

# *For Love Alone?* Anorexia and Teresa's Quest for Love

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Many of them had not seen her since Malfi's wedding: she looked many years older, terribly thin, and distracted, almost as if she did not know they were there.

Christina Stead, *For Love Alone* (255)

Christina Stead was notoriously shy, while her husband William Blake was more extroverted: both, however, loved a party (Harris 5). Indeed, Stead derived great delight from preparing food and drink for a variety of social occasions. It was the paradoxical nature of Stead's apparent lack of self-esteem, on the one hand, and her seemingly masochistic desire to expose that shyness in a public domain, on the other, that initiated the thinking for this essay. Given that *For Love Alone* is an autobiographical novel, an analysis of such paradoxical behaviour in relation to the novel's characters is pertinent. To read *For Love Alone* from a psychoanalytical perspective offers a new insight into what motivates its characters (Furst 9). For example, the character of Teresa Hawkins displays many of the physiological and psychological symptoms of anorexia. She starves herself in her quest for love, a form of self-abnegation by which she gradually denies sustenance to both her body and mind.

Teresa's self-deprivation conveys the inextricable link between food and desire: she annihilates her identity, her sense of being, her notion of selfhood—and in the process effectively jeopardises her own rich dreams and memories. Ultimately she displays a concatenation of physiological symptoms that, viewed from a psychological perspective, suggests that Teresa suffers from *anorexia nervosa*. These symptoms include distorted

perceptions, sensitivity to cold and light, and lanugo or excessive body hair (qtd. in Counihan 218). In sum, both her body and her cognitive processes are debilitated by lack of nourishment, literally and metaphorically.

Though acknowledging the “prevailing critique of psychoanalysis as a form of social control” (Elliott 47), I believe that the diagnostic criteria for psychoanalytic disorders such as anorexia offer a unique psycho-theoretical tool to analyse Teresa’s position in *For Love Alone* (even allowing that diagnostic manuals themselves are texts open to various interpretations). Several critics have noted that Stead had a deep interest in psychology (Dizard 104; Ronning 114), an interest perhaps evident in Teresa’s physiological and psychological states. Indeed, her fragmentary state of being in an androcentric world is reflected in the narrative’s dual structure. Textually her narrative is divided between “The Island Continent” and “Port of Registry: London”; geographically she is caught between Australia and England; and metaphysically she struggles with how she conceptualises her existence in the world. Viewed through Teresa’s trajectory from Australia to England in pursuit of love, the framework of *For Love Alone* is that of a traditional quest novel. The psychological and physiological traumas she experiences in her quest result in her anorexic condition.

*Anorexia nervosa* typically manifests itself in females who display low self-esteem often generated by dominant fathers or father-figures (Counihan 82). Other evidence of the condition includes conflict with hierarchical power structures, confusion over sexual identity, rigorous exercise, and solitude and self deceit (79). Teresa’s situation and character reflect each of these markers of the anorexic. For example, her subjugation by the males she interacts with at the commencement of the novel, primarily her father and her tutor Jonathan Crow, is the cornerstone of her developing ailment. It is compounded by her dysfunctional interaction with family members and her disillusionment with the teaching profession. She resorts to long solitary walks and fantasising alone in her bedroom, yet is unable to recognise her increasingly bizarre behaviour. Fundamentally, her suffering reflects gendered power structures and their relationship to self-esteem. It is only by experiencing and gradually understanding her abuse of herself that Teresa is able to establish her identity, and it is only through abandoning the males who dominate her that she is able to achieve her own sense of worth.

Teresa’s quest for love is bound up with her lack of self-esteem. Her self-starvation escalates exponentially as her fixated desire for Crow’s love

feeds her obsessive personality. Crow's self-absorbed behaviour annihilates Teresa's identity and as a result he stunts her individuality. Teresa's loss of self-identity is the foundation of her abandonment of self through wholly devoting herself to the pursuit of love. As Lilian Furst points out in her introduction to *Disorderly Eaters*, eating disorders are grounded in conflict between desire and power (4). In the process of identity formation the "self" confronts and rebels against what is traditionally expected within a cultural framework. The collection of essays in *Disorderly Eaters* analyses an eclectic set of texts but all expose the eating disorder as a "vehicle for self-assertion as a rebellion against a dominant ethos acceptable to the persona" (5). In Teresa's case it is a rebellion against the imperative of marriage that initiates her self-assertion.

Traditionally love stories conclude with a wedding, yet Teresa's tale, in some respects a traditional love story itself, commences with a wedding and avoids one at the end. As Joan Brumberg points out in discussing an earlier era, Victorian women suffering from anorexia were placed under enormous emotional pressure to marry. From surviving records she extracts an image of a society where food and eating created many problems for young females. In an age that enforced female passivity, food and its limited consumption became a marker of both decorous feminine behaviour and nonverbal rebellion. Similarly, in the twentieth century Teresa experiences ambiguous emotions in a household dominated by her father, Andrew Hawkins. The first chapter opens with the single word "[n]aked" and continues with a description of Hawkins' nakedness, his virility exposed, set in sharp contrast to the image of his two daughters, Teresa and Kitty, sewing their garments for their cousin Malfi's wedding. Hawkins denigrates his daughters' appearance: "What a strange thing that I didn't have lovely daughters," and compares them unfavourably to the "three beautiful bouncing" Harkness "maidens" (8).

The dichotomous female/male, love/hate relations at play in the Hawkins' household are represented in food metaphors and in symbolic actions. Hawkins refers to "an ugly face" as being "the dried crust of a turbid, ugly soul" (9), and he objectifies and denigrates women by asserting that the only lovable woman is a beautiful one. His contradictory assertions of what constitutes love, in conjunction with the slighting of Teresa's experience and values, ultimately contribute to her anorexia (Counihan 77). Teresa rebels against the power her father wields over her and, indeed, which patriarchy wields over all women, but in doing so her sense of identity in an

androcentric culture is severely jeopardised. There is, however, a paradox in Hawkins' conflation of psyche and body when he aligns an "ugly face" with an "ugly soul." In some respects, it could be argued that Teresa's ultimate recovery is achieved through a melding of the psyche and body. However, unlike her father she never reduces appearance to a reflection of the soul.

Although Stead vehemently denied being a feminist, her use of food as metaphor demonstrates the overt disparities in relationships between the sexes. The paternal tyranny that Teresa experiences exacerbates her sense of inadequacy and loss of self-esteem. The references to food and eating highlight the dilemma that she faces and presage anorexia as a means of self-empowerment. Such a notion is given *avoirdupois* when Teresa experiences an epiphany concerning marriage, in which she metaphorically immerses women in a stew which boils and bubbles, suggesting their enforced passivity, much like the Victorian women mentioned earlier (Stead 19). Teresa resists the impulse to subjugate herself to such tyranny and marry a "small underfed man" (18). Yet the fact that she later invests her future in Jonathan Crow underpins her dependence on "underfed" men, and for much of the narrative her resistance appears futile. She becomes, like the women in the stew, "discontented, browbeaten, flouted, ridiculous" (18). Eventually, however, through her sexual relationships with James Quick and Harry Girton, she realises that she has the power to command her own life.

Teresa's preoccupation with love indicates her obsessive personality and her anorexia: "She burned with internal flame, her hope and desperate energy, the hope that she would be loved, and at times she thought that her affair with Jonathan was only a step to the unknown man; she would use him for that" (228). Clearly, Teresa has her own agenda and is capable of some kind of self-assertion. Thus from one perspective—that of her inner emotions or, to borrow from the novel's title, her "alone[ness]"—Teresa is not a passive victim of patriarchy. Indeed, it could be argued that Teresa's regulated food intake is not a direct result of patriarchal power but a form of control exerted as a means of "constructing subjectivity" (Lupton 14): she does not perceive herself as the hopeless "ill-kempt" object of derision; instead she "burn[s] with internal flame" and "hope" (228).

Teresa's self-deceit and obsession with love, which intensify together with her rejection of food, is prefigured in the first appearance of Jonathan Crow at Circular Quay when Teresa and Kitty are on their way to Malfi's wedding.

Teresa is depicted as voluminous—“sailing,” her “skirts swelling,” “vigorous and excited” (23). This resplendent imagery contrasts with Crow’s “dark axe-faced, starved” appearance (23). The contrasting imagery of softness against harshness, along with corvine allusions of Crow’s name and the description of his “spectacles and a black felt hat cocked” (23), presage the way in which he devours Teresa’s identity. Initially, however, she exhibits a strong will and ambitious outlook and is physically strong and healthy: “She leaned over the sill, her round arms and full breasts resting on the woodwork. Her flesh was a strange shade in that light, like the underside of water beasts. Or like—she began to think like what” (73). Teresa demonstrates the capacity to dream, to indulge in the fecund potential of her imagination and the richness of her memory, and takes delight in the sensuousness of her own body.

Morag Macsween contends in her “cultural constructivist” analysis of anorexia, that the body and personality, and indeed mental disorders, are actually a set of discursive constructs. Viewed diachronically these are forever changing. She maintains, therefore, that in discussing anorexia it is essential to focus on the consistencies, the “bourgeois and patriarchal culture . . . the ideological interface of femininity and individualism” (72-73). Viewed from this theoretical perspective, Teresa’s increasingly self-destructive confusion over her sense of self as the novel progresses is fundamental to the anorectic’s problem. Early in her relationship with Crow she already displays some of the “isolating self-centredness” that is a psychological symptom of anorexia (Counihan 77). Indeed, the fact that Teresa struggles with suppressing her strong emotions results in an anger that she ultimately turns against herself. Her self-anger and resultant frustration are evident in the passage below:

Men are corrupted by power and want submissive women, but we—the corruption of weakness fortunately is a mere surface, like house-dirt; the human being sleeps underneath and can be roused. I am certain that as I lie here now, frenzied with desire and want, all women have lain for centuries, since innocent times and never an ounce of bravado to throw off the servitude of timidity. (101)

Here Stead evokes the notion of a collective memory of “the servitude of timidity” that females experience.

Teresa recognises a “weakness” that she herself experiences and that “women . . . for centuries” have endured. However, her identification of the “servitude of timidity” ultimately becomes her vehicle for “[a]rousal.” She

also recognises that something other than timid servitude is difficult in an androcentric culture, but at this juncture she lacks the “bravado” of defiance or subversion to extricate herself from the patriarchy (Brewster 40). As Joan Lidoff points out, “Stead characteristically mines surfaces, unearthing the primitive emotions beneath social interactions. . . . The figure of the Old Maid, which has suffered a long history of social opprobrium, represents not independence, but the denial of all desires” (67-68). At Malfi’s wedding Teresa recognises the terror of becoming an “Old Maid” which motivates her peers to marry “small underfed men” (18). Initially, however, she does not deny her desires: her dreams are replete with food imagery which give her “unutterable pleasure,” commencing with an “hors d’oeuvre,” and with other “movies” following in rapid succession: halls bedecked with bright colours and “golden goblets and splendid male and female slaves to bring in the food; there were scenes of taverns taken from Breughel . . . a Hogmanay party in the Highlands with the bursting of a great haggis, and the guests fallen down in a flood of pease pudding, small birds, giblets, and tripes” (84). Ultimately, though, her desires are conflated into an obsessive quest for love, itself based on an increasing lack of self-esteem.

Just as the duality of belonging/non-belonging exposes her lack of self-esteem, so too does her developing anorexic persona. Increasingly she exhibits contradictory emotions in relation to her sense of self, in particular in relation to her body. Her capacity to dream is progressively threatened as Crow’s corvine character impinges on her imaginings. As Anne Ronning points out in her discussion of the notes for a text entitled “More Lives Than One,” found in manuscripts in the National Library of Australia’s collection of Stead papers, “in writing out some aspects of the lives she describes in ‘More Lives Than One’ Stead’s view of the young girl as proud of and even flaunting her sexuality and yet at the same time afraid of it is apparent” (118). Similarly, Teresa’s conflicting ruminations on women’s sexuality expose her uncertainty about her relationship with Crow and how that impacts on her sexuality.

Although it could be argued that Teresa’s obsession is not with body size, she exhibits other signs of obsessional behaviour that result in what Hilde Bruch refers to as atypical anorexia (34). In Western culture, where power and intellect are coded masculine, and subservience and body are coded feminine, the anorectic’s struggle to understand that mind/body duality often results in what Kim Chernin names the “tyranny of slenderness” (187). At her twenty-first birthday, one year after Crow’s departure for England, Teresa’s “terribly thin” androgynous appearance, which lacks the overt signs of femininity, is

unmistakably a result of her attempt to deny her passionate sexuality (255). Moreover, her “distracted” demeanour conveys her inability to recognise the pleasure of her guests (255). This instance of not recognising facial affect is another symptom of anorexia, known as alexithymia (Kucharska-Pietura 43). Teresa’s symptoms of anorexia are further indicated when she fails to recognise faces in the city streets, and when “she develop[s] the acuity of a savage, in sound and in smell” (260). Furthermore, like many anorectics, Teresa is deceived by her mirror image, where the “physiological effects of starvation are crucial to the distorted perceptions of self and reality” (Counihan 79): “She did not notice how her bones were showing, nor was ashamed of her threadbare clothes; she appeared to others an ill-kempt sallow woman five years older than she was” (228).

In addition, her previously sensuous dreams are transformed into a parody, “so that cheap sweets, dirty jars of pineapple and coconut juice, fruits in windows, crawling with cockroaches, and even sticky, bright cakes attracted her fearfully” (276). In her analysis of food, the body and the self, Deborah Lupton claims that food connotes the feminine and because it is ingested it becomes embodied. It has the capacity to intrude “into rational thought because of its organic nature” (3). Food’s instability, inherent in its inevitable decay, is a metonym for the human flesh and the ambiguity that arises from the binary opposition of pleasure/disgust. Lupton suggests that to “pay attention to such everyday banalities as food practices is to highlight the animality always lurking within the ‘civilized’ veneer of the human subject” (3). That “animality” in Teresa metaphorically depicts her hunger for a holistic state of being in an androcentric world, a “unified condition of the self” (Chernin 191).

Finally, the narrative structure conveys her bodily transformation: two years of her tale are condensed into two pages of the novel. These portray her abstinence from food, her emotional detachment from family and friends and her total absorption in Jonathan Crow. As Shannon Zaitsoff’s research into eating disorders reveals, “an interpersonal style of focusing on others’ emotional needs and suppressing feelings appears to have a distinctive relationship with eating disorder symptoms” (58). Teresa’s obsessive self-starvation has become an all-consuming passion: “To be hungry was her life and a necessary condition of getting to Jonathan; therefore she did not mind it at all, and it made life more interesting than it had been for years” (275).

Indeed, when Teresa at last reaches Crow in England, he repeatedly degrades her. He defines love through a food classification based on social class:

“Primitive love—raw fish, Cockney love—fish and chips, middle class love—cottage pudding, the grand passion—roast duckling and port wine” (331). Crow’s wildly erratic theories on love and sex reveal his misogynistic nature. His reductionist statement that “[i]n the spring a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of—well, for me, it’s beer and bread” not only devalues Teresa’s vision of their relationship, but also subordinates the romantic ideal of spring, love and procreation to “beer and bread” (332).

However, James Quick, Teresa’s boss, is set in sharp contrast to Jonathan Crow. He reflects on the previous week when he had interviewed Teresa, her second week in London, and acknowledges the pleasure he derives from her company. His empathy for her is evident: “He went on thinking of the woman’s face, her manner, nervous, anxious, hungry, her timidity in her independence” (362). He considers her spoken language, with its “pleasing idioms of the English he had read in English literature. He masticated them, ran over them with the tip of his tongue” (363). Metaphorically he eats her words, yet he is absorbed by her mind rather than by the body that Crow has metaphorically consumed. Teresa’s monograph, entitled “The Seven Houses of Love,” about “despised and starved” women, enraptures him. The final section, entitled “The Last Star or Extinction” reads:

The last star. To die terribly by will, to make death a terrible demand of life, a revolt, an understanding, such as rives life, blasts it, twists it. To die by the last effort of the will and body. To will, the consuming and consummation. To force the end. It must be dark; then an extraordinary clutching of reality. This is not understanding, not intellectual, but physical, bitter, disgusting, but an affirmation of a unique kind. (421-22)

Here, Teresa’s affirmation of revolt is “physical, bitter, disgusting.” She assimilates the paradox of the psyche/body duality by asserting that through death she will achieve a “clutching of reality,” a clearer resolution to the conflicts that confront her. Teresa, however, comes to understand the dilemma with which she has been confronted and challenges it through another, more productive form of self-empowerment, namely writing the self. Through her writing she acknowledges her status as a “despised and starved” woman in the eyes of Crow, and concedes the futility of following that trajectory. Her hunger is transformed.

Susan Sheridan contends that Teresa’s “Seven Houses” and St. Teresa of Avila’s (b. 1515, d. 1582) *The Interior Castle* both “articulate a desire for an impossible union” and “desire [as] struggle as well as ecstasy” (75-76).

However, the parallels between the two texts are more in structure and form rather than meaning. Closer reading of the two reveals a light/dark polarity in the subject matter: *The Interior Castle* is optimistic and the imagery used is bright; “Seven Houses” is pessimistic and the imagery is dark and menacing. Teresa’s “beloved” is indeed revealed as an adversary, yet St. Teresa’s beloved God could hardly be described thus (76). What the two texts do have in common, nevertheless, is a quest for self-knowledge. The parallel themes evoke a notion of “Holy Anorexia,” the term used by Rudolph Bell in his exploration of female fasting in medieval religion. Both Teresas find an affirmative path through their explorations of self-knowledge, humility and detachment in writing their respective experiences. Indeed, the patriarchal dominance that Bell identified in medieval women’s self-starvation, like that of Victorian women, was often a consequence of coercion to marry—an imperative both Teresas steadfastly avoid. Much like the holy anorectics, Teresa Hawkins displays a wilful personality in which the refusal to eat represents a need for independence from the impositions of hierarchical control (Farmer 611-12).

Crow represents that control and, although he purports to educate Teresa’s mind, he literally feeds off her innocence and her quest for fulfilment. For example, when Quick reveals that Teresa had “half-starved herself” (439) in order to reach Crow in England, he denies enticing her: “Not on your life. She said that? She’s getting the illusions of that outcast—you know, the little match girl dreaming about the roast duckling offering itself to her with knife and fork stuck in?” (440). Furthermore, discontented with merely possessing Teresa’s body, Crow attempts to appropriate Quick’s intellectual influence: “By Jingo, of course that’s an economic truth, I certainly get somewhere rubbing my brains against yours” (440). Such a statement is analeptic of his “suspicion of everything, which was at base a fear of not eating; and whatever unhurried but persistent calculation he had made of how he was to eat for the rest of his life, [sic] was to govern him from now on” (200). Crow’s obsessive egoism is palpable and his self-righteous disdain for the female sex is clear throughout the novel, witnessed by his abusive behaviour towards all the women he interacts with.

Ultimately Teresa’s recovery from the “illusion of a love-hungry girl” is self-empowering (424). Both she and her hunger are transformed: “Her hunger had made her insatiable, and she was not content . . . she was not at all satisfied with the end of physical craving; she wanted to try men” (464). Her self-empowerment is evident: “No one would hold her prisoner, Harry did

not, and even James would not, but she would hold them both prisoners” (493). In her final epiphany she recognises not only her former weakness as “a vain, thin thing” (493), but also the futility of her striving for perfection as a saint of love. However, her epiphany also entails a recognition that “the hungry and the dispossessed, the ugly . . . will have it, all passion, all delight” (494). As Diane Taub remarks when speaking about Catherine Garret’s *Beyond Anorexia*, “employing a sociological perspective Garret views anorexia and recovery from anorexia as a spiritual, but not necessarily a religious, experience. Recovery entails the discovery of spiritual meaning, along with an awareness that a greater power than the individual participates in the recovery process” (423). Teresa’s recovery entails a purging of her negative and self-destructive thoughts thereby finding affirmation in her own insatiable desires and affinity with her psyche.

In the autobiographical *For Love Alone* Teresa Hawkin’s self-starvation in her quest for love reveals how food, desire and identity are inextricably linked. Although there is no extant evidence to suggest that Christina Stead was anorexic, she clearly understood the psychoanalytical elements of the disorder. Teresa displays many of the physiological and psychological symptoms of anorexia, and her “pain of hunger” is conveyed both literally and metaphorically (Counihan 21). Ultimately she is empowered and she demonstrates her empowerment by reconciling the psychological conflicts that affected her physically through writing the self. Her debilitated body strengthens as she recognises the profound way in which she has achieved independence and sexual liberation. In *For Love Alone* Teresa’s anorexia is a testament to the paradoxes and dilemmas that confront women and their quest for identity.

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