

## **Father's Farmland, Daughter's Innerland: Retelling and Recovery in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres***

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### **Abstract**

Jane Smiley in *A Thousand Acres* reinterprets *King Lear*, giving us the “other side of the story” by retelling it from the point of view of the two “evil” older daughters. Smiley lets us understand this evil as something more like psychological suffering at the hands of an abusive father: her main theme is the most brutal form of domestic violence—father-daughter incest—and the originally innocent daughters’ reaction to it. In this study I center my analysis on the narrator-daughter’s traumatic memory of sexual abuse and the therapeutic discourse through which she tries to overcome it. Here the domestic situation of the incest “survivor” greatly resembles the paradigm observed by Judith Herman and Lisa Hirshman: a dominating and controlling father, an absent or weak mother, and an abused daughter who is silenced by the tyrannical father from speaking about his abusive behavior. By utilizing Herman and Hirshman’s clinical evidence on incest cases, Pierre Janet’s theory of traumatic memory (as against narrative memory), and Herman’s study on the recovery of the abused victim, this paper examines the image of the incestuous father, the survival strategies of the daughter, the disclosure of amnesia, and the victim’s progress toward recovery through retelling her story of sexual violence. Even if in a state of mourning, the incest survivor, showing no sign of rage, “survives twice: survives the violation; and survives the death that follows it, reborn as a new person, the one who tells the story” (Culbertson 191).

### **Keywords**

father-daughter relationship, incest, traumatic memory, silence, amnesia, Jane Smiley,  
*A Thousand Acres*, Judith Herman, trauma, recovery, Pierre Janet, case study

I, alas!  
Have lived but on this earth a few sad years,  
And so my lot was ordered, that a father  
First turned the moments of awakening life  
To drops, each poisoning youth’s sweet hope [...].  
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Cenci*

A number of critics have commented that Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991) is a rewriting of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, viewing the text as a feminist response to the canonical narrative tradition of patriarchal culture.<sup>1</sup> Though in plot her narrative roughly parallels Shakespeare's *Lear*, Smiley centers her story on the older daughters' struggle rather than the father's inner turmoil in *Lear*. In *A Thousand Acres* Smiley has transplanted the *Lear* story from the scene of public politics to the domestic realm, making an effort to explore and uncover the unspoken words of the two "evil" older daughters. Smiley sees that something remains unexamined in Shakespeare's text: "I'd always felt the way *Lear* was presented to me was wrong. Without being able to articulate why, I thought Goneril and Regan got the short end of the stick." In the same interview, she explains her reason for focusing on these two daughters: "There had to be some reason [Lear's] daughters were so angry. Shakespeare would attribute their anger to their evil natures, but I don't believe people in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century think evil exists without cause. I knew where that anger came from [...]" (qtd. in Anderson 3). Smiley's novel then aims to give her readers access to the two older daughters' heretofore unarticulated version of the story, so that they may know "the other side of the story."

A review of the literature on *A Thousand Acres* reveals surprisingly few papers that are in any way concerned with an analysis of the surviving incest victim's re-establishment of subjectivity and overcoming of a traumatic past through the recovery of key memories. As the *Acres-Lear* comparison has been undertaken by a number of critics, I center my analysis on the narrator-daughter's therapeutic discourse of/on her traumatic sexual experience with her father, that is, the discourse through which she tries to overcome this traumatic memory. Here the domestic situation of the incest survivor greatly resembles the paradigm observed by Judith Herman and Lisa Hirshman: a dominating and controlling father, an absent or weak mother, and an abused daughter who is forbidden by her father from speaking about his abusive behavior.<sup>2</sup> Also, my discussion will include an analysis of the narrator-daughter's therapeutic narratives in a state of domestic and social alienation and the ultimate emancipation of her painful memory. By locating the crucial traumatic events within the home, Smiley not only questions the structure and values of the traditional male-centered family where individual identity is threatened by the anxiety of family relationships, but also

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<sup>1</sup> Those critics include, to name some, David Brauner, Marina Leslie, James A. Schiff, and Susan Strehle.

<sup>2</sup> See Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (esp. 67-95).

suggests alternative social units within an alienated community. With the story being told from the oldest daughter's perspective, *A Thousand Acres* probes into the patriarchal system, physical and mental orders, appearance and reality, the "territories" of land and female body, male violence and feminine fertility within the encompassing "family romance."

Though *A Thousand Acres* won critical acclaim when it was published in 1991, the novel was also attacked. Smiley's disclosure of the untold side of the Lear text is based, after all, on the most primitive and brutal form of domestic violence, incest, a theme that shocked some critics and even caused the novel to be banned in 1994 by a high school in Lynden, Washington.<sup>3</sup> In an article in *Harper's Magazine*, "Making the Incest Scene," Katie Roiphe points out that "incest has become our latest literary vogue" (65). She specifically attacks Smiley's novel, saying here "the ancient theme of *Oedipus Rex* is accompanied by the clattering breakfast plates of twentieth-century realism and the tragic, shimmering myth becomes an actual event described in pornographic detail" (65). However, Smiley justifies her focus on issues of paternal incest and the victim's recovery: "In *A Thousand Acres*, men's dominance of women takes a violent turn, and incest becomes an undercurrent in the novel. The implication is that the impulse to incest concerns not so much sex as a will to power, an expression of yet another way the woman serves the man" (qtd. in Duffy 92). For Smiley, the primary concern then is with the breaking of the familial bond by an overwhelming and violent paternal desire, a power that governs the fates and lives of the mothers and daughters.

## I. Fathering the Farm/Family

The daughter-father relationship is central to this novel in which the horror of domestic violence is uncovered in a patriarchal family. Here the father is practicing an "agrarian ideology" that subordinates not only the land but the women as well, women that are "usually concealed and peripheral," forcing them to fulfill their "duties as mothers and wives" and to devote themselves to "the overarching good of the farm" (Fink 25-26). Given his father's knowledge of the traditional agrarian/American

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<sup>3</sup> According to Marina Leslie, the novel gains "some notoriety in 1994 when it was banned in a high school in Lynden, Washington (population 5700), where a teacher assigned it as a companion text to *King Lear* in an Advanced Placement English class." See Leslie, 32-33.

values, Larry Cook claims ownership of both land and daughters; they are jointly his property and he asserts his paternal authority over them; both satisfy his lust to possess. In the young narrator-daughter's (Ginny's) mind, only her own father can define "father" and "farmer": "When I went to first grade and the other children said that their fathers were farmers, I simply didn't believe them, I agreed in order to be polite, but in my heart I knew that those men were impostors, as farmers and as fathers, too. In my youthful estimation, Laurence Cook defined both categories" (19). Ginny has placed her father in a God-like position, powerful and overwhelming, identified with "the biggest farm farmed by the biggest farmer" (20). The omniscient father prescribes family rules and determines roles; this God-like father-figure is then too aloof, too far above, making communication impossible, thus blocking the possibility of genuine family harmony and warmth. He is therefore associated with certain landmarks that are "never dwarfed by the landscape—the fields, the buildings, the white pine windbreak were as much my father as if he had grown them and shed them like a husk" (20).

A real father should be "the sum of nurturing, protection, affection, guidance and approval given by the father to his child: it is his *availability to give love and to be loved* (to be used as love-object): *to be admired, emulated, and obeyed* (to be used as a model for identification and superego formation)" (Leonard 326; italics original). But Larry Cook substitutes his farming catechism for genuine fathering. Thus the dominating and remote father threatens the growth of the daughter's sense of self-esteem. According to Marjorie R. Leonard, "[w]hen a father holds himself aloof there is insufficient opportunity for day-to-day comparing and testing of the fantasized object with the real person. Moreover, constant lack of attention is experienced as rejection which is destructive to the sense of self-esteem" (329). Ginny, who is provided with little chance to identify with her mother and no assurance from her father, withdraws herself from the surface of most relationships, ignoring both her own needs and her sadness. With her father a stranger and a "monolith" (115), Ginny is forced to silence her individual voice so that her own subjectivity becomes deformed and detached. She remains defined as the daughter of her father, not as herself.

The father-image Smiley creates in *A Thousand Acres* unquestionably expresses her criticism of the destructive paternal role exemplified by Larry Cook, who persistently ignores his daughters' need for paternal love and care, and is even cruel to his daughters. On one occasion, during a violent confrontation with her father on the night of the storm, Ginny recalls a hurtful childhood experience. At the age of eleven

she lost a shoe at school and failed to conceal the loss from the father because her mother “betrayed” her by asking her about the shoe. Her father then began to beat her, and when her mother tried to protest, he turned to her and said, “You on her side? [...] There’s only one side here, and you better be on it.’ [...] he grabbed my arm and pulled me over to the doorway, leaned me up against it, and strapped me with his belt until I fell down” (182-83). Having suddenly remembered this Ginny makes a defiant speech to her father: “[Y]ou don’t deserve even the care we give you [...] from now on you’re on your own” (183). The juxtaposition of the past painful episode with the present bold response indicates the adult Ginny’s attempt to recover from that particular traumatic memory, to heal its wounds. The father, of course, never actually knew (being cold and oblivious) how much his destructive act had injured his daughter emotionally.

The father’s urge to possess and expand his land parallels his incestuous desire to possess and abuse his daughters, whom he calls his “livestock”—“Ask him. He’ll tell you all about sows and heifers and things drying up and empty chambers” (10). Daughters are objectified and seen as insignificant, their existence defined in terms of their economic exchange value. But the father’s irredeemable sin is his use of paternal power to effectively rape his own vulnerable and innocent daughters while feeling no regret about the permanent harm done by this violent and barbarous form of abuse. Living with the threat of a dominating and misogynist father,<sup>4</sup> the daughters are interrupted in the process of their subject formation, their identity as young women remains somehow incomplete; this is most clear in the narrator-daughter’s (Ginny’s) muted and compromised nature.

## II. Other Relationships

Having been raised by such an uncaring father, Ginny seems to be incapable of really loving her own husband: she has unconsciously brought the pattern of her own relationship with her father into her married life. Smiley has presented Ginny’s husband Ty Smith, a down-to-earth farmer, as a counterpart of her father, and indeed Ty has in effect married the father and his one thousand acres: “The best thing about Ty

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara H. Sheldon remarks that the “blatant misogyny is an all-pervasive attitude in Ginny’s

had been that he attracted Daddy” (262). Ty is favored by Larry mainly because of the size of his own farm, a hundred and sixty acres with no mortgage on it; Ty can thus qualify as a “son” for Larry. Ty is also a competent farmer, one who has “always been patient, understanding, careful, willing to act as the bulwark against [Ginny’s] father” (155), but Ginny is unwilling or unable to sustain a faithful marital relationship with this man who “attracted Daddy.” Ginny just seemed to drift into this marriage, doing what is expected of a filial daughter by an imperious father; she shows not real passion for it. Her secret sexual affair with Jess is thus an act of rebellion against the rigid and machine-like figure of man represented by Ty and her father.

Jess Clark catches Ginny’s interest with his organic farming method, an alternative to the highly rational-technological-chemical-“male abusive” method used by Larry. To Ginny then Jess suggests new possibilities: he is a kind of romantic figure, a traveler who has returned to the provincial, patriarchal farming community of Zebulon County from “outside,” bringing new ideas. Ginny is charmed by Jess’s combination of (male) wildness and rebelliousness—he was a draft-dodger during the Vietnam War (an alternative form of violence, violent resistance)—and (female) sensitivity, understanding of women, not a common trait of Zebulon County farmers. Ginny’s physical intimacy with Jess brings her close to his open, untamed nature: “Sex with Jess had been an act of resistance and desire, a dangerous flouting of appearances and of Daddy’s definition of female sexuality, a reaching out for alternatives” (Carden 197). Through Jess, then, Ginny is able to rediscover that feminine sexuality so long repressed due to the traumatic childhood experience with her father. Smiley here implies that Jess’s ability to value the health of the (female, fertile) land naturally leads him to value the (mental, emotional, physical) health of women: he is the one who first suspects a link between Larry’s poisoned land and his dead wife and “diseased” daughters. He thus suggests to Ginny that her five miscarriages might be due to “the loop of poison we drank from” (370), the nitrates in the well water, the remains of the fertilizer used to increase the farm’s productivity.

However, Jess’s “wild” side means he is always moving and restless, an elusive character, unable to hold a permanent and responsible job or make a lasting emotional commitment; he is as changeable and ungraspable as water. Thus he betrays Ginny by having an affair with her sister Rose, confirming the former’s later observation: “A stranger, he looked canny, almost calculating. With no one looking at him and no

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world. Larry is the most misogynist of all” (45).

occasion to exercise his charm, his face was cool, without animation or warmth" (322). As Iska Alter puts it, Jess "sees land as an instrument upon which he can practice theory, just as he sees the bodies of women as sexual landscapes to test, to probe, to use" (156). Ironically then his coldness and scheming nature link him to Ginny's father: both sleep with and use the two girls; with the sisters' permission, Jess moves into the place where Larry had lived (Sheldon 55), and thus may finally be seen as a sort of transformation of the father. Ginny, the incest survivor is thus scarred once again by Jess; she ultimately chooses to distrust any relationship, even her relationship with Rose, the one she had always trusted most.

If we conclude that Ginny poisons Rose out of jealousy, we risk oversimplifying the already psychically injured narrator. Ginny's shocking violence against her sister might be a response to the loss of Jess ("stolen" by Rose) not just as male companion and sex object but (also) as long-lost mother-figure—sensitive, caring, nurturing, protective.<sup>5</sup> Though Jess finally is equated with Larry as a man who does not really care about women, in the beginning he is associated with the softness and free-flowingness of water, with the capacity for nurturing life (organic farming) and listening to women, qualities which encourage Ginny's maternal fantasy of him. It is Jess after all and not Ty who knows and is concerned about Ginny's five miscarriages; he understands the oldest daughter's desperate need for attention and triggers her awakening sense of self. The loss of Jess as "maternal voice" repeats and reinforces Ginny's pre-Oedipal horror of "abjection" or daughter-mother separation, which she had been forced already to repeat with the earlier death of the mother. Feelings of anger and hatred are involved in the process of mourning this loss. The empirical psychologist John Bowlby suggests in *Attachment and Loss* (1980) that the "[l]oss of a loved person gives rise not only to an intense desire for reunion but to anger at his [or her] departure and, later, usually to some degree of detachment; it gives rise not only to a cry for help, but sometimes also to a rejection of those who respond" (31). One of the responses to the loss of this person is a desire for revenge (Bowlby 304), which gives us one interpretation of Ginny's poisoning of Rose: having been deprived by Rose of a mother-substitute, Ginny suffers separation anxiety and is driven to protest.

The discovery of Rose's affair with Jess destroys Ginny's belief that her sister is her alter-ego: "My deepest-held habit was assuming that differences between Rose and me were just on the surface, that beneath, beyond all that, we were more than twinlike,

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<sup>5</sup> Farrell argues that Jess is seen as a daughter in the eyes of his father, almost feminized (52).

that somehow we were each other's real selves, together forever on this thousand acres" (307). And Rose has also been seen as the incarnation of their mother: "Rose, in herself, in her reincarnation of our mother, would speak, or act out, the answers" (94). Thus we might think that Ginny's relationships with Rose and Jess have developed along similar lines: both characters solicit her need for a mother, yet both are in fact selfish and possessive enough to also resemble Larry the authoritarian father. Rose's selfishness is revealed in her eagerness to own land and her ignoring of Ginny's feelings upon taking Jess as a lover; she aligns herself with the paternal ideology of forceful expansion and intrusion. Unharmful by Ginny's poisoned sausages she is nevertheless murdered by the poisonous father/land: "that cell dividing in the dark [...] subdividing, multiplying, growing, Rose's real third child [...]. Her dark child, the child of her union with Daddy" (323). Once her own attempt at murder fails Ginny accuses her sister of being a voluptuous and shameless whore, one who has prostituted herself with her own father to gain more land.

Though Rose is a mother herself she could not be, like her sister, the narrator of past sexual abuse at the fathers' hands since she invites and welcomes Larry's patriarchal and even sexual domination, subjecting herself to his lies. Rather than confront and expose the father's unforgivable behavior, she sees the incestuous act as a chance to become his favorite, his lover of choice. Rose says to her sister: "I thought it was okay, [...] since he was the rule maker. He didn't rape me, Ginny. He seduced me. He said it was okay, that it was good to please him, that he needed it, that I was special. He said he loved me" (190). Rose's unhealthy mind has its parallel in her body ravaged by cancer; the incurable disease multiplies, running wild within her body, killing her and depriving her of her potential role as an incest survivor who might speak out against such domestic violence. Thus in her account to Ginny of the childhood incestuous experience Rose keeps an unusually calm manner, with a tone completely detaching from the abuse memory, as the narrator-sister remembers: "Rose, you're too calm. You're so calm that it's more like you're lying than it is like you're dredging up horrors from the past" (191). In the same account of the past, when Rose is expected to show sympathy to her sister who experienced the same abuse, she appears analytical and calculating in her interrogating attitude toward Ginny on the details of the incident, which further solidifies her role as a daughter of the father at the price of sisterhood. In her detective way of recounting the experience, Rose, though who initiates Ginny's remembering of the abuse, becomes the abuser of her sister in repeating the bitter past with an iron-like heart, hard and irresistible.

### III. Searching for the Mother

Ginny's desire for the mother's presence has not only pushed her to see Rose as the lost mother; it has made her attempt to remap the unknown part of her mother's life, seeking anyone that her mother had ever known and even going to her father for answers to her questions about her mother, solutions to the "mystery" of the mother. The daughter craves a complete picture of her mother because she yearns to engage, to mix, to unite her life with that of her progenitor: "I could become her biographer, be drawn into her life, and into excuses for her or blame of her" (94). However, the mother is mentioned again more than two hundred pages later: now the daughter reenters the old family house, already empty, to clean one of the rooms for Jess to move into. While on the surface Ginny is trying to be hospitable to Jess, deep inside we sense her eagerness to rediscover the mother, who now comes alive to her through the fancy old clothes in the back of the closet, clothes that contains the hidden history of the mother. The longing daughter says that "when I seek to love my mother, I remember her closet and that indulgence of hers" (224). Approaching the house, Ginny was thinking that "it seemed like Daddy's departure had opened up the possibility of finding my mother" (225). With this description of the precondition for "finding" the mother, we get a fuller sense of the difficulty of establishing a true mother-daughter connection in this patriarchal family.

Alone inside the house Ginny starts her search for things left by her mother, "her handwriting, the remains of her work and her habits, even, perhaps, her scent" (225). This desperate search for the mother—or striving to become the mother—is total and all-encompassing, for the love-object has been missing for last twenty-two years. In her search of the closet all Ginny can find are the father's belongings, which have replaced the mother's clothes. The mother's possessions are all gone, symbolizing the hopelessness of the quest-for-mother. Yet (the author intimates) the mother-daughter bond can still be found in the realm of memory, where it is immune from the abuses of the father. Ironically, it is the "renewed grief at this memory" (227) of the mother, sparked by the absence of the mother's things, that creates in Ginny "a kind of self-conscious distance from [her] body as it rose up the staircase" (227) and eventually leads to the shocking memory of sexual abuse at the hands of her father. The search-for-lost-mother becomes, through Smiley's imagery, a quest for the memory or experience of loss-of-mother, and thus too for the memory or (childhood) experience of

loss-of-self inside this house full of dark secrets. The suddenly retrieved memory of the episode with her father hits the narrator-daughter unexpectedly; it overwhelms her and drives her to face this long-repressed past with the newly found inner voice of an injured soul: “I screamed in a way that I had never screamed before, full out, throat-wrenching, unafraid-of-making-a-fuss-and-drawing-attention-to-myself sort of screams that I made myself concentrate on, becoming all mouth, all tongue, all vibration” (229).

Such screaming is the most primitive use of the human voice, “the beginning of speech” (Nakadate 178). Here it firmly cements this shocking memory to her own life, to her self, underscoring the importance of the remembered scene in her own development. It is a bitter memory, one long denied and buried by the conscious self, which has finally found its outlet, its emergence into consciousness, through the symbolic guidance of a search-for-mother which was always already, in effect, a search-for-self. The discovery of what was repressed, or “return of the repressed,” brings out the daughter’s voice at full strength and so marks and announces her rebirth, the beginning of her process of healing, of overcoming this traumatic experience of sexual abuse. “My new life, yet another new life, had begun early in the day” (229). This outcry is Ginny’s first articulation of her individuation from her father’s ruling authority, the initial step in the construction of a subject which can now differentiate itself from the blurred category of dutiful girls doomed to perpetuate silence. “Ginny’s desire is for the language that can, and for the mother who could, provide alternatives to Daddy’s ownership, disavow paternal right, introduce the unsaid into language” (Carden 194). Thus her scream is for Ginny a form of language capable of expressing a tremendous awakening, breaking open the narrative’s “master plot”<sup>6</sup> and re-defining the father-daughter relationship by shifting from the dominant paternal standpoint to that of the daughter, whose violent scream gives voice to the violence she has suffered at the father’s hands. The reversal of the narrative viewpoint here also points to the daughter’s abandoning of her customary obedience to her father’s speech. Ginny once claimed that “I was, after all, my father’s daughter, and I automatically did believe in the unbroken surface of the unsaid” (94); but now her newfound self can speak the unspeakable with the “all mouth, all tongue, all vibration.” With this scream the

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<sup>6</sup> In her observation of the father-daughter story, Sheldon argues that “there exists a dominant father-daughter discourse, which determines the ways the roles of fathers and daughters are defined and perceived. This discourse is reflected in countless literary works and has shaped what I call the ‘master plot of the father-daughter story.’” A master plot reflects “the constellation of powerful father and submissive daughter” and “repeats pre-conceived patterns and endings” (23).

abused daughter begins to live as an individual, no longer her father's daughter and no longer oppressed and repressed by (patriarchal) language; the ability to begin to use her own language becomes the main instrument of the therapeutic process now undertaken by Smiley's narrative.

#### **IV. Silence as Suppression and Survival**

The abused daughter's usual silence, in other words, is hardly an inborn quality but rather one of the most common symptoms of a survivor of violence who "most often, nearly invariably, becomes silent about his [or her] victimization, though the experience nevertheless in every case remains somehow fundamental to his existence, and to his unfolding or enfolded conception of himself" (Culbertson 169). Ginny's silence might be said to strikingly resemble Culbertson's description: "[t]his silence is an internal one in which the victim attempts to suppress what is recalled [...], or finds it repressed by some part of himself which functions as a stranger, hiding self from the self's experience according to unfathomable criteria and requirements" (169). Ginny's silence then is the result of her unconscious internalization of the experience of paternal abuse; the shock of this experience has driven her to interact with her inward sphere, the alternative inner-land of her own private "prairie": here she was able to produce the life-energy that allowed her to cope with the memory of paternal violence. In her imaginary revision of the swampy prairie defined only as a "malarial marsh" (23) by the paternal language, Ginny creates a narrative full of fertility and life, an autonomous land that is free from male violence and destruction.

Smiley thus uses experimental narrative skills to imply what is unspoken, unsaid, and unspeakable by providing the scene of Ginny's imagined inner-prairie or inner-land, a place that embodies her mind, feelings and sensations, which creates for the narrator-daughter access to an autonomous self. With this discourse of/on the fertile inner-land Smiley shows us how her abused narrator may convey her meaning through the untold inner picture that is summed up in and by the "imaginary voice" of her silence. In calling on this silent realm as a text, a linguistic presence, Smiley illuminates a new set of values tied to the daughter's power of imagination—values of life-affirmation and self-affirmation. The move to this inward plain marks Ginny's necessary retreat away from words—for words have been the father's words and have

oppressed her—into silence, into a solitude where she can freely give voice to herself, her own inner discourse. This is a place where mind and body are joined, a place untouched by the deteriorating family relationships that surround her on all sides. This inner world, imagined by her as a natural scene, “mother nature” herself, is fully beyond the reach of paternal violence. Absent in her father’s eyes, the daughter is defiantly present and vibrating with life-energy in the world of her inner vision.

## V. Incest as Deadly Sin

The family pattern presented in *A Thousand Acres* corresponds to the standard pattern of paternal incest: financially capable yet alcoholic father, dying young mother, filial and responsible daughters. Dr. Herman (2000) claims: “The families in which the informants grew up were conventional to a fault. Most were churchgoing and financially stable; they maintained a façade of respectability” (71). At the beginning of Ginny’s narrative, we are informed that the family, “[i]n spite of the price of gasoline [...] took a lot of rides that year, something farmers rarely do,” in the father’s first car, “a Buick sedan with prickly gray velvet seats” (4). Ginny’s father is the perfect patriarch, exercising absolute authority, yet he is admired by the community as a successful farmer. Larry’s “heroic father” image fits most of the fathers in abuse cases: “while they were often feared within their families, they impressed outsiders as sympathetic, even admirable men” (Herman 2000: 71). However, the father as honored breadwinner is the same man who terrifies his wife and daughters behind closed doors. Alcoholism is another frequent characteristic of the incestuous father. According to research, “[a]lcoholism has frequently been associated with incestuous behavior. In one study of imprisoned sex offenders, for example, 46 percent of the incestuous fathers were diagnosed as alcoholic” (Herman 2000: 76).

The incestuous father described in *A Thousand Acres* defines his daughters in terms of their feminine bodies, exploitable and totally under his control, in much the same way he sees his farmland. To be a filial daughter is expected in a patriarchal family; according to Herman, “[w]hether or not they were obliged to take on household responsibilities, most of the daughters were assigned a special duty to ‘keep Daddy happy’” (2000: 79). Ginny’s father demands that his daughters keep him happy by doing housework but also by providing sexual services, seeing them as little wives or

perhaps really as prostitutes. While Shakespeare's *King Lear* asks for his daughters' public announcement of their love in the opening scene, Larry goes further by forcing his girls into incestuous love-making. The victimized Ginny finds it hard to keep a proper distance from her father; this is "only later shown to be a function of *his* inability to maintain a proper distance from her" (Leslie 36). The father's violent disruption of the normal, healthy distance between parent and child establish an unhealthy psychodynamics within the family.

As the father's incestuous behavior is unnatural and unethical according to the standards of all known human societies, and therefore will shock as well as psychologically confuse his daughters, he cannot escape the ultimate punishment of insanity and (early) death. But to speak of ethics is to speak of "sin" and "guilt" in something like a Christian sense. Larry's sin of incest, then, is unknown to the public, and he is never willing to admit—or never conscious of—his own guilt: thus he is condemned to decay mentally as well as morally and spiritually, to gradually lose his sanity as well control of his land, his body, and his daughters. Thus the father's madness, his loss of "reason," can be read as his punishment for leading his own daughters, against, their will, into sin, and not taking responsibility for this action. We may think it is easier to see it as a kind of ironic "justice" for psychologically damaging them at a tender age, making them "lose their minds": now (in a different way) he will lose his. But Smiley is less concerned with poetic justice than with paternal abuse an act that is sinful act inasmuch as it not only violently destroys a child's innocence but also blurs the fixed, ultimately "moral" boundary between parent and child.

Therefore not even the final death of the incestuous father can bring a full sense of compensation to the daughters: Ginny's response to the news of her father's death is as detached as that of a neighbor, no more, no less. "He had a heart attack in the cereal aisle. I imagined him falling into the boxes of cornflakes" (334-35). For the wounded daughter, her father's death is as natural as cornflakes in the aisle shelves of a grocery store—her feelings for him have long ago been burned out—yet his death cannot make up for or erase the memory of her childhood tragedy. Unlike other kinds of crimes, the injury caused by incest penetrates and obsesses the victim to her (or his) last breath. There is no escaping from it and no complete recovery from it. In *A Thousand Acres* Smiley wants to show, then, finally that incest is not a question of forgiveness and punishment, but one of permanent psychological damage for which there is no absolute cure. Thus even if the perpetrator may in some cases (not in this one) be convicted by a court of law, this could never really compensate for the pain

suffered by the victim, any more than the death of Ginny's father can really compensate for what he has done.

## **VI. The Traumatized Daughter: A Case Study**

On the other hand, the reliability of incest victims' recollection of the event is questioned by one of Smiley's critics, Carol Dale Osborne, who proposes that the author's depiction of the way memory functions is controversial. "Ginny's flashback [...] occurs only after Rose has described her own incest experience [...]. Despite the obvious element of suggestion working within this scenario, Smiley ignores the possibility of a false construction" (Osborne 138). Moreover, "[t]he suggestion provided by Rose's accusations, the sudden flood of memory, and the change in perspective the 'abuse excuse' affords the protagonist would all make critics of recovery suspicious were these features present in a real-life situation" (Osborne 139). Such skepticism may be inevitable and it is necessary in court cases, especially when a child's testimony is the crucial evidence that can convict an accused offender. After all, a supposed victim may have a false memory of a supposed event, or may even have imagined the event.

However, Smiley's presentation of Ginny as traumatized survivor parallels the case study of an early psychologist, Pierre Janet. Janet based his paradigm of traumatic memory on his study of a clinical patient, Irene, a young 23-year-old woman traumatized by the tragic death of her mother from tuberculosis (van der Kolk 428).<sup>7</sup> According to Janet's records, Irene cared for her mother for months before the mother's death while also working to provide for her family; she was extremely exhausted due to lack of sleep for sixty consecutive nights. On the night of her mother's death Irene, without knowing what was happening, ran to ask for help from her aunt, as her alcoholic father was drunk. The aunt later revealed that Irene, though an intelligent young woman, "had absolutely no memory of the death of her mother and did not want to believe that her mother had died" (van der Kolk 428). Irene insisted that her mother was alive, repeating over and over, "If she were dead, I would despair, I would feel very sad, I would feel abandoned and alone. Well, I don't feel anything; I am not sad at

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<sup>7</sup> The details about the case study of Irene's example shown in the following is from Van der Kolk

all, I don't cry; thus, she is not dead'." Irene could slowly start to recount the story of her mother's death only after six months of inpatient treatment and hypnotic therapy. The most striking problem of Irene, as Janet concluded, is that she didn't have any memory of her mother's dying. Furthermore, Irene suffered from a second set of symptoms: she reproduced all the details of her mother's death for three or four hours. Irene on the one hand suffered amnesia with respect to the mother's death and, on the other, she seemed to "remember too much." "The re-experiencing of the tragic night was, in fact, an exact and automatic repetition of the acts Irene had performed during that night" (van der Kolk 430). The reason Irene repeated the actions that occurred on that night is that the death of her mother had become her own "traumatic memory." This is quite different from normal people's narrative memory, which is not a mere repetition of actual events, and which has a social meaning. Traumatic memory is, on the other hand "[i]nflexible and invariable [...] [it] has no social component; it is not addressed to anybody, the patient does not respond to anybody: it is a solitary activity" (van der Kolk 431).

Osborne, we remember, distrusts Ginny's "sudden flood of memory, and the change in perspective the 'abuse excuse' affords" after hearing her sister's account of the experience. But I would argue that we can explain Ginny's behavior in this scene by paralleling it with Irene's traumatic memory as analyzed by Janet. For one thing, Ginny's outward silence and the loss of her memory of the rape experience may have been the result of her exposure to the traumatic event in a vulnerable state. According to B. A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, in their research on how the mind comes to freeze certain memories: "some memories are fixed in the mind and are not altered by the passage of time, or the intervention of subsequent experience" (441-42). They explain that "the brain is extremely plastic until myelinization, which occurs in different parts of the brain at different ages, but which is complete by the end of puberty." Moreover, "[s]evere or prolonged stress can suppress hippocampal functioning, creating context-free fearful associations which are hard to locate in space and time. This results in amnesia for the specifics of traumatic experiences, but not the feelings associated with them" (442). Apparently, in Ginny's case, her bitter childhood memory had been frozen without her knowing it. The suppression of the traumatized memory is the result of experiencing a "speechless terror": in this case the individual is unable to organize the experience on a linguistic level (van der Kolk 442). On the

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and Van der Hart's recounting of Janet's clinic treatment of this particular patient (428-30).

other hand, the suppression of her destructive memory is a survival strategy for the abused Ginny, as the traumatic experience once and for all invades and “possesses one, takes one over, and in the process threatens to drain one and leave one empty” (Erikson 458). Trying to erase the unbearable part of a violent memory is an attempt to evade the total collapse of one’s interior landscape into emptiness and nothingness.

Thus the mode of Ginny’s flashback, the sudden in-flooding of the rape memory, is identical to Irene’s case. For Irene, “it was her position near a bed which triggered re-enactment of the death scene” (van der Kolk 431). Similarly, when Smiley’s narrator-daughter enters her bedroom in the old house, as she approaches the bed she used to sleep in the memory of the rape scene burst forth like a flood. “Lying here, I knew that he had been in there to me, that my father had lain with me on that bed, that I had looked at the top of his head, at his balding spot in the brown grizzled hair, while feeling him suck my breasts. That was the only memory I could endure before I jumped out of the bed with a cry” (228). Ginny’s mode of recollecting or recovering this hidden memory therefore echoes that of Irene. In both cases “traumatic memory is evoked under particular conditions. It occurs automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation. These circumstances trigger the traumatic memory” (van der Kolk 431). Ginny’s amnesia, her blocking out of the incest memory and sudden remembering upon returning to the “scene of the crime,” then suggest the pattern of a clinical case study. This testifies to the plausibility of her being a rape victim suffering from a repressed traumatic memory.

## VII. Speaking the Unspeakable

Like her author who becomes the “bad daughter” of Shakespeare,<sup>8</sup> Ginny eventually chooses to become the bad daughter of her father by exploring his secret evil deed; but this daring, this willingness to explore and expose it, also makes possible her recovery. In her struggle to translate her traumatic memory into narrative memory, Ginny is forced to witness the rape scene for a second time, to re-experience it. Like most rape victims she feels compelled both to be confronted by and to avoid her unresolved memory. The retelling of the memory forces one to face one’s vulnerabi-

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<sup>8</sup> Marina Leslie remarks that, “[a]s the bad daughter, Smiley is blamed for the sins she would attribute

lity and powerlessness: the truth is too overwhelming. Herman observes that to become aware of extreme abuse in the past makes one “come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature” (1997: 7). However, only when the trauma victim learns to articulate, to use language as a tool to recount the hidden and lingering past can she/he survive the event. In their study, van der Kolk and Ducey explain that “a sudden and passively endured trauma is relived repeatedly, until a person learns to remember simultaneously the affect and cognition associated with the trauma through access to language” (271). Learning to tell about the violent event is then necessary for the survivors in the process of their (self-) therapy, in that they are encouraged to construct “a full and vivid description of the traumatic imagery” (Herman 1997: 177). This is the key for Smiley’s victimized narrator, whose psychological recovery depends on her virtually recounting the entire narrative of paternal abuse. When Ginny finally recalls the father’s deed she remembers him saying, “[q]uiet, now, girl. You don’t need to fight me” (280). In fact, however, she does not “remember fighting him, ever, but in all circumstances he was ready to detect resistance, anyway. I remembered his weight, the feeling of his knee pressing between my legs, while I tried to make my legs heavy without seeming to defy him” (280). The silent and hidden resistance shown in the act of cooperation and obedience are grounded in the sense of the young girl’s body being both under and not under her own control; she is helpless to resist that which is both inescapable and irresistible. The father’s forbidding the daughter to resist him forces her to resign herself to it—but “resignation” itself implies the double modality here, not resisting but also not agreeing, not liking.

In this terrible recollection, Ginny could only hang onto the partial “fragments of sound and smell and presence” (280) of the father. To the abused daughter, the fragmentation of the father’s image in the now-remembered “rape scene” suggests her inability to (re-) integrate her own sense of self due to this act of violence, leading to her failure to understand the idea of “family” and “father” upon which she used to depend: the value of these terms has been shattered by the act of incest. Ironically, however, it is the fragmented and incomplete memory of the evil scene that allows for the voided spaces in which the daughter can hide, withdraw, escape. In a way, to replace the full image of the abuser with a fragmented one is the victim-daughter’s survival strategy, a tactic also applied to her confrontation with the rape itself: she

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to the father, Shakespeare” (46).

chooses to remain in a state of “desperate limp inertia” (280) in order to sustain herself. The sense of passivity and numbness of her own body is a forced act of forgetting, a giving up of her own presence and identity. The horrified daughter “never remembered penetration or pain” (280): the cutting off of oneself from the scene of primal abuse is a becoming aware of death in one’s own (injured) body so as to be able to live again. In her study of the survivors’ bodily memories, Culbertson remarks that “[s]uch a memory is generally full of fleeting images, the percussion of blows, sounds, and movements of the body—disconnected, cacophonous.” Thus, “events and feelings are simply not registered, but this does not mean they are forgotten; they are located in other parts of the mind and the parts of the body affected as well.” Above all, “the body and mind conspire to protect the self from overwhelming awareness of its permeability, to deny in important ways the terror of the experience [...]. It may simply be the consequence of the body’s purpose—to sustain the body at nearly all costs” (174). This enforced temporary blankness (or blanking out of self) at the moment of extreme injury is not to be remembered or analyzed, but simply to be used for the purpose of survival.

For the adult Ginny, then, her body has not been united with her mind ever since the rape, and she even admits that “I didn’t want to see my body” (279) when having sex with her husband. She “assumed that all of this was normal, the way it was for everyone. It went without saying that bodies fell permanently into the category of the unmentionable” (279). Clearly the sexually violated, wounded daughter denies and rejects her own body as an abject object, to be neither assimilated nor expelled, something that continues to remind her of the “truth” of the rape. The polluted body, the site of violence, will permanently carry the memory of incest (incestuous memory) along with the denial of identity (blinking out of self) to the extreme point of possible recovery. Even in her final narration, Ginny still remains the shell of an abject body, cage of the bird that is her free, newborn self. “My body reminds me of Daddy, too, of what it feels like to resist without seeming to resist, to absent yourself while seeming respectful and attentive” (370). Facing her impossible but unavoidable existence within a rejected body, Ginny is trapped in the insoluble dilemma of being simultaneously inside and outside her trauma.

## VII. Recounting and Recovery

Still, Smiley's major concern is not with the rape itself but with the victim's transcendence of the event, the attitude toward the irrecoverable wound and ways of dealing with it, more specifically the strategy of remembering and retelling the past. Despite the cruel fact that, as Marina Leslie puts it, "[f]orgetting is a kind of death, but then so also is remembering" (48), for the victim to lose the crucial memory is to lose oneself and only by "retelling" the event can she/he fully overcome the threat and lingering fear of violence. The abused daughter's narration is an introspective discourse on the unspeakable childhood abuse she has suffered, on her growing understanding of the need to reintegrate her split self and her gradual reconstruction of a new identity, one no longer marked by shame and guilt. In her study of the aftermath of violence, Herman remarks that in the process of recovery, "the survivor tells the story of the trauma [...]. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (1997: 175). In letting go of her nightmarish past, Ginny is able to give meaning to a once buried scar that is now laid bare to her readers, her audience. In the telling, as observed by Inger Agger and Soren Jensen, "the trauma story becomes a testimony [...]. Testimony has both a private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual, and a public aspect, which is political and judicial [...]. The use of the word *testimony* links both meanings, giving a new and larger dimension to the patient's individual experience" (qtd. in Herman 1997: 181; italics original). Thus at the end of the novel Smiley's victim gives up her farmland and moves to a new place: here, in her "new and larger" life as waitress in a restaurant, she may begin reconstructing her new self.

Ginny's act of beginning a new life in an exotic place marks the last stage of her recovery,<sup>9</sup> a reconnection with ordinary life. To start a new life means in effect also to reconnect oneself to one's pre-event (pre-traumatic) life, to that life which one has lost, thus coming to terms with the demonic (traumatic) past and achieving that true recognition of the pain which allows one to overcome it. Leaving the old place, the father's farmland, is not for Ginny a passive reaction to her painful childhood memories but an active way of burying a past indelibly connected with that farmland,

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<sup>9</sup> Herman indicates that "[r]ecovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life" (1997: 155).

burying her traumatized self. Armed with newly gained inner strength, Ginny reverses her customary role as submissive woman, speaking out now in her own voice to her husband Ty (her father's clone) in order to directly and fully expose the father's crime, something she has repressed for years:

You see this grand history, but I see blows. I see taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did [...]. Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own? [...]. No. I think he had lessons, and those lessons were part of the package, along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what, poisoning the water and destroying the topsoil and buying bigger and bigger machinery, and then feeling certain that all of it was "right," as you say. (343)

This outburst is like a storm, pouring out her long-repressed anger at the father (and by extension also the husband); this is her answer to her father's calling her "a barren whore" in an early storm scene. Indeed, the intended audience for Ginny's angry shouting here is not Ty but her father; it is he who should be condemned and punished for sexually abusing his young daughter. Ginny's loud and anguished "voicing" of the rape ("beating and fucking us") shows her desire for justice, for a justice that would be a consolation and a remedy for her pain and, by bringing closure, promote her self reconstruction.

The "telling of the trauma story thus inevitably plunges the survivor into profound grief" and this "descent into mourning is at once the most necessary and the most dreaded task" (Herman 1997: 188). However, "[t]he reward of mourning is realized as the survivor sheds her evil, stigmatized identity and dares to hope for new relationships in which she no longer has anything to hide" (Herman 1997: 194). Thus, as she works toward overcoming her rape experience, Smiley's victim-narrator chooses to be the mother-surrogate of her sister's two orphaned daughters: she is attempting to break out of her state of solitary mourning over the traumatic loss. The establishing of new relationships enables Ginny to bring her injured self into the community, to engage with life. With the adoption of the two girls, she also fulfills her maternal needs in the wake of her own five miscarriages and her life as a daughter lacking maternal (as well as paternal) love: having these children compensates for this loss, fills this void. As Ginny's capacity for sharing her love with Rose's children develops, she gradually

loses her repressed feelings of shame and guilt on the abuse and “opens up.” Herman claims that “[t]he patient’s own capacity to feel compassion for animals or children, even at a distance, may be the fragile beginning of compassion for herself” (1997: 194). Ginny grows increasingly attached to the two girls, who in turn grow attached to her. Though the tragic fact remains that resolution of a past trauma can never be complete, never finalized, it is often extremely helpful for the survivor to have her/his attention drawn away from the effort of recovery to the tasks of ordinary life, to find her/his meaning in life in the everyday embrace of those closest to her. At the end of her narrative, true enough, Ginny remarks: “Remorse reminds me of Daddy, who had none, at least none for me [...]. Waking in the dark reminds me of Daddy, cooking reminds me of Daddy” (370). The impact of the rape clearly continues to haunt her, will continue to haunt her throughout her life. But while she can never reconcile herself with the (now rejected) father she can reconcile herself with Rose through Rose’s children, and through them also, perhaps, with her pre-traumatic childhood self.

Healthy admiration for her new self, then, compensates for her lingering sense of self-loathing. And in the last words of Ginny’s narrative she is able to see herself as an individual who is invulnerable to the memories of a still untold, still darkened past:

And when I remember that world, I remember my dead young self, who left me something, too, which is her canning jar of poisoned sausage and the ability it confers, of remembering what you can’t imagine. I can’t say that I forgive my father, but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember—the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed, when he wandered around the house late at night after working and drinking, like the very darkness. This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all the others. (371)

The novel’s final narrative expresses neither forgiveness nor anguish, but a mode of mourning the loss of what cannot be fully lost: paternal love, the love of a rarely present and then dead mother, sisterhood, the marital bond. It is not quite a question of the total loss of love in all human relationships, though her “poisoned” and burned out family may at times seem to suggest this, as do many families (this is also the author’s point) at the end of the century. Rather, Ginny’s mode of mourning attempts to balance the irrecoverable loss that took place in her childhood with the newly gained

knowledge of her father's "unthinkable urge." Thus the abused daughter finds power in the destructive paternal darkness now redefined by her as "the gleaming obsidian shard," an almost sacred object that will protect her in the possible future onslaught of terrible memories. Leslie claims that "[w]hat Ginny safeguards is not forgiveness or a sense of her future; it is something hard and sharp and black that connects her to her past" (48). The black shard (sharp and violent like a knife) reminds her of her rape experience yet encourages her to see the "gleaming" of its very blackness, its darkness now made concrete. What marks Ginny's victory over her emotional injury is then her ability to face her pain honestly and directly, and at the same time—though not forgiving her father—in a sense seeing him honestly and directly as well, and thus understanding him. Ginny chooses to leave the father's farmland rather than try to expose his crime in a court of law or announce it to the public; similarly, her tone in this final "gleaming obsidian shard" passage shows no sign of accusation and rage but rather a sense of calm detachment, a certain wise acceptance and indeed reconciliation. Ginny has after all accomplished what the "successful" paternal rape survivor must accomplish, she has "survive[d] twice: survive[d] the violation; and survive[d] the death that follows it, reborn as a new person, the one who tells the story" (Culbertson 191).

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