

Green or Greed?: The Irony of Ecology in Jane Smiley's *Good Will*

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Abstract Pulitzer Prize laureate Jane Smiley's novella *Good Will* tells a story of a man named Bob who lives a self-contained as well as self-deceiving life in a valley. His interactions with nature and people are hindered by his greedy anticipation, egotistic imagination and male chauvinist domination. The pastoral life he imagines turns out to be a bubble in the end. Mainly from the eco-ethical and ecofeminism angles, the paper probes into Bob's intentional living a green life and his later failure caused by his greed for absolute personal power over his family and environment; meanwhile, Smiley's ecological poetics can also be discovered through a series of irony of ecology in the story, which is different from the ecological implications in traditional fictions.

Key Words irony of ecology; nature; imagination; egotism; androcentrism

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Good Will published in 1989 is a novella written by the American novelist Jane Smiley, who won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1992 for her novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991). It's a story narrated by the protagonist Bob (Robert Miller), a Vietnam veteran, about his trying to live entirely off the land after the war for years with his wife Liz (Elizabeth Miller) and his son Tommy (Thomas Miller) in a valley 3 miles to a town named Moreton, in Pennsylvania. They seem to lead a life of minimalism, such as no savings in the bank, no electricity, or TV, or telephone, or even mirror in the house, no motor vehicles for transportation. On top of that, their life is almost self-sufficient: the Millers live in the house built by themselves; they eat and drink what they grow, raise, fish and hunt; they wear what they weave and sew; they use

or play what they make; and they barter for what they can't make. They derive almost everything they need from nature. This seemingly green and peaceful life is interrupted by an interview from a writer named Tina Morrissey at the beginning of the story, and later broken up after a series of upgrading unexpected incidents involving Tommy and his African American classmate Annabel Harris and her mother Lydia Harris, a black mathematician. The green life out of good will turns out to be gloomy in the end.

As to researches in China, papers and theses mainly center on Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and only a few on her other fictions like *Good Faith*, *Private Life*, *Ten Days in the Hills*, and *Moo*. However, there is none about *Good Will* yet. By contrast, there've been relatively more researches on Jane Smiley and *Good Will* overseas. For instance, Nakadate, in one of the chapters of his book *Understanding Jane Smiley*, focuses on Bob Miller's egotism and tyrannical dominion and control over his wife and son, of which the causes and effects are summarized. Considering the underneath reasons for Bob's determination to control the conduct of others, Nakadate does mention Bob's obsessive need to demonstrate Thoreau-like self-sufficiency and to withdraw and achieve a separate peace after his tour in Vietnam, but the whole analysis is not from an eco-ethical perspective. Suzanne MacLachlan's article "Kitchen-Table Tales of Desire and Will" published in *Christian Science Monitor* on Oct. 30, 1989 is a book review of Smiley's two novellas, *Ordinary Love* and *Good Will*. MacLachlan also regards Bob Miller as the egomaniac, but the article is a very brief and short introduction to the novella without any further justification. Kathryn Morse's "Walmart, Homesteads, and Unintended Consequences" is a review on *Good Will*, published in *Environmental History* (Oct. 2005). Morse points out the conflicts Bob, Liz, and Tom face between modern homesteading and American culture of consumption. However, Morse doesn't explore the novella from an eco-ethical angle either. According to Jesse Cohn, Bob's fatal mistake is "his commitment to his own trope of 'self-containment'" (Cohn 183). What's more, Cohn points out that Bob projects his own wishes too much on his family without any realization, and contains his family and himself in such a strict way so as to be far away from the exchange economy. However, Bob's attitude towards nature hasn't been mentioned and his seemingly ecological living style hasn't receive any attention. Accordingly, the paper is to study Bob's ecological ethics and to dig out the ironies hidden behind his superficially green life.

Mainly from both eco-ethical and eco-feminism angles, the paper probes into Bob's intentional living a green life and his later failure in doing so, by analyzing his eco-ethical relationship with the environment and the people, as well as the

ironies existed in the seemingly ecological living style. The paper finds out that behind Bob's "good will" of living a green life against capitalism hides his real greed for keeping everything under his control like God. The ending disillusionment of his dreaming pastoral life proves to be an irony of ecology, and thus reveals Jane Smiley's eco-ethical ideology, which is very different from those of traditional writers whose focuses are usually the worsening environment caused by the damages from humans, through which novelists want to call the reader's attention to environmental deterioration, arouse their ecological consciousness, and hope for a universal action to protect the earth by breaking the dualism idea of man/woman, culture/nature, and etc. Nevertheless, Jane Smiley puts an emphasis on the feasibility of realizing a totally green world with every creature and plant sharing an equal right and status, by unfolding the eco-ethical dimension of human nature.

Nature: An Idealized Refuge and Reservoir of Resources for Bob

Throughout the whole novella, Bob Miller resorts to wilderness for a peace of mind and lives off the abundance of land. Nature is where Bob longs to harbor so as to keep himself and his family far away from the disappointing world outside, for "wildernesses embody both 'soft' 'shallow' Romanticism — a provisional getaway from the mechanical or total administered hurly-burly — and, in 'deep' terms, a radical alternative" (Morton 114). After his return from the Vietnam War, he purchases the abandoned farm of about 55 acres from an estate sale for 3300 dollars, and thereafter lives a self-contained life in the valley for years. The Millers seldom get involved into any social contact except that the son Tommy, despite Bob's plan of homeschooling, goes to a grammar school for one last year under Liz's insistence, and Liz has gone to church on weekends for almost one year. The family's annual ritual, the only entertainment in the town within a whole year, is on the day after Thanksgiving, when they walk to town, eat early at the Claytons' house, and go to a movie. They never go to any markets except once when Tommy twists and breaks apart the dolls of his classmate's and they have to buy the same ones in Walmart as compensation. The rest of their days are spent in the valley without any contact with the outside world year after year. Bob depends on nature as a steady fence against the corruption of money and the sophistication of society. For Bob, the absence of money, TV, electricity, telephone and cars at home guarantees a clean and purified environment for him, his wife, and esp. for his son Tommy. Wilderness that surrounds them, in his eyes, is just a net filtering everything sordid from outside. Nature functions as a provider of vacuum or an idealized refuge for them to live in. As a contrast to nature, money is what Bob despises, just like what

he tells Tina, the interviewer: "Money is the precise thing Liz and I don't focus on, which is why we earn so little. As soon as you bring up the money, I notice, conversation gets sociological, then political, then moral. I would rather talk about food, or swimming, or turkey hunting, or building furniture" (Smiley 98)¹¹. To some extent, his self-contained living style is a kind of protest against the outside society of consumerism, for "one could use one's refusal to consume certain things in certain ways as modes of critiquing modern society" (Morton 116). And yet he can't in fact change anything outside but only escape, just as what is said by Morton — "Boycotting and protesting are ironical, reflexive forms of consumerism. By refusing to buy certain products, by questioning oppressive social forms such as corporations or globalization, they point toward possibilities of changing the current state of affairs, without actually changing it" (Morton 117).

Bob considers himself a deist. For countless times, Bob enjoys himself in his observation of nature — "From the house, everything is perfect. The natural landscape offers enclosed, familiar, pleasing curves, softened with August haze and prolific vegetation — sugar maple, black cherry, hickory, butternut, walnut, beech, yellow birch, and white oak are some of what I can see from here — and I respond, unfailingly, with love ('regard' and 'inspiration,' looking and inhaling)" (107). Here his adoration for nature is obvious. Nature pacifies and comforts him in more than one way, just like what he feels — "It is carrying the bird home through the trees, tromping through the leaves, surveying the landscape that brings me back to myself" (137). Nature is somewhat a fetish object for Bob to peer at any time he likes, and nature is objectified as a retreat for him to recover any time he needs. His longing for and obsession with nature share similarity with America's "pastoral ideology" or "green script," which according to Buell, represent "the essential America as exurban, green, pastoral, even wild" (Buell 32-33).

In addition to his pastoral complex, he seems to lead a green life in terms of ecological consciousness, which can be found on the one hand from his farming habits, such as companion planting, crop rotation, garden sanitation, and stockpiling organic compost heaps; and on the other hand from his collecting and bartering for second-hand articles. However, what behind his zeal for nature and his green life style is not his seemingly eco-ethical consciousness, but his constant consumption of nature and his desire to keep everything under control. Nature is a reservoir of resources for him to make use of, as what he assumes after his purchase of the farm

1 All the quotations from the novella in this paper come from the version: Smiley, Jane. *Ordinary Love and Good Will—Two Novellas* by Jane Smiley. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1990.; hereafter the quotations from the novella will be marked only by page number.

— “Now the land has a personality, is without dollar value, and each acre is simply more or less useful or beautiful or ripe for improvement”(99). The land is for him to use and observe, which he enjoys very much — “The fact is, I used to think that the pleasure of receiving the earth’s free gifts — water, raspberries, firewood, walnuts — would fade with habit, but it hasn’t. That’s another prayer — good luck that feels like gratitude” (136). In his opinion, nature exists just for man to use. The consumption of nature, in his eyes, is a natural deed different from the social consumption of commodities. That’s why Bob thinks with self-satisfaction — “We even burn black walnut and cherry, wood the cabinetmaking companies would pay me for if they knew I had it. That’s my luxury, my conspicuous consumption — I burn black walnut for heat” (106). Being ignorant of his own consumerism, Bob is just like “those green Romantic consumerists who have gone so far as to not consider themselves consumerists at all” (Morton 116). Here definitely contains an irony. As a matter of fact, Bob’s exploitation of nature not only satisfies the family’s daily needs, but also his longing for a sense of safety and a sense of achievement, both of which are denied to him by the outside world. Here on the land, he decides what to plant and how to plant, how much wood to cut and how much to barter; he raises lambs every year and slaughters them the next year when they grow up enough; he controls the growth of plants and maximizes the germination rate of carrot seed to almost 100 percent within 7 days while a normal germination rate is usually 30-40 percent within two or three weeks; he is such a good carpenter that he makes delicate furniture for his house and for barter; he is such a good craftsman that he makes his son all the toys. Bob prides himself on making everything the family need from nature. “What I do is remind myself that I am a genius, and, when I step into the workshop, that lends even these kitchen chairs I am making the glow of loveliness” (113). As to Bob’s pride, Neil comments: “Bob’s description of Tommy’s room amounts to a catalog of Bob’s own accomplishments, and he tells us that ‘my pleasure is the knowledge that I have brought all of my being to bear here...If he were really afloat, his bed would bump against the window, and he could look upon the orchard I planted, then bump against the shelves I built, where he could snatch down tops and cars and blocks and tools and dolls we’ve made him; this is a lovely sea, I think, tiny, enclosed, friendly, all his, and his alone’ (102)” (Nakadate 100). He is the creator of everything, like God, in this land. It seems that everything from nature is within his expectation and control. The image is confirmed in Tina’s book sent to the Millers several months later after the interview, which reads: “‘Miller’s manner is not unlike that of some powerful and wealthy CEO. He does what he wants, the way he wants to do it. Surely this

comes from rejecting the power of money and from cultivating his ability to grow, build, catch, or find everything he not only needs, but wants” (157). Although Bob escapes from a capitalist society, refuses to go with the times, and rejects consumerism and social trends, deep in his heart lurks a strong desire to become somebody who has omnipotent power and earns universal recognition, which can be found from his total authority on the land as well as his years’ longing and eagerness for an interview with a commendatory report. The green life style versus the inextinguishable greed hidden in his heart form another irony of ecology.

Nevertheless, he can’t always keep anything under his control. A case in point is his turkey-hunting activity before Thanksgiving Day. The turkeys he discovers are one tom, three hens, and two young birds. Bob targets the nearest hen, a twelve-or-thirteen-pound bird, but in the end he shoots dead the tom mistakenly. The tom is described to be “about six feet long, so large that it is nearly human in some way” (137). Bob’s original intention is very likely to be environmental and protective for the sake of turkeys’ reproduction, as a result of which he aims at one of the three hens instead of the biggest tom. However, the most ironic thing is that he kills the only tom in this turkey family, and thus causes an ecological damage. The accident reveals a truth that in spite of human beings’ good will to protect the environment and their intention to keep all the things under control, the unavoidable errors and misjudgments in their actions will bring potential threats to the environment, which is also an irony of ecology implied in the novella.

As we can see from the above, nature is idealized by Bob as an enclosed space which he takes refuge in, and as a reservoir of boundless resources for man to draw anything he needs and wants. His idealized objectification of nature is far from environmentalism. On the contrary, it uncovers his subconscious greed to rule and to dominate. The contrast between what Bob imagines and what he really desires undoubtedly implies an irony. Even when the land produces and provides in the way he expects, there’re many more unexpected things waiting for him. The unpredictable facet of nature and the unforeseen events stand just as an ironic warning for Bob and for anyone who idealize the relationship between man and nature, which resonates the words in *Ecology without Nature* — “Ecomimesis aims to rupture the aesthetic distance, to break down the subject-object dualism, to convince us that we belong to this world. But the end result is to reinforce the aesthetic distance, the very dimension in which the subject-object dualism persists” (Morton 135).

The Good Boy and the Beauty Wife Imagined and Manipulated by Bob

Besides the unexpected incidents from nature, the biggest surprise comes from Tommy, Bob's beloved son. The surprises would not have been surprises if Bob had woken up from his imagination to realize the causes behind in time. At the beginning of the novella, Bob perceives everything impressionistically — "The chestnut tree above me is alive with light and shade, the weather is warm and breezy, my wife and son go about their business with evident satisfaction. The valley that is our home is soothingly beautiful, safe, and self-contained" (114). The pastoral picture in which Bob is so intoxicated almost deludes the reader. As the story goes on, however, so many unexpected things take place that it goes far beyond the original pastoral, or green life Bob dreams of, which is just like what he confesses — "I admit I like to be prepared for things. A life without money is predicated on anticipation (although, maybe, it is shaped by the unexpected). More that is unexpected happens when you are married, more still when you have a child. Mostly these unexpected things leave me confused and slow... (116)" Bob's longing for fixed situation within his expectation discloses, in fact, his greed of keeping everything under his control. His habitual comment on his son is "He is a good boy" (103). To be a good boy, Tommy must follow what his father expects and orders, such as doing daily farm work after school, assisting in yearly sheep-slaughtering against his own will, buying no toys he wants, and sitting down when instructed. To Bob's mind, the son's unconditional obedience is a prerequisite for being good. Any different opinions from Tommy will be neglected, any protest will go in vain at last, and any noncooperation will very likely lead to physical punishment. Bob would prefer his son to be a replicate, thinking and doing the same as himself, like what he tells the interviewer — "Before he was born, I used to imagine a child-raising program that was purely example-setting. I would go about my work and he would accompany me, gradually assuming responsibility for the tasks that he was strong enough and smart enough for.... Which is not to say that example-setting is sufficient. I find that he does need a lot of molding and guidance, but that is another task we plan for, Liz and I" (104-105). As to homeschooling, despite his wife's objection, Bob plans to begin it as soon as his son finishes the second grade in grammar school. When Tina, in her interview, doubts the appropriateness and asks Liz whether Tommy likes it, Bob speaks up without even thinking — "He likes the idea" (108). Bob gets used to speaking for his wife as well as for his son, neither leaving any choice for them to make, nor any chance for them to speak. Facing his wife's glance after his abrupt interruption, Bob makes the truthful emendation: "Well, he doesn't always like it. But his schooling is my decision to make. He understands that. ... And as for taking responsibility for what goes into his head, that ATTACTS

me" (108-109). Suzanne comments that "Bob Miller thinks he knows exactly what he wants for himself and his family. He loves his wife and son and life on the farm, but most of all, he loves the fact that he has made them what they are. His life is self-contained and he wants to complete this by taking his young son, Tommy, out of school and teaching him at home" (MacLachlan 13). In effect, homeschooling itself has nothing wrong. Instead, Bob's ignorance of his son's opinions as well as his greed to control everything matter. Besides, Bob's way of educating his boy is over-strict, tyrannical, brutal, and violent. His storm-like spankings on Tommy each time after the boy's rebellious deeds are the evidence for his lack of wits and ways to educate. Bob has no other better choices but follow his grandfather's paternalistic way of treating his five sons brutally as his Saint Bernards, showing no concerns for such factors as their sense of happiness, drinking habit, political views, psychological needs, overall health development, etc., as long as the boys are obedient and under control. The grandfather's words "Your sons weren't made to like you. That's what grandchildren are for" (146). linger in Bob's mind. That's why he keeps on educating Tommy through physical punishment when he thinks necessary, as he himself describes: "I am cool and resolved. I spell out moral values, expectations, and consequences. I punish and promise more punishment. I make sure he understands. I assert authority. I bring things to that impossible point, an end" (146). His good will on his son, in fact, contains a will to triumph over his son's will. A case in point is the lamb-slaughtering. Weeping and sniffing, Tommy, for several times, expresses his reluctance to watch his father killing lambs, but Bob insists on the son's help, which in his eyes, is a lesson to learn — "If you eat something, you have to help produce it" (117). The 8-year-old boy is required to hold the lambs during the shearing, help Bob hoist them by the feet and catch the blood after they are slaughtered. The whole process is full of blood and cruelty for a young boy. However, it's not the first time for Tommy to experience the killing. Bob exposes such bloody scenes to his boy each year since Tommy's birth. Now the growing-up boy gradually realizes something, and feels what the lambs feel. Instead of comforting his son, Bob gets "angered rather than gladdened that he has grown up enough in the past year to imagine the sheep's point of view" (117). Bob despises Tommy's sympathy for those lambs. According to Bob, the sheep are no longer the cunning little lambs, but grow up into stupid and homely livestock now. Therefore, shooting them in the head and cutting their throats to drain out blood can't be natural any more. There's a wall standing between Bob's mind and the minds of "the other." His egotism severs the spiritual connection both with his family members and with nature, which he doesn't realize in time. During the father-son contact,

the son's feelings, thoughts, desires are constantly denied and suppressed by the father. Tommy's curiosity for new things and the outside world is neglected. In the end, the long lasting repression and oppression turn Tommy into a rebellious and violent boy, who consequently destroys his classmate — Annabel's new dolls, cuts her new clothes, and even burns down her whole house with an original intention of burning the new satellite dish. It's ironic that the good boy imagined by Bob turns out to be an uncontrollable arsonist. In order to compensate the damage, the Millers have to sell their farm, and work in the town for paying debts. Bob finally has to go back to the modern society that once he ran away from and works to earn money that he once distained. His former pastoral dreams are shattered. Nature becomes something precious looming in his retrospection — "...and still, from time to time, close my eyes and feel a warm, wet breeze move up the valley, hear the jostling and lowing animals in the barn, smell the mixed scent of chamomile and wild roses and warm grassy manure, and remember the vast, inhuman peace of the stars pouring across the night sky above the valley, as well as the smaller, nearer, but not too near, human peace of the lights of Moreton scattered over the face of Snowy Top" (197). The green life is finally smashed by his greed. The failure of his Thoreau-like self-sufficient living style proves to be an irony of his imagined ecology and by such an irony Jane Smiley conveys to us her eco-ethical view that any illusion of resorting to nature for an escape or any attempt for a complete oneness of man and nature is but a "good will."

In addition to Tommy, his wife Liz also lives in Bob's imagination and manipulation. According to Bob's earlier narration, his wife adores him very much, such as "The thing to do would be to get Liz to say, 'Oh, Bob can make anything,' in that factual way she has, explanatory rather than boastful..." (98). Liz does say "He can make anything" (141) to Lydia Harris when Bob offers a ten-hour-work helping around her house as some compensation for the damage done by Tommy on Lydia's daughter's new coat. For all Bob's descriptions about their happy marital life, there are a lot of conflicts between them. One fact, which denotes an ironic tone, is that without purposeful birth-control after marriage, Liz only gets pregnant once in their more than 12 years' marriage and gives birth to one child — Tommy. The barrenness implies the discord between the couple. Furthermore, Liz and Bob share few outlooks. As to moving into the valley to live an isolated green life, Liz at the beginning opposes, as she confesses to Tina: "And you know, at first I hated it. I didn't have any inner resources at all. I thought I would die of loneliness, even on days when Bob would talk to me.... This was not how I intended to spend my life" (108). Under Bob's powerful influence, Liz makes concessions. In terms of desire

and greed, Liz dares to admit her deep need while Bob deliberately neglects and denies: "You know what? When I saw that coat, I wanted to have it! I wanted to be seven years old again, and to be wearing that darling coat to school every day. I just yearned for it. That's a color that never turns up at the Goodwill" (143). She also dares to reveal the dark sides: "We are so greedy. People don't know how greedy we are" (129). As for the attitude to the other people, Liz takes on a broadminded and generous attitude while Bob is often sensitive, arrogant, angry and hostile. As for their son's education, Liz is against Bob's idea of homeschooling. That's why she asks for Tommy's study in grammar school for one more year before the homeschooling. However, Liz finally compromises under Bob's arguments that homeschooling children will have a sense of themselves and a sense of their own abilities and thus will get along better with the other kids once they get to college, and that schools nearby are regimented and limited. In terms of physical punishment, Liz doubts its necessity. Despite her euphemistic advice "I don't know if it warranted violence," Bob blindly continues. When the mother and the son want to go to church together on a Sunday morning, and Liz asks for Bob's permission and a rearrangement of Tommy's pony training from that morning to the afternoon, Bob stubbornly refuses so as to confirm his complete authority and dampen his wife's enthusiasm for God. For Bob, Liz's visits to church (Fellowship Meeting) on Sundays and her prayers each night are annoying and distracting, just like he feels: "I notice that days when she goes to church, for whatever reason, are special days, obstructing the smooth flow of time that I like. ... she never fails to kneel at bedtime and make a lengthy prayer. That, both the unfailing regularity of it, and the awkwardness of its insertion into our nightly routine, is the real bone of contention" (113). However, the contention doesn't really result from the superficial fact about Liz's pious belief, but from Bob's loss of control and authority over his wife during her church time and prayer time, when God replaces him to be the Lord of his wife. Bob's greed to totally occupy and control his wife forbids his wife's worship to others, even if the idol is God rather than another human being. He is so used to his wife's "admiring" eyes on him that he can't bear Liz's loyalty to God, for Bob considers himself to be the only God whom his wife should worship. Bob never wants to go deep into his wife's inner mind, nor his son's, for he admits — "the seeking, probing quality of her inner life demands something of me that I don't understand and can't give" (182). No wonder he doesn't meditate on the reasons why Liz keeps on going to church each Sunday despite the inconvenience of a long walk to town, and sticks to praying each night even right after their sex. Nakadate comments that "Bob is, not surprisingly, patronizing, resentful, and

dismissive of Liz's increasing need to 'be saved' and to express her identity and independence through church attendance and prayer. He never sees himself as a cause of her search for society as well as salvation..." (Neil Nakadate 101). Bob's androcentrism deriving from his strong greed deep in his heart at last vanquishes Liz's final resistance. Her declaration of surrender goes like these: "I can't do it anymore. It's too strenuous.... It's more like a trudge upstream." (179); and "there wasn't room in my life for two of you.'... 'You and God.'" (183). Bob wins the battle against God in the end. Liz has to continue living under the enormous shadow of her husband, and doing whatever that meet Bob's expectation, even against her own will. Bob chooses to see what he wants to see in his wife and his son. Liz has to live as a beauty wife in accordance with Bob's imagination. As for this, Liz reveals — "Bobby, you know that the urge for revenge is a fact of marital life... 'You always think too well of me. I love you partly because you never fail to see beauty in what you look at, but that scares me, too'" (180). The beauty wife's true desires and wants are ignored, just in the same way Bob ignores his good boy Tommy's desires and needs. Bob's extreme expectations on his wife and his son are no more than great pressure and repression on them. His undemocratic way of ruling the family is in opposition to the ecological ethics of respecting the variety in the other, which according to the Australian ecofeminist scholar Plumwood, are "listening and attentiveness to the other; sensitivity to other members of our ecological communities; being open to unanticipated possibilities and aspects of the other, reconceiving and reencountering the other as a potentially communicative and agentic being..." (Plumwood 69-70), and etc. As we can see, Bob's problematic relationship with his son and his wife is also ecologically ironic in this sense.

Annabel and Lydia: A Lydian Stone for Bob

Next to nature, his son and wife, Lydia Harris and Annabel Harris are the ones whom Bob contacts most. It is from the note sent by the teacher Miss Bussman about Tommy's mischievous act of twisting and breaking apart Annabel's dolls that Bob first hears of the girl's name, and it is from Tommy's reluctant answer to his inquiry into the motives that Bob first finds out that Annabel is a black girl. Tommy's casual explanation and reiteration — "She's a nigger." (119) agitates Bob to such an extent that he grabs his son's shoulders, lays the boy over his knees and whales the tar out of him while shouting with the beating rhythm: "NEVER. USE. THAT. WORD. IN. FRONT.OF. ME.AGAIN" (119). Bob's over-reaction to this issue seems to indicate that he is an anti-racist. Neither Bob nor Liz has ever used that expression in front of their son before. According to Tommy, he learns the word

“nigger” from some teachers including Miss Bussman, and some fifth-graders. However, Bob’s irritation doesn’t come from his defense for colored people, but from a worry about his own reputation, as what he tells his wife: “Simultaneously, I was hearing that word, I was seeing the way he sat there, I was hearing him say that word in front of strangers and feeling their disapproval of us and this setup we have, I was imagining that little girl finding her broken dolls, I was imagining her showing them to her parents and what they would think of us...” (120). All those concerns are not about his boy or that black girl, but about himself. It is not until Bob’s direct encounter with Lydia and Annabel that he gains a vivid feeling and rich experience of getting along with colored people. Different from the black figures in Faulkner’s fictions once Bob read, Lydia Harris has quite a high social status and family income. As a mathematician with a doctor degree, Lydia teaches maths in the State College, while her husband Nathan Harris teaches maths in Harvard University. The nice house with a charming garden that the Harrises live in and the delicate furniture and appliances are all a luxury for Bob. The camel’s hair coat Lydia wears and her elegant behavior form a sharp contrast to Bob’s plain life style. Lydia’s respectful way of treating her daughter is also an opposite to Bob’s tyrannical way of ruling his son, which, in the words of Bob, are “She liked to watch Annabel act. I like to see Tom act properly” (174). Lydia’s pleasure in just looking at her daughter skiing arouses Bob’s envy, for he can’t attain such simple happiness by just watching his son. In terms of educational background, financial situation and parenting method, the Harrises obviously get an upper hand over the Millers. It’s an unconventional case compared with what Bob used to know about black people. Therefore, when Lydia visits the Millers to show the couple her daughter’s new pretty lavender coat cut up by Tommy with scissors stolen from the teacher’s desk, neither Liz nor Bob is willing to believe it. Their shock is understandable, but Bob’s perspective is prejudicial — “What I am aware of is the color of her face, how its strangeness makes what she is saying totally incomprehensible to me. ...but she has become so important and strange telling me about it, then standing here, gazing at me, that I have no response” (139-140). In spite of his earlier teaching to his son against using the derogatory word to colored people, he naturally adopts a biased view toward Lydia. Facing differences in race (or skin color) as well as standpoint, Bob exhibits a hostile and resistant attitude rather than an open and tolerant one. Such an anti-ecological prejudice against “the other” based on race, gender, class, species and etc. is objected to by ecofeminism, which articulates the theory that “the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race, and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment”

(Sturgeon 23). In reality, Bob is not the only person who shows racial bias. Lydia is the only black woman mathematician teaching at a college in that country. To the question “why aren’t there any others? (149)” proposed by Bob, Lydia gives an answer — “Mathematicians aren’t very socially adept, but their field demands social interaction. They take the shortest route, through who you know, to who you are, then to what you know. With women and blacks the stretch past who you are is too difficult, slows people down. I’ve been lucky to be able to use a lot of who you know to jump over who you are. They also cherish the idea of innate genius. That idea, applied socially, always engenders prejudice. ...Three of my colleagues have come up to me at parties and asked if I was in the music department” (150). As we can see, prejudice forms gradually through a long history during which people form a certain thinking tendency toward many issues. It’s rarely easy to wipe out those partial views from all the people throughout the world. The word “nigger” Tommy learns from his teachers and seniors is less than a tip of the gigantic iceberg of society, where racial discrimination roots. Just as Lydia deems that it isn’t terrifying unless the parents are the source of the trouble, not the kids, the racial discrimination can be passed down from one generation to the next with or without the adults’ intention.

Compared with Lydia, Annabel is more evidently abhorrent to Bob. As a matter of fact, Bob’s groundless dislike emerges even just through a few first glances at the girl out of the window, where Lydia persuades the hesitant Annabel to call on the Millers under Bob’s invitation — “Click click, just like that, my dislike of the child is solid, in place, maybe even permanent” (163). As to Lydia’s sweet love for Annabel, Bob loathes the natural mother love, judging that Annabel is unworthy of such intensity. His hostility is so strong that it can be felt by Annabel. Actually, concerning the racial prejudice, Bob feels guilty but helpless: “Guilty and racist for responding to Lydia as if she were a phenomenon....But she is a phenomenon. She just told me so herself” (150). The conflicts between what he feels and what he should feel torture Bob a lot. This is a fight deep in his heart all the time, as he admits to his wife: “I think I’m having a fight with myself” (171). Nevertheless, Bob keeps on denying his true feelings and idealizing a harmonious environment among them. The Harrises’ visit, in his eyes, proves a kind of assimilation. In Bob’s eyes, he and Liz set a very good example for their son to learn that Lydia and Annabel are like any other friends or acquaintances, perfectly acceptable and welcome, different in no way. Bob still lingers in his imaginary beautiful world with a greedy desire of solving everything at one blow. When Bob feels relieved in Tommy’s seeming improvement in his communication with Annabel, and confirms that his son is never

a dyed-in-the-wool racist, Liz reminds Bob with the words that the author Smiley wants the reader to ponder for themselves: “We might think we weren’t racist, but still let something drop” (170). In fact, various prejudices exist more or less no matter how hard we try. In an era when we cannot completely eradicate biases, the most important thing is to face it instead of pretending that it doesn’t exist. To face the problem is the first step to find ways to better the situation, while to evade the fact will doubtlessly increase the threats and worsen the condition. In some sense, Annabel and Lydia are a Lydian Stone (touchstone) for Bob to feel the reluctance of discovering some darkness deep in his heart. As we can see from above, Bob’s persistent denial of his innate racial discrimination while dreaming that he loves “the other” despite the differences in race, class, gender, and the other factors could only lead to an ironic situation.

Conclusion

Throughout the story, Jane Smiley exposes to the reader a man’s habitual avoidance and cruel ignorance of the outside world, of the limits of man, of the needs and wants of his son and his wife, of his true desires and feelings, and of the conflicts in his heart. No matter in gardening, farming or hunting, Bob takes on the role of a dominator. Although he wants to flee from the bondage and rules of a hierarchical society of materialism to pursue freedom and self, he sets a lot of new rules and limitations on the farm for his son and wife to follow. He focuses little on money by saving almost none, and seemingly lives a very green and humble life, but deep in his heart he longs for power and reputation, prioritizes his pride and authority, and shoots animals and birds without any hesitation and sympathy. He stubbornly insists on homeschooling, but his parenting way is over-strict, violent, demanding, and paternalistic. Though he seems to love his wife deeply, he can’t bear his wife’s zeal for God and wants to be the only spiritual center for her to circle around. He scolds and beats Tommy for his racist expression, but he groundlessly abhors the black girl at the first sight. The man who prefers being prepared for things can’t avoid a series of unexpected events. The man who fancies that he has a good boy and a beautiful wife is actually blind and deaf as well as tyrannical to them. The man who prefers living a self-sufficient life in wilderness has to go back to the town to earn money that he used to disdain. The man, who imagines that his love is beyond the dualism of human/non-human and white/colored, turns out to be a narcissist who loves himself most. All these imply in fact an irony of ecology, just as the title of the novella *Good Will* ironically tones. At the end of the story, Bob finally realizes something that leads to the failure of his green dream and becomes more open than the past — “But it seems to me that what they want of me is to make another whole

thing, the way I made a whole of my family, my farm, my time, a bubble, a work of art, a whole expression of my whole self....Let us have fragments, I say” (196). Through the story, the novelist reminds us that if we cannot completely abandon self, eradicate human greed, wipe out dualism to lead a purely green life, why not face it with more and more awareness? Respect is of necessity for various voices in the globe, and balance is in need of multi-lateral opinions and interests. It’s the ecological ethics shared by Timothy in his book *Ecology without Nature*: “Like Alice at the Looking Glass House, we are stuck, esp. when we try to get away. Let us see if we can get away smarter, stuck as we are” (Morton 139).

To sum up, there’s never an easy way to completely overthrow the binary opposition and hierarchy patterns across the whole world and establish a totally ecological living environment for each member of the earth. The most important thing is to recognize and acknowledge the negative sides first, and then try to balance man’s desires and the rights of “the other.” Otherwise, the ecologically harmonious world will only exist in our imagination, just like the world imagined by Bob.

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