Chapter Five: Polluted Daughters

Incestuous Abuse and the Postmodern Tragic in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*

> "Down from the waist they're centaurs, / Though women all above. / But to the girdle do the gods inherit; / Beneath is all the fiend's."
> (WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *KING LEAR*)

> "The man we call Daddy who takes us away and we feel awe and love and terror: to do or say the wrong thing would take away the sense of security we are inventing here out of necessity."
> (CAMILLA GIBB, *MOUTHING THE WORDS*)

In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Lear's elder daughters Goneril and Regan are represented as the embodiment of evil. Driven by greed and ambition, they seem to have no scruples or conscience; they callously turn their aging father out into the storm, cruelly blind Gloucester, and, in the end, turn against each other because of their rivalry for Edmund. The play represents their villainy as the result of evil without clear motivation. It is precisely this gap in the plot of Shakespeare's tragedy that the American writer Jane Smiley explores in her 1991 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres*, a postmodern reworking of *King Lear* set on a farm in the Midwest. Smiley's rewriting of Shakespeare's masterpiece radically changes the father-daughter plot of the original story, reimagining the two elder daughters – here called Ginny and Rose – as victims of parental sexual abuse. The daughters are not coldblooded "pelican daughters" (*Lr.* 3.4.70) but trauma victims struggling to come to terms with their disruptive familial past and their present life within the family. Smiley's novel both textually and diegetically decentres the father – the ambitious Larry Cook, whose "kingdom" is his farm of a thousand acres – and places the daughters centre stage.

The novel's intertextual relationship with *King Lear* has received the most scholarly attention,[1] and intertextuality also plays a central role in my reading of the text as a postmodern trauma novel. Moreover, through its focus on father-daughter incest and its exploration of tragedy in relation to a personal trauma history, Smiley's novel shares a number of thematic connections with Shelley's *Mathilda*. At the same time, some of the central differences between Shelley's and Smiley's trauma narratives are indicative of certain general differences between Romantic and postmodern trauma fiction. Far more than the novels by Wollstonecraft, Godwin, and Shelley, Smiley's text explores trauma in relation to the body and memory, thereby foregrounding issues that, in different ways, also play a paramount role in *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Hiding Place*. *A Thousand Acres*, as I show in this chapter, participates in late-twentieth-century psychological discourses of trauma in general and of incest in particular. The novel responds to one of the most violent debates in the history of trauma, the "Memory Wars" of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which revolved around the question of whether or not "recovered" trauma memories should be regarded as reliable and truthful or as unreliable, constructed, or even false. Smiley's novel engages with this debate in its depiction of how the autodiegetic narrator, Ginny, lives through a process of memory recovery after decades of amnesia. However, the novel moves beyond the main points of focus of the "Memory Wars," investigating in depth the complex psychological, familial, and political ramifications of remembering versus not remembering on the one hand and of silence and secrecy versus disclosure and confrontation on the other.

Like Shelley's *Mathilda*, *A Thousand Acres* foregrounds the unspeakability of incest, but it also explores whether or not there are ways of breaking this taboo. Moreover, it relates the topos of trauma as the unspeakable to more general issues of silence and speech. Through Ginny, the novel self-reflexively stages the process of a woman finding her voice within a patriarchal community. Yet the text refrains from depicting that process in sentimental ways; it highlights Ginny's persistent ambivalence about whether or not to use her voice and her increasing feminist awareness in order to talk about her traumatic past. *A Thousand Acres* is a meditation on familial ruptures and abusive relationships, on the difficulty of finding ways to confront traumas without destroying a family. Furthermore, the novel's vision of the family evokes elements of the tragic, one key aspect being a sense of inevitability. The text represents the disintegration and decline of the family and the farm as inevitable, exploring both through the recurring leitmotif of pollution. Most strikingly, it turns out that not even the relationship between the sisters and fellow

1 A few examples to mention here are Anna Lindhé's "Interpersonal Complications," David Brauner's "Speak Again," and Sarah Appleton Aguiar's "(Dis)Obedient Daughters."

trauma victims Ginny and Rose is strong enough to withstand the dysfunctional, polluted dynamics that dominates the family. Ultimately, I argue, the text creates a profound tension between a narrative of female self-development through the recognition of trauma and a feminist revisioning of the tragic.

DECENTRING THE FATHER

The novel's intertextual links to Shakespeare's *King Lear* are crucial for reading *A Thousand Acres* as a postmodern novel and as a trauma novel. In this context, Linda Hutcheon's conceptualization of the postmodern, as articulated in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, is particularly relevant. Challenging notions of postmodernism as apolitical, Hutcheon emphasizes that the self-reflexivity characteristic of postmodern writing tends to have powerful political implications (3): postmodern fiction not only "make[s] overt the fact-making and meaning-granting process" (77), but it also combines this foregrounding of processes of signification with an attempt to challenge and de-naturalize the grand narratives, the fundamental assumptions and constructions underlying our cultural discourses. According to Hutcheon, "postmodernism works to 'de-doxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import" (3). Self-reflexively exposing the workings of specific forms of representation, postmodern writing often involves a combination of "complicity and critique," a "paradoxical installing as well as subverting of conventions" (14).[2] Postmodernism, thus, signals how heavily a long history of traditions and conventions weighs on the present and, at the same time, explores this history critically.

In this light, *A Thousand Acres* is postmodern in several ways. As a rewriting of a tragedy in the form of narrative fiction, the text self-reflexively calls attention to processes of representation and signification.[3] Furthermore, the novel follows the characteristically postmodern trajectory of "complicitous critique" that Hutcheon emphasizes (2): as one of a number of feminist texts that rewrite Shakespearean

2 Hutcheon discusses parody as one important form of postmodern writing that exemplifies the characteristics of self-reflexivity and "complicitous critique" (2). Parody, Hutcheon writes, "can be used as a self-reflexive technique that points to art as art, but also to art as inescapably bound to its aesthetic and even social past" (101).

3 *A Thousand Acres* also raises complex generic questions because the novel and tragedy have often been regarded as incompatible, an issue that Terry Eagleton explores in detail in chapter 7 of *Sweet Violence*. Eagleton grants that "[t]here is something to commend the case that the novel and tragedy are uneasily allied" (201), but he also argues that the claim of incompatibility is especially true for realist novels, while throughout the twentieth century, other types of fiction have begun to embrace the idea of the tragic (201).

plays, the novel both implicitly reinforces *King Lear*'s canonical status and critically challenges its master plot.[4] By fundamentally subverting the father-daughter plot of Shakespeare's play, Smiley's novel sets out to de-naturalize and "de-doxify" dominant patriarchal scripts. The novel is an example of what Christian Moraru discusses as a specifically postmodern form of rewriting, namely, rewritings that "set up a counterwriting distance, a 'rupture' between themselves and what they redo – the literary past – as well as between themselves and various hegemonic forces active at the moment and in the milieu of 'redoing'" (9). Appropriating the Lear plot into a twentieth-century setting, the novel reflects critically on patriarchal ideologies of the past and the present. According to Moraru, what is at stake in postmodern "rewriting" or "counterwriting" (like in *A Thousand Acres*) is a revisionism where "*literary and ideological intertextuality go hand in hand*" (35) – it constitutes an ideological critique of literary, cultural, social, and political scripts (26).

A Thousand Acres also resonates with Moraru's claim that postmodern rewriting tends to have a "clearly cultural-political thrust, especially on behalf of the exploited, marginalized and silenced by dominant ideologies" (35). While *King Lear* emphasizes the father's perspective, Smiley's novel shifts the focus to the daughters, who, as Susan Strehle puts it, have "little more than a sketchy fairy-tale identity" in Shakespeare's play (213). Endorsing the postmodern tenet that one story always contains multiple stories, Smiley's novel undertakes the project of telling, in the words of Molly Hite, "the other side of the story" (3).[5] It is especially important that the novel does not give a voice to the virtuous daughter Cordelia; instead, it allows Goneril, one of Lear's two malicious daughters, to speak through the first-person narrator Ginny.[6] The novel, thus, undertakes a double process of decentring:

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4 As Aguiar emphasizes, "Shakespeare's plays, as narratives constituting part of the very core of Western patriarchal literature, are crucial targets for feminist revisionists" (195). She notes that *A Thousand Acres* is only one of several late-twentieth-century women's novels that evoke and rewrite *King Lear*, notably, Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Anne Tyler's *Ladder of Years*, and Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*. While the other three novels focus on Cordelia, one primary feature that they share with Smiley's novel is the attempt to "broaden the outlines of the feminine archetypes" (Aguiar 195).

5 Hite's 1989 study *The Other Side of the Story* claims that women writers produce postmodern writing that has radical implications through its focus on "conventionally marginal characters and themes" and through its "critique of a culture and a literary tradition apprehended as profoundly masculinist" (2). Written two years after Hite's study, *A Thousand Acres* is part of this general trend in postmodern women's writing.

6 Shakespeare's tragedy portrays Goneril as more evil and ruthless than Regan: she is the first to turn out her father and to treat him and his train of servants with contempt; she is

it decentres the father and positions the daughters centre stage, and it focuses on the psychology of a supposedly evil character, which further reinforces its emphasis on the marginal.

I now want to push the discussion of the novel's decentring strategies further by connecting it to the subject of trauma. The foregrounding of marginalized voices is one important point where the central concerns of postmodern fiction intersect with those of trauma fiction. As Anne Whitehead emphasizes, "[t]he intertextual recovery of hitherto marginalised voices signals the ethical dimension of trauma fiction, which witnesses and records that which is 'forgotten' or overlooked in the grand narrative of history" (86). The "forgotten" history that Smiley sees in *King Lear* is the silenced history of the king's elder daughters, a history that she conceives as one of incestuous sexual abuse. The trauma of incest is the main change of plot; it constitutes the text's most radical departure from the original and represents its most insistent call for a rethinking of the assumptions underlying the plot of *King Lear*. Crucially, the revelation of the sisters' traumatic past occurs in the middle of the novel, and trauma is thus, literally and figuratively, the centre of the text.

Intertextuality, as Whitehead highlights, is a central feature of contemporary trauma fiction (94). She outlines the general workings of intertextuality in trauma novels as follows: "In returning to canonical texts, novelists evoke the Freudian notion of the repetition-compulsion, for their characters are subject to the 'plot' of another(s) story. Novelists can also revise canonical works, however, reading them against the grain and providing a new perspective on familiar texts" (85). *A Thousand Acres*, I argue, merges both approaches. With its critical rewriting and re-perspectivizing of the story, the text does read Shakespeare's tragedy against the grain. Furthermore, it suggests that underneath Ginny's narrative, there is a haunting legacy that reaches deeper than her own personal story. The representation of Ginny's struggle to cope with her traumatic past repeatedly insinuates that she may never be able to fully break out of the structure of Goneril's story. Thus, the novel resonates with Whitehead's claim that intertextual trauma fiction typically features a protagonist who "seems bound to replay the past and to repeat the downfall of another, suggesting that he is no longer in control of his own actions" (85). In an important passage at the end of Book Three, Ginny emphatically voices her feeling that her story is pre-determined or pre-scripted. In this moment of acute crisis, when the two elder sisters have been publicly accused of mistreating their father, Ginny represses her longing for escape: "But we went straight home, as if there were no escape, as if the play we'd begun could not end" (219). This self-reflexive passage suggests that the familial drama that Ginny is caught up in will inevitably take its tragic course, unfolding according to the "destiny that [they] never asked for" and

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the one who plots against her own husband in order to be with Edmund; and she is the one who poisons her own sister.

that was their "father's gift" to them (219). Hence, both Ginny's sense of impending doom and our knowledge of the tragic events determining the "hypotext" that underlies the "hypertext" (to use Gérard Genette's terminology from *Palimpsests*) contribute to the impression that Ginny's trauma history is overdetermined. In Book Five, when she attempts to poison Rose, Ginny seems completely caught up in Goneril's story. Even more strikingly, Lear's curse of sterility directed at Goneril is fulfilled in the novel in a literal and rather disturbing way through Ginny's five miscarriages. The novel's use of intertextuality in its representation of trauma, then, works in two ways at once: trauma functions as a key theme at the diegetic level, while the intertextual links to Shakespeare's tragedy also underline textually the sense of oppression, helplessness, and lack of control associated with trauma.

Smiley's rewriting of *King Lear* essentially turns the tale about a king's decline into a story about female trauma. While the first book of the novel closely follows Shakespeare's plot, restaging Lear's division of his kingdom on a contemporary American farm, the storm scene in Book Three conveys how radically the novel shifts the story's focus. In *King Lear*, the storm scene enacts a pivotal moment of self-confrontation and self-recognition for Lear. In *A Thousand Acres*, the storm sets the scene for a moment of confrontation between Larry and his daughters, a moment of violent reproaches and accusations that are indicative of deeper conflicts. After this confrontation, the novel's focus remains on the sisters, while Larry's experiences of the storm fade into the background. As Barbara Mathieson rightly points out, "Smiley shifts the psychological analogy to the storm from Lear/Larry's inner turmoil to the daughters'" (133) – a "turmoil" centred on their traumatic past. In contrast to Shelley's *Mathilda*, where the confession of incestuous desire is a highly dramatic moment between father and daughter – in fact, the *peripeteia* of the novella's tragedy – in Smiley's novel, the revelation of incest is displaced onto a confrontational moment between the sisters. Realizing that her sister suffers from long-term amnesia, Rose confronts Ginny with the shocking idea that they were both sexually abused by their father as teenagers. This moment between the sisters is constructed as the dramatic turning point and as the moment of *anagnorisis*. The comparison to the storm scene in *King Lear* as well as to the scene of revelation in *Mathilda* makes clear to what extent the novel decentres the father and highlights the daughters. *A Thousand Acres* is not concerned with the father's pain about seemingly unmotivated filial ingratitude and cruelty; instead, it explores in depth how Ginny and Rose cope with their traumatic past. The more the narrative focuses on the sisters' trauma history, the more the father's position is undermined both textually and diegetically.[7] This shift further illustrates how closely the novel's

7 It is interesting to note that the novel's decentring and reconceptualization of the father has also provoked critical reactions. For example, Iska Alter, who explores Smiley's rewriting of *King Lear* in the light of generic potentials and limitations, discusses how

emphasis on female trauma and its postmodern, de-naturalizing trajectory are interrelated.

BURIED AND RECOVERED MEMORIES

Smiley has stated that her fascination with the story of King Lear results partly from the timelessness of the material ("Not a Pretty Picture" 161). She stresses that the "material of the play was already very ancient by the time Shakespeare got to it, which means that the patterns of human behaviour that it recognizes and explores are deeply ingrained ones" (160). However, this anthropological dimension of the novel's intertextuality is only one element of the text; Smiley's novel fuses the timeless and the topical. Through its exploration of father-daughter incest, the novel responds to late-twentieth-century gender, trauma, and memory discourses, negotiating a set of highly controversial issues. Besides the literary contexts of *King Lear* and postmodern rewriting practices, then, psychological discourses constitute a second crucial context for discussing *A Thousand Acres* as a trauma novel.

First of all, the novel engages with a paradigm shift within trauma discourses that took place in the last decades of the twentieth century, namely, the increased awareness of women's and children's traumatic experiences of domestic violence, incest, and sexual abuse. Calling attention to the dramatic nature of this shift, Roger Luckhurst speaks of a "trajectory of escalation, a remarkable exercise of traumatic transmission, in which incest moves from being a vanishingly rare event (perhaps two cases per million)" to a prototypical narrative permeating Western culture (*Trauma Question* 73). Incest and other forms of traumatic violence against children and women quickly became heavily politicized issues and "prompted all kinds of public controversy" (Luckhurst 71). The feminist struggle for the recognition of domestic violence as a widespread phenomenon evoked a strong backlash, thus adding a further example to the cycles of eruption and repression that characterize trauma discourses. As Deborah Horvitz emphasizes, similar to the late-nineteenth-century discourses about hysteria, "the late twentieth-century revelation of an epidemic of domestic abuse is fighting a [...] reactionary backlash, which attempts to mute the conversation and deny women's reality" (3). In the late twentieth century, however, this backlash met with considerable resistance. The cultural arena of women's non-fictional and fictional writing, for example, emerged as a powerful medium for asserting the importance of exposing and acknowledging the bleak real-

Larry is silenced and depicted with "diminished majesty" (153): Larry is "fixed into certainty, deliberately contained and diminished by the explanatory methodology of narrative – details of language that localize, stipulate, and justify" (151).

ity of domestic violence and abuse. Diagnosing a "memoir boom" in the late 1980s and early 90s, Luckhurst maintains that "the memoir has been a key vehicle for the feminist articulation of silenced traumatic violence" (*Trauma Question* 88). Alongside this autobiographical trauma writing, a considerable number of semi-fictional and fictional explorations of incest and sexual abuse began to appear.[8] Incest, above all, rapidly assumed a pivotal position in different kinds of discourses. As Gillian Harkins asserts, the boom of incest novels and memoirs "emerged at the center of new literary markets, making incest one of the hottest topics to connect the daytime talk show circuit, the popular self-help industry, and the elite literary publishing circuit" (2). *A Thousand Acres* is a product of this boom, exploring issues that took centre stage in popular, literary, as well as legal discourses in the 1980s and 90s.[9]

The controversy over domestic violence and domestic trauma culminated in the "Memory Wars" of the 1990s, often referred to as the "False Memory Debate" and described by Chris Brewin as "the most contentious and heated debate in the field" (*Posttraumatic* 127-28). Since Smiley's novel responds directly to this debate, I will outline briefly the main issues at stake. In the late 1980s, a number of therapists began to proclaim publicly that memories of childhood trauma can be repressed or dissociated for decades and then accurately recovered through memory work or therapy. Essentially, these therapists focused on amnesia, one symptom of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder as listed in the DSM (DSM-IV 464), claiming that long-term amnesia may be a common phenomenon, especially in victims of domestic sexual abuse. These psychological discourses gave rise to the "Recovery Memory self-help movement," which, as Luckhurst emphasizes, used the "language of consciousness-raising and women's empowerment borrowed directly from feminism" (*Trauma Question* 72). This movement, whose peak can be dated to the years 1988-1992, resulted in a countermovement or backlash, which culminated in the founding of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in 1992. The False Memory Syndrome Foundation vehemently attacks any claims about trauma memories' preservation and full recovery and postulates instead that memories are subject to constant change and liable to distortion to the extent that a therapy may induce false memo-

8 Examples to mention here include Kathryn Harrison's *Thicker than Water* (1991), Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie* (1991), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), Anne-Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees* (1996), and Camilla Gibb's *Mouthing the Words* (1999).

9 Harkins also calls attention to the fact that this rapidly increasing, or even exploding, attention to incest has provoked widely different interpretations: "For some, these narratives expressed the empirical reality of women's lives" (2), a final revelation of a long-kept secret, while for others, "the popularity of incest literature in particular reflected a national turn 'inward,' a domesticating narcissism designed to shield readers from the broader social and political realities of the period" (3).

ries of a childhood trauma that never happened.[10] Describing the False Memory Debate in terms of a "collective failure of rationality," Brewin emphasizes the striking degree of polarization by "campaigners, journalists, politicians and academics" (*Posttraumatic* 137).[11] Brewin also asserts that the "initial polarization between memory researchers and clinicians has now dissolved" (150); some recovered memories have been identified as "almost certain false, and others as almost certainly true" (150-51).[12] Yet, as Janice Haaken and Paula Reavey emphasize, "even as the embers have cooled in most quarters of academia and popular culture," many "knotty questions" raised by the False Memory Debate persist ("Why Memory" 2, 6).

A Thousand Acres, written during the "Memory Wars," engages with these controversies over trauma and memory in complex ways.[13] In contrast to other novels that respond to the debate, such as Helen Dunmore's *Talking to the Dead* (1996) and Nicci French's *The Memory Game* (1997), Smiley's novel does not focus on the question of the (un)reliability of recovered memories. With its emphasis on therapeutic malpractice and the destructive impact of false memories, *The Memory Game* reads like a propaganda novel supporting the False Memory Syndrome Foundation's position. *Talking to the Dead*, in contrast, "refuses to stay *in* the debate" (Luckhurst, "Memory Recovered" 89); it refuses to participate in the polarization of the two opposing camps and, instead, depicts the question of whether or not recovered memories are true as exceedingly complex. In spite of their differences, both novels problematize the reliability and authenticity of recovered trauma memories. Surprisingly, this concern is not emphasized in *A Thousand Acres*: Ginny never questions that her flashback memory of incest is genuine, nor does the novel encourage us to doubt her memory. What do we make of this?

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10 As Nicola King rightly emphasizes, both memory theories can be traced back to Freud: the theory of preservation and recovery corresponds to Freud's model of archaeological excavation, while the rejection of the idea that memories can later be recovered intact is part of Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (*Memory* 4).

11 The highly polemical nature of this debate also manifests itself in book titles such as *Making Monsters: False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria*, by Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters, and *Victims of Memory: Incest Accusations and Shattered Lives*, by journalist Mark Pendergrast.

12 For a concise account on the False Memory Debate, see also Rüdiger Pohl's *Das autobiographische Gedächtnis*, chapter 6.

13 A few critics mention the False Memory Debate in passing in their discussion of Smiley's novel (e.g., Mary Paniccia Carden's "Remembering/Engendering the Heartland" and Sinead McDermott's "Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender in *A Thousand Acres*"), but they refrain from discussing the connection in depth.

The novel appeared one year before the founding of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, that is, at a time when the debate about the nature and the reliability of recovered memories was about to reach its peak. In this light, Smiley's refusal to engage with the core aspect of the controversy must be interpreted as a conscious choice; consequently, the novel can be read as alerting us to the fact that the focus of the debate became increasingly – and problematically – narrow and reductive in its emphasis on true versus false memories. The novel seems to signal that there are other issues at stake in the "Memory Wars" that are just as pressing, maybe even more pressing. While the novel implicitly subscribes to the psychological notion of memory recovery, its main concern is not to highlight or politically defend the truthfulness of recovered memories; rather, it is to investigate the psychological and interpersonal ramifications of both amnesia and memory recovery. In other words, *A Thousand Acres* endorses the notion of memory recovery not with polemical and political fervour but with a nuanced vision of individual and family psychology – while it explores the interrelations between memory and politics in other ways.

Sketching in detail the individual steps of Ginny's memory recovery, the novel depicts this process as lying at the heart of her fictional autobiography. The revelation of her traumatic past marks the turning point of Ginny's life-story, that is, the *peripeteia* of her tragedy. In other words, I argue that through the way it frames its psychology of trauma and memory recovery, *A Thousand Acres* incorporates the Lear plot into a drama of memory. The dramatic nature of the narrator's crisis of memory is significantly reinforced by the structure of the novel. The first two books symbolically anticipate and lead up to the revelation of the traumatic past, which occurs dramatically late in the middle of the novel. Hence, the process of memory recovery is embedded in a textual structure that evokes central themes and plot elements of tragedy, including secrets and revelations, blindness and *anagnorisis*. These themes also appear in the novel in other contexts, for example, through Ginny's secret miscarriages, Ginny's and Rose's secret affairs with Jess, Caroline's inability to see her father's character, and Harold's physical blindness, caused by farm chemicals. Yet the novel foregrounds these themes especially in relation to Ginny's struggle of memory, signalling that trauma memory plays a central role within her tragedy.

The first half of the novel literally and figuratively enacts the topos of missing memories and absence. It resonates with the ideas of the recovered memory therapists in its depiction of a victim of childhood sexual abuse as lacking conscious memories of the abuse in adulthood but sensing an indeterminate memory gap.[14]

14 As Jo Woodiwiss emphasizes, studies on sexual abuse and memory recovery often note the absence of "recall memory" and the significance of non-conscious "alternative"

The first two books feature a set of motifs that revolve around the unspoken, the invisible, and the hidden, which are metonymically connected to Ginny's buried memories and serve to build suspense. These motifs function as first hints that the reassuring family story of progress, success, and security that Ginny reports in the opening chapter might not be stable. For example, chapter 2 depicts the arrival of Jess Clark, the prodigal son of the neighbouring farmer Harold – an event that Ginny eagerly awaits because she associates Jess with the courage to challenge the community's rules of (un)speakability: "The real treat would be watching Jess Clark break through the surface of everything that hadn't been said about him over the years" (7). From her reflections on Jess, Ginny moves on to a meditation on the landscape of Zebulon county, expressing her fascination for "what is below the level of the visible" (9). The motif of digging beyond surfaces is taken up and pushed further in Book Two, where her fascination with the invisible and unspoken increasingly gives rise to a disturbing sense of an unknown threat. This threat becomes especially clear in Ginny's conversation with Mary Livingstone, a friend of her mother's. Mary's utterance that "kids on farms should be made to face facts early on" triggers a train of thought:

> Had I faced all the facts? It seemed like I had, but actually, you never know, just by remembering, how many facts there were to have faced. Your own endurance might be a pleasant fiction allowed you by others who've really faced the facts. The eerie feeling this thought gave me made me shiver in the hot wind. (90)

Ginny suddenly perceives her complacency about the past as possibly founded on shaky ground. Her fear that her version of the past might be fractured or distorted becomes even stronger when Mary tells her that her mother was "afraid" for her when she died, much more so than for her two sisters (91). Mary also hints at something concerning Ginny that especially worried her mother, but she refrains from telling her. Creating dramatic suspense, this scene of near-revelation increases Ginny's feeling that she lacks full knowledge of her past. Her pervasive sense of "imminent disaster" (143) illustrates how strongly she, in spite of her amnesia, feels the force of the ruptures and traumas hidden behind the orderly façade of family life.

Ginny's uncertain sense of threat increasingly centres on her father. As part of her growing attention to the invisible and hidden, Ginny slowly begins to examine and question her relationship with her father. She remarks self-critically that she has never found what she considers "the optimum distance for seeing one's father" (20), and, later on, begins to analyse the dynamic between them more closely: "I

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memories, including "imagistic memory, body memory, feeling memory and acting-out memory" (105).

feel like there's treacherous undercurrents all the time. I think I'm standing on solid ground, but then I discover that there's something underneath it, shifting from place to place. There's always some mystery" (104). These "treacherous undercurrents" point to Ginny's childhood trauma, which she can neither name nor remember at this point. The trauma that has long been erased from conscious memory manifests itself as a haunting presence and through enigmatic symptoms whose source Ginny cannot identify. These psychological dynamics also manifest during a power struggle between Ginny and her father, triggered by his assertion that a proper breakfast must always include eggs. Yielding to her father's wishes, Ginny runs for the missing eggs. Even more than her submissiveness, her negative perception of her body is revealing:

> The whole way I was conscious of my body – graceless and hurrying, unfit, panting, ridiculous in its very femininity. It seemed like my father could just look out of his big front window and see me naked, chest heaving, breasts, thighs, and buttocks jiggling, dignity irretrievable. (115)

Ginny's feeling of physical awkwardness and vulnerability under her father's piercing gaze is a symptom of her submerged sexual trauma. Her sense of nakedness points to earlier experiences, when her father violated her physical integrity. However, the text makes clear that Ginny does not grasp the implications of her feelings, implying that during her amnesia, it is only her *body* that remembers the abuse. Through recurring feelings of shame and physical awkwardness, her body betrays the secret of abuse: "My body told me that my shame was a fact awaiting [...] discovery" (295).

The final revelation of Ginny's traumatic past happens in two stages. First, her sister Rose confronts her with the shattering idea that their father abused them. Ginny's immediate reaction is a mixture of resolute disbelief and profound confusion; she feels as if she "had been shaken to a jelly" (192). The subsequent section of the novel emphasizes Ginny's persistent denial and her simultaneous fear that Rose might be telling the truth. The text conveys her overwhelming uncertainty through alternating linguistic markers of inclusion and exclusion, of identification and distancing: "The psychiatrist would of course take our side, Rose's side, that is. [...] he would sit in the middle, between Daddy and us, and he would phrase our, Rose's accusations perfectly" (207). These shifts between "our" and "Rose's" illustrate how Ginny's oscillates between identifying with the role of the sympathetic sister and the position of the fellow victim, highlighting her struggle to bear the idea that she was a victim of sexual abuse.

Soon afterwards, however, when Ginny lies down on the bed in her old bedroom, she is assailed by a vivid flashback of a moment of incestuous abuse:

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)

In psychoanalytic terms, this passage depicts the "return of the repressed," a moment of profound shock, and Ginny describes how her "whole body was shaking and moans flowed out of [her] mouth" (228). After the initial shock, she fears that more memories will return, so she intuitively tries to block the process of memory recovery. This crucial section of the novel implies that Ginny knows immediately that she has "found the past" (228); the question of whether or not this memory is true does not arise for her. Instead, her primary worry is how other unearthed memories will affect her life:

Behind that one image bulked others, mysterious bulging items in a dark sack, unseen as yet, but felt. I feared them. I feared how I would have to store them in my brain, plastic explosives or radioactive wastes that would mutate or even wipe out everything else in there. (229)

The striking metaphor of returning memories as "plastic explosives or radioactive wastes" conveys the extent of Ginny's fear. She imagines that she is powerless to control the damage these memories will cause. Indeed, the image of these memories taking possession of her mind expresses her fear of losing her whole identity to her traumatic past. Given that feminist discourses of the time repeatedly highlighted the empowering potential of recovering memories of childhood trauma,[15] it is significant that Smiley calls attention to the threatening and destabilizing dimensions of memory recovery.

In the remainder of the novel, Ginny recovers a few more memories, yet the process of remembering remains incomplete: "What I remembered of Daddy did not get into a full figure, but always remained fragments of sound and smell and presence" (280). Highlighting the special nature of trauma memories, especially their sensory, fractured, and elusive qualities, the novel echoes concerns of the False Memory Debate, including concerns with the complexity and potential unreliability of recovered trauma memories. The main concern within Smiley's drama of memory, however, is the question of how individual trauma victims cope with recovered memories, how memories affect a victim's identity and sense of self, her

15 Herman describes the interrelations between the recovery of trauma memories and the psychology of recovery as follows: "When survivors recognize the origins of their psychological difficulties in an abusive childhood environment, they no longer need attribute them to an inherent defect in the self. Thus the way is opened to the creation of a new meaning in experience and a new, unstigmatized identity" (*Recovery* 127).

relation to the present and past, but also her relation to others who are crucially involved in that past. *A Thousand Acres* focuses on the significance and impact of missing and recovered memories. Implying that both repression and remembering can be severely destabilizing, the novel, in the words of Marina Leslie, suggests that "[f]orgetting is a kind of death, but then so also is remembering" (48).

STRUGGLING WITH THE UNSPEAKABILITY OF INCEST

A Thousand Acres not only investigates the psychology of remembering trauma but also foregrounds the intricate – and dramatic – results of choosing between silence and disclosure, secrecy and exposure, exploring what it means for a trauma victim to keep her secret or reveal it to her family and community. The narrator Ginny's attitude towards silence and disclosure is ambivalent, and it also undergoes significant shifts. Her immediate reaction to Rose's revelation of their traumatic past is a pressing desire to talk about these deeply disturbing claims, to share her feelings of uncertainty and disorientation with a sympathetic listener. She confides in Jess but immediately regrets her unrestrained openness: "I knew that I was somehow at his mercy, not because he had exerted power or claimed me, but because in spite of my shame I had exposed myself to him in every particular" (196). Despite this uneasiness, Ginny continues to indulge in fantasies of disclosure. She imagines how her father, Rose, and she would consult a psychiatrist and how the "psychiatrist would of course take [their] side, Rose's side, that is" (208). She relishes the vision of the psychiatrist professionally managing the scene of confrontation and keeping any form of aggression or violence under control. However, she soon abandons the idea of family therapy as "impossible." Instead, her fantasies of disclosure turn to another setting; she imagines confiding in her pastor: "My pastor's voice would be deep and hollow, a good place for me to stash my story. Even while I was telling it, the comfort of his murmuring would rise around it. And then he would tell me what to do – how to talk to Daddy and Rose and Ty" (209). Ginny finds comfort in the idea of discussing the past, a past she cannot yet accept as hers, with a sympathetic and professional listener. In other words, at the time when Ginny has been confronted with her trauma but does not yet have any conscious memories, she displays the urge typical of trauma victims to talk about the past, feeling both a pressing need for disclosure and a longing for an appropriate listener.

However, Ginny's attitude to disclosure and confrontation changes dramatically once she does remember the sexual abuse. Her immediate impulse after the flashback memory is a desire to release the unbearable burden of her traumatic past by verbally transmitting it to Rose. Rose is not with her, so the only outlet Ginny finds to vent her emotions is to scream, "becoming all mouth, all tongue, all vibration"

(229). At this moment, Ginny, who has lived for so long in a state of submissive voicelessness, becomes all voice, her whole body absorbed in the sound. Yet, after this liberating scream, which she describes as a "full out, throat-wrenching, unafraid-of-making-a-fuss-and-drawing-attention-to-myself sort of screaming" (229), she abruptly relapses into silence. The text conveys how entirely different the meanings of silence and disclosure become for Ginny once she can no longer perceive the story of incestuous abuse as belonging only to her sister: "[I]t was easier to be her sympathetic supporter than her fellow victim" (230). In other words, once this trauma history is part of her own life-story, the idea of disclosure and confrontation becomes exceedingly threatening. The shame Ginny feels in the encounter with Jess inevitably becomes her own shame; it is no longer a shame she can feel on behalf of – or displace on – her sister. And shame, as June Tangney and Ronda Dearing assert, functions as an obstacle to revelation and confession (19). Moreover, Ginny fears that confessing her recovered memory would lead to further unbearable revelations, and she begins to realize how much is at stake in confronting the traumatic past: "We had spent our life together practicing courtesy, putting the best face on things, harboring secrets. The thought of giving that up, right now, with my next remark, was terrifying" (260). Due to her anxiety about her life and family falling apart, Ginny refrains from telling anyone about her recovered memory, either a professional listener or Rose.

The novel adds further complexity to issues of silence and secrecy versus disclosure and confrontation by exploring what meanings these choices have for Ginny's sisters. For Rose, disclosing the incestuous abuse is part of her attempt to overcome a state of passive endurance and to strive for retribution and justice: "Weakened isn't enough. Destroyed isn't enough. He's got to repent and feel humiliation and regret. I won't be satisfied until he knows what *he* is" (216). For Rose, anger clearly overrides any sense of shame; for her, disclosure signifies uncompromising resistance and retaliation, while silence symbolizes weakness and cowardice. Thus, it is no coincidence that, throughout the text, Rose figures as the primary "betrayer" of the family secret: Rose tells her husband Pete; she confronts Ginny once she is aware of her amnesia; and she later tells her own daughters and some members of the community. For Caroline, who, her sisters assume, has been spared the trauma of sexual abuse, the practice of silence or disclosure has significantly different implications. The novel demonstrates how the silence surrounding Ginny and Rose's traumatic past functions as a barrier between them and Caroline: Caroline is unable to understand the source of the conflicts between her sisters and their father. Increasingly, she sides with Larry, even serving as his lawyer to defend him in court. Silence, then, destroys their sisterly relationship, and although Caroline does begin to feel that there must be dark secrets in her family, she shrinks from confronting those secrets. In an important passage in the final chapter of the novel, Caroline, seized by panic, shouts at Ginny:

You're going to tell me something terrible about Daddy, or Mommy, or Grandpa Cook or somebody. You're going to wreck my childhood for me. I can see it in your face. You're dying to do it, just like Rose was. She used to call me, but I wouldn't talk to her! (362)

This passage powerfully conveys how Caroline's urge to preserve her happy childhood memories and her untainted view of her parents overrides any desire to know the truth. One of the fatal consequences of Caroline's ignorance is that she remains convinced that her sisters "are just evil"; to the end, she fails to recognize her father's faults (363).

The novel suggests that Ginny's response includes elements of Rose's and Caroline's clashing attitudes. Throughout the text, Rose's dedication to disclosure is contrasted with Ginny's complex and shifting attitude, with her profound ambivalence towards breaking the familial reign of silence and lifting the veil of secrecy. According to David Brauner, "throughout the novel there is an unresolved tension within Ginny between the desire to penetrate the barriers of silence that surround so many of the key areas of her life, and the fear that to do so would cause an irreparable breach in the fabric not only of her social world, but of herself" (657). The text implies that Ginny's reluctance to expose her traumatic past is closely connected to her fear of unlocking memories that could be too traumatic to endure. She meditates on the benefits of a philosophy of silence: "One benefit, which I have lost, of a life where many things go unsaid, is that you don't have to remember things about yourself that are too bizarre to imagine. What was never given utterance eventually becomes too nebulous to recall" (305). Yet Ginny increasingly resents her husband Ty's avoidance of confrontation and his complicity in Larry's patriarchal regime. In this way, Ginny embodies a dilemma that many trauma victims confront, one that is especially powerful in cases of incest: "Most incest victims both long for and fear to reveal their secrets" (Herman, *Father-Daughter* 131). Ginny yearns for understanding and support but fears the devastating effects revelation could have for the entire family.

What the text shows, however, is that both remaining silent and talking about the traumatic past are inevitably damaging, causing severe ruptures within the family. All three sisters are, in different ways, confronted with this dilemma, but Ginny is depicted as experiencing it with particular intensity. Negotiating the unspeakability of incest, then, is one of the text's central concerns, as it is in most narratives of incest. In fact, according to a number of critics, the taboo of speaking about incest is even more powerful than the incest taboo itself. As Leslie asserts, "it is important to register and assess the force and duration of a taboo stronger by far than the incest taboo – that is, the cultural prohibition against its acknowledgement" (43). The history of discourses about sexual abuse within the family also reveals, as Herman's discussion in *Father-Daughter Incest* demonstrates, that the denial and silencing of

incest have a considerable legacy. Reflecting on the reasons for this pervasive unspeakability, Horvitz speculates:

> Perhaps the issue of sexual violation, especially incest, evokes feelings so profoundly disconcerting that no matter how progressively politicized or socially transformed the public consciousness is, when incestuous rape becomes part of public discourse, we can expect an almost immediate and very powerful backlash. There is something uniquely 'unspeakable' about incest, as if discussing its existence exacerbates it. (14)

In other words, incest inevitably provokes cycles of disclosure and denial, of speaking and silencing, of political discourses and counter-discourses – perhaps because it threatens the sanctity of the family.[16]

The unspeakability of incest also figures as a key theme in Shelley's *Mathilda*. The text repeatedly shows how Mathilda perceives herself as a social outcast, believing that her history of incestuous desire makes her "unfit for any intercourse" (55). She avoids talking to anyone as much as possible, until she meets the poet Woodville. Even with him, though, she persistently refuses to reveal her traumatic past. Speaking about incest is represented as a taboo that Mathilda never even considers breaking; she keeps her secret until she is close to death – and even then she reveals it only in writing. *A Thousand Acres* echoes *Mathilda* in its representation of shame as a barrier to speaking about incest. At the same time, Smiley's novel explores this theme further in several ways, especially by depicting and enacting attempts at breaking the taboo. In fact, at a metalevel, Smiley's novel is part of a recent discursive shift towards breaking the taboo against speaking about incest: "From the 1970s to the 1990s, incest was transformed from taboo to trauma, recoded through new narratives by and about women" (Harkins 9). While the novel textually overcomes this taboo through its extensive exploration of incest as trauma, at the diegetic level, it emphasizes the profound difficulty of actually breaking it. What is particularly striking is that Smiley does not grant Ginny a way of talking about her past, not even with Rose. Rose forces Ginny to admit that she remembers, but Ginny refuses to utter any more than a reluctant admission: "Well, yeah" (302). Ultimately, for Ginny, incest remains not unwritable but, to a large extent, unspeakable. In this respect, the text resonates with *Mathilda*: both texts feature autodiegetic narrators who are victims of incest and who turn to written rather than oral self-expression.

16 Herman also asserts that the incest taboo is deeply rooted in society: "[It] is commonly understood as a fundamental rule of social order. It is the primordial law, which defines the special place of human society within the natural and the supernatural world" (*Father-Daughter* 50).

Unlike Ginny, Rose repeatedly breaks the silence surrounding incest; through her, the novel foregrounds the pattern of reaction that Horvitz identifies, in which female attempts at disclosure are followed by counter-reactions of silencing or denial. The text enacts this pattern, which also played out during the False Memory Debate, within the context of the family and the community, that is, within the private and public spheres. The way Ginny's husband Ty reacts to Rose's disclosure exemplifies precisely the highly critical and even hostile reaction that, according to Herman, is typical of responses to women's attempts to speak about incest (*Father-Daughter* 9). Ty sides with his father-in-law, not with his wife and her sister, thereby supporting the ideological position of the patriarchal system. He condemns Rose for speaking publicly about their family secret: "Maybe it happened. I don't say it didn't. But it doesn't make me like her any more. I think people should keep private things private" (340). Hardly able to contain his anger, Ty blames the women rather than Larry, blames the female victims rather than the male perpetrator. Furthermore, Ginny suspects that Ty does not believe Rose's accusations, that he thinks she is telling a malicious lie. The novel here evokes the contentious question of how to distinguish between memories and fantasies, between truthful accusations and destructive falsehoods – a question that led to violent exchanges during the Memory Wars. The text highlights that the family and the community blame the sisters, especially Rose, for breaking the long-standing rule of keeping up appearances, for violating the reputation of the family, and for tampering with the sanctity of the patriarch Larry, the exemplary farmer. Within the community, as Leslie emphasizes, the view that Larry "was indeed more sinned against than sinning" prevails (46).[17]

In this context, the novel's representation of the trial and its aftermath is crucial, for even though Ginny and Rose win the trial, it is their reputation that suffers, not their father's. In its depiction of the trial (a trial about farm mismanagement, not sexual abuse), the text performs a significant mechanism of displacement. It is telling, though, that Caroline, the prosecutor, keeps digressing from farm management to familial conflicts, while Larry fantasizes about the alleged murder of his darling child Caroline by her two sisters. The court trial is thus almost as pointless and absurd as the mock trial depicted in the first quarto edition of *King Lear*, where a fool and a beggar act as judges, and two pieces of furniture stand in for Goneril and Regan (see *Lr.* 3.6.). Nevertheless, the court trial in *A Thousand Acres* is significant because it calls attention to the irreparable ruptures that result when family relationships are subjected to legal discourses – which might be an indirect reference to the numerous family trials that occurred during the Memory Wars. As Ginny bitterly

17 The lines from *King Lear* that Leslie evokes here read as follows: "[…] I am a man / More sinned against than sinning" (*Lr.* 3.2.57-58). This utterance is one of Lear's many laments about filial ingratitude.

remarks: "One thing was surely true about going to court. It had marvellously divided us from each other and from our old lives. There could be no reconciliation now" (326). Smiley has Ginny realize that winning the trial is far from satisfying. Even more importantly, the novel implicitly points to a different kind of trial: "[T]he important trial in *A Thousand Acres* is not Larry's claim of corporate mismanagement or abuse, but Ginny and Rose's claim of sexual abuse," as Susan Ayres stresses, noting that Smiley explicitly voiced the idea of functioning as the "lawyer" for the two elder daughters through her novel (29).[18] *A Thousand Acres* implies that this trial – about sexual abuse rather than farm mismanagement – is far more difficult, perhaps even impossible, for the daughters to win. In this way, the novel takes up some of the issues explored in *The Wrongs of Woman*; like Wollstonecraft's novel, it points to the difficulty of advocating for women's concerns and rights within a legal system firmly inscribed with patriarchal values and ideas. Also, by displacing the scene of familial and legal confrontation onto a surrogate issue, the farm, the text indirectly reinforces the persistence of the unspeakability of incest.

TOWARDS A RECOGNITION OF POLLUTION

The text's representation of incest as being persistently unspeakable for Ginny is especially significant given that *A Thousand Acres* enacts her process of finding her own voice. She starts out as a narrator with a "self-minimizing style," as Strehle puts it (219), as a narrator who "hides herself in language that is purposefully simple, bare, and empty of value judgments" (220). In terms of narrative style, Ginny differs fundamentally from Shelley's Mathilda, who melodramatically exposes her feelings and, like Godwin's Mandeville, indulges in the detailed revelation of her most private emotions. Ginny's narrative style never approaches such a level of emotionality and self-absorption, but over the course of the novel, she does overcome her initial position as an uncritical mediator of their long-established family history and develop her own voice. The narrative realism that Smiley has Ginny use in the first part of the novel is deceptively plain and straightforward; as the narrative progresses, the text performs her process of finding a voice in a self-reflexive way

18 In "Shakespeare in Iceland," Smiley writes: "As the lawyer for Goneril and Regan, I proposed a different narrative of their motives and actions that cast doubts on the case Mr Shakespeare was making for his client, King Lear. I made Goneril my star witness, and she told her story with care. I made sure that, insofar as I was able to swing it, she was an appealing witness as well – cautious, judicious, ambivalent, straightforward" (172).

that increasingly subverts the conventions of traditional realism. As Strehle asserts, "[b]y the end, Smiley's text shatters its own form" (212).

Textually enacting the interrelations between voice and agency, between speech and power, *A Thousand Acres* features a narrator who becomes increasingly self-confident and assertive over the course of her narration. This emphasis on the development of a female voice is a central aspect of the text's overall feminist trajectory. However, it is precisely by tracing the limitations of what is speakable in a given social context that the text avoids idealizing or sentimentalizing the narrator's process of finding her voice. In fact, the novel signals critically that while the process of finding one's voice has the potential to be liberating and empowering, this potential may be significantly curtailed if one does not find an appropriate audience. *A Thousand Acres* implies that although Ginny finds her voice, her voice fails in relation to her traumatic past, at least in part because the patriarchal farming community does not provide an audience for her tale of incestuous abuse. Yet in spite of its emphasis on the unspeakability of incest, the text does depict voice and agency as closely related to Ginny's changing attitude to her traumatic past. The novel implies that it is Ginny's growing understanding of abuse as part of systemic structures (i.e., her increasing feminist awareness) that gives her the courage to speak up for herself – not regarding the abuse itself, but in general. Hence, *A Thousand Acres* suggests that an understanding of traumatic abuse not only in its personal and familial context but also in the socio-political context of the community is essential for a trauma victim's self-development.

The novel represents Ginny's increasing awareness of the systemic contexts of her abuse through the recurrent and multi-layered theme of pollution, especially the polluted body, a recurrent topos in the context of incestuous abuse. The comparison to Shelley's *Mathilda* is revealing in this context. Even though incest only happens at the level of words and imagination, Mathilda feels profoundly polluted in both body and mind by her father's revelation of his incestuous desires. In contrast to *Mathilda*, where incestuous feelings are associated with passion and romantic love, albeit an "unnatural" form of love (28), *A Thousand Acres* shifts the emphasis from the verbal and mental to the physical and from a rhetoric of emotions and passions to one of possession and brutal exploitation. In *Mathilda*, the text's ambiguous representation of the reciprocity of the incestuous attachment creates a space in which incest is connected to elements of romantic fantasies and erotic desires, resonating with Harkins's claim that "precisely because it establishes regulatory norms, the concept of incest can produce a pleasurable frisson" (xii). However, in Smiley's novel, incest is stripped of "pleasurable frisson" and rooted firmly in a bleak reality of physical violation and the abuse of power. It is not surprising, then, that *A Thousand Acres* examines the incest victim's highly problematic relationship to her body even further than Shelley's novella.

Once Ginny begins to analyse her patterns of reaction in the light of her traumatic past, she sees a direct connection between her experiences of sexual abuse and her disturbed sense of her body. She realizes that her recovered memories make the thought of sexual intercourse unbearable (256), examining her general inability to live her sexuality: she recalls how frantically she cleaned her entire body before her wedding night and reflects on the many "little rituals" that have come to determine her sexual life, such as her particular needs regarding the amount of light, the time of day, her clothing, and so forth (279). During her married life, her body, as Ginny emphasizes, has not been something to look at or talk about; it has increasingly become a *Fremdkörper*, a "foreign body," alienated from herself and defying both language and vision. Ginny explicitly traces the roots of this attitude back to her experiences of incest: "One thing Daddy took from me when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my body" (280). The narrative highlights Ginny's gradual recognition that trauma has permanently contaminated her attitude towards her body and her sexuality. She comes to understand why her feelings of sexual attraction for Jess produce such a complex mingling of "[d]esire, shame, and fear," why sexual desire makes her feel like a "freak," like a "three-legged woman" (262).

The abuse victim's problematic relationship with her body and sexuality is a common theme in contemporary novels dealing with incest and sexual abuse.[19] *A Thousand Acres*, however, adds further layers to the theme of pollution, making it a leitmotif that reaches beyond the typical association between incest and the victim's sense of being polluted, as noted by psychologists Nichole Fairbrother and S. Rachman. Figuring sexual abuse as one source of contamination, Smiley's novel also literalizes the motif of pollution by emphasizing the damaging effect of poisonous farm chemicals. Through Jess, who has a passion for organic farming, Ginny learns that her five miscarriages were probably caused by farm chemicals in the well water. In addition, although Rose has two children, like several of her female ancestors, she suffers from cancer, which is similarly represented as an effect of ecologically irresponsible, exploitative, and unsustainable farming practices. In fact, the novel draws an extensive analogy between male abuse of the female body and the farmer's abuse of the land, an analogy that has led to several ecofeminist readings of the novel.[20] The female body and the farmland are represented as male

19 Novels to mention here include Dorothy Nelson's *In Night's City*, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, and Camilla Gibb's *Mouthing the Words*. In Gibb's novel, for example, the autodiegetic narrator resolves "never to be a woman" and to be "thin and little and rigid as a twig" instead (86); her ensuing anorexia nervosa is a symptom of her more general rejection of her body, sexuality, and womanhood.

20 See for example Mathieson's "The Polluted Quarry" and Almila Ozdek's "Coming out of the Amnesia."

property that is used and abused freely by the patriarchal father/farmer, while the community quietly tolerates these abuses. Hence, the female protagonists Ginny and Rose are victims of pollution in a double way: their bodies are contaminated figuratively by sexual abuse and literally by poisoned soil and water. *A Thousand Acres*, thus, critically exposes the dark secrets behind the reassuring narratives of progress and economic success that the men in the farming community propagate.

Furthermore, Smiley has Ginny become aware that these experiences of pollution and abuse affect a larger collective of women. Like Maria in *The Wrongs of Woman*, Ginny begins to develop a feminist consciousness through her analysis of trauma, realizing that the personal may have powerful political implications. Her growing awareness manifests itself in a heated discussion with Ty about farming practices, when Ginny angrily insists on the damaging effects of keeping "private" experiences such as miscarriages a secret:

> Jess said to me that the reason for the miscarriages is probably in the well water. Runoff in the well water. He says people have known about it for years! We never even asked about anything like that, or looked into a book, or even told people we'd had miscarriages. We kept it all a secret! What if there are women all over the country who've had lots of miscarriages, and if they just compared notes – but God forbid we should talk about it! (259)

Here, Smiley has Ginny express a powerful criticism of the traditional values of silence and secrecy. In her last conversation with Ty, which takes place after their separation, Ginny speaks up even more forcefully – and with a political and polemical vigour that contrasts sharply with her initial submissiveness:

> "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. I see getting others to pay then price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was. Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own?" Ty winced. "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." (342-43)

This passage is significant because it is the one moment in the text when Ginny breaks the taboo against talking about incest and speaks with a degree of self-assertiveness that shocks Ty. Ginny here functions as the mouthpiece for the text's feminist politics, explicitly connecting the abuse of the female body and of the land practised within the patriarchal ideological system of the farming community. In a de-doxifying gesture (to return to Hutcheon's terminology), the narrator exposes the "grand history" propagated by the men as a self-serving construction intended to hide the exploitative violence that sustains it.

The novel's analogy between abuse of the female body and abuse of the land signals its ecofeminist potential. However, Greg Garrard points out that certain kinds of ecofeminism may seem politically problematic: ecofeminism can become "questionable in terms of its feminism" if it connects the female to the land in ways that risk perpetuating patriarchal stereotypes (24). According to Garrard, an essentialist vein of ecofeminism runs the risk of "present[ing] us with a mirror-image of patriarchal constructions of femininity that is just as limited or limiting" (24). I argue, though, that Smiley's novel departs from a problematically essentializing ecofeminist perspective in that it complicates a straightforward analogy between the abused female body and the abused land. First, the novel challenges conventional patriarchal associations of the female body with nature by emphasizing repeatedly how the farmland was shaped by Larry's forefathers, who first had to drain it (14). Ginny and her sisters, then, are part of a generation of women living on "engineered" land rather than in "nature." Moreover, the novel does not only depict women as suffering from the abuse of the land: Harold, who is blinded by farm chemicals, represents a male victim of the polluted land and is, thus, an important counterpart to the female victims of pollution. Hence, the novel may be said to represent an ecofeminist vision without essentialising gender, complicating the parallel between the female body and the land in several ways. It is precisely through these de-essentialist elements that the novel's de-doxifying gestures, represented in its discourse on pollution, seem more persuasive and powerful from a feminist perspective.

A Thousand Acres adds even further layers to the theme of pollution, suggesting that the family as an institution is also polluted, particularly through dysfunctional and destructive familial structures and interpersonal dynamics. The text implies that Ginny recognizes some of these structures, while remaining caught up in others. One issue that Ginny increasingly comes to understand is her father's problematic position in the family. From the beginning, she represents him as a domineering figure who causes everything around him to fade into the background or dissolve into nothingness: "[I]n my recollections, Daddy's presence in any scene had the effect of dimming the surroundings" (48). Through reflections on her childhood, Ginny eventually realizes that his overarching presence has eclipsed her memories of her mother. Furthermore, her father was to her *the* incarnation of the father and the farmer, and she regarded him with near-religious awe: "In my youthful estimation, Laurence Cook defined both categories. To really believe that others even existed in either category was to break the First Commandment" (19). This reference to the Ten Commandments is one of a number of religious allusions that Smiley has Ginny use to characterize her father. Larry Cook is described as a God-like father

figure whose desires and commands must be obeyed under any circumstances.[21] However, in the course of the narrative, Ginny becomes increasingly critical of her father's domineering position and begins to understand that her mother's early death exacerbated her problematic relationship with her father: "My mother died before she could present him to us as only a man, with habits and quirks and preferences, before she could diminish him in our eyes enough for us to understand him" (20). In other words, Ginny speculates that had her mother lived longer, she might have helped her find "the optimum distance for seeing [her] father" (20). The novel, then, traces Ginny's struggle to renegotiate that distance and, simultaneously, reconnect with her memories of her mother.[22]

Through the combination of a domineering father and an absent mother, *A Thousand Acres* evokes a type of family structure that often appears in connection with father-daughter incest. Drawing on material ranging from psychological studies to literary representations, Herman concludes that "the theme of maternal absence, in one form or another, is always found in the background of the incest romance" (*Father-Daughter* 44). The mother's absence increases the daughter's vulnerability, making her more dependent on the father, which can result in the formation of unhealthy father-daughter attachments. As discussed in Chapter Four, this type of familial constellation is explored and problematized in several of Shelley's trauma narratives. In particular, *Mathilda* suggests that a daughter can become a substitute for her mother in her father's eyes. When Mathilda's father asks her to start reading to him exactly where her mother had left off, Mathilda symbolically occupies her mother's position as her father's intimate companion. *A Thousand Acres* stresses that Larry's nightly visits to his daughters began shortly after his wife's death, which implies that a similar mechanism of replacement is at work, though one involving possession not passion. Rose forcefully expresses to Ginny the idea that, after their mother's death, Larry considered it his right to replace his wife with his daughters, the sexual objects most easily available to him: "You were as much his as I was. There was no reason for him to assert his possession of me more than his possession of you. We were just his, to do with as he pleased, like the

21 In this context, Herman's discussion of how family structures with domineering fathers affect the prevalence of father-daughter sexual abuse is interesting: "The greater the domination of the father, and the more the caretaking is relegated to the mother, the greater the likelihood of father-daughter incest. The more democratic the family and the less rigid the sexual division of labor, the less likely that the father will abuse their daughters" (*Father-Daughter* 63).

22 Carden also emphasizes Ginny's search for her mother. She argues that Ginny attempts to construct alternative versions of the past by engaging with unknown and imagined sides of her mother: "These 'answers', however, reside not in the mother she knew, but in the possibilities she invests in a kind of mother-under-the-mother" (194).

pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops" (191). Rose here claims that incestuous abuse is symptomatic of highly problematic patriarchal structures of ownership, and she relentlessly forces Ginny to examine family structures more critically. Ginny's final conversation with Ty, where she maintains that Larry "had lessons" that "were part of the package" (343), demonstrates that, by the end, Ginny has internalized Rose's critical view of her father's abuse and its familial and systemic contexts.

Thus, the narrative traces the emergence of Ginny's critical awareness of the kind of pollution that permeates her family. The novel, moreover, sets up the motif of cleaning as the counterpoint to pollution. The first time Ginny refers to cleaning, she proudly evokes it as an inherent element of her daily housework: "[M]ostly farm women are proud of the fact that they can keep the house looking as though the farm stays outside" (120). Yet, in the course of the narrative, Ginny begins to question her dedication to cleaning and comes to think of it as an obsession: "How did we get so well trained, Rose and I, that we never missed a corner, never left a cleaning job undone" (227). She eventually realizes that this obsession is connected to their familial custom of hiding conflicts behind a neat façade – and to the related habit of accepting this seemingly perfect façade as truth. Ginny's careful cleaning at a moment of crisis, her feeling that it was "the one thing [she] still knew how to do" (253), and Rose's frantic urge to clean the house after her husband's suicide, vacuuming the living-room at 2a.m. (298), demonstrate to what extent cleaning functions as a strategy for re-establishing order after things have fallen apart. It is ironic, however, that just as Ginny begins to question their cleaning habits, their lawyer encourages the sisters to push their dedication to neat surfaces even further, asserting that "appearances are everything with a clause like this" (284). It is telling that Ginny does not struggle with this task; rather, she revels in it: "I was so remarkably comfortable with the discipline of making a good appearance! It was like going back to school or church after a long absence. It had ritual and measure" (285). In spite of her emerging critical awareness, Ginny finds it difficult to overcome deeply internalized habits and beliefs.

The novel suggests, moreover, that there are some familial structures that Ginny fails to recognize and remains entangled in, notably, the structures of sibling rivalry and jealousy. Ginny admits that she is deeply jealous of Rose because of her two daughters, but she fails to see that, from early on, her father fostered a sense of rivalry among the sisters. In blatant displays of favouritism, Larry always made his two elder daughters feel that Caroline was his darling child. Moreover, it is especially striking that the seed of jealousy was nurtured, if not planted, by incestuous abuse. In a rather disturbing passage, Rose tells Ginny how incest made her feel special:

I was flattered, too. I thought that he'd picked me, me, to be his favourite, not you, not her. On the surface, I thought it was okay, that it must be okay if he said it was, 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 it was special. He said he loved me. (190)

The text here calls attention to Larry's manipulative rhetoric of favouritism and his shameless abuse of a child's vulnerability and credulity, signalling how he distorted Rose's perception of their sexual encounters so that the incest appeared to her like a gift rather than an injury. Larry's rhetoric incorporates a denial of responsibility and damage that, according to Herman, is a common claim of or about victimizing fathers in different types of literature: "[F]irst, he did no harm, and second, he is not to blame" (*Father-Daughter* 22). The text implies that Larry manipulated Rose precisely by denying any harm and by assigning her the role not of the *seductive* daughter – another common theme in the context of incest – but of the *seducible* daughter, who gave her active consent to their sexual encounters. The novel thus evokes "the myth of the willing victim of interpersonal violence," a common trope in discourses on trauma and gender, according to Laura Brown (105). An even more powerful reversal of responsibility is at work in the confrontation between Larry and Ginny during the stormy night, when he calls her a "whore," a "slut," and a "bitch" (181), accusing her of a transgressive sexuality in the – maybe even unconscious – attempt to gloss over the dark nature of his own sexuality. In calling Ginny a "*barren* whore" and a "*dried-up* whore bitch" (181, emphasis added), Larry reverses responsibility in further ways. His use of agricultural terms to condemn her for her inability to bear children is darkly ironic: he is, in fact, responsible for Ginny's infertility through his use of farm chemicals. While Larry seems unaware of the denial of responsibility his swearing performs, he once again tries to break the bond between the sisters, here symbolized by their holding hands while confronting him. Perceiving this gesture of sisterly solidarity as a threat, Larry tries to play the sisters off one another:[23] "Now he sounded almost conciliatory, as if he could divide us and conquer us" (182). Larry manipulates his daughters in two ways, imposing responsibility for his transgressions on them and repeatedly pushing them towards rivalry.

A Thousand Acres signals that the narrator Ginny, in spite of her increasingly critical attitude towards her father and the community, largely remains blind to and caught up in her father's manipulations. One blind spot in Ginny's perception also concerns the extent to which their familial relationships are determined – and con-

23 The way in which Larry tries to play Ginny and Rose off against each other repeats a central pattern of reaction that Lear displays towards Goneril and Regan. Lear repeatedly tries to side with one of them against the other, depending on his momentary judgement of who likes him more: "[…] Oh Regan, she hath tied / Sharp-toothed unkindness, like a vulture here – I can scarce speak to thee – thou'lt not believe / With how depraved a quality – oh Regan!" (*Lr.* 2.4.126-29).

taminated – by issues of property, possession, and power. As Anna Lindhé rightly stresses, the novel shows how "transfer of property and power penetrates and encroaches upon the firmest family relationships and the most solid loyalties" (58). Of vital importance in this context is Larry's division and handing over of the farm to his daughters, a plan that Ginny immediately accepts, with some scepticism, but without perceiving its deeper meaning. Larry's decision to pass on his property to his daughters is depicted as just as bizarre and enigmatic as Lear's division of his kingdom. Yet the way Lear introduces his plan, forcing his daughters to proclaim their love for him publically, is revealing: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most, / That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge?" (*Lr.* 1.1.46-47). Through this question, Lear not only creates rivalry, but he also problematically fuses public issues of power and possession with private ones of filial love and duty. Larry phrases his corresponding question in a less obviously charged way: "What do you think?" (19). Nevertheless, the text signals that Larry's seemingly innocent question masks what is really at stake – power. As Tore Høgås argues, "by giving a gift, you take control over the recipient. It is a form of economic power-assertion" (66). Larry's "gift," then, should be read as a "poisoned gift" that imposes a "debt of filial duty" on his daughters (67).[24] In handing over the farm, Larry forces upon his daughters a gift that is, like Lear's gift to his daughters, an assertion of power and a demand for love; as such, it is metonymically connected to the incestuous abuse. Ginny, however, remains largely unaware of these implications. While she in many ways comes to understand the pollution that she faces at various levels of her life – the double pollution of her body through sexual abuse and farm chemicals as well as polluted family relations – she remains entangled in a complex web where issues of property and duty, love and abuse are entwined in intricate and destructive ways. Thus, while *A Thousand Acres* follows a feminist trajectory by evoking the empowering and liberating potential of self-recognition and of gaining critical insights into the dynamics of family and community, the novel refrains from idealizing these processes of female growth. The text's feminist narrative is, in fact, undercut by a darker vision.

24 Høgås pushes his reading of Larry's gift even further: "Larry's gift was not only poisoned, it was also an empty gift, designed to display his power. Obviously, it is meaningless to give one part of one's property (the farm) to another part of one's property (his daughters). Ultimately, then, the gift Larry presented to his daughters was a gift to himself – a narcissistic gesture" (71). While Høgås's reading of the gift as a "narcissistic gesture" is convincing, the narrative reveals that the gift is not as "meaningless" as Larry intended it. Because his daughters and sons-in-law interpret the gift literally, the "poisoned gift" backfires: As Ozdek stresses, "his realization that he is no longer the owner completely destroys his sense of being, and he gradually goes mad" (67).

THE SISTERS' TRAGEDY

A Thousand Acres, then, is characterized by two opposing movements. On the one hand, the novel evokes ideas of female development and resistance through the protagonist-narrator's process of overcoming a double amnesia: first, she recovers her trauma memories and overcomes her personal amnesia; second, she becomes aware of and tries to defeat the collective amnesia of women living within patriarchal grand narratives.[25] Even if her understanding of interpersonal and systemic structures remains incomplete, Ginny's narrative suggests a movement of growth and progress. On the other hand, the narrative follows a seemingly inevitable downward spiral, depicting the disintegration of the family and the decline of the farm.[26] Within this downward movement, the text focuses especially on the daughter's tragedy. As Barbara Sheldon remarks, each book of the novel "marks a further step in Ginny's alienation from her family and in her personal growth" (62). In other words, Ginny's process of finding her voice, of gaining self-knowledge and a critical awareness, comes at a dramatically – even tragically – high cost: in the end, she loses almost everything important to her. Thus, while the novel participates in late-twentieth-century discourses on women's domestic trauma and female self-narration, it "ferociously resist[s] a sentimental portrayal of female empowerment through the discovery of the female voice" (Leslie 35). Any feminist optimism about the beneficial aspects of confronting trauma is here undercut by elements of tragedy.

One central tragic element is the dramatic turn in Ginny and Rose's relationship in Book Five, which reveals that the bond between the two sisters – and fellow trauma victims – is not strong enough to withstand the destructive power of familial disruptions and trauma. The concrete cause for the sisters' estrangement lies in rivalry and jealousy. In another textual echo of *King Lear*, Book Five uncovers Rose's betrayal of her sister: Rose confesses that she had an affair with Jess, the Edmund figure of the novel, knowing that Ginny had had sexual intercourse with

25 On the idea of a collective amnesia, see also Carden: "Smiley enters the contentious debates swirling around 'repressed memory' by suggesting that the gender/power arrangements embedded in cultural structures force corresponding amnesias" (188).

26 Amy Levin stresses that this simultaneous decline of the family and the farm should be seen in connection with popular discourses of the 1980s: "[T]he vitality of the Midwestern farm belt was associated with and perceived as a reflection of the condition of the American family. Any threat to the farm represented a potential assault on the family, as well as on the moral values in which the family was grounded" (23). From a historical point of view, the novel's setting (1979), as Alter emphasizes, also evokes the context of the American farm crisis (153).

him first. It is the explanation Rose gives for her betrayal that is particularly disturbing: Rose admits that all her sexual relationships, ranging from early sexual adventures to her marriage with Pete to the affair with Jess, have been determined by her compulsion to "erase Daddy," that is, to expunge the memories of incest (298): "I always thought one of them would have to supersede Daddy eventually" (299). The second reason Rose mentions is just as unsettling. She confesses that she wanted Jess because she knew how much Jess liked Ginny (303). Thus, Smiley has Rose display a striking degree of selfish and jealous possessiveness. For Ginny, the discovery of Rose's betrayal seems as traumatic as the revelation of incestuous abuse, and her betrayal is the reason why Ginny resolves to kill her sister. The text highlights that for Ginny, this betrayal constitutes an emotional abuse that shatters the foundations of their relationship: "The future seemed to clamp down into something writhing and fluid, and at the centre of it, the most changed thing of all, was Rose herself" (308). Ginny suffers from a sense of unbearable hurt and irreparable loss, and her agony makes her see only one option: revenge. She records in detail her careful research into poisonous plants and then meticulously pursues her scheme of killing Rose with homemade sausages, rendered deadly by water hemlock. In another (particularly literal) variation on the theme of the "poisoned gift," Ginny presents her sausages to Rose as a special surprise and a gesture of sisterly affection (313), then waits for Rose's death. The callousness with which Ginny pursues her scheme is at least as disturbing as Rose's cold-hearted, selfish betrayal. In this moment, Smiley's female protagonists come closest to resembling the "pelican daughters" of Shakespeare's tragedy (*Lr.* 3.4.70).

At this point, a number of crucial questions arise. On the one hand, the novel's decentring strategies suggest that the role of the tragic hero is displaced onto the daughters, who could be read not only as trauma victims in a patriarchal context but also as tragic heroines. But on the other hand, Book Five aligns them with their Shakespearean counterparts, who are figures of evil, not tragic heroines. The two roles are difficult to reconcile. Do the flaws that Smiley has her female protagonists display reach too deep to qualify as the "tragic flaws" of tragic figures? To what extent does our knowledge of the roots of their flaws affect our judgment of their actions? Do readers still sympathize with the traumatized autodiegetic narrator once she becomes a scheming would-be murderer? *A Thousand Acres* encourages us to reflect on the complex interrelations between trauma and the tragic. Given how difficult it is to define tragedy and the idea of the tragic,[27] a detailed examination of these interrelations on a broader scale lies beyond the scope of this chapter. How-

27 The first chapter of Eagleton's study *Sweet Violence*, which has the telling title "A Theory in Ruins," is an impressive testimony to the difficulty of defining the tragic: Eagleton evokes numerous definitions and theorizations of the tragic, only to expose the weaknesses, paradoxes, or even absurdities of each of them.

ever, investigating the specific ways in which Smiley's text negotiates the relationship between trauma and the tragic is crucial for an understanding of this trauma novel.

First of all, it is important to note that the roots of the sisters' flaws, that is, their rivalry and jealousy, can be traced back to their childhood sexual traumas. Hence, what is at play is not pure evil, as it seems to be with Goneril and Regan, but a complex entanglement of victimization and cycles of hurt, which raises intricate questions about responsibility and guilt. Smiley's female protagonists are not simply embodiments of evil, nor are they simply victims; they unite elements of victimhood and resistance, which is, according to Terry Eagleton, characteristic of tragic figures: "Tragedy must be more than mere victimage; it must involve a courageous resistance to one's fate, of the kind we witness in the great tragic works of art" (*Sweet Violence* 15). While this rather circular definition exemplifies the difficulty of pinning down the meaning of tragedy, it nevertheless points to a dimension of the tragic that I regard as pivotal to Smiley's novel: a combination of intense suffering, the struggle to resist, and an inevitable downfall.[28]

Unlike Lear, Smiley's Lear figure, Larry Cook, does not undergo the struggle of self-confrontation typical of a tragic hero; instead, he acts firmly within a specific ideological system and remains blind to the workings of that system and the consequences of his actions.[29] It is Ginny who undertakes the hero's struggle for understanding and resistance. However, despite her increasing knowledge and self-knowledge, she fails to prevent the familial disaster that she fearfully anticipates throughout the text. The novel's tragic vision, then, hinges on its depiction of the protagonist's downfall as doomed to happen, even when she is able to analyse, recognize, and name many of the causes of her suffering. The novel's conceptualization of the tragic resonates with a modern idea of the tragic as discussed, for exam-

28 It should here be mentioned that Eagleton is sceptical about the compatibility of tragedy and the postmodern: "There is an ontological depth and high seriousness about the genre which grates on the postmodern sensibility, with its unbearable lightness of being" (*Sweet Violence* ix). However, Eagleton grants that it is only "*some* postmodernism" that is "rather too shallow for tragedy" (x, emphasis added), and this is certainly not the kind of postmodernism that Smiley's novel represents.

29 In *King Lear*, as is often noted, the tragic hero learns essential lessons through his madness; the storm makes him aware of the suffering of the "[p]oor naked wretches" (*Lr.* 3.4.28) and induces him to reflect on what constitutes the elemental human condition (see *Lr.* 3.4.91-97). While determining the extent of Lear's self-knowledge is complex – Stanley Cavell's reading in *Disowning Knowledge*, for example, problematizes the nature of Lear's self-recognition – it should be emphasized that *A Thousand Acres* precludes any discussion of self-recognition regarding Larry. The novel stresses that, unlike Lear's madness, Larry's only intensifies his delusions.

ple, by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle: "[T]here is a fundamental shift from a classical idea of tragedy as inevitable and beyond human control to the modern idea of a tragedy as something humanly engineered and happening in a world in which something could and should be done, for instance about sexual inequality, racism and so on" (72).[30] *A Thousand Acres* endorses the idea that tragedy emerges from non-transcendent contingencies. The disintegration of the Cook family and their farm is represented as "humanly engineered" – yet it entirely escapes the control of its human agents. The tragedy is, thus, not only the result of the protagonists' flaws but also the effect of a mismatch between characters and the system they inhabit, between the "tragic subject" and a "cultural milieu" (Drakakis and Liebler 9). The systemic forces of patriarchy are depicted as too persistently powerful. The tragedy that the text stages, especially through Ginny, is that in spite of her awareness of the disruptive forces at play within the patriarchal family that has victimized her, she fails to prevent those forces from gaining more power over her life. The tragic in Smiley's novel, then, works differently than in Shelley's *Mathilda*. While Mathilda embraces the idea of her life as a tragedy, stylizing herself as a tragic heroine, Ginny fights against the imminent tragedy of her life. Ginny's resistance makes her a more genuinely tragic figure than Mathilda, at least according to Eagleton's characterization of tragic heroes. While Shelley's novella expresses Mathilda's connection to tragedy through its excessive use of a rhetoric of tragedy that verges on the melodramatic, Smiley's novel conveys the idea of the tragic mainly through its dramatic structures, assigning Ginny the role of the tragic heroine at a metalevel, as if against her will.

Through Ginny's failure to rescue her relationship with Rose, *A Thousand Acres* implies that the contingencies in which the individual subject is enmeshed are sometimes too powerful to be countered or overcome. At this point, I want to return to the idea that, although the novel mainly focuses on Ginny's suffering, *A Thousand Acres* revolves around a daughter's tragedy but also around the tragedy of two sisters. Ginny repeatedly emphasizes how special her bond with Rose has always been, so it seems especially tragic that their struggle against the destructive impact of incestuous abuse and paternal domination eventually fails to unite them. The core of the sisters' tragedy, then, is that their father's desire to divide them materializes in their persistent jealousy and rivalry; Smiley grants Larry the power to irrevocably destroy the sisters' close relationship. In this way, the novel's tragic frame has a feminist slant. The text highlights the disturbing power of the father's

30 Referring to notions of the tragic as expressed by twentieth-century playwrights, notably Artaud and Brecht, John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler also argue that what is a stake here is that "the delight in tragedy is generated from another source, the danger of enslavement coming not from the gods but from the cultural and psychological constructions with which modern Western humanity has deluded itself" (6).

will and his words: not only is Larry's curse of sterility (an echo of Lear's) fulfilled, but so is his implicit curse against the sisters' relationship. The idea of a feminist notion of the tragic is also reinforced by the fact that the sisters turn against each other, while they, at the same time, miss the opportunity for a direct confrontation with Larry as well as with Caroline, who is still ignorant of the family's history of abuse. On her deathbed, Rose bitterly laments her failure to "get Daddy to know what he had done, or what it meant" (355), while Ginny, in her last encounter with Caroline on the farm, realizes she should tell her the truth but still refrains from doing so. Although Ginny fights for her own voice and struggles to gain the courage to speak up, in the final chapter of Book Six, she fails to break Larry's destructive reign of silence and secrecy and instead even perpetuates it. With poisoned sausages, which function as phallic symbols in the shape of "a man's thumb" (313), Ginny attempts to punish Rose for her selfish urge to "grab" things and claim them as her personal property (62) – a flaw that makes Rose strangely complicit in a patriarchal value system. The ending, however, suggests that also Ginny is still tragically held in thrall by the destructive power of her father's reign.

Yet this is not to say that the ending of the novel fully endorses a mode of the tragic; rather, I read the ending as a complex and deliberately ambiguous negotiation of the tragic. It is telling that the ending has provoked conflicting readings, ranging from claims that Smiley's novel ends in a more tragic way than *King Lear* to assertions that the novel's ending is far more hopeful.[31] One reason for these divergent interpretations is, perhaps, that *A Thousand Acres* has not one clear and contained ending but multiple endings. The ending of Book Five can be read as the ending of the novel's tragedy, in line with the five acts of a Shakespearean tragedy. Book Six depicts Ginny's "afterlife" – after she has left her husband, her family, and the farm – and may, simultaneously, be read as the "afterlife" of *King Lear*. With this section, the novel adds a sequel to the original plot, thus adding a second ending. Finally, the epilogue, featuring Ginny's reckoning with her family and her past, constitutes the third and last ending. Those critics who claim that the ending of the novel is less tragic and more hopeful than the ending of *King Lear* focus especially on Ginny's new life as a waitress. James Schiff, for example, argues that "Smiley's novel is not nearly as unforgiving as Shakespeare's *Lear*. In Smiley's

31 Compare, for example, Mathieson's claim that the "implied future Smiley depicts is, if anything, more bleak and less hopeful than the ending of *King Lear*" (129) or Brauner's assertion that "Smiley offers no consolation, no happy ending" (666) with Ty Kessel's reading of the novel's ending: "Even though she cannot become fully uncolonized, Ginny is, at the end, fully present, fully resistant. The ultimate proof of her victory is the retelling of her story through her eyes, in her voice. She has become, to use one of Heidegger's concepts, at-home in the not-at-home – in other words, comfortable in a completely different, new life" (244).

novel, Ginny is given a second chance, something that does not exist in tragedy" (380). Indeed, as Bennett and Royle assert, tragedy relentlessly expresses the idea that "we have to suffer, we are going to die, there is no justice and there is no afterlife" (106), while Book Six does depict Ginny's "afterlife" (a term the novel literally uses). In addition, in Book Six, Ginny finally breaks free of the haunting legacy of Goneril's story: unlike Goneril and unlike the great Shakespearean tragic heroes, Ginny survives. At this point, the question arises of whether Smiley's novel here departs from the mode of tragedy – perhaps to follow recurrent patterns of contemporary trauma novels, whose endings often represent processes of working through and recovery and gesture towards new beginnings. The specific nature of Ginny's "afterlife" hence needs to be examined more closely.

Ginny's life as a waitress constitutes a radical break with almost everything that used to be important to her. She refrains from keeping in touch with her husband and her family and makes human contacts of only the most superficial, shallow, and impersonal kind: small talk at a roadside restaurant. A similarly radical break also manifests itself in the stark contrast between her life on the farm and her life in an entirely urban environment, which lacks the rhythms of nature, the weather, and the seasons. The text constructs Ginny's afterlife as a monotonous existence, an existence lacking depth and emotion in every respect. Ginny takes refuge in a state of emotional and physical numbing reminiscent of Mathilda's withdrawal. For Mathilda, this refuge lies in solitude and nature; for Ginny, it lies in the anonymity of urban life. What they have in common, however, is the avoidance of emotional attachments and love. As Ginny writes, "[i]t is easier, and more seductive, to leave these doors closed" (369). For both protagonist-narrators, their sexual traumas function as lasting obstacles not only to romantic relationships but also to close relationships of any kind. This refusal of emotional depth, closeness, and love could be read as the female trauma victims' attempts at self-protection, at shielding themselves from any further emotional wounds. Emotional numbing, the texts suggest, may originate from the need for a sense (or for the illusion) of psychological invulnerability. The epilogue of Smiley's novel emphasizes numbing in several ways. As Leslie argues, "[a]lthough Ginny, no less than Caroline, finally achieves independence, her new life, with its anonymous eternal present – serving breakfast at a roadside restaurant – seems to be the numbing replication of the caretaking role she has always played" (47). It is also telling that Ginny mentions her father's and Rose's deaths (Rose dies from cancer, not from eating the poisoned sausages) only in passing and in a non-emotional way.[32] The sentence with which Ginny sums up her ac-

32 It is pertinent that Smiley includes Larry's and Rose's deaths in Book Six, that is, in the "afterlife" rather than in the core of the tragedy. Both the structural position and the representation of Larry's death continue the marginalization and de-tragedization of the father. Larry's death is represented in a decidedly undramatic, non-immediate way, with

count of her life, "Maybe another way of saying this is that I forgot I was still alive" (42), also expresses the pervasiveness of her sense of numbing. Thus, while Ginny does not die a physical death at the end of Book Five, she dies a symbolic, emotional death; her afterlife constitutes a kind of death-in-life that resembles the psychological state of Shelley's Mathilda. Yet, in chapter 42, Ginny implies that this life did turn out to "contain a future" (334): Rose's daughters Pam and Linda come to live with Ginny after Rose's death. In a tone of cautious optimism, the novel evokes the possibility that Ginny may eventually find a way out of her numbing afterlife into a new life.

The epilogue, moreover, continues the novel's complex and ambiguous negotiation of the tragic. For one, the epilogue foregrounds issues of self-recognition, implying that Ginny has reached a state of self-understanding that her father never did. Being able to critically reflect on her "dead young self" (370) and her attempted sororicide, Ginny displays the ability to confront the darkest aspects of her self. The novel here resonates with the theme of the monster within that recurs in Romantic trauma fiction. However, in sharp contrast to Godwin's Mandeville, who similarly represents the monstrous in connection with the desire for revenge and murder (unlike Shelley's Mathilda, where the monstrous is mainly connected to the trauma victim's sense of shame), Smiley's protagonist-narrator displays the ability to accept and analyse and, possibly, to tame this monster within herself. Given how important issues of blindness versus self-recognition, of oblivion versus understanding are to both *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres*, it is significant that, at the end of the novel, Ginny is in a position to analyse the individual components of her physical and emotional legacy. In trauma psychology, the ability to confront, examine, and accept the impact the traumatic past has had on the self is described as a significant step towards recovery, and this ability is linked to agency and empowerment in feminist trauma discourses. In this respect, Ginny undergoes an important process of growth in the course of the novel. Nevertheless, *A Thousand Acres* raises fundamental questions about the interrelations between (self-)recognition and recovery. Can recognition be seen as an indicator of recovery, of the trauma victim's coming to terms with the past, if that recognition is intimately bound up with numbing, resignation, and even bitterness? Might such a state of recognition and acceptance be the only form of "recovery" possible for a trauma victim like Ginny, who feels deeply and inexorably marked by her family and her past in body and mind? Is resigned acceptance a healthier way of coping with the traumatic past than Rose's way of lasting anger?

Ginny learning about the event through Rose's letter. Finally, Smiley has Ginny further undermine any dramatic potential of Larry's death, a sudden death from a heart attack in the supermarket: Ginny coldly – perhaps even gleefully – "imagine[s] him falling into the boxes of cornflakes" (335).

The novel refuses to provide any conclusive answers. But the idea of recovery in the sense of reconciliation, forgiveness, or a readiness to turn from the past to the future is clearly destabilized by the epilogue's sobering and bleak picture of what Ginny considers her "inheritance" (368). Ginny begins with her financial legacy, and it is telling that this legacy is one of loss and lasting commitment: she has to pay back two hundred dollars a month for a period of fourteen years. From questions of property, Ginny moves on to consider the other components of her familial inheritance:

> [A]lthough the farm and all its burdens and gifts are scattered, my inheritance is with me, sitting in my chair. Lodged in my every cell, along with the DNA, are molecules of topsoil and atrazine and paraquat and anhydrous ammonia and diesel fuel and plant dust, and also molecules of memory. (369)

Through these images about the contaminated cells of her body, the text one last time evokes the notion of pollution. Ginny further examines the impact of memory by conceptualizing her inheritance in terms of personal legacies that connect her to each family member: "Let us say that each vanished person left me something, and that I feel my inheritance when I am reminded of one of them" (370). It is pertinent that Ginny's exploration of this "inheritance" mainly highlights negative emotions, such as anger and bitterness, and a sense of incomprehensibility, especially regarding Rose and her father. She stresses that Rose "has left [her] a riddle" (370) and describes her father as a man "who is what he is and can't be labelled" (369). Hence, Ginny seems to realize that her analysis of the burdensome legacies that connect her to her family members has gaps and blind spots that escape her control.

One crucial aspect of the epilogue is the powerful position Larry occupies within Ginny's final reckoning. In the last paragraph of the novel, Ginny attempts to penetrate her father's psyche, imagining what he must have felt in those moments before he entered his daughters' bedrooms:

> 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 that I safeguard above all the others. (370-71)

Ginny here sets up a contrast between the "impenetrable fog of self" in which her father remained enwrapped and her own quest for understanding, which includes the recognition of her father's and her own capacity for evil. To some extent, this passage can be read as her attempt to understand rather than just condemn her father. Yet the passage also has a disturbing quality. It is striking that Ginny focuses

her empathy on her father's urge to abuse his daughters and chooses to "safeguard" her imaginary insight into this dark abyss of his psyche. Her visualization of this insight as a "gleaming obsidian shard" that she actively preserves expresses her attempt to render tangible the incomprehensible and elusive and to appropriate and control the disturbing and threatening. The image of a fragment of volcanic glass[33] is evocative of trauma: its volcanic origin symbolizes the eruption of the traumatic past, and the fractured "shard" represents the materialization of the lava cooled down, that is, the manifestation of the recovered trauma. In this light, the term "safeguard" might be read as representing her recognition and acceptance of the darkness in her past, and "gleaming" perhaps gestures towards some kind of hope. However, the fact that Ginny chooses this specific aspect of her father as the fragment to preserve for herself "above all the others" still suggests an unhealthy approach to her traumatic past, indicating a problematic over-identification with her father. Although Ginny sets out to find the "optimum distance" for seeing her father, namely, a distance that would make him seem "dwarfed by trees or the sweep of a hill" (20), she ends, on the contrary, by focusing too closely. Entering her father's mind, Ginny identifies with her abuser and his psychology of abuse with such disturbing closeness that she appears trapped in this relationship. The epilogue, then, reinforces the sense that Larry's overpowering presence extends beyond his death. His legacy, the epilogue implies, continues to overshadow Ginny's life.

The overwhelming presence of Ginny's father in her analysis of her familial inheritance has its counterpart in the marginalization of matrilineal legacies. While she returns to her father several times throughout the epilogue and devotes several paragraphs to him, her mother only appears in one line. Furthermore, it is not her mother as a person that Ginny recalls but merely a sensory impression of her presence in the "exotic redolence of the dresses in [her] mother's closet" (369). Given her earlier attempts to find ways of connecting with her mother, this near-absence is conspicuous. Ginny seems to fall back into a state of amnesia regarding her female ancestors' silenced histories, which she had earlier begun to unearth. The epilogue, furthermore, strikes a sad note regarding Ginny's role as a mother. Having always jealously desired for Pam and Linda to be her daughters, once she does "inheri[t]" them, she seems to find little fulfilment in motherhood. Moreover, the text reveals that Ginny's five lost children continue to overshadow her life. She describes her imaginary encounters with her children in a disturbingly casual tone of voice: "I am reminded of Jess when I see one of my five children on the street, an eleven-year-old, a thirteen-year-old, a fifteen-year-old, a nineteen-year-old, a twenty-two-year-old. Jess left me some anger at that" (370). She seems to suffer from delusions re-

33 The OED defines the term "obsidian" as follows: "A hard, dark, glass-like volcanic rock which is formed by the rapid solidification of (usually acidic) lava without crystallization and shows a conchoidal fracture; volcanic glass."

garding her lost children – even though the term "anger" suggests that she sometimes recognizes the delusional nature of these moments. Finally, it is significant that Smiley has Ginny remain childless, even after her discovery of what caused her miscarriages. Motherhood, thus, figures as a contingent, troubled notion throughout the epilogue, both with regard to Ginny's mother and her own role as a (surrogate) mother. This bleak view of motherhood and the overpowering presence of Ginny's paternal legacy, which almost entirely eclipses her maternal legacy, further supports the idea that *A Thousand Acres* rewrites Shakespeare's male-centred tragedy to express a feminist vision of the tragic.

Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, then, is a feminist and postmodern trauma novel that rewrites *King Lear* by exploring silenced histories of female trauma, while decentring the father and destabilizing grand patriarchal narratives. By inserting the theme of incestuous abuse into the core of the Lear plot, the novel signals its participation in the "cultural zeitgeist" of the late 1980s and early 90s, when "the United States was caught up in a sex panic of massive proportions" (Harkins x). *A Thousand Acres* responds to debates about incestuous sexual abuse, trauma, and memory recovery in complex ways: it engages with several key issues within psychological discourses on incest but pushes them further by negotiating them on several levels of the narrative and integrating them into an intricate web of motifs and themes that frame the Cooks' familial drama. The psychology of memory recovery, a highly contested terrain within the False Memory Debate, is embedded into dramatic structures of secrets and revelations, confessions and denials; the topos of incest as unspeakable forms the core of a broader gendered struggle for voice, agency, and power; and the incest victim's sense of pollution is connected to different literal and figurative meanings, constituting a multi-layered leitmotif. These motifs and themes form the pillars of the unfolding tragedy: the text suggests that both forgetting and remembering, keeping secret and talking about incest are deeply painful and destructive – physical and emotional pollution reaches so deep that it infuses every cell of Ginny's body.

Yet the core of what constitutes the tragic in the novel is the pervasive and persistent impact of the father and the disintegration of the sisters' relationship. In spite of their critical awareness of familial and communal dynamics of abuse and exploitation, the sisters' relationship is tragically destroyed by the complex after-effects of their traumatic past. The text calls attention to the intricate relationships between fellow victims, between victim and perpetrator, as well as between victim and unknowing or unbelieving family members. Through the powerful tension that it enacts between female self-development and a sense of inevitable doom, and between recurring patterns within contemporary trauma fiction and a feminist tragic vision, the text encourages us to reflect on the meanings of recovery. *A Thousand Acres* highlights the complexity of working through traumatic experiences that are firmly rooted in the family, meditating on the importance and the limitations of self-

knowledge and understanding as well as on the meanings of anger, acceptance, and forgiveness. Ultimately, the novel leaves us with a sense of the crucial value and meaning of the family. As Eagleton asserts, tragedy shows us what is most valuable precisely by confronting us with its loss: tragedy "needs meaning and value if only to violate them," or, put differently, the tragic "reminds us of what we cherish in the act of seeing it destroyed" (*Sweet Violence* 26). By making the family the site of tragedy, *A Thousand Acres* may thus, paradoxically, be read as a forceful affirmation of the family as exceedingly important and precious. In this light, Ginny's final act of treasuring the "gleaming obsidian shard" (371) of her father's transgression may be read as an attempt to recognize the persistent value her family holds for her, even in the face of trauma, disruption, and seemingly irreparable loss.