

“SHUT UP OR I’LL SHUT YOU UP”: FAMILY VIOLENCE IN CHRISTINA STEAD’S *THE MAN WHO LOVED CHILDREN*

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Introduction

IN AN ESSAY for *The New York Times* titled “Rereading *The Man Who Loved Children*,” author Jonathan Franzen writes the following of Christina Stead’s famous 1940 novel: it “operates at a pitch of psychological violence that makes *Revolutionary Road* look like *Everybody Loves Raymond*.” The novel, Franzen further suggests, is “so retrograde as to accept what we would call ‘abuse’ as a natural feature of the familial landscape” and intrudes “on our better-regulated world like a bad dream from the grandparental past.”¹ *The Man Who Loved Children* follows the experiences of the dysfunctional Pollit family, which consists of Samuel (“Sam”) Pollit, Sam’s second wife Henny Collyer, and their six children. It chronicles the family’s attempt to navigate the destabilised political and cultural landscape of Washington, DC, in the 1930s and during the Great

1. Jonathan Franzen, “Rereading *The Man Who Loved Children*,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/books/review/Franzen-t.html>.

Depression.² Despite the novel's pleasant-sounding (and ironic) title, even the most cursory reading of the book reveals the shocking scope and volume of abuse and violence between its covers—violence ranging from verbal insults and threats through to physical assault, gaslighting, surveillance, rape, murder, and suicide. While the novel's violence is primarily perpetrated by Sam and directed towards Henny and their children, some violence is also perpetrated by Henny and directed towards Sam and the children. Despite the novel's shocking depictions of abuse, Franzen characterises the violence as “a potentially comic feature”—extreme to the point of absurdity. Indeed, for those not familiar with the complexities and realities of family violence, the language and behaviours of the novel's characters may at first appear unbelievable, even melodramatic. But a reading of the novel that takes the characters' violence seriously—particularly in light of Hazel Rowley's claim that that the novel constitutes a recount of Stead's traumatic childhood “exactly word for word”³—suggests not only that the *The Man Who Loved Children* is a believable violence narrative, but one that is consistent with several theories of family violence expounded in the social sciences over the last two decades. In this article, I propose to reread Stead's novel in light of these contemporary sociological theories of violence, and to demonstrate that family violence has changed very little in the 70 years since the novel's publication. Indeed, as I will argue, *The Man Who Loved Children* contains one of the most nuanced and insightful explorations of family violence in twentieth-century Australian fiction.

2. The novel was originally set in Sydney in the early 1910s, but both its setting and time period were allegedly changed by Stead's American publisher, Simon & Schuster, in the hope that the novel would appeal to a wider readership. See Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1993), 260–61.

3. *Ibid.*, 499.

Family Violence and the Control Context

Since the early 1990s, family violence researchers have separated family violence into different types. This classification was in response to the problematic methodologies previously developed by sociologists in large-scale social surveys, which tended to lump qualitatively distinct violence together while

ignoring key aspects in each case, such as the associated context, relationship history, fear, and the extent of the injuries inflicted by the abuser.⁴ Among a new breed of scholars of violence from the 1990s, the sociologist Michael P. Johnson constructed a control-based typology of family violence that offers a more thorough understanding of the context within which different types of family violence could occur. For Johnson, several types of violence may be “distinguished from each other by the control context within which they are embedded.”⁵ By “control,” Johnson refers to power; that is, his analysis focuses on who holds power over whom in the relationship, and how that power is constructed and maintained. As such, Johnson also classifies intimate partner violence into four “types,” namely: intimate terrorism, violent resistance, situational couple violence, and mutual violent control. As Johnson writes,

In intimate terrorism, the perpetrator uses violence in the service of general control over his or her partner; the partner does not. In violent resistance, the partner is violent and controlling—an intimate terrorist—and the resister’s violence arises in reaction to that attempt to exert general control. In mutual violent control, both members of the couple use violence in attempts to gain general control over their partner . . . In the fourth type of intimate partner violence, situation couple violence, the perpetrator is violent (and his or her partner may be as well); however, neither of them uses violence to attempt to exert general control.⁶

While short-term control is often the goal of violent actors in non-family contexts, such as in instances of common assault or robbery, the control sought by violent actors within the family or intimate partner context—particularly by an “intimate terrorist”—is a form of long-term control.⁷ Forms of long-term control are complex and totalising, generally reaching beyond physical forms of control and extending into other aspects of an affected person’s life, including their social networks, financial independence,

4. Michael P. Johnson and Kathleen Ferraro, “Research on Domestic Violence in the 1990s: Making Distinctions,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62, no. 4 (2000): 948–63.

5. Michael P. Johnson, “Domestic Violence: It’s Not about Gender: Or Is It?,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 5 (2005): 1126–30.

6. Michael P. Johnson, *A Typology of Domestic Violence* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2008), 5.

7. *Ibid.* 37–38.



Figure 1. The Power and Control Wheel.⁹

and self-esteem. As Johnson claims, each act of violence, be it a verbal threat or physical assault, “is embedded in a larger pattern of power and control that permeates the relationship.”⁸ In this context, analysing isolated incidents of violence, as many traditional quantitative surveys have done, amounts to an incomplete method of measuring family violence. Instead, studies of violence, Johnson suggests, must consider each incident within the wider history and context of the family or intimate relationship. In what follows, I will take up Johnson’s first two types of intimate partner violence—“intimate terrorism” and “violent resistance”—to interrogate the nature of the violence depicted in Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children*.

8. Ibid., 18 (figure 1.1).

9. Ibid. 6.

Intimate Terrorism

In order to explain the relationship between violent and non-violent tactics of control, it is necessary to distinguish these categories of coercion. Johnson refers to a model developed by social workers Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar in 1993, which they call “The Power and Control Wheel” (figure 1).⁹ As the wheel indicates, various non-violent control tactics are “held together” by the credible threat and/or history of violence perpetrated by an intimate terrorist. Like Johnson, Catherine Kirkwood describes this general structure or system of control as a “web of abuse”—a system wherein each tactic is mutually supportive of the others, so that if one strand fails another always remains intact, ensuring the perpetrator maintains their control.¹⁰ Among these tactics, a perpetrator’s non-violent tactics may include economic control and forced financial dependency, the use of gender norms and stereotypes to justify superiority or inferiority, or the exploitation and abuse of children. Other similarly non-violent tactics may include surveillance, forced isolation from social networks, denials of responsibility, victim blaming through gaslighting or the manipulation of reality, and other emotionally violent actions including insults, bullying, and threats. Cumulative and insidious, these threats often begin to affect victims long before they have the ability to realise what is occurring. Through the use of credible threats, which increase the likelihood of immediately damaging physical and sexual violence, perpetrators use these non-violent tactics to render their control even more threatening.

Violent Resistance

Violent resistance refers to the actions taken by victims of violence in response to threats by their abusers, which is often a means of self-protection or self-preservation. Victims may use violent resistance to guard against a threat posed against

10. Ellen Pence and Michael Paymar, *Education Groups for Men Who Batter: The Duluth Model* (New York: Springer, 1993), 7.

11. Catherine Kirkwood, *Leaving Abusive Partners: From the Scars of Survival to the Wisdom for Change* (California: Sage, 1993), 58–61.

them personally or against their children or loved ones. More broadly, violent resistance may be “expressive of the frustration generated by abuse borne over a long period of time.”¹² In *Typology of Violence*, Johnson cites an “important study” by Angela Browne from her book *When Battered Women Kill*.¹³ As Johnson writes, Browne’s study finds that women who kill their male partners are “more likely to have experienced frequent attacks, severe injuries, sexual abuse, and death threats against themselves or others” than other victims.¹⁴ The women in Browne’s study were, Johnson writes, “caught in *a web of abuse* that seemed to be out of control.”¹⁵ The vast majority of homicides carried out by these women took place either just before or during an attack at the hands of their partner—a fact that suggests their actions belong to the “violent resistance” category and that their abusers’ actions to the “intimate terrorist” category. Johnson’s analysis and Browne’s study highlight the key distinction between the violence of intimate terrorists and of violent resisters. While intimate terrorists ordinarily use violence to *maintain* control, violent resisters use violence because they *lack* control. Acknowledging the usefulness of this distinction, this article will bring this typology to bear on the characters of Sam and Henny in *The Man Who Loved Children*. These two categories are not only useful for exploring Sam and Henny, however; they may be used to explore an aspect of the violent ecosystem that Johnson’s book does not address in detail: the meaning and effect of these kinds of violence for and on children.

12. Johnson, *Typology*, 52–53.

13. Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

14. Johnson, *Typology*, 55.

15. *Ibid.* My italics.

16. See, for “narcissistic” and “egotistical,” Teresa Holtby, “Hurts so Good: Masochism in Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children*,” *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 14, no. 5 (2014): 2; for a “fascist,” Diana Brydon, *Christina Stead* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1987), 11.

Samuel Pollit, Intimate Terrorist

Sam is the Pollit family patriarch and the man of the novel’s ironic title. Various described by critics as “narcissistic,” “egotistical,” a “fascist,” “sadistic,” and a “despot,” Sam is the quintessential model of Johnson’s intimate terrorist.¹⁶ He works hard to maintain his position at the centre of the Pollit family universe, and constantly invents stories, songs, games,

and household tasks to keep his children focused on him and him alone. Physically, Sam even resembles the sun, with his “golden-white” arms and “yellow-red hair” seeming to render him a star around which his children revolve, just as the planets revolve around the sun.¹⁷ The plot follows Sam’s increasingly desperate attempts to maintain his position of authority in the family while he loses his job and social standing, and as his children grow up and begin to rebel against him.

Sam is a naturalist by trade and philosophy, a fact that, as Michael Ackland argues, explains his “scientific treatment of the world” and his “drive to order, name and create everything in his life” that links him “with either Darwin or despotic czarism.”¹⁸ For Sam, the two are interchangeable: his belief in social Darwinism informs his running of the Pollit household, and extends to a czarist vision of an ideal society:

“If I were autocrat of all nations,” with “supreme power, the lives of all, the life of the world in my hands,” he told [the children] what he would do. For example, he might arrange the killing off of nine tenths of mankind in order to make room for the fit. “This would be done by gas attacks on people living ignorant of their fate in selected areas, a type of eugenic concentration-camp; they would never know, but be hurled painlessly into eternity, or they would pass into the lethal chamber of time and never feel a pang.” (392)

Violence fundamentally structures Sam’s worldview; he sees violence as a tool wielded by the strong against the weak for the betterment of society. Relatedly, he is also a misogynist. He believes women are naturally inferior to men and uses this belief to maintain the strict gender hierarchy of the household. As Elleke Boehmer writes, while Sam “seeks to mould his sons in his image”—something pristinely clear in his decision to name one of his sons “Little-Sam”—“he imposes culturally subservient roles upon his daughters and subjects his wife to relentless verbal and financial persecution.”¹⁹ The women must cook and clean, but when the food is served, it is “thick for the lads, thin for the girls” (58).

17. Christina Stead, *The Man who Loved Children* [1940] (London: Apollo, 2016), 50. All subsequent references to the novel in this article are given in parentheses and are to this edition of the text.

18. Michael Ackland, “Breeding ‘Reptiles of the Mind’: Blake’s Dialectics of Vision and Stead’s Critique of Polity in *The Man Who Loved Children*,” *Studies in the Novel* 38, no. 2 (2006): 236.

19. Elleke Boehmer, “Daughters of the House: The Adolescent Girl and the Nation,” in *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester University Press, 2005), 112.

Women do not deserve the vote because “they is crazy” (117), their single destiny is marriage and children, and they are only valuable if they are physically attractive. The parallels between Sam and an autocratic dictator are clear: as Boehmer notes, “To Sam, the world, like the home, is an arena in which to actualise his authoritarian, eugenicist beliefs: there is little in his view to distinguish the two spheres.”²⁰

One striking example of Sam’s use of violence as a tool of social Darwinism occurs when he empties a bucket of fish offal over the head of his son, Little-Sam. Having been forced to clean up his father’s fish oil experiment, Little-Sam becomes nauseous and spills a bucket of offcuts on the ground. Sam forces his son to continue shovelling fish parts to teach him and the other children a lesson in the “[t]riumph of mind over matter” (515). Predictably, Little-Sam’s nausea gets worse and, after “look[ing] mutinously up at his father,” he “turned from the family, and disgraced himself.” As the other children protest Sam’s treatment of Little-Sam, Sam decides to “finish this” himself, filling the bucket with offal and “flinging the liquid all over [Little-Sam], drenching him” (517). He then proselytises,

“Kids, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest!²¹ Little-Sam could and did get over his abhorrence, you see! And if I didn’t have a lot of interfering, miserable beasts,” he gave a kind of malicious smile at the two little girls, “I’d have you all right in no time.” (517–18)

For Sam, violence and humiliation are character-building; they teach his children the same resilience and strength he sees in himself. The irony of the novel’s title is clear.

SURVEILLANCE

As Pence and Paymar’s model demonstrates, power and control are at the heart of an intimate terrorist’s thoughts and behaviours. As I have already claimed, there is a stark parallel between Sam’s image of an ideal society and the ways in

20. *Ibid.*, 112.

21. This line is a direct quote from *The Book of Common Prayer*, reflecting Sam’s belief that his own words are akin to holy scripture and must be respected and obeyed as such. See Rev. Rowley Hill, *Sunday School Lessons; Explaining and Illustrating the Subject of the Collects* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1866), 4.

which he controls his family. Sam's desire for control is particularly evident when the narrator, focalising the narrative through Sam, describes the metaphorical nature of vision:

He favoured a bureaucratic state socialism with the widest possible powers and a permanent staff, a bureaucracy intricately engineered, which would gradually engulf all the powers great and small. . . . In his mind's eye he saw internations within internations; and overnations over nations . . . rising to one crest of supreme judgement, sitting in a room; all glass, no doubt, with windows on the world. (332)

This description of a surveillance state foreshadows the world of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; and it even evokes Michel Foucault's metaphorical panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*,²² wherein the architectural structure controls "prisoners" through the threat of constant observation by those in power—people who are themselves undetectable and unobservable. The Pollit household is thus Sam's ideal surveillance state in microcosm, and his tendency to spy on his children—and particularly his eldest daughter Louie—both reflects and structures his desire for power. For example, Sam constantly checks that Louie is reading the "correct" books (22, 398), and searches through her bedroom when she is absent:

He poked and pried into her life, always with a scientific moral purpose, stealing into her room when she was absent, noting her mottoes on the wall, and investigating her linen, shivering with shame when suggestive words came into her mouth. . . . He would be her constant companion: they would communicate thoughts, and she would be drawn to his side. With mental lip-licking, he followed her into her most secret moments. (347)²³

22. Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975] (Pantheon Books, 1977).

23. For discussion of incest between Sam and his daughters, see Ackland, "Breeding 'Reptiles of the Mind,'" 245; and Boone, "Of Fathers," 523–525.

As Louie's rebellion against her overbearing father reaches its climax toward the end of the novel, so too does Sam's desire to observe and control Louie reach its zenith. Sam threatens to take her out of school—her last remaining external support network—in order to monitor her. "You are coming home to me," he insists, "and I am going to watch every book you read, every

thought you have.” (579) Having realised that Sam is reading her secret diaries, Louie invents her own coded language that only she can understand, which affords her some semblance of security and privacy from the all-encompassing superintendence of her father.²⁴

LANGUAGE

Sam’s desire for power and control also manifests in his use of language. Not only does Sam use language to insult his wife and children (with terms such as “gutter rat,” “great fat lump,” and “piggish”); he also uses language to manipulate their perceptions of reality through “gaslighting.” Psychiatrist Theodore Dorpat describes gaslighting as a type of “brainwashing” used to “undermine [the] victim’s belief system and replace it with another.” It operates, he writes, “by causing the victim to question [their] own abilities for thinking, perceiving, and reality testing.”²⁵ More broadly, gaslighting is commonly used in totalitarian regimes, and has recently been identified as operative in the United States under the Trump administration.²⁶

Sam’s excessive “baby talk,” which Franzen describes as “an endlessly inventive cascade of alliteration, nonsensical rhymes, puns, running jokes, clashing diction levels, and private references” is his primary gaslighting tool.²⁷ As Heather Stewart argues, Sam uses this language to “keep his children perpetually young or, like puppets, always in his control.”²⁸ Sam’s domination of the household’s linguistic system, and the indoctrination of his children into that system from birth, means that he is able to control what and how his children can think and speak. He also uses this language to position himself as “one of the kids,” gaining their trust, and portraying himself, in Duffy’s words, as an “ineffectual innocent, of apparently denying his own adult ego,” and escaping blame and consequences for his actions.²⁹ Having cultivated his children’s trust through their shared language, Sam is able to gaslight them further, convincing them that their

24. Stead, *Ibid.*, 377.

25. Theodore L. Dorpat, *Gaslighting, the Double Whammy, Interrogation, and Other Methods of Covert Control in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis* (London: Jason Aronson, 1996), 33–34.

26. See Andrea Chalupa and Sarah Kenzior, *Gaslit Nation*, MP3 audio, <https://www.patreon.com/gaslit>.

27. Franzen, “Re-reading,” 59.

28. Heather Stewart, “Feminism and Male Chauvinism in the Writings of Christina Stead (1902–1983),” *Hecate* 29, no. 2 (2003): 116.

29. Julia Duffy, “The Grain of the Voice in Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children*,” *Antipodes* 4, no. 1 (1990): 48.

mother Henny is the true villain of the household. Sam regularly refers to her as the “devil” and takes “each of his children aside . . . and [tells them], in simple language, the true story of his disillusionment”: “Oh, the hell, where there should have been heaven!” (35), he exclaims. In other words, Sam uses language to deny, deflect, and minimise his own involvement in the suffering of others, while convincing the children that he is the real victim of their mother’s hatred. In cases where the father is an intimate terrorist, language, Johnson notes, plays a key role in their repertoire. Just as Sam deceives his children through his words, the intimate terrorist uses language to convince his children that “he *should* be in charge, that he does know what is best (father knows best), and that [the children’s mother] is incompetent or stupid or immoral.”³⁰

Stead allows the reader to experience this form of linguistic dominance through the narrative’s shifting focalisation. In an essay on *The Man Who Loved Children*, Joseph A. Boone observes that Sam’s “overbearing textual presence threatens to undo the reader’s autonomy, forcing our submission and straining our patience to breaking point.”³¹ The reader’s perturbation with Sam intensifies as his perspective dominates the first half of the novel; however, this tension is later partially released as other perspectives are introduced. For example, when Louie begins to challenge Sam’s authority through the adoption of the language of classical poetry, both she and the reader begin to realise—more than halfway through the novel—that the family has unknowingly been sliding into poverty:

Now Louie noticed, *for the first time*, that they had only one glass for water. . . . It dawned upon her that they had had no glasses for a long time; and then she called to mind a slow dwindling in goods, over years. She remembered that once they had had dozens of engraved water glasses . . . which had been with them for years, and then had come plain glasses got at the ten-cent stores, and then gift glasses got with packets of tea, until now they had only one in the world. (431; italics mine.)

30. Johnson, *Typology*, 8.

31. Boone, “Of Fathers,” 515.

As Joan Lidoff notes, when Louie “discovers the power of language, she is able to reshape the family perception of reality.”³² Similarly, when Louie’s school teacher Miss Aiden comes to visit the Pollit household, her outsider perspective on the family’s circumstances shatters the illusion that Sam’s language system has created, both for the family and the reader:

The Pollits lived in a poverty that to her was actually incredible. They lacked everything. She was shown the bathroom, and found herself in a shanty with wooden walls and a roughly cemented floor. . . . Instead of toilet paper, they used cut-up newspaper; there was no bathmat but a sodden crisscross of slats. ‘I had no idea,’ thought Miss Aiden, ‘that there was a place as primitive in the whole world’; and she began to wonder how they lived at all. (440)

When Louie runs away from home at the novel’s conclusion, she makes a striking observation as she turns back to face the house: “Things certainly *looked* different: they were no longer part of herself but objects that she could freely consider without prejudice” (551; italics mine). These fresh realisations demonstrate the power of language to shape reality. In this case, not only is the “reality” experienced by the novel’s characters (the children) destabilised when Sam’s language is no longer there to shape it, but so too is the reader’s reality transformed, which has until now been shaped by Sam’s focalised perspective. As Lidoff notes, “the power of language to shape vision is one of Stead’s central subjects.”³³

PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The power of language to shape vision also extends to Stead’s graphic representations of physical and sexual violence in the novel. Although not witnessed directly by the children or the reader, several instances of violence are implied through the presentation of onomatopoeic sounds, such as crashes and bangs, or portrayed through descriptions of indecipherable yelling from another room. Although the violence is diegetically “invisible” in the text, its echoes permeate the house—as well

33. Lidoff, “Domestic Gothic,” 202.

32. Joan Lidoff, “Domestic Gothic: The Imagery of Anger in Christina Stead’s ‘Man Who Loved Children’” in *Studies in the Novel* 11, no. 2 (1979): 204.

as in the children's consciousness; and it pervades the text to the point that, as William Lane argues, Louie's bedtime stories become deliberate allegories to help the family cope with their collective trauma wrought by the violence.³⁴ Additionally, the children's powerlessness in the context of the family hierarchy is further emphasised through Stead's repetition of meteorological metaphors to describe the parents' conflicts, such as storms and winds—metaphors that suggest that this violence is so all-encompassing as to be a part of nature itself.

There are several other inferable moments of physical violence in the novel, many of them couched in colloquial language that minimises their gravity: "a mild kick in the pants," "boxed her ears," "a flip on the head", and "a bear cuff" are among the descriptions the narrator deploys to normalise the violent acts. Notably, the novel never explores how harmful these incidents are to the children, which perhaps suggests how normal these apparently minor acts of violence towards children—sometimes reframed as merely disciplinary acts—were considered among mid-twentieth-century families. Of course, depicting this violence as normal does not mean that these acts were acceptable to Stead, as Franzen asserts. Instead, Stead's depiction of violence against women and children may be understood, in the context of the narrative, as an attempt to characterise it as a symptom of the broader cultural ideology infecting the institution and Western model of the family: namely, that of patriarchy. One of the novel's most notable examples of violence as a symptom of patriarchy occurs when Louie overhears noises coming from Henny's bedroom. As the narrator describes,

[Louie] got up and stole to the head of the stairs; there was, in fact, a sort of scuffling, and Louie listened, in sacred terror, leaning on the stairhead: would they do for each other at last, would she come down and find them in pools of blood? . . . Henny gave a fretful hysterical laugh, 'Oh, leave me alone, you make me sick,' and there was again a violent

34. William Lane, "Repetition and Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*," *Australian Literary Studies* 31, no. 6 (2016): 7.

struggle, and then she heard Sam groan. That was it! . . . Louie stood at the door of Henny's room for a while with her heart beating fast, and heard Henny weeping, but she did not dare go in and find out if and how murder had been done. (458)

This episode of violence occurs after Sam has accused Henny of infidelity, an accusation that brings into question the paternity of their most recent child. While Stead's scholarly readership has referred to this scene as an instance of "make-up sex" that "is intense and fruitful," we can alternatively infer, with reference to the wider context of control in Sam and Henny's relationship, that this scene is a depiction of rape—a violent assault through which Sam attempts to reassert his masculinity and reinforce his paternal authority.³⁵ In support of this interpretation, it is notable that Henny earlier describes herself as Sam's "body servant" (151) and that, at this point of the novel, Sam's entry into Henny's bedroom, a place from which he has previously been banned, signifies Sam's invasion of and entitlement to Henny's "private" space. Consistent with this analysis, Boone argues that, "in a profound sense, Sam's rape of Henny is one final aggrandizing imposition of ego calculated to secure the interest of the father's house and with it the legitimacy of his authority."³⁶ Nonetheless, the focalisation of this scene through Louie's perspective means that the rape and its violence are kept both literally and figuratively "behind closed doors," perhaps suggesting that depictions of marital rape remained taboo in the mid-twentieth century, even for a novel as modern as *The Man Who Loved Children*.

Henny, the Violent Resistor

Stead's veiled representations of violence, established through implication and suggestion, have the cumulative effect of creating a broad atmosphere of fear, anxiety, and tension within which the novel's more explicit violence occurs. While sexual violence may have been an unspeakable or unrepresentable extreme for Stead's purposes, the novel contains many blatant depictions of physical violence within the family. Early in

35. Michael Schmidt, "Introduction" in Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children* [1940] (London: Apollo, 2016), ix.

36. Boone, "Of Fathers," 520.

the novel, for instance, Sam and Henny argue about the need for a nanny, which escalates into an argument about Louie, before giving way to accusations of infidelity. The tension of the scene builds until it explodes into a physical assault:

He flushed and rushed to her, taking her by the shoulder and shaking her hard. She turned her face awkwardly to look up at him, "You know you're lying!" He struck her hard on the shoulder, saying, "You are tempting me to do it!" She at once let out a loud cry, "Don't you hit me, you devil; don't you dare strike your wife; I'll let everyone know!" . . . she felt Sam's hand over her mouth. She spat and pushed it away, cried feebly, "Help, help! Murder!" (133)

The tension escalates again when Henny threatens to divorce Sam and take the children, a threat to which Sam responds with a counter-threat: "'Shut up,' shouted Sam, 'shut up or I'll shut you up.'" As though directly answering Sam's threat to silence her, Henny initiates one of her frequent verbal diatribes, challenging the façade of innocence Sam often uses to manipulate both his family and the reader:

"You took me and maltreated me and starved me half to death because you couldn't make a living and sponged off my father and used his influence, hoisting yourself up on all my aches and miseries," Henny began chanting with fury, "boasting and blowing about your success when all the time it was me, my poor body that was what you took your success out of. You were breaking my bones and spirit forcing your beastly love on me: a brute, a savage, a wild Indian wouldn't do what you did, slobbering round me and calling it love and filling me with children month after month and year after year while I hated and detested you and screamed in your ears to get away from me, but you wouldn't let me go."

...

Sam hit her, with his open hand, across the mouth. (148)

The juxtaposition, here, between Henny's polysyndetic dialogue, full of heavy plosives and grotesque imagery, and the concise, third-person description of Sam's violent act crystallises the power dynamic within their relationship. As Henny's emotional truth-telling threatens to upend Sam's control over the family narrative, Sam turns to physical violence to reassert his power

and authority. Sam's violence, aimed at Henny's mouth, indicates not only the role that language plays in challenging authority but how silencing another's language is the ultimate tool of control within the patriarchal family system. Unable to use her words but refusing to concede defeat, Henny grabs a kitchen knife and began

slashing him backwards and forwards across the arm and shoulder, and began slashing at his face before he had the presence of mind to knock it out of her hand and push it away. She stumbled and fell to the floor, where she lay exhausted and trembling. (149)

While both Henny and Sam enact physical violence in this scene, their actions may be understood differently in accordance with Johnson's context of control. Henny's verbal outburst exposes Sam's hypocrisy and challenges his "natural" moral authority by highlighting the way in which Sam exploits her body and misappropriates her family's wealth and reputation. This outburst poses a threat to Sam's masculinity, which is founded on self-sufficiency, and compels him to restore not just his masculine identity but the patriarchal hierarchy of the family through physical violence. Henny's attack on Sam with the knife, however, is both a self-protective response to the immediate physical threat Sam poses, as well as a retaliation to the more general existential threat he represents—a threat encapsulated in her outburst. Henny, in short, is what Johnson calls the "violent resistor."

Mothers' Violence towards their Children

As we have seen, Sam's violence towards his children stems from a desire to control and manipulate the family in order to maintain his position as the patriarch. The motivations behind Henny's use of violence toward her children, however, are not so clear. Scholars working in the social sciences and social work, including Sophie Namey, Catherine Carlson, and Kathleen O'Hara, have developed a framework for understanding mothers' violence against their children, theorising a category

of maternal violence that Johnson's system does not identify. These scholars argue that "women's use of violence against their children cannot be extracted from the dynamics of oppression inevitable for women living under patriarchal values and institutions."³⁷ In other words, Henny's violence cannot be isolated from her oppression but must instead be read as an expression of her powerlessness and a symptom of her own psychological collapse within the patriarchal family system. In the novel's opening pages, Henny's descriptions of the Pollit house bring into view her feelings about herself and her life:

She had the calm of frequentation; she belonged to this house and it to her. Though she was a prisoner in it, she possessed it. She and it were her marriage. She was indwelling in every board and stone of it: every fold in the curtains had a meaning (perhaps they were so folded to hide a darn or stain); every room was a phial of revelation to be poured out some feverish night in the secret laboratories of her decisions, full of living cancers of insult, leprosies of disillusion, abscesses of grudge, gangrene of nevermore, quintan fevers of divorce, and all the proliferating miseries, the running sores and thick scabs, for which (and not for its heavenly joys) the flesh of marriage is so heavily veiled and conventually interned. (5–6)

Through the deployment of images of corruption and decay, Henny illustrates what Lidoff describes as "the fantasies of [her] subterranean psychic world" and uses these images as a means of expressing "an anger frequently intensified into hostility by its long repression."³⁸ Though these images are, as Lidoff further notes, "an extension of personal feelings of fragmentation, pain, and internalized denigration," they also reflect the psychological and spiritual trauma Henny experiences while living within this violent patriarchal family system.³⁹

Lidoff's psychoanalytic reading of the images envisioned by Henny can also be applied to the violence that Henny enacts. Throughout the novel, Henny engages in various acts of violence against her children, but none more violent than those aimed at her stepdaughter Louie. Henny's violence

37. Sophie Namy, Catherine Carlson, Kathleen O'Hara, et al., "Towards a Feminist Understanding of Intersecting Violence Against Women and Children in the Family," *Social Science & Medicine* 184 (2017): 41.

38. Lidoff, "Domestic Gothic," 201–203.

39. *Ibid.*, 205.

is directed primarily at Louie's non-conforming body, which she variously insults as fat, dirty, clumsy, sweaty, pink, and overtly sexual. But although Henny condemns them, these same traits are those that Henny has been told her own body lacks (in contrast to Louie, Henny is thin, pale, and desexualised); and they are also traits that Henny has been taught to hate about female bodies in general. Henny's violence towards Louie in the form of verbal and physical assaults thus plays out as an externalisation of her own internalised hatred of womanhood, which she sees as the core reason for her own suffering. As Brydon argues, "Henny sees in the child another woman destined to entrapment through her sex and so lashes out against her own fate in lashing out against Louisa."⁴⁰ However, in contrast to Sam's violence, which Louie "will never understand and never forgive" (37), Louie begins to sympathise with Henny over the course of the novel, even as her violence becomes more severe.

Together, Louie and Henny form what Lidoff calls a "coalition of the oppressed" as they begin to recognise their shared suffering within the patriarchal family.⁴¹ In Louie's eyes, Henny transforms from a "half-mad tyrant [and] degenerate society girl" into "a creature of flesh and blood, nearer to Louisa because, like the little girl, she was guilty, rebellious, and got chastised." (36) As such, Louie begins to see Henny's violence as an expression of her long-suppressed feelings of anger and despair, feelings that shape and motivate almost all of her behaviour towards others. Unable to take her anger out on the true source of her suffering—Sam, and by extension, the patriarchal culture that normalises Sam's mistreatment of her—Henny takes out her anger on her children, who are constant reminders of the realities of her life as a woman. As Namy and her co-authors assert in their essay "Towards a Feminist Understanding of Intersecting Violence against Women and Children in the Family," such "maternal violence must be situated within the broader context of the patriarchal family, which

40. Brydon, *Christina Stead*, 76.

41. Lidoff, "Domestic Gothic," 202, 212.

systematically disempowers women in many domains of their lives while granting them relative power vis-à-vis their children.”⁴²

A Culture of Complicity

The violence of the Pollit household, while extreme and pervasive, is not a rarity in the Pollit neighbourhood. Indeed, the same dynamics that govern violence in the Pollit home appear in other homes and families in the novel. When Louie visits her neighbour, Angela Kidd, the narrator indicates the omnipresence of violence:

Everyone knew of her and John. They sought no friends amongst the neighbours, despising them all. But everyone knew . . . that this same John beat her, starved her, and insulted her and that she was abandoned by all her family, though old and frail, because John had systematically alienated them. The Walkers, on one side, Middenway, the grocer, on the other, had heard her cries and his storming late at night or in the peace of some holiday. (80)

Despite the whole neighbourhood “knowing” of John Kidd’s violence, nobody has ever intervened. That John’s actions have caused Angela serious psychological harm becomes even clearer when Angela asks Louie to kill their pet cat to prevent John from inflicting further beatings on her. As Deborah Horvitz argues, “silence is not a neutral act; rather, it is a politically regressive one that passively permits the continuation of violence.”⁴³ Thus, the fact that neither neighbours, community members, nor the police have ever appeared to intervene in or stop these conflicts suggests a wider culture of silence and permissiveness concerning family violence, and particularly men’s violence against women and children, which amounts to a politically regressive culture of acceptance.

The novel’s subplot, which details the Pollit family’s financial collapse, illustrates the role that wider patriarchal norms play in normalising family violence. Henny’s feelings of anger and entrapment are only exacerbated by Sam’s exclusive control

42. Namy, “Towards a Feminist Understanding,” 41.

43. Deborah Horvitz, *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women’s Fiction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 30.

of the family's finances. As Johnson notes of "intimate terrorists" such as Sam, these figures "often also work to restrict access to the resources needed for effective resistance."⁴⁴ Sam's position as the sole breadwinner of the family is consistent with the diegetic context of the novel; set in Washington, DC, in the early twentieth century, the novel captures a place and time in which fathers in middle-class families like the Pollits were expected to work while mothers were expected to take care of the children and tend to domestic matters. Having been raised in an upper-class home in the South, Henny has never been expected to work, and has never learned any of the skills that would enable her to establish financial independence. Having also lost her father's inheritance, Henny is financially dependent on Sam: she must ask him for money to buy essentials like food and clothing regularly; but she also steals money from her children, and, ultimately, she is forced to sell her most treasured possessions to keep the family afloat after Sam loses his job. Lacking financial independence, Henny is unable to divorce Sam and support herself, meaning she has no choice but to return to the house and its violence even after she has spent some time away. This cycle of leaving and returning constitutes the novel's central structure, confirming Lane's argument that the novel is driven by repetition.⁴⁵ Although Henny "resets" when spending time away, when she returns home the tension rebuilds, resulting in another violent conflict that drives Henny away again.

This "cycle of violence" creates its own narrative tension and eventually results in Henny's death.⁴⁶ Somewhat surprisingly, however, Henny's death occurs not at the hands of Sam but those of her stepdaughter Louie. Having recognised the damage being caused by their inability to resolve their conflicts, Louie decides to poison both Sam and Henny:

Only one thing was certain: it must be done, to save the children. "Who cares for them but me?" she thought coldly. "Those two selfish, passionate people, terrible as gods in their eternal married

44. Johnson, *Typology*, 28.

45. Lane, "Repetition," 1–13.

46. On such "cycles of violence," see Kirkwood, *Leaving Abusive Partners*, 17–19.

hate, do not care for them; Mother herself threatened to kill them. Perhaps she would: at any rate, their life will be a ruin even if they are allowed to go on living. There is no question of it: I have the will, I must have the firmness to get rid of the two parents." She no longer thought of Sam as her father: she had not thought of him as anything but a mouthy jailer for months; as for Henny, she did not see how her fate would be better if she went on living. (528)

Duffy argues that Louie's desire to poison her parents is a symptom of her "megalomaniacal, dictatorial tendencies" and an "aggression" that was instilled in her by her father.⁴⁷ However, to understand Louie's violence in this way is to read it in isolation, and to ignore the wider control context of the novel. Louie's guiltlessness—her lack of remorse—stems not from a patriarchal mindset but instead from her belief that her acts will put an end to Sam's abuse and liberate Henny from her suffering—a belief that is evident in Louie's rationalisation on the night before she acts (527–28). Indeed, Louie's ability to use violence to prevent suffering is foreshadowed in an earlier episode in the novel: when Louie kills a cat at the request of her battered neighbour Angela. Despite feeling "a sort of sickness" while drowning the cat, Louie justifies her actions as beneficent, believing "that the little woman loved her and that there was [now] peace in her foul cottage" (80–83).

In contrast to Sam, Louie uses violence to protect the weak from the strong. Louie may thus be understood as another violent resistor—a characterisation supported by Louie's repeated references to freedom and liberation as justifications for the poisonings. As the narrator notes, Louie "never once doubted that the right thing to do was to use cyanide tomorrow morning, or that she must liberate the children: it fell to her, no one else would do it or understand the causes as she did. Then she would at once be free herself" (528–29). And yet, Johnson's category of the violent resistor does not account for violence committed by victims against other victims, as is the case with Louie—a victim who acts out violence against a fellow victim in Henny. Nor does Johnson's model fully account for the use

47. Duffy, "The Grain of the Voice," 49–50.

of violence against the self, which might arguably describe the circumstances in which Henny, knowing that the tea Louie sets out is poisoned, drinks it anyway in an act of knowing self-harm. Tellingly, the resistance demonstrated both by Henny and Louie is ultimately ineffectual; it only results in Henny's death and Louie's abandonment of the home. By contrast, Sam remains unfazed and unpunished in a situation emblematic of the wider patriarchal culture: Sam's authority is left untouched; indeed, his authority (and actions) is no less than reaffirmed when he is offered a job as the host of an educational radio program that allows him access to his children without interference. Acts of violent resistance may grant short-term feelings of control to victims; however, these acts rarely destabilise the broader control context of a violent home environment or effectively challenge the broader cultural norms and values that allow family violence to occur.

Conclusion

Family violence is not a new phenomenon in society; nor is the exploration of family violence a new phenomenon in Australian literary fiction. However, it is only in recent decades that family violence has become a serious subject of scholarly attention, with new frameworks and discourses being developed to identify and examine family violence in instances where it might once have remained invisible, minimised, normalised, or dismissed. As this analysis has shown, not only does contemporary family violence theory allow us to revise and reconsider previous understandings of violence as they are represented in Stead's most famous novel; it also demonstrates the ways in which Stead's novel identifies the causes, contexts, and manifestations of family violence—factors that have changed very little in the seventy odd years since Stead wrote *The Man Who Loved Children*. This article has also shown how, through sociological models such as Johnson's typology of control, readers of Stead's fiction may recognise and

appreciate the prescience of *The Man Who Loved Children* in elaborating the role that gender and class play in the perpetration and normalisation of family violence in Western society. Indeed, Stead's novel represents one of the most insightful explorations of family violence in twentieth-century Australian fiction, providing a vivid, engaging, and at-times shocking portrait of its everyday reality and long-term consequences.

