

# The 'natural outlawry of womankind': four artists in the novels of Christina Stead

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## Summary

This essay considers Christina Stead's exploration of those women artists in her *oeuvre* to whom she attributes embedded artworks, Catherine Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Louisa Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children*, Teresa Hawkins in *For Love Alone*, and Eleanor Herbert in *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*. In giving these putative women artists their own voices, Stead not only empowers women in the social formation she depicts, but she explores unconsciously the nature of her own craft. These women's narratives manifest various characteristics that only recently have become the subject of debate for feminist theorists. Sometimes, with the partial exception of Eleanor in Stead's novels, the artworks are antagonistic to androcentricism in general, and to the dominant discourse in particular. In combatting the Law of the Father and in attempting an alternative discourse they connect with an idea of the mother; their creativity expresses their sexual desires or fears which are often incestuous, while death or deathliness is implicit in the act of narration itself.

## Opsomming

In hierdie opstel word 'n beskouing gegee van die verkenning van vroulike kunstenaars in Christina Stead se *oeuvre*. Sy stel vroulike kunstenaars en hul werk voor: Catherine Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, Louisa Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children*, Teresa Hawkins in *For Love Alone*, en Eleanor Herbert in *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*. Deur hierdie fiktiewe vroulike kunstenaars self aan die woord te stel, gee sy nie net aan vroue 'n magposisie in die samelewing wat sy uitbeeld nie, maar verken sy onbewustelik die aard van haar eie kunstenaarskap. In hierdie vertellings word verskeie eienskappe gemanifesteer waarvoor feministiese teoretici onlangs eers begin debatteer het. In Stead se romans is die kunswerke soms, met die gedeeltelike uitsondering van dié van Eleanor, antagonisties teenoor manlike gesentreerdheid in die algemeen en teenoor dominerende gesprekvoering in die besonder. In hierdie vroulike vertellings word daar gestry teen die Wet van die vader-figuur en word 'n alternatiewe gesprekvoering geskep waarin die idee van die moeder na vore kom; hul seksuele begeertes of vrese, wat dikwels bloedskenning is, word voorgestel deur hul kreatiwiteit, terwyl die dood of doodsheid implisiet in die vertelhandeling aanwesig is.

Stead depicts a number of putative artists in her novels, but Catherine Baguenault in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934), Louisa Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), Teresa Hawkins in *For Love Alone* (1944), and Eleanor Herbert in *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)* (1976), are distinctive because Stead has them tell tales, write plays or draft testaments directly in embedded artworks which give voice to their desires. These artworks are not isolated instances, as the narratives in which they are inscribed consider the motivation behind their creativity and just what kind of consciousness generated each literary work.

What interests me in Stead's serial exploration of these women artists is to what extent she portrays them as antagonistic to androcentricism in general

and to the dominant discourse in particular. They experience problematic interactions, sometimes of incestuous dimensions, with either a brother or a father. At the same time their creativity is linked to sexual desire, and is informed by an idea of the mother or some acknowledgement of death, be it their own or the deathliness inherent in a discourse that does not allow for any expression of women's experience. That these artists figures manifest the characteristics of a woman writer unfaithful to the Law of the Father suggests not that Stead is consciously psychoanalytic in her characterization, but that in portraying their difficulties and desires she is unconsciously exploring the dynamics of her own creativity. Stead acknowledged repeatedly that Louisa Pollit and Teresa Hawkins were modelled on her own life. In an interview with Giulia Giuffré she maintained that she had written her autobiography in these two figures, as well as in others (Stead, n.d.: 23). When Rodney Wetherell asked if she herself had figured in Teresa's "struggle" and specifically in her efforts to leave Australia she replied: "Yes, yes, that's quite true. It is I, it's me" (Stead, 1983: 18). That she portrays Louisa and Teresa as artist figures attests to a self-conscious preoccupation with her own art. Catherine and Eleanor, however, tend to function less autobiographically and more as undesirable possibilities for the woman artist struggling to write in an androcentric social formation. Eleanor's relationship with the language of her father is particularly seductive and complex.

Language, as many feminist theorists have noted, duplicates the power structures of androcentric society.<sup>1</sup> As women constitute what Dale Spender terms as "mute" rather than a "dominant" group (1982: 77), they lack rather than embody this power. By depicting in detail women rather than men narrating, Stead ascribes some power to women's abilities to speak and write. (Teresa's *Testament* is more meditative than narrative but it does tell of her own life.) Catherine, Louisa, Teresa and Eleanor are, however, all framed by a social formation which evinces little sympathy for their endeavours. Though they might attempt to deny the dominant discourse it cannot, of course, be dislocated; though they speak of their own lives they never, with the exception of Teresa, attempt to reach any female community; though their writing might suggest transcendence they are always returned pragmatically to the framework of a male audience. Significantly, Stead's concerns predate critical interest in women's insertion into language. Only recently have issues of women and creativity, language and power been debated at length and I shall draw from these writings to further my discussion.

## 1 Antagonism to androcentricism and to the dominant discourse

O'Barr and Atkins documented that although "women's language" is not gender-specific, it does constitute, generally, a language of powerlessness which is illustrative of and reinforces women's social position (1980). Thus, for a woman to write is an act of political significance because, in so doing, she is claiming a voice and demanding an audience who will take cognizance of her art. In the introduction to *The (m)other tongue* the editors discuss the widespread nature of this phenomenon:

In *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud reproduces the conventional association of women with nature, men with culture, attributing that division to woman's maternal instinct, which causes her to resist the demands of culture as a disruption of the family. When women claim authorship, they not only subvert this paradigm, in which women may be spoken of, spoken through, but may not bespeak themselves, they also raise questions about priority and the stories by which it is maintained and conferred. (Garner, Kahane, Sprengnether, 1985: 24)

Jean Bethke Elshtain is adamant that women should move beyond the polarities of "discourse as domination, or discourse as unavoidably masked, and toward speech as part of an emancipatory effort, a movement toward social clarity and self-comprehension" (1982: 129). This is certainly a project to pursue in coming to some feminist consciousness, but Elshtain's manifesto does not cohere too well with narratives that depict women mimetically rather than inspirationally. The writings of the women in Stead's novels do not constitute "rational speech" nor do they always recognize what Elshtain terms "the censors within" though they may be informed by an "eyes-open, truth-telling passion" against the dominant ideology (129). So much of what women write or speak, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar maintain, tells the truth "slant" (1979); consequently I would argue, as does Barbara Bellow Watson, that:

The meanings naïvely called "hidden meanings", those not asserted in declarative form, are where we must look in literature for a certain realism about women's experience of power. (1982: 403)

The embedded artworks in Stead's novels are where we must look for an encapsulation of these issues of power. I shall discuss later how Catherine, Teresa, Louisa, and Eleanor attempt an alternative to the dominant discourse but, initially, I would like to turn to their reactions to the dominant ideology, which informs, even sometimes motivates their writing.

In considering the myth of Astyanax, Leo Bersani emphasizes the "patricidal project which may be implicit in desire" (1976: 12) and suggests, if tentatively, that it is "the role of sublimation, conscience and character-formation to modify the potentially limitless aggressiveness of desire" (13). These observations are relevant for both Louisa and Teresa who retrieve their patricidal desires from sublimation by giving voice to them. Teresa challenges her taunting father, "You offend my honour! I would kill anyone who offends my honour" (13). Louisa takes her patricidal project to its literal extreme, actually planning to kill Sam (as well as Henny) by adding cyanide to the morning tea, but her nerve fails her at the last moment. Even so, her threats, as well as Teresa's, suggest radical literary acts, for their statements not only explicitly defy the father, but also implicitly contradict androcentric norms.

Teresa and Louisa are both preoccupied with combatting received notions of morality and language which are imposed upon them. Teresa is directly concerned with the custom that women marry early or else find themselves

consigned to the “Great Unwanted” (109). Not only does this humiliate women but it also denies any sexual openness or experimentation.

Louisa’s emphasis is different, for though she is pubescent she is not yet of marriageable age, and she battles with her father more directly and more protractedly than Teresa does, warring against his discourse and his control. During one of his prolonged diatribes about himself, religion, and love, she writes, “*Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, I can’t stand your gassing, oh, what a windbag, what will shut you up, shut up, shut up*” (372).

Catherine’s relationship with her father features little in the narrative. Instead, she battles against a hostile social formation in which “woman” is synonymous with a term of abuse, and women are either caricatured or mythologized. Although she works towards dismantling a society that exploits people by class and gender, Catherine is never as active as Louisa in her antagonism to androcentric norms. Tragically, her behaviour serves only to endorse her victimization. Although an artist herself, she rarely paints. Instead, she becomes the subject of art, posing as a model and is depicted, emblematically, either as a worn, crazy, young gypsy or as a suicide by drowning in a city where suicides at the Gap may be differentiated according to gender – the women die because of unwanted pregnancies, the men because of economic troubles.

If Catherine does not act as forcefully as Louisa, she shows an awareness of and has made some analysis of her position as Other, as an object of male desire and fear. Eleanor’s analysis, however, never progresses beyond her irritation with the “so-called moral system” (29) which she, like Teresa, judges to be imposed on women by men. In her sexual openness she believes she is “*striking a blow for freedom*” (29) but she still conceals her activities in euphemism, and, essentially, conforms to rather than questions the *status quo*. Even her desire to be a writer, secondary to her wish for marriage, a home, and children is self-conscious, but self-deluded. Dr Mack points out, “*But those are not your projects . . . Society gave them to you and you meekly accepted them*” (12). Thus, socially and linguistically, in revising her father’s novel, Eleanor reproduces rather than challenges the script she receives from her father.

## 2 An alternative to the dominant discourse

Catherine, Louisa, and Teresa differ from Eleanor in their more rigorous attempts to counter not only the rule of the Father but also to construct a discourse that is not congruent with the dominant mode of mimeticism and realism. The possibility, however, of actually developing an alternative women’s language is problematic, for women can never truly operate outside the discourse that is dominant. Feminist theorists such as H el ene Cixous and Mary Daly have attempted to write different languages for women. Monique Wittig and Virginia Woolf have experimented with a syntax and style fitted to the particular needs of the woman writer. Though Stead herself never directly voiced any desires for a woman’s discourse, the embedded artworks do take cognizance of alternative modes.

Catherine tells an obscure fairytale that only a madman comprehends, Louisa writes a play in her own devised language, and Teresa attempts to allay the sufferings of “chaste” women in lurid illustrations of myth or legend. Their writing all demands some decoding, and suggests the desire of the writer to connect with the idea of the mother. The artworks of Teresa and Louisa, most obviously, seem motivated to reach their deceased mothers and other women. This sets up a binary opposition of writing against the father and phallogocentrism and towards the mother and an acknowledgement of other women.

Feminist psychoanalytic critics have recognized the central importance and recurrence of the maternal figure in women’s writing that questions androcentricism.<sup>2</sup> More broadly, Chodorow (1978) has considered at length the preoedipal bonds between mother and daughter, a link that resonates in women’s fiction. Claire Kahane explores the problematic connections between daughter and mother in Gothic fiction. Yet this phenomenon, the “ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both self and other”, (Kahane, 1985: 337) is extensive. Alice Jardine draws on Kristevan theory in her analysis of women’s special relation to the *semiotic*, “the space of privileged contact with the mother’s (female) body” (1981: 228). She maintains:

Within the classical Oedipal structure which has dominated the West, the female child, nonetheless, has necessarily retained a special relationship to this semiotic space. The impossibility of ever completely establishing herself as *Other* than the mother – even if that is what patriarchal culture has told her she *must* do if she wants to write – has combined with that culture’s constant denial of her ability to write through its designation of her, *with* her mother, as *The Other*. Doubly Other, then, the woman who writes translates this at least double message. She experiences a kind of double vision . . . a difficult and double practice. (229)

Jardine is concerned with how this mother-daughter bond permeates the language of women writers, a phenomenon I shall discuss in connection with the embedded artworks in Stead’s novels.

More generally, however, feminist critics and women writers have foregrounded biographical rather than linguistic connections with the mother. Virginia Woolf proposed that “a woman writing thinks back through her mothers” (1929: 101) and Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes:

Judging from the evidence in Gilman, Phelps, Ward, Woolf, and Walker, there seems to be a specific biographical drama that has entered and shaped *Kunstlerromane* by women. Such a narrative is engaged with a maternal figure and, on a biographical level, is often compensatory for her losses (which may themselves be imaginatively heightened by being remembered by her child). The daughter becomes an artist to extend, reveal, and elaborate her mother’s often thwarted talents. (1985: 93)

Although such motivation on the part of the artist, Louisa, is never made explicit, she does experience intimate connections with both her deceased natural mother and her stepmother, Henny, who commits suicide. Together,

Louisa and Henny form some community against the endless incursions of Sam into their privacy:

Whenever [Louisa's] irritations got too deep, she mooched in to see her mother. Here, she had learned, without knowing she had learned it, was a brackish well of hate to drink from, and a great passion of gall which could run deep and still, or send up waterspouts, that could fret and boil, or seem silky as young afternoon, something that put iron in her soul and made her strong to resist the depraved healthiness and idle jollity of the Pollit clan. It was a strange affection. It could never express itself by embraces or kisses, nothing more than a rare, cool, dutiful kiss on the withering cheek of Henny. It came from their physical differences, because their paths could never meet, and from the natural outlawry of woman-kind. (275)

From this "natural outlawry" Louisa endeavours to write a different language, most obviously to keep her private writing from her father. Initially, her diary is written in a secret code that is indecipherable to Sam. The young maid at Henny's mother's home teaches Louisa bad French, as if those who are subservient are inserted differently into language, but the most striking instance of Louisa constructing an alternative discourse is, of course, in her play, *Tragos: Herpes Rom* for which she "invent(s) an extensive language to express every shade of her ideas" (391).

Louisa's discourse is often motivated by desires to communicate with other women as in her Aiden cycle of poems, and connections with her mother remain strong. Although she tells Sam, "I'm my own mother," (521) she obviously felt deep connections with her deceased mother. She takes as her talisman for her journey "round the world" to Harpers Ferry her mother's raffia bag that the latter had embroidered with beads. The narrative suggests that Louisa's future development as a writer will emanate from the mother's place, that she will have to return to some degree to these preoedipal links. Though Henny's murder liberates her, the bonds with her natural mother also strengthen her for her future as a writer.

Teresa is also without a mother and, like Louisa, she hopes to travel to a place called Harper's Ferry also associated with her mother, because she attempts to reach it from her mother's relatives' home at Narara.<sup>3</sup> Teresa experiences her mother's absence as a tragic lacuna in her life. She lacks a mother who could act as a guide, and had woken from a nightmare calling to her mother for help. Teresa goes further than Louisa in these quasi-maternal bonds by connecting with other women through her consciousness of their oppressed status. Her "The Seven Houses of Love" also seems to constitute a reply to a lack in women's writing. As an adolescent she had felt that in literature, perversely, her inner world was recognized by men but not by women because women silenced their own feelings in their writings. Her *Testament* is also an appeal to and a communication with "abandoned, unloved women" (419), for whom Teresa regards herself as a spokesperson.

Her envisioning a community with these women involves a subversion of patriarchal structures which always demand a recognition of male hegemony. Nina Auerbach notes:

As a recurrent literary image, a community of women is a rebuke to the conventional ideal of a solitary woman living for and through men, attaining citizenship in the community of adulthood through masculine approval alone. The communities of women which have haunted our literary imagination from the beginning are emblems of female self-sufficiency which create their own corporate reality, evoking both wishes and fears. (1978: 5)

Teresa never envisions female self-sufficiency or celibacy as an ideal, however; her "The Seven Houses of Love" seems a compensatory meditational system rather than a new practice "by which the Chaste can Know Love" (420). But if the *Testament* does envision "Heaven and Hell" as a relationship with a male lover, it reaches towards a new discourse, a paratactic phantasmagoria of images and symbols which talks of and to women's experience.

Although Catherine's tale never extends towards other women as directly as Teresa's *Testament*, it similarly challenges the dominant discourse by telling her story "slant" in metaphor. The story tells about the inability of fortune-seeking travellers to translate five words "in an unearthly tongue" on an indestructible black stone (300) and how a clue to their translation lies in a magic mirror in a witch's cave. The tale speaks of a woman's relationship to language; condemned to alterity by a phallogocentric world view, she may have a very close cerebral and physical connection with language, but, tragically, women are kept, as the witch is in her cave, from direct access to words which have the potential for far-reaching destruction and transformation. Catherine herself never provides the solution to her mysterious tale and she is prevented from bringing closure to her story by Baruch and by a madman, who then tells his turgid, phantasmagorical tale of darkness, disorder, and death. Catherine, now pale with "bright eyes" and weeping loudly, before lapsing again into silence, says, "That is my life; only a madman knows it" (304). Disorder, madness and death have constituted her existence; and the tale told by the idiot has signified everything. Both are *isolatos* who speak metaphorically.

### 3 Embedded artworks and desire

Though Catherine is silenced by a male narratee she has, at least, spoken her desire as do the other women writers, except for Eleanor, in Stead's canon. Their writing and narrating is closely associated with their sexuality and though they might not "write the body" as in *écriture féminine*, foregrounding women's bodily functions, their embedded artworks are revolutionary. Breaking the silence surrounding women's desires constitutes an opposition to phallogocentric culture which consigns women's sexuality to alterity. In the novels under discussion, Stead reveals either implicitly or explicitly that women's sexuality is a culturally-based phenomenon, as Michel Foucault has documented extensively (1978). Incest, of course, is one of the most tabooed desires in Western culture; that Stead treats of it in a number of her novels signifies her questioning of patriarchal structures which proscribe not only the satisfaction of such desires but even their acknowledgement. Ethel Spector Person confirms, in her study of gender-ordered sexuality, that "arousal itself

is prohibited in many circumstances, for example, if arousal is attached to an incestuous object" (1980: 610). In Stead's novels, incest is considered at length when Catherine speaks autonomously of her desires for her half-brother Michael, and Louisa writes reactively of the threat of her father's sexuality.

Only in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* does a character use incestuous passion as the subject of and motivation for a personal, confessional narrative. Foucault points out that "psychoanalysis allowed individuals to express their incestuous desires as discourse" (1978: 129) and Catherine's narrative can be inscribed into this mode. She confesses her plans to live in another country with Michael but he "only wanted to play with the idea" (275). As a rebel she was willing to challenge taboos, whereas Michael lacked the courage.

The patterns for Louisa are very different. Far from experiencing any desire for Sam, she dreads his paternal power which threatens incestuous intrusions. Here, fear and desire remain discrete: Louisa's only desire pertains to the power she can wrest from her father, but his behaviour is sexually provocative, (on one occasion he tries to force a banana into her mouth), and through literature, Sam initiates his daughter vicariously, believing that, as a father, he is acting as "the key to the adult world", (386) using an image fitting in its phallic symbolism.

The battle between Sam and Louisa is drawn along language lines. She "would strike at him verbally" (351) and he denigrates her speech for being "too wild, too passionate, too suggestive" (340). In reply, Louisa's stories and dramas react against his tyranny and emanate from an undirected, unformulated sexual desire. In Louisa's narratives the father-figure changes from father as possible hero in the Malayan story, to father as villain in the play, and to father as mere fool, countermanded always by a force which suggests Louisa's sexuality.

Teresa's imagination and her writing are motivated neither by incestuous desires nor by fears of incestuous encroachment; instead, she is inspired by "the countless flaming eyes of the flesh", (16). She observes that art has desire as its basis: "Everything in the world was produced by the act of love" (110). Her *Testament*, "A System by which the Chaste can Know Love", speaks of desire, lust and violence satisfied vicariously in literature or myth, and the older more experienced Teresa has two parallel desires, to complete her *Testament* and to express herself sexually.

Eleanor's art is merely an expression of decadence; her art incorporates no expressiveness of her true desires as it does for Catherine, Louisa and Teresa, but is merely a concealment and a perversion of them. Her sexuality remains impotent, unconsummated, static, consisting as it does of posing either nobly or perversely in "the quiet old rooms" over Quaideson's antique shop and enacting, to some minor extent, Quaideson's story of "the New Curiosity Shop" with its "lingering sensuality and sudden whiplashes of unseemly horror" (288).

Eleanor takes Quaideson's theory of art seriously. He considers: "All writers look as if they had stepmothers. The artist always has an expression of unsatisfied desire" (297). Her writing is too self-conscious, too money-moti-



vated ever to speak of her desires; her narratives, like her life, speak only of repression and the deathliness of stultification.

#### 4 Narrative and death

Narrative, of course, is related to the postponement of death; prototypically, Scheherazade tells stories to ward off death and a writer may regard her work as guaranteeing some kind of immortality. Stead herself believed that she was about to die when she wrote her first novel and considered *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* as something to leave behind.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, these women writers in Stead's novels all speak of and are framed by death, though, tragically, their efforts to elude imminent death through their narratives, dramas, and tales seem doomed to failure. Those desires they have redeemed from repression by addressing them in their embedded artworks still remain unattainable and thus are untransformative and deathly. Leo Bersani points out that when desires are endlessly repressed a fantasy of death as the absolute pleasure results (1976: 6); Luce Irigaray questions:

Must the multiple nature of female desire and language be understood as the fragmentary, scattered remains of a raped or denied sexuality? This is not an easy question to answer. The rejection, the exclusion of a female imaginary undoubtedly places woman in a position where she can experience herself only fragmentarily as waste or as excess in the little structured margins of a dominant ideology, this mirror entrusted by the (masculine) "subject" with the task of reflecting and redoubling himself. The role of "femininity" is prescribed moreover by this masculine specula(riza)tion and corresponds only slightly to woman's desire, which is recuperated only secretly, in hiding, and in a disturbing and unpardonable manner. (1980: 104)

Female desire, then, is always censored by the dominant ideology which also censors and judges the women writers' narratives. When they tell their own stories, Stead's women artists remain thwarted in their desires for a sympathetic audience. Thus the idea of death recurs in these women's experiences.

Catherine's relationship with death is associated very closely with the incestuous feelings between her and Michael. Peter Brooks points out:

Throughout the Romantic tradition, it is perhaps most notably the image of incest (of the fraternal-sororal variety) that hovers as the sign of a passion interdicted because its fulfilment would be too perfect, a discharge indistinguishable from death, the very cessation of narrative movement. (1985: 109)

This image of incest functions similarly in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Yet even without the fulfilment of his desire, Michael regards Catherine as representing death and Catherine, herself, longs for death: during a storm she cries, "Come sweet sea! . . . Come sweet death, I mean" (136). Her tale and the madman's completion of it tell of death, just as her whole life is informed

by deathliness. Tragically, her final artwork involves the sacrificial act of slashing her wrist, for other communication seems impossible.

Louisa, like Catherine, whose narrative and tale remain undeciphered by her listeners, also lacks an adult audience. Her creativity is, predominantly, as I have discussed above, directed towards Sam who either misunderstands or, alternatively, encroaches as an audience when she had desired some privacy for her writing.

Louisa is far more dramatically associated with death than Catherine, Teresa, or Eleanor. Her drowning of the neighbour's cat symbolizes her *desire for power through death* and prefigures her planned murder of both Henny and Sam. Unlike the other women artists in Stead's canon, Louisa acts on her death-dealing fantasies rather than repressing them.

Teresa, however, even censors her own daydreams once Jonathan goes to England, an action which can be interpreted as deathly, and years later, in London, when she discovers some of her unopened letters in Jonathan's trunk, she comes across a poem that speaks of death:

What artisan this night,  
 Blew in dark glass and fire  
 To imitate that bright  
 And sullen glance of thine?  
 Along the foaming beach  
 The tide pours dark as wine,  
 Dead flesh, black blood, and each  
 Is white and black of thine.  
 In the fierce southern night  
 The whirling meteors shine,  
 Like eyes; I am blind to sight  
 But what seems thee or thine. (325)

The poem stresses mortality not resurrection in its parody of the Mass. Without an audience, like Louisa's and Catherine's narratives, this poem had been consigned to an artistic death, and subsequently, although Quick is a receptive audience for her *Testament*, she envisages this literary artifact remaining unread in her lifetime.

Thus Teresa battles with double censorship, perhaps most obviously with the censor without, whose disapproval or indifference reduces her artworks to premature deaths. As Eleanor's own father seems fairly sympathetic, her self-repression seems to manifest itself more as a censor within. Yet both forms of censorship attest to the rule of the father's negation of a woman's voice, whether it is an external phenomenon or internalized psychologically. Eleanor's art is always circumscribed or second-hand and her embedded autobiographical narrative attests to the deathliness of using cliché as in incantation against "reality". Language for her involves a masking rather than any telling of the truth. Just as she fails ever to express her sexual desire, so her writing, confined to the deathliness of banal, magazine-type clichés or burning in her destructively "like an old wound", negates herself. (98).

## 5 Conclusion

Drawing together the apparently discrete instances of women narrating in their embedded artworks suggests that they never constitute mere moments in the novels, but may be located within Stead's concerns for women in language. The artistic desires of Catherine, Louisa, Teresa, and Eleanor also reveal issues that are currently preoccupying feminist theorists and literary critics: the act of a woman writing may be an empowering one but is complicated by how this woman writer interacts with the male symbolic, whether she complies, like Eleanor, or attempts to combat it, like the others. The language of some of the artworks, their poetry and metaphor, as well as their legendary or mythical modes, testify to a closeness with the maternal *semiotic*, confirmed biographically by Louisa and Teresa's bonds with their natural mothers.

All the narratives form brave statements of female desire that has been rescued from repression, but, because the social formation remains intact and hostile to these manifestations of desire, death figures in and around their narratives; the rule of the Father remains dominant and censoring, as Stead illustrates throughout her canon. If these embedded artworks suggest more than moments, they do remain fairly isolated instances of women narrating within or against the dominant ideology. Stead depicts most other women characters as too cowed by or complicit within the male symbolic to be artists, putative or otherwise. In attributing artworks to Catherine, Louisa, Teresa, and even Eleanor, however, Stead does foreground these women in her canon for their participation in the "natural outlawry of womankind".

## Notes

1. Robin Lakoff (1975), Dale Spender (1980), Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, Nelly Furman, eds. (1980).
2. See, for example, the essays in Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, Madelon Sprengnether, eds. (1985).
3. I have kept to the spelling in the novels: Harper's Ferry in *For Love Alone*, Harpers Ferry in *The Man Who Loved Children*.
4. Stead wrote about *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*: "I am not just going to fade away, I am going to leave something." Quoted in Geering, 1965: xii.

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