Task for *The Man Who Loved Children*

**Guide Questions for Reading**

**Chapter One:**

- How are our assumptions about family life immediately disrupted by the way that the Pollits speak to one another?
- How is the sense of a state of decline immediately established by Stead’s vivid descriptions of the Pollit home and of Henny’s possessions?
- Discuss what we see of Louie and Evie in the first chapter. How do these characters act as foils (in contrast) to each other? How do they relate to Sam, and what is foreshadowed about the role they will play in the novel?

**Chapter Two:**

In this chapter, the reader is bombarded with Sam’s thoughts and ideas from the way he speaks to the other characters. Generally, we develop a sense of sympathy with the main characters in a novel – but the effect of our continual exposure to Sam is more likely to make us feel exasperated at best, and irritated at worst. Discuss Stead’s use of characterisation in her depiction of Sam.

- How is the ordinary, everyday life of the Pollits depicted in this chapter, with its focus on the painting of the house and on Sam’s view of the neighbours?
- Examine the idiomatic or unique features of Sam and Henny’s dialogues with their children. How are the family portrayed as unhappy and dysfunctional? What are their concerns and worries throughout this chapter?

**Chapter Three:**

The action in this chapter moves from Louisa’s visit to a neighbour to a depiction of Sam at home, and of Henny’s outing with a male friend.

- Why do you think Stead moves from character to character?
- What is the effect of all the changes in setting, and how does this enable Stead to best portray the life of the family?

The rumours about Mrs Kydd (in contrast to her own words) provide a grim view of marriage, and Louie’s offer to kill her neighbour’s cat seems somewhat confronting and sudden.

- Why do you think Stead attempts to tackle such issues and actions in the novel? What message do you think she is trying to convey about life?
- Is anything being foreshadowed in this chapter?
There is a certain absurdity about this chapter – Sam outlines his utopian ideals as his wife lunches with another man.

- What is Stead saying about reality as opposed to idealism?
- Is Sam a gifted dreamer or primarily a failure as a husband and father?

**Chapter Four:**

There is much discussion about adultery and morality in this chapter, yet it is evident that Sam and Henny’s marriage is marked by tension and open hostility.

- How does Stead exploit the comic discrepancy between Sam’s ideas about the world and the reality of his situation?
- What do we learn about values and attitudes in the America of the 1930s from reading this chapter?

Compare Sam and Henny’s conversation with Sam’s discussion with Louie.

- What are the similarities and differences in the way he talks to the women in his life?

**Chapter Five:**

This chapter allows us to see the world of Louisa’s extended family in Harper’s Ferry and Henny’s family at the house called Monocacy.

- How does this give the reader new ways of understanding both of these characters?

Another minor character is introduced in this chapter: Olive, a girl who Louisa briefly befriends.

- Why do you think Stead includes these small digressions?
- Is it part of presenting the characters’ lives realistically, or is the purpose of the minor characters to provide a sense of contrast and briefly enliven a narrative that is marked by unrelenting family conflict?

Consider the use of dialogue in this chapter and the different tones used by the characters in their conversations.

- How does Stead use dialogue as a method of indirect characterisation – a way to show the reader something about the characters in the story?

**Chapter Six:**

Comment on the conversation (p. 198) that Ernie and his mother have before bed each night.

- What is different about Henny’s way of relating to her eldest son, and why does this contrast so sharply to the way that Henny treats her other children?
- Why do you think Stead included letters written by the children to their father whilst he is in Malaya? What do the letters tell us about the life of the family?
• Do you find the sudden shift of setting to Sam in Malaya convincing? How does it enable Stead’s characters to discuss and compare different cultures and ideas?

Chapter Seven:

This chapter involves the death of Henny’s wealthy father, an event which Henny hoped would enable her to settle her debts.

• Why do you think the theme of money is so prevalent within the novel?
• How does the family’s lack of money contribute to their unhappiness?

The birth of the new baby is juxtaposed with a death. Sam’s comments on events form a large part of this chapter – as usual, he presumes to give his opinions freely about everything that occurs.

• Why do you think Sam frequently tries to discuss matters such as childbirth, which he is unable to understand from personal experience?
• What would a feminist reading have to say about the way Sam speaks to and about his wife?

Chapter Eight:

Henny and Sam are perpetually embroiled in a bitter quarrel (p. 319), and its effect on the family is explored throughout the novel.

• Why would Stead choose to portray such unpleasantness in depth?
• What do you think her purpose is?

The focus of the novel seems to shift at this point towards Louisa’s broadening world – her teacher, Miss Aiden (p. 328) and her friend Clare (p. 333) are introduced, and we see her affection for others. Discuss Stead’s portrait of adolescence here and her exploration of Louisa’s inner world.

• How does Louisa’s increasing independent upset Sam and enable the reader to reflect on his unhealthy desire to control his children?

Chapter Nine:

Miss Aiden comes to dinner and is aghast at the poverty-stricken condition of the Pollits’ home (p. 409), and Ernie’s hoarding of money is discovered and shamed by Sam. Henny is determined to show Miss Aiden the reality of life in a large and impoverished family (p. 489).

• How has Henny been trapped by continually bearing children?
• Why has Sam subjected Henny to this form of oppression – is it incidental and a result of his misguided enthusiasm for children, or does the size of their family enable Sam to see himself as an influential and powerful patriarch?
• Speculate on the reasons why the Pollits live beyond their means. How does the conclusion of this chapter anticipate Henny’s death and demonstrate her decline as a result of her marriage?
Chapter Ten:

- The sense of disarray and tension surrounding the Pollits comes to a climax with Henny’s death. Comment on how Stead portrays this death.
- Is Louisa at fault, or do her actions merely provide Henny with the means of escape?
- Is her death tragic or inevitable?
- Is Louisa’s eventual fate a satisfying one, or is the conclusion to the novel too open-ended? Comment on the symbolic importance of Louisa’s departure from home and escape from her father’s influence.
- Can the novel be seen as a bildungsroman?