



## Analysis of Paul Harding's *Tinkers* from the Perspective of Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory

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### Abstract

This paper applies Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to analyze Paul Harding's *Tinkers*. It focuses on the traumatic experiences of two generations in the novel. Howard the Elder was ostracized for opposing colonialism and capitalist development. His disappearance left his son Howard with enduring pain. Howard, afflicted by his father's departure and his own epilepsy, ultimately left the family, causing confusion and suffering for his son George. The traumas of these two generations are closely related to historical changes and their yearning for family. Through analyzing their traumas, this paper reveals how trauma exists in people's unconscious minds in the form of repetitive memories and influences their lives. It also explores the historical factors behind the traumas, such as the impact of American colonization and capitalist development on ordinary families. Furthermore, this paper examines how the protagonists attempt to heal their traumas. George's effort to record his experiences and the conversation between him and his father Howard on his deathbed are significant steps in this process. This paper not only helps us understand the personal traumas in the novel but also makes us reflect on the influence of history on people's lives. It encourages us to face traumas positively, talk about them, and strive to start a new life despite the effects of history.

**Keywords:** Trauma; *Tinkers*; Cathy Caruth; Recovery.

### 1. Introduction

Paul Harding, an American writer and musician born in 1967, grew up on Boston's North Shore in Wenham, Massachusetts. His childhood experiences of playing in the woods

fostered a love for nature, while his apprenticeship with his grandfather, a watchmaker, later inspired his first novel *Tinkers*. He earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a

Master of Fine Arts from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. From 1990 to 1996, he worked as a drummer for the band Cold Water Flat, touring the United States and Europe. He cites jazz drummer Elvin Jones, particularly in his collaborations with John Coltrane, as a profound influence. Harding's ambition to become a writer was sparked by reading Carlos Fuentes' *Our Land*. After attending a summer writing seminar at Skidmore College in New York, he enrolled in the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he studied under authors such as Barry Unsworth, Elizabeth McCracken, and Marilynne Robinson. His extensive independent study of theology, including works by Karl Barth and John Calvin, shaped his self-identification as a "self-taught modern New England transcendentalist." His debut novel, *Tinkers* (2009), received critical acclaim, winning the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the 2010 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize. His second novel, *Enon* (2013), explores the lives of George Crosby's grandson, Charlie Crosby, and his daughter, Kate, characters introduced in *Tinkers*. In 2023, his third novel, *Another Eden*, was shortlisted for both the Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction.

*Tinkers* tells the story of the elderly clock tinker George Washington Crosby, his father Howard, and grandfather Howard the Elder. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2010. The reason why the Pulitzer Prize jury selected it is that it is "A powerful cell of life in which a New England father and son, through survival and joy, transpire their impressing lives and offer new ways of perceiving the world and morality." Elizabeth A. Schultz, an English professor emeritus at the University of Kansas, wrote, "*Tinkers* is deeply rooted in nature, with various seasons and weather, the tender and talkative spring, and the harsh winter of New England." The American Library Association praised this book as "examining the life of a dying person through the smallest amount of time and memory."

From the comments, it can be seen that the main reason for the award of *Tinkers* is its rich and profound themes. People have explored from multiple perspectives such as trauma, ethics, space, memory, faith, ecology, transcendentalism, and narrative techniques so far.

Scholars have examined the novel's exploration of life's nature, death's significance, and human-nature relationships. In 2014, Larry D. Bouchard initiated thematic comparisons between *Tinkers* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, laying groundwork for subsequent inquiries. ArLisa Indriawati (2019) analyzed the novel through the lens of life and death, interpreting its portrayal of "nothingness" as a reflection on existential purpose. Wan Xiaolei and Yu Yunling (2012) argued that the protagonist's merging consciousness with nature in a dying illusion signifies transcendence beyond the material world, emphasizing spiritual unity with the environment. Zhang Wenwen and Jin Hengshan (2018) identified themes of human nature, freedom, and dignity, asserting that the novel constructs a value system prioritizing natural life states and authentic human desires through its integration of nature, theology, and science. Nian Lili and Xia Weihong (2013), applying bioethics, highlighted the work's celebration of life dignity, respect for death, and concern for marginalized groups and ecological coexistence.

Research on narrative techniques focuses on how form reinforces thematic depth. Hao Jin (2024) proposed that the novel uses "temporal rhetoric" to convey a post-Enlightenment worldview, challenging linear conceptions of time. Mustafa (2014) described its parallel narrative structure, which weaves three generations' stories through embedded texts and fragmented non-narrative elements, achieving unity in protagonist George's dying consciousness. Marco Caracciolo (2020) employed "We-Narrative" theory to argue that the novel connects humans with non-human entities (animals, plants, objects), transcending

anthropocentrism. David James (2012) characterized *Tinkers* as a revival of the “Crystal Novel,” emphasizing its transparent structure and multi-dimensional reflection of reality. Rachael Marie Schaffner (2000) linked its fragmented narrative and metaphorical language to explorations of death, life, and humanity, while Bo Shuyan (2012) praised its use of clocks as symbolic motifs, stream-of-consciousness techniques, and philosophical language to prompt reader reflection on life’s meaning.

Scholars applying spatial theory have analyzed physical and psychological landscapes as social metaphors. Nian Lili and Xia Weihong (2016) traced the decline of three generations’ “homes” – a grandfather’s spiritual sanctuary, a father’s poetic abode, and George’s material void—to critique colonialism and capitalist expansion’s destruction of individual living spaces. Ma Yunfei (2020) focused on the “house” as a core image, arguing that the novel explores the necessity of repairing spiritual homes through nostalgic reflections on spatial symbols. Wu Xiaolu (2023) examined how capitalist expansion challenges the West Bay villagers’ physical and social spaces, documenting their psychological recovery through imagination, bodily perception, and symbolic interpretation, offering insights for modern readers navigating capitalist impacts.

Studies of ethics and trauma focus on family dynamics and psychological healing. Luo Jialin (2023) used literary ethics criticism to analyze Howard’s ethical crises due to epilepsy, emphasizing his quest for redemption and reconciliation with George as a meditation on father-son bonds. Huang Shufang (2013) linked the novel’s father-child conflicts to social changes: industrialization’s erosion of paternal roles, modernity’s skepticism toward religion, materialism’s undermining of patriarchal authority, and feminism’s challenges, all reflecting individual struggles in a faithless era. Jia Yiqun (2014) and Qin Lanying (2014) applied trauma theory to George’s childhood traumas

and the three generations’ recovery processes, highlighting how memory, social connection, and resilience enable healing.

This shows that *Tinkers* has important academic value, but few scholars have currently conducted research from the perspective of trauma. This paper attempts to analyze the psychological journeys of the father-son pair Howard and George from the perspective of Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory, explore the historical causes behind their traumas, and examine the protagonists’ efforts to repair these traumas. This paper’s aim is to guide people to pay attention to the psychological problems of ordinary individuals amid the historical tide.

## 2. Cathy Caruth’s Trauma theory

This paper applies Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory and in the book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth writes: “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (57-58). She believes that trauma, as an unclaimed and unrecognized suppressed event, is always an inexplicable knot in our unconsciousness. From then on, all our daily language and experiences will inevitably be shrouded in its shadow. Meanwhile, in this book, she also demonstrates the relationship between trauma and history, that trauma is not only psychological but also indirectly refers to history, which is a “historical symptom”.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth begins by tracing the relationship between trauma and literature back to the third chapter of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. She quotes Freud as follows:

“Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his

way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again" (Caruth, 1996, p. 2).

Caruth posits that this example effectively illustrates how traumatic experiences repeat themselves, demonstrating their tenacity as they resurface unbidden through the survivor's involuntary actions against their will. She articulates the book's core purpose: to explore and articulate the profound narratives of traumatic experience within the frameworks of psychoanalysis, literature, and literary theory. Rather than presenting direct case studies of trauma survivors or straightforward explanations of traumatic psychopathology, Caruth's approach examines how known and unknown events become intricately intertwined in the language of trauma and its associated stories. This suggests that trauma theory, as a literary critical method, cannot be direct but must advance through circuitous layers of inquiry. The "unhealability" of trauma, she argues, is precisely the source of its "human significance." Narrative cannot make trauma "past," but it can allow trauma to persist in language and culture in an "unclaimed" state. This persistence does not equate to stagnation in suffering; instead, through fragmented narratives, intergenerational transmission, and the impact of language, trauma becomes a bridge connecting individuals to others and the past to the present.

Caruth's trauma theory highlights the "unassimilated nature" (124) of traumatic events. Traumas often exceed an individual's immediate cognitive capacity, making them impossible to be directly represented by language. Instead, they emerge belatedly in the form of fragmented memories, recurring dreams, and other similar manifestations. This characteristic closely aligns with the narrative

style of *Tinkers*. The novel uses George's stream of consciousness on his deathbed and the fragmented collage of memories across three generations (such as Howard's epileptic seizures and the grandfather's mental breakdown) to illustrate how trauma permeates family memory. Caruth also pays special attention to the "ghostly" continuation of trauma across generations. Unresolved traumas linger like "ghosts," casting psychological shadows over subsequent generations. This perspective can deepen our understanding of the relationships among the three generations in the novel. The grandfather's mental collapse due to career failure does not end with his death. Instead, his trauma is transmitted to his son Howard through silence and estrangement (for example, Howard's refusal to discuss childhood traumas). Howard, in turn, perpetuates the trauma to George through his avoidant parenting style. By analyzing the experiences of three generations of father and son in the novel, as well as the psychological trauma they suffer, and the historical factors behind the trauma, readers can understand the struggles and pains experienced by an ordinary family in the process of colonization and capitalization in the West Coast of the United States from the 18th to the 20th century.

### 3. Manifestations of Trauma: Compulsive Repetition and Flashbacks of Memory

#### 3.1 George's Traumatic Memories

The trauma of both protagonists stems from their father, George's pain comes from his father's departure and epilepsy, while Howard's pain comes from his father's aging and death. Two generations have been constantly searching for the figure of their own father in the traumatic experience of losing him, trying to see what kind of life and thoughts are hidden behind his blurred figure. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History*, Cathy Caruth, explores the complex relationship between trauma and the concept of departure. She examines how trauma,



characterized by the repetitive reenactment of events and the inability to fully assimilate them, is deeply intertwined with the experience of leaving and returning. In the novel, the protagonist George lies in a hospital bed on his deathbed, with memories of his father floating in his mind. In George's memory, his father Howard suffered from epilepsy and always went out early and returned late every day. The deepest memories he left for George seemed to be only the muddy feet he returned late at night and the terrifying scenes of epileptic seizures.

As Cathy Caruth said, trauma is experienced "as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment," a phenomenon that marks his or her cognitive departure from the site of the traumatic experience. As a result, the event is not "assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it." The forms that a traumatic response can take include "repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience." "The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself" (17).

Caruth's strong, repeated and aggressive hallucinations are exactly what George experienced before he died "...are there even mysteries outside? a puzzle itself - but anyway, personal mysteries, like where is my father, why can't I stop all the moving and look out over the vast arrangements and find by the contours and colors and qualities of light where my father is, not to solve anything but just simply even to see it again one last time, before what, before it ends, before it stops" (33). George, as a clock repairman, often thinks of his father when facing broken watches. He said, "Occasionally, though, when he was fixing a clock, when a new spring he was coaxing into its barrel came loose from its arbor and exploded,

cutting his hands, sometimes damaging the rest of the works, he had a vision of his father on the floor, his feet kicking chairs, bunching up rugs, lamps falling off of their tables, his head banging on floorboards, his teeth clamped onto a stick or George's own fingers" (12). The recent illness of his father Howard made young George feel his father's fragmentation, "George felt his father's body quaking beneath him and was sure that it was going to rend itself apart, that his father was going to split open." "Daddy's broken!" (43). Howard's epilepsy caused psychological trauma to young George. When repairing the clock in the future, memories of his father will flood his mind like a tide. In George's eyes, a broken clock is like a broken body when his father fell ill, "but my father was in the middle of it, strangely quiet, as if concentrating or distracted, as wires and springs and ribs and guts popped and exploded and unraveled and unhinged" (43), "Thought that he was a clock was like a clock was like a spring in a clock when it breaks and explodes when he had his fits" (88). George's crazy love for clocks and repeated repairs are expressions of his love for his father, as well as his desire to repair his inner wounds. Just like George desperately wanted to rearrange the clocks in the room before he died, "and the blood in his veins and the breath in his chest seemed to go easier as he heard the ratchet and click of the springs being wound and the rising chorus of clocks, which did not seem to him to tick but to breathe and to give one another comfort by merely being in one another's presence..." (19). The clock represents his father, and his love for the clock has already integrated him into it. At this time, George's longing for the clock is a little consolation for his inner trauma.

### 3.2 Howard's Traumatic Memories

In most parts of this novel, Howard is used as the narrator to review his father. These memories are also scattered and fragmented but reflect the astonishing similarities between the two generations of father and son. The father is ambiguous and silent in his son's life, and then

completely fades away, leaving his son with a lifetime of confusion. In Howard's memory, his father was slowly disappearing, "It seemed to me as if my father simply faded away. He became more and more difficult to see...He leaked out of the world gradually, though. At first, he seemed merely vague or peripheral. But then he could no longer furnish the proper frame for his clothes. He would ask me a question from behind the box on which I sat shelling peas or peeling potatoes for my mother, and when I answered and received no reply back, I would turn around, to find his hat or belt or a single shoe sitting in the door frame as if placed there by a mischievous child. The end came when we could no longer even see him..."(65).

In Howard's memories, his father slowly couldn't pick up the apple and couldn't put on his jacket on his own. When his mother dressed him again, he was pulled like a scarecrow, his head swaying, and his wide-brimmed hat was tilted at a strange angle. In Howard's view, the father also became fragmented. Until his father was helped into the carriage on a stormy day, he watched as the carriage and seven arched figures disappeared into a distant corner of the courtyard, and never saw his father again. His father quietly disappeared like this, and at that time Howard couldn't even distinguish whether his father had really passed away or whether it was just a drill when he actually died. He couldn't distinguish between dreams and reality, and images of his father often appeared in dreams, "...because I often had dreams in which my father came into my bedroom to kiss me and cover me up with my blankets, which, a restless sleeper that I was, had fallen to the floor. In those dreams, I awoke and, seeing my father felt an overwhelming sense of how precious he was to me. His having died once, I understood what it would mean to lose him, and now that he had returned I was determined to take better care of him. Dad, I said to him in those dreams, what are you doing here? I'm not gone just yet, he

would tell me in a humorous tone that I should have recognized as belonging to a dream since he had never used it in life, although I had often wished for it. Well, this time we're going to make sure you stay well, I would say, and hug him"(68). Trauma, by definition, is something that humans cannot remember clearly, meaning that it is recalled by making it a part of our symbolic narrative. "So, it vaguely repeats itself, making a comeback, haunting the parties in its dreams" (Žižek 36-37). Howard, who missed his father, decided to go to the forest to find him. He was wearing his father's boots and a wide-brimmed hat, and everything around him began to become like his father slowly. He imagined, "I imagined breaking an ear from its stalk, peeling its husk, and finding my father's teeth lining the cob. They were clean and white, but worn like his. Strands of my father's hair encased the teeth instead of corn silk. As I hiked through the woods, I imagined peeling the bark from a birch tree, the outer layers supple, like skin. I would peel until I came to the wood. I would insert the tip of my knife into the wood and force the blade deeper until it touched something hard. I would cut a seam in the wood, prying it open an inch at a time, and find a long bone encased in the middle of the trunk. I imagined pulling flat rocks up from creek beds. I imagined climbing trees and tasting for traces of my father in their sap"(68). He repeatedly entered the forest to search for his father, seeing every plant and tree in nature as the embodiment of his father. He searched for his father's teeth in the trees and his hair in the branches of shrubs. Babette Rothschild (2000) effectively distinguished between general stress and traumatic stress. She defined traumatic stress as the most extreme form of general stress. When a traumatic event or crisis causes frustration and despair, or when a threat far exceeds a person's ability to cope, it can lead to traumatic stress. The rhythm of the autonomic nervous system will become dysregulated. The sudden disappearance of his father was the source of Howard's traumatic stress, and in this frequent imagination and dreamy flashbacks,

Howard suffered from epilepsy for the first time. Since then, epilepsy has been troubling him, which led Howard to ultimately choose to leave. Perhaps his disappearance could bring happiness to his family. He lay on the grass and dreamt of an empty room and abandoned corridor, which used to be his father's study and the narrow corridor leading to it. At this time, Howard may have understood his father's disappearance, but his departure brought George a lifetime of confusion and pain.

Trauma not only serves as an unexpected record of the past but also accurately witnesses the power of insufficiently integrated experiences (i.e. traumatic experiences). The repeated occurrence of trauma is precisely because it "lurks" without being processed at the time of its occurrence ("lurking" is an important concept proposed by Freud in *Moses and Monotheism*). But "lurking" does not mean solving, nor is it truly forgetting and disappearing, but being "left behind" in its original form (Tao 144). Karus stated that the concept of "incubation period" here is the most worthy of attention. She pointed out, "What is crucial in the experience of train accident victims, that is, what actually constitutes the core secrecy of Freud's example, is not so much the forgetting period after the accident, but rather the fact that the accident victims never truly experienced its brutality during the accident: as Freud said, he was' obviously not injured and left." (Lu and Zhang 174). For so many years, George has avoided recalling his father, but he would think of his father and his broken body when repairing his watch, but the pain his father brought him finally passed away after being "put on hold" for many years. Suddenly, he remembered his father's illness and his sudden departure. The only thing I remember before my death was that my father Howard appeared in front of my house without warning on Christmas Eve in 1953, and then disappeared into my life forever. Father became an indelible painful memory in George's heart.

#### 4. Roots of Trauma: Capitalization and Colonization of the United States

Caruth believed that there is a close political connection between trauma and history. History is not simply a linear development but is filled with traumatic events and suppressed memories. Traumatic events are often closely related to power struggles and social conflicts, such as colonialism, racial discrimination, war, etc.

Traumatic events often go beyond the victim's consciousness and are hidden deep within their unconsciousness. In order to cope with the pain caused by trauma, individuals and groups often suppress these memories and forget them. However, these suppressed memories will not disappear but will continue to emerge in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, repetitive behaviors, etc., affecting their lives and behaviors. In this section, we will explore the historical factors behind the constant flashback memories of the two protagonists. By excavating and speaking about trauma, we can re-understand history and reveal its hidden truth. In *"Moses and Monotheism,"* Freud analyzed the history of the Jewish nation and revealed the memories of Moses being murdered and suppressed, thus revealing the hidden truth in the history of the Jewish nation. By analyzing trauma, understand the history of American capitalism and colonization in the 18th and 20th centuries, as well as its impact on ordinary people.

Howard the Elder lived in the early days of the founding of the United States when new immigrants with religious passion were filled with a strong desire to establish a new world in America that could reflect God's will. This desire convinced them that God had chosen them and led them to this rapidly fertile new land. They yearned for colonial development in the United States, building houses, cultivating land, raising animals, and hunting wild animals. As early as 1701, Puritan philosopher Cotton Mather pointed out the mission of Christians,

"A Christian has two professions, one is a specific job, and the other is an overall profession, that is, serving the Lord Jesus Christ." The concept of the chosen people coming to the chosen place by God to fulfill God's mission, starting from religion, explains the rationality of Puritans immigrating to America and conquering the New World and making it sacred. This gave great encouragement to the Puritans who were exploring and establishing North American colonies at that time and gradually became a special consciousness of "God's chosen people" commonly possessed by immigrants arriving in North America. As a pastor, Howard the Elder had a completely opposite colonial pursuit to the colonizers. He advocated for equality among all living beings, and that all kinds of animals in nature, flying in the sky, running on the ground, and swimming in the water, were equally important as other creatures created by God. He called for in his sermon, "O, Senator, drop your trousers! Loosen your cravat! Eschew your spats and step into that shallow, teeming world of mayflies and dragonflies and frogs' eyes staring eye-to-eye with your own, and the silty bottom. Cease your filibuster against the world God gave you. Enough of your clamor, your embarrassing tendencies, your crooking of paths in the name of straightness. Enough of your calling ruin upon the Moor and the Hindoo, the Zulu and the Hun" (63-64). He used picked-up string, bottle caps, broken glass, nickel coins, smooth stones, shed feathers, and cut nails to build a house. He listened to the sound of the wind blowing through the trees, and listened to the ancient natural song in the chorus of the storm. In Howard's memory, his father always said "The forgotten songs we never really knew, only think we remember knowing, when what we really do is understand at the same time how we have never really known them at all and how glorious they must really be" (63). At a preaching session, Howard the Elder claimed that the "devil" was not so bad, which shocked the parish faithful. They unanimously believed that the pastor had "fallen" because he was

actually correcting the name of the Native Americans who were seen as "demons" by the colonizers. Old Howard's thoughts are no longer accepted, and his spirit and body begin to wither slowly. In Howard's view, his father begins to "recede from human circumstance, so, too, were all of these particulars, back to some unknowable froth" (66), and finally disappears in Howard's life, becoming a permanent pain in Howard's heart.

Howard's life witnessed the development and expansion of the capitalist commodity economy in the United States. Father Howard is a salesman driving mule carts through the streets, shuttling through remote forests and villages in northern Maine, selling daily necessities to local farmers, and doing odd jobs such as repairing pots and leaks. He loves nature, he likes to stay in fields full of flowers and bees dancing, he likes to "crawl into the shadows and sit quietly and become a part of the slow freshet of night, or to stop the wagon and simply remain on the bench and watch the shadows approach and pool around the wagon wheels and Prince Edward's hooves and eventually reach the soles of his shoes and then his ankles, until mule, cart, and man were submerged in the flood tide of night..." (27). He drove the carriage and engaged in a barter business. He helped the hermit Gilbert extract his teeth and regularly provided him with daily necessities, but only accepted Gilbert's handmade wood carvings as a reward; While selling goods, he helped people shoot and kill mad dogs, give birth, put out fires, cut their hair, sell five gallons of privately brewed whiskey to a person named Potts in a remote area, and rescue drowning children from the river. Relying on the simple and primitive way of selling goods to survive, Howard gradually became unable to survive in the wave of the commodity economy. Often after a day, the only money he had in his box was "the two pennies he had taken from his own pocket for the pins. Cullen, his agent, owned all of one of them and nearly all of the other" (44). "The simple and



little vendors in the West Bay, like Howard, live a miserable home life under the impact of capital and profit, while the picturesque rural homes are swaying under the invasion of capital and profit" (Nian and Xia 103). The commodity economy had already penetrated into every small family in the West Bay at that time, and his wife gradually became indifferent to him. She often used the children's hard waiting and cold meals to pressure Howard. However, the disappearance of his father in childhood made Howard yearn for a complete family. He tried to repair the cracks in the family by playing cards with George and his siblings. He imagined using a bouquet of wildflowers to make his wife happy, but his way of repairing family relationships seemed clumsy and lacking in skills. However, Howard's repeated epilepsy ultimately led his wife to abandon him and send him to a mental hospital. Howard lost his dignity, his family status, and his image in the minds of children. In George's memories, after his father bit him, he "had for the most part stayed away from the house the rest of that week, and had kept to corners and alongside walls and just beyond doorways, like a kicked dog, when he had been home" (55). The children felt that their father was cold, unfamiliar, and dirty, and Howard's image was vastly different from the male image advertised in American society at that time. "Howard became a negative example in the hearts of the children and wives: poverty, weakness, and failure" (Huang and Luo 2).

##### 5. Recovery of Trauma: Dialogue and Trauma Telling

Caruth argues that the core of trauma is an indelible void, and the subject cannot fully "possess" or "heal" trauma. Instead, meaning can only be bestowed through telling, dialogue, and ethical responses in the continuous confrontation with trauma.

Through acknowledging the unknowability and unspeakability of trauma, those who have experienced trauma allow it to gradually transform from an "unclaimed"

burden into transmissible historical experience within delayed, intergenerational narratives. Therefore, trauma survivors must confront traumatic memories, complete the process of mourning, articulate their emotions, and release stress, so as to integrate fragmented memories into a coherent narrative while processing the accompanying emotions to achieve the integration of traumatic memories. In *Tinkers*, George once attempted to recount his experiences through a tape recorder: "My name is George Washington Crosby. I was born in West Cove, Maine, in the year 1915. I moved to Enon, Massachusetts, in 1936. And so on.... He talked about blue snow and barrels of apples and splitting frozen wood so brittle that it rang when you split it..." (17). George attempts to confront his core trauma through narration. His concrete recollections of "blue snow" and "frozen wood" (17) serve as sensory details to replace emotional catharsis. Additionally, the tape, as a physical medium, carries George's traumatic experiences and memories. Although George eventually throws the tape into the stove, this act is not merely an act of abandonment but an attempt to achieve a symbolic farewell to trauma through "ritual destruction"—George attempts to transform unspeakable pain into visible ashes through the purifying power of fire. These are all George's efforts to confront trauma. Despite the failure of the recording act, it implies a key breakthrough in trauma repair: George takes the initiative to use the "self" as the narrative subject for the first time, breaking the previous defense mechanism of "escaping the self through watch repair." Uttering the name is the first step in reconstructing identity, and this simple self-identification marks a transition from "fragmented existence" to "subject return." Although he fails to directly address the core trauma, when George narrates "what it is like to be a grandparent for the first time" (17), he inadvertently reveals his thoughts on "intergenerational responsibility." George's recording attempt is a "failed success" in trauma repair—he fails to tame the chaos of memory with language, but in the clumsiness of

operation and the fragmentation of narration, he acknowledges the existence of trauma. Repair is not linear healing but learning to coexist with fragmentation. The burning of the tape is not the end but the beginning—it marks George's shift from "mechanically repairing the external" to "confronting internal fragmentation," laying the psychological foundation for integrating memories through hallucinations before his death. Above all, every failed appeal to language by trauma survivors is actually a hidden step toward healing.

Eight days before George's death, Howard suddenly visits. Howard's appearance at George's deathbed comes without any explanation or apology, yet it activates George's subconscious traumatic memories. As Caruth notes, "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). The simple conversation between father and son forces both to face the trauma directly. Howard's silence is not empty; it embodies what Caruth describes as "the delayed speech of trauma," through which both parties convey unspeakable pain. Afterward, George repeatedly hallucinates his father "kept to corners and alongside walls and just beyond doorways, like a kicked dog" (74). This repetitive imagery indicates that the trauma is breaking through defensive mechanisms, forcing George to confront repressed memories in the form of "unfinished dialogue." When George sees the same Parkinson's tremor in his father's trembling hands during a seizure as in his own hands while repairing watches, this physical similarity suddenly reveals that his father is also a victim of "inherited trauma." George's understanding begins with recognizing his father's dual role as both perpetrator and victim. This duality breaks down black-and-white moral judgments, allowing George to finally respond ethically to his father's actions. He comes to understand that

his father was also an ordinary person swept up by historical currents. George's late-life understanding of his father brings an end to the intergenerational trauma between the two.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper undertakes an in-depth exploration of the traumas experienced by the three-generation father-son relationship in *Tinkers* through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. It successfully reveals the intricate relationship between trauma, individuals, and history. The traumas of Howard the Elder, Howard, and George are not isolated incidents but are deeply intertwined with the historical context of American colonization and capitalist development. These traumas, in the form of compulsive repetition and memory flashbacks, have a profound impact on their daily lives and cognition, vividly reflecting the far-reaching influence of historical changes on ordinary people's lives. Moreover, this paper also holds significant practical implications. It serves as a call to action, reminding us that even when we are shaped by history and burdened with trauma, we should maintain a positive attitude. We need to be brave enough to face our traumas, open up and share our experiences with others. By doing so, we can actively work towards healing the emotional wounds and eventually move forward to embrace a new life. This not only helps us deal with our personal traumas but also deepens our understanding of the complex relationship between individuals and the historical and social environment they inhabit.

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