The Incest Taboo and Lynn Riggs' Territory Folk

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THE INCEST TABOO AND

LYNN RIGGS'S TERRITORY FOLK

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ABSTRACT

The incest taboo is the overt theme of Lynn Riggs's greatest failure, The Cream in the Well. Biographers and critics suggest that unresolved conflicts in Riggs's own life drove him to write a play with such an unpopular theme. Riggs's interest in Freudian psychology is related to his personal unhappiness and to the themes of his plays. Several of his earlier plays foreshadow his interest in sexual repression and its crippling effect on the developing personality. The incest triangle is distorted and disguised in the earlier plays, but dramatic tension is achieved through the incest-like portrayal of sexual jealousy, repression and guilt. Real freedom, rarely achieved, comes through acceptance of the wholeness of the life cycle, sexuality, procreation, death and decay.
INTRODUCTION

In his lifetime (1899-1954), Lynn Riggs had four plays produced on Broadway, two successes and two failures. Most of his twenty-two full-length plays were produced, if at all, by regional repertory theaters or in university settings. In a culture and in a profession that deal in superlatives, he was never more than a qualified success. Yet he continued to write plays.

Critics and theater historians have consigned Riggs to the nether world of regional or folk dramatist, a category that chafed against his aspirations. Riggs attempted to lay the specter to rest once and for all in a piece he wrote for The Carolina Play-Book, June 1931:

When people say "folk drama" to me, which they do very often, I don't know what they're talking about. What's important to me in drama is what happens between a man and his inner glowing core. I don't care whether it's happening in Texas or Connecticut. It ought to be telling something about the human heart. If it doesn't do that, there's no wisdom in it, and there's not apt to be much drama.

Nevertheless, the highest praise Riggs's canon seems to have earned for him is "the greatest playwright to come out of the Southwest." His one undisputed claim to fame is his having written Green Grow the Lilacs, the play on which the musical Oklahoma! is based. As an "absent partner" in the historic first collaboration of Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, Riggs received $250 per week as his royalty, while several others connected with the production
grew rich. Thomas Erhard, one of Riggs's biographers, writes:

The one truly American contribution to world theatre is the modern musical; and by scholarly consensus, Oklahoma! is the first mature, modern musical. And Riggs's script was the backbone.  

Oscar Hammerstein confessed in a New York Times article of September 5, 1943, that he had retained most of the lines from the original play "for the simple reason that they could not be improved on. . . . Lynn Riggs and Green Grow the Lilacs are the very soul of Oklahoma!"

This second-hand glory, coming as it did through the efforts of others, must have been an embittering experience. Riggs, a World War II draftee, was far from Broadway, serving as a sergeant at Wright Field, Ohio, when he received the news that Oklahoma! had won the Pulitzer Prize, an award for which Riggs had twice before been rumored to have been in contention. Riggs's earlier response to Susan Glaspell's winning of the Pulitzer for Alison's House over his Green Grow the Lilacs makes an implicit claim of indifference to the critical reception of his work:

I am very glad. . . for it will mean that her interest in the American theatre will receive a stimulant. . . . She has the sort of creative mind that is needed in the theatre. . . . Susan Glaspell requires this sort of encouragement to continue.

Riggs certainly disdained what he considered to be misplaced recognition. The University of Oklahoma, scene of Riggs's first success as a student poet and playwright, awarded
him a citation in 1950 in the wake of the fame of Oklahoma! for "bettering contemporary society... and making Oklahoma a better known state." Reacting to the obvious boosterism of the award by his own university, which never produced a single full-length Riggs play in his lifetime, he declined to return to his home state to accept the award. He used the occasion, however, to express in his written acceptance speech a partial reason for his perseverance as a playwright:

Actually, I have done little in life except try to discover who I am and what my relation to the world I know consists of. 6

If Lynn Riggs did not require the encouragement of critical or commercial success to continue writing plays, it was because he was on a personal quest. The proscenium arch was for Riggs the opened box into which he peered to find himself. His reason for continuing to write plays, in the face of so little encouragement, seems to explain the kinds of plays he wrote and their lack, in the main, of a popular success.

An interviewer once asked Riggs whether he had read much Freud, and he denied any great familiarity with Freud's work. A close friend said his reply was "disingenuous" and that Riggs had read widely in Freud "for obvious reasons," which will be discussed later. When David Sievers was doing research for his critical work, Freud on Broadway, he sent Riggs a questionnaire to which he received several candid answers. Had Riggs ever consulted a psychoanalyst
about his plots? No, Riggs replied, but he quoted a psychoanalyst who had told him, "You're doing the same thing I am." Riggs added that he supposed "that is so of any writer whose concern is with the nature and meaning of people." He admitted to having read several of Freud's works, including *Moses and Monotheism, Totem and Taboo,* and *The Interpretation of Dreams.* He confessed to having "sought for dramatic devices to dramatize the workings of the unconscious," notably in *The Cream in the Well.* And he offered a general comment on the contribution of Freudian psychology to the drama:

> Freud is part of our heritage. Everyone ought to know his work -- and most people do. Like an artist -- for he is that too -- he illuminates, stimulates, reminds.

Sievers classifies Riggs as a "Western Freudian" because of his "interest in western themes, a feeling for the lyricism of rude speech, and a clear conception of unconscious motivation." He suggests that Riggs's "Freudian orientation in his themes of inversion" partially accounts for his not having had "the recognition on Broadway which a serious-minded and authentic writer warrants."

Because of the significance of Freudian psychology in relation to an interpretation of Riggs's work, it would be useful to summarize a few Freudian theories. In *Totem and Taboo,* which we know Riggs read, Freud draws freely from the sociological writings found in J. G. Frazer's *Totemism and*
Exogamy to theorize about the probable genesis of the incest taboo. In prehistoric times human beings are envisioned as living in "primal hordes," in which the dominant male had exclusive right to the females. To maintain his primacy, the dominant male would chase off, kill or castrate any male who challenged his supremacy. At some point in prehistory the powerless males banded together to murder the dominant male. This crime, it is theorized, took place hundreds of times and was followed, always, by guilt and fear of some sort of retribution. All taboo is based, according to Freud, on fear of the primal father, and the incest taboo is "primarily aimed at restraining the younger generation."

The incest taboo is not, however, based solely on consanguinity. Members of the same totem in primitive tribes, and, it is theorized, among the Aryan and Semitic peoples in prehistory, are forbidden to marry or have sexual relations. The totem, usually an animal, stands in for the primal father and is regarded as a common ancestor by all members of the totem, however distantly related. The killing or eating of the totem animal is strictly prohibited except on ritual occasions. According to Freud it was a universal and recurring custom among primitive peoples to ritually kill and eat the totem animal, following which, members of the totem would engage in "obligatory excess."

Just as "totemism and exogamy were intimately connected"
in primitive society, in Western civilization the incest taboo serves the exogamous imperative. Marrying outside of one's group is a means of organizing society. Women are exchanged among groups, like hostages, and the natural offspring become an avenue for establishing social alliances.

The primary difference between primitive societies and modern Western man, according to Freud, is that savages consider incest to be a greater danger and have more conscious and rigid rules to govern their behavior. In modern man the incest anxiety is more likely to be unconscious. In the typical nuclear family of Western civilization, incestuous longings grow out of original family relationships through identification with same-sex parents, although the mother is the primary object of both sexes. Freud states, "Psycho-analysis has taught us that a boy's earliest choice of objects for his love is incestuous and those objects are forbidden ones -- his mother and his sister." The original incestuous triangle is regarded as "the nuclear complex of neurosis." In the infantile stage, all the libidinal energy of the child is directed towards, or infused into, the presentation of the object -- its mother.

The libido, which arises from the unconscious, is a powerful force. When the libido fastens onto an object that is forbidden, and, as Freud says, there is a very narrow range of permissible libidinal expression, the desire is inhibited before it becomes conscious. An instinct that
is prevented from discharging all its energy is said to be aim-inhibited. Since there is an economy of psychic forces, the inhibited aim has to find an acceptable object.

Freud offers many examples of the displacement of libidinal energy. One of the most successful is work, and one of the most symbolic, as a displacement of the incestuous libido, is the cultivation of Mother Earth.

The love of beauty, especially the type that aroused feelings of transcendancy in the Romantic poets, derives "from the field of sexual feeling" and is a "perfect example of an impulse inhibited in its aim." Fantasy provides immediate satisfaction to the libido through imagining and is related by Freud to the "mild narcosis" of formal art. Religion is an example of a mass displacement as well as an outlet for the individual libidinal drive. Romantic love is the prevalent displacement in our civilization, according to Freud. He writes that romantic love "leaves a person with residual sexual excitation," as do all substitute objects, and that "the undischarged excitations provide a continual stream of energy which is used to maintain" the romantic attraction. Unrequited love is an almost perfect displacement because it can be maintained indefinitely independently of the object:

People make themselves independent of their object's acquiescence by displacing what they mainly value from being loved onto loving. They avoid uncertainties and disappointments of genital love by turning away from its sexual
aims and transforming the instinct into an impulse with an inhibited aim. All types of idealism, from prudery to altruism, are classed as "reaction-formations" generated by inhibited libidinal instincts.

The death instinct is very important to a discussion of Riggs. Freud considered the death instinct to be innate, a part of every living thing, the longing of organic matter to return to the inorganic state. Suicide is not aggression turned inward; aggression is the death instinct turned outward in order to dissipate the death instinct. The purpose of aggression, whether active or passive, is the survival of the ego. There is libido in every instinctual manifestation, including the death instinct. Eros, which seeks to propagate life, and the death instinct "never appear in isolation from each other but are alloyed with each other in varying and very different proportions and so become unrecognizable to our judgment."

Freud frequently cites the work of creative writers as a corroboration of his own theories. In Totem and Taboo he speaks of "more and more evidence to show the extent to which the interest of creative writers centres round the theme of incest and how the same theme, in countless variations and distortions, provides the subject-matter of poetry."

In the same work he writes:

The projected creations of primitive men resemble the personifications constructed by
creative writers; for the latter externalize in the form of separate individuals the opposing instinctual impulses struggling within them.

A writer, of course, must go beyond a textbook application of Freudian psychology. The "countless variations and distortions" of the incest theme permit great latitude to the creative writer. The father-daughter-son triangle, for example, may be mimicked by the husband-wife-lover triangle to generate the same tension of sexual jealousy and guilt. The more freely and lightly Lynn Riggs handled Freudian themes, generally, the more successful his plays were on the stage.

The first play to be considered, Big Lake, sets up the tension between libidinal instincts and their inhibited aims, in this case neurotic delusions. The brief one-act play, Knives from Syria, written the same year (1925) as Big Lake, is examined in connection with the 1928 play Green Grow the Lilacs. Knives from Syria supplied the germ for the later play and demonstrates how Riggs split his earlier characters to dramatically illustrate opposing instinctual impulses. Both plays explore the tension between romantic illusion and the reality principle. The incest theme is highly distorted and very lightly, sometimes comically touched upon. In the latter play, the two protagonists experience a traumatic purgation of sexual shame and achieve acceptance of human experience as a whole. The third full-length play, The Cream in the Well, 1939, treats
overtly the theme of the incest taboo. One protagonist achieves purgation, through rationalism, of his neurotic response to libidinal urgings. The other protagonist goes under, overwhelmed by the death instinct, which has been a major component, right along, of her incestuous longing.

All three full-length plays are set in Indian Territory shortly before statehood (1907). As an experiment in individual freedom and tolerance, the "West" was already a failure in Riggs's view. The pioneers, mostly failed easterners, had brought with them all the unconscious baggage of their European and New England ancestors. He saw the pioneers not as "romantic figures of the frontier, but baffled, discontented folk struggling against hard conditions in a harsh environment." He insisted that he had not falsified the picture. A character in his 1927 play, The Lonesome West, expresses an attitude that Riggs apparently agreed with:

Pioneer, that's what you think you wuz in this country. Yeow, like all of 'em. Sick, sick people! You couldn't make a go of it nowhur else, you had a itch, you had to be on the move! . . . Now yer kids' got sumpin' eatin' on them, too. And whur c'n they move to? Who c'n they go to? What c'n they do but fester up like sores an' die? An' whose fault if that? Who brung 'em into the world -- sick like their pappy?

Nor did he see the Indians as noble savages, free of inhibitions. The Five Civilized Tribes, settled into
Indian Territory a hundred years before statehood, had a
civilization equally as ancient as modern man. Their sexual
tabooeo were doubtless stronger and more conscious than those
of the white settlers. Savages, according to Freud, are
liable to greater temptation to incest and in need of fuller
protection. Riggs was one-quarter Indian himself, and
viewed the Indians in the Territory as the last remnants of
a dying civilization.

If Riggs had one goal as a dramatist, it was that people
should wake up and cease dreaming. He was an anti-romantic
in the sense that he was contemptuous of the desire to
escape reality, especially unpleasant reality. Westward
expansion he considered to be an utter failure in achieving
human freedom. There is no world elsewhere, he writes in
one of his plays. Freedom, rarely and always incompletely
attained, is won through an effort of the intellect to get
behind the fabric of mythic thinking that controls much of
human consciousness. Myth, according to Roland Barthes,
is "language which does not want to die." Myth embodies
the societal ideals and societal taboos that organize an
entire culture. Riggs was extremely sensitive to the subtext
of language and its power to produce "magical" or delusional
thinking which insidiously numbs speakers and listeners to
"the meaning of things themselves." Taboo is the quintes-

cental example of magical thinking. The incest taboo, in
particular, demonstrates how an act, discouraged for good
and sufficient reasons in most cultures, has been invested with a supernatural horror that far exceeds rational analysis.

Rather than the wit of Shaw or the verfremdung of Brecht, Riggs employs the poetic idiom of common speech laden with the very myths he sought to explode, especially in his Indian Territory plays. The colorful, usually ungrammatical language of Territory folk was the one he knew best, but he denied that he ever got it right:

The Oklahoma speech of earlier days was a rich poetry. The people had little education, so they used the imagery at hand. Things out of their lives. It was a fine and ringing speech -- better speech than we have today in America. . . . If I could even approximate the imagery and the speech rhythms of my own aunts and uncles, for example, I'd be very happy.

It was the Territory of his own earliest memories and imaginings that Riggs wanted to portray. As a dramatist, Riggs knew, every character he created would be somehow revelatory of himself, just as in Freudian dream theory, every aspect of the dream reveals the dreamer. In his "Credo for the Tributary Theatre," he writes:

Every time we cut a piece of goods to make costumes, or dab paint on a flat, or walk across the stage, or pull a curtain, or put a word on paper, we reveal ourselves, what our nature is, who we are, what we think, what we intend to do.

Riggs might well have added, "We not only reveal, we discover." He began discovering with his first full-length play to be professionally produced, Big Lake.
The theme of sexual repression, in vogue largely because of the popular understanding of Freudian analysis during the postwar years, dominates the 1925 play \textit{Big Lake}. In this play a pair of romantic adolescents, Betty and Lloyd, attempt to escape the sordid, physical aspects of mortality and procreation and to find sanctuary in idealistic escapism, rather obviously symbolized by the dark woods on one hand and the sunlit lake on the other. Denying their sexuality is a way of denying mortality and, almost unwittingly, they choose oblivion and death as a result of their romantic retreat from reality. They are victims of their own idealism, which Freud would call a reaction-formation to their unconscious acceptance of their culture's sexual taboos.

In the opening scene, Betty and Lloyd have come through the woods, which comes to symbolize both the demands of their physical nature and their nearly hysterical terror based on cultural taboos. They have come early for a high school class breakfast because Lloyd wants to share the ecstasy of his romantic view of nature, the emblem of which is his love for the lake. We know through the dialogue that Lloyd is a sensitive, idealistic youth whose practical, farmer father scorns all fanciful activity. Lloyd, the poet, offers Betty a flower to place in her hair, but first he transforms it, with words, into a star. Betty sees it for what it is, a parasitic flower from the woods. She tells him
It growed up through the dead leaves... I cain't stand them kind of flowers.

Riggs employs a poetic device for the dialogue between Lloyd and Betty. They speak mostly in repetitive phrases, antiphonal at times, as one takes up a phrase from the other, repeats it and adds a response. Each of them makes tentative overtures to greater physical intimacy, "come sit with me," and each in turn refuses the other. Lloyd says that Betty has awakened his manhood. His gift of a flower and the underlying reason, his desire, fill Betty with an irrational fear she cannot explain. She is able to communicate, through their shared poetic diction, only her fear. She begs him to take her out of the woods.

They's sump'n-- I don't know what it is-- Please! It's like the woods wuz waitin'--

(p. 8)

Lloyd responds, "Like a animal."

Betty continues his thought:

To git us. To git us! I'm afeard. They's things growin' here --an' fightin'. They's things crawlin' on the ground, under the ground-- in the trees-- everwhur! I'm afeard!

"I'm afeard!" Lloyd exclaims, swayed by her vision of nature with mortality and generation commingled, like the flower growing out of the dead leaves.

It is Lloyd who suggests that they escape the woods by going out on the lake, but first, he insists, they must make a detour through the very darkness represented by the woods. Lloyd says he knows of a cabin where they can
borrow a boat, a strange kind of cabin that is partly underground. The idea of the dugout cabin fills Betty with horror:

   It growed out o' the same ground the big woods growed out of!

   (p. 11)

The denizens of the dark cabin in the woods are Butch Adams, a bootlegger, and Elly, his mistress. When first we see Butch, he has just killed Jim Dory for informing on him to federal officers and is covered with his victim's blood. He boasts of laying for Dory "in the big woods." It was a murder of revenge and he glories in it. He describes to Elly how he stuck a knife through Dory's ribs and turned it around. He is the type of outlaw who seems to be thrilled by his own flaunting of society because he accepts society's evaluation of him. He does not reject his culture's taboos; they give his actions meaning. A Freudian explanation of the type of behavior here exhibited by Butch is as follows:

   The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed. The irresistibility of perverse instincts, and perhaps the attraction in general of forbidden things finds an economic explanation here.

   Elly expresses horror at the act of murder. The law against bootlegging she views as arbitrary and hypocritical. Murder, however, is to her a violation of more than the
law. Reluctantly, she consents to Butch's plan to save himself by throwing the blame for Dory's death onto Lloyd. Her only excuse is that she is a self-acknowledged victim, not of lust, but of romantic love. She was young and innocent three years earlier, she says, when she formed a romantic attachment to Butch. She ought to give Butch up to the law, she says, that is, if she were behaving rationally. "Yes, why don't I?" she asks.

'Cause I'm a fool, that's why! I'm like all the women in the world that's ever lived: I ain't good, I ain't decent, I ain't even honest except to one man!

(p. 38)

All women, she excuses herself, are exempt from moral obligation if they act out of devotion to their man. As Freud says of the victim of unsatisfied romantic love,

Conscience has no application to anything that is done for the sake of the object; in the blindness of love remorselessness is carried to the pitch of crime.35

Elly describes, obviously, not all women, but women who are victims of a romantic obsession which subjugates all other concerns.

Elly's fear for Lloyd causes her to try to warn him away from the lake and its danger:

D'you know who it is that's alwys gettin' drownded in the Lake? People like you --

(p. 30)

Lloyd is too full of his own romantic view of the lake to heed her warning. He reveals his subconscious acceptance
of the lake as an escape from reality when he says that

    It's nice to know that Lake's thar. 'N
    it's nice to know 'at some time mebbe you'll
    git a chance to go out on it.

Elly realizes that it is Lloyd's romantic idealism that
makes him vulnerable. She pleads with Butch to spare him:

    Wuzn't you ever jist starting life? Wuzn't
    you ever innocent and good, wantin' to go out
    into the world and expectin' it to be kind to
    you?

Butch, the woods-dweller, replies convincingly, "No!"

    After Butch has convinced the sheriff that Lloyd is
    the murderer and is out on the lake with a girl he has
    abducted in the woods, he torments Elly with his real
    reason for wanting Lloyd dead:

        The horse and buggy's up here a ways. She's
        young, she's purty--They drove here together.
        She'll need someone to drive her home --
        through the woods. . . .

(p. 51)

Elly intuits his intention to rape Betty and calls him a
beast, but he is not acting out of animal passion. Butch
acts out of a consciousness of violating cultural taboos
that invest his behavior with the lurid glow of evil.
"Mebby I am a beast," he says.

        And this place we're livin' in -- whut's it?
        It's the woods, Elly. It's the dark woods.

(p. 51)

Miss Meredith, the school teacher, finally arrives
with the rest of the class. She typifies the climate of
sexual repression that creates the possibility of great
evil for social renegades like Butch. She is enraged when she sees a boy student swinging his partner by her waist, rather than by the arm, in an impromptu dance. She says,

   It's wrong. It's wicked. I'm ashamed of you. I'm surprised at you.

   (p. 61)

When she encounters Betty and Lloyd alone, she puts the worst construction, to her way of thinking, on their presence in the woods.

   You had to sneak off where there was no one to spy on you, and no light to make you ashamed of yourselves, didn't you?

   (p. 73)

In her benighted condition, she doesn't understand that it is the darkness of the woods, not the light of the sunlit lake, that produces shame and guilt in the adolescents.

   It was in the dark cabin that Betty sensed Butch's intentions toward her. She tells Lloyd,

   I'm afeard of him, he's a part of these woods here!...Why'd he look at me that a-way?

   (p. 64)

Lloyd preserves his innocence with a glib denial. "He liked you," he reassures her.

   Her intuitive knowledge, coupled with Lloyd's denial of her sexuality, produces a confusing guilt reaction in Betty. She must have done something to arouse Butch, she thinks. She says,

   I'm too young. It's wrong to be young.

   (p. 65)

For an instant Betty has a vision of the woods and the lake
as one, but it is a distorted image. The woods have not
become safe. It is the lake that is no longer a haven. Both
are equally dangerous:

All around the lake, everwhur, they's
woods. The lake goes out-- 'n' it's clear thar
and bright -- but it teches the woods everwhur
at the edges. Oh! They ain't no place to go!
The lake -- it teches the woods -- it's a part
of the woods!

(p. 66)

There is no world elsewhere for Betty. The failure of
the lake as a have leaves her in a spiritual vacuum. She
senses the false dichotomy of physical and spiritual nature
that helps to produce the Butches at one end of the spectrum
and the Miss Merediths at the other. But she cannot see her
way to acceptance. Lloyd tried to reinvent the vision of the
lake for her. His description of the lake sounds, ominously,
like the oblivion of death, or, as Freud would say, the
longing of organic matter to return to the inorganic state:

I wish I could be a lake. I wish I
could be that big, that deep! I wish I
could be ketchin' the sun like it -- an' sparklin' an'
singin' -- an' never afeard o' nuthin' --
(p. 66)

Betty is suspicious of Lloyd's description:

It's that a-way to me, too. . . . When you
say it. You make things nicer'n they air --

Lloyd regains control of Betty's vision of the lake by
beginning an incantation. "It's a deep pool," he says.
Betty responds hypnotically, "It's quiet."

Miss Meredith's leering accusation convinces Betty
that there is more to fear from the woods than from the lake, shattering her fleeting vision of their wholeness. In resignation she agrees to go onto the lake with Lloyd. "They's no place else t'go," she says. Lloyd replies, "It's the only place t'go. We'd oughta went thar before" (p. 74). Betty's declaration that she never wants to see her home again hints at the true significance of going into the lake. Lloyd's last words to Betty about the lake suggest a shared grave: "It's big! It's deep!" (p. 75).

In the end, the plot disrupts the seemingly intended conclusion based on the symbolism of the play. Betty and Lloyd seemingly die as a result of pure chance. They are out on the lake when the sheriff happens to come, so that Butch can carry out his plot. The sheriff shoots and kills Lloyd, and his deputy describes Betty's suicide, if it is suicide, as she stands, jumps into the water and drowns. The ending is perhaps melodramatic and unsatisfying. Elly, in her curtain speech, only suggests a sort of pessimistic determinism. It is very difficult, she suggests, for young people to steer the course between the woods and the lake. Very few make it. And there's nothing to be done about it.

It's alwys the way. People will go on the lake. Young people. Cain't keep 'em off. 'N they's alwys accidents. Sometimes it's the lake, sometimes it's the woods -- boats leak, guns go off, people air keerless, they's wild animals-- sump'n happens, sump'n alwys happens. It cain't be helped.

(p. 81)
The most successful symbol of the play is the flower that subsists on dead and decaying vegetable matter. One can imagine a wild lady's slipper, parasitic like all members of the orchid family, with its blossom resembling both male and female genitalia. Betty hates "them kind of flowers," just as she rejects the interrelationship of sexuality, procreation, death and decay.

The larger symbols of the play, the dark woods and the sunlit lake, represent the complexity of the relationship between sexual taboo and romantic idealism. What is lacking is perhaps a third landscape to represent the reality principle. Betty is unable to make any life-giving sense out of the connectedness of the woods and the lake. And Lloyd is more deluded than Betty throughout the play. He looks only to the lake and what it represents as a way out of the woods. The rigidity of his inhibited-aim is so intense that his ego-defense depends on keeping up the denial and the self-delusion on which it is founded. Elly, who comes closest to representing a maternal or mediating influence, cannot help the youngsters because she has failed in her own attempt to negotiate a third path between lake and woods. All of the adults in the play either fail to help or actively harm the young people, perhaps as a result of the generational conflict inherent in the Freudian dictum that the incest taboo is "primarily aimed at restraining the younger generation." Butch, whose name suggests a pre-social or
anti-social primitive type, plays the role of the dominant male, ready to kill Lloyd in order to gain sexual access to Betty. Miss Meredith is part of the adult conspiracy against Betty and Lloyd. She represents the reaction-formation, the prudish rejection of sexuality in favor of a higher idealism, of which their society approves. What "cain't be helped" in Elly's curtain speech is the almost inevitable disillusionment or destruction of young people by society.

II

Green Grow the Lilacs is not a play ostensibly concerned with incest. But the complex emotional relationships and overlapping romantic triangles that are portrayed in this drama take on briefly the shape of the incestuous triangle, like dancers in a courtly dance. Blood relationships, according to Freud, are irrelevant if the emotions aroused by sexual attraction have their basis in incest taboo. The original Oedipal triangle, which Freud called the nuclear complex of neurosis, plays a part in every subsequent libidinal attraction. The anxiety and guilt thus aroused must be overcome before a mature and happy sexual relationship can be achieved. Leslie Fielder has described the typically American translation of the Freudian Oedipal triangle thus:

The Oedipus triangle based on the family romance may be translated from father-mother-son to husband-wife-lover in its European forms.
but in America it more dangerously takes the form father-sister-brother. . . .\footnote{36}

In Lilacs the protagonists, Curly and Laurey, may be viewed as psychological siblings, if not twins. The role projected by the antagonist, Jeeter Fry, is that of the bad father who must be slain before the siblings' love may be consummated. In fact, he may be seen as a type of primal father in the sense that his sexual jealousy of Laurey is so intense that he is driven to kill and mutilate his challenger.

Lilacs can also be viewed as a variation on Big Lake with its muted incestuous triangle of Butch, Lloyd and Betty. Lloyd and Betty, like Curly and Laurey, behave as though they are under the injunction against sexual relationships between siblings. Butch, like Jeeter, is willing to kill to defend his sexual dominance. The outcome, however, of the struggle for male dominance in Lilacs reverses that of Big Lake.

Knives from Syria, a more direct antecedent than Big Lake, introduces prototypes for several of the roles in Lilacs. Mrs. Buster, a warm-hearted and well-intentioned widow, is the prototype for the earthier, more worldly-wise Aunt Eller of Lilacs. Rhodie, her daughter, combines the independence of Laurey and the foolhardiness of Ado Annie of Lilacs. In the latter play, Riggs wisely chose to split the character to make a more plausible and sympathetic
heroine of Laurey, who stops short of the reckless abandonment to romanticism of her prototype, Rhodie. The Syrian pedler (sic), conversely, is devalued from a romantic suitor of Rhodie's in Knives to an inferior, humorously diverting caricature in Lilacs, whose principal function is the advancement of the main plot, the rivalry between Curly and Jeeter Fry. Charley, the hired hand in Knives is neither Curly nor Jeeter, the hired hand in Lilacs. But there are overtones both of the relationship between Charlie and Mrs. Buster that carry over into the mock-flirtatious camaraderie of Curly and Aunt Eller in Lilacs and of the dependency of both pairs of widows and ingenues on the surrogate head of the house.

In the opening scene of Knives From Syria, Mrs. Buster, a "woman still definitely young," and her eighteen-year-old daughter, Rhodie, await the return of Charlie, the hired hand. The scene is a homely Oklahoma farm house of the present (1927). What becomes readily apparent is that Mrs. Buster is inordinately concerned for Charley's safe return from Verdigree, while Rhodie, his fiancee, conveys the impression of callous indifference. She minimizes the possible dangers of so prosaic a trip, while Mrs. Buster recounts recent acts of violence and recites Bible verses intended as charms to keep him safe. Rhodie makes fun of her mother's superstition, and Mrs. Buster accuses her of being sinful. She reminds Rhodie that she ought to be concerned for Charley because
she's going to marry him. "Ye'll have t' marry him, Rhodie," she says. The practical reason for the fated match, despite Rhodie's repugnance ("He's fifteen years older'n me if he's a day--"), quickly emerges:

Whut's age got to do with it? We've got to have a hand to run the place, Rhodie. Whut good'ud us two women be without one?

(p. 5)

Mrs. Buster's logic is flawless. A replacement for Rhodie's father is needed, not some adolescent Rhodie might choose. Since Rhodie is younger, her sexual allure is presumably greater. But Rhodie is obviously repelled by serving as the bait to trap a man she views as a father figure. Moreover, she is perfectly aware of the sexual attraction between Mrs. Buster and Charley.

Mrs. Buster, fearful that Rhodie's reluctance may be due to a romantic attachment to one of a number of young suitors, cross-examines Rhodie. After a few preliminary thrusts, Mrs. Buster, attuned to Rhodie's romanticism, singles out the most exotic male of her young acquaintance, the Syrian peddler. The adjective "Syrian" was, to Oklahoma farmers, both a generic and a racist term for any Middle Eastern merchant, considered by them to be socially inferior, dishonest and possibly dangerous. Mrs. Buster discovers that Rhodie has been "wearing" the peddler's letter tucked into her dress like the heroine of a dime novel. The letter accompanied a gift of a lace cap, which provides a studied
contrast to Rhodie's formless, coarse print dress. Mrs. Buster ridicules the high-flown language of the letter. Like Lloyd in Big Lake, the peddler transforms the world with words. Rhodie is his golden-haired princess. He writes that "Maybe the prince you have waited for -- will come to kiss you into joy" (P. 7). Mrs. Buster paints an unflattering picture of the peddler's first appearance on the farm, "twirlin' his mustache, awful smart-alec. . . . and actin' up." Rhodie reminds her that "after he left we talked about him fer weeks." Mrs. Buster draws the distinction between a romantic diversion to "make ye forgit yer troubles" and the solemn duty of marriage. Rhodie appears to be resigned to her impending marriage to Charley, the condition that provides the necessary complication for a romantic comedy.

Charley, an overalled, weatherbeaten farm laborer of 33, bursts dramatically onto the scene with a tale of being attacked by a man disguised by a bandanna and brandishing a knife. The dialogue is solely between Charley and Mrs. Buster, whose concern for and devotion to one another are apparent. Charley addresses her as "Mrs. Buster" until his exit, when he significantly calls her "Martha" and pats her shoulder. After Charley has gone to the barn, Mrs. Buster accuses Rhodie of inhuman indifference. Rhodie replies that she's human enough, but "I ain't in love with Charley," implying that her mother is. Mrs. Buster, unable to face her feelings for Charley, tells Rhodie,
Love ain't human. It's unhuman. It's a terrible cruel thing.

(p. 13)

There is a suggestion in these lines that Mrs. Buster is suffering great anxiety and perhaps sadness from her unacknowledged passion for Charley. Freud says that the incest taboo "centres particularly on the mother-in-law."

Among primitives, avoidance of the mother-in-law by the son-in-law is often prescribed even before the marriage takes place because "It is not right that he should see the breasts which suckled his wife."

When the peddler arrives, his red bandanna excites the suspicions of Mrs. Buster. Displaying his wares, he recites the names of the foreign countries of their alleged origins like an incantation. Mrs. Buster coldly withdraws. "I don't want none of these things," she says (p. 18). He catches her attention sharply, however, when he histrionically displays his knives from Syria, spinning a tale about their frequent employment among his people to settle disputes arising from adultery, parental tyranny and rivalry between two men for one woman. He is probably only satirizing the exotic role in which the Oklahoma farmers have cast him, a mere peddler, but he is also alluding, unknowingly, to the family's sexual tensions. The naked passion expressed in his story increases Mrs. Buster's secret fears, that it is the Syrian who has attempted to kill Charley and that he will try again.
The peddler then sets about seducing Rhodie with words, words that convey the same romantic vision of the world that Curly, in Lilacs, claims for the solitary cowboy:

It is hard. . . and lonesome, a little. But the people who love beautiful things are very kind. And there is always the sky, and the rich brown earth, and waters flowing, and sunlight everywhere. Always I stop my horse on a high hill that looks into the fertile valley, and I say: I go now into a new world. And if there is hunger there, and tongues are mean, and bad dogs -- I will come out again soon. It cannot be forever. And there are always more and more hills, and I am free to go to them -- whenever I choose!

(p. 20)

The peddler's "new world," in which there are "always more and more hills," echoes both the myth of the American West for failed easterners and Lloyd's idyllic Big Lake. Lloyd avoids dealing with the dark woods because the lake is always there as a haven. The peddler can disregard mean tongues and bad dogs because the hills are always there for him to escape into. But both the lake and the hills are false havens. "The device which produces irresponsibility," Barthes writes, "is clear: colouring the world is always a means of denying it."

Rhodie is hypnotized by his words, and he asks her to share this life with him. Mrs. Buster, seizing the one means she believes will save Charley's life, grants the pair permission, as a temporizing measure at first, but finally swearing on the family Bible at the dubious peddler's
insistence.

Rhodie is ecstatic and means to enforce her mother's promise. Under the peddler's romantic spell, Rhodie seems indifferent to her mother's plight, alone on the farm. Mrs. Buster says:

You've turned agin me now. . .I always knowed you would. But mebbe I won't need help from you--

(p. 24)

This last line acknowledges that she had intended to use her daughter's youthful sexual allure to provide for her own security. She stops short, however, of admitting that she almost married off her daughter to a man she wants for herself, in effect, using Rhodie to keep Charley in her house. Rhodie, with "a fine scorn," announces, "I leave him to you." Mrs. Buster is still not ready to lower her guard. She nervously queries Rhodie, "You-- leave him to me?" When Charley reenters and reveals that he has been the victim of a practical joke, a sham attack by one of Rhodie's erstwhile suitors, Mrs. Buster assumes an attitude of remorse for having given her daughter away in order to secure Charley's safety. Rhodie claims to have no regrets:

I won't even remember you and Charley a-slavin' here together.

(p. 26)

Actually, she is the one who has mediated their love, which seems likely to flower very soon from their unacknowledged passion. Rhodie's future seems bleaker:
I'll be on the hills he told me about. I'll be with him! We won't never come back! (p. 26)

Her romantic vision ignores all the complications of the material struggle for survival, the specter of future children unromantically roaming the hills and the problem of a continuing romantic attraction between them when the peddler is no longer an exotic stranger and Rhodie no longer his golden-haired princess. Human survival, sexuality and reproduction have no place in romantic illusion. Rhodie is not a particularly sympathetic protagonist, if she is the main focus of the play. Mrs. Buster, despite her comic self-delusion, possesses more warmth and naturalness. The comedy succeeds because it reverses the audience's traditional expectations. The older man gets the older woman, whom he really wanted all along. The youthful romantic pair are less likely to "live happily ever after" than the older pair. The tendency of the relationship between Mrs. Buster and Charley is a final acceptance of sexual desire intermingled with the homelier emotions of respect, concern and cooperative endeavor, free from taboo or illusion. Riggs's reworking of these materials in Green Grow the Lilacs point in the same direction.

When Riggs wrote Green Grow the Lilacs three years later, he set out to explore his characters more deeply, "hoping to stumble on, if lucky, the always subtle, always strange
compulsions under which they labor and relate themselves to the earth and to other people." Set in old Indian Territory in 1900, seven years before statehood, the play could have been subtitled, according to Riggs, *An Old Song*. The old traditional song, from which the play takes its title, is sung by Curly. The song is a simple declaration by a spurned lover of his decision to join the army because, without his sweetheart, he no longer cares what becomes of him. Curly begins the song "half-satirically," then becomes absorbed in its "absurd yet plaintive charm." By this means, in the first scene of the play, Riggs suggests the death instinct implicit in romantic delusion.

The principal characters are Laurey Williams, a willful, spoiled, self-absorbed and self-dramatizing young heroine whose desirability is enhanced by her sole ownership of a modest farm, Eller Murphy, her paternal aunt and a widow who has been "paw and maw both" to her for the five years since her parents' death, and Curly McClain. Curly, an accomplished ranchhand, is of a type described by Riggs in a review of Margaret Larkin's *Singing Cowboy: A Book of Western Songs*:

> Miss Larkin knows the cowboy. That he is vain-glorious, simple, mildly passionate, chivalrous, whimsical, gay, sentimental, unafraid: that he is about one-half actor: that his emotional fluctuation, though 'high, wide and handsome,' is not deep--these are things the cowboy himself will never know.
At least, this is the Curly of the opening scene who thinks he deserves Laurey's attention because he's "the best bronc buster in this yere state," "the best bull-dogger in seventeen counties," "handsome," "curly-headed," and "bow-legged from the saddle," to boot (pp. 8-9).

Aunt Eller paints a contrasting picture of the cowboy, stressing his self-delusion and loneliness:

Mr. Cowboy! A-ridin' high, wide and handsome, his spurs a-jinglin', and the Bull Durham tag a-whippin' outa his pocket! Oh, Mr. Cowpuncher! 'Thout no home, ner no wife, ner no one to muss up his curly hair, er keep him warm on a winter's night!

(p. 8)

The professional cow-puncher, for the short period of history that the open range existed, had become an amazingly resilient figure of romance, already cloaked in nostalgia when this play was written. Riggs plays the romanticized cowboy off against the real cowboy, who did suffer from loneliness, homelessness and sexual deprivation. He owned nothing and commanded respect only for his skill. He was without responsibility and, in a way, outside of society. The itinerant cowhand, like the itinerant peddler, and the outlaw were not far apart in the imagination of the landed rancher and the town-dweller. He was not an eligible suitor for respectable girls. Aunt Eller reflects the bias against the cowpuncher when she tells Curly to sing his head off "'cause you shore have got into a lonesome side-pocket 'thout no grass, you dehorned maverick, you!" (p. 7) The adjective
"dehorned" is an obvious euphemism for castrated, a reference to the cowboy's inability to make a claim on a woman of Laurey's position. Curly's characteristic bravado dictates his reply, "Whut'd I keer about that?" After all, the deepest, most vivid emotion of the cowboy is based on his nostalgic longing for all that is denied him. Curly, who fancies himself a poet as well as a singer, reveals his belief that the source of his poetry is loneliness in his refusal to sing another song for Aunt Eller:

I cain't sing, I told you! 'Ceptin' when I'm lonesome. Out in the saddle when it ain't so sunny, er on a dark night close to a fa'r when you feel so lonesome to God you could die. (p. 7)

The cowboy, in Curly's romantic view, sacrifices happiness to produce suffering and song. "Nobody cain't sing good 'ceptin' when he's lonesome," Curly says.

The same motif, song from loneliness, is echoed in a dialogue between Laurey and Aunt Eller. Laurey says,

Listen to that mockin' bird a-singin'!
Ever' mornin' he sets in that ellum and sings like a tree full of birds all by hisself. (p. 37)


The Laurey of the first act is much like Curly, vain and spoiled, with no mean estimation of her romantic
appeal. When she first sees Curly, she says, "Is this all that's come a-callin' and it a'ready ten o'clock of a Satiddy mornin'?" (p. 12). She boasts to Ado Annie that she has "three hundred and fifty" beaux and that she could take Annie's "pedler man" away from her if she wanted to (p. 45). But unlike her prototype, Rhodie, Laurey is able to separate the peddler himself from the romantic longings he deals in under the guise of peddling exotic merchandise. During the peddler's call at the farm, Laurey at first wishes for lace and perfumes, products to enhance her sexual allure. Then she admits that the "things I c'n see and put my hands on" are merely the means to an end, the always illusory romantic ecstasy that ends in oblivion:

> Want things I cain't tell you about. Cain't see 'em clear. Things nobody ever heared of... Not only things to look at and hold in yer hands. Things to happen to you! Things so nice if they ever did happen yer heart ud quit beatin', you'd fall down dead.

(p. 50)

Curly attempts to exploit Laurey's longing for sensory illusion by painting a picture in words of the way she would feel, "like a queen" with "a gold crown" set on her head, if she would ride to the play-party with him in "a bran' new surrey with fringe on the top." When he shatters the illusion by saying he "made the whole thing up outa my head," Laurey attacks his role as poet-cowboy: "the braggin', saddle-awkward, wish-'t-he-had-a-sweetheart bum" (p. 16). Of course, it is his ineligibility as a suitor
that constitutes his greatest romantic appeal. Aunt Eller claims that Laurey's anger is proof that if she fails to get Curly "she'll waste away to the shadder of a pin-point . . . . Be put in a sateen coffin dead of a broken heart" (p. 18). Her comic exaggeration of the consequences of unrequited love suggests the power that romantic illusion holds over the imagination of young people who are puzzled by their newly-developed and forbidden sexual longing. Aunt Eller explains to Curly,

She's a young girl -- and don't know her feelin's. You c'n he'p her, Curly -- and they's few that can.

(p. 18)

The insistent denial of sexual attraction for one another by both Curly and Laurey is partly the traditional love-duel of romantic comedy, but it is more than that. They are also reacting to the injunction of a Puritanical society against premarital sex. In such a small frontier town, the exogamous imperative would be very strong. There is also Curly and Laurey's temperamental twinship which could repel rather than attract. Their behavior closely resembles the relationship between the sexes during the latency period, when a boy might give a girl a charlie horse, but would never lay a hand tenderly on her shoulder. Their sexual attraction seems to be converted into mock anger by some sexual taboo, especially in the scene at the Peck's play-party. Curly kisses Laurey and then says, "Go 'way
from me, you" (p. 105). Laurey misunderstands and says, "Oh, you don't like me, Curly." He replies, "Like you? My God! Git away from me, I tell you, plumb away from me!" Curly's irrational emotional response can be explained by unconscious anxiety over the violation of a sexual taboo.

There is an even stronger injunction, one component of which is based imaginatively on the incest taboo, against Laurey's possible sexual intimacy with Jeeter Fry, the "bullet-colored" hired hand who runs the farm. A young girl is counseled to hold herself apart from any man with whom she is thrown in daily contact if she does not want his attentions. Of course, the social and economic distance between them makes her, as a forbidden object of desire, all the more attractive to Jeeter. Aunt Eller is not drawn to Jeeter, but she is conscious of their dependency, two women alone, on a man to keep the farm going. She won't allow even Curly, whom she repeatedly claims to want for herself in a light, comic echo of Mrs. Buster's love for Charley, to criticize the hired hand. She admonishes Curly:

Now you don't need to go and say nuthin' agin [Jeeter]! He's a big help around here. Jist about runs the farm by hisself.

(p. 19)

Yet she admits to Curly that Jeeter has Laurey "on his mind most of the time, till he don't know a plow from a thrashin' machine--" (p. 20).
Curly's sexual jealousy focuses on Jeeter's position in the household as the man of the house:

Well, he's around all the time, ain't he? Eats his meals with you like one of the fambly, don't he? Sleeps around here some'eres, don't he?

(p. 20)

In the strongly patriarchal frontier society, the mere proximity of an older male, along with his superior strength and the dependency of females on his labor, might well lead to a ritual suspicion of a compelling sexual attraction that would inevitably result in seduction or rape. In this instance there are three victims of the inevitable incest myth: Jeeter Fry, who is driven to violate the very taboo that makes the seduction of Laurey so compelling; Laurey, who, excited by Jeeter's passion, develops a sexual hysteria that threatens to destroy her future; and Curly, whose fantasy of slaying the bad father in order to possess Laurey is acted out with nearly tragic consequences.

The initial confrontation of Curly and Jeeter reveals the underlying assumption each makes about the other. Jeeter, brandishing pistols like an irate father with a shotgun, orders Curly to keep away from Laurey: "Don't you come around that girl, you hear me? (p. 74) Curly, as a cowhand, is an ineligible suitor. When Curly admits he doesn't know a "peach tree from a corn stalk," Jeeter advises him, "Better learn, then." Curly penetrates to the very heart of Jeeter's fantasy life when he jestingly describes how
Jeeter's suicide, by hanging, would make him the subject of popular imagination. Although the scene is treated humorously, Curly seems to have an astonishing insight into the relationship between the libidinal force and the death instinct. He tantalizes Jeeter further by singing a ballad about a man named Sam Hall who kills the man his sweetheart loves. Jeeter becomes "strangely excited" and darkly suggests, "He'd orta killed the girl, too" (p. 69). Jeeter, his tongue loosened by his emotional response to the pairing of violent death and unrequited love, tells Curly two lurid tales of passion killings. The first involves a man who catches his lover with another man, cuts her throat and throws her into a horse trough. His second story, more gruesome than the first, concerns a married farmer who gets his mistress pregnant. He binds her hands and feet, places her on top of a haystack and burns her to death. What fascinates Jeeter is that the farmer did not care about the prospect of an unwanted child; he just "didn't know how he was goin' to live 'thout havin' her all the time while she was carryin' it!" (p. 71) For the farmer the unborn child was already a source of Oedipal strife, just as Curly is viewed by Jeeter as a threat to his future relationship with Laurey. In this tale of Jeeter's is an acknowledgment of the struggle taking place between Curly and himself and a veiled threat concerning what Jeeter considers to be the appropriate resolution of
the struggle -- to kill both Curly and Laurey.

The smoke house where Jeeter lives, dark and redolent of slaughter, works as a symbol like the dark woods in Big Lake. The walls are covered with photographs of nude women, as though he wants to flaunt his "depravity."

Whereas Curly extolls loneliness in the first scene as the source of a cowboy's song, in this scene he views it as a distorting force capable of generating fantasies of guilty pleasure in the self-destructive Jeeter. Curly says to him,

Why don't you do sump'n healthy onct in a while, 'stid of stayin' shet up here a 'crawlin' and festerin'!

(p. 75)

He compares Jeeter to a rattlesnake, full of venom and most dangerous when cornered. Curly predicts, "You'll die of yer own pizen, I tell you!" Jeeter's self-loathing seems focused upon forcing a rejection from Laurey, the forbidden object, more alluring than all the "bad" women in his postcard gallery. The sought-after rejection by Laurey would serve as an excuse to commit the twin acts of passion he sees as his appropriate response, rape and murder. He tries to seduce Laurey at the Pecks' play-party, which she has agreed to attend with him only out of hysterical fear. On this occasion, Jeeter rationalizes his "incestuous" longings by alluding to an act of "daughterly" behavior on Laurey's part:
Last time it was winter 'th snow six inches deep in drifts when I was sick. You brung me that hot soup out to the smoke-house and give it to me, and me in bed. I hadn't shaved in two weeks. You ask me 'f I had any fever and put yer hand on my head to see. Why'd you do that? Whut'd you tetch me for!

(p. 90)

Seizing her arm, he threatens her, "You won't get away from me--!" Her modesty, the calculated distance she enforces, Jeeter finds equally provocative: "You've kep outa my way, and kep' outa my way--" When Laurey becomes hysterical and tries to get away, Jeeter reveals the source of his compulsion to take what society has decreed he cannot have:

"Ain't fitten to tetch you!

Laurey, in her anger, finds the strength to ignore her dependency position and tells Jeeter that he is fired. Echoing the pessimistic determinism of Elly in Big Lake, Jeeter tells Laurey,

Said yer say. Brought it on yerself. . . . Sump'n brung it on you. On me, too. Cain't never rest. Cain't be easy. That's the way it is.

(p. 92)

On some level of consciousness, Jeeter realizes that both of them are victims of a set of irrational beliefs that insist on guilt or innocence, beliefs so powerful they are capable of producing the height of ecstasy or the depth of despair. Laurey, like the typical child-victim of an incestuous attack, and like Betty in Big Lake, feels that she must somehow be to blame. Her reluctance to confide her fears
about Jeeter to Aunt Eller is indicative of her feelings of guilt. In Scene Two, which takes place in Laurey's "primitive but feminine" bedroom, a symbol of her properly idealized girlhood, Aunt Eller tries to pry out of Laurey the reasons for her near-hysteria. Her promise to go to the play-party with Jeeter is very much on Laurey's mind, but she speaks of seeming irrelevancies:

In the meader back of the wheat field... you know what I seen? A snake 'th its tail in its mouth.

(p. 31)

The snake, of course, represents Jeeter, who, Curly predicts independently, will die of his own "pizen." Laurey then sings a plaintive ballad about the determination of a young girl to marry a "miner boy," her romantic choice, against her mother's wishes. She then recites in a strange, quiet voice, a childhood memory of passing a burning farm house at night with her parents. The farmer's wife, wearing a sunbonnet in the dark, a detail that haunts Laurey, laments that she could have prevented the fire if only she had given an apparently vengeful stranger something to eat. The connection between Laurey and the farmer's wife seems obvious, but Aunt Eller is still puzzled by Laurey's odd behavior. In a seeming shift of mood, Laurey euphorically reels off names of distant places where she would like to live, then calmly admits that the farm house is the only place she really loves. A note of hysteria enters her
voice when she adds a strange qualifier:

They's only one thing I don't to say like. And that's Sunday in fall, when its windy, and the sun shines, and the leaves piles up thick agin the house. I'm 'fraid of my life to go from here to the kitchen--like sump'n was gonna ketch me!

(pp. 37-38)

Laurey's fear of her own sexuality, suggested by the Miner Boy ballad, and of the violence her sexuality might provoke, suggested by the farm-burning stranger, threatens to cripple her emotionally. She wants to retreat into her childhood, but the incontrovertible fact of her parents' death, the Sunday-in-fall feeling of the last quoted passage, proves there is no going back. "Oh, things change," she says. "Things don't last the way they air."

It is with difficulty that Laurey confesses her fear of Jeeter to Aunt Eller.

Sump'n funny about him. Sump'n black a-pilin' up. Ever since a year ago. Sump'n boilin' up inside of him -- mean.

(p. 40)

Her fear, and doubtless her guilt, are directly connected to the visit she paid to Jeeter when he lay ill in the smokehouse, a place which repels her. What's in the smokehouse, Aunt Eller wonders. Laurey replies,

I don't know, sump'n awful. I hook my door at night and fasten the winders agin it. Agin it--

(p. 41)

Jeeter's lust, and her imagined complicity, by her mere presence, represent a Gothic horror beyond naming, that may...
not be named. The "it" that has to be locked out is the stuff of nightmares, of unconscious terror. Like Betty in Big Lake, who feels that "it's wrong to be young," Laurey chooses to deny her own sexuality. Even when she agrees to marry Curly after her confrontation with Jeeter at the play-party, Laurey still has illusions of romantic escape from reality. Curly, sensing this, promises her,

    Nuthin' cain't happen now -- nuthin' bad --
    if you love me -- and don't mind a-marryin' me.

(p. 108)

On their wedding night, as they slip quietly home hoping to avoid a shivoree party, Curly, still the poet, delivers a panegyric on the beauty of the land, concluding with the ironic phrase, "a fine night for anyone." As soon as Curly and Laurey disappear offstage, the shivoree party gathers, "disturbed and hyterical with conjecture on the marital scene they have come to despoil," according to Riggs's stage direction (p. 120). The voyeuristic thrill of the shivoree party is based on the belief that despite the marriage ceremony, the sexual act is shameful. A young farmer expresses the sniggering attitude of the crowd:

    Ay, the good ole black night -- 'th
    nobody to spy on you, nobody to see what
    you're up to!

(p. 123)

That the shivoree is an expression of dark intent, that violence lurks just beneath the surface of the boisterous activity, is confirmed by Curly's threat as he is
dragged into view:

God damn you, leave her alone! Don't any
son of a bitch put his hands onto her, I'll
kill him -- !

Laurey is brought in in her nightgown and the two are forced
to mount a haystack, while a voice in the crowd suggests
that they pretend it is a bed. Curly, deeply troubled,
tells Laurey to "try to stand it." They are assailed by a
chorus of bawdy threats and suggestions until Curly notices
a nearby haystack on fire and pleads with the men to replace
the ladder so that they can climb down. A dark figure
suddenly appears. It is Jeeter, carrying a torch and threatening
to "burn (them) to cracklin's!" Jeeter attacks Curly with
a knife, while the others beat out the fire. Jeeter trips
and falls on his own knife, dead, as Curly predicted, of
his own poison. Curly is advised to turn himself over to the
law immediately, even though everyone knows that Jeeter's
death was accidental. The shivoree party could turn into a
lynch mob because of Curly's earlier resistance to the rough
heckling of the men. Their leader tells him,

You know the way ever'body feels about
shivoreein'. You got to take it right.

(p. 133)

Laurey, a helpless spectator, struggles to preserve her
illusions:

It cain't be that-a-way! . . .Cain't
be! Like that -- to happen to us!
At the beginning of the last scene, Curly is in custody awaiting trial. Aunt Eller reassures Laurey that this time of unhappiness will soon be over and forgotten. But there is more on Laurey's mind than Curly's plight. She says to Aunt Eller,

No, not over with, not forgot. You didn't see. Other things. Things you cain't get outa yer mind...
The way them men done. The things they said. Oh--why'd it have to be that-a-way!...
The one time in a body's life --!

(p. 143)

The one time, Laurey means, when sexuality is supposed to be something pure and sacred and otherworldly, not just a part of life. Aunt Eller, the realist, tells Laurey,

You got to look at all the good on one side and all the bad on the other, and say: "Well, all right then!" to both of 'em.

(p. 144)

Laurey is stronger than she thinks, Aunt Eller insists. She has borne the loss of her parents. She may, Aunt Eller says, have to suffer more, "lots of things."

Sickness, bein' poor and hungry even, bein' left alone in yer old age, bein' afraid to die -- it all adds up. That's the way life is -- cradle to grave. And you c'n stand it. They's one way. You got to be hearty.

(p. 146)

When Curly rushes in ahead of the deputy, having escaped in order to spend one night with Laurey in case the next day's verdict should go against him, he finds her a changed person. Even if she loses Curly, Laurey says, "I'll
be growed up -- like everybody else." She promises him,

       I'll put up with ever'thing now. You
don't need to worry about me no more. Why,
I'll stand it -- if they send you to the
pen for life.

(p. 154)

Curly has changed, too. He has outgrown the poet-
cowboy of the opening scenes:

       Oh, I got to learn to be a farmer, I see
that! Quit a-thinkin' about dehornin' and
branding' and th'owin' the rope, and start to
git my hands blistered a new way.

(p. 157)

Aunt Eller manages to shame the possee into letting
Curly spend the night with Laurey and turn himself in in
the morning. They young couple are no longer ashamed to
acknowledge their sexual desire. They spend their wedding
night, prosaically, in Laurey's girlhood bedroom, rather
than riding off into the hills like Rhodie and her peddler.
Curly has, in a sense, slain the bad father, unlike the
peddler, who never attempted to challenge Charley. Curly
has also replaced Jeeter as the dominant male on the farm.
Since Jeeter's death was both accidental and an act of self-
defence, Curly is not likely to suffer for long the guilt
of "father-slaying," but seems willing and able to enjoy the
fruits of the "incestuous bed." Unlike Betty and Lloyd,
Laurey and Curley have in Aunt Eller a warm and maternal
guide to ease their passage to adult sexuality and responsibility.
Hearing Curly's voice coming from Laurey's bedroom, Aunt Eller
jokes coarsely about "that fool cowpuncher" wasting time
singing on his wedding night. But his singing is a sign that Curly has abandoned the romantic notion of the first scene of the play, that song comes only from loneliness.

III

Eleven years passed, following the writing of Green Grow the Lilacs, before Riggs again chose a farm family in Indian Territory as the subject of a full-length drama. The Cream in the Well, written in 1939, brings into the open the incest theme that was touched on obliquely in Lilacs. The action of the play takes place in 1906 on the shores of Big Lake, which, fittingly enough, was the symbol for romantic oblivion in the earlier play of that name.

Riggs uses speech patterns to make a character distinction in this play. Mrs. Sawters, a sardonic, manipulative woman, her elder daughter Julie, distinguished by a preternatural coldness, and the only son, Clabe, who remains an absent enigma until the final scenes, all speak in an educated manner. Mr. Sawters, kindly and ineffectual, and the younger daughter Bina, graceless but likeable, speak in the substandard dialect of most of Riggs's Territory folk. Riggs's use of this somewhat mechanical device suggests that the orthodox speakers respond emotionally in an inhibited or studied, rather than a natural manner. Julie speaks in verse when she is most obsessed, hinting at the romanticism underlying her obsession.
There is an atmosphere of pervasive gloom about the farm house that seems to be related to the absence of Clabe, who ran away to join the Navy, but seems also to have a more profound basis. Like Laurey, Mrs. Sawters dislikes Sundays, when there is no distraction of work to blot out unhappy thoughts. She says to Bina,

Lands, when you've lived with gloom as long as I have ... you get used to it. Isolation, she suggests, somehow weakens the rational mind:

Way out here in the wilds. Brains rust, you know that?

(p. 158)

When the protagonist, Julie, makes her first appearance, she is carrying a pitcher to get some lake water. She is her mother's daughter, "full of a deep, controlled cynicism," nervous, yet arrogant (p. 159). While Mrs. Sawters and Bina have been doing the physical work of preparing dinner for guests, Julie has had "her nose stuck in a book," Mrs. Sawters speculates, suggesting Julie's romantic rather than practical nature and her aloofness. Mrs. Sawters reveals to Bina that Julie goes to the absent Clabe's room every day, including Sundays. The simple Bina is mystified by the information and asks for an explanation. Mrs. Sawters replies enigmatically,

I wouldn't care to speculate on Julie and her goings-on.

(p. 160)

Bina is distressed by the fact that Clabe is so badly needed
around the farm, which is much too large for one man to handle. She angrily demands to know why he left to join the navy in the first place. Julie, who briefly reenters the room with her pitcher of lake water scornfully remarks, "Maybe he had to."

The expected guests are Gard Dunham, who was jilted by Julie, and his wife Opal, who had been seeing Clabe steadily before his sudden departure. Bina, puzzled by all the shifting relationships, reveals her secret fear in a very matter-of-fact manner:

I don't wanta die an old maid! It don't make sense, it's just crazy, its --

(p. 162)

Her sister Julie's seemingly confirmed spinsterhood and the strange vigil she keeps for Clabe suggest to Bina an irrational behavior that is as frightening as it is inexplicable to her. She seems to sense a mysterious force that could infect her. But her resilient nature won't permit her to linger on gloomy thoughts:

A minute ago I didn't know how I could last out the summer. I could a-died dead and been happy. Stuck in my coffin with forget-me-nots in my hair.

(p. 162)

Like Aunt Eller in Lilacs, Bina punctures the solemnity of the renunciation-and-death theme of romantic ballads with comic exaggerations of her own. She is grounded in a reality that doesn't permit you to be dead and happy at the same time.
An exchange between Bina, a girl of marriageable age, and Mrs. Sawters demonstrates the taboo nature of speaking of sexual desire. Puzzled by a remark made by Gard Dunham, Julie's spurned suitor, Bina said to her mother,

He said [Julie] was the only woman for him, and how she stirred him all up, and tied him in hard knots and -- What'd he mean by that? (p. 161)

Her mother replies, "I wouldn't care to speculate." Mrs. Sawters is an educated woman, yet she refuses to discuss sexuality with her daughter. One can infer that she was equally laconic with Julie, who will emerge as a type of the "ingrown personality, which is bred by isolation," and is a "regional by-product."

Mr. Sawters returns from an errand with a letter from Clabe informing them that he is never coming home. All Mr. Sawters' bitterness over the hardships he endures because of the absence of his only son pour forth. "He's a God-damned chicken-hearted ungrateful bastard!" he says. Mrs. Sawters replies in her typically sardonic manner, "You don't make much by questioning his paternity." What troubles Sawters, more than his resentment, is his puzzlement over Clabe's sudden defection. Clabe had always loved farming and seemingly wanted nothing better despite his education. Sawters is filled with a sense of foreboding. He can't sleep at night, he says. He lies in the dark and "the
dark ain't friendly like it used to be." His wife, he believes, must be stronger than he. Mrs. Sawters, however, has a different view of the essential difference between them. "No," she says,

    I feel things less. I make myself. Afraid not to. That's weakness.

(p. 164)

Mrs. Sawters, Julie and Clabe are susceptible to a learned range of emotional responses so powerful that self-control can be achieved only at the cost of anaesthetization. Mr. Sawters (as well as Bina) feels what he can't help feeling, and he is not ashamed. Guilt, Mrs. Sawters' speech implies, is a product of the intellect, and so is repression.

In a revealing scene involving the mother, father, and sisters, Mrs. Sawters reads aloud Clabe's letter expressing his intentions never to return, concluding with the sentence, "If you want to know why, ask Julie" (p. 168). Sawters angrily demands an explanation from her. Mrs. Sawters dryly remarks that Julie will certainly have an explanation. Julie reminds them of the evening three years ago when they had all gone to a box-supper at the Verdigris School House. Clabe drank too much, and, according to Julie's interpretation, drunkenly proposed marriage to Opal. The next day, she relates in a free verse speech, she found him beside Big Lake, weeping over his mistake, "sick in his soul" (p. 171). She admits that she advised him to leave town at once, without seeing anyone. Then she rushes on to claim other
extenuating causes for his departure, that he hated the "smallness and lonesomeness of the farm," that he was "young and adventurous and all life beckoned to him."

Sawters accuses Julie of lying; her description of Clabe is at odds with the son he knew. "They's sump'n here too deep for me," he says. Mrs. Sawters attempts to deflate Julie's superior knowledge of Clabe by sadistically reading a postscript in which Clabe reveals his main reason for staying away: he never wants to see Julie again. "I don't know why it is so," he writes, "but there is something wrong, something awful and evil driving her" (p. 172).

Julie's reaction to the postscript is, on the surface, a calm, deliberate hatred: "Clabe hasn't heard the last of this" (p. 172).

Julie retreats to her room before the arrival of Gard and Opal Dunham, an obviously unhappily married couple. Out of their bickering come the twin accusations that Opal is still pining for Clabe and Gard for Julie. Almost in defiance of Mrs. Sawters' apology for Julie's absence, Julie sweeps into the room in her best dress and with a calculated show of civility. She insists that the Dunhams spend the night because of a storm whipping up the lake, making it unsafe to return as they had come, by rowboat. Opal, reluctantly, and Gard, eagerly, accept the invitation.

Mr. and Mrs. Sawters go to prepare Clabe's room, which
Julie has suggested the Dunhams occupy for the night. Sawters is puzzled because it has been Julie's custom to regard Clabe's room as a private shrine, even locking it. To their surprise, they find everything in readiness, including fresh flowers on the mantel. The sight of the room releases a flood of memories, and Mrs. Sawters recalls that people said they were crazy ever to build on the lake.

The damp, they said, would mould everything, make it rot away.

(p. 180)

She reminds Sawters that his mother died in this house and also a first-born son, Edward. Now they've lost Clabe, Sawters adds.

Julie, whose bedroom adjoins Clabe's, bursts in on them, obviously annoyed to find them there. Mrs. Sawters takes advantage of her husband's trip to the barn to determine Julie's motive in inviting the Dunhams, whom Julie considers common, to spend the night. "What is it you're planning?" she asks. Julie's calm evasion doesn't fool her mother, who says

Once when you were about ten, you had a kitten scratch you one day you were playing with it. You didn't say anything, you didn't even cry. Later on, we found that little kitten hung up in the barn loft by a piece of binder twine.

(p. 181)

Julie is no mystery to her mother, she claims, because "when I look at you I see myself." She warns Julie against
performing consciously guilty acts. "You don't know what blackness can rise up in you and strike you blind," she says. The blackness, she adds, is the other side of the coin. She alludes to a deeply buried incident in her own past that enables her to understand Julie's exalted passion for her brother and her exalted sense of power to do evil. The only way to make a stand against the mythic power of Julie's secular religion, she suggests, is to judge its effects. Basing one's behavior on reason is what Mrs. Sawters calls "character." "It's called something else, too," she says. "It's called being a man -- or a woman -- a member of the human race," not a worshiper of illusions.

This scene reveals the struggle that is taking place between Julie and Mrs. Sawters for control of Clabe. Mrs. Sawters knows that Julie is keeping Clabe away from the farm, which is suffering in his absence. She suspects Julie's motive because she has experience something similar. It seems likely that she suffered, in the past, from a passion that was forbidden, if not for her own brother, then for a lover. The essence of taboo is that a forbidden relationship is forbidden because it is a forbidden relationship. Because of her own renunciation and her husband's compassion, she averted disastrous consequences. It is interesting to speculate that the first-born son who died could have been the result of Mrs. Sawters' forbidden liaison. Perhaps, at least, she regards
the death of the infant as a punishment and expiation of her guilt. This sequence of events would tie in with the power of the mysterious force that seems to be bent on destroying the family.

The kitten incident has a number of Freudian overtones. Julie apparently killed the kitten in an oddly ritual fashion, hanging it with string in the barn. We know that Julie and Mrs. Sawters are psychologically and temperamentally alike. Their likeness increases the tension between them. We may suspect from Bina's testimony that Julie has always sought exclusivity in her relationship to Clabe, even as a child. Her only childhood challenge to his devotion, given his normal psychological development, would have been his love for his mother. In Freudian literature case histories abound in which a totem animal stands in for the feared father in the psyche of a male child with Oedipal anxiety. In this instance, it seems likely that Julie could have been performing a ritual murder of her mother, who seems to belong to the same totem as Julie, by the ritual killing of the cat, which, incidentally, seems to be the perfect choice as a totem animal for both characters. The comic "struggle" between Rhodie and Mrs. Buster for Charley (one doesn't want him and the other doesn't know she does), along with its comic echo of rivalry between Aunt Eller and Laurey for Curly, becomes in this play a deadly struggle. It seems inevitable that either Julie or Mrs. Sawters will
have to die. And Mrs. Sawters does, in effect, assent to Julie's suicide when she says, "I haven't any control over death" (p. 213). She then goes in to tell Clabe all of Julie's guilty secrets with the foreknowledge that Julie will kill herself if she does.

There is a further insight into Julie's character to be gained from the childhood incident. What Julie was primarily angered by in the cat's behavior, the scratch, seems to indicate that she expected the cat to behave in some ideal manner that was the product of her own imagination, rather than natural cat behavior. We later learn that she has been projecting her own romantic vision onto Clabe, creating her own persona of what Clabe is really like, with such intensity that even he has believed it for many years. That he doesn't want to be a farmer, that he longs for adventure and experience, that he wants to see the world, these are all Julie's ideas.

In the scene following the discussion of the killing of the kitten, Julie sets about to manipulate Opal, a backwoods girl, "unstable and morbidly fearful" (p. 173). The two are alone in Clabe's bedroom, and Julie has just hung a miniature of Clabe on the wall to torment Opal, who confesses to being nervous because of the wind, which seems, to her, to live on the lake. Julie encourages her morbid state by commenting,
It must be cold at the bottom of the lake. 
Cold as death.

... 
Well, I've often thought -- in spite of the 
chill and how lonely a way to die -- if 
things ever got too bad, you could easily 
row out in the middle and jump out of the 
boat. 

(p. 183)

Despite her protestation that she is referring to herself, 
Opal says, "I think you mean me." She feels threatened by 
Julie's hatred of her, never doubting that it was Julie 
who prevented her marriage to Clabe. Her best protection, 
she believes, is that she knows "the real reason" Julie 
would not let her marry Clabe. Opal foolishly seals her 
own fate, pulling from her dress love letters written to 
her from Clabe and revealing her secret, that Clabe intends 
to return to marry her one day. Julie moderates her 
immmediate, violent reaction, threatening to get the letters 
and burn them to ashes, to a conciliatory gesture of proferred 
friendship. Opal accepts with alacrity: "Life is too 
short." Julie, suddenly grown thoughtful, attempts to look 
steadily at life, without romantic illusions. She says,

Short, yes? And not very pleasant for any of 
us. When I was younger, I thought it could be. 
Why don't they tell you the truth? 

(p. 187)

Opal, echoing Mrs. Sawters' distinction between rational and 
irrational behavior, tells Julie,

It's funny -- I don't mind you so much now I 
see you're kinda human.
Opal's complacent statement, however, that Julie must know that she has harmed her, triggers Julie's obsessive belief in the sacred nature of her devotion to Clabe. To sin, and sin greatly against accepted cultural norms, is proof of the exaltation of the forbidden relationship. Opal foolishly confesses to Julie, on the strength of their new intimacy, that her mother is not dead, but in an insane asylum. Julie plays on Opal's morbid fear of hereditary insanity and places in her mind the suggestion of the lake as a possible escape. As a result, Opal kills herself attempting to go home across the lake. Later, while Mrs. Sawters and Bina arrange Opal's dripping corpse on Clabe's bed, Julie goes to his portrait, the one she placed on the wall to torment Opal, and in a low, tense voice demands of it:

Is that what you wanted? How do you like it?

To the true believer, according to Freud, there is no sin.

Toward morning, Mr. and Mrs. Sawters and Gard sit watching with the corpse. Gard shows no remorse and even speaks of having made a poor choice when he married Opal. Mrs. Sawters makes his longest speech of the play about how people choose:

In ever' kind of thing it's the same. When we first come here to Verdigris, this was long before the gover'ment allotted us Indian land -- we was all set to buy the old Lowry Place we had rented. It suited us ever' way--'cept one. They had a well there--a big old stone well with the clearest coldest water in the section. It was shore a treat to dip 'er up on a hot day and guzzle 'er down. But we'd
hang the milk and butter and things down in it -- the way you do to keep it cool-- and ever' time the blame stuff'd spoil. I couldn't figger it out. Why, the butter'd get so rancid you couldn't stay in the same room with it. Good fresh cream and eggs we'd put down there-- and ever'time the same dadburned thing. We shore let that place go like a hot potato, and found us another'n. (Gravely.) Yeah, more things in this life you have to watch out for. So many things-- and most of 'em you cain't even see. It's too much for me.

The relationship between Julie and Clabe, when they were younger, may have seemed clear and pure, like the well water. But there was something poinsonous between them even then. Bina retains bitter memories of the exclusiveness of Julie and Clabe's childhood bond. She accuses Julie,

You both look down on me. You know you do. You had secrets together, too. You left me out, like I was poison.

(p. 193)

Julie coldly responds,

You and I aren't anything alike. Clabe and I are.

Bina had to be excluded from Clabe's childhood affection, Clabe sent "half the world away" to keep him from marrying Opal, and Opal, when she remained a threat, had to be eliminated. Yet all of Julie's machinations also keep Clabe apart from her. When Gard and Julie take up the vigil in the early morning after Opal's death, Julie comments that "some men get a lot." Gard replies, "But not what he wants." This is Julie's dilemma, that she wants what she cannot have, because of the proscription of the incest taboo, and she
is unable to want what she can have. This is the perpetual
dilemma for the victim of the most pervasive myth in Western
culture, the myth of romantic love, that the goal is
never the attainment of the object. The more powerful the
injunction against attainment, the stronger are the
masochistic emotions (the real goal) that destroy the
victim as if by unseen forces. It is Julie's delusion
that she is in control.

During the vigil, Gard reveals to Julie Opal's dying
words, "Julie drove me to it," and attempts to blackmail
her into marrying him. She agrees, not out of fear, she
says, but because

I don't care what I do now, do you understand?
Just so it's filthy and disgusting.

(p. 196)

The depth of Julie's self-loathing, and the power the
incest myth holds for her, is revealed in her declaration
to Gard, whom she despises, that she will lie with him
anywhere, in the

slops they throw to the pigs. . .the muck of the
barnyard! Any place! It's where I belong. . .
I know what I am.

The second act is centered on Clabe's homecoming.
It is Thanksgiving day of the same year. Julie has married
Gard, who has become an alcoholic as a result, presumably,
of Julie's cold, contemptuous treatment of him. They are
living across the lake from the Sawters, who rarely see
them. Julie comes in before Clabe arrives, uncertain whether she should have come. She tells a curious story about Smoky's colt, born on the Sawters' farm, finding its way home from Julie's.

. . . I suddenly found myself glad to be coming home, knowing it was the right thing to do. Wondering why I'd put it off so long. (p. 201)

The colt's snorting and prancing sureness of its place in the world creates for Julie, at least temporarily, a vision of ordinary, homely happiness. When Gard had drunkenly threatened to prevent her coming, she tells her mother, she vowed to "walk across the lake," and apparently almost believes she could have. Forgotten for the moment are the lake's icy depths.

Gard's drunken insults, however, have driven Julie from the room when Clabe arrives, "haunted and bitter," his mind "complicated by dark passions and an almost-violent necessity to survive" (p. 204). His love for the farm is revealed by his criticism of the neglect his farmer's eye so easily detects. Mrs. Sawters apologetically says that her husband is "a changed man." Clabe, obviously thinking of himself, says,

I can understand that. A man starts out with something and he thinks he's got it for keeps. Only it doesn't work out that way. Some little maggot of a nerve turns this way instead of that--and he finds himself doing things that aren't like him, things he lives to regret. Then he wonders how it ever happened. (p. 206)
Julie reenters the room in time to hear Clabe's last speech. All she hears is what concerns her most. She says to Clabe, "Then that means you-- you've come home to stay." Blocky has suggested that Clabe come into a new law office with him in Claremore, and Julie fervently urges the plan. Clabe, knowing the answer, asks her, "Why is it, the minute I get home again, you want me to leave?" (p. 209). Julie answers, "Why, I'm not even used to you being here yet." Clabe thrusts home to the heart of the romantic dilemma, the impossibility of having and wanting at the same time: "Will you ever get used to it, I wonder? I don't think so. Not in a million years." To get used to Clabe, so that he no longer can serve as the illusory and elusive object of her idolatrous love, is the last thing Julie wants to happen. Clabe, however, refuses any longer to be used as an object.

When I was young, I didn't have sense enough to do what I wanted. Now I've got on to a few things. I've had a look at the world -- and a good one at myself. This time I'll make up my own mind.

(p. 209)

Isolation from the outside world, experienced by Julie only vicariously through literature, breeds perversity, Clabe seems to be saying. "This country air," he sarcastically comments, "Peace on earth, good will to men."

Clabe goes with his father to see to the teams, falling in comfortably with farm routine over Julie's objection.
Mrs. Sawters uses the occasion to question Julie privately. "You're very unhappy, aren't you?" she asks. Julie replies, more truthfully than she knows, "I never expected to be happy." Mrs. Sawters, who understands how her daughter's cultivated hopelessness has sown alienation and death, tells her,

I wish you had. A human being has a right to expect happiness -- even if he knows how hard it is to find.

(p. 211)

She urges Julie to face down "the thing that threatens you and the folks you love." She accuses her of wanting Clabe to leave again even though she has thought of nothing else for months and even though his departure will destroy her father. Julie describes her own situation with the same snake metaphor that Curly uses to describe Jeeter in *Lilacs*. She is like "a snake coiled up, waiting a chance to strike," but, she admits, "it's myself the poison reaches." The masochism inherent in romantic love, the sought-after suffering of the unworthy, is easily transformed into sadistic cruelty toward others, Julie's cruelty to Gard, for example. Mrs. Sawters comes close to revealing the dark secret of her past before she was "saved" by the ordinary love of her husband. Julie, she fears, is past saving. She threatens to tell Clabe all she knows about Julie, including the events leading to Opal's death, in order to break her hold over him. Julie pleads to be allowed to
tell Clabe herself, even though, she says, "you know I'll die." As if challenging Julie's veiled suicide threat, Mrs. Sawters says, "The strong never die by wishing they were dead." Julie makes her meaning plain: "They can have a hand in their death." Mrs. Sawters draws the lines of battle, without completely understanding that Julie's goal is oblivion. She says,

I haven't any control over death. Only a little bit over life. It's life I'm serving now.

(p. 213)

Julie responds, "I know now who my enemy is," meaning, not her mother, but, as stage directions suggest, life itself, which will not conform to her will. What she wants is not the obdurate stuff of life, but the escape of perpetual illusion, which does not take into account the fact of human mortality or sexuality.

While waiting for Clabe to join her for a private meeting in fulfillment of her promise to her mother to tell Clabe all, Julie stares out at the lake. Clabe enters and immediately tells Julie that he has made up his mind to stay on at the farm. Instead of confessing her past deeds, Julie makes a last attempt to ensnare Clabe in her illusion. She says,

We used to think we were different from everybody else-- and that drew us together.

(p. 215)

She demands to know how Clabe could have turned on her
so cruelly. Clabe admits his own weakness in leaving when Julie prevented his marrying Opal. But Julie, he suggests, is too weak to face the real reason for her actions. Julie pleads Opal's unsuitability and Clabe's longing to see the world:

...everyone wants all the experience he can have...

Clabe rejects her argument, saying,

It was you put those thoughts in my head.

(p. 216)

Julie has created her own idol in Clabe out of the materials of her own imagination. The romantic quest, at bottom, is always solipsistic. She has no understanding of what Clabe's experience has really been, the self-loathing that he experienced for having deserted his family. He sent her a brooch while in the navy as a secret symbol of his degradation. The money for the brooch, he confides, he obtained as a homosexual prostitute preying upon the lonely and desperate. He didn't care what he did, he tells Julie, echoing her acceptance of Gard's marriage proposal, as long as he felt degraded:

When you're bent on destroying youself-- you'll do anything-- and gladly-- just so it fills you with disgust.

(p. 217)

He tells all this to Julie in order to convince her that "even to think about evil is death." Belief in evil, Clabe realizes, unlike Butch in *Big Lake* or Jeeter in *Green Grow*
The Lilacs, begets evil. But Julie cannot give up her belief in great evil, because she would then have to give up the great renunciation that has been the romance, the entire emotional sustenance of her life. She feeds on pain, not pleasure. She still believes that she made a conscious choice, continuing to deny the mythic force of her culture's belief in the sin of incest, alluded to earlier by Mrs. Sawters as "something horrible beyond knowing" (p. 212).

In a free verse speech, Julie expresses her vision of a pre-genital, Edenic bliss that has eluded them, brother and sister, because of the monster form her sexuality imposed on the relationship, as if by a conscious act of will.

When we were young, everything was so clear and bright.
We were happy.
If you could see my real self now--
My soul
If there is such a thing.
It's a field that wagons have been driven over,
over and over again in the rains.
The wheels have cut the juicy earth to pieces.
It's packed solid underneath the ruts--
Solid-- like rock.
And no seed will ever grow there any more.
Never.
It's me that drove those wagons up and down,
Me that wanted the field to be different,
The crop that grew to be another kind of grain.

I can't lick what I am.
I see it now.

(p. 218)

Julie believes that if she had the will to alter her desires, if she could achieve total repression, she could wipe out her misery. Clabe disagrees; all the misery in the world,
he says, is caused by "people-- pathetic from the first," struggling vainly to conform to unnatural ideals. "Give in to what you are," he begs her. But Julie cannot.

It's more evil...sin that could never be wiped out.

... It's in the mind, it's in the blood. The whole race of man is against it.

(p. 219)

Clabe replies, "Not all." They are brother and sister who love each other. In their society, Clabe admits, "it's taboo." So they struggled against it and turned their self-loathing on everyone else. "We were wrong," he tells her, "and ignorant." Through his wider experience he has gained a vantage point from which to judge what is real and what is ideal, and therefore nonexistent, in the real world of time and mortality:

Any love every offered to you has things against it. . . .But at least it's something positive. It declares you on the side of life, instead of violence and death.

(p. 219)

Clabe still equates the idealistically motivated destruction of war, which he has seen firsthand, with the poisonous self-destruction of romantic, unrequited love. Both are frauds, both destroy life. He pits his rational argument against the power of irrational mythic thinking:

Are you so committed to darkness you can't make one step against it? Julie! Can't you cross a border that has not existence, none whatever? Are you lost that far?

(p. 219)
Julie replies, "Lost, yes! Of course I am."

Clabe begs her to take one step back to reality, for "there's no other way." But Julie, whose goal all along has been to escape to the oblivion that seems to elevate her existence, her quest, above time and mortality, is all for death. God-like, she says she will "walk out a little way" on the water. "The ice," she says, "is thin." Clabe offers to go with her, but Julie understands the fundamental difference between them:

You can look at yourself without shame.

She wears Clabe's brooch into the lake, as if to remove the last vestige of "original sin" from his consciousness, taking his sin upon herself in a Christ-like gesture of self-sacrifice.

The lake, like the lake in Big Lake, becomes a symbol of the oblivion of delusional thinking. But there is no dark woods equivalent to represent the terror excited by naked libidinal urges that have the power to drive their victims to violate sexual taboos and bring down destruction on themselves. On this farm, as Mr. Sawters says, the damp from the lake itself threatens to rot and mold everything. The mysterious force-- not incest, but the incest taboo-- and the escape from it into delusional oblivions are combined into one symbol, the lake. The flower that "grewed up" in the dark woods in Big Lake is translated in this play into flowers that Julie carefully sustains with the water
from Big Lake, because they "keep better," and, rather than eschew them, she places them devotionally in the shrine of Clabe's empty room.

Clabe consents to Julie's suicide by granting her the fifteen minutes she required. He diverts Bina from going to look for Julie by saying

   Wait till morning. The night will pass. A few hours. It's best. She said so.  

(p. 221)

Clabe is finally completely purged of the power of the incest taboo. He tells the uncomprehending Bina,

   I don't feel guilty. Not yet. I don't think I ever will.  

(p. 221)

There is an innocence beyond guilt, Clabe suggests, if irrational guilt can be brought into the open and rejected. "Tomorrow," he says, echoing Julie's distorted childhood memory, "will be clear and bright."

IV

For over ten years Lynn Riggs was included on nearly everyone's list of promising young playwrights. With the production of The Cream in the Well, Riggs's last new play to be performed on Broadway, most critics seemed to think he had reneged on his promise. The reviews that came pouring in on January 21, 1941 were not just bad; they were devastating. Louis Kronenberger (New York Newspaper "PM" recommended that no one see it "unless your tastes are
virtually depraved." Richard Lockridge (New York Sun) called the play "minor-league O'Neill." John Mason Brown (New York Post) levelled the accusation at Riggs that he had "failed his actors, his audience, and his theme."

John Anderson (New York Journal and American) quipped, "Moral: Use refrigerators and avoid incest." Richard Watts, Jr., (New York Herald Tribune) concluded that this "is not the drama we have all been hoping for from Mr. Riggs." Grenville Vernon wrote in Commonweal (33:375) that "Mr. Riggs wants to write Greek tragedy with Oklahoma farmers in place of kings and queens...it just can't be done..." One morning-after reviewer, Brooks Atkinson (New York Times, January 21, 1941) asked the question, why?

Why? If Lynn Riggs's The Cream in the Well were not written in such good prose and with so many overtones of serious thought, it would not be necessary to begin a review by asking what he has in the back of his mind, why he is torturing his characters, why he is enveloping the audience in gloom...But Mr. Riggs writes individual scenes so well that the problem of The Cream in the Well resolves itself into one word: Why?

Atkinson received an answer in the "Drama Mailbag" of the Times (February 2, 1941) from a close friend of Riggs's, Ida Rauh Eastman:

Mr. Atkinson asks "Why" to this play and also states that "nothing happens."...Does he not realize that in the distortion and defeat of the natural or energetic impulses of life, even though no crime takes place (as in this play), such defeat is certainly something
happening, and something of a most tragic nature?

Charles Aughtry, his biographer, offered another reason Riggs might have chosen to write about such an unpleasant subject:

It is not outside the realm of possibility that *The Cream in the Well* was written out of personal need. Riggs' own emotional and sexual life probably were not entirely normal; and some of the dark recesses that he probes here, without complete success, may have presented him with unresolvable personal problems which he could not articulate satisfactorily in dramatic form.

What Aughtry seems to be saying is that in the theater of Riggs's time, he could not have written about the societal taboo that most greatly troubled him, the taboo against homosexuality. None of Riggs's biographers state unequivocally that Riggs was a homosexual. They allude to his "effeminacy" and his personal unhappiness. Eloise Wilson, also a Riggs biographer, writes:

Riggs was a shy, sensitive, and perhaps effeminate young man, who found little understanding in Claremore, in Oklahoma. He did not find happiness in love either in Oklahoma or elsewhere. After he was twenty-four, he was a self-exile, a nomadic poet-playwright.

Joe Benton, later Joseph Bentonelli of the Metropolitan Opera and Riggs's closest friend at the University of Oklahoma, said of Riggs as a college student: "His social life began to blossom, too, since he discovered girls." It would seem that, rather than disingenuousness on Benton's part, he was responding to the ambivalence, or
perhaps total repression, of what would later be Riggs's sexual orientation. It is quite possible, given the time and the environment, that Riggs did not himself understand his own ambivalence. Riggs and his lifelong closest friend, his sister Mattie Cundiff, both retailed the story of Riggs's tragic only love affair. Riggs was pinned to the beautiful Eileen Yost in the fall of his junior year. A rich geology student, the story goes, came driving in from Wisconsin in a Stutz speedster and took her away from Riggs. She later died in childbirth, and "Riggs never married and close friends give no indications of any further romances over the years." Riggs left school the fall of his senior year without graduating, having suffered a nervous breakdown, perhaps from grief over his failed romance, perhaps from his near escape from leading a double life. He turned up, sheaf of poems in hand, on the doorstep of Witter Bynner in Santa Fe. Bynner, a Harvard-educated poet, had visited the campus the previous year where he met Riggs, already a published poet. Riggs was subsequently befriended by a series of male writers, just as he, in turn, befriended younger male writers and artists after he was established. Aughtry writes:

It would be less than candid not to note a certain effeminacy about Riggs. His close friendships with attractive young men together with various allusions by his friends to his deep-seated emotional unrest, suggest strongly some sort of personality problem. Just what this problem was cannot be stated with any sort of documentary evidence. Perhaps if Riggs's diary,
now in the hands of his literary executor were open to inspection, one could say with some surety what was bothering him and keeping him from feeling at home in the world.\textsuperscript{49}

It would seem that Riggs was not able fully to accept his homosexuality or that his relationships were not satisfying to his special needs. The Oedipal triangle is the "nuclear complex of neurosis," and any unresolved problems created for Riggs by his sexuality would doubtless be traced back to his earliest experience. Riggs's own mother died when he was two years old. His father remarried almost immediately, and neither Riggs nor his sister Mattie got along with their stepmother. They spent much of their time with their aunt, Mary Riggs Brice, who served as a model for many of the maternal characters in his plays. There was a series of significant maternal figures in Riggs's life as he seemingly sought the maternal love of which he had been deprived. Shortly before his death Riggs wrote a television play about one of the most important figures. Mother Lake befriended the young Riggs during the summer of 1922, when they were on the Chautauqua circuit together. She must have eased Riggs's passage into adulthood, despite his subsequent breakdown. He described her in \textit{Someone to Remember} as a woman who was truly motherly, "a woman who made life large, not mean and empty. Someone who made a difference, you see, just by being."

The study of Freud must have been a revelation and a comfort to Riggs as a young man. It is not surprising
that Freudian psychology found its way into his work. Why he chose to write about the incest taboo, rather than homosexuality seems a moot point. Perhaps he did not feel he could write about his own struggle with any objectivity. Rather, he chose to let the incest taboo stand for whatever terrorizes from within. It is the bogeyman that prevents the fullest expression of the self. Julie, in The Cream in the Well, is an intelligent, articulate woman, but she cannot bring herself even to pronounce the word "incest." Incest becomes an "it," like Betty's "it" that haunts the dark woods in Big Lake and Laurey's "it" that she latches her bedroom door against in Green Grow the Lilacs. The word, alone, is bad magic. Riggs thought someone should say it. Clabe says to Julie, "Let's say it out plain, and see if it can hurt us" (p. 219). Clabe's experiences out in the world did not purge him of his incestuous desire; only of his fear and remorse. One can arm himself simply with knowledge, as Riggs did by reading Freud. In "A Credo for the Tributary Theatre," Riggs writes:

...the more we seek to know and to comprehend, and to add what we can to make it bearable for ourselves and others to live, the more revelation we stumble on, and the more we possess the power to change that world.

The world is not, however, easily changed. Freud wrote that "what we call our civilization is largely responsible for our misery." A character in a 1927 unpublished Riggs
play is probably expressing Riggs's own opinion when she says,

It shouldn't be this way. . .but we have to stand for it. It's been ordered this way. Somebody has done this thing to the world. It ought to be something else. Where's the light, where's the god in this to make us more than we are!54

Riggs would very likely say there is no god in it, only ordinary people with a very slight chance of finding happiness. Of the three pairs of protagonists in the full-length plays we have looked at, the first pair go under before they are old or strong enough to make a fight. The second pair find themselves in an environment that is less hostile to their development and they overcome their difficulties together. Of the third pair, one goes under and one survives, apparently, to be happy. There is no avoiding taboo; it is a part of life. Perhaps it shouldn't be this way, but it is. Everyone cannot follow his every libidinal impulse. The "inhibited-aim" is necessary for society to survive. The choice, however, ought to be deliberate and as conscious as possible.

The choice Riggs seems to have made for himself, judging from his output as a writer, is work. Julie offers the advice to Clabe that she cannot take for herself:

Work will save you. To work, to make something--it's the only way to fight destruction.

(p. 220)

Curly also comes to the decision that he has to "start in
to git my hands blistered a new way" and become a farmer. A farm seems very nearly ideal for libidinal displacement. Farming is labor intensive. There is always work that demands to be done. The reason Riggs chose farming as a solution for Curly and Clabe may have been that he himself was born on a small farm near Claremore, Oklahoma, and lived there until his new stepmother decided his father should move to town and become a banker. Freud said that work is the best displacement for libido, especially "psychical and intellectual work," but if that is not possible, then the ordinary work that is available to anyone will do.

The work Riggs found at hand was writing plays. Although he is not a great playwright, he is considered to be a significant minor playwright who contributed greatly to the development of regional theater. Like most dramatists, he wrote because he had something to say. The best plays may not necessarily result from writing for therapy, but Riggs also wrote plays in order to understand himself better through the exploration of his characters. Riggs offered this reason for the work he chose to do:

I find, however, five working senses. And by great good luck I am able to see that these are tools that can perhaps be made to work for good instead of evil, that if I can refine them enough—these five senses— if I can use them enough truthfully, they may relate things to me that will give me strength and enough hope to go on when I find myself and the world impossible. Perhaps—if I am lucky, if I
make declarations strong enough through work or through living—other people, too, may find the way less hard.

It seems, too, that Riggs's "natural and energetic impulses of life" were not entirely defeated. Three years before his death, Riggs bought a summer house, although his permanent residence was Greenwich Village, on Shelter Island, off Long Island. He spent every summer there "usually sharing his home with some aspiring young artist." Looking back, perhaps, to his earliest life, before his mother died, and to the work that had been his salvation, he called his home on Shelter Island "the farm."
Notes


3  Ibid., p. 34.

4  Ibid.

5  Ibid., pp. 21-22.

6  Ibid., p. 39.

7  Aughtry, p. 5.


9  Ibid., p. 307.

10  Ibid.

11  Ibid., p. 308.

12  Ibid., p. 305.

13  Ibid., p. 307.

14  Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo (New York: Norton,

15  Ibid., p. 140.

16  Ibid., p. 146.

17  Ibid., p. 17.


19  Freud, Totem, p. 152.


22  Freud, Totem, p. 54.

23  Freud, Civilization, p. 76.

24  Freud, Totem, p. 17 (italics mine).

25  Ibid., p. 65.

27 Freud, Totem, p. 9.

28 Aughtry, p. 64 (from A World Elsewhere).


30 Ibid.


34 Freud, Civilization, p. 28.

35 Freud, General Selection, p. 191.

36 Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Stein and Day, 1975), p. 120.


39 Barthes, p. 133.

41 Erhard, p. 16.

42 Aughtry, p. 142.


45 Aughtry, p. 70.


47 Aughtry, pp. 17-18.

48 Erhard, pp. 5-6.

49 Aughtry, p. 2.

50 Aughtry, p. 8.

51. Ibid.

52 Riggs, "Credo."

53 Freud, *Civilization*, p. 36.

54 Aughtry, p. 126.
55  Ibid., pp. 8-9.

56  Freud, Civilization, pp. 28-29.

57  Erhard, p. 39.

58  Aughtry, p. 92.
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