeth Pell Broadwell, of all the novels Smith has written, "Family Linen has the most positive ending. Brought together initially to attend their dying mother and, finally, to celebrate a wedding, family members, whose lives have been conditioned by a past previously unexamined, learn to use the past creatively and to make significant changes during their middle-age years" (423). Although not overly sentimental, each sibling has some sort of hope for a better future. Sybill is finally part of the family again as she helps to plan the wedding; she also ". . .feels a lot better in general now that her headaches have disappeared. . ." (268). The reader also learns that: "Even Arthur looks reasonably decent. . ." (269). Arthur is pursuing things with Mrs. Palucci, a nurse he finds

attractive. Lacy's outlook on life changes as she finally decides to write her dissertation and work on her relationship with her ex-husband. Even Myrtle elects to do more in her life and go into real estate. Finally, Candy continues working contentedly at the beauty shop and excitedly waits for her son Tony to come home for the wedding.

The final ending to the wedding and the novel occurs when the whole family ends up in the pool: "Tomorrow, nobody will remember exactly who was the first one in the pool, but soon it's full of churning bodies, pale flashing flesh beneath the water" (272). According to Dorothy Combs Hill, it is a joyous baptism: "It is a moment when tradition, religion, and family are simultaneously redeemed . . ." (102). Each of the characters has been symbolically cleansed of the past and is ready to face the future.

In Family Linen, each of the five siblings unarguably suffers from a bad home life; if they do not witness the murder of their father, they at least suffer from his absence and the absence of a nurturing mother. In an attempt to ignore what has happened in the past, Nettie explains, "There's no point hanging dirty linen on the line" (213). However, if the "dirty linen" had been addressed early in the characters' lives, they might have been able to function normally. The reader witnesses the effects of their troublesome childhood as the characters each struggle as an adult. It is evident that forcing children to grow up prematurely and making them aware of the bleakness of society at a young age is harmful through all stages of life. However, each character is also reminded there is more to life than what he

or she has made of it. Lee Smith again mixes life's inconsistencies with joyous moments, proving the variety in life and the constant mixture of both the positive and the negative.

Conclusion

Lee Smith's first novel and those later in her career may at first reading seem vastly different. Harriette C. Buchanan describes The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed as "like many first novels . . . the coming-of-age story" which received "scant critical attention," whereas Family Linen and Smith's later novels "demonstrate a mature novelist in full control of her material" (325). Despite the difference in techniques and level of maturity evident in Smith's novels, both her first novel and those later in her career explore many of the same themes with the same outlook. Even though they exhibit different perspectives and are very different in terms of style, Lee Smith's The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen examine issues relevant to both Smith's personal life as well as, in her opinion, to Southern literature.

The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen each explore divorce and its effect on children in the South. Smith explains the problem of divorce concerning children and its role in society as well as in Southern literature in an interview with Claudia Loewenstein:

> The divorce rate alone completely destroys the kind of configuration that produces Southern writing because you don't have these families that are totally coherent and stay together over generation and generation. . . . And all the ills that beset contemporary society, beset the South too—such as the divorce rate, the break-up of the family,

> the loss of ideals in general, the failure of education to address what's happening with the kids—all these things are Southern too. (487)

Both of Smith's novels embody this theory. Susan's parents neglect her in The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed, by not giving Susan any explanation as to what is happening in their relationship. Similarly, the children in Family Linen never receive an explanation from their mother of what had happened between her and their father.

According to Harriette C. Buchanan, Susan from the first novel, ". . . like many Southern girls, has been, on the one hand, overprotected and sheltered from reality, and, on the other hand, denied her parents' time and presence" (343). Buchanan goes on to say that Susan is likely to become like Myrtle in Family Linen, being influenced by "external standards presented in magazines and social conventions"(343). The children in both of Smith's novels are victims of this shelter from reality by not having parents or any family members in whom they can confide. The idea of children dealing with divorce and facing more than is expected at such a young age is an important issue in life, one which has special relevance in Southern literature.

Like divorce, adultery is another issue in Southern Literature important to Smith. When confronted by Loewenstein with the statement, "In your novels, women who have affairs often become stronger and the affairs even resuscitate their own floundering marriages," Smith states, ". . . I just think that's true, and this

makes it worth writing about" (501). Smith realizes that affairs are, with some misfortune, a part of life, and therefore, an important part of literature.

Both The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen explore bleak issues present in society, but they simultaneously demonstrate how life in the South can be surprisingly uplifting and promising. Smith states in her interview with Nancy Parrish that " . . . everybody longs for a world that is just a little bit more understandable and has its familiar elements. I think Southern writing still by large does have that, even when the fiction concerns the breakdown of the world" ("Lee Smith" 398). Such realism, however tragic and disturbing, is an important part of Lee Smith's life and her understanding of the South. In an interview with Nancy Parrish, Smith explains how the family is portrayed unrealistically in many forms of Southern literature:

> I think probably so many of the people who are drawn to nostalgia about the Southern past never had that kind of extended family, or maybe any sense of family in their own lives. . . . I have always felt that the South we study about and think about in terms of Southern literature is the South we find mostly in Southern writing. It's a kind of convention. It's not really the South that most of us were aware of growing up. The South's perception of itself is a literary perception. ("Lee Smith" 401)

Smith's effort to create a realistic South and the perception of the family is present in both The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen. Each household is

filled with controversy and daily struggles, much like Smith's own family and other surrounding families, which Smith successfully recreates.

As certain themes are recurring in Smith's novels, they also appear in her personal life. In an interview with Charline McCord, Smith states that she has ". . . written very little of what you would call autobiographical fiction" (98). However, her works would prove otherwise. The suggestion of an imperfect childhood has been an influence in Smith's life and novels. In the interview with Nancy Parrish, Smith explains, "In my work I respond very strongly to what I am thinking about at the time. So there are too many divorce stories in Me and My Baby View the Eclipse, because I was writing those stories during the time of my divorce. No matter what you think you are writing about, your daily life seeps in" ("Lee Smith" 398). Although Smith writes a great deal about divorce in her novels, she also illustrates many tensions in childhood in her early works, which are evident in her personal life. Smith talks about her parents in another interview with Claudia Loewenstein: "Both my parents were institutionalized many times. And the nervous breakdown was something that happened a whole lot in my childhood, so, naturally it found its way into the writing" (504). Smith, herself, does not reveal much about her childhood in regard to her mother. However, there is evidence from the above statement that it was not ideal, as the children's lives in her novels are not. As Smith testifies, it is difficult not to write about what has occurred in one's life; therefore childhood difficulties surface repeatedly.

Divorce and the loss of innocence in a child are frequent issues in Lee Smith's novels. Both The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen explore issues relevant to both Smith's personal life as well as to Southern literature. As Southern literature does not always portray the South accurately, Smith's goal is to realistically illustrate this way of life, including both the negative and the positive aspects. Therefore, both the novels succeed in allowing the reader to see life in the South more explicitly, as well as have a glimpse into the personal life of Lee Smith herself.

As she attempts to portray life in the South, as well as moments in her own personal life, Lee Smith also captures the realism of everyday life in society in The Last day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen. However skillful Smith is in recreating the essence of actual people and places, realism is not always of what readers wish to be reminded. Dorothy Combs Hills explains, "Lee Smith's life is so phenomenal, her message so radical, that it hardly seems permissible to speak of the things she speaks of . . ." (xvii). Smith addresses such radical issues in these two novels, including the problems with the institution of marriage for the family unit and the presence of evil in society; Smith emphasizes the seriousness of these problems through the most innocent victims of all—children. By using such innocent characters, Smith emphasizes the destructiveness of marriage and the bleakness in society; a tragedy among children is far more detrimental than those among adults because of children's innocence, their trusting and naïve nature, and that lack of understanding of the world around them. Therefore, it is harder for the

reader to ignore the issues that Smith illustrates and the consequences of these issues if they are ignored. The character Susan in The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and the characters in Family Linen each represent lost innocence and the need for such atrocities to be addressed by their surrounding society and families.

The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen each explore childhood tragedies by using different perspectives but resulting in the same conclusions. Smith's first novel illustrates the possible cause of future trauma in adults, and Family Linen illustrates the effect of early childhood tragedies. For example, in The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed the reader witnesses a marital affair from a child's point of view. Susan's mother and the Baron are having an affair and eventually run off with each other. At first, Susan does not want to accept this loss: ". . . I had a new trick of how not to think about things. I had fixed my mind up so it was cut into boxes. . . That way, if I ever wanted to think about anything I could just pull it out of its box. . .and there are some things that I never took out of their boxes at all" (173). Susan is in denial at many points of the novel as to what is going on with her family. Susan witnesses the selfishness of her mother and the lack of effort put forth by her father, which prepare Susan for failure of her own.

Family Linen explores divorce as well as adultery, but with a different perspective than The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed. In this novel, the reader sees marital difficulty among adults who have already witnessed relationship problems as children. Four of the five children in the novel have either had an affair

or a divorce (some even both). In Family Linen, the characters have relationship problems stemming from childhood and the relationship between their parents. Smith emphasizes the problem with the institution of marriage through the innocent Susan in The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed to demonstrate the effect unsuccessful marriages have on the whole family, not just the parents. In Family Linen, Smith illustrates the effect of unsuccessful marriages and the problem of not addressing the issue at the time it occurs on children and throughout their adult lives.

As the characters in The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen undergo many childhood difficulties, the most tragic problem is that the children have no one with whom to share these incidents. The failure of the family unit is addressed in both these works. Susan, confused and alone, creates a fantasy world for herself because her parents are too preoccupied to take part in her life. In Family Linen, the children are never told about their father and therefore can never understand or have a close relationship with their mother. Smith uses the characters in these two novels to emphasize the damaging effects a lack of parental guidance has on children. If Susan continues to be neglected, she may end up like Sybill in Family Linen by not being able to have a family of her own or function normally in society. Smith addresses both the long-term and short-term effects of neglecting children and the serious dangers of ignoring the issue.

Children's loss of innocence and their premature entrance into a world of harsh realities are themes in both The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen. Smith's first novel again demonstrates the cause of possible problems in the

future stemming from childhood events. Susan is raped, loses her mother, and questions her belief in God—all at age nine. The effects of such tragedies are then seen in Family Linen; Sybill, who suffers from repressed memories of her father's murder, and the other children, who suffer from not having a father and the negative attention received from their one remaining parent, must deal in their adult lives with the damage caused them. Therefore, Susan in the first novel undergoes similar childhood ordeals to those with which the adult siblings in Family Linen must learn to cope.

By witnessing the problems caused by early childhood trauma on adults, Family Linen demonstrates the effect of what could happen to a character like Susan in Smith's first novel. Although each novel uses a different perspective by demonstrating either the cause or effect on a child's involvement in a family breakdown, Smith uses each novel to emphasize the negative and permanent impact traumas can have on children.

In addition to problems among families, Smith addresses the presence of evil in society. In The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed, Susan is introduced to evil at age nine through Eugene and his imaginary friend, Little Arthur. Through them, Susan witnesses and takes part in destructive behavior, but most tragically of all, she is raped. In Family Linen, a series of terrible crimes, the murder of an abusive father brought on by the rape of the innocent Fay, causes the destruction of an entire family. Smith uses children as the victims of such adult crimes to emphasize how bleak society is, how evil proliferates, and how it should not be ignored.

As Lee Smith expresses her concern for society, she displays these problems through the young and innocent. In order to continue her realistic portrayal, Smith illustrates the good in life as well as the bad. Buchanan expresses her belief that often Smith's characters are left with no solutions in their lives:

> Smith's stories are about women faced with a world for which they are unprepared. These women are not only unprepared but also have little idea of where to look for guidance, because their families and communities provide so little in the way of honest or genuinely nurturing support. The families are usually broken, with key members either physically or mentally absent. These characters are so frequently lost and spiritually impoverished that they see no solution to their problems. (344)

The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed explores one dark summer in the life of nine-year-old Susan but ends with hope for her future. The reader witnesses Susan in the end of the novel, unafraid, accepting God, and willing to trust her father; she states, "I loved him [her father] then so much that I almost fell down the steps. . . . I prayed, but nothing mattered. The steps were solid under me and it was all right" (180). Susan has gained independence in spite of all that has happened to her and she is ready, perhaps with a more cynical outlook, to face the world again. Family Linen again demonstrates the effect on what has happened earlier to children like Susan. Each character undergoes difficulties based on his or her adolescence, but has by the end of the novel put the past behind and begun to move forward. This

positive change demonstrates the future for Susan; she will face problems but will have the strength to overcome them. Smith uses these novels to illustrate the presence of hope and blessings in everyone's life.

The characters in The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed and Family Linen are at times unprepared and have definitely come from broken families with little guidance or nurturing; however, the characters in both novels have not completely conceded to the idea that there are no solutions in sight. Susan at the end of The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed gains a new sort of independence; she accepts the existence of evil, but does not lose faith in God. She now has a chance to rebuild a stronger and healthier relationship with her father and sister. Similarly, at the end of Family Linen, each character has come to some resolution of his or her past and is ready to face the future with a new outlook. Dorothy Combs Hill explains, "Through the power of the written word, Smith begins to imagine a conclusion beyond complicity and destruction. Her fiction is redemptive, finally, because wholeness, not damage, is what Smith is seeking" (127). Lee Smith's goal is not to exclusively express what is wrong with the world, but to illustrate the inconsistencies in life and to reiterate that with all stages of life there are both misfortunes and blessings, as well as the possibility of redemption.

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